



HOTEL BRANDING AND PATRONAGE OF SELECTED 3-STAR HOTELS IN PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between hotel branding and customer patronage of selected 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt. Two hypothesised relationships were formulated, with quality customer service and brand positioning serving as the dimensions of hotel branding. The study adopted the quasi-experimental research design and quantitative research approach and a causal design to test the influence of branding on components of customer patronage. The study population was hotel guests from registered 3-star hotels with the Commercial Department of the Rivers State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt as of February 2020, with a sample size of 224 determined with Freund and Williams formula for unknown population. The study hypotheses were analysed using Pearson's product-moment coefficient which showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between the two hotel branding dimensions and customer patronage of 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt. The study concluded that a thought-out branding strategy can improve the 3-star hotel patronage in Port Harcourt and branding can further improve the effect on corporate reputation and image of the hotel. The researchers recommended that (i) Hotel managers should focus predominantly on branding those appeals to their target audience to ensure that their hotels address adequately patronage intentions and patronage actions to enhance customer patronage. (ii) Managers of hotels should position strategically, the components of branding to improve customer patronage.

KEYWORDS

HOTEL BRANDING, PATRONAGE OF SELECTED 3-STAR HOTELS, PORT HARCOURT.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality sector of the tourism industry is characterized by massive and fierce competition and as such hotels must understand the growing need to distinguish their service offerings from those of competitors and to do so, Branding is one of the strategic tools to use. These days, branding is not only considered as a procedure or method of developing ideas such as names, symbols, signs, and/or designs, through which hotels can enable customers in recognizing their services (Keller, Aperia& Georgson,2008), but also as a continuance commitment aimed at ensuring a positive and effective hotel image and growth (Kapferer, 2008). Robust brands are made of considerate market separation, and product differentiation, which are intended to inform the hotel's corporate vision to the target customer base, while trying to ensure continuity among customers (Kapferer, 2008). Therefore, hotel operators more than consider brands only as "marketing engines" illustrated in emblems, and signs, but also as valued resources along with hotels' personnel, and capital, for instance (Petromilli& Berman, 2003). Branding influences hotels' status, and strengthens brand awareness for customers to patronize.

According to the New Webster Dictionary (1994), Patronage can be said to mean "the act of being a regular customer to a shop. In a highly competitive industry, such as hospitality, satisfying the customers should be the primary focus of hotels that wish to sustain patronage (Sulek &Hensley, 2004). Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2008), assert the word customer or consumer patronage to mean a person or thing that eats or uses something or someone that purchases product and services for individual utility. Guest patronage is concerned with desire of a guest to be committed to a hotel either because of its service quality or perceived service qualities. Hence, the extent to which a customer will patronize the services of a hotel depends on how the customer perceives the hotels brand and the perception and feeling that the condition of the service received is consistent with his /her personality.

Scholars such as Georgiev, Gueorguieva and Maseviciute (2015), Nwulu, and Asiegbu (2015) and Kenneth, Miebaka&Ezirim (2015) have conducted studies in service sectors such as banks, hospitals and hotels taking into consideration consumer patronage and factors that influence consumers decision to patronize a particular brand over another in different locations. The two denominators they found that was prominent in their study were quality of service anticipated and quality of service received and customer satisfaction. These studies were conducted outside the scope of this present study and as such their findings might not be applicable and generalized on the present geographical scope which is 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt. The main purpose of this current study is to investigate the relationship between hotel branding and customer patronage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Model

The major variables of this study are hotel branding (independent variable) and customer patronage (dependent variable). The focus of this study was on customer patronage through hotel branding. The researcher operationalized hotel branding in terms of quality customer service and brand positioning. For the sake of convenience, the researcher limited the study to two variables for the independent variable taking into consideration that the independent variable can be operationalized with more variables. The diagram below shows the link between the independent variable and dependent variable.

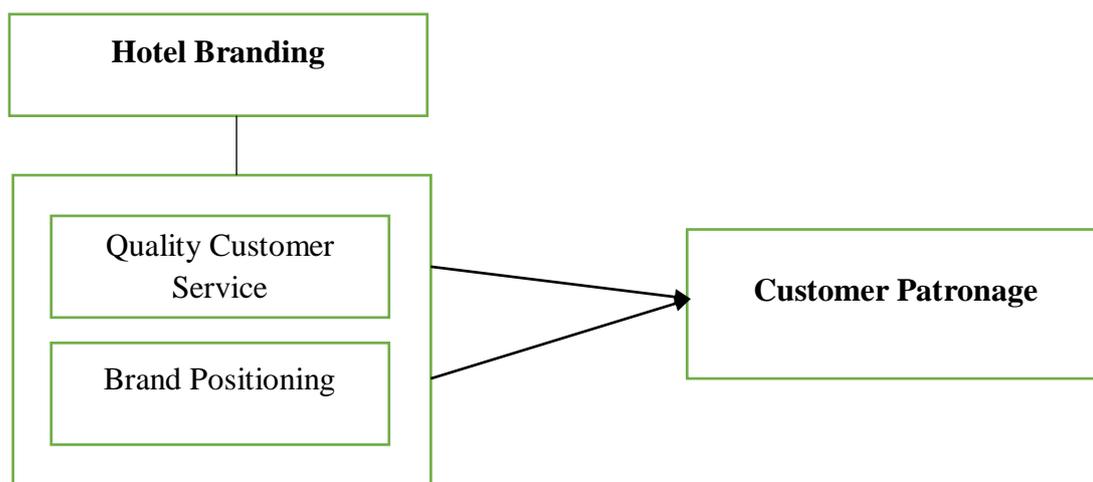


Figure 1. Model adapted from the works of Aaker, J. (2002), *Building Strong Brand*. 4th Edition. New York: The Free Press

Hotel Branding

The concept of branding has gained a distinct position in the marketing literature. The study of this phenomenon has been complex and multidisciplinary, as it has been found to be related with other concepts such as corporate image, corporate personality, corporate reputation, and corporate identity (Balmer, 2001; Knox & Bickerton, 2003).

Numerous products or services offered to the market have to be branded, and branding is one of the essential elements in the service and product planning activities of any hotel. Hotel branding is concerned with efforts a hotel makes in selecting, developing, innovating, projecting and establishing its own identity (brand). Hotel branding within the hospitality business environment is now linked to high management significance in the last decades due to the growing realization that branding is one of the most valuable intangible assets that hotels could have. Hotels are now realizing, understanding and are ready to deploy the power of good branding to attract immediate guest acknowledgment of the hotel's services. Hotel branding is a combination of distinct and unique image or image to a specific product which sets it apart from every other hotel service impressed in the minds of guests (Ehikwe 2005).

Obiesie (2003) stated the very core of hotel branding when he stated that hotel branding is fundamental and intimate aspect of hotel service policies. He went further to opine hotel branding as a name, term, sign, service, symbol, or design or a mixture of these is intended to guests identify and distinguish them from their competitors. Okpara (2002) demarcated branding as the creative procedure of developing a distinct, germane and pleasant name, term, sign, services, products, symbol, or its amalgamation to identify a hotels's product and to differentiate them from those of the competitors. Anyanwu (2003) defined hotel branding as the use of both tangible and intangible objects and themes such as customer service, positioning, advertising name, term, symbol, design or blend of these to identify a product. He also opined that branding is very important for advertising effectiveness because it is branding that distinguishes similar goods of different manufacturers. Hotel branding is a thoroughly organized and applied procedure of creating and maintaining a favorable reputation of the hotel with its constituent elements, by sending signals to stakeholders using the corporate brand. (Van Riel, 2001, as cited in Einwiller & Will, 2002)

Branding is one of the most important components of marketing. In the hotel industry, branding is a term used to describe the name, description, and design of services (Ikporah, 2012). Perreault and McCarthy (2002) connotes hotel branding to be the use of a name, icon, service delivery and quality, image, celebrity engagement or design or a combination of all of these to recognize an organization. Furthermore, branding is the application of a typical name and customized services to distinguish it from comparable competitive services. Arens (2002) submitted that hospitality branding is concerned with the fundamental distinction plan for all hotel service; it includes, name, words, symbols, or designs that identify the product and its source and distinguishes it from competing products. Nwaizugbo (2004) defined branding as “a method of creating a service or product identity.

The significance of branding in a successful marketing programme has been well researched (James, 2004). Literature has proved that a successful brand is the most treasured asset that any business organization can have (Aarker, 2000; Keller, 2005; Chakravarti, 2002; Brown, 2005; Campbell, 2002; Kotler & Keller 2006). In fact, Keller (2005) opined that brand is so much treasured that organizations will start appending a “statement of value addendum” to their balance sheet to include such intangibles as the value of their brands.

Customer Service Quality: Overall, customer service quality is all about the treatment a hotel gives to its guests. Dei-Tumi (2005) sees quality customer service delivery as a behavior/attitude and not as a department. He stated that, a hotel can only retain and gain customers based on the attitude displayed by the hotel.

Customer service is simply the sentimentality guests gets which makes them know their perception and expectation of a service have been met. Osuagwu (2009) clarified customer service to include creating, preserving, and improving the relationships among partners in a business entity to realize the objective of the significant parties. He further elucidated customer service as a state where all buyers are viewed as separate beings, and every action of the organization in question is directed to enhance the communication between key partners in order to realize the objectives of an organization.

Haroon (2010) asserted that customer services play an integral part in increasing the customer patronage, loyalty, retention, and customers highly consider the price of these services. This therefore implies that, constant and regular delivery of top-notch and excellent a hotel customer service is designed and targeted at bringing the customers to an emotional state of affiliation with the organization.

Customer service thus involves the conducts through which gratification will be reciprocally be of benefits with respect to the intangible parts of services considered by guests who have the urge to gratify their needs (Sokefun, 2011). Customer service is an important tool to generate income and revenue in an organization as it enhances its ability to undertake these tasks better. The opinion one has about an organization can greatly be influenced by a particular customer service experience (Sokefun, 2011).

Brand Positioning: Positioning is all about creating an emotional brand identity in the minds and consciousness of the target market. Kotler and Keller (2008) defined the notion of positioning as act of innovating and designing the organization’s offering, and the particular reputation the organization wants to build in the minds of the targeted consumers. In order to achieve successful brand positioning, hotel must ensure that their guests recognize the brand values in the way the hotel

intends to. Moreover, hotels should ensure brand value is included in their services which was identified earlier, and therefore, should aim at gaining guest patronage.

Hooley, Piercy and Nicoulaud (2008) supported the statement, opining that hotel brand positioning deals with the way a hotel influences and occupies its potential guest's minds. Additionally, they claim that brand positioning is not a one-time process but a continuous one by continually evaluating the competitors' positioning strategies. By likening the latter to the hotel's brand positioning, managers are able to determine, if changes must be made. As customers' decision-making is based on comparison, it is of significant importance for a hotel to position itself successfully on the market (Kapferer, 2001). The marketing efforts must not only focus on what the brand offers, but also on how this bundle of offerings is different from that of the competitors. Considering that a major part of the hotel's attributes is intangible, it makes it difficult for clients to differentiate competitive offerings. In order to help customers, make that distinction, brand managers strive to position the organization using specific images, slogans and unique brand names that indicate these intangible attributes.

Customer Patronage

Consumer patronage is the extent to which a buying unit makes purchases over time to a specific brand. Consumer patronage evolves through positive reinforcement and repetition of purchasing actions (Oliver, 1997). According to the New Webster Dictionary (1994), patronage is defined as "the material helps, and reassurance given by an individual, in this instance the individual is seen to be a customer in an exchange transaction". Customer patronage could also be described as "the behaviour of being a regular client to an organization. In a fiercely viable industry, such as hotel, meeting and exceeding guests' expectation should be the basic attention of hotels that wish to sustain guest patronage (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Behavioral scientists believe that customer patronage results from an early product that is strengthened through delivering satisfaction, leading to repeat purchase. Cognitive scholars put more attention on the protagonist of mental process in developing consumer patronage. It is scholar's confidence that the consumers involve in wide spread problem-solving attitudes involving services and attribute compassions, leading to strong customer preferences and repeat purchase.

Theoretical Review

Nicosia Model

This study was based on Nicosia model. In Nicosia (1969) a consumer is an individual who purchases, or has the willingness and ability to purchase goods and services offered for sale by marketing institutions in order to gratify individual or household needs, wants or desires. Schiffman and Kanuk (1987) noted that the Nicosia model focused on the relation between firm and its potential consumers. The organization connects with the customers through its marketing messages (advertising) or captions on the packing and consumers also relate with the organization through their purchase replies. The Nicosia model is interactive in design. Nicosia model is divided into four major fields (Goodhope, 2013) namely, the consumer's attitude based on the firm's message; search and evaluation; the act of purchase; and feedback.

This study draws its hypotheses from this model in that, branding and its qualities are part of communication to patrons which the hotels hope could inspire patrons to patronize their services. Customers in turn, are becoming classier in their search for accurate information that can help their purchasing decisions. The model distinguished that consumer forms favorites among the brands in

the choice set and may also form an intention to buy the most preferred brand. Marketers must monitor post purchase satisfaction; post-purchase action and post purchase product uses.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The Relationship between Branding and Customer Patronage

Harcourt (2021) conducted a study on brand appeal and customers' patronage of fast food firms in Port Harcourt. The aim of the research was to evaluate the extent of the usage of brand appeal in customer patronage in fast food firms in Rivers State of Nigeria. The target respondents of the study were determined to be 65 fast food firms, a sample of 39 was drawn with the aid Taro Yemen's formula. The simple random sampling technique was adopted for the collection of 200 concerned respondents from 39 fast food firms in Rivers State of Nigeria. The questionnaire survey was used to collate data for analysis. the study had a 93% questionnaire return rate. 200 copies of questionnaires were received useful, obtaining a 93 percent response rate. Simple regression analysis was used to test the study hypotheses. The results of the study revealed that branding has a significant stimulus on patronage intention.

Ogonu and Didia (2020) investigated brand appeal and customer patronage of fast food firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The objective of the paper was to examine the degree to which branding influence customer patronage of fast food firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The simple random sampling method was adopted to select 130 respondents from 65 fast food firms to participate in the study. The study utilized structured questionnaire to collect primary data. The study obtained a 79.4 per cent response rate. The simple regression statistic was used to test the hypotheses. The results suggest that branding has a significant and positive influence on customer patronage in terms of patronage intention, actual patronage and repeat patronage.

Ramjit and Abid (2019) did a study on influence of service quality delivery on brand image and patronage in hospitality industry: A content analysis. The present study explored the correlation amongst service quality constructs, brand image and guest repeat patronage in the hospitality industry. The study was qualitative one, and therefore the method of analysis was adopted to review the related studies and instantaneously to analyse the impact of service quality on customer patronage of hotels. It suggested that there was sufficient literature supporting the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer patronage of hotels in India.

Anetoh (2016) investigated scopes of service quality and customer patronage of house hold services in Nigeria. The research and submitted the use of SERVPERF model in measuring the Correlation between service quality scopes and customer patronage of grocery services in Nigeria. Service quality and customer patronage are very vital ideas needed by grocery outlets in order to survive the competitive challenges of time. The study had 130 correctly filled questionnaire and as such usable copies of questionnaire and evaluated the relationship between dimensions of service quality and customer patronage of grocery business in Nigeria with reference to Anambra area. Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation was used to test the formulated hypotheses necessitated using SPSS software package. The results indicated that there is significant relationship between service quality dimensions and customer patronage of grocery services in Nigeria. The major findings revealed that all dimensions are significantly correlated to customer patronage and also that SERVPERF model is a useful tool in measuring service quality and customer patronage of Nigerian grocery services. The study concluded by stating that organizations that position their brand with service quality are better positioned to enjoy brand patronage and preference.

Mary (2016) in a dissertation conducted a study on the impact of customer service on customer patronage in banking services with the mediating effect of ICT adoption. The study sought to assess the relationship between customer service and customer patronage in Access bank. The study was limited to the branches of Access bank in the Kumasi Metropolis and customers were the main objects. The study used a hierarchical linear multiple regression to assess the relation among the variables using three hundred and eighty-six (386) questionnaires. The study proved a significant relationship between customer services and customer patronage.

Umar and Abdu (2016) examined the effect of branding on consumer purchase intention in Kano Metropolis. Convenient sampling technique was employed to obtain representative response from a sample of 306 customers of Shoprite retail chain in Kano State, Nigeria. Product knowledge, brand satisfaction, brand trust, brand attachment, low price and past experience were employed as the explanatory variable while purchase intention was employed as the independent variable. The data generated were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. It was found that product knowledge, brand satisfaction, brand trust, brand attachment, low price and past experience were found to have significant effect of consumer patronage.

Yatundu, Abuga and Olala (2015) examined the effect of branding on patronage of public sugar manufacturing firms in Kenya. The data was analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistics and the findings indicated that, Branding had a positive and significant influence on the performance in terms of patronage of public sugar firms.

Kalu, Anyanwu, Maduenyoghasi and Udo (2014) examined the influence of brand extension strategy on marketing of soft drinks bottling firms in Nigeria. The study adopted survey research design. Analysis of the data was done through the application of descriptive tables (PPMC) total soft drink's products sold on annual bases belong to the extended brands of the parent products.

Yeboah et al (2013) assessed the role of branding in Ghana's telecommunication industry. Their findings stated that there was statistically insignificant correlation between trademarks and the choice of network, indicating that trademark does not significantly impact on patronage of mobile networks. The study findings of this revealed that brand quality significantly encourages sales of mobile network in Ghana, though it is not the most important factor in the telecommunication industry.

Uduji, Edicha and Oyaka (2012) examined agricultural produce branding for consumers in Nigeria. The descriptive survey targeted Kogi – one of the agricultural States in Nigeria. The study population comprised 400 farmers from nine Local Government Areas in Kogi State, which has three senatorial districts. Data were analyzed using Average Mean Score statistical tool. Majority of the respondents showed a greater positive response on the branding of agricultural produce for Nigeria. It was discovered from the findings that branding of agricultural produce helps to attract more customers and also to influence customers' perception in addition to creating promotional advantages. It also showed that branding as strategy increases sales revenue and equally helps to maintain brand loyalty of the customers.

With the literatures reviewed above, the following null hypothetical statements were formulated for the study;

HO₁: There is no significant relationship between customer service quality and customer patronage of 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt

HO₂: There is no significant relationship between brand positioning and customer patronage of 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the quasi-experimental research design. The quasi experimental research is a research design adopted in social and management sciences. The research setting is a non-contrived one. The study used a quantitative research approach and a causal design to test the influence of branding on customer patronage. The study population was hotel guests of 35 registered 3-star hotels with the Commercial Department of the Rivers State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt as of February, 2020. The study used the Freund and Williams formula for sample size determination to get a sample size of 224 hotel guests.

The guests of hotels were chosen as the study sample because they can provide quality information relating to the patronage of the brand of the hotels under study. Thus, 224 questionnaires were distributed to the guests of the hotels. Out of a total of 224 copies of study questionnaires that was distributed to the respondents, 198 copies were returned, giving a response rate of 88 percent. 26(12%) copies produced and distributed were not returned and were unaccounted for. furthermore, of the 198 copies of the questionnaire returned and proved useful for statistical analysis. The study used the Pearson Correlation to test the two hypotheses of concern with the aid of computer by means of the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.0 package.

Test of Hypotheses/Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Correlations analysis of the relationship between quality customer service and customer patronage

		Quality Customer Service	Customer Patronage
Quality Customer Service	Pearson Correlation	1	.975**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	198	198
Customer Patronage	Pearson Correlation	.975**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	198	198

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Computation Output 2021

Quality Customer Service and Customer Patronage

Rho = 0.975

P-value = 0.001 (p<0.05)

Where * illustrates significance at 0.05 and **illustrates significance at 0.001

Interpretation Based on Decision Rule

Table 2 above shows the result of the Pearson Correlation analysis which indicates that there is a strong and positive correlation between quality customer service and customer patronage in Port Harcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria with $r=0.975$. The p value $=0.000$ which is less than 0.05 , meaning that the correlation is significant. Consequently, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis which states that;

HA: There is significant relationship between customer service quality and customer patronage of 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt

The result of the test of hypotheses shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between quality customer service and customer patronage. The correlation coefficient indicates a coefficient of 0.975 which is 95% . This implies that 95% of customer patronage of 3-star hotels can be determined and evaluated through hotel branding. The finding of this study concludes that branding is a good strategy to increase the patronage of 3-star hotels in port Harcourt. This finding is in line with the findings of Harcourt (2021) who posited that that branding has a significant stimulus on patronage intention. Patronage is vital to the existence of hotels since most of its service is perishable and intangible, developing marketing strategies to improve patronage through branding becomes a welcome development. The findings also agree with the findings of Ogonu and Didia (2020) who asserted in their study that branding has a significant and positive influence on customer patronage in terms of patronage intention, actual patronage and repeat patronage. Given the strength of significant relationship from the analysis, this study also agrees with earlier findings of Ramjit and Abid (2019) who opined that sufficient literature supporting the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer patronage of hotels in India, Anetoh (2016) whose results indicated that there is significant relationship between service quality dimensions and customer patronage of grocery services in Nigeria. The major findings revealed that all dimensions are significantly correlated to customer patronage and also that SERVPERF model is a useful tool in measuring service quality and customer patronage of Nigerian grocery services. The study concluded by stating that organizations that position their brand with service quality are more capable to enjoy brand patronage and preference, Mary (2016) who proved a significant relationship between customer services and customer patronage.

Table 2: Correlations analysis of the relationship between brand positioning and customer patronage

		Brand Positioning	Customer Patronage
Brand Positioning	Pearson Correlation	1	.965**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	198	198
Customer Patronage	Pearson Correlation	.965**	1

Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	198	198

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Computation Output 2021

Brand Positioning and Customer Patronage

Rho = 0.965

P-value = 0.001 (p<0.05)

Where * illustrates significance at 0.05 and **illustrates significance at 0.001

Interpretation Based on Decision Rule

Table 1 above shows the result of the Pearson Correlation analysis which indicates that there is a strong and positive correlation between brand positioning and customer patronage in Port Harcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria with $r=0.975$. The p value =.000 which is less than 0.05, meaning that the correlation is significant. Consequently, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis which states that;

HA: There is significant relationship between brand positioning and customer patronage of 3-star hotels in Port Harcourt

The result of the test of hypotheses shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between brand positioning and customer patronage. The correlation coefficient indicates a coefficient of 0.965 which is 93%. This implies that 93% of customer patronage of 3-star hotels can be determined and evaluated through brand positioning. The finding of this study concludes that branding is a good strategy to increase the patronage of 3-star hotels in port Harcourt. This finding is in line with the findings of Anandan (2011) who posited that that brand positioning has a significant stimulus on patronage. Brand positioning is a critical branding strategy in both product and service marketing. With 93% of patronage be determined by brand positioning, this study can agree with the findings of Bayero(2019) who asserted in their study that that branding has a significant and positive influence on customer patronage in terms brand association which is significantly boosted by how the brands positions both in the mindset of the consumers and also physical location in terms of availability and proximity.

Study Implications

The finding of the study discovered that hotel branding has a positive and significant relationship with customer patronage of 3-star hotels, and that this relationship is further strengthened by branding techniques which the hotel adopts. This has implications both for theory and practice. Theoretically, customer patronage is linked to the consumer behaviour and motivation for preference of a hotel decision over every other available choice confirming the behavioural theory which hotels need to understand so as to provide innovative and satisfying services that will enhance patronage.

In terms of practice, the study emphasizes the need for hotel managers to view branding as a strong marketing strategy used for competitive advantage and also as a tool to differentiate their service offering from their competitors distinctively. Whatever branding strategy they have should be

purposefully coordinated in a method so as to achieve the predetermined organizational objective. This is so because the purpose of every corporate organization is to be productive (efficient and effective) and profitable (competitive advantage) so as to enhance patronage, and this can be achieved through intensive and intentional programmes targeted at improving sales.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the study concluded that a thought-out branding strategy can improve the 3-star hotel patronage in Port Harcourt; and branding can further improve the effect on corporate reputation and image of the hotel. The study therefore recommended that:

- i. Hotel managers should focus predominantly on branding those appeals to their target audience to ensure that their hotels adequately address patronage intentions and patronage actions to enhance customer patronage.
- ii. Managers of hotels should position strategically, the components of branding to improve customer patronage. The managers should consider branding as a powerful strategy for achieving customer patronage in their hotels

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