Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management

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ISSN: 2706-6592

Stratford Peer Reviewed Journals and Book Publishing
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management
Volume 9||Issue 2||Page 41-54|September||2026|
Email: info@stratfordjournals.org ISSN: 2706-6592

Brand Awareness and Customer Loyalty in Selected Chain Restaurants in Nairobi, Kenya

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How to cite this article: **Otieno, F. O., Burugu, R., Kibe, J. & Nthiga, R. (2026). Brand Awareness and Customer Loyalty in Selected Chain Restaurants in Nairobi, Kenya. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Management,* 9(2), 41-54.** https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t4411

Abstract

This study investigated the influence of various elements of brand awareness on customer loyalty within selected chain restaurants in Nairobi, Kenya. Despite their robust market presence and investments in pricing and quality incentives, fast-casual dining chains encounter challenges in customer retention amidst intense competition and evolving consumer preferences, frequently overlooking strategic opportunities by disregarding brand awareness factors. By applying Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model and Thibaut and Kelley's Comparison Level Theory, the research employed both descriptive and explanatory methodologies. The study involved 3,550 customers from fourteen outlets of two fast-casual restaurants located in busy shopping centers in Nairobi. These establishments were strategically situated within the malls and directly competed by offering comparable products. A random sample of 347 respondents was selected based on daily sales figures. Data was gathered using structured questionnaires, and the analysis included descriptive statistics and simple linear regression. The findings showed that brand awareness significantly and positively influences customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = 0.013$). These results suggest that boosting cognitive brand salience can enhance long-term customer retention. It is recommended that restaurant management focus on digital engagement strategies such as targeted social media campaigns, using user-generated content, improving interactive feedback systems, and collaborating with local micro-influencers to reinforce brand value.

Keywords: *Brand awareness, Brand image, Customer loyalty, Chain-affiliated restaurants, Nairobi.*

1.0 Introduction

Customer loyalty is fundamental to a restaurant's success within a competitive marketplace (Mosahab, Mahamad, & Ramayah, 2010; Zhou, Lu & Wang, 2009; Ismail & Yunan, 2016; Kaura, Prasad & Sharma, 2015). As Goofin and Price (1996) note, it is pivotal because it enhances product quality, offers a competitive advantage, creates profitable opportunities, and ultimately increases sales and revenue. Strong brands help customers visualise and understand the intangible attributes of products and services. They also reduce perceived risks associated with financial, social, or safety concerns related to purchases and can facilitate cognitive processing (Berry, 2000; Bharadwaj *et al.*, 1993). Goofin and Price (1996) emphasise that customer loyalty is vital, as it leads to superior product quality, a competitive edge, lucrative opportunities, and ultimately, higher sales and revenue.

Although restaurants have existed in Kenya since the 1990s, attracting and retaining customer loyalty remains a critical challenge amid rising competition targeting the same market segment. Even well-known restaurant chains that offer a comfortable, homely environment are struggling to retain customers. As customer expectations become more sophisticated and competition intensifies, hospitality managers face new challenges. Globalisation, market diffusion, and technological advancements have heightened consumer awareness, making success through product and pricing strategies alone increasingly difficult. Although these organisations provide loyalty rewards, competitive pricing, quality service, and products, they have yet to thoroughly investigate how brand awareness impacts customer loyalty, leaving valuable opportunities unexploited.

The growing importance of brand awareness to consumers has prompted restaurant and hospitality businesses to adopt more adaptable strategies and prioritise building customer loyalty. Although brand awareness remains vital in hospitality, its impact on customer loyalty has not been extensively examined, particularly in Nairobi's restaurant scene. Most studies to date originate in Western countries and focus mainly on industries such as airlines, electronics, and telecoms, which operate in different economic contexts from those in Kenya and Africa. This highlights the need to examine this relationship specifically within Nairobi's chain restaurant industry. This study explains how brand awareness, an independent variable, influences customer loyalty, a dependent variable, using the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model and the Comparison Level (CL) model.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the modern hospitality industry, cultivating enduring customer loyalty is paramount to securing a sustainable competitive advantage, enhancing customer retention, and increasing profitability (Zeithaml, 2000). To succeed in competitive markets, restaurant managers must establish a distinctive brand identity and maintain robust brand awareness, thereby helping consumers form clear, consistent mental associations with the brand (Ryu et al., 2008). Despite a comprehensive strategic framework, chain restaurants in Nairobi are experiencing challenges with poor customer retention and frequent brand switching. The market is highly fragmented owing to the rapid proliferation of both local and international casual dining brands. In response, leading restaurant chains have heavily invested in strategies such as expanding their physical footprint, launching customer reward and loyalty programs (Mason et al., 2006), and continuously monitoring consumer preferences to tailor menus, implement aggressive price promotions, and adopt Western-style, home-like decor. However, these conventional operational and pricing tactics are now inadequate. Globalization, market saturation, and technological advancements have cultivated a highly sophisticated consumer base that exhibits weak brand loyalty.

Competitors can readily replicate ambiance, promotional activities, and menu offerings, rendering product and pricing strategies alone ineffective. The primary concern is that, despite substantial investments in operational upgrades, large restaurant chains still struggle with unpredictable customer loyalty, often underestimating the importance of brand image and consumer awareness. While extensive research on brand equity exists within Western industries such as airlines, telecommunications, and electronics, there remains a notable lack of empirical data on how multidimensional brand awareness influences loyalty in casual dining establishments in developing sub-Saharan economies. Hospitality managers in Nairobi risk losing market share to more flexible rivals because there is insufficient evidence linking brand awareness to the ability to retain local customers, which could jeopardize their strategic objectives and revenue targets.

1.2 Research Objectives

To examine how brand awareness influences customer loyalty in selected chain-affiliated restaurants in Nairobi, Kenya.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study provides practical, data-driven insights that are applicable across different sectors of the hospitality industry. For hospitality managers and executives, it offers strategies to move away from costly price wars and focus on sustainable brand growth, thereby encouraging long-term customer loyalty. It provides market insights into consumer behaviour trends in Nairobi's growing fast-casual dining scene to industry policymakers and investors, guiding strategic market entry and expansion. For academic researchers and scholars, it bridges geographical gaps by applying Western brand equity models in a sub-Saharan economic context.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model

The research principally based its framework on Kevin Lane Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model. Keller characterizes CBBE as the distinctive influence of brand knowledge on consumer reactions to marketing initiatives. The model is organized as a four-tier pyramid, encompassing six essential brand-building components: brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgments, brand feelings, and brand resonance.

https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t4411

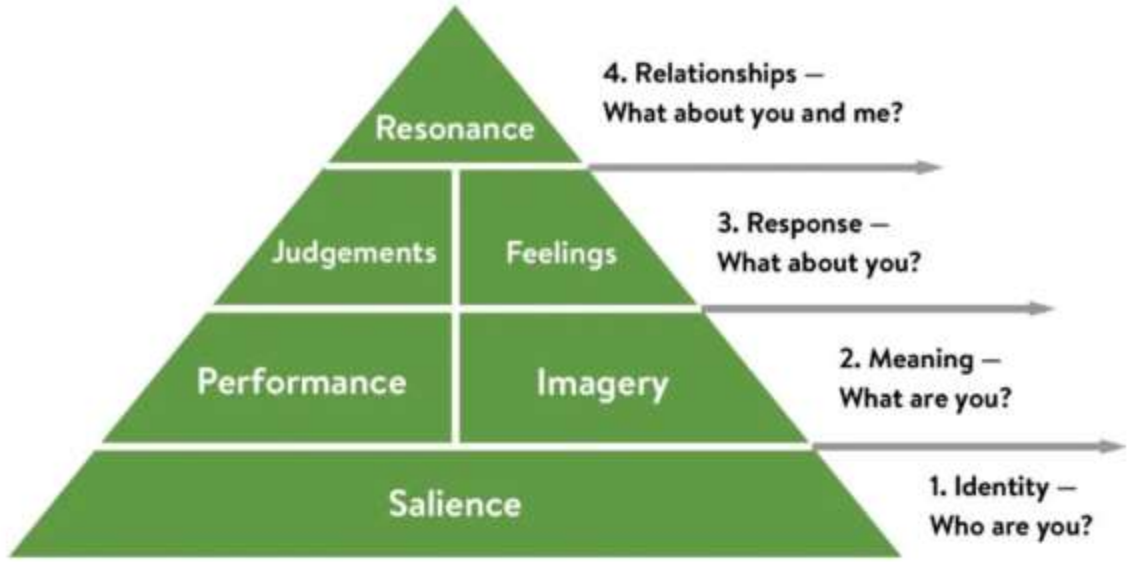

Figure 1: CBBE Model

Source: Brand Equity Model – CBBE Model (Keller, 2009).

This study focuses on the pyramid's foundational tier: Brand Salience, which pertains to brand awareness. Keller posits that brand awareness comprises two principal components: brand recall, defined as the consumer's capacity to remember the brand when contemplating a product category, and brand recognition, which refers to the consumer's ability to identify the brand upon encountering a visual or auditory cue.

In Nairobi's chain-affiliated restaurants, the CBBE model indicates that reaching the highest level of brand resonance - marked by strong customer loyalty - begins with building a solid cognitive base of brand awareness. In a market with many options and low switching costs, a well-known brand helps consumers decide. This awareness lowers perceived risks and serves as the main reference point, encouraging customers to repeatedly select the same restaurant chain and develop loyalty.

2.1.2 Comparison Level (CL) Model

The study additionally utilized the Comparison Level (CL) Model, which is based on Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) Social Exchange Theory. This model asserts that a consumer's assessment of a relationship or experience is influenced by a fundamental standard known as the Comparison Level (CL). The CL represents the minimum quality or outcome that a customer perceives they are entitled to, shaped by prior experiences, word-of-mouth communications, and marketing messages. Moreover, the model includes the Comparison Level for Alternatives (CLalt), which determines whether a customer stays loyal or switches to a competitor, depending on their perception of the quality of the next-best available option in the market. In Nairobi's fragmented fast-casual dining scene, the Customer Loyalty (CL) model clarifies why conventional loyalty strategies often prove insufficient. When consumers have multiple chain restaurant options within the same shopping center, their CLalt continuously fluctuates due to promotional discounts and aggressive marketing efforts by competitors. Brand awareness serves as a vital cognitive filter that raises consumers' baseline expectations (CL) for a specific restaurant while reducing the perceived attractiveness of alternatives (CLalt). When a restaurant chain develops strong brand recognition, customers perceive its offerings as substantially superior, thereby increasing perceived switching costs and protecting the brand against imitation by competitors.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

2.2.1 Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty pertains to a customer's emotional attachment to a specific brand (Liu & Hu, 2013). Uncles *et al.*, (2003) investigated customer loyalty from a multidimensional perspective, based on Meyer and Allen's (1991) research regarding employee commitment. They defined loyalty as positive attitudes or beliefs toward a brand, signifying an emotional bond. Akunja (2020) observes that in service markets, loyalty is also multidimensional, as customers demonstrate varying degrees of loyalty to a service at different times.

Brands that cultivate strong customer loyalty often become consumers' preferred choice when selecting products or services (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Such loyalty can diminish competitors' marketing influence and bolster a company's position within distribution channels (Moon *et al.*, 2010). Customer loyalty encompasses emotional commitments - such as price sensitivity - and observable behaviours, including recommending products and making repeat purchases. As Thompson *et al.* (2014) emphasize, fostering customer loyalty yields benefits such as increased market share, higher profits, and a broader customer base that is less vulnerable to competitors' marketing strategies.

Akunja (2020) underscores the importance of establishing and maintaining a positive product image with consumers for a business to succeed in today's competitive markets. Elevated brand awareness and a favourable brand image enhance the likelihood of brand preference, foster customer loyalty, and reduce the impact of competitors' marketing strategies (Keller, 1993). A brand encompasses not only the product, packaging, promotion, and advertising but also its overall presentation and specific name (Pepe *et al.*, 2011). Consumers tend to favour well-known brands, and restaurants with a robust brand image are generally preferred, leading to more positive attitudes toward their products and characteristics (Aghekyan-Simonian *et al.*, 2012).

Brand awareness refers to consumers' capacity to recognize or recall a brand as prominent within a particular product category (Nurdiyanto & Purnomo, 2021). It plays a vital role in shaping consumers' intentions to purchase products or services (Kadir & Shamsudin, 2019). The primary goal of brand awareness is to establish a dominant presence in consumers' minds (Abror & Setiaji, 2018). Typically, consumers display higher levels of brand awareness when they perceive the brand's quality as robust.

Brand awareness stored within a customer's memory can influence their purchasing decisions (Rahman & Supranto, 2019).

2.2.2 Brand Recall and Customer Loyalty

Brand recall refers to a consumer's ability to remember a specific brand name when prompted about a product or service category. Aaker's (1991) initial research indicates that high brand recall signifies strong memory associations, making brand recognition easier for consumers. In the hospitality sector, empirical studies consistently show that strong brand recall helps attract both new and returning patrons. For instance, Keller (2013) observed that when consumers seek a service such as dining, they construct a mental shortlist known as the consideration set. If a restaurant chain can effectively activate this internal list through memory cues, it can secure a competitive edge by converting immediate needs into sustained customer loyalty.

2.2.3 Brand Recognition and Customer Loyalty

Brand recognition assesses a consumer's ability to recall prior exposure to a brand when presented with explicit physical or visual cues, such as logos, distinctive colour schemes, signage, or exclusive interior decorations. Chi, Yeh, and Huang (2009) empirically assessed consumer decision-making and found that brand recognition serves as a vital heuristic in purchasing choices. When faced with unfamiliar settings or numerous options, consumers tend to favour recognised brands, viewing them as safer and of higher quality. Huang and Sarigöllü (2012) confirmed that brand recognition is linked to increased market share and customer loyalty. In busy retail environments such as Nairobi's malls, prominent visual branding draws attention, lowers perceived purchase risks, and helps foster lasting customer loyalty.

2.2.4 Top-of-Mind Awareness and Customer Loyalty

Top-of-mind awareness represents the highest level of brand equity, occurring when a consumer instinctively recalls a brand as the first within a particular product category. Kim and Kim (2005) examined how various aspects of brand equity influence financial performance in luxury hotels and casual dining establishments, affirming that top-of-mind awareness has the strongest positive influence on repeat patronage. Malik *et al.*, (2013) also found that top-of-mind awareness reduces the marketing effort competitors must expend. When a brand dominates consumers' perceptions, it builds strong psychological loyalty, making customers less responsive to price fluctuations or promotions from new competitors and ensuring consistent loyalty.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research employed both descriptive and explanatory methodologies. The descriptive component involved the systematic collection and presentation of quantitative data to delineate current consumer behavior and brand awareness within specific fast-casual dining establishments. Concurrently, the explanatory approach tested hypotheses and ascertained the nature, direction, and strength of the causal relationship between brand awareness (independent variable) and customer loyalty (dependent variable).

3.2 Target Population

The target population comprised 3,550 active customers frequenting fourteen strategically selected outlets of two leading fast-casual restaurant chains located within the same commercial shopping malls in Nairobi, Kenya. These two chains were deliberately chosen because each has over fifty regional outlets and several subsidiary brands, thus representing prominent casual dining organizations operating within a highly competitive market environment.

3.3 Sampling Frame, Size, and Technique

A sample size of 347 respondents was selected from a target population of 3,550 customers using Cochran’s formula. The study employed a two-stage sampling method. Purposive sampling identified 14 specific restaurant outlets, 7 from each major chain, located in identical shopping malls to control for geographic and socioeconomic differences. At each restaurant, structured questionnaires were randomly distributed to dine-in customers, with samples proportionally allocated based on recorded daily customer footfall at each site.

https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t4411

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

Quantitative data were collected using structured, self-administered questionnaires with a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To ensure data quality, a pilot study was performed, involving 10 questionnaires distributed to dine-in customers outside the main restaurants, to test the instrument's reliability and validity.

3.5 Data Analysis and Regression Model

After cleaning and coding questionnaires, data were entered into SPSS for analysis. Scale reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.70. A simple linear regression at $\alpha = 0.05$ was used to evaluate how well brand awareness predicted customer loyalty.

4.0 Research Findings and Discussion

A total of 347 structured questionnaires were distributed to customers at fourteen fast-casual restaurant outlets in Nairobi, and 334 fully completed and validated forms were received. Table 1 shows that the gender distribution is stable across all groups, with 58% males and 42% females. This means both brands tend to attract slightly more males while keeping a balanced gender ratio. The similarity suggests that gender probably has little impact on customer preference for either brand. Concerning age demographics, the predominant proportion of respondents falls within the 31 to 45-year age bracket (49%), with the subsequent group being those aged 21 to 30 years (29%).

Table 1: Gender, Age and Level of Education

	All Respondents	
Name of Variable	**N=334**	
	f	***%***
Gender of the Respondents		
Male	194	58
Female	140	42
Age		
20 years and below	8	2
21-30 years	97	29
31-45 years	165	49
46 years and above	64	19

Source: Authors' Thesis, (2026)

Table 2 indicates that respondents are well educated, with 37% holding diplomas, 31% holding bachelor's degrees, and 30% having postgraduate qualifications such as master's degrees and PhDs. This implies that both restaurants tend to attract a highly educated clientele, which likely influences their expectations regarding service, ambiance, and menu options.

Table 2: Level of Education

	All Respondents	
Name of Variable	**N=334**	
	f	**%**
Education Level		
High school	8	2
Diploma	122	37
Bachelor's degree	105	31
Master's degree	63	19
PhD	36	11

Source: Authors' Thesis, (2026).

Contemporary consumers within this industry demonstrate heightened discernment, underscoring the significance of consistent operations, brand reputation, and the overall quality of the customer experience (Assael, 1992; Grönroos, 2000).

Table 3: Marital Status and Duration of Dining

	All Respondents	
Name of Variable	**N=334**	
	f	**%**
Marital Status		
Married	285	85
Single	49	15
Duration of Dining		
3 - 5 years	64	19
5 - 7 years	48	14
7 - 10 years	152	46
Above 10 years	70	21

Source: Authors' Thesis, (2026).

Table 3 shows that most respondents are married (85%), while 15% are single. This suggests that visits are mainly motivated by family or social reasons rather than personal leisure. Regarding dining duration, the data highlight a loyal customer base: 46% have visited these places for 7–10 years, and another 21% for over 10 years. This indicates strong customer retention and brand loyalty across both venues. In contrast, only 19% have been patrons for 3–5 years, underscoring effective long-term engagement.

4.2 Brand Awareness and Customer Loyalty

4.2.1 Customers' Familiarity with the Brands

The abbreviations in the figures and tables are as follows: SA = strongly agree, A = agree, NS = not sure, D = disagree, and SD = strongly disagree. A majority of respondents distinctly differentiate these brands from their competitors, with 73% strongly affirming this distinction - a clear indication of strong brand recognition. The remaining respondents also concur, implying that nearly all customers are capable of recognizing and identifying these brands within a competitive marketplace, as depicted in Figure 2.

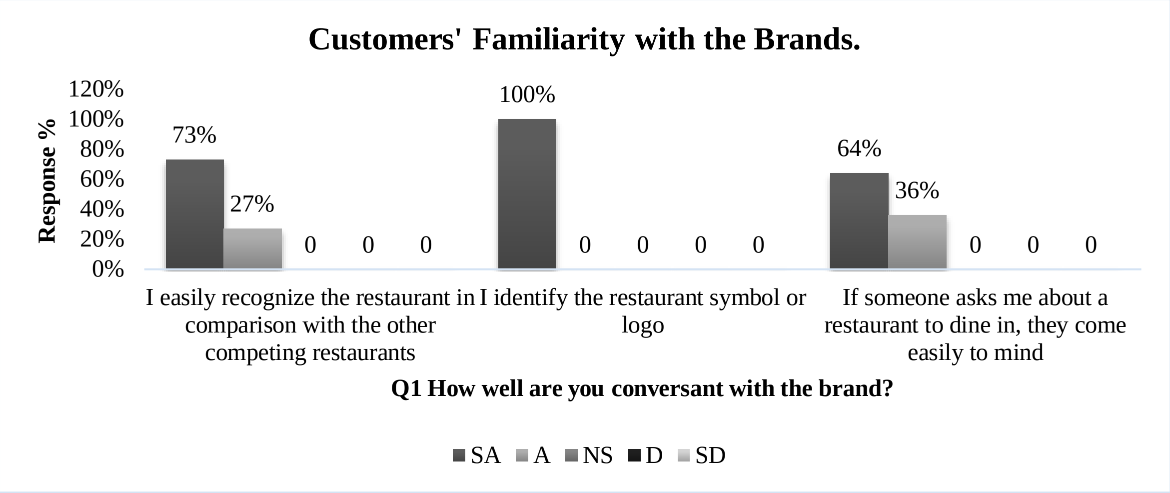

Figure 2: Customers' Familiarity with the Brands

Source: Authors' Thesis, (2026)

All respondents (100%) recognized the brand logos, indicating consistent visual branding and effective strategic implementation. Both establishments have distinct, memorable visual identities. The data show that these restaurants are highly recognizable and influence customers' dining choices. Specifically, 214 respondents (64%) strongly agreed that they are easily recalled when choosing a dining location, with many others also agreeing. While this recognition is somewhat lower than overall logo and brand awareness, the absence of negative feedback indicates that both brands are firmly ingrained in customers' minds. Overall, the data show strong brand recognition, characterized by ease of identification, distinctive visual identities, and high recall rates. The high percentages and large respondent numbers across metrics suggest effective branding that increases familiarity and keeps these restaurants top of mind for consumers.

4.2.2 Customers' Ability to Recognize the Restaurant Brands

Customers demonstrated a remarkable ability to associate colors effectively with their brands. For both brands, 313 respondents (94%) strongly concurred that they could easily recognize the colors, while 21 respondents (6%) concurred. This suggests that both brands employ consistent colour schemes that are memorable and readily identifiable. Logo recognition was also strong, as shown in Figure 3. Most respondents strongly concurred: 322 individuals (96%) stated that they could easily identify the logos, with only 4% simply concurring. This highlights the strong visual identity of these brands, as their logos serve as highly recognizable symbols that enhance brand visibility and facilitate differentiation in the marketplace.

Stratford Peer Reviewed Journals and Book Publishing
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Volume 9||Issue 2||Page 41-54|September||2026|
Email: info@stratfordjournals.org ISSN: 2706-6592

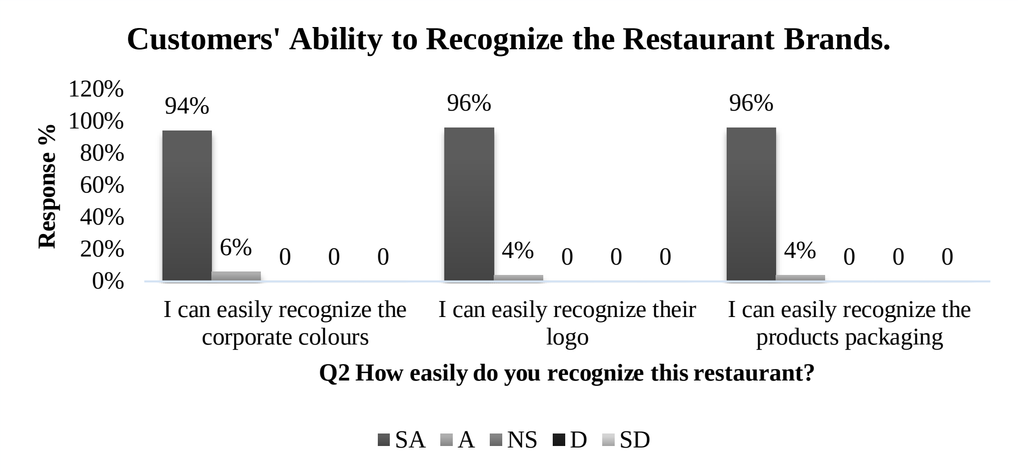

Figure 3: Customers' Ability to Recognize the Restaurant Brands

Source: Authors' Thesis (2026)

A similar positive trend is evident in product packaging recognition. For both restaurants, 322 respondents (96%) strongly agree they can easily identify the packaging, and a further 12 (4%) agree. These findings highlight the importance of packaging in brand recognition, as both restaurants use packaging designs that clearly reflect their brand identity. The results show that both restaurants have high brand recognition. The high percentages and respondent counts confirm that customers easily identify the brands through their colors, logos, and packaging. This familiarity reflects effective branding strategies and greatly improves brand awareness and customer recall.

4.3 Reliability Test

The reliability of the data was evaluated through Cronbach's alpha, particularly for key variables such as brand awareness and customer loyalty. The results showed that all indicators measuring these variables were reliable, with values surpassing the 0.7 benchmark. Table 4 presents these reliability results for brand awareness, revealing that measures of brand awareness significantly predicted customer loyalty, with mean scores between 4.64 and 5.00 and standard deviations from 0.000 to 0.446.

Table 4: Reliability on Brand Awareness and Customer Loyalty

	Mean	**SD**	**Cronbach's alpha (α)**
BRAND AWARENESS			
1. How well are you conversant with the brand?			
I easily recognise the restaurant compared with other competing restaurants.	4.73	0.446	
I recognize the restaurant's symbol or logo.	5.00	0.000	
If someone asks me for a dining recommendation, the restaurant often comes to mind easily.	4.64	0.481	0.743
2. How easily do you recognise this restaurant?			
I can easily recognise the corporate colors.	4.94	0.243	
I can easily recognise their logo.	4.96	0.186	
I can easily recognise the product's packaging.	4.96	0.186	0.921

Table 5 presents the reliability results for the customer scale, demonstrating excellent psychometric reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.927 derived from a 4-item instrument.

Table 5: Reliability of Customer Loyalty

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha (α)
CUSTOMER LOYALTY			
1. How positive are you about the products and services?			
I consider this restaurant my first choice compared to the other restaurants.	4.22	0.418	0.927
I will recommend this restaurant to others as my first choice.	4.20	0.401	
I will continue purchasing products and services from these restaurant brands.	4.28	0.450	
I am satisfied with the products and services offered by this restaurant.	4.13	0.342	

Source: Authors' Thesis, (2026).

4.4 Regression Coefficients

Table 6 shows the model's regression coefficients, with brand awareness as a significant positive predictor (β = 0.135, p = .013).

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

Coefficients[a]									
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	0.588	0.242		2.427	0.016	0.111	1.065		
Brand awareness	0.264	0.106	0.135	2.491	0.013	0.055	0.472	0.703	1.422
a. Dependent Variable: Customer loyalty									

Source: Authors' Thesis, (2026).

The study hypothesized that brand awareness did not significantly influence customer loyalty.

H_{01}: There is no significant influence of brand awareness on customer loyalty in chain restaurants.

Analysis indicates that brand awareness positively affects customer loyalty (β = 135, t = 491, p = 013). Given that the p-value is significantly below 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a noteworthy effect. Although brand awareness is a vital factor for loyalty, its relatively low beta coefficient suggests that mere recognition alone is insufficient to foster long-term commitment.

Analysis shows that top-of-mind awareness gives restaurants a competitive edge by improving recognition and differentiation. This supports Rahman and Supranto's (2019) conclusion that brand memory impacts buying choices. Top-of-mind awareness refers to the first brand recalled during dining decisions, reflecting how easily a brand is retrieved in consumer decision-making. Keller's (2009) Brand Equity Model explains customer perceptions and attitudes toward the brand.

Brand awareness is sustained through exposure across media channels, online platforms, social media engagement, and daily customer interactions. The high recall rates among respondents support Keller's (2001) assertion that brands establish a robust identity within the fast casual segment. These findings align with Yasin *et al.*, (2007), who contended that heightened consumer awareness enhances brand visibility and recall during shopping.

Furthermore, these results endorse Keller's (1993) Customer- Based Brand Equity Model, emphasizing that brand salience underpins the cognitive foundation necessary for relationship-building. For casual dining establishments, attaining top- of- mind status in high- traffic areas such as Nairobi malls facilitates rapid consumer recognition, minimizes search effort, and renders the brand an immediate choice.

Lastly, Malik *et al.*, (2013) observed that top- of- mind awareness establishes a psychological barrier, safeguarding the brand against short- term competitive strategies such as price reductions or decor imitation, thereby aiding in the preservation of operational stability and customer loyalty.

5.0 Conclusion

The study demonstrates that relying solely on conventional product and pricing strategies is insufficient to maintain market share in Nairobi's competitive hospitality sector. As the market becomes increasingly saturated and consumers more discerning, establishing strong cognitive brand equity is essential to secure long-term customer loyalty. Chain restaurants that fail to build brand awareness expose themselves to strategic risks, enabling agile competitors to gain market share by replicating their offerings.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the study puts forward the following actionable recommendations for corporate managers and hospitality executives:

i. Restaurant chains ought to shift their marketing budget from traditional print ads and temporary discounts to more engaging digital platforms to keep consumer awareness high.
ii. Utilise User-Generated Content (UGC): Marketing professionals should develop well-structured loyalty programs that motivate consumers to share positive dining experiences, tag relevant locations, and post visual content on social media. This organic promotion helps strengthen local brand recognition.
iii. Management should implement strong, automated feedback systems to continuously track service quality and confirm that the actual experience matches the company's public image.
iv. Partner with Local Influencers: Restaurant brands ought to forge strategic and enduring collaborations with regional micro-influencers whose audiences correspond with the fast-casual dining sector, thereby embedding the restaurant's brand identity into modern consumer lifestyles.

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