



EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYER–EMPLOYEE CONFLICT ON JOB SATISFACTION AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN THE BACKYARD ENTERPRISES OF ZIMBABWE

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The objective of this qualitative study was to establish the severity of workplace conflict in backyard enterprises, investigate how employer-employee conflicts arise in backyard business settings, and establish the effects of employer-employee conflict on job satisfaction and customer loyalty. The study was informed by the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation. Seven backyard business enterprises and 38 managerial and non-managerial employees who participated in the study were selected purposively. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect data from participants. Data collection stopped after data saturation. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study established that conflict in backyard enterprises often arises from insufficient resources, poorly defined roles and responsibilities, poor communication, employee diversity, personality differences, varying cultural or religious backgrounds, goal incompatibility, and delays or non-payment of salaries. The study also found that conflict in backyard enterprises adversely affects job satisfaction and customer loyalty. The study recommends that the government, through its labor regulation agencies, ensure that workers and employers adhere to the provisions of the Labor Act, the Constitution of Zimbabwe, and relevant collective bargaining agreements to minimize workplace conflicts. This study is crucial as it offers valuable insights for scholars, human resource practitioners, and policymakers who aim to improve workplace harmony and organizational performance in developing countries.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Synonymous with other forms of conflict, workplace conflict is inevitable, which has made it to be a subject of much debate among academics and business practitioners (Nyanga 2025, Nyanga 2024, Majtaab & Garner 2025, Morgan 2025, Nguyen et-al 2021). The prevalence of workplace conflict has increased in today's labor markets, especially in informal, unstable employment environments. Trust, cooperation, and organizational stability are frequently undermined as power disparities between employers and employees widen and labor relations shift from standard contracts towards more unstable arrangements. In many situations, conflict is not merely interpersonal; rather, it is ingrained in the structural aspects of employment that influence employee satisfaction and the quality of services provided to clients. Studies (Morgan 2025; Nyanga 2025) have persistently shown that conflict at workplaces significantly influences key organisational constructs such as performance, job satisfaction, harmony, and employee engagement.

Globally, decreased job satisfaction and declining service quality have been linked to insecure jobs characterized by low stability, unfavorable working conditions, and few perks (Nguyen et al., 2021; Nig, 2021; Morgan, 2025), which, in turn, cause workplace conflict. Studies (Son 2021; Singh et al 2023) further show that job uncertainty lowers staff engagement, increases stress, and fuels burnout, propel organisational conflict, all of which negatively affect consumer experiences and organizational performance. Precarious work conditions reinforce unequal power relations and limit employee voice, often leading to conflict. A comparative study conducted in Hong Kong and mainland in China by Li (2019) indicated that segmented labor markets allow employers to control workers, restrict mobility, and create mistrust and workplace tensions. Non-standard contracts, volatility, low pay, weaker labor safeguards, exposure to workplace hazards, limited prospects for advancement, and unbalanced power dynamics in interpersonal relations are common characteristics of precarious employment (Collins, 2024). According to a study of 422 precarious workers in Malaysia, job instability had a major negative impact on psychological well-being, and a lack of work-life balance exacerbated workplace and family conflicts (Abdul Jalil et al., 2023). Poor onboarding procedures, unclear contractual conditions, and insecure work

arrangements cause stress, animosity, and strained relationships with management (Malinga, 2024; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2024).

Informal and insecure working arrangements increase conflict, undermine job satisfaction, and reduce trust between employers and employees, all of which affect customer relations and service quality. Despite differences in settings and industries, these studies agree that organisational conflict hinder organizational cohesiveness and customer-focused performance.

Similar dynamics have been observed in Zimbabwe, particularly in small and medium-sized businesses and foreign-owned companies, where precarious employment is common. Using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, Rugotwi et al. (2025) found that job instability significantly reduced employee engagement and increased intentions to leave. A study by Sauti (2019) showed that workers in the hospitality and agricultural industries experience various forms of malpractices at workplaces such as sexual harassment, hazardous workplaces, unstable contracts of employment, and inadequate institutional protection. In Zimbabwe's informal economy, where businesses operate with limited regulatory oversight, employer-employee conflicts are particularly pronounced. Although informality may temporarily lower compliance costs, it often heightens internal conflicts and erodes customer confidence (Karedza et al., 2014).

Backyard companies are small-scale, unofficial businesses run from domestic premises without official registration or a license, according to Nyanga et al. (2023). These businesses arise from economic instability, unemployment, and barriers to participation in the formal market. Backyard businesses in Zimbabwe are typically characterized by a lack of formal contracts, blurred boundaries between personal and professional life, and clear power imbalances between employers and employees. These characteristics create a distinct context for conflict between employers and employees, distinct from that in formal organizations.

Despite a wealth of empirical information (Nyanga, 2022; Belias, 2023; Collins, 2024) linking hazardous work environments to conflict, low worker satisfaction, and poor service outcomes, informal businesses in Chinhoyi remain under-researched. Most researches focused on conflict in established businesses (Chandra et al., 2025; Nyanga & Kele, 2024; Singh & Gupta, 2024; Nyanga, 2025). Given the rise in precarious employment and the scarcity of empirical research on conflict in informal business contexts, backyard businesses in Zimbabwe offer an important venue for examining the intensity of conflict and workplace conflict affect customer loyalty and job satisfaction in backyard businesses.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate employees' opinions, perceptions, and experiences regarding the intensity of conflict, the mechanisms by which

employer-employee disputes arise, and the consequences of such disputes on customer loyalty and job satisfaction.

This research makes two significant contributions. Firstly, by analyzing employer-employee conflict in informal and precarious work settings, particularly in backyard businesses in Zimbabwe, it fills a major empirical gap. Secondly, it builds on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) to show how conflict erodes customer loyalty and service delivery and disrupts reciprocal employer-employee relationships.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Social Exchange Theory (SET) by Homans (1964) and on Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation (1959). Social Exchange Theory holds that social behavior stems from an exchange process intended to maximize benefits and minimize costs. In employer-employee relationships, SET suggests that when employers treat employees fairly, with respect, decent wages, and good working conditions, employees are likely to show higher commitment, greater job satisfaction, and less conflict (Kebede, 2021). When employers abuse their power by delaying employee payments, imposing harsh treatment, or setting unrealistic expectations, employees feel unfairly treated, leading to dissatisfaction and conflict (Morgan, 2025). This negatively affects employee productivity and service delivery, harming customer satisfaction and loyalty. The SET theory is powerful because it illustrates how unfair employer practices create conflict and how dissatisfaction lowers service quality and customer loyalty. However, critics argue that SET treats relationships as transactions driven solely by rewards and punishments (Lawler et al., 2008). Thus, it oversimplifies complex human interactions into mere cost-benefit analyses, overlooking the emotional, psychological, and social factors that influence relationships (Lawler et al., 2008). In a different vein, different cultures may have distinct norms and values that influence how relationships are formed and maintained, but SET does not adequately account for cultural variations in social exchanges, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of social interactions. While SET offers valuable insights, it is essential for scholars to consider its limitations when applying it to real-world social dynamics.

Herzberg's theory categorizes factors into hygiene factors (salary, working conditions, supervision) and motivators (recognition, responsibility, achievement). Herzberg concluded that job satisfiers are related to job content, while job dissatisfiers are

related to job context. Herzberg labeled satisfiers as motivators and called dissatisfiers hygiene factors (Nyanga, 2022).

Hygiene factors primarily concern the work environment. For example, Herzberg categorizes human basic needs as hygiene factors. This means that basic needs do not provide motivation but merely create a conducive work environment. However, Herzberg's theory posits that the absence of hygiene factors leads to job dissatisfaction, while the presence of motivators leads to job satisfaction. One problem with Herzberg's theory at the time of its conception was that respondents generally associated good times in their jobs with factors under their personal control or for which they could take credit (Nyanga, 2022). By contrast, bad times were more often associated with environmental factors under management's control. Critics note that Herzberg assumed standardized satisfaction scales that did not account for the various job factors that might cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Some job factor scales are not purely motivational or hygiene factors, which may lead to errors in findings (Nyanga, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, backyard enterprises are often characterized by poor working conditions, limited benefits, and disorganized management. As a result, hygiene factors are frequently overlooked. This not only leads to employee dissatisfaction but can also fuel conflicts between employers and employees. Moreover, the absence of intrinsic motivators, such as employee recognition and career development, reduces employee commitment and organizational citizenship behavior, leading to poor service delivery, absenteeism, and turnover (Emasealu, 2023). It is critical for scholars to unravel how conflict, intrinsic motivators, and hygiene factors affect employees in precarious work and shape customer loyalty, especially in MSMEs. Herzberg's theory supports the notion that poor job design and a lack of motivation lead to many conflicts between employers and employees, which ultimately affect job satisfaction and the customer experience.

Employer-employee conflict

In general, conflict encompasses disagreements, friction, situations in which two or more sides pull or push in opposite directions, and antagonistic interactions between individuals or groups due to differing viewpoints, incompatible goals, and scarce resources (Nyanga, 2025). Examples of conflict at the team level in the workplace include differing ideas and views on how to approach or interpret a task, relationship conflicts with other employees, process conflicts related to delegation, logistics, and task completion, and status conflicts over who is at the top of the social hierarchy and has decision-making power and resources (Nyanga, 2025).

Nyanga (2025) argues that several studies have defined conflict in the organizational context as a clash of goals, interests, or values among workers or groups in a workplace. Hyatt & Gruenglas (2023) describe employer-employee conflict as a disagreement or misunderstanding that arises between an employer and employees due to actual or perceived differences in needs, beliefs, resources, and relationships among members of an organization.

Causes of employer-employee conflict

Employer-employee conflict rarely exists in isolation; it is shaped by complex interactions among structural, interpersonal, and psychological factors, many of which worsen in informal and precarious work settings, such as Zimbabwe's backyard enterprises. Understanding these underlying causes is crucial for addressing their downstream effects on job satisfaction and customer loyalty.

One prominent structural cause of conflict is precarious employment. Precarity is marked by job insecurity, absence of formal contracts, low wages, and a lack of benefits or legal protections (Collins, 2024). In such contexts, employers often wield unchecked power, while employees work under the threat of dismissal or exploitation, which fosters tension. A 2025 study by Rugotwi et al. found that workers in informal Zimbabwean small- to medium-sized enterprises reported feeling undervalued and easily replaceable. This situation breeds resentment, passive resistance, and open conflict, especially when combined with unclear work expectations.

Additionally, role ambiguity and role conflict, in which employees are uncertain about their responsibilities or face conflicting demands, are common in informal enterprises. This uncertainty often leads to frustration and blame-shifting, igniting interpersonal and hierarchical conflict. A meta-analysis by Üngüren & Arslan (2021) found that role stressors were consistently linked to job dissatisfaction and increased conflict in both formal and informal organizational settings.

At the interpersonal level, poor leadership and communication are central causes of conflict. In many informal enterprises, leadership is informal, autocratic, or micromanaging, with limited room for negotiation or employee voice. Brockway (2025) highlights how employees feel and respond to top-down management styles that prioritize control over collaboration. This approach fuels discontent and psychological withdrawal.

Abusive supervision, defined as sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, has also been shown to cause employer-employee conflict, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement. Research by Lee et al. (2022) found that employees who perceive their

supervisors as abusive report lower job satisfaction and are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, such as resistance, complaints, and escalating conflict. The lack of employee recognition, minimal involvement in decision-making, and the absence of feedback mechanisms further deepen relational rifts. In Zimbabwe, cultural norms may emphasize hierarchical respect. Managers' failure to consult or respect junior workers, particularly in informal settings, has been shown to trigger negative emotional reactions and breakdowns in cooperation (Moyo et al., 2020).

Moreover, occupational stress caused by heavy workloads, unsafe working environments, and a lack of control has been linked to increased employee frustration and workplace aggression. Studies in South Africa and Kenya found that high-stress environments in the retail and hospitality sectors led to verbal disputes, absenteeism, and even physical altercations (Mazwile, 2024; Ntwakumba, 2022).

Effects of employer-employee conflict

Employer-employee conflict is common across many organizational settings, but its effects are more pronounced in informal and precarious work environments, such as backyard enterprises. In this context, conflict is any form of disagreement, tension, or hostility between employers and employees, usually arising from unequal power dynamics, poor communication, and unmet expectations (Folger et al., 2024). The most immediate and well-documented effect of employer-employee conflict is a decline in job satisfaction. According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), poor interpersonal relationships and managerial behaviors are "hygiene factors" that create dissatisfaction when absent or negative. Employees in contentious environments often feel devalued, mistrusted, and emotionally strained. This can lead to psychological withdrawal, demotivation, and burnout (Morgan, 2025). In a South African study of temporary workers, frequent workplace disagreements and a lack of managerial support were found to significantly correlate with emotional exhaustion and reduced commitment to the organization (Luzipho et al., 2023).

In environments such as backyard enterprises, where contracts are often verbal and protections are minimal, conflict tends to be more personal and emotionally charged. Workers may feel exploited or silenced. The absence of conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as Human Resources departments, grievance procedures, or unions, worsens the situation, leaving employees with little recourse. This leads to feelings of powerlessness and resentment, which ultimately damage satisfaction and workplace morale (Mazwile, 2024).

The effects of employer-employee conflict extend beyond internal dynamics. A growing body of literature supports the Service-Profit Chain theory (Heskett et al., 1994), which asserts that employee satisfaction is essential to customer satisfaction and loyalty. When employees are in conflict with management, they are less likely to demonstrate positive workplace behaviors, such as helpfulness, patience, and responsiveness. In Zimbabwe, Dlamini (2022) found that unresolved conflicts between fast-food managers and staff led to customer service failures and reduced repeat business.

In informal enterprises, where customer experience depends heavily on interpersonal interaction, the effects can be severe. Upset employees may display open hostility, indifference, or low effort in their service delivery, behaviors that significantly harm customers' perception of value. A study by Belias et al. (2023) in the hospitality industry found that workplace conflict led to lower service quality, with customers perceiving tensions between staff and management.

Furthermore, employer-employee conflict creates operational instability, frequent staff turnover, absenteeism, and service process disruptions. These effects reduce reliability, a key aspect of service quality (Opiyo, 2021). A customer who encounters service delivery inconsistencies, especially due to staff changes or spillover conflict, is less likely to return or recommend the business.

Customer loyalty

Dike & Stanley (2021) argues that customer loyalty is a customer's readiness to return to a company to purchase its products or services. It is evident when a client repeatedly purchases products or services from the same company, choosing it over its competitors (Aripin et al., 2023). Arguably, customer loyalty reflects commitment to a brand, indicating an expectation to continue the relationship. In short, the multifaceted nature of customer loyalty hinges on three aspects: commitment, expectations, and consumer behavior, as evidenced by repeat purchases.

Job satisfaction

According to Adamopoulos & Syrou (2022), job satisfaction is an employee's emotional response to their role, responsibilities, and work environment. When conflict with employers undermines this satisfaction, it can lead to low morale, poor performance, and a negative customer experience. Job satisfaction serves as a bridge between internal workplace relations, such as employer-employee interactions, and external business outcomes, such as customer loyalty.

The influence of employer-employee conflict on job satisfaction and customer loyalty

The link between job satisfaction and customer loyalty is well-documented in organizational behavior and service management literature. Job satisfaction is a positive emotional state that stems from an individual's evaluation of their job or job experiences (Adamopoulos & Syrou, 2022). In service-driven or customer-facing environments, employee satisfaction not only influences internal performance but also directly affects customer perceptions and loyalty. According to the Service-Profit Chain (Heskett et al., 1994), satisfied employees are more likely to be productive, engaged, and customer-focused. When workers feel valued, treated fairly, and empowered in their roles, they typically deliver better customer interactions, better problem-solving, and higher-quality service. This improved service quality fosters customer satisfaction, which, over time, reinforces customer loyalty through repeat business, positive word-of-mouth, and lasting relationships (Singh, 2023).

Empirical studies support this relationship. For example, Son et al. (2021) found that in the South Korean service sector, higher levels of employee job satisfaction significantly influenced customer satisfaction, which in turn predicted customer loyalty. Similarly, Belias et al. (2023) found that hotels with higher employee satisfaction received better customer ratings. Nguyen et al. (2021) also confirmed a consistently positive relationship between job satisfaction and customer loyalty across different industries. Mashavira et al. (2023) found that in Zimbabwean retail enterprises, job satisfaction led to better employee-customer interactions and fewer customer complaints. In Ghana, Boakye et al. (2023) reported that small- to medium-sized enterprises with motivated and satisfied staff experienced higher customer retention, even in highly price-sensitive markets.

In backyard enterprises, particularly in towns like Chinhoyi, there is a dearth of research examining the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Conflicts, low pay, or a lack of recognition in backyard enterprises quickly translate into negative customer experiences and business losses. Additionally, low job satisfaction stemming from employer-employee conflict can lead to disengagement, poor attitudes, or absenteeism, further disrupting customer service. As Vignoli et al. (2021) note, emotional dissonance and burnout among dissatisfied employees often lead to cold, indifferent, or hostile customer interactions. In informal enterprises, where human resource systems are weak or absent, these effects are amplified.

3. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study adopted an interpretive paradigm to capture multiple, subjective perspectives of managerial and non-managerial workers engaged in backyard businesses in Chinhoyi Urban, Zimbabwe. An interpretive approach was deemed suitable given the socially constructed nature of workplace conflict in informal enterprises, which is shaped by individual experiences, perceptions, and power dynamics and is more effectively understood through participants' narratives than through quantitative metrics. The study population comprised all workers, managers, and owners of backyard enterprises in Chinhoyi Urban, Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was used to select seven backyard businesses from different sectors of the economy in Chinhoyi urban. Businesses from different sectors, such as retail, manufacturing, and service-oriented, were chosen so as to show how work is organized and how conflicts occur in different informal sectors. The criteria for choosing backyard enterprises were that the businesses had to have been in business for at least a year and have at least two employees to be eligible. Businesses that had been in business for less than a year or had only one employee were not included because they were less likely to have ongoing employer-employee interactions and conflicts.

Purposive sampling was also employed to select participants from the purposively chosen backyard businesses. Purposive sampling was opted for because the researchers wanted to ensure that all the participants were capable of providing rich, relevant information about conflict in backyard businesses in Chinhoyi. This non-probability sampling technique was specifically chosen to ensure the inclusion of both managerial (owners or supervisors) and non-managerial staff, thus facilitating a comparative analysis of their perspectives (Thomas, 2022). The sample comprised individuals from various backyard enterprises, including retail, manufacturing, and service-oriented businesses. At the individual level, purposive sampling was used to select 38 managerial and non-managerial employees (22 males; 16 females). Participants were approached directly at their workplaces after obtaining consent from enterprise owners. People who met the inclusion criteria were asked to participate voluntarily. Work experience of at least 1 year as a manager/owner or employee in backyard enterprises was used as a criterion for selecting individual participants. The assumption behind selecting participants was that people who had spent more time in backyard business settings would provide more detailed and trustworthy accounts of workplace conflict.

Table 1. Demographic data of participants

Biographical Variable	Category	Number
Gender	Male	22
	Female	16
Position	Managerial/supervisory	12
	Workers	26
Work experience	>5	13
	6-10	8
	11-15	12
	< 16	5
Marital Status	Single	7
	Married	13
	Divorced	10
	Widowed	8
Educational qualifications	Masters	4
	Bachelors	15
	Diploma/Certificate	12
	Secondary/high school	7

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews from 38 participants comprising of the managerial and non-managerial employees of backyard enterprises. Data was collected over a period of weeks, a period deemed adequate for enabling meaningful engagement with participants. Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable method because they allowed participants to articulate their experiences of conflict in their own terms and enabled the researcher to seek clarification and additional detail (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This flexibility was necessary given the informal and often personalized nature of employment relationships in backyard enterprises. These interviews were conducted using a guide that sought to establish participants' views and experiences regarding the severity of conflict in backyard enterprises, the main triggers of conflict between employers and employees, and the consequences of employer-employee conflict for job satisfaction and customer loyalty. Each interview took place at participants' workstations, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and was audio recorded with participants' consent (VandeVusse et al., 2022). Additionally, field notes were taken to document nonverbal cues and contextual observations. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which participants

were given the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed interviews. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a consistent interview guide across all interviews and keeping an audit trail of interview procedures and analytical decisions. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and enterprise types.

Although interviews were the primary method, triangulation was achieved by comparing accounts across managerial and non-managerial participants and across different enterprise types. Peer debriefing with academic colleagues was also conducted to review emerging interpretations and reduce researcher bias.

Data collection ceased when further interviews yielded no new data. Limited sample diversity and the exclusive use of interviews are key limitations, so the results are transferable but not generalizable.

Data Analysis

Transcribed data were subjected to member check prior to thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were analyzed using the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify dominant themes. This methodology included steps such as the researchers first familiarizing themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts. Second, initial codes were generated manually by identifying meaningful text units related to workplace conflict. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories representing patterns across the dataset. Fourth, these categories were reviewed and refined into candidate themes by comparing similarities and differences across managerial and non-managerial accounts. Fifth, themes were defined and named to ensure conceptual clarity. Finally, representative verbatim quotations were selected to illustrate each theme. Theme validation was achieved through cross-checking among researchers and by comparing themes across enterprise types and participant roles. Disconfirming evidence was actively sought to avoid selective interpretation.

Ethical approval was granted by the Great Zimbabwe University Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality, participant identities were anonymized, and data were stored securely. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (Dahal, 2024).

4. RESULTS

Biographical data

The biographical data included gender, work experience, job positions, participant qualifications, and marital status. Results showed that there were more male than female employees in backyard business entities in Chinhoyi city. Male workers outnumbered female workers, most likely because many positions for backyard enterprise required manual labor. Most women held jobs traditionally seen as suitable for women, such as working in backyard restaurants, chicken breeding, beverage service, and housekeeping at backyard lodges. As is typical in many organizations, most workers held non-managerial roles such as grounds technicians, housekeeping officers, gardeners, carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, bartenders, and cooks. Regarding marital status, the married group accounted for the largest share, followed by the divorced group. The single and widowed groups had the fewest participants, yet they accounted for the same number in the study. This is likely because married and divorced individuals generally have more socio-economic responsibilities, making them easier to retain than single workers. The largest number of participants had 5 years or less of experience, followed by 11-15 years, 6-10 years, and finally more than 16 years. The latter category had the fewest participants, likely because many in that group would have retired or moved to more formal organizations. The data indicated that bachelor's and diploma qualifications were more common than master's and secondary/high school qualifications. However, some participants' qualifications did not directly match their jobs.

Severity of conflict in backyard enterprises

The study found that conflict between employers and employees in backyard enterprises was severe, ongoing, and often dysfunctional. Many participants described the workplace environment as hostile and confrontational. For instance, participant 4 explained, *"Employers and employees in this organization are always in conflict."* Similarly, participant 12 remarked, *"There is intense and unresolvable conflict between workers and their employers in backyard organizations. Some of the conflicts have degenerated into hostility, with workers and managers calling each other names and engaging in physical fights. The conflicts have also resulted in the dismissal of workers, in most cases without following proper procedures."* These findings indicate that conflict was not only frequent but also personalized, with name-calling, emotional abuse, and unfair dismissals becoming common. Such patterns

suggest that conflict had moved beyond ordinary workplace disagreements into a chronic and dysfunctional state.

Causes of conflict in backyard enterprises

The causes of employer–employee conflict were multidimensional, encompassing structural, managerial, and socioeconomic issues. Participants identified several primary causes of conflict between workers and employers in backyard industries. Below are the themes for the main triggers of conflict:

Resource inadequacy

One of the most frequently cited causes of conflict was resource inadequacy. Workers reported receiving insufficient raw materials or tools to meet targets. Participant 23 said, *“I am a carpenter by trade and work for a backyard wardrobe manufacturing company. My supervisor gives me insufficient raw materials and won’t buy me consumable supplies, which in turn has bred tension between us.”* Participant 6 said, *“Conflict between managers or owners of backyard enterprises and workers comes from a lack of adequate resources, goal incompatibility, and unclear job roles. Low wages and salaries also contribute.”* Participant 18 explained, *“Conflict between my employer and me arises from the fact that my employer expects me to meet targets without providing me with the necessary resources.”* These remarks indicate that a lack of resources, such as raw materials and tools, is a major cause of conflict in backyard enterprises.

Role ambiguity

Another source of tension was role and task ambiguity. Workers’ roles were vaguely defined, and more often than not, workers performed duties outside the provisions of their employment contracts. Participant 8 remarked, *“Unclear roles are a primary driver of employer–employee conflict in backyard enterprises. An artisan may be asked to prepare meals for the employer’s family, which is outside the worker’s contract of employment. Such assignments lead to conflict between workers and their managers.”* Participant 27 commented, *“The cause of conflict is that workers’ roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined, a situation which gives employers room to assign tasks that workers feel are outside their responsibilities.”* Participant 4 shared, *“I had a serious conflict with my employer because he wanted me to do something we didn’t agree on in our employment contracts.”* Participants also indicated that role ambiguity leads to work intensification and work-life imbalance.

Goal incompatibility

Participants also noted goal incompatibility and value clashes. For instance, different departments had reward systems that pitted workers against one another rather than fostering collaboration. In some cases, employers' religious practices led to misunderstandings. Participant 15 explained, *"The owner of my company wants us to begin work with a prayer, which many of my co-workers do not want."* Participants reported that conflict between employers and employees often arises when both sides view their goals, responsibilities, and roles as completely separate. Participant 19 remarked, *"In backyard enterprises, disagreements frequently occur due to the different ways workers approach their tasks."* Participant 14 stated, *"My pay depends on how many chairs and tables I make and sell in a day, week, or month. I requested that the procurement department ensure raw materials and transport were always available to ensure timely delivery. My colleagues in sales and transport earn salaries based on how much the firm saves on procurement and transit, which often puts us at odds due to conflicting goals."* Participant 15 noted, *"Misunderstandings also happen because we see the world differently and attach various beliefs to our perspectives. For instance, the owner of my company wants us to begin work with a prayer, which many of my co-workers do not want."*

Salary and wage-related issues

Participants indicated that misunderstandings between workers and employers in backyard enterprises can also stem from wage delays or nonpayment. Many organizations struggle financially and struggle to meet their obligations. When workers do not receive their pay on time, it causes frustration and disrupts workplace activities. This leads to reduced productivity, which can further aggravate employers and fuel conflict. Here are some direct quotes from participants: Participant 1 said, *"Conflicts occur because the employer pays us our wages long after the expected date."* Participant 24 noted, *"The employer willingly lowers our salaries without discussing it with us or explaining the reasons for the changes. Such actions cause conflict between employers and workers in backyard enterprises."* On communication, Participant 10 stated, *"Poor communication is a major cause of misunderstandings between workers and employers in backyard enterprises."* Participant 17 added, *"When both management and workers fail to share important information, it can lead to conflict. One side may withhold critical information, thereby disrupting operational flow and creating frustration."*

Poor communication

Poor communication was also highlighted as one of the issues that triggers and strains relations between employers and employees in backyard enterprises. Participant 10 noted, *“Poor communication is a major cause of misunderstandings between workers and employers in backyard enterprises.”*

Management style, favoritism, and interference from family members in work activities and decisions

Participants reported that sources of conflict included management styles, favoritism in the workplace, and interference by entrepreneurs' family members in work programs and decisions. Participants indicated that workers are uncomfortable with situations in which people outside the organization's organizational chart dictate the pace, operations, and procedures of work activities. Participant 11 remarked, *“One of the major causes of conflict in backyard enterprises is the use of inappropriate management styles in given situations. Most leaders apply one leadership style in all circumstances, a situation which leads to disputes between managers and their workers.”*

Physical and emotional abuse of workers

Results also indicated that physical and emotional abuse of workers in backyard enterprises was among the major triggers of conflict between workers and employers. In light of this result, participant 3 said, *‘Workers in backyard enterprises are physically and emotionally abused by their employers. If they resist being abused, conflict emerges.’* Furthermore, worker diversity, personality differences, and cultural or religious backgrounds were also viewed as significantly contributing to conflicts between employers and employees in backyard manufacturing enterprises.

Impact of conflict on job satisfaction

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that employer-employee conflict significantly affects job satisfaction across all worker categories. Conflict fosters negative attitudes toward management, work, and the work environment. Participants reported that workplaces engulfed in conflict show signs of low job satisfaction, including apprehension, increased exhaustion, noticeable shifts in product or service quality and attitude, irregular work attendance, instances of inappropriate conduct, and substantial

life actions that affect performance. Here are some comments from participants: Participant 7 stated, *“Conflicts in backyard enterprises have seriously decreased job satisfaction among both part-time and full-time workers. Workers dislike work environments that are characterized by unending disputes.”* Participant 23 noted, *“The reason many workers dislike their jobs in backyard enterprises is the constant disputes over wages and employment conditions.”* Participant 13 said, *“Backyard enterprises need to improve their financial position, which will boost worker morale and reduce conflicts.”* Feedback from participants suggests that conflict between employers and employees in backyard enterprises hampers worker satisfaction and reduces productivity and morale.

Impact of employer-employee conflict on customer loyalty

All participants indicated that organizational conflict adversely affects customer loyalty and market share in backyard enterprises. Participants noted that customer loyalty develops over time through relationship marketing and relies on salespeople and operations teams to deliver products and services that meet customer needs. Customer loyalty arises from customer satisfaction. Participant 11 had this to say: *“Most clients were loyal to our product, but that changed when disputes over wages between the company owner and workers arose. The quality of our products dropped, and we began mistreating customers, even directing them to competitors, which diminished their loyalty.”* Similarly, participant 29 remarked, *“Customer loyalty depends on good relationships between employers and employees. Backyard enterprises are plagued by severe conflicts between employers and employees, which impact customer satisfaction and loyalty. Disputes disrupted production and service delivery, leading to declining product quality and poor customer service.”* Participant 19 also highlighted that *“customer loyalty depended heavily on harmonious relations between employers and employees, but persistent conflicts undermined satisfaction and trust. As a result, long-term relationships with customers weakened, leading to a loss of market share for backyard enterprises.”*

Table 2. Summary of Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Illustrative Verbatim Quotes

Main theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative verbatim quotes
Causes of employer-employee conflict	Resource inadequacy; role ambiguity; goal incompatibility; wage and salary issues; poor communication; management style; favouritism and family interference; physical and	“My employer expects me to meet targets without giving me the necessary resources” (P18)
		“An Artisan may be asked to prepare meals for the

	emotional abuse; worker diversity and personality differences	employer's family, which causes conflict" (P8) "The employer pays us long after the expected date" (P1)
Impact of conflict on job satisfaction	Low morale; emotional exhaustion; negative attitudes towards management; reduced motivation; absenteeism and misconduct; declining work quality.	"Conflicts have seriously decreased job satisfaction among workers (P7); "Workers dislike work environments characterised by unending disputes" (P23); "Many workers lose morale and stop caring about the job" (P13)
Impact of conflict on customer loyalty	Poor service quality; reduced product quality; loss of repeated customers; declining market share	"We began mistreating customers and directing them to competitors" (P11) "Disputes disrupted delivery and service delivery" (P29) "Customer trust weakened, and we lost loyal clients" (P19)

5. DISCUSSION

This study established that backyard enterprises in Chinhoyi are characterized by severe and persistent employer–employee conflict. The main causes of conflict were resource inadequacy, role ambiguity, goal incompatibility, wage and salary issues, poor communication, management style, favoritism, family interference, and physical and emotional abuse. The findings further showed that such conflict significantly reduces job satisfaction and, in turn, undermines customer loyalty by degrading service quality, lowering product standards, and weakening customer relationships.

Severity of conflict in backyard enterprises

The study found that backyard enterprises are characterized by ongoing, intense, and dysfunctional conflict between workers and employers. It also found that backyard enterprises do not address workplace conflict promptly, leaving room for it to degenerate into dysfunctional disputes. In some cases, unresolved conflicts lead workers and managers to resort to name-calling and physical and emotional abuse of each other. The findings align with those of Nyanga (2025), who observed that workplace conflicts are often intense and often go unmanaged in family, small, or emerging enterprises. They also align with Mujtaba & Garner (2024), who, in their study on the importance of negotiation and mediation in resolving workplace disputes, observed that workplace conflicts are usually intense and dysfunctional. They concluded that conflict is unavoidable in all organizations, but it tends to be more intense and dysfunctional when not properly managed. Other studies (Omene, 2021; Pembi et al., 2023) consistently show that ignoring early signs of conflict can lead to serious issues that harm organizational performance and worker morale.

From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, persistent conflict signals a breakdown in reciprocal relationships between employers and employees. When workers perceive unfair treatment, hostility, or abuse, they are less likely to reciprocate with commitment and cooperation. Instead, they respond with withdrawal, resistance, or counterproductive behavior, thereby deepening conflict and reinforcing dysfunctional workplace relations.

Causes of conflict in backyard enterprises

The study found that conflict between employers and employees in backyard enterprises often stems from organizations' failure to provide sufficient resources, such as raw materials, tools of the trade, and other essential supplies. When companies cannot supply adequate consumables, workers face conflict. Many backyard businesses, especially in manufacturing, struggle with cash flow and poor financial management, which prevents them from providing workers with the necessary tools and supplies. For example, a welder may receive too few welding rods, even though they have targets to meet. The findings support earlier studies (Mitchell, 2023; Kharadze & Gulia, 2023), which identified resource shortages as a major cause of organizational conflict.

According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, adequate working conditions and resources are hygiene factors that prevent dissatisfaction. The absence of these factors, as observed in this study, does not motivate workers; instead, it creates dissatisfaction and

conflict. Resource shortages, therefore, act as dissatisfiers, triggering negative reactions and disputes between workers and employers.

Poorly defined roles and responsibilities also contribute to conflict between employers and employees in backyard enterprises. Many workers in backyard businesses do not have clearly defined roles, which escalates conflicts between workers and their employers. Role ambiguity usually stems from the prevalence of verbal contracts, which, in most instances, are prone to misuse, misinterpretation, and unilateral changes by the other party. Ambiguous responsibilities lead to misunderstandings and performance-related conflicts because expectations are unclear. These findings are consistent with Üngüren & Arslan (2021), who argued that undefined roles are central to employer-employee conflicts in both private and public organizations. The study also revealed that conflicts arise when management and workers perceive their goals and roles as conflicting. Often, different perspectives on job duties lead to disagreements. Studies (Aguilera et al., 2024; Üngüren & Arslan, 2021) indicate that goal incompatibility is a primary source of conflict in many organizations, particularly in manufacturing.

From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, role ambiguity and goal incompatibility weaken trust and mutual expectations between employers and employees. When obligations are unclear, employees perceive the exchange relationship as unfair or exploitative, increasing resistance and fueling conflict.

Worker diversity, personality differences, and cultural or religious backgrounds significantly contribute to conflicts between employers and employees in backyard manufacturing enterprises. Like many organizations and backyard businesses, these enterprises are expected to comply with the Labour Act Cap 28:01 and not discriminate against workers, thereby creating a diverse workforce. Conflicting worldviews often lead to misunderstandings, especially when some company owners expect workers to start the day with a prayer, while others may not feel comfortable with this practice for various reasons. The findings of Eusebius & Chukwudi (2023) support the notion that worker diversity is a significant source of conflict in small to medium enterprises.

The study further identified misunderstandings between workers and employers stemming from salary payment delays or nonpayment. Many backyard businesses are small and face liquidity issues, making it difficult to meet salary obligations on time. When employers fail to pay workers on time, it frustrates workers and fuels disputes that disrupt work activities (Silva et al., 2024). Additionally, employers sometimes unilaterally reduce workers' salaries, leading to further conflicts (Sun et al., 2024).

In many cases, conflicts stem from simple, unintentional communication issues, such as unkind remarks, failing to provide timely instructions, not returning calls, or not replying to emails. Miscommunication is a key driver of misunderstandings between

workers and employers. Maneerutt (2021) supports this view, noting that effective communication is essential for managing conflict and maintaining workplace harmony.

A study by Nguyen et al. (2022) also found that the spread of false information or the withholding of crucial details can spark tensions between workers and employers. Other identified causes of conflict include task interdependence, poor work-life balance, socioeconomic factors, management style, external interference, and favoritism, along with the physical and emotional abuse of workers. While this study viewed these issues as minor causes, other research (Adekoya, 2022; Mohammed, 2022; Nyanga et al., 2023) argues that they can still lead to significant conflicts and disrupt backyard enterprises' operations.

Effects of conflict in backyard enterprises on job satisfaction

The research found that conflict in backyard enterprises significantly affects job satisfaction across all worker categories. Conflict in backyard enterprises mainly breeds negative effects on job satisfaction. It leads workers to develop a negative attitude toward their work and a strong dislike for their work and its environment. The study showed that key job satisfaction factors, such as job rotation, enrichment, enlargement, flexi-time, compressed workweeks, and remote work, are affected by employer-employee conflicts. Job satisfaction is a measure of how happy a worker is with their job, and it is important for organizational citizenship and engagement (Ng et al., 2021; Janvi et al., 2024). Conflicts in backyard enterprises significantly lower job satisfaction for both part-time and full-time workers. Ongoing disagreements over wages and working conditions lead to worker dissatisfaction. However, resolving disputes can improve working conditions and foster good relationships between employers and employees. Thus, conflict between employers and employees in backyard enterprises largely undermines job satisfaction, leading to lower productivity and morale (Memon et al., 2023).

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory helps explain this pattern. Conflict was mainly associated with poor hygiene factors, including salary issues, poor supervision, and unsafe emotional environments. These conditions created dissatisfaction rather than motivation, thereby reducing job satisfaction. The findings, therefore, extend Herzberg's framework to informal enterprise contexts, showing that hygiene factors remain critical even outside formal organizational structures.

From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, reduced job satisfaction reflects employees' perception that the exchange relationship is unbalanced. When workers feel exploited or mistreated, they withdraw positive attitudes and effort, which manifests as low morale and disengagement.

Effects of conflict in backyard enterprises on customer loyalty

The study also found that employer-employee conflict negatively affects customer loyalty and the market shares of backyard enterprises. Customer loyalty develops over time and relies heavily on relationship marketing and the ability of salespeople and production staff to deliver satisfying products and services. Loyal customers often feel connected to the organization because of positive interactions with sales staff. However, conflicts between owners and workers lead to the production of low-quality goods and poor customer service. In the worst cases, salespeople may direct customers to competitors, thereby diminishing the organization's market share and customer confidence and loyalty. These findings align with those of Singh et al. (2023), who noted that strong relationships between employers and employees are essential for fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty.

From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, deteriorating internal relationships weaken external exchange relationships with customers. When employees feel unfairly treated, they are less likely to invest effort in serving customers well, thereby undermining customer trust and loyalty.

The study also noted that, to some extent, conflicts can enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Out of fear of management repercussions and the effects of disputes, workers may feel compelled to treat customers with respect, thereby promoting loyalty and satisfaction.

This finding challenges a purely negative view of conflict and suggests that fear-based compliance may produce short-term service improvements but does not build sustainable loyalty. Herzberg's theory suggests that such behavior is driven by the avoidance of dissatisfaction rather than genuine motivation, making it fragile and unsustainable over time.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that employer-employee conflict in backyard enterprises is frequent and severe and predominantly dysfunctional, with negative effects on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Employer-employee conflict in backyard enterprises is largely due to the informal, poorly regulated nature of backyard businesses. Conflict is driven by interrelated factors, including resource shortages, role ambiguity, poor communication, incompatible goals, wage delays, and socio-cultural differences, and often escalates into hostility, emotional abuse, and physical

confrontations. The study concluded that conflict in backyard enterprises significantly affects key job satisfaction factors, such as job rotation, enrichment, enlargement, flexi-time, compressed workweeks, and remote work, thereby propelling workers to develop a negative attitude towards their work. Employer-employee conflicts also affect these factors. The study further concluded that such conflict extends beyond internal employment relations, undermining service quality and customer trust, highlighting employer-employee conflict in backyard enterprises as a broader socio-economic concern with implications for labor protection, enterprise sustainability, and service delivery in the informal economy.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that the government, through labor regulatory agencies, strengthen oversight of backyard enterprises by promoting simplified registration procedures and basic compliance frameworks tailored to informal businesses, while prioritizing awareness campaigns and mobile labor advisory services to educate employers and employees on labor laws. Backyard enterprise owners should receive targeted training in conflict management, communication, and basic human resource practices, including role clarification and fair remuneration systems. Workers should be encouraged to organize through sector-based associations or trade unions to enhance collective protection, and enterprise owners should adopt clear workplace rules on wages, working hours, and grievance handling to reduce ambiguity and disputes. Improving labor relations in backyard enterprises should also be seen as a strategy to enhance enterprise competitiveness and customer trust in the informal economy.

8. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should extend this study through comparative analyses across towns and regions in Zimbabwe to assess the consistency of conflict dynamics in informal enterprises. Quantitative studies are needed to test and validate the relationships identified between conflict, job satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Longitudinal research could examine how conflict evolves over time and how interventions such as labor training or policy reforms influence workplace relations and customer outcomes. Incorporating the perspectives of customers and labor inspectors would further enhance

understanding of how internal workplace conflict affects service delivery and regulatory compliance in backyard enterprises.

9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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