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Food sellers' physical evidence and customer satisfaction in tertiary institutions in Calabar Metropolis, Nigeria

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Keywords

Food sellers, physical evidence, customers satisfaction, tertiary institutions.

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Abstract

This study aims at analyzing the significance of physical evidence of food sellers on the satisfaction of customers in tertiary institution within Calabar Municipality Local Government Area. In carrying out the study, University of Calabar was chosen based on the high population of food sellers compared to other institutions. A survey was conducted among 385 customers of food sellers who were conveniently selected from 55 food sellers within the campus. The result of regression analysis shows that tangible element of food sellers' service quality has no significant effect on customers' satisfaction ($p>0.05$). It was therefore recommended that food sellers should give maximum attention to their business premises by keeping the production and service equipment clean and in good condition. Clean table cloths, waiters' appearance, and condition of dining chairs and tables should be given adequate attention, while maintaining good sanitation standard.

Introduction

The current competition within the service industry has placed a significant emphasis on consumer happiness, prompting corporate organizations to prioritize quality services. Food sellers worldwide have recognized the need of prioritizing customer satisfaction in their service delivery as a means of retaining their clientele. The presence of food vending businesses on school campuses has been observed globally (Rahman, Arif, Bakar, & Tambi, 2016). Food vending industry in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, is experiencing rapid growth, especially within the campuses of higher education institutions. Umeanyika, Eze, Anyasor and Anetoh (2021) stated that campuses of higher education institutions have become favourable environment and lucrative market for food sellers within a highly competitive dining industry.

According to Abiiro, Gyan, and Akanbang (2019) the rise in student enrollment in Nigerian tertiary institutions has resulted in a proportional growth of food sellers on campus. This increase in student population has directly influenced the expansion of the food service industry within the campuses of tertiary education. Accordingly, there has been a noticeable increase in food vending firms in Nigerian tertiary institutions in recent years, which can be attributed to the high enrollment of students. Ayodele and Panama (2016) stated that there is a positive correlation between increase in the number of food sellers and the rise in student enrolment and employee population. This leads to a corresponding increase in the demand for food and changes in consumption patterns not necessarily because of the quality of service they receive but as a result of quenching the hunger. Umeanyika et al. (2021) opine that the surge in demand for readily available food have played a substantial role in the proliferation of on-campus restaurants, cafeterias, and fast food establishments that delivers less quality services.

As argued by Mensah, Aidoo and Teye (2013), the daily routine on campus is predominantly marked by the practice of dining outside of one's residence due to extended periods spent away from home for various reasons. Many students choose eating out over cooking their own meals due to time constraints, particularly as they engage in other activities during breaks between lectures (Umeanyika et al., 2021; Abiiro et al., 2019). Employees also see the vendor services as convenient and efficient in terms of accessibility and time management especially during work hours. According to Meshack and Prusty (2021) individuals affiliated with higher education institutions such as students and employees, tend to frequent on-campus food vendors due to the convenient availability of a diverse range of prepared food options, the affordability of meals offered, and the challenges they have in cooking their own meals during their work hours. Therefore, to effectively attract and satisfy customers, food sellers in higher educational institutions must demonstrate an understanding of their customers' preferences and integrate them into the food preparation and service processes (Kasim, 2021). This study seeks to evaluate the effect of tangible service quality attribute (physical evidence) of food sellers on customer satisfaction in Nigerian tertiary institutions using University of Calabar.

Literature review

Service quality

The term "service" has multiple interpretations, resulting in a degree of ambiguity regarding its conceptual definition. It could be an industry, an output, an offering, a process, or a performance (Ju, Back, Choi, & Lee, 2019). Services can be defined as activities, benefits, and satisfactions that are either offered for sale or supplied in conjunction with the sale of commodities. Within the realm of economic activities, services encompass a broad spectrum that excludes the manufacturing of tangible products or the construction industry. These activities typically involve the immediate consumption of the output and provide intangible benefits, such as convenience, amusement, timeliness, comfort, or improved health, which are of primary importance to the initial consumer (Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin, & Zikmund, 2015). According to Ju, Back, Choi, & Lee (2019) services are commonly characterized as intangible and their output is often described as an activity rather than a tangible item. However, this characterization is not entirely clear, as tangible elements such as physical buildings, equipment, and personnel are also integral components of services (Temba, 2013).

According to Ali, Gardi, Othman, Ahmed, Ismael, Hamza, Aziz, Sabir, Sorguli & Anwar (2021), a noteworthy and unprecedented attribute of services is their inherent nature as a process.

In their perspective, services possess an intangible nature, hence presenting challenges for providers in terms of their promotion and for consumers in terms of their evaluation. Gronroos (2007) stated that services are characterized as actions or a series of actions that are primarily intangible in essence. These activities occur when customers relate with service providers, service premise and the processes involved in providing the service. The primary purpose of these activities is to offer solutions to customers' problems. In essence, services are the advantageous provisions extended by one party to another in several sectors, including but not limited to banking, telecommunication, education, insurance, retail, tourism, and hospitality services (Diminyi et al. 2020).

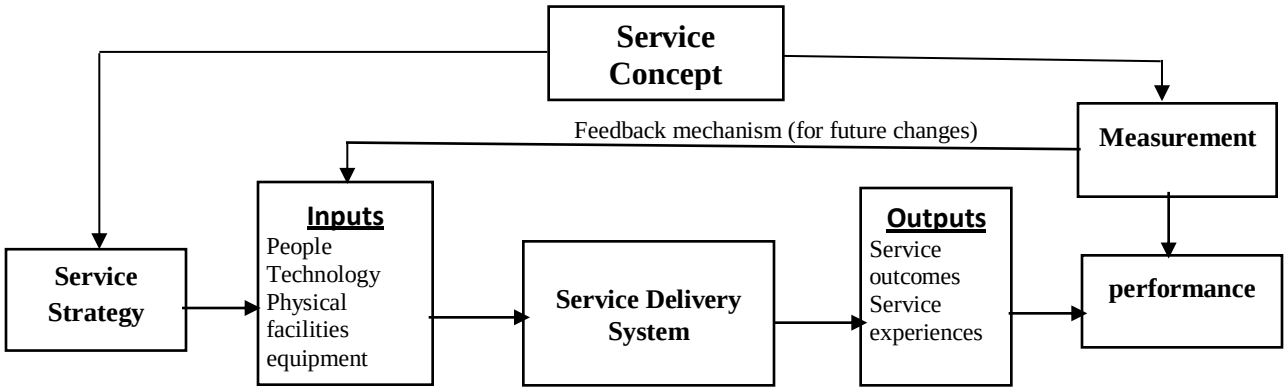

FIG. *1: The service concept framework.*
Source: *Adopted and modified from Goldstein (2002)*

Quality on the other hand is the degree to which a product or service meets or exceeds the expectations of its intended users, as well as its suitability for fulfilling its intended functions. The term "applicability" pertains to an object, such as a product, service, or process, and is specifically defined as the extent to which a collection of intrinsic qualities or attributes of said object meets a certain set of requirements (Diminyi, Agaku, Ibuo, Anyanwu & Odey, 2020). Consequently, the evaluation of an object's quality is established by the comparison of a predefined set of attributes with a corresponding set of criteria. When the aforementioned characteristics align with the specified standards, a state of high quality is attained. Conversely, if these characteristics fail to align, a degree of quality that is low or unsatisfactory is realized (Diminyi et al., 2020).

Physical evidence

The physical evidence (tangible) element of service quality refers to physical objects or environment that the customer experiences during the service process. Fitzsimmons, Fitzsimons and Bordoloi (2014) asserts that the concept of physical evidence pertains to the physical aspects of a firm's services. This encompasses several elements such as materials and equipment, physical facilities, environmental conditions, and communication materials. Ali et al. (2021) argues that tangible service provided by a firm include the observable aspects such as the physical appearance of equipment, staff, building aesthetics, and renovations. The concept of tangibility pertains to the level of cleanliness observed in various aspects of the business environment, such as the rooms, staff uniforms, and restaurant (Abdullah, Al-Shorman, Ibrahim, Omar & Ariff, 2024).

Physical evidence provides a concrete manifestation of visual representations of services, which clients, particularly new customers, utilize to evaluate the quality. To develop a method for assessing service quality, the majority of business enterprises integrate physical elements with other dimensions of service quality to enhance their standing, ensure consistency, and convey quality to their clients (Anwar & Balcioglu, 2016). In their study, Ali et al. (2021) conducted research to determine how the quality of service within the hospitality industry can influence the satisfaction of customers. The participants consisted of 111 individuals who were randomly selected to ensure representativeness. Using the multiple regression model, the study found out that physical evidence has significantly predicted customer satisfaction with $\beta = 0.393$ and $p<.001$, indicating a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. In a study conducted in Malasia by Omar et al. (2016) which was aimed at analyzing service excellence, customer's fulfillment, and the moderating effect of gender within Arabic restaurants. Using convenient sampling method, the result of hierarchical regression and correlational analysis revealed that physical evidence was the second most important predictor of customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.233$, $p< 0.01$). This was corroborated by Kasim (2021) who found out that physical evidence has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in the Legend Coffee Yogyakarta ($p< 0.05$). According to Zygiaris, Hameed, Alsubaie and Rehman (2022), the tangible service component of a business significantly impacts customers' perceptions of service quality.

The relevant factors that significantly influence the perception of consumers about the quality of service include price, rivals' ranking, word-of-mouth, and communication tactics (Ismagilova, Dwivedi & Slade, 2019). However, in contrast to the report of Zygiaris et al. (2022), Fida, Ahmed, and Al-Balushi (2020) and Eresia-Eke et al. (2020), a comparable investigation conducted by Balinado, Prasetyo, Young, Persada, Miraja & Redi (2021) using SERVQUAL approach, with the objective of identifying the elements that influence customer satisfaction in the automotive after-sales service at Toyota company, Philippines, reveals that physical evidence aspects of service quality did not have a substantial impact on customer satisfaction. This was evident from the β coefficient of -0.20, suggesting that customers had relatively low expectations with regard to facility and personnel physical appearance. In a study conducted by Tefera and Governder (2017), on the perceptions of Ethiopian hotel guests regarding the quality of service, satisfaction of customer and customer loyalty. The findings indicate that intangible dimensions of the quality of service delivery in hotels have a greater impact on customer satisfaction compared to tangible dimensions

Customer satisfaction

According to Mosahab, Mahamad, and Ramayah (2010), satisfaction refers to the comprehensive assessment made by customers following their interaction with a company's product or service. It depends on the extent to which service delivery connect with customers' expectations, which determines whether the consumer is satisfied or not. Satisfaction entails the comprehensive evaluation made by customers regarding the performance of an organization's product and service offerings (Ludin & Cheng, 2014). It is the customer's reaction to the performance of a product offered by a business, which is evaluated based on a predetermined set of consumer expectations (Tjiptono & Chandra, 2011). Satisfaction is the emotional experience of joy or disappointment that a consumer undergoes while evaluating the performance of a product or service in relation to their expectations (Kotler & Killer, 2009). However, the concept of customer satisfaction is not considered absolute, but rather dependent on the individual customers' experiences with the product or service (Tjiptono & Chandra, 2011). Hence, the assessment of

satisfaction encompasses various dimensions, such as the comparison between an organization's performance and the expectations of its stakeholders (Wilson & Christella, 2019).

Competition within the food vending industry serves as a significant benchmark for vendors, as it compels them to actively seek out and attract a maximum number of customers. The importance placed on customer satisfaction has been steadily increasing due to the fundamental objective of businesses, which is to cultivate a feeling of contentment among customers (Kasim, 2021). Customer satisfaction has been clearly explained as being distinctive to each transaction, indicating that it is determined by the consumers' experiences during a given service interaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1994). Khudhair, Jusoh, Mardani, and Nor (2019) posit that customer satisfaction is typically assessed through the evaluation of customers' experiences, which are contingent upon the quality of the service they are provided. In Ratih's (2010) study, customer satisfaction was conceptualized as a post-service evaluation in which the selected option meets or goes beyond the client's expectations. Customer perception refers to the subjective evaluation made by individuals regarding a service that has successfully fulfilled their expectations.

Methodology

Population of the study

The population for this study encompasses sellers of ready-to-eat solid food in restaurants, cafeteria, fast food joints and their customers within the premises of University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria. University of Calabar was chosen based on high population of food sellers compared to other tertiary institution within Calabar Metropolis.

Sampling techniques

Since the researcher adopted a survey design in this study, a multi-stage sampling technique comprising probability and non-probability sampling methods was used to select the required samples for the study. First, cluster sampling techniques was used to divide food vending enterprises into six clusters or zones namely, Main Campus, Medical College, Physical/Biological Sciences, Library, Cameroon and Malabo respectively. Thereafter, purposive sampling procedure was used to select 55 food vendors across the six zones in the following proportion: main campus 10, medical college 5, physical/biological sciences 4, library 6, Cameroon 21and Malabo 17 (see sample size determination for food vendors). Seven (7) customers each were conveniently selected across the 55 sample food vendors making a total of 385 customers. The reason for choosing this method is because some respondents were not willing and ready to participate in the survey.

Sample size

The population under consideration for this study comprises all food vendors operating within the University of Calabar as well as persons who regularly purchase food from these vendors. To ensure an adequate representation, the sample size for this study was 55 food vendors and 384 clients. The determination of the sample size for food vendors was conducted using the statistical method proposed by Yamane (1967). Therefore, the formula can be expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

table 1: sample size for food sellers

Food vendors zone	Population	Sample size	Percentage
Main Campus	16	10	18%
Medical College	8	5	9%
Physical Science	6	4	7%
Library	10	6	11%
Cameroon	21	13	24%
Malabo	27	17	31%
Total	**88**	**55**	**100%**

Source: Author's field work (2024)

The sample size for customers of food vendors was drawn from an infinite population since it is difficult to ascertain the exact population of those who patronize food vendors. Based on this, the researcher used a formula that estimates the representativeness of a sample on certain critical parameters at an acceptable level of probability (Olowe & Okeke, 2020) as given by Mendenhall & Reinmuth (1978). Thus:

$$n = \frac{z^2pq}{e^2}$$

table 2: sample size for patrons (customers) of food vendors

Food vendors zone	Number of vendors per zone	Sample size of customers per zone	Percentage
Main Campus	10	70	18%
Medical College	5	35	9%
Physical Science	4	28	7%
Library	6	42	11%
Cameroon	13	91	24%
Malabo	17	118	31%
Total	**55**	**384**	**100%**

Source: Author's field work (2024)

Instrument and procedure for data collection

A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on respondents' biodata, expectations and perceptions about the

quality of service delivered to them and their overall satisfaction. The questionnaire consists of 28 close ended questions across the five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) and the overall satisfaction of the service. The questions were phrased in a manner that participants will not be confused by similar questions or make errors in their responses. The questionnaires were administered one-on-one to customers of selected food vendors within the six clusters of the University of Calabar by intercepting them after they had purchased their desired meal. The questionnaire was divided into two sections labelled A and B. Section A seek information on demographic profile of respondents, while section B elicited data on the five dimensions of food vendors' service quality and how it affects the satisfaction of customers. A total of 384 questionnaires were successfully administered to customers of food vendors in the University of Calabar, out of which all were duly completed and returned, representing 100 percent response rate.

table 3: questionnaire return rate

Food vendors zone	**Sample size of customers per zone**	**Number of questionnaires distributed**	**Number of questionnaires returned/%**
Main Campus	70	70	70(18%)
Medical College	35	35	35(9%)
Physical Science	28	28	28(7%)
Library	42	42	42(11%)
Cameroon	91	91	91(24%)
Malabo	118	118	118(31%)
Total	**384**	**384**	**384(100%)**

Source: Author's field work (2024)

Data analysis techniques

The data collected was analyze using three different techniques. First, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages and charts was used to analyze data on the demographic characteristics of respondents as well as respondent's satisfaction of food vendor's service quality. Secondly, simple linear regression was used to ascertain the effect or influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable (service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction) from hypothesis one to hypothesis five. The regression analysis was computed electronically with statistical package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20. However, in order to have a seamless analysis, items under each of the independent variables were sum and transformed into latent variables and then use for regression analysis.

Result and discussion

Respondents demographic characteristics

Figure 2 gives an insight into respondents' gender. From the figure, it can be seen that out of three hundred and eighty-four respondents, 55% were male, while 44% were female. This implies that the greater percentage of the respondents were males.

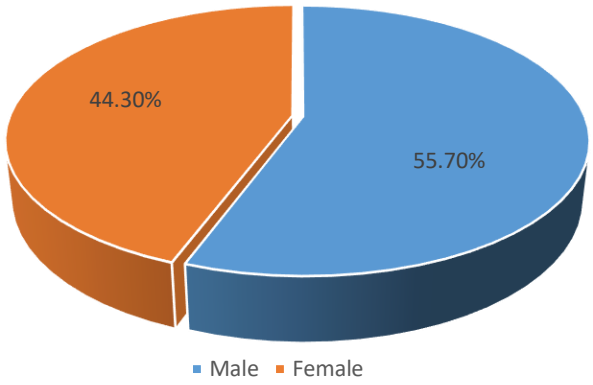

FIG. 2: Respondent's gender
Source: Author's field work (2024)

Figure 3 provides details on respondents' age. From the figure, respondents within the age bracket of 18 - 30 years were 35% of the samples, those that fall between the age range of 31 - 40 years constitute 34.1% of the sample, while 13.5% and 4.2% fell within the age range 41 - 50 years and 51 years of age and above.

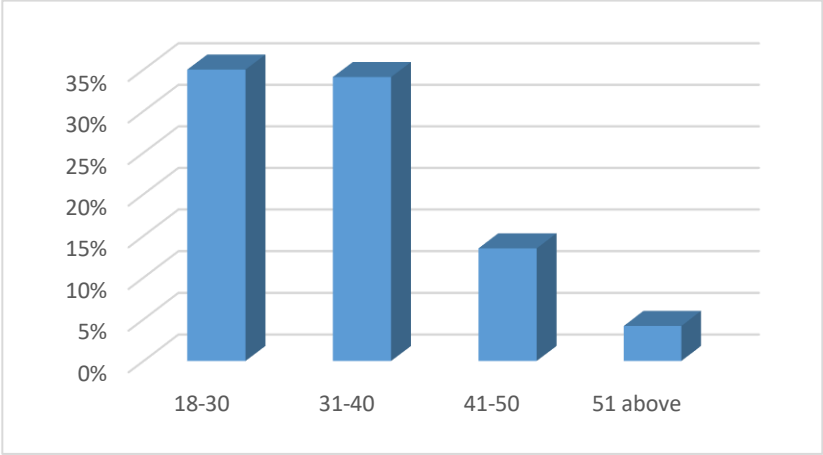

***FIG. 3:** Respondents age*
Source: Author's field work (2024)

Figure 4 shows the occupation of respondents. From the figure, 9.4% were academic staff, 13% represent non-academic staff, 54.7% were students and 15.1% were business owners. The figure further indicates that 4.2% were made of applicants, 2.3% constitute civil servants, while only 1.3% fell within the category of public servants.

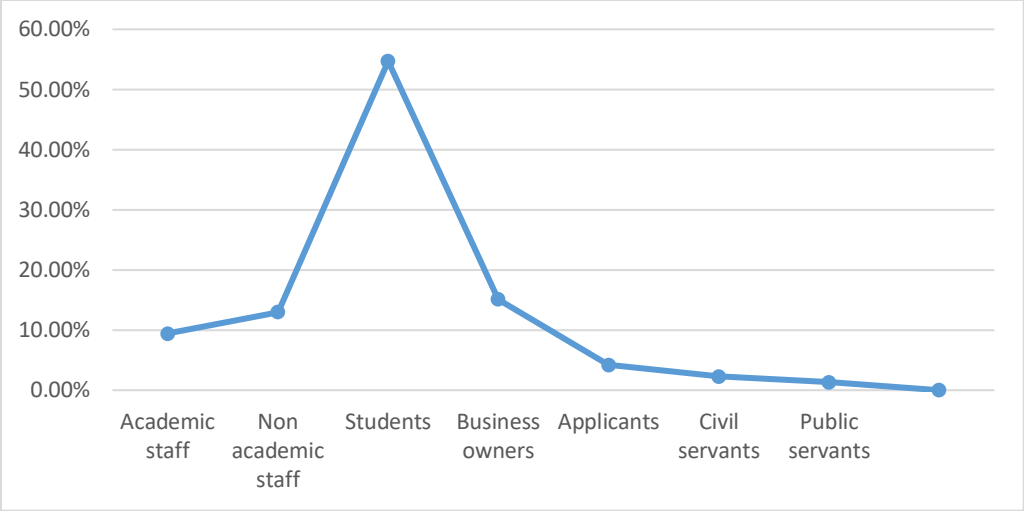

***FIG. 4**: Respondents occupation*
Source: Author's field work (2024)

Figure 5 gives details on the highest educational qualification of respondents. From the figure, 8.3% of are PhD degree holders, 18.2% had master degree, 45.6% constitute those with B.Sc./HND holders, and 10.4% had NCE and ND certificates respectively. Others were SSCE certificate holders constituting 17.2% of, and FSLC holders with only 0.3% respectively.

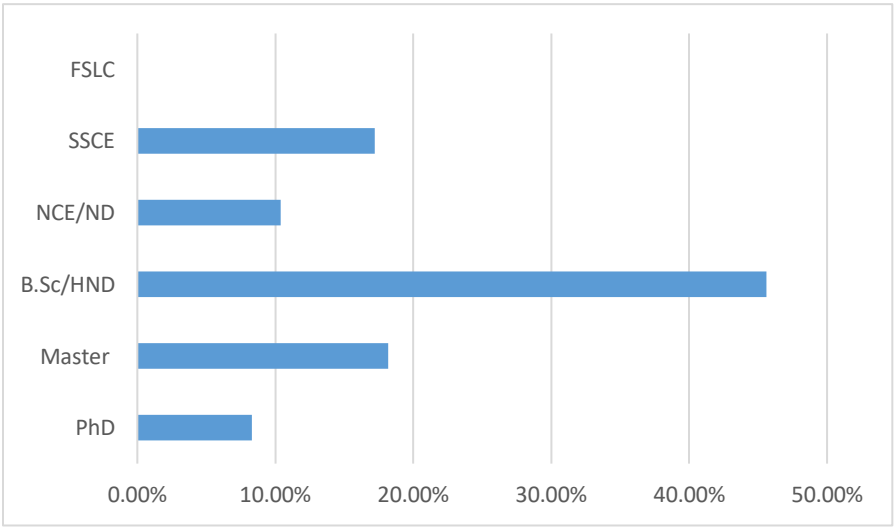

***FIG. 5**: Respondents educational qualification*
Source: Author's field work (2024)

Tangible service quality attribute of food sellers and customer satisfaction

To ascertain the satisfaction of customers on the tangible attribute of food vendor' service quality at the University of Calabar, table 4 reveals that 31% of customers were very dissatisfied

with the physical environment of food vendors at the University of Calabar, followed by 22.9% that were somewhat dissatisfied and 13.8% who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The table further revealed that 20.3% of the sample customers were very satisfied, while only 12% said they were a little bit satisfied. 6% of respondents were very satisfied with waiters' appearance, 12% each were somewhat satisfied and neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 35.9% were somewhat dissatisfied, while 34.1% were not pleased at all with waiters' appearance. Concerning the appearance of vendors' equipment at the service area, 36.5% were very dissatisfied with vendors' tableware, 38.5% were a bit dissatisfied and 7.6% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Only 8.9% and 8.6% were very satisfied and somewhat satisfied respectively. On the condition of food vendors' dining area, the table also revealed that 29.7% of customers were very dissatisfied, 39.1% were somewhat dissatisfied, 9.9% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 10.4% were somewhat satisfied and 10.9% were very satisfied with the dinning condition of food vendors in University of Calabar.

Table 4: perception of customers on tangible service quality of food vendors at the University of Calabar

	Item	Frequencies and percentages of responses					
		Very satisfied	**Somewhat satisfied**	**Neither satisfied or dissatisfied**	**Somewhat dissatisfied**	**Very dissatisfied**	**Total**
1	Clean environment	78(20.3%)	46(12.0%)	53(13.8%)	88(22.9%)	119(31.0%)	384(100%)
2	Appearance of waiter	23(6.0%)	46(12.0%)	46(12.0%)	138(35.9%)	131(34.1%)	384(100%)
3	Tableware appearance	34(8.9%)	33(8.6%)	29(7.6%)	148(38.5%)	140(36.5%)	384(100%)
4	Condition of dining tables and chairs	42(10.9%)	40(10.4%)	38(9.9%)	150(39.1%)	114(29.7%)	384(100%)
Total		177(11.5%)	165(10.7%)	166(10.8%)	524(34%)	504(33%)	1536(100%)

Source: Author's field work (2024)

Test of hypothesis

H_0: Tangible service quality attribute of food vendors has no significant effect on customer satisfaction at University of Calabar.

H_1: Tangible service quality attribute of food vendors has significant effect on customer satisfaction at University of Calabar.

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of food vendors' tangible service quality on customers' satisfaction by testing the null hypothesis. The data from table 4 was utilized for this analysis, with the results presented in tables 5, 6, and 7. This statistical approach aimed to determine the relationship between the quality of service provided by food vendors and the level of satisfaction experienced by customers. From the computation, table 5 indicates that there is a 6.2 percent correlation between the two variables, as shown in the R column. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.004) suggests that 0.4 percent of the variance in the

performance of food vendors can be explained by tangibility attribute of service quality when controlling for other variables. This is deemed statistically significant, implying that the model adequately approximates the population mean. However, the F-test (1.494, p>0.05) reveals that the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable is not statistically significant, as indicated in table 6.

The coefficients table 7 offers essential data regarding the ability of tangibility to predict customers' satisfaction of food vendors. This table provides valuable insights into the relationship between tangibility and customer satisfaction within the context of food vendors. It can be seen from the table that, tangibility has no significant effect on customers' satisfaction of food vendors with p>0.05 and t value of 1.222. The contribution of tangibility to the model is also demonstrated in table 4.9 through the standardized coefficient. Notably, the beta coefficient of 0.62 signifies a positive impact of tangibility on the model. The results of the regression model indicate that tangible service quality dimension of food vendors has no effect on customers' satisfaction at University of Calabar. Consequently, the null hypothesis is accepted and the alternative hypothesis in hereby rejected.

table 5: model summary for tangibility

Mode 1	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.062[a]	.004	.001	1.600

a. Predictors: (Constant), Tangibility

table 6: ANOVA table for tangibility

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.825	1	3.825	1.494	.222[b]
	Residual	977.735	382	2.560		
	Total	981.560	383			

a. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction
b. Predictors: (Constant), Tangibility

table 7: coefficients for tangibility

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.017	.431		4.685	.000
	Tangibility	.033	.027	.062	1.222	.222

a. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

Discussion of results

The study included 384 customers of food vendors at the University of Calabar who willingly participated in the research. They were customers who frequently patronize food vendors or those who have past experience of patronizing food vendor at the University of Calabar. The demographic profile analysis indicated that the gender distribution among respondents was not uniform, with males making up 55.7% and females accounting for 44.3% of the total sample. The most prevalent age group among those surveyed is between 18 and 30 years (48.2%), followed by 31-40 years (34.1%), 41-50 years (13.5%) and lastly 51 years and above (4.2%) respectively.

More so, the result of the study indicate that the highest number of respondents were students (54.7%), followed by business owners (15.1%), non-academic staff (13.0%), academic staff (9.4%) and applicants (4.2%). Only 2.3% and 1.3% respondents were civil servants and public servants respectively. From the result, we can also see that the highest number of responds are those with B.Sc. and HND certificate holders (45.6%). This is followed by those with Master degree (18.2%), SSCE (17.2%) NCE/ND (10.4%), Ph.D (8.3%) and FSLC being the least with (0.3%).

The study further revealed the findings of customers' satisfaction of food vendors' services based on tangibility. The results of the regression analysis show that tangible service quality attribute of food vendors has no significant effect on customer satisfaction. From the result, tangibility was found to be statistically insignificant ($p>0.05$), meaning that customer satisfaction is not influenced by physical evidence of food vendors in University of Calabar. The finding of this study is in consonant with the report of Balinado, et al. (2021), when they found out that tangible service quality has no significant effect on customer satisfaction (β: -0.20), indicating that customers have very little expectations in terms of facilities and personnel physical appearance. Thus, confirming the insignificant effect of such indicators as clean environment, waiter's appearance, tableware appearance and the condition of dining tables and chairs of food vendors on customer satisfaction at University of Calabar. Also, the results of Diminyi (2020) and Tefera and Governder (2017) were in consonance with the findings of this study. However, the report of Ali, et al (2021), Abiro, et al. (2019) and Abdullah et al. (2024) contradicts the findings of this study when they found out that business enterprises integrate physical elements of service quality to enhance their standing, ensure consistency and convey satisfaction to clients. This was reiterated by (Zygiaris, 2022; Kasim, 2021 and Eresia-Eke et al. 2020).

Conclusion and recommendations

Quality remains a critical factor in achieving high performance and gaining a competitive edge. Customers consistently seek quality, whether they are purchasing consumer products or receiving services (Mmutle & Shonhe, 2017). The findings of this research indicate that customers attribute significance to all elements of tangible service quality, including a clean environment, the appearance of wait staff, the condition of tableware, and the state of dining tables and chairs. Customers have elevated expectations regarding these key characteristics of the physical evidence provided by food vendors. Therefore, it is essential for food vendors to establish service standards that enhance all aspects of physical evidence for their customers. Understanding customers' perceptions of service quality and effectively measuring it can yield significant benefits for food vendors, as it fosters the achievement and maintenance of services that encourage repeat patronage. Therefore, it is crucial for food vendors to pay close attention to customer expectations when delivering services, as meeting these expectations can lead to repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth referrals for the establishment.

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