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## The Effect of Consumer Socialization, Perceived Employee Identification, and Flexibility on Store Loyalty for Beauty Products

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# The Effect of Consumer Socialization, Perceived Employee Identification, and Flexibility on Store Loyalty for Beauty Products

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# The Effect of Consumer Socialization, Perceived Employee Identification, and Flexibility on Store Loyalty for Beauty Products

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**Abstract** - The survey data from a Chinese university suggests that consumer socialization and digital engagement profoundly influence employees' identification with their retailers. This identification, in turn, empowers retailers to become more flexible and adaptive to consumers' ever-changing needs, resulting in higher levels of store loyalty. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis revealed that retailers' flexibility was vital in mediating employee identification and store loyalty.

**Keywords** - Consumer socialization; Digital engagement; Employee identification, Flexibility; Store loyalty

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** - The relevance of this study is to show that social bonding with the consumers helps the retailer to use relationship-marketing activities appropriately. Consumers feel obligated to owe any favors taken from the retailer by increasing their intentions to buy from this seller and improve store loyalty. Retailers should strengthen their relationship continuity with their consumers so that the benefits of the relationship marketing rewards to the consumer may be more than a short-term gimmick by the retailer to improve its margin only. Consumer socialization and digital engagement enhance this process of obtaining store loyalty.

## Introduction

Consumer socialization, digital engagement/interaction, and employee identification have changed consumers' pre-purchase behaviors with retailers (Burt and Sparks, 2002; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Mieres et al., 2006; Rameshan and Stein, 2014; Schau et al., 2009). This change may be seen in the beauty products market for the Z and millennials, who allocate a high percentage of their discretionary income to purchase these products (Shi, 2020; Xu-prior and Cliquet, 2013). This change affects retailers because these consumers can conveniently compare retail outlets and brands using consumer socialization and digital engagement to switch stores frequently (Euromonitor International, 2021; Rameshan and Stein, 2014).

To reflect this change, retailers like Ulta and Sephora allow consumers to sample cosmetics in-store before purchasing them since it is difficult to do a skin match online or understand other sensory issues like odor. However, this in-store product testing is insufficient to reduce switching costs and improve consumer loyalty; to show loyalty, consumers want interactions and building relationships with in-store employees that identify with their employers and the products they sell (Bedgood, 2016; Chen and Quester, 2006; Huang et al., 2017; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Meredith, 2014; Press and Arnould, 2011).

Through interaction, consumers encourage employees to improve their identification. Employee identification is the degree to which employees' oneness and believability align with

the retailer's product; consequently, consumers readily believe the messages that employees send to consumers (Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Li et al., 2021). Identification is a continual process created and recreated (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Employee identification and changes in buying behavior necessitate retailers to personalize ways to improve store loyalty; improving store loyalty can reduce a retailer's supply-chain costs and improve its profits (Elkins, 2020; Zhang et al., 2017). Store loyalty refers to consumers' commitment to patronize the same retail store because of their emotional attachment to the store (Bloemer and Ruyter, 1998).

Since Z and millennials enjoy engaging in dialog digitally with their friends and retailers using social media and other digital platforms before purchasing beauty products, retailers can provide services like streaming, online learning, and video chat to engage consumers to enhance bonding behaviors (e.g., Collin-Lachaud and Diallo, 2021). Theorists note that relationship marketing paves the way for retailers to personalize messages and illustrate the value of their offerings to enhance consumer retention and store loyalty. However, for fear of losing control and improving short-term margins and share of consumers' wallets, retailers implement relationship-marketing activities using transactional loyalty programs. Although these arms-length transactions look appealing, they lose their ability to maintain and enhance mutual benefits for the consumers and retailers, which is the purpose of relationship marketing (Audrain-Pontevia and Garnier, 2021; Demoulin and Zidda, 2009; Solem, 2016; Valta, 2013).

These theorists suggest that retailers should not fear the loss of control if they choose relationship management to bond with their consumers as a way of practicing relationship marketing. Relationship marketing is a set of marketing activities directed toward consumers and maintaining relationships successfully with them. In a competitive arena, companies use relationship marketing to attract and develop consumer loyalty (Sheth and Parvatier, 1995; Audrain-Pontevia and Garnier, 2021). Relationship management is a joint effort instead of a one-way interaction; customer retention and loyalty will improve (Bagozzi, 1995; Sheth and Palvatier, 1995; Palmatier et al., 2009). It allows retailers to use global brand strategies to spread their marketing costs to improve store loyalty (Huang et al., 2017).

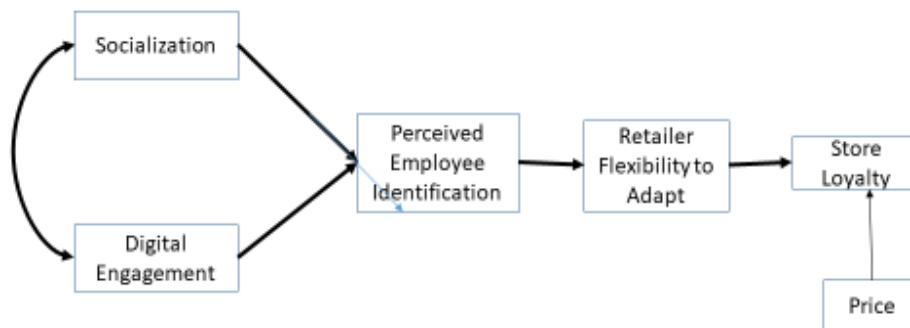
Using commitment-trust to practice relationship management has been widely discussed in the literature, but researchers are unable to find its direct impact on store loyalty; most studies focus on trust's impact on loyalty intentions but stop short of proving store loyalty (Palmatier et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2017). Moreover, commitment-trust is not an action-oriented coordinating mechanism that consumers can observe when evaluating a retailer's marketing activities. Action-oriented coordinating mechanisms enable retailers to justify their investments to their most profitable consumers and improve store loyalty (Audrain-Pontevia and Vanhuele, 2016).

In that regard, relational norms are action-oriented coordinating mechanisms buyers and sellers use for goal attainment. Using relational norms such as role integrity, reciprocity, solidarity, and flexibility sets the tone for evaluating an object favorably and improving interpersonal relationships (Clark and Mills, 1993; Valta, 2013). Although relational norms improve the outcomes between buyers and sellers, their usage in consumer and retailer interaction needs more attention (Palmatier et al., 2009; Valta, 2013). Because these norms are highly correlated (Macneil, 1980; Valta, 2013), the focus is on flexibility (e.g., Ivens, 2005), as will be explained later.

This study evaluates the relationship between the degree of retailers' flexibility to adapt to young women's (18-38) purchase needs and store loyalty for beauty products as the first contribution. Since this population likes spending time interacting with the store's employees, the

article examines the mediating effect of retailers' flexibility between consumers' employee identification and store loyalty as the second contribution. Finally, consumers use socialization and digital engagement/interaction for such products to compare retail outlets and switch retailers if needed. The influence of these variables directly improves employee identification, which is the third contribution. This study illustrates that by improving flexibility to buyers' needs, retailers may enhance their ability to maintain store loyalty. Since consumers engage in digital interaction during socialization, these constructs of consumer socialization and digital interaction have been correlated for this study.

**Figure 1**  
**Parsimonious Model - Antecedents to Store Loyalty**



The article is organized as follows. Social exchange theory and the relationship management literature are initially explored to emphasize flexibility, and its effect on store loyalty is hypothesized. Next, hypotheses about the influence of consumer socialization and digital engagement on employee identification, which affects retailers' flexibility to adapt to consumers' needs, are developed. Subsequently, the methodology is described to test the hypotheses. Then, the results are presented. Finally, the study's findings and limitations are discussed, and future research is suggested.

## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Although businesses may conduct buyer-seller transactions at arm's length, such transactions are relational and long-term, with the expectation that they will re-occur. However, parties are assumed to have limited cognitive ability to acquire and absorb market information perfectly, leaving room for a party with valuable information to behave opportunistically during such transactions. This behavior increases transaction costs; a party with helpful information can

withhold, distort, and control information (information asymmetry) and prevent the other party from achieving its goal.

Relationship management is a bonding behavior that overcomes transaction costs to achieve a goal. By establishing bonding behaviors, one party provides rewarding services to another, which obligates the latter to furnish benefits to the former; the outcome is extrinsic benefits that both parties value, such as store loyalty (Blau, 1967; Heide and John, 1992). As per social exchange theorists, parties involve themselves in such relational transactions because it is a voluntary tangible or intangible process to accomplish their rewarding common goals (Homans, 1958).

Although much has been discussed about relationship management in inter-organizational transactions, its relevance to retailer-consumer transactions needs to be developed (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Bazoggi, 1995; Valta, 2013). Similar transaction costs exist for retailer-consumer transactions, but the retailer chases profits while the consumers derive value from consumption (Bagozzi, 1995; Palmatier et al., 2009). Consumers would like to interpret retailers' marketing communications and employees' service work as a reason to derive value from consuming a retailer's product (Press and Arnould, 2011); however, transaction costs prevent them from doing so. Retailers' investments in employee training reduce consumers' perceived transaction costs and financial loss if consumers are dissatisfied (Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000; Palmatier et al., 2009).

Through relationships, consumers can avoid transaction costs by extracting proper information about a product's consumption, reducing information overload, avoiding haggling and search costs, and reducing their evoked set (Bagozzi, 1995; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Relationships with the consumer enable retailers to obtain a competitive advantage, lower marketing costs, and get superior streams of profits. In other words, if retailers and consumers work together, they can accomplish their respective goals. The retailer will improve its consumer retention and store loyalty while the consumer will get educated in product consumption and managing their expectations. Hence, understanding the antecedents that motivate consumers to build loyalty via relationships is essential (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Relational norms guide relational transactions. These norms are informal agreements about appropriate behavior that a group of actors shares in an exchange. Relational norms may be placed along the continuum between discrete and relational exchanges as endpoints. These informal agreements curtail selfish goals and exploitative behaviors, which improves the exchange value (Heide and John, 1992; Iven, 2005). They provide buyers and sellers sufficient confidence to relinquish control over decisions without losing vulnerability to accomplish marketing strategy, selling, economic, and logistics performance (e.g., Bello and Gilliland, 1997; Lao et al., 2010).

Borrowing from Macneil's (1980) overlapping set of relational norms, researchers distilled them to information exchange, flexibility, and solidarity norms. Moreover, because of the high correlations among them, they are tested as a higher-order, single construct (Noordewier et al., 1990; Heide and John, 1992). Among these norms, flexibility is essential and relevant to overcoming transaction costs since it adjusts the initial agreement between buyers and sellers as environmental events unfold or change. Additionally, because of its strategic, operational, and relational properties, flexibility allows organizations to practice product and service differentiation to compete (Bello and Gilliland, 1997; Kaufmann and Dant, 1992; Hartmann and Grahl, 2011; Ivens, 2005). Because organizations focus on competitiveness and overcoming transaction costs,

flexibility has been used across several B2B exchanges, such as supply chains, manufacturing, inventory management, exporting, and services.

## **Flexibility and Store Loyalty**

Since relationship management is customer-focused instead of product-focused, it influences customer-related outcomes like store loyalty rather than market share or financial performance (Ivens, 2005). Hence, retailers may use flexibility in retailer-consumer transactions because each consumer does not want the same offering. Flexibility improves reciprocity, gratuity, and moral value while reducing information asymmetry (Hartmann and Grahl, 2011; Hedio and John, 1992; Ivens, 2005). However, flexibility's direct and mediating effect on store loyalty has yet to be empirically tested in a retailer's interaction with its consumers.

Consumer markets are environmentally diverse and dynamic (e.g., a change in consumers' needs and special requests); flexibility can accommodate these changes. One or more consumers will likely need a retailer to adjust its offerings to overcome a change in their circumstances (e.g., Ansari and Mela, 2003; Benoit et al., 2017). Consumer markets such as fashion, mobile phones, and bicycles have benefitted from organizations being flexible to consumer needs by offering various products and delivery methods (Lao et al., 2010).

Retailers sometimes provide consumer incentives like gifts, promotional prices, purchase points, and loyalty cards to retain consumers. However, the marginal utility of these extrinsic benefits may decrease in the short term, for example, when competitors provide similar incentives. Long-term bonding behavior may overcome these marginal utility problems (Blau, 1967). Flexible actions allow the receiving party to compensate the issuing party by continuing the relationship's longevity for the burdens the giving party takes (Noordewier et al., 1990).

Practicing flexibility is a cost to the retailer because it needs to expend time and effort to train its employees and adjust its offerings to please the customer. Benefits to the retailer may be increased business from the customer, customer retention, and customer referrals (Hartmann and Grahl, 2011). The cost is more than offset since acquiring a customer is approximately five times more costly than retaining an existing one (Taylor, 2022).

A retailer's lack of flexibility increases the risk that the relationship may lose its value for the consumer; consequently, the consumer might decide to switch if retailers are not flexible with the marketing activities consumers desire (Ivens, 2005). U.S. companies lose \$136.8 billion per year through consumers' switching behavior. Improving retention by five percent improves profitability from 25 to 95 percent (Taylor, 2022).

Practicing flexibility by adapting improves customer experience (Arnold et al., 2002). For instance, practicing flexibility during a textile's design has extended its consumption life cycle and reduced waste (Cao et al., 2014); flexibility improves retail productivity (Dunković, 2004). Consumers value these normative actions and reward the retailer with their store loyalty. Improving loyalty enhances a company's long-term survivability. Loyal consumers purchase more frequently from the same business, which improves visibility when consumers pass on their positive feelings and refer other consumers (Bojei and Alwie, 2016).

Because of the detailed attention required during the trial and consultation process before purchasing beauty products, they lend themselves to flexible marketing programs and product applications. For example, retailers should be flexible in setting up appointment times and walk-

in time blocks for consumers to test beauty products. Retail employees and consumers should be flexible in understanding each other's expertise and opinions about the product. Other types of flexibility include product ingredients on skin type, color, delivery, return policy, and location, as well as approaching the same consumer using different communication methods (e.g., YouTube, mobile apps, and instant digital coupons).

If retail employees spend effort and provide flexible incentives (e.g., gifts and tokens), consumers become more interested in purchasing from this retailer (Palmatier et al., 2009). To improve competitively, each contact point with the consumer allows the retailer to provide product and service differentiation and good-faith modification. For example, logistics organizations use flexibility as a competitive weapon to respond to customer needs and overcome unforeseen changes in circumstances to establish and maintain customer loyalty (Bowersox et al., 2020).

H1: The greater the retailer's flexibility, the greater the store loyalty.

## **Employee Identification and Flexibility**

Hiring, training, and retaining an employee are investments that implement flexibility with consumers. Flexible actions do not occur randomly. It is the service provider's behavior to adjust to consumer wants; the mere abilities and intentions are insufficient to justify this cost. Effectively improvising this behavior improves bonding (Blau, 1967; Ivens, 2005; Lao et al., 2010).

Employees' identification with their retailer is an effective behavior to improve relationship management. Employee-company identification helps in sustaining a company's image in society. Employee identification enables retailers to send believable messages to consumers (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Smidts et al., 2001). Intrinsically motivated employees espouse positive thoughts and actions about their employers. Employees can positively associate with the company to express themselves to their target audience (e.g., Homburg et al., 2009).

Through employee-company identification, a seller's intent is presented to a buyer. Employees who identify with their organization feel a sense of loyalty and commitment to their employer. It gives them a sense of ownership of the store's products (Homburg et al., 2009). They are more likely to understand the company's goals and are willing to share them with their consumers. Moreover, they become in tune with the company's culture, enabling them to be flexible and align with its policy. Sirianni et al. (2013) found that college student's confidence in the sincerity of an employee's brand-aligned behavior enhanced the effectiveness of the employees' personalization with them.

H2: The greater the consumers' perceived employees' identification with their employer, the greater their flexibility.

## **Consumer Socialization and Perceived Employee Identification**

Studying how consumers live and adapt to society and the marketplace is essential. Consumer socialization is a way for consumers to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes to communicate with each other about products and consumption. People behave in socially approved ways to avoid the consequences of violating social norms and being ignored by their social groups



Ekström (2006). Consumers form images and meanings about products and retailers by interacting with other consumers and retailers' marketing activities.

There are two forms of socialization: (a) self-growth through cognition and psychological development and (b) social learning through socialization agents like friends/peers, mass media, parents, and organizations. Peers/friends are the strongest predictors of the consumer socialization process during adulthood (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Wang et al., 2012).

When consumers do not fully know what they want, conforming to their social circles becomes a significant portion of their desires, which may be implicitly (i.e., vicariously) or explicitly formed and shared with others. By socialization, consumers build consumption competencies in the marketplace. Socialization agents can provide positive or negative reinforcement to change consumptive habits (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999).

Consuming beauty products is pleasing to the senses and can improve self-confidence (Townsend, 2015). Z and millennials use their friends, classmates, and college roommates to formulate opinions and discuss the attributes/benefits of these products before consuming them (Shi, 2020). Such interactions motivate consumers to control and transmit normative behaviors (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Köhler et al., 2011).

Employees must possess good product knowledge because of beauty products' chemical properties and unique applications. While shopping, consumers and retail employees constantly engage in dialog and examine beauty products. Interactions are necessary to evaluate beauty products with connotations of safety consumption (Audrain-Pontevia and Vanhuele, 2016). During such interactions, the consumer observes employees' expressions about the product's ability to camouflage one's beauty. Observing and absorbing each other's rational and emotional appeal during interaction requires consumers' and retail employees' undivided attention (Grewal and Roggeven, 2020; Hughes et al., 2019). Consumers discuss these interactions with their friends, which may encourage employees to learn about the retailer's products, services, and policies.

According to Fowler and Bridges (2010), customer perceptions of frontline employees are an integral part of the overall evaluation of a service experience. Consumer observations, inquiries, and conversations about employees' networks improve their role clarity, attitude toward their careers, and organization representation (Tang et al., 2014).

H3: The greater the consumer socialization, the greater their perception of employees' identification with their retailer.

## **Digital Engagement/Interaction and Perceived Employee Identification**

Like mass media, digital engagement/interaction is another form of socialization. Digital interaction is a form of communication that has increased consumers' reliance on their network community, peers, and acquaintances (Muratore, 2008). Digital devices have given consumers immediate access to product information; they can also express their opinions about the product using these devices (Kozinets et al., 2010). It allows retailers to use online social networks, websites, and marketing communications to interact and entice consumers to buy their products (McWilliam, 2012).

Digital apps improve customer-retailer interaction by allowing consumers to evaluate and share their ideas and feelings about a store and its brands (Flores and Vasquez-Parraga, 2015; Lee et al., 2008; Schau et al., 2009). Employees may share anecdotes with consumers and show clips about themselves or other consumers using the product to deliver its performance. From its pre-selection to ex-post purchase, consumers and retail employees are in constant dialog and examination about the product (Wang et al., 2012).

Retailers may also allow employees to use their companies' networks and digital platforms for direct and unobtrusive communication with consumers within the stores (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Shankar et al., 2021). Digital channels such as micro-cloud computing, company/brand websites, mobile apps, chatbots, and virtual reality have improved one-order clicking and personalization (e.g., digital coupons) and have enhanced retailers' and consumers' real-time interaction (Shankar et al., 2021).

Consumer socialization and digital engagement can improve consumer perceptions about retail employees' identification because they help build a preconceived notion about employees' expertise in the subject matter and help build rapport between consumers and the employees. Consumers can write messages during and after visiting a retail store about their experiences with the employees. Digital apps have provided retailers with a convenient opportunity to become consumer-centric. With the high adoption rate of digital apps for seeking consumptive information, understanding how consumers identify with the retailer has become necessary for building consumer loyalty (Kupfer et al., 2018).

H4: The greater the digital engagement, the greater the consumers' perception of employees' identification with their retailers.

## **Methodology**

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, as of November 2020, the retail value of cosmetics reached 307.58 billion yuan, with a yearly growth of 9.5 percent. Moreover, China accounts for 50 percent of the global usage of e-commerce for regularly consumed products (International Trade Administration, 2023). Additionally, females (Gen Z and millennials) account for 14.3 percent of China's population, contributing to 38 percent of the cosmetics products sold in China (B. Li, 2021).

One hundred and fifty female millennials (18-38 years old) attending a large public university in China where the language of instruction is English completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire focused on the respondents' favorite cosmetic retailer that they visited, irrespective of where they finally purchased the product (i.e., the retailer's website or other e-commerce platform).

Because female college students are increasingly participating in the consumption of cosmetics, data was collected from female students. Moreover, these college students prefer to shop in groups. If they like a product, they quickly spread the message to their fellow students. Cosmetic retailers also target their products in college towns (Shi, 2020).

## Measurement Instrument

The construct items were adopted from published articles with some changes to the wording and the number of items to accommodate them for this research setting. Each questionnaire item was measured on a 5-point Likert agree/disagree scale. Table 1 shows the initial items of each construct, their source, and the final items for this study and their Cronbach's alpha. Three of the four consumer socialization items were adopted from Moschis (1976). The fourth item was highly correlated with the digital interaction items and was removed from the final analysis. Four items were adopted from the "engagement and interactivity" seven-item scale that reflects consumers' digital engagement with a retailer's website (Boateng and Narteh, 2016). Three of the seven employee identification items the consumer can perceive were adopted from Pansari and Kumar's (2014) article. Items that measured "my success," "treat me like a family," and "my organization's brand-related messages" were not included; consumers may not readily perceive such measures during their interaction with employees. Three items that may reflect flexibility in a retailer-consumer interaction were adopted from Noordewier et al.'s article (1990). The fourth item relates to emergency deliveries necessary for a business-to-business transaction and does not apply to this research setting. The three-item scale of store loyalty was adopted from Kongarchapatara and Shannon's article (2016).

Table 2 displays the measurement's loadings, t and p values, and fit indices. Scale composite reliabilities are deemed acceptable (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The average variance extracted for each construct is greater than the square of its correlation with the other constructs. The results indicate that these models'  $\chi^2$  values are significant and acceptable (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

**Table 1: Questionnaire Items from the Source and reliability of the final items**

| Questionnaire Items   | Cronbach's alpha | Items and their source   |
|---|------------------|--|
| <b>Consumer Socialization</b>   |                  |  |
| I place a lot of confidence in my friends' opinion in buying beauty products. | 0.67             | I place a lot of confidence in friends' opinions in buying cosmetics.                          |
| I often decide to buy those beauty products that I see my friends using.      |                  | I often decide to buy those cosmetic products that I see my friends using.                     |
| Many beauty product brands I own are similar to those of my friends.          |                  | Many cosmetic items I own are similar to those of my friends                                   |
|   |                  | I often decide to buy those cosmetic products that friends have told me about (Moschis, 1976). |
| <b>Perceived Employee identification</b>                                      |                  |  |
| Employees are proud of being part of retailer.                                | 0.79             | I am proud to tell others that I am part of the organization.                                  |
| They feel a sense of ownership toward retailer.                               |                  | I feel a sense of ownership towards this organization.   |

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| When someone praises the store, the employee takes it like a personal compliment.           |      | When someone praises this brand, it feels like a personal compliment.                                 |
|   |      | My sense of pride towards the organizational brand is reinforced by its brand-related messages.       |
|   |      | I view the success of the brand as my own success.  |
|   |      | The organization is like a family to me.  |
|   |      | When I talk about this organization, I usually say “we” rather than “they” (Kumar and Pansari, 2014). |
| <b>Digital Engagement</b>   |      |   |
| Write comments and messages on this retailer’s social media pages                           | 0.85 | I write comments and messages on my bank’s social media pages.  |
| Retailer’s online platforms engage my attention   |      | My bank’s online platforms engage my attention.   |
| Converse on their online platform   |      | I contribute to conversations on my bank’s online platform.   |
| Interact with retailer’s customers via Internet   |      | I can interact with my bank through their website.  |
|   |      | I can interact with my bank through their social media page.  |
|   |      | I interact with other customers of my bank through the internet (Boateng and Narteh, 2016).           |
| <b>Store Loyalty</b>  |      |   |
| I prefer to buy products (online or the physical store) that are available at this store.   | 0.60 | I prefer to make my purchases from this store.  |
| I recommend the store to friends and acquaintances.   |      | I recommend the store to friends and acquaintances  |
| I will buy the products (online or physical) that are available at his store in the future. |      | I will also make my purchases from this store in the future (Kongarchapatara and Shannon, 2016).      |
| <b>Flexibility</b>  |      |   |
| Retailer handles this change well   | 0.74 | Supplier handles change well.   |
| It readily makes adjustments to meet my needs.  |      | Supplier can readily adjust its inventories to meet unforeseen needs that might occur.                |
| This retailer is flexible in response to requests I make.                                   |      | Supplier is flexible in response to requests we make.   |
|   |      | Supplier can provide emergency deliveries (Noordewier et al., 1990).                                  |
|   |      |   |

**Table 2: Measurement Model of the constructs**

| Questionnaire Items   | Std. Loadings | Critical Ratio | Probability |
|---|---------------|----------------|-------------|
| I place a lot of confidence in my friends' opinion in buying beauty products.               | 0.55          | 4.90           | 0.00        |
| I often decide to buy those beauty products that I see my friends using.                    | 0.66          | 5.38           | 0.00        |
| Many beauty product brands I own are similar to those of my friends.                        | 0.70          |                |             |
| Composite reliability = 0.67; AVE= 0.41; mean = 10.61; SD = 2.03; Alpha = 0.67              |               |                |             |
| Employees are proud of being part of retailer   | 0.87          | 7.61           | 0.00        |
| They feel a sense of ownership toward retailer  | 0.73          | 7.27           | 0.00        |
| When someone praises the store, the employee takes it like a personal compliment.           | 0.66          |                |             |
| Composite reliability = 0.80; AVE = 0.58; mean = 10.60; SD = 2.17; Alpha = 0.79             |               |                |             |
| Write comments and messages on this retailer's social media pages                           | 0.82          | 9.99           | 0.00        |
| Retailer's online platforms engage my attention   | 0.64          | 7.64           | 0.00        |
| Converse on their online platform   | 0.85          | 10.34          | 0.00        |
| Interact with retailer's customers via Internet   | 0.77          |                |             |
| Composite reliability = 0.86; AVE = 0.60; mean = 13.35; SD = 3.60; Alpha = 0.85             |               |                |             |
| I prefer to buy products (online or the physical store) that are available at this store.   | 0.62          | 4.20           | 0.00        |
| I recommend the store to friends and acquaintances.   | 0.55          | 4.07           | 0.00        |
| I will buy the products (online or physical) that are available at his store in the future. | 0.58          |                |             |
| Composite reliability = 0.61; AVE = 0.34; mean 11.33; SD = 1.58; Alpha = 0.6                |               |                |             |
| Retail is flexible enough to handle unforeseen customer problems.                           | 0.74          | 5.51           | 0.00        |
| Retailer handles this change well.  | 0.72          | 5.48           | 0.00        |
| It makes adjustments to meet my needs.  | 0.55          |                |             |
| Composite reliability = 0.70; AVE = 0.46; mean = 10.72; SD = 1.95; Alpha = 0.70             |               |                |             |

***Control Variables***

The sample comprised college students, who are generally price-conscious. Several respondents noted that they used retail stores for brand comparison and socializing and then shopped around using their mobile apps for the best price. Cosmetics are readily available through e-commerce platforms and are often cheaper for the same brand. Therefore, price is a controlled variable in this study. The questionnaire measured price consciousness: "I purchase beauty products through eCommerce websites because of the lowest pricing."

## Results

Table 3 shows that the standardized estimates of the paths in the model and the overall model had an adequate statistical fit. Price consciousness was statistically significant at the critical ratio, with a t-value of 2.679. The hypotheses were confirmed with a critical ratio, t-values > 1.96 for the model. Retailers' flexibility improved consumers' store loyalty with a t-value of 3.22 (H1). Consumers' perceived employee identification improved retailers' flexibility with a t-value of 4.182 (H2). Consumer socialization improved perceived employee identification with a t-value of 2.90 (H3). Consumers' digital engagement improved perceived employee identification with a t-value of 1.996 (H4). Additionally, consumer socialization and engagement were highly correlated (0.48) with a covariance estimate of 0.263 and a critical ratio t-value of 3.756.

To show the mediating effects of the model, adding a path from perceived employee identification to store loyalty did not improve the model fit. Therefore, the positive mediating impact of flexibility on store loyalty prevails ( $t > 1.96$ ). Additionally, adding direct paths from consumer socialization and engagement to store loyalty one at a time did not improve the model fit. Finally, adding direct paths from socialization and digital engagement to flexibility did not improve the model fit. In summary, the indirect paths of consumer socialization, digital engagement, and employee identification through flexibility to store loyalty, as shown in the model, hold for this research setting.

**Table 3: Path Estimates**

| Paths  | Std. Estimates | Critical Ratio | p-value |
|--|----------------|----------------|---------|
| H1: Socialize to Employee Identification             | .394           | 2.90           | .004    |
| H2: Digital Engagement to Employee Identification    | .223           | 1.996          | .046    |
| H3: Employee Identification to Retailer Adaptability | .567           | 4.182          | .000    |
| H4: Retailer Adaptability to Store Loyalty           | .470           | 3.220          | .001    |
| Price to Store Loyalty                               | .280           | 2.679          | .007    |

$\chi^2_{112} = 145.74$ ;  $p = .02$ ; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .045; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .95; Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) = .94;  $\chi^2/df = 1.30$

### Correlation

Socialization and Digital Engagement = 0.478

### Additional Analysis

Over the consumers' life cycle, cognitive development and social learning improve consumers' maturity in the marketplace, so demographics play a crucial role in buying behavior (Moschis, 1987). Because the current study's model was tested within a college atmosphere (college students), social structural variables like education, age, and marital status may play a role in consumers' price consciousness, consumer socialization, and store loyalty (Moschis and Churchill, Jr., 1978; Shi, 2020; Wang et al., 2012).

Thompson and Hirschman (1995) emphasize that people learn to become less wrinkled and grey and hide imperfections in their appearance. While growing up, consumers form a long-lasting attachment to some products, which is why age is used as a control in most store loyalty

studies (Audrain-Pontevia and Vanhuele, 2016; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2014). Age may be a proxy for maturation during a consumer's life cycle (Moschis and Churchill, Jr., 1978). Thus, the model (Figure 1) was tested under unequal and equal parameters for age (18-22 versus 23-38).

Significant differences between the models were found. Additionally, constraining price to equal in both age groups, the path from price to store loyalty was non-significant for the 18-22 age group versus the age group 23-38 (t-value 1.54;  $p < 0.12$  versus t-value 2.18;  $p < .03$ ). Thus, the age group 18-22 may not be as price-conscious for beauty products as the other age group. In college, social learning is influenced by student's interaction with coursework, student clubs, and other social events. The education experience also improves the student's skills, knowledge, and attitude about consumption (Moschis, 1987; Shin, 2020). Consumers with college degrees than those without college degrees use digital products and apps more often (Wang et al., 2012). Thus, demographics like education may impact store loyalty (Shi, 2020). The model (Figure 1) was tested for students with undergraduate degrees or less versus those with a graduate degree. Checking the models under equal and non-equal group parameters, the models were invariant, meaning that education as a change agent does not differentiate the two groups regarding store loyalty.

Consumptive situations change over consumers' life cycle. For example, consumers may participate in socializing activities that please their significant others (Ekström, 2006). Marital status makes consumers focus on socialization related to being a good spouse, so studies on consumer socialization should include lifestyle changes. The model (Figure 1) was tested under unequal and equal parameters for single versus the rest; it was invariant.

## Discussion

This article tested a framework for understanding the antecedents of store loyalty that motivate consumers to build store loyalty. The framework explains how to reduce consumer transaction and switching costs through relationship bonding. Retailers should focus on consumer socialization, digital engagement, employee identification, and flexibility to adapt to consumers' needs, allowing all parties to participate in transactions that improve store loyalty.

By finding the positive effect of flexibility on store loyalty, retailers should not fear the loss of control if they choose to bond with their consumers. This finding endorses previous studies that arms-length transactions lose their ability to maintain and enhance mutual benefits for consumers and retailers (Audrain-Pontevia and Garnier, 2021; Demoulin and Zidda, 2009; Solem, 2016; Valta, 2013). For instance, Ivens (2005) found flexibility to improve relationship quality between marketing research providers and their clients.

This result generalizes previous bonding-behavior research in B2B marketing, where relational norms improved logistics performance for bearing manufacturers operating under dynamic and unstable market demands (Noordewier et al., 1990). Hartmann and Grahl (2011) found logistics service providers' flexibility to improve customers' loyalty. Vickery et al. (1999) found flexibility to improve out-of-stock situations, product variety, and time to market for new products.

Perceived employee identification, digital engagement, and consumer socialization indirectly affected store loyalty through flexibility, showing flexibility as a central construct for

improving store loyalty. Being flexible, retailers can tailor relationship-marketing activities towards a long-term relationship with each consumer.

The result about the influence of employee identification on flexibility supports previous researchers' suggestion that employees who identify with their organizations espouse a supportive attitude about the benefits of their organizations' products (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). It also adds to Homburg et al.'s (2009) finding that employee identification improves customer orientation. By directly affecting flexibility and indirectly affecting store loyalty through flexibility, perceptions about employee identification may be a reason for consumers to believe retailers' communications about products and services.

Research on consumer socialization has focused on identifying social agents such as demographics, mass media, family, and peers and their effect on consumers' cognitive development, social learning, materialism, and finance. Future research should study this phenomenon for new situations consumers face over their lifecycles (Moschis and Churchill, Jr., 1978; Ekström, 2006). This current study (Figure 1) suggests college life allows students to learn skills and knowledge on how to interact with the marketplace and build store loyalty. Through consumer socialization, consumers learn to adapt to the use of beauty products to camouflage their bodies.

Tang et al. (2014) focused on new employees' socialization skills and found that socialization tactics like observation, inquiry, and networking improved employees' commitment and reduced employee turnover for furniture retailers. By finding consumer socialization's direct effect on employee identification, the current study adds value to consumer socialization by tying it to organization socialization literature. Social agents outside an organization, such as friends/peers, can improve employees' attitudes and behavior to assist an organization in developing internal employee identification programs. Moreover, the high correlation between consumer socialization and digital engagement (0.48) shows they may be combined to improve employee identification and social loyalty.

Grewal and Roggeveen (2020) suggested that retailers should understand the convenience of using digital technologies in enhancing consumers' shopping experience, which will benefit the retailers. Wang et al. (2012) found peer-to-peer communication using virtual communities, media websites, mobile devices, and product reviews to influence consumers' attitudes toward a product, which then influenced purchase intention. Since consumers' digital engagement improved perceived employee identification directly and influenced flexibility and store loyalty indirectly, these findings address Grewal and Roggeveen's (2020) suggestion and add value to Wang et al.'s (2012) finding that social media influences purchase intention.

Age is crucial for understanding a consumer's consumption life cycle (Moschis and Churchill, Jr., 1978). Blogs state that the Z generations are more price-conscious than other generations. This generation evaluates products closely using price-quality cues; offering competitive pricing and more product options may be needed to attract them (e.g., [try.commentsold.com](https://try.commentsold.com), 2023). This current study shows that students aged 18-22 are less price-conscious when purchasing beauty products than those aged 23-28; college lifestyles may make this younger generation less price-conscious and more open to consumption using something other than price-quality cues.



Since the age groups significantly differed in price consciousness, the sample was median split for non-price consciousness versus price consciousness. The two models were significantly different (variant). Comparing the hypothesized paths, flexibility to store loyalty was higher for non-price-conscious shoppers versus price-conscious shoppers. Although rewards and surprises are a big attraction for Z and young millennials' purchase intentions (retaildive.com, 2019), retailer flexibility in marketing relationships may be the preferred method to attract non-price-conscious shoppers. To attract price-conscious shoppers, retailers may offer price promotions over a short time and reduce the back-end costs, such as selling only one type of product color. They may still maintain the flexibility of selling high-quality products, for example, offering several colors to the non-price-conscious population (Forbes.com, 2020).

## **Managerial Implications**

Digital marketing using social media platforms provides retailers with an opportunity to attract consumers and an invitation to increase relationships. Additionally, retailers should take advantage of these platforms to improve active communication (Wang et al., 2012). Retailers should encourage consumers to comment, write messages, and converse digitally. Moreover, retailers should motivate consumers to interact with each other through their websites.

Consumers observe and model their peers/friends regarding consumption through consumer socialization. Retailers can encourage these interactions by allowing their employees to interact with consumers to provide new topics about their products. Because of the high correlation between consumer socialization and digital engagement, they may be used to increase consumers' friends on their digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and retailers' social network chats.

Proper communication with consumers is the key to employee identification; communication between an organization and its constituents improves identification (Press and Arnould, 2011). Besides monitoring and training programs, this study's findings point out that management should allow employees to participate freely with consumers using digital engagement to improve employees' sense-making of the consumers' consumption process. Consumers' viewpoints enable employees to engage with shoppers about product consumption through flexibility. Retailers may provide different flexible relationship marketing programs for consumer groups.

Since retailing is a labor-intensive industry and the turnover of retail employees remains high (Tang et al., 2014), retailers should find unique ways to motivate their employees to stay loyal and committed to reducing turnover and controlling labor costs. To improve employee identification, retailers should allocate resources to enhance employees' use of digital apps with consumers. Retailers may provide user-friendly digital platforms to increase employee-consumer interactive activities.

Additionally, retailers must allow their employees to impress consumers using flexible actions to resolve their immediate marketing needs. Once employee identification improves, employees are willing and able to share ideas with their consumers that resonate with organizations' principles, enhancing product sales and the organization's workflow (e.g., inventory). Homburg et al. (2009) found that employee identification improved employee problem solving in offering the services and products the customer needs.

Although responding to customer requests for adjustments may create value for the customer, retailers fear it may not benefit the organization. The current study's findings indicate that retailers should invest in employee flexibility to solve consumer needs, increasing store loyalty. Using digital apps and being flexible allow retailers to tailor relationship-marketing activities toward long-term customer relationships.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The findings of this study may be limited since the sample comprised Chinese students ages (18-38) from a non-cosmopolitan large Chinese university. This study did not measure race, cultural values, or interpersonal skills. Future studies may incorporate a national sample from different regions of the country. Besides the chemical reactions to one's skin, cosmetic ingredients may be perceived as less important across cultures (Sachdev et al., 2016).

Although multinational corporations influence China's economy, consumer socialization is constrained by the socio-political control of the government. The political environment may co-mingle with cultural issues to keep consumers' mixed utilitarian and hedonic shopping motives in check (Sachdev et al., 2016; Tsang et al., 2004). Chinese nationals still respect the wishes of government policies over self-definitional needs. Cooperating with and adapting to the underlying country's political economy is ingrained in the Chinese system to consume products (Liu, 2018). Tolerance to conform to government policies becomes a priority and moral commitment toward the consumption of products, which regulates consumers' shopping behavior (He and Mukherjee, 2007; Wu and Wilkes, 2018). Future studies should examine hedonic and utilitarian reasons for buying products and the influence of the political economy.

This cross-sectional study may not have captured consumers' perceptions about employee identification. Each employee may have different degrees of skill sets to advance relationships with consumers. Retailers may be open to new ideas and compensate employees for taking on new responsibilities than others. Additionally, data were gathered from the consumers' perspective. Future studies may address retailers' needs to establish a long-term commitment within different consumer segments. Despite these limitations, the results provide guidelines for retailers to attract and retain the educated younger generations.

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