
Decoding Customer Loyalty: A Thematic Analysis of Consumer Experiences in Subscription-Based Businesses

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Abstract

Background: Subscription-based businesses are globally adopted due to its ability to provide ease of use in its services in exchange for recurring payments. The business model, however is highly dependent on customer experience such as perceived value, trust, pricing, and satisfaction, which shape customer loyalty.

Aim: The study aimed to assess customer loyalty and experiences through subscription-based businesses' in Sri Lanka's e-commerce sector.

Methodology: The study implemented an interview-based qualitative research design, focusing on Sri Lankan urban centres. A convenience sampling technique was used, with 15 customers recruited as participants. Thematic analysis was used to discern the patterns and trends present in the Sri Lankan e-commerce sector regarding subscription-based businesses and customer loyalty. Major themes emerged included Perceived value and pricing strategies, User Experience and Customer Loyalty, Trust in Subscription-based Services, and Brand Image and Loyalty.

Findings: Participants revealed that perceived value with balanced pricing strategies were major drivers of customer experience and customer loyalty. Moreover, user experience had a major role in increasing customer satisfaction with personalised services being prominent. Constraints such as uneven infrastructure were reported, however, it was also noted that subscription-based businesses can use honest advertising and strategies to overcome this constraint in the long run.

Conclusion: The study highlights that subscription-based businesses can create significant customer loyalty within Sri Lanka since they are delivering value, user experiences, honest advertising, and are can create value for its customers.

Keywords: Customer Loyalty, Ease of Use, Perceived Value, Perceived Usefulness, E-commerce Sri Lanka.

1. Introduction

Customer loyalty is the willingness to continue purchasing from organisations despite competitive alternatives. It is also considered a strategic factor for organisations seeking revenue growth and improving their brand image (Pereira et al., 2025). By demonstrating trust and transparency, subscription-based businesses can foster customer loyalty. This is due to open communication about their services and product information, which is perceived positively by customers. This helps create value for customers and engage them with relative ease. Companies also implement perks for customers such as loyalty programs, reward program, renewal and referral options so that customers can be engaged and are provided with satisfaction (Sachani, 2025).

Customers tend to trust brands that reliably meet their requirements and are transparent with their services, such as conducting honest advertising (Busser & Shulga, 2019).

Subscription-based businesses encourage such practices, which leads to repeat purchases, increase commitment, and thus increase customer loyalty (Yum & Kim, 2024). This helps create positive word-of-mouth for businesses, citing the positive perception created by such practices and thus can generate customer loyalty.

Digital environment refers to subscription-based businesses, which are business models generating their revenue by charging their customer a regular fee for their ongoing product. Subscription-based businesses shift the association from one-time transactions to continuing interaction, such as regular upgrades of their services, thus establishing a recurring revenue-generating model (Kakkar et al., 2025). These businesses have been conceptualised to create and maintain their value over time and provide personalised ease of access to its customers (Liu et al., 2025). It is mainly based in the digital environment and can connect with its customer at any given time. This feature

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is one of the most important since it helps in establishing customer loyalty, evidenced through trust, perceived use of access, hedonic values, and also brand image (Albayrak et al., 2020).

Additionally, current trends regarding subscription-based businesses have demonstrated strong growth and emerged as a potential alternative to traditional companies. This is due to the convenience and access to personalised services provided by subscription-based businesses, which makes them suitable for growth in emerging markets (Akterujjaman et al., 2025). One of the significant trends in subscription-based business includes freemium models, where organisations offer their products for free for a short period before customers pay for more services. Freemium models rely on their services and convenience, which renders the possibility of their users paying for subscriptions to use their services further; evidence of strong customer loyalty (Shang et al., 2024).

One of the significant benefits observed in subscription-based models is that it introduces predictability in their revenue, i.e. guarantees profits for their shareholders. This allows subscription-based businesses to forecast ongoing trends and gauge opportunities for more personalisation (Zhou & Dai, 2024). This is also effective in continuous service improvement and simultaneously building customer loyalty. With better services, the organisation can generate trust and improve its perceived value amongst its customers. On the contrary, existing literature also identified challenges for subscription-based businesses, such as the risk of the depreciating value of their services. Such events can lead to unreliable services and subsequently poor user experience (Lindström et al., 2024). This can erode their customer loyalty, citing subscription-based businesses' inability to provide better personalised services.

Despite global trends, it is observed that there are substantial gaps present regarding subscription-based businesses, such as limited literature solely focusing on the business model. Within the Sri Lankan context, literature about subscription-based businesses is not widely covered, which is largely attributed to its population composition, i.e. 77% population reside in rural areas with a lack of proper digital infrastructure (Tennakoon, 2020). Such a large population concentration in rural areas makes it difficult for subscription-based businesses to penetrate the Sri Lankan market. Trends, however, suggest that subscription-based businesses have witnessed an increase in Sri Lanka, where 53% are registered online and use the internet for various purposes (Nandasena & Wickramasinghe, 2024).

However, despite high internet usage in urban areas, preference for traditional payment models, such as cash-based transactions, still poses a potent threat to subscription-based businesses in Sri Lanka. There is limited research conducted in identifying subscription-based businesses and consumer loyalty in emerging economies, in this case, Sri Lanka. The study, therefore can derive empirical insights regarding subscription-based businesses' scope in Sri Lanka and its ability to create customer loyalty.

Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate subscription-based businesses' influence on customer loyalty in Sri Lankan e-commerce sector.

Literature Review

2.1 Factors Influencing Customer Loyalty

Perceived value is considered to be a core driver of loyalty within subscription business since it comprises of utilitarian elements i.e. price, service quality, and hedonic aspects i.e. satisfaction. Value perception is largely dependent on service quality since the ways businesses provide services to their customer base, such as cancellation services, renewal services, and complaint management, help in shaping a strong perception about subscription-based businesses (Anisa & Tjhin, 2023). In addition, subscription-based services use recommendation systems that helps in tailoring services to each customers' preference. This includes recommending products, contents, based on the users' past usage (Shukla et al., 2024). This helps in increasing customer loyalty due to heightened perceived value. Subscription management is another element in this case that is effective.

Trust includes confidence established with subscription businesses and is a crucial element due to recurring payments, renewals, and transparency about services. As the e-commerce industry expands in Sri Lanka, it is quite important for subscription-based businesses to develop trust with their customer base (Younis & Zeebaree, 2025). Customer satisfaction and brand image are closely interrelated, and the former has a proportional and direct impact on brand image. Positive brand image, coupled with strong customer satisfaction, can lead to strong customer loyalty. Strong customer experience is quite important in maintaining customer loyalty and is used to shape the relationship between customers and organisations (Ernawati et al., 2025). For subscription-based businesses, attracting new customers is largely dependent on services' quality and reliability, thus enhancing brand image.

2.2 Customer Centric Marketing Strategies

E-commerce has transformed substantially as it is a platform connecting businesses with their customers and allows businesses to implement strategies to create both customer loyalty and brand image (Rosário & Raimundo, 2021). Therefore, it is important for subscription-based businesses to understand digital platforms and to adapt their marketing approaches to appeal to their customers and create positive customer behaviour. Subscription-based businesses are also required to consider factors that lead to customer loyalty and to ensure it is both attracting and retaining their customers (Lindström et al., 2024). This is quite important for improving its position in the business environment and can provide personalised services to its customer base.

Customer-driven marketing strategies are created to create value for customers and to retain them for a long period. Strategies in this case include implementing AI-based recommendation engines that help in analysing customer behaviour. This leads to improved perceived value and reduced customer churn rate (Ranasinghe et al., 2023). Moreover, implementing omnichannel for localised personalising is also important since it delivers consistent and tailored services through digital platforms. Localising content, such as providing options in the country's language and payment options, reflects the customer's preference and culture, which is crucial for deepening customer loyalty.

2.3 Subscription-Based Services' Importance and Constraints in Sri Lanka's E-Commerce Industry

Subscriptions are potentially a new step in developing the e-commerce landscape of Sri Lanka. The consumers of Sri Lanka are reported to be after convenience, and many are still associated with the necessity of cash-on-delivery and encounter the constraints of the payment gateway (Gamage, 2023). From an economic perspective, Sri Lanka's e-commerce sector has demonstrated significant growth, which creates opportunities for subscription-based business. Expected growth in this sector tends to be \$1.06 billion in 2025 and is expected to growth by 10% at the end of the decade. Subscription models can allow Sri Lanka to be at par with their counterpart Asian economies and create niche for itself in e-commerce market (Statista, 2025). Subscription-based services can provide substantial value for e-commerce businesses since, unlike traditional businesses, this model can guarantee predictable revenue streams. The surplus revenue can then be reinvested in

expanding personalised services and thus ensure customer loyalty. As e-commerce is on a positive trend, subscription-based businesses.

2.3.1 Strategies to Integrate Subscription-based Services in Sri Lanka E-Commerce Industry

Sri Lanka is witnessing a shift towards personalised shopping experiences since e-commerce companies are leveraging customer data according to their needs. This includes customising interfaces and adapting marketing accordingly (Salah & Ayyash, 2024). This ongoing trend creates strong potential for subscription-based businesses as it can integrate strategic interventions such as localising content and optimising customers' purchase intentions.

The use of various payment methods, such as digital payments or hybrid, i.e. facilitating both COD and digital payments as a solution, can assist in mitigating the barrier of trust and adoption. For integrating subscription-based businesses, Sri Lanka must invest in a digital payment structure and create awareness and customer loyalty about subscription-based models. A similar approach was adopted in Japan, where characteristics of digital content subscription were identified and efforts were made to address barriers (Yang & Kwon, 2024).

Several subscription-based businesses in Sri Lanka struggle with competition owing to a lack of trust due to differences in services, which thus reduces purchase intention. Hesitation towards digital payment still remains despite adopting strong payment management systems and regulations.

2.5 Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

Used in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM); Perceived usefulness refers to the customer's belief about a product and service while perceived ease of use indicates the perception customers have about a product and the value it creates. Both are significant in influencing customer purchase intentions and both work together to create value for the customer (Nguyen et al., 2024). Subscription-based businesses integrate both PU and PEOU while facilitating its customer base since it influences them to adopt new services and products. Moreover, PU and PEOU are also used for satisfying hedonic values and repeat purchase intentions and also ensuring that its customer base is accustomed to new services as well (Puspitasari et al., 2023).

2.6 Theoretical framework

2.6.1 Technology Acceptance Model

TAM uses the notion that there are two dominant determinants to the attitude regarding the application of a certain technology, which is described as Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), impacting their intention to use technology (Dehghani & Mashhadi, 2024). Perceived usefulness may be the extent to which the subscription service is perceived to provide useful benefits e.g. cost savings, convenience, exclusive content, and ease of use a specific level to which the user perceives the process of signing up, managing the subscription, navigation, moving the mouse, paying, and the platform overall (Ali & Warraich, 2024).

Within Sri Lankan context, Technology Acceptance Model model assists to determine how consumers make decisions that are dependent on the use of subscription services and their drop-off. Sri Lankan adoption of e-commerce and online shopping signifies that usefulness and ease of use can predict adoption. Factors affecting the adoption of e-commerce among Sri Lankan executives within the private sector, Perceived Ease of Use and Perceived Usefulness yielded a positive and high correlation with e-commerce adoption.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

A qualitative interview-based research design was used in this study in Sri Lanka, particularly its e-commerce industry to understand customer loyalty. For this study, 4 themes were derived i.e. Perceived value and pricing strategies, User Experience and Customer Loyalty, Trust in Subscription-based Services, and Brand Image and Loyalty.

3.2 Data collection

Primary data collection was done in this study involving customers using subscription-based services from the e-commerce industry in Sri Lanka. Interviews were conducted from these participants regarding subscription-based models implementation in Sri Lanka to gauge their perceptions and opinions about the model and the impact it has on their loyalty.

3.3 Sample size and techniques

Relatively moderate sample size was selected for this study i.e. 15 consumers associated with Sri Lanka e-commerce industry. Non-probability methods such as

convenience sampling technique is used to obtain relevant inputs about subscription-based businesses.

3.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used after compiling interviews and their responses about subscription-based businesses and customer loyalty in Sri Lanka's e-commerce industry. The data analysis technique helps in assessing the ongoing trends and patterns present in the e-commerce industry related to customer loyalty.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting the interview maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in sharing any personal details.

3. Results

Theme 1: Perceived value and pricing strategies

"I bought it as I felt that the monthly cost was cheap in relation to the package of benefits that I received premium content, ad-free service and a few discounts. At the external entrance I believed I was receiving high perceived value of what I was paying."

The response reflects strong perceived value since the customer effectively weighs the costs and the benefits received from subscription-based business services. Within this context, it refers to discounts and premium content, thus demonstrating utilitarian value assessment. The hedonic aspects are being addressed through this service, and thus create customer loyalty. From an e-commerce perspective, it implies that subscription-based businesses can improve their customers' experience and gain loyalty through customer-centric strategies and providing personalised access to services.

"Many of the features I had been told to include were added at additional cost. I felt a decline in what I was getting and was thinking about dropping".

The aforementioned response effectively captures the value decay present that is evident between pricing and expectation amongst customers. The response indicates that the participant is not satisfied with subscription-based businesses, citing their ineffective pricing strategy. Therefore, there is a lack of transparency and thus also decreased perceived use and fairness, which leads to reduced customer loyalty.

"What kept me loyal was the trial period they provided and how they provided the offer: First month of free services followed by minimal monthly fee. The normal

price was made reasonable by such anchoring. Their occasional successive rise in prices was also accompanied by additional benefits, and assisted me in remaining loyal to their fairness”.

This response derives information about perceived use and pricing strategies in place, including freemium models, which can thus increase the credibility of subscription-based businesses. Moreover, subscription-based businesses can use their services, such as freemium models, to manage their customers’ expectations and subsequently loyalty. Such policies are required to be in line with being transparent with its customer base and can communicate its issues with relative ease. This can satisfy its hedonic values and also improve its credibility and image amongst the customer base.

Theme 2: User Experience and Customer Loyalty

This theme has emerged as a response to both reliability and usability of the digital platforms, which indicates responsiveness of its customers’ requirement and providing them personalised access.

“When the subscription process was smooth and could cancel or switch the plan without much trouble, I did not feel insecure as a customer.”

The main inferences derived from the response refer to interface aesthetics, usability, and subsequently to subscription management. Perceived risk and usage are dependent on user experience and thus are a precursor to increasing both customer loyalty and trust.

“Sometimes the application is slow, or the contents do not load, which infuriates me. However, when the company had resolved those problems in a flash, and modified software allowing me to surf, stream, and handle subscription without any problems, it enhanced my loyalty.”

This response attracts interest to system performance (speed, availability) and reliability and issues content failures, slow loading hurt user satisfaction, but they can be immediately addressed and overcome to regain their trust and loyalty. The relationship between the weaknesses of the user interface and service quality is quite evident. The companies have to ensure that the site is functioning properly most of the time, but they also need to be ready that sometimes they will crash, and they should have a customer support team and technical team ready to be on the site as soon as possible. Quick resolution of the problem is a loyalty repair process.

Theme 3: Trust in Subscription-based Services

“I recommend this service to others due to their effective communication regarding renewal dates, potential increments, fiscal cancellation, and their fulfilment of promises. Openness creates a confidence in me”.

This reaction is based on high trust on transparent and communicative foundation and openness tends to decrease hesitation and subsequently develop the consumers confidence.

In the case of the subscription-related business, clear communication regarding all conditions (renewals, potential increases, cancellation, etc.) is also paramount. Customers would develop trust and would not think they are being taken unawares by unpleasant superficialities. In Sri Lanka, it can assist in overcoming reluctance associated with the lack of confidence in digital payment models. Furthermore, companies are notified to emphasise these policies on inquiry, renewal, email/applications.

“Once they had service outage but they publicly apologised, promising a credit, and what happened. The trust I had regained following such a reaction. This would have led me to unsubscribe, especially had they either ignored it or covered it up”.

Subscription-based businesses can be equipped with a system of addressing the service discontinuities: prompt response, apology, compensations or interventions, outward communication. This overtly affects loyalty. Service recovery behaviour can work against the Sri Lankan firms, where it may be essential in this group that the user is sensitive towards reliability, transparency, etc. Moreover, such situations can be controlled through the potential integration of incident logging, customer notification and compensation policy systems.

Theme 4: Brand Image and Loyalty

“My taste is to use a brand, which is familiar to me, and with good reputation even at a higher price. The existence of a valued brand makes me believe that the service is one that is stable and reliable, a factor that will affect my loyalty”.

This theme reflected the significance of these factors as brand familiarity and reputation. The respondent implies that the price can be higher, but the worth they place on stability and reliability based on a reputable brand highlights the issue of cost. Therefore, brand image is a positive index of quality/trust and reduces perceived risk. Moreover, subscription-based services should invest in brand building and perception by creating and sustaining

a positive brand identity, reputation, and reliability. The marketing communications must emphasise the brand's stability and past or good reviews. Additionally, consistent investment (delivery, service, assumption) should be considered since a mismatch between the brand image and reality destroys loyalty.

“As long as others are suggesting the brand, or are leaving good reviews, or the brand is in media or reliable sites, I will feel more comfortable subscribing. The social evidence and brand image are important that way. It also applies when the brand matches my values, such as being local, ethically sourced, sustainable, and so on. When the brand image is what I am concerned with, then I remain loyal even when small problems occur, as it seems like the support of something I believe in.”

The theme reflects that minor user and service problems can be overlooked when the brand image can satisfy personal values and thus brand image and customer loyalty is maintained-

Subscriptions must motivate social agents to create social proof (reviews, endorsement by a celebrity, media attention), and make the values of their brand, such as local, sustainable, and ethical. Although there may be some minor problems, the brand image can accommodate a negative impact because of its strong brand image. Brand-value alignment could be critical in the Sri Lankan e-commerce industry, where many consumers value ethics, local support, or even their origin.

Discussion

Findings of the study provided substantial insights regarding the mechanisms of subscription based businesses and its influence on consumer loyalty. The findings suggested that such business models can create customer loyalty as it is able to generate perceived value, positive customer experience, trust, and also create a positive brand image. Subscription-based businesses are able to shape their customer perceptions and behaviours, which can be used for long-term engagement. Findings are also in line with the proposed theoretical framework i.e. TAM as it dictates technology driven businesses can capitalize on innovation to create positive customer experience. Within subscription-based business' their niche in providing personalised access and freemium models can guarantee satisfaction and thus can lead to customer loyalty.

Regarding the thematic analysis; main themes and patterns emerged related to perceived value and pricing strategies, which was found to significantly influence customer loyalty

owing to its ability to provide cost effective services. This is in line with Nguyen et al. (2021)'s study, which observed service quality and customer loyalty through perceived value in Vietnam. Similar dynamics and features were observed in the current study where subscription-based businesses in Sri Lankan e-commerce sector were able to satisfy its customer's hedonic values and shape customer loyalty. This is also in line with Hride et al. (2022)'s study, which accounted for Bangladesh's perspective and observed pricing strategies had a significant role in gaining customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Moreover, thematic analysis observed that customer evaluated subscription services are able to deliver tangible benefits, and thus yielded positive outcomes for this business model. Main constraint, however, was observed in the online payment option, citing a lack of strong digital infrastructure across Sri Lanka and thus limits subscription-based services' range. This finding was however, differed with Shafiee and Bazargan (2018)'s study that observed online shopping was less preferred than traditional models owing to trust and perceived convenience. Another aspect observed in the analysis was user experience, which was in line with the theoretical framework as well, since participants shared positive experiences, such as subscription management and interfaces. This demonstrated that positive experience reduced perceived risk and reduced apprehensions about subscription-based models. These findings are in line with Yum and Kim (2024)'s study, who observed that creating value for customers renders higher trust and loyalty with the business. Loyalty is particularly significant within the digital environment since it drives revenue growth for the organisation and helps enhance its identification, thus creating a niche for itself (Pereira et al., 2025). Customer loyalty towards brands is maintained when they are constantly valued and both their needs and expectations are met

The findings observed the importance of service recovery behaviour for shaping loyalty since subscription based businesses can influence initial adoption and can maintain that trust. This is based on their service quality and can create value for its customer base with relative ease (Kakkar et al., 2025). This is guaranteed with effective communication, which is transparent and used for problem resolution. This was a salient finding in Sri Lanka e-commerce context where despite positive outcomes, it is still relegated due to lack of general awareness and issues with reliability on their model.

Moreover, TAM constructs such as PU and PEOU are also

found to be linked with customer loyalty as they can shape a positive customer experience. Both constructs are reflected in participants' responses when they discussed about ease in changing their subscription plans and smooth software updates, which contributes in improving satisfaction. This is also observed in Rupasinghe et al. (2025)'s where key factors observing mobile banking adoption in Sri Lanka observed that both constructs of the TAM model influenced customer loyalty significantly.

However, (Rupasinghe et al., 2025)'s study also concurred that within the Sri Lankan e-commerce context, PU is found to have a stronger impact than PEOU as usability is considered important and customers are more likely to be persuaded by the services provided. The current study however, did not find much difference in both constructs and observed similar impact on customer loyalty.

Overall, the findings dictate that there is significant customer loyalty present in subscription-based e-commerce businesses owing to their ability to integrate hedonic factors. Customer loyalty is significantly mediated by trust, brand image, and service recovery, and services such as personalised access, transparency in communication, and policies can shape customer loyalty behaviors. Findings from the current study can then be applied to other economies, and the probability of subscription-based businesses emerging as a potential alternative to traditional businesses is high.

Conclusion

The study highlights that subscription-based businesses are able to drive customer loyalty especially targeting its features of perceived value, pricing strategies, trust, and customer experience. Customer satisfaction plays a moderating role in providing service quality and is directly involved in yielding customer loyalty. within Sri Lankan e-commerce sector, it was observed that subscription-based businesses provided a strong likelihood of significant services to its customer base. Despite the ongoing challenge of infrastructure gap and payment hesitancy, subscription-based businesses have still generated positive brand image due to personalised services and creating value for its customer base.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has a number of strengths since it focused on Sri Lanka regarding subscription-based businesses, thus adding new evidence to the current body of research. The local setting can be seen as a significant

source of information that can be used to shape academic knowledge and real-life decisions. It can also be seen that qualitative research design contributes to the study by targeting an under-researched environment, and the results can be used in future studies and policymaking.

However, there are some limitations to be mentioned such as sample size is rather limited, which limited external validity of the findings. In addition, the research included only the participants that are related to the field and this restricts the areas of comparison between industries. Subsequent studies of larger and more diverse samples would strengthen the rigour and utility of the results.

Future Directions

Future research can aim towards conducting longitudinal studies to track and assess other dimensions of customer loyalty, such as their purchasing power in emerging economies. This can lead to a better understanding of alternative payment systems, digital payment infrastructure, and competitive advantage. Moreover, future studies can also target other elements of subscription-based businesses, such as their policies and after-purchase services, to understand their relationship with customers and their ability to create customer loyalty for a longer period. Cross-sectional studies can also be implemented based on customer loyalty with similar dimensions to evaluate whether such policies are effective in creating a positive customer experience and converting it into loyalty with the business.

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