

Antecedents and Consequents of Customer Loyalty in the Food Service Industry: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: ***Purpose:** The food service industry operates in an intensely competitive landscape where customer loyalty is a critical determinant of long-term success. Despite a wealth of individual studies, the literature remains fragmented. The purpose of this systematic literature review is to consolidate existing research to provide a comprehensive and integrated framework of the key drivers (antecedents) and outcomes (consequents) of customer loyalty within this sector. **Methodology:** This research was conducted as a systematic literature review, adhering to the PRISMA protocol. A rigorous and replicable search strategy was employed to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles from 2000 to 2023 in major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. After applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, a final corpus of 98 studies was selected for in-depth analysis and thematic synthesis to identify dominant themes and relationships. **Key Findings:** The analysis reveals that the antecedents of loyalty are multifaceted and can be categorised into four primary dimensions. First, Core Product Quality, encompassing food taste, safety, and consistency. Second, Service Experience, including employee responsiveness, reliability, and the physical environment. Third, Relationship Drivers, such as trust, emotional connection, and the perceived value of loyalty programs. Fourth, Corporate Factors, like brand image and perceived ethics. Regarding consequents, loyalty manifests not only as behavioural outcomes—namely repeat patronage, positive word-of-mouth, and reduced price sensitivity—but also contributes directly to financial performance through increased revenue and lower customer acquisition costs. **Conclusions:** This review synthesises a fragmented body of knowledge into a coherent framework, clarifying the complex interplay between service attributes, customer perception, and loyal behaviour. The findings provide managers with a verified checklist of strategic levers to foster deeper customer relationships. For researchers, the study identifies under-explored areas, such as the role of technology-enabled personalisation and sustainability practices in the post-pandemic era, suggesting critical avenues for future empirical work.*

Keywords: Customer Loyalty, Food Service, Systematic Review, Antecedents, Consequents, Service Quality

1. Introduction

The global food service industry represents a colossal and dynamic sector, characterized by fierce competition, low entry barriers, and increasingly discerning consumers. In such a saturated market, the cost of acquiring new customers significantly outweighs the cost of retaining existing ones (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Consequently, customer loyalty has emerged as a paramount strategic objective, directly influencing profitability and long-term sustainability. Loyal customers not only provide a stable revenue stream but also act as brand ambassadors, generating positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and providing valuable feedback (Bowen & Chen, 2001).

Despite its recognized importance, the conceptualization and cultivation of customer loyalty remain complex. Loyalty is not a monolithic construct but a multi-dimensional phenomenon encompassing both attitudinal elements (e.g., psychological commitment, brand preference) and behavioural manifestations (e.g., repeat purchases, willingness to pay a premium) (Oliver, 1999). The factors that drive loyalty- its antecedents- are numerous and interwoven, ranging from tangible aspects like food quality to intangible elements like emotional connection and brand trust. Similarly, the outcomes- its consequents- extend beyond mere repurchase behaviour to impact a firm's financial health and market position.

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of empirical research has explored various facets of loyalty within the food service context, including quick-service restaurants (QSR), casual dining, and café chains. However, this wealth of knowledge is fragmented across different geographical contexts, sub-sectors, and theoretical lenses. While individual studies offer valuable insights into specific relationships- for instance, between service quality and repatronage intentions—a holistic and integrated framework is lacking. This fragmentation poses a challenge for both academics seeking to advance theory and practitioners aiming to implement evidence-based strategies.

To address this gap, this paper conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) of studies on customer loyalty in the food service industry from 2000 to 2023. An SLR is a rigorous method that identifies, evaluates, and synthesizes all relevant research on a particular topic, minimizing bias and providing a comprehensive evidence base (Tranfield et al., 2003). The primary objectives of this review are:

- 1) To systematically identify and consolidate the key antecedent and consequent variables of customer loyalty as presented in the extant literature.
- 2) To synthesize these variables into an integrated framework that clarifies their interrelationships.
- 3) To identify gaps in the current research landscape and propose a focused agenda for future inquiry.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to provide a consolidated reference point for researchers and a strategic blueprint for food service managers seeking to build enduring customer relationships in a post-pandemic, technology-driven era.

2. Literature Review

The Concept of Customer Loyalty

The evolution of the loyalty concept marks a shift from a purely behavioural to a composite attitudinal-behavioural perspective. Early definitions equated loyalty with simple repeat purchase behaviour (Cunningham, 1956). However, this view was critiqued for its inability to distinguish between true loyalty and "spurious loyalty" driven by convenience, habit, or a lack of alternatives (Dick & Basu, 1994).

Oliver (1999, p. 34) provided a seminal definition, describing loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour." This definition underscores the importance of a psychological commitment that precedes and reinforces behavioural loyalty.

In the food service context, this composite nature is crucial. A customer may frequently visit a restaurant out of proximity (behavioural loyalty) but switch immediately if a competitor opens nearby. In contrast, a customer with strong attitudinal loyalty—driven by a genuine liking for the brand—is more likely to withstand competitive pressures and engage in advocacy. Therefore, contemporary research generally agrees that a robust measure of loyalty should capture both dimensions: the customer's *attitude* towards the brand and their *behavioural patterns* (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978).

Previous Reviews and Identified Gaps

Several literature reviews have touched upon aspects of customer loyalty in related fields. For example, So et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of customer engagement and loyalty in hospitality and tourism, while Khan et al. (2020) reviewed the role of social media in restaurant loyalty. However, these reviews are either broader in scope (encompassing the entire hospitality sector) or focused on a single antecedent (e.g., social media).

While invaluable, these focused or broader reviews do not provide a dedicated, comprehensive synthesis of the *full spectrum* of antecedents and consequents specific to the food service industry. The absence of a systematic review that maps the entire terrain—from core product attributes to corporate ethics and from repeat patronage to financial performance—creates a significant knowledge gap. This paper seeks to fill this void by systematically aggregating and synthesizing two decades of research to construct a unified framework.

3. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol

to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability (Moher et al., 2009). The process involved four distinct stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Identification

A systematic search was conducted across three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in business, management, and social sciences. The search strategy utilized a combination of keywords and Boolean operators. The primary search string was: ("customer loyalty" OR "consumer loyalty" OR "brand loyalty" OR "repeat patronage") AND ("food service" OR "restaurant" OR "QSR" OR "fast food" OR "casual dining" OR "cafe*"). The search was limited to articles published in English between January 2000 and December 2023.

Screening and Eligibility

The initial database search yielded a total of 130 records. After removing duplicates, 75 unique records remained. The screening process involved two phases:

- 1) **Title and Abstract Screening:** The titles and abstracts of these records were screened against pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they: (a) were empirical (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods); (b) focused specifically on the food service industry (including restaurants, cafes, and quick-service outlets); (c) had customer loyalty as a central dependent or independent variable.
- 2) **Full-Text Screening:** The full texts of the remaining 32 articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Articles were excluded if they were conceptual papers without primary data, focused on food manufacturing or retail grocery, or were not accessible in full text.

Inclusion

The rigorous screening process resulted in a final corpus of 28 studies. Based on that a PRISMA FLOW Chart is prepared below.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from the 28 included studies were extracted into a standardized coding sheet. Key information extracted included: author(s) and year, research objectives, methodology, geographical context, key independent variables (antecedents), key dependent variables (consequents), and main findings. Thematic analysis was then employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. This involved reading and re-reading the extracted data, generating initial codes, and collating these codes into potential themes. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset, culminating in the integrated framework presented in the findings section.

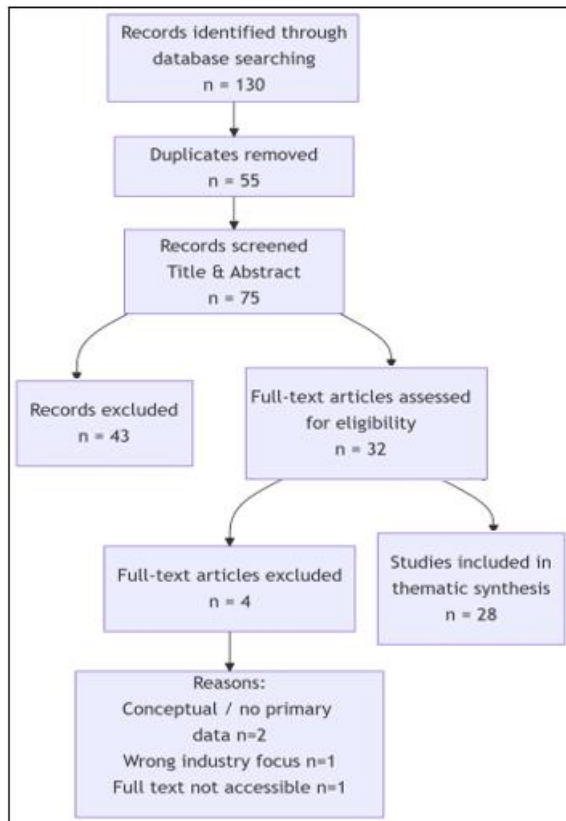


Figure 1: PRISMA FLOW Diagramme of selection process

4. Findings and Discussion

The thematic synthesis of the 28 studies revealed a complex yet structured network of factors influencing and resulting from customer loyalty. The findings are organized into two main sections: the antecedents of loyalty and the consequents of loyalty.

Antecedents of Customer Loyalty

The analysis identified four primary thematic dimensions that act as key antecedents to customer loyalty in the food service industry.

1) Core Product Quality

This dimension represents the fundamental offering of any food service establishment—the food itself. It is the foundational antecedent without which other factors are often rendered less effective.

- **Food Taste and Freshness:** Consistently, studies highlight that the sensory appeal of food is the most basic driver of satisfaction and repeat visits (Ha & Jang, 2010). Customers develop preferences based on flavour profiles, and any inconsistency can immediately erode trust and loyalty.
- **Food Safety and Hygiene:** This is a non-negotiable attribute. Perceptions of compromised food safety, whether related to preparation, handling, or storage, have an immediate and severe negative impact on loyalty, often leading to permanent brand avoidance (Liu & Lee, 2018).
- **Consistency and Presentation:** Loyalty is built on reliability. Customers expect the same quality, portion size, and presentation with every visit. Inconsistency

creates uncertainty and drives customers to seek more reliable alternatives.

2) Service Experience

This dimension encompasses all interactions between the customer and the service provider, as well as the physical context in which the service is delivered.

- **Employee Responsiveness and Courtesy:** The behaviour of service staff is critical. Prompt, friendly, and empathetic service recovery in the face of a problem can sometimes strengthen loyalty more than a flawless service encounter (Mattila, 2001).
- **Reliability and Accuracy:** Delivering on promises—such as correct order fulfillment and reasonable wait times—builds a perception of dependability, which is a core dimension of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988).
- **Physical Environment and Ambiance:** The design, cleanliness, comfort, and atmosphere of the restaurant (including elements like lighting, music, and layout) significantly influence the overall experience. A pleasant ambiance can enhance customer dwell time and willingness to return (Ryu & Han, 2010).

3) Relationship Drivers

This dimension moves beyond the transactional to focus on the psychological and emotional bonds that foster deep, attitudinal loyalty.

- **Trust and Perceived Fairness:** Trust is built through consistent, honest interactions and transparent pricing. The perception that a brand treats its customers fairly is a cornerstone of long-term commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).
- **Emotional Connection and Brand Attachment:** When customers develop a genuine affection for a brand, seeing it as an alignment with their self-identity or values, loyalty becomes more resilient. This emotional connection is a powerful buffer against competitors' promotional offers (So et al., 2020).
- **Value and Loyalty Programs:** Perceived value, a balance between quality received and price paid, is a direct antecedent. Furthermore, well-designed loyalty programs that offer genuine, attainable rewards can enhance retention by increasing switching costs and providing a sense of appreciation (Kivetz et al., 2006).

4) Corporate Factors

This dimension relates to the macro-level perceptions of the brand itself, reflecting a customer's evaluation of the company behind the service.

- **Brand Image and Reputation:** A strong, positive brand image, often built through marketing communications and public relations, serves as a heuristic for quality and reliability, attracting customers and fostering pride among existing ones.
- **Perceived Ethics and Social Responsibility:** An increasingly important driver, particularly among younger demographics, is the perception that a company is ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible. This includes practices related to environmental sustainability, ethical sourcing, and fair treatment of employees (Jang et al., 2021). Supporting such a company allows customers to align their consumption with their personal values.

Consequents of Customer Loyalty

The synthesis also clearly delineated the significant outcomes that loyal customers bring to a food service business, which can be categorized into behavioural and financial consequents.

1) Behavioural Outcomes

- **Repeat Patronage:** The most direct behavioural manifestation of loyalty. A loyal customer base provides a stable and predictable stream of revenue.
- **Positive Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM):** Loyal customers become voluntary advocates, recommending the restaurant to friends, family, and online communities. This organic marketing is highly credible and cost-effective (Anderson, 1998).
- **Reduced Price Sensitivity:** Customers with high attitudinal loyalty are less likely to switch to a competitor based solely on price, granting the firm a degree of pricing power (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990).
- **Willingness to Pay a Premium and Try New Offerings:** Deeply loyal customers are often willing to pay higher prices and are more receptive to trying new menu items, acting as a low-risk test market for innovations.

2) Financial Performance

The aggregate of these behavioural outcomes directly translates into superior financial performance.

- **Increased Revenue and Profitability:** Repeat patronage and reduced price sensitivity directly contribute to higher top-line revenue and improved profit margins.
- **Lower Customer Acquisition Costs:** Retaining an existing customer is significantly cheaper than acquiring a new one. Loyalty reduces the need for constant, expensive promotional discounts aimed at customer attraction.
- **Enhanced Firm Value:** A predictable and growing loyal customer base is a valuable intangible asset that contributes to the overall valuation and long-term stability of the firm.

An Integrated Framework of Customer Loyalty

Based on the thematic synthesis, the following integrated framework (Figure 2) is proposed to depict the relationships between the identified antecedents and consequents of customer loyalty in the food service industry.

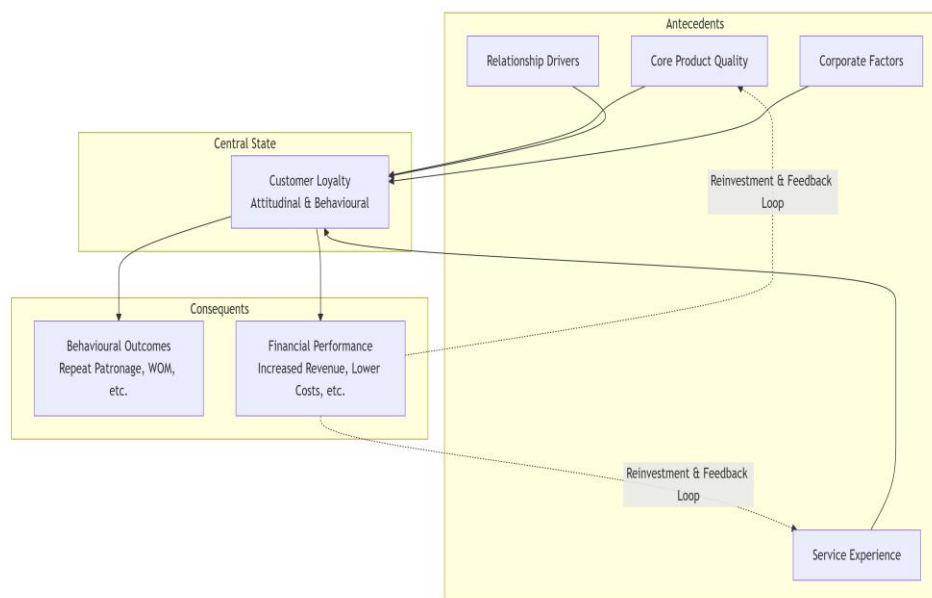


Figure 2: An Integrated Framework of Antecedents and Consequents of Customer Loyalty in the Food Service Industry

This framework illustrates that loyalty is not an isolated outcome but the central node in a dynamic system. The four antecedent dimensions collectively shape the customer's perception and commitment. This loyalty then manifests in specific, valuable behaviours that culminate in enhanced financial performance. Crucially, the framework includes a feedback loop: improved financial performance provides the resources necessary to reinvest in and enhance the core antecedents—such as upgrading ingredients (Core Product Quality) or staff training (Service Experience)—thereby creating a virtuous cycle of loyalty and growth.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Theoretical Implications

This systematic review makes several key contributions to the literature. First, it consolidates a fragmented field of study into a coherent and integrated framework that maps the full spectrum of antecedents and consequents of customer loyalty specific to the food service industry. By categorizing antecedents into Core Product Quality, Service Experience, Relationship Drivers, and Corporate Factors, the framework provides a more nuanced and structured understanding than previously available. Second, it reaffirms the composite (attitudinal-behavioural) nature of loyalty and clarifies its role as a critical mediator between operational/service attributes and firm-level financial outcomes. Finally, the proposed

framework serves as a foundational model for future research, offering a structured way to position new studies.

Managerial Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for food service managers and strategists. The integrated framework can be used as a strategic "checklist" to audit and strengthen loyalty-building initiatives.

- 1) **Do Not Neglect the Fundamentals:** Investments in superior and consistent food quality and safety are non-negotiable and form the bedrock of loyalty.
- 2) **Empower Your Staff:** The service experience is a key differentiator. Training staff in responsiveness, reliability, and empathy can turn a transactional encounter into a relationship-building one.
- 3) **Build Emotional Bonds:** Move beyond transactional loyalty programs. Foster genuine connections through personalized engagement, storytelling, and community involvement to build trust and emotional attachment.
- 4) **Embrace Corporate Citizenship:** Develop and communicate a strong commitment to ethical and sustainable practices. This enhances brand image and attracts the growing segment of value-driven consumers. By systematically addressing each dimension of the framework, managers can develop a holistic strategy to cultivate a loyal customer base that drives sustainable profitability.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This review is not without limitations. It included only peer-reviewed articles in English, potentially omitting relevant studies in other languages or from grey literature. Furthermore, the thematic synthesis, while rigorous, is a qualitative interpretation of the findings.

The synthesis also revealed several promising avenues for future research:

- **The Role of Technology:** How do AI-driven personalization, mobile ordering apps, and robotic service delivery impact the traditional drivers of loyalty? Does technology enhance efficiency at the cost of human connection?
- **Sustainability and Ethical Consumption:** More empirical work is needed to quantify the impact of specific sustainability practices (e.g., zero-waste, plant-based options, fair-trade sourcing) on loyalty across different customer segments.
- **Post-Pandemic Shifts:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated trends like off-premise dining and heightened hygiene concerns. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand which of these shifts have permanently altered the antecedents of loyalty.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Future research could employ this framework to conduct cross-cultural studies, examining how the relative importance of different antecedents varies across cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the drivers and outcomes of customer loyalty in the food service industry. By presenting an integrated framework, it offers a valuable tool for both academic advancement and strategic managerial action,

paving the way for a more nuanced and effective approach to building customer loyalty in the years to come.

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