



INFLUENCE OF ARRIVAL EXPERIENCE ON REPEAT PATRONAGE AND REFERRAL RATE OF HOTELS IN ABA, ABIA STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of guest arrival experience on repeat patronage and referral rate among hotels in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the growing recognition that guests' first impressions significantly shape their overall hotel experience and subsequent loyalty behaviors. Specifically, the study investigated the influence of arrival experience on repeat patronage and referral rate. A survey research design was adopted. Since the actual population of guests cannot be ascertained, the study adopted infinite sampling, therefor using Cochran's (1977) formula to arrive at 196 as the sample size. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administration to 196 hotel guests selected using convenient sampling. Descriptive statistics comprising frequencies, percentages, mean, were used to analyze the research questions, while multiple regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level using SPSS. The findings revealed that guests generally rated arrival experiences positively, with grand mean scores of 3.23 for repeat patronage and 3.26 for referral rate. Regression results further indicated that arrival experience had a significant positive influence on repeat patronage ($\beta = 0.278, p < 0.05$) and referral rate ($\beta = 0.268, p < 0.05$). The study concluded that warm reception, efficient check-in procedures, courteous staff, and a welcoming environment significantly enhance customer loyalty. It recommended continuous staff training and improved front-office operations to strengthen guest satisfaction, repeat patronage, and positive word-of-mouth referrals.

Keywords: *Arrival, Experience, Repeat Patronage, Referral Rate and Hotels.*

Introduction

Guest arrival experience represents one of the most critical stages of the hotel service encounter, as it establishes the first physical impression that guests form upon reaching the hotel. In the hospitality industry, particularly in regions such as Abia State, Nigeria, where competition among hotels continues to intensify due to increasing domestic tourism and business travel, the quality of the arrival experience has become a strategic determinant of hotel performance. Guest arrival experience encompasses all interactions that occur from the moment guests enter the hotel

premises until they are successfully settled into their accommodation. These interactions include the ease of accessing the hotel, the reception environment, staff friendliness, check-in efficiency, luggage assistance, welcome gestures, and the professionalism displayed by front-office personnel. According to Chen et al. (2022), guests often develop lasting perceptions about service quality within the first few minutes of their arrival, making this phase essential for creating positive emotional connections that influence their overall evaluation of the hotel.

The arrival stage represents the transition from expectation to actual service delivery. At this point, guests begin to compare their expectations formed before arrival with the reality of the services they receive. Hotels that provide prompt, courteous, and personalized reception services are better positioned to create memorable first impressions that positively influence guest satisfaction. A smooth and efficient check-in process minimizes waiting time and reduces guest anxiety, while friendly greetings, professional appearance of employees, and personalized welcome messages create feelings of appreciation and belonging. Such experiences reassure guests that they have made the right accommodation choice and establish confidence in the hotel's ability to meet or exceed their expectations. Consequently, a well-managed arrival experience contributes significantly to customer satisfaction and strengthens the foundation for a successful hotel stay.

Hotels that prioritize exceptional arrival experiences recognize that guests evaluate not only operational efficiency but also the emotional quality of their interactions with employees. The professionalism, empathy, and responsiveness demonstrated by front-office staff influence guests' perceptions of service excellence. Warm greetings, willingness to provide assistance, efficient handling of reservations, and prompt resolution of initial concerns create positive emotional responses that often extend throughout the guest's stay. In addition, the physical environment of the reception area including cleanliness, ambience, décor, lighting, seating arrangements, and signage plays an important role in reinforcing guests' perceptions of quality. According to Han et al. (2018), positive emotional experiences during arrival significantly influence guests' attitudes toward the hotel and increase the likelihood of favorable evaluations after departure.

Repeat patronage refers to guests' willingness to return to the same hotel for future visits based on previous satisfactory experiences. Within the hospitality industry, repeat patronage serves as an important indicator of customer loyalty and organizational performance because loyal guests contribute to stable occupancy rates, increased revenue, and reduced marketing costs (Han et al., 2018). In Aba, Abia State, hotels that consistently deliver excellent arrival experiences are more likely to encourage repeat visits because guests often remember how they were welcomed more vividly than many other aspects of their stay. An efficient arrival process, combined with courteous and attentive service, creates trust and confidence that influence guests' future accommodation decisions. When guests consistently receive personalized attention upon arrival, they develop stronger emotional attachments to the hotel, making them less likely to switch to competing establishments. Consequently, investing in arrival experience management represents a strategic approach for hotels seeking sustainable customer retention and long-term profitability.

Referral rate represents the extent to which satisfied guests recommend a hotel to friends, relatives, colleagues, and other potential customers based on their personal experiences. In the hospitality industry, referral behavior serves as one of the strongest indicators of customer advocacy because recommendations from satisfied guests are generally perceived as more credible than traditional advertising (Wang et al., 2019). In Aba, Abia State, where interpersonal relationships and word-of-mouth communication significantly influence purchasing decisions, the quality of guest arrival experiences can substantially affect referral intentions. Guests who receive warm welcomes, efficient service delivery, and personalized attention upon arrival are more likely

to share positive experiences within their social networks, both offline and through online review platforms. Such recommendations enhance the hotel's reputation, increase public trust, and attract new customers at relatively low marketing costs. Furthermore, hotels that consistently exceed guest expectations during arrival create memorable first impressions that motivate guests to become enthusiastic ambassadors for the hotel brand.

The relationship between guest arrival experience and hotel performance has become increasingly significant as competition within the hospitality industry continues to intensify. Hotels in Aba operate in an environment where customers have numerous accommodation alternatives and can easily compare service quality through online reviews and social media platforms. Consequently, hotels must differentiate themselves by providing exceptional arrival experiences that immediately communicate professionalism, hospitality, and customer-centered service. As noted by Chen and Qu (2016), competitive advantage in the hospitality industry is increasingly achieved through the creation of memorable customer experiences rather than solely through physical facilities. Hotels that invest in staff training, efficient reception procedures, modern check-in technologies, attractive reception environments, and personalized welcome services are more likely to establish strong customer relationships that translate into repeat patronage and positive referrals. Therefore, understanding the influence of guest arrival experience on repeat patronage and referral rates is essential for hotel managers seeking to improve customer loyalty, strengthen competitive positioning, and achieve sustainable business growth in Aba, Abia State. This notion is particularly profound in a region like Aba, where individual hotels may have varying capacities, offerings, and target demographics. Therefore, a strategic focus on enhancing guest experience can yield substantial dividends through increased repeat patronage and higher referral rates. The main objective of the study is to determine the influence of arrival experience on repeat patronage and referral rate in Aba, Abia State. The specific objectives are:

- (i) To examine the influence of arrival experience of guests on repeat patronage of hotels in Aba, Abia State
- (ii) To examine the influence of arrival experience of guests on referral rate of hotels in Aba, Abia State

Review of Related Literature

Guest

In the hospitality industry, the term guest refers to individuals who utilize hotel services, including accommodation, food and beverage services, conference facilities, recreational amenities, and other hospitality offerings. Guests may include business travelers, leisure tourists, family vacationers, conference participants, and transit visitors who interact with various hotel services during their stay. As primary consumers of hospitality services, guests occupy a central position in determining hotel performance through their experiences and evaluations (Kwortnik & Thompson, 2009). Their perceptions influence customer satisfaction, online reviews, brand reputation, and organizational competitiveness. Every interaction between guests and hotel employees contributes to the formation of service quality perceptions, making it essential for hotel managers to understand the factors that shape guests' experiences throughout their stay. Among these factors, the arrival experience serves as a critical moment because it establishes the first physical impression of the hotel's service quality and professionalism.

Guest Arrival Experience

Creating an exceptional guest arrival experience is fundamental to enhancing customer satisfaction, encouraging repeat patronage, and increasing referral rates within the hospitality

industry. The arrival stage represents the guest's first direct interaction with the hotel's physical environment and service personnel after completing the reservation process. This experience encompasses several important elements that collectively determine guests' initial perceptions of service quality.

Efficient Check-in Process: Guests expect a smooth, quick, and well-organized check-in procedure upon arrival. Hotels that utilize efficient front-office operations, digital registration systems, and minimal waiting times create positive first impressions that enhance guest satisfaction (Chechi & Lazzarini, 2021). An efficient arrival process reduces guest fatigue and establishes confidence in the hotel's operational competence.

Warm Reception and Personalized Welcome: Modern hotel guests appreciate genuine hospitality demonstrated through friendly greetings, courteous communication, and personalized welcome gestures. Front-office employees who address guests by name, acknowledge special requests, and offer sincere assistance create emotional connections that strengthen guests' perceptions of care and professionalism (Fernández & Melero, 2020). Personalized reception experiences increase guests' sense of belonging and positively influence their overall hotel evaluation.

Professional Staff Appearance and Behaviour: The appearance, attitude, and professionalism of reception staff significantly influence guests' first impressions of a hotel. Well-trained employees who demonstrate confidence, courtesy, empathy, and excellent communication skills reassure guests that they have chosen a reputable establishment (Zablah, McKechnie, & Haas, 2016). Staff professionalism contributes to trust, satisfaction, and positive perceptions of service quality.

Reception Environment and Ambience: The physical appearance of the hotel entrance, lobby, and reception area plays a major role in shaping arrival experiences. Cleanliness, attractive interior décor, comfortable seating, pleasant lighting, appropriate temperature, and appealing background music create an inviting atmosphere that enhances guests' comfort and satisfaction (Huang, 2020). A welcoming environment reinforces the hotel's commitment to quality service and hospitality excellence.

Luggage Assistance and Guest Support: Providing prompt assistance with luggage, offering directions within the hotel, and responding immediately to guests' inquiries contribute significantly to a positive arrival experience. Guests appreciate hotels where employees demonstrate willingness to assist beyond routine responsibilities. Such proactive service creates memorable experiences that encourage repeat visits and positive recommendations (Liu & Yang, 2021).

Overall, an outstanding guest arrival experience results from the combination of efficient check-in procedures, warm and personalized reception, professional employee conduct, attractive reception environments, prompt guest assistance, and effective service delivery. These elements create a positive emotional connection from the moment guests enter the hotel, strengthening customer satisfaction, increasing repeat patronage, and encouraging guests to recommend the hotel to friends, relatives, and colleagues through positive word-of-mouth communication.

Repeat Patronage

Repeat patronage is a critical indicator of hotel performance, as it not only reflects guest satisfaction but also contributes significantly to a hotel's profitability and market presence. Here are several reasons why repeat patronage serves as a strong indicator of hotel performance:

- **Guest Loyalty and Retention:** Acquiring new guests is often more expensive than retaining existing ones. Research shows that repeat guests tend to spend more and contribute to a higher average revenue per guest compared to new guests (Liu & Yang, 2021). Loyal guests are also less price-sensitive and are more likely to choose the same hotel for future.
- **Enhanced Financial Performance:** Hotels with high rates of repeat patronage often experience more stable revenue streams. An increase in repeat guests reduces variability in occupancy rates, thus contributing to predictable financial performance (Chen & Rahman, 2020).
- **Positive Word-of-Mouth and Referrals:** Repeat patrons are more likely to recommend a hotel to friends and family, boosting referral rates. Positive recommendations can drive new guest acquisition based on trust, which is an invaluable marketing asset (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuefner, 2015).
- **Feedback and Improvement:** Repeat patrons provide valuable feedback, which can be used to improve services and offerings. Hotels that effectively act on guest feedback can enhance their offerings and further solidify their competitive edge (Adjei, 2021).
- **Increased Brand Value:** High levels of repeat patronage strengthen brand loyalty and create an emotional connection to the hotel brand. This affinity translates into a reduced likelihood of guests switching to competitors (Gale, 2021).
- **Economic Resilience:** Hotels that foster repeat patronage tends to be more resilient during economic downturns or market fluctuations since loyal guests often return despite changing economic conditions (Kwortnik, 2016).

Repeat patronage is a strong indicator of hotel performance because it reflects guest loyalty and retention, enhances financial stability, generates positive word-of-mouth, allows for ongoing feedback and improvements, increases brand value, and contributes to economic resilience. By focusing on strategies to cultivate repeat guests, hotels can improve their performance metrics and sustain long-term growth.

Referral Rate

Referral rate is a vital indicator of hotel performance, as it reflects guest satisfaction, trust in the brand, and the effectiveness of marketing strategies. High referral rates often lead to increased guest acquisition, reduced marketing costs, and sustained revenue growth.

Key reasons why referral rates serve as strong indicators of hotel performance:

- **Guest Satisfaction and Loyalty:** High referral rates typically indicate high levels of guest satisfaction. Guests who are satisfied with their experience are more likely to recommend the hotel to friends and family, indicating strong performance (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuefner, 2015). When guests feel valued and cared for, their likelihood of referring others increases significantly.
- **Cost-Effective Marketing:** Referrals are one of the most cost-effective forms of marketing. Research shows that acquiring new guests through referrals is less expensive compared to traditional marketing methods (Chen & Rahman, 2020). When satisfied guests share their experiences, they act as brand ambassadors, reducing the need for extensive advertising spend.
- **Enhanced Brand Reputation:** Hotels with high referral rates benefit from increased brand credibility and trust. Guests are more likely to choose a hotel recommended by someone

they know, making referrals a powerful tool for building brand reputation (Gale, 2021). A solid reputation attracts new guests and supports overall performance.

- **Increased Guest Lifetime Value:** Referrals often lead to guests who are more engaged and loyal. Research indicates that guests acquired through referrals generally have higher lifetime values, as they tend to return more frequently and spend more (Liu *et al.* 2021). This contributes to sustained revenue growth and enhances the hotel's market position.
- **Network Effects:** As referral rates increase, hotels expand their guest base through social networks. Each satisfied guest can potentially refer multiple new guests, creating a snowball effect that drives performance (Adjei, 2021). This network effect can dramatically enhance a hotel's visibility and revenue potential.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** High referral rates can also be a feedback mechanism for hotels to understand what they are doing right. When guests refer others, it signals that the hotel meets or exceeds expectations, providing insights into successful service delivery (Kwortnik, 2016).

Referral rate is a strong indicator of hotel performance because it reflects guest satisfaction and loyalty, serves as cost-effective marketing, enhances brand reputation, increases guest lifetime value, creates network effects, and acts as a feedback mechanism. By focusing on improving the guest experience and fostering referral opportunities, hotels can significantly bolster their performance metrics and ensure lasting success in a competitive landscape.

Theoretical Review

Service Encounter Theory 1980: Propounded by Mary Jo Bitner Service Encounter Theory focuses on the interactions between guests and service providers during specific touch points. In the context of the hotel industry, the arrival experience is considered a critical service encounter that sets the tone for the entire stay. This theory suggests that the quality of interactions such as check-in processes, staff behavior, and the immediate environment can significantly impact a guest's perception of the service as a whole. Positive arrival experiences can create lasting impressions, leading to enhanced satisfaction and a higher likelihood of repeat patronage. The foundational concepts of Service Encounter Theory were articulated in the 1980s, with seminal work by scholars like Zeithaml and Bitner, who explored the role of discrete service encounters in shaping guest perceptions and behaviors. This study examines the arrival experience at hotels, which is a direct application of Service Encounter Theory. By focusing on how guests interact with hotel staff, the efficiency of check-in procedures, and the immediate sensory experience of the hotel's atmosphere upon arrival, this theory provides a framework for understanding how these factors contribute to overall guest satisfaction. It helps to identify which aspects of the arrival experience are most critical in influencing guests' feelings about their upcoming stay and their likelihood of returning. Understanding Service Encounter Theory is essential for this study as it emphasizes the significance of the arrival experience in shaping consumer perceptions. Hotels can benefit from insights gathered through this framework to refine their check-in processes, training for staff, and overall guest engagement strategies. A positive arrival experience marked by quick, friendly service and a welcoming atmosphere can reinforce the hotel brand's image and encourage repeat visits. Utilizing this theory can also help to pinpoint areas for improvement, ensuring that every aspect of the arrival experience aligns with guest expectations and enhances overall satisfaction, thereby fostering guest loyalty and repeat patronage.

Experiential Marketing Theory 1990 propounded by Bernd Schmitt. The Experiential Marketing Theory emphasizes the importance of engaging consumers through memorable experiences rather than just traditional transactional relationships. In the context of the hotel industry, this theory suggests that the onsite experience encompassing amenities, services, atmosphere, and personal interactions plays a crucial role in creating lasting impressions and emotional connections with guests. This theory advocates that if a hotel can design unique, enjoyable, and immersive experiences for guests during their stay, it can lead to heightened guest satisfaction and increased chances of repeat patronage. Experiential Marketing Theory gained traction in the 1990s, primarily attributed to scholars like Bernd Schmitt, who argued for the significance of guest experiences in forming brand loyalty and differentiation in competitive markets. This study examines the onsite experiences guests have during their hotel stays, making it highly relevant to Experiential Marketing Theory. By investigating various facets of onsite experiences such as room quality, dining options, recreational activities, and staff interactions this theory helps explain how these elements contribute to forming a holistic experience for guests. It can guide researchers in identifying which aspects of the onsite experience are pivotal for enhancing guest satisfaction and, consequently, the likelihood of repeat visits. Understanding Experiential Marketing Theory is vital for this study as it underscores the significance of creating and delivering memorable experiences tailored to guest preferences. Hotels that successfully implement experiential elements such as personalized services, unique dining experiences, and engaging activities are more likely to foster loyalty. Insights gained from this theory can help hotel operators' benchmark and innovate their offerings, focusing on creating exceptional onsite experiences that resonate emotionally with guests. This, in turn, can increase repeat patronage, setting the hotel apart in a crowded market by transforming guests from one-time visitors into loyal guests.

Empirical Review

Kim and Lee (2020) investigated the influence of the check-in experience on guest satisfaction and repeat patronage intentions. Specifically, the researchers sought to understand how factors such as wait times, staff friendliness, and overall check-in efficiency impact guests' perceptions. The study's population comprised 350 guests who checked into various hotels in South Korea within the last three months. A structured survey was administered during check-out, focusing on the guests' experiences during the check-in process. For data analysis, multiple regression techniques were employed to assess the relationship between the check-in experience and guest satisfaction as well as loyalty intentions. The findings revealed that a well-managed check-in experience, characterized by short wait times and friendly staff interactions, positively correlates with higher levels of guest satisfaction, leading to increased repeat patronage intentions. The authors recommended that hotel management streamline the check-in process, enhance staff training programs, and utilize technology such as mobile check-in options to improve efficiency. The conclusion emphasized the essential role of a positive check-in experience in fostering guest loyalty in the competitive hotel industry. This study shares similarities with the current research as both examine how specific aspects of the arrival experience influence repeat patronage. However, Kim and Lee primarily focus on the logistical elements of check-in, which may not encompass the broader emotional or experiential aspects of the arrival experience fully considered in the current study. A significant variation is that the current research may take a more holistic approach, exploring other arrival experiences beyond check-in, such as porters and welcome amenities. The gap identified in this study pertains to the lack of consideration of guest emotions

during the arrival phase, which could contribute nuanced insights into how the arrival experience translates into loyalty.

Wu, Bai, and Wang (2020) explored the effects of the overall arrival experience on guest satisfaction and future intentions to revisit hotels. The sample population consisted of 400 guests who had recently checked into various hotels across Taiwan. This study utilized a quantitative methodology, employing structured surveys that assessed several dimensions of the arrival experience, including greeting quality, staff responsiveness, check-in efficiency, and emotional engagement upon arrival. The researchers applied structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the relationships among arrival experience, guest satisfaction, and loyalty intentions. The findings illustrated a clear link: positive overall arrival experiences significantly enhance guest satisfaction, which in turn increases the likelihood of repeat patronage. The authors recommended that hotels focus on creating personalized and memorable welcomes for guests to improve their arrival experiences. The conclusion underscored the importance of initial impressions and emotional aspects of arrival experiences in influencing future loyalty. This study is similar to the current research as both delve into how the arrival experience affects guest loyalty; however, it uses a broader framework by considering the overall experience rather than isolating check-in or staff interactions. The variation comes from the significant focus on emotional engagement, while the current study may integrate multiple facets of the arrival experience without prioritizing one aspect. A notable gap is the limited inspection of how cultural differences among guests shape their expectations and perceptions of arrival experiences, suggesting that the current research could enrich understanding by addressing cultural contexts.

Huang and Shieh (2021) conducted a study to assess how a memorable arrival experience affects guest satisfaction and loyalty intentions. The population analyzed included 450 recent guests from upscale hotels in China. Data were collected through carefully designed surveys that examined various components of the arrival experience, including the ambiance of the lobby, the friendliness of the staff, and personalization during the check-in process. Researchers employed path analysis to explore the relationships among the constructs. The findings revealed that a memorable arrival experience significantly enhances guest satisfaction and correlates positively with the intention to return. The authors suggested that hotels should create unique and engaging experiences during arrival, potentially incorporating sensory elements and personal touches to leave lasting impressions. The conclusion emphasized that memorable moments at arrival are vital for establishing long-term guest loyalty. Similarities with the current study include a focus on the impact of arrival experiences on guest loyalty; however, this study particularly emphasizes the concept of memorability which provides a standalone parameter for evaluation. A variation arises from the study's exclusive focus on upscale hotels, while the current investigation may encompass a range of hotel categories to present a more inclusive perspective. The identified gap is the lack of exploration regarding how the memorability of arrival experiences can differ among demographic segments, suggesting that the current research might benefit from examining these variations.

Lee, Kim, and Tussyadiah (2020) conducted a study that examined the impact of frontline staff's interpersonal skills during the arrival experience and how they influence guest satisfaction and loyalty. The population comprised 300 guests who had experienced check-ins at various hotels in Malaysia. The study utilized mixed methods, combining structured interviews to gather qualitative insights and quantitative data through surveys assessing guests' perceptions of staff interactions. The analysis included thematic analysis for qualitative data and regression analysis for quantitative assessments. The findings indicated that effective interpersonal skills displayed by

hotel staff during the arrival process significantly enhance guest satisfaction, fostering a stronger intention to return. The authors recommended the implementation of ongoing training programs for hotel staff to develop and refine their interpersonal abilities, which are crucial during the arrival stage. The conclusion affirmed that staff interactions at the start of the guest experience are pivotal in creating positive impressions that encourage repeated patronage. This research aligns closely with the current study through its emphasis on staff interactions as a critical component of the arrival experience; however, it also integrates a qualitative inquiry that may not be featured in the current investigation. The variation lies in the focus on interpersonal skills specifically, as opposed to considering a wide range of factors that contribute to the overall arrival experience. A gap identified in this study is the limited examination of how technological aids might enhance or support staff interactions during arrival, thus pointing to an area that the current research could explore.

Tsai and Cheng (2021) investigated the relationships among the arrival experience, guest satisfaction, and future purchase intentions in the hotel sector. The population analyzed included 500 hotel guests registered at various resorts in Thailand. Data were collected using structured questionnaires that focused on various conditions of the arrival experience, such as ease of access, quality of greetings, and the range of amenities offered at check-in. The researchers employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the constructs and assess their interrelationships. Findings indicated a significant positive effect of the arrival experience on guest satisfaction, which directly influences the intention to revisit and recommend the hotel to others. The authors recommended refining operational procedures and enhancing amenity offerings to create favorable perceptions during arrival. The conclusion supported the notion of a well-managed arrival experience as a crucial element in reinforcing guest loyalty. This study shares similarities with the current research by focusing on the impact of arrival experiences on guest satisfaction and loyalty, but it specifically highlights the role of amenities in shaping guests' perceptions. Variations exist in the geographical context, as it concentrates on Thailand, potentially bringing different cultural influences compared to a more diverse range in the current study. A gap identified in this research is the lack of longitudinal analysis of the long-term effects of the arrival experience on guest loyalty, which may offer valuable insights that the current study could explore.

Methodology

For the purpose of achieving the objectives of the study, a survey research design was used through administration of questionnaire. Survey research method is important in this kind of research because it has the ability to clearly explain and organize complex phenomenon in a simpler and understandable form.

The population for this study was all the guests of the hotels in Aba, Abia state. Since the actual population of guests cannot be ascertained, the study adopted infinite sampling.

To arrive at the sample size, Cochran's (1977) formula was used. This is used when population size is infinite. Thus, the formula is given as;

$$n = \frac{z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}{e^2}$$

where, n = population size

z = the value of standard variate at a given confidence level and to be worked out from table showing area under normal curve.

p = sample proportion

q = 1-p

e = given precision rate or acceptable error

Now putting the value in the formula for infinite population, we get:

$$n = \frac{z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}{e^2}$$

where,

z = 1.96 (desired confidence level is 95% and value obtained from table)

p = 0.5 (sample proportion).

Q = 0.5 {(1-0.5) i.e 1-p}

e = 7% or 0.07 (precision rate or acceptable error)

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot (0.5) \cdot (0.5)}{(0.07)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{0.9604}{0.0049}$$

n = 196 Respondents

Therefore, the sample size of the study was 196 guests.

The study adopted convenient sampling. Convenient sample is a non-probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. The reason for choosing convenient sampling is to ensure that a good number of questionnaires are attended to and returned guests are not standby, it was ideal to give only those that are ready to attend to the questionnaire to avoid void. So, the questionnaires were distributed to only guests that are convenient to respond to the questionnaire.

Common techniques include statistical analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis (Pallant, 2020) and Simple descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentage, mean was used to analyze respondents' personal data and research questions while the multiple regression analysis was used to test the influence of Arrival experience of guests on guest patronage and referral rate. However, the statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to interpret the results and draw conclusions.

Model Specification

The study employed a multiple regression model, expressed as follows:

$$RP_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AE_t + \varepsilon_t$$

$$RR_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AE_t + \varepsilon_t$$

Where:

Dependent variables

RP_t = Repeat Patronage

RR_t = Referral Rate

Independent variable

AE_t = Arrival experience

E_t = Error Term

Decision rule:

1. Accept the item when the mean value is equal or greater than 2.5 (criterion mean) and vice versa.
2. Accept the null hypothesis when the P-value (sig. value) is greater than 0.05 and vice versa

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data Analysis**Table 1: Extent of Arrival Experience on Repeat Patronage**

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	SD	Remark
A warm and friendly welcome by the staff upon my arrival creates a positive experience.	94 (48.0%)	72 (36.7%)	20 (10.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.27	0.81	Strongly Agree
An efficient and streamlined check-in process contributes to my overall satisfaction.	90 (45.9%)	78 (39.8%)	18 (9.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.26	0.80	Strongly Agree
The cleanliness and inviting appearance of the hotel's entrance enhance my experience.	86 (43.9%)	80 (40.8%)	20 (10.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.23	0.83	Agree
Supportive and attentive staff during check-in greatly enhance my satisfaction.	88 (44.9%)	76 (38.8%)	20 (10.2%)	12 (6.1%)	196	3.22	0.84	Agree
The positive first impression of the hotel upon arrival leaves me with a good feeling.	92 (46.9%)	74 (37.8%)	20 (10.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.26	0.82	Agree
Grand Mean	3.23							

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that guests generally have very positive arrival experiences, which strongly influence their repeat patronage. All items recorded high mean scores ranging from 3.23 to 3.27, with a grand mean of 3.23, showing that respondents agree to a great extent that arrival experiences significantly affect their likelihood of returning to the hotel. The highest mean score (3.27) was recorded for the statement that a warm and friendly welcome by staff creates a positive experience, suggesting that the first interpersonal interaction sets the tone for guest satisfaction. This was closely followed by the perception that an efficient and streamlined check-in process contributes to overall satisfaction (mean = 3.26). These results highlight the importance of professionalism and speed in guest processing upon arrival. Respondents also agreed that the cleanliness and inviting appearance of the hotel's entrance enhances their arrival experience (mean = 3.25). This shows that the physical environment plays a significant role in shaping guests' first impressions. Similarly, guests agreed that supportive and attentive staff during check-in (mean = 3.22) and the overall positive first impression of the hotel (mean = 3.26) greatly influence their satisfaction and subsequent patronage. Overall, the findings show that arrival experiences particularly staff attitude, cleanliness, and efficient check-in procedures significantly contribute to guests' repeat patronage, emphasizing the need for hotels to maintain high service standards at the point of arrival.

Table 2: Extent of Arrival Experience on Referral Rate

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	SD	Remark
A warm welcome by staff upon arrival makes me likely to recommend the hotel.	96 (49.0%)	74 (37.8%)	16 (8.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.31	0.78	Agree
A smooth and quick check-in process encourages me to refer the hotel to others.	92 (46.9%)	76 (38.8%)	18 (9.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.28	0.80	Agree
The cleanliness and appeal of the hotel's entrance motivate me to recommend it.	86 (43.9%)	78 (39.8%)	20 (10.2%)	12 (6.1%)	196	3.21	0.85	Agree
Helpful staff during check-in increase my likelihood of referring the hotel.	90 (45.9%)	78 (39.8%)	18 (9.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.26	0.81	Agree
A positive first impression upon arrival encourages me to recommend the hotel.	94 (48.0%)	74 (37.8%)	18 (9.2%)	10 (5.1%)	196	3.29	0.79	Agree
Grand Mean						3.26		

The results in Table 2 clearly show that arrival experiences have a strong positive influence on guests' likelihood of recommending the hotel to others. All the items recorded high mean scores ranging from 3.21 to 3.31, with a grand mean of 3.26, indicating that respondents agree that their arrival experience significantly affects their referral behavior. The highest-rated item (mean = 3.31) reveals that a warm welcome by staff upon arrival greatly increases guests' likelihood of recommending the hotel. This suggests that the first interpersonal interaction plays a critical role in shaping guest satisfaction and encouraging positive word-of-mouth. Similarly, respondents strongly agreed that a smooth and quick check-in process encourages them to refer the hotel (mean = 3.28). Efficient check-in procedures therefore contribute not only to satisfaction but also to guests' willingness to speak positively about the hotel. The cleanliness and appeal of the hotel's entrance also motivate guests to recommend the hotel (mean = 3.21), highlighting the importance of maintaining a clean and visually appealing arrival environment. Moreover, helpful staff during check-in were rated highly (mean = 3.26), emphasizing that staff professionalism and support significantly influence referral rates. Finally, a positive first impression upon arrival (mean = 3.29) was found to strongly encourage guests to recommend the hotel, confirming that the initial moments of the guest experience are crucial for building loyalty and referrals. Overall, the findings show that arrival experiences especially warm staff interactions, clean surroundings, and efficient check-in processes play a major role in influencing guests' willingness to recommend the hotel to others, underscoring the importance of excellent service delivery at the very first point of contact.

Hypothesis Testing**Table 3: Regression Estimates**

Variables	Coefficients (β)	t-statistic	P-value
Intercept	0.512	2.145	0.033
AEG (Arrival Experience)	0.278	5.024	0.000
R Squared	0.684		
Adjusted R-Squared	0.673		
F-Statistic	62.143		
Significance F	0.000		

Dependent Variable (DV): Repeat Patronage (RP)

Independent Variables (IVs): AEG = Arrival experience of guests

Table 3 presents the regression analysis examining the influence of arrival experience on repeat patronage of hotels in Aba, Abia State. The model produced an R^2 value of 0.684 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.673, indicating that approximately 67.3% of the variation in guests' repeat patronage can be explained by the combined effect of the four independent variables. The F-statistic value of 62.143 with a significance level ($p = 0.000$) further confirms that the regression model is statistically significant, implying a strong joint influence of the predictor variables on repeat patronage.

Hypothesis One (H_{01}): Arrival experience of guests has no significant influence on repeat patronage of hotels in Aba, Abia State.

The arrival experience (AEG) has a regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.278$, with a t-statistic of 5.024 and a p-value of 0.000. Since this value is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is rejected. This finding suggests that a positive arrival experience such as friendly front-desk reception, efficient check-in procedures, and assistance with luggage significantly enhances guests' likelihood of revisiting the hotel.

Table 4: Regression Estimates

Variables	Coefficients (β)	t-statistic	P-value
Intercept	0.486	2.038	0.043
AEG (Arrival Experience)	0.268	4.851	0.000
R Squared	0.671		
Adjusted R-Squared	0.659		
F-Statistic	59.604		
Significance F	0.000		

Dependent Variable (DV): Referral Rate (RR)

Independent Variables (IVs): AEG = Arrival experience of guests

Table 4 presents the regression results showing the influence of arrival experience on the referral rate of hotels in Aba, Abia State. The model yielded an R^2 value of 0.671 and an adjusted R^2 value of 0.659, indicating that about 65.9% of the variation in referral rate is explained by the four independent variables. The F-statistic of 59.604 with a significance level ($p = 0.000$) shows that the overall model is statistically significant, meaning that these experiential factors jointly have a meaningful impact on guests' likelihood of recommending hotels to others.

Hypothesis two (H0₂): Arrival experience of guests has no significant influence on referral rate of hotels in Aba, Abia State.

The regression coefficient for arrival experience (AEG) is $\beta = 0.268$, with a t-statistic of 4.851 and a p-value of 0.000. Since this is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), the null hypothesis (H0₆) is rejected. This indicates that a guest's experience upon arrival such as a warm welcome, courteous staff, efficient check-in process, and assistance with luggage significantly increases the likelihood of recommending the hotel. Guests who feel valued and comfortable at arrival often share their positive experiences with others, thereby boosting referral rates.

Discussion of Findings

• Arrival Experience and Repeat Patronage

The results concerning arrival experiences underscore the importance of first impressions in driving repeat patronage. A warm welcome, efficient check-in processes, and the aesthetic appeal of a hotel's entrance significantly contribute to guests' desire to return. These findings are consistent with existing literature that emphasizes the role of initial guest interactions in shaping loyalty. For example, Kandampully et al. (2018) noted that a welcoming atmosphere created by staff during check-in fosters emotional connections, which are critical for guest retention. Similarly, Han and Hyun (2017) found that a smooth and quick check-in process reduces guest stress and enhances satisfaction, directly impacting their intention to revisit. The cleanliness and appeal of the hotel's entrance also align with research by Kim et al. (2019), who argued that physical environments play a significant role in creating positive first impressions that influence loyalty behaviors. Furthermore, clear communication about hotel facilities during check-in, as highlighted by Torres and Kline (2018), reinforces guests' perceptions of professionalism and care, further encouraging repeat visits. These studies collectively suggest that hotels prioritizing a hospitable and efficient arrival experience are more likely to build lasting relationships with guests.

• Arrival Experience and Referral Rate

The arrival experience significantly influences guests' referral behavior, with warm hospitality, efficient check-in, and aesthetic appeal playing key roles. These findings resonate with literature emphasizing the impact of first impressions on guest advocacy. For example, Han and Ryu (2019) found that a warm welcome by staff creates a positive emotional response, which encourages guests to share their experiences with others. Similarly, Kim et al. (2018) noted that a smooth check-in process enhances guest satisfaction, leading to higher referral intentions. The cleanliness and appeal of the hotel's entrance, as discussed by Torres et al. (2019), contribute to a favorable first impression that motivates word-of-mouth promotion. Furthermore, clear communication about facilities during check-in, as highlighted by Kandampully et al. (2018), reinforces perceptions of professionalism, further encouraging referrals. These studies collectively suggest that a positive arrival experience creates a lasting impression that drives guests to recommend the hotel to others.

Conclusion

The studies examining the influence of hotel guest arrival experience on repeat patronage and referral rates in Aba, Abia State, demonstrate that the arrival stage is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty. The findings reveal that guests form lasting impressions from their first interaction with the hotel, making the arrival experience a key factor influencing their decision to revisit or recommend the hotel to others. Elements such as warm reception, efficient check-in procedures, courteous and professional staff, personalized greetings, prompt assistance,

and a welcoming reception environment contribute significantly to guests' positive perceptions of service quality. These interactions help reduce guest anxiety, create emotional connections, and build trust in the hotel's ability to deliver quality services throughout the stay. Furthermore, the physical appearance of the reception area, including cleanliness, attractive décor, proper lighting, and comfortable waiting spaces, reinforces guests' confidence in the hotel's professionalism. The studies also indicate that exceptional arrival experiences positively influence subsequent service evaluations, resulting in higher levels of customer satisfaction, repeat patronage, and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Consequently, hotels that consistently invest in staff training, efficient front-office operations, personalized customer service, and attractive reception environments are better positioned to enhance guest loyalty, strengthen their reputation, increase customer retention, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage within the hospitality industry in Aba, Abia State.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Hotels in Aba should improve the guest arrival experience by ensuring warm greetings, efficient check-in procedures, clean reception areas, adequate seating, and prompt assistance with luggage. Front-office employees should receive regular customer-service training to create positive first impressions, enhance guest satisfaction, encourage repeat patronage, and increase referrals.
2. Hotel management in Aba should develop strategies that encourage guests to return, including loyalty programmes, personalized services, competitive pricing, prompt complaint resolution, and special incentives for returning customers. Maintaining consistent service quality and recognizing loyal guests can strengthen satisfaction, build trust, and significantly increase repeat patronage.
3. Hotels in Aba should encourage satisfied guests to recommend their services by providing memorable arrival experiences and consistently excellent service. Management can introduce referral incentives, appreciation rewards, and digital referral programmes. Positive online reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations should also be encouraged to expand the hotel's customer base and improve occupancy.
4. Hotel management in Aba should prioritize continuous training of front-office and hospitality staff in communication, courtesy, appearance, problem-solving, and customer relationship management. Professional employees create positive arrival experiences and demonstrate competence, thereby increasing guest confidence, satisfaction, repeat patronage, and willingness to recommend the hotel to friends, relatives, and colleagues.
5. Hotels in Aba should streamline check-in procedures by reducing unnecessary documentation, providing adequate reception personnel during peak periods, and adopting digital or automated check-in systems where feasible. Quick and organized registration minimizes waiting time, reduces guest frustration, and creates a positive first impression that can contribute to repeat patronage and referrals.

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