

ARE SATISFIED CONSUMERS WILLING TO BE LOYAL? A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHINESE CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of turning satisfied customers into loyal ones is increasingly prevalent for companies in a dynamic market. This qualitative research aims to investigate customer loyalty in terms of brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty, regardless of product categories or industries. The research employs in-depth interviews with 45 Chinese consumers across four regions. The findings indicate that, unlike Western consumers, brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty are crucial determinants of customer loyalty among Chinese consumers. This study unveils a triad of overarching themes that effectively counteract adverse sentiments towards customer loyalty. These themes encompass the strategic communication of brand quality information, the cultivation of firm trust through ethically principled practices, and the strategic empowerment of salespeople to cultivate a sense of esteem among consumers. The findings provide a unique insight into customer satisfaction and loyalty in the field of marketing and offer critical lessons for promoting customer loyalty in emerging markets.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive research has been conducted on the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty in marketing, consistently indicating that customer satisfaction is a critical determinant of customer loyalty (Curtis et al., 2011; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Oliver, 1999; Taylor & Sirmans, 2019). Higher levels of customer satisfaction generally lead to increased loyalty, while lower levels lead to decreased loyalty (Salegna & Goodwin, 2005; Wolter et al., 2019). Nevertheless, studies on customer satisfaction and loyalty among Chinese consumers have yielded mixed results. Some studies have found that Chinese consumers exhibit loyalty to the products they enjoy, particularly luxury items (Chen, 2004; Gadiesh, Leung, & Vestring, 2007; Hexter & Woetzel, 2007; Chand & Fei, 2021; Fastoso et al., 2018; Henry, 2008). In contrast, several other studies have produced opposing results. For example, Uncles, Wang, and Kwok (2010) found that Chinese consumers are not loyal to brands with which they are satisfied and that exclusive brand loyalty has declined among Chinese consumers, who tend to favor multi-brand loyalty. Jiang & Zhang (2016) found that Chinese customers who felt satisfied with their service were not more loyal to an airline company. According to the McKinsey Quarterly report, "Meet the 2020 Chinese Consumer," "Despite their love affair with brands, Chinese consumers to date have been far less loyal than their western counterparts, preferring to choose from among a repertoire of their favorite labels. Only 46% of Chinese households with monthly incomes of more than \$1,800 (equivalent to RMB12,300) say they stick with a particular brand of a product they like, compared to 71% in the United States" (p. 28).

Understanding the relationship between customer satisfaction, complaining, and loyalty within specific cultural contexts is of critical importance (Badghish, Stanton, & Hu, 2018; Lee & Thorelli, 1989). Limited research on the satisfaction-loyalty link suggests that

this relationship is not always linear (Powers, Jack, & Choi, 2019) and is dependent on several moderation variables, including industry type, customer expectations, relational switching costs, and customer characteristics (Larivière et al., 2016; Morgeson III et al., 2020; Evanschitzky, Stan, & Nagengast, 2022; Schirmer et al., 2018). However, there is a dearth of research exploring the factors that influence satisfied customers to become loyal among Chinese consumers (Filiari et al., 2019; Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Wu & Cheng, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to address three fundamental questions based on loyalty theories. First, are Chinese consumers who are satisfied with a product or service willing to become loyal customers? Second, how do consumer relationships with the brand, firm, and salespeople influence customer loyalty? Lastly, what factors contribute to consumer attachment to the brand, firm, and salespeople?

Most of the research on customer satisfaction and loyalty has been conducted quantitatively (Jiang & Zhang, 2016; Luo & Homburg, 2007; Powers, Jack, & Choi, 2018). However, the present qualitative study provides an opportunity for researchers to obtain a more comprehensive and richer understanding of the topic. Qualitative research approaches have their advantages in gaining further insight into social relationships in marketing (Johnson & Ross, 2015), satisfaction (Wright, 1996), consumer complaint behavior (Cohen, 2016; Yan & Lotz, 2009), consumers grudges (Nordstrom & Egan, 2021), and customer loyalty (Filiari et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2021), each involving a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. In particular, qualitative research can offer a more profound and nuanced exploration of the complexities of human behavior, providing insights into underlying motivations and attitudes that quantitative research cannot capture (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2015; Wright & Larsen, 2023). Furthermore, qualitative research can provide a more comprehensive context, allowing researchers to explore the external factors that may influence human behavior, such as culture and environment (Cárdenas, 2012; Flick, 2015). These benefits make qualitative research valuable in the customer satisfaction and loyalty literature. A variety of qualitative research methods have been widely employed in this area, including focus groups (e.g., Karani, 2021), depth interviews (e.g., Bakir, Bakir, & Blodgett, 2020), ethnographic studies (e.g., Wright, Larsen, & Higgs, 1996), literary analysis (e.g., Wright & Larsen, 2012), and autodiving photoelicitation technique (e.g., Petersen, Wright, & Aron, 2020). By utilizing these methodologies, research has contributed to the understanding of consumer behavior by providing diverse and richer interpretations of consumer culture in various contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Loyalty

In the field of marketing, customer loyalty is defined as “a deeply held commitment to consistently rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Customer loyalty is a crucial element for any company, and loyal customers are indispensable to a firm’s success (Casteran, Chrysochou, & Meyer-Waarden, 2019; Cheng & Yu, 2021; Khamitov et al., 2019).

According to loyalty theorists in sociology, there are two fundamental premises of loyalty. Firstly, loyalty is the result of a relationship, as loyalty must “get its grip in relationships with others” (Fletcher, 1993, p. 14). Thus, loyalty can only exist in “the

context of a particular relationship” (Randels, 2001, p. 32). Secondly, loyalty is based on reciprocity, which refers to the outcome of an exchange in which both sides benefit from the loyal relationship (Fletcher, 1993). Customer loyalty should be based on “shared beliefs, interests, commitments, shared sense of belonging, a shared sense of mission, a shared sense of mutual interest” (Randels, 2001, p. 33). Previous research suggests that consumers want to enter into strong, committed, and meaningful relationships with those companies that can satisfy one or more critical self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Chand & Fei, 2021; Liu, Loken, & Wang, 2021). The marketing literature recommends that businesses understand what benefits appeal to customers and retain them in long-term relationships (Costa Filho, Falcao, & Motta, 2021; Fournier, 1998; Gremler et al., 2020; Yang, Yu, & Bruwer, 2018).

Customer loyalty is a vital factor in achieving success in business, but managing customer loyalty is more challenging than ever before (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016; Morgeson III et al., 2020; Reinartz & Kumar, 2002). Customer loyalty is a complex and multi-dimensional trait that consists of various dimensions, such as trust, relationship involvement, repeat purchase, and emotional commitment (Salegna & Goodwin, 2005), attitudinal and behavioral factors (Rahman & Soesilo, 2022; Watson et al., 2015), customer engagement (Pansari & Kumar, 2017), trust (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002), and delight and commitment (Petzer & Roberts-Lombard, 2021). Salegna & Fazel, (2011) found that customer loyalty can manifest in various forms in service marketing (i.e., product loyalty, brand loyalty, personal and service provider loyalty), and by leveraging the interactions of these different types of loyalty, service companies can optimize their profitability. Typically, customer loyalty includes three distinct subtypes of loyal relationships, depending on the target of loyalty: brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty (Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 2007; Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). Brand loyalty relates to the customer’s loyalty to the product or service (Khamitov, Wang, & Thomson, 2019), firm loyalty is the customer’s commitment to the company, and salespeople loyalty is the customer’s commitment to the salesperson (Watson et al., 2015). The following section reviews the existing literature on brand, firm, and salespeople loyalty to provide insights into how they are related to customer loyalty.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to the tendency of customers to continuously purchase and recommend a company's products (Aaker, 1998). Brand loyalty is increasingly recognized as a crucial strategy for achieving sustainable competitive advantages (Keller, 2000; Khamitov, Wang, & Thomson, 2019; Morgeson et al., 2020) and avoiding price competition (Aaker, 2003). In today's market, where consumers have many options and face less pressure to buy, building brand loyalty and retaining customers has become more challenging. Scholars and practitioners agree that brand loyalty is culture-dependent (Mattison Thompson, Newman, & Liu, 2014; Palumbo & Herbig, 2000; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007) in a cross-cultural setting. When international marketers extend a reputable brand to a new regional market, particularly emerging economies, they may encounter significant differences from their home countries that hinder their efforts (Paparoidamis et al., 2019; Heinberg, Ozkaya, & Taube, 2016). The rise of nationalism, for example, has made it difficult to gain consumer brand loyalty (Anglès, 2019; Pecotich & Ward, 2007).

In highly collectivistic societies such as China, an individual's behavior is influenced by environmental factors and social sentiment (Diamant et al., 2005; Earley & Gibson, 1998; Isac & Remeş, 2021). Cultural traditions have shaped the Chinese group (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995), and the words of influential figures such as Confucius have established and nurtured business and cultural practices over time (Li, 2013). This is evident in the way brand loyalty is linked to cultural beliefs and values (Ronen & Shenkar, 2017). Therefore, any behavior that contradicts Confucian teachings is not accepted by mainstream society (Li et al., 2015; Shi, 2010). This shared attitude towards brands, companies, salespeople, and other aspects of life is noticeable in Chinese consumers (Isac & Remeş, 2021; Lee & Thorelli, 1989).

Firm Loyalty

Firm loyalty refers to the strong connection that customers establish with a company, leading them to exclusively purchase its products. This type of loyalty is multifaceted and involves factors such as quality, convenience, image, and attitude-based considerations (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998). The perception of a company's reputation or image, known as image-based loyalty, and the customer's overall attitude toward the company, known as attitude-based loyalty, are among the critical elements of firm loyalty. Consumer perceptions of a company's actions and evaluations of its attributes, known as corporate associations, have a significant effect on customer loyalty and purchase intentions (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Moon, Lee, & Oh, 2015; Guo et al., 2017).

Firm loyalty has been correlated with higher customer retention rates, as loyal customers tend to stay with a company significantly longer compared to their less loyal counterparts. To increase customer loyalty, a company must be perceived as innovative and socially responsible (Brown & Dacin, 1997). In China, a company's products and services are positively evaluated if it has a good reputation or image, and a negative reputation can decrease consumer purchase intentions (Guo et al., 2017). Additionally, Chinese consumers' loyalty is determined by their perception of a business's moral integrity, with trust playing a mediating role (Li, Zhang, & Yang, 2018).

Salespeople Loyalty

Salespeople loyalty refers to the personal connection between a salesperson and customers that can result in repeat purchases (Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). Limited research has demonstrated that customers who are loyal to a salesperson are more likely to be satisfied with their experience and make more purchases (Ellis & Beatty, 1995; Reynolds & Arnold, 2000). Salespeople loyalty enables customers to establish a personal relationship with the salesperson, making it more probable that they will continue to work with the same salesperson in the future (Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 2007).

The literature has seen several studies on consumer-salespeople relationships in Chinese society (Twing-Kwong, Albaum, & Fullgrabe, 2013). In its social hierarchy, Confucianism does not grant salespeople and business owners high status (Li et al., 2015; Opper & Andersson, 2019). The conventional Confucian prejudice against business had a long-lasting impact on the central government's attitude toward businesses and salespeople, and almost all Chinese dynasties implemented various discriminatory and humiliating measures to keep businesspeople out of political power (Sterckx, 2020). These traditional values persist and cultivate business and consumption culture in China's modern society

(Gao, 2018; Huang, 2009; Li et al., 2015), with some stereotypes branding firms and salespeople as greedy, cheating, dishonest, cold-blooded, and evil. For instance, Lee et al. (2009) discovered that contemporary Chinese salespeople were more favorably disposed than expected towards unethical selling behavior, and also more favorably disposed than previously studied US salespeople.

In recent years, as livestreaming and online salesrooms have become more popular in China, salespeople loyalty has become a dominant online marketing strategy (Booth, 2022; Hallanan, 2021). A new brand can attract many loyal consumers if its salespeople are popular among the target market (Greeven, Xin, & Yip, 2021; Robertson, 2022). If salespeople, also influencers and Key Opinion Leaders, have higher social status and enjoy consumer trust for their expertise, their recommendations influence purchase intentions and customer loyalty (Basiouny, 2022). According to recent research by Greeven, Xin, & Yip (2021), Jiaqi Li, also known as Austin Li in English, one of China's most popular online salesmen, sells cosmetics using online sales broadcasts and has millions of followers, having sold billions of dollars of brands within one day. His online salesroom received more than 60 million views, and he sold an estimated \$18 million worth of products. Li is one of many online salespeople who, warmly greeted by their army of fans, have phenomenal influence and the power to boost retail sales so significantly in China. In this case, consumer decisions are determined more by salespeople loyalty than brand or firm loyalty.

METHODS

Qualitative research is a more appropriate method to investigate consumer brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty in-depth. This study employed a qualitative approach and involved conducting a series of in-depth interviews with 45 consumers residing in China. The subjects were randomly selected from four Chinese cities: Beijing (North China), Nanjing (East China), Lanzhou (Northwest), and Chengdu (Southwest), each representing different geographical centers of China. The mall intercept approach was used to recruit participants in each city. A supermarket was selected in each location, and shoppers were approached and recruited to participate in the study.

Twenty-two MBA students who were enrolled in a Marketing Research course at a renowned university in China were assigned to collect and analyze data. These students were divided into four teams, each consisting of 4-5 members, and were given the task of conducting a study on the factors that influence consumer satisfaction and loyalty in one of four cities. The students had completed coursework covering various aspects of marketing research and had successfully undertaken focus group studies earlier in the course. As a result, they possessed sufficient knowledge of research methods to collect and analyze data for the present study. Some of the students also had prior work experience in marketing research before enrolling in the program.

The project assignment titled “Antecedents of Consumer Satisfaction and Loyalty and Reasons” instructs students to investigate the following issues: the correlation between consumer satisfaction and loyalty; the reasons behind loyalty and disloyalty; consumer perceptions towards brands, companies, and salespeople; as well as the interconnection among brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty. Before data collection, each team was mandated to prepare a comprehensive research plan that covers research design,

recruitment of informants, participant approach, and interviewing process. The teams had to obtain approval for their research plans before conducting the research.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, forty-five face-to-face interviews were conducted and tape-recorded, with each interview lasting 30 to 50 minutes. As the informants did not speak English, the interviews were conducted in Chinese. A payment of CNY25 (approximately \$3) was given to each informant at the end of the interview. The average age of the 45 participants was 36.7 years old, with 53.3% female and 46.7% male, and 71% were married. The participants came from various occupations, including college professors, librarians, high school teachers, engineers, and office clerks. 80% of the informants held a bachelor's degree, while the remaining 20% had a high school degree. This sampling method was appropriate for qualitative research, and the sample size was fair (Boddy, 2016). According to Boddy (2016), even with a small sample size, qualitative research can be highly informative and meaningful in presenting a picture of the entire population under review (p. 426).

Table 1 Demographics of Informants

City	Informants	Age
Beijing	11 (Males=3, Females=8)	32.1 years old (25-40)
Nanjing	9 (Males=4, Females=5)	37 years old (25-51)
Chengdu	14 (Males=6, Females=8)	41.2 years old (30-51)
Lanzhou	11(Males=5, Females=6)	36.7 years old (21-65)

Once all the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, which emphasizes the content of the text (Riessman, 2008; Spiggle, 1994; Wright, 1996). This method facilitates theorizing across multiple cases by identifying common thematic elements or patterns among research participants and the events they report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Johnson & Ross, 2015; Day, 2002). The data analysis was conducted in three distinct phases. The first phase involved analyzing the interviews and field notes for each informant, with the aim of identifying emergent themes related to consumer satisfaction, loyalty, and attitudes toward companies and salespeople. The first phase was conducted by the students under the author's supervision, both in and out of the classroom. To accomplish this, the team members read the data twice, generating between 70 to 90 single-spaced typed pages of data, depending on the number of informants. Then, they compared the findings from the different informants of each team, as well as analyzed the various interviews, field notes, and emergent themes. This phase required several iterations to question and expand the evolving themes, and to form them into a coherent interpretation. Whenever clarification or elaboration was necessary, the video recordings of the interviews were reviewed. Finally, in this phase, the analysis shifted to a comparison of the findings from the different cities, involving the interviews of the

four teams, field notes, and themes. The aim was to probe and expand the emerging themes, and to categorize them based on factors such as age groups, antecedents of loyalty, and strategies for improving consumer trust and loyalty. These initial findings formed our first-order codes, representing the granular units of analysis.

Subsequently, in the second phase of our analysis which took place in the classroom, the students and the author examined these first-order codes to assess their potential consolidation into second-order themes or higher-level nodes. During this phase, the group referred back to the primary data, compared back and forth across the phases as required, and adjusted the analysis until they reached a consensus on the conclusions and the research questions were answered satisfactorily by the end of this phase. Afterward, the author and students consolidated the findings from the team reports. This rigorous analysis revealed eight second-order dimensions: some were linked to brand loyalty, others to firm loyalty, and some to salespeople loyalty, respectively. Notably, each team comprised 4-5 students, ensuring diverse perspectives, and facilitating triangulation through multiple researchers (Day, 2002).

During the third phase, the author systematically organized the second-order themes, aligning them with the overarching dimensions that formed the foundation of our theoretical framework. Through this process, three key overarching themes emerged. The first theme centers around the communication of high-quality information, serving as a catalyst to instill belief in the brand's unique values among consumers. The second theme revolves around establishing and fostering consumer trust in the firm. Lastly, the third theme focuses on cultivating a transformative image of the firm's salespeople by empowering salespeople as influencers, leading to increased esteem from consumers. When salespeople are perceived as credible sources of product information, they are likely to attract a greater number of loyal consumers.

FINDINGS

The primary distinction observed in this study is that respondents displayed a lack of interest in brand loyalty, firm loyalty primarily due to a general distrust in companies, and salespeople loyalty. This study validates the existence of eight second-order themes concerning brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty. Among these, two are associated with brand loyalty, three pertain to firm loyalty, and three are relevant to salespeople loyalty. Each of these second-order themes will be expounded upon in the subsequent sections.

Brand Quality

The significant findings regarding brand loyalty indicate that quality holds paramount importance across all age groups when making brand purchases. Most participants emphasize the importance of practicality and utility in products or services, underscoring the need for offerings that cater to genuine consumer needs. Additionally, attention to product details, coupled with a judicious approach to changes in brand features, emerged as key factors in building consumer confidence. The following remarks from the respondents offer valuable insights into their brand loyalty:

Don't be loyal to brands; I am willing to try new brands that use new and advanced technology and cheaper.

Rational consumer should not be loyal to a brand; the more you are loyal, the more likely the brand will stop growing, and the less competitive it will become; loyalty is only necessary within a short period; only a fool will be loyal to a brand that is not good for a long time.

I am more likely to buy from businesses that are big, competitive, respectful to consumers, and customer-oriented.

Brand Uniqueness

Certain informants, particularly younger individuals, articulate their aspirations to acquire their favored brands. They consistently gravitate towards global brands or those renowned for their superior quality, unique brand features, and brand experience, including after-sale services. Additionally, they are open to trying new brands that offer innovative technology, reasonable pricing, and align with their income level. According to the majority of respondents, brand uniqueness entails the brand's capacity to distinguish itself from competitors. It encompasses the brand's ability to provide something distinctive, special, or differentiating in terms of its products, features, attributes, values, or market positioning. Participants believe that when a brand stands out from its competitors by offering something distinct or exclusive, it generates a sense of value and differentiation in their minds and the perception of their peers. Notably, they show a keen interest in brands showcasing unique features that are difficult to replicate or imitate, and they display a propensity to remain loyal to such brands. This elevated brand loyalty arises from the perception that the unique aspects render the brand irreplaceable, consequently increasing the likelihood of their continued commitment to it.

For the majority of participants, brand experience emerges as a pivotal determinant in their decision to make repeated purchases. The term "brand experience" encompasses the holistic impact of diverse touchpoints and interactions a consumer encounters with a brand across various online and offline channels and contexts. These interactions encompass sensory, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral responses. Participants place particular emphasis on the multidimensional facets stirred by these interactions. They believe that good brand experience should transcend the mere product or service itself, enveloping the complete customer journey encompassing the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages. These individuals seek to re-engage with a brand that not only facilitate a positive and memorable encounter but also enriches their quality of life and fosters emotional enrichment through the brand.

Firms Not Being Customer-Centric

The present study underscores a prevailing tendency among Chinese consumers, where a propensity to establish enduring relationships with firms is notably limited. When elaborating on the factors contributing to their skepticism towards businesses, a significant portion of the respondents frequently refer to the well-known Chinese proverb, "No business is honest." Subsequently, they assert that their own experiences have led them to perceive companies as irresponsible entities, often resorting to exploitative tactics such as misleading pricing strategies. This emphasizes the need for consumers to exercise vigilance in their interactions with businesses and their promotional endeavors. Notably, respondents

express considerable skepticism towards the credibility of advertisements, leading them to adopt cautious approaches when engaging with firms. Employing an array of precautionary measures to safeguard their interests, they often assert that businesses tend to exaggerate product values while disregarding truthfulness in their advertising messages. This portrayal reflects their perception of firms as being self-centered. The prevailing sentiment, as indicated by respondents, is that firm loyalty is precarious, given the potential for exploitation by businesses.

Further analysis has revealed that the underlying cause of weak firm loyalty among Chinese consumers lies in their inherent mistrust of businesses. The data unveils that those exhibiting low levels of trust in firms tend to be influenced by traditional Chinese cultures and moral values. This alignment with traditional values is unsurprising, given that Chinese society continues to be shaped by the enduring tenets of Confucianism, whose principles have significantly impacted societal norms (Gao and O'Sullivan-Gavin, 2015; Rowley & Oh, 2020). For instance, this philosophy advocates that noble individuals or organizations should uphold "righteousness," while only the "inferior" focus on "profits" (Li et al., 2015; Shi, 2010). As a dominant moral compass in Chinese culture, Confucian "righteousness" is deemed the pinnacle of universal morality (Cochran, 2006). However, businesses often diverge from this "righteous" path by encouraging individuals and organizations to prioritize economic gains or material possessions.

Hence, most participants tend to distance themselves from firm loyalty due to their perception that loyalty primarily serves the firm's interests rather than their own. Furthermore, they hold the view that brand loyalty could potentially result in firms becoming complacent and taking their loyalty for granted. A significant number of participants used the term "spoil firms" to describe a situation where firms grow complacent due to perceived consumer loyalty, hindering progress. "Spoiling" refers to frequent customer purchases leading firms to assume a loyal customer base, potentially undermining motivation for quality improvement, innovation, and competitive pricing. This can result in stagnation, reduced quality, or unwarranted price increases without a corresponding increase in value.

The notion of "spoiling" additionally suggests that participants may lack confidence in firms. If a firm becomes accustomed to consistent business (or "spoiled"), consumers' ability to influence the situation becomes limited. Therefore, abstaining from showcasing loyalty can be seen as a means of exerting influence over the firm's performance. This lack of loyalty could potentially trigger a response, compelling firms to intensify their efforts in enhancing the quality of their products and services. Through this lens of skepticism, consumers have the potential to inspire the firm to consistently invest the necessary effort to either uphold or elevate levels of customer satisfaction.

Price Changes Negatively Impact Consumer Trust in the Firm

The participants' responses, particularly those from older participants, highlight "prices" as the primary factor influencing their reluctance to exhibit loyalty towards a firm. The data unveils two price-related triggers that underscore these attitudes. Firstly, participants express discontent with the firm's frequent price fluctuations, explaining their inclination to explore new brands, often enticed by promotions during the growth stage. Secondly, constrained by limited income, many participants perceive the firm as overcharging for additional features that they deem unnecessary. This perception stems

from the belief that firms incorporate these "extraneous" features to justify higher prices, seemingly prioritizing their own interests over consumer considerations.

Participants demonstrate a propensity for price comparison across similar products, making repurchase decisions based on specific features. However, when brands alter these features or remove them altogether, participants respond unfavorably, expressing displeasure towards the updated brands. This recurrent scenario, prevalent in the Chinese markets, tends to irk many consumers. Interestingly, what the West terms "fair pricing strategies" is perceived as "unfair" by Chinese consumers, eroding their trust in firms. These practices, in turn, hinder Chinese consumers from developing trust and loyalty towards a firm and its products. Expressing their perspectives, many participants assert that companies should adopt equitable pricing and remain mindful of competing brands' prices.

These illuminating insights provide invaluable direction for firms aiming to cultivate robust and enduring relationships within their target audience. By attuning to these nuanced consumer sentiments, firms can forge stronger connections, enhance brand reputation, and foster lasting loyalty in the intricate landscape of the Chinese market.

Country-of-Origin Image

The study's findings highlight the role of a positive Country of Origin (COO) image in shaping brand loyalty, particularly among participants who choose brands for conspicuous or social status purposes. The influence of the COO image on perceptions is substantial. Notably, a subset of middle-aged participants (aged 30-39) opts for various global brands that project a favorable COO image, elevating their perceived social status through brand familiarity. This preference reflects the importance of the COO image in conveying positive associations. Additionally, participants within this subset exhibit reluctance to engage with brands from countries lacking a positive COO image, emphasizing the significant impact of this factor. Importantly, these participants note that some firms' failure to leverage the COO information effectively diminishes its role as a crucial quality indicator, thereby affecting their firm loyalty.

Another intriguing discovery is the positive correlation between firm size and firm loyalty. The data illustrates that certain participants base their trust on the magnitude of a company, opting to place faith primarily in larger enterprises. This inclination subsequently influences their product or service choices, with company size assuming a pivotal role in their decision-making process. Notably, although respondents exhibited a willingness to invest in high-end brands for their esteemed reputation, their allegiance waned when confronted with vague or ambiguous company information. As an illustration, a few participants mentioned, "sales-reps from smaller companies are more likely to cheat consumers and sell counterfeit products."

This finding aligns with earlier studies involving Chinese consumers, as evidenced by the works of Banik & Gao (2020), Yang et al. (2018), and Zhang & Liu (2017). For example, Yang et al. (2018) assert that Chinese consumers place greater emphasis on trust-based confidence and identity benefits when evaluating loyalty club programs, as opposed to information-sharing and economic benefits. Similarly, Yang, Pusaksrikit, & Buavaraporn (2020) found that trust acts as a mediator in the relationship between brand experience with skincare products and brand loyalty. Lastly, Chen's (2021) study demonstrated that brand trust significantly impacts the purchase intentions of Chinese consumers in the medical brand sector.

Dishonest and Untrustworthy Sales Behavior

The data highlights a substantial connection between consumers and salespeople that exerts a significant influence on the brand loyalty of Chinese consumers, particularly notable among older demographics who exhibit a hesitancy towards sustained loyalty. This phenomenon is predominantly rooted in their pessimistic perception of salespeople, evidenced by their adverse remarks detailing disagreeable interactions with sales or business representatives across different brands. The subsequent comments underscore their adverse sentiments towards salespeople.

Salespeople and business owners enjoyed a higher social status than they deserved.

Business people should be responsible for corrupting government officials through bribery or collusion in some industries or sectors. The interests of salespeople primarily lie in making money, which can contribute to the erosion of trust within society.

Salespeople who engage in bribery of governmental officials pose a threat to the integrity of the government and the laws of the country, leading to corruption.

A significant majority of informants hold the belief that individuals within the business sector achieve elevated social status primarily through their wealth, often referencing the proverbial adage, "money makes the mare go." The data indicates that a substantial portion of participants has encountered deceptive practices by salespeople at least once, while others have managed to avoid falling victim to fraud mainly due to their lack of trust in salespeople. Consequently, the majority of participants describe their interactions with salespeople using negative or highly negative language, employing terms such as "cheating," "greedy," "dishonest," "mean," "snobbish," "noisy," "treacherous," and "materialistic." Due to this perception, most participants expressed a strong aversion to living in the same neighborhood as salespeople, attributing their sentiment to "complex social relationships" and the perception that salespeople tend to "show off."

Respectful Salespeople

While the majority of participants maintain a negative perspective towards salespeople and exhibit reluctance to place their trust in them, a minority of respondents present a contrasting outlook. This smaller segment regards salespeople as "hardworking," "philanthropic," "willing to share successful experiences with others," and even "smart." They have a more favorable outlook on business and salespeople, acknowledging their significant role in China's economic development. These participants believe that many salespeople, thanks to their active involvement and positive impact on the local communities, warrant admiration and recognition. These participants believe that businesspeople deserve a high social status because of their contribution to the development of China's economy. They highlight instances where successful salespeople have made substantial donations to charities or educational organizations, showcasing their altruistic side. Additionally, many salespeople engage in media activities such as appearing on TV programs or utilizing social media platforms to share their experiences with the

public, which contributes to the public welfare. These actions demonstrate that salespeople are not solely driven by self-interest. Certain instances left a significant impression on the informants, highlighting how salespeople can effectively shape favorable public perceptions and earn respect through their proactive engagement in specific endeavors. The subsequent comments serve to exemplify the activities that contribute to a positive view of the salespeople:

Numerous business people involvement in philanthropy enhances their reputation.

Successful business people play a crucial role in promoting industry growth and regional employment.

Salespeople willingly share their experiences with others through various channels, reflecting their selflessness.

Many business people play a significant role in driving the economic development of their respective countries, deserving respect for their contributions.

Many salespeople deserve respect for their significant contributions to their communities.

Appreciation of Influencers

The findings suggest a noticeable increase in consumers' affinity and admiration for influencers or celebrities who leverage livestreaming technology to endorse brands. Here are insights from respondents, elaborating on their positive attitudes towards influencers or celebrities engaged in brand promotion through live streaming:

Have trust in celebrities or influencers and are more acceptable to their recommendations.

Influencers know more and have more resources because they work for larger companies or brands so they won't cheat individual consumers.

*People buy from the influencers and their reviews are trustworthy.
Influencers are less likely to engage in unethical practices for small profits.*

The above comments from respondents reflect a notably positive disposition towards online influencers. One prevailing trend is a substantial trust in celebrities or influencers, which results in a greater receptiveness to their recommendations. Participants perceive influencers as individuals with a wealth of knowledge and resources, attributed to their affiliations with larger companies or prominent brands. This, in turn, establishes a sense of security, as respondents believe that influencers would refrain from deceiving individual consumers. Moreover, influencer reviews are regarded as dependable, fostering a sense of reliability that bolsters brand recognition. Interestingly, participants seem to associate ethical integrity with influencers, asserting that they are less likely to engage in dubious

practices for minimal gains. Furthermore, the increasing admiration for influencers, especially those leveraging livestreaming technologies for brand promotion, suggests a growing recognition of their influential role in shaping consumer preferences. These insights underscore the evolving dynamics of influencer marketing, wherein trust, credibility, and the ability to facilitate genuine connections with consumers are emerging as pivotal factors in harnessing the potential of this marketing strategy.

EMERGENT THEMES

Through data analysis, the study unveiled the importance of three fundamental steps aimed at alleviating negative attitudes prevalent among Chinese consumers regarding brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty: (1) Communicating the brand quality information to foster brand loyalty; (2) Establishing firm trust through ethical practices and equitable treatment of consumers; (3) Empowering salespeople as influencers to garner esteem from consumer. These steps assume a crucial role in mitigating consumer skepticism and cultivating a sense of brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty. The study's findings are elaborated upon in the subsequent section. Figure 1 illustrates the definitive data structure and the interplay between first-order codes, second-order codes, and overarching themes. This diagram encapsulates the culmination of the findings, integrating illustrative first-order data that bolsters and serves as the foundation for the second-order codes, thereby contributing to the overarching themes.

Communicating Brand Quality Information

In cultivating brand loyalty, marketers may strategically aim to enhance consumers' perception of their brand values. These values, when effectively conveyed, possess the potential to inspire Chinese consumers to warmly embrace novel brands. Notably, the perception of quality assumes a pivotal role in establishing a brand's reputation, serving as a means to surmount any Chinese apprehension toward unfamiliar brands. As global marketers venture into the Chinese market, the formulation of adept marketing strategies and substantial investments in marketing communications are imperative to nurture consumer awareness. The insights derived from respondents' comments shed valuable light on this matter:

Crafting compelling ad messages to effectively communicate their value.

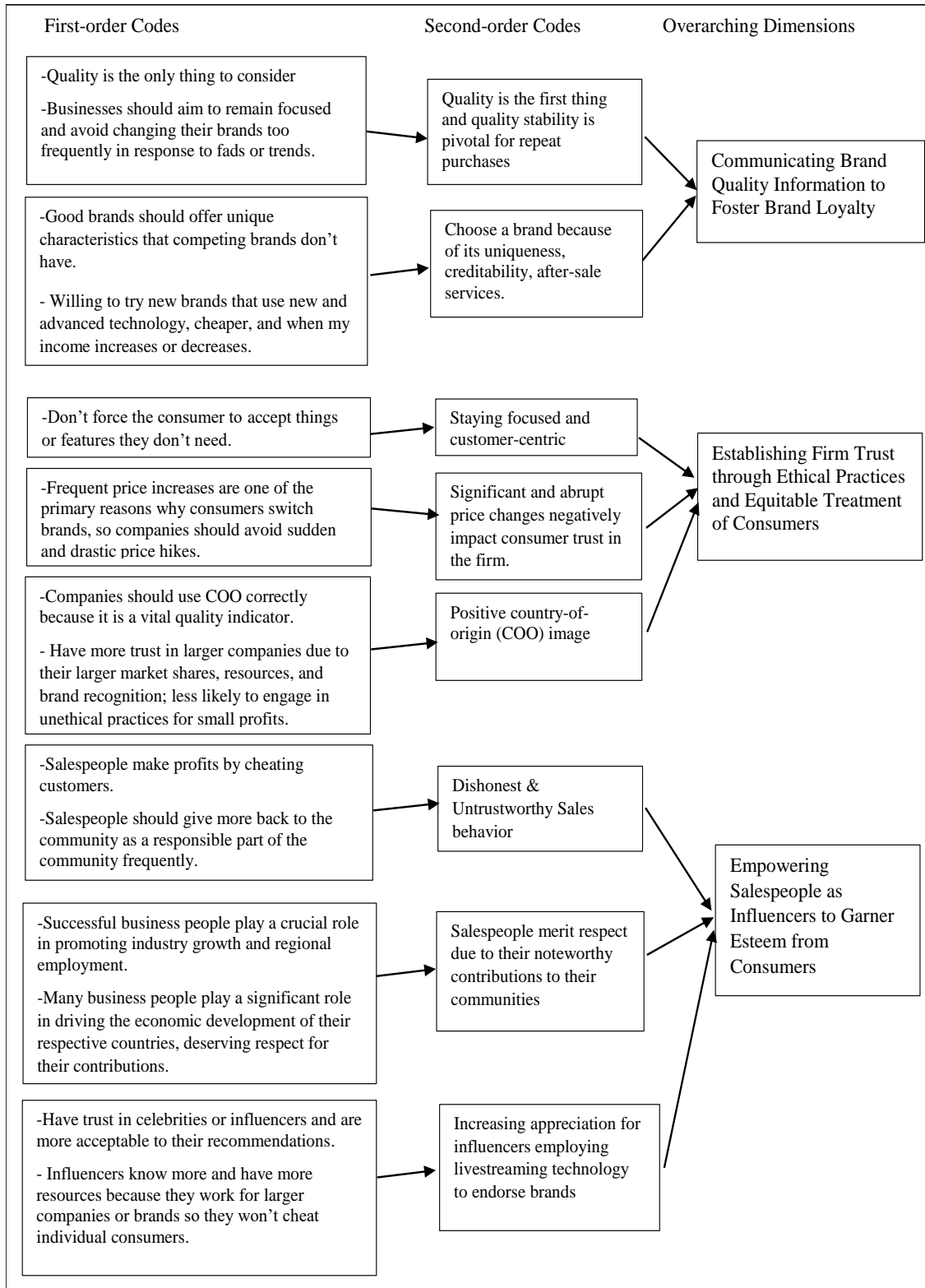
Advertisements should not contain fake information and lies.

Companies should make their products/services practical and useful.

Firms should pay more attention to its product details.

These comments emphasize the pivotal role of strategic marketing communication in nurturing brand loyalty and positive consumer perceptions within China's competitive market. They highlight a strategic directive for global brand marketers, emphasizing the communication of value propositions rooted in quality within branding strategies. Brand quality information, underscored by attributes like experiences, distinctiveness, quality-

Figure 1: Data Analysis Framework



price ratio, COO perception, and company scale should be prominently showcased. These quality indicators significantly influence consumer brand preferences, fostering trust and brand loyalty. Crafting compelling and honest advertising messages is also highlighted as integral to conveying value effectively, while the avoidance of misinformation and deceit within advertisements is critical for maintaining credibility.

Establishing Firm Trust through Ethical Practices and Equitable Treatment of Consumers

The data analysis reveals a significant trend among participants, highlighting their proclivity for seeking reliable indicators and concrete attributes when making decisions about brands. A collective preference has emerged, indicating a strong inclination to establish enduring associations with companies that boast a favorable COO image and possess a notable market presence. This inclination is rooted in the belief that such companies are less likely to exploit consumers, driven by the perception that larger corporations exhibit reduced tendencies toward consumer exploitation. Particularly noteworthy is the heightened trust exhibited by a considerable number of participants in sizable global enterprises. They view their loyalty to such firms as a pathway to enhanced benefits.

Furthermore, participants' apprehension when considering the purchase of expensive brands from smaller companies underscores the importance of addressing concerns related to counterfeit products and cultivating trust through transparent business practices. This prompts the consideration for global marketers to retain their foreign brand names rather than pursuing a Chinese name. As Aaker (2003) aptly points out, a foreign brand name can serve as a potent differentiator, significantly contributing to bolstering brand strength in the Chinese market. Gong & Yi (2018) elaborate on the potential of quality service to ameliorate unfavorable perceptions of foreign companies among Chinese consumers, concurrently enhancing customer satisfaction and overall well-being. Moreover, the research conducted by Guo & Zhang (2020) validates the role of brand history information in fostering brand loyalty.

The significance of the COO image is supported by Han (2020), who advocates prominently featuring a foreign identity in advertisements in China to capitalize on the substantial competitive and economic advantages associated with this information. Thus, the interplay between COO, company size, ethical practices, and transparent communication emerges as a crucial factor in building firm trust and cultivating brand loyalty within China's intricate market landscape.

Furthermore, companies have the opportunity to enhance their corporate image in China by harnessing additional factors, notably corporate social responsibility (CSR). Our research underscores that, despite prevailing stereotypes held by Chinese consumers about businesses, maintaining a favorable CSR track record can effectively surpass these perceptions and trigger a transient shift in attitudes toward the business. As a result, global companies can strategically leverage their CSR initiatives to counteract Chinese consumers' inherent skepticism towards businesses, fostering a heightened willingness to engage with and invest in their brands.

Finally, global companies should employ tailored strategies to bolster consumer trust. While loyalty tactics effective in Western markets may attract Chinese consumers temporarily, sustained loyalty necessitates culturally aligned marketing approaches. To

foster a credible image, companies must assure customer privacy and responsibility. Rather than individualized person-brand relationships, firms should focus on building connections within consumer groups or local communities. Zhang & Zheng (2021) propose that group endorsement in China can mitigate negative perceptions and cultivate trust. Aligning with China's collectivist culture, global firms can diminish consumer distrust and enhance legitimacy, making their brand more appealing and desirable. Ultimately, group attitudes improve brand trust, translating into higher satisfaction. By thoughtfully integrating these perspectives into strategies, firms can forge strong connections, enhance reputation, and foster enduring loyalty in the Chinese market.

Empowering Salespeople as Influencers to Garner Esteem from Consumers

Chinese consumers demonstrate a strong inclination toward brands that exhibit outstanding salespeople, characterized by their adeptness in business acumen, accurate market understanding, and excellent communication prowess. This consumer preference underscores the significance of equipping sales personnel with these skills. Global companies keen on captivating the Chinese market can strategically focus on enhancing their sales force's competencies and harnessing specific marketing activities to elevate their brand's stature.

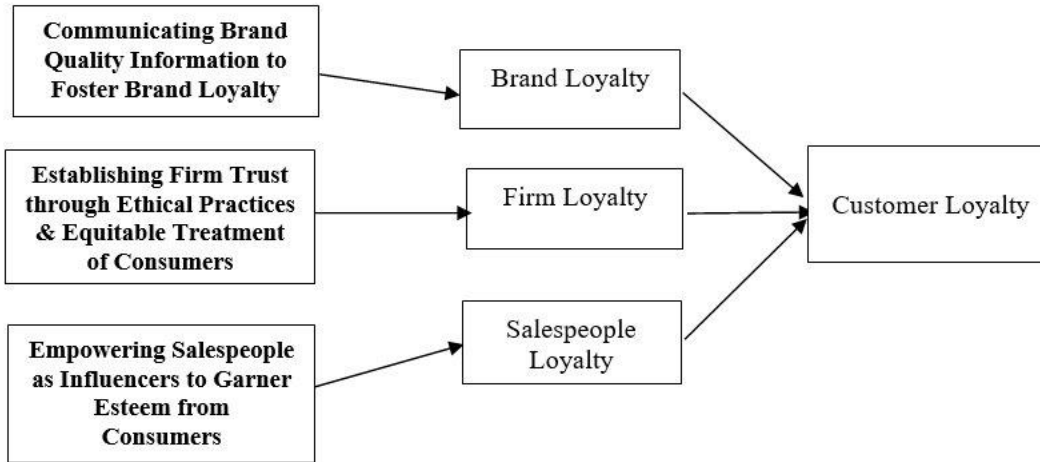
An impactful approach involves the establishment of online salesrooms, a pivotal avenue for kindling consumer interest in brands. Through the creation of dedicated online sales platforms, companies provide sales teams with an exclusive arena to showcase their brands. Ensuring that sales personnel possess adeptness in leveraging online platforms is of paramount importance. Additionally, a potent strategy involves transforming these salespeople into influencers, amassing a substantial following through other effective channels such as blogs and social media platforms. Collaborating with other influencers and seamlessly integrating them into brand promotion strategies further amplifies this potential. Grounded in a meticulous examination of target consumers' media consumption patterns, companies can identify influential figures spanning diverse industries, each boasting a significant follower base. The adaptation of branding strategies to optimize consumer-influencer engagement surfaces as a compelling avenue for enhanced brand resonance.

Notably, the activation of consumers' brand interest is potent within the realm of online salesrooms, unlike traditional offline contexts. The virtual convergence of consumers within these spaces fosters a shared sense of brand enthusiasm, amplifying purchase intentions. In this dynamic, the role of peer influence becomes pronounced. To encourage consumer participation, marketers should incentivize membership in the company's salesroom, offering benefits such as preferential pricing relative to competing brands. Managing the brand's salesroom involves cultivating a unified brand identity through various means, such as rewarding loyal and engaged members with badges, points, coupons, discounts, exclusive sales, and invitations to unique events.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate customer loyalty in terms of brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty, regardless of product categories or industries. The study findings have led to the development of a new framework (Figure 2) that deals with customer loyalty and its relationship with brand, firm, and salespeople.

Figure 2: Customer Loyalty Framework



Customer loyalty among Chinese consumers is built upon three essential pillars. To begin with, perceived value assumes a pivotal role in nurturing brand loyalty, encompassing not only competitive pricing but also encompassing unique brand experiences and attributes. Secondly, firm loyalty tends to gravitate towards companies with a favorable COO reputation and those that align with the cultural expectations deeply ingrained in Chinese society. Finally, the allegiance of customers to salespeople hinges on a combination of factors, including their expertise, popularity, and influence, as evidenced by a substantial fan base.

Chinese consumers often exhibit reluctance to commit to long-term loyalty. This resistance arises from a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and social factors that challenge the establishment of enduring customer loyalty. New firms, small firms, and salespeople encounter low levels of trust, while brand loyalty can be rekindled if the brand consistently delivers the initial benefits that attract consumers. The quest to mitigate negative attitudes of Chinese consumers towards firms and salespeople has led to the emergence of three key themes.

First and foremost, maintaining a steady and transparent communication channel focusing on brand quality significantly influences brand loyalty. This underscores the critical role played by a positive country of origin image. Secondly, trust emerges as a linchpin in nurturing firm loyalty. Companies can foster trust through ethical practices and ensuring that consumers are treated equitably and genuinely. Lastly, the esteem held for salespeople exerts a profound impact on customer loyalty. In the global context, empowering salespeople as influencers and allowing them to cultivate mutual respect can establish strong connections with the target market. By acknowledging and investing in the reciprocal relationship between salespeople and customers, firms can solidify loyalty towards the brand, the company, and the salesperson.

When executed with precision, these three strategic steps serve as a compass for global marketers, enabling them to navigate the intricate web of cultural and social influences. Ultimately, this cultivates brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty among Chinese consumers, forging lasting and meaningful connections.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Marketing scholars are increasingly recognizing the paramount importance of investigating customer satisfaction and loyalty as a valuable avenue for research (Bhattacharya, Morgan, & Rego, 2021; Wright & Larsen, 2023). In this context, the present qualitative study embarks on a journey to offer three distinct and enlightening insights into the realm of customer loyalty, making a noteworthy contribution to the existing body of knowledge surrounding consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Primarily, this study builds upon the foundation laid by previous research on customer loyalty, with a particular emphasis on the intricate dynamics of brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty frameworks as elucidated by Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp (2007) as well as Reynolds & Arnold (2000). By doing so, this study takes a decisive step forward, advancing the existing literature on customer loyalty by presenting an integrated framework that outlines the precursors to customer loyalty. This comprehensive framework not only elucidates the individual contributions of brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty but also provides a holistic understanding of their collective impact on customer loyalty within the rich tapestry of Chinese social and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the prevailing body of literature pertaining to loyalty predominantly centers around customer loyalty as observed within Western cultures, as noted by Heinberg et al. (2016). In contrast, the primary objective of the current study is to inject novel perspectives into the realm of customer loyalty, specifically honing in on brand, firm, and salespeople loyalty dynamics within the dynamic landscape of the Chinese market. Accordingly, this article introduces a distinct vantage point, firmly grounded in Chinese culture and business history. This perspective is rooted in data gleaned from consumers residing across diverse representative cities within the nation. Through this lens, the study employs a comprehensive approach to unravel the intricacies of customer loyalty. The outcomes and insights derived from this inquiry hold the potential to significantly enrich our comprehension of the multifaceted concept of customer loyalty as it unfolds within the distinctive contours of the Chinese market.

Third, prior research has extensively established the significance of customer loyalty in specific contexts, such as particular industries (Taylor & Sirmans, 2019), product categories, or private-public brand settings. However, limited understanding exists regarding customer loyalty in a general context, with a particular focus on consumer attitudes towards brand, firm, and salespeople. Drawing on satisfaction and loyalty theories, this study asserts that consumer brand loyalty, consumer-firm relationships, and consumer-salespeople engagement are pivotal in triggering customer loyalty and rendering it salient. Our model proposes that distinct factors contribute to brand, firm, and salespeople loyalty, which, when functioning cohesively, are more likely to engage satisfied consumers and foster stronger customer loyalty. Nonetheless, if firms overlook these contributing factors, or if they do not work effectively or appropriately, their efforts to establish customer loyalty may be hampered, resulting in decreased loyalty or even consumer dissatisfaction.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any research, this study has several limitations that require further investigation. First, this study is confined to a qualitative analysis of customer loyalty in China. The informants selected for this study possess a higher level of education compared

to the general population of the country. This discrepancy arises from the fact that the informants are drawn from major urban centers in China. As middle consumers residing in these urban locales, they enjoy a relatively higher disposable income, which could potentially influence their level of brand loyalty. As a consequence, while the findings presented in this paper provide valuable insights, it is prudent to approach them with a degree of caution and a recognition of the contextual factors that may influence the observed outcomes.

It is also important to note that online salesrooms may not be widely used by salespeople in other countries, and many brands, particularly those operating internationally, may not have access to influencers. Additionally, consumer cultures in various countries may exhibit diverse behavioral patterns. Therefore, future researchers should examine and validate the connections among the three subtypes of customer loyalty (brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty) in different contexts to expand the scope of knowledge.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of customer loyalty but acknowledges the need for further investigation into the interplay between the three subtypes of customer loyalty. Future empirical research can test the interaction effects of brand loyalty, firm loyalty, and salespeople loyalty on overall customer loyalty in the online salesroom context. For example, research can explore whether brand loyalty changes when competing brands are promoted, whether salespeople loyalty moderates the impact of influencers on customer loyalty, and whether firm loyalty increases consumer interest in joining the online salesroom. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the topics that salespeople should focus on to effectively engage their audience when interacting with customers in the salesroom. Furthermore, future research could investigate how salesrooms can facilitate the formation of a new brand community and enhance overall customer engagement and loyalty.

This study addresses the discourse on customer loyalty research (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Salegna & Goodwin, 2005) by investigating Chinese consumer loyalty and its underpinnings rooted in their enduring values. Guided by loyalty theory, it establishes that customer loyalty emanates from quality-based brand loyalty, trust-based firm loyalty, and respect-based salespeople loyalty. Chinese consumers prioritize trust in businesses, respect for salespeople, and unique brand experiences. This trust and respect drive brand and firm support, forming the bedrock of customer loyalty. Damages in any of these aspects can prompt consumers to switch to competitors. Thus, fostering loyalty across brand, firm, and salespeople domains is vital for heightened marketing effectiveness, ROI, and sustained growth.

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