

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Customer-centric brand promotion model: operational excellence of import-export in the food industry

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the critical importance of customer-focused strategies and brand promotion within the food component import–export sector, a context that remains underexplored, particularly with respect to the influence of external factors across diverse geographical settings. Its objective was to empirically investigate how operational excellence, particularly customer relationship management (CRM), value-added services, and product quality and safety assurance affects customer loyalty and, in turn, drives brand promotion. Utilizing a descriptive quantitative research design, a cross-sectional survey was administered in the Philippines, with data analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings indicate that CRM exerts the most significant influence on customer loyalty, while product quality and safety assurance also positively contributes. Importantly, customer loyalty emerged as a strong driver of brand promotion. The model demonstrated high predictive power for customer loyalty and substantial explanatory power for brand promotion. These results highlight that strong customer relationships developed through CRM are essential for fostering loyalty and positioning customers as effective brand advocates. Preserving product quality and safety assurance is fundamental, the study's results imply that companies should purposefully put in comprehensive CRM systems and tailored encounters. To develop devoted clients, hence boosting brand awareness and securing sustained competitive advantage. Future studies ought to broaden the scope of investigated factors and explore more generalizable geographical settings to improve generalizability.

Keywords: Operational excellence; customer relationship management; value-added services; customer loyalty; brand promotion

1. Introduction

Companies are becoming more aware of the need to use customer-centric methods in order to stay competitive in a period marked by globalization and quickly changing consumer tastes. It is generally accepted that customer loyalty, which is gained by routinely meeting or surpassing client expectations and opportunities, is a critical factor in long-term competitive advantage and sustainable growth ^[1]. Compared to

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 16 April 2025 | Accepted: 10 August 2025 | Available online: 23 September 2025

CITATION

J. Palmiano, R. Ferrer, C. Umali, R. R. Sanchez, M. A. R. Pascua, A. Regala. Customer-centric brand promotion model: operational excellence of import-export in the food industry. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2025; 10(9): 3639. doi:10.59429/esp.v10i9.3639

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gaining new clients, it lowers costs while also increasing the overall value of the industry. Promoting a brand effectively helps improve a business's standing, attracts new customers, and keeps it ahead of the competition. The food product import-export industry, with its complex supply chains, strict regulations, and the vital need to guarantee product quality and safety, faces a range of unique challenges and opportunities. In this highly competitive environment, businesses aim to boost how well their brand is known while also building stronger customer loyalty. The trust and loyalty directly affect how business grows and becomes profitable, especially in this specific industry ^[2].

This study investigates business strategies that foster customer loyalty and advance brand promotion within the food component import-export industry. Specifically, it examines how the key dimensions of operational excellence are CRM, value-added services, and product quality and safety assurance individually and collectively influence customer loyalty, and how loyalty, in turn, drives brand promotion. By scrutinizing these interconnected dimensions, the study offers both a comprehensive basis and practical insights for strengthening customer relationships and enhancing brand equity in this complex yet promising sector ^[3, 4]. The findings highlight the importance of adopting integrated strategies that prioritize CRM, supported by value-added services and robust product quality and safety assurance, to achieve long-term success, customer satisfaction, and operational efficiency.

2. Literature review

2.1. Operational excellence

Operational excellence plays important role in developing customer loyalty and strengthening brand association through CRM, value-added services, and product quality and safety assurance. CRM establishes the foundation by cultivating meaningful relationships with customers, enabling businesses to deliver personalized services and maintain consistent product quality. It enhances the overall customer experience by building trust and satisfaction through attentive service and a clear understanding of the customer's needs. Businesses can support loyalty and establish their commitment to delivering genuine value ^[5, 6]. Practical CRM also enables ongoing collaboration and interaction with customers, an important component for service-oriented industries ^[7]. CRM equips companies with insights into customer expectation and opportunities, allowing them to refine offerings and strengthen long-term connections ^[7]. Value-added services improve customer engagement by going beyond transactional exchanges and market operations. Initiatives such as loyalty programs, personalized communication, and after-sales support enable businesses to differentiate themselves in competitive markets while cultivating lasting long-term relationships with the clients ^[6]. Ensuring product quality and safety through wide-ranging measures like total quality management further enhances customer satisfaction. Evidence from case studies demonstrates that robust quality assurance practices significantly improve product reliability, trust, and reinforce loyalty ^[8]. While these integrated strategies are necessary for sustaining customer loyalty, traditional factors such as pricing and product availability continue to influence customer decision-making. Businesses must therefore balance conventional considerations with modern operational excellence to develop strategies that align with evolving customer needs and expectations. Ultimately, success lies not only in retaining customers but also cultivating enduring relationships that generate long-term value.

2.2. Customer loyalty

In the food component import-export industry, multiple factors, including pricing, service quality, and customer segmentation, play a decisive role in shaping customer loyalty. To strengthen retention, businesses must recognize and effectively respond to these dynamics. Research consistently identifies service quality as a critical determinant: superior service fosters long-term loyalty, whereas poor services accelerate customer

attrition ^[9]. Effective customer segmentation further enhances loyalty-building efforts. Approaches such as the RFM (Recency, Frequency, Monetary), enables companies to identify and target high value loyal customer groups with personalized marketing ^[10]. Loyalty programs also remain a powerful tool for reinforcing retention. The most effective initiatives provide meaningful, customer-centric benefits, thereby strengthening relationships and sustaining loyalty ^[11]. Nevertheless, building loyalty in this sector is complicated by challenges such as intense market competition and economic fluctuations. While businesses may draw on strategies developed in other industries, successful implementation requires careful adaptation to local consumer preferences ^[12]. Ultimately, cultivating loyalty necessitates a balanced approach that combines service quality, effective segmentation, and innovative loyalty programs with traditional considerations such as pricing and product availability. By aligning these strategies, businesses can secure a competitive advantage and foster enduring customer relationships.

2.3. Brand promotion

In the highly competitive food component import-export sector, brand promotion is essential for enabling companies to differentiate themselves and secure market share. A dominant market position certainly depends on combining good product quality, smart social media marketing activities, and clear communication. These elements build trust and awareness among consumers ^[13, 14]. Product quality forms the pillar of brand recognition and loyalty particularly in the food industry where reliability and consistency are vital. Firms that consistently meet international standards increase competitive advantage and strengthen brands in global position and international trade ^[13, 14]. High-quality products act as a powerful sign of a brand's reliability, that attracts new customers while keeping and maintaining existing ones. Social media marketing efforts have become an important tool for brand promotion. By showing up on the digital platforms where their customers already spend time and sharing content that's not just creative but genuinely meaningful companies can do more than promote themselves. They can spark real conversations, earn trust, and build lasting relationships. It is not only visibility, but also about being relatable, authentic, and present in ways that make customers feel seen and valued ^[13, 15]. Strong communication skills are vital for showing brand's unique value and improving operational performance. Promotional strategies like targeted advertising and personal selling do not only increase brand visibility but it also signals credibility to consumers ^[14, 15]. Businesses often face ongoing challenges including economic volatility and crowded markets. Therefore, in making a brand stand out, it requires balancing standardized global business strategies with adjustments to suit local customer preferences ^[16]. Exploring these complexities, it requires integrated and flexible management approach that ensures continued presence and a strategic competitive advantage.

2.4. Hypothesis development

2.4.1. Customer relationship management in relation to customer loyalty

Businesses foster customer loyalty by implementing CRM strategies that enhance satisfaction and strengthen customer relationships. These strategies encompass customer identification and as well personalized, proactive communication, both of which increase loyalty, as shown by PT. Telkom Indonesia's implementation ^[17, 18]. CRM integrates innovative technology with genuine human interaction. This combination builds trust, establishes long-term relationships, and improves financial performance ^[19]. Strong customer bonds create a sense of value and understanding while emotional connection lowers the likelihood of customers attrition. The study hypothesizes that *customer relationship management has a significant positive impact on customer loyalty (H1)*.

2.4.2. Value-added services in relation to customer loyalty

Value-added services strengthen customer loyalty by increasing satisfaction and perceived value. These services help businesses stand out in competitive markets. Companies implement strategies such as value co-creation, which involves customer participation in the service process, and deliver high-quality service, competitive pricing, and attractive promotions to reinforce their brand value ^[20, 21, 22]. In sectors like tourism, businesses tailor services to meet diverse customer needs and improve loyalty ^[23]. Trust and satisfaction mediate the relationship between service quality and customer retention ^[22]. Companies build loyalty by delivering exceptional experiences and earning customer trust. This leads to the hypothesis that *value-added services have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty (H2)*.

2.4.3. Product quality and safety assurance in relation to customer loyalty

Product quality and safety assurance play a critical role in building customer loyalty by fostering trust and satisfaction. Customers tend to remain loyal to products that demonstrate strong performance, reliability, and durability ^[23]. When companies prioritize safety, they reinforce consumer trust and deepen loyalty ^[24]. A positive buying experience shaped by consistent quality and safety standards directly influences customer retention. While pricing and service quality contribute to loyalty, product quality and safety remain the most decisive factors in sustaining customer relationships within competitive markets ^[24, 25]. This understanding supports the hypothesis that *product quality and Safety Assurance have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty (H3)*.

2.4.4. Customer loyalty and brand promotion

Brand promotion and customer loyalty share a strong relationship. Promotional strategies boost engagement and retain customers through personalized marketing and emotional advertising, which create a strong bond between consumers and brands ^[26, 27]. A positive brand image builds trust and credibility, reinforcing customer loyalty and complementing promotional efforts to deepen customer attachment ^[28]. Researchers note that while brand image enhances loyalty, promotional efforts directly influence customer behavior ^[29]. Customer loyalty drives brand promotion and reflects its effectiveness. This leads to the hypothesis that *customer loyalty has a significant influence on brand promotion (H4)*.

Nonetheless, figure 1 of this study demonstrates the conceptual framework of this study.

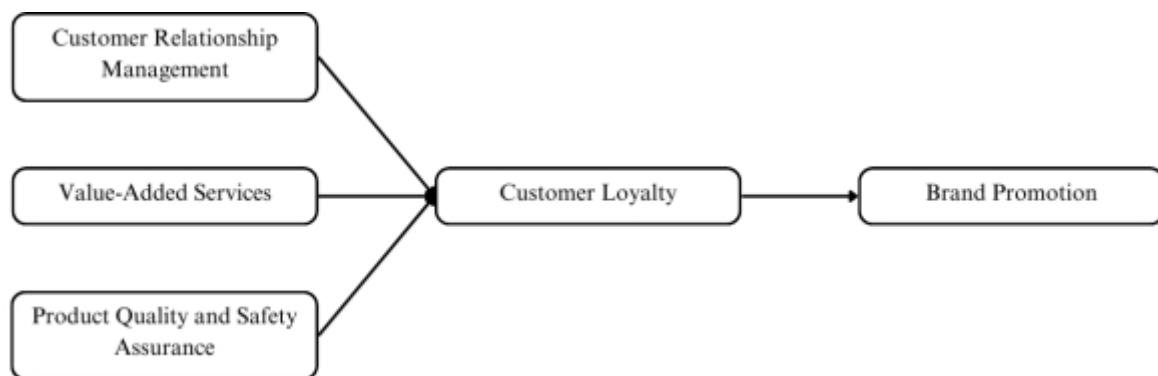


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

3. Methodology

This section outlines the study's methodology, beginning with an overview of the research design and theoretical framework. It details the instrument development process, including participant selection through a defined sampling technique, questionnaire validation, and the procedure for data collection and survey administration. The section also explains how construct reliability and convergent validity were assessed to

ensure the robustness and accuracy of the measurements. These measurements evaluate operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion within the food component import-export sector.

3.1. Research design

The study employs a descriptive quantitative research design and utilizes a cross-sectional survey in combination with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). It investigates how operational excellence covering CRM, value-added services, and product quality and safety assurance influences customer loyalty and brand promotion. Data were collected at a single point in time from customers in the food component import-export sector using survey questionnaires. These instruments gathered information on demographics characteristics, company profiles, and customer perceptions of the key variables. The study uses descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic and company characteristics of the sample. It analyzes respondents' evaluations of operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion. The researchers apply SEM to examine the relationships among these constructs and assess the impact of operational excellence on customer loyalty, as well as the influence of loyalty on brand promotion. This methodology offers insights into how businesses improve customer retention and enhance brand visibility.

3.2. Theoretical background

This study builds its theoretical foundation on relationship marketing, which emphasizes building strong customer connections to drive loyalty. Customers show consistent brand preference when companies deliver high product quality and manage operations effectively. Customer satisfaction plays a key role in aligning expectations. Companies increase satisfaction and loyalty by improving service and practicing corporate social responsibility. Brand promotion plays a pivotal role in communicating organizational value, reducing customer sensitivity to price, and fostering growth through long-term loyalty. Within this study, operational excellence is viewed as the key driver of brand promotion., operationalized through three dimensions: customer relationship management (CRM), value-added services, and assurance of product quality and safety.

The Resource-Based View suggests that a firm secures lasting competitive advantage by leveraging distinctive and internal resources and capabilities that competitors cannot easily replicate. In the context of this research, advanced CRM systems, the consistent provision of value-added services, and strict adherence to quality and safety standards constitute such strategic capabilities. These resources enable organizations to deliver superior experiences, strengthen customer relationships, and achieve differentiation in the marketplace. When effectively utilized, they enhance satisfaction and loyalty, positioning customer loyalty itself as a critical intangible resource that sustain competitive advantage.

Signaling Theory offers another way to look at how businesses demonstrate their credibility and trustworthiness to people they deal with, especially when there's a gap in information between them. For instance, investing in Customer Relationship Management, offering extra valuable services, and having really strict quality assurance practices all send powerful messages. They signal an organization's strong commitment to its customers' well-being and happiness. Consistently reliable product quality shows customers they can truly depend on the business. Similarly, personalized services and actively managed customer relationships highlight a deep dedication to building long-lasting connections. What's more, when customers are loyal, it's a clear sign that a brand is reliable, often expressed through repeated purchases and positive word-of-mouth. These kinds of signals help reduce any doubts customers might have, build stronger trust, and improve both the emotional bond customers feel with the brand and the brand's presence in the market.

By bringing together RBV and Signaling Theory, this study creates a complete framework. It helps in understanding how a company's internal strengths can generate outward signals that boost customer satisfaction, build deeper relationships, and increase both loyalty and how visible the brand is in the food component import-export industry. This strong theoretical foundation supports the hypotheses proposed about how operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion are connected.

Sampling Technique

This study incorporates rigorous data screening procedure, along with reliability and validity assessments, all supported by relevant methodological literature. Data collection in the Philippines poses several challenges, as noted in prior research ^[30]. Within the context of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), recommendations regarding sample size vary considerably. Some scholars rely on rules of thumb for determining adequacy ^[31, 32], while others advocate for a minimum of 100 participants to ensure stability of estimates ^[33]. In addition, more advanced approaches such as bootstrapping techniques, are increasingly applied to address sample size limitations and improve the robustness of model testing ^[34]. AVE values confirm convergent validity ^[35, 36]. While AMOS studies often use fit indices like CFI and RMSEA ^[37], this study focuses on R-squared and p-values below 0.05, consistent with ADANCO and SmartPLS approaches ^[38, 39, 40]. The study recognizes these methodological constraints as limitations. Researchers initially use simple random samplings to ensure unbiased participant selection. They later apply purposive sampling to align with participant availability and research goals. Given the study's scope and resource limits, they identify 159 participants as a practical and sufficient sample size. The study examines how operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion influence outcomes in the food component import-export sector. This sample size supports reliable SEM analysis and yields meaningful insights into the relationships explored.

3.2.1. Initial validation of questionnaire

The study conducts a multi-step process to validate the questionnaire. The content validity is assessed by industry professionals and experts in the food component import-export sector and survey design. These professionals and experts review each item to ensure it measures key constructs like CRM, value-added services, product quality and safety, customer loyalty, and brand promotion, while also aligning with the study's objectives ^[41, 42]. To establish face validity, a sample of customers from the target population reviews the survey instrument and provides feedback on the clarity and comprehensibility of the items. This step helps identify and resolve potential ambiguities. A pilot test is conducted with a small group of respondents to evaluate the instrument's internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are computed for each construct. Values of 0.70 or higher are considered acceptable indicators of reliability. Any scales that fail to meet this threshold are revised accordingly. Through this multi-stage validation process, the questionnaire is refined to ensure that it measures the intended constructs accurately and generates reliable and valid data.

3.2.2. Data collection and survey administration

The study used a systematic plan for gathering data and administering the survey. The questionnaire, designed to capture customer perceptions of operational excellence, loyalty, and brand promotion, was distributed using Google Forms. This secure online platform safeguards data privacy and ensures participants remain anonymous ^[43]. Participants came from the food component import-export industry, recruited through online professional networks and industry associations. This approach ensured both relevant and diverse responses. The survey invitation clearly explained the study's purpose, offered assurances of confidentiality, and provided a direct link to the instrument. Before participating, respondents reviewed an

informed consent form that outlined their rights and confirmed their voluntary involvement. This structured process made the data collection ethical, efficient, and reliable.

3.2.3. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Table 1. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Construct	rho (pA)	rho (pc)	Cronbach's alpha(α)	AVE
Customer Relationship Management	0.949	0.948	0.948	0.786
Value-Added Services	0.924	0.910	0.915	0.674
Product Quality and Safety Assurance	0.891	0.874	0.878	0.587
Customer Loyalty	0.885	0.873	0.870	0.584
Brand Promotion	0.913	0.885	0.878	0.617

The measurement model has strong psychometric properties. This means all measured aspects meet the required standards for reliability and validity. The coefficients for rho_A, rho_C, and Cronbach's alpha all exceed the benchmark value of 0.70. High levels of composite reliability and internal consistency are confirmed with it, especially in relation to the expectations of Generations X and Y [37, 44, 45]. Convergent validity is also established. The average variance extracted values for all constructs surpass the minimum threshold of 0.50. This indicates that the observed indicators effectively represent their respective underlying concepts [35, 36]. Among the constructs, CRM, value-added services, and brand promotion display especially strong AVE values, while product quality and safety assurance and customer loyalty are slightly closer to the threshold yet still within the acceptable range. These results confirm the robustness of the measurement model. It provides a reliable foundation for further analysis. This validation supports the study's objective of examining how operational excellence influences customer loyalty and, in turn, promotes brand visibility within the food component import-export sector.

4. Results and discussion

The result of the study shows the demographic characteristics and discussion of descriptive statistics for the key variables such as operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion. It also shows the result of SEM with a focus on model fit indices and relationships within the model.

The analysis highlights significant effects among the variables, with a visual SEM model demonstrating how operational excellence influences customer loyalty, and how customer loyalty drives brand promotion within the food component import-export sector. Acknowledging the inherent challenges of data collection in the Philippines [40], the study addresses sample size determination by considering various approaches, including a rule of thumb [31, 32], the recommended minimum of 100 participants [33], and the use of bootstrapping techniques for robust analysis for SEM [34].

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the sample population

	Level	Count	Proportion
Sex	Female	124	0.780
	Male	35	0.220
Age	20 - 25	10	0.063
	26 - 30	49	0.308
	31 - 35	20	0.126

	Level	Count	Proportion
	36 - 40	20	0.126
	41 - 45	35	0.220
	46 - 50	9	0.057
	51 - 55	7	0.044
	56 - 60	5	0.031
	61 - 65	4	0.025
Company Size	Small	14	0.088
	Medium	44	0.277
	Large	55	0.346
	Multinational	46	0.289
Frequency of Repeat Purchases	Monthly	105	0.660
	Quarterly	39	0.245
	Semi-Annual	8	0.050
	Annual	7	0.044

Table 2. (Continued)

Note. N=159

Table 2 outlines the demographic characteristics of the sample population. The majority of respondents were female (78.0%), with males comprising 22.0% of the sample. The gender distribution among participants was not balanced in this study, with a higher representation of female respondents ^[46, 47]. While this is a common characteristic of studies conducted in the Philippines ^[48, 49, 50], it is acknowledged as a limitation of the current research. Researchers recognize that this imbalance may introduce potential bias into the findings. Regarding age distribution, the largest group was aged 26-30 (30.8%), followed by those aged 41-45 (22.0%). In terms of company size, respondents from large companies accounted for the largest share (34.6%), closely followed by those from multinational corporations (28.9%). Medium-sized companies represented 27.7%, while small companies made up 8.8% of the sample. In the Philippines, the size of a company is determined by its total assets and the number of employees, as defined by the Magna Carta for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises. These classifications range from Small Enterprises with at least ₱3,000,000 in assets and 1-9 employees, to Large Enterprises, which have more than ₱100,000,000 in assets and at least 200 employees. Large companies, especially multinational ones, are considered large enterprises because of their vast size and resources ^[51, 52]. When we looked at how often our survey respondents made purchases, we found that most of them a significant 66% bought things every month. Quarterly purchases also made up a notable portion at 24.5%. Less common were semi-annual purchases at 5.0% and annual purchases at 4.4%. These insights give us important context about who participants are and how their purchasing habits relate to this study's focus on operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion. Understanding their backgrounds also helps to see how different groups might view business practices and their impact on keeping customers happy and getting them to advocate for a brand. It's also worth noting how important trade businesses are, especially in the U.S. economy, where they employ over a third of the workforce ^[53].

Table 3. Summary of Model Fit Indices Including R-Squared and Adjusted R-Squared

Construct	Coefficient of determination (R ²)	Adjusted R ²
Customer Loyalty	0.943	0.942
Brand Promotion	0.633	0.631

This study evaluates how well the model fits with data. This assessment involves using R^2 values and establishing a significant level of $p < 0.05$. This approach is consistent with studies that utilize statistical software such as ADANCO and SmartPLS, diverging from the broader set of indices like CFI and RMSEA which are frequently employed with AMOS [38, 39, 40, 46, 54]. As presented in Table 3, the model demonstrates a strong fit, particularly for customer loyalty, evidenced by an R^2 value of 0.943 and an adjusted R^2 value of 0.942. This means that roughly 94.3% of the variance in customer loyalty is explained by the model's predictors, indicating a very strong relationship [55]. For brand promotion, the R-squared value is 0.633 (adjusted R-squared is 0.631), suggesting that approximately 63.3% of its variance is explained by the model. While this is a substantial portion, it also indicates that other unmeasured factors may influence brand promotion. A higher R^2 generally signifies a better fit to the data [56]. Overall, these findings point to a strong model fit for customer loyalty and a reasonably good fit for brand promotion, highlighting the importance of the included variables in explaining these constructs. The SEM analysis demonstrated a strong model fit, particularly for explaining customer loyalty. The model shows strong predictive power when it comes to customer loyalty, which means the factors it includes like CRM strategies, value-added services, and product quality and safety are doing a great job of reflecting what really drives loyal behavior. These elements aren't just nice to have; they're genuinely shaping how customers feel and whether they stick around. While the model for brand promotion had a good fit, it also indicates that other external factors not examined in this study may play a role in shaping brand promotion. Thus, this aligns with the understanding that a brand's reputation is influenced by a multitude of complex variables.

Table 4. Effects overview of professional excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion

Effect	Beta	Cohen's f^2
Customer Relationship Management -> Customer Loyalty	0.680	2.998
Value-Added Services -> Customer Loyalty	0.112	0.072
Product Quality & Safety Assurance -> Customer Loyalty	0.242	0.244
Customer Loyalty -> Brand Promotion	0.796	1.728

Table 4 highlights the effects of corporate strategies, customer loyalty, and brand promotion within the analyzed model, providing valuable insights into how these variables interact. Notably, CRM plays a pivotal role in driving customer loyalty, as evidenced by a beta coefficient of 0.680, a total effect of 0.680, and a Cohen's f^2 of 2.998 indicating a substantial positive impact [57]. Value-added services, while less impactful, still contribute positively to customer loyalty, with a beta coefficient along with a Cohen's f^2 of 0.072, signifying a modest role. Product quality and safety assurance exhibit a meaningful influence on customer loyalty, reflected by a beta coefficient of 0.242 and a Cohen's f^2 of 0.244. This signifies a medium effect, emphasizing the role of quality and safety in building trust and retaining customers. Customer loyalty emerges as a significant driver of brand promotion, with a beta coefficient of 0.796 and a Cohen's f^2 of 1.728 indicating a strong and positive relationship. This illustrates how loyal customers actively contribute to a company's branding and advocacy efforts.

Based on empirical findings, building customer loyalty is a strategic imperative that depends on strong CRM, providing value-added services, and ensuring product quality [58, 59]. By focusing on deep, CRM instead of just transactions, businesses can boost customer satisfaction, which is a key indicator of loyalty and leads to more repeat purchases and brand promotion [60, 61, 62]. This strategy not only reduces customer loss but also creates a loyal customer base that is less sensitive to price and more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth [63]. This reinforces that loyalty is a psychological factor essential for long-term business success [64]. Thus, this acts as a strong defense against competitors and other elements that might cause

customers to switch brands through this deep commitment or the value-added services and product quality and safety assurance, built through loyalty and long-term relationships [1]. A robust brand relationship, nurtured by trust and loyalty, directly leads to positive brand promotion and is more cost-effective than acquiring new customers [65]. Developing loyalty through positive experiences and trust is a key part of brand credibility and a powerful marketing tool [66]. It is tied to providing high-product quality and safety assurance, which are vital for long-term customer retention and organizational success [67]. The link between operational excellence and customer-focused strategies ultimately improves a company's market position and provides a sustainable competitive advantage [68]. Additionally, ongoing product quality and safety assurance for customers are crucial for strengthening a brand's image and fostering lasting loyalty [65]. This view confirms that customer loyalty is not just a result of operational excellence but also a key factor for long-term profitability and lower customer acquisition costs [69].

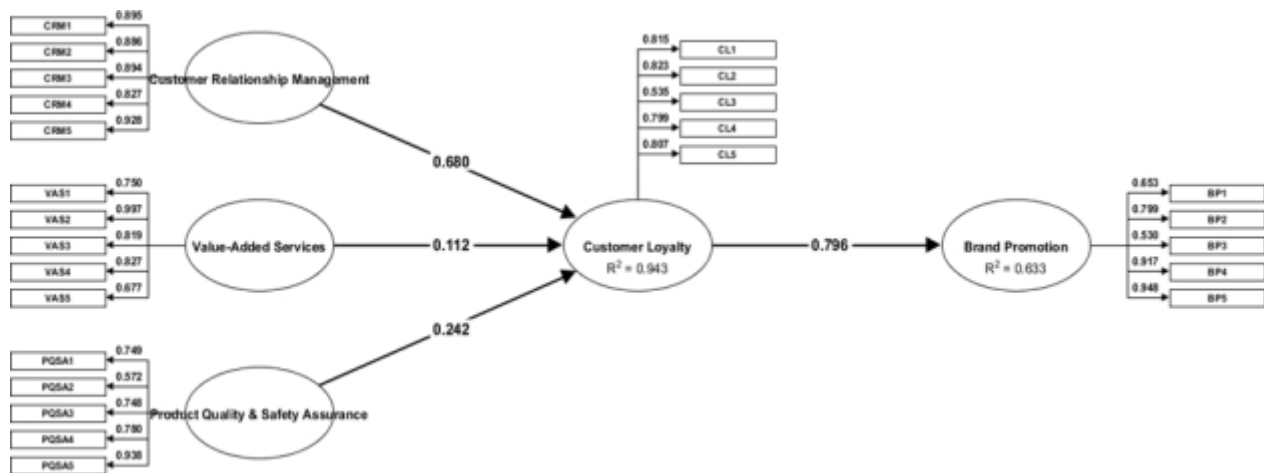


Figure 2. Operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion SEM model

In this SEM analysis, CRM emerged as the most significant factor influencing customer loyalty, with a beta coefficient of 0.680, highlighting its pivotal role in fostering relationships. While product quality and safety assurance showed a moderate effect (beta = 0.242) and value-added services had a weaker impact (beta = 0.112), their combined influence alongside CRM accounts for 94.3% of the variance in customer loyalty. In turn, customer loyalty demonstrated a substantial influence on brand promotion with a beta coefficient of 0.796, explaining 63.3% of its variance. These results underscore that strong customer relationships are the most crucial element for driving loyalty and, consequently, enhancing brand advocacy and visibility. Businesses should therefore prioritize investing in personalized interactions and effective support systems to leverage customers as active brand advocates.

5. Conclusion

This study successfully investigated the relationships between operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion in the food component import-export sector. The findings confirm that operational excellence, particularly through CRM, has a profound impact on customer loyalty, which in turn significantly drives brand promotion. The high predictive power of the model for customer loyalty, with an R-squared value of 0.943, underscores the importance of the constructs examined. While product quality and safety assurance and value-added services also contribute positively, the central role of CRM in fostering loyalty is undeniable. Overall, the results provide a strong foundation for understanding how firms in this industry can leverage customer-centric strategies to achieve sustainable growth and market advocacy.

This research makes a really important contribution by showing, with clear evidence, how excellent operations, customer loyalty, and brand promotion are all connected, especially in the import-export food business, an area that hasn't been studied much. The findings build on existing ideas about how companies manage their customer relationships and develop their brands. The study discovers that in this specific business-to-business (B2B) environment, CRM isn't just a background function, it's the main thing that drives customer loyalty, even more so than other operational aspects. It also offers a fresh perspective that brand promotion doesn't just come from marketing campaigns, but directly from nurturing strong customer loyalty. For managers in this industry, our results have practical implications: you should wisely put your resources into CRM initiatives rather than just other operational improvements. This is how to maximize customer retention and get customers to truly champion the brand. By focusing on personalized interactions and solid customer support, businesses can build a loyal customer base that naturally promotes their brand, giving them a lasting competitive edge.

Methodologically, future studies could make this model even richer by including more factors that might influence brand promotion. For example, consider things like a company's commitment to social responsibility, the level of competition in the market, or the impact of digital marketing efforts. To get a more balanced and accurate view, it would also be helpful to use a sample of participants that are more diverse in terms of gender and age, which could help reduce any biases seen in this study. And to make sure that findings apply more broadly, future research could collect data from various countries or regions, instead of just focusing on the Philippines. Additionally, studying these relationships over a longer period would provide deeper insights into how they evolve over time.

Companies in the food component import-export sector should really focus on investing in strong CRM systems and making sure their staff are well-trained. This means implementing personalized communication, providing efficient customer support channels, and creating loyalty programs to build solid, long-lasting relationships with clients. While maintaining high product quality and ensuring safety are absolutely essential, it's the personal connection built through CRM that will truly turn satisfied customers into devoted brand advocates. What's more, businesses should then encourage these loyal customers to actively promote their brand through testimonial campaigns, referral programs, and other word-of-mouth marketing efforts.

The primary limitation of this study is the sample's imbalanced gender distribution, which may introduce a bias and affect the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on a single-country context the Philippines also limits the transferability of the results to other global markets. Additionally, while the model demonstrated a strong fit, it does not account for all external factors that may influence brand promotion, such as competitive actions, economic shifts, or broader consumer trends. The data not being normally distributed, as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test, is another limitation that was addressed but remains a consideration.

Future studies could explore the mediating and moderating roles of other variables, such as brand reputation, corporate social responsibility, and customer satisfaction, within the framework of operational excellence, customer loyalty, and brand promotion. Investigating the differences in these relationships across various cultures or within different sub-sectors of the import-export industry could also yield valuable insights. Furthermore, a qualitative study could be conducted to explore the specific behaviors and motivations of loyal customers that lead to active brand promotion, providing a more nuanced understanding of the causal mechanisms at play.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank everyone who contributed to this study. Our deepest gratitude to Dr. Adolf Josef Yao and Dr. Solomon Oluyinka for their invaluable technical expertise and guidance. We are also grateful to our institution for providing the facilities and academic support necessary for this research. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful critiques and suggestions significantly improved the quality and clarity of our manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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Annex A

Descriptive Statistics of Operational Excellence, Customer Loyalty, and Brand Promotion

Indicators	Mean	Median	SD	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk	
							<i>W</i>	<i>p</i>
CRM1	4.33	4.00	0.643	0.414	-0.729	0.855	0.752	<.001
CRM2	4.33	4.00	0.700	0.489	-1.015	1.382	0.751	<.001
CRM3	4.37	4.00	0.642	0.412	-0.814	0.971	0.744	<.001
CRM4	4.43	4.00	0.621	0.386	-0.926	1.409	0.719	<.001
CRM5	4.36	4.00	0.610	0.372	-0.736	1.317	0.723	<.001
VAS1	4.46	5.00	0.644	0.414	-0.783	-0.419	0.729	<.001
VAS2	4.46	4.00	0.571	0.326	-0.458	-0.752	0.715	<.001
VAS3	4.51	5.00	0.561	0.315	-0.582	-0.702	0.699	<.001
VAS4	4.53	5.00	0.560	0.314	-0.659	-0.609	0.694	<.001
VAS5	4.38	4.00	0.681	0.464	-0.640	-0.686	0.756	<.001
PQSA1	4.36	4.00	0.660	0.436	-0.692	0.043	0.763	<.001
PQSA2	4.53	5.00	0.583	0.339	-0.792	-0.350	0.699	<.001
PQSA3	4.45	4.00	0.547	0.299	-0.255	-1.023	0.702	<.001
PQSA4	4.50	5.00	0.526	0.277	-0.277	-1.342	0.677	<.001
PQSA5	4.52	5.00	0.625	0.390	-1.267	1.991	0.690	<.001
CL1	4.53	5.00	0.513	0.263	-0.257	-1.604	0.660	<.001
CL2	4.52	5.00	0.514	0.264	-0.231	-1.617	0.660	<.001
CL3	3.98	4.00	0.689	0.474	-0.093	-0.531	0.815	<.001
CL4	4.42	5.00	0.678	0.460	-1.107	1.473	0.733	<.001
CL5	4.38	4.00	0.700	0.490	-1.125	1.589	0.739	<.001
BP1	4.55	5.00	0.559	0.313	-0.738	-0.497	0.687	<.001
BP2	4.57	5.00	0.556	0.310	-0.848	-0.315	0.677	<.001
BP3	4.08	4.00	0.842	0.708	-0.737	0.386	0.832	<.001
BP4	4.47	5.00	0.560	0.314	-0.434	-0.835	0.707	<.001