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The Impact of the Perception of Relational Loyalty on Purchasing Sustainable Products – Pilot Study

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Abstract:

Purpose: *Relational loyalty, built on trust, satisfaction, and long-term ties between consumers and brands, is often viewed as a crucial mechanism for increasing customer attachment and willingness to recommend the brand. Research indicates that loyal customers are more inclined to support a company's sustainability initiatives. However, there is a lack of detailed analyses examining how such relationships specifically influence purchasing decisions in the FMCG sector. In particular, little is known about how loyalty programs can be designed to simultaneously enhance customer retention and promote the choice of environmentally friendly products. The aim of this article is to fill this research gap by exploring the relationship between relational loyalty and the purchase of sustainable FMCG products.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *To achieve the set goal, we conducted quantitative and qualitative research. Data for quantitative research was collected using a closed-ended questionnaire and for qualitative research using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. In the numerical studies, we checked the reliability of the measurement scale of independent variables using the Cronbach's alpha test and then conducted a Spearman's rank correlation analysis. On this basis, using descriptive statistics tests, we determined for which ranks the variables of perception of relational loyalty and the variables of the purchase of sustainable FMCG take the highest value. The analysis of the obtained results was deepened by qualitative research. Our research is of a pilot nature and for this reason was not conducted on a representative sample.*

Findings: *Although about half of consumers consider themselves loyal to their chosen brands, most of them do not feel bound by loyalty when making purchases. They believe that loyalty programs strongly encourage choosing more sustainable products and that loyal customers are willing to promote sustainable products to other buyers. They value product durability, but not out of concern for the environment, but for pragmatic reasons. The impact of product durability on purchasing decisions is weak, but when consumers feel appreciated by companies, well-designed loyalty programs encourage the purchase of sustainable FMCP.*

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Practical Implications: *Consumers' relational loyalty is a factor that increases the willingness to make repeated purchases of FMCP. To achieve this effect, companies must shape loyalty programs so that customers feel appreciated.*
Originality/Value: *The influence of relational loyalty on the purchase of sustainable FMCP is not a common subject of research. Our research fits into this gap.*

Keywords: *Customer Retention; Sustainable FMCP; Loyalty Programs.*

JEL Codes: *Q56, M31.*

Paper Type: *Research article.*

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly changing business environment, characterized by globalization and intense competition, customer loyalty emerges as a critical pillar supporting the long-term stability of enterprises. Loyalty programs, initially designed to reward repeat purchases, have evolved into sophisticated mechanisms for building lasting and personalized customer relationships. With technological advancements and growing emphasis on sustainability, companies face the challenge of integrating effective loyalty strategies with eco-friendly initiatives, increasingly demanded by modern consumers.

This challenge is particularly relevant in the context of the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, which includes everyday products such as food, hygiene items, and cleaning supplies. These products, due to their mass production, short consumption cycles, and significant environmental footprint, are at the centre of attention for businesses and researchers addressing sustainability.

Companies like Unilever and Ecover exemplify initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of their products while fostering lasting relationships with their customers. Campaigns such as recyclable packaging and promoting environmentally friendly products reflect a broader trend to combine customer loyalty with sustainability practices.

Moreover, the growing pressure from consumers and regulatory institutions compels companies to adopt sustainability initiatives. Modern consumers, particularly from younger generations, expect not only quality and competitive pricing but also commitment to social and environmental issues from the brands they support. Faced with these demands, FMCG companies must transform traditional loyalty programs to meet these new expectations. In this context, the challenge is not only to retain customers but also to encourage them to make purchasing decisions aligned with sustainable development.

In the existing literature on customer loyalty and sustainable marketing, a clear research gap emerges concerning the relationship between relational loyalty and purchasing decisions related to sustainable FMCG products. Although numerous studies highlight the role of loyalty in shaping eco-friendly behaviours, the majority focus on high-involvement products such as electric vehicles or luxury items. In contrast, FMCG products are characterized by low consumer involvement, presenting additional challenges for loyalty strategies aimed at fostering more responsible purchasing behaviours.

Relational loyalty, built on trust, satisfaction, and long-term ties between consumers and brands, is often viewed as a crucial mechanism for increasing customer attachment and willingness to recommend the brand. Research indicates that loyal customers are more inclined to support a company's sustainability initiatives. However, there is a lack of detailed analyses examining how such relationships specifically influence purchasing decisions in the FMCG sector. In particular, little is known about how loyalty programs can be designed to simultaneously enhance customer retention and promote the choice of environmentally friendly products.

Another significant research challenge lies in the gap between theory and practice in sustainable marketing strategies. While the literature suggests that sustainable marketing can foster trust and customer loyalty, companies often struggle to integrate eco-friendly initiatives into their loyalty programs. The key question is whether relational mechanisms such as trust, satisfaction, or perceived brand value can be effectively leveraged to encourage customers to make more conscious purchasing decisions within the FMCG sector.

This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the key question: "Does relational loyalty influence the purchase of sustainable FMCG products?" By focusing on this issue, we integrate concepts of relational loyalty with sustainable practices, offering a novel approach to addressing challenges related to balancing commercial efficiency with social responsibility.

Our research does not aim to obtain final results that would be fully representative because we conduct it on a non-representative sample size. From a scientific point of view, we are rather interested in determining the directions of research in the field of the relationship between customer loyalty and purchases of sustainable FMCP and also in obtaining results that may be signals for the direction in which theories of relational marketing and sustainable development may be developed. Since they are of a pilot nature, an important effect for us is also testing the research tools, including the structure of the survey.

The sense of conducting this research also has a utilitarian justification. The results we obtained can provide companies with initial guidelines on how to design loyalty programs that not only support sales, but also promote sustainable consumer attitudes. This is particularly important for companies in the FMCG sector, where ecological responsibility is becoming a key factor in competitiveness. The results can help identify consumer segments more susceptible to the influence of loyalty activities promoting sustainability. This will allow companies to better adapt marketing campaigns and loyalty programs to the expectations of customers interested in sustainable development.

Moreover, the results we have obtained can inspire both companies and researchers to undertake more advanced research projects that will allow for a deeper understanding of the topic and the implementation of effective and responsible marketing strategies.

2. Literature Review

Customer loyalty, an essential pillar of modern marketing, is based on various approaches aimed at strengthening consumer loyalty toward a brand or product. This loyalty, which significantly contributes to the success of businesses (Singh & Jain, 2020), can be influenced by both economic strategies and relational and emotional dimensions. With the growing importance of sustainability in purchase decisions, it is crucial to explore how these dimensions interact to create lasting and engaging loyalty.

2.1 Transactional Approach

There are a couple approaches to explanation of the loyalty phenomena: transactional, relational, behavioural and attitudinal, emotional, and value-based and community-based.

The transactional approach to loyalty focuses on the material benefits offered by the company, such as discounts or loyalty points (Cottet, Lichtle, and Plichon, 2012). These strategies, widely used in sectors like hospitality and fast food, encourage customers to return by offering immediate and tangible benefits for each purchase or visit (Kumar and Shah, 2004). These rewards, which maximize perceived benefits while minimizing costs, help increase purchase frequency and ensure stable revenue through repeated interactions.

However, while this approach is effective in stimulating short-term purchasing behaviors, it often overlooks the relational dimension of loyalty. Relational loyalty is based on emotional and affective factors that go beyond simple economic incentives. Customers seek not only material benefits but also a sense of recognition and shared values with the brand (Berry, 1995).

For example, loyalty programs that include personalized experiences or strengthen an emotional connection between the brand and the customer are more likely to generate lasting loyalty, as they meet the need for authentic and meaningful relationships.

The sustainability of products also plays a key role in building customer loyalty. Consumers, particularly those sensitive to environmental issues, consider sustainability as a determining factor in their purchasing decisions (Testa et al., 2019). When sustainable products are associated with tangible benefits, such as long-term savings or reduced environmental impact, they reinforce the perception that the company shares the customer's ethical values.

This value alignment helps establish a strong emotional connection, thus fostering relational loyalty. For example, companies incorporating sustainability into their loyalty programs, such as rewards for environmentally responsible behaviors, offer not only an immediate benefit but also strengthen the customer's identification with the brand. By demonstrating a concrete commitment to sustainability, they transform economic loyalty into lasting relational bond.

Relational loyalty and product sustainability are deeply interconnected. A loyalty strategy that emphasizes product sustainability while strengthening relationships with customers can turn a simple transaction into an engaging experience. For example, a brand that promotes sustainable products and actively communicates its positive impact reinforces the perception that its values align with those of its customers. This alignment of values not only encourages repeat purchases but also active recommendations to other consumers (Peattie, 2010).

Moreover, in a world where competition for economic rewards is fierce, integrating sustainability into relational strategies can offer a competitive advantage. Companies can thus differentiate themselves by emphasizing intangible benefits like trust and engagement, while also responding to the growing demand for ethical products.

Although the transactional approach stimulates short-term loyalty, it must be enriched by relational and sustainable dimensions. Companies that integrate sustainability into their strategy strengthen relational loyalty, fostering long-term customer-brand bonds and contributing to long-term success (Singh and Jain, 2020).

The relational approach to loyalty emphasizes the creation of lasting and strong bonds between the company and its customers, highlighting that loyalty stems from a desire to maintain a long-term relationship. Olivier (1999) defines this loyalty as the result of a deep commitment, where the customer is willing to make efforts to preserve this relationship.

Unlike the transactional approach, which focuses on economic exchanges, the relational approach views the customer as a long-term partner, engaged in a beneficial and evolving relationship (Parvativar and Sheth, 1995). Engagement is a central concept in this approach. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), it is crucial for establishing stable relationships.

This engagement, especially emotional engagement, is decisive: the more emotionally connected a customer feels to a brand, the more loyal they are in the long term (Wilson and Connelly, 2009). Emotional attachment to the brand translates into a sense of community and shared values, as demonstrated by examples like Apple or Harley-Davidson, which have cultivated very loyal customer bases through unique experiences and communities around their products (Quester *et al.*, 2013).

Customers feel valued when companies take steps to strengthen their loyalty, as emphasized by Berry (1995). This sense of value is even more significant in a context where consumers are increasingly sensitive to environmental issues. Grimmer and Woolley (2014) show that loyalty programs, when they encourage sustainable behaviors, can not only foster loyalty but also encourage consumers to adopt more eco-friendly practices. By integrating product sustainability into their loyalty strategies, companies can meet both their customers' ethical expectations and strengthen the perception of relational loyalty.

2.2 Relational Approach

CRM (Customer Relationship Management), which involves customizing interactions based on customer needs, preferences, and behaviors, helps to strengthen engagement and loyalty (Payne and Frow, 2005). By incorporating sustainability into this personalization, companies offer added value that goes beyond personal benefits to address the environmental concerns of their customers.

This model helps create lasting loyalty by combining responsible products with tailored and personalized customer experiences. However, this approach has its challenges. High costs associated with implementing relational loyalty programs (e.g., CRM software, staff training) can be a barrier, especially for SMEs. Furthermore, an over-reliance on customer data may undermine the emotional aspect of the relationship, and concerns about data privacy may affect consumer trust. In a saturated market, it can also be difficult for companies to differentiate themselves and maintain strong relationships with their customers.

2.3 Behavioral and Attitudinal Approach

"Loyalty is a biased behavioral response (because it is not random) expressed over time by a decision entity considering one or more brands within a set, based on a decision-making process" (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973).

According to this approach, loyalty is manifested through repetitive behaviors, such as recurring purchases, but it goes beyond the act of purchasing itself, as it also includes preference, which can exist without a real transaction. This concept of multifidelity shows that consumers can be loyal to multiple brands, depending on different contexts, challenging the idea of a singular loyalty (Frisou, 2010).

One of the key concepts in the behavioral approach is operant conditioning (Skinner, 1938), which suggests that consumer behavior is influenced by the rewards they receive, thereby reinforcing loyalty through reward programs. For example, brands like Starbucks, which offer loyalty points for each purchase, encourage customers to return, making recurring purchases a habit.

This approach focuses on tangible rewards that ensure short-term loyalty. Behavioral segmentation (Solomon and Bamossy, 2016) also plays a crucial role: by segmenting customers based on their purchasing habits, companies can offer targeted promotions that foster loyalty and meet the specific needs of each consumer group.

However, the attitudinal approach has limitations, as attitudinal measures such as purchase intention may not translate into real and lasting loyalty. Changes in a consumer's personal situation or external factors, such as a promotion, can temporarily influence their attitude (Gleim *et al.*, 2013). In this framework, loyalty may not last in the long term, and an initial preference for a brand does not guarantee continued loyalty, especially in markets where choices are numerous and sustainable products are becoming more popular.

Relational loyalty is built on deeper commitments than repeated purchases. As Oliver (1999) emphasizes, consumers value a relationship with a brand when they perceive a benefit beyond the simple transaction, including trust, reciprocity, and a strong emotional connection. Sustainable products, increasingly at the forefront of consumers' concerns, alter this dynamic by influencing purchasing behaviors. Brands that integrate sustainable values, for example through green initiatives, can strengthen relational loyalty.

Grimmer and Woolley (2014) show that loyalty programs promoting sustainable products can encourage consumers to adopt more responsible behaviors and, in turn, strengthen their loyalty to the brand, provided that this sustainability is perceived as authentic and aligned with consumer expectations.

The behavioral approach to loyalty is thus much more than an analysis of purchasing behaviors: it must incorporate product sustainability into its strategy. Programs that encourage responsible behaviors, such as purchasing sustainable products, can not only stimulate loyalty but also enhance the perception of relational loyalty, where customers feel valued for their commitment to sustainable practices. In this sense, long-term loyalty becomes a symbiotic relationship between consumers and brands, where trust, shared values, and tangible benefits play a fundamental role in sustaining this loyalty (Oliver, 1999).

2.4 Emotional Approach

The emotional approach to loyalty highlights the central role of emotions in creating lasting relationships between customers and brands. According to Roberts (2004), brands that establish authentic emotional connections are more likely to foster lasting loyalty, as consumers do not only choose brands based on rational criteria such as price or quality but also based on the emotional experiences they have with the brand.

One of the fundamental theories in this approach is the affect theory, which posits that emotions strongly influence decision-making. Positive emotions, such as joy or satisfaction, enhance loyalty, while negative emotions, such as disappointment, can lead to abandoning the brand (Forgas, 2000; Gollwitzer, 1993; Schwarz, 2007). For example, when a brand offers a positive and emotional experience to its customers, it creates a deep bond, thereby influencing long-term loyalty. This connects to the idea of customer value: as Berry (1995) emphasizes, "I feel valued as a customer when a company takes steps to retain me," which is a key element of emotional loyalty.

Emotional storytelling is a powerful tool for establishing such a connection. A campaign like Dove's "Real Beauty," which highlights emotional values of diversity and self-esteem, shows how a brand can go beyond the mere functionality of its products to strengthen the emotional attachment of consumers. This approach allows relational loyalty to be seen as an emotional investment, where consumers identify with the brand and wish to support its values in the long term.

Another key theory is emotional congruence, which proposes that the emotions associated with the brand should align with the emotions that customers want to feel. For example, a sustainable product brand, in addition to promoting the quality of its products, must also convey emotions aligned with the ecological and ethical values of its customers.

This congruence between the brand’s emotions and the emotional expectations of customers fosters loyalty, not only through product quality but also through the emotional experience throughout the relationship with the brand. In this way, product sustainability plays an important role in creating loyalty based on shared values, beyond simple transactions.

2.5 Value-based and Community-based Approach

"Customer loyalty is not limited to transactional benefits, but also relies on creating a community where customers feel valued and connected to the brand" (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This approach emphasizes the importance of creating value for customers beyond simple commercial transactions and fostering a sense of belonging to a community that shares common values.

According to Morgan and Hunt, loyalty is not solely based on financial rewards or immediate benefits, but seeks to establish a deep relationship with customers, engaging them in a holistic experience that exceeds their expectations. A fundamental theory in this approach is the perceived value theory, which suggests that customers evaluate a brand based on the value they perceive, whether economic, functional, emotional, or symbolic (Olivier, 1980). This perception of value directly influences their loyalty. Companies that succeed in understanding and offering the most relevant types of value for their customers are better positioned to create lasting relationships.

For example, brands like Apple have managed to build exceptional perceived value through an immersive and high-quality customer experience, thus creating loyalty that endures despite higher prices than their competitors. Moreover, this loyalty is strengthened when a shared value between the brand and its customers is nurtured, particularly in a sustainability context. At the same time, many companies, such as Patagonia, have built a community around shared values like environmental protection and outdoor adventure.

Patagonia, for example, organizes community events, such as beach clean-up initiatives, and engages its customers through inspiring stories about the sustainability of its products. This approach creates a sense of belonging that not only strengthens the emotional attachment of customers to the brand but also their long-term relational loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

According to Grimmer and Woolley (2014), loyalty programs can encourage consumers to adopt more sustainable behaviors. By integrating elements related to sustainability, such as rewards for purchasing eco-friendly products or special promotions for responsible behaviors, brands can enhance loyalty while supporting more responsible business practices. This goes beyond simple commercial transactions and promotes purchasing behaviors that are beneficial to both consumers and the planet.

Furthermore, loyal customers are often brand ambassadors and advocates for its values. Peattie (2010) highlights that loyal customers are more likely to recommend sustainable products to others, thereby strengthening word-of-mouth and expanding the brand’s community. This social dimension of loyalty is not limited to the act of purchase but also includes sharing a vision of sustainability, contributing to the creation of a network of individuals committed to the same cause.

Loyalty programs play a strategic role for businesses, aiming to establish long-term relationships with their consumers. Programs must offer attractive rewards while minimizing customer effort. Homans (1961) and Skinner (1953) explain that tangible and tailored rewards enhance loyalty, based on social exchange and reinforcement theories.

However, studies such as Sharp and Sharp (1997) have nuanced this view, suggesting that loyalty does not depend solely on economic rewards. The performance of loyalty programs relies on the perceived value of the rewards, whether economic or emotional. According to Holbrook (1999), an effective program must combine tangible and intangible benefits to strengthen loyalty. Capizzi (2005) specifies that the personalization of rewards, based on the needs and preferences of customers, is essential to maximize impact.

Pine (2002) emphasizes the importance of customer data to personalize offers. For sustainable products, this personalization strengthens customer engagement with the brand. Companies can optimize loyalty by adopting personalized and omnichannel strategies. This approach allows them to meet the varied expectations of consumers while creating an emotional bond with the brand.

Bijmolt *et al.* (2010) recommend continuous performance analysis to adjust programs and meet the ever-changing needs of consumers, especially in the context of sustainable products. Companies must adjust their programs to offer personalized rewards, whether tangible or intangible. Kumar and Shah (2004) show that personalization and customer data analysis help strengthen loyalty while differentiating the brand in the market.

The efficiency of loyalty tools is critical for maintaining a long-lasting relationship with customers. An effective theoretical model should be based on identifying variables that influence loyalty. Well-designed programs offer rewards that create long-term value for consumers. These tools are essential for differentiating brands in the market and boosting loyalty. An effective model relies on a deep understanding of factors influencing loyalty, such as purchasing behaviors, preferences, and the ongoing management of engagement. Programs that are structured for the long term and adapted to customer needs foster sustainable loyalty.

Loyalty programs increase profitability by reducing customer acquisition costs and strengthening the loyalty of existing customers. They generate positive effects on a company's reputation and market share. Customer loyalty is a key success factor for companies, especially in the context of sustainable products. According to Singh and Jain (2020), customer loyalty directly contributes to profitability by reducing acquisition costs.

Kumar and Shah (2004) emphasize that well-designed loyalty programs encourage customers to return, thus strengthening long-term profitability. Oliver (1999) and Berry (1995) highlight the importance of the emotional relationship in loyalty, noting that consumers feel valued when rewarded in a personalized way. The sustainability of products plays an increasingly significant role in purchasing decisions.

Gleim *et al.* (2013) and Testa *et al.* (2019) show that eco-responsibility positively influences buying behaviors. Moreover, loyalty programs can encourage consumers to adopt more sustainable behaviors, as suggested by Grimmer and Woolley (2014). In fact, studies show that loyal customers are more likely to recommend sustainable products to others, thus strengthening the impact of loyalty on green consumption

(Peattie, 2010). Companies that succeed in adapting their loyalty programs to consumers' ecological and social concerns, while offering personalized rewards, can establish long-lasting customer relationships and promote the purchase of sustainable products.

3. Research Methodology

Our literature review indicates that companies strive to understand how their loyalty initiatives can not only boost sales but also encourage more responsible purchasing behaviours. Although there is a considerable amount of literature on loyalty programmes and the pro-environmental orientation of customers, a cognitive gap persists regarding the factors influencing the effectiveness of these programmes, particularly for fast-moving consumer products (FMCP).

We aim to address this gap by conducting quantitative and qualitative research on consumer opinions, with the questions posed to participants formulated based on issues raised in studies on the effectiveness of loyalty programmes in the context of sustainable products.

We conducted the quantitative research using a survey questionnaire comprising closed and semi-open questions. The questionnaire was made available online. The survey was open to anyone with access to the shared link, which was distributed via LinkedIn. This approach allowed us to reach a wide audience and collect diverse opinions, enhancing the questionnaire’s reliability. The response rate was 83 participants. In pilot studies, as in the case of our survey, a convenience sample is entirely sufficient.

The closed survey questions were developed for both independent and dependent variables. Based on the literature review, the independent variables (Iv) were described using the following statements:

- Iv1: Customer loyalty is essential for a business’s success.
- Iv2: A good loyalty programme encourages repeat purchases.
- Iv3: I rely on customer loyalty when choosing a brand.
- Iv4: I feel valued as a customer when a company builds my loyalty.

The dependent variables (Dv) were described as follows:

- Dv1: Frequency of purchasing sustainable products.
- Dv2: The influence of product durability on purchasing decisions.
- Dv3: Loyalty programmes encourage more sustainable consumer behaviours.
- Dv4: A loyal customer recommends sustainable products to others.

Responses to the questions about independent and dependent variables were expressed on a Likert scale, where 1 represented a very weak value (e.g., a negative respondent opinion) and 5 represented the highest value (e.g., full agreement with the statement posed in the question).

The collected data were analysed using the following methods:

- The frequency of responses and combinations of responses to various questions.
- Reliability of the measurement scale for independent variables using Cronbach's alpha test, which demonstrated good reliability at 0.70. This indicates that variables Iv1-Iv4 measure the same phenomenon, which can be defined as the importance of loyalty programmes for buyers.
- Spearman's rank correlation test for independent and dependent variables, which assesses whether there is a statistically significant relationship between variables, identifying only a general trend in the association.
- Kruskal-Wallis test, which determines whether statistically significant differences exist between the medians of dependent variables corresponding to different ranks of independent variables.
- Post hoc multiple comparison test, which identifies which rank groups of the independent variable yield different medians for the dependent variable. In our case, this means knowing for which ranks of Iv different statistically significant Dv values are obtained.
- Descriptive statistics, which reveal for which rank of the independent variable the dependent variable reaches its highest value.
- The analytical tools listed above enable the identification of those features of loyalty programmes that encourage buyers to purchase sustainable products.

Qualitative research was conducted using an interview questionnaire. Interviews were carried out with 10 participants. Some of these individuals were known to the interviewer, while others were recommended by the interviewees. The aim of the interviews was to better understand consumer perspectives on the following issues:

- Understanding Relational Loyalty.
- Perception of Product Sustainability.
- Impact of Relational Loyalty on Purchase Choices.
- Consumer Expectations from Companies.
- Improvement Suggestions.

On average, the interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes.

4. Research Results

The survey questionnaire included questions addressing the following issues, with respondents providing answers on a 5-point Likert scale:

- Iv1 – Customer loyalty is essential for a business's success.
- Iv2 – A good loyalty programme encourages repeat purchases.
- Iv3 – I rely on customer loyalty when choosing a brand.
- Iv4 – I feel valued as a customer when a company builds my loyalty.

In all these cases, respondents could select from the following options: (1) Not at all agree; (2) Rather disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Rather agree; (5) Completely agree.
For the variables treated as dependent, the available responses were as follows:

- Dv1 – Frequency of purchasing sustainable products:(1) Several times per year; (2) Once a month; (3) Several times per month; (4) Once a week; (5) Several times per week.
- Dv2 – Influence of loyalty programme incentives:(1) Not at all; (2) Slightly; (3) Moderately; (4) Fairly strongly; (5) Strongly.
- Dv3 – Loyalty programmes encourage more sustainable consumer behaviours:(1) Not at all encouraging; (2) Somewhat encouraging; (3) Neutral; (4) Encouraging; (5) Very encouraging.
- Dv4 – A loyal customer recommends sustainable products to others:(1) No, not at all; (2) No, not necessarily; (3) Neither No nor Yes; (4) Yes, to some extent; (5) Yes, absolutely.

To clearly highlight differences in respondents' opinions, the responses that were strongly negative and slightly negative (1+2) were combined, as well as the positive and strongly positive ones (4+5). The percentage of these combined responses is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Frequency of answers for independent and dependent variables [%]*

Rank	Iv1	Iv2	Iv3	Iv4	Dv1	Dv2	Dv3	Dv4
1+2	2.4	3.6	13.3	4.8	51.8	2.4	3.6	15.7
3	1.2	3.6	36.1	10.8	22.9	19.3	21.7	0.0
4+5	96.4	92.8	50.6	84.3	14.5	68.7	74.7	84.3
No answer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.8	9.6	0.0	0.0

Source: *Authors' calculations.*

In Table 2, we present the results of the Spearman rank correlation analysis between variables Iv1 and Dv1. Although correlation does not have a direction as it only measures the strength and degree of the relationship between variables, we classify the variables as independent (Iv) and dependent (Dv) based on the research question.

Table 2. *Spearman rank correlation*

Variable	Iv1	Iv2	Iv3	Iv4
Dv1	0.094	0.107	0.158	0.038
Dv2	0.094	**0.315**	**0.228**	**0.247**
Dv3	0.059	**0.230**	0.207	**0.238**
Dv4	-0.009	-0.12	0.081	0.043

Source: *Authors' calculations.*

Nighter the independent variable Iv1 (Customer loyalty is essential for a business's successnor) nor the dipendent Dv1 (Frequency of purchasing sustainable products), and Dv2 (Influence of loyalty programme incentive) are correlated with any other variable. Given that the variables Iv2, Iv3, and Iv4 can potentially increase the purchase of sustainable products, we conducted a Kruskal-Wallis test, a non-parametric alternative to analysis of variance (ANOVA).

For each of these variables, we aimed to determine whether at least two of its ranks yield different medians for the dependent variable correlated with it. The test did not show that the medians of the dependent variables Dv2 (Influence of product durability on purchasing decisions) or Dv3 (Loyalty programmes encourage more sustainable consumer behaviours) differ for any of the ranks of Iv2, Iv3, or Iv4.

This implies that an increase in the rank of each independent variable (Iv2, Iv3, Iv4) does not have a statistically significant effect on increasing the purchase of sustainable FMCG products. Consequently, there was no reason to apply a multiple comparison test. Tese weak correlations are confirmed by the descriptive statistics analysis (Table 3).

Table 3*. Median of dependent variables according to rank of independent variable*

Variable	Iv2	Median	Lower quartile	Upper quartile	Interquart. range	Variable	Iv3	Median	Lower quartile	Upper quartile	Interquart. range	Variable	Iv4	Median	Lower quartile	Upper quartile	Interquart. range
						Dv2	1	4.5	4.0	5.0	1.0						
Dv2	2	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv2	2	3.5	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv2	2	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0
Dv2	3	3.5	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv2	3	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv2	3	4.0	3.5	4.0	0,5
Dv2	4	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv2	4	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0	Dv2	4	4.0	3.0	4.0	0.5
Dv2	5	4.0	4.0	5.0	1.0	Dv2	5	4.5	4.0	5.0	1.0	Dv2	5	4.0	4.0	5.0	1.0
						Dv3	1	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.0						
Dv3	2	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv3	2	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0	Dv3	2	3.5	3.0	4.0	1.0
Dv3	3	3.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv3	3	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv3	3	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0
Dv3	4	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv3	4	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0	Dv3	4	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0
Dv3	5	4.0	4.0	4.0	1.0	Dv3	5	4.0	3.0	4.0	1.0	Dv3	5	4.0	4.0	4.0	0.0

Source: *Authors' calculations.*

Table 3 shows the following:

- Except for rank Iv2=3 for which the median Dv2=3.5 and Dv3=3.0, the remaining ranks (2, 4, 5) give a median of 4.0, with the interval between the first and third quartiles being 1. This indicates that the values of Dv2 range from (3) "Neutral" to slightly above (4) "Fairly strongly". Meanwhile, Dv3 ranges from (2.5), slightly below "Neutral", to (4.5), slightly above "Encouraging". The ranks of the independent variable Iv2 have practically no effect on these dependent variable values.
- The ranks of the independent variable Iv3 (I rely on customer loyalty when choosing a brand) correspond to the median values of the variable Dv2=3.5 when the rank of Iv3 is 2, Dv2=4.0 when the rank of Iv3 is 3 or 4 and Dv3=4.5 when the rank of Iv3 is 1 or 5. Excluding the case of Iv3=1, where the median of Dv2=4.5, the other ranks (2, 3, 4, 5) result in an increase in the median from 3.5 to 4.5.

As Table 3 shows for all ranks of the independent variable Iv4 (I feel valued as a customer when a company builds my loyalty) the median of the variable Dv2 is the same and equal to 4.0. The medians of the dependent variable Dv3 are the same except for the case when rank Iv4=2. Then the median Dv4=3.5. On this basis, we can say that the impact of product durability on purchasing decisions (Dv2) does not depend on the rank of Iv4.

On the other hand, the impact of loyalty programs encouraging sustainable consumer behaviors (Dv3) increases slightly when consumers stop feeling undervalued by the company's efforts to gain their loyalty (Iv4=2) and their state of appreciation is at least neutral (Iv4 $\geq$ 3).

To deepen the analysis of the quantitative research results, we conducted an interview with ten respondents (Table 4). The interview was semi-structured and covered the following issues: understanding relational loyalty; perception of product sustainability; impact of relational loyalty on purchase choices; consumer expectations from companies.

5. Discusion

As shown in Table 1, an overwhelming majority of respondents believe that consumer loyalty is of great or very great importance for business success (Iv1=96.4%) and that good loyalty programmes encourage repeat purchases (Iv2=92.4%). A similarly large proportion of customers feel valued when a company fosters their loyalty (Iv4=84.3%).

However, only half of the respondents consider themselves loyal to the brands they choose (Iv3=50.6%), and relatively many consumers do not feel bound by loyalty when making purchases (Iv3=36.1%). Most customers rarely purchase sustainable products (Dv1=51.8%), yet the majority value product durability (Dv2=68.7%). This comparison suggests that while durability is appreciated, it is likely for pragmatic reasons rather than ecological concerns. Consumers are inclined to choose durable products even if they are not eco-friendly.

Nevertheless, a significant majority believe that loyalty programmes strongly encourage the selection of more sustainable products (Dv3=74.7%) and that loyal customers are willing to engage in promoting sustainable products among other buyers (Dv4).

From Table 2 we know that the variable Iv1 is not statistically significantly correlated with any dependent variable. Despite the fact that 96.4% of respondents believe that customer loyalty is very important for business success (Table 1), this belief does not correlate with the frequency of purchasing sustainable products (Dv1), the influence of product durability on purchasing decisions (Dv2), the encouragement provided by loyalty programmes for sustainable consumer behaviour (Dv3), and the promotion of sustainable product purchases by loyal customers (Dv4).

For the dependent variables Dv1 (Frequency of purchasing sustainable products) and Dv4 (A loyal customer recommends sustainable products to others), no independent variable (Iv) has a statistically significant impact. However, the dependent variable Dv2 (Influence of product durability on purchasing decisions) is statistically significantly influenced by:

- The encouraging effect of loyalty programmes on repeat purchases (Iv2),
- Loyalty-oriented behaviour when choosing a brand (Iv3), and
- The sense of being valued as a customer when a company builds loyalty (Iv4).
- In the case of the dependent variable Dv3 (Loyalty programmes encourage more sustainable consumer behaviours), statistically significant influences are found from Iv2 and Iv4.

All significant correlations, however, are relatively weak. The data in Table 2 suggest that while the relationship between rational loyalty (Iv) and the purchase of sustainable FMCG products (Dv) is weak, well-designed loyalty programmes can help companies increase the purchase of such products.

As Table 3 shows for all ranks of the independent variable Iv4 (I feel valued as a customer when a company builds my loyalty) the median of the variable Dv2 is the same and equal to 4.0. The medians of the dependent variable Dv3 are the same except for the case when rank Iv4=2. Then the median Dv4=3.5.

On this basis, we can say that the impact of product durability on purchasing decisions (Dv2) does not depend on the rank of Iv4. On the other hand, the impact of loyalty programs encouraging sustainable consumer behaviors (Dv3) increases slightly when consumers stop feeling undervalued by the company's efforts to gain their loyalty (Iv4=2) and their state of appreciation is at least neutral ($Iv4 \geq 3$).

To deepen the analysis of the quantitative research results, we conducted an interview with ten respondents (Table 4).

The interview was semi-structured and covered the following issues: understanding relational loyalty; perception of product sustainability; impact of relational loyalty on purchase choices; consumer expectations from companies.

The analysis of the interviews reveals general trends based on age, socio-economic context, and personal sensitivity. Consumer perceptions demonstrate clear differences, but also points of convergence, regarding relational loyalty and product sustainability. Below is a structured synthesis according to the main thematic axes.

The relational loyalty is understanding differently and varies by age and expectations. As general perceptions we could say that older generations (45 years and above) tend to associate relational loyalty with emotional and relational dimensions, expecting companies to demonstrate commitment. For this group, loyalty is rooted in the quality of the relationship and a personalized response to customer needs.

But younger generations (under 35 years old) adopt a utilitarian and transactional approach, focusing primarily on tangible benefits such as discounts or immediate rewards. These consumers place less emphasis on a lasting relationship with the brand, prioritizing quick benefits instead. Older consumers value programs that foster a long-term trust relationship, offering benefits aligned with their values (e.g., sustainability). Younger consumers prefer simple, straightforward mechanisms with a clear preference for concrete, visible rewards.

Table 4. *Characteristics of the interviewees*

Number	Years	Sex	Job
1	25	Man	Engineer
2	46	Man	Consultant
3	26	Woman	Teacher
4	60	Woman	Handicraft
5	36	Woman	Teacher
6	23	Man	Student
7	46	Man	Former military
8	75	Woman	Retiree (Social Services)
9	22	Man	Military
10	31	Woman	Oenologist

Source: *Authors' calculations.*

We note that the product sustainability have moderate but segmented importance. Consumers broadly agree on a functional definition of sustainability: a product that lasts over time and resists wear and tear. For some, sustainability also includes environmental impact, but this remains secondary for most. Older generations tend to link sustainability to quality and reliability, while younger generations occasionally associate it with ecological practices, though this is not a primary purchasing criterion.

It is important to remember when purchasing that older profiles, with higher purchasing power, are more willing to invest in durable products and view it as a personal commitment to quality and ecology. Younger consumers, often constrained by budget considerations, place sustainability in the background. Their purchasing decisions are primarily guided by price and the product's immediate performance.

There is a noticeable tension between recognizing the benefits of sustainable products and their perceived high cost. Younger consumers or those with limited resources hesitate to prioritize sustainability in their choices.

The impact of loyalty programs is generally low, except when they offer exceptional benefits. We can notice a general Influence. Most consumers state that loyalty programs do not strongly influence their purchasing decisions. However, exceptional rewards (e.g., trips, valuable gifts, or significant discounts) capture greater attention, particularly among younger consumers.

Older profiles, while less swayed by immediate rewards, are more receptive to programs aligned with their values (e.g., ecology, sustainability). Loyalty programs incorporating sustainability values (e.g., points redeemable for eco-friendly products) are viewed positively, but primarily by profiles already sensitive to these issues. Younger generations are open to such initiatives, provided they are not complex or expensive.

Expectations towards companies are moderate but growing, with an increasing demand for responsibility. About product Sustainability, consumers expect companies to design reliable and affordable products while integrating environmentally friendly practices.

However, this expectation remains low among younger or less environmentally conscious profiles, who prioritize price and effectiveness. Older generations, particularly those more aware of these issues, view sustainability as a key responsibility for companies and are inclined to reward those taking initiatives in this area.

There is a raising Consumer Awareness. Educational or advertising campaigns about sustainability are seen as useful for encouraging more responsible behaviors, although their impact is considered limited if not accompanied by clear financial or practical incentives.

To conlude several key insights emerge from this analysis. First, generational differences play a significant role in shaping expectations and behaviors regarding relational loyalty and sustainability.

Younger consumers tend to prioritize price and immediacy, while older generations place greater emphasis on quality and relational values. Moreover, sustainability, while appreciated, is often viewed as a value-added feature rather than an essential criterion.
Economic constraints and the desire for immediate efficiency generally take precedence over sustainable considerations in consumer decision-making. Lastly, engagement with traditional loyalty programs tends to be low. To captivate consumers, these programs must offer benefits that are perceived as truly

exceptional. Ideally, they should also incorporate societal values such as sustainability, which can enhance their appeal and relevance.

It is possible to make strategic recommendations to adapt loyalty programs to generational profiles. For instance, offering differentiated rewards could be a valuable approach: younger consumers might benefit from immediate discounts, while older customers could be drawn to personalized or ethical benefits. Integrating sustainability in an accessible way also represents an effective strategy. This could involve concrete incentives, such as discounts on sustainable products or loyalty points that can be converted into donations for ecological initiatives.

At the same time, it would be beneficial to support consumers through educational campaigns on sustainability, highlighting the economic and practical advantages it offers. Finally, making sustainable products economically competitive is essential. This could include reducing the cost of these products or introducing attractive options within loyalty programs to encourage their adoption while promoting responsible choices.

6. Limitation of the Study

The results of our research have certain limitations. First of all, both quantitative and qualitative research were conducted on non-representative samples, and therefore we treat them as pilot studies only. Although the research survey was available on the Internet to everyone, the respondents were mainly residents of France.

We can therefore assume that the studies do not take into account cultural differences, or at least that we learn nothing from them about the possible impact of cultural differences. Furthermore, the findings reflect a snapshot in time and may not account for shifts in attitudes due to evolving economic or societal conditions. The exploration of sustainability was also somewhat limited to notions of durability and environmental impact, leaving other dimensions, such as social responsibility, less explored.

7. Conclusions

The research we conducted leads to the following conclusions that highlight the influence of relational loyalty on the behavior of sustainable FMCP consumers:

- Although about half of consumers consider themselves loyal to their chosen brands, most do not feel bound by loyalty when making purchases. However, they believe that loyalty programs strongly encourage choosing more sustainable products and that loyal customers are willing to promote them to other buyers.
- They value product durability, not out of concern for the environment, but for pragmatic reasons. The impact of product durability on purchasing

decisions is weak, but when consumers feel appreciated by companies, well-designed loyalty programs encourage the purchase of sustainable FMCP.

This study sheds light on generational and socio-economic dynamics that influence consumer behavior. The findings reveal a complex but coherent picture of how individuals relate to brands and products based on their values, priorities, and financial constraints.

- Relational loyalty appears to vary significantly across generations. Older consumers, generally over 45 years of age, value emotional and relational aspects of loyalty, seeking trust and personalized interactions with brands. Their loyalty is deeply tied to long-term relationships and shared ethical values, particularly in areas such as sustainability.
- Conversely, younger consumers under 35 adopt a more pragmatic and transactional approach, prioritizing immediate and tangible rewards like discounts or convenience over long-term brand attachment. This generational divergence underscores the importance of tailoring loyalty strategies to the specific needs and preferences of different age groups.
- Sustainability, while recognized as an important factor, remains secondary to economic considerations for most consumers. Older individuals tend to associate sustainability with quality, durability, and a commitment to ethical practices. For them, investing in sustainable products aligns with their values and purchasing power.
- Younger consumers, however, often face budgetary constraints, making affordability and product performance their primary concerns. Although they appreciate eco-friendly practices, these are seldom the decisive factor in their purchasing decisions. This disparity highlights the challenge of making sustainability an accessible and compelling choice across socio-economic and generational divides.
- Traditional loyalty programs, despite their widespread presence, generally exert limited influence on consumer behavior unless they offer exceptional benefits. Programs that provide significant discounts, valuable rewards, or unique experiences are more likely to capture attention, particularly among younger consumers. For older consumers, loyalty programs that align with their ethical values, such as those promoting sustainability, hold greater appeal. Initiatives incorporating ecological benefits, such as earning points for sustainable purchases, are well-received but must remain simple and cost-effective to encourage widespread participation.
- Consumers are also developing growing expectations of corporate responsibility, particularly in the areas of product sustainability and ethical practices. While older generations are more inclined to reward companies for sustainable initiatives, younger consumers are more receptive to educational campaigns that emphasize the practical and financial benefits of responsible consumption. However, these campaigns are most effective when complemented by clear incentives, such as reduced prices or loyalty rewards for sustainable choices.

- In response to the research question, the study concludes that loyalty programs can effectively engage consumers by aligning their structure with generational priorities and promoting sustainability in a pragmatic, accessible manner. For younger consumers, brands should focus on tangible, immediate rewards and streamlined mechanisms.
- For older consumers, fostering a sense of trust and shared values, particularly around sustainability, is key to building long-term loyalty. Ultimately, strategies that balance economic realities with societal trends stand the best chance of fostering both relational loyalty and sustainable behaviors..

As our studies are pilot study from their nature, future studies could address these gaps mentioned above by expanding the sample size and diversity, and exploring additional psychological and behavioral drivers behind loyalty and sustainability. Longitudinal research could track how consumer attitudes change over time, while sector-specific analyses could provide insights tailored to particular industries.

Additionally, examining the role of emerging technologies, such as AI personalization and gamification, could shed light on how digital tools reshape loyalty programs and sustainable consumption. By addressing these areas, future research could deepen our understanding and help companies design more effective, inclusive, and sustainable loyalty strategies.

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