

# Customer Experience Management and Brand Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction of Nigerian Telecommunication Firms in Port Harcourt

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## Abstract

This empirical investigation questions the intersection of Customer Experience and Customer Loyalty to the operations of the service market segment. Anonymous questionnaire was distributed to 248 participants, chosen among organizations that operate in the sphere of customer loyalty service, thus, the empirical sample was created. The type of analytical approach taken involved the use of Partial Least Squares (PLS) in Design Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The hierarchical framework as defined by the emerged framework comprises three specific dimensions, which are customer experience, entailing the core service quality, price transparency mechanisms and brand image perception. These elements have significant impact on customer loyalty measures. The empirical results confirm that the positive experience of the customers is a positive contributor to customer loyalty. The findings of the study contain important implications to the maintenance and management of relationship with clients in service businesses, providing the strategic best practice of maintaining loyalty through personalized and tailored engagement processes. Providing customers with outstanding experiences and interactions that are critical in ensuring success of the organization, maintaining competitive edge within the service industry remains key to brand loyalty. In addition, this study attempts to advance the knowledge of the marketing practitioners towards the identification of the exact mechanisms that customer experiences can build and its subsequent impact on loyalty behaviors. As a result, organizations gain the insights to strategically influence and control brand loyalty using the proxies of this study to improve interactions with the clients and deepen customer relationships.

**Keywords:** Customer Loyalty, Relationship Marketing, Customer Experience, Loyalty Service Programmes.

## Introduction

In the modern business world, establishing sustainable relations with clients is a challenging task to undertake by businesses in the competitive markets. Current customer loyalty strategies and programmes can be reinforced and maintained through the delivery of high chain-of-command services and building strong customer relationships but this is not just enough to achieve differentiation or maintaining a competitive edge in the dynamic markets (Schembri, 2006; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This study explores nexus of customer loyalty to customer experience in service industry which places the research query in its context of operation. The expected results of the current research would help to contribute to the academic knowledge about customer experience in extant literature and expectantly introduce a new discourse to the ongoing marketing conversations. This investigation contributes to making the concept of customer experience lucid in its conceptualization and outlining the key elements and implications of the concept. This study objectively measures customer experience in the context of the reality of business operation of the service industry. Even though most of the conclusions reached after the study will be directly relevant to the telecommunications service sector, several managerial implications and insights are bound to find their way, likely to expand the scope of the study. Frost & Sullivan (2014), in their study of the Malaysian Industries Consumer Experience, taking the form of a digital survey, showed that 58 percent of respondents in Malaysia cited inadequate customer experience by service operators as one of the primary reasons to cancel their subscriptions, among all termination motives. In situations where the price architecture and terms of subscriptions have not been fully determined, 83 per cent of customers said they are ready to switch providers and 66 per cent demanded

better speeds on their Internet connections and were also willing to cancel their services in the event of failure to meet their expectations on network quality and performance. Such results force service providers to implement new sets of strategies and approaches to remain in the position of an incumbent customer. This is in pursuit of steady growth, increased Average Revenue per User (ARPU), greater customer loyalty and service differentiation as well. Representation of sound customer experience strategy is among the most critical means by which the strategic objective can be achieved and greatly influence loyalty as well, the major source of client retention behaviors (Barsky & Nash, 2002).

## Literature Review

### Customer Experience

Customer experience in marketing scholarship can be explained as the interaction between a product and a customer which results to emotional, behavioural or cognitive responses (Verhoeff et al., 2009). Customer experience is by its very definition, a subjective and discrete phenomenon, which is highly dependent on employee and customer, as well as the service environment (Schmitt, 1999). This is why customer experience is the most prevalent source of competitive advantage and differentiation in the service market (Bagdare & Jain, 2013). The service sector more so, telecommunication's building issue lies in service delivery and quality, as the key alliance of the main dimension discussed in the current research. Mohammad et al. (2013) argue that such essential aspects of network architecture and connectivity have a significant influence on the customer experience. On the other hand, Richardson (2010) asserts that an exclusive network experience and an effective pricing framework will not only make the customer experience satisfying but memorable. The core service attributes are used by customers to distinguish and identify suppliers and base most of their buying decisions on the core or essential services (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2011). The study conducted by Islam & Rina (2013) on the factors of customer satisfaction, in the Pakistan telecommunication industry, was of the view that critical services significantly increase the consumer experience. Therefore, any network service provider that strives to provide a unique experience and develops a significant ensuing consumer base, trigger purchase behaviour and develop loyalty. The most important parts are the network infrastructure and the connectivity is that the user is bound to express his/her experiences as either negative, neutral or positive. User satisfaction purely hinges on the quality of the experience of their repurchase and continuity. Noteworthy to state, the emotional reactions and feelings of a customer have observable impacts on recalling of memory and processes of evaluating experiences and decisions making. These factors, if positive are critical in keeping the clients loyal and committed. However, initial buyers are concerned only with basic service features and characteristics when they compare first purchases and subscriptions (Walsman et al., 2014).

### Pricing strategy

Telecommunication companies have litany of complaints when it comes to the perceived accuracy of billing and transparency of charges (Athanasopoulos et al., 2003). A similar concern is registered in the Wipro (Council of Industry Research, 2012) which states that offering customers full clarity of fees combined with frequent updates on the control of expenditure and monitoring of its consumption will result in increased satisfaction rates and the overall experience. It is also important to establish fair pricing systems consequently, the growing profits from customer retention (Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos, 2005). Consequently, Hanif et al. (2010) hypothesized using this result that rational and fair pricing systems will foster and reinforce loyalty behaviours.

### Brand Image

Brand Image has been explicated as the mental depiction or appearance of a brand in the mind of a consumer (Ogba & Tan, 2009). Its symbolic meaning and emotional connotations is attributed to specific characteristics of product that is held by a consumer. Other scholarly inputs identified in marketing literature argue that a brand is a name or word, design, symbol or other attributes that make a seller's offer stands out among his competitors' brand (Bennett, 2001). The strategic thinking of considering a brand as an aspect of the product is such that determines the difference between competing products at the marketplace. An excellent customer experience can be promoted and amplified with the support of a strong brand image and a positive impression of a brand. Infusing these components and creating good associations, a brand may be strategically positioned into the cognitive structure of the customer. Sirapraha et al. (2012) observed that service companies need to provide an attractive customer experience that can differentiate their brands in the competitive markets. As a

consequence, customer experience closes the gap between brand image and consumers impressions. The ways customers construe their encounters with brands can make them change their perceptions about the brands they encounter. Interacting with customers and imparting on consumer conclusions of the brand may likely change the common perception held of a product thus greatly affecting the feelings and attitudes of the customers towards the brand.

### **Customer Experience and Customer Loyalty**

The validity of empirical studies supports the fact that the economic advantages of retaining existing customers in the long run are better than those achieved by conducting expensive acquisition campaigns (Chung and Wu, 2012). Most corporate administrations have come to consider client loyalty cultivation and strengthening as a strategic goal and business imperative. Garrett (2006) argues that the experiences of the customers have direct impact on the retention and loyalty behaviours. To this, modern businesses are putting more emphasis in the delivery of strong and sustainable experiences that create long-term recollections (Berry et al., 2002; Wyner, 2000).

Customer loyalty is best explained as a deep sense of loyalty to the repeated and insistent use of preferred goods or service over competing brands. Situational factors and heightened marketing campaigns have been identified as possible influences that can cause a loyal customer to switch allegiance. This loyalty is expressed in the form of regular consumption pattern of a particular brand or brand category, despite the existence of situational drivers and marketing stimuli (Oliver, 1999). The reasons behind client switching behaviour can be attributed to the marketing efforts and environmental factors (Oliver, 1999). The struggles of attracting new customers in services have become even fiercer, as in service industries. The preservation and restoration of client loyalty are considered as crucial in maintaining the market leadership, achieving lasting profitability and organizational sustainability. Scholarly observations noted that; it is becoming economically beneficial to retain customers than to win back old ones even most difficult to win new ones through marketing campaigns (Chung and Wu, 2012).

Value creation and improvement on customer experience is thus invaluable in the profitability ladder of a firm (Lin and Bennett, 2014; Kumar, Pozza and Ganesh, 2013). In the recent past, the managers in organisations have increased their sense of urgency to provide value by creating memorable experiences. Customer experience largely dictates factors that determine the probability of the customer in returning to the service or referring the service to colleagues and friends (Slatten, Krogh and Connolley, 2011). An ideal experience is one that creates customer involvement and provokes positive and memorable experiences (Pine and Gilmore (2002). The customer experience is proven to be positively related to brand image and brand perception.

In the competitive environment of service industries, the marketing managers are most focused on improvement of customer experiences. The general objective of these is to strengthen customer loyalty, increase customer base, improve organizational profitability, attain sustainability and develop deeper personal relationships with customers in the foreseeable future. Based on this, marketers are required to provide an interactive and memorable experience, which brings about an emotional reaction (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Berry, Carbone and Haeckel, 2002; Gilmore and Pine, 2002). In furtherance to these scholarly remarks, when an experience elicits customer involvement as well as creates long lasting memories, then such experience is considered a success. This statement is consistent with previous research, which shows the far-reaching effect of customer experience on loyalty behaviours and retention (Barsky and Nash, 2002; Berry et al., 2002). Based on this the above discussion therefore states the following hypothesis:

H1: Customer experience will exert a positive effect on customer loyalty.

### **Methodology**

This discussion includes service quality in the main, systems of pricing transparency and the perception of a brand image as aspects of consumer experience. The survey measures the core service quality which was based in previous researches, ( Tabaku et al. 2015) and Sujata et al. (2015). To assess pricing transparency systems, a three-item scale that was revised after Lim et al. (2006) was used. Brand image perception dimensions are evaluated using five items based on Zhang et al. (2009) and Sirapricha et al. (2012). The customer-loyalty construct was measured using a five-item scale derived from Aydin and Ozer (2005).

Two statistical methods were adopted in the research to analyse data collected. The descriptive and inferential analyses were carried out through the SPSS. Second, the testing of the hypothesis was done using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) methodology under Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework. The modern academic opinion is that SEM-PLS is a powerful and trustworthy method of researching survey information and exploring multifaceted associations (Hearth and Rao, 2009; Simkin and McLeod, 2010). Harman single-factor test was used to measure common method bias, in compliance with the recommendations of the Podsakoff et al. (2003). A principal component analysis that was not rotated on all items was conducted in order to check whether a unit general factor contributes over 50 percent of the variance between variables. The overall variance was explained by the first factor as 48.13 which is not more than 50% threshold showing that there is no substantive common method bias in this study. The demographic status of the respondents in this research includes a total population of 210 respondents. The statistics indicate that 61.7 per cent of the participants are females whereas 38.3 per cent are males. The highest percentage (46.9) of respondents is within the age group of 18-34 year of age, with the next highest (36.8) is under the 35-49 year old age group, and the last (16.3) is aged 50 years and above. Regarding the number of years worked with their selected operator, 33.5 per cent have been with the same operator more than ten years, 22.5 per cent with the same operator between 6 and 10 years, 31.6 per cent with the same operator between 1 and 5 years and the other 12.4 per cent with the same operator less than one year.

It was confirmed that the convergent validity of the measurement model (outer model) was assessed in line with the accepted procedures (Hair et al., 2006). The loading of the components were analyzed and all of them are higher than the recommended value of 0.708 (Hair et al., 2014). As a result, the constructs namely pricing transparency mechanism (Cj1, Cj2, Cj3), core service quality (CS1, CS2, CS3), brand image (B1-B5), and customer loyalty (Loy1-Loy5) had sufficient convergent validity.

Table 1: Convergent Validity Assessment

Construct	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
Core Service	CS1	0.850	0.884	0.719
	CS2	0.833		
	CS3	0.860		
Charging	Cj1	0.873	0.894	0.738
	Cj2	0.838		
	CJ3	0.866		
Brands	B1	0.799	0.887	0.612
	B2	0.810		
	B3	0.803		
	B4	0.748		
	B5	0.747		
Customer Loyalty	Loy1	0.831	0.930	0.727
	Loy2	0.817		
	Loy3	0.902		
	Loy4	0.916		
	Loy5	0.790		

After comparing the discriminant validity using the heterotrait monotrait (HTMT) criterion (Henseler, 2015) and the standards proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct are presented in Table 2 with the elements of the diagonal bolded per the Fornel & Larcker standard. Hair et al. (2006) argue that the average variance of a construct considering the indicators of the construct should exceed the variance of the construct with the other constructs, a fact that the off-diagonal items in respective rows and columns of Table 2 depict. The criterion of HTMT presented by Henseler involves a more rigorous evaluation of the construct as compared to its predecessor, which proves that all constructs are discriminated at the 0.90 level (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2: Fornell and Larcker Criterion

BRANDS (BB)	CHARGING (CAJ)	CORE (CS)	SERVICE LOYALTY (LOY)
Brands (BB)	0.782		
	<b>0.859</b>		
Charging (Caj) Core Service	0.617		
	0.341 (CS)	0.319	
		<b>0.848</b>	
Loyalty (Loy)	0.667	0.594	
		0.342	<b>0.853</b>

Table 3: HTMT Criterion

BRANDS (BB)	CHARGING (CAJ)	CORE (CS)	SERVICE LOYALTY (LOY)
Brands (BB)			
Charging (Caj) Core Service	0.736		
	0.406 (CS)	0.391	
		<b>0.400</b>	
Loyalty (Loy)	0.757	0.686	

Criteria: Discriminant Validity is established at  $HTMT_{0.90}$

Assessment of Formative Second Order Construct

In case the reflective measurement protocol meets the necessary conditions and criteria, a second higher-order construct is subsequently completed by using the formative construct. Brand-image perception, price-transparency systems and core service quality evaluation is done with specific mention of collinearity issues. The evaluation of collinearity is a necessity to ensure that the conceptions reflect different aspects and define different dimensions. The findings indicate that the VIF numbers consistently fall under the traditional mark of five (Hair et al., 2014) of 1.148 to 1.663 and a particular value of 1.637, which implies the uniqueness of these structures and effective estimation of the customer-experience construct. As evidenced in Table 4, all the first order characteristics affecting customer experience are necessary and significant except core service excellence. The importance of this outstanding indicator in customer experience assessment is supported by the previous studies and theories (Grace 2004 & Ocass 2004; McDougall 1999). In its turn, these indicators are stored in the model. Table 4 also shows that the outer weights of the formative construct are statistically non-significant in determining the relationship between customer experience and the first-order dimension aspects of it.

Table 4: Reliability and Validity of Second Order Construct

Weight of The First Order Construct on Customer Experience	Weight VIF	T-Value	P-Value
Brands <- Customer Experience	0.631	1.663	6.628**
Charging <- Customer Experience	0.416	1.637	4.377*
Core Services <- Customer Experience	0.131	1.148	1.825

\*\*p< 0.01, \*p<0.05 (one-tailed)

Assessment of Structural Model

Check whether there are no collinearity problems in the inner model before going any further and assessing the structural model and the following hypothesis tests. According to Hair et al. (2014), the all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are less than the commonly used value of 5 and the variance is between 1.148 and 4.339, and thus, there is no evidence of collinearity. The findings of the bootstrapping steps that are used to assess the path coefficients of the hypothesized relationships and interactions are shown in Table 5; the findings indicate that customer loyalty and customer experience have a strong and statistically significant relationship (p < 0.01, 0.292).

Table 5: Results of the Structural Model

Hypothesis	Standard Beta	Standard Error	T-Statistics	Supported
H1: Customer Experience -> Loyalty	0.292	0.066	4.462**	Yes

\*\*p< 0.01, \*p<0.05 (one-tailed)

Table 6: Determination Coefficient (R<sup>2</sup>), Predictive Relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>) and Effect Size (f<sup>2</sup>)

Determination Coefficient (R <sup>2</sup> )	Predictive Relevance (Q <sup>2</sup> )	Effect Size (f <sup>2</sup> )
0.725	0.489	0.176

Table 6: Coefficient of Determination (R<sup>2</sup>), Predictive Relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>), and Effect Size (f<sup>2</sup>)

Table 6 indicates the R<sup>2</sup> values that describe the capabilities of the predictor variables to the corresponding construct which includes the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>), predictive relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>), and effect size (f<sup>2</sup>). The amount of customer experience contributes 72.5 per cent of the customer loyalty (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.725). Chin et al. (2008) categorize endogenous latent variables into considerable, moderate and minimal types of model validity, which are associated with R<sup>2</sup> values of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 respectively. As a result, consumer loyalty (R<sup>2</sup> = 0.725) can be considered significant as well as substantial. The model shows predictive relevance which denotes that customer experience has adequate predictive ability to predict customer loyalty as shown by Q<sup>2</sup> of 0.489 which is above zero. The effect size (f<sup>2</sup>) is then calculated based on the recommendations made by Cohen (1988). The value of f<sup>2</sup> of 0.02 represents the slight impact, 0.15 that of medium impact, and 0.35 that of high influence. The predictive (exogenous) construct has a f<sup>2</sup> = 0.176, which has a medium effect size.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aims to investigate how customer loyalty and customer experience are related in services industries. The results are that customer experience has a positive and statistical effect on customer loyalty behaviors in the service industry. This is in line with the existing literature which shows that customer experience is invaluable in retaining clients in the retail and hospitality sector.

The findings of the research are in line with Berry et al. (2002) and Barsky and Nash (2002). When a customer undergoes an excellent experience and encounter, he is likely to be more loyal and committed. The discussion has helped us to determine the key elements that reinforce three dimensions of customer experience namely brand image perception, pricing transparency mechanisms, and basic service quality and hence increase customer loyalty behaviors. The marketers are therefore advised to emphasize these characteristics in order to enhance services provided to clients in order to build better relationships. The findings can help the network

operators to change their perception of the factors that determine the client's loyalty and retention. Any positive response and positive client's feedback in a service setting has an echo effect across the organization, and would result in a greater customer retention rate and a more attaching inclination to the company and its services. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) believe that customers that received a positive experience in one service place will be more likely to continue with positive perceptions of the same service brand in other places, and this would increase customer loyalty in various touchpoints. A poor experience with one of the service locations would have a negative impact on consumer loyalty to the service brand in other locations. This research and evaluation will have major contributions to the service industry. The findings of the survey will help service industries to determine the most highly regarded client experience, which may not necessarily be as the company claims to offer. It provides the best instructions into client loyalty development through the customer experience as its main practical implementation to the managers. Enhancing the client experience will make the service industry sector perform better. This study is bound to increase knowledge of marketing managers on the importance of customer experience in terms of client loyalty and retention.

This is an empirical study that supports the view that customer experience influences client loyalty in the service industry. The investigation revealed that the three elements of customer experience, which are core service quality, pricing transparency procedures, and brand image perception, have a significant impact on customer loyalty. The essential core offering is important to heighten customer satisfaction and to promote purchases and loyalty. Brand image also plays a significant part in customer experience. This means that in the mind of the customers, brand positioning depends on the relationship between the customer and the service provider, which means that there is an increase in customer loyalty, and there is less likelihood to change to a different brand or a competitor.

1. Service Firms Should Improve Overall Customer Experience: Service organizations operating in telecommunications departments should prioritize the improvement of customer experience across all service touchpoints. Since customer experience has a **significant positive influence on customer loyalty**, firms should endeavor to design strategies which would ensure that customers consistently receive satisfactory and memorable service encounters at all times.
2. Strengthen Core Service Quality in Telecommunication Firms: Managers should focus on improving the core service quality, such as network reliability, service accessibility, and prompt service delivery. The study reveals that these core service quality form an essential component of customer experience, and this contributes to the increment in customer satisfaction and loyalty significantly.
3. Pricing Transparency should be ensured: Telecommunication companies have a duty to adopt clear and transparent pricing mechanisms to avoid dissatisfaction arising from hidden charges or unclear billing structures. Transparent pricing practices will improve the customers' trust and perception of fairness. This will further send a signal of authenticity, which will in turn strengthen customer loyalty.
4. Build and Maintain a Strong Brand Image: Service providers should aim to invest in significant branding activities which will reinforce a positive brand image and customer perception because a strong brand image enhances customer experience and strengthens the emotional connection between customers and the service provider. By doing so, customer loyalty will heighten and bring about a reduction and possibility of switching behavior or interest.
5. Continuous Monitoring of Customer Feedback and Experience: Service organizations should work towards establishing effective monitoring systems in order to checkmate customer feedback and experience which will be efficient in identifying areas where service improvements are needed. Regular evaluations of customer experiences will help managers develop strategies that will improve customer satisfaction, increase retention rates, and foster long-term customer relationships.

#### **Future Research and limitations**

Although the results contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the factors of customer loyalty and experience, this study takes into consideration numerous limitations and presents a way forward to the future research. Since the models used in this study were primitive and quite basic, it is highly recommended that more research can be undertaken with more variables considered strong and robust enough to affect consumer satisfaction and loyalty actions.

The use of convenience sample method in the research has clearly reduced the applicability of the findings of the research. Furthermore, scholars need to be careful when inferring the results to other industries. On the

other hand, further studies on similar topics in the future should incorporate additional industries to determine the applicability of the results.

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