Chapter 15

Exploring Determinants of Internet Service Provider Customer Switching Barriers Using an Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Research Design

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to give a practical illustration of the exploratory sequential mixed methods research to contribute to the literature in the proper application of this research design in addressing complex research phenomena. The research was motivated by the fact that, despite the growing body of literature on customer retention, "churn" or customer movement between competitors remains an ongoing problem for most service providers, including ZOL, the study case in this chapter. A pragmatic research philosophy was used in terms of methodology, and exploratory sequential mixed methods research was used. The research process started with a literature review to identify possible factors. The push-pull-mooring framework of migration was used as the research model to understand and determine the switching barriers variables affecting a customer's decision to remain with a service provider among ZOL internet subscribers in Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This study sought to investigate the impact of switching barriers on a customer's decision to remain with a service provider. In the last decade, the role of switching barriers in influencing consumer behaviour has generated considerable theoretical and practical interest (Han, Kim, & Hyun, 2011; Qian, Peiji, & Quanfu, 2011; Nagengast, Evanschitzky, Blut, & Rudolph, 2014; Li, 2015; Chuah, *et al.*, 2017; Liang, Choi, & Joppe, 2018). High switching costs, interpersonal relationships, and attractiveness of alternatives have in recent years been counted among the most effective retention strategies.

Switching barriers are obstacles that customers face when they switch from one product or service to another (Barusman & Virgawenda, 2019). The switching barriers include among other things: costs, contractual obligations, risks, interruptions of service, and inconveniences. Shi *et al.* (2009) defined switching costs as "the perceived economic and psychological costs associated with changing from one alternative to another" (p. 85). In other words, switching costs can be described as barriers that maintain customers in service relationships. Switching barriers make customer defection difficult or costly. For instance, when consumers switch between service providers, they incur various costs ranging from time spent gathering information about potential alternatives to foregone benefits that require continued patronage of an existing provider. As such, switching barriers can be used as a retention strategy to survive short-term fluctuations in service quality that might otherwise result in defection.

Over the last five years, Zimbabwe has experienced a tremendous increase in Internet Access Providers (IAP) and Internet Service Providers (ISP) with active internet subscribers increasing by 48.97%. According to the Post and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe -POTRAZ (2015) 1st Quarter Report, there were 5,782,491 active internet subscribers in January 2015 and the number increased to 8,614,009 in the 1st Quarter of 2020 (POTRAZ, 2020). This growth indicates operators' aggressiveness to grow their respective market share through promotions and special offers.

Liquid Telecom which is a sister company to the study case company, Zimbabwe Online (ZOL), enjoys a relatively large market share in terms of both equipped capacity (62.6%) and used capacity (57.1%) followed by TelOne which has a relatively higher ratio between its equipped capacity (31.3%) and its used capacity (32.3%) (POTRAZ, 2020a). Although the number of internet users and ZOL subscribers has been growing exponentially, some internet service providers in Zimbabwe are experiencing high churning rates and might lose significant market share in the near future. Therefore, an understanding of the push factors and the pull factors that influence internet subscribers' intentions to switch to another Internet Service Provider (ISP) is of great importance to operators' customer retention strategies. This study, therefore, sought to understand customer switching behaviour and determine the extent to which switching barriers affect customer retention at ZOL Zimbabwe.

From the foregoing background and context, it is evident that the reasons for customer switching barriers are not known. In terms of research methodology, this points to exploratory research as we have to begin by exploring possible independent and dependant variables that could be causing the subscribed customers to defect from one ISP to the other. As a result, an exploratory sequential mixed methods research (MMR) was adopted in this study. It is sequenced research starting with a minor qualitative research strand to explore the possible variables and their association followed by a major quantitative research strand informed by outcomes from the initial qualitative research strand. The research process culminates with a mixed data analysis that is a comparison of qualitative and quantitative research findings. The following sections collectively describe step by step the application of the exploratory sequential MMR to address the complex research phenomena presented.

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