

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SERVICE FIRMS IN PORT HARCOURT**Chukundah, Tutah Tonye (Ph.D)¹ & Acee-Eke, Beatrice Chinyere (Ph.D)²****Department of Marketing, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt.***Email: tonyetutah@gmail.com¹ & bettyacee1@gmail.com²***ABSTRACT**

Our study centered on impact of covid19 on service firms in Port Harcourt. The study was informed on key challenges posed by Covid 19 pandemic, the coping mechanisms, and potential long-term implications for business sustainability, as understanding these factors is crucial for developing policies and strategies that will enhance the resilience of service firms against future economic shocks and pandemics. The study was guided by two research questions and two hypotheses, adopted correlational research design, the study population comprised of thirty (30) service firms in Port Harcourt and census study carried out. Questionnaire was the major instrument for data collection. Data collected was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) adopted to test the various hypotheses formulated, with the aid of statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 26. In course of the study it was found and held that there is a strong and significant relationship between lock down and service reliability. There is significant relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt. Consequently, the study recommended among others that service firms in Port Harcourt must prioritize moving their operations online, offering services via digital platforms to ensure continued service delivery, especially during times of social distancing or lockdowns. Service firms in Port Harcourt should develop flexible business models that can easily adapt to unforeseen circumstances, be customer centered providing prompt service delivery to remain competitive.

Key Words: Covid 19, Impact, Service firms, Pandemic, Lock down, Speedy delivery

Background to the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, has profoundly disrupted global economies, with service firms being particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on human interaction and mobility (World Bank, 2020). In Nigeria, and specifically in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, the service sector plays a pivotal role in economic development, encompassing industries such as hospitality, transportation, retail, and financial services (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). Understanding the pandemic's impact on these service firms is crucial for formulating effective recovery strategies and enhancing resilience against future crises.

Prior to the pandemic, Nigeria's service sector was a significant contributor to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), accounting for approximately 54.39% in the first quarter of 2020 (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). Port Harcourt, as a major urban center and oil hub, witnessed substantial economic activities driven by its service industries. However, the advent of COVID-19 led to unprecedented challenges, including mandatory lockdowns, social distancing measures, and travel restrictions, all of which severely disrupted service-oriented businesses (UNDP, 2021). In response to the rising number of COVID-19 cases, the Rivers State government implemented stringent measures to curb the virus's spread. On May 4, 2020, Governor Nyesom Wike announced a 24-hour total lockdown on Obio Akpor and Port Harcourt City Local Government Areas, mandating that all residents stay at home (Daily Post, 2020). While these measures were essential for public health, they inadvertently led to the suspension of numerous business operations, particularly affecting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the service sector (Vanguard, 2020). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a survey revealing that approximately 20% of Nigeria's full-time workforce experienced job losses during the pandemic (UNDP, 2021). This statistic underscores the pandemic's profound effect on employment within the service industry, where human capital is a critical asset. The reduction in workforce not only affected income levels but also diminished consumer spending power, further exacerbating the challenges faced by service firms (NBS, 2021).

Financially, service firms encountered significant hurdles. A study examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on accounting and financial reporting in Nigeria highlighted notable differences between financial

reports published before and during the pandemic (PwC, 2020). The pandemic influenced events after reporting periods, raised concerns about the going concern status of firms, and affected interim financial reporting. These financial strains were particularly pronounced in SMEs, which often lacked the reserves to withstand prolonged periods of reduced revenue (ILO, 2020). Despite these challenges, certain sectors within the service industry demonstrated resilience. The Nigeria Customs Service, Area 1 Command in Port Harcourt, reported a revenue of N16.18 billion for the first quarter of 2020, an increase of N2.99 billion compared to the same period in 2019 (Vanguard, 2020). This improvement suggests that while some service sectors suffered, others managed to adapt and even thrive amidst the pandemic's constraints.

The pandemic also prompted a shift towards digitalization. With physical interactions limited, many service firms turned to digital platforms to sustain operations (UNDP, 2021). This transition was particularly evident in the financial services sector, where there was an increased adoption of electronic payment systems and online banking (PwC, 2020). However, this shift also highlighted the digital divide, as not all businesses possessed the technological infrastructure or skills to make this transition seamlessly (NBS, 2021).

Environmental impacts were another facet of the pandemic's influence. A study assessing air quality in Port Harcourt during the lockdown observed changes in pollution levels, attributed to reduced industrial and vehicular activities (Nwokocha & Dike, 2021). This unintended environmental benefit underscores the intricate link between economic activities and environmental health, suggesting that sustainable practices could be integrated into the recovery plans of service firms. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a multifaceted impact on service firms in Port Harcourt. The challenges ranged from operational disruptions and financial strains to workforce reductions and accelerated digitalization. Conversely, certain sectors exhibited resilience, and environmental conditions experienced temporary improvements. A comprehensive understanding of these impacts is essential for policymakers and business leaders to develop strategies that not only facilitate recovery but also enhance the resilience and sustainability of service firms in the face of future crises.

Statement of Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound and far-reaching consequences on service firms globally, with particularly severe impacts in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The service sector, which includes hospitality, banking, transportation, and retail businesses, suffered immense disruptions due to the lockdown measures, movement restrictions, and economic downturn caused by the pandemic (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021). Many businesses experienced operational challenges, revenue losses, and workforce reductions, thereby affecting their long-term sustainability (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021).

One of the major challenges faced by service firms in Port Harcourt was the financial strain resulting from decreased customer patronage and mandatory restrictions on business operations. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute a significant portion of the service sector, were particularly vulnerable as they lacked financial reserves to cushion the impact of prolonged closures and reduced demand (PwC, 2020). Consequently, many businesses either shut down permanently or struggled to recover post-pandemic due to limited financial support and access to credit facilities (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). The pandemic led to massive job losses within the service sector, as businesses were forced to downsize or shut down completely. A survey by UNDP (2021) revealed that about 20% of Nigeria's full-time workforce lost their jobs during the pandemic, significantly affecting household incomes and overall economic stability. In Port Harcourt, where many people rely on service sector employment, this resulted in widespread economic hardship and reduced consumer spending power, which further exacerbated the decline in business performance (NBS, 2021).

Another critical issue was the shift towards digitalization, which, while beneficial for some businesses, exposed technological gaps in the service industry. Many firms had to adopt digital solutions such as e-commerce, online banking, and virtual customer interactions to sustain their operations (UNDP, 2021). However, not all service firms had the resources, infrastructure, or technical expertise to transition effectively, leading to a widening gap between digitally advanced firms and those struggling to adapt (PwC, 2020).

Government interventions and economic stimulus packages aimed at mitigating the effects of the pandemic were often insufficient or did not reach all affected businesses. While some firms benefited from financial relief programs, others were left without adequate support, making it difficult for them to resume operations

or recover their pre-pandemic performance levels (ILO, 2020). This uneven distribution of support further contributed to the challenges faced by service firms in Port Harcourt.

Despite these challenges, certain service sectors, such as logistics and digital financial services, witnessed increased demand due to shifts in consumer behavior during the pandemic (Vanguard, 2020). However, the overall negative impact of COVID-19 on service firms in Port Harcourt remains significant, necessitating a comprehensive study to assess the extent of these effects and identify effective recovery strategies. In light of these issues, this study seeks to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on service firms in Port Harcourt.

Conceptual Framework

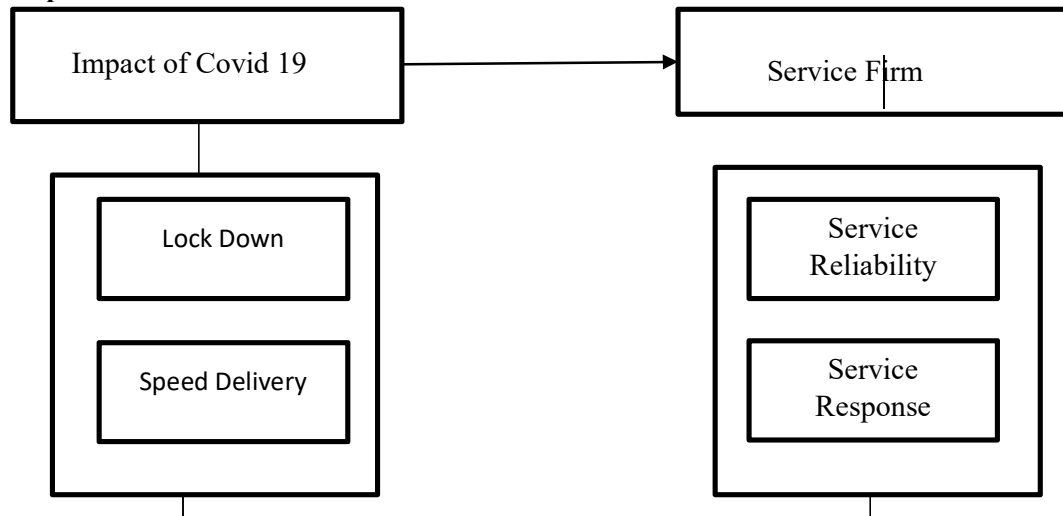


Fig 1 Conceptual Frame Work Showing the Relationship between the Impact of Covid19 on Service Firms in Port Harcourt.

Source: Soludo, C. C. (2020);

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is focused on investigating the impact of Covid19 on service firms in Port Harcourt with the following specific objectives to:

1. Examine the relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt
2. Examine the relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt?
2. What is the relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt?

Research Hypotheses

HO₁: There is no significant relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt

HO₂: There is no significant relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Impact of Covid19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on various sectors globally, with Nigeria experiencing economic, social, and health-related disruptions. The outbreak of the virus led to widespread lockdowns, movement restrictions, and economic downturns that affected businesses, employment, and

public health. According to Soludo (2020), the pandemic exposed Nigeria's economic vulnerabilities, particularly in the informal sector, which employs a large portion of the population.

The economic impact of COVID-19 was profound, as businesses struggled to cope with supply chain disruptions and reduced consumer spending. The pandemic led to a decline in oil prices, affecting government revenue and foreign exchange reserves (Salami, 2020). This decline in revenue subsequently impacted the government's ability to implement economic stimulus programs effectively. The service industry, including hospitality, transportation, and retail, suffered the most, as restrictions limited customer interaction and business operations (Adeniran & Sidiq, 2021). The labor market also faced challenges, with job losses escalating as businesses reduced their workforce to remain afloat. Olayemi (2021) noted that many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were unable to sustain operations due to decreased demand and rising operational costs. Consequently, the unemployment rate in Nigeria surged, exacerbating existing economic hardships. In addition to economic effects, the health sector experienced severe strain. The pandemic revealed deficiencies in Nigeria's healthcare infrastructure, as hospitals and healthcare workers struggled to manage the surge in COVID-19 cases. Ehanire (2020) emphasized that inadequate testing facilities, shortages of medical supplies, and insufficient healthcare personnel worsened the crisis. This situation underscored the need for increased investment in the health sector to improve resilience against future pandemics.

Socially, COVID-19 altered the way individuals interacted, with social distancing and virtual communication becoming the new norm. Educational institutions had to transit to online learning, which posed challenges for students in rural areas with limited access to digital resources (Afolabi & Igbokwe, 2020). Similarly, religious and social gatherings were restricted, affecting communal activities that are deeply rooted in Nigerian culture (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021).

Despite these challenges, the pandemic also accelerated digital transformation across various industries. The rise in e-commerce, digital banking, and remote work demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of businesses in Nigeria (Adewale, 2021). This shift towards digital solutions suggests that organizations must continue investing in technology to remain competitive in the post-pandemic era. COVID-19 had a multifaceted impact on Nigeria's economy, health sector, labor market, and social interactions. While the crisis exposed structural weaknesses, it also highlighted opportunities for innovation and policy reforms. Future preparedness and strategic investments in critical sectors are essential for mitigating similar disruptions in the future (Soludo, 2020).

Dimensions of the impact of covid19

Lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the implementation of lockdown measures worldwide, including in Nigeria, as a means of curbing the spread of the virus. Lockdowns involved restrictions on movement, closure of non-essential businesses, and limitations on public gatherings, significantly affecting economic activities and service delivery. According to Ehanire (2020), the lockdown was crucial in controlling the rate of infection, but it also had profound economic and social consequences. One of the primary effects of lockdown on service delivery was the disruption of business operations, particularly in the service sector. Many businesses, including hospitality, retail, education, and transportation, had to suspend or reduce their activities. According to Adeniran and Sidiq (2021), service-based businesses that relied on physical interactions faced severe operational challenges, leading to financial losses and, in some cases, permanent closures.

Healthcare service delivery was also significantly impacted by lockdown measures, while hospitals remained operational, restrictions on movement and fear of contracting the virus discouraged individuals from seeking medical attention for non-COVID-related illnesses (Ehanire, 2020). Additionally, disruptions in supply chains led to shortages of essential medical supplies and personnel, further straining healthcare services (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021). In the education sector, the lockdown forced schools and higher institutions to shift to online learning. However, Afolabi and Igbokwe (2020) noted that this transition was challenging, particularly for students in rural areas who lacked access to digital devices and internet connectivity. The shift also highlighted disparities in technological infrastructure, making it difficult for some institutions to effectively implement remote learning solutions. Financial services were also affected, as many bank branches had to close or operate with reduced staff. Digital banking and fintech solutions became more prominent as customers turned to online banking and mobile transactions to meet their financial needs

(Soludo, 2020). This shift accelerated the adoption of financial technology and reshaped the banking landscape in Nigeria.

Despite the disruptions, the lockdown period also highlighted the importance of digital transformation. Businesses that had already adopted technology-driven service delivery models were better positioned to navigate the crisis. The pandemic underscored the need for organizations to invest in digital infrastructure to enhance service resilience in future crises (Adeniran & Sidiq, 2021). The COVID-19 lockdown had far-reaching consequences on service delivery in Nigeria, affecting business operations, healthcare, education, logistics, and financial services. While the restrictions posed significant challenges, they also accelerated digital transformation and innovation across various sectors. Moving forward, organizations must focus on building resilience through technology adoption and flexible service delivery models to withstand future disruptions (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021).

Speed Delivery

Speed delivery refers to the efficiency and timeliness with which goods and services are transported to consumers. In an increasingly digital and fast-paced world, speed delivery has become a critical factor in customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and business competitiveness (Christopher, 2016). Organizations, especially those in logistics, e-commerce, and service industries, prioritize rapid delivery to enhance customer experience and maintain a competitive edge. The importance of speed delivery became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns and movement restrictions increased reliance on fast logistics and e-commerce services. According to Adeniran and Sidiq (2021), businesses that could efficiently fulfill orders and deliver services promptly gained a significant advantage over competitors. Speed delivery also plays a crucial role in emergency response services, healthcare supply chains, and perishable goods industries, where delays can have critical consequences (Ehanire, 2020).

No doubt, technological advancements have played a significant role in enhancing speed delivery. The adoption of artificial intelligence, automation, and real-time tracking has streamlined logistics operations, reducing delays and optimizing routes (Adewale, 2021). Additionally, digital payment solutions and e-commerce platforms have facilitated seamless order processing, ensuring quicker turnaround times (Soludo, 2020). However, speed delivery also comes with challenges. The pressure to deliver rapidly can lead to increased operational costs, logistical errors, and employee burnout. Maintaining a balance between efficiency and quality service is essential for sustainable business operations (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021). Companies must invest in robust infrastructure, workforce training, and innovative solutions to meet the growing demand for speed delivery without compromising service standards.

The efficiency of speed delivery varies across industries. E-commerce, companies like Jumia and Konga have optimized their logistics networks to ensure same-day or next-day delivery in major cities (Salami, 2021). In healthcare, rapid delivery of medical supplies and vaccines has been crucial in responding to health crises (Ehanire, 2020). In the food and beverage industry, speed delivery ensures that perishable items reach consumers in optimal conditions, reducing food waste and increasing customer satisfaction (Afolabi & Igbokwe, 2020). Consumer expectations continue to evolve, driving businesses to adopt innovative solutions to improve delivery times (Chukundah & Agbi, 2024). The use of drones, electric vehicles, and smart warehouses are emerging trends in logistics aimed at enhancing speed delivery while reducing environmental impact (Adewale, 2021). Additionally, partnerships with third-party logistics providers enable businesses to expand their reach and improve service efficiency (Soludo, 2020).

Governments and regulatory bodies also play a role in facilitating speed delivery by improving infrastructure, streamlining customs processes, and implementing policies that support efficient logistics operations (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021). Investments in road networks, digital payment systems, and cybersecurity measures are essential for the sustained growth of speed delivery services. Speed delivery is a vital component of modern business operations, significantly influencing customer satisfaction and overall efficiency. As consumer expectations continue to evolve, businesses must embrace technological innovations and strategic planning to enhance their delivery capabilities and remain competitive in an ever-changing marketplace (Adeniran & Sidiq, 2021). With continuous advancements in logistics and technology, speed delivery will remain a key driver of economic growth and business success.

The Concept of Service Firms

Service firms are businesses that primarily provide intangible products rather than physical goods (Chukundah & Agbi, 2024). These firms operate in various industries, including healthcare, finance, education, hospitality, and professional services, and their main objective is to deliver value through expertise, experience, and customer interactions (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2018). The service industry is a critical driver of economic growth, contributing significantly to employment and GDP in many countries, including Nigeria (Adewale, 2021).

Unlike manufacturing firms that produce tangible goods, service firms focus on delivering experiences, problem-solving, and customer satisfaction. According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2016), services have four key characteristics: intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability. Intangibility means that services cannot be physically touched or stored, making customer perception and trust essential to business success. Inseparability indicates that production and consumption occur simultaneously, often requiring direct interaction between the service provider and the consumer (Kotler & Keller, 2015). Variability refers to the fact that service quality can differ depending on factors such as the provider, location, or time of delivery. Perishability implies that services cannot be stored for future use, necessitating demand management strategies (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016).

Technology has significantly transformed the service industry, improving efficiency and customer experience. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and automation have enabled businesses to offer faster and more personalized services. For instance, e-commerce platforms, online banking, and telemedicine have revolutionized traditional service delivery models (Adeniran & Sidiq, 2021). Additionally, service firms rely heavily on customer relationships, as repeat business and referrals are crucial for long-term success (Zeithaml et al., 2018).

Service firms face various challenges including competition, service quality management, and customer expectations. Maintaining high service standards requires continuous staff training, investment in technology, and customer feedback mechanisms (Afolabi & Igbokwe, 2020). Additionally, regulatory compliance and economic fluctuations can impact service firms' sustainability (Soludo, 2020). In all, service firms play a vital role in the economy by providing intangible yet valuable offerings that enhance consumer experiences and business operations. Their ability to adapt to technological advancements and evolving consumer needs determines their long-term success in a dynamic and competitive marketplace (Adewale, 2021).

Measures of Service Firms

Service Reliability

Service reliability refers to a firm's ability to consistently deliver its services as promised, meeting or exceeding customer expectations. It is a critical factor in building customer trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Service reliability ensures that customers receive the expected level of service every time they engage with a business, reducing uncertainty and frustration (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). A reliable service is characterized by dependability, consistency, and accuracy. Customers expect that a service provider will fulfill their commitments on time and with the promised quality. For instance, in the banking sector, customers trust that financial transactions will be processed accurately and without unnecessary delays (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2018). Similarly, in the healthcare industry, service reliability is crucial as errors or inconsistencies can have life-threatening consequences (Adeniran & Sidiq, 2021).

To achieve high service reliability, organizations must develop and implement robust quality management systems. This includes setting clear service standards, training employees effectively, and monitoring performance regularly. Organizations can also leverage technology, such as automated customer support and predictive analytics, to minimize errors and enhance service consistency (Soludo, 2020). Service reliability also extends to contingency planning and crisis management. Unexpected disruptions, such as natural disasters or economic downturns, can affect service delivery. Companies must have backup plans in place to ensure continuity and minimal impact on customers (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many firms quickly adopted digital solutions to maintain service reliability despite lockdown restrictions (Afolabi & Igbokwe, 2020). Despite its importance, achieving service reliability comes with challenges. External factors such as supply chain disruptions, technological failures, and human errors can lead to service inconsistencies. Organizations must continuously evaluate and improve their service delivery models to adapt to changing circumstances and maintain reliability (Adewale, 2021).

Service reliability is a cornerstone of business success, directly influencing customer perception and retention. It takes firms that prioritize reliability through effective strategies, employee training, and technological advancements to gain a competitive edge in their respective industries (Kotler & Keller, 2015).

Service Response

Service response refers to the speed, effectiveness, and quality with which an organization addresses customer inquiries, complaints, or service requests. It is an essential component of customer service and plays a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction and brand perception (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2018). A well-structured service response system ensures that customers receive prompt and relevant assistance, enhancing their overall experience. The efficiency of service response is often measured by response time, resolution time, and customer satisfaction levels. Timely responses to customer concerns are crucial in industries such as healthcare, banking, and e-commerce, where delays can lead to significant inconvenience or loss of trust (Kotler & Keller, 2015). Organizations that provide rapid and effective responses to service-related issues are more likely to retain customers and improve their reputation (Adeniran & Sidiq, 2021).

One of the key aspects of an effective service response system is accessibility. Customers should be able to reach service providers through multiple channels, including phone calls, emails, live chat, and social media platforms (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016). Businesses that invest in omnichannel support enhance customer convenience and satisfaction, leading to long-term loyalty. Service response also requires accuracy and professionalism. Providing customers with precise, well-informed solutions is vital for maintaining trust. Miscommunication or misinformation can escalate issues and damage a company's credibility (Afolabi & Igbokwe, 2020). Organizations must train customer service representatives to handle queries efficiently and with empathy.

Technological advancements have revolutionized service response by enabling faster and more efficient interactions. The use of artificial intelligence, chatbots, and automated response systems allows businesses to address common inquiries quickly and accurately (Soludo, 2020). Additionally, data analytics tools help companies predict customer needs and provide proactive responses to potential issues (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021). However, service response is not without challenges. High customer demand, inadequate workforce training, and poor communication systems can hinder response efficiency. Businesses must continuously invest in staff development, technological upgrades, and customer feedback mechanisms to enhance service response (Zeithaml et al., 2018). Moreover, personalization is increasingly becoming a key factor in service response. Customers appreciate when businesses recognize their past interactions and tailor responses accordingly. Personalized service responses not only improve customer satisfaction but also strengthen relationships and encourage brand loyalty (Adewale, 2021).

Service response is a vital component of effective customer service. Businesses that prioritize fast, accurate, and empathetic responses to customer inquiries and complaints gain a competitive advantage in today's dynamic market. By leveraging technology, training employees effectively, and adopting a customer-centric approach, firms can enhance their service response and build lasting customer relationships (Kotler & Keller, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Contingency Theory

The study anchored on contingency theory, developed by scholars such as Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), stating that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to management or organizational effectiveness. Instead, the optimal course of action depends on internal and external environmental factors. The theory suggests that businesses must adapt their strategies, structures, and processes based on prevailing conditions to achieve success.

In the context of service firms in Port Harcourt during the COVID-19 pandemic, Contingency Theory is highly relevant. The pandemic created unprecedented challenges, forcing businesses to modify their operational strategies. Service firms that quickly adapted by implementing remote work, digital customer service, and flexible supply chain management were more likely to sustain operations and maintain customer satisfaction (Afolabi & Igbokwe, 2020).

Contingency Theory emphasizes the need for organizational agility, responsiveness, and strategic decision-making based on situational factors. Companies that ignored these factors struggled with inefficiencies, poor

customer experiences, and financial losses. Thus, the theory provides valuable insights into how service firms can navigate crises and improve resilience in uncertain environments.

Empirical Review

Afolabi & Igbokwe (2020) conducted an empirical study on the impact of COVID-19 lockdown measures on Nigeria's service sector. Their study found that businesses that swiftly adapted digital strategies performed better than those relying on traditional business models. Many service firms transitioned to remote work and e-commerce platforms to maintain service delivery. The study also revealed that industries such as banking and telecommunications saw a rise in customer engagement due to digitalization. However, sectors like hospitality and transportation suffered massive declines in revenue. The findings emphasized the importance of business agility in crisis management. Their study suggested that government policies should encourage digital transformation to enhance service sector resilience in future crises.

Okonjo-Iweala (2021) explored how the Nigerian healthcare system adapted to service delivery challenges during COVID-19. The research showed that telemedicine and mobile health services became vital alternatives for medical consultations. Hospitals and clinics leveraged digital platforms to facilitate patient interactions, reducing physical visits and the risk of infection. The study revealed that private healthcare providers adopted electronic health record systems to streamline operations. However, the public health sector faced difficulties due to inadequate infrastructure and funding. The research recommended stronger public-private partnerships to improve healthcare delivery during pandemics. Findings underscored the need for policy interventions to integrate digital health solutions across the sector.

Adeniran & Sidiq (2021) analyzed the pandemic's impact on banking services in Nigeria. Their empirical research showed a significant increase in mobile and internet banking transactions during lockdown periods. Many banks expanded their digital services to accommodate growing customer demands. However, challenges such as cybersecurity threats and digital literacy gaps emerged. The study found that customers preferred mobile banking over traditional banking, a trend that continued post-pandemic. Recommendations included enhanced cybersecurity measures, customer education on digital platforms, and the expansion of financial inclusion strategies. The study highlighted how crises can accelerate digital transformation in financial institutions.

Adele (2021) investigated the effects of COVID-19 on customer service in Nigeria's retail sector. The study revealed that firms with strong online presence retained customers better than those without digital alternatives. Businesses that integrated chatbots and AI-driven customer support experienced higher customer satisfaction. The research also found that supply chain disruptions affected product availability, leading to customer dissatisfaction. Recommendations included the adoption of predictive analytics to improve inventory management and enhance supply chain resilience. The findings stressed the need for businesses to invest in digital tools to ensure continuous service delivery in crises.

Soludo (2020) examined the role of technology in maintaining service reliability during the pandemic. The study showed that automation and artificial intelligence improved response times in sectors such as banking, telecommunications, and healthcare. Firms that invested in cloud computing and remote work solutions maintained operational efficiency. However, organizations without digital infrastructure struggled to keep up with service demands. The research suggested that companies should adopt hybrid work models to increase flexibility. The findings emphasized the long-term benefits of technological investments in service delivery.

Eze & Nwankwo (2021) conducted an empirical study on e-commerce performance during COVID-19. Their research found that the pandemic accelerated the adoption of online shopping in Nigeria. Speed of delivery, order accuracy, and payment security significantly influenced customer retention. Challenges such as logistical constraints and delivery delays negatively impacted customer satisfaction. The study recommended that e-commerce firms collaborate with logistics providers to enhance service efficiency. Findings demonstrated that businesses that optimized their digital platforms experienced sustained growth beyond the pandemic.

Ogunyemi & Adebola (2021) analyzed the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Nigeria's logistics industry. Their research found that firms with flexible supply chain strategies recovered faster post-pandemic. Companies that diversified their supply sources experienced fewer disruptions. The study emphasized the need for logistics firms to invest in data-driven decision-making tools. Findings also suggested that government interventions should support infrastructure development for smoother transportation and delivery services. The study reinforced the importance of adaptability in supply chain management.

Ojo & Balogun (2022) assessed crisis management strategies among service firms in Nigeria during COVID-19. The study found that companies that adopted proactive strategies performed better than those that reacted late. Businesses that implemented scenario planning and risk assessment frameworks managed operational disruptions effectively. The research suggested that service firms should integrate crisis preparedness into their long-term planning. Findings emphasized that business that embraced strategic planning experienced minimal financial setbacks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted the correlational research design, because the researcher determined the relationship between the impacts of covid19 on selected service firm in Port Harcourt.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised of thirty (30) service firms in Port Harcourt. The information was obtained from <https://www.finelib.com>.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Sequel to the population of the study which is thirty (30) service firms in Port Harcourt, the study adopted a census approach. The census approach enabled the researcher to study the target population with a focus on (managers, customer service personals, human resource managers, finance department) of these firms. To generate data for the study, questionnaire was distributed in the frame of four (4) copies per firm. A total of one hundred and thirty (120) respondents covered. The non-probability convenience sampling technique adopted..

Methods of Data Analysis

The data that was collected through the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) adopted to test the various hypotheses formulated, with the aid of statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 26.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research question 1: What is the relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt

S/N	Lockdown	Responses					Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
	Items	SA	A	UD	D	SD			
1	The lockdown restrictions led to significant delays in the delivery of services by service firms in Port Harcourt.	78	12	17	9	4	4.28	1.13	Agree
2	Lockdown measures forced many service firms to adopt remote work strategies, affecting their efficiency.	81	15	11	7	6	4.31	1.16	Agree
3	The movement restrictions during the lockdown negatively impacted customer access to essential services.	80	11	18	9	2	4.31	1.08	Agree
4	Many businesses in the service sector struggled to maintain operations due to financial losses caused by the lockdown.	77	15	11	11	6	4.21	1.23	Agree

5	The lockdown period led to an increase in digital service delivery among firms in Port Harcourt.	83	8	8	12	9	4.20	1.34	Agree
Grand mean							4.26	1.18	Agree

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Table 1: shows that items (1 to 5) have means which were greater than the criterion mean (3.0). Moreover, the grand mean (4.26) was also greater than the criterion means. This revealed a strong relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt.

Research question 2: What is the relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of extent of relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt

S/N	Service Response	Responses					Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
		SA	A	UD	D	SD			
1	Customer complaints increased significantly during the COVID-19 period due to service inefficiencies.	71	20	9	17	3	4.15	1.20	Agree
2	Many businesses took longer to respond to customer inquiries during the pandemic.	68	31	5	7	9	4.18	1.22	
3	Firms that prioritized customer service response during the pandemic retained more customers.	82	8	7	15	8	4.17	1.35	Agree
4	Digital customer support platforms became more effective in handling service inquiries.	79	10	8	12	11	4.11	1.39	Agree
5	The pandemic highlighted the importance of a strong and efficient service response system for businesses.	84	9	14	9	4	4.33	1.14	strongly agree
Grand mean							4.18	1.26	Agree

Source: Survey Data, 2024.

Table 2: shows that items (1 to 5) have means which were greater than the criterion mean (3.0). Moreover, the grand mean (4.18) was also greater than the criterion means. This unveiled that speed delivery strongly relates with service response of service firms in Port Harcourt.

Test of Hypotheses

H0₁: There is no relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt.

Table 3: Correlations Analysis between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt.

	lock down	service reliability of service firms
lock down	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.975**
	N	0.000
		120

service reliability of service firms	Pearson Correlation	.975**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	120	120

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 shows a correlation coefficient of .975 with a probability value of 0.000. Since the probability value (0.000) is less than the significant level (0.01). It implies that the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. Meaning, there is a significant relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt.

H0₂: There is no relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt.

Table 4: Correlations Analysis between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt

		speed delivery	service response of service firms
speed delivery	Pearson Correlation	1	.940 **
	Sig.(2-tailed)		0.000
	N	120	120
service response of service firms	Pearson Correlation	.940**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	120	120

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: shows a correlation coefficient of .940 with a probability value of 0.000. Since the probability value (0.000) is less than the significant level (0.01). It implies that the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. Meaning, there is a strong relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt.

Discussion of Findings

The outcome of research question one as reflected in table 1 revealed a strong relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt. Also, table 3 shows a significant relationship between lock down and service reliability of service firms in Port Harcourt. The findings corroborate to that of Vanguard (2020). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a survey revealing that approximately 20% of Nigeria's full-time workforce experienced job losses during the pandemic.

Table 2 unveiled that speed delivery strongly relates with service response of service firms in Port Harcourt. Also, table 4 shows a strong relationship between speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt. The findings collaborate or in accordance with the findings of Nwokocha & Dike(2021). This unintended environmental benefit underscores the intricate link between economic activities and environmental health, suggesting that sustainable practices could be integrated into the recovery plans of service firms.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, it was concluded that there was a strong and significant relationship between lock down and service reliability, speed delivery and service response of service firms in Port Harcourt.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Base on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were made;

1. Service firms in Port Harcourt must prioritize moving their operations online, offering services via digital platforms to ensure continued service delivery, especially during times of social distancing or lockdowns.
2. Service firms in Port Harcourt should develop flexible business models that can easily adapt to unforeseen circumstances, such as future lockdowns or restrictions. This includes diversifying revenue streams, incorporating both in-person and virtual services, and being prepared to quickly

adjust operational strategies based on government regulations that's customer centered, prompt in delivery to remain competitive.

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