

**Investigating farmer loyalty towards agricultural
businesses in the Free State
Province of South Africa**

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's economy is partially based on agriculture, and the Free State Province is a key player in the country's agricultural sector. This research examines the intricate relationships between farmers' allegiance to agricultural businesses doing business in the Free State Province. The commitment of farmers is a crucial element that influences the viability and expansion of agricultural businesses in this area. Long-term success for farmers and agricultural enterprises depends on understanding the factors influencing farmer loyalty. This study assesses the importance of several loyalty variables, such as product quality, price, customer service, and trust, to establish and sustain loyalty among farmers in the Free State Province. It also looks at how socioeconomic and environmental aspects may differ throughout the province's various agricultural sectors regarding their effects on farmer loyalty. The results aim to shed light on the main factors influencing farmer loyalty in the Free State Province and provide helpful information for local agricultural businesses. The study's objective was to investigate farmers' loyalty towards agricultural enterprises using a qualitative research design and an interview schedule. The findings of this study provide a useful foundation for agricultural businesses, detailing the important aspects that drive customer loyalty to a brand. When formulating and carrying out their customer loyalty marketing programmes, these companies are advised to prioritise these aspects. These findings show that customer service quality, trust, and perceived value drive farmers' loyalty to Free State, South African agricultural firms.

Keywords: brand, loyalty, agribusinesses, trust, customer service, qualitative.

DECLARATION

I, Duncan McCalman, declare that the work in this dissertation is original and my work and that I have not previously submitted it to any other university in its entirety or part.



Signature

24 September 2023

Date

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To my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, without whom none of this would be possible, I would want to express my profound appreciation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

USA	United States of America
NZ	New Zealand
GM	Generically Modified
US\$	United States Dollar
ZAR	South African rand
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NWUEC	North West University Ethics Committee
IT	Information technology

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Manufacturing and support services for agriculture are key contributors to the performance and growth of the agricultural industry, particularly in exports and employment; hence, agro-processing is a significant component (Bugador, 2015).

A brand is more than just a semantic construct. It represents a product or service's attributes, including what it repairs, how effectively it does it, for whom it fixes it, and how the client feels after it has been repaired (Pitta & Franzak, 2008:65). Brand loyalty is an essential element of a company's survival and development, particularly for businesses that face fierce competition from regional and international brands, according to Babic-Hodovic et al. (2018:59). One of the most studied issues in empirical and theoretical studies is the identification of brand predecessors and how they affect brand loyalty as well as the identification of consumer preferences. Brand awareness (brand knowledge) refers to the degree of the brand's existence in the customer's consciousness and is a significant antecedent of brand experience, image, and loyalty (Kotler et al., 2009).

Customers frequently identify with a brand, similarly to how believers identify with their faith. Customer-brand interactions are essential to the process of developing a brand. Numerous customer-brand relationships, including self-brand connection, brand loyalty, brand love, and brand attachment, have been studied in research studies. When taken to its utmost, the emotional bond inside a brand community approaches religious traits captured in a mental pattern of worship and belief (Wang et al., 2018:736).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

South Africa's agribusiness sector is highly competitive and contributed 10% to exports, representing 2.57% towards the GDP in 2022 to the national economy (South Africa GDP share of agriculture, 2022). South Africa has a population of over 32,000 commercial farmers, with a subset of 5,000 to 7,000 individuals responsible for generating nearly 80% of the country's agricultural production. In the fiscal year 2021,

the agricultural industry made a notable contribution of almost 10% to the overall export profits of South Africa, amounting to a significant value of \$12.0 billion. The primary commodities that constituted the highest export value were citrus fruits, wine, table grapes, maize, apples, pears, and wool. In addition to its primary exports, South Africa exports several commodities such as wool, nuts, sugar, mohair, and pears, among others (Agricultural Sector, 2023). Global agribusinesses also compete with local produce on world markets, while local agriculture faces increasing competition from international producers in the trade. The leading commodities imported in 2022 were rice, palm oil, wheat, chicken, and whisky. The sources of origin for these items are located predominantly in Asia, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the Americas (Sihlobo, 2023). For example, recently imported chicken from Brazil posed severe price competition for local chicken growers when Brazil is the primary source of chicken imports for South Africa, accounting for around 70% of the total import volume. This makes Brazil the biggest supplier of chicken to the nation (Thomas, 2023). South Africa has procured 40% of its projected imports of 1.5 million tonnes of wheat, with the remaining quantity expected to be sourced from other nations at a comparatively elevated expense compared to the amounts previously acquired from Russia and Ukraine (Isilow, 2022). In addition, several technical, socio-political, and economic factors, as well as the recent Covid-19 pandemic, impacted the competitiveness of the South African agribusiness sector.

The external environment, especially the policies that govern the agricultural market, is one of the most overwhelming influences. Additionally, Climate factors such as light, water, rain fall, temperature, air, relative humidity and wind also affect South African agribusinesses in many ways (Cong, 2021)

Agribusinesses must, therefore, focus on branding as a competitive advantage. One aspect of branding that could significantly improve the competitive advantage is actively managing consumers' brand loyalty by implementing focussed marketing strategies to initiate and maintain brand loyalty. However, to actively manage brand loyalty, managers must first establish current loyalty levels; that is, to initiate the measurement of their customer's loyalty.

This study aims to improve agribusiness competitiveness by identifying crucial brand loyalty aspects of loyalty towards agricultural businesses. Therefore, this study aims to determine how loyal the Free State farmers are towards agribusinesses.

1.3 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Brand loyalty: According to Hsieh et al. (2012:311), brand loyalty is the consumer's resistance to switching to other products or services despite efforts to sway their buying decisions.

Agribusinesses: A company associated with farming and other commercial operations related to agriculture is referred to as agribusiness, a combination of the terms "agriculture" and "business". Agribusiness includes all production, processing, and distribution processes necessary to bring an agricultural product to market. (Chen, 2023).

Trust: Any commercial connection, particularly between agricultural firms and farmers, must be built on trust. Loyalty, collaboration, and long-term relationships are encouraged by trust (Beckman, 2023).

Customer service: Any company, particularly agricultural operations, must prioritise providing excellent customer service. Offering first-rate customer service benefits the company's overall performance and reputation by helping to draw in and keep consumers. (Indeed. 2023)

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 Research Questions

Primary research question: What are the brand loyalty levels of Free State farmers towards agricultural businesses?

Secondary research questions:

- What antecedents influence brand loyalty of Free State farmers?
- Are there central brand loyalty themes that can improve agribusiness competitiveness?

1.4.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the level of brand loyalty among Free State farmers toward their agricultural businesses.

- To identify common themes of brand loyalty among farmers.
- To conclude and make recommendations based on the study's results.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews. This study was conducted in two phases. First, a literature review of the studies on farmers' brand loyalty towards agriculture businesses, and second, an empirical study examining the farmer brand during semi-structured interviews in the Northern Free State Province. Research design parameters included a unit of analysis consisting of nine mixed farmers in the Northern Free State Province. In this study, candidates were contacted via the information provided by the gatekeeper after receiving their consent for an appointment to perform the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews collected the data. Interviews were transcribed for analysis to find trends and themes. The research methodology is detailed in Chapter 3.

1.6 IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

The outcomes of this research will enhance our knowledge of the brand loyalty of farmers in the agricultural business. By understanding how brand loyalty impacts farmers' purchase choices of specific agricultural enterprises, agribusinesses could improve their competitive stance in the market. The results, firstly, emphasize the farmers' dedication to service and dependability. Secondly, the results demonstrate the direct relationships between brand loyalty themes and the agribusiness environment and farmers. Thirdly, understanding brand loyalty mediates between farmers and corporate choices. In conclusion, this research contributes to the literature on brand loyalty and, in practice, to improving managerial efficiency in agribusinesses.

1.7 DELIMITATIONS

1.7.1 Delimitations

Only a few antecedents influencing farmer loyalty to agricultural firms were selected and examined because of the study's restricted scope. Additionally, only a specific group of farmers could participate in this research. Only a sample of farmers with mixed farming activities within South Africa's Free State Province was included as research participants. Other farmers, such as mixed farmers farming outside the specified geographical area, were not included in this study because they fell outside the population demarcation.

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years, marketing researchers have shown a great interest in brand loyalty, especially because loyal customers are least likely to be influenced by competitors' marketing campaigns (Lamb et al., 2015:385). Oliver (1999:34) defines brand loyalty as *"a deeply held commitment to consistently rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service in the future, causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational antecedents and marketing efforts that can cause switching behaviour."*

Huang et al. (2016:145) define brand loyalty as behavioural loyalty as follows: A *"customer's repeated purchase of a brand and intention to buy it again"*.

Ferrell and Hartline (2011:204) describe three levels of brand loyalty:

1. **Brand Recognition:** The weakest brand loyalty. Brand recognition is when a customer is aware of a brand, which ensures that the brand is considered when buying a product or service.
2. **Brand Preference:** A customer prefers one brand over others. The brand is only preferred when readily accessible. If the customer's preferred brand isn't available, they'll buy an alternative.
3. **Brand Insistence:** Strongest brand loyalty. Customers are so loyal to a brand that they will pay a premium or make great efforts to obtain it. According to (Bairrada et al., 2019), an emotional affection for a brand is a strong indicator of brand loyalty, translated into behavioural intent, such as continuing to purchase the same brand at the expense of competing brands. According to (Narteh, 2018), brand loyalty influences the propensity to pay a premium because it significantly correlates with purchase intent. In this theory, consumers with a strong emotional attachment to a brand believe that the brand is irreplaceable, exhibiting behaviours such as a propensity to make financial sacrifices, such as paying a higher price to acquire a specific brand.

The significance of brand loyalty lies in its potential to establish a connection with one's consumer base. Furthermore, it facilitates the enhancement of client retention and the establishment of corporate growth. The phenomenon of brand loyalty yields many advantageous outcomes in the business context. These include an amplified

generation of word-of-mouth leads, an increased volume of referrals, elevated rates of new product adoption, reduced costs associated with customer acquisition, enhanced profitability, and augmented lifetime value. Brand loyalty refers to the phenomenon whereby a consumer, having had favourable encounters with a particular product or service, consistently engages in repeat purchases over an extended period. Brand loyalty may be influenced by several variables, including providing high-quality goods, delivering excellent customer experience, providing satisfactory customer service, and aligning shared values (Withers, 2023).

Agribusinesses must, therefore, focus on branding as a competitive advantage. One aspect of branding that could significantly improve the competitive advantage is actively managing consumers' brand loyalty by implementing focussed marketing strategies to initiate and maintain brand loyalty. However, to actively manage brand loyalty, managers must first establish current loyalty levels; that is, to initiate the measurement of their customer's loyalty.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The anonymity of the analysis unit and participants' ability to decline to answer specifically specified questions were among the study's ethical issues. Interviews that were scheduled in advance and performed without violating participants' privacy in the comfort of their homes or workplaces were another ethical issue. Additionally, participants were made aware of the researcher's relationship with his job. Before the interview began, all participants signed the required permission papers. Additionally, the Ethics Committee of North-West University granted its permission and issued a formal ethics number (NWU-00610-23-A4).

1.10 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: Introduction

The setting and background are established in this chapter of the research investigation. The subject, the research issue, and the major and secondary research questions were all presented. The study objectives, research design, and research limits were all developed simultaneously as the problem description.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a theoretical framework and further background on the effect of brand loyalty and consumer choice on farmers and agricultural companies.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The research strategy, methodologies, and chosen techniques of data collecting are all described in this chapter for the qualitative study. Here, a detailed explanation of how the chosen approach was used to solve the research topic is provided.

Chapter 4: Findings

The study's findings are analysed using inductive reasoning. The results are presented after triangulation to address the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations in this chapter are based on the study's findings.

1.11 SUMMARY

The overview, problem statement and objectives are explained in Chapter 1. The chapter highlights the research design and the population while also showing the study's contribution and layout.

The next chapter discusses the theoretical foundation and explains branding and brand loyalty.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

A key idea in marketing and consumer behaviour, brand loyalty, has attracted much interest from scholars and practitioners. It describes a customer's steadfast, long-lasting connection to a specific brand or item, which leads to repeated purchases over time, especially in the face of competing options. Brand loyalty is often seen as a key factor in determining a company's long-term success in an age of oversaturated marketplaces and harsh competition.

This literature review aims to provide a thoughtful summary of the substantial corpus of research on brand loyalty. To shed light on the intricate elements that affect brand loyalty, it synthesises current research, discusses important theories and models, and looks at empirical data. Additionally, it examines how brand loyalty is changing in the digital era and considers the effects of new trends like globalisation, social media, and e-commerce.

2.2 DEFINING BRAND LOYALTY

Brand loyalty is an essential element of a company's survival and development, particularly for businesses that face fierce competition from regional and international brands, according to Babic-Hodovic et al. (2018). Some of the most studied themes in empirical and theoretical studies include the identification of brand predecessors and their effects on brand loyalty, as well as the identification of client preferences. Brand awareness (brand knowledge) refers to the degree of the brand's existence in the customer's consciousness and is a crucial antecedent of brand experience, image, and loyalty (Kotler et al., 2009).

Dating back, Kohls et al.'s (1957) research in 1957 found that brand loyalty is more critical than dealer loyalty. Several participants in this study repeated an 80-year-old finding, stating that they would not switch brands even if their dealers switched brand product sources.

According to additional literature review findings, a customer's motivational, brand-related, and contextual state of mind, characterised by a certain level of cognitive,

emotional, and behavioural engagement activities in direct brand interactions, can be defined as the level of their general brand loyalty. In this sense, direct brand engagement refers to a customer's physical or direct brand relationship with a focused brand instead of indirect brand interaction through mass media (Hollebeek, 2011:790).

Customers often identify with a brand similarly to how believers identify with their faith. Customer-brand interactions are essential to the process of developing a brand. Numerous customer-brand connections have been studied in research, ranging from self-brand connection to brand loyalty, love, and attachment. In its most extreme manifestation, a brand community's emotional ties reflect religious traits shown in a customer's mental pattern of worship and faith (Wang et al., 2018:736).

Comi (2019:172) found further evidence that farmers value their dealers' technical competence. Farmers are loyal to their favoured brands even when dealers swap brands. This research backs up Comi's (2019:172) assertion that farmers are brand loyal when provided with high-quality agricultural products and machinery, such as Tractors, precision monitoring planters and spreaders, genetically modified (GM) hybrids Products, which have a combined increase in output.

A customer loyalty matrix by Hollebeek (2011:797) identified four consumer segments: apathists, activists, exits, and variety seekers. Applying the matrix to this study's data implies that maize and wheat farmers involved in irrigation are variety seekers owing to their strong brand engagement. However, if new and better technically advanced machinery and genetically modified (GM) products like maize or wheat hybrids become available, these farmers may be motivated to follow consumer preferences.

The agricultural business choice subject showed that farmers choose the most direct route to market for commodities and equipment and trade discounts. This study supports the premise that established customer-agricultural company relationships, which lack technological support and a human interface, are better than direct purchases' trade discount benefits.

Yeap et al. (2018:2, 8) examined the clothing industry and stressed the importance of word-of-mouth advertising. Participant 1 found that word-of-mouth advertising boosts brand loyalty and sales. Advertising helps build brand loyalty and a strong brand image in customers' thoughts.

Segmenting customers allows agricultural businesses to give an appropriate marketing mix and develop specialised marketing strategies, according to Kotler (1997:65). The sub-theme on marketing validated the finding mentioned above. On-farm demonstrations and internet marketing tools are crucial for irrigated and mixed farmers seeking technically advanced machinery and quality branded products.

The participants agreed with Rutsaert and Donovan (2020:500) on pricing and conveying expectations. This suggests that the perceived quality of products like fertilisers and seeds is linked to their price. The pricing analysis shows that farmers are prepared to pay more for pioneering products like technically advanced machinery and genetically modified (GM) hybrids like roundup-ready maize and wheat. This is because these products are expected to outperform their predecessors. Harbour and Roucan-Kane (2008:24) found that farmers care about non-price aspects, including yield rate on return and technical aid.

The survey divided Argentine farmer loyalty into four categories: performance, price, balance, and convenience. Feeney and Berardi (2013:33) define performance buyers as those who value product productivity and technically advanced machinery above cost. This focus on efficiency affects how they see loyalty. The performance purchasers in this study followed this trend. However, Participant 4 stressed that being a performance buyer depends on the conditions, stating that certain irrigated farms with limited output potential would not justify the investment in genetically modified hybrids. The person is a price-conscious customer in a certain area. The author hypothesises that technically advanced machinery, fertilisers, maize, and wheat hybrids' high cost does not affect pricing. Instead, the option may be made to match a field's yield potential with conservatively priced GM hybrid products and technically advanced machinery costs.

The sub-theme of product support in this study is related to Weitz and Jap (1995:308). Their findings support the idea that agricultural business products are more valuable than traditional marketing. Comi (2019:172) supports the premise that farmers are loyal to their dealers' technical expertise. The research mentioned above agrees with this study's relationship-focused theme analysis. Several participants requested continuing technical help and prompt product grievance resolution throughout the season.

The research found that trust is needed for behavioural loyalty. Loyal farmers' customers pay more for their goods and share their experiences via word-of-mouth marketing.

The study of farmer loyalty to their agricultural business yielded surprising findings, especially on agricultural business management. History shows that seed businesses have lost power to the agricultural business, according to Wen (2011:64). The agricultural business's capacity to build and retain farmer-customer connections may explain this development. The farmer-consumer control relationship shows client loyalty. Agricultural businesses, especially independent commissioned agents, have become the dominant entity, outperforming agricultural firms. The research found that farmers need innovative goods, technically advanced machinery like tractors, precision planters, fertiliser spreaders, and genetically modified (GM) hybrid products to compete. These solutions provide seed businesses control over agricultural business and client loyalty.

2.3 MODELS OF BRAND LOYALTY

Several models of brand loyalty exist. In 2013, Raj (2013) postulated that brand loyalty consists of six determining factors of customer preference. Table 2-1 summarises these determinants.

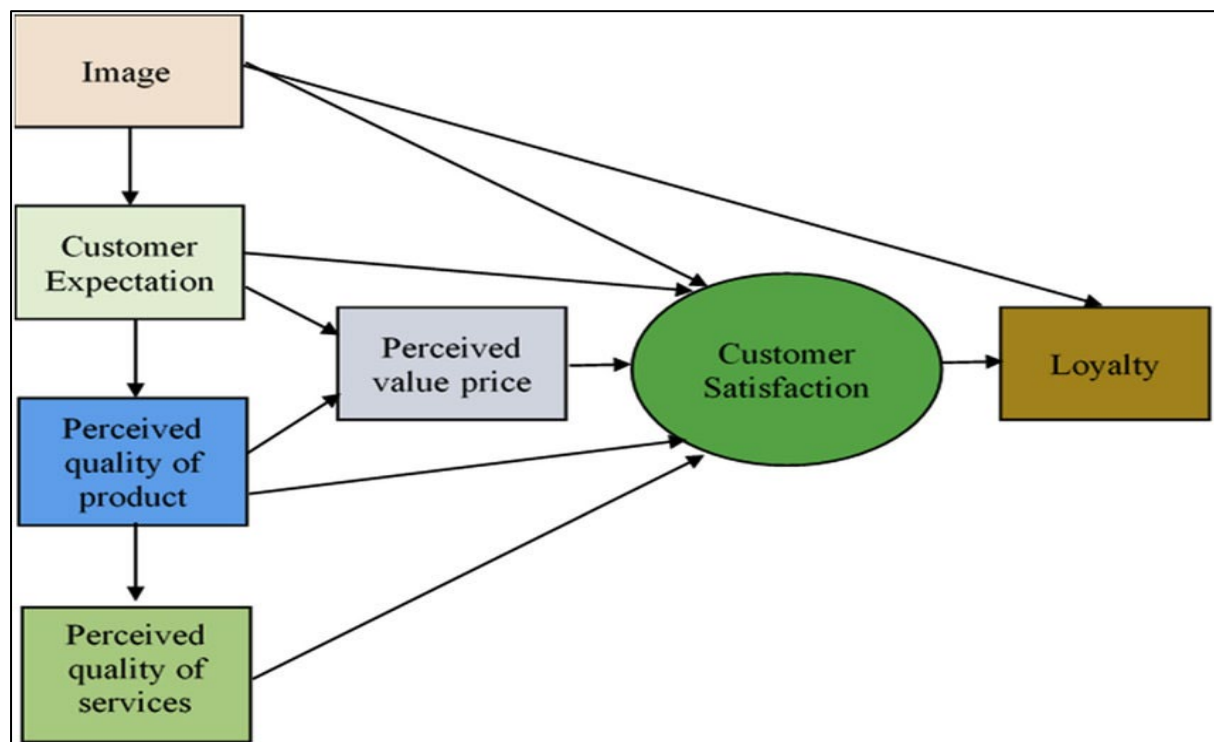
Table 2-1: Key determinant factors of customer preference

Determinant factor	Customer preference antecedent
Product reliability	Offerings of features and advantages; product quality.
Price	The price-sensitive character of the buyer making the transaction and the post-sale service provided are revealed.
Brand uniqueness	Style and design of the goods being provided and the product's reputation at the time of purchase.
Trustworthiness	The impact of celebrity endorsement as a measure of trust, which firms might build upon.
Product promotion	Promotional activities ranging from event sponsorship to commercials significantly impacted customer choice.
Customer need sensitivity	Refers to the manufacturers' readiness to understand, pay attention to, and meet the consumer's demands while providing long-term advantages.

Source: (Raj et al., 2013:48)

In 2000, Anderson and Fornell (2000) announced their model. This model, in Figure 2-1, shows that Customer expectations and Perceived quality leads to Perceived value pricing, which leads to customer satisfaction. All the antecedents contribute to Customer satisfaction as the main contributor to loyalty. Only Image has a direct influence on Loyalty.

Figure 2.1. Framework of study. Determinants of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty



Source: Anderson and Fornell (2000)

Key determinant factors of customer preference are:

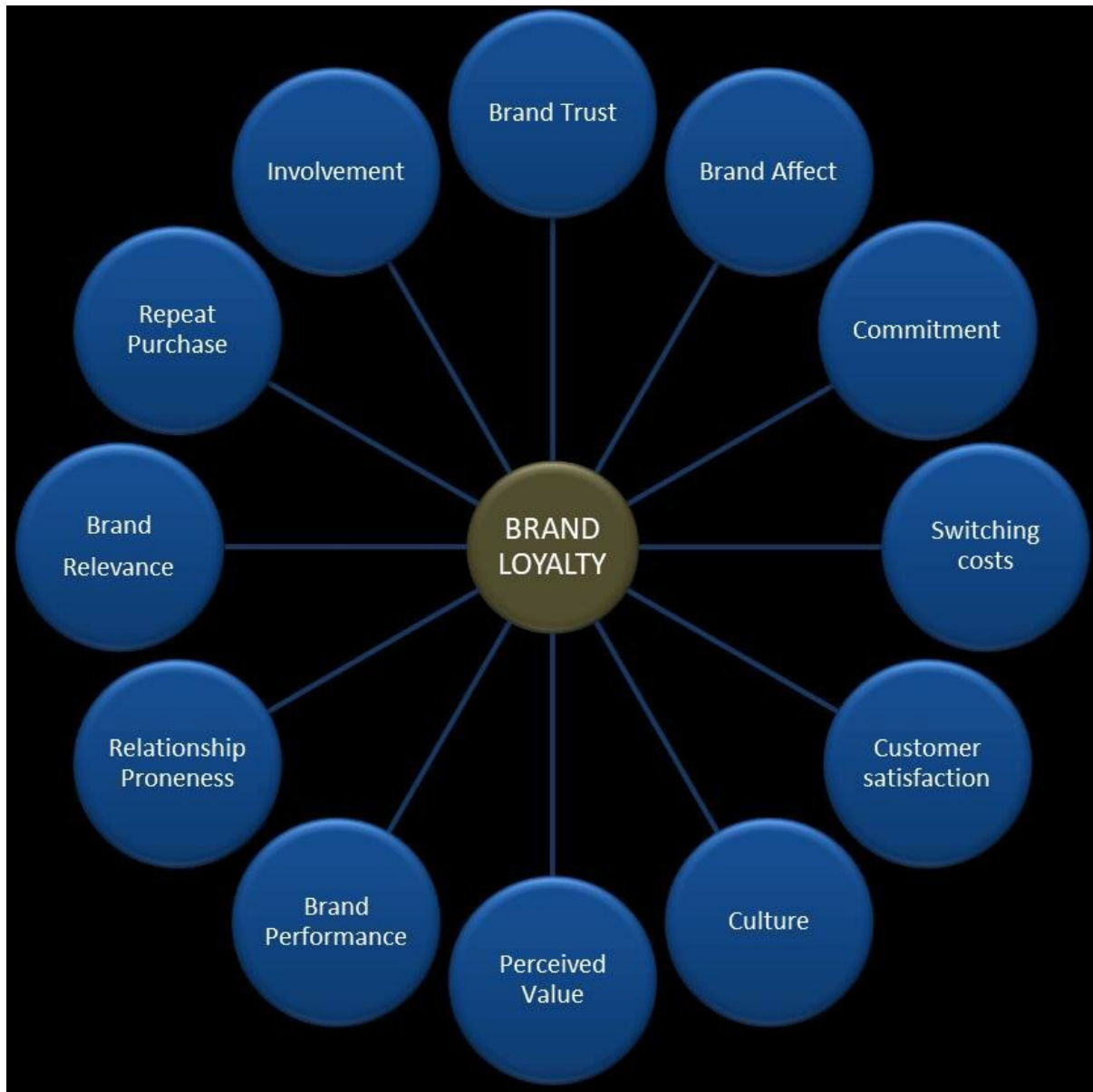
- **Product reliability.** They want your product to perform as predicted the whole time they anticipate it. Any item that a consumer purchases from you should never malfunction. The expectation then goes to your company making things right (Schenkelberg, 2021). In one study, 52% of customers say they're likely to switch brands if they don't get the kind of care they anticipate (Dethloff et al., 2023).
- **Price.** A price is the monetary value assigned to a product or service. Demand decreases as prices rise, according to demand theory (Indeed, 2022). Pricing

will undoubtedly be crucial if a product is currently in high demand on the market since a price rise may discourage buyers from purchasing it. In a similar vein, if prices are reduced under such market circumstances, then customers' purchases will rise sharply (Zhao et al., 2021).

- **Brand uniqueness.** Quality is one of the most crucial elements that greatly affects consumer decisions (Dilley, 2022). Any successful firm is built on its brand identity. Forging strong relationships with your target market, delivering exceptional customer service, and increasing profitability is crucial (Brand Identity, 2023).
- **Trustworthiness.** After all, it makes it possible for you to provide better services, foster more customer loyalty, and keep more clients (Bishop, 2022). Without trust, business cannot be done, influence is lost, leaders risk losing their teams, and salespeople risk losing their customers. The list continues. The currency of business is trust and connections, not money (Bromhall, 2023).
- **Product promotion.** Customer preferences are the hopes, desires, motives, and tendencies that lead customers to buy certain goods. Knowing consumer preferences enables you to implement successful marketing tactics, enhance your brand's reputation, and build client loyalty (Pnadmin, 2023). Choosing to purchase a product or service is the most typical example of a customer preference. For example, a consumer decides to spend money on a less expensive product than their rivals, although it is of lesser quality (Williams, 2022).
- **Customer need sensitivity.** Insensitivity may result in clientele loss, a poor review of your company, or even the loss of potential customers who will recommend you. Most significantly, our duty as businesspeople is to take excellent care of every client and customer who needs our products and services (D'Anna, 2019). Businesses must pay attention to what clients say during interaction to grasp their needs better. One may better understand the target market's expectations using the abovementioned methods.

Understanding consumer wants may help you achieve some excellent outcomes. Along with customer loyalty, referrals and suggestions from pleased clients can help you build a better reputation (Team, 2023).

Figure 2.2. Moolla's brand loyalty model



Source: Moolla (2010:197)

This model was widely used and validated in agriculture by several researchers. Hill (2018), for example, used twelve of the most recognised antecedents of brand loyalty in his study to investigate loyalty towards chicken brands in the Free State province.

The antecedents of Moolla's brand loyalty model are:

2.3.1 Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a metric used to evaluate the extent to which a company's offerings, whether goods or services, align with and fulfil the expectations of its customers. Purchase intentions and client loyalty are considered crucial indicators of consumer behaviour. Therefore, it aids in anticipating company expansion and generating income (Szyndlar, 2023). Product quality provides clients with consistently high-quality agricultural goods and services, fostering loyalty and confidence (Linkedin, 2023).

2.3.2 Brand effect

Organisations understand the importance of brand identity. This includes choosing a name, logo, and communication standards. The effect may be significant if every organisation feels compelled to do this. Innovation can keep consumers interested and devoted by consistently releasing new and better goods, services, and solutions (Fontanella, 2022).

Brand effect refers to reputation's ability to affect conduct. In businesses, branded companies enjoy more sales at higher prices. However, a strong brand has an impact beyond business. It might dramatically affect people's willingness to donate, share information, participate in campaigns, volunteer, pay taxes, and other desirable behaviours. People are more likely to support well-known groups. Names and logos help people track and remember reputations (Finkle & Finkle, 2023).

2.3.3 Switching cost

Switching costs refer to the financial obligations that are borne by a consumer or organisation when they choose to switch their allegiance from one brand, supplier, or product to another. The presence of switching fees influences the purchase decisions made by customers significantly. Customers tend to engage in recurrent transactions with a specific firm if such a company imposes significant switching costs. Conversely, customers may move to a rival when switching costs are minimal. Consumers may encounter switching costs when purchasing from another shop or firm due to levies and divergent pricing structures for items or services (Apoorva, 2023).

2.3.4 Brand Trust

Brand trust refers to the level of esteem and allegiance that consumers have towards a brand and the extent to which they see the company as capable of fulfilling its commitments. Public perception is often influenced by personal experiences and corporate messages, with marketing playing a significant role in both (Brand Trust, 2022).

2.3.5 Brand Commitment

Demonstrating a steadfast dedication to one's brand entails consistently conveying the same message throughout every consumer engagement. With regular implementation over a prolonged period, clients will clearly understand the expected standards and experiences associated with your organisation. Brand dedication is a distinguishing factor that sets your company apart from others (Bauman, 2022).

2.3.6 Culture

Brand culture refers to the comprehensive framework of ideas, values, experiences, and tangible characteristics that define a corporation and are embraced collectively by its workers and society. A robust brand culture fosters a collective of micro-influencers that unite around common ideologies and actively endorse your merchandise. Suppose the brand culture has an appealing quality that resonates with workers, prospects, and customers. In that case, it is likely to generate a desire among individuals to become part of this culture and outwardly manifest these ideals to the broader society (Hansen, 2022). Many modern agribusiness clients share a dedication to sustainable and ecologically beneficial practices (Sustainable Agriculture, 2023).

2.3.7 Perceived Value

Perceived value pertains to a consumer's subjective viewpoint or assessment on a particular product or service, often shaped by the extent to which those products and services fulfil the customer's requirements and meet their expectations. Perceived value, often called customer-perceived value, pertains to the assessment or rating that a consumer assigns to a product or service concerning other comparable offerings. Perceived value is vital for marketing professionals as it informs their strategic decision-making in effectively promoting and positioning items and services from the customer's perspective (Gordon, 2022).

2.3.8 Brand Performance

Quality brands perform better financially and provide higher returns on investment. Brand performance is how well a product or service meets customer needs. How does the brand do in objective quality evaluations? How well does the brand meet clients' utilitarian, aesthetic, and economic needs in the given product or service category? (Apoorva, 2023). Dependability in terms of product availability and delivery times may assist in increasing customer loyalty to agricultural businesses (Global, 2022).

2.3.9 Brand Relevance

Brand relevance refers to the capacity of a firm to establish an emotional connection with individuals and attain personal significance in their lives. The preservation of brand integrity is no longer contingent upon factors like as intellectual property, financial resources, or product differentiation. What strategies may be used to ensure their businesses' long-term viability and resilience? In the contemporary landscape, establishing and sustaining brand relevance emerges as a paramount strategy for safeguarding against various challenges (Clément, 2020). Excellent customer service within agriculture businesses develops a good connection with clients by providing timely answers to questions and resolving issues (Rana, 2023).

2.3.10 Repeat Purchase

A repeat buy refers to the act of a customer acquiring a product from the same brand purchased previously. The act of making a repeat purchase may indicate the level of client loyalty towards a specific brand. Additionally, this is a chance for marketers to cultivate enduring client connections. A substantial frequency of repeat purchases signifies a content and effectively kept client, resulting in reduced expenses for acquiring new customers and heightened profitability. The company's repeat purchase rate can be enhanced via online and social media promotions, digital loyalty programmes, and great customer service (Active Demand, 2022).

2.3.11 Involvement

Customer participation encompasses a diverse range of activities, including providing input on goods and services, engaging in focus groups or surveys, and collaborating with the firm to co-create or co-design products. The primary objective of customer participation is to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty by cultivating a feeling of

cooperation and ownership between the consumer and the organisation. By actively engaging consumers, companies may better understand their customers' requirements, anticipate them, and develop goods and services that align with their expectations (Collaborators, 2023).

2.3.12 Brand Trust

Brand trust encompasses more than just confidence in the quality of a brand's goods. Furthermore, it comprises the whole range of interactions that consumers encounter with the brand, from the first purchase to the subsequent product use.

The establishment of customer trust in a brand is contingent upon three primary variables that play a crucial role in fostering confidence and trustworthiness in such a brand. One of the primary characteristics is the practise of transparency and sincerity. The second criterion pertains to the practise of inclusivity and respect, while the third criterion involves the provision of customer care and the ability to empathise with them. These elements have significance irrespective of the brand's novelty (Writer, 2022). Transparency: Being open and honest with customers about the sources, methods, and costs of your products will help you win their confidence (Nguyen, 2022).

However, all these models (including Moolla and Raj and Anderson & Fornell) are quantitative, while this study uses a qualitative design. As a result, this study scrutinised and selected some antecedents for probing in the interviews.

2.4 AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS SECTOR A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

South Africa's agricultural economic development plays a significant role and can positively influence its employment opportunities and household nutrition security, according to the Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (2017:2). The Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries is the core supplier of information been utilized towards this content. The agriculture, forestry, and fisheries industries contributed to the economic growth of the country despite the worst droughts that the country experienced in 2017. South Africa's agricultural sector has seen a series of successful seasons from 2019/20. The gross value added of the industry had a growth rate of 14.9% in 2020, followed by a growth rate of 8.8% in 2021 and a more moderate growth rate of 0.3% in 2022. The main factor contributing to this phenomenon was the presence of suitable climatic conditions (Sihlobo, 2023).

South Africa does not produce all agricultural products, including wheat, poultry, and red meat. Processing agricultural products is one of South Africa's largest exports on a net basis. In 2022, South Africa exported goods with an approximate value of 122.9 billion U.S. dollars, while in the same year, it imported goods worth approximately 136.21 billion U.S. dollars (O'Neill, 2023). The statistic shows the value of goods imported to South Africa from 2012 to 2022. About 50-60% of the country's wheat requirements are imported. Between 2016 and 2020, South Africa's annual wheat imports averaged around 1.8 million tonnes. This accounted for almost half of the country's yearly wheat consumption. On average, the proportion of wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine was 34% and 4% respectively (Isilow, 2022).

In 2017, South Africa maintained a positive trade balance for agricultural products. From May 2022 to May 2023, South African exports increased by ZAR1.65 billion; this represents a growth rate of 0.94%. The value of exports climbed from ZAR175 billion to ZAR176 billion. In parallel, imports also experienced an upward trend, with a notable gain of ZAR23 billion, equivalent to a growth rate of 15.2%. The value of imports rose from ZAR151 billion to ZAR174 billion (South Africa Exports & Imports, 2023). The agricultural commerce of South Africa in the year 2022 saw a notable achievement, as the exports surged to a historic high of US\$12.8 billion, reflecting a 4% increase compared to the preceding year. In 2022, notable exportable commodities were maize, wine, grapes, citrus fruits, berries, almonds, apples and pears, sugar, avocados, and wool. Significantly, the shipments were distributed across many crucial markets. In 2022, Africa maintained its prominent position as a primary market, constituting 37% of South Africa's agricultural exports (Agricultural Business Chamber of South Africa, 2022). The Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries sectors are now considering implementing targeted initiatives to expand the agricultural industry. The department developed primary focus areas and corresponding predictions to enhance the performance of these sectors. The delineation of these focal domains is elucidated in Table 1. By including an enlarged Table 1.1, the focal point of the agriculture sector's expansion may be accentuated. (Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries, 2021).

Table 1.1: Core focus areas: Agriculture sector expansion

Essentials	Department strategies/plans
Enhance employment opportunities within the industry and stimulate its expansion.	The primary objective of the Land Care initiative is to foster the adoption of sustainable land and soil management practises within rural regions, with the overarching goal of mitigating land degradation and desertification.
Export more goods to foreign markets.	The African Continental Free Trade Area will facilitate the inclusion of agricultural, forestry, and fisheries goods within its framework. Moreover, the industry is poised to enhance its export capabilities and diversify its export destinations outside conventional markets, thus contributing to economic growth and generating employment opportunities inside South Africa.
Implement measures to reduce the volume of imported goods.	The African Continental Free Trade Area will facilitate the inclusion of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries goods within its framework. The imports are expected to see a decline.
Improving basic veterinary healthcare services for animals.	The agency intends to allocate veterinary graduates to rural regions for deployment annually.
Enhance the level of food security.	The promotion of food security is facilitated by the National Food Security Policy implemented by the department, which includes the inclusion of Fetsa Tlala as a key component.

Source: Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021

2.5 AGRIBUSINESSES

Agricultural business is also called bio-business or bio-enterprise (Heijman, 2016). Understanding the agricultural business sector in the Free State is of utmost importance and beneficial to understanding this study. A study by the South African Country Commercial Guide (2023) reports that international trade in South Africa is among the world's most diverse agricultural sectors, encircled and incorporated in private intensiveness and extensive crop farming systems, including vegetables, fruits, nuts, and grains. Planters, self-propelled sprayers, and small agricultural implements are imported from South America, Europe, and the United States. In contrast, small implements are produced locally (South Africa - Agricultural Sector, 2023). There are several well-established and well-known American brands in the agribusiness market,

including but not limited to John Deere, Massey Ferguson, and New Holland (South Africa - Agricultural Sector, 2023).

Agribusiness products can be categorized into different groups based on their main sectors. The groups with their sectors are as follows:

- **Group 1: Agriculture sector:** Agriculture, horticulture: Sub-tropical fruits such as Cherry, peanuts, nuts, potatoes, soya, and other vegetables. Poultry, beef, sheep, and pork are all livestock. Agriculturally derived raw materials and intermediate products are processed by the agro-processing sector; this is an important subset of the South African manufacturing industry.
- **Group 2: Fisheries sector:** In South Africa, aquaculture thrives due to abundant marine and freshwater resources and declining ocean-wide fish stocks.
- **Group 3: Forestry sector:** About 1% of KwaZulu-Natal's GDP comes from the forestry sector, and forestry remains a significant economic contributor to the province (Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, 2022).

2.6 BRAND LOYALTY IN THE AGRIBUSINESS SECTOR

The agricultural sector studies the interdependent, interconnected value chains in agriculture and bioeconomy and the enterprises, the industry, and the associated system (Desmond & Siebert, 2009).

The focus of this particular industry is on the optimisation of financial gains while simultaneously catering to the demands of customers via the provision of goods associated with natural resources, including but not limited to agricultural produce, food items, timber, aquatic resources, energy sources, and textile materials (Poignant, 2023).

In studies of agricultural business growth and performance, it has been found that successful agricultural businesses operate in an environment that is physically,

economically, and politically conducive. Increasing labour, capital, and land productivity allow the industry to grow and make profits while keeping prices competitive (Adamowicz, 2020).

Agriculture is not the only aspect of agribusiness. Agribusiness encompasses a wider scope through input supply, value-addition, marketing, entrepreneurship, microfinance, agricultural extension, and more (Desmond & Siebert, 2009). For brands to maintain customer loyalty, customers should receive the right value proposition based on the above characteristics. A positive brand image, product quality, and brand awareness help build brand loyalty, according to the MBA School Team (2020). Customers develop brand loyalty by repeatedly using a particular product, service, or brand. As a result, loyal consumers tend to become regular customers and refer their friends and family to products & services they have benefited from (MBA School Team, 2020).

2.7 FREE STATE CONTEXT

The Free State region is a primary producer of several agricultural commodities. During the preceding planting season, the Free State region had notable agricultural productivity, accounting for 45% of the overall maize crop, 56% of the national sunflower crop, 41% of the soya crop, 26% of the groundnuts, 23% of the sorghum, and 44% of the dry beans. The province contributed 4% to the chosen livestock sector, with goats accounting for 4%, porkers for 8%, beef for 19%, and mutton for 20%. (Free State Agriculture and Rural Development Prov Budget Vote 2022/23 | South African Government, 2022). In 2021, the Western Cape province emerged as the leading contributor to the agriculture and related services industry's revenue from sales of goods and services, generating a substantial amount of R74.9 billion, which accounted for 19.5% of the industry's total. Following closely behind was the Free State province, which contributed R51.1 billion (13.2%), followed by Gauteng with R46.4 billion (12.0%), and North West with R45.7 billion (11.8%) (Stats SA. 2021).

Given that the Free State has 25% of the country's fertile land, it seems sense that agriculture is crucial to the province's prosperity (Agriculture in the Provinces, 2023). According to Sihlobo (2019), the province produces 15.2% of the nation's agricultural output. The Free State contributed R46,9 billion or 14,1% of agricultural revenue in the

most recent Commercial Agriculture Census (2017), placing it second only to the Western Cape (Stats SA, 2020).

It is a significant producer of both winter and summer crops. Maize (43.7%), grain sorghum (18%), groundnuts (40%), sunflower (56%), dry beans (28.5%), and soybeans (46.8%) are the main grain and oilseed crops listed below, followed by the proportion that the Free State contributed to national output. This province also supplied 20.6% of the nation's wheat (Dalrrd, 2023).

The nation's cherry and asparagus industries are in the east, which is hilly and has a moderate environment. Apples, berries, peaches, plums, and apricots thrive well here, as do other deciduous fruits. This province is home to around 28% of the nation's commercial potato growers (Potatoes SA, 2018). The vegetation in the south is karoo/semi-desert.

Farming raises sheep (20%), cattle (17%), pigs (7%) and other animals (Dalrrd, 2022). The province is home to 7% of the nation's dairy processors and 11% of the nation's milk producers, who together produce 4% of the nation's milk (MPO, 2023). 16.4% of the eggs in the country are produced by layers in this province, generating over 13% of our broilers (SAPA, 2021).

2.8 SUMMARY

The second chapter of this research is devoted to giving an overview of the agricultural business environment. It also emphasises that agricultural businesses must continually adapt to regional and global trends to be relevant and viable. The chapter emphasises brand loyalty as one of the factors that might increase an agricultural business's financial stability and sustainability.

The next chapter explains the research design and methodology followed.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the research methodology is described in detail. The chapter explains the methodology, the research paradigm, approach and design before it presents the empirical data collection details.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodologies generally seek to ascertain the causal factors behind occurrences and their potential for future forecasting. Occasionally, these designs are grouped nearby and designated as "quantitative" due to their emphasis on quantifiable aspects, such as quantity or magnitude, and the following presentation of outcomes in statistical forms. Researchers are inclined towards comprehending the significance of phenomena for the individuals involved rather than just demonstrating causality, forecasting outcomes, or defining attribute distributions. Hence, qualitative researchers are keenly interested in elucidating individuals' interpretations of their experiences and their significance to these encounters. Qualitative research focuses on examining how individuals build meaning and interpret their experiences within the context of their lives and surroundings. The primary objective of qualitative research is to uncover and comprehend the many implications associated with a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009:5).

Qualitative research provides researchers with the chance to investigate social or human issues via the use of a specific theoretical framework. Using a qualitative methodology for investigation occurs within an authentic environment, whereby data analysis is conducted inductively, leading to the identification of patterns or themes. This technique is influenced by the philosophical perspectives of constructivism and interpretivism (Creswell & Poth, 2013:37).

According to Creswell and Poth (2013:40), qualitative research is undertaken when researchers seek a comprehensive and intricate comprehension of the study topic rather than depending only on pre-established material obtained via a literature review. Acquiring a thorough understanding of this kind necessitates engaging in direct

conversations with individuals, visiting their workplaces or residences, and allowing them to freely recount their narratives without being influenced by pre-existing literary knowledge. Qualitative research is undertaken to empower individuals to express their experiences, fostering their confidence in having their voices acknowledged and mitigating the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant interaction. Moreover, the objective is to comprehend the underlying reasons behind participants' replies, the cognitive processes that influenced their answers, and the situational factors that shaped their reactions. Qualitative research is used when quantitative techniques cannot adequately address the research issue. Specific metrics may lack sensitivity towards socioeconomic position or personal preference.

According to Fossey et al. (2002:730), qualitative research approaches are characterised by their objective of comprehending the significance and experiential aspects of human existence and their social surroundings. Effective qualitative research's hallmark is the unity between the underlying viewpoint or paradigm that informs the research topic and the subsequent selection of the research methodology. The quality of qualitative research and its ethical criteria are closely intertwined, ensuring that the participants' subjective interpretations, behaviours, and social environments are portrayed accurately. Moolla (2010) developed an instrument to measure brand loyalty. This instrument was applied by Hill (2018) to measure brand loyalty in the Free State Province by Farmers towards their agricultural business. This instrument focuses on twelve primary antecedents of brand loyalty and is, therefore, concluded that the validated Moolla brand loyalty measuring model is viable for use in this study. Retail businesses can increase returns by utilizing customer behaviour information to prevent customer disappointments, diversify their products, and develop customer satisfaction to build loyalty and make customers want to continue doing business with them. (Wahhabi et al. 2015). Customers who are brand loyal feel that a specific brand symbolizes superior quality and better service than any competitor, and the price is irrelevant. (Kopp, 2022). One of the most straightforward methods to promote brand loyalty is establishing a program to reward current consumers for their business (Kopp, 2022).

3.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is a process or framework utilised for research for a long time and accepted by the scientific community. Most research paradigms have their roots

in the two research paradigms of positivism and interpretivism. Each research endeavour uses one of the research paradigms as a framework for selecting its strategy and choosing the most trustworthy and appropriate way to tackle the problem. Although there are just two paradigms, many others have developed from these two, particularly in social scientific research. This study follows the interpretivist paradigm.

3.3.1 Interpretivist Paradigm

An interpretive research approach is used in most qualitative social science studies. According to interpretivism, existing probability models cannot predict it accurately because of complicated human behaviour. In addition to genes, environmental variables also affect it, and depending on the circumstance, it may change. Human behaviour is quite different from an easy-to-control scientific variable. Numerous factors affect human behaviour, which is primarily subjective. Therefore, interpretivism prefers observing human behaviour in a natural environment instead of a lab setting (Dash, 2005).

3.4 RESEARCH APPROACH

According to Schram (2003:71), phenomenology studies how humans perceive their surroundings, go about their daily lives and interact with others. Moustakas (1994:13), a significant contribution to the research methodology, describes phenomenology as a return to experience to collect thorough descriptions that serve as the foundation for a reflective structural analysis that captures the event's core. In this research, farmer loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State Province of South Africa, phenomenology aims to reveal and explain the behaviour phenomena. After that, the fundamental structures of an experience are identified by analysing the initial descriptors and impressions of the circumstances surrounding the event. To avoid getting in the way of determining the components or structure of phenomena, the researcher often must set aside or bracket existing ideas about the phenomenon of interest. Awareness is increased when preconceived notions are called into question (Merriam, 2009:25).

By noting that studying the universe through the eyes of individuals who have directly experienced experience allows for finding how participants interpret their experience and make sense of their reality, Bryman et al. (2018:42) give more insights into the

phenomenological method. Since reality is created collectively, the researcher participates in the process while attempting to keep their own biases to a minimum to comprehend the individual experiences of others.

Moran (2002:4) offers a deeper philosophical interpretation of phenomenology. His study indicates that phenomenology is an innovative application of philosophy, a practice rather than a doctrine. It is understood best as an anti-traditional philosophical approach that focuses on pursuing the reality of events and characterising occurrences. A chosen group of mixed-race farmers in South Africa's Free State province were the subjects of the planned phenomenological research, which sought to explain their lived experiences. More precisely, the research sought to understand how farmers in South Africa's Free State Province remain loyal to agricultural businesses and make sense of their experiences throughout this crucial process.

3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.5.1 Sampling method

The population of this study consisted of mixed farmers primarily located in the Northern Free State Province within the Mafube local municipality area. Mixed Farmers within this area contribute towards crop and livestock farming. Mixed farmers of the study population are knowledgeable and well-informed about the agricultural business in the Northern Free State.

The study is primarily concerned with analysing the impact of brand loyalty on agricultural businesses within the Northern Free State. It is important to ascertain the consumer's perspective of the agricultural businesses. Berg (2001:31) suggests, however, that for qualitative research projects when large-scale surveys are not feasible, researchers may depend on nonprobability samples (as is the case here, only a few mixed farmers were present). Saunders et al. (2009:233) concur that non-probability sampling relies on subjective evaluation. Given the limited diversity within the population, the researcher used convenience sampling approaches within non-probability sampling.

The unit of analysis information was in the public domain. Bryman et al. (2018:187) argue that by sampling in several places (in this example, different farmers), the

researcher may contextually categorize certain behavioural patterns of the unit of analysis.

To acquire high-quality data, the researcher conducted on-site interviews with farmers to improve realism, offer a distraction-free atmosphere, and raise the interviewee's comfort. Berg (2001:29) argues that for research to be performed successfully, the study location must be accessible, and the unit of analysis must be available.

The unit of analysis for this research did meet all of these criteria. Researchers used two major sampling techniques: probability and non-probability sampling. This study used the non-probability technique.

The sample size was based on the subjective judgement of the researcher rather than random selection (Bryman *et al.*, 2015:172). The rule of thumb was followed where saturation plus two served as the point of interview termination. All relevant information and data were adhered to the POPI Act during the interviews. For sample description purposes, the following demographic data were collected: namely, *Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Representative, Education, Style of farming, and Time frame* within the farming sector.

3.5.2 Data collection

The research aimed to ascertain farmer loyalty to agricultural firms in South Africa's Free State Province. The goal was to identify the significant influences significantly impacting farmers' loyalty to agricultural firms in South Africa's Free State Province. The numerous product features that farmers appreciate were incorporated into these decision-making factors. In preparation for data for analysis, the researcher made an audio recording of the interview after obtaining permission from the interviewee. All interviewees agreed that they may be recorded. These interview recordings allowed the interviewer to adjust some of the interviews as the study progressed (Merriam, 2009:109). Additionally, field notes on body language and subtleties were taken throughout the interviews to be reviewed afterwards. The interviewer was able to start the data analysis and keep track of the information flow thanks to these notes.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews using open-ended, prepared questions (avoiding yes/no questions), followed by probes and requests for further

information. Participants may express themselves freely and define their perspectives independently of the researcher's throughout semi-structured interviews (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40).

The interview schedule's questions helped to place the study objective in a larger social perspective. According to Silverman and Marvasti (2008:148), the optimal approach for new researchers is to keep questions basic and maintain a clear equilibrium between subject, technique, and model. Research questions cannot be utilised to determine which techniques should be used; instead, the methods are used to answer the research question. Interview questions were generated from the research questions to get the necessary information (Bickman & Rog, 2008:236).

Nine people in all were questioned with ten questions and probing questions. (Refer to attached *Annexure 4*). Interviews continued until saturation plus two was reached.

Steps taken in this study to collect data:

1. **Step 1:** Obtained authorisation from NWU Ethics Committee to conduct the research.
2. **Step 2:** Obtained permission from Farmers Union of Riversdal in the Northern Free State of Frankfort, utilised their database to conduct the research, and acted as gatekeeper.
3. **Step 3:** The gatekeepers (IT department of the company) distributed a letter explaining the research project and a request to participate in the family business research to all qualifying business owners. This email was an open invitation letter to participate in the study.
4. **Step 4:** The letter contained the live link on which the customers clicked and *accept* or *reject* the invitation. If they accept the invitation, the link also requested them to provide active consent for their data to be used for research purposes.
5. **Step 5:** After perusing the Letter of Consent, the participants consented by clicking on the "*Agree*" tick-box. The gatekeeper was informed that the specific business owner agreed to participate. They then provided the contact details to the researcher, who then contact the business owner and made an appointment to do the interview. Those who clicked on the "*Not agree*" tick box were thanked for their time, and their details were not provided to the researcher by the gatekeeper.

6. **Step 6:** A total of nine participants were interviewed. Interviews continued until saturation (seven) plus two. Seven interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate data capturing. The recording is protected by storing the original recording in a safe, while the data is password-protected on the computer. After interview completion, the transcribed data was saved automatically with the other responses inside the qualitative analysis programme. The data remains anonymous – and there was no reference to a specific interviewee. Interviewees were coded and referred to as *Interviewee 1*, *Interviewee 2*, and so forth.

Table 3-1 Inclusion criteria and Exclusion criteria of the research participants (2023).

Participant	Area	Age	Education
Participant 1	Frankfort	48	Agricultural degree
Participant 2	Frankfort	35	Agricultural degree
Participant 3	Frankfort	38	Master's degree
Participant 4	Jim Fouche	42	Agricultural Diploma
Participant 5	Frankfort	40	Bachelor's degree
Participant 6	Frankfort	49	Agricultural certificate
Participant 7	Frankfort	50	Senior certificate

The structure of the study adheres to all relevant guidelines set out by the POPIA act (POPIA. 2020)

3.5.3 Data analysis

The best source for analysis is verbatim interview transcriptions (Merriam, 2009:110). Transcripts result from a notation system required to permanently record a brief interview for use in empirical data analysis later on (Jenner et al., 2004:248).

The goal of the transcription is to faithfully reproduce the spoken words as well as extra-linguistic (eye motions) and paralinguistic (laughter, throat clearing) cues. Because a hired transcriber would not have been acquainted with the important phrases and the context of agriculture, the researcher utilised his transcription of the interviews instead of using one. The interview was formatted in such a way as to facilitate data analysis, notably by adding line numbering to the transcription page and allocating the letters A to the interviewer and B to the interviewee. A note-taking space was added to the page's margin to facilitate open coding.

Data categorization is a notion that Merriam (2009:178) endorses since creating categories involves data analysis. Reading the first transcript and taking notes are the initial steps in category building. The second list of notes was combined with the first during the second transcript's analysis to create a crude categorization scheme that reflects recurrent themes in the study and eventually leads to the categories. The researcher's initial goal for the analysis was to have several categories (themes) that would ultimately be condensed to a core handful utilised to code the data. When categories (themes) are condensed and improved, according to Merriam (2009:192), the analysis progresses to a model that explains the significance of the data. Three stages of coding were used: open, axial, and selected since phenomenology was the chosen qualitative research methodology. As previously discussed, open coding only marks data pertinent to the study. As a primary or core category (theme), axial coding requires identifying the categories and then refining them in selective coding.

3.5.4 Assessing and demonstrating quality and rigour

Reliability, reproducibility, and validity are essential for establishing rigour in quantitative research. According to Maher et al. (2018:2), the applicability of rigour in research is less relevant when it comes to qualitative investigations. Consequently, they challenge the significance of these principles in the context of qualitative research studies. To fulfil the requirements of this project, some aspects of these notions were modified and understood within the framework of a qualitative paradigm. A comprehension of the concept of rigour serves as a driving force. It empowers the researcher to fully engage with the data, fostering profound and significant interactions with the data across several dimensions. Acquiring comprehensive and abundant data

is necessary to conduct a thorough analysis using theme coding. This analytical approach enables researchers to get insights into existing practices and generate novel information (Bryman et al., 2018:342). Integrating document analysis and triangulation techniques enhanced the researcher's endeavour to comprehend a particular occurrence.

These efforts were based on a robust theoretical and conceptual foundation to guarantee high quality. Furthermore, including comprehensive descriptions in the research facilitated the transferability of the results, allowing readers to apply them to their contexts. While qualitative research is inherently non-reproducible and unlikely to provide identical results upon replication, researchers must establish dependability by generating findings and suggestions that might potentially inform or bolster subsequent studies. The last aspect of rigour pertains to the research study's validity in addressing the proposed research inquiries and making a meaningful contribution to the expanding knowledge base within the particular domain. The pursuit of academic rigour is a continuous and non-linear endeavour, characterised by a dynamic interplay that is intricately woven throughout the whole of the research process (Bryman et al., 2018:25). Furthermore, the researcher's profound grasp of the subject matter, derived from practical application and first-hand experience, served as a basis for establishing credibility. This was evident via the researcher's comprehensive comprehension of the participants' data and their ability to analyse and reflect upon it critically.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Bryman et al. (2018:120), ethical principles in business research may be categorised into four distinct domains. These domains include the following aspects: the acquisition of informed permission, the prevention of damage to participants throughout the research process, the avoidance of privacy infringement, and the abstention from using deceptive practices during interview tactics. Considering the possible adverse effects on participants, precautions were made to ensure that the publication of the results did not disclose the identities of organisations or people involved. To safeguard participants, the researchers' employer created a confidentiality agreement that delineates the scope of information accessible to the researcher and specifies the extent to which details about the research report may be disclosed about the organisation. To effectively address the ethical implications arising

from a potential absence of informed permission, the participants were provided with comprehensive information about the interview procedures in a language that was accessible and understandable to them. The participants were provided with enough information to facilitate their decision-making on their participation. Before the commencement of the interview, a permission form was also distributed. The participants were provided with information on the publication of the data in a mini-dissertation, as well as the potential for producing research articles or conference papers. The concept of privacy was also associated with the informed consent form. The participants were allowed to refrain from responding to specific questions should they elect not to do so. The disclosure of participants' names would not be made publicly available while publishing the data and disseminating the research results.

The participants were informed about the researcher's involvement with his job to effectively address possible conflicts of interest. The primary objective of the researcher was to establish a sense of trust and foster rapport with the participants to ensure mutual benefits from the study results. Upon obtaining official clearance from the Economic and Management Sciences Research and Ethics Committee, the researcher proceeded with the intended study and conducted the interview procedure. The researcher further secured formal authorization from their workplace for the study endeavour, mitigating any possible ethical concerns for the employing organisation. Preventive actions were implemented to minimise the occurrence of plagiarism.

3.7 SUMMARY

Chapter 3 explained the qualitative research methodology used in this study. In contrast, the current chapter presents the data that has been distributed and the following conclusions that have emerged from the analysis. Inductive reasoning determined the subsequent themes and sub-themes to address the study inquiries.

The next chapter explains the various themes, which are further elaborated via corresponding sub-themes that highlight distinct aspects of the connection between consumers and businesses, focusing on the factors that influence loyalty.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 explained the qualitative research methodology used in this research project. In contrast, Chapter 4 presents the dispersed data and the resulting results. The findings of this study were gathered by interviewing seven individuals actively participating as consumers in agricultural businesses in the Frankfort area of Free State Province. Each theme is expanded upon by matching sub-themes that emphasise different facets of consumer-business interaction, emphasising the drivers of loyalty. The process of inductive reasoning was used to determine the following themes and sub-themes to address the study inquiries.

4.2 RESULTS

The themes derived from the data may be briefly stated as: Loyalty, Economic Factors, Relationships, and Agricultural business preference.

4.3. THEME 1: LOYALTY

4.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Agricultural Business Loyalty

Data analysis from semi-structured interviews reveals a significant difference between branded products and loyalty towards the businesses. Participants gave a broad range of answers when asked how loyal they felt towards their present Agricultural businesses and brand product selections within the businesses. They claimed that neither a clear preference nor a particular commitment to the branded equipment agricultural businesses use nor the items they sell existed. However, greater data distribution led to a deeper understanding of how they conceptualised loyalty.

Three out of the seven participants said they had a strong loyalty to the participant who represented the agricultural business. Participant 2 declared, *“My loyalty would rather be with the person than the business”*. Spontaneously, this participant also emphasised the reliability of after-sales help and product support. Participants 5 and 7 expressed loyalty to the individual representing the agricultural businesses. Participant 7 said with certainty that the same agricultural business is represented in my region by two local representatives. *“I don't buy from any of them; I only buy from*

the one. It's about the person; if he weren't available, I wouldn't buy from that business". Participant 1 showed a loyalty preference towards the brand product instead of the representative, which was an intriguing result that was noted.

Participant 1 said, *"I must continue to be economically relevant. Loyalty is not necessary for my survival if it entails switching to a new firm and cutting ties with my present agent".*

The results demonstrated that participants were loyal to either the representative or the Branded product and could easily explain their choice of loyalty. Even though three participants expressed devotion to the individual who represented the agricultural business, most participants (four) expressed brand loyalty to the business and the products and equipment it sells.

4.3.2 Sub-theme 1: Product and company loyalty

According to Participant 7, the story has two sides; people will also move between agricultural businesses, indicating their possible lack of loyalty towards an agricultural business or brand. This participant believed that representatives often stayed loyal to the agricultural business until offered a better position or more remuneration elsewhere.

Participant 7 was sure that *"I will not move with him if I am still satisfied with the product and brand regardless of accepted new work at a potential agricultural competitor business".* The view is that even if the representative switches between other agricultural businesses, the farmer won't change agricultural businesses. Participants numbers 1 and 2 agreed with the statement. This shows that farmers are aware of problems with agent loyalty and the agricultural businesses they represent in the agriculture industry. This result demonstrates that for farmers, loyalty to a product considerably trumps loyalty to an agent who represents an agricultural business, the first secondary study question.

Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 agreed about the sentiment of product loyalty. Participant 6 had inconsistencies within this segment of the interview. When presented with a probing inquiry, a declaration was made expressing loyalty towards agricultural business individuals. Participant 6 expressed his intention to remain loyal to the business if the agent changes their allegiance, affirming their commitment to staying with the agriculture business brand.

Participant 2, although expressing a significant inclination towards agricultural business loyalty, acknowledged a certain degree of product loyalty when considering the technical advancements associated with innovative items. In his words, *"I would consider exploring new products from a different Agricultural business if they effectively addressed my needs and concerns"*. Participant 7, who had previously expressed a strong inclination towards valuing loyalty to a specific agricultural business representative, acknowledged the possibility of remaining loyal to a preferred agricultural business even if their agent had recently joined a competitor. However, they emphasised the significance of personal connection in fostering loyalty.

In conclusion, examining loyalty as a central theme resulted in inconsistent outcomes. While some farmers may highly value the individual who serves as the intermediary for the agricultural businesses, their brand loyalty to the firm itself may not be contingent upon the agent or representative's transition to a new agricultural business. However, some farmers expressed a distinct devotion to a particular branded product, regardless of the agricultural business or business associated with this branded product. This subject included the identification and exploration of three distinct categories of loyalty: personal loyalty, business loyalty, and product loyalty.

4.4 THEME 2: ECONOMIC FACTORS

4.4.1 Sub-theme 1: Price

Farmers use the most efficient agricultural businesses to transport commodities to and from agricultural companies. The intermediaries inside the agricultural business supply channel impact the final cost of a product. The research findings on price expectations are of great interest, especially considering the need for farmers to manage their increasing input costs efficiently.

Participant 1 expressed concern over manufacturing corporations contacting agricultural businesses and offering them trade discounts. *"I hold the opinion that the proposed concept lacks merit"*. What is the underlying cause behind that phenomenon? *"Why is it not possible for me, as the end-user, to directly get the discount from the producing company?"*

The effect of price as a channel expectation has unambiguous outcomes. Although there were some linguistic variances in the replies, the consensus was that farmers

were unconcerned about price effects if their product provided dependable yield and return gains.

Participant 2 said, "*Product price is not a factor for me*". However, more explicative answers provided some context for the assumption of pricing. Participant 6 said, "*It's not always about the money; it's about if the product delivers results and returns*". Participants 1, 5, and 6 agreed that the price becomes irresponsible if a product performs better than expected. It was also often said that respondents 1, 5, and 6 would all be willing to pay more for excellent Products.

4.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Yield and Return

The participants' input also demonstrated the significance of Yield revenue and rate of return as a crucial factor in decision-making from which agricultural business will be supported. All participants unanimously said that the first and most essential characteristic an agricultural product or equipment should possess is the ability to generate income via yield and investment rate. Participant 5 expressed his reluctance to use a product or equipment until it has shown its efficacy over an extended period inside his manufacturing practises, consistently yielding satisfactory results. This statement provides essential details on agricultural businesses' goods and equipment and the agricultural business used. It emphasises the need for ongoing on-farm testing and demonstration to attract and retain new clients. Participant 5 further reinforces the sub-theme of the preamble by expressing their commitment to achieving a constantly improving growing yield objective.

4.4.3 Sub-theme 2: Technological Advances and Genetic Progress

The interviewed participants in this research use sophisticated technical practises and place significant importance on technology's productivity enhancements to their agricultural activities. Indeed, their commercial operations are contingent upon technology and genetic progress. Individuals with a strong inclination towards new technical breakthroughs sometimes exhibit a proactive tendency to be early adopters of emerging technology trends.

This technology requirement is supported by Participant 1 when he emphasises that technology in products and technically integrated equipment is very important for sustainability in farming. Participant 1 stated, "*If we can have genetic progress*

technology in a Product and equipment that can minimize stress during critical stages, we will be able to consistently achieve the yield objectives”.

Participant 2 added to the discussion on the need for genetic advancement by highlighting the delayed access to technology experienced by South African farmers, resulting in a consistent delay of around three to four years behind global countries like NZ and the USA. Participant 4 emphasised, *“We need continuous genetic advancement.”* He highlighted the importance of achieving genetic development to develop genetically modified hybrids that exhibit enhanced performance while maintaining equivalent requirements for water, fertilisers, and management inputs.

Participant 5, who has a comprehensive understanding of an agricultural business that encompasses this challenge, argues that the agriculture industry will gain a competitive edge in attracting and retaining loyal farmers by successfully bringing novel technologies to the market. Participant 1 concurred with this audacity, emphasising the necessity of the ongoing introduction of novel products and genetic advancements.

Participant 5 further emphasised the perpetual need for technical progress by expressing the pursuit of yield increases and biotechnology as integral components of future development. Participant 6 expressed the viewpoint that obsolete technological items and equipment are no longer included in his selection of products and suggested that the agriculture businesses should terminate these outdated product versions.

Participant 4 agreed that in regions with lower agricultural productivity, they exercise caution in adopting sophisticated technological items and equipment. This cautious approach is based on the understanding that these high-tech hybrids would be limited by the current conditions, making their use unwise. In contrast to the participants mentioned above, who exhibit a strong dependence on technological advancements and genetic progress in their decision-making process for product purchases and equipment choices within agricultural businesses, the findings of this study underscore the significance of agricultural businesses proactively staying ahead of the curve and continuously enhancing their product offerings to maintain a competitive edge and sustainability. Considering the viewpoints mentioned above, it is evident that the farmers in this study comprehend the significance technology brings to their agricultural practices. Furthermore, they intend to selectively employ this technology

in their most productive fields, prioritising those that yield the highest investment returns through their preferred agricultural business.

Price does not seem to be a fixed factor in determining an agricultural business as long as new goods satisfy the needs of farmers. Farmers often display loyalty towards the agricultural business, the product, and/or the machinery when their expectations are realised. The research on this subject showed how important it is for an agricultural business to provide farmers with high-quality technical equipment that continuously raises output levels and rates of return. These constantly rising production levels, a result of technological development, make farmers viable and will also influence the agricultural business they choose.

4.5 THEME 3: RELATIONSHIPS

4.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Customer Engagement

Farmers appreciate specific characteristics of an agricultural business engagement in their interactions with compensated representatives or agricultural businesses. Not surprisingly, participants needed specific expectations and features about relationships with their chosen agricultural business, given the general interpersonal nature of the agriculture business sector. Personal connections, regular visits to the farm, and a thorough comprehension of their requirements and preferences about their agricultural business are all included in this.

Participants 4, 5, and 7 reported that they had selected trust as a necessary condition for the personal aspect of such interactions and as an agricultural business route. The research made it clear that the connection between the individual representing the agricultural business and the farmer is driven by trust.

Trust is related to the human connection theme and the agricultural business's confidence in its equipment and goods, including whether or not they would provide value and durability to its farmer, as stated by Participant 4. Participant 1, "expressed *trust can only be built up over time*". Participant 5 said, "The agent you work with is what makes me build trust and loyalty in the company I work with".

Participants 1 and 2 recognised the significance of competent after-sales support as a noteworthy attribute of their preferred agricultural business. Participant 2 preferred

to be challenged by their agent about equipment and product purchase selections, encouraging them to assess and consider various possibilities consistently.

In addition, Participant 2 provided more explanation by stating: *“I am receptive to those who provide novel perspectives on my agricultural practises, provided they possess a comprehensive understanding of my established farming methods”*. However, the nature of our partnership is also intertwined with the requirement for mutual compatibility and familiarity. Without these elements, sustaining an open relationship would be challenging. Agents need to know about my identity, farming practices, and the specific characteristics of the soils under my cultivation.

Participant 4 amusingly highlighted the distinction between friendship and on-farm help by suggesting that some agents assist at the farm level for legitimate reasons. Still, others may prioritise supporting their acquaintances. Participant 6 also expressed the significance of interpersonal connections by asserting that they would have a greater sense of ease in the presence of an individual who demonstrates respect, unlike an untrustworthy and oppressive individual who lacks alignment with their particular value system. Participant 4 stated, *“I am inclined to establish a strong bond and establish a sense of affinity with those that share similar ideals and beliefs as myself”*.

Participant 2 succinctly encapsulated the outcomes within this thematic domain by presenting a compelling case. Firstly, the emphasis is on the quality of equipment and products. Secondly, the focus shifts towards the provision of after-sales support. This encompasses frequent visits and a comprehensive understanding of the farmer's needs, individual circumstances, challenges, and farming practices.

This sub-theme highlights the significance of trust and the provision of after-sales support. After-sales service evaluation is important, and the chosen agricultural business must provide sufficient product support.

4.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Product support

The agricultural business selection in the geographical region under examination is influenced by the significant technical expertise necessary to assist the advanced farmer's needs. Consequently, equipment and product assistance emerge as crucial factors to be considered. Participants in this survey emphasised the significance of equipment and product support without doubt.

Participant 2 eloquently articulated the assertion mentioned above by highlighting the significance of an agricultural business approach towards addressing grievances and the expeditiousness with which they respond, characterising it as excessively burdensome. The individual substantiated this viewpoint by asserting that if they disregard a grievance, they will refrain from future purchases of their equipment and goods, irrespective of their superior quality. The participant mentioned above provided an additional valuable insight into the research, stating that although it is possible to get equipment and supplies from various agricultural businesses, these entities only engage in product sales without offering any supportive services. While they provide financial assistance, there is a lack of on-farm agronomy support and after-sales service.

Participant 7 agreed with the viewpoint mentioned above, emphasising the significance of the service he now gets, the physical presence of the agricultural business partner on his farm, and their extensive expertise, which often surpasses that of the farmer.

Participants 4 and 6 expressed a common preference for product support that aligns with their agricultural business selection, emphasising the need for a consistent and frequent presence in their respective industries. Participant 4 emphasised that providing ongoing technical assistance and constant communication significantly influenced his decision when selecting a distribution channel and an agricultural business. Furthermore, Participant 1 made mention of significant product support needs that include not just technical assistance but also encompass various phases of the product life cycle and punctual delivery. The individual expressed his apprehensions by formulating the following inquiries:

“Does he fulfil his commitments?” Is it possible to get the required equipment and product volumes?” Is the delivery expected to be punctual? Is the consumer adequately notified in advance by the company or individual on any potential issues with the product, or are they informed about introducing a superior alternative?”

Similarly, Participant 1 articulated his need for extensive product assistance, emphasising the importance of having access to all relevant information. He stressed the necessity of understanding which equipment and goods suit his specific geographical location, considering the varying seasonal and soil conditions.

Participant 5 emphasised the importance of having specialist equipment and product support when addressing a complaint about technologically advanced equipment or products like animal feeds and poisons. In contrast, Participant 2 highlighted the significance of product support in terms of product placement and usage. The agricultural business and supply channel plays a crucial role in supporting the diverse needs of farmers by providing appropriate goods that align with the specific farming circumstances and needs.

When combining the data about this issue, it is crucial to underscore the significance of connections and certain human attributes. Agricultural businesses should prioritise establishing frequent on-site visits via their supply channels to foster personal connections and gain a comprehensive grasp of their customers' specific requirements and preferences. Continuous product support throughout the season is an additional need for establishing effective relationships between the participants in this research and their chosen agricultural business. Agricultural businesses must pledge sufficient technical and product support on the farm level to accommodate the equipment and products associated with the needs of the farmers. The cultivation of trust is fostered via successful relationship-building and the provision of product support. The trust element plays a significant role in farmers' decision-making process when selecting an agricultural business within the agriculture businesses. The results of the subsequent topic indicate that farmers may possess explicit expectations that influence their purchase choices. An agricultural business's selection is ultimately influenced by several factors, known as key drivers, which include product features such as yield, technology, and pricing.

4.6 THEME 4: AGRICULTURAL BUSINESS PREFERENCE

4.6.1 Sub-theme 1: Current preferences

Data analysis from semi-structured interviews reveals a significant need for a direct agricultural business with the most efficient method to reach the end client. Initially, farmers perceived agricultural companies as a distribution route of little value. Furthermore, farmers lacked a clear differentiation between an agricultural business representative and an independent agent when selecting an agricultural business.

The perspective mentioned above was substantiated by participants 6 and 7, who preferred not to acquire their goods from nearby agricultural businesses. Indeed, it was said that these agricultural businesses do not engage in any direct marketing activities. Participant 6 *“explicitly said that the agricultural businesses would have been unaware of your need for items such as seed and fertiliser products had it not been for the involvement of the local agent”*. Participant 7 agreed by stating that businesses refrain from selling seeds and fertilisers. The acknowledgement of Participants 1, 2, and 5 also included the farmers' preference for direct seed and fertiliser purchases.

Participant 5, in contrast, drew attention to a prevalent misconception about using two often utilised agricultural businesses, fertiliser and seed businesses, as he said, *“I acquire the products directly from the designated agent or representative of the fertiliser and Seed business”*. Participant 1 further reinforced this misinterpretation by expressing, *“I posit that they are agents”*. Notably, among the participants, only Participant 4 demonstrated a precise understanding that fertiliser and seed businesses utilise distinct agricultural business structures, either via direct employment of salespeople or through independent agents that operate on a commission basis.

It is important to emphasise the distinction between these two agricultural businesses. Using either a paid representative or an independent commission-based agent by fertiliser and seed businesses constitutes distinct approaches to accessing the market, necessitating divergent management systems. The observation that a significant proportion of farmers lack a comprehensive comprehension of the distinction between these two agricultural businesses serves as a conspicuous signal that fertiliser and seed businesses possess adaptability in their marketing strategies targeted at their specific market position. This research indicates that farmers do not have a distinct inclination towards either a direct representative or a commissioned agent in agricultural finance. Instead, they only rely on agricultural financing to fund their product purchases. This is due to the availability of production financing loans tailored explicitly for fertilizer and seed procurement within the agricultural industry.

Another discovery suggests the increasing usage of digital technologies in placing orders. Participant 1 emphasised the significance of digital applications in enhancing transparency and transaction efficiency. The questioned farmers in this research are recognised as prominent figures in their respective domains. Throughout the

interviews, they consistently underscored the significance of using technology as a strategic approach to sustain a competitive edge. Hence, it is unsurprising that the incorporation of technology in marketing tactics had a significant role in their selection of an agricultural business.

4.6.2 Sub-theme 2: The role of marketing

The findings about this sub-theme suggest that alternative marketing channels that visibly exhibit product performance via demonstration plots and field days, alongside digital technology, have significant worth. The potential impact of digital marketing endeavours is likely to hold substantial importance in forthcoming marketing campaigns. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the significance of human interaction in distributing and selling equipment and goods remains pertinent.

Participant 2 emphasised an essential need for selecting an agricultural business about the marketing function. The effect of word-of-mouth communication from one's neighbour plays a significant role in shaping one's decision-making process regarding selecting agricultural businesses. The statement indicates that the information being discussed is more significant than what is seen often in news articles or radio broadcasts. This assertion was reinforced further by the participant's remark, wherein they indicated that the most influential marketing message is sent by their neighbour, who asserts that the preeminent farmer in the vicinity employs genetically modified wheat and maize integrated with cutting-edge technology and modern equipment, resulting in commendable outcomes.

Participants 3 and 4 emphasised the significance of marketing responsibilities associated with on-farm trialling initiatives and new product releases in their decision-making process regarding agricultural businesses. Participant 4 asserts that they thoroughly understand the businesses involved in the planting trials and those seeking to advertise their products. The significance of packaging and brand design is a sometimes-disregarded aspect within the realm of marketing. Participant 5 emphasised the significance of the first visual impact of a fertilizer and seed bag's brand design, highlighting the need not to underestimate its attraction. Agricultural businesses should be aware that farmers place importance on branding fertiliser bags or genetically modified maize seeds, particularly when there are little yield disparities between competing products.

Participant 3 presented a compelling case for the significance of on-farm performance trials. The Frames states that their decision to buy a certain fertiliser or genetically modified hybrid is not influenced by an appealing field sign but rather by their experience of planting it in a trial and seeing the resulting harvest. Participant 1 highlighted a significant discovery about the forthcoming marketing demands in selecting an agricultural business. The establishment of robust brand awareness is vital, necessitating the indelible imprinting of the brand in the minds of consumers, whether it is via the prominent display of a logo on a hat or the strategic broadcasting of advertisements. The field of marketing has transformed in parallel with advancements in technology. The strategies and approaches that are effective in the present day may not be effective in the subsequent four or six years. Furthermore, it is important for marketing strategies to include creative approaches.

Participant 1 also mentioned Field Day's purpose as a marketing initiative. The presence of a corporate expert at a farmer's market lends legitimacy to their products and allows the specialist to answer questions. Despite the accessibility of information on the Internet, there is inherent value in having a tangible, physical presence.

The condensed results of the first topic suggest a significant inclination among participants in this survey to see little worth in procuring from agricultural businesses, instead favouring the most direct approach to product distribution in the market. Moreover, agricultural enterprises must have a robust presence in on-farm research and demonstration operations since farmers place significant importance on brand equity. The proposition that word-of-mouth marketing has more value than printed media initiatives also maintain validity. On-farm field trials, which serve as platforms for demonstrating novel goods, continue to shape farmers' preferences about agricultural businesses effectively. The on-farm field trials also demonstrate a company's commitment to market development, leading to word-of-mouth advertising that supports future sales endeavours. The establishment of a physical presence on the farm, together with the implementation of novel marketing strategies, serves as the foundation for cultivating client relationships and fostering loyalty.

4.7 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings are summarised in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1: Findings executive summary

Loyalty	Agricultural business loyalty	Farmers who emphasise personal connections and trust are more likely to be loyal to the individual who represents the agricultural business.
	Product/company loyalty	Frequently, loyalty to the product sold by a rival firm surpasses allegiance to the salesperson. However, if new competing goods perform better than existing ones, farmers may switch their agricultural business.
Economic Factors	Price	As long as new items outperform their predecessors, this is not a deciding factor.
	Yield/Return	The selected agriculture business should always aim to improve yield as a product characteristic.
	Technology/genetic progress	Seed companies that provide innovative technology via their agriculture businesses will get new clients and keep existing ones.
Relationships	Customer Engagement	Personal interactions and frequent on-farm visits foster trust, which is an important factor in the selection of an agricultural business.
	Product support	Product concerns must be handled promptly and responsibly. Throughout the season, provide skilled technical assistance (which is regarded to be absent in agricultural business).
Agricultural business preference	Current preferences	Farmers like to take the quickest path to market. Agricultural businesses are of little worth. At the farmer level, there is no apparent separation between commissioned agents and paid representatives.
	The role of marketing	On-farm demonstrations and presence are greatly desired. As farmers grow increasingly technologically savvy, innovative digital marketing methods are essential. Word-of-mouth marketing is still a powerful tool.

Table 4-1 shows that four main themes could be identified. These themes also comprise nine sub-themes. Common in all the subthemes is that farmers conduct business effectively, and their loyalty follows good business opportunities (such as new seed cultivars). In addition, product and service quality also plays a significant role in their choice of agribusiness. These findings dovetail well with the identified antecedents from all three models discussed in the theory.

4.8 SUMMARY

This chapter categorised the interviews' data into themes. Seven interviewees who actively patronise agricultural businesses in the Frankfort region of the Free State province were analysed.

Each highlighted topic is carefully examined in this chapter and is clarified further by related sub-themes that emphasise different facets of the consumer-business relationship, with a special emphasis on the elements that motivate loyalty. Inductive reasoning was used to identify these themes and sub-themes, enabling a thorough analysis to respond to the study's research objectives.

The next chapter is the final chapter of the study. It presents the conclusions, recommendations and potential areas for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 is the final chapter and provides insights into the conclusions and recommendations of the study. The chapter also lists the research questions and answers these questions based on the findings. Finally, the chapter offers some advice to researchers who would like to continue along the lines of this study.

5.2 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As shown by the data collected in Chapter 4, the primary research question of determining the central study inquiry was to ascertain the extent of brand loyalty exhibited by Free State farmers towards agricultural businesses.

For farmers, trust is a key component because they depend on the agricultural business support for the delivery of new technology as well as the essential technical support provided by a dedicated support team to help farmers with technical problems relating to equipment, software, or any other technology offered by the agricultural business.

The interconnection between the two secondary study topics is facilitated primarily by the factor of trust, which was found to be unexpectedly significant. It is worth mentioning that brand loyalty exhibits a clear correlation with brand success, including yield returns or genetic advancement, and significantly impacts the selection of an agricultural business. Marketing initiatives that cultivate a favourable brand perception concurrently foster heightened brand loyalty within the agricultural consumer base.

The findings suggest that farmers do not clearly prefer a directly employed representative and a commissioned agent representing the agricultural business distribution channel in terms of effectiveness. The effectiveness of an agricultural business is not reliant on whether the structure of the channel is direct or indirect within the sampling region.

The second study question about the characteristics that influence the preferences of farmer consumers towards a particular agricultural business yielded several conclusions. The individuals within the surveyed region place importance on technology advancements to sustain profitability. They tend to be loyal to agricultural enterprises that can promptly provide these technological advancements while offering on-site technical assistance. Once again, it should be noted that client preferences remain unaffected by the presence or absence of a direct or indirect agricultural business. Based on the analysis of farmer's preferences regarding technology delivery and product support, it can be inferred that agricultural businesses possess little significance as a distribution channel platform. The impact of pricing was minimal and did not significantly influence the selection for agricultural business. The study found that product quality and after-sales support significantly influence farmers' selection for an agricultural business.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

By implementing these recommendations, agricultural businesses can build trust, enhance loyalty, and create mutually beneficial partnerships with farmers. Several useful suggestions are made for the larger agriculturist sector to ensure that both farmers and agriculturist businesses profit from the findings of this research

- Encourage the use of data-driven decision-making, precision agriculture, and digital record-keeping tools by farmers by providing them with opportunities to embrace new technologies and digital tools.
- Tailor after-sales services and offerings to meet each farmer's specific needs and challenges, as different regions and individuals may have unique requirements.
- Ensure fair and transparent pricing for agricultural products so that Farmers feel they are getting a fair share of the profits. Establish a dedicated support team to assist farmers with technical issues related to equipment, software, or any technology the agricultural business provides.
- Promoting and supplying high-quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and technically advanced machinery to help farmers improve crop yields and product quality. By promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices, many farmers are increasingly concerned about the impact of agriculture on the environment.

- Streamline the supply chain to reduce post-harvest losses, improve storage facilities, and ensure efficient transportation and distribution. With the transformative impact of digitization on distribution and the consequential challenges offered by online distribution to conventional brick-and-mortar channels, the agricultural sector continues to place significant importance on the physical presence and direct engagement of on-farm operations.
- Providing access to affordable credit or financing options for farmers to invest in their operations and manage cash flow.
- Collaborating with agricultural research businesses to develop innovative solutions that benefit the business and the farmers. The increasing significance of technically advanced machinery genetically modified (GM) products, such as GM wheat and maize hybrids, in South Africa's irrigated wheat seed market, necessitates the active involvement of human factors to realise this technology's potential value fully. Facilitate access to broader markets, both domestic and international, for farmers' produce, providing them with opportunities for higher revenues. This involvement is crucial for ensuring that South African farmers remain globally competitive.

5.4 LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

This research was limited to a single geographic region inside the Free State Province. Only a selected sample of the farmer population from a specific district was used. Consequently, it was impossible to generalize the study's findings and outcomes. However, this study's results are significant, as they present clear evidence of factors that influence the choice of farmers' loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the geographical area in question.

5.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The scope of this research has the potential to be broadened to include more geographical regions, as well as incorporate a more extensive sample of farmers engaged in mixed farming practices. This would enable the generalisation of some results.

In addition to providing technically sophisticated equipment and genetically modified (GM) hybrid products, numerous agricultural businesses in the fiercely competitive

agricultural sector also provide farmers with access to crop protection agents that effectively protect their crops from weed infestation, insect damage, and fungal infections. Hence, there is a potential avenue for future study to assess the efficacy of integrating brand loyalty for both seed and pesticides into a unified product offering and to examine the impact of this choice on farmers' brand purchase behaviour. The significance of digital marketing in engaging the technologically inclined consumer base of the next generation of farmers, who are poised to assume control of family farming operations, has potential value for agricultural enterprises. Agricultural businesses may enhance their marketing strategies and cultivate customer loyalty by comprehending the marketing platforms that resonate with the emerging market segment and effectively aligning their marketing messages with the preferences of this new target group.

5.6 SUMMARY

Chapter 1, the first chapter of the research paper, presents an introductory section that encompasses a general overview of the study, a description of the issue, and the research goals. Additionally, the document delineates the research methodology target demographic and underscores the significance of the investigation alongside its organisational structure.

Chapter 2 of the text centres its attention on the agricultural business environment. The present chapter examines the need for agricultural enterprises to effectively respond to local and international developments to maintain their relevance and long-term viability. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of brand loyalty as a contributing component that might augment agricultural enterprises' fiscal stability and long-term viability. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the qualitative research approach used in the present study. In contrast, the present chapter (probably Chapter 4) summarises the data that has been gathered and the conclusions that have been reached from the study. The analytical procedure used in this study utilised inductive reasoning to find themes and sub-themes that are pertinent to the research objectives.

Chapter 4 of the research summarises the collected scattered data and presents the findings. These findings were obtained through interviews conducted with seven individuals who are regular customers of agricultural enterprises in the Frankfort region of the Free State Province. Within this chapter, each highlighted topic is meticulously analysed, and a deeper understanding is achieved through associated sub-themes that shed light on various aspects of the consumer-business relationship. Particular attention is given to the factors that drive customer loyalty. The methodology of inductive reasoning was employed to uncover these overarching themes and their corresponding sub-themes, facilitating a comprehensive analysis that addresses the study's research objectives.

Chapter 5 provides an insightful analysis of the results and suggestions made from the research. The study's research questions are provided in this chapter, and each is answered using the information learned during the research method. The chapter offers helpful suggestions based on the study's findings and summarises the important takeaways. These suggestions may be used by agricultural enterprises trying to increase customer loyalty and sustainability as practical advice. Additionally, Chapter 5 offers guidance and recommendations for future scholars interested in following similar lines of investigation, lending a helping hand in this area.

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ANNEXURE 1: LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE



Dynamic Language &
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Friday, 06 October 2023

To whom it may concern

Re: Confirmation of language edit, typography and technical precision

The MBA mini-dissertation "Investigating farmer loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State Province of South Africa" by D McCalman (28365550) was edited for language and technical precision. Referencing and sources were checked to comply with the Harvard guidelines specified by the 2020 NWU Reference Guide.

Final, last-minute corrections remain the responsibility of the author.

Antoinette Bisschoff

BA Languages (UPE – now NMU); MBA (PU for CHE – now NWU); Translation and Linguistic Studies (NWU)

Officially approved language editor of the NWU since 1998
Member of SA Translators Institute (no. 100181)

Precision ... to the last letter

ANNEXURE 2: ETHICS APPROVAL



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31 March 2023

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) on 31/03/2023, the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: Investigating farmer loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State of South Africa

Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Prof Christo Bisschoff-MBA
Student: McCalman D(28365550)

N W U - 0 0 6 1 0 - 2 3 - A 4

Institution Study Number Year Status

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type:

Commencement date: 1/4/2023

Risk: **Low**

Expiry date: 1/5/2024

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

•

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- *The study leader/supervisor (principal investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:*
 - *annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and*
 - *without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.*
- *The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.*

ANNEXURE 3: INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant

This **Informed Consent Statement** serves to confirm the following information as it relates to the officially approved research project at North-West University on:

Investigating farmer loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State Province of South Africa.

1. The sole purpose of this study is to obtain information from farmer customers to determine farmer loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State of South Africa.
 2. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may opt-out at any time. You may also decide not to answer specific questions.
 3. The procedure to be followed is a qualitative research design, which entails a semi-structured Interview of approximately 30 minutes. Basic information will be asked regarding your perceptions, Expectations and experiences regarding farmer loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State of South Africa. This will include questions on preferences for certain Brands and Agricultural Businesses. Questions regarding purchasing decisions and brand loyalty will also be posed.
 4. To protect your privacy, the confidentiality of the data is guaranteed, and only the combined results will be used for research and publication purposes. You may opt that a pseudonym be used in the research report. The data disseminated from this study will be used to inform findings in a mini-dissertation for a MBA and possible publications in the form of academic articles.
 5. Also note that interview questions will not have a correct or incorrect answer. The aim is to determine your individual preference.
- Please indicate your consent.

I hereby give my consent after having read the above information that my data may be used as stated above.	YES	NO
--	-----	----

Thank you for your time.

.....
The Researcher

.....
The Participant

ANNEXURE 4: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How long have you been in the Farming business?
2. How long have you been doing business with a selected agricultural business?
• Probe: What influenced them in doing business?
• Probe: When did they start doing business?
3. Do you often buy the equipment you need via a dealership or business representative, and if so, why?
4. Do you know whether there are any further commercial avenues that can be used to buy agricultural equipment in your region? Which, if any, is it?
5. What characteristics indicate trust and loyalty in the particular agricultural firm (or companies) that you purchase from?
6 What motivates you to make a certain agriculture purchase?
7 What feature of a particular agricultural company product do you appreciate most? Why?
8. Do you have a stronger sense of loyalty to the agricultural industry as a whole or to the particular agent or representative you work with most frequently?
9. What enhancements would you want to see in the agricultural company you presently purchase from in the future?
10. What requirements must new competitors in the agricultural industry meet before you consider making a change?