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Customer Experience In The Telecommunication Industry In Matabeleland North Province In Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The telecommunication industry in Zimbabwe has experienced significant growth over the past decade, yet customer experience remains a critical challenge affecting subscriber retention and loyalty. This study examines customer experience in the telecommunication industry in Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe, focusing on service quality dimensions, customer satisfaction, and retention strategies. A survey research design was employed, targeting 384 mobile telecommunication subscribers from the three major operators: Econet Wireless, NetOne, and Telecel Zimbabwe. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings reveal that network reliability, tariff affordability, customer service responsiveness, and infrastructure challenges significantly influence customer experience in Matabeleland North Province. The study found that 68% of subscribers own multiple SIM cards, indicating low brand loyalty and high switching behavior. Service quality dimensions including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy were found to positively correlate with customer satisfaction and retention. The research concludes that telecommunication operators must prioritize network infrastructure development, competitive pricing strategies, and enhanced customer care services to improve customer experience in the province. The study recommends that operators invest in alternative power solutions to mitigate load-shedding effects, implement localized customer service centers, and develop affordable data packages tailored to the socioeconomic conditions of Matabeleland North Province residents.

Keywords: Customer experience, Telecommunication industry, Service quality, Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe, Customer satisfaction, Customer retention

I. Introduction

The telecommunication sector has emerged as a critical driver of economic development and social transformation in Zimbabwe, facilitating communication, enabling digital financial services, and supporting various economic sectors including agriculture, mining, and commerce (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025). The industry has undergone substantial transformation since deregulation, with three major mobile network operators competing for market share: Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, NetOne, and Telecel Zimbabwe. Despite this growth, the industry faces significant challenges in delivering consistent customer experience, particularly in peripheral provinces such as Matabeleland North (Chitura, Dube and Chari, 2019).^[1]

Matabeleland North Province, located in northwestern Zimbabwe, encompasses districts including Binga, Bubi, Hwange, Lupane, Nkayi, Tsholotsho, and Umguza, with a predominantly rural population facing unique socioeconomic challenges. The province's geographical terrain, characterized by remote rural communities and dispersed settlements, presents distinct obstacles for telecommunication service delivery and customer experience management. Network coverage challenges, infrastructure limitations, power supply inconsistencies, and affordability concerns significantly impact how customers perceive and interact with telecommunication services in this region (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

Customer experience in the telecommunication industry encompasses the totality of cognitive, emotional, sensory, and behavioral responses that customers encounter throughout their interactions with service providers, from initial awareness and purchase through ongoing usage and support interactions. In competitive markets, superior customer experience has become a critical differentiator, directly influencing customer satisfaction, loyalty, retention, and ultimately, organizational profitability. The escalation of competition in Zimbabwe's telecommunication industry has exacerbated the challenge of retaining customers and acquiring new ones, with customer switching behavior becoming increasingly pronounced (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025). This switching behavior is particularly evident in Matabeleland North Province, where subscribers frequently change operators seeking better network coverage, affordable tariffs, and improved service quality (Chigwende and Govender, 2020).^{[3][2]}

The contemporary business environment demands that telecommunication operators understand the multidimensional nature of customer experience and its determinants. Service quality, as conceptualized through the SERVQUAL model, encompasses five critical dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, all of which significantly influence customer perceptions and behavioral intentions. Understanding how these dimensions manifest in the specific context of Matabeleland North Province is essential for operators seeking to enhance customer experience and maintain competitive advantage. The introduction of Mobile Number Portability in Zimbabwe has further intensified competitive pressures, enabling customers to switch operators while retaining their phone numbers, thereby reducing switching costs and increasing customer bargaining power (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

The purpose of this research is to comprehensively examine customer experience in the telecommunication industry in Matabeleland North Province, identifying key factors that influence customer satisfaction and retention. The study seeks to understand how service quality dimensions, pricing strategies, network performance, and customer service practices shape customer experience in this specific geographical context. By investigating these factors, the research aims to provide actionable insights for telecommunication operators, industry regulators, and policymakers to enhance service delivery and customer experience in Matabeleland North Province and similar peripheral regions in Zimbabwe.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework of Customer Experience

Customer experience has emerged as a central construct in contemporary marketing theory and practice, representing a holistic perspective on customer-organization interactions. The concept transcends traditional transactional views of customer relationships, encompassing cognitive evaluations, emotional responses, sensory perceptions, and behavioral outcomes that occur throughout the customer journey. In the telecommunication industry, customer experience is particularly critical due to the continuous nature of service consumption, high switching costs for operators, and intense competitive dynamics (Awuku, Agyei and Gonu, 2023).^[4]

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, provides a foundational framework for understanding service quality as a determinant of customer experience. This model conceptualizes service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In the telecommunication context, tangibles encompass physical facilities, equipment, and communication materials; reliability refers to the ability to perform promised services dependably and accurately; responsiveness involves willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; assurance relates to employees' knowledge, courtesy, and ability to inspire trust; and empathy involves providing caring, individualized attention to customers (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025). Research in African telecommunications markets has consistently demonstrated that these dimensions significantly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Shava and Herring, 2021).^{[5][2]}

The Customer Experience Management framework extends beyond service quality to incorporate touchpoint analysis, identifying critical moments of truth where customers interact with service providers. In telecommunications, these touchpoints include network performance during calls and data usage, customer service interactions, billing processes, retail store experiences, and digital platform engagements. Each touchpoint represents an opportunity to enhance or diminish overall customer experience. Studies have shown that negative experiences at critical touchpoints disproportionately influence overall customer perceptions and switching intentions (Botha, Kruger and De Vries, 2011).^[6]

The Gaps Model of Service Quality provides additional theoretical insight by identifying discrepancies between customer expectations and perceptions. In Zimbabwe's telecommunication industry, significant gaps exist between expected and perceived service quality, particularly regarding network reliability, data speeds, tariff transparency, and customer service responsiveness. These gaps are exacerbated in peripheral provinces like Matabeleland North, where infrastructure limitations, power supply challenges, and resource constraints compromise service delivery (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

2.2 Customer Experience in African Telecommunications

The African telecommunications landscape presents unique characteristics that distinguish it from developed markets, including infrastructure challenges, regulatory complexities, affordability constraints, and diverse customer segments with varying needs and expectations. Research across African markets has documented that network quality, particularly voice call clarity and data connectivity, emerges as the primary determinant of customer satisfaction and retention. In markets characterized by infrastructure limitations, customers prioritize functional reliability over ancillary services or brand image (Shava and Herring, 2021).^[5]

Studies in Zimbabwe's telecommunication sector have revealed concerning trends regarding customer satisfaction and loyalty. Chitura, Dube and Chari (2019) found that mobile phone subscribers in Gweru encounter numerous network-related problems when accessing services from their network providers, indicating that operators struggle to provide the level of service quality that subscribers desire. The research revealed low service quality perceptions and satisfaction levels, although subscribers exhibited reluctance to

switch providers due to switching barriers. Similarly, Chigwende and Govender (2020) investigated corporate brand image and switching behavior among mobile telecommunications customers in Zimbabwe, finding that brand image alone is insufficient to prevent customer switching when service quality deficiencies persist.^{[1][3]}

The unique challenges facing Zimbabwe's telecommunication industry significantly impact customer experience. The sector operates within a volatile economic environment characterized by hyperinflation, currency instability, unemployment, and liquidity crises. These macroeconomic challenges affect operators' ability to invest in infrastructure, maintain network quality, and price services affordably. Power outages resulting from load-shedding have emerged as a critical challenge, forcing operators to rely on diesel generators to maintain base station functionality, significantly increasing operational costs and compromising network reliability (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

Foreign currency shortages present another substantial obstacle, limiting operators' capacity to pay international equipment vendors, license fees, and suppliers. This constraint hampers network maintenance, expansion, and modernization initiatives, directly impacting service quality and customer experience. The regulatory environment, including punitive taxation and tariff controls, further constrains operators' financial capacity to invest in customer experience improvements (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

2.3 Customer Retention and Loyalty in Telecommunications

Customer retention has become a critical strategic priority for telecommunication operators globally, driven by the recognition that acquiring new customers costs significantly more than retaining existing ones. Loyal customers generate higher lifetime value, exhibit greater average revenue per user, and provide positive word-of-mouth referrals that reduce acquisition costs. In competitive markets, customer retention directly influences market share stability, revenue predictability, and profitability (Yaqub, Halim and Shehzad, 2019).^[7]

Research in the telecommunication industry has identified service quality as a primary antecedent of customer retention. Viriri and Chimwanda (2025) demonstrated a positive relationship between service quality and customer retention in Zimbabwe's mobile telecommunication industry, finding that quality service delivery reduces customer churn and switching behavior. The study revealed that 18.7% of variation in customer retention results from variations in service quality, indicating that while service quality is significant, other factors including pricing, network coverage, and competitive offerings also influence retention decisions.^[2]

Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, serving as a psychological state resulting from customers' evaluation of their experiences relative to expectations. Satisfied customers exhibit higher repurchase intentions, greater willingness to recommend services to others, and increased resistance to competitive offerings. However, satisfaction alone is insufficient for retention in highly competitive markets where switching costs are low and competitors actively pursue customer acquisition. Operators must transcend satisfaction to create emotional connections and commitment that foster genuine loyalty (Yukongdi and Vimolwan, 2023).^[4]

The phenomenon of multi-SIM ownership presents a unique challenge in African telecommunications markets, including Zimbabwe. Many customers maintain subscriptions with multiple operators simultaneously, switching between networks based on contextual factors such as call destination, data requirements, promotional offerings, and network availability. This behavior indicates low exclusive loyalty and high sensitivity to service quality variations and competitive offerings. Understanding the drivers of multi-SIM ownership provides valuable insights into customer experience deficiencies and competitive vulnerabilities (Chigwende and Govender, 2020).^[3]

2.4 Matabeleland North Province Context

Matabeleland North Province presents distinct geographical, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics that shape telecommunication customer experience. The province encompasses approximately 75,025 square kilometers, making it the largest province in Zimbabwe by area, yet it maintains a relatively sparse population distribution, with significant proportions residing in remote rural communities. This geographical dispersion creates substantial challenges for network infrastructure deployment and maintenance, as establishing base stations in sparsely populated areas yields lower returns on investment compared to urban centers (Robb and Paelo, 2020).^[1]

The province's economic profile significantly influences customers' capacity to purchase telecommunication services and their expectations regarding value for money. With substantial portions of the population engaged in subsistence agriculture, informal trading, and other low-income activities, affordability emerges as a critical determinant of service adoption and usage patterns. High data costs and call tariffs relative to household incomes constrain usage and satisfaction, with customers extremely price-sensitive and value-conscious. This economic reality necessitates that operators develop pricing strategies and service offerings tailored to the province's socioeconomic conditions (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

Infrastructure challenges in Matabeleland North Province extend beyond telecommunications to encompass power supply, transportation networks, and digital literacy levels. Persistent load-shedding affects network reliability, as base stations require consistent power to maintain connectivity. While operators employ backup generators and alternative power solutions, the frequency and duration of power outages in the province compromise service quality and customer experience. Additionally, limited digital literacy among some population segments, particularly in rural areas, affects customers' ability to fully utilize available services and troubleshoot basic problems, increasing dependence on customer service support (Robb and Paelo, 2020).^[1]

III. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine customer experience in the telecommunication industry in Matabeleland North Province. The descriptive approach was appropriate for systematically describing the characteristics, perceptions, and experiences of telecommunication subscribers in the province. This design enabled the collection of quantitative data regarding service quality dimensions, customer satisfaction levels, retention factors, and switching behavior patterns. A cross-sectional survey approach was adopted, collecting data at a single point in time, rather than a longitudinal design, due to time and resource constraints.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised active mobile telecommunication subscribers in Matabeleland North Province who use services from any of the three major operators: Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, NetOne, and Telecel Zimbabwe. According to the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, mobile penetration in the province exceeds 90%, with numerous subscribers maintaining multiple active SIM cards. Given the large and dispersed population, a representative sample was essential for drawing valid conclusions about customer experience in the province.

The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula for finite populations, yielding a target sample of 384 respondents to achieve 95% confidence level with 5% margin of error. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across the province's districts (Binga, Bubi, Hwange, Lupane, Nkayi, Tsholotsho, and Umguza) and demographic categories (age, gender, occupation, and

urban/rural residence). Within each stratum, simple random sampling was used to select individual respondents, ensuring every eligible subscriber had an equal probability of inclusion.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through structured questionnaires administered to the sampled respondents across Matabeleland North Province. The questionnaire comprised four main sections: demographic information, service quality perceptions using adapted SERVQUAL scales, customer satisfaction and loyalty measures, and switching behavior and retention factors. Questions utilized five-point Likert scales ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" to capture respondents' perceptions and attitudes. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 respondents from Bulawayo to identify ambiguities, ensure clarity, and assess reliability before full deployment.

Data collection occurred over a four-week period, with trained research assistants administering questionnaires in urban centers, rural growth points, and selected rural communities across the province. Respondents were approached in public spaces including shopping centers, bus terminals, and community gathering points. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations that participation was voluntary and data would be used exclusively for academic research purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured to encourage honest responses.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires was coded, cleaned, and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and describe customer experience dimensions. Inferential statistics including correlation analysis and chi-square tests were employed to examine relationships between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. Regression analysis was conducted to identify the relative importance of different factors in predicting customer retention and switching intentions.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. Additionally, gatekeeper permission was secured from the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, which oversees the telecommunications sector. Written permission was also obtained from the three major operators to approach their subscribers for research purposes. Throughout the research process, ethical principles including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection were strictly observed.

IV. Results and Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed across Matabeleland North Province, with 368 completed questionnaires returned, yielding a response rate of 95.8%. The high response rate reflects the relevance of telecommunication services to residents' daily lives and their willingness to share experiences and opinions. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	196	53.3
	Female	172	46.7
Age Group	18-25 years	98	26.6
	26-35 years	142	38.6
	36-45 years	84	22.8
	46-55 years	32	8.7
	Above 55 years	12	3.3
Education Level	Primary	42	11.4
	Secondary	168	45.7
	Tertiary	158	42.9
Occupation	Employed (Formal)	124	33.7
	Self-employed	146	39.7
	Student	62	16.8
	Unemployed	36	9.8
Residence	Urban	152	41.3
	Rural	216	58.7
Primary Operator	Econet Wireless	224	60.9
	NetOne	98	26.6
	Telecel	46	12.5

The demographic distribution reveals that respondents represented diverse segments of Matabeleland North Province's population. The slight male majority reflects typical patterns in mobile phone surveys, though gender distribution was relatively balanced. The predominance of younger age groups, with 65.2% of respondents aged between 18 and 35 years, aligns with national patterns showing higher mobile adoption among youth and economically active populations.^[2]

Educational attainment showed substantial representation of secondary and tertiary-educated respondents, collectively comprising 88.6% of the sample, indicating that mobile telecommunication users in the province generally possess moderate to high education levels. Occupational distribution revealed that self-employed individuals constituted the largest segment, reflecting the prominence of informal economic activities in the province. The rural-urban distribution showed that 58.7% of respondents resided in rural areas, appropriately reflecting the province's demographic composition.^[1]

Regarding operator preference, Econet Wireless dominated with 60.9% of respondents identifying it as their primary operator, followed by NetOne at 26.6% and Telecel at 12.5%. This distribution mirrors national market share patterns, with Econet maintaining market leadership. Notably, 68.2% of respondents reported owning and actively using SIM cards from multiple operators, indicating low exclusive loyalty and high multi-homing behavior, consistent with findings in other African telecommunications markets.^[3]

4.2 Service Quality Perceptions

Respondents were asked to evaluate various service quality dimensions of their primary telecommunication operator using five-point Likert scales. Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for service quality dimensions, with higher means indicating more favorable perceptions.

Table 2: Service Quality Dimensions in Matabeleland North Province Telecommunications

Service Quality Dimension	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Network Coverage and Reliability	2.64	1.18	Below Average
Voice Call Quality	2.82	1.15	Below Average
Data Connection Speed	2.46	1.22	Poor
Network Availability	2.71	1.19	Below Average
Tariff Affordability	2.38	1.26	Poor
Billing Accuracy and Transparency	3.12	1.14	Moderate
Customer Service Responsiveness	2.56	1.21	Below Average
Problem Resolution Effectiveness	2.48	1.23	Poor
Staff Knowledge and Courtesy	3.08	1.16	Moderate
Physical Facilities and Equipment	3.24	1.09	Moderate
Understanding Customer Needs	2.68	1.18	Below Average
Individualized Attention	2.52	1.20	Below Average
Overall Service Quality	2.73	1.17	Below Average

The service quality assessment reveals concerning patterns regarding customer perceptions in Matabeleland North Province. Data connection speed received the lowest mean score of 2.46, indicating that subscribers experience poor internet connectivity, likely reflecting infrastructure limitations and network congestion issues in the province. This finding aligns with broader national challenges, as Zimbabwe has been identified as having some of the most expensive and least reliable internet access in Southern Africa.^[2]

Tariff affordability also scored poorly at 2.38, suggesting that customers perceive telecommunication services as expensive relative to their economic circumstances. Given that Matabeleland North Province has substantial rural populations engaged in low-income activities, this perception significantly impacts customer experience and satisfaction. The disconnect between customer purchasing power and service pricing creates accessibility barriers and usage constraints.^[1]

Network coverage and reliability scored below average at 2.64, reflecting persistent challenges with signal strength and consistency, particularly in remote rural areas. Voice call quality, though slightly higher at 2.82, similarly indicates customer dissatisfaction with basic communication functions. These connectivity challenges are exacerbated by power outages affecting base station operations and limited infrastructure investment in peripheral areas.^[2]

Customer service dimensions showed mixed results. While staff knowledge and courtesy received moderate ratings at 3.08, customer service responsiveness and problem resolution effectiveness scored poorly at 2.56 and 2.48 respectively. This discrepancy suggests that while customers perceive staff as knowledgeable and courteous, they experience frustrations with response times and the effectiveness of solutions provided. The gap between empathy dimensions and responsiveness dimensions indicates systemic challenges beyond individual staff capabilities.^[1]

Physical facilities and equipment received the highest ratings at 3.24, suggesting that operators have invested in visible infrastructure such as retail outlets and branding materials. However, this tangible dimension appears disconnected from functional performance, as network reliability and service delivery scored considerably lower. This pattern indicates that operators may prioritize visible investments over operational excellence.^[2]

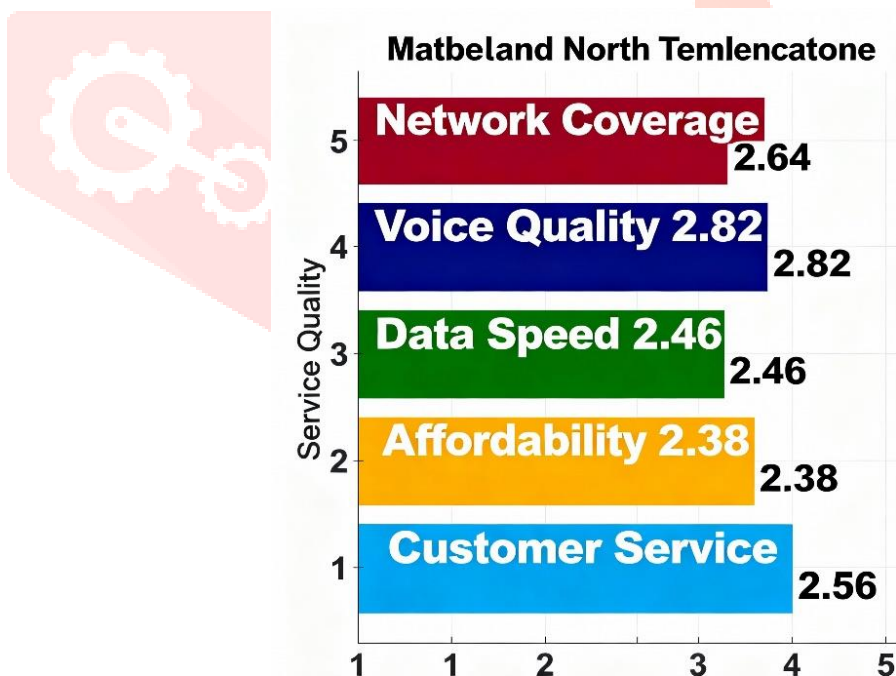


Figure 1: Service Quality Dimension Ratings in Matabeleland North Province Telecommunications

Source: Author's own analysis based on primary survey data collected in Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe, 2025

This bar chart visualizes the mean scores for key service quality dimensions as rated by 368 telecommunication subscribers in Matabeleland North Province. The chart displays five critical service dimensions with their corresponding mean ratings on a 5-point scale. Data connection speed received the lowest rating (2.46), followed by tariff affordability (2.38), indicating these as the most problematic areas for customers. The visual representation clearly illustrates the below-average performance across all measured dimensions, with no dimension achieving a rating above 3.0 (moderate level).

4.3 Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

Respondents were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their primary operator and their intentions to continue using the service. Table 3 presents satisfaction levels and loyalty indicators.

Table 3: Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty Indicators

Indicator	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Overall Satisfaction	Very Satisfied	18	4.9
	Satisfied	86	23.4
	Neutral	124	33.7
	Dissatisfied	102	27.7
	Very Dissatisfied	38	10.3
Likelihood to Recommend	Very Likely	24	6.5
	Likely	78	21.2
	Neutral	138	37.5
	Unlikely	94	25.5
	Very Unlikely	34	9.2
Likelihood to Continue	Definitely Will	46	12.5
	Probably Will	158	42.9
	Undecided	92	25.0
	Probably Will Not	54	14.7
	Definitely Will Not	18	4.9
Switching Consideration	Actively Considering	86	23.4
	Somewhat Considering	128	34.8
	Not Sure	78	21.2
	Not Considering	76	20.6

The satisfaction data reveals a troubling picture for operators in Matabeleland North Province. Only 28.3% of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their primary operator, while 38.0% expressed dissatisfaction or high dissatisfaction. The large neutral segment comprising 33.7% suggests ambivalence, where customers neither strongly endorse nor reject their operator. This tepid satisfaction level indicates significant customer experience deficiencies requiring urgent attention.^[2]

Recommendation intentions were similarly weak, with only 27.7% of respondents indicating they would likely or very likely recommend their operator to others. Conversely, 34.7% stated they would be unlikely or very unlikely to recommend their operator. The substantial neutral segment of 37.5% further indicates that customers lack strong positive associations sufficient to generate advocacy behavior. In competitive markets, customers who are mere satisfied without being enthusiastic advocates represent vulnerable segments susceptible to competitive appeals.^[4]

Retention indicators showed concerning patterns, with 19.6% of respondents indicating they probably or definitely would not continue with their current operator. While 55.4% expressed likelihood to continue, the substantial undecided and unlikely segments suggest retention vulnerabilities. Most alarmingly, 58.2% of respondents reported actively or somewhat considering switching operators, indicating widespread dissatisfaction translating into switching intentions. This finding validates earlier research documenting high customer churn in Zimbabwe's telecommunication sector.^[3]

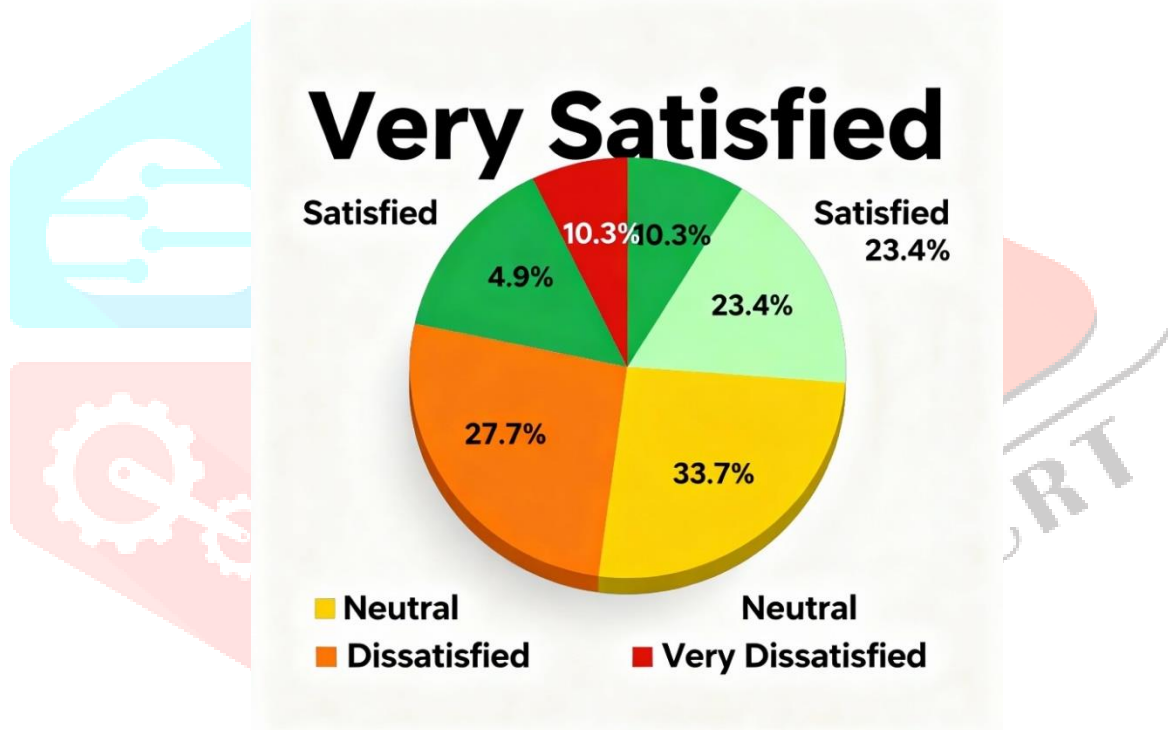


Figure 2: Overall Customer Satisfaction Distribution in Matabeleland North Province Telecommunications

Source: Author's own analysis based on primary survey data collected in Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe, 2025

This pie chart illustrates the distribution of overall customer satisfaction levels among 368 telecommunication subscribers in Matabeleland North Province. The visualization reveals a concerning satisfaction profile, with only 28.3% of customers expressing satisfaction (combining "Very Satisfied" 4.9% and "Satisfied" 23.4%). The largest segment comprises neutral customers (33.7%), while 38.0% express dissatisfaction (combining "Dissatisfied" 27.7% and "Very Dissatisfied" 10.3%). The color coding uses green tones for positive satisfaction, yellow for neutral, and red-orange tones for dissatisfaction levels.

4.4 Factors Influencing Customer Experience

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various factors in their overall customer experience. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify factors most strongly associated with overall satisfaction and retention intentions. Table 4 presents the standardized regression coefficients indicating the relative importance of different factors.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Customer Experience Determinants

Predictor Variable	Standardized Beta Coefficient	t-value	Significance (p)	Interpretation
Network Reliability	0.342	7.86	0.000***	Strong Positive
Data Connection Speed	0.286	6.42	0.000***	Moderate Positive
Tariff Affordability	0.264	5.98	0.000***	Moderate Positive
Customer Service Responsiveness	0.218	4.82	0.000***	Moderate Positive
Problem Resolution	0.196	4.36	0.000***	Moderate Positive
Billing Transparency	0.142	3.18	0.002**	Weak Positive
Physical Facilities	0.088	1.94	0.053	Not Significant
Staff Courtesy	0.076	1.68	0.094	Not Significant

Note: $R^2 = 0.524$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.512$, $F = 42.86$, $p < 0.001$; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

The regression analysis reveals that network reliability emerged as the strongest predictor of overall customer satisfaction and retention, with a standardized beta coefficient of 0.342. This finding underscores that functional network performance constitutes the foundation of customer experience in Matabeland North Province. Customers prioritize consistent connectivity above all other factors, reflecting the fundamental importance of core service delivery. This result aligns with research across African telecommunications markets documenting network quality as the primary satisfaction driver.^[5]

Data connection speed also significantly influences customer experience, with a beta coefficient of 0.286. As customers increasingly rely on mobile internet for information access, social connectivity, mobile money transactions, and entertainment, data performance becomes critical. The poor ratings for data speed combined with its high importance suggest a significant service quality gap requiring infrastructure investment and network optimization.^[2]

Tariff affordability emerged as another significant predictor with a beta of 0.264, confirming that pricing sensitivity substantially affects customer experience in the province. Given the socioeconomic profile of Matabeleland North residents, service costs relative to perceived value significantly influence satisfaction and retention decisions. Operators that successfully balance affordability with quality will likely gain competitive advantage.^[11]

Customer service dimensions including responsiveness and problem resolution both significantly predicted satisfaction, with betas of 0.218 and 0.196 respectively. These findings indicate that customer interactions with service representatives and the effectiveness of complaint handling significantly shape overall experience perceptions. The current poor performance on these dimensions represents both a challenge and an opportunity for differentiation.^[12]

Interestingly, tangible factors including physical facilities and staff courtesy did not significantly predict overall satisfaction when controlling for other factors. This suggests that while these elements contribute to positive impressions, they do not compensate for deficiencies in core service delivery. Customers ultimately prioritize functional performance over peripheral amenities.^[13]

The overall model explained 52.4% of variance in customer satisfaction and retention ($R^2 = 0.524$), indicating that the identified service quality dimensions substantially account for customer experience outcomes. However, 47.6% of variance remains unexplained, suggesting that other factors including brand image, social influences, switching costs, and competitor offerings also influence customer decisions.^[13]

4.5 Challenges and Barriers in Matabeleland North Province

Respondents were asked to identify specific challenges affecting their telecommunication experience in Matabeleland North Province. Open-ended responses were content analyzed and categorized thematically. Table 5 presents the frequency of challenges mentioned.

Table 5: Customer-Identified Challenges in Matabeleland North Province

Challenge Category	Frequency of Mentions	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Poor network coverage in rural areas	286	77.7
Frequent network outages	264	71.7
Slow data connection speeds	278	75.5
High cost of data bundles	298	81.0
Expensive call tariffs	242	65.8
Poor customer service response	198	53.8
Difficulty resolving complaints	186	50.5
Limited service centers in rural areas	224	60.9
Lack of staff in local service points	168	45.7
Power outages affecting network	256	69.6
Unreliable internet connectivity	272	73.9
Hidden charges and billing issues	142	38.6

Note: Respondents could mention multiple challenges, therefore percentages exceed 100%

The challenge identification reveals systematic issues affecting customer experience in Matabeleland North Province. High data costs emerged as the most frequently mentioned challenge, with 81.0% of respondents identifying it as problematic. This finding reflects broader concerns about affordability and value for money, particularly given the province's socioeconomic profile. Respondents expressed frustration that data packages are quickly depleted and require frequent purchases, creating financial strain for households with limited incomes.^[2]

Network coverage deficiencies in rural areas were mentioned by 77.7% of respondents, highlighting persistent infrastructure gaps. Many respondents from districts including Binga, Nkayi, Tsholotsho, and parts of Lupane reported weak signals, dead zones, and inconsistent connectivity. These challenges reflect the economic realities of deploying infrastructure in sparsely populated areas, where return on investment is limited. However, from customers' perspectives, inadequate coverage represents service failure regardless of underlying business considerations.^[1]

Slow data speeds troubled 75.5% of respondents, consistent with the service quality assessment showing poor ratings for this dimension. Respondents described frustrating experiences attempting to access websites, download content, stream videos, or conduct mobile money transactions. Slow speeds undermine service utility and customer productivity, generating dissatisfaction and negative experiences.^[2]

Power outages affecting network performance were identified by 69.6% of respondents, illustrating how broader infrastructure deficiencies cascade into telecommunication service quality. Load-shedding disrupts base station operations despite backup generators, as prolonged outages exhaust backup power supplies. Respondents in rural areas particularly emphasized this challenge, as rural base stations often lack robust backup systems.^[2]

Customer service challenges including poor responsiveness, difficulty resolving complaints, and limited service center availability collectively affected more than half of respondents. These findings suggest that operators have not adequately established localized customer support infrastructure in Matabeleland North Province, forcing customers to travel to district centers or Bulawayo for assistance. The absence of accessible customer service points exacerbates frustrations and diminishes overall experience.^[1]

V. Discussion

The findings from this research provide valuable insights into customer experience in the telecommunication industry in Matabeleland North Province, revealing significant challenges and opportunities for service improvement. The study's results align with and extend previous research on telecommunications in Zimbabwe while highlighting province-specific nuances requiring targeted interventions.

The poor ratings for service quality dimensions, particularly network reliability, data speeds, and affordability, confirm persistent challenges documented in broader Zimbabwean telecommunications research. Viriri and Chimwanda (2025) similarly found that service quality significantly influences customer retention, with network performance emerging as critical. However, the present study demonstrates that these challenges are particularly acute in Matabeleland North Province, where infrastructure limitations, geographical dispersion, and socioeconomic constraints intensify service delivery difficulties. The mean service quality score of 2.73 indicates below-average performance, suggesting that operators are failing to meet customer expectations consistently.^[2]

The finding that only 28.3% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their primary operator, while 58.2% were considering switching, indicates a customer experience crisis requiring urgent attention. This dissatisfaction translates directly into business vulnerabilities, as dissatisfied customers actively seek alternatives and readily respond to competitive offerings. The high prevalence of multi-SIM ownership,

with 68.2% of respondents maintaining multiple active subscriptions, reflects adaptive customer behavior in response to service quality inconsistencies. Customers strategically use different operators for different purposes, selecting the network with best coverage in specific locations, most affordable rates for particular services, or most reliable connectivity at given times. This behavior, while rational from customers' perspectives, indicates failure of any single operator to comprehensively meet customer needs (Chigwende and Govender, 2020).^[3]

The regression analysis identifying network reliability as the strongest predictor of customer satisfaction validates the primacy of core service delivery in customer experience. Customers fundamentally expect telecommunication networks to facilitate reliable voice calls and data connectivity. When these basic functions fail, no amount of peripheral service enhancements can compensate. This finding has important strategic implications for operators, suggesting that infrastructure investment and network optimization should receive priority over marketing campaigns, promotional activities, or cosmetic improvements. Operational excellence must precede marketing sophistication (Shava and Herring, 2021).^[5]

The significance of affordability as a customer experience determinant reflects the socioeconomic realities of Matabeleland North Province and broader Zimbabwe. With 81.0% of respondents identifying high data costs as problematic and 65.8% citing expensive call tariffs, pricing emerges as a critical barrier to positive customer experience. This finding creates a dilemma for operators who face substantial operational costs including power generation expenses, infrastructure maintenance, and international vendor payments requiring foreign currency. However, from customers' perspectives, affordability concerns override operators' cost structures. Successful operators will need to develop innovative pricing strategies including usage-based packages, off-peak discounts, social tariffs for low-income segments, and community-based offerings that balance revenue requirements with customer purchasing power (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

The customer service challenges identified, including poor responsiveness and difficult complaint resolution, indicate systemic deficiencies in how operators interact with customers. While staff were rated moderately well on courtesy and knowledge, the failure to respond promptly and resolve problems effectively suggests organizational rather than individual inadequacies. Customer service excellence requires not only well-trained frontline staff but also empowerment, appropriate tools and systems, clear escalation procedures, and organizational commitment to customer-centricity. The limited presence of service centers in rural areas of Matabeleland North Province compounds these challenges, creating access barriers that force customers to expend time and money reaching distant service points (Chitura, Dube and Chari, 2019).^[1]

The infrastructure challenges documented, particularly network coverage gaps in rural areas and power outage impacts, reflect broader development constraints in Zimbabwe. These challenges transcend individual operator control, requiring coordinated responses involving government, regulators, and industry players. Infrastructure-sharing arrangements, as recommended by regulatory authorities, could alleviate some deployment costs and accelerate coverage expansion. Additionally, investments in renewable energy solutions including solar power for base stations could mitigate load-shedding impacts and improve network reliability (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

The finding that 58.2% of respondents were considering switching operators, combined with low satisfaction levels, indicates substantial customer churn risk. Customer switching imposes significant costs on operators through lost revenues, reduced market share, and increased customer acquisition expenditures to replace departing subscribers. The introduction of Mobile Number Portability in Zimbabwe has reduced switching costs, making it easier for dissatisfied customers to change operators while retaining their phone numbers. This regulatory change shifts bargaining power toward customers and intensifies competitive pressures, making customer experience management increasingly critical for operator sustainability (Viriri and Chimwanda, 2025).^[2]

The modest R-squared value of 0.524 in the regression analysis, while statistically significant, indicates that approximately 48% of variance in customer satisfaction remains unexplained by the service quality dimensions examined. This suggests that other factors beyond functional service attributes influence customer experience and retention decisions. These may include brand image and reputation, social influences and peer recommendations, switching costs and barriers, competitive offerings and promotions, and habitual behaviors. Future research should explore these additional determinants to develop more comprehensive understanding of customer experience dynamics (Chigwende and Govender, 2020).^[3]

VI. Conclusion

This study examined customer experience in the telecommunication industry in Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe, revealing significant service quality deficiencies and customer dissatisfaction that threaten operator sustainability and competitive positioning. The research demonstrates that customer experience in the province is characterized by poor network reliability, inadequate data connection speeds, affordability concerns, and customer service responsiveness challenges. These deficiencies result in low customer satisfaction, weak loyalty, high multi-SIM ownership, and substantial switching intentions, collectively indicating a customer experience crisis requiring urgent strategic intervention.

Network reliability emerged as the most critical determinant of customer satisfaction and retention, emphasizing that telecommunication operators must prioritize core service delivery above peripheral enhancements. Infrastructure investment to expand coverage, particularly in rural areas; network optimization to improve reliability; and alternative power solutions to mitigate load-shedding impacts represent essential foundations for customer experience improvement. Without addressing these fundamental service delivery challenges, operators will continue experiencing high customer churn regardless of marketing investments or brand-building initiatives.

Affordability concerns significantly impact customer experience in Matabeleland North Province, reflecting the socioeconomic realities of the region. High data costs and expensive call tariffs create barriers to service adoption and usage, generating customer dissatisfaction and limiting telecommunications' developmental impact. Operators must develop pricing strategies that balance revenue requirements with customer purchasing power, potentially including segmented offerings, social tariffs, community packages, and flexible usage-based options that enhance accessibility.

Customer service dimensions including responsiveness and problem resolution effectiveness significantly influence overall customer experience, yet current performance on these dimensions remains poor. Establishing localized customer service centers in district towns, training and empowering staff to resolve complaints effectively, implementing multichannel support including digital platforms, and fostering customer-centric organizational cultures represent critical priorities for experience enhancement.

The high prevalence of multi-SIM ownership and switching considerations indicates that customers adaptively respond to service quality inconsistencies by maintaining relationships with multiple operators. While this behavior is rational from customers' perspectives, it signals that no operator has successfully differentiated itself through superior customer experience. This situation represents both a challenge and an opportunity, as operators that successfully address service quality gaps and deliver consistently positive experiences can potentially capture greater customer loyalty and wallet share.

The study contributes to telecommunications research by providing province-specific insights into customer experience determinants in peripheral regions of Zimbabwe. While previous research has examined telecommunications at national levels, this focused investigation reveals how geographical, infrastructural, and socioeconomic factors unique to Matabeleland North Province shape customer experiences and expectations. These findings have practical implications for operators' resource allocation, service design, and customer engagement strategies in the province and similar peripheral regions.

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