BRAND SWITCHING COSTS AND CUSTOMER RETENTION IN FOOD SERVICE OPERATIONS: PRICING AND INCONVENIENCE SWITCHING INCIDENTS PERSPECTIVES.

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Abstract
This study sought to determine the influence of pricing and inconvenience as incidents of switching costs on customer retention in food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis Abia State. This research uses a descriptive survey research in which two specific objectives and two research hypotheses guided the study. The researchers purposively used 300 customers of six reputable food service establishments in the study area as sample size. The research instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire on a 4-point scale which was subjected to reliability test that produced a reliability co-efficient of 0.79 proving the usability of the instrument. Accessibility sampling technique was used in the administration of the instrument. Descriptive and inferential statistics on SPSS version 24 were used to analyze the data generated. Findings revealed that, the independent variables, (pricing and inconvenience) as incidents of switching costs significantly influence customer retention in the study area as indicated by their respective adjusted R square and F values significant at p=0.000F; pricing = 0.727, 2.052 and inconvenience = 0.622, 0.565. Based on the findings, it was concluded that pricing and inconvenience as incidents of switching costs can significantly influence customer retention in the study area. On the strength of the findings, it is recommended that operators of food service establishments are to ensure that there is a continuous and holistic improvement in quality service delivery that raises customer value and switching costs while improving customer-brand relationship.
Keywords: Food, Service, pricing, inconvenience, switching costs, incidents, customer, retention.

Introduction
Creating, increasing, and sustaining customer commitment for a brand are central to many corporate strategies because acquiring new customers is costly and customer retention is connected to long-term profitability. Business establishments employ strategies that tend to incur some sort of high cost in order to dissuade customers from switching over to a rival brand. Hence, brand switching has become a topical issue in the business world over the years as it has greatly impacted business performance. The extent to which the customers are inclined to switch brands has become a key factor influencing the market trends in the business world and particularly in food service operations. Services are experiential in nature implying that customers may also face a considerable risk in switching to an alternative

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service provider because service itself cannot be evaluated before actual purchase.

One consequence of brand switching especially switching by high margin customers is the loss of revenue (Czajkowski and Sobolewski, 2013, Chang, Liu, and Chen, 2013), coupled with shrinking market share. It is often difficult to acquire new customers and even more difficult to retain the newly acquired customers as both operating and marketing costs must be incurred. Switching costs provide a unique and valid theoretical window into the mechanisms of consumer decision-making process as well as account for the behaviors of dissatisfied customers who still decide to patronize the same product or service. Therefore, switching costs provide a new research paradigm for consumer behavior studies, which are currently dominated by benefit-based articulations (Whitten and Wakfield, 2006). The significance of switching costs emerges out of the recognition that even satisfied customers will still change products/services and demonstrate disloyal intentions and behaviors at some point (Azize and Hakan, 2013).

In food service operations, the level and intensity of competition particularly with the launch of new menu offerings and services tend to benefit consumers and even attract new consumers to switch to the brand that has launched the products not just by switching costs. Costs relating to brand switching need to be considered in order to understand and situate them properly. Switching costs are some of the factors that contribute to maintaining relationships with customers (El-Manstrly, 2016) and it is an important strategy that is used to lock customers from moving to other service providers (Ngo, Phan, Nguyen, and Vu, 2019). Caruana (2003) argued that customer commitment comes from emotional involvement represented by switching costs. Switching costs will not be incurred should customers remain loyal but must be borne by the customer should he switch. Therefore, switching costs are seen as the driving factors that motivate customers to stick to one product or service choice.

The consumer's consideration when switching to another product is the implication of the cost or risk that will be received (Temerak and El-Manstryly, 2019; Amana, Handoko, Hafas, Hermansyur, and Harahap, 2021). Thus, we can say that switching costs are costs incurred by a consumer as a result of changing brands, suppliers, or products among others. While there is a broad agreement on what switching costs are, the constituents of switching costs are less definite. Although most prevalent switching costs are monetary in nature, there are also psychological, real or perceived, effort-based, and time-based switching costs.

Over the years researchers have developed different models in an attempt to identify and classify switching costs. Klempere (1987) cited in Azize and Hakan, (2013) argued that prior to an actual purchase, switching costs seem to be nonexistent but after a purchase is made, there appear to be hidden costs that are either imposed directly by the firms or indirectly by the very nature of the product purchased. The author classified the costs into three:

transaction costs that occur when starting a new relationship with a new provider as well as the cost of terminating existing relationship; learning costs that represent the effort required by the customer to reach the same level of comfort of knowledge acquired by using a product but which may not be transferable to other brands of the same product; and contractual costs are directly firm-induced in order to penalize switching by customers such as repeat-purchase discounts or rewards, frequent flyer programs among others.

In some cases, customers (corporate) sign some kind of undertaking to remain loyal for certain period of time or pay exit penalty. Besides these explicit costs, there are also implicit switching costs that have psychological and emotional coloration. For instance, when service performance is less than satisfactory, a psychological exit barrier might prevent the customer from switching on account of social bonds, personal rapport and trust developed with the service provider over time. The customer will want to avoid the accompanying psychological and emotional stress and the risk and uncertainty that the termination of current relationship could bring.

Similarly, Wong, Chang, and Yeh (2019) classified switching costs into three: (i) procedural switching costs related to time – economic risk costs (costs of the risk of uncertainty that arise when receiving new products/services), evaluation costs (costs of effort and time to seek information), learning costs (costs of effort and time to learn skills and knowledge to use the new product), set-up costs (costs of effort and time required to initiate a relationship with new product/service); (ii) financial switching costs related to monetary gain – benefit/loss costs (cost of a contractual bond that creates more value to stay afloat), monetary loss costs (costs of switching to a new provider); and (iii) relational switching costs related to emotional factors – personal relational loss costs (consumer emotional loss when having to break the relationship), brand relationship loss costs (consumer emotional loss when he/she has to break the relationship with brand identification that has been done so far). However, researchers maintain that if switching costs are deemed so high, the tendency to switch will not arise instead consumers will use an alternative deemed to have low switching costs as high switching costs retain customers from changing brand relationships (Azize and Hakan, 2013; Temerak and El-Manstryly, 2019).

From the foregoing therefore, it can be concluded that switching costs are multi-dimensional and encompass a combination of the costs of various psychological, physical and economic factors involved in changing a supplier or service provider.

Literature Review on Brand Switching Cost

A review of literature suggests that higher switching costs are positively related to customer loyalty (Ping 1993; 1997; cited in Caruana, 2003). Jones and Sasser (1995) mentioned switching costs as one factor that determines the competitiveness of the market since high switching costs discourage changing from a current service provider thereby yielding less

incentive for firms actively to compete. As customer satisfaction is strongly linked to impressions of performance, satisfaction and switching costs are assumed to be the most important antecedents of repurchase behavior or the intention to repurchase a product or service. Researchers maintain that switching costs interact with satisfaction to influence loyalty (Caruana, 2003; Azize and Hakan, 2013; Temerak and El-Manstryly, 2019). Thus, high switching costs can as well influence customer retention since customer loyalty relates to customer retention as disloyal customers are hardly retained.

Customer retention is a link between customer loyalty and profitability, which is a form of loyalty related to consumer buying behavior as indicated by the high frequency of a consumer buying a product/service. Customers behave to defend certain brands, either because of price or brand image (Huarng and Yu, 2020). Heesup, Shim, Lee, and Kim (2019) defined customer retention as the process of creating loyalty by fostering good relationships with customers. The purpose of marketing is to prevent customers from moving to other competitors (Larsson and Brostrom, 2019), which is a form of the future tendency of customers to remain loyal to the brand (Kim, 2019) and this very much means keeping the customers satisfied, loyal, and retained.

Baumann, Hoadley, Hamin, and Nugraha (2017) argued that some of the key factors having impact on brand switching in the service industry are service quality (service adequacy and value perception), proactive approach of service providers to minimize switching, and various patterns of behavior exhibited by the customers. In food service operations, the birth of new brands or outfits with perceived new and diverse menu offerings might influence brand switching particularly for hedonic and variety seeking consumers.

To gain a competitive edge, the incumbent firms focus on service improvement as a means to enhance customer value (Chen, Hsu, and Lu, 2018). Keaveney (1995) formulated a model with eight switching incidents in an attempt to explain brand switching: pricing (price increase, unfair pricing practices); inconvenience (location, waiting time/hours); core service failures (billing errors, service catastrophes); service encounter failures (uncaring, impolite, unresponsive and unknowledgeable staff); employee response to service failures (reluctant response, failure to respond); attraction by competitors (consumers' positive responses related to the service provider they switched to); ethical problems (dishonest behavior, intimidating behavior, unsafe practices or conflict of interest) and involuntary switching, besides other seldom mentioned incidents (such as customer having shifted locations or service provider having changed alliance). Out of the eight switching incidents, only pricing and inconvenience are used in this present study to mediate the relationship between switching costs and customer retention.

Pricing relates to the various costs associated with brand switching such as transaction costs (costs that are associated with each switch a consumer makes between identical products or services) and learning costs

(costs that are associated with how to use a new product or service incurred when a consumer switch to a new supplier). Brand switching costs have important strategic implications for firms that compete aggressively to gain market share before consumers attach themselves to suppliers. Switching costs may influence consumer behavior by increasing loyalty and making it difficult for the consumers to switch, while reducing switching costs for potential customers may make it easier to acquire new customers. Moreover, switching costs can create a barrier to entry for new supplying firms (Klemperer, 1987 cited in Gunjan and Surinder, 2019).

Inconvenience refers to the degree to which a customer perceives a product or service to be complicated to understand or use (Burnham, Frels and Mahajian, 2003). When a product or service has a variety of functions or is difficult to understand, it is simply viewed as being complicated. Inconvenience might make customers most likely think that switching costs are high. Additionally, when products or services are perceived as more complex, customers rely more on the relationship with the brand and people to guarantee that they receive a quality product or service and to simplify their choices (Burnham, *et al.,* 2003). In food service operations for instance, the inability of consumers to understand and interpret menu terms might be viewed as inconvenience.

Studies have been carried out in different sectors and industries of the world to determine the influence of switching costs on varied factors or variables (including switching incidents) such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, brand association, brand advocacy, customer retention, brand trust and repurchase intention (Caruana, 2003; Czajkowski and Sobolewski, 2013; Chang, *et. al.*, 2013; Temerak and El-Manstryly, 2019; Heesup, *et. al.*, 2019; Ngo, *et. al.*, 2019). For instance, Azize and Hakan (2013) carried out a study to determine the role of switching costs on satisfaction-trust-commitment chain in Istanbul Turkey in which 457 customers served as respondents. Results revealed that switching costs have moderating effect on satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Similarly, Amana, et al., (2021) explored the influence of switching costs and brand trust on customer retention in which 120 Postgraduate students served as respondents in Egypt. Results revealed that switching costs and brand trust affect customer retention partially and simultaneously.

The intensity of competition in food service market means that operators of food service establishments must place high premium on increasing switching costs through quality service delivery that meets the needs and aspirations of customers thereby developing a long-lasting relationship. Observations have shown however that customers of food service establishments in the study area are seemingly savvy, sophisticated, largely choosy and hedonic in their choice of food service outfit. With increased competition among food service establishments and the growing health consciousness of consumers coupled with the need to be more conscious of the quality of service received in view of the avalanche of

attractive, tempting and strikingly similar menu alternatives the food service market can offer, it has become very imperative for food service operators to put a tab on switching costs to dissuade consumers from defecting. Findings indicate that switching costs can impact customer retention (Larsson and Brostrom, 2019; Kim, 2019; Amana, *et. al.*, 2021). The authors also noted that operators of food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis might be ignorant of the influencing role of switching costs in achieving customer retention. The current paper draws from this gap in the literature as not much has been done empirically on the topic area.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to determine the influence of pricing and inconvenience as incidents of switching costs on customer retention among customers of food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis. Specifically, the study sought to determine:

i. The influence of pricing as an incident of switching costs on customer retention in the study area;
ii. The influence of inconvenience as an incident of switching costs on customer retention in the study area;

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses guided the study:

H_{01}: Pricing as an incident of switching costs does not significantly influence customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

H_{02}: Inconvenience as an incident of switching costs has no significant influence on customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

Methodology

Design for the Study

The study adopted a quantitative research design (descriptive survey) because it helps to study people's attitudes, motivation and characteristics. This research design was considered suitable on account of having been used successfully in previous related studies: Temerak and El-Manstryly, (2019); Heesup, *et. al.*, (2019); Ngo, *et. al.*, (2019); and Amana, *et. al.*, (2021).

Area of Study

The study was carried out in Umuahia the capital of Abia State and it is located in the Southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria. Umuahia consists of Umuahia North (the location of the study) and Umuahia South. Umuahia North Local Government Area is located within Latitude 5° 20′ and 30^0 N, of the Equator and Longitude 7° 40′, and 7° 50′ E of the Greenwich meridian. Notable food service establishments operate in Umuahia such as De Choice,

Crunchies, Apples, Jovit, Chicken Republic, Roots and Kilimanjaro. However, the geographical scope of this study was limited to Umuahia metropolis as only food service establishments in operation within this area were used for the study.

Population for the Study

The population for this study included all customers of food service establishments in Umuahia metropolis of Abia State who visited these establishments during the period of this study (August and September 2021).

Sample for the Study

The researchers purposively used 300 dinners drawn from different food service establishments in Umuahia as the sample size. The breakdown of the establishments and the numbers of the research instrument administered are presented as follows; Crunchies (50), De Choice (50), Roots (50), Kilimanjaro (50), Jovit (50), and Chicken Republic (50).

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was 14 itemed questionnaire which had two sections. Section A sought to collect biodata of the respondents, while section B contained measurements of variables for the study. The incidents of switching costs; pricing had 8 items while inconvenience had 6 items. On each of the items, the respondents were requested to indicate their opinion on a four-point scale of Strongly Agree (4 point), Agree (3 point), Disagreed (2 point), and Strongly Disagreed (1 point). The instrument was subjected to Cronbach Alpha reliability test and a reliability coefficient of 0.79 was obtained confirming the internal consistency of the instrument.

Data Collection Technique

The administration of the instrument was based on observed customer at the selected food service establishments and accessibility sampling technique was used. Thus, only accessible customers were used for the study. This was achieved through the help of three research assistants (RAs). These RAs were trained on how to collect the data. All the copies of the instrument administered were retrieved on the spot. However, only 281 copies of the instrument were found usable for the study representing 93.7% of the total number administered.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and parametric inferential statistics on SPSS version 24.

Findings and Discussions

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pricing as an Incident of Switching Cost on Customer Retention in the Study Area.

ITEMS	SD	D	A	SA	Total	Mean	Remark
1.Consumers are loyal because of price rate	21	61	112	87	281	2.94	Accepted
2. Price creates commitment in the minds of consumers.	23	63	125	70	281	2.86	Accepted
3. Strategies of pricing make the consumers to be loyal.	16	15	52	198	281	3.54	Accepted
4. High switching costs discourage changing from a current provider, thereby yielding less incentive for firms actively to compete	36	126	27	92	281	2.62	Accepted
5. Word of publicity and repetitive purchase pave way for better pricing incentives to consumers.	38	48	107	88	281	2.87	Accepted
6. Pricing helps the customer to achieve the equal stage of comfort of familiarity acquired of using an item for consumption but which may not be transferable to additional brands of the same product	36	76	96	73	281	2.73	Accepted
7. Price reflects the facilities on ground	30	61	79	111	281	2.96	Accepted

8. Prices increases switching cost (defection)	0	87	105	89	281	3.01	Accepted
Grand Mean						2.94	Agreed

Field Survey, 2021
Criterion 2.50

Table 1 shows that the respondents agreed on all the items concerning how pricing as an incident of switching cost can influence customer retention in the study area as all met the mean score benchmark of 2.50. The grand mean of 2.94 which is also above the mean score benchmark indicates that respondents agreed with the above listed interactions between pricing as an incident of switching costs and customer retention in the study area.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Inconvenience as an Incident of Switching Costs on Customer Retention in the Study Area.

Variable	SD	D	A	SA	Total	Mean	Remark
1.It takes time to go through the steps of switching to a new service provider	29	55	90	107	281	2.98	Accepted
2. Switching service provider involves an unpleasant sales process	24	78	79	100	281	2.91	Accepted
3. There are a lot of formalities involved in switching to a new service provider	13	23	81	164	281	3.41	Accepted
4. The process of starting up with a new service provider is quick/easy	44	60	78	99	281	2.83	Accepted
5. Switching to a new service would mean losing or replacing points, services, and so on that I have accumulated with my current service	8	25	41	207	281	3.59	Accepted
6. I will lose benefits of being a long-term customer if I leave my service provider.	48	101	80	52	281	2.48	Rejected

Grand Mean	**3.03**	**Agreed**

Field Survey, 2021
Criterion 2.50

Table 2 shows that the respondents agreed on 5 items concerning how inconvenience as an incident of switching cost can influence customer retention in the study area as all met the mean score benchmark of 2.50. However, the respondents disagreed on item 6 as it recorded a mean score of 2.48, meaning that 50.4 % of the respondents did not agree that they will lose benefits of being long-term customers if they leave their service provider. Thus item 6 was rejected. The grand mean of 3.03 which is also above the mean score benchmark indicates that majority of the respondents agreed with the above listed interactions between inconvenience as an incident of switching costs and customer retention in the study area.

Inferential Statistics and Hypothesis Testing

H_{01}: Pricing as an incident of switching cost does not significantly influence customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.083[a]	.727	.624	78.3765	2.052	.051[b]

a. Predictors: (Constant), Pricing

Table 3 shows the results of regression analysis conducted with customer retention as the dependent variable and pricing as an incident of switching cost as the independent variable. The adjusted R square is 0.727 implying that 72.7% of customer retention is explained by pricing as an incident of switching costs. The F value of 2.052 which is significant at p=0.000 indicates that the variable explained the 72.7% of the pricing relationship with customer retention at the 1% significant level. As a result of this finding, the null Hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted which states that pricing as an incident of switching cost significantly influences customer retention in the study area. This is in line with the findings of Bernama, (2010) who reported that an increase in price affects customer retention particularly when the price increase is not justifiable and does not congruent service quality.

Price is a sensitive promo tool that is hardly used to gain competitive advantage since consumers are price sensitive and expect price to reflect product/service quality (product-price dichotomy). Consumers as economic

beings place high premium on customer value and will be favorably disposed to sticking to a brand with high switching cost since such brands meet their needs and expectations. Benny (2016) posited that price either negative or positive impacts brand loyalty and by extension customer retention. Bloemer, Hillebrand, and Joorten (2017) identified price as one of the determinants of dinning satisfaction and post-dinning behavioral intentions, and such post-dinning behavioral intentions might influence brand loyalty or customer retention.

H_{02}: Inconvenience as an incident of switching cost has no significant influence on customer retention among customers of food service establishments in the study area.

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.643[a]	.622	.528	78.5715	0.565	.003[b]

a. Predictors: (Constant), Inconvenience

Table 4 shows the results of regression analysis conducted with customer retention as the dependent variable and inconvenience as an incident of switching cost as the independent variable. The adjusted R square is 0.622 implying that 62.2% of customer retention is explained by inconvenience as an incident of switching cost. The F value of 0.565 which is significant at p=0.000 indicates that the variable explained the 62.2% of the inconvenience relationship with customer retention at the 1% significant level. As a result of this finding, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted which states that inconvenience as an incident of switching cost significantly influences customer retention in the study area.

This result is not contrary to findings obtained by Baumann, *et. al.*, (2017), Temerak and El-Manstrly, (2019), and Amana, *et. al.*, (2021). According to Andaleeb and Carolyn (2006), customer retention is dependent on the extent to which the customer is satisfied with the product or service. Consumers who are involved with a product/service are said to have a narrow latitude acceptance, thus are unlikely to be persuaded to switch. This follows that the establishments with high switching costs get their customers involved with the product/service thereby building long-term customer-brand relationship leading to customer retention.

Further to this, operators of food service establishments should be wary of the fact that high perceived risk in terms of inconvenience indicates that consumers are concerned with losses resulting from their purchases, which leads to avoidance tendencies and behavior (commitment to a brand and repeat purchase behaviors) as consumers are more often motivated to avoid mistakes (losses) than to maximize utility in purchases. This means that

once the avoidance tendency is developed on account of high perceived risk by the consumer, then it becomes difficult to retain such consumer.

Conclusion

In view of the findings of the study, it is concluded that pricing and inconvenience as incidents of switching cost can significantly influence customer retention in food service establishments in the study area. Operators of food service establishments must ensure that the quality of their menu offerings increases the switching cost in terms of meeting the expectations of consumers capable of eliminating the avoidance tendencies and facilitate customer retention. Operators of food service establishments must ensure that there is continuous and holistic improvement in all facets of their operations to enhance customer value and reduce perceived risk regarding their operations since consumers act as they perceive. It is therefore suggested that future researchers should carry out further studies in other food service systems (e.g hotels,) to determine the influence of other incidents of switching cost on customer retention in different locations while using different methodologies. In conclusion, pricing and inconvenience as incidents of switching cost should be seen as critical factors in achieving customer retention in food service establishments.

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