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Consumers' brand loyalty towards small family-owned businesses

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ABSTRACT

Family-owned businesses constitute a substantial portion of the workforce and GDP in South Africa and, with limited work opportunities in the public sector, play a significant role in job creation. As a result, family enterprises significantly influence South Africa's economy. This study aims to understand consumer loyalty towards family-owned businesses as brands by investigating family-owned businesses in the small mining town "Stilfontein" in the North-West Province, South Africa. Qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews with customers of family businesses to gather insights into brand loyalty. The identified themes and sub-themes highlight the importance of community bonds, personalized services, product quality, and symbiotic relationships in driving consumer loyalty. Participants emphasize their preference for supporting local family-owned businesses, citing a deep connection to the community and a commitment to local economic growth. Managerial visibility, employee alignment with values, and quality interactions are vital in fostering customer loyalty.

Keywords: *Brand loyalty, Family-owned, Business, Consumer, Qualitative, Interviews*

INTRODUCTION

According to Family Enterprise USA (2011), the value of the family-owned brand is reinforced by about 98 million people who are engaged in the family-owned business sector, accounting for 63% of the workforce in the United States. Family-owned businesses account for 57% of total USA GDP. In 2019, family enterprises accounted for 50% of South Africa's economic growth. Research on family business popularly examines a broad range of issues, such as the financial performance, governance, and succession of the family business (Lude and Prügl, 2018). However, very few studies aim to determine why customers are loyal to the family-owned business brand. This study developed a framework to identify the critical factors that explain why customers choose to do business with dedicated family-owned businesses.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Branding is essential for any size family business to acquire a competitive advantage in saturated markets (Jandaghi *et al.*, 2011). Valuable managerial information can be generated by collecting consumer brand loyalty data, which in turn provides marketing strategies for the business (Kyriakidis and Rach, 2010). Developing brand-loyal customers has various advantages for small to medium-family businesses, and customers tend to be less sensitive to changes in price once they are loyal and attached to the brand (Bisschoff, 2023). Branding is used as a primary tool to distinguish a product or a service from that of the competition (Moolla, 2010; Bisschoff, 2023). Branding aims to link product identification, loyalty, and enhancing new products to a specific brand or brand name. However, what are the reasons causing customers to be loyal to a small family-owned business? This is even more intriguing when loyalty is examined in a small rural town like Stilfontein.

The most significant result of brand loyalty is that brand loyalty increases the attraction of new clients through brand awareness and reduces marketing costs (Venter and Bisschoff, 2022). Competitiveness greatly influences the business environment (Richardson, 2018). Businesses are affected by six uncontrollable environmental influences, namely 1) socio-cultural activities, 2) the competitive environment, 3) politics, 4) geographical influences, 5) technology, and 6) economic stance (Richardson, 2018). Business experts have warned South African businesses to prepare for a total electrical blackout (Staff Writer, 2023). This is a clear example of a business environment that an individual or company cannot control. The ongoing power crisis exemplifies a political and socio-economic environment that is out of the business's control.

The force behind markets is driven by competition (Godfrey, 2008). The South African family-owned business industry is affected by socio-economic problems such as load-shedding, high-interest rates, and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic (Kaftan *et al.*, 2023). Hence, family-owned businesses need to improve their approach toward their market and brand loyalty strategy to maintain their market share, keep current customers and attract new customers.

This study intends to assist family businesses in identifying the areas in their business that generate brand loyalty. The research gap is why customers purchase products and services from small to medium-sized family-owned businesses instead of major retail stores. In the competitive economic environment, businesses depend on loyal customers to survive. However, determining customers' loyalty is challenging.

Managers are tasked to determine the company's risks. One of the significant company risks is the continuous entry of new products and businesses into the market, which could cause business vulnerability and customer attrition if consumer loyalty is lacking (Obeng *et al.*, 2016). Thus, every family-owned businesses, must know the drivers behind brand loyalty. This study specifically focusses on small family-owned businesses in Stilfontein to answer the question why customers choose to conduct repeat business with a specific family-owned business.

DEFINING A "SMALL FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS"

The research on family business has examined a broad range of issues, according to Lude and Prügl (2018), such as the financial performance, governance, and succession of the family business. The family business consists of various levels and dimensions. It is, therefore, not

easily defined as a sole concept. However, most definitions focus on ownership or management (Van Breda, 2014). Thus, a family-owned business is owned by a family (or families) and managed by the family or combined families (Van Breda, 2014). The National Small Enterprise Act (No. 102 of 1996) (SA, 1996) states that a family business is classified according to its turnover. However, this classification of a “small” family business using the turnover, differs between the industries in which they operate. For example, in agriculture, a small business has a turnover of less than ZAR 17 million¹, but in mining supplies it is less than ZAR 45 million. Likewise, in construction a small business has a turnover of less than ZAR 75 million, and in manufacturing it is less than ZAR 25 million. Stilfontein is a small South African mining town, and all the family businesses deal with manufacturing, construction, or trade activities with the mining sector in some way.

In this study, a small family-owned business refers to a business owned and managed by the immediate family rendering services or products to customers with a turnover below ZAR 50 million.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

What drives customers' loyalty towards a small family-owned business brand in a small mining town? This question drives the primary objective, namely, to investigate customers' brand loyalty towards small family-owned businesses.

The secondary objectives are to:

- Obtain a sound literature insight into the defining characteristics and unique dynamics of customers' brand loyalty towards family-owned businesses.
- Empirically explore the reasons for 'customers' loyalty towards small family-owned businesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature examines feasible small business brand loyalty antecedents, how brand loyalty affects customers' choices, and how these choices determine the success of the family businesses. Furthermore, the family business concept was elaborated on to contextualize this study. Brand loyalty is a biased action toward a specific brand of preference (Usman *et al.*, 2016). Bandyopadhyay *et al.* (2005) argue that brand loyalty is based on an interpersonal occurrence where individuals are loyal to a trusted brand, institution, or individual. Punniyamoorthy and Raj (2007) seminally describe brand loyalty as preferential behavior towards a brand consisting of a broader spectrum of competitive alternatives. Brand loyalty is an act that consists of a choice that is supported by the behavior of customers towards a preferred product or service (Usman *et al.*, 2016).

Cultural distinctions influence loyalty patterns, while economic conditions shape consumer behavior and preferences. Social media and digital marketing revolutionized the dynamics of brand loyalty. Notably, a small mining community has a specific culture, specifically in a small town where everybody knows everybody and where "outsiders" are not easily trusted. As such, cultural differences influence brand loyalty by altering customer preferences, behaviors, and emotional connections (Bisschoff and Els, 2023). In fact, research by Venter and Bisschoff

¹ Average exchange rate for 2023: 1 US\$ = ZAR 18.459

(2022), confirmed earlier findings by Moolla (2010), Moolla and Bisschoff (2014) and Bisschoff and Moolla (2015) that brand performance is a culturally sensitive, and that different cultures in South Africa experience brand performance differently (see also Bisschoff, 2021, and Bisschoff and Els, 2023).

These societies emphasize communal values, individualism, and community relationships, all contributing to different loyalty patterns. According to Seock and Lin (2011), the analysis of these cultural impacts reveals how brands connect with varied communities, promoting loyalty through cultural empathy. Economic variables play a critical influence in shaping brand loyalty worldwide, for instance, the effect of COVID-19 on various shopping trends and brand loyalty. Customer loyalty is influenced by socio-economic differences, purchasing power, and economic stability (Awad *et al.*, 2023). While some regions place a premium on cost and value, others place a premium on quality experiences. Hence, understanding the relationship between economic settings and brand loyalty explains why customers support specific brands despite changing financial environments. Awad *et al.* (2023) expand on the change in consumer loyalty due to the restrictions experienced in the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, where customers chose brands that could provide a service without placing the consumer in danger.

The Internet of Things has also transformed brand loyalty by allowing brands and customers to connect globally (Arulkumar *et al.*, 2022). Technological advancements make real-time engagement, personalized experiences, and cross-border connections possible. Social media, e-commerce platforms, and digital marketing have transformed how firms generate and sustain loyalty on a global scale, crossing physical boundaries to construct virtual communities of loyal customers. This means that even small-town businesses could expand nationally, and even internationally, based on their expertise.

BENEFITS OF SMALL BUSINESS BRAND LOYALTY

Sustained Customer Base

Brand loyalty is essential for cultivating a continuous and recurrent client base. Customers who form emotional bonds with family-owned businesses tend to become loyal customers who regularly return (Cardoso *et al.*, 2022). This devotion assures a consistent stream of income, which is critical to the business's financial stability and growth. Hence, brand loyalty provides a beneficial advantage for businesses, enabling them to secure future transactions and sustain their customer base.

Community engagement

Family-owned businesses frequently play important roles in their communities. Brand loyalty enhances this community integration, resulting in a mutually advantageous relationship in which the businesses develop alongside the community's success. Community engagement is done mainly through an online presence of businesses on social media as a marketing platform (Park and Namkung, 2022). Although this may be true for expanding business outside the small town's perimeter, the personal touch remains imperative in a small town. Family businesses are regarded to be "one-of-our-own" and customers support local businesses with a feeling of belonging. Business owners need to build strong relationships between the business and the community to develop loyalty. Typically, small businesses would support the local sports teams, schools, church activities, and engage in community projects.

Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Being part of the community and integrated in building pleasant experiences and emotional ties, loyal customers mature into brand supporters (Karim and Rabiul, 2022). Loyal customers engage naturally in word-of-mouth marketing, and in a small community-driven economy, brand visibility, legitimacy, and reputation, amongst others, increase greatly. According to Karim and Rabiul (2022), family-owned businesses have a wider consumer base because of their social networks, loyalty, and the customers' zealous recommendations.

Competitive edge

Brand loyalty is a significant distinguishing feature for family-owned businesses in competitive industries. While larger organizations may have more resources, family-owned businesses thrive on their personalized services, unique stories, and community participation (Temprano-Garcia *et al.*, 2023). Brand loyalty emphasizes this originality by establishing obstacles that make it difficult for competitors to reproduce the same consumer devotion.

Resilience during economic challenges

During economic downturns or crises, brand loyalty's durability becomes especially important. According to Cardoso *et al.* (2022), loyal customers, motivated by emotional ties, are more likely to continue purchasing even when faced with difficult economic conditions. Natural resilience acts as a buffer, protecting family-owned businesses from income erosions that would otherwise bankrupt less established entities.

Nurturing generational success

Family-owned enterprises have a long-term view, generally with the goal of intergenerational succession. Brand loyalty is critical in building this legacy and maintaining a strong consumer base for subsequent family members who take over the firm (Arambhan and Seetharaman, 2022:337). The goodwill and relationships built with loyal clients provide a solid basis for sustained success.

Personalized customer experiences

A preference for personalized interactions is inherent in family-owned enterprises. Loyal customers are known by name, and their preferences are preserved thoroughly (Van Breda, 2014). This personalized approach strengthens the link between clients and the business, instilling in patrons a sense of respect and understanding and strengthening loyalty even more.

Flexibility and adaptability

Family-owned firms are well-suited to capitalizing on brand loyalty due to their agility and adaptability. According to Van Breda (2014), the agility of family-owned businesses enables them to respond quickly to client input, preferences, and changing market circumstances. This increased response boosts consumer pleasure and loyalty, confirming the relationship between flexibility and long-term brand loyalty.

Small family businesses must develop loyalty amongst their customer base to reap advantages in a small-town economy. Brand loyalty promotes community cohesion, improves reputation, provides a competitive advantage, and cultivates long-term sustainability. Family-owned businesses rooted in personalized encounters, community participation, and legacy-building are positioned specifically to reap the benefits of brand loyalty, fostering ties that span generations and justify their ongoing success (Van Schoor, 2023).

BRAND LOYALTY IN SMALL SOUTH AFRICAN FAMILY BUSINESSES

Brand loyalty emerges through how customers perceive a brand (Sindhu *et al.*, 20216). The family-owned business's brand is communicated through brand personalities, which determines the consumer's loyalty (Van Schoor, 2023). Brand loyalty is a market-based resource and provides a sustainable competitive advantage to the company, which holds 'customers' loyalty (Usman *et al.*, 2016). Brand loyalty consists of a bi-dimensional concept, firstly the measurement of behavior and, secondly, the consumer's attitude towards a selected range of brands in the same category (Bisschoff and Els, 2023).

Family business range from the Italian family pizza house to the public traded family-owned business Walmart. In essence, the economies of most countries were founded and built by family businesses. The family business is dependent on the loyalty of its customers. Without the loyalty of the customer, the family business could be depleted. Therefore, the family business is viewed as unique. Van Breda (2014) emphasizes the uniqueness of family businesses since family businesses can access resources that are seldom available for non-family-owned enterprises. Family business management faces challenges such as the economic environment, policy uncertainty, competition, and external factors, but one of the biggest challenges is acquiring a loyal client base (Lude and Prügl, 20181). In addition, the family-owned business seeks economic growth in emerging markets and rarely considers brand loyalty's potential to facilitate economic growth (Sindhu *et al.*, 2021). Loyal customers are the core asset of any business; this asset can only be utilized and maintained by a strong relationship with the customer (Usman *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, the accumulation of loyal customers is linked directly to trust, defined as the confidence that a customer will acquire what is desired and be satisfied with the product or service (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2005). Furthermore, brand loyalty is built over time through positive experiences with the business from a cliental view; these positive experiences require consistent attention and managerial effort (Moolla, 2010). The genesis of loyal customers is generated through solid relationships with the customer; this relationship includes being genuine and honest, and this aspect of brand loyalty is the core of the existence thereof.

In South Africa, family businesses play an increasingly important role in creating jobs and distributing wealth; the family business is, however, not exempt from challenges (Hnatek, 2012). Thus, the family-owned business should be aware of the level of loyalty associated with their brand, to secure future growth and sustainability. Establishing brand loyalty in a company generates essential benefits since brand loyalty creates entry barriers that prevent the entrance of competitors and provides the opportunity to increase sales and revenue (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2005). In addition, brand loyalty guarantees that loyal customers will resist competitive efforts and increases the company's ability to respond to market changes (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2005).

BISSCHOFF AND MOOLLA'S BRAND LOYALTY MODEL

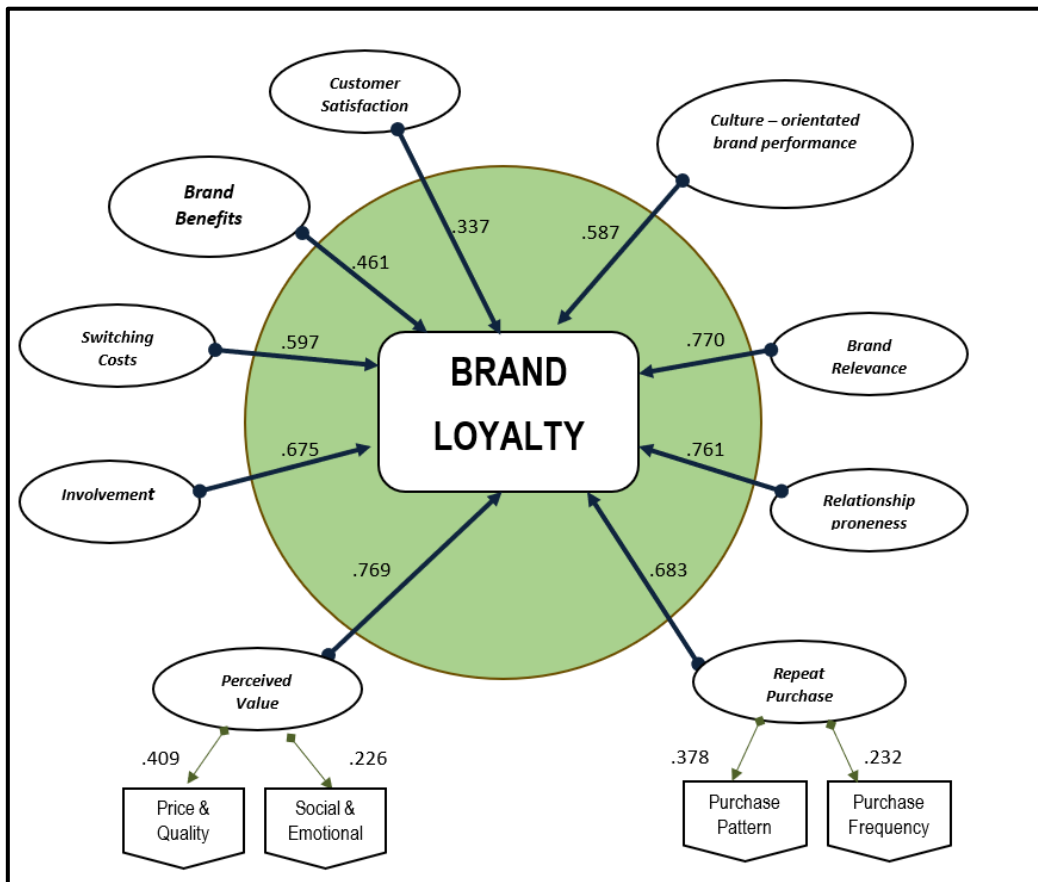
The brand loyalty model by Bisschoff and Moolla serves as the theoretical foundation in this study. Over the years, several researchers identified many brand loyalty antecedents (Dandis and Eid, 2022; Dandis and Wright, 2020; Dick and Basu, 1994; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978; Ong et al., 2018). However, regardless of the number of antecedents used to measure brand loyalty, these researchers discovered that the seminal multi-dimensional model of Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) remains important and that both attitudinal and behavioral antecedents are required to measure brand loyalty. As a result, this viewpoint advises that brand loyalty assessment incorporates attitudinal and behavioral components. Dandis and Eid (2022) conclude from their study that the strongest conceptualization of brand loyalty is adopting a multi-dimensional approach encompassing both attitudinal and behavioral components, based on Dick and Basu's (1994) multi-dimensional model of brand loyalty.

After an exhaustive examination of historical and existing brand loyalty models, Moolla (2010) found more than 100 probable antecedents to measure and manage brand loyalty from diverse applications and sectors. Moolla discovered 96 confirmed brand loyalty antecedents from his theoretical research of the brand loyalty models after scrutinizing the popularity of the antecedents. Later, Moolla and Bisschoff (2013) lowered the number of antecedents of brand loyalty to 26 and later to 12 (Moolla and Bisschoff, 2014). The final selection of 12 antecedents was kept after the literature study validated their applicability in current measuring applications. Since then, these 12 antecedents and their corresponding measurement criteria have been attempted, evaluated, and statistically verified in over 15 different businesses (Bisschoff, 2021). Banking (Bisschoff and Salim, 2014; Taoana et al., 2022), hospitality (Scholtz, 2014), pet food (Basson, 2015), fresh chicken (Schmulian, 2019), generic and branded medication (Du Plooy, 2012), membership services (Muller, 2012), cosmetics (Mashava, 2016), and even the children's soft drink market (Bisschoff and Bester, 2018) are examples of these industries. The approach was also utilized in the agriculture industry, where Wiese (2014) and Hill (2017) validated it to quantify farmer brand loyalty to their agribusinesses.

The initial model included 50 questions to assess the 12 brand loyalty factors. Examples are customer happiness, switching costs, brand trust, relationship proneness, participation, perceived value, commitment, repeat purchase, brand affect, brand relevance, brand performance, and culture.

Bisschoff and Moolla (2014) improved and verified their model to provide a functional model for measuring brand loyalty. The initial twelve brand loyalty precursors were reduced to nine. Further refining means that the initial 50 measurement criteria were reduced to 39 in the new empirical model, considerably simplifying the model and making it more practicable in the corporate sector. Bisschoff (2021) has proposed that the nine brand loyalty antecedents may be used to quantify loyalty based on the effective implementation in the various sectors (as indicated above). Bisschoff and Moolla (2015), Bisschoff (2021), Venter and Bisschoff (2022) and Bisschoff and Els, 2023's research on the refined Moolla and Bisschoff (2014) model identified and confirmed nine valid brand loyalty antecedents: (1) Culture-orientated Brand performance; (2) Repeat purchase; (3) Relationship proneness; (4) Customer satisfaction; (5) Brand relevance; (6) Perceived value; (7) Brand benefits; (8) Switching costs; and (9) Involvement (see Figure 1 for the refined model).

Figure 1. Bisschoff and Moolla's Refined Model



The nine brand loyalty antecedents in Moolla and Bisschoff (2014) and Bisschoff's (2021) model are utilized to quantify brand loyalty in this study. These nine antecedents have been defined following the multi-dimensional brand loyalty model principles derived from the theory of planned behavior (which employs both attitudinal and behavioral antecedents). However, two of the nine antecedents (*Perceived value* and *Client Satisfaction*) do not fall into either group and are classified as "other" antecedents. The categorization of the nine brand loyalty antecedents is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. Description and Supporting Sources of Bisschoff and Moolla's Nine Brand Loyalty Antecedents

	Description	Researchers
Culture-orientated brand performance	Companies must engage with their customers through their culture. Culture is the prism through which people see, comprehend, and evaluate the brand's products, services, and market events. Culture can impact consumer preferences. A brand that appeals to a consumer's culture is more likely to be recognized. It is easier for them to interact with these businesses. Culture influences consumers' attitudes and actions, which affects their decision-making processes and buying behavior. The brand is a culture in and of itself. Iconic brands are philosophies that go beyond the advantages and features of the product. Brand culture is the process of connecting culture and brand in terms of personality, mode of operation, customer experience, and values. Organizations with a strong, inventive culture may establish successful brands by discovering new techniques to give customers increased perceived value, which adds to brand performance.	Baghi and Gabrielli, 2019; Bisschoff, 2020a, 2020b; Carter, 2017; Kapferer, 2013; Kotler and Armstrong, 2019; Moolla and Bisschoff, 2013; O’Cass and Ngo, 2007, 2010; Ong <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Pratap, 2017; Thompson <i>et al.</i> , 2010; Unurlu and Uca, 2017.
Repeat purchase	Individual customers decisions to buy a certain product or service from the same firm are repurchase intents. When consumers are more likely to buy a product again, suggest it to others, and are less likely to buy competitor brands, this is referred to as repeat purchase. Repeat purchases are made by loyal customers, and previous purchasing conduct typically predicts future behavior. Repeat customer behavior is heavily influenced by availability, service or product, service environment, service delivery, knowledge, and reliability. Additional external characteristics such as accessibility, ease, or the unavailability of adequate alternatives impact decisions to repeat consumption patterns.	Arslan, 2020; Dlamini and Chinje, 2019; Huang <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Kopp, 2021; Riza and Wijayanti, 2018; Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2017.
Relationship proneness	The willingness of a consumer to build and sustain a relationship with a brand is referred to as relationship proneness. Consumer and brand connections can be strong if the consumer feels that the brand performs effectively and can match the consumer's expectations. Customers stay in relationships for a reason; thus, it is critical to investigate the cause of loyalty. This might be due to seller-imposed lock-in limits or valued qualities such as rational quality, emotional brand connotations, or cost.	Fetscherin <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Bahia, 2020; Samudro and Susanti, 2021; Soedarto <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Taoana <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Watson <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Yao, 2019.

	Description	Researchers
Customer satisfaction	Customer satisfaction refers to a consumer's perception of how well a product or service performed compared to their expectations or whether it exceeded consumer expectations. It is not just the brand's capacity to satisfy customers but also the reason for their satisfaction. Customer happiness is influenced by product quality. Offering customers more prompt and customized services may increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. Customer satisfaction is a leading indication of consumer loyalty and repurchase intentions. Customer satisfaction results in repeat purchases, brand loyalty, referrals, and recommendations to other customers.	Basson, 2015; Farris <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Grant, 2021; Mudanganyi <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Otto <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Samudro and Susanti, 2021; Shirazi <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Yao, 2019; Zouari and Abdelhedi, 2021.
Brand relevance	Brand relevance assesses how customers see a brand in connection to the marketing mix (pricing, product, distribution, and promotion). It refers to the brand's visibility and positioning concerning its competitors within its industry. It is the capacity to connect with customers and ensure that they share this with their circle of influence. What makes a brand relevant is its ability to have personal relevance. Consumers will not be attracted or retained if a brand is not personally acceptable or relevant to them. Brand relevance is the extent to which a brand influences customer decision-making and the weight it places on brand criteria.	Beyene, 2021; Johnen and Schnittka, 2020; Leischnig and Geigenmüller, 2020; Nel <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Zorraquino, 2022.
Perceived value	Customers assess the usefulness, functionality, or other important metrics when purchasing products, services, or items. Perceived value is how the consumer perceives the brand's quality and worth. It is a consumer's view that a brand is better in terms of value or quality than other brands. Perceived value may be defined as the additional value proposition that drives purchasing behavior and increases brand equity. It also improves a brand's marketability. The brand offering and price are considered to establish perceived value; this is a trade-off between total advantages acquired and total sacrifice made by customers.	Grant, 2021; Mudanganyi <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Samudro <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Samudro and Susanti, 2021; Soedarto <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Thompson <i>et al.</i> , 2010.

	Description	Researchers
Brand benefits	Brand benefits indicate the increased value of a brand. Brand benefits are customers' benefits from using a product or service. There are three types of benefits: functional (logical), emotional (experiential), and symbolic. The product traits and features related to its outcomes and performance are referred to as functional benefits. Customers' emotional or experiential advantages are what they experience when they use a product or service. It is the sensory and cognitive reactions of the customer to the brand. Symbolic benefits are the inherent advantages of a brand when eaten and relate to customers' desires for emotional satisfaction, self-expression, and social approbation. The successful use of practical and symbolic advantages improves overall business performance by enhancing client trust, loyalty, and commitment.	Ghantous and Christodoulides, 2020; Huang <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Keller, 1993; Stokburger-Sauer <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Sullivan, 2019; Zorraquino, 2022.
Switching costs	Switching costs or barriers are the costs associated with changing service providers. This fee can be avoided if a client remains loyal to their present service provider. Switching costs are not just monetary but also psychological in nature, such as the time and effort required to transfer brands. Other examples include the expense of looking for a new brand, changing customer behaviors, and the emotional cost. The expense of switching brands discourages consumers from doing so. As a result, the intensity of switching costs mediates the link between customer happiness and loyalty. Whether direct or indirect, switching costs always positively impact consumer loyalty.	Demir <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Ganaie and Bhat, 2021; Gao <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Samudro <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Singh <i>et al.</i> , 2017.
Involvement	The contact and engagement of a consumer with a brand is referred to as involvement. Brand participation influences consumers' impressions of items or brands. It refers to a customer's level of interest in a certain brand or product. Involvement assesses the level of brand interest and the brand's value to the client. The level of participation reveals how personally meaningful or appealing the product is and how much information the buyer requires to decide. When customers are involved with a brand, they are more inclined to devote time and cognitive effort to learning more about it. Customers who are very involved are also interested in the brand and perceive personal value in it. This excites consumers about the brand and encourages them to actively participate in their brand experience.	Barreto and Ramalho, 2019; Bian and Haque, 2020; Cho, 2021; Dahlgren, 2011; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; France <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Gligor and Bozkurt, 2021; Yang <i>et al.</i> , 2022.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm and design

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews collected the data. Interviews were conducted until saturation plus two were reached. A cross-sectional study design was used because it involves gathering data to identify patterns and associations between variables (Bryman *et al.*, 2018). This study collected data from a specific population of customers at four selected small family-owned businesses in Stilfontein. The assumptions and philosophies of individuals concerning the world around them are defined as a paradigm that influences the method employed when research is conducted (Collis and Hussy, 2014). Given the study's objectives, the interpretivism paradigm was used in this study because it follows an inductive approach and supports qualitative research methods. In interpretivism, data is collected through qualitative methods, and the opportunity is given to the researcher to interpret (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Population, sample, and methodology

The Stilfontein population is too large to use. As such, four small family businesses were conveniently selected, and their customers targeted. The inclusion criteria consisted of customers who regularly shopped at one of the four selected family-owned businesses. These four businesses included a business in the building industry, a motor vehicle spares supplier, a hardware supplier, and a butchery. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for a participant to participate in this study was that they had to be an active client in this family-owned business participating in the study.

Customers of large retail stores formed part of the exclusion criteria since the study focused on why customers choose family-owned businesses instead of major retailers in the building, butcher, motor vehicle spare, and hardware sectors. The owners or managers of the four businesses acted as gatekeepers and brought the researcher in contact with their client base. Through this method, the researcher conducted interviews with the eight willing participants. The management approved the permission required to interact with customers in the business, and the participants gave consent to participate in the study. Since the study wanted to determine why customers support family-owned businesses in the building, butchery, motor vehicle spares, and hardware sector, the study's outcome enables the business to exploit these characteristics attached to why customers support them and gain a market advantage.

Data collection

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews collected data on why customers are loyal to the family-owned business brand in the town. The family-owned businesses' clientele was interviewed. All interviews were recorded. The clients were asked to explain why they support the family-owned business brand.

Through an interview schedule, prominent data can be managed, and the semi-structured questions are flexible and attractive (Bryman *et al.*, 2014). The semi-structured questions consisted of a list of questions that pertained to specific topics and themes; these questions were used as a guide for the researcher. The utilization of an interview schedule with semi-structured questions is viewed as pragmatic since questions can be asked that are not included

in the original question as the response of the participant grows. The primary raw data required in this study was gathered directly from the participants and depended on their willingness to share their experiences. This approach allowed the researcher to retrieve valuable data through interaction with the participant, and elaboration on the participant's view will enrich the study (Rabonda, 2022).

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach to analyze the data was employed when the primary data were collected. Saunders *et al.* (2019) describe the thematic analysis process as a theme-giving process. The researcher coded the data into major themes and sub-themes that directly corresponded with the research question. The thematic analysis approach provided a systematic yet flexible data analysis process since it included four primary elements. These elements included becoming familiar with the data collected, coding the data, identifying themes, and linking the themes to the research question (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Assessing and demonstrating quality and reliability

Reliability determines the quality of the study. Reliability and validity enrich the interpretation and meaning of the research findings if qualitative research is conducted. In turn, it increases the confidence of others in the study's quality. Bryman *et al.* (2015) argue that trustworthiness has four specific criteria, namely 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability. The study determines how others accept the outcome of the investigation (Bryman *et al.*, 2015). The researcher can ensure credibility by using a well-designed research method.

Further, the researcher ensured reliability and validity by asking for permission to conduct the interviews in various family-owned businesses. Firstly, the researcher ensured that each participant understood what was expected during the interview. Secondly, the researcher confirmed that all interviews were recorded with permission to back up the evidential data provided by the respondents. Dependability was of grave concern to the researcher. The research design was implemented precisely as stated, and all changes were documented to ease the traceability process. In ensuring trustworthiness, the researcher presented the findings to the participants to authenticate whether the researcher understood the elaboration of the respondent correctly. Any additional information was added.

The findings are made after interviewing eight individuals actively participating as customers in the selected four small family-owned businesses. Each theme was expanded by matching sub-themes that emphasize different facets of customer-business interaction, emphasizing the drivers of loyalty. These findings provide insight into the complex dynamics between community participation, personalized service, and the mutual loyalty that sustains customers' steadfast support for these family-owned businesses.

RESULTS

The investigation into customer loyalty towards small family-owned businesses in the Stilfontein area unveiled several themes and sub-themes as the drivers of brand loyalty.

Theme 1: Support for local family-owned businesses

During the interviews, it became evident that people prefer to do business with people they know. The participants from each family-owned business clearly stated they chose to do business locally. They also choose to promote community connections and create an environment where small family-owned businesses support one another and, by doing so, invest in the local town economy. Most of the interviewees expressed their preference for quality and personal service above price and accessibility.

Sub-Theme 1.1: The local community as a loyalty driver

Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 strongly emphasized their preference to conduct business at local family-owned businesses, citing a deep-seated belief in the interchange relationship between supporting local businesses and receiving support from the community. Interviewees 1 and 5, being small business entrepreneurs, emphasized that they stay local and *buy local*" and that this mindset must form part of small communities to ensure sustainability. The interconnectedness between the community and small family-owned businesses showcased that people choose to do business with others they know. This connection is perceived as a foundational aspect of community strength and sustainability, where loyalty becomes a way to invest in the shared prosperity of their town. Community connection and interchange are the first drivers of consumer loyalty toward small family-owned businesses.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Local investment and loyalty to community brands

Interviewees 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 expressed a symbiotic mindset in their support for local businesses. They view their loyalty as a direct investment in the local economy, foreseeing their support returning to them through an increased community economy. This economic engagement aligns with a larger goal of fostering a thriving local business ecosystem, promoting the shop local idea. This sub-theme demonstrated that the customers in the economy of the town know which businesses are family-owned and tend to direct their loyalty toward these businesses. The loyalty directed toward these businesses gives the customers the security of knowing that the town's economy is sustained through their loyalty. Managing small family-owned businesses can increase the customers' loyalty by promoting the local shop idea. The interviewees' responses indicated that customers are aware of the economic stance of the community. This awareness, in turn, creates a moral obligation to support locals. As a result, family-owned businesses can capitalize on this loyalty driver and make local business's support more visible. They are promoting the businesses that the family business supports, for instance, on social media, could draw attention to the business. This can, in turn, foster the "shop local" and "stay local" drive.

In conclusion, the interviews indicated a multi-faceted and interconnected narrative of consumer behavior. This narrative revolved around the preference for local family-owned businesses, driven by trust, community connection, and a commitment to local economic growth. Interviewees actively sought out businesses with whom they share personal connections, emphasizing the concept of reciprocity between the businesses and their community. Moreover, they considered their loyalty not merely as transactions but as investments in the shared prosperity of their town, aligning with a larger goal of fostering a robust local business ecosystem.

Theme 2: Identifying and valuing family-owned businesses

Interviewees knew that they were conducting business at a family-owned business. Customers in the small-town community are acutely aware of which businesses are managed and owned by families. Most customers have a personal connection with the family and/or the management.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Managerial visibility and contribution

Participants consistently recognized family-owned businesses through their distinct management styles. The hands-on and personalized approach of managers and owners in family-owned businesses leaves a permanent mark on business operations. This goes beyond mere professionalism, extending into a realm of relational engagement where managers become acquainted with customers on a personal level. An interviewee doing business with the building material business remarked that, for example, the management knows how they want their products delivered. This interviewee (Interviewee 1) stated *They know I 'don't like sand or bricks delivered on my grass* (Interviewee 1). This statement exemplifies the personal connection between management and clients, creating a recurring purchase effect and assuring future sales. Building relationships between management and customers sustains managerial attendance, care, and personal connection. As such, relationship building is identified as a consumer loyalty driver.

Managerial attendance as a loyalty driver links clearly with the literature where a sustained customer base is built on management's attendance. Hence, managing small family-owned businesses can increase the loyalty of consumers by actively engaging with clientele. This active engagement provides managerial visibility in the business and drives consumer loyalty as derived from the responses.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Employee alignment with values

The influence of family ownership and management transcends organizational boundaries, as participants noted that employees also reflect the business' family-oriented approach. This alignment stems from shared values and a consistent attitude that resonates through all levels of the business, ensuring that customers encounter a cohesive and genuinely caring team. Interviewees stated that employees' level of expertise and knowledge is evident in a family-owned business. Interviewee 3.1 stated, "the staff are well informed about the products and knows exactly what you are referring to; they even advise you on a better product or alternatives for your choice" (Interviewee 3). This sub-theme identifies a critical driver of consumer loyalty, namely employee alignment. The employee's knowledge about products and services and their service approach toward consumers strongly influences customer loyalty (and future sales).

The Interviews revealed that participants were well-attuned to family-owned businesses in their local community. The participants recognized these businesses through their unique management styles and observed how management visibility and employee alignment with values were pivotal in cultivating consumer loyalty. This understanding underlines the interplay between personal connections, managerial engagement, employee expertise, and shared values driving loyalty within small family-owned businesses.

Theme 3: Local business advocacy and loyalty

The importance of local business support among the interviewees was profound. All the interviewees stated that they ‘do not only support one or two local family-owned businesses but also tend to support as many family-owned businesses as possible. Additionally, support for the local family-owned businesses was evident, and the advocacy for local businesses as a driver of loyalty was prominent during discussions with the participants.

Sub-Theme 3.1: Holistic community support as a loyalty driver

Interviewees demonstrated a broader commitment to supporting multiple family-owned businesses within the community of Stilfontein beyond merely prioritizing one or two businesses. This dedication stems from an understanding that a network of thriving local businesses enhances the collective economic foundation of the area. Interviewees were aware of the financial situation in the town and stated that they support and advocate for local businesses because family-owned businesses keep the money circulating locally. This advocacy resonates around loyalty not just to a specific brand but also to community loyalty. Interviewee 7 stated that “the struggle of one family business is the struggle of all businesses” (Interviewee 7). This statement signified the interrelatedness between businesses in small communities and showcased the effect of loyalty. Small-town loyalty is not restricted to a brand but extends towards a specific business. The loyalty driver in this sub-theme is labelled as holistic support in the community to support local family-owned businesses and resonates around a moral obligation seated in relationships built in the community.

Sub-Theme 3.2: Proactive community engagement as a loyalty driver

Participants prioritize local family-owned businesses as their choice of businesses to support actively in the Stilfontein community. By supporting these businesses, they uphold the shared identity of their community, promoting the growth of local businesses and, in return, the welfare of their town and its people. Interviewee 2 stated that “Stilfontein is not a rich town, we know one another, and we feel for one another, we carry our own” (Interviewee 2). This statement signifies that family-owned businesses gain loyalty not just because of products or quality but also because of community engagement. The consumer loyalty driver identified in this sub-theme is the engagement of family-owned businesses in the community, which builds brand visibility among consumers.

Theme 4: Quality and personalized service

Quality and personalized services as a theme refer to a business's reputation in the community, hence creating trustworthiness and reliability. Emphasis was especially placed on the personalized notion of doing business within family-owned businesses.

Sub-Theme 4.1: Quality as a loyalty driver

Participants perceive their loyalty as a two-way street, asserting that family-owned businesses gain customer support through deep-seated loyalty toward their community. This sense of community enrichment arises from a cohesive cycle where both business and customer contribute to the overall vibrancy of the local community. Interviewees repeatedly stated that the community of Stilfontein is a tight-knit community where people know one another. This

was mentioned as a sub-theme, indicating that the loyalty of consumers is driven by their obligation toward the town's economy. The willingness to do business in town, even though the small family-owned business might not have all the products readily available, is driven by the quality of products and services provided (Interviewee 2).

Sub-Theme 4.2: Personalized services and interaction as loyalty drivers

The attraction of family-owned businesses lies in the personalized nature of the interaction customers experience. Interviewees value the extra effort invested in understanding individual preferences and needs. This leads to heightened customer satisfaction and a strengthened sense of belonging. Interviewees stated they feel like part of the family (Interviewee 7). This feeling of belonging and personal connection drives the loyalty of consumers toward small family-owned businesses. The participants stated that family-owned businesses cannot compete with large retail stores in terms of price (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 6 further elaborated and said that the family-owned business's ability to provide a personalized service outweighs the inability to compete with large retail stores.

DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

In Stilfontein, customers' loyalty towards small family-owned businesses resonates around the profound sense of community connection and shared prosperity among consumers. The participants in the study expressed their loyalty through a belief system that the support of local family-owned businesses exceeds the act of only a transaction. Consumers recognize that their loyalty directly contributes to the sustainability of the town. Another driver of loyalty is the personalized experience offered by family-owned businesses. The hands-on and personable approach of these businesses' management creates a sense of customer familiarity and belonging. This individual attention exceeds routine transactions, creating lasting impressions and fostering an emotional tie that drives consumer loyalty.

Furthermore, the economic engagement and community welfare associated with supporting family-owned businesses contribute significantly to consumer loyalty. Participants view their loyalty as an investment in their local economy. In this context, a distinctive aspect of consumer loyalty is the advocacy for local businesses. While individual brands matter, participants demonstrate a broader commitment to the community's well-being by actively supporting a range of family-owned businesses. This collective orientation emphasizes loyalty's integral role in the community's economic climate. The embeddedness of family-owned businesses within the community also drives loyalty. Their longstanding presence fosters trust and reliability, shaping their reputation in the community. This trust, in turn, generates customer loyalty.

Lastly, the holistic engagement of family-owned businesses with the community emphasizes the loyalty equation. Participants value the products, services, or quality these businesses offer and their active participation in the community. This engagement embodies a commitment to the community's identity and welfare, strengthening the connection between businesses and consumers. In conclusion, the loyalty that drives consumers towards small family-owned businesses in the Stilfontein area is the product of a multi-faceted relationship characterized by community connection, personalization, economic engagement, collective advocacy, quality, and holistic engagement. These elements create a loyalty that transcends transactional boundaries, embodying a shared commitment to the prosperity and identity of the family-

owned businesses and the community they serve. Figure 2 shows the themes and sub-themes generated in this study.

Figure 2. Themes and Sub-themes

Theme 1: Support for local family-owned businesses	Theme 2: Identifying and valuing family-owned businesses	Theme 3: Local business advocacy and loyalty	Theme 4: Quality and personalised service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-theme 1.1: The local community as a loyalty driver. • Sub-theme 1.2: Local investment and loyalty to community brand as a loyalty driver. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-theme 2.1: Managerial visibility and contributions as loyalty driver. • Sub-theme 2.2: Employee alignment with values as loyalty driver. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-theme 3.1: Holistic community support as a loyalty driver. • Sub-theme 3.2: Proactive community engagement as a loyalty driver. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-theme 4.1: Quality as a loyalty driver. • Sub-theme 4.2: Personalised services and interaction as loyalty driver.

ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary research question is, *What drives customers' loyalty towards the small family-owned business brand in the town Stilfontein in the North West Province?*

The empirical results show that the support for local family-owned businesses with the key drivers of the local community and investment in local community brands drives customers' brand loyalty. They are, furthermore, identifying, and valuing family-owned businesses as loyalty drivers with key elements such as managerial visibility and employee alignment as drivers. Additionally, local business advocacy is considered a driver of loyalty, with key elements such as holistic community support and proactive community engagement as drivers. Lastly, quality and personalized services are loyalty drivers, with the key elements of quality products and personalized services as the drivers. The abovementioned identifies the main drivers of the loyalty of customers and brand loyalty toward small family-owned businesses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion 1: Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the research on customer brand loyalty to family-owned businesses offers valuable insights. However, certain limitations within the study suggest avenues for future research. The study's geographical constraints and reliance on non-probability sampling methods indicate opportunities for further exploration. Based on Conclusion 1, it is recommended that future research endeavors consider employing a combination of non-probability and probability sampling methods. This approach can address the geographical limitations and enhance the study's representativeness.

Conclusion 2: In view of the study's specific geographical focus and the mining town's subculture, the findings may not fully represent all small family-owned firms across the country. Consequently, future studies should broaden their scope to encompass a more diverse range of brand loyalty patterns.

Expanding on Conclusion 2, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach and undertake longitudinal studies to gain deeper insights into consumer behavior and brand loyalty dynamics over time. Additionally, conducting cross-cultural analyses and involving various stakeholders, including employees within family-owned firms, can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.

Based on the conclusion, it is recommended that future studies explore opportunities for validation and generalizability by replicating the research methodology in different contexts, including urban and rural populations. This approach can enhance the findings' robustness and applicability across diverse settings.

LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

Despite contributing to the literature on 'consumers' brand loyalty toward family-owned businesses, this study has limitations. Future research will be able to take advantage of these limitations. More data can be collected from other provinces and African countries as a future contribution. In this study, the significant limitations are the geographical demarcation and the non-probability sampling. This study's simplicity, convenience, and low cost of this type of sampling makes it ideal. While the study's conclusions cannot be generalized to the entire population, the insights gained are helpful in comprehending the specific problem scenario. Future research should investigate different geographical areas and include a broader range of small family-owned firms to widen the scope of the study. This broadening would allow findings to be extrapolated in a broader context and allow for cross-regional comparisons.

Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on family-owned businesses in Stilfontein, in the North-West Province of South Africa. The study did not adequately represent all South Africa's family-owned businesses. The study's findings were unintended to be generalized to the population. Instead, they provided insights into the nature of the problem.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study holds the potential for extension to different geographical regions, encompassing a broader spectrum of small family-owned businesses. This expansion would facilitate the extrapolation of specific findings and provide a deeper understanding of the drivers of brand loyalty in small family-owned businesses in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

"What drives the loyalty of consumers towards the small family-owned businesses brand in Stilfontein?"

Investigating consumer loyalty toward small family-owned businesses in the Stilfontein area has identified several themes and their corresponding sub-themes. Intricately woven, these insights illuminate the underlying mechanisms that cause and uphold this loyalty and match the overarching research question. The investigation, encapsulated within the outlined themes and sub-themes, establishes a coherent narrative emphasizing consumer loyalty dynamic in the context of family-owned businesses. The themes collectively signify a convergence of factors that interplay to create an ecosystem of loyalty rooted in community bonds, personalized services, quality, and symbiotic relationships between consumers and family-owned businesses. As evidenced by the data, consumer brand loyalty towards small family-owned

businesses in Stilfontein predominantly arises from the convergence of superior product quality and personalized service.

While the study has contributed to understanding consumer brand loyalty in family-owned businesses, certain limitations underscore the need for future research. These limitations, encompassing geographical constraints and the nature of sampling, offer avenues for further exploration. Notably, the study's geographical focus on Stilfontein prompts the prospect of expansion to encompass diverse regions and a more extensive range of small family-owned businesses. This study encapsulates the complex connection between consumer loyalty, community engagement, and personalized services within family-owned businesses. Its findings enrich the current body of knowledge and indicate a future rich with opportunities for expansion, exploration, and refinement.

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ETHICS APPROVAL

This project was approved by the North-West University's Ethics Faculty Committee in 2023 and classified as a low-risk project. The formal ethics number (NWU-00632-23-A4) was registered for the project.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christoff Botha is a tenured professor at the North-West University's Business School. Christoff completed his PhD in 1992 and have experience in the academic world as well as in the industry. Christoff joined the NWU Business School in 2008 after honing his skills in the private sector as an entrepreneur and consultant. During his professional journey he successfully managed the executive education (2008 until 2010) and research (2010 – 2020) programmes at the NWU Business School. He was also involved with the initiation and introduction of the Post graduate diploma in Business Management at the NWU Business School. He authored 7 chapters in university textbooks, published 71 accredited journal articles, and presented 33 accredited conference papers locally and internationally. He successfully promoted 19 PhD students, graduated 103 master's students, and acts as PhD examiner for numerous national and international universities. His research interests include employment relations, attraction, engagement and retention of talent, employability, unemployment, conflict management procedures. He also acts as a disciplinary consultant for clients in a variety of workplaces. He focuses on middle managers' training and teaching and do training for several listed companies amongst others for example Coca Cola, Glencore, Astral, South- and North-West Cooperation as well as organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

Marco van Schoor is a dedicated professional who embarked on his career as a high school educator, specializing in Economics and Science. Recognizing the importance of continuous development, he sought to broaden his expertise and enrolled in a postgraduate diploma in management at the NWU Business School of North-West University and then pursued an MBA degree. Marco's upbringing in a small mining town, where both his parents managed family businesses, instilled in him a deep understanding of the challenges faced by small local communities. Witnessing the need to empower the community with knowledge to sustain their businesses and uplift the local economy, Marco was driven to equip himself first,

recognizing that self-improvement was the key to having a positive influence on others. After completing his MBA degree Marco is focused on entering tertiary education to continue his research in small business brand loyalty.

Doret Botha is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, South Africa. Doret holds a Ph.D. degree from the North-West University (2014) entitled: Women in mining: a conceptual framework for gender issues in the South African mining sector. Her interest and expertise lie within the Sociology of Work or Industrial Sociology. She currently teaches Sociology at undergraduate and Industrial Sociology at post graduate level, while she also supervises Master's and Ph.D students in the field of Industrial Sociology. She conducts research on the following topics: gender issues in the South African mining sector, employability, work values/motivations, employee attraction, engagement and retention, remote and hybrid work, workplace changes during and post the Covid-19 pandemic. She was and is still involved in the management and conducting of research projects, locally, and internationally. She published numerous articles in accredited national and international journals and presented papers at national and international conferences on various topics in the field of Industrial Sociology.

Christo Bisschoff started his career as an agricultural economist in 1987 and joined the academia in 1991 while furthering his in Marketing and Agricultural Business Management. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of South Africa (1992). Since then, Christo published more than 120 accredited articles, and supervised about 200 master's, and 15 PhD students successfully. Today, Christo's research is primarily focused on brand loyalty and business ethics. However, he still researches his favorite topic: agricultural business management. He collaborates with his international network and focuses on comparative research. He served on the technical panel of the Marketing Association of South Africa and served as Chairman of the International Business Conference for a three-year term. He is the editor of the International Business Conference and responsible for publishing the conference proceedings, and still heads the Academic Quality Committee. He reviews articles for several esteemed journals and acts as external doctoral examiner for several national and international universities. Christo consults widely and guides businesses in their marketing and business strategy concerns. He also acts as a senior staff development consultant for two private universities. In his day job, Christo teaches marketing management at the North-West University's Business School in Potchefstroom, South Africa. Christo loves the outdoors. He is an avid angler and hunter. (His keenness on golf is unfortunately not met with the same skills levels.) Christo is married to Antoinette, and they have two sons, Christo Jnr is a Senior lecturer in Sport Sciences, while Wilhelm is an electrical engineer in New Zealand.