

# What is Missing from the Shopping Experience Provided by Omnichannel Marketing Model? Probing the Drivers of Loyalty in the Hypermarket Industry

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*The integration of online and in-store interactions via omnichannel marketing has become standard in retail. While online channels facilitate repeat purchases through convenience, the in-store experience remains a critical driver of customer loyalty. This study investigated the specific elements of the physical shopping experience that foster such loyalty. Although omnichannel models in supermarkets are well-documented, research in the hypermarket context remains limited. To address this gap, qualitative data were collected through one-on-one interviews with customers of a leading South African hypermarket. A thematic analysis of the responses identified key in-store factors motivating repeat purchases. The findings indicate that customer loyalty is primarily driven by two elements: perceived service quality and perceived price fairness. Service quality appeals to customers' emotional motivations, while price fairness aligns with their personal values. Consistency in delivering both emerged as a crucial determinant of long-term loyalty. These findings contribute to retail literature by pinpointing the in-store experience elements that positively influence omnichannel marketing. The study also offers strategic recommendations for retailers seeking to strengthen the link between their in-store efforts and customer loyalty.*

**Keywords:** customer loyalty, consumer behaviour, customer experience, physical sales, omnichannel marketing, groundedness

**JEL Classification:** M10, M31

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Article History:

Received 15 June 2025 | Accepted 10 October 2025 | Available online 31 October 2025

Cite Reference:

Moatshe, P. and Tsvakirai, C.Z., 2025. What is missing from the shopping experience provided by omnichannel marketing model? Probing the drivers of loyalty in the food retail sector. *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 13 (2), pp.49-56.

## 1. Introduction

Omnichannel retailing has emerged as a prominent model, characterized by the integration of in-store and online platforms to facilitate seamless retailer-customer interactions (Zhang et al., 2024). Its strength lies in providing diverse engagement points, from digital applications and social media to direct in-store contact, that collectively optimize the consumer experience (Huang, 2021). As omnichannel strategies become ubiquitous, customer expectations have heightened regarding the sophisticated use of these multiple touchpoints, prompting retail firms to focus on the complex plurality of touchpoint combinations that can foster loyalty (Yaya et al., 2014; Abdallah et al., 2024). However, despite a significant industry emphasis on the unique and personalized offerings afforded by infinite online possibilities (Gelles, 2021; Yin et al., 2024), consumers continue to exhibit an insatiable need for the fundamental services that foster human connection (Bruckberger et al., 2023). This need manifests in the pursuit of groundedness during in-store shopping, where consumers seek to satisfy a deep-seated desire for a sense of rootedness and connection to their physical, social, and historic environments (Eichinger et al., 2022); a concept which, as Bruckberger et al. (2023) note, provides feelings of safety, stability, and strength that subsequently influence repeat purchasing behaviour.

The concept of consumer groundedness and its impact on retail is well-theorized, primarily drawing on the Mehrabian and Russell (1974) model. This model, informed by attachment theory, posits that external stimuli in a retail environment can inspire consumer loyalty (Bruckberger et al., 2023). Past research utilizing this framework has established product quality and attributes (Chang and Wang, 2011; Wu et al., 2024) and superior service quality (Gefen, 2002; Chang and Wang, 2011; Dharmesti and Nugroho, 2019) as key antecedents of attachment and loyalty in physical retail settings. More recently, studies such as Zhang et al. (2024) have highlighted the influence of hedonic and utilitarian experiences as components of customer experience on loyalty. While existing research has connected retailer efforts to foster groundedness with loyalty, and separately linked customer experience to loyalty, a clear gap remains in integrating these three elements into a cohesive framework. Addressing this gap is critical, as elucidating the pathway from retailer initiatives through customer experience to loyalty would provide a clearer blueprint for achieving customer satisfaction and retention concurrently. Such research would offer valuable insights for designing marketing strategies that efficiently leverage products, services, and pricing to cultivate loyalty (Zheng and Li, 2024), while also clarifying the key elements of an effective omnichannel strategy and how customers respond to them, aspects that remain unclear in the current literature (Yin et al., 2024).

This study aims to establish the relationship between retailers' marketing efforts and consumer experiences, and to determine how these experiences motivate attitudinal loyalty. It makes three primary contributions to the literature. First, it aligns with a growing research direction by examining the psychological underpinnings of loyalty in a domain historically dominated by experiential aspects. Second, it introduces a critical distinction by separately analysing cognitive attitudinal loyalty, driven by reasoned evaluations of value and utility, and affective attitudinal loyalty, driven by emotional connection and subconscious motivation. Disentangling these dimensions is vital, as it provides clear indications for tailoring marketing strategies; cognitive loyalty may be fostered through value-based messaging, while affective loyalty requires relationship-building experiences. Third, the study employs a qualitative methodology to illuminate the nuanced consumer decision-making processes within retail stores. This offers a valuable complement to the predominant quantitative approaches in the field, which, while effective at tracking behavioural outcomes, often lack the depth to clarify whether such behaviours are merely reflective of the past or a reliable predictor of future intentions.

## 2. Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach to investigate customer experience within the specific context of a leading retailer in South Africa. To uphold research ethics and ensure anonymity, this retailer will be referred to as "The Retailer" throughout the study. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with ten participants, who were randomly selected and interviewed on-site at The Retailer's branch located in Johannesburg. South Africa presents a fitting research context due to its significant uptake of omnichannel retailing. Furthermore, Johannesburg, as the country's economic hub, hosts a high concentration of retail stores and is a central node for retail activity in Africa (Das Nair, 2017; Naidoo and Gasparatos, 2023), making it an ideal location for this inquiry.

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study adhered to stringent ethical guidelines, which included ensuring participant anonymity and explicitly informing individuals of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All experimental protocols were approved by the University of South Africa’s School of Business Leadership, and the study was granted ethical clearance (Certificate Number: 2023\_SBL\_MBA\_065\_FA\_1497). All participants were above the age of 18. Furthermore, the recruitment and briefing process ensured that all participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, along with its potential risks and benefits.

Participants engaged in 35–45 minute interviews, responding to a series of open-ended questions designed to explore three key areas of retailer marketing efforts: service quality, product quality, and price competitiveness. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, following established qualitative protocols (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis was then employed to identify the antecedents of customer loyalty from the data. Guided by the loyalty value framework (Woratschek et al., 2020), which posits that loyalty is promoted by behavioural predispositions (e.g., habits) and cognitive predispositions (e.g., explicit attitudes and feelings), this study focused specifically on the attitudinal dimension due to its greater utility in revealing consumer thought processes. Consequently, the analysis differentiated between motivations rooted in emotion (affective) and those derived from a conscious appraisal of personal values (cognitive).

### 3. Analysis and Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive Results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the study's sample. The sample comprised 60% male and 40% female participants. In terms of age distribution, 30% of respondents were 18–30 years old, 40% were 31–40, 20% were 41–50, and 10% were 51–70. Regarding income, the majority (80%) were classified as middle-income earners, subdivided into upper-middle (50%) and lower-middle (30%) categories. The remaining 20% of the sample was evenly split between low and very-low-income earners. The data on shopping frequency reveals that the largest proportion of respondents (40%) shopped at The Retailer monthly, while 20% visited weekly. A minority (10%) reported shopping quarterly, and 30% visited once every six months. Notably, all respondents conducted 75–100% of their retail shopping at The Retailer. Furthermore, the data indicates an inverse relationship between visit frequency and the amount of money spent per visit.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics*

<b>Variables and variable scale measurements</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	60%
Female	40%
<b>Age</b>	
Below 30 years	30%
31 to 40 years	40%
41 to 50 years	20%
Above 50 years	10%
<b>Income</b>	
Below R5 000	10%
R5000- R10 000	10%
R10 000- R15 000	30%
Above R15 000	50%
<b>Frequency of shopping at The Retailer</b>	
Weekly	20%
Monthly	40%
1 – 3 times a year.	30%
4 – 6 times a year	10%

Source: Authors’ survey

### 3.2. Empirical Results

#### 3.2.1 Perceptions on service quality

The findings revealed a consensus among participants regarding the critical role of service quality in securing their loyalty. Analysis of the interview data identified staff helpfulness, knowledge, and responsiveness as the primary indicators of good service quality. This aligns with established literature, which positions service quality as a fundamental driver for building enduring customer-retailer relationships (Kartika et al., 2020).

Participant testimonials substantiate this view. For instance, Participant 1 mentioned that, *"The staff at The Retailer really know their stuff! Every time I've had a question, they've been super helpful and knowledgeable. This makes me want to keep coming back."*

Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized responsiveness, stating, *"What stands out for me is how responsive The Retailer's staff are to any issue. They handle complaints like pros, and that level of support keeps me loyal to them."*

In support of the above Participant 4 said, *"The assistance I get at The Retailer is top-notch. It's like they really care about making my shopping experience smooth and enjoyable."*

These specific attributes correspond with the findings of past research. The value of knowledgeable staff, as highlighted by Participant 1, was identified by Budianto et al. (2019) as a compelling reason for loyalty. Furthermore, the broader literature confirms that attributes such as personalized assistance, responsiveness to inquiries and complaints, reliability, and consistent support are hallmarks of quality service (Gefen, 2002; Budianto et al., 2019; Nakamori et al., 2019). The pivotal nature of these elements is underscored by Sinha and Lu (2019), who argue that poor service can be interpreted as a form of social exclusion.

A thematic analysis of these excerpts indicates that the reported loyalty was primarily driven by affective motivations. The participants' statements consistently reflect positive emotions, such as feeling valued and cared for, that resulted from their interactions with staff. This implies that The Retailer's service quality efforts successfully facilitated emotional connections with customers. This finding resonates with the work of Zhang et al. (2024), who demonstrated that personalized, quality service positively influences the hedonic, or emotional, aspect of the shopping experience.

#### 3.2.2 Perceptions on product quality

The interview data consistently highlighted that participants' perceptions of product quality were a significant determinant of their continued patronage. Analysis of the responses revealed that loyalty was driven by two distinct motivational pathways: affective connections and cognitive evaluations.

Several participants expressed loyalty rooted in trust and positive emotional assurance. For instance, Participant 5 said, *"I trust The Retailer for quality products. They consistently deliver items that exceed my expectations, and I feel lucky with every big purchase."*

This view was supported by Participant 4 who said, *"The products at The Retailer have never disappointed me. It's not just about what I buy; it's about the assurance that it's always going to be good."*

The use of terms like "trust" and "never disappointed" points to an affective motivation for loyalty, where consistent quality fosters a positive emotional bond with The Retailer.

In contrast, other participants demonstrated a more cognitively-driven loyalty, based on a rational appraisal of value and performance. Participant 7 stated, *"Quality matters to me, and The Retailer gets it right. Their stuff lasts, performs well, and that's why I stick with them,"* while Participant 8 noted, *"Value for money is what I find at The Retailer. Their products might not be the cheapest, but they're worth every penny for the quality they offer."*

These responses indicate that loyalty was motivated by cognitive proponents of consumer attitudinal loyalty, where the perceived congruence between product durability, performance, and price aligns with the customer's personal values of practicality and financial prudence. These findings align with Kartika et al. (2020) and Wu et al. (2024), who found that customer loyalty is significantly influenced by product durability, reliability, and value.

However, a divergent perspective was provided by Participant 9, who shared a contradicting opinion by saying, *"Some of The Retailer's products are not 100 percent reliable. At some point in time, I got worried about durability or functionality; though they have earned my loyalty by consistently providing top-notch items, sometimes I get disappointed."* This opinion highlights that perceived inconsistencies in product quality

can trigger cognitive reassessments and negative emotions like disappointment. This erosion of trust demonstrates how isolated failures can undermine the affective loyalty built through other marketing efforts.

### **3.2.3 Perceptions about product pricing**

The data indicated that price competitiveness was a significant factor in shaping customer loyalty, though participants consistently framed it within a broader concept of value rather than low cost alone. The participants' perspectives highlighted that competitive pricing, when effectively balanced with other attributes, invoked a cognitively-driven loyalty based on rational assessment.

Participant 8 had this view: *"I like that The Retailer offers competitive prices without compromising on quality. It's not just about being cheap; it's about getting value, and they get that balance right."*

This sentiment, emphasizing a value-based calculation, was echoed by others. Participant 10 stated, *"I've stuck with The Retailer because they don't just compete on price; they compete on overall value. That's what keeps me coming back,"* while Participant 1 reported, *"Sure, I might find slightly lower prices elsewhere, but the total package at The Retailer, including service and quality, is what makes me loyal to them."*

Collectively, these excerpts underscore three key findings: first, customers appreciate the strategic balance between price and quality; second, they value offerings that meet their holistic value expectations; and third, The Retailer's success lies in augmenting competitive prices with superior service and other benefits. This pricing strategy primarily invoked a cognitive motivation for loyalty, appealing to the rational, utilitarian evaluation of the offer. This connection between competitive pricing and a utilitarian customer experience aligns with the findings of Zhang et al. (2024), suggesting that such pricing strategies are particularly effective for targeting the rational shopper.

These findings are consistent with the broader literature. Kartika et al. (2020) confirm that customers are often price-sensitive and actively seek value for money, making competitive pricing a key driver of patronage. Furthermore, Budianto et al. (2021) encourages retailers to strike this exact balance, advocating for competitive prices that are complemented by additional value, such as superior service, to foster deeper loyalty.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study investigated the mechanisms through which retailers' marketing efforts foster customer experiences that motivate attitudinal loyalty. Through a qualitative analysis of participant responses regarding a major hypermarket's service, product, and pricing strategies, the study delineates how these elements trigger distinct psychological pathways to loyalty. The findings indicate that customer loyalty is not a unitary construct but is driven by two primary mechanisms: affective motivations, rooted in positive emotions, and cognitive motivations, derived from rational appraisals of value.

Affective loyalty emerged most prominently in relation to service quality. Participants reported feeling an emotional connection to The Retailer, driven by interactions with knowledgeable and responsive staff. This affective bond represents a significant competitive advantage, as emotions are powerful drivers of behaviour that can transcend purely rational calculations (Cardoso et al., 2022). Furthermore, attitudinal loyalty grounded in emotion can enhance customer retention, even in the face of operational disruptions, as the emotional connection fosters a degree of forgiveness and resilience (Dugar and Chamola, 2021). Consequently, a service-centric strategy is paramount for building deep, emotional attachments with customers, particularly for categories where trust and personal interaction are highly valued.

In contrast, cognitive loyalty was the dominant mechanism invoked by The Retailer's product pricing. Customers demonstrated a rational evaluation of the price-value equation, deeming the overall package of price, quality, and ancillary benefits as worthwhile. This cognitive positioning is crucial in a market like South Africa, where economic constraints force frequent re-evaluation of spending (Naidoo and Gasparatos, 2023). By consistently meeting rational value expectations, The Retailer can maintain a strong competitive stance.

The role of product quality was uniquely complex, as it elicited both affective and cognitive motivations. Trust in consistent product quality built an emotional sense of assurance (affective), while assessments of durability and performance satisfied rational value criteria (cognitive). However, this dual role also reveals a critical vulnerability. Instances of inconsistent product quality, as reported by some participants, did not merely represent a cognitive failure but also actively eroded the affective loyalty built through other

positive experiences. This negative transfer effect highlights the fragility of customer perceptions and underscores that consistent product quality is non-negotiable for maintaining the integrity of the entire customer loyalty structure.

#### **4.1. Theoretical Contribution**

This study makes several distinct contributions to the retail marketing literature. First, it addresses a identified research gap by empirically linking retailers' marketing efforts directly to specific customer experiences and, in turn, to the psychological mechanisms of attitudinal loyalty. While previous studies have often examined these elements in isolation, this research provides an integrated qualitative framework that clarifies their interrelationships. Second, the study introduces a critical analytical distinction by separately examining cognitive and affective attitudinal loyalty. By demonstrating that service quality primarily drives affective loyalty through emotional connection, while pricing strategies foster cognitive loyalty through rational value appraisal, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of *how* different marketing levers influence customer retention. The finding that product quality uniquely fuels both motivational pathways further enriches this model, highlighting its dual role in the loyalty ecosystem. Finally, by applying this framework in the under-researched context of a hypermarket in an emerging market, the study extends the generalizability of omnichannel and loyalty theories beyond their typical Western and supermarket focus, providing a valuable contextual lens for future research.

#### **4.2 Managerial and Policy Implications**

The findings of this study offer actionable insights for retail managers and policymakers. For managers, the primary implication is the need to develop differentiated strategies that target the specific pathways to loyalty. Marketing efforts should not be monolithic but should be tailored: service strategies should be designed to build emotional bonds and affective loyalty through personalized, responsive, and knowledgeable staff interactions. Pricing and product strategies, conversely, should be geared towards reinforcing cognitive loyalty by consistently communicating and delivering undeniable value, durability, and reliability. Critically, the study demonstrates that gains in one area can be eroded by failures in another; a single instance of poor product quality can undermine the affective trust built through excellent service. Therefore, a consistent and integrated delivery across all three domains, service, product, and price, is paramount for building resilient, long-term loyalty.

#### **4.3. Limitations of study and Future directions of research**

While this study provides valuable insights into the affective and cognitive drivers of attitudinal loyalty, limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the reliance on attitudinal indicators presents an inherent constraint. A favourable attitude does not always translate into future purchasing behaviour, as contextual factors at the point of purchase (e.g., stock-outs, promotional offers from competitors) can lead to actions that deviate from the loyalty predicted by attachment theory. Secondly, the qualitative methodology and the relatively small sample size, while rich in depth, limit the generalizability of the findings and raise the potential for bias. The study's scope was also confined to a specific hypermarket context, which may restrict the direct application of the results to other retail formats or cultural settings.

To address these limitations and build upon this research, several clear future directions emerge. A possible next step would be a comprehensive quantitative study involving a large, representative sample. This would allow for the precise measurement of the relationships identified here, using statistical methods like regression analysis to quantify the influence of service quality, product quality, and pricing on both attitudinal loyalty and, crucially, actual behavioural and financial outcomes such as share-of-wallet and customer lifetime value.

Furthermore, to overcome the temporal limitation of a snapshot study, a longitudinal research design is highly recommended. Tracking the same cohort of customers over multiple years would reveal how the interplay between affective and cognitive motivations evolves in response to shifting market conditions, technological advancements, and changes in consumer lifestyle. Such an approach would provide a dynamic understanding of loyalty formation and erosion, moving beyond static predictions to model the long-term sustainability of loyalty strategies.

**Author Contributions:** Palesa Moatshe: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft. Chiedza Z. Tsvakirai: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing-Review & Editing, Supervision

**Acknowledgements:** None

**Funding:** None

**Conflicts of Interest:** None

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