



## FOOD QUALITY AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY OF EATERIES IN UYO METROPOLIS, AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study was necessitated by the quest to unravel the effect of food quality on customer loyalty at eateries in Uyo metropolis. The main objective of the study was to investigate the effect of food quality on customer loyalty at eateries in Uyo metropolis. The researcher adopted survey design as the main research design. The study was conducted in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. Structured questionnaire was use as the main instrument of data collection. 296 customers were respondents for the study. The data from the field was analyzed using simple linear regression. The result revealed a significant relationship between food quality dimensions and customer loyalty. The researcher concluded that the variables of food quality do enhance customer loyalty to a very large extent and recommended that Mechanism should be put in place by management to provide instant fresh meal for customers rather than storing them for days and that food should be presented in an enticing and hygienic manner.*

**KEYWORDS:** Food, Quality, Customer, Loyalty.



## INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, there is an increasing demand for meals outside of home as a result of higher earnings, changes in consumption habits, changes in household composition, and the time demands produced by multiple working families (Sezgin and Şanlıer 2016). The food service industry has emerged as a lucrative business area for entrepreneurs, but it has also grown fiercely competitive due to the rising number of food service establishments in response to growing demand (Cahaya *et al.*, 2023). In order to succeed in such a competitive industry, eatery operators need to understand the factors that influence restaurant patrons' decisions (Nwokah and Adiele, 2018).

Scholars have attempted to concentrate on the fact that consumers frequently rely on both internal and external signals to determine the quality of food. For instance, intrinsic quality indicators include food appearance, colour, shape, and structure, all of which are non-replaceable without altering the product's outward appearance (Sampson *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, factors such as price, brand, retail location, country of origin, nutrients included, and production information are examples of external signals that are not included in the physical makeup of the product (Konuk, 2019). In the same vein, scholars have proposed that freshness, health, palatability, and food presentation are dimensions that may be considered in assessing the quality of food (Cahaya *et al.*, 2023).

Researchers and service managers have focused a great deal of attention on the value of food quality in restaurants (Keshavarz *et al.*, 2016). Traditionally, it has been thought that providing high-quality food is essential to retaining clients and gaining market share. Hence, the importance of good food quality in influencing restaurant patronage cannot be over-emphasized. Food quality is one of the most important determinants of customer satisfaction, patronage, and loyalty in the restaurant industry (Nwokah and Adiele, 2018). Quality food can, in brief, be described as food that is well presented, fresh, and tasty. Prior research has indicated that even in unsatisfactory dining environments, offering excellent service and food quality in a restaurant can positively increase customer loyalty (Moorthy, Chee, Yi, Ying, Woen, and Wei, 2017).

In this study, customer loyalty was held as a uni-dimensional construct that refers to the willingness of a consumer to interact with and make repeat purchases from a particular eatery rather than considering competitors. A customer's positive experience with an eatery leads to loyalty, which builds trust (Etuk *et al.*, 2022; Usani and Eko, 2021; Etuk *et al.*, 2021; Sampson *et al.*, 2022; Usani *et al.*, 2021). Despite the current prosperity and future potential of the eatery industry, the literature shockingly lacks a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence food quality and customer loyalty in eateries in Uyo metropolis. Many studies have been conducted within and outside Nigeria, examining food quality and customer loyalty constructs in different settings and perspectives.

The results of these studies have confirmed the significance of the relationships between these constructs. To the best of the researcher's knowledge and from the review of empirical literature, it appears that there is a scarcity of research on the effect of food quality and customer loyalty in the Nigerian context, especially in Uyo metropolis, Akwa Ibom State.



Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate the effect of food quality on customer loyalty at eateries in Uyo metropolis. With specific objectives to include:

- i. To examine the effect of food freshness and customer loyalty of eatery in Uyo metropolis
- ii. To investigate the effect of food presentation and customer loyalty of eatery in Uyo metropolis

### **Research Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were formulated for the study.

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant effect of food freshness and customer loyalty of eatery in Uyo metropolis.

H<sub>02</sub>: Food presentation does not have any significant effect on customer loyalty of eatery in Uyo metropolis.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Overview of Food Quality**

Peri (2016) asserts that restaurants must give top priority to food quality in order to satisfy the expectations of their customers. The quality of food is the only characteristic that can accurately predict the purpose of dining behaviour and is the most important precursor to customer satisfaction. Ensuring a superb eating experience has significant importance for the majority of customers, especially in non-restaurant settings. Keshavarz (2016) states that clients seek outstanding food and service to create a memorable dining experience. Food quality is determined by the extent to which customers' expectations align with their evaluation of the actual freshness or presentation of the food.

According to Gundur *et al.* (2021), food quality refers to the whole capacity of food to meet client requirements. It is a vital element of the culinary industry. Food quality is a crucial aspect of meal service. Food quality, as per the definition provided by Siregar *et al.* (2022), encompasses a range of properties that customers deem satisfactory, such as consistency, texture, freshness, size, shape, and colour. Food quality is a key approach to foster the growth of the restaurant sector. Researchers have identified several crucial elements of food quality, including colour, appearance, portion size, form, temperature, texture, aroma, and flavour (Gaman and Sherrington, 2016; Jones, 2019).

### **Dimensions of Food Quality**

#### **Food Freshness**

The concept of food freshness has garnered significant scholarly attention within the service industry due to its impact on meal quality. Freshness pertains to the condition of food characterised by its firmness, moisture, and fragrance (Peneau, Hoehn, Roth, Escher, & Nuessli, 2006). When it comes to food characteristics, freshness is the primary sensory aspect that interacts with factors such as taste, smell, and sight (Delwiche, 2004). Freshness



typically pertains to the immediate and tangible condition of food, which is closely associated with its attributes such as crispness, juiciness, and scent.

Food freshness refers to the level of heat and moisture retained by a food item when it is being transported to the customer (Delwiche, 2004). In general, freshness is a term used to describe the state of food that is fresh and physically intact. As to Trenkle's (1982) definition, freshness refers to food that has not been subjected to any processes to extend its shelf life, either during or after production or fabrication. In a restaurant context, food freshness can be defined as the state of a dish that has not exceeded a specific duration since its produce.

### **Food presentation**

The presentation of food can serve as an enticing factor for restaurants and is mostly employed to create a favourable impression on potential customers. Food presentation, also known as food display or visualisation, involves the skillful arrangement and decoration of food dishes on a plate to enhance their visual appeal. Food presentation refers to the act of presenting food in a visually pleasing manner to guests (Bennet 2017). Kivela *et al.* (2019) argue that the way food is presented has a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction with their eating experience. Indeed, the aesthetically pleasing presentation of food can evoke positive emotions and enhance the inclination of customers to consume the meal at a specific fast food establishment.

As a result, this will foster a positive rapport and establish an emotional bond between consumers and the eatery provider. Namkung and Jang (2017) assert that meal presentation is a crucial element of food quality and significantly influences the customer's appetite and perception of food quality. Presentation refers to the manner in which the food is cooked and displayed for the clients. According to Adiele and Gren (2016), visually appealing and well-decorated food might enhance the customer's sense of quality by serving as a tactile indication. Additionally, they stated that food presentation pertains to the consumer's perception of the product's value, whether it is in terms of its physical appearance or the quality of its contents. The physical perception of food quality might be enhanced by appealing packaging or informative labelling (Namkung, and Jang 2018).

### **Customer Loyalty Conceptualization**

Customer loyalty refers to the success of the service provider in establishing long-term relationships with their customers and also achieving rewards for interacting with them. It is the tendency to choose a particular product over all others due to satisfaction with the product or service (Etuk *et al.*, 2022) Customer loyalty always encourages customers to buy more consistently. The loyalty may be product-specific or company-specific. When a loyal customer buys the same product repeatedly, he may be described as brand- or product-specific loyal. Additionally, customers may also buy different products from the same manufacturer, which may be described as company-specific loyalty (Usani and Sampson, 2023; Sampson *et al.*, 2022). Customer loyalty refers to the customer who chooses one particular product over another to fulfill his or her needs. Customer loyalty means that the customer is loyal to the company and only turns to a competitor in exceptional cases (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2004). Certain factors such as boredom and dissatisfaction with a product, availability of competitors and increased concern over price are the reasons for decline in consumer loyalty and patronage (Udonde and Eke, 2023).



## Theoretical Framework

This study uses Anderson's (1973) assimilation-contrast hypothesis for post-exposure product performance, based on Sherif and Hovland's (1961) research. Assimilation-contrast theory states that customers will dismiss any discrepancy between their expectations and their performance when it falls within their acceptable range. Consequently, absorption will result in adequate performance. If the performance is within the rejection range, the contrast will increase, and the service will be unsuitable.

The assimilation hypothesis combines contrast and assimilation theories. According to this paradigm, satisfaction depends on the difference between predicted and realised performance. Customers tend to use past expectations to shape their product performance judgements, similar to assimilation theory. This adjustment only occurs when their expectations and performance differ slightly. Assimilation-contrast theory shows how both paradigms apply to customer loyalty studies. Understanding assimilation and contrast theory is key. Because the food quality strategy is new in Nigeria, this study should apply this approach. This study uses the idea since it instantly clarifies customer behaviour. This commonly used model helps marketing managers estimate consumer loyalty and purchase probability. Products and services are bought with expectations of performance.

## Empirical Framework

Perter (2019) examined fast food presentation and consumer loyalty. This study examined fast food restaurant customer loyalty and meal presentation. Data was collected through a questionnaire. Analyses included linear and multivariate regression. Food presentations increase consumer turnover and loyalty, according to the findings. With experienced internal staff, creative service features, and self-service technological knowledge, organisations may thrive in any economic climate, according to this study.

Recently, Cahaya *et al.* (2023) surveyed how to increase client loyalty through customer satisfaction, service, and food quality. In this study, client loyalty in the food business was examined through customer happiness, service quality, and food quality. In this research, quantitative descriptive approaches were utilised to collect data from 100 respondents and analyse it using SEM-PLS. The research shows that food and service quality are positively correlated, affecting customer happiness. The satisfaction of Subway Indonesia customers also increases their loyalty. These statistics show that Subway Indonesia must continue to enhance service and food quality to meet consumer expectations and increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Mohaydin *et al.* (2017) examined how food safety affects quality and customer satisfaction. We wanted to know how much individuals care about food safety in their daily lives. A questionnaire was used to collect data from UET students. Food safety is a mediator between food quality and consumer happiness, and people are concerned about what goes into their food and what they eat. Food producers, restaurants, and home cooks must follow proper food processing processes.





Siregar et al. (2022) evaluated how food and service quality affect consumer loyalty at Aisyah Catering Medan, with satisfaction as an intervening variable. The number of Aisyah Catering Medan customers who had bought twice was unknown for this investigation. 97 respondents were chosen using purposive sampling. The research tool was a questionnaire. This study tested hypotheses with SEM. Food quality boosts Aisyah Catering Medan customer loyalty considerably. Service quality boosts Aisyah Catering Medan customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction boosts Aisyah Catering Medan's loyalty. At Aisyah Catering Medan, food quality, atmosphere, and freshness boost customer happiness. Service quality greatly improves satisfaction. Food quality affects customer loyalty through satisfaction. Quality service may satisfy customers and build loyalty.

In another study, Alenxander et al. (2022) studied Burger King customer loyalty in Surabaya during the pandemic and cuisine, pricing, location, atmosphere, and service quality. This study should improve management expertise, specifically how customer satisfaction influences it, which would boost Burger King restaurant customer loyalty, correct errors, and promote sustainable transactions in Surabaya. This study surveyed 132 male and female Surabaya residents aged 18–60 who consumed Burger King twice in two years. This study analysed data with SPSS 22.0. Use SEM AMOS 22.0 to analyse the respondent's study outcomes and test the research model.

Peter and Iheanacho (2019) examined Port Harcourt restaurant patronage, food freshness, and temperature. This study studied Port Harcourt restaurant patronage, food freshness, and temperature. This study used cross-sectional causal surveys and structured questionnaires. Data from 384 Port Harcourt restaurant consumers was collected using a 5-point Likert scale to weight 25-item questions. A Cronbach alpha of 0.70 assessed the measuring item's internal consistency. The data was analysed using regression. The study discovered strong links between food freshness, temperature, and customer loyalty. This study demonstrated that improving food freshness and temperature can enhance restaurant business.

Gad (2024) investigated Egyptian Asian food chains' meal quality, pricing justice, location, physical atmosphere, and customer retention. The study explores how meal quality, pricing justice, location and physical environment, and customer retention affect Egyptian oriental cuisine chains. This study also supports a variable connection model. The study used 410 real survey replies. AMOS software used structural equation modelling to analyse the results. This study found that meal quality, pricing fairness, location, and surroundings affect customer retention. Statistics show that food quality, pricing justice, location, and environment affect consumer happiness. Retention and satisfaction are statistically linked. Finally, consumer pleasure influences food quality, pricing justice, location, and physical environment on customer retention.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher adopted a survey design as the main research design. This is because survey design allows information to be gathered from a sample of people or organisations through the use of a questionnaire. The study was conducted in Uyo metropolis, Akwa Ibom State. The proximity of the area of study to the researcher was to ease the collection of needed data within the time frame of the study. The population of this study consists of all the people that were encountered at the major fast food outlets at the time of this study. This was irrespective of the demographic variables or social status of the respondents. Since it was not possible to



have a clear figure of people in this category, the population of the study was treated as infinite. The Topman formula was used to determine a sample size of 296. A questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. A purposeful sampling technique was adopted in selecting the eatery, while simple random sampling was used to select the respondents for this study. Simple linear regression analysis was used to analyse the data collected. Table 3.1 shows the selected eateries in Uyo metropolis.

**Table 1: List of Selected Eateries in Uyo Metropolis**

S/N	Name of Fast Food Vendour in Uyo	Location
1.	<u>Crunchies Fast Food</u>	142 Aka Road, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria
2.	<u>aLaCart Foods &amp; Kitchens Nigeria Limited</u>	Plot 2, Unit G, Ewet Housing Estate, Uyo, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria
3.	<u>Beton Cooks</u>	27 Usanga Akpan Street off Ukana Offot, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria
4.	<u>Cedar Court Cuisine</u>	197, Udo Udoma Avenue, Opp. Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio Hall, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria
5.	<u>Cherries Food Service</u>	210 Nsikap Eduok Avenue, 2 Lane, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria
6.	<u>ChopStop Foods</u>	65 G-Line Ewet Housing Estate, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria
7.	<u>Pyramid Lounge &amp; Grill</u>	G-Park Udo Udoma Avenue Opposite Ibom Tropicana Gate, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria
8.	<u>Foodamental Fastfood</u>	197 Udo Udoma Avenue Opposite Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio Hall, Itam Uyo, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria
9.	<u>Life Delicacies</u>	Clement Isong Off Abak Road Federal Housing Estate, Uyo, Akwa Ibom Nigeria

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

### Test of Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study were tested with the use of t-statistics, probability value (p-value), and F-ratio as criteria for accepting or rejecting any of the hypotheses (null or alternative hypothesis) computed using simple linear regression.



## Hypothesis One

The simple linear regression statistics were computed and presented on the Table 2:

**Table 2: Simple Linear Regression Output**

Variable	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t-Stat.	P-Value	Remark	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj R <sup>2</sup>	F-ratio
Constant	0.640	5.645	0.000	Significant	0.917	0.840	0.840	1875.954, p<0.05
Ff	1.095	43.312	0.000	Significant				

\*Dependent Variable=CL

**Source:** *Computed by the Researcher, (2023)*

In testing the hypothesis, food freshness (Ff) was regressed against customer loyalty. The result of the simple regression analysis showed that the model examined the effect of food freshness on customer loyalty. Customer loyalty = 0.640 + 1.095 F.F. The result showed that the coefficient of Ff had a positive effect on customer loyalty. This means that Ff has a positive and direct effect on customer loyalty. The results of the t-statistic denote that the coefficient was statistically significant because the observed values of the t-statistic (43.312) were greater than its P-values (0.000). Because the observed value of the F-statistic (1875.954) was higher than its p-value (0.000), the F-statistical test showed that the overall regression of hypothesis one was statistically significant. The strength of the relationship between the two variables was high. However, we rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that Ff had a significant effect on customer loyalty.

## Hypothesis Two

The simple linear regression statistics were computed and presented on the Table 3.

**Table 3: Simple Linear Regression Output**

Variable	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t-Stat.	P-Value	Remark	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj R <sup>2</sup>	F-ratio
Constant	0.195	2.275	0.024	Significant	0.941	0.885	0.884	2734.409, p<0.05
Fp	1.015	52.292	0.000	Significant				

\*Dependent Variable=CL

**Source:** *Computed by the Researcher, (2023)*

In testing the hypothesis, food presentation (Fp) was regressed against customer loyalty. The result of the simple regression analysis showed the model to examine the effect of Fp on customer loyalty. Customer loyalty = 0.640 + 1.015CI. The result showed that the coefficient of Fp had a positive effect on customer loyalty. The results of the t-statistic denote that the coefficient was statistically significant because the observed values of the t-statistic (42.292) were greater than its P-values (0.000). The F-statistic test showed that the overall regression of hypothesis one was statistically significant. This was because the F-statistic's observed value (2734.409) was higher than its  $\pm$  value (0.000). Hence, we rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that Fp had a significant effect on customer loyalty.





## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The result shows food quality has a significant effect on customer loyalty, such that consumers take into consideration the variables under study before making purchases. The result of the analysis shows that food freshness has a positive effect on customer loyalty. This shows that consumers prefer meals that are prepared instantly, not stored food. Also, the finding reveals that food presentation has a significant effect on customer loyalty. This implies that the physical features and how the food is arranged at the eatery do influence customer loyalty.

## CONCLUSION

From the result, it is obvious that the proxies of food quality are viable marketing tool. The researchers conclude that the variables of food quality do enhance customer loyalty to a very large extent.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made from the findings of the study.

1. Mechanism should be put in place by management to provide instant fresh meal for customers rather than storing them for days.
2. Food should be presented in an enticing and hygienic manner.

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