

## WAITING LINE MANAGEMENT AND CUSTOMERS' SATISFACTION OF QUICK SERVICE RESTAURANTS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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### Introduction

The effect of waiting line management strategies as dimensioned by perceived waiting time, customers' engagement, staff empathy and waiting environment on positive word of mouth is the focal point of this paper. To achieve this purpose, four research questions were posed; with four corresponding hypotheses tested. The cross-sectional variant of the survey design was adopted for the study; and data was fetched from 384 customers from 15 major quick service restaurants in Rivers State. The data for the study was subjected to statistical analysis using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling aided by SMART PLS. The results indicated that there is a significant relationship between waiting line management and positive word of mouth. It was demonstrated that staff empathy, perceived waiting time, customer engagement and waiting environment all had positive correlations with positive word of mouth with beta ( $\beta$ ) values of 0.652, 0.687, 0.491 and 0.428 respectively. It was recommended that Quick service restaurants should integrate innovative technology such as online delivery systems; virtual queuing and the use of mobile apps to enable their customers make orders online rather than visiting the outlets. They should also provide serene and comfortable waiting area for on-site customers to enable them feel relaxed during their waiting periods. They were also urged to train and motivate employees to interact with customers in a friendly manner and create friendly organizational climate that would stimulate empathy as part of their organizational culture.

**Keywords:** Customer Engagement, Perceived Waiting time, Positive Word of Mouth, Staff Empathy, Waiting Environment.

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## Introduction

Quick service restaurants (QSRs) otherwise known as fast food centres (FFCs) are essential components of the culinary experience; and play a vital role in the hospitality and tourism sectors of the service industry. In Nigeria, the industry was valued at approximately N190 billion in 2006 (The Food Institute Report, 2006 as cited in Ezema-Kalu & Onuoha, 2022). Within the next decade, the industry has grown to more than one trillion naira and provides an estimated 4.6% of the nation's gross domestic product (Daily Trust, 2017; Ezema-Kalu & Onuoha, 2022). As a consequence of the progressively fast-paced lifestyles prevalent in urban regions, a considerable number of urban settlers are now choosing to consume a portion of their meals away from home (Ezema-Kalu & Onuoha, 2022). To benefit from this huge opportunity, managers of fast food restaurants have continued to devise strategies to satisfy their customers. Kotler and Armstrong (2010) provide a definition of customer satisfaction as the degree to which the purported performance of a product or service by the consumer aligns with their expectations. Customer satisfaction was defined by Hansemark and Albinson (2004) as "the general perception of customers regarding a service provider or their general emotional response to the discrepancy between their expectations and the actual experience of receiving the service in relation to the fulfilment of certain needs, desires, or objectives. In a bid to satisfying customers' growing demand for swift food service, operations managers in QSRs have strived to devise several strategies and innovation to improve their operations systems; one of such strategies to accomplishing this is adequate waiting line management (Kamau, 2012; Polas et al., 2018).

Research indicates that waiting-lines are inherent in QSRs, and their management extends beyond mere operational logistics to encompass customer perceptions and satisfaction (Maister, 1985). This is due to the fact that the efficiency and effectiveness of the waiting experience are crucial factors in determining the level of consumer satisfaction in quick service restaurants (Zeithaml et al., 1985). Therefore, waiting-line management has become a crucial factor influencing customer satisfaction within QSR establishments. The efficiency at which waiting lines are managed can have a substantial influence on the overall dining experience and, consequently, customer satisfaction (Smith et al., 2018). Although there are multiple factors that contribute to customer satisfaction, the management process of waiting lines, which includes staff empathy, customer engagement and the waiting environment, stands out as a critical determinant of the quality of service provided in QSRs (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Regrettably, scholars are yet to research this extensively with particular focus on the QSRs in Rivers State. Although, there are a plethora of studies on customer satisfaction in fast food establishments. The central focus of researchers to improving customers satisfaction has been on service/product quality (Ndu, 2018; Ndu & Iheanacho, 2018); strategic positioning and marketing (Ademe, 2021; Ejiogu et al., 2024), food quality (Ezema-Kalu & Onuoha, 2018; Horsefall & Didia, 2020) amongst others. Despite the escalating demands for swift and efficient services delivery from impatient customers of QSRs especially within Rivers state, not many scholars have considered it worthwhile to discuss this critical matter. A few studies that have considered this discussion were

domiciled in other industries like banking sector and outside Nigeria (Kamauo, 2012; Polas et al., 2018). This obviously has created a gap which this study seeks to address.

The problem of this study stemmed from the noticeable complaints of poor customer services and lengthy queuing time incessantly experienced by customers in QSRs across Rivers State especially during peak period. Despite the fact that customers are crucial to business success especially of fast food establishments, deliberate attention to manage customers on queue has not been prioritised by operations leaders in the industry. This is evidence in the poor attitude of employees in QSRs; at times they fail to treat customers with empathy, respect and concern. The level of customer engagement is still abysmally poor. Also the waiting environments of many quick service restaurants, particularly eating areas are sometimes unkempt. These challenges if not well managed could gradually lead to low patronage. When customers' needs are not promptly satisfied, QSRs stand a chance to losing them to their nearest competitors. The burden is therefore on QSR operations managers to guarantee that service delivery lives up to client expectations.

Aside continuous patronage and loyalty, a satisfied customer could make referrals to other people. However when a customer is not satisfied such may not be possible. This situation has continued to affect the survival of quick service restaurants in Rivers State. For instance, there have been many cases of significant loss of business, closure of outlets, or even the bankruptcy of QSR companies in extreme cases (Ndu & Iheanacho, 2018). Major fast food chains like Sizzler and Mr. Biggs have just gone out of business in Rivers State, which is a very concerning trend. The majority of these once-thriving fast food chains have closed their doors, leaving the remaining locations to struggle for survival. In the same vein, you could find brands like Joewenedy, Wendy, and Native Fingers with similar experiences. This concerning scenario might be alleviated if fast food businesses proactively seek out better ways to handle waiting lines so they can meet consumers' needs quickly. Customers often dislike having to wait for lengthy periods of time to get the service they have ordered. Given these factors, the fundamental issue that this study aims to address include: What is the impact of waiting-line management practices on customer satisfaction in quick service restaurants in Rivers State? In order to do this, this research examines how waiting line management affects customer satisfaction, specifically looking at factors including perceived waiting time, staff empathy, customer involvement, and waiting environment in relation to positive word of mouth. The specific objectives of the study are to examine the relationship between:

- a. Perceived waiting time and Positive Word of Mouth in QSRs in Rivers State.
- b. Staff Empathy time and Positive Word of Mouth in QSRs in Rivers State.
- c. Customer Engagement and Positive Word of Mouth in QSRs in Rivers State.
- d. Waiting Environment and Positive Word of Mouth in QSRs in Rivers State.

In line with the specific objectives of this study, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the relationship between Perceived Waiting Time and Repeat Patronage of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria?
2. What is the relationship between Staff Empathy and Repeat Patronage of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria?
3. What is the relationship between Customer Engagement and Repeat Patronage of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria?
4. What is the relationship between Waiting Environment and Repeat Patronage of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria?

The essence of this study stems from the fact that it useful to QSRs that often deal with large crowds and long waiting times. By understanding the factors that influence customer satisfaction in waiting-line management; these companies can improve their processes and procedures to ensure that customers have a positive experience while waiting on queues. The study will help fast food establishments identify the areas where they need to focus their attention to improving queuing management. This will enable them to allocate their resources more effectively and efficiently so as to improve their overall customer service. Other business firms within the hospitality industry which include hotels, local restaurants, bakeries etc. that rely on customer satisfaction, will benefit from this study by gaining insights into how to improve their waiting line management. By reducing customer waiting times and improving the overall customer experience, these businesses can enhance customer loyalty and improve their bottom line. Lastly, the study would be useful as a future reference point to academia and other researchers that may develop interest on the subject matter for future studies. The scope of this investigation at the content level, encompassed the primary themes and of the study namely - waiting line management, perception of waiting time, customer engagement, staff empathy, waiting environment and positive word of mouth. At the geographical level, the study was carried out is Rivers State, Nigeria; limiting it to QSRs in the state. While the unit of analysis was at the macro-level due to its involvement with multiple fast-food organisations located in Rivers State.

## **Literature Review**

The literature review for this study was conducted in accordance with three broad headings: conceptual clarifications, theoretical underpinning and empirical literature.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Concept of Waiting Line Management**

Waiting line or queue is precisely what its name implies; it occurs when something or someone waits for something else to happen, such as an activity or a transaction. Waiting line management refers to the practice of optimizing the management of queues and waiting times to improve customer experiences. It can be defined as the strategic use of operational tactics to manage customer queues and waiting times. "Waiting line management" focuses

on the study and modelling of queues, as well as the implementation of managerial strategies that reduce consumer wait times. It encompasses the process of strategizing, coordinating and organizing the movement of customers through a waiting line. Waiting lines seem to be general phenomenon in our day-to-day lives. Undeniably, it holds significant importance for various enterprises, including those involved in quick service. Implementing effective waiting line management practices can yield favourable outcomes such as reduced customer wait-times, heightened customer satisfaction levels, and enhanced employee productivity (Chen & Shen, 2018; Cui & Wu, 2018; Kumar & Sridhar, 2016). This may involve implementing a range of tactics, such as queue design, staffing levels, and service policies, that work together to minimize customer waiting times and maximize customer satisfaction (Chen & Shen, 2018). This may also include using metrics such as average waiting time, queue length, and abandonment rates to monitor queue performance, as well as implementing tools such as self-service kiosks, digital signage, and mobile apps to improve customer experiences (Kumar & Sridhar, 2016). Other strategies may include providing customers with estimated waiting times, offering them options for alternative service channels, and providing them with updates on their progress through the queue (Sorour & Kabir, 2016).

### **Operations Management Approach to Waiting Line Management**

One of the primary reasons for managing waiting times is to enhance customer satisfaction. Studies have shown that long waiting times can lead to dissatisfaction among customers and even result in them abandoning the service altogether (Hui & Tse, 2013). This can have a detrimental impact on the reputation of the business and ultimately result in a loss of revenue. Therefore, businesses need to implement effective waiting line management strategies to ensure that customers are not waiting for extended periods. Waiting line management is an essential aspect of operational management for event planning and management. The approach to managing queues is critical in ensuring customer satisfaction, efficient service delivery and the success of the event. According to McCarter et al. (2018), waiting line management is a crucial aspect of operations management, which involves planning and managing the flow of customers or attendees through a queuing system in a way that optimizes efficiency, minimizes waiting times and maximizes customer satisfaction.

The operational management approach to event waiting line management involves several strategies that help to manage queues effectively. One of the key strategies is the use of technology to manage queues. Technology such as virtual queuing systems, mobile apps, and self-service kiosks can help to improve the efficiency of queues by reducing waiting times, increasing throughput and improving customer experience (Zhang, 2019). Virtual queuing systems, for example, allow customers to book their place in a queue remotely and receive alerts when their turn is approaching. This reduces the need for customers to wait physically in a queue and improves the overall experience. Another key strategy is the use of data analysis to manage queues. Data analysis can help to identify bottlenecks and areas of

inefficiency in queues and help event managers make informed decisions on how to optimize the queuing system. For example, data analysis can help to identify peak periods and allocate resources accordingly to ensure that queues move efficiently during busy periods (McCarter et al., 2018). Additionally, the operational management approach to waiting line management involves the use of effective communication strategies. Clear communication with customers regarding queuing expectations and waiting times can help manage customer expectations and reduce frustration and dissatisfaction (Zhang, 2019). Effective communication can be achieved through the use of signage, announcements and staff engagement.

Furthermore, the operational management approach to waiting line management emphasizes the importance of managing the psychology of queuing. Customers' perception of waiting times is influenced by several factors, including their mood, the social context of the queue, and their expectation of the service delivery time (Liao et al., 2018). To manage the psychology of queuing, event managers can employ strategies such as distraction techniques, socialization, and providing feedback to customers on their progress in the queue. These strategies may help to minimize waiting times, increase throughput, and improve customer satisfaction, which are critical in ensuring the success of events. For the purpose of this study, the identified proxies for waiting line management include customer engagement, staff empathy, waiting environment and perceived waiting time.

### **Customer Engagement**

The concept of "customer engagement" has gained prominence; it is the process of dialogue, interaction, and collaboration between service providers and their customers in order to foster meaningful customer relationships (Van Doorn et al., 2010). It underscores the dynamic interaction between customers and brands, encompassing a spectrum of experiences and interactions. Brodie et al. (2013) define customer engagement as a psychological state that occurs when customers are willing to invest their attention, time, and resources in a brand. This definition emphasizes the depth of customer involvement and the emotional commitment inherent in engagement. Customer engagement represents a paradigm shift in marketing; moving beyond transactional relationships to emphasize the importance of on-going, dynamic and meaningful connections between customers and brands. It has been argued that brands that harness the potential of social engagement are better positioned to build communities around their products or services, leading to a sense of belonging among customers (Füller et al., 2009). On the customer side, factors such as trust, commitment and identification with the brand contribute significantly to the engagement process (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). The outcomes of customer engagement are manifold and goes beyond immediate financial metrics. Engaged customers are more likely to exhibit loyalty, repeat purchase and positive word-of-mouth (Bowden et al., 2009). Their emotional connection to the brand translates to a higher likelihood of forgiveness in the face of service failures (Verleye et al., 2013).

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### **Staff Empathy:**

Staff empathy connotes the ability and willingness of employees to show sincere affection and sense of concern to customers' needs. According to Davis (1996), staff empathy comprises both cognitive and affective aspects of employees' thoughtfulness of the customer's perspective and an emotional responsiveness to their needs. The antecedents of staff empathy are multifaceted, influenced by individual and organizational factors. From an individual perspective, employee traits, such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, are integral to the development of empathetic responses (Goleman, 1998). Staff empathy has been linked to positive word-of-mouth and customer advocacy. Customers who experience empathetic interactions are more inclined to share their positive experiences with others, contributing to the reputation and brand image of the service provider (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001). In the healthcare sector, studies have demonstrated that patient perceptions of staff empathy are correlated with improved health outcomes and adherence to medical recommendations (Derksen et al., 2013).

### **Waiting Environment:**

Waiting environments can be found in various settings, such as concert venues, theatres, sports arenas, amusement parks and airports, among others. It is a place, setting, or space where people converge while waiting for a service or activity. One crucial aspect of event waiting environments is crowd management. The flow of attendees must be carefully organized to prevent congestion and ensure a smooth experience. In the fast food industry, achieving this requires various crowd management techniques, such as queue management systems, virtual queuing and personalized scheduling (Huang, 2019). It is also pertinent to create an aesthetic and conducive atmosphere which could elicit a positive impression on the attendees, ensuring that they have a memorable and enjoyable experience during their waiting times. These approaches aim to distribute the crowd effectively, reduce perceived waiting time, and maintain a comfortable and safe environment for attendees (Kumar et al., 2014). Waiting environments are designed to provide a positive and engaging experience for attendees while they await the start of a specific event. Through effective crowd management, thoughtful spatial layout, strategic seating arrangements, diverse amenities, and engaging entertainment options, event organizers can minimize perceived waiting time and ensure attendee satisfaction.

### **Perceived Waiting Time:**

Customers guess how long they think they will have to wait. When the perceived waiting time is exceeded by the actual waiting time, they become dissatisfied (Maister, 1985). The term "perceived waiting time" pertains to the duration that customers expect to spend in the queue. The way in which individuals perceive and respond to waiting time is inherently subjective and influenced by their unique experiences. Moreover, an individual's response to waiting time is determined by cognitive processes (Maister, 1985). Delaying actions incurs both financial and psychological repercussions. Consistently, customers exhibit a

preference for dining establishments that provide timely service. Therefore, it has been demonstrated that consumers' satisfaction with respect to the duration of the delay is influenced by the perception of the wait time (Oliver & Westbrook, 1993). It is possible that the subjective experience of waiting does not always align with the actual duration of the wait, as individuals may perceive the wait to be longer than it truly is; potentially leading to negative evaluations of the service provider or organisation. Therefore, client satisfaction can potentially be improved by having the product delivered prior to the expected waiting period (Dabholkar, 2015).

### **Concept of Customer Satisfaction**

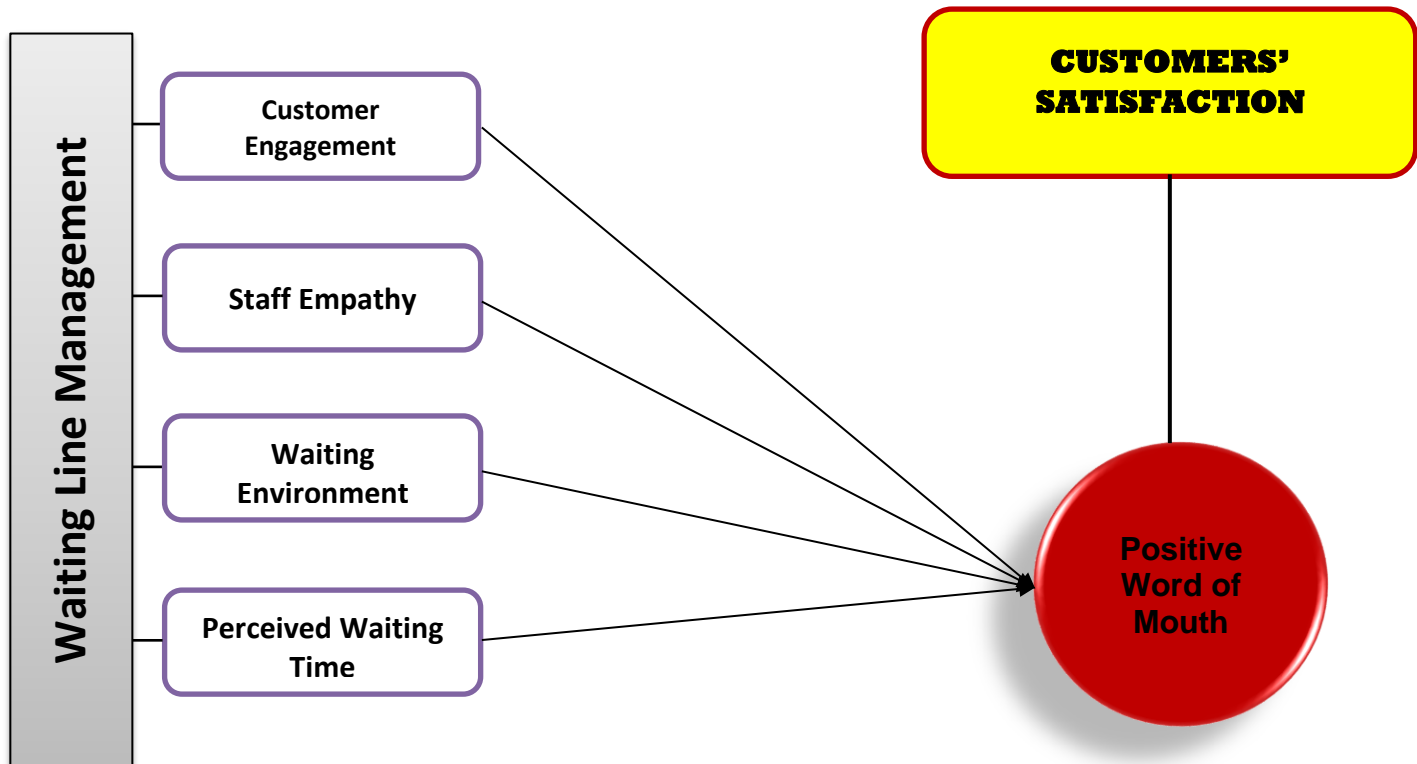
Customer satisfaction was defined by Pairot (2008) as the capacity of an organisation to satisfy the commercial, emotive and psychological requirements of its clientele. The existence of varying degrees of consumer satisfaction presents a challenge for businesses in identifying and fulfilling their requirements. Customer satisfaction serves as a crucial indicator, assessing the extent of contentment that customers derive from the products or services they avail. The service and fast food businesses are exposed to a number of elements that affect consumer satisfaction. Parasuraman et al. (1988) listed pricing, physical environment, service quality and staff behavior as some of these characteristics. In the service and quick service sectors, service quality is the single most important component affecting consumer happiness. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988), customers' satisfaction is defined as how well the actual service meets or exceeds the customer's expectations. In this study, positive word of mouth was adopted to measure customers' satisfaction.

### **Positive Word of Mouth:**

Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM) refers to the voluntary and favourable communication by customers about their involvements with a product, service, or brand. It is a form of interpersonal communication where satisfied customers share positive comments, recommendations, or testimonials with others (Smith & Johnson, 2021). PWOM is a crucial aspect of consumer behaviour as it extends beyond individual purchasing decisions, influencing the choices and perceptions of others in the social network. The advocates of Social Influence Theory argued that people are often swayed by the opinions and behaviours of those in their social circle (Brown & White, 2018). This is because individuals are more receptive to messages from sources they perceive as credible and similar to themselves (Giles, 2018; Jones & Brown, 2020). This notion advocates that positive recommendations from friends, family, or peers can significantly impact an individual's perception and choice. According to Anderson and Smith (2019), favourable referrals (PWOM) are a strong indicator of customer satisfaction. Customers that had a good experience are more likely to recommend the business to others. The advent of social media has transformed the landscape of PWOM, providing new platforms for individuals to share their opinions on a global scale. Online reviews, ratings and testimonials amplify the reach and impact of

PWOM, making it a powerful force in shaping brand perceptions (Chen & Wang, 2021; Lee & Youn, 2009; Smith et al., 2018).

These conceptualized variables have been captured in a diagram as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Operational Framework of the study**

**Source:** Researchers' Conceptualisation, 2024 Based on Identified Variable of the Study

### Theoretical Underpinning

This study was founded on Service Quality Theory (SQT) which is a well-known theory in the area of service management. Service Quality Theory seeks to evaluate and enhance the quality of services offered by organisations. Building on the foundation of quality management as a whole, this idea stresses the significance of surpassing customers' expectations in order to guarantee their happiness and loyalty. In the 1980s, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Beryl published the SERVQUAL model, which laid the groundwork for what is now known as Service Quality Theory. The theory is founded on the five aspects of service quality which included tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, all of which together determine how good a service was. Although SQT was propounded by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), over the years, other scholars have contributed to the refinement and extension of the theory. Notable contributors include Gronroos (1984), who proposed the Nordic model emphasizing the role of customer-perceived service quality; and Cronin and Taylor (1992), which developed the service performance (SERVPERF)

model as an alternative to service quality (SERVQUAL). SQT has proven invaluable in both academic research and practical applications. It provides a structured framework for organizations to assess and manage the quality of their services, leading to enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty. The theory's dimensions offer a systematic approach for evaluating various facets of service delivery, aiding organizations in identifying areas for improvement and strategic intervention. In addition to its application in assessing overall service quality, the theory has been instrumental in the development of various industry-specific models. For instance, in healthcare, the Patient-Perceived Service Quality (PPSQ) model builds upon the SERVQUAL framework to evaluate the quality of healthcare services (Pai & Chary, 2016).

This theory is essential to this study because it places a heavy emphasis on customer perceptions and expectations (Dabholkar et al., 2000). Its fundamental tenets such as empathy, responsiveness, assurance emphasised the need for service providers in QSRs to adequately provide assuring waiting environment and empathic attitudes towards customers during waiting times. Therefore, drawing from this theory, this study calls for managers of QSRs to prioritise meeting and surpassing customers' expectations by offering quality service in order to improve their overall satisfaction.

## Empirical Literature

### Customer Engagement and Positive Word of Mouth

In contemporary marketing literature, customer engagement has attracted reasonable attention as a dynamic and multidimensional construct. Several outcomes can be attributed to customer engagement; including but not limited to financial measures. Studies have shown that engaged customers are more likely to exhibit loyalty, repeat purchase behaviour and positive word-of-mouth (Bowden et al., 2009). The investigation of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) indicated that engaged customers are very useful in the co-creation of value, active participation in the innovation process and significant contribution to new products and services development. The growth of the digital era has in no small way fuelled the increasing role and importance of customer engagement. For instance, today's customers are no longer passive receivers of products and service offerings; but active brand communication participants, courtesy of the rising number of social media outlets and online channels. Brands that encourage social engagement of customers are in a better position to building community bonds around their products and services; thereby, creating a sense of belongingness among their customers (Füller et al., 2009) and eliciting positive words of mouth from them. Such emotional bonding and connection to the brand creates a brotherhood fellowship where customers easily forgive service failures (Verleye et al., 2013) and become advocates of the brand. Based on these, it was hypothesized that:

**H<sub>0</sub>:1** There is no significant relationship between Customer Engagement and Positive Word of Mouth of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

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### **Staff Empathy and Positive Word of Mouth**

The extent to which staff competence elicited positive reviews by customers has been of concern to investigators. For instance, Hsu et al., (2017) examined how competent event workers affected customers' confidence during trade events. The findings demonstrated that client trust was positively impacted by the competency of the event workers. The opposite is true for culinary festivals, as research by Kim et al., (2019) indicated that competent event workers had no discernible impact on consumer loyalty. On the other hand, the authors held that consumer loyalty at food festivals could have been more affected by aspects like atmosphere and food quality. Similarly, the correlation between competent event workers and satisfied festival goers was investigated in Kim and Chua (2019). The result showed that customer satisfaction was positively affected by the competency of the event workers. Choi et al. (2011) considered how client satisfaction and behavioural intentions were affected by service quality and staff competency (empathy). The result proved that customers' happiness and future actions which may include positive word of mouth were shown to be substantially affected by service quality and employee competency.

Other studies like (Jang et al., 2015) investigated the connection between employees' competency and customers' satisfaction. The findings of these studies revealed that employees' competency especially empathic skills greatly affect the level of customers' satisfaction. This revealed clearly that it takes competent and empathic employee to attend to customers' needs in a pleasing manner. These studies are however, mostly domiciled in other business organisations within the hospitality industry; none of them specifically consider positive word of mouth as an antecedent of customers' satisfaction. The impact of staff empathy on positive word of mouth is still unclear within the quick service restaurants in Rivers State. This study therefore hypothesized that:

**H<sub>0:2</sub>** There is no significant relationship between Staff Empathy and Positive Word of Mouth of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

### **Waiting Environment and Positive Word of Mouth**

The waiting environment of businesses is thought to provoke positive or negative words feedbacks from customers. Research by Yan and Wu (2018) investigated the influence of technology on the waiting environment and customer feedback (word of mouth). The study found that the use of technology in the waiting environment, such as digital signage and mobile apps, can improve customer feedback by providing a more engaging and interactive experience. Customers appreciated the use of technology in the waiting environment, and it positively affected their perception of the business. Kuehnl and Wieseke (2017) conducted research on the impact of waiting areas on customers' loyalty in hotel establishments. Both the psychological and physical aspects of the waiting room were found to have substantial effects on customers' levels of happiness and loyalty, according to the research. Specifically, it was shown that Customer loyalty was directly affected by the design of the waiting room. Hussain and Al Nasser (2015) also looked at how waiting areas affected customers'

happiness with banking services. According to the research, the waiting area's physical design greatly affected customers' levels of satisfaction. Customer satisfaction in the banking business was shown to be directly influenced by the design of the waiting room. Based on these empirical evidences, the researchers proposed the hypothesis that:

**H<sub>0</sub>:3** There is no significant relationship between Waiting Environment and Positive Word of Mouth of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

### **Perceived Waiting Time and Repeat Patronage**

Research indicates that when perceived waiting time rises, satisfaction levels decrease (Kumar & Gupta, 2018). Customers anticipate the waiting time before visiting eateries. Dissatisfaction occurs when the real waiting time exceeds the perceived time. Customers consistently want to acquire services promptly and enjoyably. If it takes a long time, consumers may feel bored and disheartened. Customers may feel unhappy when they get the goods after a longer waiting period than they anticipated (Dabholkar, 2015). Buttressing this, Kim and Hyun (2018) examined the association between queue management and customers' happiness. Wait management was found to have substantial impact on consumer happiness, according to the study's survey of 299 visitors. The result indicated that customer satisfaction was determined by many aspects, including perceived waiting time, line design and queue fairness. It was found specifically that when perceived waiting time is considered satisfactory by customers, there overall satisfaction increases and consequently their willingness to patronise the business again. Lee et al., (2018) investigated the effects of queue line management on customer experience and behavioural intentions in a shopping mall. The study used a survey of 331 shoppers and found that queue line management significantly influenced customer experience and behavioural intentions. Specifically, the study found that perceived waiting time, queue fairness and queue design were crucial factors in determining customer experience and behavioural intentions.

In another study, researchers considered the influence of perceived waiting time on customer feedback. The study found that perceived waiting time is an important determinant of customer feedback (Vogel et al., 2008). Specifically, customers who perceived a shorter waiting time tended to give more positive feedback than those who perceived a longer waiting time. The study concluded that businesses should make efforts to manage customer perceptions of waiting time to increase the likelihood of positive feedback. The impact of managing the restaurant's wait on customers' satisfaction was studied by Li et al. (2018). Using a descriptive survey method, four hundred customers of the eateries were surveyed for the purpose of the research. It was revealed that customer satisfaction was positively impacted by wait line management. Similar findings were recorded in several studies like Kim et al. (2020), Lee et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2012).

Based on these empirical investigations, the researchers proposed the hypothesis that:

**H<sub>0</sub>:4** There is no significant relationship between Perceived Waiting Time and Positive Word of Mouth of QSRs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

### Methodology

This study adopted the quasi-experimental design because the participants are humans that are not under the control of the researcher. In so doing, the cross sectional survey design was chosen, and data was primarily sourced using a 5-point Likert-like scale. The target population comprised customers of quick service restaurants in River State. Thus, Cochran method for sample size determination for unknown population was used to arrive at a sample size of 384 respondents. Data for the study was gathered through the use of questionnaire which was purposively distributed to 15 major quick service restaurants in Rivers State.

To guarantee the instrument's validity, professionals in the field examined initial copies and offered feedback on each. These suggestions were considered and included into the final version of the survey to ensure its face validity. By using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we were able to determine that the study instrument met the criteria for convergent and discriminant validity as suggested by Bagozi et al. (1991) and Hair et al. (2014). A Cronbach alpha value and composite reliability were used to ensure the instrument's reliability. Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling; which according to Hair et al. (2014) is a multivariate data analysis approach that searches for linear correlations between many independent variables and multiple dependent variables was utilized for statistical data analysis.

### Results and Discussions

The responses to the administered questionnaire have been provided below.

#### Response Rate of Questionnaire

**Table 1: Response Rate of Questionnaire**

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Number Distributed</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100</b>
Number Retrieved	367	95.57
Number of Defective Responses	81	21.09
<b>Number used</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>73.18</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The questionnaire response rate for the research is presented on Table 4.1. Consistent with the study's sample size, a grand total of three hundred and eighty-four (384) copies of the questionnaire were distributed; 367 of those copies were collected, resulting in a response rate of 95.57%. Out of this number, two hundred and eighty-one (281) were found to be

useful for the analyses. This resulted to 73.18% valid response rate which was consequently used for analysis.

### Demographics of Respondents

**Table 2: Demographics of Respondents**

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	163	58
	Female	118	42
<b>Age</b>	20 to 30 years	79	28
	31 to 40 Years	107	38
	41 to 50Years	62	22
	51Years and above	33	12
<b>Education</b>	SSCE	30	10.67
	OND/NCE	68	24.19
	B.Sc/HND	111	39.51
	M.Sc/MBA	72	26.63

**Source:** Survey Result Computations, 2024

Table one show the demographic details of the respondents. It showed that 58% of the respondents were male while the remaining 42% were females. Another notable insight that could be derived from this analysis is the respondents' level of education which showed that most respondents have higher educational qualifications. This assured the researcher the confidence that respondents are quiet knowledgeable and would provide objective response to the questionnaire items.

### Descriptive Statistics and Assessment of measurement instrument/model

For the descriptive analysis, a threshold for mean value was set at 2.5 as suggested by Asawo (2009). The analysis comprised two major steps. First is the assessment of the instrument to confirm their validity and reliability; the second part is the test of hypotheses.

**Table 3: Results of the Measurement Model with Descriptive Analysis and Factor Loadings**

Constructs	Item Scale	Mean	S.D	Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE	Sq. Root of AVE
<b>Customer Engagement</b>	CE Item 1	2.841	0.97	0.783	<b>0.776</b>	<b>0.857</b>	<b>0.600</b>	<b>0.775</b>
	CE Item 2	3.140	0.72	0.862				
	CE Item 3	3.581	1.00	0.734				

	CE Item 4	3.102	0.96	0.712				
<b>Staff Empathy</b>	SE Item 1	3.105	0.94	0.805	<b>0.780</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.779</b>
	SE Item 2	3.662	0.92	0.691				
	SE Item 3	3.463	1.00	0.834				
<b>Waiting Environment</b>	WE Item 1	3.780	0.94	0.708	<b>0.791</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.786</b>
	WE Item 2	3.780	0.931	0.844				
	WE Item 3	3.613	0.91	0.848				
	WE Item 4	3.792	0.817	0.734				
<b>Perceived Waiting Time</b>	PWT Item 1	3.169	1.00	0.741	<b>0.784</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.785</b>
	PWT Item 2	3.304	0.99	0.769				
	PWT Item 3	3.169	1.00	0.854				
	PWT Item 4	3.304	0.99	0.746				
<b>Positive Word of Mouth</b>	PWM Item 1	3.64	.950	0.779	<b>0.712</b>	<b>0.79</b>	<b>0.56</b>	<b>0.749</b>
	PWM Item 1	3.59	.900	0.760				
	PWM Item 1	3.94	.835	0.705				

**Source:** Researchers' Computation, 2024.

The table 3 shows the descriptive results, and the outcome of model assessment for the study. The results of the convergent validity analysis for the final model hypothesis are also shown on the table. The descriptive statistics result as portrayed with mean and standard deviation scores were satisfactory as they all crossed the minimum threshold. Statistically significant factor loadings were shown for all items in the model's variables. These factor loadings are greater than 0.7, which is the minimum allowable according to Hair et al (2014) and Ndu and Ajao (2019). In addition, as shown by Hair et al. (2014, 2010), the AVEs are higher than the minimally acceptable threshold of 0.5. As a result, the convergent validity is considered satisfactory. To assess the reliability of the model/instrument, the analysis also revealed the several reliability indicators such as Cronbach Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and Composite Reliability (CR) for each of the constructs. The result on the table clearly showed that a favourable score for each of the constructs as none of them fell below the recommended threshold of 0.70. The internal consistency of the research instrument is therefore satisfactory. The implication of this is that each of the variables in the model are quite consistent with one another.

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix Showing that Discriminant validity of Latent Variables**

Constructs	CE	SE	WE	PWT	PWM
Customer Engagement	<b>0.775</b>				
Staff Empathy	0.671	<b>0.779</b>			
Waiting Environment	0.593	0.679	<b>0.786</b>		
Perceived Waiting Time	0.603	0.624	0.652	<b>0.785</b>	
Positive Word of Mouth	0.557	0.589	0.597	0.724	<b>0.749</b>

**Source:** Researchers' Computation, 2024.

**Note:**

CE – Customer Engagement

SE – Staff Empathy

WE – Waiting Environment

PWT – Perceived Waiting Time

PWM – Positive Word of Mouth

Table 4 showed the assessment result for the discriminant validity of each of the identified latent constructs in this study. The essence of discriminant validity according to Hair et al (2010) is to measure the degree to which two conceptually similar constructs are distinct to each other. Examining the construct-to-construct correlations on the table revealed that the Square roots of AVE along the diagonal of the correlation matrix being greater than all the off-diagonal correlation value on the row and columns proved that discriminant validity of the research instrument/model is acceptable (Hair et al., 2010).

**Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing**



**Figure 2: Structural Path Model Showing Hypotheses Results**

**Source:** Smart PLS output, 2024.

**Interpretation of the Model**

Figure 2 showed the path analysis result which revealed that there is a positive relationship between the dimensions of waiting line management and positive word of mouth as follows. The first structural path which represented the first hypothesis of the study disclosed that substantial positive association exists between customer engagement and positive word of mouth with a beta value ( $\beta$ ) of 0.652 at  $P\ 0.00 < 0.05$  and T-Value  $8.001 > 1.96$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis does not stand.

The second structural path which represented the second hypothesis of the study unveiled that positive association exists between staff empathy and positive word of mouth with a beta value ( $\beta$ ) of 0.687 at  $P\ 0.00 < 0.05$  and T-Value  $5.344 > 1.96$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis does not stand. The third structural path which represented the third hypothesis of the study made known that substantial positive connexion exists between waiting environment and positive word of mouth with a beta value ( $\beta$ ) of 0.491 at  $P\ 0.00 < 0.05$  and T-Value  $3.412 > 1.96$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis does not stand. The fourth structural path divulged that substantial positive association exists between perceived waiting time and positive word of mouth with a beta value ( $\beta$ ) of 0.428 at  $P\ 0.00 < 0.05$  and T-Value  $9.993 > 1.96$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis does not stand. Furthermore, collectively waiting line management has significant positive influence on positive word of mouth with  $R^2$  Value of 0.481, indicating a moderate predictive capacity of 48%.

**Table 5: Path Analysis Result of the Hypothesis**

S/n	Hypothesized Path	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	P-Value	Standard	T Value	Decisions	f-Squared
1.	CE -> PWM	0.652**	0.000	0.006	8.001	Not Supported	1.012
2.	SE -> PWM	0.687**	0.001	0.013	5.344	Not Supported	0.167
3.	WE -> PWM	0.491**	0.000	0.100	3.412	Not Supported	0.554
4	PWT -> PWM	0.428**	0.000	0.041	9.993	Not Supported	1.072

\*\* $P < 0.01$       \* $P < 0.05$

**Source:** The Researcher’s Computation (2024).

Table 5 summarised the structural model of the study which confirmed the existence of a substantial relationship between waiting lines management and positive word of mouth. The result showed that structural path of each identified dimensions of waiting lines management. It was revealed that staff empathy → Positive Word of Mouth has the strongest relationship with beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.687 and  $R^2$  value of 0.472. While the lowest was Perceived Waiting Time waiting environment → Positive Word of Mouth with beta ( $\beta$ ) value of 0.428 and  $R^2$  value of 0.183.

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## Discussions

This examined the impact of waiting line management on positive word of mouth of Quick service restaurants in River state, Nigeria. The findings indicate a statistically significant correlation between waiting line management and positive word of mouth in quick service restaurants with a collective  $R^2$  value of 0.481. This connotes a 48.1% predictive capacity of WLM over PWM. The study further revealed that there is a substantial positive relationship between customer engagement, staff empathy, waiting environment and perceived waiting time on positive word of mouth with beta ( $\beta$ ) values of 0.652, 0.687, 0.491 and 0.428 respectively.

The findings of this study demonstrate that waiting line management is critical to satisfying customers of fast food restaurants. It has become essential to the level of consumers' satisfaction and their overall dining experience because they desire prompt service delivery with a touch of professionalism and courtesy. In line with the result of this study, Wang et al. (2012) found that queue waiting time management significantly influenced customer satisfaction. Lee et al. (2019) also found that reducing waiting time and implementing a virtual queue system significantly improved customer satisfaction, while social distancing did not have a significant effect.

As regards the result on staff empathy, Kim and Chua (2019) gave a similar result in their study which found that competent employees with courtesy and empathy tend to satisfy their customers better. The results of other scholars (Choi, et al., 2011; Jang et al., 2015) also revealed that client satisfaction and behavioural intentions were impacted by service quality and staff competency (empathy). These result proved that customers' happiness and future actions (referrals and repurchase) were shown to be substantially affected by service quality and employee competency. In corroboration with our finding, the findings of these studies revealed that employees' competency especially empathic skills greatly impact the level of customers' satisfaction. This revealed clearly that to engender customers' satisfaction and positive referral, it takes competent and empathic employee to attend to customers' needs in a pleasing manner.

The finding of this study as regards to waiting environment is in tandem with previous findings in the banking industry (Hussain & Al Nasser, 2015) where it was established that waiting environment plays a pivotal role on customers' satisfaction. This is not far from reality; a serene and comfortable waiting area could enable customers feel relaxed during their waiting period, which could eventually improve their overall dining experience. Aesthetics, light music, cleanliness, lighting, temperature, and seating arrangements are few of both the psychological and physical features of the waiting area that could promote customers' levels of happiness and loyalty to quick service restaurants (Kim et al., 2020).

Lastly, our finding on perceived waiting time and customers' satisfaction was supported by previous empirical investigations. Kumar and Gupta (2018) found that when perceived waiting time rises, customers' satisfaction levels decrease. This is because customers anticipate the waiting time before visiting eateries. Dissatisfaction occurs when the real waiting time exceeds the perceived time. Customers especially in the fast food restaurants

consistently want to acquire services promptly and enjoyably. If it takes a long time, consumers may feel bored and disheartened (Dabholkar, 2015; Kim & Hyun, 2018; Lee et al., 2018).

### **Conclusions and Implications of the Study**

This study set out to empirically establish the relationship between waiting line management (as dimensioned by customer engagement, staff empathy, waiting environment and perceived waiting time) and customer satisfaction (as measured with positive word of mouth). The results revealed that these dimensions have significant and moderately positive correlations with positive word of mouth. Therefore, the study concludes that waiting line management is a relatively good antecedent of customer satisfaction. However, with a collective  $R^2$  value of 0.481, implying a 48% predictive capacity, other factors not accommodated in the model account for the remaining 52%; and should be controlled for maximum impact of the predictor variables on the dependent variable. These findings give useful insights into the complex dynamics of customer satisfaction in quick-service restaurants (QSRs) in Rivers State, Nigeria. These insights have practical implications that could guide operations managers in quick service restaurants in making strategies to improving customers' satisfaction in their fast food establishments. The research elucidated the primary elements that have a substantial impact on consumer satisfaction, as measured by positive word of mouth. The robust positive impact of staff empathy and customer involvement on positive word of mouth emphasizes the crucial significance of these factors in cultivating a favourable customer experience. Furthermore, the correlations between the waiting environment, perceived waiting time and positive word of mouth emphasizes the significant influence of operational factors on customer satisfaction in the facility layout of Quick service restaurants (QSRs). This indicates that creating a better waiting atmosphere and reducing the perceived waiting times have a major impact on improving customer satisfaction. These observations have practical consequences for managers in the quick-service restaurant (QSR) industry, highlighting the need of investing in the development of enjoyable waiting areas as well as implementing strategies to reduce customers' perception of waiting time. As the hospitality business progresses, it is essential for QSR enterprises to comprehend and tackle these elements in order to adjust to changing client tastes and improve overall service quality.

### **Recommendations**

- i. Operations managers in QSRs should endeavour to integrate innovative technology such as online delivery systems, virtual queuing and the use of mobile apps to enable their customers make orders online rather than visiting the outlets. Also, technology could enhance communication with customers. For instance, a virtual queue allows customers to wait comfortably without physically being in line, receiving updates on their status via their mobile devices.

- ii. Managers of QSRs should endeavour to train, motivate employees to interact with customers in a friendly manner. They should provide a friendly organizational climate that would stimulate empathy as part of their organizational culture.
- iii. Employees should be ethical during interaction with customers especially while managing the waiting line; Unethical behaviour such as bribe or favouritism should be totally avoided. However, people with physical challenges and elderly could be given some consideration.
- iv. It is imperative for managers of quick service restaurants to periodically conduct fair analysis based of previous data, seasonal periods, and festivities. This would enable them make realistic estimate of demands and customer influx and adequate preparation to receiving them.
- v. Managers could use digital displays or signage, artefacts, screens etc. within their facility to indulge the attention of customers while on the waiting line.
- vi. Comfortable Waiting Area: It is recommended that QSRs provide serene and comfortable waiting area for customers to enable feel relaxed during their waiting period. In doing this, they should invest in providing quality designs, free Wi-Fi light music, good lighting, temperature, and seating arrangements to boost both the psychological and physical features of their waiting area. This could make customers' waiting time more enjoyable.

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