

Retailers' Perceptions of Consumer Choice of Retail Outlets: A Test of Three Attributes

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejlpjscm.2013/vol11n32749> Published September 30 2023

Citation: Ogbunankwor C.E and Madumere H.I. (2023) Retailers' Perceptions of Consumer Choice of Retail Outlets: A Test of Three Attributes, *European Journal of Logistics, Purchasing and Supply Chain Management*, Vol.11 No.3, pp.27-49

ABSTRACT: *Most retail businesses in Nigeria do not continue to live or exist for a long time as a result of the fact that apart from other challenges, some retailers are not conversant with what makes consumers patronize the various retail outlets. Accordingly, this study sought to examine the factors influencing consumer choice of retail outlets from a retailer perspective. To be more precise, the study investigated the influence of customer service, product quality and store location on consumer choice of retail outlets. A convenience sample of 138 retailers was pooled up in Awka metropolis, South-East, Nigeria while multiple regression analysis was used to test the formulated hypotheses with the aid of SPSS Version 20.0 software at 5% level of significance. Results indicate that the three attributes investigated namely customer service, product quality and store location influence consumer choice of retail outlets. More importantly, customer service has the most influence on consumer choice of retail outlets followed by store location and product quality in that order. Overall, the study concludes that the success of any retailing business depends on consumer patronage. In consequence, this piece of research recommends that retailers should invest in technology to enable customers use the necessary tools to purchase products and services as well as receive help from customer service personnel.*

KEYWORDS: retailers, perception, choice, retail outlets, attributes.

INTRODUCTION

The retailing industry has become very attractive to investors because of its lucrative nature. As a result, multinational companies such as Walmart, Amazon, Costco, Alibaba and Shoprite are raking in billions of dollars in net income from retailing. Moreover, bricks-and-mortar businesses such as supermarkets, department stores, convenience stores, specialty stores and chain stores operate retail outlets in their respective unique fashion. In addition, goods are sold online by many retailers through websites, internet marketplaces, mobile applications and

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online stores. Even individuals with little capital to spare operate small retail businesses that may include a local store, a kiosk or an online shop. Nevertheless, these aforementioned retail businesses operate as sole proprietorship, partnership or corporation selling a huge variety of goods and services to consumers.

Certainly, multinational companies, bricks-and-mortar businesses, online retailers and small retailers are not the only ones interested in retailing. Likewise, the World Retail Congress held each year since 2007 and hosted almost by a different city is also interested in retailing. Of course, in one of the annual events, consultants Deloitte and Planet Retail identified five African countries namely Algeria, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa as being among the 10 new markets most likely to appeal to multinational store groups in the coming years (Reuters, 2011). To be more precise, during the World Retail Congress in Berlin in 2010-11, the consultants said in a published report that all the mentioned countries have fast-growing economies, young and growing populations, and fragmented retail sectors (Reuters, 2011). In consequence, this showcases the untapped opportunities in retailing businesses in these climes, Nigeria inclusive.

Fortunately, all this enthusiasm for retailing and the concomitant information given at retailing events have led to statistics that are favorable to the industry. For instance, worldwide retail sales generated \$26 trillion in 2021 and of that number; \$21.1 trillion came from physical stores and the remaining \$4.9 trillion from ecommerce (eMarketer as reported by Sekulic, 2023). On the other hand, according to National Retail Federation, Walmart was the world's leading retailer in 2021 with global revenue of \$538.15 billion, Amazon was second place (\$330.2 billion), Costco in third (\$187.16 billion), Schwarz Group was in fourth with (\$158.58 billion), Aldi was in fifth with (\$134.67 billion) and unfortunately for every \$1 billion earned, retailers lost \$720,000 to theft (Sekulic, 2023). In contrast, the fashion and apparel sector is expected to grow at a CAGR of 8.7 percent, making it the world's fastest-growing retail sector between 2021 and 2026 (Statistica, 2023). More importantly, global retail spending is expected to reach \$31.3 trillion in 2025 as reported by Sekulic, 2023).

Interestingly, Nigeria has more than 600,000 small retailers accounting for 97% of national sales with traditional retail essentially consisting of small kiosks and open-air markets (Boston Consulting Group, 2022). In 2018 alone, the retail industry in Nigeria generated revenues of N1.59 trillion, accounting for 10 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) as reported by Salau, 2023). Furthermore, the industry in Nigeria grew by over 13 percent between 2016 and 2018, indicating its positive trajectory, and employed over 1.1 million people in 2018 alone (NCC as reported by Salau, 2023). Moreover, 70 percent of the industry's workforce in Nigeria is made up of women, who are mainly employed as clerks and shop assistants (Salau, 2023). Accordingly, the aforementioned statistics suggest that the retail industry is a key driver of economic development in both Nigerian and global economies.

Statement of the Problem

Regrettably, small businesses in Nigeria have been characterized by high mortality within their first five years of existence as only about five or ten percent survive, thrive and grow to maturity

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK (Etim, Williams, Inyang & Ekikor, 2022). This scenario is particularly prevalent among retail businesses as they dominate the small business landscape in Nigeria. Moreover, these retail businesses in Nigeria are characterized by low volume, diffused product base, lack of supply chain visibility, little capital requirement, few staff requirement, consumer goods dealership and selling in bits. In consequence, most retail businesses in Nigeria do not continue to live or exist for a long time. More importantly, this high mortality rate for retail businesses in Nigeria results from the fact that apart from other challenges, some retailers are not conversant with what makes consumers patronize the various retail outlets. Accordingly, this study is an attempt to crystallize ideas and unravel the attributes responsible for consumer choice of retail outlets from a retailer perspective to ascertain their clean, competent, expert perspective.

Certainly, several studies have been conducted in different countries of the world on factors influencing consumer choice of retail outlets from a consumer perspective. For instance, some of these studies established the relationship between demographic variables and consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Prasad & Reddy, 2007; Mirza, 2010; Prasad & Aryasri, 2011; Iqbal, Ghafoor & Shahbaz, 2013; Meng, Florkowski, Sarpong, Chinnan & Resurreccion, 2014). On the contrary, an avalanche of studies examined the relationship between store attributes and consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Sinha & Barnerjee, 2004; Uslu, 2005; Polat & Kulter, 2007; Yilmaz, Aktas, & Celik, 2007; Chamhuri & Batt, 2009; Mittal & Prashar, 2010; Wel, Hussin, Omar & Nor, 2012; Panda, 2013; Prashar, 2013; Zameer & Mukherjee, 2013; Agarwal & Guirat, 2017). Also, studies have integrated demographic variables and store attributes to examine factors influencing consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Gorton, Sauer & Supatpongkul, 2009; Seetharaman, Bajaj, Raj & Saravanan, 2013; Phoebe & Nyongesa, 2015; Gido, Ayuya, Owuor & Bokelmann, 2016; Iton & Ewan, 2016). More importantly, a plethora of studies have been executed in the Nigerian context to ascertain the determinants of consumer choice of retail outlets from a consumer perspective (e.g., Oghojafor & Nwagwu, 2013; Igwe & Chukwu, 2016; Akekue-Alex & Kalu, 2016; Onyeagwara, Agu & Aja, 2019; Okeke, 2020; Iloamaeke, Nwaizugbo & Ogbunankwor, 2022). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of studies that have examined the factors influencing consumer choice of retail outlets from a retailer perspective. As a result, this study attempts to bridge this gap in extant literature.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to establish a model of consumer choice of retail outlets in Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Thus, this objective can be broken down into the following particular objectives:

- To verify the extent to which customer service influences consumer choice of retail outlets.
- To find out the extent to which product quality influences consumer choice of retail outlets.
- To examine the extent to which store location contributes to consumer choice of retail outlets.

Significance of the Study

This study is justifiable academically, economically and socially. To begin with, the study is considerable because there is relatively a dearth of studies that have examined the determinants of consumer choice of retail outlets from a retailer perspective. As a result, the study will add

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK to the stock of existing knowledge as well as provide a base for further studies in this area of supply chain management. The study is also worthwhile because it will also be beneficial to retailers, retail industry employees who are interested in job security and members of Retail Council of Nigeria (RCN) established by the private sector as a forum for operators to engage themselves on common issues. In addition, the three prominent regulatory agencies in the country namely Consumer Protection Council (CPC), National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON) will equally benefit from the results of this study, hence they will regulate better on consumer protection issues. Moreover, the study will be beneficial to customers of retail outlets who desire a positive shopping experience, the community around the business, manufacturers of consumer goods, marketing consultants, management consultants and the government that needs to reposition the country's ailing economy. Finally, it will also be beneficial to research scholars as it will act as a springboard for further research in this area of supply chain management.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is defined by content scope or subject matter, territorially or geographically and by unit of analysis. To begin with, in terms of content scope, the present study is domiciled within the domain of consumer behavior. At the same time, in terms of geographical scope, the study covers Awka Metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria. Finally, the unit of analysis in this study is consumers that patronize Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) retail outlets.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework: Attribution Theory

The theoretical framework of the present study is developed based on the adaption of the Attribution Theory propounded by Heider (1958). To begin with, Heider (1958) first developed the Attribution Theory from his book on 'the psychology of interpersonal relations' domiciled within the domain of social psychology. In the classical Attribution Theory, individuals, groups and organizations possess an inherent need to understand "why" events or situations occur (Heider, 1958; Gooding & Kinicki, 1995). That is to say, Attribution Theory indicates that an individual's psychological state is a consequence of his or her evaluation of causal factors (Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest & Rosenbaum, 1971).

To be more precise, Heider (1958) first introduced the concept of perceived 'locus of causality' to define the perception of one's environment and stated that an experience may be perceived as being caused by factors outside the person's control (external or situational cause) or it may be perceived as the person's own doing (internal or dispositional cause). These initial perceptions are called attributions (Heider, 1958). Accordingly, internal attribution is assigned to individual's characteristics such as ability, personality, mood, efforts, attitudes, or disposition whereas external attribution is assigned to the situation in which the behavior was seen such as the task, other people, or luck, meaning that the individual producing the behavior did so because of the surrounding environment or the social situation (Heider, 1958). Therefore, the Attribution Theory states that individual outcomes are influenced by a set of

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 situation specific causal attributions, that is, factors to which the cause of a certain outcome can be attributed (Frieze & Synder, 1980; Anderson, 1983; Johnston & Kim, 1994; Gooding & Kinicki, 1995).

According to Gooding and Kinicki (1995), through gaining a better understanding of the causal factors leading to an event, individuals are able to modify their behaviors and control the likelihood of future occurrence of the event. Similarly, Weiner et al. (1991) maintains that causal attributions are made by people to aid them in dealing with, and reacting to, events occurring in their environment. Likewise, Schmitt (2015) maintains that Attribution Theory attempts to analyze the impact of such attribution on people’s future behavior. More importantly, Weiner (1974) identified ability, effort, task difficulty and luck as the most important factors affecting attributions for achievement. These attributions are classified along three causal dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability.

Moreover, the adaptability of the Attribution Theory is demonstrated by its continuous applications in social, cognitive, personality, and educational psychology, as well as applied research domains such as consumer research and marketing (Johnson, 2006). More importantly, researchers have applied the Attribution Theory to study consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Onyeagwara et al., 2019; Iloamaeke et al, 2022). Nevertheless, Kelley (1967, 1973) extended Attribution Theory to include cause and effect relations whereas Martinko and Thomson (1998) synthesized the two major attributional frameworks: Kelley’s covariation model and Weiner’s achievement-motivation framework. Unfortunately, the Attribution Theory has been criticized as being mechanistic and reductionist for assuming that people are rational, logical, and systematic thinkers (Assignment Point, 2016). It is also criticized for failing to address the social, cultural, and historical factors that shape attributions of cause (Assignment Point, 2016).

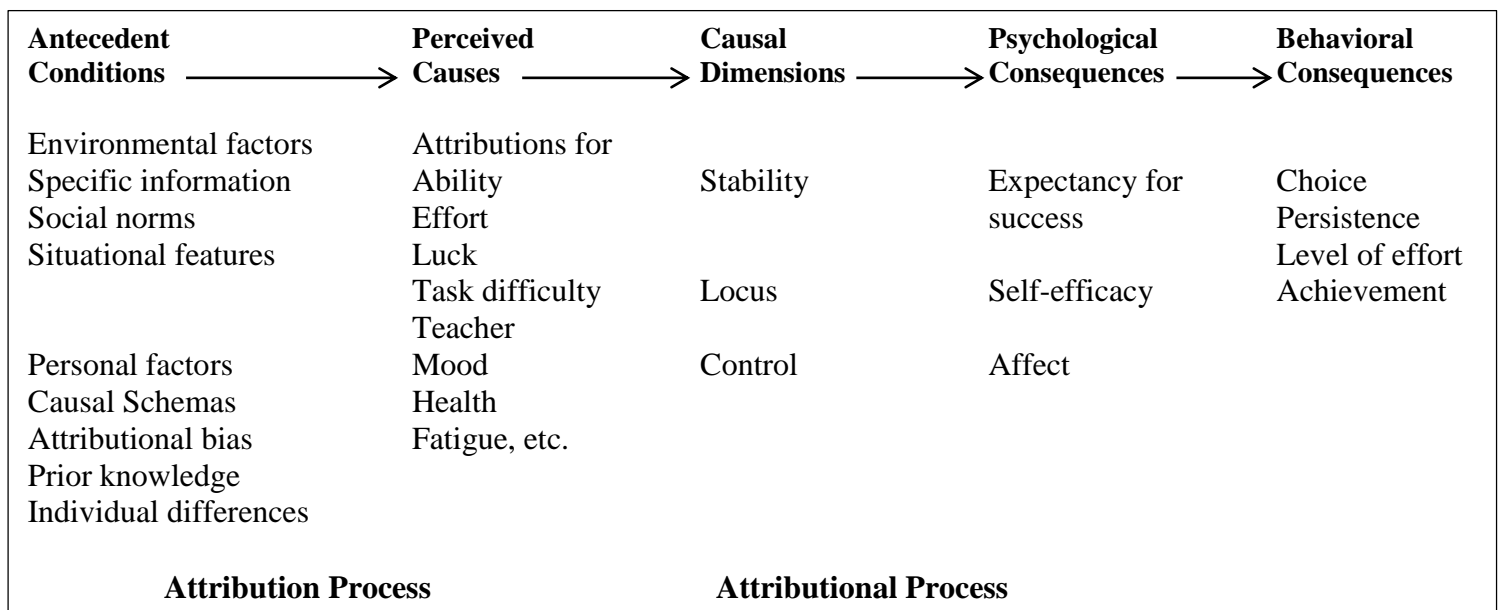


Fig 1: Overview of the Attributional Model (Weiner, 1986, 1992)

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For the purpose of the present study, the application of the Attribution Theory is as follows: firstly, the “causal attributions or factors or antecedent conditions” are represented by the customer service, product quality and store location variables. Secondly, the “outcome” or “behavioral consequence” is represented by choice of retail outlets. Interestingly, the Attribution Theory as described by the Attributional Model shown in Figure 1 above is arguably the most suitable theory in consumer behavior used to understand consumer choice of retail outlets.

Empirical Review

The main thrust of this section is to review empirical studies conducted in the area of determinants of consumer choice of retail outlets. This empirical review is broken down into (1) previous studies on consumer choice of retail outlets from a consumer perspective, (2) existing studies on consumer choice of retail outlets in Nigeria. Each category in each of the aforementioned sub-sections of this empirical review follows an inverted temporal sequence structure from the most recent study to the earlier studies.

Previous Studies on Consumer Choice of Retail Outlets from a Consumer Perspective

Some studies have sought to establish the relationship between demographic variables and choice of retail outlets. For instance, Meng et al (2014) examined shopping choice in Ghana and found that supermarkets are preferred by high income and well educated households. On the contrary, open-air markets are attractive to large households whereas hawkers appear to be more attractive to households of a lower socio-economic status than households of a better educated or higher income. Moreover, location did influence the shopping frequency to supermarkets, open-air markets and hawkers. An earlier study in this category conducted in Pakistan by Iqbal, Ghafoor and Shahbaz (2013) found that education level, occupation, income level and household size did influence store selection. A third study in this category carried out in India by Prasad and Aryasri (2011) on retail format choice for food and grocery products found that shopper’s age, gender, occupation, education, monthly household income, family size and distance travelled to store have significant association with retail format choice decisions. Another study conducted in the city of Karachi, Pakistan found that the demographic influence on choice of retail outlets is partial with household size, education and income having a significant effect on choice of retail outlet selected (Mirza, 2010). Finally, a study conducted in the food and grocery retailing sector in India found that age, occupation, educational level, household income level and household size does influence the choice of retail format (Prasad & Reddy, 2007).

Conversely, many studies have examined the relationship between store attributes and choice of retail outlets. To begin with, a study carried out by Agarwal and Guirat (2017) studied the factors influencing the behavior of consumers towards fast food joints in Indian markets and found overall delivery, variety in menu, taste and quality of food, décor, seating capacity and waiting time, more efficient services, better handling of complaints, staff appearance and their friendly and polite approach, price competition, and proper promotion and advertising as significant attributes. Another study (Zameer and Mukherjee, 2013) studied the food and grocery retail patronage behavior in India and found that there was significant difference in the role played by convenience of location, parking facility, product variety, product quantity,

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home-delivery facility, sales promotion schemes, bargaining facility, self-service facility, goods return facility, goods exchange facility and availability of loyalty programs between Kirana Stores and modern retailers. Similarly, Prashar (2013) examined retail outlet attributes that acted as drivers of store selection in the Indian food and grocery sector. This study found that availability and variety of products at store, store ambience, service and facilities, and value for money were the key factors in store selection. Moreover, the study found that store location was outperformed by other store atmospherics. At the same time, a study carried out in Odisha State in India by Panda (2013) analyzed fifteen variables thought to influence selection between traditional outlets and modern outlets. Findings indicate that opinion of the customers regarding convenient location, parking space, product volume, product variety, home delivery, goods return facility, goods exchange facility, and customer loyalty programs were significantly different in the two formats. In addition, a Malaysian study in this category by Wel et al. (2012) found store personnel, physical characteristics of the store, advertising by the store, store convenience, merchandise selection, store location, peer influence, product variety, product quality, and service offered by the store as important determinants of retail store selection. A sixth study in this category by Mittal and Prashar (2010) analyzed the consumer preferences of the specific attributes of retail stores in 5 selected cities of Punjab, India. The factors identified of much significance include availability and variety, ambience, service, price, advertisement, prestige, and quality. A second Malaysian study in this category by Chamhuri and Batt (2009) found perceptions of freshness, Halal assurance, having good relationship with retailers, good quality meat, competitive price, convenience, varieties of products to choose from and retail outlets that have good and pleasant environment as factors increasing consumers' choice of retail stores for fresh meat in Malaysia. Similarly, Yilmaz et al. (2007) found that convenient location of the shopping mall, product, price, quality, physical appearance, attitude of staff were important factors shaping customer outlet selection preferences in Turkey. Another study conducted in Turkey by Polat and Kulter (2007) established the factors which determine retail store preference of consumers to include product diversity, product quality, inner atmosphere and appearance, quick shopping facility, attitude and interest of staff, and prices of goods. Moreover, a Turkish study by Uslu (2005) found that the approach of the store staff to customers, contents of product, parking space, issue, of hygiene, after sales services, variety of products, product price, location convenience, and quality of products on offer are major factors impacting customers' choice of shopping centers in Turkey. Also, Sinha and Barnerjee (2004) studied store choice in an evolving market like India and found that store convenience and customer services positively influence customers' supermarket choice, whilst, entertainment, parking and ambience facilities had a negative influence on consumer outlet choice. Finally, one of the earliest studies in this category carried out in the United States by Martineau (1958) suggested that the store's personality or image has two components, its functional qualities and its psychological attributes. According to Martineau (1958), the functional attributes included such attributes as location, assortment of products and store layout whereas the psychological attributes related to the feelings generated by functional factors such as spacious, not crowded, etc.

Nevertheless, studies have integrated demographic variables and store attributes to examine factors influencing consumer choice of retail outlets. One of such studies executed in Trinidad and Tobago by Iton and Ewan (2016) examined consumers' retail outlet choice for roots and

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tubers between traditional and modern retail outlets and found that four demographic variables namely age, employment status, ethnicity and income plus two latent factors of store attributes, that is, value and location were statistically significant. A Kenyan study by Gido et al. (2016) examined consumers' choice of retail outlets for African indigenous vegetables. Their findings revealed that local open air markets and green groceries were the most preferred retail outlets in rural and urban households, respectively. In addition, gender, age, and education level of the key decision-maker, household size, variety diversity, vegetable bunch size, market distance and perceptions regarding African indigenous vegetables (AIV) retail prices significantly influence the choice of AIV retail outlets. Another Kenyan study in this category by Phoebe and Nyongesa (2015) investigated the factors that influence consumer retail outlets patronage in Kenya. In consequence, the study found eight most important factors that influence patronage to include adequate number of cashiers to reduce queuing, reasonable prices of products, employees' courtesy and warmth with customers, knowledgeable employees, display and arrangement of merchandise, convenient operating hours, availability of all types of merchandise and channel for customer complaints. Moreover, there was no evidence to prove that consumers' demographics influence loyalty. In addition, Indian consumers' perception of Wal-Mart and the factors that affect their perception were examined by Seetharaman et al. (2013). The study found that product and service quality do not affect the consumer perception of Wal-Mart while other variables like price, convenience and social and cultural affinity influence consumer perception of Wal-Mart. Finally, Thai shopping behavior between wet markets, supermarkets and food quality was investigated by Gorton et al (2009). Findings show that gender, age, income and education are not significant in explaining variations between wet markets and supermarkets. However, for fresh produce sales there are positive relationships between supermarket spending and speed of service and variety of products. Similarly, Gorton et al. (2009) found frequency of wet market visits to be positively related to the importance given to speed of service and product quality, and negatively related to atmosphere and the interaction of quality and cleanliness.

Existing Studies on Consumer Choice of Retails Outlets in Nigeria

Of course, a number of studies on consumers' choice of retail outlets have been previously undertaken in the Nigerian context as revealed by extant literature. For example, a recent study carried out by Iloamaeke et al. (2022) examined the attributes influencing consumer choice of retail outlets in the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector in Awka metropolis, Nigeria and found that customer service, product quality, product assortment, competitive pricing, and store location significantly influence consumer choice of retail outlets. A second study (Okeke, 2020) found that product quality, ambience and price had significant positive influence on customer choice of retail outlets in South-Eastern, Nigeria. Another study conducted by Onyeagwara et al. (2019) found that product, outlet and demographic attributes are significant predictors of choice of buying outlets by consumers in Imo and Abia States. A fourth study by Akekue-Alex and Kalu (2016) investigated the relationship between positioning strategies and customer patronage of fast food firms in Port-Harcourt metropolis. Findings revealed an insignificant relationship between all positioning strategies and customer patronage. To be more precise, only 2.5 percent of the variation in customer patronage was explained by the joint influence of customer expectation, location, service quality and assortment. A fifth study (Igwe and Chukwu, 2016) examined the impact of consumer demographic variables on

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consumer store choice in four major commercial cities in Nigeria. Findings revealed that there is no significant difference between retail pattern choice and sex, marital status and religion while there is a significant difference between store choice based on income, age, education and economic position of the consumer. Finally, Oghojafor and Nwagwu (2013) examined the influence of demographic variables on choice of shopping outlets for grocery products among female residents of Lagos State, Nigeria. In consequence, this study found that socio-economic variables such as income, level of education, type of employment, marital status and family size did not influence retail outlet choice for groceries by Nigeria women.

From the foregoing discussion, the gap in the literature is that there is a dearth of studies that have examined retailers' perception of consumer choice of retail outlets especially in the Nigerian context. Interestingly, this study examines the views of retailers regarding consumer choice of retail outlets in the FMCG sector to find out their clean, competent, expert perspectives. More importantly, the current literature suggests that customer service, product quality and store location are three of the most highlighted store attributes influencing consumer choice of retail outlets. Accordingly, these three store attributes are suitable for helping us provide an empirical evidence of what works in Nigeria with respect to consumer choice of retail outlets.

Hypotheses Development

The three factors identified were reviewed in this empirical study. The proposed hypotheses to be tested in the empirical research are explained hereunder.

Customer Service

The effect of customer service has shown inconsistent result in prior studies. For example, several studies have proven that customer service has a significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Iloamaeke et al, 2022; Agarwal & Guirat, 2017; Prashar, 2013; Wel et al, 2012; Mittal & Prashar, 2010; Gorton et al, 2009; Uslu, 2005; Sinha & Barnerjee, 2004). On the other hand, the studies by Akekue-Alex and Kalu (2016) and Seetharaman et al (2013) have proven that customer service does not influence consumer choice of retail outlets. Thus, we state the first hypothesis.

H₁: H₀₁: Customer service does not have a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

H_{A1}: Customer service has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Product Quality

Of course, an avalanche of studies has proven that product quality has a significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Iloamaeke et al, 2022; Okeke, 2020; Agarwal & Guirat, 2017; Wel et al, 2012; Mittal & Prashar, 2010; Chamhuri & Batt, 2009; Gorton et al, 2009; Yilmaz et al, 2007; Polat & Kulter, 2007). In contrast, the study by Seetharaman et al (2013) shows that product quality does not significantly influence consumer choice of retail outlets. Accordingly, we state the second hypothesis:

H₂: **H₀₂:** Product quality has no significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets.

H_{A2}: Product quality has a significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Store Location

Some studies have confirmed a significant relationship between store location and consumer choice of retail outlets (e.g., Iloamaeke et al, 2022; Iton & Ewan, 2016; Zameer & Mukherjee, 2013; Wel et al, 2012; Yilmaz et al, 2007; Uslu, 2005). On the contrary, a few studies have confirmed store location not to have a significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets. (e.g., Akekue-Alex, 2016; Prashar, 2013). As a result, we state the third hypothesis:

H₃: **H₀₃:** Store location has no significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

H_{A3}: Store location has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Research Model

The conceptual model is formulated based on the preceding discussion and hypotheses (see Figure 2 below).

Causal Factors/Attributes

Outcome/Behavioral Consequence

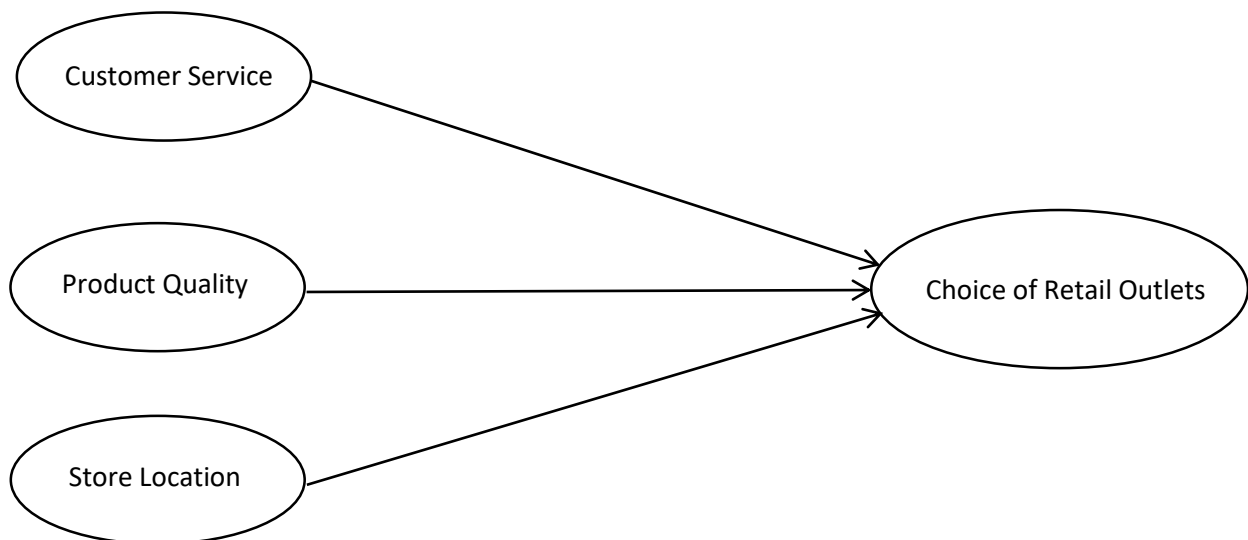


Fig. 2: Proposed research model

Interestingly, the proposed research model as shown in Fig 2 above is an abridgement of the attribution model (Weiner, 1986, 1992) as depicted in Figure 1. This was done by leaving out perceived causes, causal dimensions and psychological consequences variables as the attributional processes intervening between the antecedent conditions and the behavioral consequence or outcome.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey which is the predominant method of executing descriptive research design is adopted in this study.

Area of Study

Interestingly, Awka metropolis, South-East, Nigeria is the area of study. To be more precise, Awka is the capital of Anambra State, Nigeria and contain retail outlets in the different segments of the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector like food and beverages, healthcare, household and personal care, and stationery.

Population of the Study

The retailers, who operate in the food and beverages outlets, healthcare outlets, household and personal care outlets, and stationery outlets in Awka metropolis were taken as the population for this study. Therefore, since there is no accurate statistics on the number of retailers who operate in these retail outlets in Awka metropolis, at any given time, the population is not known.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Owing to the fact that the population could not be ascertained, the sample size was determined by estimating the sample based on a proportion. According to Rose, Spinks and Canhoto (2014), the sample size estimate can be obtained by the formula:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 pq}{d^2}$$

Where n = sample size

d = degree of precision or the margin of error that is acceptable.

p = proportion of the population having the characteristic.

q = proportion of the population not having the characteristic.

To be more precise, because the population is not known, then for a degree of precision (d) of 5%, and a proportion of the population having the characteristic (p) of 90% and a proportion of the population not having the characteristic (q) of 10%, the sample size required for the current study is calculated as

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.90)(0.10)}{0.05^2} = 138 \text{ respondents}$$

Accordingly, the sample size here is 138 respondents.

A convenience sample (non-probability sampling method) of 138 retailers was polled up for the current study in April and May, 2023. The retailer sample is suitable for this study in the sense that retailers interface with the final consumer. As a result, they can provide a clean, competent, expert perspective on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Instrument of Data Collection

The questionnaire is the research instrument employed in this study. The instrument contained two major parts. The first part comprised 6 demographic questions. On the other hand, the second part consisted of 20 questions concerning participants' perception of consumer choice

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK of retail outlets borrowed from Iloamaeke et al's (2022) scale. This second part of the questionnaire contains the core subject-matter section and was developed based on the proposed research model (see Figure 2). This part of the questionnaire contains questions to enable the researchers test the formulated hypotheses and meet the objectives of the study. That is to say, they contain the predictor and criterion variables of interest in the study. Each construct in the model consisted of items measured using 5-point Likert scales, ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree). See Table 1 for the constructs, their sources, and corresponding survey questions.

Table 1: The Development of Survey Instrument

Construct	Source(s)	Adapted Items/Survey Questions
Customer Service	Iloamaeke et al (2022)	Customers like buying where they can get parking space. (x ₁) Customers shop where they are treated fairly. (x ₂) Customers like shopping where they will be assisted to pack their loads. (x ₃) Customers like transacting with employees who are honest. (x ₄) Customers like to shop at outlets that handle their complaints very well. (x ₅)
Product Quality	Iloamaeke et al (2022)	A customer patronizes a store if s/he discovers it sells quality products. (x ₁) In my opinion customers kind of store should sell clean products. (x ₂) Customers think goods in their preferred store should sell clean products. (x ₃) Customers rarely consider quality as important factor. (x ₄) Customers always make quality a priority. (x ₅)
Store Location	Iloamaeke et al (2022)	A store's accessibility makes customers patronize it. (x ₁) Customers never consider nearness of a store when buying. (x ₂) Customers rarely consider store convenience. (x ₃) Customers sometimes buy from a neighborhood store. (x ₄) Closer stores are always the best for customers. (x ₅)
Choice of Retail Outlets	Iloamaeke et al (2022)	A store frequently patronized by customers grows. (x ₁) A security lapse in a store keeps customers away. (x ₂) Customers are less exposed to retailing business. (x ₃) Customers do not buy at stores but their family and friends buy for them. (x ₄) Upgraded stores are attractive to customers. (x ₅)

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

The instrument was validated by using face validity method otherwise known as content validity. The face validity was evaluated by the researchers and two retailers from the FMCG industry.

To check the reliability of the measuring instrument, the questionnaire was pre-test through a pilot study to determine its effectiveness in soliciting the information intended. In consequence, copies of the research instrument were restricted on a sample of thirty respondents who were representatively drawn from the area of the study. Also, Cronbach Alpha reliability test was employed in the analysis due to the nature of the instrument. Moreover, Wong (2013) and Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins and Kuppelwieser (2014) recommended that an internal consistency greater

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Table 2: Reliability Test

Variable/Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Customer Service	5	0.923
Product Quality	5	0.989
Store Location	5	0.890
Choice of Retail Outlets	5	0.770

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Administration of the Instrument

The copies of the research instrument were administered by the researchers themselves with the help of two research assistants. The drop-off and pick-up method (Ibeh, 2004) was adopted in administering the copies of the questionnaire to ensure that the distribution and collection processes were systematic and objective.

Method of Data Analysis

To test the significant effect and the relationship between the dependent variable and independent variables, multiple regression analysis was used to test the formulated hypotheses with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 20.0 software at 5% level of significance. The decision for the hypotheses is to accept the alternative hypotheses if the p-value of the test statistic is less than or equal to the alpha (α) at 5% (0.05) significance level. All the items in the dimension of each variable were used to test each hypothesis.

Instrument Administration and Collection

Initially, the researchers and their assistants distributed 138 copies of the questionnaire which tallied with the already determined sample size of the study. Eventually, due to external variables such as the time and busy schedule of some of the respondents, 110 copies of the questionnaire were completed and returned. Table 3 below shows the distribution and collection statistics of the research instrument.

Table 3: Distribution and Collection of Copies of Research Instrument

Returned and Usable Copies Analysis			Copies/Rate Usable to Total Copies Produced	
Copies produced and distributed	Copies returned and usable	Copies not returned/not collected and unusable	Copies usable to total copies produced	Percentage of copies usable to copies produced
138(100%)	110 (79.7%)	28 (20.3%)	110/138	79.7%

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

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Table 3 comprised two major parts. Accordingly, the first part, *Returned and Usable Copies Analysis*, shows that the total copies of the questionnaire produced and distributed to the respondents which tallied with the sample size were 138, which is 100%. Out of this figure, 110 were returned and usable representing a 79.7% response rate. However, copies of the questionnaire not returned and unusable were 28, which represent 20.3% of the total copies produced and distributed. In consequence, the 79.7% response rate in this study is well above the 70% minimum response rate recommended by scholars (e.g., Kothari, 2011).

The second part of Table 3 which is *Copies/Rate Usable to Total Copies Produced* compares the usable copies with the total copies produced. As clearly shown, 110 returned usable copies represents 79.7% of the 138 total copies of the research instrument produced and distributed. As has been said previously, this rate is once again considered sufficiently high to proceed with the study.

Data Presentation

The data is presented using a frequency table and simple percentages.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Table 4 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample which is validly 110 retailers. This is shown hereunder.

Table 4: Respondents' Demographic Profile

Items	Categories	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	48	43.6
	Female	62	56.4
Age	18 – 29	44	40.0
	30 – 39	33	30.0
	40 – 49	24	21.8
	50 – 59	7	6.4
	Above 60	2	1.8
Income per month	Below ₦30,000	29	26.4
	₦30,000 – ₦50,000	42	38.2
	₦50,001 – ₦70,000	14	12.7
	₦70,001 and above	25	22.7
Education	Non-formal/primary	9	8.2
	Secondary	28	25.5
	Tertiary	57	51.8
	Postgraduate	16	14.5
Segment of FMCG	Food and Beverages	40	36.4
	Healthcare	21	19.1
	Household and Personal Care	38	34.5
	Stationery	11	10.0

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How long respondents have been in business	Less than 7 years	75	68.2
	7 – 12 years	21	19.1
	13 – 18 years	10	9.1
	19 – 24 years	3	2.7
	25 years and above	1	0.9

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Data Analysis

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
CRO	5	16.00	209.00	110.0000	88.95786	-.021	.913
CS	5	13.00	211.00	110.0000	91.22500	-.036	.913
PQ	5	13.00	219.00	108.0000	90.86528	.129	.913
SL	5	13.00	209.00	110.0000	90.37422	-.013	.913

Source: SPSS 20.0 Output, 2023.

The descriptive statistics for the dependent variable, choice of retail outlets (CRO) and independent variables namely customer service (CS), product quality (PQ) and store location (SL) are presented in Table 5. The mean is used to establish a baseline. The central tendency is taken by the median, which re-ranks. The maximum and minimum statistic on the other hand, aid in the detection of data problems. The deviation/dispersion/variation from the mean is represented by the standard deviation. It is a risk indicator; the greater the standard deviation, the greater the risk. The standard deviation is a metric that expresses how much each item in a dataset deviates from the mean. It is the most reliable and extensively used metric. The standard deviation of the variables are 88.96, 91.23, 90.87 and 90.37 for choice of retail outlets (CRO), customer service (CS), product quality (PQ) and store location (SL) respectively. The table shows that the product quality variable has a positive value or is skewed whereas choice of retail outlets (CRO), customer service (CS) and store location (SL) have negative values.

Test of Hypotheses

Regression analysis using SPSS Version 20.0 software was used to test the hypotheses by using data from Table 5 above. Likewise, Table 6 below shows the regression analysis results.

Table 6: Regression Analysis

CRO	RSquare	Adjusted RSquare	Coefficients	T	p-value
CS	1.000	1.000	1.000	260.021	0.000
PQ	0.993	0.991	0.997	21.366	0.000
SL	0.999	0.999	1.000	66.240	0.000

Hypothesis One

H₁: **H_{O1}:** Customer service does not have a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

H_{A1}: Customer service has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

A regression analysis was used to investigate the association between customer service and consumer choice of retail outlets in Table 6. The Coefficient of determination or Adjusted RSquare shows how much variation in the dependent variable is caused by changes in the independent variable. According to the findings in Table 6, the value of the Adjusted RSquare is 1.000, indicating that 100% changes in consumer choice of retail outlets was due to variations in customer service. This means that all the changes in consumer choice of retail outlets can be described by customer service.

In Table 6, it reveals that the probability of the slope coefficients indicate that p-value (0.000) <0.05. Conversely, the t-statistics of 260.02 for customer service implies that customer service positively effects consumer choice of retail outlets and this is statistically significant at 5%, hence the p-value is less than 5% level of significance. Table 6 shows a positive link between customer service and consumer choice of retail outlets with a correlation coefficient of 1.000. That is to say, there is a high level of confidence between customer service and consumer choice of retail outlets and the correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level of significance.

Decision:

Since p-value of the test statistic is less than alpha value, we therefore, reject the null hypothesis and uphold the alternative hypothesis which states that customer service has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Hypothesis Two

H₂: **H_{O2}:** Product quality has no significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets.

H_{A2}: Product quality has a significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Similarly, a regression analysis was used to investigate the association between product quality and consumer choice of retail outlets in Table 6. The coefficient of determination or Adjusted RSquare shows us how much variation in the dependent variable is caused by changes in the independent variable. According to Table 6, the value of Adjusted RSquare is 0.991, indicating that 99.1% changes in consumer choice of retail outlets was due to variations in product quality. This means that 99.1% of the changes in consumer choice of retail outlets can be described by product quality, while 0.9% was by other variables not included in the model.

In Table 6, it reveals that the probability of the slope coefficients indicates that p-value (0.000) <0.05. On the contrary, the t-statistics of 21.37 for product quality implies that product quality positively affects consumer choice of retail outlets and this is statistically significant at 5%, hence the p-value is less than 5% (0.05).

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A positive link between product quality and consumer choice of retail outlets is shown in Table 6 with a correlation coefficient of 0.997. To be more precise, there is a high level of confidence between product quality and consumer choice of retail outlets and the correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level of significance.

Decision:

Since p-value of the test statistic is less than alpha value, we therefore, reject the null hypothesis and uphold the alternative hypothesis which states that product quality has a significant influence on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Hypothesis Three

H₃: H_{O3}: Store location has no significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

H_{A3}: Store location has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

In the same way, a regression analysis was used to investigate the association between consumer choice of retail outlets and store location in Table 6. To begin with, the coefficient of determination or Adjusted RSquare shows how much variation in the dependent variable is caused by changes in the independent variable. According to findings in Table 6, the value of Adjusted RSquare is 0.999, indicating that 99.9% changes in consumer choice of retail outlets was due to variations in store location. This means that 99.9% of the changes in consumer choice of retail outlets can be described by store location, while 0.1% was by other variables not included in the model.

At the same time, in Table 6, it reveals that the probability of the slope coefficients indicate that p-value (0.000) < 0.05. Nevertheless, the t-statistics of 66.24 for store location implies that store location positively affects consumer choice of retail outlets and this is statistically significance at 5%, hence the p-value is less than the 5% level of significance.

Finally, a positive link between store location and consumer choice of retail outlets is shown in Table 6 with a correlation coefficient of 1.000. That is to say, there is a high level of confidence between store location and consumer choice of retail outlets and the correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level of significance.

Decision:

Since p-value of the test statistic is less than alpha value, we therefore, reject the null hypothesis and uphold the alternative hypothesis which states that store location has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets.

Table 7 presents a summary for analysis of variables towards choice of retail outlets.

Table 7: Results from Testing Influence of Independent Variables on Choice of Retail Outlets

Hypothesis	Variables Involved	t-statistics	ANOVA p-value	Remarks
H ₁	Customer Service Vs. Choice of Retail Outlets	260.021	0.000	Significant Relationship
H ₂	Product Quality Vs. Choice of Retail Outlets	21.366	0.000	Significant Relationship
H ₃	Store Location Vs. Choice of Retail Outlets	66.240	0.000	Significant Relationship

The result of the analysis including the hypotheses involved, the variables involved, their t-statistics, ANOVA p-values and remarks are shown in Table 7. Accordingly, as shown in Table 7, all the three hypothesized relationships (the relationship between choice of retail outlets and customer service, choice of retail outlets and product quality, choice of retail outlets and store location) in the research model are statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. To be more precise, the results indicate that customer service is the most important attribute influencing consumer choice of retail outlets, followed by store location and product quality in that order with t-values of approximately 260.0, 66.2, and 21.4 respectively.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Our study developed a conceptual model to examine retailers' perception of consumer choice of retail outlets and furthered our understanding of their expert perspective. Based on our findings and previous studies, it is now possible to construct a definitive model to predict consumer choice of retail outlets. Specifically, customer service, product quality and store location all influence consumer choice of retail outlets.

We have discovered that customer service is an important attribute influencing consumer choice of retail outlets, which is consistent not only with Nigerian scholars' findings (e.g., Iloamaeke et al, 2022) but also with previous studies in other climes (e.g., Sinha & Barnerjee, 2004; Uslu, 2005; Gorton et al, 2009; Mittal & Prashar, 2010. Wel et al, 2012; Prashar, 2013; Agarwal & Guirat, 2017). Customer service appears to be the most important factor in predicting consumer choice of retail outlets. That is to say that most Nigerian consumers consider customer service (the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met) the overarching reason for choosing retail outlets. In other words, Nigerian consumers are more likely to choose retail outlets when retailers focus on serving the customers. In this sense, Nigerian retailers will benefit greatly if they provide parking space for customers, treat them fairly, assist them to pack their loads and handle their complaints very well.

Likewise, we found a positive path from product quality to consumer choice of retail outlets. Evidently, this means that Nigerian consumers are willing to patronize retail outlets that stock products in such a way that the totality of the features and characteristics of the products bear

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on their ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. This is also consistent with previous studies conducted in the context of shopping mall (Uslu, 2005), retail store (Polat & Kulter, 2007), fast food joints (Agarwal & Guirat, 2017), and fast moving consumer goods (Iloamaeke et al, 2022) in which product quality is an important factor in consumer choice of retail outlets. The implication is that Nigerian retailers should stock products that satisfy or delight the consumers' expectations. Obviously, providing consumers with fake, substandard products would deter Nigerian consumers from patronizing particular retail outlets.

We also found that store location has a significant effect on consumer choice of retail outlets, which of consistent not only with Nigerian scholars' findings (e.g., Iloamaeke et al, 2022) but also with previous studies in other countries (e.g., Wel et al, 2012; Panda, 2013; Zameer & Mukherjee, 2013; Iton & Ewan, 2016). In other words, Nigerian consumers are more likely to choose retail outlets when the consumers believe that they are accessible, near, convenient and close. In this sense, Nigerian retailers should site their retail outlets close to the customers. In summary, our study has confirmed that Nigerian consumers favor retail outlets that provide customer service, product quality and are conveniently located. Stricter regulation is required to ensure that consumers are not provided with fake, substandard products. Besides, retailers should focus on serving consumers well in conveniently sited retail outlets.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the success of any retailing business depends on consumer patronage. In other words, for a retailing business to become and continue to be strong, healthy and flourishing, it must receive support from consumers/customers who continually spend their money on such specific outlets. Therefore, retailers must first understand what interests the consumers and what turns them off to be able to serve them better and ensure repeat patronage. From a retailers' viewpoint, customer service, product quality and store location individually influence consumer choice of retail outlets. Interestingly, this expert perspective serves as a guide for retailers in the FMCG sector in achieving their organizational goals and objectives.

As a result, retailers should invest in technology to enable customers use the necessary tools to purchase products and services and also receive help from customer service personnel in a bid to improve customer service. That is to say, they should adopt more modern methods of payment such as QR codes, gift cards and mobile money as well as customer support tools such as help desk ticketing system, knowledge base software, live chat software, social listening and monitoring tool, and customer feedback survey tool.

Furthermore, retailers should always stock quality products and avoid providing consumers with fake, substandard products. Moreover, the Nigerian government should invest massively in infrastructure and provide incentives to manufacturers to stimulate local economic growth leading to businesses that provide quality products and services. More importantly, the regulatory agencies in Nigeria should rid the Nigerian market of substandard products.

Finally, retailers can increase the number of their outlets to make them more convenient, accessible and near to customers. Moreover, this strategy can also make retailers not to be

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outdone by competitors. In addition, Nigerian retailers should consider factors such as traffic, type of neighborhood, type of building, customer demographics, accessibility, type of merchandise sold, and neighboring competitors when choosing store locations in an attempt to increase customer traffic to the store.

Suggestions for Future Research

To begin with, this study is limited to Awka metropolis. Further studies can be duplicated in other cities in Nigeria or cities in other climes to ascertain the end result. At the same time, further studies should analyze extra attributes such as product assortment, competitive pricing, promotion and advertisement, store ambience, store facilities, physical characteristics/appearance, staff attitude, store layout, social affinity, and cultural affinity that may affect consumer choice of retail outlets. Finally, further studies should employ the structural equation modeling (SEM) statistical analysis technique used mostly in the social and behavioral sciences but also used in business and other fields to test the formulated hypotheses as encapsulated in this study's schema.

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