

The Effect of Tangibility on Customer Loyalty in Zimbabwe's Hardware Industry

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ABSTRACT

In Zimbabwe's hardware industry, tangibility is the cornerstone of customer loyalty, as the physical quality, durability, and reliability of products not only build trust but also transform one-time buyers into lifelong patrons. This sector is experiencing growth driven by urbanization, infrastructure development, and construction activity. Despite its potential, many retail hardware businesses struggle to retain customers, highlighting the need to understand service quality dimensions—particularly tangibility. Grounded in the SERVQUAL model and guided by a pragmatist philosophy, the research employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to examine the relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, targeting a stratified sample of 330 respondents across various hardware outlets. The study revealed that customers in Zimbabwe's hardware industry place strong importance on tangible factors such as product reliability, store layout, and product quality. These physical cues significantly influence customer loyalty, with elements like visually appealing facilities, organized layouts, and product demonstrations fostering trust and encouraging repeat patronage. Qualitative insights reinforced these findings, with participants emphasizing the importance of sensory experiences, brand presentation, and physical infrastructure in shaping customer perceptions.

The study highlights tangibility as a critical driver of customer loyalty in Zimbabwe's hardware industry. Product reliability, store layout, and visible service cues are shown to be strategic assets that foster trust and repeat patronage, even amid economic challenges such as inflation and currency instability. The findings emphasize that retailers should invest in tangible service elements to enhance engagement and competitiveness, while policymakers should support frameworks that strengthen consumer confidence. For scholars, the research enriches service quality literature by linking empirical evidence with theory. Overall, the study advocates for tangibility as a pathway to resilience, differentiation, and sustainable loyalty in the evolving retail landscape.

Keywords: Tangibility Customer Loyalty Hardware Industry

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe's hardware industry, tangibility is the cornerstone of customer loyalty, as the physical quality, durability, and reliability of products not only build trust but also transform one-time buyers into lifelong patrons. The hardware industry refers to the sector that produces and distributes physical tools, equipment, machinery, fasteners, fittings, and durable products used in construction, manufacturing, and everyday applications (Platform Executive 2024). It is expected to grow steadily, driven by increasing urbanization, infrastructural development and construction activities. For instance, this industry generated revenue of U.S \$1.93 billion in 2025. It is projected to experience annual growth of 2, 46% this year. Among countries worldwide, China leads the pack with revenue of \$546.21 billion in 2025. By 2027, Zimbabwe's Hardware industry is forecasted to achieve a stable growth rate of 2.40%, with Egypt leading the African region, followed by South Africa, Ethiopia, Algeria and Nigeria. The industry is heavily influenced by macroeconomic factors, for example, global economic trends, the country's economic outlook, fiscal policies, and other relevant economic indicators.

Zimbabwe's hardware industry is experiencing a surge in demand due to the country's infrastructure and development initiatives. There is a growing demand for materials due to infrastructure projects, which is also

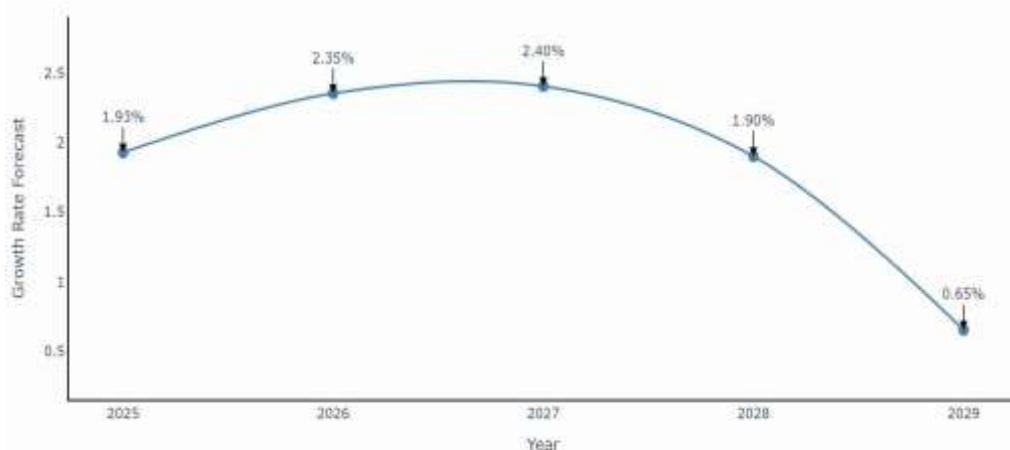
driving innovation in both small and large businesses, although challenges remain in financing and skills development. There has been explosive growth in the number of houses being constructed in Zimbabwe since the dollarization of the economy (Taramax, 2020). Developments in Zimbabwe's hardware industry include a focus on supply chain modernisation, technological integration, and government support for SMEs. The overall performance of the market is closely tied to the economic stability and growth of the country, as well as shifts in the global economy. Furthermore, fiscal policies such as taxes and tariffs also impact the market by affecting purchasing power and overall business profitability. Additionally, changes in the country's investment and infrastructural development also have a significant impact on the demand for hardware and building materials.

Key challenges include high inflation, low consumer spending, currency instability, limited access to credit and high transport costs, which are exacerbated by complex and irregular import regulations. The country's strict import regulations also impact the availability and pricing of products. Due to high costs of transportation coupled with limited access to resources, local suppliers and manufacturers have substantial bargaining power in the industry. Key challenges include financial constraints and competition, whilst success in the industry is determined by factors like product reliability, customer service and managing inventory effectively. Manhiwa (2016) observed that some of the challenges faced by the hardware industry were a lack of business skills, a lack of training and development, and the need for financial management skills. The need for a collaborative network with their suppliers is very important. The industry continues to benefit from infrastructure development and increasing demand for construction products. Overall, the market is closely tied to the economic climate, making it significant for businesses to closely monitor and adapt to both microeconomic and macroeconomic developments.

Key success factors for the hardware include cost reduction, product differentiation, favorable payment terms and good pricing strategies. Other strategies include good supplier relationships, networking, collaboration and market segmentation, positioning and targeting (Manhiwa, 2016)

The government is committed to supporting SMEs through financial assistance, entrepreneurship training, and career development schemes.

Zimbabwe Hardware Market, Growth Rate Forecast (2025-2029)



Note: The market forecast is derived through analysis of correlations between key macroeconomic factors and market sales trends, followed by predictive modeling to project future sales

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growth potential of Zimbabwe's hardware industry which is driven by urbanization, infrastructure development and rising construction activity, many retail hardware businesses struggle to retain customers and build long term loyalty. Tangibility is of paramount importance as it includes physical facilities, product quality and store layout.

The lack of localized, data-driven insights into how tangibility influences loyalty in Zimbabwe's hardware sector presents a significant research gap. Without clear evidence, hardware retailers may underinvest in physical infrastructure or misalign their service strategies, leading to missed opportunities for competitive differentiation and customer engagement. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty, using a mixed-methods approach grounded in the SERVQUAL model, to generate actionable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and scholars.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tangibility is one of the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), alongside reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Shariff et al (2025) asserted that tangibility has been extensively studied in hospitality and banking sector and its application in hardware industry remains limited. Tangibility represents the physical evidence of service delivery, including facilities and equipment (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985).

Theoretical framework

SERVQUAL Model

As of now, the SERVQUAL model, established by Parasuraman and colleagues in 1988, is the most widely-used model for service quality measurement. Just Included in the SERVQUAL paradigm is a confirmation computation technique that subscribers use to identify how much disparity there existed between what service they were expecting to receive and what got delivered to them. These ten qualities, taste, convenience, dependability, concern for customers under fire and competence--constitute the quality of services in the highest sense, Parasuraman et al. 1985). These qualities were then reduced to a total of five dimensions through factor analysis (Reheul, Caneghem and Verbruggen 2019). These five characteristics became tools for evaluating the quality of services.

Reliability

According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), it denotes the ability of one to provide accurate, prompt, convenient and dependable service. To this end one must honour agreements, promises made to customers, maintain regularity in providing services. This calls for adherence to agreements, commitments made to clients, and consistency in the provision of services. Dependability is defined as the accurate and consistent delivery of promised services. Consumers prefer to do business with companies or organisations that are trustworthy and fulfil their commitments, particularly when it comes to important support elements and service guarantees. Customers value and prioritise dependability in any business context (Ali et al., 2021).

Responsiveness

According to Ali et al. (2021), it is possible to define it as the capacity of the organisation to rapidly respond to the demands and aspirations of its customers. Specifically, it evaluates the ability to address difficulties in a timely manner, handle customer complaints in an expert manner, and demonstrate a willingness to assist consumers while simultaneously satisfying their requirements (Parasuman, 1988). In a different way of putting it, responsiveness is the capacity to respond to the desires of the clients.

Tangibles

According to Parasuman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), for instance, the hardware industry's hardware is a mirror image of their own facilities, machines and people, as well as information systems, papers, information manuals, technology and equipment. To put it another way, the tangibles consist of the impact that the facilities, equipment, people, and communication materials have on the clients (Agarwal and Sigh 2016). There is yet another way to put it. According to Sureshchandar (2013), environmental service scapes are characterised as having repercussions that are physiological, psychological, sociological, cognitive, and emotional for both staff and clients. Their effects may be highlighted differently according to the type of environment. This impact is

felt by both company employees and its customers. Tangibility has a significant role in the hardware industry in Zimbabwe, particularly given the country's growing construction and infrastructure development projects. The importance of tangibility can be seen in the following aspects;

- a) **Customer preferences:** Zimbabwean customers tend to prefer tangible products with clear specifications, quality, and durability. This is important in the hardware industry, where products are often used for construction and building purposes.
- b) **Product quality:** Tangible products allow customers to assess quality firsthand, which is vital in the hardware industry, where product failure can have serious consequences.
- c) **Building trust.** Tangible products can build trust with customers, especially in a market where durability and reliability are key considerations.
- d) **Marketing and sales.** Highlighting the tangible features of hardware products can be an effective marketing strategy, particularly in a competitive market with both local and international suppliers.

Assurance

Customers are able to have faith in the quality of the services provided by the company because it establishes its credibility and trustworthiness by providing professional services, demonstrating good technical expertise, maintaining a pleasant demeanour, and having effective communication skills.

Empathy

It entails providing clients with the highest care, attention, and preparation in order to make them feel as though they are "guests" of the company and to ensure that they are always welcome, regardless of where they are or when they visit. This success may be attributed, in large part, to human factors, and the retail industry's awareness of its customers increases in proportion to the degree to which it cares for them.

The SERVQUAL model has been implemented in a selection of different organizational settings, despite the fact that it was initially developed for use in the marketing sector. The SERVQUAL has evolved as the most extensively used tool and economical model for evaluating service quality across a variety of service organizations and sectors, including retail (Irfan, Shamsudin, & Hadi, 2016; Kofi & Wilberforce, 2018; Osman & Sentosa, 2018). This is a noteworthy development.

The SERVQUAL Model is represented graphically in the diagram below.

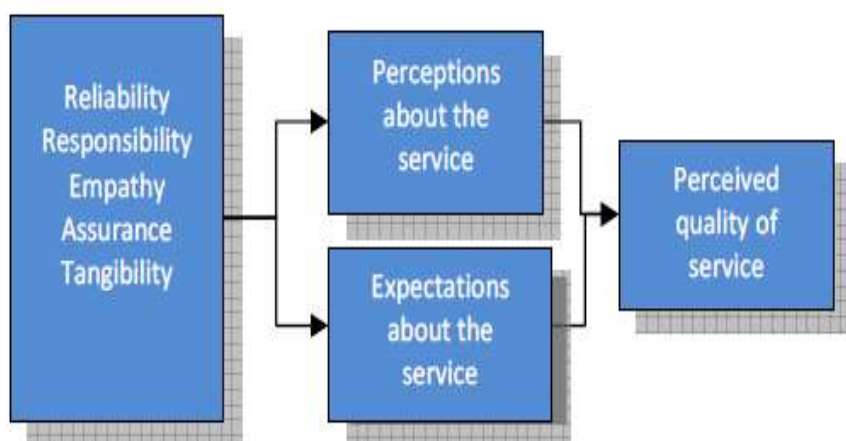


Figure 2.4. SERVQUAL Model

Source: Parasuraman et al. (1988:56).

The effects of tangibility on customer loyalty

The physical features of a service or product that clients can see, feel, and experience are known as tangible aspects (Panda and Das, 2022). The idea of tangibility specifically examines the physical spaces of the service providers, the way staff members look, and the tools and equipment that are utilised to deliver the service. Gupta and Rokade (2023) state that businesses typically use tangibles to communicate signal quality and image. The impact of physical facilities and customer communication materials are also considered tangibles. According to Malik, Hadi, and Gaadar (2018), physical amenities, aesthetic appeal, and attractiveness may all be regarded as favourable markers of tangibility in the service industry.

Understanding the tangible elements such as the physical setting, service and product quality is essential for businesses looking to establish enduring relationships with their clientele in today's cutthroat business environment. Since it makes the initial impression on clients, the physical space is a crucial component of tangibility. By fostering a friendly environment, a well-designed physical proof can increase client happiness and loyalty. A pleasant, well-maintained physical space with improved lighting, colour, and layout encourages repeat business from customers. Another important component of tangibility is service quality. It is the perceived judgement in which the client assesses the procedure and contrasts the service received with the expectations, according to Chikazhe et al. (2022a, b). The calibre and modernity of the technology that is utilised to give the service, as well as the polished appearance of the people and facilities, all have an impact on the customers' perceptions of the quality of the service. As a result of the fact that customers are more likely to purchase products that possess superior physical features such as durability and beauty, product quality is also an essential component of tangibility. Specifically, it refers to the properties of a product that are tactile and can be touched and felt by customers. Product conformity, design, performance, and features are the primary elements that contribute to the overall quality of a product. Customer happiness, brand loyalty, and profitability are all directly impacted by product quality, making it an extremely important factor for organisations.

According to the findings of a survey study that was carried out by Kim, Fan, Chang, and Park (2023), there is a correlation that is statistically significant between the satisfaction of customers and the tangible nature of the services that are offered. According to the findings of a different study conducted by Yee, Yeung, and Cheng (2017), tangibility has the ability to lessen the risks and uncertainties that customers face while also assuring high-quality services. This has a considerable and favourable effect on customer loyalty.

In contrast, Yilmaz and Ari (2017) found that tangibility had a negative effect on consumer loyalty when they investigated the relationships between service quality, image, satisfaction, complaints, and intention to reuse. They found that tangibility was a factor that negatively impacted customer loyalty. According to the findings of Isikli, Aydin, Celik, and Gumus (2017), tangibility does not have a direct impact on customer loyalty and has a limited link with customer satisfaction. Similarly, Agarwal and Singh (2016) found that although tangibility and customer loyalty have a negative relationship, communication and knowledge are more significant. This finding is in line with the previous one. Furthermore, according to Kofi and Wilberforce (2018) and Reheul, Caneghem, and Verbruggen (2019), tangibility had an indirect impact on customer loyalty in the hardware business. This was found to be the case in the hardware industry. Since this is the case, the objective of this study is to determine whether or not tangibility has an effect on customer loyalty that is either direct or indirect.

METHODOLOGY

Pragmatism philosophy

The study used pragmatist philosophy. In the first case, pragmatism places an emphasis on practical outcomes and the application of concepts in real-world contexts, which aligns with the study's goals of examining the effects of tangibility on client retention. Understanding the intricate relationships that exist in the hardware industry sector is made easier by this line of thinking, which enables the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Goldkuhl, 2012). Furthermore, pragmatism acknowledges how the environment shapes the study's conclusions. By taking into account the opinions of numerous stakeholders, pragmatism enhances the calibre of data gathered and the relevance of the findings (Muchaendepi et al., 2019). It emphasizes workable

solutions that are needed under the particular circumstances of Harare to present practical insights which would lead to the better performance of hardware industry. Furthermore, pragmatism promotes continuous investigation and adjustment-which is particularly called for with respect to the pace of evolution in both the areas of tangibility and customer loyalty. In fact, pragmatism can actually serve as a path toward the constant discovery of new ways for strategy evaluation and improvement concerning service quality for dynamically arising issues such as assurance and responsiveness amongst consumers.

Research Approach

The study used a mixed-methods approach. Therefore, the mixed-method approach was used in this study to investigate how tangibility affects customer loyalty in the hardware sector. This method was especially well-suited for this study since it combined qualitative and quantitative data, which would enhance the research's understanding. Focus groups and in-depth qualitative interviews would enable the study to examine the diverse experiences and perspectives of different stakeholders, while also gathering quantitative data via questionnaires to assess the impact of tangibility on customer loyalty

Furthermore, using a mixed-method approach makes data triangulation easier, which improves the validity and reliability of the results. The effect of tangibility on customer loyalty was better understood by combining quantitative data with qualitative observations. The study can investigate in-depth the factors influencing customer loyalty in the hardware industry because it can identify patterns and associations that are not readily apparent when using a single method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Furthermore, in a field that is changing quickly, like service tangibility, the flexibility of the mixed-methods approach makes it possible to explore novel concepts and themes.

Target Population

As defined by Willie M. 2024, the term "target population" refers to any group of individuals who are participating in the research study and who share one or more characteristics that the researcher considers to be relevant and significant in relation to the topic of the investigation. In the current study, the researcher concentrated on the 2000 customers who are directly served by the hardware industry in Harare and are economically active.

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed in the study. Because the study examines how tangibility affects customer loyalty in the hardware industry, a cross-sectional survey research design was used. The design was quite useful in acquiring a snapshot of any given community which could, in return, allow the researcher to effectively obtain a lot of data from various respondents. To this end, the cross-sectional survey enables one to obtain quantitative information about tangibility dimensions in terms of the present status and also regarding their perceived impacts on customer loyalty business (Fowler, 2014). Cross-sectional survey enables the study of relationships that may exist among multiple variables. Such correlations can be measured and assessed for their statistical significance in leading towards improvement in tangibility by using the structured questionnaires.

This method is very helpful for finding the trends and connections in the data that can help with the creation of practical suggestions for professionals working in the hardware industry (Bryman, 2016). The cross-sectional design has the added advantage of allowing a wide variety in the inclusion of individuals, which enhances generalizability. In surveying various hardwares, therefore, the research can capture a wide range of views and practices that strengthen the findings.

Sample size determination

Creswell and Creswell (2017) assert that a sample is a smaller group that is taken from the larger population that is available. It indicates the proportion of the population's respondents who were representative of the entire

assemblage. When calculating the sample, a margin of error of 5%, a confidence level of 95%, and a level of significance of 5% are all taken into consideration. Using the formula developed by Cochran, a sample size of two thousand participants was chosen for this investigation.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + \frac{N-1}{n}}$$

Whereas:

n = sample size, at 95% confidence level, 5% level of significance

N = the total target of infinite population

No = desired sample size

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot (1-0.5)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$(0.05)^2$$

$$= \frac{384.16 \cdot 0.5 \cdot 0.5}{0.0025}$$

$$0.0025$$

$$= 384.16$$

$$n = \frac{384.16}{1 + \frac{384.16 - 1}{2000}}$$

$$1 + \frac{384.16 - 1}{2000}$$

$$2000$$

$$n = \frac{384.16}{1.19158}$$

$$1.19158$$

$$n = 330$$

Probability sampling refers to a technique that ensures that every component of the population is eligible for selection and that this selection is accompanied with a particular probability. The method of stratified sampling was utilized in this investigation.

Probability sampling's stratification. It is best suited for stratified sampling in an environment where the goal of the study is to enhance customer loyalty through better service quality. This entails separating the population into discrete subgroups or strata with comparable traits. The bases could be behaviour, loyalty levels, location, or business size.

Therefore, stratified random sampling can help in giving insights into how tangibility affect customer loyalty because each subgroup is well represented in the sample. Such a detail becomes relevant to comprehend the several opportunities and challenges faced by the various hardwares in the region (Lee et al., 2022). Stratified sampling would ensure its validity and reliability features also for the study. It's potential to any sort of bias would be at minimum, too, as the researcher shall select all relevant strata representative systematically rather than merely relying upon random sampling. Stratified sampling strengthens research output by allowing efficient processing of data and comparison between the strata. Segmentation of the samples into relevant categories

allows the researcher to further achieve a more successful exploration in investigating the differences in service quality.

This would go a long way in bringing out best practices within the specific strata that could then be diffused into the wider community. The knowledge from this study would, therefore, consolidate our understanding and the vital importance of tangibility in the hardware industry.

Findings

Response rate

Table 4.1: Questionnaire Response Rate

Respondents	Questionnaires Distributed	Questionnaires Returned	Response Rate%	Non-Response Rate%
Customer	330	323	98	2%
Totals	330	323	98	2%

Source: Primary data.

The response rate was 98 percent when customers were given questionnaires to fill out at their own pace (Table 4.1). Two percent of the respondents did not return the questionnaires, even though the researcher encouraged them to do so. Insightful analysis was made possible by the high response rate.

Tangibility on customer loyalty

The participants answered questions with confidence. Table 4.15 below shows the results of the descriptive statistics.

Table 4.15 Descriptive statistics on tangibility on customer loyalty

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tangible evidence of reliability builds long-term loyalty among customers.	323	2	5	4.12	.744
The hardware's physical facilities are visually appealing to customers and they influence loyalty	323	2	5	3.75	.920
Well-organized and appealing store layouts enhance customer experience and retention.	323	2	5	3.93	.719
Tangible features such as product quality and durability impact customer loyalty.	323	2	5	3.84	.822
Availability of clear product demonstrations strengthens customer trust.					
Valid N (list wise)	323				

Source: SPSS Output Data

The means provided (4.12, 3.75, 3.93, 3.84) suggest a generally positive perception of the impact of tangibles on customer loyalty. The statement with the highest mean (4.12), "Tangible evidence of reliability builds long-term loyalty among customers," suggests that customers place a high value on seeing physical proof of a hardware store's tangibility in fostering long-term loyalty. The other statements, with means ranging from 3.75 to 3.93, further support this, emphasizing the importance of visually appealing physical facilities, well-organized store layouts, product quality and durability, and clear product demonstrations in enhancing customer experience and retention. The data indicates that tangible elements play a significant role in building customer loyalty. This supports the claims made by Malik, Hadi, and Gaadar (2018), that physical amenities, aesthetic appeal, and attractiveness may all be regarded as favourable markers of tangibility in the service industry. Understanding the tangible elements such as the physical setting, service and product quality is essential for businesses looking to establish enduring relationships with their clientele in today's cutthroat business environment. Since it makes the initial impression on clients, the physical space is a crucial component of tangibility. The researcher also aimed to establish the relationships among elements.

H5: There is a positive relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty in retail industry.

The findings of the correlation analysis are displayed in the following table.

Table 4.16 Correlation between tangibility and customer loyalty

Correlations			
		Tangibility	Customer Loyalty
Tangibility	Pearson Correlation	1	.871**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	323	323
Customer Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.871**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	323	323

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output Data

Tangibility and customer loyalty show a rather strong, positive, and statistically significant link according to the correlation study. With tangibility rising, customer loyalty also typically rises according to the Pearson correlation coefficient of .871 ($p < .001$). This implies that a main driver of customer loyalty is tangibility. Further supporting the conclusion that tangibility greatly affects customer loyalty is the significance level of .001, which denotes that this relationship is quite improbable to have happened by accident. The analysis is based on a sample size of 323. This is in line with the findings that by fostering a friendly environment, a well-designed physical proof can increase client happiness and loyalty. A pleasant, well-maintained physical space with improved lighting, colour, and layout encourages repeat business from customers. Another important component of tangibility is service quality.

From the interviews, it was noted that

"Tangibility is incredibly important in hardware. Customers want to see, touch, and feel the products before they buy. We create a positive tangible experience by having well-organized stores, displaying products attractively, and providing opportunities for customers to test and demo the hardware. This sensory experience builds confidence and encourages loyalty."

Another added that

"Tangibility extends beyond just the products themselves. It also includes the physical environment of our stores. We strive to create a clean, well-lit, and inviting atmosphere that makes customers feel comfortable and welcome. This positive physical experience enhances their overall perception of our brand and fosters loyalty."

It follows that tangibility is also about the presentation of our brand. These tangible elements create a consistent brand image that reinforces commitment to quality and builds customer trust, ultimately leading to increased loyalty. It is the perceived judgement in which the client assesses the procedure and contrasts the service received with the expectations, according to Chikazhe et al. (2022a, b). The calibre and modernism of the tools used to deliver the service as well as the polished appearance of the staff and facilities shape customers' impressions of service quality. Because consumers are more inclined to buy products with superior physical attributes like durability and aesthetics, product quality is also a crucial component of tangibility. It alludes to the tangible qualities of a product that buyers can touch and feel. Design, performance, features, and conformance are the main components of a high-quality product. Because it affects customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability, product quality is crucial for businesses.

Because the results of the survey conducted in by Kim, Fan, Chang, and Park (2023) show that tangibility in the services given has statistically significant effects on customer loyalty. Yee, Yeung, and Cheng (2017) have written a different story, claiming that Tangibility means assurance of high quality and low risk for consumers, and the strengthening positive influence it exerts thereon will naturally raise customer loyalty levels. But when Yilmaz and Ari (2017) did their research into the relationships among service quality, image, satisfaction complaints and intentions to reuse, Tangibility was found as having no relation with increased customer loyalty. In addition to that, Isikli, Aydin, Celik, and Gumus (2017) found that tangibility is not directly connected with customer satisfaction and so only has a weak correlation to these. Zeithaml et al. (1996) found that tangible cues significantly influence perceived service quality in physical retail environments. In hardware, where products are utilitarian and often high-investment, tangibility reduces perceived risk and enhances trust.

The study found that customer loyalty in the hardware sector is rather influenced by tangibility. The Pearson correlation coefficient of **0.871** ($p < .001$) confirms a statistically significant and strong positive relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty. Customers value physical evidence of tangibility, such as product demonstrations, store layout, modern technology and visual appeal, as key drivers of customer loyalty. This is because hardware products are high-investment items, meaning that, physical inspection and quality assurance are essential. This implies that customer impressions and experiences are much shaped by the physical surroundings. Investing in pleasing store layouts, keeping neat and orderly displays, and using technology to enhance the shopping experience will help hardware stores to increase tangibility. Hardware stores can build customer loyalty and stand out from rivals by designing a pleasing and interesting physical space.

Tangibility has been extensively studied in sectors such as hospitality and banking (Shariff et al., 2025), yet its application in hardware retail remains limited. Literature suggests that tangible elements influence customers physiologically, psychologically, and emotionally, as highlighted by Sureshchandar (2013) in his work on service scapes. In Zimbabwe's hardware industry, tangibility is particularly critical given the country's growing construction and infrastructure projects. Customers prioritize products with clear specifications, durability, and visible quality, as these reduce risks of product failure and build trust in suppliers. Tangible features also serve as effective marketing tools, differentiating businesses in competitive markets with both local and international players.

Complementary SERVQUAL dimensions reinforce the role of tangibility. Reliability ensures consistent delivery of promised services (Ali et al., 2021), responsiveness reflects the ability to address customer needs promptly (Parasuraman, 1988), while assurance and empathy strengthen credibility and customer care. Together, these

dimensions highlight that tangibility is not an isolated factor but a pivotal driver of loyalty when integrated with broader service quality practices.

Significance of the study

Policy

The study is important from a policy perspective because it can help shape and impact Zimbabwe's laws and regulations pertaining to tangibility and customer loyalty. Policymakers can use the information gathered from this study to develop incentives, support systems, and training programs that are specifically tailored to the needs of the hardware industry. By aligning policy frameworks with the needs and challenges faced by these businesses, the study can help create a more favourable environment for the adoption of tangibility. In the end, this strengthened the hardware industry's overall resilience and sustainability.

Theoretical

This study contributes to the tangibility knowledge base which already exists with a kind of yardstick to measure it because it relates specifically how people view good comparative practice in developing nations. The inquiry identifies certain factors that affect takes-up and operation of service management systems. For example, there is probably an argument for Harare city to try out things that are successful as well as suitable in practice; it is not enough just doing what looks good on paper. The findings of this study may also offer prospects for further investigation, including comparative analyses among different sectors or regions or the development of more comprehensive theoretical models that consider the challenges of providing high-quality services in environments with limited resources.

Practical

Customer loyalty and tangibility are closely related since they serve as the cornerstone for establishing enduring client relationships and promoting the viability of businesses. As a result of the practical significance of service quality, the hardware business has the potential to acquire a competitive advantage over its rivals by increasing market share through the use of service quality dimensions. Providing the best customer tangibility service in the hardware sector increases customer lifetime value, which raises purchase volume and frequency. Customer satisfaction increases the likelihood that they will make additional purchases from the company in the future and refer it to others, which boosts sales. According to this study, giving staff members the abilities and information necessary to provide dependable, prompt, and passionate service can lead to excellence in tangibility. Employees should receive the necessary training to enable them to promptly and effectively address customer concerns. Additionally, Google analytics and ongoing customer feedback measurement can be used to pinpoint customer preferences and study areas that need improvement. Hardware industry should create and implement uniform service standards that meet changing customer demands. Last but not least, technology has made the hardware sector dynamic. To improve reliability and convenience, digital tools like self-service platforms and mobile apps must be integrated with in-store pickup.

METHODOLOGICAL

By using quantitative techniques, the study offers empirical support for the link between customer loyalty and tangibility, enabling data-driven decision-making. Data on tangibility is analysed using statistical techniques to produce conclusions that can be applied to larger populations. In order to help businesses, make well-informed decisions, the significance is also utilised to forecast customer loyalty outcomes based on tangibility metrics.

CONCLUSIONS

This study critically examined the role of tangibility in shaping customer loyalty within Zimbabwe's hardware industry, a sector experiencing steady growth due to urbanization, infrastructure development, and rising construction activity. Using a mixed-methods approach grounded in pragmatist philosophy and the SERVQUAL

model, the research revealed a strong, statistically significant relationship between tangible service attributes and customer loyalty.

Quantitative findings demonstrated that customers highly value physical evidence of reliability, product quality, and store aesthetics. The Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.871 ($p < .001$) confirmed that tangibility is a key driver of customer loyalty. Qualitative insights further reinforced this, with customers emphasizing the importance of sensory engagement, professional store environments, and visible product demonstrations in building trust and satisfaction.

Despite mixed findings in global literature—where some studies suggest limited or negative correlations—the Zimbabwean context affirms tangibility as a strategic differentiator. In a market challenged by inflation, currency instability, and regulatory constraints, tangible cues serve not only functional purposes but also signal quality, professionalism, and brand credibility.

The study concludes that hardware retailers who invest in tangible infrastructure, product presentation, and service quality are more likely to foster customer loyalty and gain competitive advantage. Moreover, the findings have implications for policymakers, brand managers, and SME support programs, highlighting the need for targeted interventions that enhance physical service delivery and customer experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need to establishing an aesthetically pleasing and orderly shopping space should be a top priority for hardware stores. This involves making certain that there is unambiguous signage, sensible product placement, and eye-catching displays. To improve the client experience, think about implementing contemporary technology, like interactive product displays or self-service kiosks. A welcoming and stimulating physical space can have a big impact on repeat business and customer loyalty.

The hardware industry should enhance more on product demonstrability. This provide more opportunities for customers to test or inspect products before purchase. This will bring confidence in customers and recruit them to be advocates and opinion leaders. In addition to that, use of clear labels, technical specifications and sample installation builds customer trust and loyalty

The hardware industry should also continuously train staff on tangible service delivery. Employees must be trained to maintain professional appearance, have product knowledge and reinforce the brand's tangible value. Continuous grooming them on alignment and etiquette mould their behaviour and influence customer perception

Finally, the hardware industry should segment and target environments based on tangibility preferences. The hardware industry should use stratified marketing strategies to target customer segments that prioritize tangibility such as contractors and Do It Yourself home owners. This will assist to customize store environments and product displays to match segment expectations (Shah 2025).

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