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PANDEMIC MARKETING STRATEGIES AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF SMEs

Acee-Eke, Beatrice Chinyere, Ph.D
Bursary Department, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria

Ogonu, Gibson Chituru, Ph.D
Marketing Department, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt

ABSTRACT
The study examined pandemic marketing strategies and customer patronage of SMEs. The study adopted the correlational research design. A sample of 660 respondents selected from 330 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), out of the 1,200 registered enterprises operating in Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria participated in the study. A 40-item 2 marketing professionals or experts validated 4-point scale instrument titled "Pandemic Marketing Strategies and Customer Patronage Inventory" (PMSCPI) with a reliability coefficient of 0.841 was used to elicit data analyzed using regression analysis. The study revealed that: innovation, knowledge, and empathy statistically and significantly contributed 53.7%, 61.2%, and 32.9% respectively to customer loyalty of SMEs. Again innovation, knowledge, and empathy statistically and significantly contributed 9.9%, 10.7%, and 6.3% respectively to customer retention of SMEs. Thus, among the recommendations was that: SMEs should adopt innovations (such as virtual advertising, home delivery, and shopping apps) as strategies for ensuring that their products and services reach, satisfy and influence their target customers continued loyalty and retention. Alongside, SMEs are encouraged to timely and humanely engage, communicate, and meet the changing customer needs for improved loyalty and retention.
Keywords: *pandemic marketing strategies, customer patronage, SMEs, Port Harcourt metropolis.*

INTRODUCTION

Businesses and organizations operate in environments susceptible to activities, crisis and events that significantly ignite intense changes that could enhance, retard, stifle or shrink their sales, patronage, and profitability including transforming their business operational strategies. As such an emergency or crisis situation (as the COVID-19 Pandemic) can affect organizations (i.e. small, medium and big) through the disruption of operations, plans, supply chain, and modus operandi based on the ensuing protocols (as restrictions, closures, quarantines etc.), measures and reactions for tackling a pandemic. Motti (2020) sees COVID-19 as a coronary disease and fast spreading global invasive pandemic that influences individuals, organizations, and Governments welfare, routine and functions respectively, thereby, compelling them to responsively re-strategizing and altering their pattern for maneuvering and navigating an environment (like business) based on the emerging experiences and challenges on what is termed as the "new normal" in the society.

In specificity, businesses (manufacturing firms) amid a pandemic are also re-strategizing, rebuilding and redesigning all strategies, ideas or procedures through stocking products and

delivering services in conformity with the trends (i.e. new normal) in order to thrive, survive and continually positioned to maintaining their trademark even during a catastrophic and economic repellant situation (as COVID-19). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are businesses (as services, logistics, trading, etc.) with limited capital base, small workforce, and little or no share base but with the capacity to provide jobs, goods and services that compete with foreign products in the market (Rijkers, 2014). The Central Bank of Nigeria defines SMEs based on criteria as asset base (between 5 to 500 million naira) and staff strength (between 11 and 100 employees) (CBN, 2010). This leaves SMEs with minor holding and lean capital base businesses often requiring Governments intervention programmes as financing, trainings, and internship for acquiring the needed capacity and knowledge for growth and survival (Petrakis & Kostis, 2012).

Agwu and Emeti (2014) view SMEs as the vehicle for the conglomeration of labour intensive and capital saving entrepreneurial prospects and ventures for the intent of alleviating poverty and creating jobs towards the economic empowerment and equitable development of the nation's economy. Also, SMEs provides the means for reducing income disparities and developing pool of skilled and semi-skilled workers discharging services in support of industrial and economic growth. Nkwor-Azariah and Nkwor (2016) states that "support" is a vital performance tool aiding SMEs fronted with poor infrastructure (like epileptic power, rising cost of good internet service, logistics, etc.), uncertain access to growth finance, and other challenges to effectively navigate the business environment whilst retaining their brand loyalty and customer patronage.

Onyinyechukwu (2020) reviewed the National Bureau of Statistics report of 2010, which stated that SME sector is strategically placed to: employ up to 80 percent of jobs, increase per capita income, value addition to raw materials supply, expand export earnings, boost capacity utilization in vital industries, and unlock massive economic and GDP growth in Nigeria. In view of this, it positions SMEs as the drivers of economic and industrial transformation in the country, state, and locality. Despite this, the relatively low capacity and poor capital base are challenges and it has impacted their savings and confined cash flows to be plowed back into the business as reinvented capital, labour cost and operating expenses. In the light of this, Onyinyechukwu (2020) states SMEs are literally engaged in a capital and capacity survival debacle, and as such any emergency or crisis (like pandemic) that alters this operational routine of SMEs throws up more intense challenges that could worsen the survival fiasco and eventually lead to their shutting out of businesses.

Consequently, the pandemic (COVID-19) prompted the adoption of impulsive and artificial measures like lockdown, market shutdown, and border closure. These measures necessitated the restriction of movement of goods and services, people etc. causing economic shock that affected SMEs from playing their role in the economy as well as sustain livelihood of customers with changing consumption pattern and consumer buying behaviour (Acee-Eke & Ogonu, 2020). The fallout of these domestic and international restrictions severally affected the operations and obstructed the trade of SMEs which require physical movement of goods and services for their optimal performance, productivity and sustainability.

Furthermore, the realities of the prevailing situation, underscores the need for SMEs to adopt innovative strategies as virtual or online businesses, as an essential tool for continued

performance, survival, profitability, in other to navigate the challenging post-pandemic business climate that would most likely linger longer than expected. Onyinyechukwu (2020) emphasized that post-COVID-19 recovery priorities in every aspect of the business value-chain must be centred on revitalizing the enterprises. In order to strategically integrate pandemic-induced marketing strategies that are geared towards meeting the obviously anticipated customer boundless changing needs from the hitherto normal to the new normal for essential products (groceries, foods, sanitizers, face masks, soap) offer by SMEs that customers daily patronizes, there is need for new strategies and adjustments to put the firms in right footing (Acee-Eke & Ogonu, 2020).

Customer patronage provides the basis for a stable and growing market share. According to Cross et al (1988), the cost of winning customers is six times as much as to retain existing ones. Customer patronage entails the level of consent or support expressed in order to stir customer's exhibition of repurchase or repeat intention and satisfaction towards using a brand or product (Anetoh & Moguluwa, 2018). The extent of patronage is stimulated by customer's behaviourial, attitudinal and psychological commitment and willingness to incur extra cost towards repurchasing a brand or product amidst other alternatives (Perutkova & Parsa, 2010). Ayodele (2016) reiterates customer patronage is measured by the number of brands purchased, ratio of purchases, and future purchase intention exhibited towards a brand even in the midst of change in quality and price. According to Kotler (2007), consumers have varying degree of patronage to specific products and services. Also, customer patronage inspires consumer loyalty and retention as conceptualized in this study, to expectedly help SMEs build their brand or products, grow their market share, promptly deliver services, and create marketing improvement strategies. Similarly, Nyakweba and Wesonga (2015) suggest consumers are better grouped into four according to their patronage status:

- Switchers – these are consumers who do not show any loyalty to any firm or service provider.
- Shifting patrons – are consumers who shift from one firm or service provide to the other.
- Split patrons – these are consumer loyal to more than one firm or service provider.
- Hard core patrons – those who purchase products and services from a particular firm or service provider.

Drawing from the view of James (2020), marketing is at the heart of strategies for attaining business goals and growth. James (2020) view marketing strategy as a business overall strategic plan for getting the interest of potential consumers and turning them into loyal customers of the products or services provided by such businesses (SMEs). Also, the adoption of proactive marketing strategies would enhance swift response to complaints, trustworthiness, adaptability, innovativeness, reasonable charges and friendliness of staff promptly delivering their products and services that enhances their value and competitive advantage (Aregbeyen, 2011). Adach (2020) states marketing strategies is a time sensitive issue requiring businesses to understand ways to re-evaluate their strategies and activate digital platforms for display and delivery of their products and services in a pandemic (as COVID-19) where businesses are on restrictions and

lockdown. Omowunmi and Idowu (2020) opine SMEs needs to resiliently and swiftly re-invent their strategies in crisis period or be stifled out of the market.

Furthermore, the restrictions on the physical operation and conduct of businesses in a pandemic stirred the innovative adoption and use of technological or online platforms as WhatsApp, Instagram, mobile shopping devices or apps for advertising and purchase products (Meyer, 2020). In the view of Akintemi, (2020) SMEs should intensified integration of new strategies and techniques for efficient delivering of goods and services towards wining customers' patronage through loyalty and retention for effective business growth, profitability and sustainability. There is no doubt therefore, that covid 19 has disrupted the global economy and by extension Nigeria economy as a result of its direct impact on businesses.

Now that business survival is the spotlight in a pandemic period as we have world over, this study expects SMEs to queue behind pandemic marketing strategies to ensuring that their businesses are in compliance with the post-covid 19 way of doing business. It is against this backdrop that we are joining in the discourse to believe that pandemic marketing strategies have effect on customer patronage of SMEs

Statement of the Problem

SMEs are established for survival based on the patronage (via sales) of its products and services by customers in order to grow their limited capital base, else they would become insolvent and unable to sustain in a competitive business environment. In particular, SMEs are challenged by faulty access to financial incentives which suffices as the main stimulus package driving the supposedly great strategies and exemplary leadership possessed by SMEs operators (**Akintemi, 2020**). Thus, limited capital base could affect SMEs proactively synthesizing openings for re-designing services and re-stocking products innovatively and excellently delivered in line with pandemic induced ingenious marketing strategies to stir customers reminiscence, loyalty, retention and repurchase, which are among the business (SMEs) growth and sustainability parameters.

Although, SMEs engaged in manufacturing, trading, and processing, it have been gasping for breath based on challenges (paucity of funds, non-disbursement or diversion of stimulus packages) that are hindering their performance (Agwu, 2014), and crystallizing to their oblivion or extinction of about 834 enterprises permanently closed in Rivers State between 2009 and 2014 (Josiah, Ozele & Agbo, 2016) before the covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic requires SMEs ingenuity to new strategies (innovation, knowledge, empathy) for their survival, profitability, and sustainability. Instructively, a carefully-cultivated marketing strategy is fundamentally rooted in an enterprises value proposition, increased patronage and competitive advantage. Yet, fund could constrain businesses from breaking-even amidst the high volatile business environment fraught with uncertain financial incentive, high operating costs, and lack of stimulus package that chokes and affects survival of many SMEs that are heavily depending on increased customer patronage (loyalty and retention) of their services and products especially in a pandemic (COVID-19).

Furthermore, the restricted and closed work guidelines during crisis and pandemic requires SMEs to reprioritize and discover captivating marketing strategies such as innovation, knowledge and consumer empathy (Adach, 2020). That can profitably and competitively position brands store or outlets (i.e. SMEs) capably disposed to innovatively tackle complexities and challenges for achieving the expansion (i.e. size and capital), viability and continued operation of SMEs during and beyond the COVID-19 era. Previous studies focused on the performance status of small and medium scale enterprises in Rivers State (Nkwor-Azariah & Nkwor, 2016**),** Omowunmi and Idowu (2020) **examined t**he marketing perspectives for reinventing businesses in a post COVID-19. However, not much study has been directed towards integrating pandemic responsive marketing strategies for the survival of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It is based on this premise that this study examined pandemic marketing strategies and customer patronage of SMEs.

Specifically, the purposes of this study were to determine:

1. the contribution of innovation to customer loyalty of SMEs.
2. the contribution of innovation to customer retention of SMEs.
3. the contribution of knowledge to customer loyalty of SMEs.
4. the contribution of knowledge to customer retention of SMEs.
5. the contribution of empathy to customer loyalty of SMEs.
6. the contribution of empathy to customer retention of SMEs.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the contribution of innovation to customer loyalty of SMEs?
2. What is the contribution of innovation to customer retention of SMEs?
3. What is the contribution of knowledge to customer loyalty of SMEs?
4. What is the contribution of knowledge to customer retention of SMEs?
5. What is the contribution of empathy to customer loyalty of SMEs?
6. What is the contribution of empathy to customer retention of SMEs?

Fig. 1.1: Conceptual Framework

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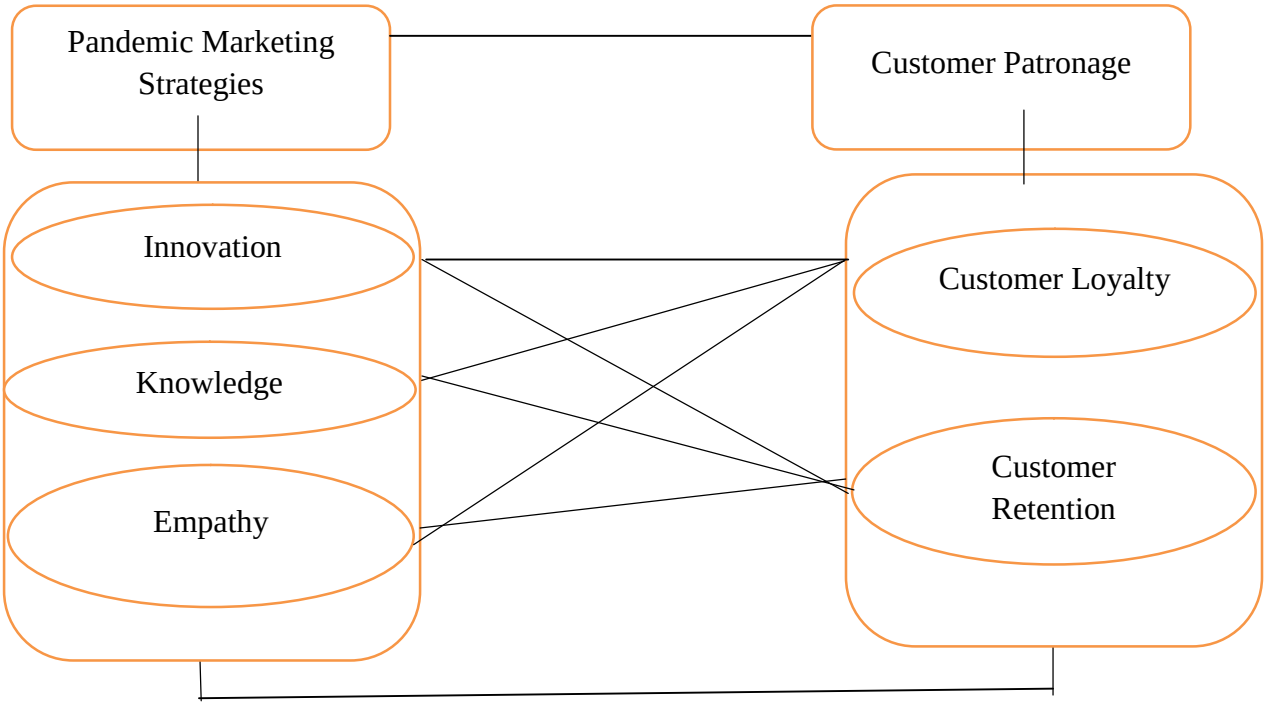

Fig. 1: Conceptual Model of Pandemic Marketing Strategies and Customer Patronage
Source: Researcher's Review of Related Literature (2020)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was a quantitative research that adopted the correctional research design. Nwankwo (2013) stated that the correlational research establishes the relationship between two or more variables in order to determine the effect of the independent variable (i.e. pandemic marketing strategies) on the dependent variable (i.e. customer patronage). In this study the independent variable with dimensions (innovation, knowledge and consumer empathy) was examined with the dependent variable with measures (consumer loyalty and consumer retention).

Study Area

This study was specifically carried out in mainly in Port Harcourt (comprising Port Harcourt City and Obio-Akpor Local Government Areaa), Rivers State (South-South Nigeria) where the 1,200 registered Enterprises (otherwise SMEs) are operating and providing services to the population

of 157,791,115 persons (Josiah *et al*., 2016; Rivers State Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2019).

Population for the Study

The population for the study comprised all the proprietors and staff in all the SMEs operating in Port Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 660 respondents or staff from 330 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) participated in the study. The study adopted a three phase multistage sampling technique. Firstly, stratified sampling technique was used in the delimitation of Port Harcourt into twenty-two (22) strata classification via: Borokiri, Town/Old GRA, Marine Base, Rumuola-Rumuokwuota, Mgbuoba, Choba, D/Line, Ogbunabali, Mile 1, Mile 2, Mile 3, Rumuolumeni, Rumueme, New GRA, Rumuomasi, Elekahia, Rumuokoro, Agip, Olu Obasanjo, Rumuogba, Elelenwo, and Woji strata. In the second phase, random sampling technique was used in the selection of fifteen (15) SMEs (manufacturing, trading, processing, skilled and unskilled servicing, etc. outlets or firms) from each of the 22 strata classification totaling to 330 SMEs from this exercise. Thirdly, purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of 2 staff or respondent from each of the 330 SMEs operating in the 22 strata classification in the study area. This constituted a sample of 660 respondents or staff (comprising 2 staff from each of the 330 SMEs selected from each of the 22 strata classification of the Port Harcourt) that was used for the study.

Instrumentation

The study sourced both primary and secondary data. The primary data was sourced from a self-structured 40-item instrument titled "Pandemic Marketing Strategies and Customer Patronage Inventory" (PMSCPI). The PMSCPI instrument was patterned after a four point rating scale of "Very High Contribution" (VHC, 4 Points), "High Contribution" (HC, 3 Points), "Low Contribution" (LC, 2 Points), and "Very Low Contribution" (VLI, 1 Point). Furthermore, the PMSCPI instrument consists of three sections. Section A elicited the demographics of the respondents (i.e. staff of SMEs), Section B comprised of the 24 items variables on pandemic marketing strategies (via 8 each for innovation, knowledge, and customer empathy), while Section C comprised 16 items on customer patronage (via 8 each for customer loyalty and customer retention). Furthermore, the secondary data was sourced from text books, articles, manuals, documents, magazines, dictionaries, and other publications.

Validation of Instrument

The face and content validity of the PMSCPI instrument was determined by two (2) experts (comprising. 1 Marketer in University of Port Harcourt, and the other 1 from Ignatius Ajuru University of Education). These validates prior to the commencement of their validation, were presented with the topic, objectives and research questions of this study for their comments, suggestions, and views towards improving the PMSCPI instrument validity.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability or internal consistency of the PMSCPI instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha (r_a) method. In doing this 50 copies of the PMSCPI instrument was administered to 50 staff of SMEs in Aba, Abia State (which was not used for the study). Then 50 copies of the

PMSCPI instrument were administered to the respondents and upon completion was retrieved, coded and analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha (r_a) method to obtain a reliability coefficient of .841, which necessitated using the PMSCPI instrument for administration.

Method of Data Collection

The face-to-face direct delivery technique was adopted by the researcher and three research assistants for the administration of the PMSCPI instrument to all the 660 respondents. Out of the 660 copies of the PMSCPI instrument administered to the respondents or staff of SMEs, only 608 copies (representing approximately 92% return rate) were validly retrieved and used for the analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data was scored, tabulated, coded, and analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis to answer the research questions through the SPSS 23.0.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the contribution of innovation to customer loyalty of SMEs?

Table 1: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of innovation to customer loyalty of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	1635.094	1	1635.094	246.039	.000[b]	S
Residual	3542.805	606	6.646			
Total	5662.367	607				
Multiple R (r_p) =.537[a]						
R. Square (r^2) = .280						
Adjusted R^2= .288						
Standard Error of Estimate =2.57792						

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty
b. Predictors: (Constant), Innovation

Table 1 shows that the use of innovation to predict the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (rp) of 0.537 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.280. This also shows that F is 246.039 which is significant at $P < 0.05$ (i.e. p-value is less than 0.05). This shows that innovation contributed or accounted for 53.7 percent of the variance in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt. In other words, approximately 54% of the variance in the change in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This implies that 46% of the variation in the customer loyalty in SMEs cannot be explained by the variables of innovation alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 2: What is the contribution of innovation to customer retention of SMEs?

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of innovation to customer retention of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	545.176	1	545.176	66.275	.000[b]	S
Residual	4984.903	606	8.226			
Total	5530.079	607				
Multiple R (r_p) =.314[a]						
R. Square (r^2) = .099						
Adjusted R^2= .097						
Standard Error of Estimate =2.86809						

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Retention
b. Predictors: (Constant), Innovation

Table 2 shows that the innovation to predict the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (rp) of 0.314 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.099. This also shows that F is 66.275 which is significant at $P < 0.05$ (i.e. p-value is less than 0.05). This shows that innovation accounted for 9.9 percent of the variance in customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 10% of the variance in the change in customer retention of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 90% of the variation in the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of innovation alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 3: What is the contribution of knowledge on customer loyalty of SMEs?

Table 3: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of knowledge to customer loyalty of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	2119.562	1	2119.562	362.562	.000[b]	S
Residual	3542.805	606	5.846			
Total	5662.367	607				
Multiple R (r_p) =.612[a]						
R. Square (r^2) = .374						
Adjusted R^2= .373						
Standard Error of Estimate =2.41789						

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty
b. Predictors: (Constant), Knowledge

Table 3 shows that the use of knowledge to predict the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (rp) of 0.612 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.374. This also shows that F is 362.562 which is significant at

P < 0.05 (i.e. p-value is less than 0.05). This shows that knowledge accounted for 61.2 percent of the variance in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 61% of the variance in the change in customer loyalty of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 39% of the variation in the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of knowledge alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 4: What is the contribution of knowledge to customer retention of SMEs?

Table 4: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of knowledge to customer retention of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	589.124	1	589.124	72.255	.000[b]	S
Residual	4940.955	606	8.153			
Total	5530.079	607				
Multiple R (r_p) =.326[a]						
R. Square (r^2) = .107						
Adjusted R^2= .105						
Standard Error of Estimate =2.85541						

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Retention
b. Predictors: (Constant), Knowledge

Table 4 shows that the use of knowledge to predict the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (rp) of 0.326 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.107. This also shows that F is 72.255 which is significant at P < 0.05 (i.e. p-value is less than 0.05). This shows that knowledge accounted for 10.7 percent of the variance in customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 11% of the variance in the change in customer retention of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 89% of the variation in the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of knowledge alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 5: What is the contribution of empathy to consumer loyalty of SMEs?

Table 5: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of empathy to customer loyalty of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	1863.601	1	1863.601	297.292	.000[b]	S
Residual	3798.765	606	6.269			
Total	5662.367	607				

Multiple R (r_p) =.574[a]
R. Square (r^2) = .329
Adjusted R^2= .328
Standard Error of Estimate =2.50372

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty
b. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy

Table 5 shows that the use of empathy to predict the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (rp) of 0.574 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.329. This also shows that F is 297.292 which is significant at $P < 0.05$ (i.e. p-value is less than 0.05). This shows that empathy accounted for 32.9 percent of the variance in customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 33% of the variance in the change in customer loyalty of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 67% of the variation in the customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of empathy alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Research Question 6: What is the contribution of empathy to customer retention of SMEs?

Table 6: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis on the contribution of empathy to customer retention of SMEs

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square	F. Ratio	P-value	Remark
Regression	350.507	1	350.507	41.009	.000[b]	S
Residual	5179.572	606	8.547			
Total	5530.079	607				

Multiple R (r_p) =.252[a]
R. Square (r^2) = .063
Adjusted R^2= .062
Standard Error of Estimate =2.92355

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Retention
b. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy

Table 6 shows that the use of empathy to predict the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria yielded a coefficient of multiple regression R (rp) of 0.252 and multiple regression square (R^2) of 0.063. This also shows that F is 41.009 which is significant at $P < 0.05$ (i.e. p-value is less than 0.05). This shows that empathy accounted for 6.3 percent of the variance in customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. In other words, approximately 6% of the variance in the change in customer retention of SMEs can be explained by pulling the different variables together. This means that 94% of the variation in the customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt cannot be explained by the variables of empathy alone. Thus, there must be other variables.

Discussion of Findings

The result in Table 1 revealed that innovation statistically and significantly contributed to customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is in agreement with Gursoy and Chi (2020) that a pandemic (like COVID-19) calls for the adoption of innovation (like digital marketing, shopping apps, etc.) in the service delivery concepts, ideas or techniques in order for businesses to meet with the customers changing inclinations, leanings, demands and purchases or buying behaviours of goods and services. Corroborating this view, Pesach (2020) stated that crisis or pandemic provides opportunities for the adoption of persuasive, innovative, and effective marketing strategies or approaches that can instill customers continued loyalty, purchase and patronage which would enhance the growth and performance of businesses.

The result in Table 2 revealed that innovation statistically and significantly contributed to customer retention in SMEs of Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding conforms to the views of Adach (2020) that innovation (via improved branding, flexible shopping and timely delivery) stems as an appealing marketing strategy that would edify and fortify customers retaining a brand or product and service. This is capable of improving the sales, profit, capital base and performance of SMEs that are confronted with survival strategies in and post-pandemic era.

The result in Table 3 revealed that knowledge statistically and significantly contributed to customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is consistent with earlier findings by Kalsi (2020**)** that knowledge of the need for flexibility, and shifting priorities suffices as the requisite marketing plan, approach and strategy and an indication of marketers and business operators creativity or ingenuity in meeting customers changing purchasing pattern, behaviours and expectations during crisis or pandemic situation is a vital in showing. Meyer (2020) assert that this marketing strategies would help businesses (like SMEs) to ensure their brand, product and services reaches their target clients or customers whose dedication or loyalty and patronage would increase SMEs performance, profitability and productivity whilst navigating through crisis or pandemic period.

The result in Table 4 revealed that knowledge statistically and significantly contributed to customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding aligns with the position of Pesach (2020) that awareness or familiarity with customer's crisis-induced purchasing pattern of products and services, is a demonstration of marketers and businesses commitment to retaining their customers and increased profiteering thereby, surmounting challenges that are tantamount to putting them out of business during and after COVID-19.

The result in Table 5 revealed that empathy statistically and significantly contributed to customer loyalty of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is in agreement with earlier findings by Onyinyechukwu (2020) that aligning towards customer empathy (via honesty, uprightness, educative, etc.) is a proficient post-COVID-19 recovery marketing strategies that positions SMEs strengthened in all the phase of the business value-chain including making customers to always put their trust in the brand, product and service offered or marketed by SMEs. This would position SMEs profitable and competitive while navigating business stifling

situations (like COVID-19 pandemic) with plans to meet customers changing needs and purchases.

The result in Table 6 revealed that empathy statistically and significantly contributed to customer retention of SMEs in Port Harcourt Rivers State Nigeria. This finding is consistent with Rumack (2020) that customer empathy (via friendly message, humane appeal, sharing credible tips, offering rebates, prompt response to complaints, etc.) is a mindful, persuasive, smart, and proactive marketing strategies or measures engaged by SMEs in order to competitively and successfully navigating a crisis or pandemic situation (like COVID-19) whilst delivering services that would facilitate customer retention or repeat purchase.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that SMEs adoption of marketing strategies (dimensioned via: innovation, knowledge and customer empathy) contributed to customer patronage (measured via customer loyalty and customer retention). This was through the hands-on information or specifics on customers changing needs (like households, decontaminators, health kits/materials, groceries, etc.) in order to improve SMEs productivity and survival in the Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, and global business environment impacted by a pandemic.

Furthermore, SMEs or small businesses adoption of resilience, agile and flexible marketing strategies suffices as a way of retaining their customers whose loyalty would expand the marketing and advertising threshold of products and services that would help businesses effectively, profitably and competitively adjust during crisis or pandemic. Therefore, marketing strategies was found to facilitate SMEs maintenance of customer patronage while navigating a pandemic (like COVID-19) that have stifled, choked or disrupted businesses (like SMEs) including their immense roles in the manpower development, and stimulating the economy and export growth of a state (like Rivers State), and nation (like Nigeria).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SMEs should adopt innovations (such as virtual advertising, home delivery, and shopping apps) as tactics for ensuring that their products and services reach, satisfy and influence their target customers continued loyalty and patronage.
2. Government should assist SMEs discover modern and captivating innovations of delivering products and services in a way that it meets their goal of retaining and growing their customer base.
3. Operators of SMEs should improve their knowledge of understanding, predicting and quickly switching and stocking the changing needs and purchasing patterns of customers in order to enhance their profit and survival during pandemic.
4. SMEs are encouraged to increase their understanding and meeting customers changing purchasing and consumption behaviour in order to overcome the reduced sales and other challenges to businesses patronage and profitability during the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. Businesses should provide opportunities for regularly interacting, communication, reaching out, and winning customer loyalty as a support towards navigating the pressure and challenges caused by crisis or pandemic.
6. SMEs are encouraged to timely and humanely engage, communicate and meet the changing customer needs for improved loyalty and retention.

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