

**RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY OF
DEPOSIT MONEY BANKS: A POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC SURVEY IN
CALABAR, NIGERIA**

BY

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Abstract

This study examined relationship marketing and customer loyalty of deposit money banks: A post-COVID-19 pandemic survey in Calabar, Nigeria. It was carried out to determine the effects of building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment on customer loyalty to deposit money banks in Calabar after the pandemic. Cross-sectional survey research design was used for the study. Judgmental sampling technique was applied and primary data were obtained from 248 deposit money banks' customers in Calabar using a structured questionnaire. Content validity method was applied to validate the structured questionnaire, while Cronbach's alpha method was adopted to confirm the instrument's reliability. Data obtain from the study were analyzed using multiple linear regression. The findings of the study revealed that building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment had significant positive effects on customer loyalty of deposit money banks after the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. The study recommended that deposit money banks should consistently strive to boost customers' confidence in their ability to deliver

satisfactory banking services amidst disruptive pandemics like COVID-19 by using technology and human efforts to strengthen service quality delivery; deposit money banks should deploy customer-friendly technologies to deliver customer care services.

Keywords: *Relationship Marketing, Service quality/performance, Loyalty, and COVID- 19.*

Background to the Study

The Nigerian banking sector is the second largest in sub-Saharan Africa behind South Africa, with a total asset worth of N39.6 trillion recorded in August, 2019 (BusinessWire, 2020). The industry is driven by the operations of 22 registered financial institutions (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2020) and a total number of 111.5 million active bank accounts as of May of 2020 (Emenike, 2020). Total savings account increased by 13.8 percent from 114.13 million accounts recorded in April 2019 to 129.91 million accounts in May of 2020. Also, current accounts increased by 3.59 percent from 24.3 million accounts to 25.17 million in 2020 (Emenike, 2020). By almost every measure, the Nigerian banking industry showed tremendous rates of growth in 2019 and the early months of 2020, until Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic made its way into Nigeria in February, 2020 (NCDC, 2020 as cited in Uford, Effiong & Charles, 2023). The emergence of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was predicted to have adverse effects on the Nigerian banking industry (Maclean, 2020; Ozili, 2020). However, despite the lockdowns and the adverse effects of Coronavirus on the economy, Nigerian banks recorded an increase in loans and advances by 18.94 percent and customers' deposit by 18.84 percent. This indicates that regardless of the COVID-19-induced lockdown of the economy, there was an increase in banking activities as loans, advances and customers' deposits grew (Ogunlayo, 2020).

In the same period, the industry witnessed an increase in the intensity of marketing activities, such as relationship marketing, carried out by banks to counteract the adverse impacts of the pandemic on their commercial activities. According to Lovelock (2005), relationship marketing is an effort that intends to cultivate and nurture long-term, cost-efficient relationships between the company and its customers for the mutual benefit of both parties. It is a philosophy of doing business, a strategic orientation that focuses on keeping and improving current customers rather than on acquiring new ones (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). As the pandemic progressed and the prospects of new customer acquisition declined, Nigerian commercial banks sought to retain existing customers by implementing various relationship marketing practices. However, this study centered on building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment. Trust-building entails establishing and sustaining confidence in the minds of customers about the ability of deposit money banks to deliver services that consistently meet their needs (Abbey *et al.*, 2017). Customer care is the provision of support and supplementary services to bank customers before, during and after patronizing banks to ensure customer satisfaction (Adejoke & Adekemi, 2012). Customer communication entails the regular

flow of information between deposit money banks and customers to maintain mutual understanding between both parties and facilitate service delivery (Bataneh *et al.*, 2015). Also, customer commitment is the dedication or devotion of deposit money banks to consistently meeting the banking needs of customers by offering value to customers, prioritizing customer satisfaction and ensuring quality service delivery (Chatterjee & Kamesh, 2019).

As the COVID-19 pandemic prevailed in Nigeria, deposit money banks resorted to these and other relationship marketing practices to reinforce their operations. More digital service points such as POS (point-of-sale) banking, mobile banking, internet banking and electronic funds transfer were intensified to sustain customers' trust in the stability of banking services (Uford, Mfon & Charles, 2023). Social media, email and direct phone lines were harnessed by deposit money banks to sustain communication with customers during the pandemic. Customers' complaints and service failure issues were also addressed through these communication channels since physical bank branches were closed in compliance with government directives. Similarly, through innovative banking systems like virtual banking, deposit money banks displayed their commitment to ensuring customers had access to much needed banking services amidst the pandemic. However, it remains unclear how these relationship marketing practices affected customers' loyalty to deposit money banks during the pandemic in Calabar due to the absence of adequate relevant empirical evidence.

It has been observed in extant literature that while a good number of studies have been carried out in Nigeria and the world (Aminu, 2012; Sani, 2014; Ojiaku, Aghara & Ezeoke, 2017; Sheehy, 2019; Maden, 2019; Aldaihani & Ali, 2019; Imouokhome *et al.*, 2020; Olayiwola *et al.*, 2020; Etuk, Anyadighibe, Amadi & Mbaka, 2020; Etuk, Anyadighibe, Amadi, & James, 2022; Etuk, Akpan & Awah 2023;), none of them adequately laid emphasis on the influence of relationship marketing on banks' customer loyalty post COVID-19 in Nigeria. As such, there is insufficient empirical evidence that demonstrates how relationship marketing affected banks' customer loyalty in Nigeria amidst the pandemic. Therefore, this study was designed to determine the influence of relationship marketing (building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment) on customers' loyalty to deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. Hence, there is need for more deposit money bank- focused research in Nigeria to supplement the identified gaps.

Objectives of the Study

1. determine the effect of building trust on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar;
2. examine the effect of customer care on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar;
3. determine the effect of customer communication on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar;
4. examine the effect of customer commitment on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Relationship investment model (Rusbult *et al.*, 1998)

The relationship investment model is a theory of romantic relationships that was developed by Rusbult *et al.* (1998) to explain the antecedents and consequences of commitment in romantic relationships (i.e., why some people might remain in a relationship while others might not). The model is based on the notion that individuals should feel more committed to a relationship when they derive more satisfaction from the relationship, believe they have few desirable alternatives to the relationship, and have invested heavily in the relationship (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). It presumes that as people become more attached to their partners, their relationship orientation shifts from the short term to the long term, and their willingness to maintain the relationship increases (Segal & Fraley, 2016). According to the investment model, three factors drive commitment and hence persistence in romantic relationships: satisfaction level, investment size and quality of alternatives. Commitment is a psychological phenomenon referring to a person's concern for the future and stability of a specific relationship, along with the desire for that relationship to continue (Akpan, 2023).

Satisfaction, the first component of the investment model, is a “function of the comparison level and current relational outcomes”. In other words, satisfaction is subjective to the individual and is determined by both relative perceptions and current feelings of enjoyment ((Le & Agnew 2003; Segal & Fraley, 2016).

Quality of alternatives refers to perceiving alternatives to the relationship as appealing. It refers to having viable alternatives to the current relationship. As people “scope the field”, they search for attractive alternatives to their current partner and weigh the costs of leaving the relationship versus the benefits of starting a new one. Alternatives also may refer to the perceived attractiveness of no relationship at all (Baker *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, investment size refers to the various kinds of investments people make in their relationships; investments that would be lost if the relationship ended. These investments range from more abstract things, such as time, effort, or sacrifices, to more tangible things, such as sharing possessions, vehicles, or a home. The more invested a person is in his or her relationship, the less likely he or she will be to end it, even if the relationship is an unsatisfying one (Segal & Fraley, 2016). In summary, the investment model proposes that satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size each uniquely influence the level of commitment in a relationship (Sparks, 2012).

The relevance of the relationship investment model to this study which will examine relationship marketing and customer loyalty in deposit money banks is that the display of commitment by both customers and deposit money banks is the basic ingredient required for the existence of a robust and fruitful long-term relationship between the parties. According to the relationship investment model, this commitment can be built by three

(3) distinct yet interwoven factors, namely: satisfaction level, quality of alternatives and investment size. In the context of this study, satisfaction level relates to the degree to which customers' banking needs are met by deposit money banks which ultimately culminates in customers' commitment to long-term relationships with deposit money banks. However, customers' commitment will diminish if their banking needs are not satisfactorily met by banks.

Also, quality of alternatives deals with whether or not customers are exposed to other deposit money banks that can serve as a viable and valuable replacement for the banks they currently patronize. Accordingly, the model asserts that bank customers are very likely to be less committed to a bank if the quality of available alternatives is higher than their current banks. And finally, investment size entails the amount of tangible (such as bank deposits and accounts held) and intangible (length of business relationship, brand experience and connection) investments that customers have made in deposit money banks. In line with the model's premise, bank customers will become more committed to a long-term relationship with a deposit money bank if the level of their investment in the bank is substantial. Therefore, relationship marketing practices (such as building trust, customer care, communication and display of banks' commitment) can be used to build customers' commitment to a long-term relationship with deposit money banks (Inseng & Uford, 2019).

Commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) Morgan and Hunt (1994) introduce one of the most cited theories in relationship marketing. They argued that trust and relationship commitment are the key mediators in the exchange between participants, which essentially lead to building a relational co-operation. The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing states that two fundamental factors: trust and commitment, must exist for a relationship to be successful. The theory further affirms that trust and commitment are inseparable in a successful business relationship because trust leads to commitment and commitment derives from mutual trust. Hence, both constructs reinforce each other and one cannot thrive without the other.

Trust: Trust refers to relying on someone's word. It is based upon reputation, personality, systems and processes. Trust is the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Trust is the confidence both parties in the relationship have that the other party will not do something harmful or risky. Businesses develop trust by standing behind their promises.

Commitment: Customer commitment is a party's durable intention to develop and sustain the relationship with the other party in the long run. Commitment is an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship; this implies a higher level of obligation to make a relationship succeed and to make it mutually satisfying and beneficial. It is also means keeping in touch with valued customers, providing timely and trustworthy information on service and service changes, and communicating proactively if a delivery problem occurs. Commitment involves a long-term desire to maintain a valued partnership.

The relevance of the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing to this study is that for deposit money banks to build a cordial, value-laden relationship with customers, at least two (2) elements are essential ingredients that may form the foundations of their relationship marketing efforts. These elements are: trust building and expression of commitment to customers. According to the theory, these two elements are required in building and maintaining long-term relationships with bank customers that guarantee sustainable customer loyalty. The theory emphasizes that customers need to have confidence and assurances in the capacity of deposit money banks to meet their banking needs before they will maintain loyalty to any particular bank. Similarly, deposit money banks can encourage customer loyalty behaviours by explicitly expressing their commitment, in word and deed, to consistently delivering high-quality services capable of satisfying customers' needs.

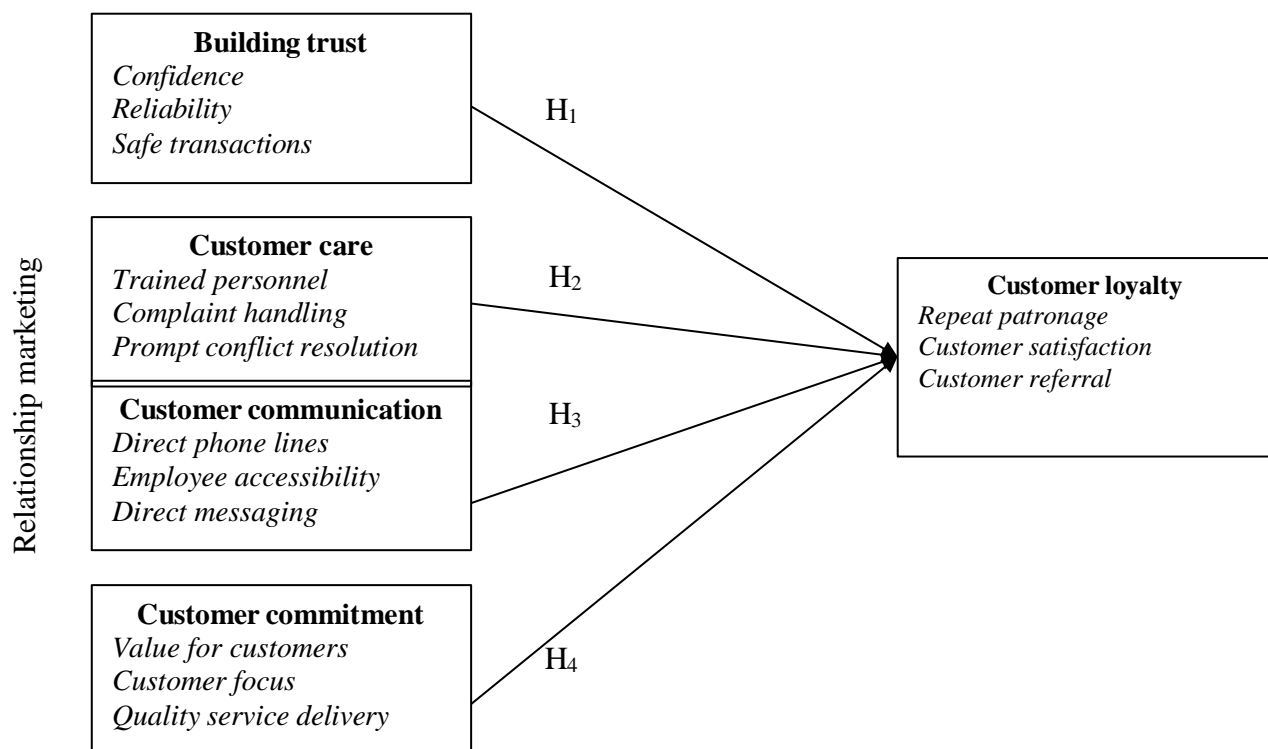


FIG. 2: Conceptual model of the study

Source: Parameters of independent variables adapted from Husnain and Akhtar (2015); Aldaihani and Ali (2019); Olayiwola *et al.* (2020). Parameters of dependent variable adapted from Hasan (2019)

Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing is an effort that intends to cultivate and nurture long-term, cost-efficient relationships between the company and its customers for the mutual benefit of both parties (Loverlock, 2005; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003; Chakiso, 2015). In the banking industry, relationship marketing entails attracting, developing and sustaining long-term customer relations that will enable banks gain a competitive edge over their competitors. The practice of relationship marketing is particularly important in the banking industry because of the intangible nature of banking services and the high level of customer trust required to maintain sustainable business relations (Chatterjee & Kamesh, 2019). Also, given the competitive nature of the banking industry, the dynamism of banking technologies and growing customer sophistication and enlightenment, relationship marketing strategies are highly necessary if banks are to successfully thrive and maintain prominence in the banking sector (Adejoke & Adekemi, 2012). Moreover, establishing and maintaining cordial relationships with customers enables banks to have continuous insights into the dynamic needs and requirements of customers in order to design services and strategies that ensure that customers are adequately satisfied (Chatterjee & Kamesh, 2019).

Meaning of Customer Loyalty

Loyalty is a word traditionally used to describe fidelity and enthusiastic devotion to a country, a cause, or an individual. It has also been used in a business context, to describe a customer's willingness to continue patronizing a firm over the long term, preferably on an exclusive basis, and recommending the firm's products to friends and associates (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016; Haran *et al.*, 2013; Levesque & McDougall, 2014 ; Lewis & Maurice, 2018; Robert *et al.*, 2018). Levesque and McDougall (2014) are of the opinion that, loyal customers purchase a firm's products or services exclusively and they are not willing to switch their preferences over a competitive firm/brand.

Variables of Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty can be measured using variables such as customer satisfaction, customer patronage, customer repurchase, positive word of mouth, customer commitment, among others (Nazari *et al.*, 2014). However, in the context of this study, customer patronage, customer satisfaction and customer referral are considered variables of customer loyalty.

Customer patronage: Customer patronage is the support, especially financial support that is given to a company and its offerings by a customer. It is a situation whereby customers continually prefer to buy and consume a firm's products and services over those of its rivals (Olayinka & Odunlami, 2018).

Customer Satisfaction: Customer satisfaction can be defined as the extent to which customers' expectations of a company's product/service are met or exceeded (Awara & Anyadighibe, 2015). The concept of satisfaction embraces not only what is gained

in the use of a product, but also consumers' feeling about the effectiveness of their own decision process. In the views of Awara and Anyadighibe (2015), customer satisfaction is outcome in relation to his/her own expectations. It is a feeling of happiness and excitement a customer experiences when actual service performance meets or exceeds expected performance or customer expectations. Hence, it is fundamental for firms to ensure the constant improvement of customer satisfaction through consistent delivery of quality service.

Customer referral: Customer referral is a system of marketing that motivates and encourages existing customers to refer new customers usually friends and family, coworkers, colleagues and neighbors to patronize organizations through positive recommendations (Salman & Rehman, 2013; Gumilang & Delvanghi, 2011; Jacques *et al.*, 2010) . Referral marketing is a method of promoting products or services to new customers through referrals, usually word-of-mouth.

Building Trust

In the relationship marketing context, trust is the confidence displayed by customers in the business organization's integrity and capacity to provide products and services that satisfy customers' needs (Jesri *et al.*, 2013). Trust is customers' confidence in the capacity of a firm to effectively and satisfactorily meet their needs and requirements. A customer trusts a firm when he believes and is assured that the firm has the expertise and competency to effectively serve his needs and wants (Bradley, 2018). In the view of Olayinka and Odunlami (2018), trust entails customers' expression of confidence or reliance in the ability of firms to provide products and services that are accurate, reliable, appropriate, valuable and capable of satisfying their needs and expectations. An organization can build trust with customers by being honest in all its operations; providing truthful and unadulterated information about the real performance or quality of its products and services; taking responsibility and apologizing to customers in the event of product or service defects; consistently delivering high quality products/services and ensuring to satisfactorily fulfil promises made to customers.

Just as trust is a vital prerequisite for long term relationships among groups of people to survive, trust is also very consequential for the establishment and maintenance of relationships between a firm and its customers (Jackie *et al.*, 2017). In the banking sector, trust can be perceived as a service-consumer's belief or confidence in the service-provider's reliability, integrity and capacity to deliver high quality banking services that consistently meet their banking needs and requirements. It is an indispensable ingredient for the existence and sustenance of a long-term relationship between a company and its customers, because when customers trust a firm and its operations, they will be more committed to maintaining long-term business interactions with the firm and easily recommends them to their friends, family, and others (Husnain & Akhtar, 2015).

Relationship marketing enables banks to create and maintain cordial relationships with customers while projecting their ability to effectively and satisfactorily deliver services that adequately meet customers' needs and requirements (Sayil *et al.*, 2019). The assertions above are supported by the study of Husnain and Akhtar (2015); Etuk *et al* (2022), which revealed that building trust, as an element of relationship marketing, had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty in the Pakistani banking industry. This finding is also in agreement with the study of Ali (2016), which revealed that as a component of relationship marketing, trust had a statistically significant positive influence on customer loyalty of selected banks in Ethiopia. Finally, the study of Chakiso (2015) revealed that trust had a significantly strong correlation and effect on customers' loyalty in an Ethiopian bank. Thus, this study hypothesized that:

Ho: Building trust has no significant effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar.

Customer Care

Customer care is how customers are treated when they interact with a brand. It includes all experiences with the company and its employees before, during and after a purchase. Customer care is an important aspect of customer service because it fosters an emotional connection with the brand's community (Fontanella, 2019). It is the process of building an emotional connection with customers by offering support, advice and assistance to them at every point of service encounter. Eyonam and Kofi (2018) view customer care as the provision of support services to customers before, during and after their needs have been met. It is how a firm's personnel treat customers from the moment they walk into the shop until they leave. Politeness, respect, courtesy and empathy are the most attractive customer care attributes sought by customers. The quality of customer care service received by a subscriber determines their future purchase tendencies and loyalty.

According to Wong (2020) and Adejoke & Adekemi (2012), customer care is the process of looking after customers to best ensure their satisfaction and delightful interaction with a business and its brand, products and services.

The viewpoints above are supported by the study of Olayiwola *et al.* (2020) and Imouokhome *et al.* (2020), which revealed that customer care had a positive and significant relationship and effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty in Nigerian commercial banks. In addition, it was revealed in the study of Ali (2016) that customer care, as a relationship marketing element, had a statistically significant positive influence on customer loyalty among selected banks in Ethiopia. Thus, this study hypothesized that:

Ho: Customer care has no significant effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar.

Customer Communication

Communication is the act of conveying meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs, symbols and semiotic rules. The channel of communication can be visual, auditory, olfactory, electromagnetic or biochemical (Harper, 2013). According to Wayne (2018), communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place, person or group to another. In the context of relationship marketing, communication is the back-and-forth transmission of information between a business organization and its customers in order to achieve established business objectives (Rajah & Al-Islami, 2014; Anabila *et al.*, 2012; Etuk *et al.* 2022). Communication, in relationship marketing, involves keeping in touch with valued customers; providing timely and trustworthy information on service and service changes; and responding proactively if a delivery problem occurs (Ndubisi & Madu, 2009; Bataineh *et al.*, 2015; Sayil *et al.*, 2019). The viewpoint above corresponds to the study of Olayiwola *et al.* (2020), which reveals that communication had a positive and significant relationship and effect on customers' satisfaction and loyalty in the Nigerian banking industry. Similarly, the study of Aldaihani and Ali (2019) revealed that as a dimension of relationship marketing, communication had a significant statistical impact on customers' loyalty of Islamic banks in Kuwait. Finally, the study of Chakiso (2015) revealed that communication had a significantly strong correlation and effect on customers' loyalty in an Ethiopian bank. Thus, this study hypothesized that:

Ho: Customer communication has no significant effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar.

Customer Commitment

Commitment as the state or quality of being dedicated to a cause, activity, etc, is also a pledge or undertaking to fulfill certain future obligations. In relationship marketing, commitment is the long-term desire by business organizations and customers to maintain a valued partnership with each other (Mack, 2018). This desire causes the business organization to consistently invest in developing and maintaining relationships with customers.

Relationship commitment is at the core of all successful working relationships and it is a vital ingredient in successful long-term relationships, because it relates to high level of perceived stakes held by partners in an exchange relationship necessitating the need to maintain such relationships (Chakiso, 2015; Husnain & Akhtar, 2015). This premise is backed by the study of Husnain and Akhtar (2015) which revealed that commitment had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty in the Pakistani banking sector. Similarly, the study of Chakiso (2015) revealed that as a component of relationship marketing, commitment had a significantly strong correlation and effect on customers' loyalty in an Ethiopian bank. Finally, the study of Imouokhome *et al.* (2020) revealed that commitment had a significant effect on customer

satisfaction and loyalty in the Nigerian banking industry. Thus, this study hypothesized that:

Ho: Customer commitment has no significant effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar.

Research Methodology

The cross-sectional survey research design was adopted for the studying the data. Additionally, cross-sectional survey research design enabled the researcher to obtain data from many different individuals (customers of deposit money banks) at a single point in time without influencing or manipulating the data. This study was conducted in Calabar, the Capital of Cross River State.

As a viable commercial city, Calabar Municipality is home to virtually all deposit money banks operating in Nigeria. The Topman Formula was applied to determine a sample size of

280 respondents for the study. The researcher adopted convenient sampling technique to include bank customers who ultimately participated in the survey. Data were obtain from primary through the administration of questionnaire. The statements measuring the independent variables were adapted from Husnain and Akhtar (2015); Aldaihani and Ali (2019); Olayiwola *et al.* (2020); Etuk *et al* (2022). Whereas, the statements measuring the dependent variable parameters were adapted from Hasan (2019). Statements 1 – 3 were adapted to measure building trust; statements 4 – 6 were adapted to measure customer care; statements 7 – 9 were adapted to measure communication; statements 10 – 12 were adapted to measure commitment while statements 13 – 15 were adapted to measure

The Cronbach’s alpha, a common method for checking internal consistency reliability was adopted for this study with the range from 0.745 to 0.883.

1. Result and Discussion of Findings Table 1

Descriptive statistics of relationship marketing and customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar

Questionnaire Items	N	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Undecided (U)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)
Building trust						
Confidence	248	85 (34.3%)	104 (41.9%)	28 (11.3%)	13 (5.2%)	18 (7.3%)
Reliability	248	74 (29.8%)	63 (25.4%)	38 (15.3%)	33 (13.3%)	40 (16.1%)
Safe transactions	248	75 (30.2%)	81 (32.7%)	24 (9.7%)	31 (12.5%)	37 (14.9%)
Customer care						
Trained personnel	248	59 (23.8%)	120 (48.4%)	22 (8.9%)	18 (7.3%)	29 (11.7%)

))	(8.9%)		
Complaint handling	248	23 (9.3%)	98 (39.5%)	53 (21.4%)	41 (16.5%)	33 (13.3%)
Prompt conflict resolution	248	77 (31.0%)	107 (43.1%)	19 (7.7%)	17 (6.9%)	28 (11.3%)
Customer communication						
Direct phone lines	248	79 (31.9%)	77 (31.0%)	33 (13.3%)	23 (9.3%)	36 (14.5%)
Employee accessibility	248	82 (33.1%)	70 (28.2%)	20 (8.1%)	40 (16.1%)	36 (14.5%)
Direct messaging	248	64 (25.8%)	76 (30.6%)	36 (14.5%)	24 (9.7%)	48 (19.4%)
Customer commitment						
Value for customers	248	27 (10.9%)	59 (23.8%)	44 (17.7%)	31 (12.5%)	87 (35.1%)
Customer focus	248	95 (38.3%)	81 (32.7%)	20 (8.1%)	25 (10.1%)	27 (10.9%)
Quality service delivery	248	52 (21.0%)	64 (25.8%)	43 (17.3%)	33 (13.3%)	56 (22.6%)
Customer loyalty						
Repeat patronage	248	45 (18.1%)	70 (28.2%)	32 (12.9%)	38 (15.3%)	63 (25.4%)
Customer satisfaction	248	128 (51.6%)	63 (25.4%)	16 (6.5%)	21 (8.5%)	20 (8.1%)
Customer referral	248	46 (18.5%)	88 (35.5%)	35 (14.1%)	30 (12.1%)	49 (19.8%)

Source: Author's computation via SPSS, 2022

Test of hypotheses

Independent variables: Building trust, Customer care, Customer communication, Customer commitment

Dependent variable: Customer loyalty

Test statistic: Multiple linear regression

Decision criteria: Accept the alternative hypothesis if ($P < .05$) and reject the null hypothesis, if otherwise.

Table 2

Model summary of the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.774 ^a	.599	.592	.35032

a. Predictors: (Constant), Building trust, Customer care, Customer communication, Customer commitment
 b. Dependent Variable: Customer loyalty

Source: Author’s computation via SPSS, 2022

Table 3

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	44.475	4	11.119	90.599	.000 ^b
	Residual	29.822	243	.123		
	Total	74.297	247			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer loyalty

b. Predictors: (Constant), Building trust, Customer care, Customer communication, Customer commitment

Source: Author’s computation via SPSS, 2022

Table 4

Coefficients for the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.707	.165		4.285	.000
Building trust	.242	.030	.379	7.936	.000
Customer care	.148	.036	.203	4.090	.000
Customer communication	.180	.026	.327	6.876	.000
Customer commitment	.197	.038	.215	5.227	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer loyalty Source: Author's computation via SPSS, 2022

Tables 2, 3 and 4 present the multiple linear regression results of the effect of relationship marketing on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. The correlation coefficient (R) in Tables 2 indicates that the relationship between relationship marketing and customer loyalty is 77.4 per cent, which is a very high degree of relationship. The coefficient of determination (R^2) in the same table indicates that up to 59.9 per cent of the variability in customer loyalty is explained by relationship marketing practices of deposit money banks. The implication is that a unit change in the application of relationship marketing practices by deposit money banks in Calabar will result in a 59.9 per cent change in customer loyalty post the COVID-19 pandemic, when other factors remain unchanged. The F- statistic in TABLE 3 ($F = 90.599$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) indicates that the regression model is considered statistically significant, which implies that relationship marketing significantly influenced customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar.

As can be seen in Tables 4, the p-values of all independent variables tested (building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment) were less than the error margin of 0.05 with corresponding t-values that are positive. This implies that relationship marketing practices (building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment) significantly and positively influenced customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. Therefore, there is substantive empirical evidence to reject all null hypotheses, accept all corresponding alternative hypotheses and conclude that building trust, customer care, customer communication and customer commitment had significant positive effects on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. Furthermore, the Standardized Coefficients section of Tables 4 provides information on the contributions of each of the predictor variables tested to the

regression model. With a Beta Coefficient of 0.379 (37.9 per cent), building trust had the highest contribution to the model. This is followed by customer communication as the second-highest contributor to the model, with a Beta Coefficient of 0.327 (32.7 per cent). The third-highest contributor to the model is customer commitment, with a Beta Coefficient of 0.215 (21.5 per cent); while the least contributor to the model is customer care, with a Beta Coefficient of 0.203 (20.3 per cent).

Discussion of Findings

Building trust and customer loyalty

The first hypothesis test revealed that building trust had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. This finding is supported by the study of Husnain and Akhtar (2015), which revealed that building trust had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty in the Pakistani banking sector. The finding is also supported by the study of Chakiso (2015), which revealed that building trust had a significant positive relationship with customers' loyalty to commercial banks in Ethiopia. Another study by Ali (2016) reinforces this finding by revealing that building trust had a significant positive influence on customer loyalty towards Ethiopian deposit money banks. The implication of this finding is that post the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, deposit money banks were able to significantly improve customers' loyalty to their brands by building customers' trust, as a relationship marketing practice. This entails that going forward, in the event of future pandemics, Nigerian deposit money banks can substantially improve and sustain customers' loyalty by reinforcing the trustworthiness, stability, reliability and security of banking services.

Customer Care and Customer Loyalty

The test of hypothesis two revealed that customer care had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. This finding is reinforced by the study of Ali (2016), which revealed that customer care had a significant positive influence on customer loyalty towards commercial banks in Ethiopia. The finding is also backed by the study of Imouokhome *et al.* (2020), which revealed that customer care had a significant effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Nigerian banking industry. Also, the finding is in alignment with the study of Olayiwola *et al.* (2020), which revealed that customer care had a significant positive effect on customers' satisfaction and loyalty in Nigerian banks. The implication of this finding is that post the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, deposit money banks were able to significantly improve customers' loyalty to their brands through the delivery of customer care services, as a relationship marketing practice. This entails that going forward, in the event of future pandemics, Nigerian deposit money banks can substantially improve and sustain customers' loyalty by providing customer care services through trained personnel in order to effectively handle and promptly resolve customers' complaints and service conflicts.

Customer Communication and Customer Loyalty

The test of hypothesis three also revealed that customer communication had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. This finding is supported by the study of Aldaihani and Ali (2019), which revealed that customer communication had a significant positive relationship with customers' loyalty of Islamic banks in Kuwait. The finding is also backed by the study of Olayiwola *et al.* (2020), which revealed that customer communication had a significant positive relationship with customers' satisfaction and loyalty in Nigerian banks. Another study by Nam *et al.* (2017) supports the finding of this study by revealing that customer communication had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty in Vietnam cosmetics market. In the context of this study, this finding implies that post the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, deposit money banks were able to significantly improve customers' loyalty to their brands by strengthening communications with customers despite the lockdowns and other restrictive protocols established by the Nigerian Government. This entails that going forward, in the event of future pandemics, Nigerian deposit money banks can substantially improve and sustain customers' loyalty by ensuring uninterrupted communication with customers through direct phone lines, customer service personnel and direct messaging software tools like social media.

Customer Commitment and Customer Loyalty

The test of hypothesis four revealed that customer commitment had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks post the COVID-19 pandemic in Calabar. This finding is supported by the study of Imouokhome *et al.* (2020), which revealed that banks' commitment to customers had a significant effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Nigerian banking industry. The finding is reinforced by the study of Hasan (2019), which revealed that customers' commitment had a significant impact on customer loyalty in the banking industry of Bangladesh. Similarly, the finding is backed by the study of Nam *et al.* (2017), which revealed that customer commitment had a significant positive effect on customer loyalty in Vietnam cosmetics market. Overall, the implication of this finding to this study is that post the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, deposit money banks were able to significantly improve customers' loyalty to their brands by strengthening their commitment to customers, as a relationship marketing practice. This entails that going forward, in the event of future pandemics, Nigerian deposit money banks can substantially improve and sustain customers' loyalty by strengthening their commitment to customers by providing value to customers through customer-focused service delivery and ensuring the consistent delivery of high-quality services.

Conclusion

The emergence of COVID-19 in Nigeria marked the beginning of a new era among businesses defined by automation, technological innovation, virtual service delivery and contactless marketing. The pandemic compelled businesses to adapt and resort to

innovative technologies to survive and thrive in the Nigerian business environment. This created a survival-of-the-fittest status quo in which those businesses that were unwilling or incapable to adapt were ultimately driven out of operations as the pandemic hardened nationwide. Like other technology-oriented sectors of the Nigerian economy such as the telecommunications industry, the Nigerian banking industry marshalled a series of contingency marketing strategies to reinforce their operations and prevent the pandemic from adversely impacting their customer bases. One of such marketing strategies was relationship marketing, through visible practices like building trust, customer care services, customer communication systems and customer commitment initiatives which had significant effect of customers' loyalty of Nigerian deposit money banks amidst COVID-19.

Recommendations

1. Deposit money banks should consistently strive to boost customers' confidence in their ability to deliver satisfactory banking services amidst disruptive pandemics like COVID-19 by using technology and human efforts to strengthen service quality delivery.
2. In the face of pandemics like COVID-19, deposit money banks should deploy customer-friendly technologies like mobile software to deliver customer care services in order to ensure that customers enjoy steady access to banking services without having to visit physical bank branches.
3. There is need for deposit money banks to establish easily-accessible communication systems such as phone lines, direct messaging and social media through which vital service information can be transmitted to customers in order to facilitate the service delivery process. Customers' enquiries, suggestions and complaints should be prioritized and promptly resolved through such a communication system in order to improve customers' satisfaction and retention.
4. Deposit money banks should demonstrate their unwavering commitment to meeting customers' banking needs amidst disruptive pandemics like COVID- 19 by offering more value to customers and prioritizing consistent customer satisfaction at every point of service encounter. A display of such commitment by deposit money banks will inspire confidence in customers and motivate them to maintain loyalty to their brands.

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