

Exploring Customer Loyalty in the Department Store Retail Setting: A Comprehensive Study of ABC Shopping Mall[†]

Wang Xinran^{1,*}, Noppawan Wisedsind² and Jirapong Ruanggoon²

¹*Master of Business Administration, Dhonburi Rajabhat University, Bangkok 10600, Thailand*

²*Faculty of Management Science, Dhonburi Rajabhat University, Bangkok 10600, Thailand*

(*Corresponding author's e-mail: 1173991672@qq.com)

Abstract

The objectives of this research were: 1) to investigate the customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall after the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) to analyze the factors that affected customer loyalty with ABC shopping mall, and; 3) to find out the business strategies that could improve the competitiveness and customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall. This study adopted a mixed methods research approach, with data collected through questionnaire surveys and interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and linear regression, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that: 1) there were varying levels of customer loyalty at ABC Shopping Mall after COVID-19. While trust in safety measures was high, challenges persisted in service quality, store ambiance, and value perception. Issues such as long queues, cleanliness, and pricing disparities compared to online options needed addressing; 2) the regression analysis revealed that product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction collectively accounted for 93.6 % of the variation in customer loyalty towards ABC Shopping Mall. All identified factors demonstrated a significant positive influence on customer loyalty, and; 3) to enhance customer loyalty, ABC Shopping Mall could implement strategies such as relationship marketing, differentiated store atmosphere management, adjusted pricing strategies, and establishing a specialized customer relationship management (CRM) team. These efforts aimed to personalize services, cater to diverse demographics, offer competitive pricing, and proactively addressed customer needs, ultimately fostering stronger connections and sustained success for the mall.

Keywords: Customer loyalty, Product quality, Service quality, Store atmosphere, Convenience, Perceived value

Introduction

Background and significance of research problem

The investigation into customer loyalty has persisted for over a century, and it is extensively acknowledged that cultivating customer loyalty is a crucial element in augmenting product repurchase frequencies and enhancing customer assessments of corporations. The exploration of the concept of customer loyalty gained significant attention within academia during the 1960s, with a particular focus on defining it as “repurchase”. The prevailing belief was that customers could be considered loyal if they repeatedly purchased products or services from the same brand three or more times in succession. True loyalty is demonstrated when customers hold a high regard for a brand’s products or services in terms of attitude and remain unaffected by the allure of other brands, persistently making purchases from that particular brand (Oliver, 1999). The year 2022 will present various challenges to China’s economy. The occurrence of the COVID-19 epidemic has led to limitations in production activities across numerous locations, thus resulting in a decline in individuals’ inclination towards consumption.

ABC Shopping Mall is also inevitably affected by the epidemic. ABC Shopping Center is a fashionable lifestyle comprehensive mall in Xiangtan City, Hunan Province, with trendy elements as its

[†]Presented at the 6th Conference in Management: Summer 2024 (May 25, 2024 at Walailak University, Thailand)

theme, integrating food, clothing, play, and drink. It mainly targets the younger generation of consumers, aiming to create a unique shopping area in Xiangtan at the small capital level with new concepts and innovative marketing methods, combined with a comfortable shopping environment and perfect comfortable services, in order to break the traditional small-scale store operation model in Xiangtan. Taking the catering industry in the mall as an example, there are many chain restaurants in ABC mall, such as Haidilao, as well as private restaurants, with a wide variety of options to choose from. According to data released by the China Bureau of Statistics, the revenue of China's catering industry increased from over 460 billion yuan in 2014 to over 650 billion yuan in 2019, and per capita catering consumption also increased accordingly. In these 6 years, the average annual growth rate has reached 7 %. It can be seen that the development potential of the catering industry cannot be underestimated. However, the catering industry will be particularly affected by COVID-19 in 2019 and 2020. In 2020, the revenue of the catering industry decreased by more than 50 billion yuan, which is undoubtedly a major trauma to the catering industry.

However, following the containment of the epidemic, the government promptly implemented a range of policies aimed at safeguarding production and stimulating consumption. As a consequence, the adverse effects of the epidemic on the economy have been significantly mitigated. In actuality, the total retail sales of consumer goods in China witnessed a year-on-year increase of 12.46 %, amounting to 44.08 trillion yuan in 2021(Xinhua, 2021). At first, the strength of consumer spending remains robust. The growth of consumer spending is driven by the expansion and enhancement of individual demands, which have presented fresh opportunities and transformations for the department store retail sector. Under such opportunities and challenges, customer loyalty has become a key factor in gaining an advantage over competitors.

Research objectives

- 1) To investigate the customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall after the COVID-19.
- 2) To analysis the factors that affect customer loyalty with ABC shopping mall.
- 3) To find out the business strategies that can improve the competitiveness and customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall.

Research hypothesis

The product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, customer perceived value, and customer satisfaction have a positive effect on customer loyalty in ABC shopping mall.

Scope of the study

This article combines theoretical knowledge with practical cases, using a mixed research method that combines qualitative and quantitative methods. First of all, through the questionnaire survey of store customers after the COVID-19, we can grasp the specific situation of the store and the views and suggestions of consumers, understand the main factors affecting consumer purchasing power and customer loyalty and the situation of competitors. These data will provide reference for our research, and achieve the effect of combining theoretical models with practical research. Then analyze the indicators of ABC Mall since the COVID-19, review relevant literature and research data, and summarize specific research directions.

Methodology

This study conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature, combining the works of domestic and foreign scholars. The purpose was to design a reasonable questionnaire to conduct a comprehensive survey of customer loyalty in ABC Shopping Mall after COVID-19. Subsequently, statistical analysis was conducted using the results of the questionnaire survey, aiming to explore the factors that affected customer loyalty in ABC Shopping Mall. A critical study was conducted on the contemporary status and challenges of establishing customer loyalty in ABC Shopping Mall within a theoretical framework. Finally, through questionnaire survey data analysis and interviews with relevant experts,

tailored business strategies were proposed to address the root causes of the impact on ABC Shopping Mall, in order to help ABC Shopping Mall improve customer loyalty.

Questionnaire data were collected from 382 customers of ABC Shopping Mall, who had different ages, professions, genders, and cultural levels, and educational backgrounds. Key informant interviews included twelve customers who frequently shopped at ABC Shopping Mall, 8 customers who did not frequently shop at ABC Shopping Mall, and 3 experts within the shopping mall. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and linear regression. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results and discussion

Customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall after the COVID-19

Customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall after the COVID-19 as show in **Table 1**.

Table 1 Customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall after the COVID-19.

Customer loyalty	Mean	S.D.	Interpret
I intend to continue shopping at ABC Shopping Mall in the future.	3.33	1.34	Moderate
I recommend ABC Shopping Mall to friends and family.	3.07	1.34	Moderate
I feel a sense of attachment to ABC Shopping Mall.	2.75	1.49	Moderate
I trust ABC Shopping Mall to prioritize my safety and well-being during shopping.	3.52	1.39	High
ABC Shopping Mall has effectively adapted to the challenges posed by COVID-19.	3.87	1.47	High
I am satisfied with the measures ABC Shopping Mall has taken to ensure a safe and hygienic shopping environment.	3.78	1.38	High

The findings from **Table 1** indicate that ABC Shopping Mall faces challenges in terms of customer loyalty post-COVID-19. While some aspects of loyalty, such as trust in safety measures and perceived adaptation to challenges, show relatively high scores, others, like intention to continue shopping and recommendation to friends and family, demonstrate moderate levels. Additionally, there's a sense of attachment to the mall, albeit at a moderate level.

Despite these moderate levels of loyalty, there are notable areas of concern highlighted in the analysis. Dissatisfaction among respondents revolves around various aspects of their experience, including service quality, store atmosphere, and perceived value. Long queuing times, unclean dining areas, high prices compared to online options, and unhelpful staff emerged as significant issues. To address these concerns and enhance customer loyalty, improvements in service quality and store atmosphere are crucial. Key areas for improvement include staff initiative, queuing times, cleanliness, and staff attitude. Additionally, addressing concerns related to location guidance and mall lighting could further enhance the overall customer experience. ABC Shopping Mall needs to prioritize initiatives aimed at improving service quality, enhancing the store atmosphere, and providing better value to customers to foster greater loyalty and satisfaction in the post-COVID-19 landscape.

The findings from **Table 1** suggest that ABC Shopping Mall faces challenges in maintaining customer loyalty post-COVID-19. While certain aspects of loyalty, such as trust in safety measures and perceived adaptation to challenges, demonstrate relatively high scores, others, such as intention to continue shopping and recommendation to friends and family, indicate moderate levels. Additionally, there exists a moderate level of attachment to the mall among respondents.

These results align with previous research indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on consumer behavior and preferences (Gu et al., 2021). In particular, the uncertainty and fear surrounding the virus have led to changes in shopping habits, with consumers prioritizing safety and hygiene when choosing retail outlets (Petković et al., 2020). This shift in consumer priorities is reflected in

the high scores for trust in safety measures and perceived adaptation to challenges exhibited by ABC Shopping Mall.

However, despite these relatively high scores in certain aspects of loyalty, there are notable areas of concern highlighted in the analysis. Dissatisfaction among respondents primarily revolves around various aspects of their shopping experience, including service quality, store atmosphere, and perceived value. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that service quality and overall shopping experience significantly influence customer loyalty and satisfaction (Kusdibyo & Februadi, 2019). Key issues identified by respondents include long queuing times, unclean dining areas, high prices compared to online options, and unhelpful staff. These findings underscore the importance of addressing operational issues and enhancing customer service to improve loyalty and satisfaction levels post-COVID-19. Previous studies have highlighted the negative impact of long waiting times and poor service on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Lahap et al., 2018).

To address these concerns and enhance customer loyalty, improvements in service quality and store atmosphere are crucial. Key areas for improvement include staff initiative, queuing times, cleanliness, and staff attitude. Additionally, addressing concerns related to location guidance and mall lighting could further enhance the overall customer experience (Yuan et al., 2021). ABC Shopping Mall needs to prioritize initiatives aimed at improving service quality, enhancing the store atmosphere, and providing better value to customers to foster greater loyalty and satisfaction in the post-COVID-19 landscape.

The analysis of the relationships of all variables

Table 2 Relationships of all variables.

	Customer loyalty	Product quality	Service quality	Store atmosphere	Convenience	Perceived value	Customer satisfaction
Customer loyalty	1						
Product quality	0.935**	1					
Service quality	0.923**	0.889**	1				
Store atmosphere	0.878**	0.850**	0.872**	1			
Convenience	0.884**	0.864**	0.801**	0.781**	1		
Perceived value	0.782**	0.749**	0.716**	0.704**	0.761**	1	
Customer Satisfaction	0.824**	0.814**	0.814**	0.743**	0.745**	0.623**	1

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Using Pearson correlation to analyze the relationship between several related factors, the relevant situation is shown in **Table 2**. From the data in the table, it can be seen that the correlation coefficients between product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty are all greater than 0. Therefore, there is a significant positive correlation between customer loyalty and these 6 factors, with correlation coefficients of 0.935, 0.923, 0.878, 0.884, 0.782, and 0.824, respectively. At the same time, there is a correlation between product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value and customer satisfaction. The correlation coefficients between the four factors of coefficient, product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience and the perceived value are all greater than 0, indicating a significant positive correlation between them.

There is a strong positive correlation between customer loyalty and various factors including product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction in ABC shopping malls. This finding aligns with existing literature on the subject. For instance, previous research by (Zeng Dengyan, 2023) found that customer satisfaction is positively associated with customer

loyalty in retail environments. Similarly, Yulistiana et al. (2021) demonstrated that perceived value plays a crucial role in shaping customer loyalty. Moreover, studies by Mehta and Tariq (2020) highlighted the importance of service quality and store atmosphere in influencing customer loyalty.

The high correlation coefficients observed in this study suggest that ABC shopping malls have been successful in delivering positive experiences across various dimensions, thereby fostering customer loyalty. This underscores the importance of continuous efforts by businesses to maintain high standards in product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction. However, it's essential to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The research was conducted in a specific context (ABC shopping malls), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other retail settings. Future research could explore these relationships in different geographical locations or industries to enhance the external validity of the results. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for managers and marketers in ABC shopping malls, emphasizing the significance of prioritizing factors such as product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction to cultivate and maintain customer loyalty.

Results of regressive analysis

Table 3 Results of regressive analysis (n = 382).

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p	Collinearity diagnosis	
	B	Std. Error.	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
Constant	-0.912	0.073	-	-12.458	0.000**	-	-
Product quality	0.404	0.050	0.297	8.097	0.000**	7.956	0.126
Service quality	0.359	0.038	0.316	9.454	0.000**	6.633	0.151
Store atmosphere	0.122	0.035	0.096	3.465	0.001**	4.574	0.219
Convenience	0.233	0.034	0.188	6.756	0.000**	4.592	0.218
Perceive value	0.108	0.024	0.094	4.461	0.000**	2.617	0.382
Customer satisfaction	0.078	0.036	0.053	2.179	0.030*	3.453	0.290
R ²	0.937						
Adj R ²	0.936						
F	F (6.375) = 924.462, p = 0.000						
D-W	1.701						

Dependent variable: Customer loyalty

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Regression analysis is used to investigate whether there is an impact relationship between variables and the magnitude of the impact relationship. Regression analysis is performed on the data collected from the questionnaire survey to obtain the regression analysis data shown in **Table 3**. It can be seen that R^2 is 0.936, so the 6 factors of product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction can explain 93.6 % of the changes in customer loyalty. When conducting an F-test on the data, it was found that the data passed the F-test, with $F = 924.462$ and $p = 0.000 < 0.05$. This indicates that at least one of the factors, product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction, will have an impact on the size of customer loyalty. After testing for multicollinearity, it can be concluded that all VIFs are less than 10 and all tolerances are greater than 0.1, indicating that there is no significant multicollinearity in the model. The regression coefficient for Product quality is 0.404, the regression coefficient for service quality is 0.359, the regression coefficient for Store atmosphere is 0.122, the regression coefficient for convenience is 0.233, the regression coefficient for perceived value is 0.108, and the regression coefficient for customer satisfaction is 0.078. All of these factors have a significant positive impact on customer loyalty. The model formula is:

$$\text{Customer loyalty} = -0.912 + 0.404 * \text{product quality} + 0.359 * \text{service quality} + 0.122 * \text{store atmosphere} + 0.233 * \text{convenience} + 0.108 * \text{perceived value} + 0.078 * \text{customer satisfaction}$$

The high value of R^2 (0.936) indicates that a substantial portion of the variance in customer loyalty can be explained by the six factors under investigation: Product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction. This suggests that these factors play a crucial role in shaping customer loyalty within the context of ABC shopping malls (Dokcen et al., 2021). The F-test results indicate that the regression model as a whole is statistically significant, further supporting the notion that at least one of the factors examined has a discernible impact on customer loyalty. This underscores the importance of considering multiple factors simultaneously when assessing customer loyalty (Mulia et al, 2021).

The absence of significant multicollinearity, as indicated by the variance inflation factors (VIFs) and tolerances, lends credibility to the regression model's findings. This suggests that the observed relationships between the predictor variables and customer loyalty are unlikely to be distorted by intercorrelations among the predictors. The regression coefficients provide insights into the relative importance of each factor in influencing customer loyalty. Notably, all factors—product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction—demonstrate statistically significant positive effects on customer loyalty. This highlights the multifaceted nature of customer loyalty and underscores the importance of addressing various aspects of the customer experience (Shehadeh et al., 2024). The findings suggest that enhancing product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction can lead to improved customer loyalty in ABC shopping malls. This underscores the importance of comprehensive strategies aimed at optimizing the customer experience across multiple dimensions.

The business strategies that can improve the competitiveness and customer loyalty of ABC shopping mall

Relationship marketing strategy

In order to enhance customer loyalty, it is necessary to meet the personalized needs of customers as much as possible, in order to increase customer satisfaction with ABC shopping mall. Specifically, it means providing customers with thoughtful and meticulous services, eliminating pain points during the consumption process, and making them feel that they have received enough attention and satisfaction. For the department store retail industry, implementing relationship marketing strategies can establish a Relevance with customers and actively respond to customer needs. This can bring staff closer to customers, cultivate and maintain a good relationship between the enterprise and customers, and ultimately achieve a win-win reward for both customers and enterprises.

Differentiated store atmosphere management

According to interviews with the management of ABC shopping mall, it can be known that the main customer group of ABC shopping mall is young people who pursue trends. Therefore, the decoration and atmosphere design of the mall are based on the trendy and lively factors that most young people like. However, the mall also has a considerable number of other customer groups and is unwilling to give up on this group. For example, the second largest group of elderly people in terms of age group, the majority of elderly people do not like overly trendy and lively atmosphere, which can make them feel uncomfortable. ABC shopping mall often plays rock and pop music that young people like, as well as live performances by bands, etc., which can affect their shopping experience. In order to reduce the negative experience of such customers, differentiated management can be implemented for the store atmosphere. Loud music, performances, and activities can be placed in the popular milk tea and food layer among young people, while soothing music can be played in the tea drinks and rest areas favored by the elderly, providing performances such as Tai Chi. Attention should also be paid to odor and hygiene. The underground food

floor should strengthen the ventilation system, while the catering area should pay more attention to cleaning issues.

Modify pricing strategy

From the results of the questionnaire survey, it can be seen that perceived value has a significant impact on customer loyalty. The cost of purchasing a product belongs to the total customer cost in the customer delivered value. Compressing prices can reduce the cost paid by customers and increase their delivered value. From previous research, it can be seen that the main customer group of ABC shopping mall is mostly middle-income young people with a bachelor's degree, the consumption characteristics of this group of people are: they are easy to accept new things, pursue quality, pursue cost-effectiveness, and have a relatively high repurchase rate, which is also one of the characteristics of the department store retail industry. Therefore, this study suggests that ABC shopping mall modify its pricing strategy, set an appropriate product price range based on market research, and determine the final pricing within the range. This is beneficial for attracting and maintaining customers, maximizing revenue and customer satisfaction, and thus enhancing customer loyalty. Controlling prices may be difficult and requires thorough investigation of oneself and peers before making a decision.

Maintaining customer enterprise relationships with innovative and thoughtful services

A customer relationship management team, also known as a CRM team, can be established to carry out a series of planned work and obtain loyal customers through good service from a professional perspective. Through interviews and on-site investigations with the management personnel of ABC shopping mall, it was found that the responsibilities of each department in ABC shopping mall are not clear enough, and there is no dedicated department to maintain customer relationships. This can lead to personnel mixing and delayed maintenance of customer relationships. In order to better maintain customer relationships and improve customer loyalty, ABC shopping mall needs to establish a professional CRM team. The CRM team is composed of staff from various departments, from R&D to service, to ensure comprehensive consideration and analysis of all issues that affect customer relationships. It regularly selects customers for customer satisfaction surveys and analyzes relevant results, develops corresponding assessment plans, and includes solving customer problems and maintaining relationships with customers in the assessment content. This can help ABC shopping mall find more suitable solutions. More efficient improvement strategies.

In striving to bolster competitiveness and cultivate customer loyalty, ABC shopping mall has outlined a multifaceted approach encompassing relationship marketing, store atmosphere management, pricing strategy modification, and the establishment of a dedicated customer relationship management (CRM) team. These strategies, rooted in contemporary marketing principles, hold promise for augmenting the mall's appeal and fostering lasting relationships with its diverse customer base. At the heart of ABC shopping mall's strategy lies a commitment to meeting the personalized needs of customers, thereby enhancing satisfaction and loyalty. This aligns with the tenets of relationship marketing, which emphasize the cultivation of long-term connections through tailored experiences and attentive service (Payne & Frow, 2016). By prioritizing thoughtful interactions and proactive engagement, the mall endeavors to forge deeper bonds with its patrons, driving repeat business and positive word-of-mouth.

Recognizing the heterogeneity of its customer segments, ABC shopping mall seeks to curate an inclusive atmosphere that resonates with diverse preferences. By tailoring decor and ambiance to cater to distinct demographics, such as the trendy inclinations of youth and the preference for tranquility among the elderly, the mall aims to create an environment where all feel welcome and valued. Such differentiation not only enhances customer satisfaction but also fosters a sense of belonging, driving loyalty and affinity with the brand. In response to the pivotal role of perceived value in shaping customer loyalty, ABC shopping mall endeavors to refine its pricing strategies to align with market dynamics and consumer expectations. By striking a balance between affordability and quality, the mall aims to maximize customer satisfaction while optimizing revenue generation. This approach acknowledges the nuanced purchasing behaviors of its target demographic, thereby fostering goodwill and loyalty among its clientele (Nagle & Müller, 2017).

To fortify its customer-centric endeavors, ABC shopping mall proposes the establishment of a dedicated CRM team tasked with nurturing relationships and addressing customer concerns proactively. This initiative reflects a strategic shift towards proactive relationship management, where every touchpoint is an opportunity to delight and retain customers (Frow & Payne, 2009). By centralizing efforts to understand and cater to customer needs, the mall seeks to elevate the overall shopping experience and cultivate enduring loyalty.

Conclusions

The analysis of customer loyalty towards ABC Shopping Mall post-COVID-19, as presented in **Table 1**, reveals a mixed picture. While trust in safety measures and adaptation efforts is high, satisfaction levels vary across different aspects. Challenges include concerns about service quality, store atmosphere, and perceived value, with issues such as long queues, cleanliness, and pricing disparities compared to online options highlighted. Improvements in staff conduct, queue management, cleanliness, and pricing strategies are necessary to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, addressing ancillary issues like wayfinding assistance and lighting can contribute to an improved overall shopping experience. Prioritizing initiatives to refine service quality, store ambiance, and value propositions is crucial for fostering greater loyalty and satisfaction post-COVID-19.

Through literature review, questionnaire surveys, and interviews, this study conducted correlation and regression analysis on the data and found that the factors affecting customer loyalty in ABC shopping mall include product quality, service quality, store atmosphere, convenience, perceived value, and customer satisfaction. The most prominent factors are service quality, store atmosphere, perceived value, and customer satisfaction.

Based on the information obtained from questionnaire surveys and interviews, combined with relevant literature and research, this study proposes corresponding solutions for ABC Shopping Center, including relationship marketing strategies, differentiated atmosphere management, modified pricing strategies, and innovative and thoughtful service strategies.

Practical recommendations

In light of the analysis of customer loyalty towards ABC Shopping Mall post-COVID-19, several practical recommendations emerge to address the identified challenges and opportunities. Firstly, enhancing service quality is paramount to meet evolving customer expectations. This entails investing in staff training programs to improve communication skills and streamline checkout processes, while actively soliciting and addressing customer feedback to continually refine service delivery. Secondly, optimizing the store atmosphere is essential for creating a welcoming and engaging environment. Tailoring ambiance to cater to diverse customer preferences, ensuring cleanliness and maintenance, and leveraging data analytics to refine store layout are key strategies in this regard. Thirdly, improving the value proposition through competitive pricing strategies and targeted marketing campaigns can enhance perceived value for customers. Bundling products, offering discounts, and effectively communicating unique selling points are recommended approaches. Lastly, embracing innovative service strategies such as personalized shopping experiences and virtual concierge services can differentiate ABC Shopping Mall and foster long-term loyalty.

Future research suggestions

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track post-COVID-19 consumer behavior trends, explore the impact of emerging technologies on customer satisfaction, conduct cross-cultural analyses to understand loyalty drivers across diverse demographics, and investigate the influence of sustainability and ethical practices on consumer preferences. By implementing these recommendations and exploring avenues for future research, ABC Shopping Mall can adapt to changing consumer needs, strengthen customer relationships, and thrive in the competitive retail landscape.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this research requires a special heartfelt gratitude to my thesis advisor and co-advisor, who have given me a lot of useful advice and encouraged me when I feel confused. At the same time, we also want to thank all the customers and staff who participated in the questionnaire survey and interviews.

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