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Original Research Article

Hospital Service Quality and Patient Patronage in Private Hospitals in Port-Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined the influence of hospital service quality on patient patronage among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, it investigated the relationships between empathy and responsiveness as dimensions of hospital service quality and patient patronage measured through patient retention and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM). A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted. The study covered 230 management and senior healthcare personnel, including hospital administrators, medical directors, nursing managers and departmental heads, drawn from registered private hospitals in Port Harcourt. A census approach was employed, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from validated measurement scales. Face and content validity were established through expert review, while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold. Data were analysed using the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient at the 5% level of significance. The findings revealed that empathy has a strong positive and statistically significant relationship with patient retention ($\rho = 0.801$, $p < 0.05$) and electronic word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.728$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, responsiveness exhibited significant positive relationships with patient retention ($\rho = 0.657$, $p < 0.05$) and electronic word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.778$, $p < 0.05$). These results indicate that compassionate, individualized attention and prompt, responsive healthcare services significantly enhance patients' willingness to continue patronizing private hospitals and recommend them through digital communication channels. Hospital managers should institutionalize empathy-driven service culture, improve responsiveness through streamlined service delivery, and integrate service quality indicators into performance management systems to strengthen patient retention and stimulate positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Keywords: Hospital Service Quality, Empathy, Responsiveness, Patient Patronage, Patient Retention, Electronic Word-Of-Mouth, Private Hospitals, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare organizations increasingly operate in environments where patients evaluate quality not only by clinical outcomes but also by the manner in which healthcare services are delivered. While technical competence remains fundamental, patients now place equal importance on empathy, responsiveness, effective communication, respect and the overall care experience. Consequently, hospital service quality has evolved from a purely operational concern into a strategic organizational capability that strengthens patient trust, enhances institutional reputation and sustains long-term competitiveness (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1984, 1994; Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Kandampully *et al*., 2015). This shift reflects the growing recognition that hospitals create value through successful medical interventions and also, through meaningful service encounters that encourage patients to maintain enduring relationships with healthcare providers and voluntarily recommend them to others (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008; Wolf *et al*., 2021; Ahmed *et al*., 2022).

There is a growing change in the healthcare landscape in Nigeria, as a result of rapid urbanization, population growth, increased health awareness and greater access to digital information which have heightened patients' expectations of healthcare delivery. Despite sustained investments in the health sector,

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Nigeria continues to face significant challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, uneven service quality and persistent shortages of skilled healthcare professionals. These challenges have been aggravated by the increasing migration ("Japa") of physicians, nurses and other healthcare workers, which has reduced service capacity, increased workload and raised concerns about the sustainability of healthcare delivery (WHO, 2023; Adebisi *et al*., 2023; Federal Ministry of Health & Social Welfare, 2024; Nwosu *et al*., 2024). The National Health Facility Survey (2023) further revealed considerable disparities in service readiness and quality standards across healthcare facilities, reinforcing the need for hospitals to improve both clinical and interpersonal aspects of care.

Against this backdrop, private hospitals have become increasingly important providers of healthcare services in Nigeria. Their growing number has expanded patients' freedom to choose healthcare providers, making patient retention a strategic imperative rather than a routine operational outcome (Federal Ministry of Health & Social Welfare, 2024; NHIA, 2024), especially, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, where continued expansion of private healthcare facilities have been supported by quality assurance initiatives of the Rivers State Ministry of Health and the Rivers State Contributory Health Protection Programme (RIVCHPP), has intensified competition among providers (Rivers State Ministry of Health, 2024; RIVCHPP, 2024). Hence, private hospitals increasingly depend on superior service experiences to retain patients and stimulate favourable electronic word-of-mouth, which has become a powerful source of competitive differentiation (Berry, 1983; Kandampully *et al*., 2015; Wolf *et al*., 2021).

Although hospital service quality has been widely investigated, existing studies have largely emphasized patient satisfaction or treated service quality as a multidimensional construct without examining the distinct behavioural roles of empathy and responsiveness. Moreover, findings regarding their influence on patient retention and electronic word-of-mouth remain inconsistent across healthcare settings (Meesala & Paul, 2018; Ahmed *et al*., 2022; Shaqura *et al*., 2022; Chandra *et al*., 2023; Guan *et al*., 2024). More importantly, empirical evidence from private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State remains limited despite the increasing importance of patient loyalty and digital advocacy in sustaining organizational performance. This study addresses this contextual and empirical gap by examining how empathy and responsiveness influence patient retention and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Based on the foregoing, the study seeks to examine the influence of hospital service quality on patient patronage among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

i. Examine the influence of empathy on patient retention among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria;
ii. Determine the influence of empathy on electronic word-of-mouth among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria;
iii. Examine the influence of responsiveness on patient retention among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria; and
iv. Determine the influence of responsiveness on electronic word-of-mouth among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Development

The relationship between hospital service quality and patients' patronage in this study is explained by Relationship Marketing Theory and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL). Relationship Marketing Theory posits that sustainable organizational success is achieved by cultivating trust-based relationships that transform satisfied customers into voluntary advocates (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the private hospitals for example, empathy and responsiveness strengthen patients' trust, emotional assurance and relational commitment, increasing their willingness to share favourable healthcare experiences through online reviews, social media and other digital platforms. On the other hand, Service-Dominant Logic argues that value is co-created through interactions between service providers and beneficiaries rather than embedded solely in organizational outputs (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008).

Accordingly, empathetic and responsive healthcare encounters generate experiential value that motivates patients to voluntarily disseminate positive digital narratives. Electronic word-of-mouth therefore represents the behavioural expression of relationship quality and value co-creation, through which positive service experiences evolve into credible online recommendations that shape hospital reputation and influence prospective patients' decisions. Hence, hospitals that consistently demonstrate empathy and responsiveness are consequently more likely to strengthen electronic advocacy, enhance digital reputation and sustain patient patronage (Kandampully *et al*., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Wolf *et al*., 2021; Guan *et al*., 2024).

Conceptual Framework

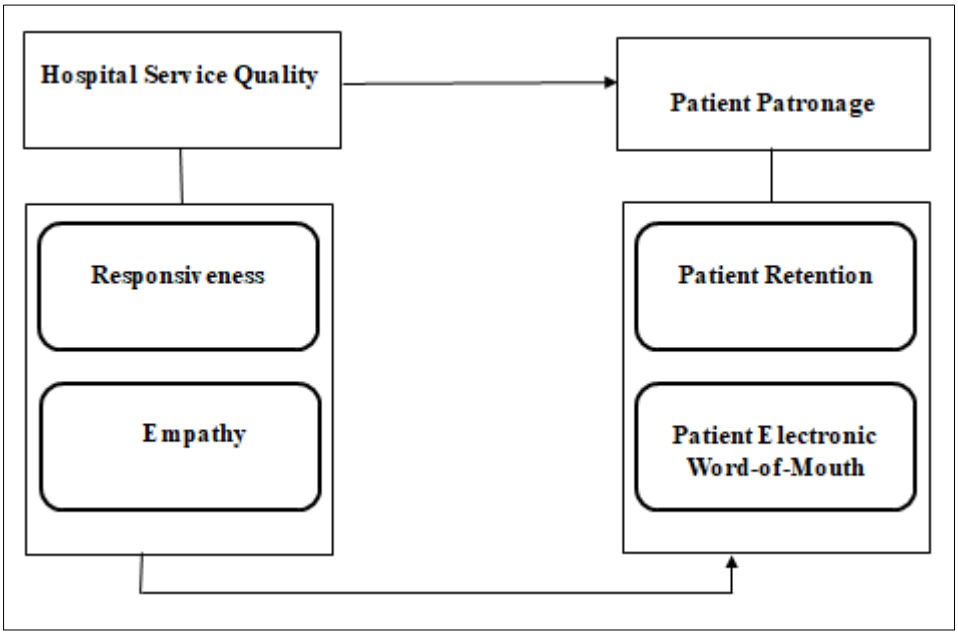

Figure 2.1: Hospital Service Quality and Patient Patronage of Private Hospitals in Port-Harcourt

Patient Patronage

Patient patronage has emerged as a strategic performance indicator in healthcare management because it reflects the ability of healthcare organizations to attract, retain and sustain long-term relationships with patients. Increasing competition within healthcare markets, advances in medical technology, demographic transitions and rising patient expectations have shifted healthcare from a provider-oriented model to a patient-centred system in which hospitals compete through clinical excellence, service quality, organizational reputation and superior patient experiences (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; OECD, 2023; Busse *et al*., 2019). Consequently, hospitals are evaluated not only by clinical outcomes but also by their capacity to encourage repeat utilization, retain patients and generate favourable referrals, making patient patronage a critical indicator of organizational sustainability and competitive advantage.

The concept of patient patronage is rooted in relationship marketing and customer patronage literature, where patronage originally referred to customers' repeated preference for a particular provider or service (Cunningham, 1956; Kunkel & Berry, 1968). Berry (1983) later argued that organizational success depends on maintaining enduring customer relationships rather than merely attracting new customers, while Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasized trust and commitment as the foundations of long-term exchanges. Extending these ideas to healthcare, Izogo and Ogba (2015) conceptualized patient patronage as patients' continued utilization of a healthcare provider resulting from favourable service experiences, whereas Fatima *et al*., (2018) described it as patients' behavioural intention to revisit and recommend a hospital based on perceived service quality and satisfaction. Similarly, Ahmed *et al*., (2022) viewed patient patronage as a behavioural outcome reflecting patients' confidence in a provider's ability to consistently deliver quality healthcare. These definitions collectively suggest that patient patronage extends beyond repeated hospital attendance to encompass behavioural continuity, relational commitment and positive advocacy.

The growing importance of patient patronage reflects broader changes in healthcare delivery. Healthcare reforms, private-sector expansion, digital health technologies and increased access to health information have empowered patients to compare providers before making treatment decisions (Doyle *et al*., 2013; Anhang Price *et al*., 2014; Wolf *et al*., 2021). As a result, hospitals increasingly compete through patient-centred care, effective communication and relationship management rather than clinical competence alone. This transformation reinforces the relationship marketing perspective that sustainable organizational performance is achieved through long-term relational exchanges that foster trust, satisfaction and loyalty (Grönroos, 1994; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Empirical evidence consistently identifies service quality, patient satisfaction, trust, organizational reputation and perceived value as the principal determinants of patient patronage. Hospitals characterized by reliable service delivery, responsive healthcare professionals, effective communication and patient-centred care consistently record higher levels of repeat visits, retention and positive word-of-mouth referrals (Mosadeghrad, 2014; Izogo & Ogba, 2015; Wolf *et al*., 2021). Recent studies further demonstrate that digital healthcare capabilities, including

telemedicine, electronic health records and online appointment systems, increasingly strengthen patronage by improving accessibility, convenience and patient experience (Beckett *et al*., 2024; Zhang *et al*., 2024). Although scholars differ regarding the relative importance of these determinants, the evidence consistently indicates that patient patronage is the cumulative outcome of multiple organizational capabilities operating simultaneously rather than the product of any single factor.

Collectively, the literature establishes patient patronage as a multidimensional behavioural outcome reflecting patients' willingness to revisit, remain loyal to and recommend a healthcare provider following consistently positive healthcare experiences. For private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, this evidence implies that sustainable patient patronage depends not only on clinical competence but also on integrated strategic operations that enhance service quality, operational efficiency, organizational credibility and patient-centred care. Consistent with this perspective, the present study defines patient patronage through patient retention and electronic word-of-mouth, which collectively represent the strongest behavioural manifestations of enduring patient–hospital relationships.

Patient Retention

Patient retention has emerged as a strategic outcome in contemporary healthcare as providers increasingly prioritize long-term patient relationships over episodic service delivery. Within value-based healthcare, retention contributes to continuity of care, treatment adherence, patient safety and organizational sustainability (Fox & Rosen, 2015; Geng *et al*., 2016; WHO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Rooted in relationship marketing theory, retention reflects the cumulative outcome of repeated service encounters through which organizations create value, strengthen trust and commitment, and minimize switching behavior (Berry, 1983; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Payne *et al*., 2017; Kandampully *et al*., 2015).

In healthcare, patient retention extends beyond repeated utilization because treatment decisions are characterized by uncertainty and reliance on providers' professional competence and ethical conduct (Donabedian, 1988; Doyle *et al*., 2013). Consequently, contemporary literature conceptualizes retention as a multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioral continuity, attitudinal commitment and relational attachment, which recognizes that sustained patient relationships are shaped by actual utilization, future intentions and trust in healthcare providers (Fox & Rosen, 2015; Izogo, 2017; Fatima *et al*., 2018; Ahmed *et al*., 2022; Wolf *et al*., 2021).

Empirical evidence further indicates that patient retention is driven by the combined influence of service quality, patient satisfaction, trust, effective communication and positive patient experiences, while digital health technologies strengthen accessibility, continuity of care and patient engagement (Han & Hyun, 2015; Zhou *et al*., 2017; Fatima *et al.,* 2018; Ahmed *et al*., 2022; Guan *et al*., 2024; Zhang *et al*., 2024). Hence, this study conceptualizes patient retention as a higher-order construct which comprises of behavioral, attitudinal and relational dimensions, reflecting the enduring commitment of patients to continue receiving healthcare services because of consistently positive healthcare experiences and sustained confidence in the provider.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WoM)

Digital technologies have not changed why patients recommend healthcare providers; rather, they have fundamentally transformed how, where and to whom those recommendations are communicated. As healthcare increasingly operates within digitally connected service ecosystems, patient experiences are no longer shared exclusively through conversations with relatives, friends or colleagues. Instead, online review platforms, patient communities, healthcare rating websites and social networking sites have extended the reach of patient communication, allowing individual experiences to remain visible and influential long after the clinical encounter has ended (Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 2004; Huete-Alcocer, 2017). Consequently, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WoM) has evolved beyond a digital communication channel to become a strategic relational resource through which hospitals build reputation, reduce uncertainty for prospective patients and influence healthcare choices within increasingly transparent healthcare markets (Wolf *et al.,* 2021; Guan *et al*., 2024).

This transformation reflects an evolution in service relationships rather than a departure from them. Service-Dominant Logic views value as co-created through interactions among multiple actors rather than produced solely by organizations (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Digital platforms extend this co-creation process by enabling patients to generate informational value through reviews, testimonials and shared experiences that guide future healthcare consumers. Similarly, relationship marketing argues that genuine advocacy is the natural outcome of relationships characterized by trust, commitment and consistently delivered value (Berry, 1983; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 1994). Hence, digital media do not create advocacy; they magnify its visibility, permanence and organizational influence.

Contemporary healthcare evidence reinforces this relational interpretation. Patients who experience compassionate care, effective communication, service quality and organizational responsiveness are significantly more likely to share favourable electronic recommendations that shape organizational reputation

and influence subsequent provider choice (Han & Hyun, 2015; Wolf *et al*., 2021; Adams *et al*., 2024; Guan *et al*., 2024; Zhang *et al.,* 2024). Also, customer experience research demonstrates that memorable service encounters foster emotional attachment, transforming satisfied patients into voluntary digital advocates (Kandampully *et al*., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rather, 2018; Ali *et al*., 2021). Accordingly, electronic word-of-mouth is best understood as the digital expression of patient advocacy through which healthcare organizations convert positive experiences into enduring online credibility, wider market visibility and sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, EWoM is defined as the extent to which patients voluntarily communicate favourable healthcare experiences, opinions and recommendations through digital platforms based on their cumulative evaluation of a private hospital's clinical care, service quality and overall healthcare experience.

Hospital Service Quality

Healthcare organizations exist to preserve life, improve human wellbeing, and enhanced overall service quality. Hospital service quality has evolved from a narrow assessment of technical competence into a strategic organizational capability through which hospitals create patient value, strengthen trust and sustain competitive advantage. In today's patient-centered healthcare environment, superior service quality represents both operational objective and a philosophy of service excellence that shapes patient experiences, institutional reputation and long-term organizational performance (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Meesala & Paul, 2018; Ahmed *et al*., 2022; Wolf *et al*., 2021). The concept of hospital service quality has undergone considerable refinement over the past four decades.

Parasuraman *et al*., (1988) conceptualized service quality as customers' evaluation of the gap between expected and perceived service performance, introducing dimensions that continue to underpin healthcare quality assessment. Within the healthcare, hospital service quality therefore reflects the organization's ability to integrate clinical excellence with compassionate, responsive and patient-centered care that enhances trust, improves patient experience and encourages continued patronage. According to Parasuraman *et al*., (1988) service quality is a multidimensional construct that comprises reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness. Studies in the healthcare sector suggest that interpersonal dimensions increasingly outweigh physical attributes because patients place greater emphasis on compassionate care, effective communication and timely attention than on tangible facilities alone (Meesala & Paul, 2018; Ahmed *et al*., 2022). Hence, this study focuses on empathy and responsiveness. Empathy is the healthcare professionals' ability to understand patients' concerns, provide individualized attention and demonstrate genuine compassion throughout the care process. It includes listening attentively, respecting patients' unique circumstances, offering emotional support and treating every patient with dignity and understanding. Empathy enhances patients' overall healthcare experience and encourages continued patronage and positive electronic word-of-mouth (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1994; Ahmed *et al*., 2022). Responsiveness on the other hand refers to the willingness and readiness of healthcare professionals to provide prompt, timely and effective assistance whenever patients require care. It involves minimizing waiting time, responding quickly to patients' requests, communicating promptly and ensuring efficient coordination of healthcare services. Responsive healthcare delivery reassures patients that their wellbeing is valued, strengthens confidence in the hospital and contributes to favourable behavioural outcomes, including patient retention and electronic word-of-mouth (Parasuraman *et al*., 1988; Kandampully *et al*., 2015; Guan *et al*., 2024). On this note, this study defines hospital service quality as patients' overall evaluation of the extent to which a hospital consistently delivers compassionate, responsive and patient-cenetred healthcare services that meet or exceed their expectations throughout the healthcare journey.

Empathy and Patient Retention/Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Among the relational dimensions of hospital service quality, empathy has consistently attracted scholarly attention because it represents the human side of healthcare delivery. While patients expect hospitals to provide competent clinical care, they equally desire to be understood, respected and treated as individuals rather than medical cases. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) empathy is the provision of caring, individualized attention that an organization gives to its customers, emphasizing employees' ability to understand customers' unique needs and treat them with genuine concern. Within the SERVQUAL framework, empathy reflects personalized care, accessibility, effective communication and sincere attention to individual customers. Also, Mercer and Reynolds (2002) defined empathy in healthcare as the ability of healthcare professionals to understand patients' situations, perspectives and feelings, communicate that understanding effectively, and act upon it in a therapeutic manner. Berry (1983) argued that sustainable relationships are created when organizations consistently demonstrate genuine concern for customers' needs, while Grönroos (1994) maintained that every service encounter either strengthens or weakens the customer relationship.

In the private hospitals, empathy creates relational value by reducing patients' anxiety, and strengthens confidence in healthcare professionals. Hence, empathetic care is recognized as a strategic capability through which hospitals encourage patients to remain loyal. Zhang *et al.,* (2018; 2021) demonstrated that empathy significantly strengthens patient loyalty by enhancing trust and emotional attachment to healthcare

providers. Likewise, Meesala and Paul (2018), Fatima *et al*., (2018) and Ahmed *et al*., (2022) found that patients who perceive compassionate and individualized care are considerably more likely to revisit hospitals, maintain long-term relationships and recommend healthcare providers to others. Contemporary studies equally reveal that empathetic interactions encourage patients to share favourable online reviews and positive digital recommendations because emotionally satisfying healthcare experiences are perceived as worthy of public endorsement (Wolf *et al*., 2021; Guan *et al*., 2024; Osei-Frimpong *et al*., 2024; Zhang *et al*., 2024). These findings reinforce customer experience theory, which suggests that customers become advocates not simply because services meet expectations, but because organizations create emotionally meaningful experiences that exceed functional outcomes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kandampully *et al*., 2015).

Despite this broad consensus, contemporary scholarship also indicates that empathy does not always translate directly into patient retention or electronic word-of-mouth. Studies (Dayan *et al*., 2017; Gabay, 2016) observed that clinical outcomes and institutional trust sometimes exert stronger effects on patients' loyalty than interpersonal care alone. Similarly, Lai *et al.,* (2020) and Shaqura *et al*., (2022) reported relatively weak associations between empathy and revisit intentions. Also, in the digital environment, patients may experience highly empathetic care yet refrain from posting online reviews because of privacy concerns, limited digital literacy or low engagement with healthcare review platforms (Alabdaly *et al*., 2024). Other studies further suggest that empathy often influences retention and electronic word-of-mouth indirectly through mediating mechanisms such as patient satisfaction, trust, perceived value and overall patient experience rather than through a direct behavioural pathway (Han & Hyun, 2015; Ahmed *et al*., 2022). Nevertheless, there abundant evidence that favours a positive relationship between empathy and patient retention/eWoM outcomes. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: There is no significant relationship between empathy and patient retention among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

H2: There is no significant relationship between empathy and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

Responsiveness and Patient Retention/Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Responsiveness has become one of the defining attributes of hospital service quality because it reflects a hospital's capacity to respond promptly, appropriately and consistently to patients' healthcare needs. Timely attention, prompt communication, reduced waiting time, accessibility of healthcare professionals and the willingness of doctors and nurses to provide immediate assistance reassure patients that they are respected and valued. Responsiveness is the quick response to customers within short time period and the ability to make time limits more flexible and creating consumer choices more internalized (Shockley *et al*., 2015). Studies (Meesala & Paul, 2018; Fatima *et al*., 2018; Ahmed *et al*., 2022) demonstrate that prompt service delivery, timely communication and efficient response to patient concerns significantly strengthen satisfaction, trust, loyalty and behavioural intentions. Also, Zhou *et al*., (2017) further identified responsiveness as one of the strongest antecedents of patient loyalty because patients interpret timely healthcare delivery as evidence of organizational reliability and commitment. Recent studies (Guan *et al*., 2024; Zhang *et al*., 2024; Kumar *et al.,* 2024) equally reveal that responsive hospitals encourage patients to post favourable online reviews, recommend healthcare providers through social media and engage in positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Despite this dominant perspective, the relationship is not universally consistent. Some studies report that responsiveness exerts only a weak or indirect influence on patient behavioural outcomes when other dimensions of hospital service quality assume greater importance. For example, Al-Neyadi *et al.,* (2018) found that responsiveness contributed positively to patients' quality evaluations but exerted a limited direct effect on loyalty after empathy, assurance and reliability were considered. Similarly, Lai *et al*., (2020) observed that revisit intention was more strongly explained by perceived value and overall service experience than by responsiveness alone, while Chandra *et al*., (2023) reported that organizational trust partially diminished the direct influence of responsiveness on behavioural intentions. Also, according to Shaqura *et al*., (2022); Rojas *et al.,* (2023), responsiveness may become statistically insignificant where overcrowding, inadequate staffing and infrastructural deficiencies undermine the overall patient experience despite healthcare workers' efforts to provide timely care. Conclusively however, contemporary evidence strongly supports the proposition that responsive healthcare delivery strengthens patient retention and stimulates favourable electronic word-of-mouth. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H3: There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and patient retention among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

H4: There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to examine the influence of hospital service quality on patient patronage among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study was conducted among selected registered private hospitals operating within the state. The target population comprised 250 management and senior

healthcare personnel, including hospital administrators, medical directors, nursing managers and departmental heads, who possess adequate knowledge of their hospitals' service delivery practices, patient relationship management and behavioural outcomes. Their positions make them appropriate key informants for providing reliable organizational-level information on service quality practices and patient patronage.

Considering the finite and accessible nature of the study population (N = 250), a census approach was adopted, whereby all eligible respondents were included in the study. This approach ensured complete representation of the population, eliminated sampling error associated with respondent selection and enhanced the reliability of the findings (Saunders *et al*., 2023). Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising measurement items adapted from previously validated scales. Empathy and responsiveness were adapted from the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman *et al*., (1988) and its healthcare adaptations by Meesala and Paul (2018) and Fatima *et al.,* (2018). Patient retention items were adapted from Zeithaml *et al*., (1996), Caruana (2002) and Ahmed *et al*., (2022), while electronic word-of-mouth items were adapted from Hennig-Thurau *et al*., (2004), Goyette *et al*., (2010) and Cheung and Thadani (2012). The items were modified to reflect the operational context of private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

The research instrument was subjected to face and content validity through the evaluation of experts in marketing and healthcare management to ensure that the measurement items adequately captured the study constructs. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values of 0.70 or above considered acceptable, indicating satisfactory reliability of the measurement scales (Hair *et al*., 2022). The hypotheses were tested using the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient at the 0.05 level of significance. The choice of Spearman's correlation was informed by the ordinal nature of the measurement scale and the non-normal distribution of the data. Spearman's correlation is appropriate for examining the strength and direction of monotonic relationships between variables without requiring the assumption of normality (Hair *et al*., 2022; Field, 2024).

Data Analysis, Results and Discussion of Findings

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between empathy and patient retention among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.1: Spearman Rank Order Correlation Analysis Showing the Relationship between Empathy and Patient Retention among Private Hospital Patients in Port Harcourt

Correlations				
			Empathy	**Patient Retention**
Spearman's rho	Empathy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.801**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	230	230
	Patient Retention	Correlation Coefficient	.801**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	230	230
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).				

Source: *Field Survey Data, 2026, SPSS 23.*

Table 4.1 presents the Spearman Rank Order Correlation analysis examining the relationship between empathy and patient retention among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt. The result reveals a strong positive correlation between empathy and patient retention ($\rho = 0.801$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 230$). Since the probability value (0.000) is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. The finding indicates that increased empathy demonstrated by healthcare personnel is associated with higher levels of patient retention. This suggests that compassionate care, individualized attention and genuine concern for patients significantly enhance patients' willingness to continue utilizing the services of private hospitals.

Hypothesis Two

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between empathy and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.2: Spearman Rank Order Correlation Analysis Showing the Relationship between Empathy and Electronic Word-of-Mouth among Private Hospital Patients in Port Harcourt

Correlations				
			Empathy	**Electronic Word-of-Mouth**
Spearman's rho	Empathy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.728**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	230	230
	Electronic Word-of-Mouth	Correlation Coefficient	.728**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	230	230
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).				

Source: *Field Survey Data, 2026, SPSS 23.*

Table 4.2 shows the Spearman Rank Order Correlation analysis between empathy and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt. The result indicates a strong positive relationship between the two variables ($\rho = 0.728$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 230$). Because the probability value is less than the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding implies that higher levels of empathy exhibited by healthcare professionals significantly encourage patients to communicate favourable opinions and recommendations about the hospital through electronic platforms and social media. Consequently, empathy plays an important role in promoting positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Hypothesis Three

H_{03}: There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and patient retention among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.3: Spearman Rank Order Correlation Analysis Showing the Relationship between Responsiveness and Patient Retention among Private Hospital Patients in Port Harcourt

Correlations				
			Responsiveness	**Patient Retention**
Spearman's rho	Responsiveness	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.657**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.003
		N	230	230
	Patient Retention	Correlation Coefficient	.657**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.
		N	230	230
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).				

Source: *Field Survey Data, 2026, SPSS 23.*

Table 4.3 presents the Spearman Rank Order Correlation analysis of the relationship between responsiveness and patient retention among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt. The analysis reveals a strong positive relationship between responsiveness and patient retention ($\rho = 0.657$, $p = 0.003$, $N = 230$). Since the probability value (0.003) is lower than the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected. The result suggests that prompt attention to patients' needs, timely service delivery and the willingness of healthcare professionals to provide immediate assistance significantly enhance patient retention in private hospitals.

Hypothesis Four

H_{04}: There is no significant relationship between responsiveness and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.4: Spearman Rank Order Correlation Analysis Showing the Relationship between Responsiveness and Electronic Word-of-Mouth among Private Hospital Patients in Port Harcourt

Correlations				
			Responsiveness	**Electronic Word-of-Mouth**
Spearman's rho	Responsiveness	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.778**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	230	230
	Electronic Word-of-Mouth	Correlation Coefficient	.778**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	230	230
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).				

Source: *Field Survey Data, 2026, SPSS 23.*

Table 4.4 presents the Spearman Rank Order Correlation analysis examining the relationship between responsiveness and electronic word-of-mouth among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt. The result reveals a strong positive correlation between responsiveness and electronic word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.778$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 230$). Since the probability value is less than the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected. The finding indicates that prompt, timely and efficient responses to patients' needs significantly encourage patients to share favourable experiences and recommend the hospital through electronic channels.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study demonstrate that hospital service quality, operationalized through empathy and responsiveness, significantly enhances patient patronage among private hospital patients in Port Harcourt. Specifically, empathy exhibited a strong positive and significant relationship with patient retention ($\rho = 0.801$, $p < 0.05$) and electronic word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.728$, $p < 0.05$), while responsiveness also showed significant positive relationships with patient retention ($\rho = 0.657$, $p < 0.05$) and electronic word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.778$, $p < 0.05$). These findings imply that patients are more likely to remain loyal to hospitals and voluntarily recommend them when healthcare professionals demonstrate genuine concern, individualized attention, prompt service delivery and timely responses to patients' needs. The results are consistent with the propositions of the Relationship Marketing Theory (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which argues that organizations cultivate enduring customer relationships through trust, commitment and superior service experiences, and the Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), which views value as being co-created through positive interactions between service providers and beneficiaries.

Empirically, the findings corroborate those of Meesala and Paul (2018), Fatima *et al*., (2018), Ahmed *et al*., (2022), Zhou *et al*., (2017), Wolf *et al*., (2021), Guan *et al*., (2024), Zhang *et al*., (2024), Kumar *et al*., (2024) and Osei-Frimpong *et al*., (2024), all of whom reported that empathetic and responsive healthcare delivery significantly improves patient loyalty, retention and favourable word-of-mouth. Although previous studies such as Gabay (2016), Dayan *et al*., (2017), Lai *et al*., (2020), Al-Neyadi *et al*., (2018), Shaqura *et al*., (2022), Chandra *et al*., (2023) and Alabdaly *et al*., (2024) suggested that the effects of empathy and responsiveness may sometimes be indirect or moderated by contextual factors such as organizational trust, perceived value, staffing constraints and digital engagement, the present study provides strong evidence that, within the private hospitals in Port Harcourt, empathy and responsiveness are strategic service quality capabilities that directly strengthen patient retention and improve positive electronic word-of-mouth.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of hospital service quality dimensions (empathy and responsiveness) on patient patronage among private hospitals in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The study examined whether interpersonal service quality enhances patient retention and word-of-mouth, two critical behavioural indicators of patient patronage. The study found that empathy exhibited strong positive and statistically significant relationships with patient retention ($\rho = 0.801$, $p < 0.05$) and word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.728$, $p < 0.05$). Also, responsiveness demonstrated significant positive relationships with patient retention ($\rho = 0.657$, $p < 0.05$) and word-of-mouth ($\rho = 0.778$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, these findings suggest that patients' behavioural responses are shaped by the technical quality of healthcare and also, how healthcare providers consistently demonstrate compassion, individualized attention, prompt service delivery and genuine concern throughout the care process.

The study therefore concludes that hospital service quality (empathy and responsiveness) strengthens patients' trust, reinforce relational commitment and encourage both continued utilization and favourable recommendations, thereby creating sustainable patient patronage. The findings extend Relationship Marketing Theory by demonstrating that enduring patient–hospital relationships are cultivated through repeated positive service encounters that transform patient satisfaction into long-term retention and advocacy. Hence, private hospitals seeking sustainable competitive advantage should embed empathy and responsiveness within their service culture and operational strategy.

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