

**EMOTIONAL POSITIONING STRATEGY:
Can it create Customer Loyalty in the Hardware Construction Sector
in Zimbabwe?**

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Abstract

This study seeks to establish the extent to which emotional positioning strategy dimensions may influence customer loyalty in the construction hardware sector in Zimbabwe. The research used both qualitative and quantitative methodology paradigms. Self-administered questionnaires were used to gather data from 300 individual customers. Emotional positioning strategies influence customer loyalty in the construction hardware sector. Emotional positioning strategy (EPS) alone cannot determine the loyalty of customers. There is need to highlight activities of promotion and aspects of economic status as other determinants of loyalty. Improved theoretical models are needed to generate more knowledge about the emotional positioning strategy. The authors believe the findings are particularly relevant for marketing managers of construction hardware. The paper reveals the possible relationships that may exist between emotional positioning strategy techniques and loyalty of customers. The study further suggests some implications for managers when making decisions on adoption and implementation of EPS. The paper identifies a knowledge gap in current position strategies being employed by firms in the construction hardware industry. The original contribution of this paper is to address this gap so that researchers and practitioners have some understanding of the relationship that exists between EPS and loyalty. The framework can also be used by firms in comparable markets.

Key Words: Customer Loyalty, Corporate Symbols, Corporate Associations, Corporate Personalities

Introduction

Low margins and intense competition coupled with growing expectations in the societies and fickle customer loyalty and economic competition between nations have significantly affected the conditions for competition in today's global marketplace (Aaker, 2005; Anisimova, 2009; Lall, 2001). This development has driven firms to seek to strongly position themselves in terms of the aspects that

glue customers to their brands. Scholarly information on different positioning strategies has been availed to decision makers to enable them increase customer loyalty and off-set the effect of global competition. Both local and international organisations are increasingly adopting different positioning strategies to enhance their competitiveness. These include brand (a) community-based positioning (Schau, Muniz and Arnould, 2009; Poter and Kramer, 2006) which has the following dimensions: (i) open-source innovation-based (Etgar (2009), (ii) web community-based (Szmigin and Reppel (2004) and lifestyle-based (Goulding and Saren (2009).

(b) personality-based (Loius and Lombart, 2010; Freling and Forbes, 2009; Spielmann and Babin, 2011; Harris and Fleming, 2005).

(c) brand extension (Diamantopoulos, Smith and Grime, 2004; Keller, 1993; Loken and John, 1993; Kolarov, 2009; O' Cass and Grace, 2009).

(d) eco-friendly labelling (Purohit, 2012; Michalko, 2010; Leire and Thidell, 2005).

(e) sponsorship (Meng-Lewis, Thwaites and Pillai, 2013; Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009).

Plethora of studies so far done are indicative of the great potential that is inherent in some of these aspects to evoke positive emotion in customers towards a brand but the current literature does not provide a framework for emotional positioning that is applicable to developing countries like Zimbabwean save for emotional model of advertising postulated by Wood (2012). Such relatively new positioning strategy occupies a prominent place on construction sector agenda at institutional, national and international level ,especially, in the face of intense competition.

The state of competition in the construction industry of Zimbabwe is reflected in the sentiments of former president of the Construction Industry Federation of Zimbabwe, Daniel Garwe as he highlighted the need for new laws that protect local players in the construction sector (Bulawayo24.com(2013). He says, " There are many foreigners making a presence and taking advantage of opportunities in the market at the expense of local players," www.thestandard.co.zw(2013). As a result the construction industry is operating at about 20% to 30% capacity due to lack of huge capital inflows from major national development projects (www.theeye.co.zw) and private sector. Most of these contracts are taken by foreigners despite the fact that plenty of opportunities are there including, for example, farmers who require administration centres and schools, clinics and hospitals that have to be built (www.financialgazette.co.zw). Another drawback is that of communities that desire imported materials, which according to them, construct durable structures and reduce maintenance cost(www.thestandard.co.zw), a perception that can be changed if the industry becomes knowledgeable of the relation that exists between emotional positioning and loyalty.

However, there is debate in the academic arena on what emotional positioning is but Kohls (2010) describes it as the highest level of marketing to win and occupy the hearts of customers by making them feel cared for and hence a surety of customer loyalty. This entails channelling company efforts towards creative marketing activities which will leave the customer feeling cared for. In the context of this study, emotional positioning is operationalised into constructs as *corporate symbols* (Pantin-Sohier,2009; Miranda and Konya,2009;Laforet,2011 Guo and Hao,2011), *associations* (Sonnier and Ainslie,2011; Parsons and Yap (2013), *sponsorship* (Blomack and Scandeliuss,2013; Mishra and Mohanty,2013) and *personalities* (Parker,2009; Lin 2010). This study stands to investigate the relationship between emotional positioning strategies and customer loyalty.

Literature Review

Customer Loyalty

According to Jacoby and Olson (2009) and Bennett and Rundle-Thiele (2000) customer loyalty is referred to as the result from non-random, long existent behaviour response, and as a mental purchase process formed by people when considering more than one brand. In early researches, repurchase has been considered as a measure of customer loyalty. However Dowling and Uncles (2009) argue that repurchase might never be for the same brand but maybe for different products. Thus, customer loyalty is all about revisiting to purchase the same product or brand. Baldinger and Rubinson (2006) and Groth and McDaniel (2003) describe customer loyalty as having two elements which are affective loyalty and action*** loyalty. Affective loyalty embodies the consumer's preference and resemblance for a specific brand (Eisman, 2009).

Emotional Positioning

According to Kohls (2010) emotional positioning aims at winning the hearts of customers, differentiates the brand from competitors Gaski (2012), and makes customers loyal to company's brands, Hunt (2009) as it enhances communication with important customers, Walker (2010). This might imply discrimination of customers by classifying some customers as important and some as not yet in business all customers contribute to the success of the organisation. Anderson (2013) considers them as intangible, irrational but a force capable of inspiring customers to act and to stick around. Brown (2005) argues that emotional positioning strategies are those strategies that are impossible to replicate but providing powerful competitive advantage and customer retention. Almost the

same sentiments of (Walker,2010); Anderson (2013) are shared with Dwyer (2012) who says emotional positioning is making the customer feels cared for and hence a surety of customer loyalty. However, Theng, Parsons and Yap (2013) argue that there are several ways an organisation can utilise emotional positioning strategies which trigger emotional attachment leading to customer loyalty namely: Corporate Values; Corporate Symbols; Corporate Associations; Corporate Activities; Corporate Personalities. However this research narrowed down to corporate symbols, associations, sponsorship, and personalities which are seen to play a role in the industry.

* *Corporate Symbols*

According to Kay (2006) corporate symbols are an extrinsic value that corresponds to the non- product related attributes which communicate a variety of brand meanings to customers and serve to satisfy a customer's social approval and self expressive needs, Miranda (2007). Guo, Hao, Shang (2011) confirm that symbols reflect customer's actual self. In addition, Guo et al (2011) say that brands are supposed to go beyond their basic function to also have symbols that attract consumers. They identify four symbolic categories of brands: personalisation, interpersonal connection, pleasure stimulus and product identification. Wedimany Behrens, Klarimann and Hennings (2013) also bring up another set of four symbolic factors which are functional value; financial value; individual value and social value. Scholars converge on pleasure stimulus and social value as perceived personalisation and individual value respectively which results in prestigious emotional feelings a customer's drive from symbols of a brand. Pantin-Sohier (2009) identifies design of a product, colour of the product, and weight as symbolic dimensions.

These dimensions help customers identify brands Okonkovo (2007) as well as remember attributes of the brand well Pantin-Sohier (2009), force customers to be highly involved with a brand, develop brand attachment towards a particular brand and bring to reality life expressions about it implying not only a strong association with a particular brand and preference to it but also product extensions or family brands are preferred Laforet (2011). This might bring an emotional attachment to a brand as noted by Guo *et al* (2011) that symbols tend to remind and encourage customers of the previously bought brand, thus repeat purchases and can actually make customer price insensitive towards a preferred brand Teagle, Mueller and Lockshin (2010). Annisimova (2007) and Chevalla & Mazalovo (2008) conclude that symbols enhance status of customers as well as personal image more so they encourage social approval of a particular brand. According to Richie (2009) they do not only make customers price insensitive but indirectly forces a customer to voluntarily recommend the brand firstly to a friend and then to other customers. These customers usually express sadness when the product is not

available. Guo *et al*, (2011) recommend that firms should invest in symbols that match the status and image of their customers. Miranda (2007) encourages adoption of symbols with distinct characteristics as well and avoids not well researched symbols that might have negative impact on customers brand preference.

**Corporate Associations*

Corporate association is the knowledge that the customer has about a brand in their memory which the customer uses to evaluate the brand Boisvert and Burton (2011). This means that the customer uses past brand interactions and experience to rate the performance of a brand. Cass and Grace (2003) concede that corporate associations are crucial information cues customers use when judging a firm's credibility. Kolarova (2011) identifies the determinants of corporate association as the products itself, brand name, design, quality, extra service that accompanies the product which could be warranties, guarantees, installation, delivery, financial plan and personal relations with the supplier. According to Dillon *et al*, (2001) corporate associations are the key building blocks in creating and building attachment in consumers leading to customer loyalty. According to Kolarova (2009) corporate associations give customers confidence to trust the brand as they fulfil brand promises. Therefore customers perceive the firm to be a dependable partner and are then willing to augment their emotional commitment towards a particular brand Ainslie and Sonnier (2011). Grace and Cass (2003) allude that a trustworthy partner also encourages customers to view their customer brand relationship in a long-term perspective as they have faith in the firm's ability to meet their needs in the future. Okonkwo(2007) observes that the more favourable a customer's view on the company's corporate associations, the greater the chance of emotional attachment hence customer loyalty surety. This however translates to a certainty of brand commitment from the customer if companies adopt corporate associations. Corporate associations help companies to be considered as successful good citizens Ansimova (2007), Chralier and Mazzalovo (2008) and corporate leaders amongst players Kolarova (2009) portray environmental friendly, generally good behaviour and compliance Kolarova (2009) and encourage customer loyalty Sonnier and Ainslie (2011). Moreover associations help customers to anticipate forthcoming new products and when they are finally launched products are taken up with ease implying that they can be used like advertising and displays in order to increase the influence on the customer leading to customer loyalty Bolsvert and Burton (2011).

**Corporate Sponsorship*

According to Park (2010) Christensen (2006) corporate sponsorship enhances the customers' perceived image and brand reputation. Meeghan (2007) encourages customers to view the brand as being a competent, credible, and reliable

relationship partner. In addition Petty *et al.*, (2014) assert that corporate sponsorship is the financial payment by a business to a non profit to further the non profit's mission, which is generally accompanied by an acknowledgement that the business has supported the non profit's activities, programs or special event resulting in having the customers view the organisation as a good citizen (Meeghan, 2007) since the corporation pays for all (Shimp, 2009) in exchange for recognition. Sponsorship can be through citizenship or responsibility programs (Kay, 2006) that include event, campaigns of sports, music, and cultural events (Tong, 2009). Furthermore Kay (2006) identifies a major strength of corporate sponsorship towards liking a brand but expresses that it is dependent on the achievements of the goals and responsibilities of a firm since sponsorship gives brand a chance to be evaluated and develop emotional attachment which is further strengthened by the involvement of celebrities resulting in improved brand awareness of the company, increased emotional liking of the brand (Tong, 2009).

** Corporate personalities*

Corporate personalities are elements of creativity, compassion, agility and collaboration (Freiling and Forbes, 2005; Parker, 2009) symbolic embodiments and employee behaviours (Spielmann and Bablin, 2011) the aura of a person indicating that brands are changed by what they represent emotionally. There are four indicators of corporate personality: friendly personality, unassuming personality, novel personality and trustworthy personality. Each indicator has various elements that seek to describe a product for instance a friendly product could be characterised by easy to use, flexible product, whilst a novel product could be a unique, original, creative features and trustworthy would be a dependable, reliable and consistent product Di Mascio (2010). According to Spielmann and Babin (2011) customers that have trust in a brand, have confidence in the brand to continually meet their expectation hence are more willing to be brand loyal. Also Lin (2010) observes that customers see brands possessing personality traits that reflect brand competence, sophistication and efficiency which then according to Annisimova (2007) become corporate personality indicators when customers choose brands.

Meng-Lewis (2013) concludes that emotional positioning strategies influence the customers' purchase intentions. The strategies as alluded to in the positioning strategy literature are corporate symbols, corporate associations and corporate personalities. However, there is no theoretical framework for and empirical evidence of the relationship between these constructs in the construction hardware retail sector. As such, this study seeks to close this gap by examining the following objectives:

- To examine the impact of corporate symbols on customer loyalty.
- To find out the impact of corporate associations on customer loyalty.

- To determine the impact of corporate sponsorship on customer loyalty.
- To establish the impact of corporate personalities on customer loyalty.

Conceptual model and Hypothesis development

From the literature review, we selected four constructs namely: corporate symbols, corporate associations, corporate sponsorships and corporate personalities as determinants of both individual customer loyalty in the hardware construction retail sector in Zimbabwe. Following the work of Park (2010), Meng-Lewis *et.al* (2013) and Kay (2006) we posit that the four constructs would directly affect customer loyalty. Furthermore, in relevant literature each of the constructs is operationalised by four attributes, details of each are shown in Table 1. Figure 1 shows the above mentioned four dimensions which directly influence customer loyalty.

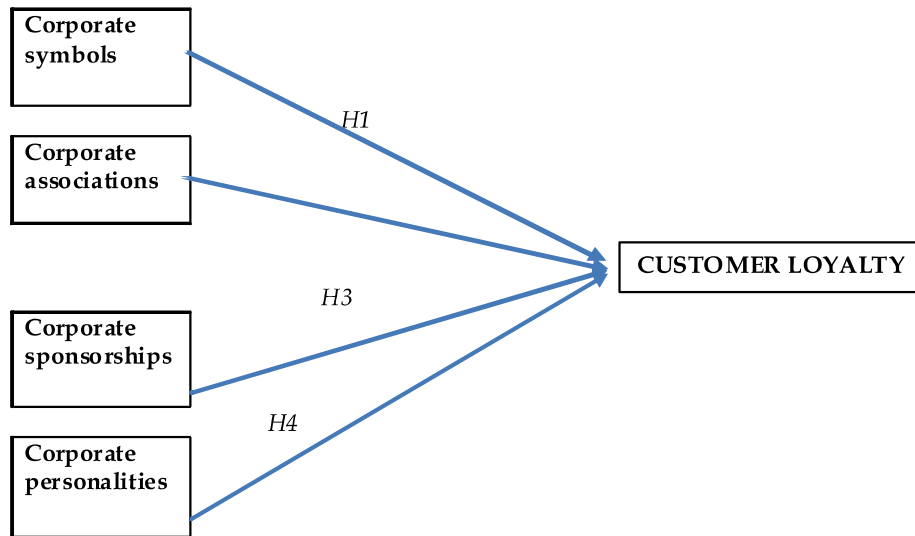
Table 1: Constructs and associated variables

Corporate Symbols Elements
status
personal image
social approval
trust
Corporate Associations Elements
success
good citizen
quality
leadership
Corporate Personalities Elements
competence
exciting
efficiency
durability
Corporate Sponsorship Elements
cares for the community
passionate about the community
bond the community
responsive to the community

The theory of intrinsic factors by Kanuk and Schiffman (2002) and communication by Kotler (2000) provide the rationale for the need to target emotions of customers.

They demonstrate that the desire to regularly associate with the brand is not only built from external stimuli but also from within.

Figure1: Constructs that have direct influence on customer's loyalty



- H_1 . There is a relationship between corporate symbols and customer loyalty.
 H_2 . There is a relationship between corporate associations and customer loyalty.
 H_3 . There is a relationship between corporate sponsorships and customer loyalty.
 H_4 . There is a relationship between corporate personalities and customer loyalty.

Methodology

The research used both qualitative and quantitative methodology paradigms. A qualitative method allows a deeper understanding of constructs under study and discovery of contextual peculiarities (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Then self-administered questionnaires were used to gather data from (300) individual customers who were randomly selected from the data base of regular customers of the construction hardware industry throughout Zimbabwe. The scale was adopted from McMullan (2005) who was measuring customer loyalty in the transport sector. The loyalty questionnaire enabled customers to rate effectiveness of the four emotional positioning strategies: corporate associations, corporate symbols, corporate personalities and corporate sponsorships. Customers were given options to rate the strength of their opinion, from a choice of: strongly disagree; disagree; no opinion; moderately agree; and strongly agree. A weighting of 1-5 was attached to the

options. The interval data generated were aggregated for each strategy on each one of the agreeableness options so as to provide summary measures. The loyalty level was determined by the number of purchases made within a period under study.

The questionnaire was checked for accuracy and applicability with help of reliability which is expressed through the Cronbach's alpha. The alpha ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating higher internal consistency. Generally, it is accepted that values above 0.6 indicate internal consistency (Malhorta, 2007). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.7 and so the items are considered to have internal consistency.

Results and discussion

The data collected in the survey were analysed and compared using Stata 11 version of statistic package software. The correlation analysis was used to examine the correlation of the variables of constructs and finally the regression analysis was considered for the hypotheses test.

H₁: There is a relationship between corporate symbols and customer loyalty

To test whether there was a significant relationship between corporate symbols and customer loyalty, the regression analysis was adopted. The results that are displayed in Table 2 show that the relationship is significant since *p-value* is 0.0011. The *H₁* is accepted. *R-squared value of 0.0350* shows that corporate symbols contribute 3.5% of customer loyalty variability. The relationship is supported by Guo *et al.*, (2011) who assert that brands are supposed to go beyond their basic function but to also have symbols that can help satisfy the consumer.

Table 2: Corporate symbols and customer loyalty

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. regress CSY l1
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Source	SS	df	MS			
Model	.466994368	1	.466994368	Number of obs =	300	
Residual	12.8796723	298	.043220377	F(1, 298) =	10.80	
Total	13.3466667	299	.044637681	Prob > F =	0.0011	
				R-squared =	0.0350	
				Adj R-squared =	0.0318	
				Root MSE =	.2079	

CSY	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
l1	.1546339	.0470428	3.29	0.001	.0620557	.2472121
_cons	1.65489	.0915826	18.07	0.000	1.474659	1.83512

H₂: There is a relationship between corporate associations and customer loyalty.

The regression analysis for the relationship of corporate associations and customer loyalty is shown as Table 3. $p=0.0000$ and $R\text{-squared}=0.1366$. The results show a statistical significance meaning that corporate associations have significant positive influence on customer loyalty. The results reflect the viewpoint of Okonkwo(2007) who states that the more favourable a customer's view on the company's corporate associations, the greater the chance of emotional attachment, hence customer loyalty surety.

Table3: Corporate associations and customer loyalty

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. regress CA l2
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Source	SS	df	MS			
Model	7.88666667	1	7.88666667	Number of obs =	300	
Residual	49.8333333	298	.167225951	F(1, 298) =	47.16	
Total	57.72	299	.193043478	Prob > F =	0.0000	
				R-squared =	0.1366	
				Adj R-squared =	0.1337	
				Root MSE =	.40893	

CA	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
l2	-.3611111	.0525831	-6.87	0.000	-.4645923	-.2576299
_cons	2.361111	.0934737	25.26	0.000	2.177159	2.545063

H3: There is a relationship between corporate sponsorships and customer loyalty.

The results that are displayed in Table 4 show that the relationship is significant since $p\text{-value} = 0.0011$. The H3 is accepted though it is not very strong as shown by $r\text{-squared value}=0.0350$. The literature in support with these results is by Kay (2006) who identifies a major strength of corporate sponsorship towards liking a brand but expresses that it is dependent on the achievements of the goals and responsibilities of a firm since sponsorship gives brand a chance to be evaluated. Therefore evaluation outcome may contribute to the weak or strong relationship.

Table4: Corporate sponsorships and customer loyalty.

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. regress CS l1
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Source	SS	df	MS			
Model	.466994368	1	.466994368	Number of obs =	300	
Residual	12.8796723	298	.043220377	F(1, 298) =	10.80	
Total	13.3466667	299	.044637681	Prob > F =	0.0011	
				R-squared =	0.0350	
				Adj R-squared =	0.0318	
				Root MSE =	.2079	

CS	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
l1	.1546339	.0470428	3.29	0.001	.0620557	.2472121
_cons	1.65489	.0915826	18.07	0.000	1.474659	1.83512

H4: There is a relationship between corporate personalities and customer loyalty.

The regression analysis for the relationship of corporate personalities and customer loyalty as shown in Table 5 produces $p\text{-value}=0.0000$ and $R\text{-squared}=0.802$. The results show a statistical significance meaning that corporate associations have significant positive influence on customer loyalty. H4 is accepted. These results corroborate the findings by Lin (2010) and Spielmann and Babin (2011).

Table 5: Corporate personalities and customer loyalty.

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. regress CP l1
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Source	SS	df	MS			
Model	1.56584229	1	1.56584229	Number of obs =	300	
Residual	17.9641577	298	.060282408	F(1, 298) =	25.98	
				Prob > F =	0.0000	
				R-squared =	0.0802	
				Adj R-squared =	0.0771	
				Root MSE =	.24552	
Total	19.53	299	.065317726			

CP	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
_l1	.2831541	.0555577	5.10	0.000	.173819	.3924892
_cons	1.383513	.1081593	12.79	0.000	1.17066	1.596365

Table 6: Standardised correlation of constructs

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. correl CSY CA CP CS
(obs=300)
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	CSY	CA	CP	CS
CSY	1.0000			
CA	-0.0951	1.0000		
CP	0.0632	-0.0137	1.0000	
CS	1.0000	-0.0951	0.0632	1.0000

Note: Significant at $p < 0.05$.

Conclusions

The study concludes that corporate symbols, associations, sponsorships and personality are significantly related to customer loyalty. The implication to theory is that the findings further strengthen the debate on role of emotional positioning strategies on customer loyalty as a sector (the hardware construction) has been empirically tested. Additionally, the practice is challenged to consider the constructs corporate symbols, associations, sponsorships and personality seriously as they contribute to customer loyalty and consequently improved sales and performance (Eisman, 2009).

Limitations

The study was geographically limited to Zimbabwe and therefore might not be internationally applicable. Not all individual customers make repeat purchase regularly for the investment they make lasts for a long time. This means that the cross-sectional nature of the study excludes such customers from objectively evaluating the role of emotional positioning strategies.

Further research

Further research should focus at testing the constructs in other sectors in Zimbabwe. Future research should have a longitudinal focus to allow assessing the relationship between the constructs over a long period of time. There is also need to highlight activities of promotion and aspects of economic status as other determinants of loyalty. Improved theoretical models are needed to generate more knowledge about the emotional positioning strategy. Organisational customers can also give their views.

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