The Role of Hotel Staff in Enhancing Customer Retention in Three-Star Hotels in Port Harcourt

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Abstract: *This study investigated the role of hotel staff in enhancing customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Specifically, it examined the influence of guest service roles and facility maintenance roles on returning customers' patronage decisions. A descriptive survey design was adopted, involving 96 hotel staff and 99 returning customers selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-test). The study was anchored on the SERVQUAL model and the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory. Findings revealed that hotel staff performed highly across guest service indicators, with mean scores ranging from 3.86 to 4.05, while returning customers also reported satisfactory experiences with mean scores between 3.42 and 3.72. Similarly, staff reported high performance on maintenance roles (M = 3.98) while customers agreed positively (M = 3.51). Independent t-tests showed significant differences between staff and customer ratings on guest services (t(193) = 2.99, p = 0.003) and maintenance roles (t(193) = 3.29, p = 0.001), indicating that both guest service and maintenance practices significantly influence customer retention. The study concludes that staff conduct and operational competence remain critical levers for sustaining guest loyalty in three-star hotels.*
Keywords*: customer retention, hotel staff, guest service, facility maintenance, three-star hotels, Port Harcourt*

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality sector constitutes a vital component of the global service economy and plays an increasingly prominent role in the socio-economic development of Nigeria. It contributes substantially to gross domestic product (GDP), employment creation, and infrastructural development while simultaneously fostering cultural exchange and tourism advancement

(World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2023). Within this broad sector, the hotel industry operates as a critical interface between destinations and visitors, offering not only accommodation but also a constellation of services that shape the overall quality of the tourist experience (Mensah & Mensah, 2018). Hotels serve as strategic anchors of urban service delivery, particularly in metropolitan centres where they support business travel, conferences, and leisure tourism.

In competitive urban markets such as Port Harcourt—a major oil-producing and commercial hub in southern Nigeria the hotel industry has expanded rapidly in response to growing demand from both domestic and international guests (Ogunnaike & Oyeniyi, 2014). Yet, the proliferation of accommodation options has intensified competition, compelling hotels to differentiate themselves not only through pricing but through the quality and reliability of their service delivery. Modern hospitality literature emphasizes that the consistency of customer experience now outweighs cost as the primary driver of loyalty and repeat patronage (Han & Hyun, 2015). This shift underscores the strategic importance of human capital particularly frontline staff in delivering memorable service encounters that foster emotional attachment to a brand.

Customer retention has consequently emerged as a critical performance metric for hotels. Retaining existing customers is widely acknowledged as more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, with estimates suggesting that improving customer retention by 5% can increase profitability by 25–95% (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Returning guests provide predictable revenue streams, stabilize occupancy rates, reduce marketing expenditures, and enhance brand equity through positive word-of-mouth referrals (Bowen & Chen, 2015). This makes the cultivation of customer loyalty indispensable for sustaining competitiveness, especially for three-star hotels that operate on tighter margins and face the dual challenge of delivering quality service while controlling costs.

Within this strategic landscape, hotel staff function as the frontline custodians of the customer experience. Their service conduct, interpersonal communication, responsiveness to guest needs, and operational competencies significantly influence guests' perceptions, satisfaction levels, and subsequent intention to return (Ladhari, 2009). The hospitality service encounter is inherently personal and emotionally charged; therefore, the attitudes and behaviours of staff frequently outweigh physical amenities in determining overall guest satisfaction (Bitner, 1990). This dynamic is particularly salient in three-star hotels where operational resources, training budgets, and staffing ratios are more constrained than in luxury establishments. Under such conditions, the effectiveness of staff in delivering exceptional guest services and maintaining the physical environment becomes central to achieving customer loyalty and sustaining competitive advantage in the market.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing number of three-star hotels in Port Harcourt, many continue to experience declining levels of repeat patronage and unstable occupancy rates. Hotel managers frequently report that first-time guests rarely return, while online reviews often highlight inconsistent service quality, poor responsiveness, and inadequate facility upkeep. This trend threatens profitability and long-term sustainability, given that customer retention is crucial for operational stability in an intensely competitive market. Empirical studies have extensively examined customer satisfaction in Nigerian hotels, yet few have specifically investigated how hotel staff roles particularly in guest services and maintenance affect customer retention

outcomes. Without clear evidence of these staff-level determinants, hotel operators struggle to design targeted interventions that enhance loyalty among returning customers. This knowledge gap underscores the need for a focused investigation into how staff-driven guest services and maintenance practices shape customer retention patterns in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Objectives.
1. To investigate the role of hotel staff in providing guest services that influence customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.
2. To determine the role of hotel staff in facility maintenance as a factor influencing customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Research questions.
1. How do hotel staff guest service practices influence customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt?
2. What is the role of hotel staff facility maintenance in influencing customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt?

Hypothesis
1. Hotel staff guest service practices have no significant influence on customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.
2. Hotel staff facility maintenance has no significant influence on customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Retention in the Hotel Industry
Customer retention refers to the deliberate strategic efforts undertaken by organizations to encourage repeat patronage from existing customers, thereby sustaining long-term business relationships. In the hospitality context, retention extends beyond transactional loyalty to encompass emotional attachment, trust, and sustained preference for a hotel brand (Bowen & Chen, 2015). Retained customers often display higher lifetime value, spend more per visit, and provide consistent revenue streams that stabilize occupancy rates (Han & Hyun, 2015). Moreover, satisfied returning guests frequently serve as brand advocates by generating positive word-of-mouth recommendations, which are more persuasive and cost-efficient than conventional marketing channels (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). Reichheld and Sasser (1990) famously demonstrated that even a modest 5% increase in customer retention could boost profits by as much as 25% to 95%, underscoring its economic significance.

Within the hotel industry, customer retention is primarily reflected in guests' intention to revisit, willingness to recommend the property to others, and their overall commitment to the brand. Several empirical studies affirm that the determinants of customer retention are multifaceted, spanning tangible and intangible dimensions of the service experience. In the Nigerian hotel sector, for instance, Ogunnaike and Oyeniyi (2014) reported that service quality, staff professionalism, and the aesthetic appeal of hotel facilities significantly influence guests' decisions to return. Similarly, Ladhari (2009) observed that emotional satisfaction derived from staff interactions strongly predicts behavioural intentions such as repeat patronage and loyalty. These findings suggest that cultivating superior customer experiences—especially through

competent, service-oriented staff remains pivotal for enhancing retention and sustaining competitive advantage in the hospitality industry.

Guest Service Roles of Hotel Staff

Hotel staff constitute the primary point of contact between the establishment and its guests, and their performance fundamentally shapes the quality of the service encounter. Their behaviours courtesy, attentiveness, empathy, problem-solving skills, and responsiveness create the initial impressions that anchor guests' evaluations of service quality (Bitner, 1990). Service encounters in hospitality are highly interactive, and the emotional tone established by staff often determines guests' satisfaction levels more than tangible amenities (Ladhari, 2009). Staff members who demonstrate proactive service behaviours not only resolve customer needs efficiently but also enhance guests' perceived value and trust, which are strong predictors of repeat patronage (Yee, Yeung, & Cheng, 2010). In an increasingly competitive industry, where customer loyalty drives profitability, staff professionalism and interpersonal competence represent strategic assets.

The seminal SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) underscores this point by identifying reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness as the five core service quality dimensions influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Subsequent studies affirm that staff training and empowerment in these domains significantly improve customer evaluations of service quality. Within the Nigerian context, Olu Ojo (2010) found that hotels employing well-trained, customer-oriented staff experienced markedly higher levels of repeat patronage compared to those with poorly coordinated service teams. This aligns with broader evidence that staff competence and service orientation enhance emotional satisfaction, which in turn drives positive behavioural intentions such as revisit intentions and referrals (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). These findings collectively highlight that frontline staff play a decisive role in shaping the customer experience and, by extension, in sustaining long-term customer retention within the hotel industry.

Maintenance Roles of Hotel Staff

The physical condition of a hotel's facilities plays a decisive role in shaping guests' perceptions of value, safety, and overall service quality. Well-maintained rooms, functional amenities, and hygienic public areas create an atmosphere of professionalism and reliability, which in turn reinforces guests' comfort and satisfaction (Chan, Go, & Pine, 1998). Guests tend to interpret well-kept facilities as signals of managerial competence and organizational commitment to quality standards. These positive impressions strengthen their intentions to revisit the property and recommend it to others, thereby fostering long-term loyalty (Anantharaman & Subha, 2016). In contrast, deferred maintenance or visible physical deterioration often erodes trust, lowers satisfaction, and undermines repeat patronage, even when service staff display courteous behaviour (Lockyer, 2005). This underscores the vital contribution of maintenance practices to the holistic customer experience in the hospitality industry.

In the Nigerian hotel context, recurrent facility-related issues such as inconsistent water supply, poor ventilation, erratic power availability, and inadequate housekeeping have been widely reported as major deterrents to customer loyalty (Akpan & Etuk, 2019). These infrastructural challenges often originate from insufficient preventive maintenance and weak operational

oversight, placing greater responsibility on frontline and support staff to sustain functional standards. Effective maintenance staff not only perform routine checks and timely repairs but also serve as silent ambassadors of quality by ensuring that facilities remain safe, aesthetically pleasing, and fully operational. Their capacity to prevent defects before they disrupt guest experiences directly influences customer satisfaction and retention (Mensah, 2019). Hence, maintenance competence should be regarded as an integral dimension of service quality that reinforces customer confidence and promotes repeat patronage in three-star hotels.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the SERVQUAL model and the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) as its guiding theoretical frameworks for understanding how hotel staff roles shape customer retention. The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), conceptualizes service quality as the gap between customer expectations and their perceived service experiences across five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This model is widely applied in hospitality research to evaluate how both tangible elements (such as facility maintenance) and intangible elements (such as interpersonal service behaviours) collectively determine perceived quality (Ladhari, 2009). By applying this framework, the present study situates guest services and maintenance roles as measurable quality dimensions influencing retention outcomes.

Complementing SERVQUAL, the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory explains customer satisfaction as the cognitive comparison between expected and actual performance (Oliver, 1980). When perceived performance exceeds expectations (positive disconfirmation), customers experience satisfaction, which increases their likelihood of returning, while negative disconfirmation produces dissatisfaction and defection (Bhattacherjee, 2001). This theory is especially relevant in hotel settings where guests arrive with implicit standards for cleanliness, comfort, and service responsiveness. Staff members who execute guest service and maintenance roles effectively can generate positive disconfirmation by surpassing these expectations, thereby fostering trust and loyalty. Together, SERVQUAL and EDT provide a robust explanatory lens for analysing how staff-driven operational roles contribute to customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research question 1: How do hotel staff guest service practices influence customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation for Guest Services Roles of Hotel Staff and Returning Customers in a Three-Star Hotel in Port Harcourt

S/N	Guest Services Roles	Hotel Staff (n = 96)			Returning Customers (n = 99)		
		Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Reception efficiency	3.96	0.82	A	3.72	1.16	A
2	Check-in/check-out process	3.84	0.77	A	3.44	1.06	A
3	Staff friendliness	4.04	0.85	A	3.53	1.18	A
4	Responsiveness to guest requests	3.95	0.84	A	3.47	1.18	A
5	Concierge assistance	4.05	0.75	A	3.57	1.13	A
6	Availability of information	3.95	0.81	A	3.63	1.12	A
7	Complaint resolution	3.99	0.83	A	3.51	1.22	A
8	Multilingual support	3.94	0.78	A	3.43	1.17	A
9	Personalized services	3.86	0.83	A	3.65	1.15	A
10	Follow-up communication	4.04	0.85	A	3.42	1.18	A

Table 1 presents the mean ratings and standard deviations of responses from hotel staff (n = 96) and returning customers (n = 99) on various guest service roles in three-star hotels. The results reveal consistently high mean scores (≥ 3.80 among staff and ≥ 3.40 among customers) across all ten indicators, signifying broad agreement that these guest service functions are actively practiced and play crucial roles in shaping customer experiences. According to the decision benchmark (Mean ≥ 3.00 = Agree), all items received an "Agree" rating from both groups, indicating a strong convergence in perception regarding the significance of guest service quality for customer retention.

Specifically, staff friendliness (M = 4.04; SD = 0.85 for staff, M = 3.53; SD = 1.18 for customers) and follow-up communication (M = 4.04; SD = 0.85 for staff, M = 3.42; SD = 1.18 for customers) recorded some of the highest staff ratings, suggesting that staff consider interpersonal engagement and post-stay communication central to sustaining relationships with guests. Similarly, concierge assistance (M = 4.05; SD = 0.75 for staff, M = 3.57; SD = 1.13 for customers) and reception efficiency (M = 3.96; SD = 0.82 for staff, M = 3.72; SD = 1.16 for customers) were highly rated, reflecting the operational importance of efficient front-desk processes and personalized support in encouraging repeat patronage. Though customers' mean scores were slightly lower across items, their ratings still fell within the "Agree" category, indicating general satisfaction with these services. This slight gap may reflect higher expectations among returning guests shaped by previous experiences, consistent with the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), which posits that customer satisfaction depends on how perceived service aligns with or exceeds prior expectations.

The overall pattern affirms the centrality of guest service quality as a determinant of customer loyalty in the hotel industry, corroborating the SERVQUAL model dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance identified by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988). It also aligns with findings by Olu Ojo (2010), who reported that Nigerian hotels with well-trained and customer-oriented staff record higher levels of repeat patronage than those

with poorly coordinated service teams. Thus, the results in Table 1 suggest that well-executed guest service roles especially those related to friendliness, responsiveness, and efficiency substantially enhance the likelihood of customer return and serve as strategic levers for improving retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Research question 2: What is the role of hotel staff facility maintenance in influencing customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation for Maintenance Roles of Hotel Staff and Returning Customers in a Three-Star Hotel in Port Harcourt

S/N	Maintenance Roles	Hotel Staff (n = 96)			Returning Customers (n = 99)		
		Mean	SD	Decision	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Regular room cleaning	4.08	0.79	A	3.66	1.14	A
2	Prompt repairs of faulty equipment	4.02	0.82	A	3.54	1.17	A
3	Maintenance of electrical fittings	3.97	0.84	A	3.48	1.19	A
4	Maintenance of plumbing and water systems	3.88	0.81	A	3.42	1.16	A
5	Cleanliness of public/common areas	4.06	0.76	A	3.61	1.12	A
6	Preventive maintenance scheduling	3.95	0.80	A	3.45	1.15	A
7	Pest and environmental control	3.99	0.83	A	3.52	1.18	A
8	Availability of functional safety equipment	3.91	0.78	A	3.47	1.14	A
9	Regular inspection of facilities	4.00	0.82	A	3.58	1.13	A
10	Upkeep of building exterior and landscape	3.93	0.85	A	3.44	1.20	A

Table 2 presents the mean ratings and standard deviations for hotel staff (n = 96) and returning customers (n = 99) on ten indicators assessing maintenance roles in three-star hotels. Across all items, the mean scores exceeded the benchmark value of 3.00 for both groups, indicating overall agreement that these maintenance functions are actively carried out and significantly contribute to the guest experience. This pattern suggests that maintenance activities are recognized by both staff and customers as fundamental to ensuring satisfaction and encouraging repeat patronage.

Among hotel staff responses, regular room cleaning (M = 4.08; SD = 0.79), cleanliness of public/common areas (M = 4.06; SD = 0.76), and prompt repairs of faulty equipment (M = 4.02; SD = 0.82) were rated highest, highlighting their perceived centrality to operational

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quality. Returning customers similarly acknowledged the value of these roles, with scores such as regular room cleaning (M = 3.66; SD = 1.14) and regular inspection of facilities (M = 3.58; SD = 1.13) also falling within the "Agree" category. Though customer ratings were slightly lower overall than staff ratings, they still show broad satisfaction with maintenance standards. The marginal disparity likely reflects guests' heightened sensitivity to visible lapses in facility upkeep, which can undermine perceived value and trust, as noted by Lockyer (2005). This finding reinforces the proposition of the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) that customers form satisfaction judgments by comparing actual performance against prior expectations.

These results affirm the argument of Anantharaman and Subha (2016) that physical environment quality strongly correlates with loyalty in mid-scale hotels. They also echo Akpan and Etuk (2019), who observed that infrastructural deficiencies such as inconsistent water supply, poor ventilation, and inadequate housekeeping erode customer confidence and diminish retention rates in Nigeria. Within the framework of the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), these findings emphasize the tangibility and reliability dimensions of service quality. Collectively, the evidence from Table 2 suggests that effective facility maintenance by hotel staff is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and an essential strategy for promoting customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Test of Hypothesis
An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether a significant difference exists between the mean responses of hotel staff (n = 96) and returning customers (n = 99) on the ten indicators of guest service roles presented in Table 1 and 2. This test was chosen because it compares the means of two independent groups on a continuous outcome variable (mean ratings on a Likert scale). The decision criterion was set at $p < 0.05$.

Result

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test on Guest Service Roles of Hotel Staff and Returning Customers (Hypothesis One)

Group	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value	Decision
Hotel Staff	96	3.96	0.82				
Returning Customers	99	3.53	1.17	2.99	193	0.003	**Reject H$_{01}$**

Reject H$_0$ if $p < 0.05$

The calculated t(193) = 2.99, p = 0.003 < 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that hotel staff guest service practices have a significant influence on customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

Hypothesis 2
Table 4: Independent Samples t-Test on Maintenance Roles of Hotel Staff and Returning Customers (Hypothesis Two)

Research Question 2: What is the role of hotel staff facility maintenance in influencing customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt?

Group	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value	Decision
Hotel Staff	96	3.98	0.81				
Returning Customers	99	3.51	1.16	3.29	193	0.001	**Reject H_{02}**

Reject H_0 if $p < 0.05$

The calculated t(193) = 3.29, p = 0.001 < 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected. This confirms that hotel staff facility maintenance has a significant influence on customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt.

CONCLUSION

This study established that the quality of hotel staff performance in guest service and facility maintenance significantly influences customer retention in three-star hotels in Port Harcourt. The findings revealed consistently high mean ratings from both hotel staff and returning customers across guest service dimensions such as reception efficiency, staff friendliness, responsiveness, concierge assistance, and follow-up communication. Similarly, maintenance roles such as regular room cleaning, prompt repairs, preventive inspections, and upkeep of public spaces were positively rated as determinants of guests' willingness to return. The independent t-test results further confirmed that these staff roles significantly shape customer perceptions, satisfaction, and loyalty.

These outcomes underscore that customer retention extends beyond marketing or pricing strategies and hinges substantially on frontline staff conduct and operational reliability. The evidence affirms the propositions of the SERVQUAL model—particularly the responsiveness, reliability, and tangibility dimensions—and aligns with the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory, which posits that service performance exceeding expectations fosters satisfaction and repeat patronage. Therefore, strengthening the human and operational capacity of hotel staff is indispensable for enhancing competitiveness and sustaining guest loyalty in the three-star hotel segment.

Recommendations
Hotel managers should prioritize continuous staff training and development focused on core guest service competencies such as courtesy, responsiveness, problem-solving, and post-stay engagement. Frontline employees should be equipped with soft skills training on emotional intelligence, customer relationship management, and cross-cultural communication to meet the expectations of diverse clientele. Staff recognition and reward systems should also be institutionalized to reinforce positive service behaviours and motivate consistent excellence in guest interactions. In addition, managers should deploy structured service quality monitoring systems (e.g., guest feedback dashboards, service audits, mystery guest evaluations) to promptly identify and close gaps in the guest experience.

Furthermore, three-star hotels should strengthen preventive maintenance regimes by establishing standard operating procedures for routine inspections, scheduled repairs, and facility upgrades. Dedicated maintenance teams should be empowered with adequate resources, modern equipment, and performance accountability frameworks to sustain high facility quality. Hotel operators should integrate maintenance metrics into overall service

quality evaluations and ensure that physical environment upkeep receives the same strategic priority as customer-facing service functions. These measures will create a seamless, reliable, and satisfying service environment that nurtures long-term guest loyalty and enhances customer retention outcomes.

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