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Effects of Service Quality on Customer Retention in the Zimbabwean Mobile Telecommunication Industry

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ABSTRACT

The escalation of competition in the telecommunication industry has exacerbated the challenge of retaining customers and acquiring new ones. Even though customer switching adversely affects all industries, it is more pronounced in the mobile telecommunication industry. The purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of service quality on customer retention in Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication industry. The survey research design targeted Zimbabwe's mobile telecoms. The population of the study comprised telecommunication subscribers and management. The sample comprised 356 participants identified using stratified and purposive sampling. The study's findings revealed a positive relationship between service quality and customer retention in Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication industry. The study recommends that the industry always provides a seamless customer experience to control churn. Service quality management is a prerequisite for competitive advantage. The sector should also strive to improve network connectivity to retain customers.

Key Words: Service quality, Switching, Telecommunication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The telecommunication industry is critical to the economy regarding revenue generation, infrastructural development and improvement in people's standards of living. Even though Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication is experiencing significant growth, its ability to deliver excellent service quality is compromised by several challenges. This promotes customer switching among service providers which undermines firm revenue, margins and competitiveness. Customer switching behavior seems to be rampant and a precarious problem in the telecommunication industry globally with the potential to erode telecommunication competitiveness and sustainability. It may be a mammoth task for the country to attain Vision 2030 of being an Upper Middle-Income Class unless the problem of customer churn in the telecommunication industry is urgently addressed.

After the deregulation of Zimbabwe's telecommunication industry, the sector comprises Econet Wireless, Net One and Telecel Pvt Ltd. Despite the prevailing inflationary pressures and increased operational costs, the industry is growing very fast in terms of subscriber base and infrastructural development. Data and Internet services are also expanding driven by increased demand as the adoption of digitalization continues, spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. The major challenge faced by customers is the high cost of data and Internet connectivity speed in comparison to developed markets (Gilllward *et al.*, 2012). The intensification of competition has resulted in serious difficulties in maintaining customer loyalty and acquiring new ones. In the realm of telecommunication business, establishing a connection between a customer and a service provider is a strategic asset which has an enduring value (Yukongdi and Vimolwan, 2023).

Zimbabwe's telecommunication market operates within the larger economic landscape, making it susceptible to the effects of inflation. Zimbabwe’s postal and telecommunication sector is facing challenges due to the country’s volatile economic environment including high inflation, an unstable currency, and unemployment and liquidity crisis. Telecommunication firms have been under economic pressure, facing stress on revenue and on their ability to invest in infrastructure and network upgrades. Even though they mitigate these challenges by regularly hiking tariffs, the financial gains would be eroded by inflation since they price their products and services using local currency (Dublin, 2022).

Saki and Simanje (2022) argue that Zimbabwe is one of the countries in Southern Africa with expensive Internet access. However, Econet Wireless says Zimbabwe has the lowest tariff rates for broadband services compared to other operators in the region, a situation which hampers investments in the industry. Zimbabwe telecommunication operators charge US$0,0014 for one megabyte of broadband services compared to South African operators. Vodacom charges US$0, O24 and MTN US$0,025 per megabyte. Zamtel of Zambia charges US$0, 05 whilst Mascom and Orange of Botswana offer broadband of US$0, 08. The general sentiment is that the current telecom tariffs are limiting capital expenditure endeavors (Tome, 2023). However, most consumers regard the tariffs as expensive considering their low disposable incomes and unemployment in the country

Various factors contribute to this including macroeconomic policies, unstable currency and political interests. Due to the hyperinflationary environment, limited access to foreign currency, and the taxation of the telecommunication industry, it is difficult for citizens to enjoy affordable Internet access. This has widened the digital divide between low-income and high-income people and also among people who live in rural areas and urban areas.

The industry is largely affected by problems of unavailability of credit, foreign currency shortages, reduced consumer spending, and prolonged load-shedding which all affect service quality delivery. For instance, telecom firms struggle to access foreign currency to pay international vendors of equipment, licenses and suppliers. Foreign currency is necessary to service foreign network suppliers. This continues to be a serious challenge and this has already hampered their ability to implement much-needed network maintenance and expansion. Of course, the industry is planning to modernize its current core network by adopting visualization technologies which will improve the ability to efficiently allocate network resources (Karombo, 2023).

Zimbabwe’s telecommunication industry is vulnerable to unstable economic conditions facing the country. This has been exacerbated by significant economic difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Revenue from the sector has been adversely affected by regulatory policies of the government including punitive taxes. Mazikana (2023) observed that telecom firms like Telecel and Net One have been facing challenges of competition, failure to adopt innovation, high expenses, decline in subscriptions and decline in sales. The problems were quite severe to the extent that some have been failing to pay rentals. Despite these challenges, Econet launched 5G technology. Econet is the only mobile operator with 5G infrastructure. In addition, all operators need to comply with the infrastructure-sharing policy to cut costs and improve business efficiency.

The industry is currently facing numerous challenges including foreign currency debt and relatively low tariffs in comparison to rising costs. A major cost driver of the industry is load-shedding which results in significantly higher operating costs as firms are forced to purchase diesel for generators to power base stations to keep the network up.

Zimbabwe mobile telecommunication is experiencing significant transformation driven by changing consumer behavior, new technology, social trends, financial market conditions, and government regulations. Beer (2019) observed that increasing competition from non-telecom providers, reduced network investments, and the rise of digital media and mobile technology suggest that telecom operators are required to radically change their business models and service- offerings to survive.

Intense competition and shifting customer loyalty in Zimbabwean telecommunication are forcing firms to focus on service quality for increased customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and organizational profitability. Literature and empirical evidence confirm that there is deteriorating customer loyalty in Zimbabwe’s telecommunication industry as evidenced by customer switching behavior and the subscribers' ownership of multiple SIM cards. Viriri and Maxwell (2017) observed that most telecommunication customers experience problems with their service providers and this encourages customer switching. The majority of customers switch operators due to expensive tariffs, competitor offerings, the need for convenience and the existence of low switching costs in the industry. These factors compromise operator margins and sustainability.

Zimbabwe mobile telecommunication is always accused of shoddy service to customers. It is believed that this is caused by forex shortages, power cuts and low tariffs (Sengere, 2023). There is a need for service providers to improve service quality to improve customer experience. This would enable service providers to retain customers and control customer switching, a common industry challenge. The adoption of Mobile Number Portability recently facilitated customer switching, which enables customers to retain their original numbers even if they switch service providers. Service providers in Zimbabwe’s telecommunication industry need to significantly improve service quality to retain customers and control customer switching behavior which is common in the industry. However, industry experts blame the serious deterioration in the quality of telecom services on power outages in the country which affect Internet connectivity. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of service quality on customer retention in the Zimbabwean mobile telecommunication sector to recommend strategies for improving service quality.

2. Importance of the Telecommunications Industry: Theories and perceptions

The telecommunication industry is important for the service sector and the growth of the industry cascades to the country’s economic development. Mobile telecommunication is essential since it constitutes the epicenter of development for almost all strategic economic sectors for instance mining, agriculture and manufacturing.

Globally, telecommunication has turned into an enormously competitive scenario due to the liberalization of the communication system to improve the communication process in general. The intense nature of competitive rivalry has shifted the underlying ideology of marketing from customer acquisition to customer loyalty and retention. The telecommunication industry is very competitive, thus forcing operators to constantly improve their existing innovations. According to Chigwende and Govender (2020), mobile telecommunication service providers are using the brand image to market their products and services to minimize customer switching which originates from market competition.

The significance of telecommunication for growth and development is often discussed in literature and empirical circles In addition to facilitating communication and reducing transaction costs, increased growth and investment in telecoms have spill-over effects that can spur economic growth. Indeed, low-cost, high-quality telecommunications services improve productivity across the economy (Robb and Paelo, 2020). Telecommunications is one of the prime services necessary for the growth and modernization of various sectors of the economy.

The growth of telecommunication has been hampered by harsh economic conditions currently prevailing in the country and revenue is reportedly declining steadily (Karomabo, 2017). Brand switching is common among network providers. To maintain competitiveness in the telecommunication business, efforts should be made by service providers to understand consumer tastes and serve their needs smarter than competitors to attain customer loyalty (Alamgir, 2017).

Deregulation and digitalization of services have made telecommunications one of the most volatile and competitive growth industries in history. The future of telecommunications is actually in jeopardy. Most businesses are struggling to stay up to date with consumer demands including high infrastructure expenses, and the need for outsourcing.

The disruptive innovation theory argues that service providers must always improve on the existing services to retain their existing customers (Awuku *et al.*, 2023). This is because customer switching behavior is evident in telecommunication since it is a precarious problem. Shaila and Shweta (2017) found out that price sensitivity, mobile portability number, and cost impact the subscriber's switching intentions. Switching customers to another organization has become a critical concern for organizations. It is a reflection that an organization is not able to meet the demands of customers. Customer retention is one of the key challenges in the telecommunications industry. Firms should realize that customer churn prediction can be vital to the success of their operations because a careful analysis of churning may provide clues to retaining customers (Al-Mashraie et al., 2020).

Customer loyalty has gained the attention of academics and practitioners due to its relationship to organizational growth, survival and profit (Yaqub *et al.*, 2019). Telecommunication firms offer nearly the same products and services like call rates, Internet subscriptions, and financial services. So there is relatively low customer loyalty as evidenced by customers switching from one network provider to the other leading to a drop in the number of customers as a result of failure to retain old customers. Repeated purchases of products and services are a manifestation of customers. In addition, loyal customers have both greater lifetime value and greater average revenue per user. Service quality is the customer's opinion of the service delivered

The Gaps model regulates two types of gaps which are; customer gap and service provider gap. Telecommunication service providers must consider reducing the gap between customer expectations and customer perceptions.

Ranya et al., (2019) suggest that service quality has five dimensions, which are;

a) Tangibles involve the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, personnel and communication material. Since services are tangible, customers derive their perception of service quality by comparing the tangible associated with the services provided.
b) Reliability involves the ability of employees to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Reliability means that the firm delivers on its promise when dealing with customer promises regarding customer requests, complaints, questions and problems.

c) Responsiveness involves the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. This dimension emphasizes attentiveness and promptness when dealing with customers' questions, problems, complaints and problems.
d) Assurance relates to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. This assurance includes competence, credibility, courtesy and security.
e) Empathy involves the provision of caring and individualized attention to customers. These dimensions of service quality are shown in the diagram below;

Fig: 2.1: The five Dimensions of the Servqual Model

As shown in Fig. 2.1 above, the five key dimensions of service quality include tangibles, assurance, responsiveness, reliability and reliability.

Fig 2.2 The Five Key Service Dimensions of the Servqual model

Fig 2.2 shows the five key service dimensions of the servqual model. It shows that reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness influence both service expectation and performance. This has a positive effect on received service quality and customer satisfaction. This promotes customer loyalty and retention by firms.

In a competitive environment, service quality is a vital source for the growth, success and survival of firms. Service quality is defined as an evaluation of how well the delivered service matches consumer expectations and perceptions. Businesses that meet and exceed customer expectations are considering having service quality. Research findings reveal that perceived service quality and customer satisfaction are the main driving forces of customer loyalty. Furthermore, it allows firms to endure competition. Service quality is considered a valuable organizational resource and a vital factor in business financial performance and marketing.

Customer loyalty is a deep commitment to repurchase a product or service despite situational influences and marketing efforts that may necessitate a change in purchasing behaviour. The telecommunication industry is facing the challenges of satisfying and retaining customers as they are more exposed to comprehensive options. Customer loyalty is an ongoing exercise and requires the deployment of proper strategies. The study found a positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty (Agha *et al.*, 2021). The study recommended that for the industry to remain competitive in the current market, telecommunication firms should offer users a quality experience.

The mobile telecommunication companies encounter the problem of declining customer satisfaction with their services. Service quality can be a good means to measure customer satisfaction. However, there are shortage of studies on how telecommunication firms can recognize and measure the satisfaction levels of customers regarding the services they deliver (Meel, 2020). Chitura, Dube and Chari (2019) noted that mobile phone subscribers are encountering several network-related problems when accessing the services of their network providers. This implies that service providers are facing challenges regarding the services they provide to their customers. Hence subscribers' quality service perceptions are relatively low. However, subscribers hardly switch network providers due to several switching costs.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used the survey design and the population was Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication sector. It included 356 active subscribers of Econet Wireless, Net One and Telecel Pvt. A descriptive study aimed at understanding the situation in Zimbabwe's telecommunication sector was used. Generally, descriptive design helps to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation or phenomenon. A descriptive design was appropriate since the aim of the study was to identify characteristics and trends in the Zimbabwean mobile telecommunications industry regarding the effect of service quality on customer retention. Due to limitations of time and financial resources, the study adopted a cross-sectional survey instead of a longitudinal one. This was prompted by the problem of customer switching behavior which has the potential to erode revenue, margins, market share and firm competitiveness. Ethical approval to conduct the study was provided by Chinhoyi University's Department of Post-Graduate Studies. Furthermore, the gatekeeper's permission was issued by the industry regulator which is the Postal and Telecommunication Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe. Written permission was further granted by Econet, Net One and Telecel Pvt Ltd. Informed consent was administered verbally as the researcher informed respondents that the study was purely for academic purposes. Participation in the study was voluntary since they had the discretion and freedom to participate in the study or not.

4. FINDINGS

The Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Retention in the Telecom Industry

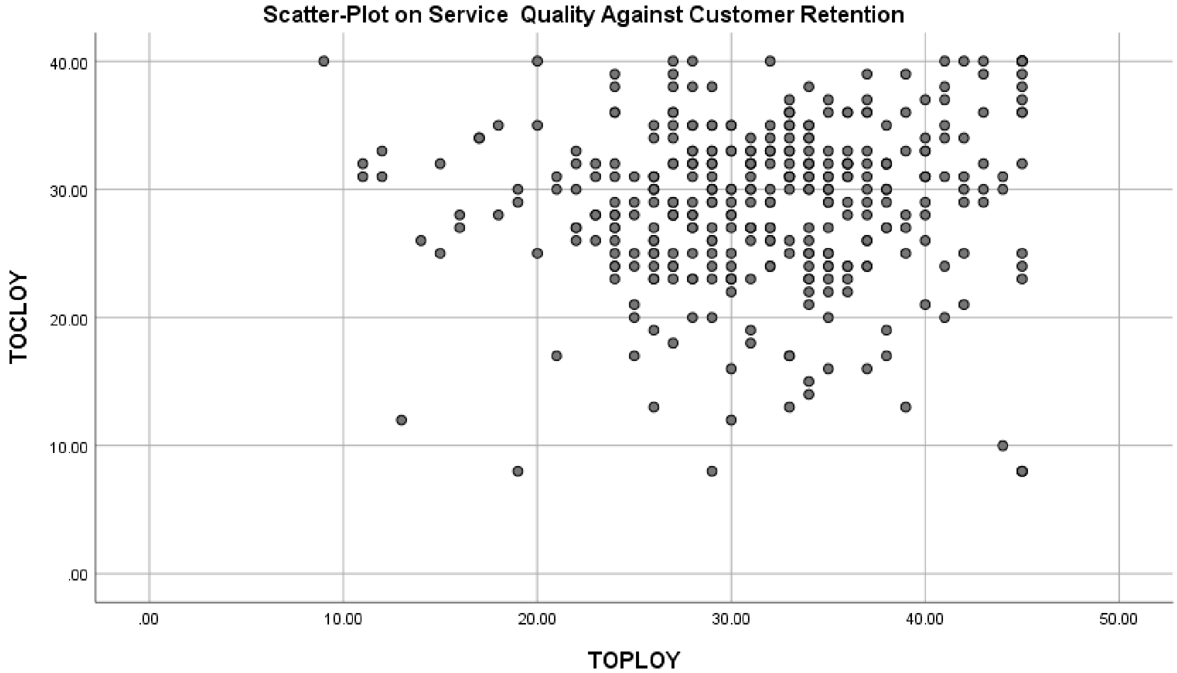

Fig 4.1

Fig 4.1 above the scatter plot about the relationship between service quality and customer retention. Most of the points are in the northeast corner of the plot. This means that customers take the services that they are receiving from their providers to be of high quality and therefore want to stay with their service providers.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of dimensions of Service Quality in the Zimbabwean Telecommunication industry

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Quality of service improves customer retention in Zimbabwe's telecommunication industry.	356	1	5	4.06	1.181
My telecommunication service provider attends to my complaints satisfactorily	356	1	5	2.98	1.262
My service provider understands my needs and wants	356	1	5	2.80	1.234
I am satisfied with the service quality provided by my telecommunication firm.	356	1	5	2.88	1.228
I will not switch to other telecommunication firms if they provide me with quality services.	356	1	5	3.66	1.339
My service provider provides me with quick service	356	1	5	2.93	1.291
My telecommunication service provider gives me caring attention	356	1	5	2.89	1.239
My service provider has the technology to solve queries	356	1	5	3.26	1.244
Valid N (listwise)	356				

From Table 4.2 above, respondents agreed that quality of service improves customer retention in Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication industry. This had the highest mean value of 4.06. Participants concurred that they would not switch service providers if firms provided quality services. This had a mean value of 3.66. In addition, respondents also agreed that firms like Econet Wireless, Net One and Telecel Pvt Ltd have the necessary technology to solve customer queries. This had a mean value of 3.26. However, respondents rated the empathy of telecommunication employees together with their responsiveness lowly. Furthermore, respondents rated the aspect that telecommunication firms understand customer needs and wants. Generally, respondents seem not very happy with the service provision of the industry.

Hypothesis testing

Service quality positively influences customer retention in Zimbabwe's Mobile Telecommunications Industry

The p-value of 0.000 for the Pearson Chi-Square suggests that there is some association between customer retention and service quality.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1489.522[a]	1050	.000
Likelihood Ratio	750.842	1050	1.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.847	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	356		

Fig.4.3 Chi-Square Tests

Fig 4.3 above shows Chi-Square Tests. Although there is some association between customer retention and service quality as suggested by the table above, the Nagelkeke value of 0.187 in the above table means that only 18.7 per cent of the variation in customer retention is a result of variations in service quality.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The scatter plot above shows that the Zimbabwean telecommunication subscribers value service quality in the industry. The statistics show that service quality improves customer retention in that particular industry. The customer's propensity to switch to another service provider would be minimized if service providers provide excellent service quality. This suggests that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention in the industry. Chi-Square Tests also provided a positive relationship between service quality and customer retention in the industry. Literature has confirmed the significant relationship between service quality and customer retention. A related study undertaken by Ubeja, Malukani, and Joshi (2023) showed that service quality dimensions of unique product design, reliability and transmission quality promote customer satisfaction and loyalty in the telecommunication industry. Service quality can be improved by charging reasonable tariffs on data and when calling. The Industry should try to improve network coverage, especially in remote places by securing alternative power supplies. In addition, service providers should continuously train their employees and reward them accordingly to motivate them.

Viriri and Phiri (2017) suggest that service quality in Zimbabwe's Telecommunication industry can be improved by providing affordable tariffs, value-added products and services. They should consolidate their promotional campaigns, and improve network coverage and customer care. Telecommunication firms should implement customer relationship management and customer experience management to reduce customer complaints.

Recently, representatives from the industry petitioned the Zimbabwean parliament to urgently consider reviewing the pricing model of the sector such that prices are pegged in US dollars and converted to Zim-dollar using the prevailing interbank rate. This would bring stability to the pricing of their products and services and bring transparency in communication with customers. Pricing telecommunication products and services in US dollars are preferred to generate revenue in foreign currency to improve the network, bolster service quality, and make service affordable. Such a move has the potential to improve market stability, help planning, attract foreign investment and encourage innovation in the industry. However, others believe customers should be given freedom and choice to buy telecommunication products using the currency they prefer since the country is using a multi-currency regime (Mpala, 2023).

5.1. CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between service quality and customer retention in the Zimbabwean mobile telecom industry. In addition, service quality and its dimensions are determinants of customer retention and loyalty. To control customer switching behavior in Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication industry, service providers should always improve service quality to minimize customer complaints and problems.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Zimbabwean telecommunications firms always improve their service quality and customer care. Customer satisfaction and effective complaint- handling are critical in the industry. Service quality delivery in the Zimbabwean context is compromised by power outages which affect network connectivity. In addition, a lack of employee training and motivation further compromises service quality. Shortage of resources is another impediment. Service quality can be improved by improving staff training and motivation through awarding them competitive remuneration. To improve service quality, there is a need to deploy more resources, improve network expansion, address data privacy and security, digital transformation and create more viable business models. The industry needs to implement an infrastructure-sharing plan. This would enable them to be efficient, improve network coverage, reduce costs and improve service delivery to customers. Telecommunication firms need to identify dimensions of service quality and prioritize them to control customer churn. In addition, they ought to benchmark their operations against industry standards. They should embrace technology by digitalizing their systems and procedures to encourage self-service. Due to technological changes, service providers are encouraged to practice digital marketing like social media to engage with customers, thereby controlling customer switching behavior. Communication should also be effective. Since the telecom industry is dynamic, there is a necessity to undertake regular market research to understand the latest consumer behavior. To control customer switching, telecom firms are advised to use churn prediction models to detect it in advance. Some strategies to reduce customer switching include automation, network management and maintenance, customer service support, service provision, and activation and using data analytics and insights.

Declaration by Authors

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