

Original Article

# Customer Loyalty in the Digital Era: A Critical Literature Review of Conceptual Evolution and Measurement Challenges

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**Abstract:** Customer loyalty remains a central construct in marketing, yet its relevance and conceptualization are increasingly challenged by digital transformation and evolving business models. This study aims to critically and comprehensively examine the evolution, antecedents, and measurement of customer loyalty within profit-oriented firms across service, trading, and industrial sectors. A narrative literature review approach was employed by analyzing 65 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2025, sourced from Scopus and Web of Science databases. The review adopts a thematic mapping strategy to synthesize fragmented perspectives and identify emerging research trends. The findings reveal that customer loyalty has shifted from a traditional focus on repeat purchase behavior and attitudinal commitment toward a multi-dimensional construct shaped by digitalization, platform-based ecosystems, and organizational capabilities. Key antecedents of loyalty extend beyond satisfaction and trust to include innovation, dynamic capabilities, digital transformation, and sustainability practices. Furthermore, the study identifies significant limitations in traditional loyalty measurement approaches, highlighting the need for new metrics that capture engagement, multi-channel interactions, and ecosystem participation. This study contributes to the literature by integrating diverse theoretical perspectives and proposing a more holistic understanding of customer loyalty in contemporary markets. It also highlights critical research gaps, particularly regarding the role of digital platforms, algorithmic influence, and cross-context variations in shaping loyalty. The findings offer important implications for both researchers and practitioners. Future research should focus on developing integrative frameworks and context-sensitive measurement models, while managers are encouraged to adopt data-driven, personalized, and sustainability-oriented strategies to foster long-term customer loyalty.

**Keywords:** Customer Loyalty, Digital Transformation, Dynamic Capabilities, Platform Ecosystem, Sustainability, Literature Review.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Customer loyalty is still one of the key constructs in marketing theory and practice, especially among profit-oriented firms engaged in service provision (e.g., hotels), trading (e.g., retailers), and industrial (B2B) activities. The strategic value of retaining customers is well documented and loyal customers add to firm performance via repeat purchases, minimized acquisition cost efforts and positive word-of-mouth [1], [2]. Along this traditional line, recent research evidence emphasizes the fundamental importance of customer loyalty in maintaining firm competitiveness [3] in more turbulent [4] and technology-intensive environments.

While customer loyalty is an old term and still an important one, its definition keeps evolving. Initially, the research focused on a behaviorist view where loyalty was considered as repeated purchasing behavior [5]. However, this logic was deemed flawed in that it does not differentiate true loyalty (to the brand) from pseudo-loyalty (the result of inertia or switching barriers) [6]. To respond, further research added attitudinal and psychological dimensions and stated that loyalty consists of cognitive, affective, and conative elements [7]. One of the more enduring conceptual treatments coming out of that period is the composite perspective, which integrates behavioral and attitudinal elements [8].

However, while there is general agreement regarding the multidimensionality of customer loyalty to some extent, several theoretical and empirical challenges still exist. A central question pertains to the relevance and stability of customer loyalty in contemporary markets, which are marked by vibrant customer sovereignty, digital platformization and low switching costs. More recent work has indicated that traditional loyalty concepts could be evolving under the influence of platform-based ecosystems, subscriptions and algorithmic personalization that can simultaneously strengthen or weaken customer loyalty [9], [10]. Algorithmic recommendations can lead to better customer engagement and retention, for instance, but they can also diminish brand loyalty by moving the locus of loyalty from brands to platforms (like marketplaces or super-apps), as a few examples.



Moreover, academic studies reveal an increasing contention on the “dark side” of loyalty, stating that excessive loyalty may generate a lower propensity for customers to switch brands, make them more susceptible to company exploitation or lead to negative word-of-mouth when service expectations are not met [11], [12]. These changes point to a notion that customer loyalty is not a one-size-fits-all positive construct, but instead a complex and fluid property of the consumer-brand relationship that needs serious re-evaluation.

Another unanswered question involves whether customer loyalty should be measured the same in the digital age. Although previous research recognizes that a standardized metric is needed [13], the latest studies reflect that current metrics, specifically repurchase intention or frequency, may not adequately mirror loyalty in omnichannel and platform-based contexts [14]. For instance, consumers might show high engagement across multiple channels without making exclusive commitments to any particular firm. It challenges us to come to terms with whether loyalty needs to be reframed in modern times as exclusivity, engagement intensity or relational commitment.

While there is a growing body of literature, much of it remains siloed per sector or perspective. It is noted that numerous studies on customer loyalty are conducted in silo contexts (e.g., services, retail, industrial markets) and fail to integrate across these contexts. This fragmentation poses an acute problem for profit-seeking firms that span hybrid business models, encompassing services, trading operations, and industrial activities. Considering general differences across sectors in customer relationships, switching costs, and value co-creation processes, the forms loyalty may take will differ, but a comprehensive synthesis directly comparing these sectors is still missing.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to conduct a focused literature review on customer loyalty by integrating insights across service, trading, and industrial contexts within profit-oriented firms. Rather than attempting to cover all possible aspects of loyalty, this review is delimited to three key areas: (1) the evolution of customer loyalty conceptualization, (2) the identification of key antecedents in contemporary (particularly digital) environments, and (3) the measurement of loyalty in multi-channel and platform-based contexts. By narrowing the scope in this manner, the study seeks to provide a more coherent and up-to-date understanding of customer loyalty while addressing inconsistencies and emerging debates in recent literature.

## II. METHODS

This paper is an extension of a larger research agenda looking into the influence customer loyalty has on firm performance in profit-focused firms such as the service, trading and industrial sectors. To this end, this study reviews and integrates major theoretical and methodological approaches to customers' loyalty in general market settings.

By performing a narrative literature review, this study aims to construct a thematic and critical synthesis of the customer loyalty literature. Whereas a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is structured to respond to overly specific research questions by highly formalized and reproducible methods, the present review seeks to trace the conceptual evolution of customer loyalty through discussion of key paradigmatic shifts in its study and integrate varied theoretical perspectives generated in disparate research contexts. Their wide-ranging biennial resource of customer loyalty research, representing many features of multi-disciplinary studies (from marketing to information systems, and from service management), which relies on different conceptualizations and methods, makes this body of knowledge especially sensitive to narrative exploration that allows for theory capturing diversity and having deeper interpretive insights (Snyder 2019).

The data for the literature were mainly gathered through two of the largest academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science, which are highly accredited for indexing top-quality peer-reviewed journals (Chadegani et al., 2013; Norris and Oppenheim, 2007). The search was performed from January to March 2026 for publications between 2021–2025 to include both past and present works on this topic.

For increased transparency, the initial search strategy used a combination of Boolean search strings including: (“customer loyalty” OR “brand loyalty”) AND (“measurement” OR “antecedents” OR “engagement” OR “digital ”OR “platform”). Articles were selected according to pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) published in peer-reviewed journals, (2) written in English, (3) published between 2021 and 2025, and (4) served as central constructs dealing with customer loyalty. The exclusion criteria were: (1) conference proceedings, editorials and book reviews, (2) studies that allude to customer loyalty but do not offer broader theoretical relevance or insights beyond specific non-profit or public sector contexts, and (3) articles where customer loyalty is referenced only passively.

This yielded an initial search of about 420 articles. Following the screening of titles and abstracts for relevance, 173 articles were retained for full-text review. After reviewing these articles according to their conceptual relevance and contribution, we selected a final set of 65 articles for in-depth analysis. Although the review does not claim to be exhaustive, these procedures facilitate a transparent audit trail and ensure that the selected literature provides a high-level yet focused perspective on the field.

Some measures were taken to minimize the potential selection bias characteristic of narrative reviews. First, the citation search for tracking backwards and forward in-citation of impacts beyond the first round of search results was performed. Second, the purpose of the review is intentionally integrative in nature and captures diverse and sometimes even startup perspectives, including work that challenges the assumption that customer loyalty is stable or even a good thing in modern-day contexts. Third, we iteratively discussed the selection and interpretation of key articles to ensure consistency across syntheses and a balance between critical appraisal and scepticism.

The results of this analysis are systematized in three thematic areas according to the focus of our study (1) Conceptual evolution of customer loyalty, (2) Significant antecedents and drivers of loyalty, with a special focus on digital-based and platform-based environments and (3) Approaches towards measurement and methodological research challenges. Through this thematic organization, it is possible to coherently compare the studies while laying bare points of concordance, discordance and research opportunities. In doing so, the study intends to deliver a coherent and comprehensive synthesis of the customer loyalty literature, shedding light on its theoretical evolution and signaling significant avenues for future investigation.

### III. RESULTS

#### A) The Trend of Publication between 2021 and 2025

This subsection presents a descriptive mapping for the period 2021–2025.

**Table 1: Trend of Publication between 2021 and 2025**

Final Publication Years	Record Counts	Percentage (%)
2025	13	20.0%
2024	18	27.6%
2023	15	23.0%
2022	10	15.3%
2021	9	13.8%
Total	65	100%

This subsection presents a descriptive overview of publication trends on customer loyalty research during the period 2021–2025. Based on the dataset of 65 articles, the findings indicate a generally increasing trend with some fluctuations, reflecting sustained and growing academic interest in the topic. In 2021, the number of publications was relatively modest (9 articles; 13.8%), representing the lowest point within the observed period. This may indicate the early stage of intensified research interest following global market disruptions and rapid digital transformation. A noticeable increase occurred in 2022, with 10 publications (15.3%), suggesting a gradual recovery and renewed scholarly attention to customer loyalty. This upward trajectory continued in 2023, reaching 15 publications (23.0%), which indicates a significant expansion in research output. The surge in 2023 may be associated with increasing interest in digital platforms, customer engagement, and evolving loyalty mechanisms in technology-driven markets. The peak of publication activity is observed in 2024, with 18 articles (27.6%), accounting for the largest proportion of the total sample. This highlights that customer loyalty has become a highly prominent research area, potentially driven by the growing complexity of customer relationships in omnichannel and platform-based environments. Although there is a slight decline in 2025 (13 publications; 20.0%), the number remains relatively high compared to earlier years. This suggests that the research interest in customer loyalty is sustained rather than declining, indicating its continued relevance in contemporary marketing research.

#### B) The Identified Countries/Regions between 2021 and 2025

This subsection presents the distribution of publications on customer loyalty across different countries and regions during the period 2021–2025. The results reveal a highly uneven geographical distribution, indicating that research on customer loyalty is concentrated in specific regions, particularly in developed and emerging economies with strong research infrastructures.

**Table 2: Identified Countries/Regions between 2021 and 2025**

Countries/Regions	Record Count	Percentage (%)
China	29	44.615%
England	12	18.462%
USA	10	15.385%
Australia	9	13.846%
Italy	9	13.846%
Germany	7	10.769%
India	7	10.769%
Brazil	5	7.692%
France	5	7.692%
Malaysia	5	7.692%

South Africa	5	7.692%
Lebanon	3	4.615%
Netherlands	3	4.615%
Poland	3	4.615%
Scotland	3	4.615%
Austria	2	3.077%
Denmark	2	3.077%
Finland	2	3.077%
Norway	2	3.077%
Pakistan	2	3.077%
Saudi Arabia	2	3.077%
Singapore	2	3.077%
Wales	2	3.077%
Kuwait	2	3.077%
Anguilla	1	1.538%

The most dominant contributor is China, with 29 publications (44.615%), accounting for nearly half of the total dataset. This finding highlights China’s significant role in advancing customer loyalty research, which may be attributed to its rapidly expanding digital economy, large consumer base, and the prevalence of platform-based business models. The prominence of China also reflects increasing scholarly attention to digital ecosystems, e-commerce, and technology-driven customer relationships. Following China, England (12 publications; 18.462%) and the United States (10 publications; 15.385%) emerge as major contributors. These countries have traditionally been central to marketing research and continue to influence the development of customer loyalty theory, particularly through contributions published in leading international journals. Similarly, Australia and Italy each contribute 9 publications (13.846%), indicating strong research activity in both Anglo-Saxon and European contexts. A second tier of contributing countries includes Germany and India (each with 7 publications; 10.769%), as well as Brazil, France, Malaysia, and South Africa (each with 5 publications; 7.692%). These findings suggest that customer loyalty research is increasingly globalized, with emerging economies playing a more prominent role in recent years. In particular, countries such as India and Malaysia reflect growing interest in customer loyalty within rapidly developing markets characterized by digital adoption and changing consumer behavior. Meanwhile, several countries, including Lebanon, Netherlands, Poland, and Scotland, contribute moderately (3 publications; 4.615%), while others, such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Wales, and Kuwait show relatively limited contributions (2 publications; 3.077%). Anguilla appears as the least represented region, with only 1 publication (1.538%).

**C) The Identified Publisher between 2021 and 2025**

This subsection presents the distribution of publications on customer loyalty based on publishers during the period 2021–2025. The findings indicate a high concentration of publications among a small number of major academic publishers, suggesting the dominance of established publishing houses in disseminating research on customer loyalty.

**Table 3: Identified Publishers between 2021 and 2025**

Publishers	Record Count	Percentage (%)
Elsevier	32	49.231%
Wiley	22	33.846%
Acad Management	3	4.615%
<b>Emerald Group Publishing</b>	2	3.077%
IEEE	2	3.077%
Sage	2	3.077%
Springer Nature	2	3.077%
Total	65	100%

It is evident from the results that out of the total 65 publications, Elsevier has emerged as a top publisher (32 publications, i.e. 49.231%), almost half of the data set. Such dominance correlates with Elsevier’s extensive portfolio of high-impact journals in the fields of marketing, business and adjacent domains that continue to re-emerge as primary outlets for publishing customer loyalty research. Wiley is the second in line, having 22 publications (33.846%). More than 80% of total publications belong to Elsevier and Wiley combined. This concentration may indicate that consumer loyalty research is primarily driven by editorial standards, topical priorities and methodological preferences within these publishing ecosystems (cf. Parry et al., 2015). Less than half of the publications are divided among other publishers. Academy of Management (Acad Management) accounts for 3 publications (4.615%); other sources, grouped by publisher, such as Emerald Group Publishing, IEEE, Sage, and Springer Nature, have been associated with 2 articles each (3.077%). The relatively lesser contribution from these publishers indicates that while customer loyalty is a well-covered topic, its dissemination tends to be concentrated in

journals controlled by certain big players. More generally, this distribution underscores a phenomenon of concentration in publishing, whereby only a few publishers account for most outputs. This could have implications for customer loyalty research and development, since publisher dominance can shape and constrain the agenda, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies. Meanwhile, publishers such as IEEE represent the potential for customer loyalty to be investigated within interdisciplinary settings with overlapping themes in information systems and technology-oriented environments.

**D) The Identified Journals between 2021 and 2025**

This subsection presents the distribution of customer loyalty research across academic journals during the period 2021–2025. The findings reveal a highly concentrated yet interdisciplinary publication pattern, indicating that customer loyalty is not confined to a single domain but spans multiple research areas, including marketing, strategic management, innovation, and sustainability.

**Table 4: Identified Journals between 2021 and 2025**

Publication Titles	Record Count	Percentage (%)
Journal of Innovation & Knowledge	20	30.769%
Business Strategy and the Environment	13	20.000%
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	5	7.692%
European Management Journal	4	6.154%
International Journal of Management Education	4	6.154%
Academy of Management Perspectives	2	3.077%
IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management	2	3.077%
Long Range Planning	2	3.077%
Academy of Management Journal	1	1.538%
Administrative Science Quarterly	1	1.538%
Business Process Management Journal	1	1.538%
Electronic Commerce Research	1	1.538%
Industrial Marketing Management	1	1.538%
Journal of International Business Studies	1	1.538%
Journal of Management Studies	1	1.538%
Journal of Product Innovation Management	1	1.538%
Journal of Service Research	1	1.538%
R&D Management	1	1.538%
Research in Transportation Business and Management	1	1.538%
Strategic Management Journal	1	1.538%
Supply Chain Management: An International Journal	1	1.538%
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100%</b>

The most prominent journal is Journal of Innovation and Knowledge, with 20 publications (30.769%), representing nearly one-third of the total dataset. This dominance suggests that customer loyalty is increasingly examined within the context of innovation, knowledge management, and digital transformation, rather than being treated solely as a traditional marketing construct. The second-largest contributor is Business Strategy and the Environment, with 13 publications (20.000%), followed by Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management with 5 publications (7.692%). The strong presence of these journals indicates a growing integration between customer loyalty and sustainability, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and environmental strategy. This trend reflects a shift in the literature toward understanding loyalty not only as a behavioral or attitudinal outcome but also as a function of ethical, social, and environmental considerations. Several journals contribute moderately to the literature, including European Management Journal and International Journal of Management Education (each with 4 publications; 6.154%), as well as Academy of Management Perspectives, IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, and Long Range Planning (each with 2 publications; 3.077%). These journals highlight the cross-disciplinary nature of customer loyalty research, extending beyond marketing into areas such as education, technology management, and strategic decision-making. At the same time, a number of highly prestigious journals—such as Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Strategic Management Journal, and Journal of Service Research—each contribute only one publication (1.538%). This suggests that while customer loyalty remains relevant, it may not always be positioned as a primary research focus in top-tier general management journals, or it may be embedded within broader theoretical discussions.

**E) Customer Loyalty Research Mapping**

This subsection presents a thematic mapping of customer loyalty research based on the analysis of Keywords Plus. The results reveal that customer loyalty research is increasingly interdisciplinary, technology-driven, and strategically oriented,

reflecting a significant shift from traditional marketing perspectives toward broader organizational and ecosystem-based approaches.

**Table 5: Thematic Mapping of Customer Loyalty Research (2021–2025)**

Thematic Cluster	Key Topics / Keywords	Representative Concepts	Research Implications
Digitalization and Technology	Information technology, Artificial intelligence, Big data, Digital platforms, Industry 4.0, Technology adoption	Digital transformation, Algorithmic interaction, Data-driven personalization	Loyalty shifts from relational to technology-mediated; the importance of digital infrastructure.
Innovation and Capabilities	Dynamic capabilities, Innovation, Absorptive capacity, Knowledge management, Open innovation	Resource-based view, Capability development, Value creation	Loyalty is an outcome of firm capabilities rather than only customer attitudes
Firm Performance and Value Creation	Firm performance, Competitive advantage, Value creation, Productivity, Growth	Strategic performance, Market competitiveness	Loyalty is linked to long-term profitability and strategic outcomes
Sustainability and CSR	Sustainability, ESG, Corporate social responsibility, Green innovation, Environmental performance	Ethical consumption, Corporate legitimacy	Loyalty is influenced by environmental and social values, not just product/service quality.
Ecosystem and Platform-Based Logic	Ecosystem, Platforms, Networks, Complementors, Interfirm cooperation	Platform economy, Multi-actor interaction, Co-creation	Loyalty extends beyond the firm-customer dyad to ecosystem-level relationships
Customer Behavior and Engagement	Customer engagement, Trust, Word-of-mouth, Behavior, Perception	Attitudinal loyalty, Behavioral loyalty, Emotional attachment	Traditional loyalty constructs remain relevant but are digitally influenced
Strategic and Organizational Context	Business model innovation, Strategic agility, Organizational performance, Governance	Strategic orientation, Organizational transformation	Loyalty embedded in firm-level strategy and business model innovation

One of the most prominent findings is the strong presence of keywords related to digitalization, information technology, artificial intelligence, big data, and Industry 4.0. These themes indicate that customer loyalty is no longer examined solely within the boundaries of traditional marketing but is increasingly embedded in digital transformation processes and technology-enabled business models. For example, keywords such as information technology, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, big data, and technology adoption appear frequently across studies. This suggests that customer loyalty is being reshaped by data-driven interactions, algorithmic personalization, and platform-based ecosystems, which fundamentally alter how firms build and maintain relationships with customers.

Another dominant cluster of keywords relates to innovation, dynamic capabilities, firm performance, and value creation. This indicates that customer loyalty is increasingly conceptualized as an outcome of organizational capabilities and strategic resources, rather than merely a consequence of customer satisfaction or relational factors. Keywords such as dynamic capabilities, innovation, absorptive capacity, value creation, and firm performance highlight that firms must develop internal competencies to sustain customer loyalty in competitive environments. This aligns with the growing view that loyalty is embedded within resource-based and capability-based frameworks, where firms leverage technological and organizational resources to enhance customer engagement and retention.

The analysis also reveals a significant presence of keywords related to sustainability, ESG, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and green innovation. This suggests that customer loyalty is increasingly linked to ethical, environmental, and social considerations, reflecting a shift in consumer expectations and corporate strategies. Keywords such as sustainability, ESG, green innovation, environmental performance, and CSR communication indicate that customers are not only evaluating firms based on product or service quality but also on their social responsibility and environmental impact. This reinforces the idea that loyalty in contemporary markets is influenced by values alignment and corporate legitimacy, rather than purely transactional factors.

A further important finding is the increasing prominence of keywords related to ecosystems, platforms, networks, and open innovation. These themes suggest that customer loyalty is no longer confined to dyadic firm customer relationships but is shaped by multi-actor interactions within complex business ecosystems. Keywords such as ecosystem, platform, networks, open innovation, and interfirm cooperation highlight that value creation and, consequently, loyalty are co-produced across multiple stakeholders. This indicates a shift toward ecosystem-based loyalty, where customers may develop attachment not only to firms but also to platforms or networks.

In addition to structural and strategic themes, the mapping also identifies keywords related to customer behavior, engagement, trust, and word-of-mouth. These constructs remain important, indicating that traditional marketing perspectives

are still relevant, albeit increasingly integrated with new technological and strategic dimensions. Keywords such as engagement, trust, behavior, word-of-mouth, and customer perception suggest that customer loyalty continues to involve psychological and behavioral components, but these are now influenced by digital and social contexts.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

This study set out to critically and comprehensively examine the evolution, antecedents, and measurement of customer loyalty within profit-oriented firms across service, trading, and industrial sectors. The findings reveal that customer loyalty is undergoing a fundamental transformation, shifting from a stable, firm-centric construct toward a dynamic, ecosystem-based phenomenon shaped by digitalization and platform economies.

##### ***A) Reconceptualizing Customer Loyalty in the Digital Era***

One of the strongest conclusions arising from this review is that customer loyalty can no longer be conceptualised exclusively through traditional frameworks focusing on repeat purchase behaviour and attitudinal commitment. The traditional notion of loyalty becomes more relevant in organisational-level contexts, where value is no longer firmly dependent solely on the companies but rather co-created between multiple actors involved within a digital ecosystem and platform-embedded context. As an illustrative example, work on digital platforms has made it clear that competition is no longer firm-to-firm, but rather based on ecosystems in which customer relationships are mediated by platforms rather than directly controlled by firms. This means that all loyalty might get transferred from brands to platforms, creating difficulties in the traditional assumption of making loyalty a firm-level construct. Moreover, the prevalence of algorithmic decision-making and personalized recommendations is transforming how consumers interact with brands. Customers might never develop deep psychological bonds, but may be displaying something called “functional loyalty”, which requires a different set of drivers, such as convenience, data-driven personalization or switching cost structures, without any emotional involvement. These results reinforce the case made in the Introduction that we need to rethink how relevant and stable loyalty is as a construct in markets today.

##### ***B) Emerging Antecedents of Customer Loyalty: From Relationship to Digital Capabilities***

The results also show a change in the main antecedents of customer loyalty. Although conventional drivers such as satisfaction, trust, and perceived value remain useful, emerging literature points to the growing importance of digital capabilities, innovation, and ecosystem participation. Multiple studies show that digital transformation contributes to firm performance, innovation, and value creation, which, in turn, affect customer relationships indirectly. Digital capabilities, in particular data analytics, platform integration and omnichannel coordination, for example, allow firms to offer more personalized and frictionless customer experiences. Sustainable or corporate social responsibility connectivity into business strategy is also a function of consumer loyalty. According to research, digital transformation can not only help companies improve underpinnings but also strengthen ESG performance and stakeholder relationships, ultimately positively influencing customer perceptions and building loyalty over time. This means that factors of loyalty are shifting from transactional or relational, to ethical, environmental and social. Importantly, the literature also addresses the organizational capabilities and strategic orientation (e.g. digital orientation and dynamic capabilities) that determine loyalty outcomes. These results lead us to conclude that customer loyalty is just not a marketing outcome but rather a strategic capability embedded in firm-level resources and competencies.

##### ***C) Rethinking the Measurement of Customer Loyalty***

In accordance with the research question, this study demonstrates that customer loyalty measured in digital contexts is still an unfolding problem. Classic metrics, including repurchase intention, purchase frequency and attitudinal loyalty, are inadequate to capture the evolving nature of customer behavior in multi-channel or platform-based settings. The reviewed literature points towards the fact that customer behaviour is now multi-dimensional and non-linear as customers are embedded with many brands, platforms, and channels at the same time. Accordingly, loyalty can live as intensity of engagement, participation across platforms or embeddedness within an ecosystem vs commitment to a single brand. Moreover, the presence of algorithmic mediation and digital interfaces makes it more complex to interpret loyalty behaviors. For example, frequent repeat interactions may result from system design (e.g., recommendation algorithms or interface limitations) rather than authentic customer choice. This highlights significant methodological issues surrounding the effectiveness of already existing loyalty measures.

##### ***D) Toward an Integrative Understanding of Customer Loyalty***

Bringing these insights together, this study proposes that customer loyalty should be reconceptualized as a multi-level and context-dependent construct, shaped by the interaction between customers, firms, and digital ecosystems. Rather than viewing loyalty as a static outcome, it should be understood as a dynamic process influenced by technological, organizational, and institutional factors. The findings also highlight a growing fragmentation in the literature, as customer loyalty is increasingly studied across diverse domains such as innovation, sustainability, and digital transformation. While this

interdisciplinary expansion enriches the field, it also creates conceptual dispersion, reinforcing the need for integrative frameworks.

### **E) Implications for Theory and Future Research**

This discussion leads to a few crucial implications. First, on a theoretical level, traditional loyalty models need to be transcended and frameworks should be developed that engage with digital ecosystems, platform dynamics and algorithmic mediation. Second, future research should examine the boundary conditions of customer loyalty as influence dynamics may vary in contexts where platform dominance diminishes direct firm–customer relationships (e.g., Cennamo & Santalo, 2013). Third, the results indicate a need for new measurement approaches that emphasize behavioral complexity, multi-channel interactions and loyalty based on engagement. Finally, more cross-context and cross-country studies are warranted to understand how customer loyalty differs across institutional and technological environments.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This paper offers a critical and integrative review of existing customer loyalty research in profit-oriented firms operating in service, trading and industrial sectors. The results prove, through synthesis of previous literature, that customer loyalty has substantially altered its conceptual definition towards a multidimensional construct shaped not just by the rational component of purchasing behavior and attitudinal commitment, rather also digitalization, organizational abilities and ecosystem dynamics. First, the review notes that customer loyalty is increasingly ingrained in digital and platform-based environments, wherein interactions are mediated by technology and data-centric systems. This goes against the common view of loyalty as a stable, firm-centric (or company-specific), neatly-defined construct that directly correlates with repurchasing behavior at the point-of-sale (POS) level; rather, it is fluid and context-dependent, emergent from outputs of cloud-based algorithmic systems and platforms. Second, this study recognizes a change in the main antecedents of customer loyalty.

In addition to classic drivers such as satisfaction and trust, more recent studies highlight innovation, dynamic capabilities, digital transformation and sustainability practices. These results indicate that customer loyalty cannot be considered just a marketing outcome; it is a strategic capability driven by the organizational resources and competencies. Third, the review continues to highlight challenges ubiquitous in customer loyalty in multi-channel and digital contexts. As interactions become more fragmented, engagement happens in various platforms, and decisions commence non-linearly, traditional metrics no longer do justice to the complexity of customer behavior. The findings emphasize a need for new measurement approaches that capture the intensity of engagement, whether brands are part of people’s ecosystems, and the nature of customer experience across touchpoints.

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