

## ROLE OF MECHANIC CLUES IN HEALTHCARE CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Mechanic clues create first impressions that have a great impact on the expectations of the customer about the kind of service being offered by the organization. It is on this premise, that this study examined the roles of mechanic clues in healthcare customer loyalty. The specific objectives of this study were to investigate whether mechanic clues of health care service influence customer loyalty. A survey of 365 healthcare customers of the selected four private hospitals in Nigeria provides support for the study. The study employed Multi-stage sampling techniques. The data collected from the respondents were subjected to descriptive statistics in order to determine the sum, mean, standard deviation and the relative importance index of the variables investigated. The categorical regression analysis with optimal scaling technique otherwise regarded as CATREG in SPSS was used to investigate the influence of mechanic clues on customer loyalty among the respondents. The finding of the study revealed that mechanic clues play significant role in influencing customer loyalty. Going by the finding, it was recommended that the healthcare managers must ensure that the environment of the healthcare organization is conducive for the customers (patients) always so as to create a positive impression in the mind of the customer (patient).

**Keyword:** Mechanic clues, customer loyalty, healthcare

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The healthcare industry customers usually interrelate more with the physical environment (mechanic clues) than with the service provider. Previous studies have discovered that the equipment, facilities and physical environment have positive influence on the customers' perception of service quality (Breiter & Milman, 2006; Kuo et al., 2010; Robinson & Callan, 2005). Early studies carried out by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry

(1985) and Parasuraman, Valarie, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) categorised five key dimensions of service quality, which are: “reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles”. The tangible elements connected with services have been termed by different authors differently for example Hoffman and Turley (2002) termed it atmospherics, while Harris and Ezah (2008) referred to it as healthscapes and physical evidence by Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2006). In the same vein Berry, Wall, and Carbone (2006) coined the tangibles as mechanic clues. Knutson (2000) in a study carried out has shown that the mechanic clues influence consumer choice of purchase or patronage. Based on the study carried out by Berry *et al.* (2006) customers usually act like investigators as they look for clues and shape their perceptions into series of feelings about the delivery of service. Customers shape their perceptions according to the mechanical performance of the services, for example, the tangibles connected to the service. However, the health care sector in Nigeria remains feeble, as seen in the paucity of organisation, disintegration of services, scarcity of resources, insufficient and declining infrastructure and inequality in resource circulation (Osain, 2011). Tabibi, Ebadifard and Tourani (2001) contend that the health facilities built-in the Nigerian health centers or hospitals are as ancient as the health centers themselves. Most of the health equipment are unusable and they require absolute replacement (Tabibi *et al.*, 2001). The lack of maintenance of the physical environments, buildings in the Nigerian health centers offers difficulties in quality health care services delivery (Tabibi *et al.*, 2001). Meanwhile, the existing literature shows that mechanic clues trigger emotional responses that make customers decide to insist on the service or stop dealing with the service provider (Hoffman & Turkey, 2002; Tombs & McColl-kennedy, 2003). In spite of the visible prominence of mechanic clues, there are astonishing absence of empirical study dealing with its role in the consumption situation (Tombs & McColl-kennedy, 2003; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999) as well as its influence on consumers’ attitude toward the organisation (Foxall & Yani-de- Soriano, 2005; Cronin, 2003). In the tourism and hospitality literature, Bonn and Lawrence (2005) asserted that scholars have emphasized more on the influence of mechanic clues on the “destination image”. Subsequent study (Ryu & Jang, 2007) focused on the distinct effects of the physical environment on consumers’ perception about the quality of service; however, there exist few studies carried out on the mechanic clues and brand insistence of the customer. This appears to be a significant area of study, since customers experience view the environment as important as any other clues. Thus this research explored the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence of customers in the healthcare sector of Nigeria. Based on this, the research question is: How does the mechanic clue influence the brand insistence of customers in the healthcare service? Therefore, the null hypothesis is:

**H<sub>0</sub>: Mechanic clues do not have a significant influence on the brand insistence of customers in healthcare sector in Nigeria.**

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Mechanic Clues**

Berry *et al.* (2006) asserted that in cooperating with organisations, clients consciously and unconsciously channel clues installed in the encounter and situate them into series of impressions. Some exactly normal, while others have a greater amount of emotion. Anything observed or sensed – alternately arresting over its nonattendance may be an experience piece of information or clue. These entrenched experience clues permit consumers to shape opinions in light of the specialized practical execution of the service (functional clues), those tangibles connected with those service (mechanic clues), and the self-destructive considerations and conduct and manifestation from the service providers (humanic clues) (Berry *et al.*, 2006). However, this study will be focused on the tangibles connected with services. Mechanic clues originate from tangible objects or surroundings and consist of smells, sights, sounds, textures, and tastes. While the functional clues involve the consistency of the service, the mechanic clues involve the physical appearance of the place of service (Berry *et al.*, 2006). Mechanic clue is a strong foundation of physical representations that aid the consumer envision the service. Mechanic clues create first impressions that have a great impact on the expectations of the customer about the kind of service being offered by the organisation. The perception of the customer about the quality of services is a biased assessment of the experience of the service when matched with the anticipations of the service (Berry *et al.*, 2006). Sharma and Stafford (2000) have discovered that the perceptions of the customer about the environment of an organisation can inspire his/her beliefs about the employees in the organisation and that the pleasant or pleasing environments are usually related to more reliable service providers. Berry *et al.* (2006) agreed that “mechanic clues are especially important for services in which customers experience the facilities for an extended period of time, such as airplanes, hotels, and hospitals. The right type of mechanic clues influence an organization or a hospital to attract the right kind of patients it seeks. Mechanic clues are quite salient to value creation in the aforementioned types of services.” According to Haeckel, Carbone and Berry (2003), mechanic clues are obtained from non-living things or environments and represent a tangible demonstration

of the service. For example, the furnishings, building design, displays, equipment, colours, smells, sounds, lighting and all other physical clues envisage the service, thereby communicating with clients without any words. Several scholars are in agreement that mechanic clues have a powerful influence on consumer's behavioural intents and loyalty (Foxall & Greenley, 1999; Cronin, 2003; Foxall & Yani-de- Soriano, 2005), and that mechanic clues may cause customers to either remain or terminate their business deal with the service provider (Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). The mechanic clues of service in hospital comprises all the physical illustration of the service such as hospital physical facilities and other types of physical communication. Components of mechanic clues that influence patients includes the exterior elements, such as entrances, parking, signage and the landscape, while the interior elements, such as layout, design, décor and equipment (Sreenivas & Srinivasa Rao, 2015). It is also important for the organization to pay attention to infrastructure such as water, lighting, cross ventilation, electricity, sewerage and security. The awards and certification won by the hospital also serve as mechanic clues and can also be displayed on the walls of the hospital so as to instill confidence in the mind of the consumers (Sreenivas & Srinivasa Rao, 2015).

## 2.2. Role of Mechanic Clues in Healthcare

The mechanic clues of the health care service station are the overall exterior of the hospital and are very important in forming the first impression in the mind of the customers. Research has shown that consumers always employ tangibles i.e. physical facilities and price to substitute for quality and their expectations and perception about the service experience are the evaluative criterion for which the services are judged (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1993). The perception of customers are not only regulated by marketing stimuli, which include advertising, publicity etc. but are regulated by mechanic clues such as lighting, furnishing, temperature, colour and layout (Booms & Bitner, 1982). Baraban and Durocher (2001) asserted that tangible elements such as furnishing, colour and layout in service experience have the highest direct relationship with the perception of the customer as they help to form the impression and evaluation of the service. The mechanic clues can enhance the efficient flow of activities in the hospital, thereby making it better for healthcare customers and provider to achieve their goals. The conducive ambience of the hospital environment will influence how people think, feel and react to the services of the organization (Sreenivas & Srinivasa Rao, 2015). Consumers can easily pass judgement about the employees of the organization based on their perception about physical environment of the organization. The design of the physical environment of the hospital can differentiate the hospital from its competitors and can also help to reposition the hospital to generate new customers. The Symbols, Artifacts and Signs are very significant in shaping the initial impressions for introducing new services in the hospital. Once customers are not familiar with a specific service, they will always watch out for mechanic clues to assist them in classifying the place and start forming their expectations on the quality of services being provided. Mechanic clue is a visual symbol for the intangible service. The physical environment of the healthcare organization presents an opportunity to deliver an image. Thus, mechanic clues of healthcare service organization play significant role in creating a favourable impression in the minds of the healthcare customers. A study by Pullman and Gross (2004) revealed that customers framed their total perceptions of services based on the components of the touchable environment and their dealings with the providers of such services and other customers, which consecutively stimulate emotions that can impact customer loyalty behaviours.

## 2.3. Customer Loyalty – An Overview

Customer loyalty, according to Blomqvist, Dahl and Haeger (2000) can be described as; a client which repeatedly makes use of one particular organisation to fulfill entirely, alternately a noteworthy part, of his/her needs by utilizing those company's items or benefits. Other authors (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schroder, 2002 & Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996) have defined customer loyalty as a multi-dimensional concept comprising buying intention, endorsements, price forbearance, complaint behaviour, word of mouth, and tendency not to leave. The consumer becomes loyal to an institution if its service ensures his or her positive feelings. This loyalty is additionally strengthened by the respect and recognition shown to a consumer, whereby an institution is perceived as honest and righteous. Furthermore, providing competent customer service and meeting consumer needs or expectations also positively affects consumer loyalty. However, if anything disturbs the consumer's positive perception of a defined service or an institution, the level of loyalty deteriorates.

Due to the complicated nature of health care services as well as the complex level of participation of the patients in dealings with a medical doctor, the dealings with the health care service provider will be greatly significant compared to the surroundings in healthcare locations. Patients attend the health care centers to recuperate from sicknesses and diseases. The basic health care services delivered can generate favourable physical as well as psychological responses to physicians and treatment, which can lead to or increase the

loyalty of the patient (Salgaonkar, 2006). The whole thing that a patient perceives, hears, senses, and experiences in a health care service location ought to infuse trust (Baird, 2013). Day (1969) initiated the notion of loyalty from two dimensions which are attitudinal and behavioural. According to the studies carried out by Kumar and Shah (2004) and Fellerton (2003), there are basically two types of loyalty: attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty means consumers may not give assurance that they will buy the product/service but they will inform others via word of mouth communication, thereby creating a favourable image about the company to others. Whereas behavioural loyalty certifies that the loyalty of the customer can be transformed into real buying behaviours. Most authors in this field of study view loyalty as attitudinal loyalty (an emotional construct) and behavioural loyalty (an extensive element). In attitudinal loyalty, the role of commitment or dedication is very important since commitment replicates the consumers' self-appraisal of the utilisation framework and the energetic choice to participate in a longstanding relationship (Evanschitzky, Gopalkrishnan, Plassmann, Niessing & Meffert, 2007). Emotional commitment encompasses the aspiration to preserve a connection that the consumer views to regard (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It can be seen as the causal psychological bond that replicates the emotional state of association between the customer and the provider of service (Fellerton, 2003; Kumar, Stern & Steenkamp, 1995 & Petrick, 2002). Hence, this psychological bond transforms into powerful attitudinal loyalty as explained by Dick and Basu, (1994). The multiple dimension of loyalty is the mixture of the two dimensions, which include the attitudinal and the behavioural loyalty. Loyalty is assessed using the consumer tendency to switch brand, product favourites, the rate of buying and the overall cost of purchase (Pritchard & Howard, 1997; Hunter, 1998; Wong, Dean, & White, 1999).

### 3. METHODS

To investigate whether mechanic clues of the health care service influence brand insistence in the healthcare sector in the selected private hospitals in Lagos, Nigeria.

*Data Characteristics:* The data for this objective are quantitative in nature. The quantitative data are the socio-economic characteristics of customers sampled and their ratings of the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence.

*Data Source:* The data for this objective were derived from the selected private healthcare customers. The data from the healthcare customers on the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence were sourced via the administration of structured questionnaires.

The questionnaires were administered to the healthcare customers of the four private hospitals during the working hours of the week days. Accidental or convenience sampling technique was adopted in administering the questionnaire to the healthcare customers during the waiting time of the week days. Four hundred (400) questionnaires that is, 100 questionnaires were administered to the customers of each of the four private hospitals sampled and 365 copies of questionnaires representing about 91.25% of the distributed questionnaire were retrieved. The response rate is deemed reasonably high for surveys of this type, and thus regarded satisfactory. It is worthy of note that the help of the total quality department of the healthcare organizations in granting approval to the researcher as well as the administration of the questionnaire contributed to the high response rate achieved in the surveys. On the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence, the respondents were asked to respond to the statements on a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree and 1=strongly disagree.

*Data Analysis:* The data collected from the respondents were subjected to descriptive statistics in order to determine the sum, mean, standard deviation and the relative importance index of the variables investigated. Tables were used to compute the frequencies and percentages so as to give adequate understanding of the respondents' characteristics and their view on how mechanic clues influence brand insistence. Again, the categorical regression analysis with optimal scaling technique otherwise regarded as CATREG in SPSS was used to investigate the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence among the respondents.

### 4. RESULTS

Employing the Relative Importance Index, the formula stated below was used.

$$RII = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^5 W_i \times f_{xi}}{N(A)}$$

where,

$\sum_{i=1}^5 W_i \times f_{xi}$  = The weight age of the respondents

A= 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

$f_{xi}$  = The frequency of every respondent

N = Total number of respondents (Hamzah, Khoiry, Ali, Zaini & Arshal, 2011, Tawil, Hamzah, Khoiry, Ani & Basri, 2011).

**Table 1: The Influence of Mechanic Clues on Brand Insistence**

Components of Mechanic Clues	Total Score	RII	Rank
The cleanliness of the health care organisation	1550	0.849	1
The physical appearance of the health care organisation	1479	0.810	2
The facilities of the health care organization	1478	0.809	3
The comfort of the health care lobby/reception area	1465	0.803	4
The lighting of the health care organisation	1454	0.797	5
The conducive ambience of the health care organisation	1449	0.794	6
The convenient location of the health care organisation	1444	0.791	7
The furniture and fitting of the health care organisation	1332	0.730	8
The aroma of the health care organisation	1265	0.693	9

**Source:** Researcher's Field Survey, 2017

Table 1 shows result of the descriptive statistics of the influence of mechanic clues, that is the physical environments such as furnishings, building design, displays, equipment, colours, smells, sounds, lighting and the appearance of the health care facilities on brand insistence using the relative important index. The result reveals that the cleanliness of the healthcare organisation has the highest RII value of 0.849, followed by the physical appearance and the facilities of the healthcare organisation, which emerged with RII value of 0.810 and 0.809 respectively. The comfort of the healthcare lobby/reception has the RII value of 0.803. This means that the respondents in the hospitals sampled strongly agreed that the cleanliness of the healthcare organisation, the physical appearance, the facilities of the healthcare organisation and the comfort of the healthcare lobby/reception contribute positively in making the customers insist on the services of the organisation, while all other statements related to the mechanic clues on brand insistence also revealed positive responses but with a slight difference among the RII value of the remaining items. Given these results, it is obvious that the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with all the statements concerning the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence.

## 5. TEST OF HYPOTHESIS

**Table 2: Model Summary of Mechanic Clues on Brand Insistence**

Multiple R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Apparent Prediction Error
.719	.517	.495	.483

a. Predictors: (Constant), Mechanic Clues: The lighting of the health care organisation, the conducive ambience, the facilities of the health care organisation, the furniture and fitting and the physical appearance of the health care organisation.

b. Dependent Variable: Brand Insistence

Table 3 is the ANOVA of the regression analysis of the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence. It is evident from the result (Table 3) that the regression model has  $F(16,348) = 23.284$  and  $P < 0.000$ . This means that the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is rejected since P-value is less than 0.05. Consequently, from Table 3 the mechanic clues are statistically significant to brand insistence.

**Table 3: ANOVA of Mechanic Clues on Brand Insistence**

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	188.718	16	11.795	23.284	.000
Residual	176.282	348	.507		
Total	365.000	364			

Predictors: (Constant), Mechanic Clues

Dependent Variable: Brand Insistence

**Table 4: Coefficients of Regression Analysis of the Influence of Mechanic Clues on Brand Insistence of healthcare customers**

	Standardized Coefficients		Df	F	Sig.
	Beta	Bootstrap (1000) Estimate of Std. Error			
	.180	.095			
The physical appearance of the health care organisation.	.242	.239	3	3.605	.014*
The conducive ambience of the health care organisation	.251	.117	3	1.026	.381
The furniture and fitting of the health care organisation	.216	.121	3	4.655	.003*
The facilities of the health care organisation.	.207	.104	4	3.167	.014*
The lighting of the health care organisation.					

The model in Table 4, revealed that the furniture and fitting of the health care organisation had more statistical significance in predicting brand insistence of customers, recording the highest beta value of ( $\beta = .251$ ) contributes most in explaining brand insistence by customers. This is followed by the facilities of the health care organisation ( $beta = .216$ ), the physical appearance of the health care organisation ( $beta = .180$ ) and the lighting of the health care organisation ( $beta = .207$ ). This means that the customers of the healthcare organisations believe that furniture and fitting of the health care organisation makes the strongest unique contribution in explaining brand insistence.

## 6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Findings on the influence of mechanic clues on brand insistence of the customers are discussed based on the results of the descriptive and inferential statistics as well as the findings from the review of the existing literature.

The existing literature shows that mechanic clues are obtained from non-living things or environments and present a tangible demonstration of the service. For instance, the furnishings, building design, displays, equipment, colours, smells, sounds, lighting and all other physical clues envisage the service, thereby communicating with clients without any words (Haeckel *et al.*, 2003). The importance of mechanic clues cannot be over emphasized as they inform the customers' view about the overall experience and also shape the first impression that the customer gets in consumption setting (Berry & Carbone, 2007).

The result from the hypothesis indicates that mechanic clues significantly influence brand insistence of customers. This contradicts Donnelly *et al.* (2008)'s study in the Ireland tourism industry, which found out that there was no direct relationship between mechanic clues and customer loyalty. This may be as a result of the differences in the contexts of the two studies, the environments and the way the variables were conceptualized and handled. The results of this research also show that the mechanic clues model explains roughly 52% of the variant in brand insistence of customers (Table 2).

Similarly, the result of the Relative Importance Index (RII) revealed that the respondents viewed the cleanliness of the healthcare service organisation as the most important factor in ensuring brand insistence of customers in the healthcare sector. The customers of the healthcare organisations sampled also ranked the physical appearance and the facilities of the healthcare organisations second and third in order of importance, respectively. Therefore, based on these findings, it is obvious that the customers were positive concerning their experiences in the hospitals and their perception of the mechanic clues and brand insistence. This finding corroborates the study carried out in Venezuela by Foxall and Yani-de- Soriano (2005), which revealed that there is a strong influence between mechanic clues and customer loyalty.

The findings from the hypothesis resulting from the categorical regression analysis revealed that the furniture and fitting of the health care organisations is a major predictor of brand insistence from the customers. The implication of this is that healthcare customer insistence on the brand/service of organisations is as a result of good furniture and fittings of the healthcare service firm. On the other hand, all other variables such as the facilities of the health care organisation and the physical appearance of the health care facilities have significant influence on brand insistence by customer while the lighting and the conducive ambience of healthcare facilities have little significant impact on brand insistence of customer. The implication of this finding is that the facilities of the health care organisations, the furniture and fittings and the physical appearance of the health care and the lighting of the healthcare facilities determine the degree to which customers insist on the brand/service provided by the organisations. Hence, it can be inferred that mechanic clues contribute significantly to consumers brand insistence in the healthcare service industry. This finding corroborates that of various scholars (Foxall & Greenley, 1999; Cronin, 2003; Foxall & Yani-de- Soriano, 2005) who have indicated that mechanic clues have a powerful influence on consumer's behavioural intents and loyalty.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is therefore concluded that mechanic clues have positive influence on brand insistence by customers in the Nigerian healthcare sector. Findings of the study support the idea that mechanic clues are important element of customer experience and they add immensely to customer loyalty via brand insistence. Therefore, healthcare organisations must take extraordinary note of mechanic clues because these clues form the initial and long lasting impressions in the minds of their customers the first time they patronize them and are also important in surpassing their anticipations which inevitably influence customer experience and their loyalty to the organisation. With regards to the mechanic clues, healthcare management must ensure that the environment of the healthcare organisation is conducive for their patients at all times, the lobby, lighting, aroma and the furniture and fitting should be positioned such that they will create a positive impression on the mind of the patient.

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