

## Evaluating Customer Retention: A tool for sustainable hospitality industry in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This paper evaluates customer retention as a tool for sustainable hotel industry in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Ten duly registered hotels with Rivers State tourism board were employed for the study. Primary and secondary sources of data collection were employed to elicit information for the study. The primary sources comprised the use of questionnaire, interviews and telephone survey while the secondary sources involved the use of recorded data in the hotel registry and documented published materials. The result of the study revealed that a total of 171,959 customers patronized the hotels between 2014 and 2018 while 18% of the customers were found to patronize Best Western hotel which was the most patronized hotel in the city. The study also observed that 62% of the customers to the hotels were based outside Port Harcourt city, followed by 22% of the customers who were based within the city while 16% were based outside the country. The study also revealed that 38% of the customers visited the city for the purpose of spending their holidays and 25% visited to attend seminars and meetings respectively. In terms of customer retention, the study observed that 455 of the customers were first timers to the hotels, 36% of the customers revisited while 19% of the customers had the intention to revisit the hotels again showing that the number of customers that were satisfied with their experiences were far below those that were satisfied with the hotels. It in view of this result that the study recommends that the hotel industry in the study area should make effort to advertise its products and services to the public, they should also ensure that they train their staff periodically to acquire knowledge on how to interact with customers while government and private investors should also collaborate to build a sustainable hospitality industry in the area.

**Keywords:** Advocacy, customer retention, hotel industry, hospitality, sustainability.

### Introduction

A company could choose to embrace advocacy by becoming a faithful representative of customers' interests (Amalu et al 2019a). In this approach, a hospitality industry such as firm industry provides customers and prospects with open, honest, and complete information. The firm gives customers' advices to enable them obtain products, even if those products are not the company's products. The honesty of advocacy reflects the reality that customers will learn the

truth anyway. In most cases if a particular hospitality industry distorts the truth, customers will detect the falsehoods and act accordingly.

At the same time if a hospitality industry embraces honesty, it shows evidence of having good products. The market experience has proven that transparency is a sure way to easily earn customer's patronage and purchases. A firm or industry will earn more if it invests significantly in product design, quality and less in pushy promotion or advertising (Amalu et al 2019b). Advocacy is not a way for a company to speak at customers rather, it is a mutual dialogue and a partnership that assumes that if the hospitality industry or company advocates for its customers, those customers will reciprocate with trust, purchases, and enduring loyalty (Enang et al 2016).

According to Tauni, Kham, Durrami and Aslam (2014) patronage and customer retention are the focal point of every business and organizations are trying to satisfy the needs of their customer's through customized product with the aim of retaining the customers and sustaining the long term and flourishing relationships with their customers. Customer retention is the process of being close and having a long and healthy relationship between customers in the hospitality industry with service provider.

In recent times, numerous studies (Kelley, Gilbert, and Mannicom 2013; Amalu et al 2017a and b) report that instead of giving much attention to advertisement and products promotion, it is worthwhile and very significant to adopt strategies that will ensure that the existing customers are retained.

Customer retention has direct influence on extended lifetime values and advantages which is more significant and also creates opportunities for organizations that look for enhancement and prolong business activities and also help organizations that are looking for various means to protect their businesses from market decline which is the consequence of reducing economy (Gee et al 2008). In supporting of this argument, Lombard (2009) affirmed that the hospitality industry is paused by the market to retain customers where the possession of customers is declining.

Customer retention is one of the most viable strategies an organization can adopt to ensure the sustainability of the business. Its main aim is to retain as many customers as possible that lift the industry or business outfits (Mornay Robert-Lombard 2011; Amalu and Ajake 2015). The challenge here is that, most of the members of the hospitality industry usually chase their guest away with poor guest retention initiative or a complete lack of guest retention strategy. This is applicable to the hospitality industry in Port Harcourt where most of the hotels are observed to employed non-professionals who give wrong impression about the services, facilities and amenities in the hotels through bad reception and attendant, which eventually disappoints guests who initially had high expectation from the industry.

More so, most hotels in Port Harcourt are undergoing challenges which can be traced to the management not being interested in making sure that their customers are adequately satisfied. Moreover, most employed persons and

managerial staff lack requisite and managerial skills respectively, which have steadily affected their performance in the hotel industry in the area. Although, studies have been conducted as regards to guest retention in the hospitality industry sustainability across major cities of the world (Gustafsson, Johnson and Roos 2005; Verhoef 2003), however, there is little or no study on customer retention and hotel industry sustainability in port Harcourt which forms the basis of this study which seek to evaluate customer retention as a tool for sustainable hospitality (hotel) industry in the study area.

### **Business sustainability and customer retention**

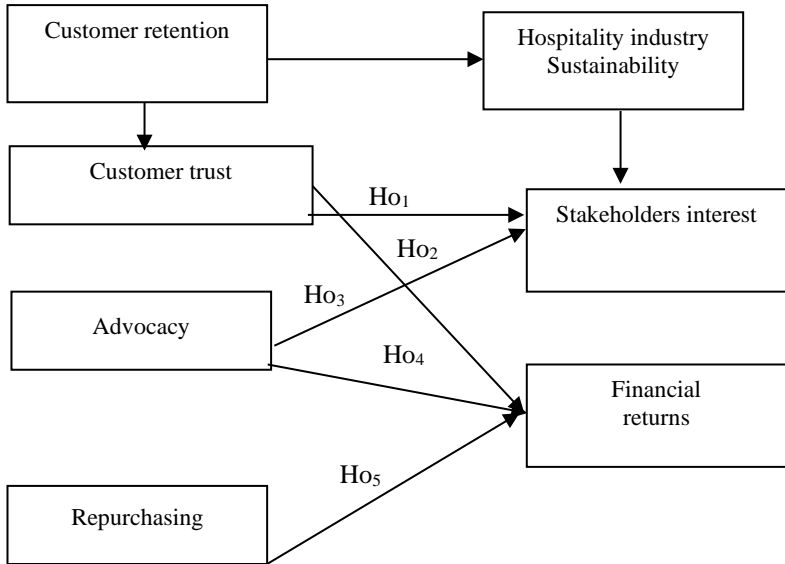
Business sustainability model was adopted for this study. This model shows the operational relationship between customer retention and business sustainability and was first used by Chefiow, Abber and Benabbou (2017). The model presented how guests retention could be examined through customer trust, advocacy and repurchases while hospitality industry sustainability was measured in terms of shareholders' interest and financial returns (figure 1).

However, other variables such as distance between the customer and the industry, needs of choice, purchasing power were not put into consideration, the study considered five variables (customer trust, stakeholders interest, advocacy, repurchasing and financial returns). The model clearly shows the relationship between customer retention and hospitality industry sustainability as illustrated in the diagram below:

Most part of hospitality industry are actively integrating sustainable principles in their business operation by pursuing objectives that go far beyond earlier concern for reputation management (McKinley 2011). The concept of business sustainability has so far grown in recognition and significant due to the fact that majority of business organizations are trying to balance their performance within the economic, environmental and social domains (Gonzalez, Avila-Beltran and Hernandez 2013). Sustainable goal are often broad and to evaluate business performance, organizations must focus on certain aspects of priority (Epstein and Marid-Josic 2001).

In recent times, majority of the hospitality industry and other companies, are becoming sustainable through a conscious and continuing effort to build long-term value for shareholders by providing a conducive business environment and a sustainable business inclined society (Akadiri, Chinyio and Olomolaiye 2012).

Shareholders are usually individual that hold stock in an organization or any hospitality industry. They share ownership with the management of the organization. According to Gillan and Stark (2000), shareholders has the incentive to undertake monitoring and advertising other costly activities in an organizational gain from activities even they don't bear the costs of the process.



**Figure 1: Diagram showing relationship between customer retention and business sustainability**

The shareholders’ theorists of good governance tend to affirm Milton Friedman assertion which according to him, “social responsibility of any business is to enhance or improve business and consider that the main interest of shareholders is the increase in value of their shares which is very significant and the main aim of corporation goals” (Gioia 1999). This conception shows that directors in companies and executives act as middlemen of the shareholders and should effectively use corporation’s resources only for their principal’s benefit. More so, the sole aim of organizational or business activities is concerted on the effort and ability to make and maximize profits.

### **Methodology**

This study is focused on evaluating the relationship between customer retention as a tool for sustainable hospitality industry in Port Harcourt and ensuring the growth of the hospitality industry through increased level of patronage and improved quality of services in the industry. The hotel industry was used to represent the hospitality industry in the study area. In order to successfully conduct this study a total of ten (10) hotels were purposely selected as listed in the table 1 for this study. The choice of the selected hotels was based on popularity and high level of patronage.

**Table 1: Selected hotels for the study (2019)**

	<b>Hotel Names</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	Echelon Heights Hotel.	73, Ken Saro Wiwa (Formerly Stadium) Road, Port Harcourt.
2	Novotel Hotel.	No. 3 Stadium Road, Port Harcourt
3	Swiss Spirit Hotel & Suites.	79 Ken Saro-Wiwa Road, Rumuola, Port Harcourt.
4	Olive Branch Hotel.	No. 5 Oringwo Road, GRA Phase II, Rumuadaolu, Port Harcourt.
5	Habitat Hotel and Resort.	No. 5 Habitat drive off NTA/Choba Road Rumualogu Port Harcourt.
6	Claridon Hotels and Resort.	273/274 Aba Road Rumuadaolu, Port Harcourt
7	Stinson Hotel Limited.	2/3 Hosanna, Close Off Ada George, Port Harcourt.
8	Royal Residence Hotel.	No. 152 Tombia Street, GRA Phase II Port Harcourt.
9	Limpopo Spring Hotel	No. 7 Bosket Road, Aba P/H Expressway, Port Harcourt.
10	Best Western Premier Hotel & Resort.	Aba Expressway Km 16, Opposite Intel camp, Eleme Port Harcourt.

The sample size for the study comprised of customers who were visiting the hotels for the first time, customers who had visited the hotels more than once, the staff of the hotels and the management of the hotels as shown in table 2.

**Table 2: Distribution of the study population**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Customer who visited the hotel for the first time	100
Customer who visited the hotels more than once	100
Staff of the hotels	100
Management of the hotels	100
Total	400

A total of 400 respondents were employed for the study. The study used primary and secondary sources of data collection for the study. The primary sources involved the use of questionnaires and interview sessions with stakeholders and telephone survey of customers who had patronized the hotels in the past while the secondary sources involved the use of recorded information from the hotel registry and other documented information in published articles and textbooks.

The data for the study was presented with the aid of tables, charts and graphs. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as simple percentages, averages, mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics such as students't-test and Analysis of variance.

### **Data presentation**

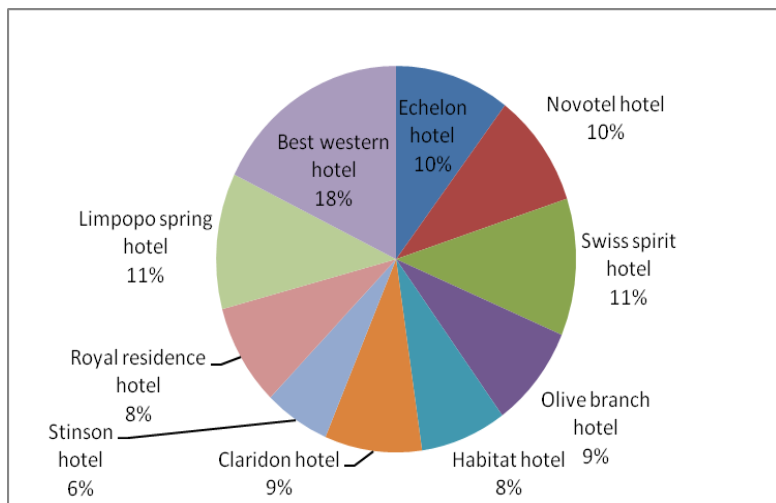
The study examined the number of customer who patronized the hotels within the last five years (2014-2018). Information on table 3 shows that a total of 171,959 customers patronized the hotels between 2014 and 2018. The highest

number of patronage was observed from Best Western hotel with 30,584 customers representing 18% of the overall customers that visited the selected hotels within the duration of time under investigation; this was followed by Swiss spirit hotel with 19732 customers, Limpopo spring hotel with 19,565 customers representing 11% each respectively. This is further shown on figure 2. Figure 2 shows that Best Western hotel had the highest number of patronage, followed by Limpopo spring hotel, Swiss spirit hotel, Novotel hotel, Echelon hotel and that the least patronized hotel was Stinson hotel.

**Table 3: Pattern of patronage of hotels in the study area 2014-2018**

Hotels	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total	%
Echelon hotel	4120	5322	3122	3092	2122	17778	10
Novotel hotel	3233	3144	4651	2978	2478	16484	10
Swiss spirit hotel	4588	6781	3402	2780	2181	19732	11
Olive branch hotel	3244	4355	3004	2231	1890	14724	9
Habitat hotel	3532	3100	2780	2118	1766	13296	8
Claridon hotel	4331	3221	3109	2988	1365	15014	9
Stinson hotel	3122	2411	1970	1523	1101	10127	6
Royal residence hotel	4511	3211	3101	2331	1501	14655	9
Limpopo spring hotel	4367	5233	4211	3652	2102	19565	11
Best western hotel	5448	6880	7322	6322	4612	30584	18
Total	42510	45673	38688	32032	23136	171959	100

Source: Author’s field survey, 2019



Source: Author’s field survey, 2019

**Figure 2: Patronage pattern of hotels in Port Harcourt (2014-2018)**

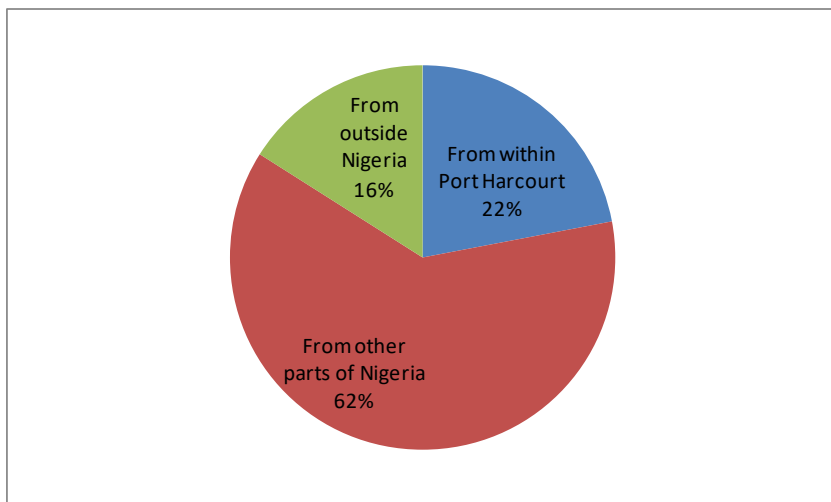
The study also examined the origin of the customer to the hotels. Information on table 4 revealed that 37, 831 customers who patronized the hotel came from within Port Harcourt city while 106,615 customers visited the hotel from other States of Nigeria and 27,513 customers resided outside Nigeria. Figure

3 shows that 22% of the entire customers that patronized the hotels were based within Port Harcourt, 62% of the customers travelled from other States in Nigeria while 16% of the customers were based outside Nigeria.

**Table 4: Origin of customers to the hotels**

Origin of customers	Number of patronage	%
From within Port Harcourt	37,831	22
From other parts of Nigeria	106,615	62
From outside Nigeria	27,513	16
Total	171,959	100

Source: Author's field survey, 2019



Source: Author's field survey, 2019

**Figure 3: Origin of customers who patronized the hotels**

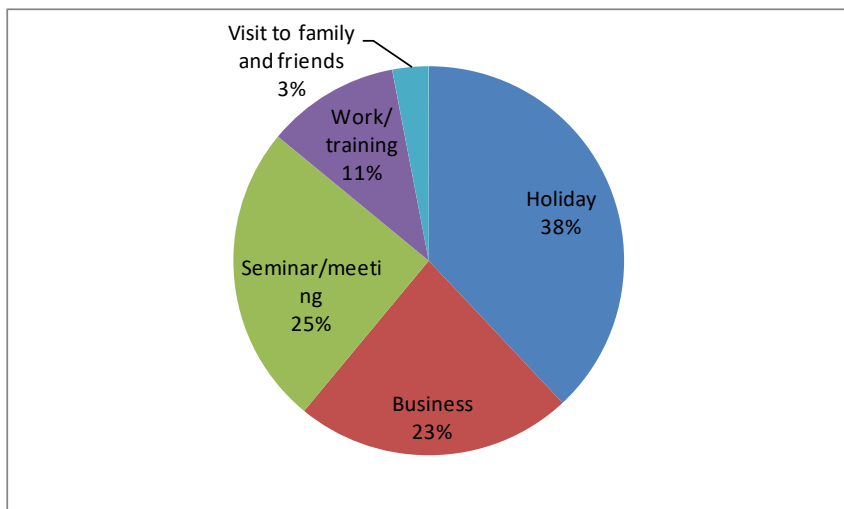
The study also examined the purposes for which the customers visited the city of Port Harcourt. Information on table 5 shows that 65,344 people representing 38% of the overall customers who patronized the hotel to rest and spend holiday, followed by 42,990 who visited for seminars, then 39,551 people who slept in the hotels so as to perfect their business. The least group were 5,159 people who patronized the hotel because they came to see their family members and friends. Figure 4 revealed that 38% of the customers visited to spend their

holiday, 25% visited to attend seminar, 23% visited for their personal business while 3% visited the city to see their family and friends.

**Table 5: Purposes of customers visit to the hotel**

Purpose of visit	Number of customers	%
Holiday	65,344	38
Business	39,551	23
Seminar/meeting	42,990	25
Work/ training	18,915	11
Visit to family and friends	5,159	3
Total	171,959	100

Source: Author’s field survey, 2019



Source: Author’s field survey, 2019

**Figure 4: Reasons for the customers visit to the city**

The study also examined the frequency of customers to the hotels in 2018. Information on table 6 shows that 11,723 people were 1<sup>st</sup> time customers to the hotel in 2018, 9395 customers were 2<sup>nd</sup> timers or customers who had patronized the hotel more than once while 5,028 customers had the intention to revisit the hotel.

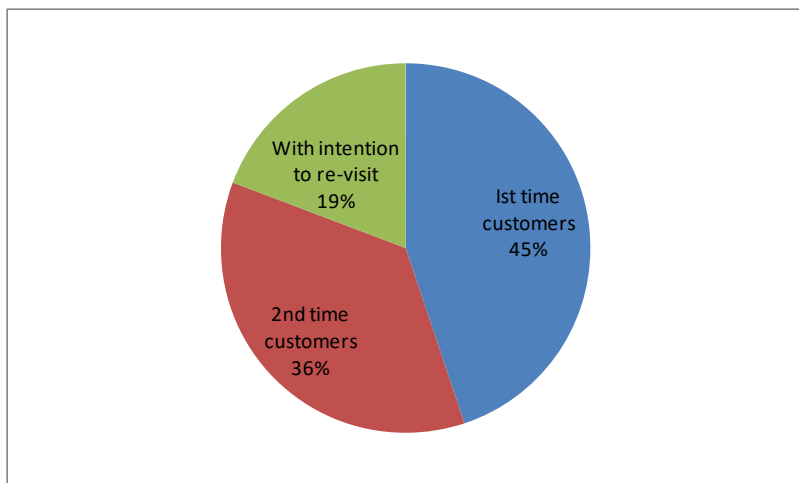


**Table 6: Frequency of customers visit to the hotels (2018)**

Variable	1 <sup>st</sup> time customer*	2 <sup>nd</sup> time customer*	With intention to re-visit**
Echelon hotel	1047	1075	511
Novotel hotel	1604	874	309
Swiss spirit hotel	1009	1172	444
Olive branch hotel	1005	885	301
Habitat hotel	909	857	412
Claridon hotel	803	562	311
Stinson hotel	611	490	202
Royal residence hotel	707	794	459
Limpopo spring hotel	1021	1081	770
Best Western hotel	3007	1605	1309
Total	11,723	9,395	5,028

Source: \*Hotel registry, 2019 \*\*Author's telephone survey, 2019

Information on figure 5 revealed that out of the entire customers that patronized the hotels in 2018, 45% were 1<sup>st</sup> timers, 36% were 2<sup>nd</sup> timers while 19% out of all the customers had intention to revisit the hotels.

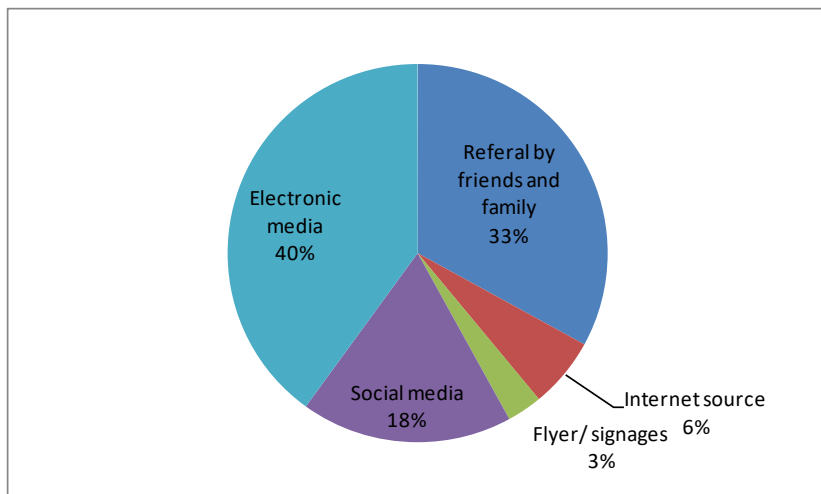


Source: Hotel registry and author's telephone survey, 2019

**Figure 5: Pattern of customers' patronage of hotels (2018)**

The study also examined the medium of awareness of the customers to the hotels. Figure 6 reveals that 40% of the entire customers that patronized the hotel got to know about the hotel through the electronic media, followed by customers who got to know about the hotel through referral by friends and family members. The least means awareness was recorded by those who knew about the hotel

through sign posts or flyers with 3% and closely followed by those who knew the hotel through the internet with 6% of the entire customers.



Source: Author’s field survey, 2019

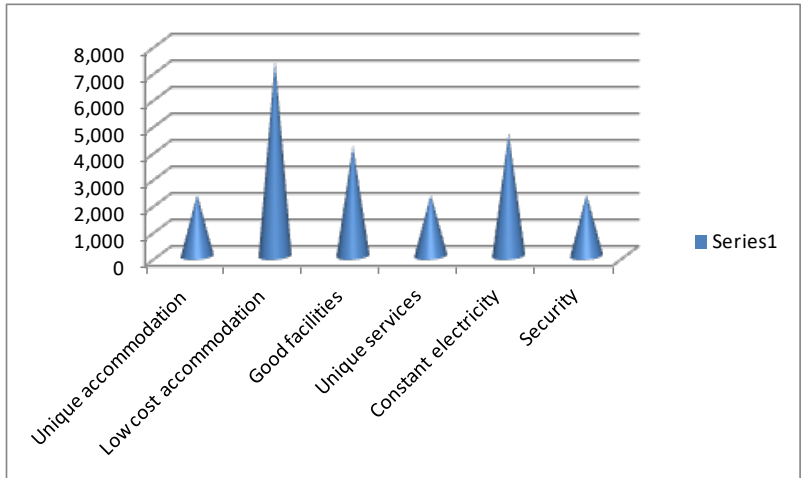
**Figure 6: medium of awareness of the hotels**

The study also investigate to know what were the things that attracted customers to the hotels, information on table 7 reveals that 32% of the customers patronized the hotels because of low cost of their accommodation facility, followed by those who were attracted by the constant electricity supply in the hotels, while the least group were customers who patronized the hotel because of their unique and standard accommodation facility, unique and standard services and security availability with 10% response each. This information was further illustrated in figure 7.

**Table 7: major factors of attraction to customers (2018)**

Variable	Customers	%
Unique accommodation	2,314	10
Low cost accommodation	7,404	32
Good facilities	4,164	18
Unique services	2,313	10
Constant electricity	4,627	20
Security	2,314	10
Total	23,136	100

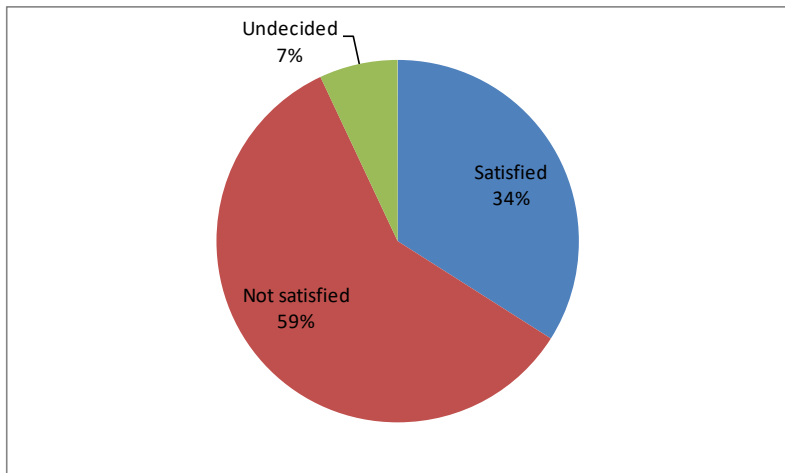
Source: Author’s field survey, 2019



Source: Author's field survey, 2019

**Figure 7: Notable reasons for patronizing the hotels**

The study also examined the level of satisfaction of the visitors to the hotels. Information on figure 8 revealed that 59% of the entire customers were not satisfied with their experience in the hotel, 34% of the entire customers were satisfied while 7% of the customers to the hotels remained undecided.

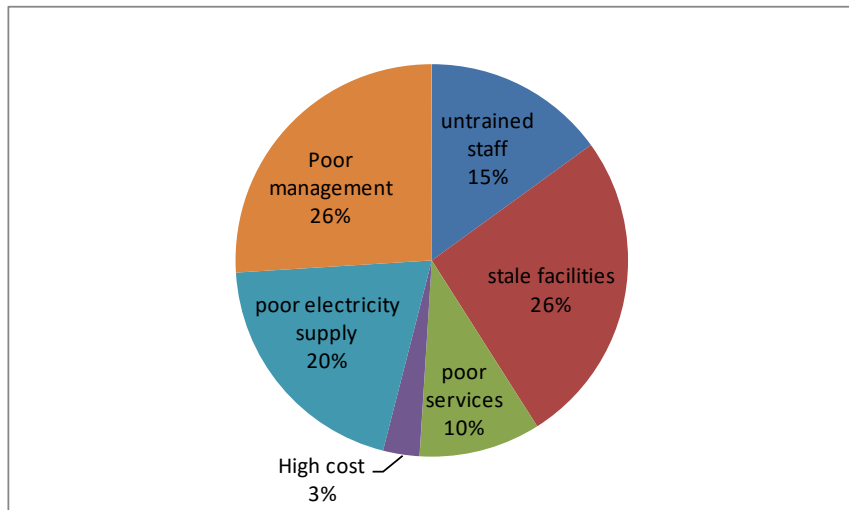


Source: Author's telephone survey, 2019

**Figure 8: Assessment of customers' level of satisfaction with the hotels**

The study also examined the challenges observed by the customers with the hotels visited. Information on figure 9 revealed that 26% of the entire customers

were of the opinion that the major challenge is poor management of the hotel, stale facilities in the hotel while least observed challenge was high cost of items in the hotels.



Source: Author's telephone survey, 2019

**Figure 9: Major challenges observed by customers**

### **Discussion of findings and data analysis**

The study which aimed at evaluating customer retention in hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria revealed that a total of 171,959 customers patronized ten selected most popular hotels in the city of Port Harcourt and that the greatest number of the customers patronized Best Western hotel with 18% of the overall customers between 2014 and 2018.

The study observed that 62% of the customers who patronized the hotels were based in other states or cities outside Port Harcourt, followed by 22% of the customers who were based within the city of Port Harcourt while 16% of the entire customers were based outside the country. This is in line with the findings of Amalu et al (2019); Bebchuk and Fried (2004) who emphasized that distance and comfort plays a major role in determining choice of hospitality industry facility to be patronized.

The study also revealed that 38% of the customers who visited the hotels did so in order to spend their holidays, followed by those who attended seminars and meetings with 25% level of patronage while 3% of the customers went around the city in order to visit their families and friends. This is in line with the findings of Akadiri et al 2012; Amalu and Ajake 2015 who pointed out that holidaying stands as the unique purpose of major travels and arrivals in most tourists' destinations across the world.

The study also observed that 45% of the customers were first timers, 36% were customers who had patronized the hotel in the past or more than once while 19% of the customers declared their intentions to patronize the hotel again whenever the opportunity arises. This is in line with the findings of Chok (2010); Enang et al (2016) who pointed out that in most hospitality industry facilities, that first time customers are usually more in number than customers who are re-visiting the facility due to the fact that most tourist' also want to satisfy their curiosity and usually try to use every possible time and opportunity to explore new grounds.

The study also observed that the highest utilized means of awareness of the hotel by the customers was through the electronic media and recommendation (referral) by family and friends. This is in line with the findings by Amalu et al (2017a and b); Drexhage and Murphy (2010) who posit that the electronic media and personal referrals are one of the most utilized marketing strategies as people tend to be more comfortable when someone gives them some assurance about a yet to be visited hospitality facility.

The study also observed that most of the customers were attracted to the hotels because of the availability of low cost accommodation and good modern facilities. Consequently, the study found that 59% of the customers were not satisfied with their experiences in the hotels, 34% of the customers were satisfied while 7% were undecided. This is in line with the findings of Bebachuk and fried (2004); Amalu et al (2019a) who highlighted that most at times people are usually not satisfied because the wants of human beings are always insatiable.

Finally, the study observed that the major problems with the hotels were poor management, stale facilities and poor electricity supply with a response level of 26%, 26% and 20% respectively while the least challenge were observed from those who complained of high cost of the facilities.

## **Conclusion**

The study evaluates the customer retention as a tool for sustainable hospitality industry in Port Harcourt. The study realized that customer retention is one of the major catalysts that can lead to the survival of the hotel industry in any tourists' destination as explained by the business sustainability model. This implies that if customers' retention strategies are put in place, it will boost business sustainability in the hotel industry. Apart from the issue of stale facilities and poor services, the study observed that poor management was a key factor that affected the growth of the hotel industry. On this ground the study concludes that the customer retention is vital for business sustainability and survival of the hotel industry. Based on these findings, the following recommendations were made;

- In order to ensure the sustainability of the hotel industry, effort must be put in place to enhance the growth of customer retention in the industry
- The hotel industry must ensure that their products and services are in line with customers' preference as this would help to create the needed satisfaction and at the same time ensure the sustainability of the industry

- The hotel industry should work hard to improve shareholders interest so as to strengthen the industry capital base and at the same time ensure the sustainability of the hotel industry
- The hotel industry must provide an effective mechanism that would enable the customers to be vested with the needed information while their stay in the hotel. This would help provide an effective feedback mechanism that would survive the industry at the long run.

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