MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Circumventing customers’ switching behavior in telecommunication industry in Tanzania: Insight from Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love

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Abstract: Recently, business organizations have been including customers’ switching barriers as part of their strategic plans for retaining customers. For decades, customer switching barriers have been the most important business strategy developed by achieving customer satisfaction. However, evidence from consumer psychology indicate that the majority of satisfied customers switch, and many dissatisfied customers do not switch, implying that satisfaction and dissatisfaction alone cannot fix the problem of customers switching behavior. Therefore, the study developed and tested a model that proposes a relational-based mechanism, i.e., brand love, as the determinant factor in circumventing customers’ switching behavior. Data were collected from 401 customers of five telephony companies in the telecommunication industry in Tanzania, using a cross-sectional survey and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings show that the dimensions of brand love suggested by Sternberg’s triangular theory of love significantly energize customers’ switching barriers. Therefore, service organizations should invest in developing a loving relationship with their customers to reduce the intention to switch.

Subjects: Mass Communication; Business, Management and Accounting; Service Industries

Keywords: Customers; Customers switching Barriers; Sternberg’s triangular theory of love; brand love

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The modern marketplace encompasses high-demanding customers who have tendencies or prefer to switch or migrate from one service provider to another. Surprisingly, this tendency has been demonstrated by both dissatisfied and satisfied customers. Therefore, it is clear that satisfaction alone cannot ensure intention to stay, as modern customers prefer multiple brands rather than single brands. Customer retention has been perceived as crucial in building a competitive edge; therefore, it is important for service organizations to understand dimensions that reduce intention to switch while enhancing intention to stay. This study suggests that a high-intensity relationship developed through love towards the brand can elicit customers’ intention to stay with the current service provider.
1. Introduction

In recent times, services organizations are confronted by fierce competition that increases the costs of attracting new customers, and therefore there have been efforts to capitalize on customer retention (Qiu et al., 2015). For a long period, scholars’ views have been that customer switching barriers that build customers’ retention can be achieved through satisfaction (Chuah et al., 2017). However, scholars in consumer psychology challenge this conventional understanding by showing that satisfaction does not constantly turn into loyalty and dissatisfaction does not stimulate switching (Sang et al., 2018). Additionally, recent literature in consumer psychology has reported switching behavior or intention among highly satisfied customers (Evanschitzky et al., 2021). Kaur Sahi et al. (2016) argue that under the current settings, where customers tend to be loyal to multiple brands than to a single brand, satisfaction alone does not guarantee loyalty and customers’ intent to stay.

Seminal work in consumer psychology unveils that some customers exhibit variety-seeking behavior, which drives them to switch from one brand to another regardless of their level of satisfaction (Jung & Yoon, 2012; Sang et al., 2018). Regardless of the reasons for customers switching intention, the undeniable truth is that service organizations cannot survive unless measures have been taken to combat any reasons for switching behavior (Nagengast et al., 2014). Therefore, the conventional belief that satisfaction builds loyalty as the driver of customer retention deserves more attention as it fails to provide conclusive theoretical and empirical understanding on switching barriers (Mittal, 2016; Sang et al., 2018). Park and Jang (2014); Nagengast et al. (2014) argue that switching behavior or intention among satisfied customers violates the principle of the driver of different behavioral intentions, such as loyalty. Scholars agree that loyalty as an important facet of customers’ intent to stay is driven by a high level of satisfaction. However, given the recent evidence on switching behavior or intention among satisfied customers, it is evident that the debate on factors that could build customer switching barriers is inconclusive (Blut et al., 2016; Evanschitzky et al., 2021; Nagengast et al., 2014).

Although the role of customer satisfaction should not be underestimated among service organizations, the scholarly view is that satisfaction is a short-term feeling of individuals’ needs fulfillment and hence may fail to comprehensively explain how to achieve long-term effects, such as customers’ retention (Ghazali et al., 2016). Regarding this argument, Zhang et al. (2020) further proposed two categories of brand relationships that may cause satisfaction or loyalty, and they mentioned expressive brand relationships and instrumental brand relationships. The expressive brand relationship focuses on building the brand and customers’ communal relationship while investing in emotional attributes. Overall, customers engaging in an expressive brand relationship can easily demonstrate attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty (Zhang et al., 2020). On the other hand, an instrumental brand relationship concentrates on unveiling product differentiation through a low-cost strategy that is transactional specific and hence can only work in the short term (Zhang et al., 2020).

According to Zhang et al. (2020), from consumer psychology point of view business organizations that invest in instrumental brand relationships may often experience negative effects between the attributes of the relationship with brand trust and brand loyalty. The instrumental brand relationship is attributed to characteristics that cannot stimulate customers to uphold a relationship with the brand for a long period. Thus, the fact that a good number of satisfied customers tend to switch implies that satisfaction, as the outcome of the instrumental brand relationship, is no longer powerful to enhance to dictate customers switching barriers towards intention to stay (Jung & Yoon, 2012).

Literature has documented statistics to validate the shortcomings of satisfaction in predicting customers’ behavioral intentions, such as loyalty and intention to stay. For instance, the finding by Reichheld et al. (2000) suggests that 60–80% of defective customers were claimed to have either satisfied or very satisfied with their previous service provider. Further statistics from Banking
Industry in Australia indicate that 70% of dissatisfied customers express intention to re-buy service from existing service providers (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004). In addition, research focusing on a meta-analysis of customer satisfaction discovered that satisfaction explains less than 25% of the variance in customers’ repurchases intentions or behavior (Szymanski & Henard, 2001).

Other scholars, e.g., Haumann et al. (2014); Kumar et al. (2013), confirm that in today’s competitive and turbulent marketplace, investing in only satisfying customers is not sufficient or is inadequate to guarantee long-lasting gainful customer relationships. Overall, these statistics suggest that scholars and practitioners should focus on other variables that could enhance loyalty to achieve customer retention that has not been well examined or have not been given attention in recent literature. Thuy et al. (2016); Li (2015) argued that other strategies like barriers to customer defection that include building strong interpersonal relationships had been suggested to be relevant in building switching barriers to achieve customer retention. Li (2015); Liu et al. (2011) suggest that these barriers are crucial as they strengthen customer retention, particularly during short-term variations in service quality that might otherwise lead to defection.

Therefore, since satisfied customers may quit, marketers must divert from the so-called “customer satisfaction trap” and develop a more comprehensive theoretical and empirical understanding of antecedents of brand loyalty as the driver of customer retention (Song et al., 2018). Evidence indicates that the tendency of satisfied customers to switch brought challenges to service organizations that invest in satisfaction as their strategic area for building customer retention (Qiu et al., 2015). Chuah et al. (2017); Evanschitzky et al. (2021) suggest that, given the importance of customer retention, evidence that even satisfied customers tend to switch put marketers in confronted environments in practices that require special scholarly attention. Theoretically, switching intention among satisfied customers could suggest that customer retention is no longer determined by conventional approaches, particularly customer satisfaction (Jung & Yoon, 2012; Sang et al., 2018). It implies that service organizations should seek alternative ways of enhancing customer retention instead of relying only on customer satisfaction (Liu et al., 2011).

Several studies have been done to explore other determinants of customer retention to address this empirical and theoretical contradiction. The study of Kim et al. (2010) investigated the role of love in satisfied customers’ relationships with retailers. It unveiled that in environments where overall defection rates among satisfied customers increase, love could be used as a mechanism to strengthen unshakable loyalty. The study recommended more studies that will consider the retailers and customers in emotional relationship partnership. Additionally, Liao et al. (2021) examined the antecedents of smartphone brand switching: a push–pull–mooring framework. The study discovered that relational-based variables such as emotional commitment and brand community engagement positively influence brand switching behavior or intention. It proposed replication of the study across different countries, regions, and cultures because the antecedents of switching intention vary among customers in different countries, regions, and cultures.

Although a relational-based approach or expressive brand relationship is proposed to extend knowledge on customer retention, scholars have put less attention on psychological variables such as brand love in building customer switching barriers to have customer retention. As noted before, the focus of both empirical and theoretical understanding in switching barriers has been predominantly on customer satisfaction as the antecedent of customer switching barriers with very little consideration on an interpersonal relationship that can be expressed in the form of a loving relationship (Li, 2015). Overall, the focus has been on transactional-specific dimensions, such as satisfaction, service delivery, price level, etc., with little emphasis on relational-specific dimensions, such as brand love. From consumer psychology, brand love implies feelings of very strong and constant affection for a brand that evokes intention to defend the brand by building customers’ intent to stay (Zhang et al., 2020). It encompasses a broad spectrum of positive, deep, passionate, emotional, and mental states towards the loved brand, demonstrated through the heartiest
interpersonal affection. Sternberg (1986) defines love as a superior level or status of the close friendship between two parties. In his theory, namely a triangular theory of love, Sternberg (1986) suggested intimacy, passion, and commitment as dimensions constructing important facets of love. Given this theory, brand love is technically not transaction-specific but the result of a nurtured interpersonal relationship between customers and the brand.

Therefore, this study intends to develop and test a model of customers' switching barriers by incorporating brand love elements that build an interpersonal affection between the service organization and customers. It extends knowledge on customer retention through focusing on relational-specific dimensions, such as brand love as the driver of switching barriers. This study intends to complement extant theories emphasizing customer satisfaction in building customer switching barriers as a mechanism to ensure customer retention. The focus of the study is to extend theoretical and empirical understanding of the antecedents of switching barriers from a nurtured interpersonal relationship between customers and service organizations or brands. The contribution of this study is that it introduces relational-specific dimensions, namely brand love to supplement the weaknesses of transactional-specific dimensions, such as satisfaction in achieving customer intent to stay. In addition, the study introduces the mediator variable, namely brand defense, a new concept in branding to conceptualize the predicting role of the dimensions of brand love, i.e., brand intimacy, brand commitment, and brand passion towards customer switching barriers. Using Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, this study theorizes that the dimensions of brand love, namely brand intimacy, brand commitment, and brand passion, motivate customers in building brand defense and ultimately customers switching barriers.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Brand defense

Literature categorizes brand defense as extra-role behavior expressed by customers who have a higher affiliation with their chosen or loved brand(Ali et al., 2021). As extra-role behavior, brand defense covers attributes similar to activities related to brand value co-creation. It is widely accepted that when customers engage in brand defense, they intentionally create and protect the value of the brand through brand value co-creation (Javed et al., 2015). Based on this ground, scholars such as Ihan et al. (2018) perceive brand defense as an advanced form of Word of Mouth (WOM) recommendation behavior. Sawaftah et al. (2021) argued that marketers should consider brand defense as a mechanism to enable or help customers stand firmly against the spread of negative WOM or anti-brand behavior. Ali et al. (2021) recommended that in the current period of the emerging use of Web 2.0 technologies, such as social media, the brand defense could be a strategic tool for a service organization to compete against online negative WOM. Unlike other extra-role behavior, brand defense focuses on protecting the chosen brand against threats of competitors’ brands or brand haters. Scholars such as Javed et al. (2015) recommended the categorization of brand defense as among the strongest form of positive WOM behavior that goes beyond brand advocacy. Often brand defense does not only involve positive recommendations, but it also involves behavior that focuses on protecting the interest of the brand against the unchosen brands. Javed et al. (2015) argue that brand defense should be perceived as a state of positive WOM recommendations, in which customers with strong brand relationships engage in defending the chosen brand against any criticism.

Literature has documented several antecedents and consequences of brand defense. For instance, Lisjak et al. (2012) suggest that customers who participate in brand defense build resilience to negative information about their favorite brands. In addition, Dalman et al. (2019) suggested that brand defense is an outcome of a loving relationship between customers and the loved brand. When the brand defense is motivated by loving relationships, emotional affiliation drives customers to defend the brand. Overall, customers can defend their chosen brand through different behavioral intentions, including loyalty, patronage, intention to stay, forgiveness, etc. It is therefore theorize in this study that, customers switching behavior can be circumvented through
brand love that promote brand defense as customers’ extra role behavior. Even though it has not been well tested empirically, this study propose that, through brand love, service organizations can enhance brand defense among customers, and hence enhancing customers switching barriers. This study theorize that, brand love is built on a broader spectrum that instill to customers the feelings of loving the brand with all their heart and all their soul. Theoretically, loving brand with all their heart implies investing efforts, resources, and mental capability in supporting the loved brand. Moreover, loving brand with all their soul heart implies feelings of considering the brand as part of the self. In the context of brand defense, loving the brand with all their hearts and all their soul motivate customers to reject the false about the brand.

2.2. Brand love

Seminal work in consumer–brand relationships has suggested that brand love has recently received growing consideration from scholars (Batra et al., 2012). It is widely accepted that consumer–brand relationships comprise a major shift in the marketing paradigm from a transactional to a relationship perspective (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Evidence indicates that the focus of scholars in consumer behavior concentrates on transactional views emphasizing customer interactions with a brand as a series of exchanges. Scholars emphasize the need to replace a transactional perspective with a relational perspective that perceives customer interactions with a brand as emotionally intense consumer–brand exchange (Dessart et al., 2020). Langner et al. (2015) argue that brand love is among the latest developments in consumer–brand relationships that emphasize emotionally deep consumer–brand relationships. It is said that the form of relationships that exist between the service organization and customers are conveyed in different ways. As pointed before, satisfaction is perceived as an outcome of the lowest intensity relationship, usually understood as customers’ positive experiences with the service organization. In addition, different forms of loyalty behavior entail an outcome of the highest intensity relationship between the service organization and customers (Chuah et al., 2017). Empirical evidence shows that brand love is an outcome of the highest intensity of the relationship that service organizations have with their customers (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). It holds the degree of emotionality a customer has with his favorite brand. It includes different forms of positive emotions that the customer experiences with the loved brands and loyalty and attachment to the brand. It should be perceived as enhancing a customer’s social life by reflecting his inner self with a positive association with the brand (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Langner et al., 2015). Batra et al. (2012) posit that brand love connects the customers and the brand emotionally and interpersonally, establishing a very strong sensation of immensity between the customers and the loved brand that creates enabling environments for the brand to escalate itself higher level.

Evidence indicates that conventional customers’ satisfaction differs considerably from brand love, in that customer satisfaction often exist within a limited timeframe soon after the post-purchase period (Langner et al., 2015). In other words, satisfaction occurs and might disappear the moment customers move from the post-purchase period. On the contrary, brand love is customers’ inner behavior expressed as emotional devotion or sanctity towards a certain brand developed through strong feelings of the nurtured relationship between the brand and its customers (Joshi & Garg, 2020). Brand love involves advanced or complex consumer behaviors, including fanatic and sacralization towards the favorite brand. Unlike satisfied customers, customers who are brand lovers are willing to pay a premium price. Therefore, they are often price insensitive and imbibe or inculcate the brand value in their self-identity or self-image (Joshi & Garg, 2020). Furthermore, satisfied customers and brand lovers differ in responding to undesirable situations, such as service failure. Evidence indicates that customers who are fanatics towards their favorite brand are likely to forgive during service failure situations compared to satisfied customers (Javed et al., 2015). Literature shows that satisfied customers believe that the relationship with the service providers is built by transactional dimensions, particularly satisfaction. Therefore, if satisfaction is not there, the relationship cannot exist or becomes too weak. Furthermore, it is unlikely for customers who fanatics express the deepest love with their favorite brand to engage in public complaints or malpractices during service failure. Due to this empirical evidence, the study proposes that when
brand love influences behavior, such as intention to forgive, non-complaint it implies that it can be used as a source of building switching barriers. Overall intention to forgive or non-complaint is an approach that brand lovers use to cover the faults or weaknesses of the loved brand.

2.3. Brand intimacy
Sternberg (1986) provided a good conceptualization of the term intimacy by arguing that intimacy results from individuals’ passionate or emotional and relational investment in the relationship, including mutual understanding with the loved one. It is the dimension of love that covers profoundly knowledge which each partner possesses about the other partner due to time spent together. Overall, intimacy measures the psychological and affective proximity between individuals and their loved objects (Noël Noël Albert & Valette-florence, 2010). Literature indicates that intimacy should be understood as an individual consciousness of the internal sphere and the ability to explore the most important inward reality of the others (Noël Albert et al., 2008). Almobarak et al. (2018) argued that intimacy presents a regular preference or willingness for experiences of a close, warm, and communicative, interactive relationship between partners. Intimacy influence protecting behavior between partners in the relationship due to the level of proximity. Seminal work in human psychology indicates that intimacy is a very powerful catalyst in motivating partners in romantic love or relationship to protect the interest of each other (Sarkar et al., 2013). Overall, in romantic love, intimacy indicates psychological and affective proximity, which influences partners in the relationship to be responsible for the actions of each other (Sarkar et al., 2013). Sternberg (1986) indicates that intimacy converts partners into a watchdog of the behavior of the other and behaves in the manner that protects or defends their relationship.

Therefore, brand intimacy echoes customers’ attitudes or perceptions of the care, understanding, and attention from the loved brand (Batra et al., 2012). Literature on consumer psychology indicate that intimacy explains the closeness and harmonization characteristics of a customer–brand relationship, and it symbolizes customers’ emotional willingness to remain in touch with the favorable brand, share their feelings with it, and defend it when it is in difficulty (Noël Albert et al., 2008; Kinyongoh, 2019). Wallace et al. (2014) suggest that brand intimacy reflects the form of reciprocity in which customers participate in reciprocal emotional exchanges with their chosen or loved brands. Customers with a high level of intimacy develop a strong sense of loyalty and patronage towards their loved brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). It is widely accepted that proximity as an indicator of brand intimacy influence customers to live and breathe the brand. Customers with a high level of intimacy would love to be close with their loved brands and avoid situations that may lead to missing connections with their brands (Kinyongoh, 2019). It is an important engine in predicting different customers’ behavioral intentions includes customers’ intention to stay, protecting behavior, recommendations, etc. Therefore, this study theorize that,

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between brand intimacy and brand defense.

2.4. Brand commitment
Brand commitment indicates a psychological state that customers can manifest through a positive attitude toward the preferred or loved brand. Noel Noel Albert and Merunka (2013) argued that brand commitment is behavior expressed by customers who have a strong relationship with the loved brand or chosen brand. Customers with a high commitment to the brand are willing and ready to invest energy, efforts, and resources in their preferred brands (Montgomery et al., 2018). Often, customers with high commitment prefer to incultate a strong connection with the preferable brand(Batra et al., 2012). Therefore, they are always developing a tendency to create environments for upholding affiliation with their favorable brand (Reimann et al., 2012). Wallace et al. (2014) indicate that brand commitment influences customers to develop strong identification and consider the threat to the loved brand as the
threat of the self. Therefore, a high level of brand commitment may influence customers to develop protecting behavior towards their loved brands. Usually, the intention of developing protecting behavior is to defend the brand, which explicitly implies defending self-image or self-identity.

Theoretically, brand commitment is a multi-dimensional phenomenon or construct, although some scholars treat it as unidimensional. Literature documents that brand commitment can manifest itself in two major perspectives. First, brand commitment can occur based on cost means that customers maintain the relationship with the brand because there are no other equivalent options to choose or the cost of switching to other relationships is relatively too high, termed continuance commitment (Noel Albert & Merunka, 2013). Second, brand commitment can be manifested in emotional affection to a favorable brand based on strong identification, which is called affective commitment. Overall, affective commitment is based on the affective or emotional attachment to the favorable brand. The strongly committed customers identify with, are involved in, and enjoy membership with brand community members (Bowden, 2011). It is broadly accepted that affective commitment motivates customers to uphold their relationship with their favorite brands based on the identified values and develop a tendency to defend them. Therefore, the continuance commitment in a relational-based context should be contextualized on the side bets, switching costs, and insufficiency of best alternatives (Garcia-Acebrón et al., 2010). Customers with affective commitment demonstrate a willingness to pay a premium price, protect brand values, and demonstrate a tendency to use the brand in any situation (Luo, 2012).

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between brand commitment and brand defense.

2.5. Brand passion
Noel Albert and Merunka (2013) argued that brand passion is a psychological state of mind consisting of excitation, infatuation, and obsession with a loved brand. It is the category of idealization and obsessive existing in the mind of customers motivating the desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the loved brand (Batra et al., 2012). Theoretically, passion is a state of intense longing for living together with others. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005) suggested that passion comprises strong feelings or emotional state for the other person. Strong positive feelings and emotional state are typically attributed to physiological stimulation and the desire to be united or live together with the other person in multiple senses (Almubarak et al., 2018). Within the context of love, interpersonal passion covers the ability of the partner to occupy space in other partners’ thoughts, the idealization and enactment of the relationship, and a need for reciprocity (Matzler et al., 2007). In consumer psychology, brand passion is a mainly affective triggering of extreme behavior such as a positive attitude toward the loved brand that influences exact emotional attachment and elicits suitable behavioral intention (Noël Albert et al., 2008). It describes the fanaticism and enthusiasm characteristics of customer–brand relationships (Kinyongoh, 2019) and replicates a powerful and aroused positive mental state toward the loved brand (Wallace et al., 2014).

Literature suggests that a passionate customer participates and actively engages in an emotional relationship with the loved brand and misses the brand when absent (Becerra & Badrinarayan, 2013). Thus, brand passion seems to be a strong feeling that binds customers with their preferable or loved brand (Noël Noël Albert & Valette-­florenc, 2010). Overall, this feeling indicates the customer’s willingness to establish and maintain affiliation with the partner, in this case, the loved brand, all forms of physiological arousal from owning or consuming the brand. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005) suggest that brand passion consists of two major perspectives: the existence of the loved brand in the customer’s mind and the idealization of the loved brand. This study adopts previous definitions of brand passion as a psychological phenomenon encompassing excitation, infatuation, and obsession for a certain brand. Although it is not well examined empirically in literature, brand passion as an element
of deep emotional bonds can significantly cultivate different forms of behavior, including brand loyalty (Batra et al., 2012); enhancing brand defense (Javed et al., 2015); attenuating judgments of unethical behavior (Kinyongoh, 2019); and predicting customers’ actual purchase behavior (Matzler et al., 2007). Brand passion influences customers to develop the highest intensity of the relationship, and therefore they do not love the brand in a mediocre or lackluster way. Therefore, the study hypothesized that;

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between brand passion and brand defense.

2.6. Customer switching barriers

Customers’ switching barriers include various forms of difficulties or complexities developed and imposed intentionally by service organizations to discourage customers from switching or migrating to other service providers. Literature has figured out different forms of switching barriers, including psychological barriers that cover customers perceived risk and uncertainty regarding a new service provider (Blut et al., 2015), social barriers, which is customers loss of personal bond or friendship with the current service provider; financial barriers cover termination fees (Chuah et al., 2017). Therefore, based on these forms of switching barriers, the construct can be categorized into positive customers’ switching barriers and negative customers’ switching barriers (Qiu et al., 2015). Positive customers’ switching barriers are assenting reasons for customers to retain and remain in the relationship and are made mainly through service providers’ relational investment with their customers (Qiu et al., 2015). It takes features such as the presence of an emotional bond with a service provider, special discounts, and unique benefits. On the other hand, negative customers' switching barriers signify the negative reasons that force customers to retain and stay in a relationship (Han & Hyun, 2012; Qiu et al., 2015). It comprises the monetary and non-monetary sacrifices customers incur when switching service providers (Han & Hyun, 2012). A typical example of monetary sacrifices are setup costs, and non-monetary are evaluation or learning costs. Therefore, customers’ switching barriers are motivated by customers’ intention to defend the loved brand against any malpractices harmful to the brand and self-identity (Chuah et al., 2017).

It is agreed that switching barriers have been an area of interest to most scholars in marketing, although scholars still debate its dimensions and measurements (Oyeniyi & Abiodun, 2010). Evidence indicates that some scholars argue that customer switching barriers are a multidimensional construct (Han & Hyun, 2012), while others consider it unidimensional (Jung & Yoon, 2012). On top of that, it is agreed that customers’ switching barriers differ significantly across different sectors or industries, implying that the antecedents and consequences differ across the industries (Qiu et al., 2015). This study considers customers’ switching barriers as a multidimensional construct by viewing brand love as its antecedents. It is theorized that brand love stems from the heart; that is, from within, from what is not visible, from customers’ most intimate thoughts and feelings, customers profound intention. Like customer switching barriers, love is considered a multidimensional concept constructed by several factors or dimensions. Therefore, the study theorize that, by viewing love as antecedents of customer switching barriers it may extend knowledge about customers switching barriers as multidimensional constructs. In addition, the study conceptualize that, brand love does not only influence customers to refrain from switching intention, but more importantly influence customers not to think about it or desire it. Therefore, based on the above explanation is theorized that;

H4: There is a significant positive relationship between brand defense and customer switching barriers.
3. Theoretical foundation

3.1. Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love
Sternberg’s triangular theory of love was propounded by Sternberg’s (1986) to conceptualize the nature of love. The theory is well applauded in explaining, theorizing, and conceptualizing loving relationships in the context of human psychology and sociology. However, in recent time, scholars, particularly in marketing, has been drawing their attention to the theory to explain the relationship between the brand and customers. The theory suggests that love can be well conceptualized and understood through the lens of three important components: brand intimacy, brand commitment or decision, and brand passion that forms the vertices of the triangle. Scholars such as Diessner et al. (2004) perceive the above three facets of love positioned triangular theory of love in the context of cognitive, affective, and conative capacities. In the context of this theory, love exists when individuals develop a high level of intimacy, commitment, and passion. Overall, psychologists and sociologists advocate that the human mind or psyche is constituted with these components that drive both partners to express a loving relationship. When the theory is applied in business, scholars such as Noël Albert et al. (2008) argue that when intimacy, commitment, and passion exist, they strongly contribute to loyalty toward the organization or loved brand. While borrowing a theoretical stance from this theory, the study as presented in Figure 1 theorizes that interpersonal relationships between customers and brands should be understood as a customer’s love relationship to the loved brand characterized by the interplay of intimacy, passion, and commitment to the brand.

3.2. Methodology
The study was conducted in Dodoma, the capital city of Tanzania. The main objective of the study was to investigate the mechanism that mobile telephony companies can use to reduce switching behavior or intention among customers. Therefore, the study model was tested by surveying mobile telecom customers across five major mobile telecom companies in Tanzania: Vodacom, Tigo, Airtel, Halotel, and Tanzania Telecommunication Corporation (TTCL). The telecom companies were chosen purposely because they are leading companies in terms of market share, and it was easy to reach their customers for the study. Using a cross-sectional survey research design, the study collected data from 401 customers of the selected mobile telephony company in Tanzania. The study used the convenience sampling technique to select a sample of 401 customers using a structured questionnaire self-administered to selected respondents. Overall, in selecting the sample of 401 respondents,
| Item          | Statement                                                                 | λ   | Mean | SD   | CR  | α   |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|------|-----|-----|
| Brand Intimacy |                                                                           |     |      |      |     |     |
| bri1         | I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my mobile service provider | 0.886 | 3.641 | 1.047 | 0.911 | 0.910 |
| bri2         | I feel emotionally close to my mobile service provider                   | 0.865 | 3.500 | 1.008 |       |     |
| bri3         | I value my mobile service provider in my life                            | 0.887 | 3.604 | 1.072 |       |     |
| Brand Commitment |                                                               |     |      |      |     |     |
| brc1         | I feel personally satisfied when I buy the service and product of my mobile service provider | 0.824 | 3.783 | 1.037 | 0.842 | 0.841 |
| brc2         | I am very attached to my current mobile service provider                 | 0.832 | 3.666 | 1.053 |       |     |
| brc3         | I would be disappointed if I could not find my mobile service provider on air | 0.742 | 3.668 | 0.978 |       |     |
| Brand Passion |                                                                     |     |      |      |     |     |
| bpr1         | I take pleasure in buying and using the services and products of my mobile service provider | 0.698 | 3.725 | 1.029 | 0.791 | 0.788 |
| bpr2         | There is nothing more important to me than my relationship with my mobile service provider | 0.782 | 3.581 | 1.002 |       |     |

(Continued)
| Item  | Statement                                                                 | λ    | Mean | SD    | CR   | α   |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-------|------|-----|
| brp3  | I am always happy to use the products and services of my mobile service provider | 0.758 | 3.506 | 0.997 |      |     |
|       | **Brand Defense**                                                         |      |      |       | 0.848| 0.849|
| brd1  | I try to take their criticism as personally threatening, and I try to refuse to believe the negative information against my mobile service provider | 0.745 | 3.633 | 1.011 |      |     |
| brd2  | I try to take their criticism as personally threatening and try to argue for my mobile service provider | 0.765 | 3.620 | 1.023 |      |     |
| brd3  | I try to make people realize that my mobile service provider has better services and products | 0.797 | 3.721 | 1.038 |      |     |
| brd4  | I try to refer to the strong points of my mobile service provider         | 0.745 | 3.623 | 1.022 |      |     |
|       | **Customer Switching Barriers**                                           |      |      |       | 0.814| 0.814|
| csb1  | Switching to other mobile service providers often bring a psychological burden | 0.784 | 3.645 | 1.144 |      |     |
| csb2  | I receive special rewards and attention from doing business with my mobile service provider | 0.781 | 3.503 | 1.017 |      |     |
| Item | Statement                                                                 | $\lambda$ | Mean | SD  | CR  | $\alpha$ |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------|-----|-----|-----------|
| csb3 | If I were to change mobile service provider, I fear that the service I would receive from the new mobile service provider might be bad | 0.679     | 3.558| 1.006 |     |           |
| csb4 | I am concerned about not being able to keep my phone number when changing my mobile service provider | 0.644     | 3.586| 0.997 |     |           |

Notes: $\lambda$—Standardized Loadings, SD—Standard Deviation, CR—Composite Reliability, $\alpha$—Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
a conscious effort was made to include only subscribers or customers who have used the services of the companies for the past 12 months. Data collection was conducted from May, 2021 to July, 2021 and was analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Gerbing and Anderson (1988) argued that SEM is the most powerful and highly recommended multivariate data analysis technique that estimates the direct and indirect effects of variables in multivariate structures.

### 3.3. Measures of the constructs

The constructs were measured using scales borrowed from pre-existing scales validated in previous studies. All measurement items adopted to measure the constructs are presented in Table 1. The scales by Noël Albert et al. (2008) were adapted to measure brand love. Furthermore, the brand defense was measured using scales from Javed et al. (2015). Finally, the scales by Colgate and Lang (2001) were borrowed to measure customer switching barriers. To ensure the measurement scales fit the study context and setting, minor modifications were done through wordings. All constructs were captured using 5 points Likert scale; 5-strongly agree to 1-strong disagree.

### 3.4. Common Method Bias (CMB)

The study collected data using the same method, self-administered questionnaire; thus, it is admitted that common method bias could likely occur (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Harman’s single-factor test was adopted to test for common method bias. To test common method bias using Harman’s single-factor test, all latent items were taken into Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), of which it is recommended that none of the factors should explain more than half of the variance

### Table 2. Discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker procedures

| AVE   | MSV  | MaxR(H) | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   |
|-------|------|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1.BRP | 0.558| 0.484   | 0.795| 0.747|     |     |     |
| 2.BRI | 0.773| 0.484   | 0.912| 0.696| 0.879|     |     |
| 3.BRC | 0.641| 0.436   | 0.848| 0.555| 0.660| 0.800|     |
| 4.CSB | 0.525| 0.294   | 0.825| 0.542| 0.350| 0.398| 0.725|
| 5.BRD | 0.583| 0.251   | 0.850| 0.448| 0.501| 0.408| 0.452| 0.763|

Notes: the bolded diagonal represent the square root of AVEs

### Table 3. Path analysis

| Path Models | Path coefficient | s.e. | t-statistics | p-value | Decisions |
|-------------|------------------|------|--------------|---------|-----------|
| H₁         | BRI → BRD        | .280 | .049         | 5.691   | ***       | Accepted  |
| H₂         | BRC → BRD        | .246 | .078         | 3.175   | .001      | Accepted  |
| H₃         | BRP → BRC        | .466 | .081         | 5.779   | ***       | Accepted  |
| H₄         | BRD → CSB        | .572 | .072         | 7.995   | ***       | Accepted  |

Notes: *** p-value < 0.001.

### Table 4. Sobel test results

| Mediation Path | coefficient | Sobel Test Statistics | Hypotheses |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| BRI→CSB        | 0.3569      | 6.462***              | Accepted   |
| BRI→BRD        | 0.8640      | 21.520***             | Accepted   |
| BRD→CSB        | 0.3211      | 4.789***              | Accepted   |
| BRI→BRD→CSB    | 0.0794      | 1.005*                | Accepted   |

Notes: *** p-value < 0.001, * p-value > 0.05.
Table 5. Sobel test results

| Mediation Path | coefficient | Sobel Test Statistics | Hypotheses |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| BRC→CSB        | 0.4091      | 6.921***              | Accepted   |
| BRI→BRD        | 0.8643      | 18.542***             | Accepted   |
| BRD→CSB        | 0.2819      | 4.549***              | Accepted   |
| BRI→BRD→CSB    | 0.1654      | 2.101**               | Accepted   |

Notes: ***p-value < 0.001, ** p-value < 0.05.

Table 6. Sobel test results

| Mediation Path | coefficient | Sobel Test Statistics | Hypotheses |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|
| BRP→CSB        | 0.5780      | 9.765***              | Accepted   |
| BRP→BRD        | 0.9251      | 19.117***             | Accepted   |
| BRD→CSB        | 0.4507      | 5.529***              | Accepted   |
| BRP→BRD→CSB    | 0.1376      | 2.259**               | Accepted   |

Notes: ***p-value < 0.001, ** p-value < 0.05.

(Podsakoff et al., 2003). Overall, the results confirm the absence of common method bias because the un-rotated factor accounted for only 46.3% of the total variance.

3.5. Evaluation of measurement model

CFA using AMOS version 21 was adopted to check for measurement model goodness-of-fit. Overall the goodness-of-fit statistics suggests measurement model fits the data well with \( \chi^2 = 231.599; (p < 0.05, df = 109); \chi^2/df = 2.125 \) below the acceptable threshold of three (Hooper et al., 2008). Other model fit indices have yielded acceptable value as follows: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.969, Goodness Fit Index (GFI) = 0.935, Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) = 0.909, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.961 within the acceptable value of 0.9 (McDonald & Ho, 2002). Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.053 above the acceptable range of 0.1 (Hair et al., 2010). Furthermore, the value of Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.03 below the acceptable threshold of 0.08 (McDonald & Ho, 2002). Finally, Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI) = 0.755 and Parsimony Comparative Fit Index (PCFI) = 0.776 above the acceptable value of 0.6 (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

In addition, CFA was used to validate the psychometric properties of the measurement model. In checking validity issues, both convergent and discriminant validity were considered. The findings in Table 1 indicate that all factor loadings are above the threshold of 0.5, positively significant, and with \( R^2 \) ranging from 0.415 to 0.787, indicating good convergent validity (Hooper et al., 2008). Also, the convergent validity was good because the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs range from 0.525 to 0.773 above the acceptable value of 0.5 (Said et al., 2011). In addition, the Composite Reliability (CR) coefficient was above 0.7, as recommended by Henseler et al. (2014). Discriminant validity was checked using Fornell-Larcker procedures suggesting that, discriminant validity is achieved when the value of the square root of AVE is greater than the inter-construct correlation between the construct and other constructs (Ab Hamid et al., 2017). Furthermore, the value of Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) of the construct should be less than the value of its respective AVE. The results in Table 2 indicate good discriminant validity, as all conditions suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) for testing discriminant were fulfilled. On the other hand, the value of the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient for all constructs, as presented in Table 1, ranging from 0.788 to 0.910, is higher than the recommended value of 0.7, suggesting good reliability of the measurements (Santos, 1999; Ursachi et al., 2015). Finally, the value of McDonald Construct Reliability (MaxR(H)) for all variables
ranging from 0.795 to 0.912 significantly above the recommended threshold of 0.7, suggesting a high level of reliability of the measurement items (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988).

3.6. Evaluation of structural model and hypotheses testing
Overall the goodness of fit statistics suggests structural model fits the data well with $x^2 = 252.255$; ($p < 0.05, df = 122$); $x^2/df = 2.252$ below the acceptable threshold of $<3$ (Bollen, 1989; Hooper et al., 2008). Other model fit indices have yielded acceptable value as follows: CFI = 0.964, GFI = 0.931, AGFI = 0.905, TLI = 0.956 above the recommended value of $>0.9$ (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). In addition, SRMR = 0.04 below the acceptable threshold of 0.08 (Kelloway, 1995) and RMSEA = 0.056 below the acceptable range of 0.1 (Shook et al., 2004). Finally, PNFI = 0.772, PCFI = 0.794 above the acceptable value of $>0.7$ (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). Following the proof of the structural goodness-of-fit, the hypothesized relationship were tested using AMOS version 21. The findings presented in Table 3 shows that, BRI has significant influence on BRD ($\beta = 0.280, t > 1.96, p < 0.001$) which support hypothesis 1. Furthermore, BRC influence BRD ($\beta = 0.246, t > 1.96, p < 0.05$), therefore hypothesis 2 was supported, and BRP influence BRD ($\beta = 0.466, t > 1.96, p < 0.001$) hence hypothesis 3 was supported. Finally, hypothesis 3 was supported with the findings indicating that BRD positively influence CSB ($\beta = 0.572, t > 1.96, p < 0.001$).

3.7. Testing of mediation effect
The study tests the mediation effect using procedures and conditions proposed by Baron and Kenny (19861986). Baron and Kenny proposed four important conditions that should prevail in testing mediation effects. These conditions are: First, independent variables should be the predictor of the dependent variables in the regression model. The results in Tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate that this condition was fulfilled because brand intimacy influence customer switching barriers ($\beta = 0.3569; p < 0.001$), brand commitment predict customer switching barriers ($\beta = 0.4091; p < 0.001$), and brand passion influence customer switching barriers with ($\beta = 0.5780; p < 0.001$). Second, the independent variable should influence the mediator variable. The findings in Tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate that this condition was fulfilled because brand intimacy influence brand defense ($\beta = 0.8640; p < 0.001$), brand commitment predict brand defense ($\beta = 0.8643; p < 0.001$), and brand passion influence brand defense ($\beta = 0.9251; p < 0.001$). Third, the mediator should be the predictor of the dependent variable. Also, the findings in Tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate that this condition was fulfilled because brand defense influence customer switching barriers ($\beta = 0.3211; p < 0.001$), brand defense predict customer switching behavior ($\beta = 0.2819; p < 0.001$), and brand defense influence customer switching behavior ($\beta = 0.4507; p < 0.001$). Fourth, a significant level of relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable should decrease (leading to partial mediation) or become insignificant (leading to full mediation) when the mediator variable is introduced in the regression model. The findings in Tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate that path coefficient from brand intimacy and brand defense to customer switching barriers yielded insignificant results ($\beta = 0.0794; p > 0.05$), implying full mediation. Furthermore, brand commitment and customer switching barriers mediated with brand defense with ($\beta = 0.1654; p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation. Finally, the results of brand passion and customer switching barriers when mediated with the brand defense have significant results ($\beta = 0.1375; p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation.

4. Discussion and conclusion
The motive behind this study was to examine the influence of loving relationships or expressive brand relationships on strengthening customers’ switching barriers. Overall, the study speculated that loving or expressive brand relationships could be an alternative for building resistance to switch among satisfied and unsatisfied customers. The study attempts to complement the current knowledge about mechanisms that service organizations can use to induce customers’ intent to stay. The study was motivated by existing literature indicating that satisfaction that has been considered for a long time as the mechanism to reduce switching intent is no longer effective in resisting customers switching behavior or intention. Furthermore, the study was motivated with
evidence showing that dissatisfaction is no longer powerful in predicting or accelerating customer switching behavior or intention. Given the importance of customers’ retention and the side effects of customers’ switching behavior, the study proposed and tested the relationship between brand love and customer switching barriers when mediated with brand defense. While building its theoretical base or conceptualization from Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love, the study’s findings discovered that brand love in the form of expressive brand relationships could enhance customers’ defense to their loved brand and reduce switching intention. Overall, the study theorized that customers who switch are intentionally or unintentionally hurt their brands. Evidence from literature shows that customer retention can enhance corporate reputation and eventually increase profitability. In addition, the cost of attracting new customers is a thousand costly compared to the cost of retaining existing customers. Therefore, the findings unveil that customers who have a deeply loving or expressive brand relationship with their loved brands would not be ready to hurt or harm their brands by demonstrating switching behavior.

From human psychology, a loving relationship creates everlasting love, which motivates partners to stay committed to each other regardless of misfortune or other social problems. In business, the findings suggested that a loving or expressive brand relationship influences customers to build resilience towards different stimulants, which might cause or fuel customers’ intent to switch service providers. Brand love influences customers to stay committed to the brand, as it means to defend their loved brand. To customers who love the brand, switching service providers implies betrayal of their loved brands. The findings are supported by Javed et al. (2015), who discovered that customers are ready to defend their loved brand through participating in extra-role behavior, such as brand defense. A high rate of switching among customers and a large number of switchers may tarnish the overall corporate reputation of the service organization. Conventionally, switching behavior is always associated with poor brand performance or dissatisfaction. Therefore, brand love influences customers in expressive brand relationships to defend their service providers’ corporate reputation through building intent to stay. The findings suggest further that brand love that facilitates expressive brand relationships influences customers to tolerate several challenges or problems that might be aroused, including service failure or any service mismatch. It promotes customers to demonstrate affective attachment to the loved brand, motivating them to demonstrate continuous commitment or consistent behavior toward it or a willingness to buy the brand at a premium. Specifically, the findings show that intimacy, a component of love, builds the desire to defend the loved brand by avoiding the intention to switch. Brand Intimacy implies a sense of the close relationship between the brand and customers. Thus, the more customers build a strong connection with the brand, the more they resist external and internal stimuli that fuel switching intent.

In addition, other dimensions of love as proposed by Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love have been investigated and found to influence building brand defense en route to customer switching barriers. For instance, brand passion covering a sense of romantic love towards the brands has been found to influence brand defense, hence reducing switching intent. It is widely accepted that brand passion motivates customers to build a sense of involvement with their loved brand in an expressive brand relationship. A higher level of brand passion influence customers to demonstrate a strong sense of trust and personification to the loved brand. Therefore, it influences customers to avoid switching to other brands even when the loved brand is not available in the marketplace. Like other categories of brand love, brand passion is expected to build resilience to drivers that may influence switching behavior by enhancing brand defense. On the other side, the brand commitment that covers customers’ willingness to maintain a loving or expressive brand relationship can strengthen customer switching barriers. In the view of Sternberg (1986), commitment is a cognitive facet, while other scholars such as Batra et al. (2012) consider commitment as a conative or motivational element that is the outcome of cognition and affect. Within the study findings, brand commitment involves both reasoning and emotional decisions regarding the loved brand, which evoke an emotional state to defend the brand against any malpractices. Batra et al. (2012) support the findings, who consider brand commitment as customers’
willingness to purchase and consume the loved brand for a long time to indicate conative loyalty further. In the context of the study findings, brand commitment influences customers to build intent to stay with the brand and continue using, supporting, and defending the brand for a long period.

5. Theoretical implications
Within the context of theoretical implication, the study deploys Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love to investigate the relationship between dimensions of brand love and customer intent to stay. Furthermore, the study extends theoretical understanding of the brand defense, a new concept in branding as a mediator variable that explains the relationship between brand love and customer switching barriers. Theoretically, the study extends the deployment of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love by theorizing that a loving relationship, which is built-in passion, intimacy, and commitment, can be cultivated among customers to fuel their intent to stay with the loved brand. Therefore, switching barriers can be well conceptualized theoretically within the cycle of love. When customers' switching barriers are conceptualized in the cycle of love, it implies that customers' intent to stay is motivated by the expressive brand relationships that can be characterized by the interplay of intimacy, passion, and commitment to the brand.

6. Managerial implications
This study is among few studies investigating brand love in the context of an expressive brand relationship in building a brand defense as a basis for stimulating brand switching barriers. It provides insights for service providers to have strategic actions which can ensure customers build resilience to internal and external stimuli which accelerate switching behavior or intentions. Overall the finding of the study suggests that service organizations should build loving or expressive brand relationships to circumvent switching behavior. Managers, particularly marketers, should refrain from transactional-based or instrumental brand relationships in building customers' intention to stay. To retain existing customers and improve their resilience to forces that might motivate them to switch, service providers need to maintain a certain level of customer satisfaction and invest in building loving or expressive brand relationships. The findings of the study have uncovered that components that are the outcome of transactional-specific practices, such as satisfaction have less impact on building customers' intention to stay. While service providers should not ignore these dimensions in their strategies, it is more important to adopt a relational-based approach and outcomes that greatly can supplement the weakness of conventional strategies.

Marketers have roles in inducing customers to develop passion, intimacy, and commitment to become prominent brand followers who are willing and ready to participate in public praise for the brand. It is believed that brand lovers are often eager to protect the brand and resist different actions and practices, which can build intent to switch. Therefore, marketers should create suitable strategic actions to build expressive brand relationships to ensure customers can defend the brand and maintain their intent to stay. The findings proposed that, even if customers have strong switching intentions due to loss of functional benefits, they may wish to stay because of communal benefits, which emanate from a strong bond with the loved brand. Marketers should understand and consider that brand love instigates customers' attitudinal preferences and behavioral intentions and prompts customers' persistent stickiness toward the loved brand (Reimann et al., 2012; Tsai, 20112011). Overall the findings suggest that, in cultivating love through passion, intimacy, and commitment for the brand, service providers must choose suitable positioning strategies which focus on building expressive brand relationships. Positioning strategies should focus on occupying a distinctive space in the mind of customers through building emotional brand relationships, which can cultivate passion, intimacy, and commitment for the brand.

In addition, the nature of the service industry as a highly interactive sector necessitates the need to watch out service encounter behaviors during the interaction between customers and brands. Unique features of services, such as inseparability and variability suggest that staff have
a special role in determining the quality of a loving relationship. Within the context of interactive marketing, staff facilitates the interaction between the brand and customers. Often there is a close relationship between the quality of interaction and commitment that staff put in facilitating the relationship. Therefore, it is recommended that staff of service organizations play a strategic role in building and strengthening switching barriers to their customers. Marketers should ensure staff demonstrates exemplary and meaningful behavior in loving relationships to enhance customers’ tireless stickiness with the loved brand. In a turbulent global marketplace situation, marketers should ensure staff demonstrates positive behavior during service encounters to build an acute sense of brand presence among customers everywhere and at every moment. Based on the findings of the study, evidence from prior literature, and theoretical stance, the study emphasized that it is difficult for customers with the highest intensity relationship, that is, brand love, to take another way or opt for switching wherein the loved brand is present.

7. Study limitations and further studies
Although all rigorous efforts were considered to reduce study limitations, the following limitations permit opportunities for further studies. There is an opportunity to undertake a comparative study across gender and age of customers of telecommunication companies on how they respond to dimensions of brand love and its influence on customers switching barriers across these socio-demographic dimensions. In addition, the study examines the relationship between brand love and switching barriers while adopting quantitative approaches. It is important to examine the same relationship while adopting a qualitative approach to get a naturalistic picture of the subject under investigation. In addition, another area for further studies includes the use of longitudinal study design to trace changes of behavior of customers over a period. It is widely accepted that love towards an object can assume different forms given time and settings. However, the use of a cross-sectional survey design in this study did not permit tracing of changes of customers over a specific period and their impact on customers switching behavior.

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