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TASTE UNIQUENESS AND BRAND LOYALTY IN FAST FOOD INDUSTRY IN OWERRI, IMO STATE.

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State. The research was motivated by the increasing competition in the industry and the need to understand the factors influencing brand loyalty. The work used survey research design. Data were collected from 200 respondents using a structured questionnaire, and Pearson correlation analysis was employed to test the hypothesis. The findings revealed a strong and significant positive relationship (r = 0.93) between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty, indicating that customers are more likely to remain loyal to brands offering distinctive and consistently appealing flavors. The study underscores the importance of taste uniqueness as a key driver of customer satisfaction and loyalty in the fast-food sector. Recommendations were made for fast-food businesses to invest in culinary innovation, maintain consistent quality, leverage customer feedback, and adapt to local taste preferences. These efforts will not only enhance brand loyalty but also provide a competitive edge in a highly saturated market. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the role of sensory attributes in consumer behavior and offer actionable insights for operators in the fast-food industry.
Keywords: Taste uniqueness, Brand loyalty, Fast food industry, Customer satisfaction
Brand differentiation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fast-food industry has become a significant contributor to economic growth globally, providing convenience and variety to consumers. In Nigeria, particularly in urban centers like Owerri, Imo State, the fast-food sector has seen remarkable growth due to changing lifestyles, urbanization, and a growing middle class (Adewale et al., 2021). Among the factors driving consumer preferences in this industry, taste uniqueness plays a critical role. Taste uniqueness refers to the distinct flavors and culinary styles that differentiate one brand from another, influencing customer satisfaction and retention.

The fast-food industry has become a significant sector in the global economy, providing convenience and affordability to millions of consumers daily (Fraser et al., 2020). In Nigeria, particularly in Owerri, Imo State, the industry continues to experience rapid growth, driven by factors such as urbanization, an expanding middle class, and changing consumer lifestyles (Ogundele, 2018). Fast food restaurants are no longer merely places to eat but have evolved into hubs of social interaction, entertainment, and cultural expression (Nwokoye et al., 2021). Among the various factors driving customer preference and patronage, taste uniqueness has emerged as a critical determinant of brand loyalty.

Taste is a multifaceted sensory experience that significantly influences consumer choices in the food industry. It encompasses flavor, texture, aroma, and the overall satisfaction derived from a meal (Spence et al., 2019). In the highly competitive fast-food sector, brands that consistently deliver unique and appealing tastes are more likely to build a loyal customer base (Khan et al., 2020). Brand loyalty, in turn, is a cornerstone for the

long-term success of businesses, as it fosters repeat patronage, positive word-of-mouth, and sustained revenue growth (Oliver, 1999). Understanding the interplay between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty is therefore vital for fast food operators seeking to establish and maintain a competitive edge in the industry.

Brand loyalty, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which customers consistently choose one brand over others despite competitive offerings and marketing efforts from rivals (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It is a reflection of customer commitment to a brand, often driven by satisfaction, trust, and emotional connections built over time (Oliver, 1999). In the fast-food sector, achieving brand loyalty is essential for maintaining a competitive edge, as consumers are frequently presented with numerous alternatives that offer similar convenience and pricing (Kim et al., 2019).

The interplay between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty has become a critical area of study, given its implications for marketing strategies and customer relationship management. Research suggests that taste, being a primary sensory attribute of food, has a profound impact on customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty (Spence et al., 2019). For fast food brands, developing and consistently delivering a unique and appealing taste can differentiate them in a saturated market and foster a sense of exclusivity and preference among consumers (Khan et al., 2020). Furthermore, taste uniqueness is often associated with a brand's identity, creating a recognizable sensory experience that customers associate with quality and consistency (Tian et al., 2020).Therefore, this study seeks to examines the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State, highlighting how distinctive taste profiles influence consumer preferences, foster brand loyalty, and drive competitive advantage in a rapidly growing urban market.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid growth of the fast-food industry in Owerri, many brands face challenges in retaining customers. High competition, changing consumer preferences, and high employee turnover have made it difficult for businesses to maintain consistent patronage. While studies have highlighted price, convenience, and service quality as factors influencing customer loyalty, the role of taste uniqueness remains underexplored in the context of Owerri's fast-food industry. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining how taste uniqueness influences brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri. Understanding this relationship is crucial for businesses aiming to differentiate themselves and build a loyal customer base.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the level of brand loyalty among customers of fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State.
2. To examine the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the level of brand loyalty among customers in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State?
2. What is the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State?

Research Hypotheses

The study will test the following hypotheses:

- **H_0:** There is no significant relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State.
- **H_1:** There is a significant relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State.

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Significance of the Study

The findings of this study would offer valuable insights into how taste uniqueness can be strategically leveraged to attract and retain customers in the fast-food industry. This study would also aid marketers in developing targeted strategies to build and sustain brand loyalty, contributing to the growing body of literature on consumer behavior and brand loyalty, particularly within the Nigerian context. Additionally, it would provide practical recommendations for fostering a conducive environment for the growth and success of the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

The Fast-Food Industry in Nigeria

The fast-food industry in Nigeria has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven by factors such as urbanization, changing lifestyles, and a growing middle class (Adewale et al., 2021). With over 52% of Nigerians living in urban areas as of 2023 (World Bank, 2023), the demand for quick and accessible meals has risen sharply. The growing middle class, with a preference for Western dining experiences and modernized food outlets, has further fueled this trend (Euromonitor International, 2022). Additionally, Nigeria's youthful population where over 60% of the populace is below 30has embraced fast food due to its convenience and modern appeal (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Research by Ogundele (2018) stated Nigeria's fast-food market is dominated by local brands such as Mr. Bigg's, Chicken Republic, and Tantalizers, which have established a strong presence by blending local flavors with global standards. International brands like KFC and Domino's Pizza have also penetrated the market, capitalizing on the increasing demand for international cuisines (PwC Nigeria, 2022). Therefore, fast food establishments in the region are no longer simply places to eat but have evolved into social hubs where customers interact, relax, and enjoy cultural experiences (Nwokoye et al., 2021).

Many fast-food outlets incorporate traditional meals like jollof rice, pounded yam, and suya into their menus, ensuring cultural relevance (Ajayi &Oke, 2022). Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has transformed consumer interactions with fast-food outlets, with online delivery services like Jumia Foods and Bolt Food gaining traction (Statista, 2023).Online food delivery platforms and digital payment systems have enhanced convenience, attracting tech-savvy consumers. Mobile apps and social media marketing have further bolstered brand visibility, particularly among urban dwellers (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2021).While the fast-food industry in Nigeria is growing, it faces significant challenges such as economic volatility, including inflation and fluctuating exchange rates, affects the cost of imported ingredients and equipment (IMF, 2023). Additionally, poor infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity supply, increases operational costs. Public health concerns, including obesity and food safety issues, also pose threats to the industry (WHO, 2023).However, sustainable practices, such as reducing plastic waste and adopting eco-friendly packaging, are likely to gain prominence as environmental awareness grows (UNEP, 2023).

Concept of Taste Uniqueness

Taste uniqueness refers to the distinctive flavors, ingredients, and culinary styles that set one food brand apart from others, making it a critical factor in consumer decision-making. It goes beyond just the basic flavor profile, incorporating elements such as texture, aroma, and appearance to create a holistic sensory experience (Spence et al., 2019). In the fast-food industry, where many offerings may appear similar on the surface, it is the unique taste that can be the differentiating factor that draws customers in and fosters loyalty (Tian et al., 2020).

Brands that are able to blend international fast food with local culinary influences often create an experience that resonates with customers and fosters a deeper emotional connection. For instance, Nigerian fast-food brands like Mr. Biggs and Tantalizers have capitalized on incorporating Nigerian flavors, such as spicy seasonings and locally popular dishes, into their menus, thereby differentiating themselves from international brands like KFC and McDonald's (Adebayo & Adebayo, 2018). Brands that successfully offer a unique taste profile often

create memorable experiences for consumers, which leads to repeat visits and long-term loyalty (Khan et al., 2020). This is particularly evident in Owerri, Imo State, where local fast-food businesses that incorporate traditional Nigerian flavors into their offerings have a competitive edge. For example, Bukka Hut, a fast-food restaurant chain in Nigeria, has attracted a loyal customer base by serving a unique fusion of Nigerian dishes such as jollof rice, pounded yam, and suya alongside more traditional fast-food offerings like burgers and fried chicken (Ogundele, 2018). Moreso, consumers are often attracted to brands that offer distinctive and memorable taste experiences that set them apart from competitors (Tian et al., 2020). A unique taste profile can help a fast-food brand develop a loyal customer base, as consumers tend to return to brands that consistently meet or exceed their taste expectations (Khan et al., 2020).

The Concept of Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to the extent to which consumers consistently choose one brand over others, even when alternatives are readily available. It represents a psychological commitment that stems from a series of positive experiences, which result in trust, satisfaction, and emotional connections built over time (Aaker, 1991; Oliver, 1999). In the fast-food industry, brand loyalty is vital for long-term business success because loyal customers not only make repeat purchases but also contribute to positive word-of-mouth, acting as ambassadors who recommend the brand to others (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Research by Iyiola (2020) suggests that consumers increasingly value the overall dining experience, including product quality and the emotional connection they feel toward a brand. As a result, brands must find ways to foster loyalty by creating an emotional bond with their customers, making taste uniqueness a critical factor for success. According to Nwachukwu and Ogbu (2018), consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that they perceive as having a culturally relevant or personalized touch. For instance, fast food outlets that integrate local flavors or cater to local dining habits can generate an emotional connection with consumers, making them more likely to return to the brand consistently.

In the fast-food sector, the factors influencing brand loyalty can be categorized into product-related elements such as taste, quality, and consistency, as well as non-product-related elements such as customer service, ambiance, and price (Okpara, 2017). Studies have shown that brands that consistently deliver unique and pleasing tastes are more likely to build strong, long-term relationships with their customers (Adegoke, 2019; Spence et al., 2019). As Adegoke (2019) observes, many Nigerian fast-food chains focus on tailoring their products to local tastes and preferences, thus fostering a deeper connection with their customers. The uniqueness of these tastes, whether through locally inspired dishes or distinct flavor profiles, becomes a critical driver of customer loyalty.

The Relationship Between Taste Uniqueness and Brand Loyalty

Taste is a primary sensory attribute influencing consumer preferences, and its impact on brand loyalty has been extensively recognized in marketing research (Khan et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2019). The ability of a brand to consistently offer a unique and appealing taste often translates into the establishment of a loyal customer base. This is because consumers tend to associate such brands with quality, satisfaction, and a reliable dining experience (Tian et al., 2020). In a competitive market, where taste preferences vary widely, the uniqueness of taste can serve as a critical differentiating factor, setting a brand apart from its competitors.

The relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty operates through various psychological and emotional mechanisms. When consumers encounter a distinctive and enjoyable taste, it activates positive emotional responses and reinforces favorable perceptions of the brand (Keller, 2013). These emotional responses often extend beyond satisfaction, evolving into deeper emotional attachments that lead to habitual patronage. Moreover, the distinctiveness of taste contributes to a sense of identity and exclusivity among consumers. This exclusivity can foster a sense of belonging, where customers perceive themselves as part of a special group that shares a preference for the brand's unique offerings (Spence et al., 2019).

Khan et al. (2020) noted, consumers value reliability in their dining experiences, particularly in the fast-food industry. A consistent taste ensures that customers can trust the brand to meet their expectations during every visit. This trust builds a sense of reliability, strengthening the emotional bond between the customer and the brand (Oliver, 1999). A unique taste enhances the brand's memorability, increasing its salience in the minds of consumers (Tian et al., 2020). When faced with multiple options, consumers are more likely to recall and prefer brands that have left a distinct impression through their unique taste. This phenomenon, often referred to as brand recall, influences purchasing decisions by positioning the brand as a top choice within its category (Spence et al., 2019). Furthermore, unique tastes often evoke sensory nostalgia, which is a powerful tool for fostering brand loyalty. Sensory nostalgia occurs when a specific taste triggers fond memories or emotional connections to past experiences. This nostalgic connection deepens the emotional attachment to the brand, further reinforcing loyalty. For instance, fast-food brands that incorporate traditional flavors or culturally significant recipes may create a sense of familiarity and comfort for their customers, thereby enhancing brand allegiance (Keller, 2013).

In the work of Keller, (2013), the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty can be influenced by demographic and cultural factors. Younger consumers, for example, tend to seek novel and adventurous tastes, associating such experiences with innovation and modernity. On the other hand, older consumers might favor brands that offer consistent and familiar tastes, emphasizing tradition and reliability (Adegoke, 2019). Cultural preferences similarly play a role, as brands that tailor their unique tastes to local flavors are more likely to resonate with regional markets and foster loyalty among specific consumer groups (Spence et al., 2019). According to Tian et al., (2020), brands that successfully leverage their taste uniqueness in marketing and communication strategies are better positioned to cultivate loyalty. By highlighting the exclusivity and distinctiveness of their tastes in advertising campaigns, brands can appeal to the aspirational and experiential desires of consumers. Additionally, storytelling that emphasizes the craftsmanship, heritage, or innovation behind the creation of unique tastes adds to the perceived value of the brand, enhancing its overall appeal and loyalty potential (Khan et al., 2020).

Empirical Studies

Magbanua et al. (2023) explored the Fast-Food Industry: Brand Association and Perceived Quality Influence on Purchase Intention of Millennial Consumers. The study involved 385 participants who completed an online survey, with data analyzed using descriptive statistics, PLS-SEM, WARP PLS Version 7.0, and SPSS Version 20. The results highlighted that service quality was the most critical factor influencing consumer behavior. Respondents emphasized that positive treatment by employees in fast food restaurants was essential for their repeat patronage. Although brand association was less impactful compared to service quality, it still played a role in shaping purchase intentions by increasing awareness about new entrants in the fast-food sector in the Philippines.

Achmadi et al. (2023) investigated the Increase in Brand Loyalty Through Customer Satisfaction at Restaurants by examining the effects of product and service quality on brand loyalty at Bakso Lapangan Tembak Restaurant, a popular eatery in Jakarta and its environs. Using a sample of 261 customers, the study employed a questionnaire-based survey, and data was analyzed using SEM-PLS with Smart PLS software. The findings demonstrated that customer satisfaction and service quality had a direct and significant impact on brand loyalty, as satisfied customers and superior service encouraged repeat patronage. However, product quality did not have a direct effect on brand loyalty. Instead, its impact was mediated through customer satisfaction, highlighting the interplay between product quality and customer loyalty via satisfaction.

Sun (2023) evaluated the Antecedents of Restaurant Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty, with a focus on the moderating role of food healthiness. The study applied the DINESERV framework to Shake Shack, assessing six sub-dimensions: taste, healthiness, employee service, price fairness, ambience, and convenience. Data was

collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk, resulting in 353 valid responses. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed for hypothesis testing, while the Hayes Process Macro Model 1 tested the moderating effect of food healthiness. Results indicated that brand trust was positively associated with taste, employee service, and ambience ($p < 0.05$), while brand loyalty was positively linked to taste, healthiness, price fairness, ambience, and brand trust ($p < 0.05$). Notably, food healthiness negatively moderated the relationship between taste and brand loyalty ($p < 0.05$). Convenience, however, was found to have no significant effect on either brand trust or brand loyalty.

Kumar et al. (2023) analyzed the Role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives in Building Customer Trust in the Restaurant Industry. The study surveyed 400 participants across multiple cities in India, focusing on how restaurants' involvement in CSR activities influenced customer perceptions. The findings revealed that CSR initiatives related to environmental sustainability and community support enhanced customer trust and brand loyalty. The study highlighted those ethical practices and transparency about sourcing ingredients positively influenced repeat patronage.

Johnson and Patel (2023) examined The Influence of Service Recovery on Customer Retention in Fast Food Chains. This study surveyed 200 customers who had experienced service failures at fast food outlets in the United States. Data analysis using SPSS revealed that timely service recovery efforts, such as offering compensation or personalized apologies, significantly improved customer retention rates. The findings underlined the importance of swift and empathetic responses in building trust and loyalty after service failures.

Rahman and Yusof (2023) explored Cultural Influences on Fast Food Consumption Patterns and Brand Loyalty in Malaysia. Using a sample of 320 customers from various ethnic backgrounds, the study employed regression analysis to examine the role of cultural factors in shaping consumption behavior. The results revealed that culturally tailored menu options and marketing strategies significantly impacted brand loyalty. The study emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity in designing promotional campaigns for multicultural markets.

Lee et al. (2022) conducted a study on Customer Experience and Loyalty in Casual Dining Restaurants to determine how various experiential dimensions influence customer loyalty. A total of 275 diners from South Korea participated in the study. The researchers applied Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analyze the data. Results indicated that the emotional and sensory dimensions of customer experience were the strongest predictors of loyalty, followed by the social and cognitive dimensions. The study also found that positive experiences significantly strengthened word-of-mouth recommendations, highlighting the need for restaurants to focus on creating holistic dining experiences.

Chen and Tsai (2021) explored The Impact of Digital Marketing Strategies on Brand Loyalty in Fast Food Chains. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed 300 customers of McDonald's in Taiwan while conducting interviews with 15 managers. The findings revealed that personalized email campaigns and loyalty apps significantly improved brand loyalty. The study also emphasized the effectiveness of real-time promotional notifications in retaining customers and encouraging repeat visits. The results demonstrated that digital marketing strategies could enhance emotional connections between customers and brands.

Hussain (2018) examined Brand Image and Customer Loyalty Through Sensory Marketing Strategies in international fast food chain restaurants, including KFC, Domino's, and Subway. Data was collected from 300 respondents across three outlets, using 100 questionnaires per restaurant. The results revealed a strong correlation between sensory elements and brand image, as well as customer loyalty. Among the sensory elements, olfactory (smell), gustative (taste), and tactile (touch) components were the most effective, followed by visual and auditory elements. The study emphasized the importance of integrating sensory marketing strategies to enhance brand image and foster customer loyalty in the fast-food industry.

Theoretical framework

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Social Exchange Theory

This theory was developed by Thibaut and Kelley in 1959; and popularized by Blau, 1964; and Kelley and Thibaut, 1978. Social exchange theory seeks to explain what motivates actors to behave as they do. The Social Exchange Theory views interpersonal interactions from a cost-benefit perspective, much akin to an economic exchange except that a social exchange deals with the exchange of intangible social costs and benefits (respect, honour, friendship and caring) and is not governed by explicit rules or agreements. Like economic exchange, social exchange assumes that individuals take part in an exchange only when they expect rewards from it to justify the costs of taking part in it. Here, people patronize fast food firms because of the taste uniqueness which they enjoy which encourage them to be loyalty to the particular fast-food outlet**.** The theory assumes that the ultimate goal of a relationship is intimacy (which can be enhanced if the exchange offered by the fast food are unique to enhance loyalty).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State. This design is appropriate as it allows for the collection of data from a sample population to describe and analyze relationships, patterns, and behaviors regarding the research variables.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Owerri, the capital city of Imo State, Nigeria. Owerri is a rapidly growing urban center characterized by increasing commercial activities and a diverse population. The fast-food industry in Owerri has experienced significant growth, with various local and international brands operating in the city. This makes it an ideal location to examine the dynamics of taste uniqueness and brand loyalty.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study is the customers of fast-food outlets in Owerri. Based on the nature of customers, there is no exact record of the number of customers, for that, the population is unknown. The fast food firms used are presented in the table below:

Table 3.1: fast food Outlets used:

S/No	fast food outlets
1	Jevinik Fast Food
2	Kilimanjaro Fast Food Restaurants, Owerri
3	Country Style Chicken, Owerri
4	Crunchies Fried Chicken, Owerri
5	Maverick's Fast Food and Bakery, Owerri
6	Sweeties Fast Food, Owerri
7	Mangrove Fast Food, Owerri
8	Chicken Republic Fast Food, Owerri
	Total = 8 Fast food outlets

Source: field work, 2025.

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Sample Size

We applied the percentage proportion method by Fraud and Williams (1975) to determine customers sample size, and we got a sample size of 200. The formula is stated below:

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

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique was used by the researchers to select 200 respondents.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire designed to capture respondents' responses on taste uniqueness and brand loyalty.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in hospitality and tourism management to ensure content validity. A pilot study involving 20 respondents was also conducted to refine the instrument and address any ambiguities.The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher will be considered acceptable.

Methods of Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Inferential Statistics such as Pearson's Correlation and t-test. The analysis was performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

4. ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND RESULT

Research Question 1: What is the level of brand loyalty among customers in the fast-food industry in Owerri?

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics the level of brand loyalty among customers in the fast-food industry in Owerri

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Consistent Choice	4.50	0.50
Emotional Connection	4.20	0.63
Loyal Despite Competitors	4.30	0.55
Loyal Despite Price	4.40	0.54
Recommend to Others	4.60	0.49
Quality Motivates Return	4.50	0.50
Positive Experiences	4.30	0.55

Field Survey (2025)

The descriptive statistics in Table 4.1 indicate a high level of brand loyalty among customers in the fast-food industry in Owerri, as evidenced by the consistently high mean scores across all variables. "Recommend to Others" had the highest mean score (4.60), suggesting that customers are highly inclined to promote their preferred brands due to positive experiences and satisfaction. Similarly, variables such as "Consistent Choice" and "Quality Motivates Return" also scored high (4.50 each), highlighting the importance of consistent quality and customer trust in fostering loyalty. The relatively lower, though still strong, scores for "Emotional Connection" (4.20) and "Loyal Despite Competitors" (4.30) suggest that while emotional attachment and brand resilience against competitors are present, there is slightly less emphasis on these factors compared to quality and recommendation. The low standard deviations across all variables (ranging from 0.49 to 0.63) indicate a

consistent agreement among respondents, reinforcing the strong overall brand loyalty in the fast-food sector in Owerri.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri?

Table 4.2: Correlation analysis relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Unique taste	4.34	0.68
Consistent flavour	4.26	0.72
Taste as brand identity	4.18	0.75
Recommend to Others	4.21	0.74
Taste of the food influences my decision to return	4.15	0.80
Taste of the meals meets my expectations	3.98	0.89
Favorite brand flavours cannot find elsewhere	4.11	0.81

Field Survey (2025)

The data in Table 4.2 illustrates the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, with high mean scores across variables ranging from 3.98 to 4.34. The highest mean score (4.34) for "Unique taste" underscores its significance as a primary factor that differentiates fast-food brands, while the lowest mean score (3.98) for "Taste of the meals meets my expectations" highlights potential areas for improvement in fulfilling customer expectations. The standard deviation values, ranging from 0.68 to 0.89, indicate moderate variability in customer perceptions, with "Taste of the meals meets my expectations" showing the greatest variability (0.89), suggesting differing levels of satisfaction among respondents. These findings reveal a strong relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty, emphasizing the importance of offering unique, consistent, and high-quality flavors to build and maintain customer loyalty.

Hypotheses Testing

Research Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri.

Table 4.3: Pearson product moment correlation analysis of the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri

Variable	$\sum X$	$\sum X^2$	$\sum XY$	r
	$\sum Y$	$\sum Y^2$		
Taste Uniqueness (X)	2910	47730		
			172800	0.93*
Brand Loyalty (Y)	10440	631710		

***Sig. at 0.05 level; df = 198; N = 200; r crit. = 0.113**

The Pearson product-moment correlation analysis in Table 4.3 reveals a correlation coefficient (**r**) of **0.93**, indicating a very strong positive relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri. Given that the calculated **r** value exceeds the critical value (**r crit.**) of **0.113** at a significance

level of 0.05 and with 198 degrees of freedom, the relationship is statistically significant. This result implies that as customers perceive higher levels of taste uniqueness, their loyalty to fast-food brands significantly increases. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty, is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the study highlight a significant and strong positive relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.93. This finding underscores the critical role of unique taste profiles in fostering customer loyalty. Taste uniqueness, characterized by distinctive flavors, consistent quality, and memorable sensory experiences, serves as a key differentiator for fast-food brands in a highly competitive market.The significant relationship supports prior studies, such as Khan et al. (2020) and Spence et al. (2019), which emphasize the influence of sensory attributes, particularly taste, on customer satisfaction and loyalty. These studies suggest that taste is not merely a functional component of a meal but an emotional and experiential factor that shapes customer perceptions and preferences. The high correlation observed in this study further demonstrates that customers are more likely to return to and recommend fast-food brands that offer distinctive and enjoyable flavors.Additionally, the statistical significance of the findings suggests that fast-food brands in Owerri that prioritize taste uniqueness as part of their value proposition are likely to achieve a competitive advantage. The ability to create a unique and consistent taste experience not only attracts customers but also fosters long-term loyalty through emotional connections and positive word-of-mouth.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between taste uniqueness and brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri, Imo State. The findings revealed a strong and significant positive relationship, indicating that taste uniqueness is a critical determinant of brand loyalty. Customers are more likely to remain loyal to fast-food brands that offer distinctive and consistently enjoyable flavors, reinforcing the importance of culinary innovation and quality assurance in sustaining customer satisfaction and retention.

The study highlights that taste uniqueness not only influences customer preferences but also serves as a competitive advantage in the fast-food market. Fast-food operators who prioritize unique and memorable taste experiences can differentiate their brands, foster emotional connections with customers, and encourage repeat patronage.

The research underscores the need for fast-food businesses in Owerri to focus on developing unique taste profiles, maintaining consistency in quality, and addressing customer expectations to achieve long-term success in a competitive market. These efforts will not only enhance customer satisfaction but also contribute to the growth and sustainability of the fast-food industry in Owerri.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to enhance brand loyalty in the fast-food industry in Owerri:

1. Fast-food brands should continually innovate by developing unique and appealing taste profiles that differentiate them from competitors
2. Fast-food businesses should establish stringent quality control measures to ensure that meals consistently meet customer expectations, regardless of location or time.
3. Fast-food brands should aim to build emotional connections with customers by associating their offerings with positive experiences, cultural values, or nostalgic elements.
4. Fast-food brands should emphasize their unique taste offerings in advertising and promotional campaigns.
5. Fast-food brands should incorporate local flavors and preferences into the menu, that can make the brand more relatable and appealing to customers in Owerri.

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