



Impact of brand authenticity, trust in companies, and organizational cynicism perceived by customers on attitudinal and behavioral loyalty in SMEs

Impacto de la autenticidad de la marca, la confianza en las empresas y el cinismo organizacional percibido por los clientes en la lealtad actitudinal y comportamental en PYMES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of brand authenticity, trust in companies, and organizational cynicism on customers' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty in SMEs. In a competitive business environment, the lack of authenticity and trust is recognized as a factor that undermines customer loyalty. This analysis provides a strategic roadmap for addressing these challenges and highlights their relevance to long-term business success. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative data obtained from focus groups and analyzed using QDA Miner Lite, with quantitative data collected from a sample of 412 customers. Validated measurement scales and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) were employed to assess perceptions of brand authenticity, trust, and organizational cynicism within companies. This research design enabled a deeper understanding of customer experiences. The results reveal that organizational cynicism undermines customer loyalty by eroding trust and violating the implicit psychological contract. However, brand authenticity and trust in companies can mitigate these effects by strengthening emotional bonds and fostering loyal behaviors that are essential for attracting and retaining customers. This study contributes to the literature by providing a theoretical framework that links organizational cynicism to customer loyalty. Its theoretical implications highlight the need for a multidimensional approach in organizational behavior research. The practical implications suggest the urgency of implementing strategies that promote authenticity and trust, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals and fostering a more equitable and fair business environment.

Keywords: Attitudinal loyalty; Behavioral loyalty; Brand authenticity; Organizational cynicism; PLS-SEM; Trust.

R E S U M E N

Este estudio investiga el impacto de la autenticidad de la marca, la confianza en las empresas y el cinismo organizacional en la lealtad actitudinal y comportamental de los clientes en PYMES. En un contexto empresarial competitivo, se reconoce que la falta de autenticidad y desconfianza erosionan la lealtad del cliente. Este análisis ofrece una hoja de ruta estratégica para abordar estos desafíos y su relevancia en el éxito empresarial a largo plazo. Se adoptó un enfoque metodológico mixto, combinando datos cualitativos obtenidos de grupos focales, analizados con QDA Miner Lite y datos cuantitativos de una muestra de 412 clientes. Se utilizaron escalas validadas y modelos de ecuaciones estructurales PLS SEM para evaluar las percepciones de autenticidad de marca, confianza y cinismo organizacional en las empresas. Este diseño permitió una comprensión más profunda de las experiencias del cliente. Los resultados revelan que el cinismo organizacional socava la lealtad de los clientes al erosionar la confianza y violar el contrato psicológico implícito. Sin embargo, la autenticidad de marca y la confianza empresarial pueden mitigar estos efectos, fortaleciendo vínculos emocionales, fomentando conductas leales esenciales para atraer y retener clientes. Este estudio, contribuye a la literatura al proporcionar un marco teórico que conecta el cinismo con la lealtad del cliente. Sus implicaciones teóricas resaltan la necesidad de un enfoque multidimensional en la investigación sobre comportamiento organizacional. Las implicaciones prácticas sugieren la urgencia de implementar estrategias que promuevan autenticidad y confianza, alineándose con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y promoviendo un entorno más equitativo y justo.

Palabras clave: Lealtad actitudinal; Lealtad comportamental; Autenticidad de la marca; Cinismo organizacional; PLS-SEM; Confianza.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Contemporary markets, characterized by information overload, advertising saturation, and recurring corporate scandals, have led customers to develop more critical attitudes toward companies (Burrell *et al.*, 2022; Kapoor & Banerjee, 2021). In this context of growing distrust, building customer loyalty has become a strategic challenge for organizations, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), whose sustainability largely depends on long-term relationships and emotional bonds with their customers (Agu *et al.*, 2024; Udeh & Dugba, 2025).

Three factors emerge as key determinants of loyalty: perceived brand authenticity, trust in companies, and organizational cynicism as perceived by customers. The latter is defined as the perception that companies lack integrity, honesty, or genuine concern for their stakeholders, and has gained relevance as a complex attitude involving cognitive judgments, negative emotions, and defensive behaviors toward brands (Gökerik, 2024; Indibara *et al.*, 2023). Unlike the traditional employee-centered approach, this study analyzes how customers experience and respond to this phenomenon in their role as consumers, offering a novel perspective on the variables under investigation.

In contrast, brand authenticity—defined as the perception that a brand is true to its values, consistent, and transparent—as well as trust in companies, have been shown to act as protective factors capable of strengthening customer loyalty even under adverse conditions (Campagna *et al.*, 2023; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). However, although these constructs have been widely examined individually, few studies have analyzed in an integrated manner how they interact to shape customers' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, particularly in emerging markets such as Colombia.

Furthermore, a significant theoretical gap remains in the analysis of organizational cynicism from the consumer's perspective. Existing research has predominantly examined this construct from an internal, employee-centered perspective, while largely neglecting its growing manifestation among end customers (Gökerik, 2024; Indibara *et al.*, 2023). To address this gap, this study jointly examines the effects of organizational cynicism, brand authenticity, and corporate trust on two key dimensions of customer loyalty: attitudinal loyalty (emotional and cognitive bonds) and behavioral loyalty (repurchase, recommendation, and retention). Furthermore, it introduces a new hypothesis examining the relationship between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the customer loyalty-building process in SMEs.

SMEs constitute an ideal context for analyzing the proposed model because, unlike large corporations, they tend to maintain closer relationships with their customers, thereby intensifying the effects of trust, authenticity, and perceived cynicism on loyalty. Given their resource constraints, SMEs do not primarily compete through price or advertising; rather, they rely on trust and customer loyalty as key mechanisms of differentiation. Furthermore, their lower level of diversification makes them more vulnerable to reputational damage and the erosion of customer loyalty.

In Colombia, as in much of Latin America, SMEs account for the largest share of both business activity and employment;

however, they remain underrepresented in the relationship marketing literature. Taken together, this context provides a rigorous test of the proposed model and strengthens its potential for broader generalization.

The mixed-methods approach—combining qualitative and quantitative techniques—allowed us to capture both the interpretive richness of customer experiences and the statistical robustness of the hypothesized relationships. As a result, this study provides valuable empirical and theoretical evidence for understanding how loyalty dynamics are shaped in contexts marked by cynicism and the search for authenticity.

This article is organized into seven sections. Section 2 presents the background and literature review. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 discusses the findings. Section 6 outlines the limitations and future research directions. Finally, Section 7 presents the conclusions.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Brand authenticity

Brand authenticity has emerged as a key strategic factor in consumer behavior, particularly in contexts where customers value consistency, integrity, and emotional connection with companies. It is defined as the perception that a brand is true to itself, acts consistently with its stated values, and operates transparently toward its stakeholders (Moulard *et al.*, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, authenticity is a subjective psychological experience that triggers processes of identification and connection with the brand. It implies a perceived alignment between the brand's identity, its actual actions, and consumer expectations, generating a sense of truth or legitimacy in the value proposition that strengthens emotional and cognitive bonds with the company (Napoli *et al.*, 2014).

Empirically, it has been shown that consumers are more willing to engage with brands they perceive as authentic, even when facing more affordable or popular alternatives. This engagement translates into attitudinal loyalty—emotional attachment, sustained preference, or identification with the brand—and behavioral loyalty, expressed through repurchase, recommendation, or active brand advocacy (Campagna *et al.*, 2023; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

Brand authenticity also acts as a mechanism of competitive differentiation, especially in markets where SMEs face positioning barriers against large corporations. By being perceived as more human, consistent, and approachable, SMEs can build long-term relationships that enhance customer retention and long-term engagement (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

Given that authenticity fosters emotional identification, a sense of belonging, and favorable repeat behaviors toward the brand, it is expected to positively influence both dimensions of loyalty.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Perceived brand authenticity has a positive effect on attitudinal loyalty.

H2. Perceived brand authenticity has a positive effect on behavioral loyalty.

2.2. Trust in the Company

Trust in the company is a central component in the development of sustainable and long-term business relationships (Agu *et al.*, 2024; Glaveli, 2021). From a relationship marketing perspective, it is defined as the belief that a company will act honestly, predictably, and for mutual benefit, even in situations characterized by risk or ambiguity (Guerola-Navarro *et al.*, 2024).

Trust is gradually developed through accumulated experiences in which customers assess the consistency between the company's promises and its actions. It is not merely an affective disposition; it also involves a rational judgment regarding the organization's integrity, competence, and benevolence (Kähkönen *et al.*, 2021). Several studies indicate that trust encompasses at least three key dimensions: integrity (fulfillment of promises and ethical conduct), competence (technical and operational capability), and benevolence (genuine concern for the consumer) (Dandotiya *et al.*, 2024).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that trust significantly influences customer loyalty processes by generating security, emotional attachment, and a reduction in perceived risk (Huo *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2021; Urdea & Constantin, 2021). Consequently, it becomes a robust predictor of both attitudinal loyalty (preference, commitment, identification) and behavioral loyalty (repurchase, recommendation, retention) (Alnoor *et al.*, 2022; Cardoso *et al.*, 2022).

Although trust may be conceptually related to brand authenticity, it is important to clearly distinguish between the two constructs. While authenticity is based on perceptions of consistency and truthfulness (i.e., what the brand "is" from the customer's perspective), trust is built upon the cumulative and evaluative interaction derived from actual experiences with the company (Campagna *et al.*, 2023; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). This distinction reinforces its discriminant validity in explanatory models.

In the context of SMEs, where customer relationships tend to be more direct and personalized, trust plays an even more critical role. These organizations can leverage their proximity to customers and reliability in fulfilling commitments to develop strong relationships that compensate for structural limitations when competing with larger firms (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

Given its role in strengthening the company–customer relationship and its ability to foster favorable attitudes and behaviors, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3. Trust in the company has a positive effect on attitudinal loyalty.

H4. Trust in the company has a positive effect on behavioral loyalty.

2.3. Customer-perceived organizational cynicism

Organizational cynicism is understood as a generalized negative attitude toward an organization, based on the belief that it lacks honesty, integrity, or genuine intentions (Dean *et al.*, 1998). Although the construct has been extensively studied from an employee-centered perspective, recent research has begun to examine its manifestation among customers, who may perceive companies as entities that act hypocritically or are driven solely by utilitarian motives (Gökerik, 2024; Indibara *et al.*, 2023).

From this perspective, customer-perceived organizational cynicism can be defined as an attitude formed through negative judgments regarding the authenticity of a company's actions, which may give rise to adverse affective reactions and rejection behaviors. This attitude emerges when consumers detect inconsistencies between an organization's discourse—for example, regarding sustainability or social responsibility—and its actual practices, which are interpreted as manipulative, hollow, or inconsistent (Aydin, 2021; Tuna *et al.*, 2018).

This form of cynicism has been conceptualized as a three-dimensional attitude comprising cognitive dimensions (beliefs about the organization's lack of integrity), affective dimensions (emotions such as indignation, annoyance, or disillusionment), and behavioral dimensions (intentions to punish, abandon, or discredit the brand) (Brandes *et al.*, 2008; Chylinski & Chu, 2010). This multidimensional structure makes it a consistent predictor of relational breakdowns, as it involves not only negative beliefs but also emotional and behavioral dispositions toward disengagement.

Drawing on the general framework of attitudes (Ajzen *et al.*, 2018), scholars have argued that complex negative attitudes, such as customer-perceived organizational cynicism, can predict specific behavioral intentions, including avoiding interactions, ceasing purchases, or sharing negative messages. This effect becomes stronger when perceptions of cynicism are not limited to isolated incidents but are generalized to the organization's overall image.

Recent literature has demonstrated that this form of cynicism significantly affects loyalty-building processes by weakening emotional (attitudinal) loyalty and reducing desirable behaviors such as repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth recommendations, and brand advocacy (Gökerik, 2024; Gupta *et al.*, 2020; Indibara *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, it erodes other key relational variables, such as trust and perceived authenticity, thereby triggering a progressive deterioration of the customer–firm relationship.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5. Customer-perceived organizational cynicism has a negative effect on attitudinal loyalty.

H6. Customer-perceived organizational cynicism has a negative effect on behavioral loyalty.

2.4. Relationship between attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty

Customer loyalty has been conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising an attitudinal dimension, related to the emotional and cognitive bond with a brand, and a behavioral dimension, reflected in repeated actions such as repurchase and recommendation (Singh *et al.*, 2023).

Attitudinal loyalty represents the affective and symbolic ties that connect customers to a brand. It encompasses feelings of identification, pride, and trust, as well as a favorable psychological disposition characterized by a sustained preference over time (Goyal & Verma, 2023). This form of loyalty is often associated with perceptions of authenticity, alignment with consumers' values, and a sense of belonging, which foster emotional attachment and positive attitudes toward the brand (Soedarto *et al.*, 2019).

Behavioral loyalty, in contrast, is manifested through observable actions such as repurchase behavior, purchase frequency, and active recommendations to other consumers. This type of loyalty is particularly valuable in contexts where brands face distrust, cynicism, or widespread skepticism, as it represents a tangible source of revenue, growth, and long-term sustainability (Kaur *et al.*, 2021; Saini & Singh, 2020).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that attitudinal loyalty is a significant antecedent of behavioral loyalty, as consumers who are emotionally committed to a brand tend to express this bond through concrete behaviors of support, retention, and advocacy (Liu *et al.*, 2021). From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior, stable and positive attitudes toward an object increase the likelihood that such beliefs will be translated into congruent actions, provided that facilitating conditions are present (Ajzen *et al.*, 2018).

Accordingly, when a brand succeeds in consolidating attitudinal loyalty through positive experiences, authenticity, and trust, it is expected that this affective and cognitive connection will translate into sustained behaviors that benefit the organization.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7. Attitudinal loyalty has a positive effect on behavioral loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the complex nature of the phenomenon under analysis, a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach was adopted (Clark & Plano Clark, 2022), combining qualitative data (focus groups) and quantitative data (structured survey). This strategy allowed for an in-depth understanding of consumers' perceptions and motivations and provided an empirical basis for testing the hypothesized relationships.

In the qualitative phase, seven face-to-face focus groups were conducted with a total of 52 participants (7–8 participants per group), following the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2015). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, educational level, and consumption patterns, while acknowledging limitations in statistical generalizability. The inclusion criterion required participants to have interacted with a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) in the commerce or service sector at least once per month. This diversity allowed for the capture of a broad range of perspectives concerning organizational practices and their effects on trust, perceived authenticity, and customer loyalty.

The focus groups explored topics such as perceptions of corporate practices, experiences of trust and disappointment, factors that foster or undermine loyalty, and emotional responses toward authentic and cynical brands. The semi-structured discussion guide was developed based on relevant literature (Indibara *et al.*, 2023; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014) and reviewed by two external experts.

All sessions were moderated by an experienced researcher, audio-recorded, transcribed, and independently coded by three researchers using QDA Miner Lite software. Data analysis followed a thematic coding procedure involving exploratory reading, pattern identification, development of representative

codes (e.g., “loyalty,” “cynicism,” “trust,” and “consistency”), and iterative refinement. Intercoder reliability was assessed using percentage agreement, reaching a satisfactory level of 85%. Researcher triangulation and cross-validation with the existing literature were employed to strengthen analytical validity.

The qualitative findings played a crucial role in the development of the conceptual model by refining the study constructs and providing support for the proposed hypotheses. For instance, the relationship between perceived authenticity and loyalty emerged as an emotional bond grounded in the congruence between organizational discourse and actual behavior. Likewise, cynicism manifested as accumulated disappointment, distrust, and a breakdown in the customer–brand relationship. These findings were used to validate, adapt, or eliminate theoretical relationships, ensuring consistency between theory, empirical evidence, and context, while also informing the design of the survey instrument.

For example, participants' distinction between “saying the right things” (discourse) and “acting consistently” (behavior) led to prioritizing, within Napoli *et al.*'s (2014) scale, items capturing discourse–action congruence (e.g., “This brand stays true to itself”). Regarding cynicism, both cognitive components (distrust) and affective components (anger and disappointment) were identified, leading to the prioritization of items reflecting negative emotional responses (e.g., “This company irritates me”). Furthermore, the distinction between attitudinal loyalty (“feeling loyal”) and behavioral loyalty (“acting loyally”) was reinforced, justifying their separate measurement.

Two nuances were not operationalized due to the scope of the study: the temporal dimension of cynicism (gradual versus sudden emergence) and the influence of prior experiences with other brands. These aspects are proposed as avenues for future research.

In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire was designed and administered between July 2024 and March 2025 to a sample of 412 Colombian consumers. Purposive sampling was employed, targeting individuals who maintained frequent contact with SMEs operating in the commerce or service sectors. The inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old, reside in medium-sized or large cities, and have at least one commercial interaction per month with an SME. Although the sociodemographic profile of this sample was not identical to that of the focus groups, partial overlap was ensured in terms of age, educational level, and purchasing behavior. This methodological decision was intended to enhance analytical robustness by extending sample coverage and empirically testing the patterns identified during the qualitative phase.

The questionnaire included sociodemographic variables and an adaptation of five widely used scales based on the qualitative findings: organizational cynicism (Brandes *et al.*, 2008; Indibara *et al.*, 2023), brand authenticity (Napoli *et al.*, 2014), trust in the company (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), attitudinal loyalty (Goyal & Verma, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2021), and behavioral loyalty (Saini & Singh, 2020; Soedarto *et al.*, 2019). All scales employed a seven-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) and were adapted to the Colombian context. A pilot test involving 30 participants was conducted to assess clarity and contextual

appropriateness. No items were eliminated following the pilot test; however, minor wording adjustments were made to three cynicism items to improve fluency in Spanish.

Quantitative data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software. In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated through internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability), convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio, HTMT). Subsequently, the structural model was assessed by examining path coefficients (β), coefficients of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and statistical significance using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples.

In addition, a configurational approach based on fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) was employed to identify sufficient configurations of conditions associated with high levels of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. This approach is particularly useful for examining complex and non-linear causal relationships, as well as equifinality and combinatorial effects among variables (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2009). The analysis was conducted using fsQCA 3.1 software (Ragin, 2018). The variables included in the configurational model were Organizational Cynicism, Brand Authenticity, and Trust in the Company as causal conditions, and Attitudinal Loyalty and Behavioral Loyalty as outcome variables.

Because all variables were measured using seven-point Likert scales, direct calibration was performed using the following anchor points: threshold for full membership = 6, crossover point (point of maximum ambiguity) = 4, and threshold for full non-membership = 2. These thresholds were selected based on theoretical rather than empirical (percentile-based) considerations. On a 1–7 Likert scale, a value of 4 represents the theoretical midpoint (neither agreement nor disagreement), 6 reflects a high level of agreement (full membership), and 2 reflects a low level of agreement (full non-membership). These calibration

points capture the conceptual interpretation of the constructs and are appropriate when the constructs possess clear substantive meaning (Ragin, 2009). The calibrated values were used to construct the truth table, applying a consistency threshold of 0.80 to identify relevant configurations. Configurations exhibiting the highest levels of consistency and coverage were subsequently interpreted.

This approach complemented the net-effects analysis provided by PLS-SEM by incorporating a configurational perspective that recognizes the existence of multiple pathways leading to high levels of loyalty. It also acknowledges that organizational cynicism, authenticity, and trust may interact in synergistic or compensatory ways depending on the context. All research procedures complied with the ethical principles established by the Declaration of Helsinki (Miranda-Novales & Villasis-Keever, 2019), ensuring informed consent, participant anonymity, and approval by the university's institutional ethics committee.

4. RESULTS

The qualitative and quantitative findings reveal the complex relationships among brand authenticity, trust in the company, customer-perceived organizational cynicism, and their impact on customers' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. The main patterns identified are presented below:

4.1. Qualitative results

The thematic analysis of the focus groups identified five themes related to customers' perceptions and attitudes toward organizational cynicism, brand authenticity, trust, and loyalty. These themes reveal complex perceptual trajectories through which consumers emotionally process their experiences with firms, strengthening or weakening relational bonds depending on the values and practices they perceive (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1
Core theme, Key indicators, and representative quotation regarding the Consumer experience

Core Theme	Key Indicators	Representative Quotation
Generalized distrust toward corporate promises	Perceived dishonesty, discredit, lack of credibility, advertising distrust	"Nowadays, you cannot believe everything brands say; they exaggerate or lie about their products."
Ethical and emotional rejection of profit-centered practices	Anger, disappointment, hypocrisy, perceived cynicism	"It really bothers me when companies do things solely to make money without caring about customers or the environment."
Positive evaluation of authenticity and consistency	Transparency, integrity, authenticity, alignment between discourse and actions	"I highly value a brand that is honest, does not lie, and genuinely delivers on its promises."
Loyalty toward brands demonstrating sustained integrity	Responsibility, genuine concern, social commitment, customer well-being	"If a brand shows through its actions that it genuinely cares about customers and does the right thing, you become very loyal to it."
Reactive emotions toward perceived betrayals	Distrust, disappointment, insensitivity, loss of trust	"I felt very angry and disappointed when a company appeared in the news because of that scandal; I no longer trust them."

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 2
Core theme and key indicators related to the customer experience

Core Theme	Key Indicators
Widespread skepticism and distrust toward companies and their advertising claims. “Nowadays, you can’t believe everything brands say; they often exaggerate or misrepresent their products.”	Perceived Dishonesty Discredit Lack of Credibility Advertising Distrust
Sensitivity and indignation toward practices perceived as unethical, misleading, or solely profit-driven. “It really bothers me when companies do things just to make money without caring about customers or the environment.”	Anger Disappointment Cynicism Perceived Hypocrisy
Appreciation for transparency, authenticity, and consistency between brands’ words and actions. “I highly value brands that are honest, don’t mislead consumers, and truly deliver on their promises.”	Transparency Integrity Authenticity Alignment Between Words and Actions
Tendency to remain loyal to brands perceived as ethical, responsible, and genuinely concerned about customers and society. “When a brand demonstrates through its actions that it truly cares about customers and does the right thing, people become very loyal.”	Responsibility Genuine Concern Customer Well-Being Social Commitment
Negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, and cynicism when hypocrisy or a breach of trust is perceived. “I felt very angry and disappointed when a certain company appeared in the news because of that scandal; I no longer trust them.”	Distrust Perceived Dishonesty Lack of Integrity Insensitivity Cynicism Perceived Hypocrisy

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

EMERGING PERCEPTUAL DYNAMICS

Participants indicated that perceptions of organizational cynicism —particularly when brands fail to fulfill their promises or prioritize profit over ethical considerations— trigger negative emotional responses such as anger, disappointment, and rejection. These emotions reduce customers’ willingness to recommend, remain loyal to, or repurchase from such brands, suggesting that cynicism undermines both the affective and cognitive bonds that support attitudinal and behavioral loyalty acting as a relational barrier.

In contrast, brand authenticity was consistently perceived as a key factor in counteracting the effects of cynicism. Participants highlighted the importance of consistency between what a brand communicates and what it does not, noting that when they perceive integrity, commitment to values, and responsible behaviors, they tend to maintain and even strengthen their loyalty.

Trust in the company also emerged as a fundamental pillar of the customer–brand relationship. Brands perceived as genuinely concerned about the well-being of consumers and society generated stronger commitment, greater tolerance toward mistakes, and higher levels of retention. Enhanced trust appeared to function as an emotional bridge, enabling customers to overcome previous negative experiences.

A cross-cutting finding concerned the relational dynamics among cynicism, authenticity, and trust. When customers detected hypocrisy, inauthenticity, or inconsistent messaging, lev-

els of cynicism intensified. Conversely, when experiences were perceived as coherent, ethical, and honest, trust and loyalty remained stable or even increased. These findings suggest reciprocal relationships and moderating effects among the three key phenomena, providing important insights for the development of the conceptual model, subsequently evaluated through quantitative analysis.

Figure 1 summarizes the relationships emerging from participants’ perceptions, emotions, and relational experiences with brands. The figure illustrates how customer-perceived organizational cynicism —triggered by incoherent, dishonest, or exclusively profit-oriented practices— generates negative emotional responses, such as anger and distrust, which ultimately affect both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

The figure also highlights the buffering role of brand authenticity and trust in the company. When consumers perceive integrity, consistency, and genuine concern, they are more likely to maintain stable affective and behavioral bonds with the brand.

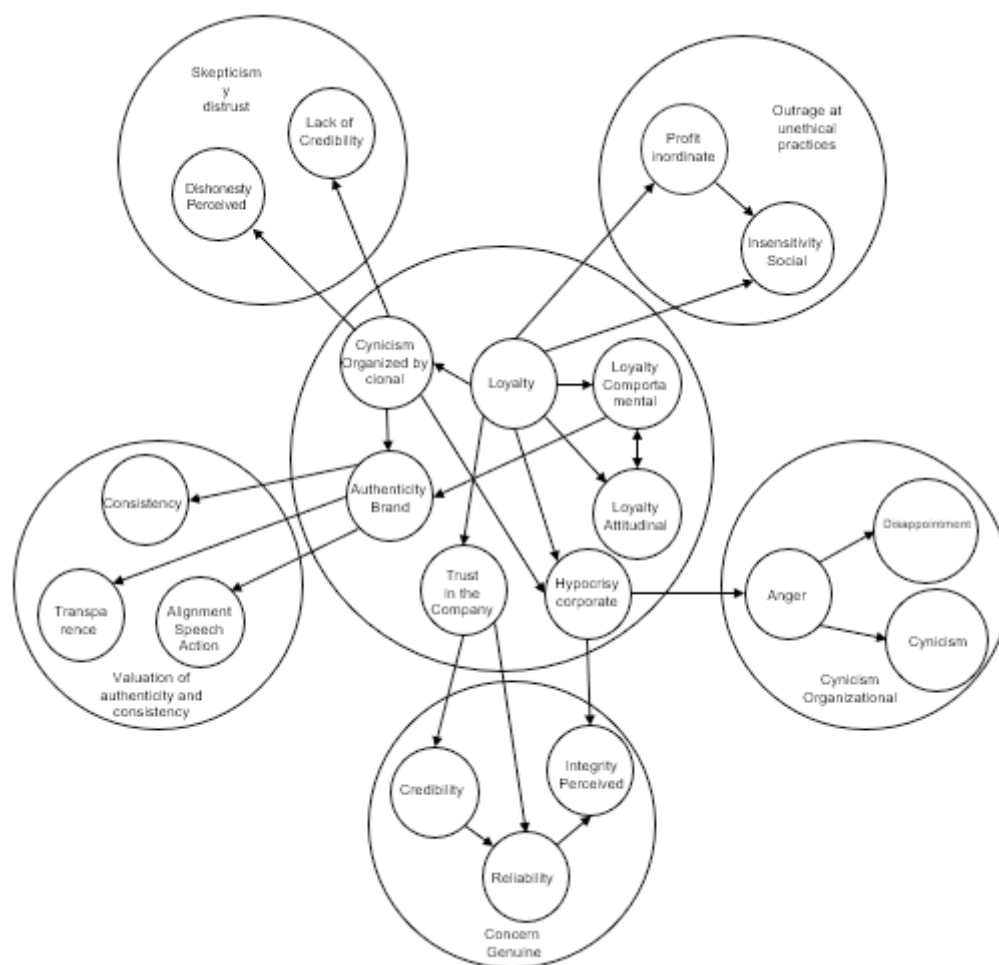


Figure 1
Concept map: qualitative analysis

Source: Authors' own elaboration. Note: Emerging relationships among organizational cynicism, brand authenticity, trust, customer loyalty, and customers' emotional and behavioral responses.

Furthermore, Figure 1 contributed to refining the study's conceptual model by informing the hypothesized relationships later tested through PLS-SEM. It also provides a visual representation of the reciprocal dynamics among the study's key constructs as expressed by the participants themselves.

TRANSITION TO THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative findings enabled further refinement of the conceptual model, particularly regarding the negative effect of organizational cynicism, the protective role of authenticity and trust, and the relationship between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. These insights provided the foundation for the subsequent quantitative analysis using PLS-SEM.

4.2. Quantitative results

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The final sample consisted of 412 Colombian consumers, of whom 48.1% were male and 51.9% were female. Partici-

pants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years, with a mean age of 36 years. Regarding educational attainment, 43.0% reported having completed technical or technological studies, 29.1% held a university degree, and 27.9% had completed secondary education. In terms of socioeconomic status, 29.4% belonged to lower socioeconomic strata, 47.1% to the middle stratum, and 23.5% to higher socioeconomic strata. Participants' primary occupations included employees (40.5%), students (27.9%), self-employed workers (21.1%), and unemployed individuals (10.5%). Concerning purchasing frequency, 42.0% reported making purchases once per month, 30.8% once per week, 16.3% less than once per month, and 10.9% several times per week (Table 3).

Table 3
Sample descriptive statistics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	198	48.1%
	Female	214	51.9%

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (in years)	18 a 30	23	5.58%
	31 a 40	187	45.39%
	41 a 50	123	29.33%
	Over 50	79	19.70%
Educational level	High school graduate	115	27.90%
	Technical	177	43.00%
	College graduate	120	29.10%
Socioeconomic status	Low (1–2)	121	29.40%
	Middle (3)	194	47.10%
	High (4–6)	97	23.50%
Primary occupation	Student	115	27.90%
	Employee	167	40.50%
	Self-employed	87	21.10%
	Unemployed	43	10.50%
Frequency of purchase	Several times a week	45	10.90%
	Once a week	127	30.80%
	Once a month	173	42.00%
	Less than once a month	67	16.30%

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations of the five principal constructs measured using seven-point Likert scales.

Table 4
Construct descriptive statistics (n = 412)

Construct	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Organizational Cynicism	4.422	0.872
Brand Authenticity	5.173	0.824
Trust in the Company	5.691	0.858
Attitudinal Loyalty	5.831	0.783
Behavioral Loyalty	5.016	0.806

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

MEASUREMENT MODEL ASSESSMENT

The measurement model was evaluated following established guidelines for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair *et al.*, 2021).

RELIABILITY AND CONVERGENT VALIDITY

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). All values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2021; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Convergent validity was evaluated through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with all constructs exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Customer-perceived organizational cynicism was measured using an adapted version of the scale developed by Brandes *et al.* (2008), which captures the cognitive (e.g., "I doubt this company's motives"), affective (e.g., "I feel irritated with this company"), and behavioral (e.g., "I criticize this company's practices") dimensions of the construct.

Brand authenticity was measured using the four-item scale proposed by Napoli *et al.* (2014), including indicators such as "This brand is genuine and real" and "This brand stays true to itself." The scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87. Attitudinal loyalty was assessed through adapted items from Saini and Singh (2020) and Goyal and Verma (2023), capturing both affective and cognitive dimensions of loyalty (e.g., "I recommend this brand to others" and "I am loyal to this brand"). Behavioral loyalty, in turn, was measured using five items focused on repeated behavioral patterns (e.g., "I have purchased this brand more than once").

Consistent with Marcos and Coelho (2021) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996), recommendation behavior was treated as a behavioral manifestation of loyalty and distinguished from recommendation intention, which reflects an attitudinal disposition. This distinction aligns with recent research differentiating intention from actual behavior in the context of word-of-mouth communication (Becker *et al.*, 2024), as well as studies examining recommendation behaviors as observable actions distinct from attitudes and intentions (Álvarez-Santamaría *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, this distinction was supported by the qualitative findings, where participants clearly differentiated between "wanting to recommend" (attitude) and "having recommended" (behavior).

As shown in Table 5, all indicator loadings were statistically significant and exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, suggesting that the observed indicators adequately represent their corresponding latent constructs. Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from .83 to .92, surpassing the recommended minimum of .70 and indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Similarly, AVE values ranged from .62 to .69, exceeding the recommended threshold of .50 and indicating that more than 50% of the variance of each construct is explained by its indicators. Taken together, these results provide strong evidence of reliability and convergent validity for the study's core constructs: organizational cynicism, brand authenticity, trust in the company, attitudinal loyalty, and behavioral loyalty.

Table 5
Factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE)

Construct and Items	Factor Loading
Organizational Cynicism (CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.69)	
This company appears to have little integrity	0.843
I doubt this company's true motives	0.872
This company's policies create conflicts	0.796
This company irritates me	0.834
This company represents the worst aspects of this type of organization	0.813
This company's actions make me feel indignant	0.852
I believe this company takes advantage of whoever it can	0.825
I perceive a lack of sincerity in what this company says and does	0.848
Brand Authenticity (CR = 0.87, AVE = 0.63)	

Construct and Items	Factor Loading
This brand is genuine and real	0.766
This brand stays true to itself	0.815
This brand is honest	0.794
This brand is authentic	0.827
Trust in the Company (CR = 0.89, AVE = 0.68)	
This company is trustworthy	0.794
This company has high integrity	0.845
This company cares about its customers	0.856
This company is credible	0.821
Attitudinal Loyalty (CR = 0.89, AVE = 0.67)	
I consider myself loyal to this brand	0.810
This brand is my first choice	0.844
I would recommend this brand to others	0.798
I have an emotional bond with this brand	0.831
I feel proud to be a customer of this brand	0.825
Behavioral Loyalty (CR = 0.83, AVE = 0.62)	
I have purchased this brand more than once	0.760
I usually buy products from this brand	0.829
I am very likely to continue purchasing this brand	0.792
I have actively recommended this brand	0.797
I will continue choosing this brand as my preferred option	0.864

Source: Authors' own elaboration

DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

Discriminant validity was assessed using two approaches: the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 6, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with the others, satisfying the traditional Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 6
Fornell–Larcker criterion

	OC	BA	TC	AL	BL
Organizational Cynicism (OC)	0.83				
Brand Authenticity (BA)	–0.68	0.79			
Trust in the Company (TC)	–0.72	0.75	0.82		
Attitudinal Loyalty (AL)	–0.61	0.73	0.69	0.82	
Behavioral Loyalty (BL)	–0.49	0.57	0.51	0.72	0.79

Note: Square roots of the AVE are reported on the main diagonal (bold values).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In addition, the HTMT criterion proposed by Henseler *et al.* (2015) was applied to further assess discriminant validity. All values were below the 0.85 threshold (Table 7).

Table 7
HTMT Matrix

Construct	OC	BA	TC	AL	BL
OC	—	0.65	0.71	0.59	0.45
BA		—	0.76	0.72	0.61

Construct	OC	BA	TC	AL	BL
TC			—	0.74	0.58
AL				—	0.69
BL					—

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Satisfying the Fornell–Larcker and HTMT criteria provides support for the discriminant validity of the model, confirming that the constructs represent conceptually distinct phenomena.

COLLINEARITY ASSESSMENT

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were calculated to rule out multicollinearity among predictors. As shown in Table 8, all VIF values were below the critical threshold of 5, indicating that there is no problematic multicollinearity among the predictors included in the model.

Table 8
VIF Values for predictor constructs

Relationship	VIF
Organizational Cynicism → AL	2.13
Brand Authenticity → AL	1.87
Trust in the Company → AL	2.42
Organizational Cynicism → BL	2.11
Brand Authenticity → BL	1.94
Trust in the Company → BL	2.36

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The model explained 61% of the variance in Attitudinal Loyalty ($R^2 = .61$) and 38% of the variance in Behavioral Loyalty ($R^2 = .38$), which represents an adequate level of fit for social and consumer behavior studies.

EFFECT SIZE (f^2)

The effect size of each predictor on the dependent variables was assessed using f^2 values Cohen's (1988). The results revealed large, medium, and small effects depending on the specific relationship examined. Brand authenticity exerted the strongest influence on attitudinal loyalty ($f^2 = 0.35$), whereas organizational cynicism showed moderate effects on both loyalty dimensions (Table 9).

Table 9
Effect size (f^2)

Relationship	f^2	Interpretation
Organizational Cynicism → Attitudinal Loyalty	0.18	Medium
Brand Authenticity → Attitudinal Loyalty	0.35	Large
Trust in the Company → Attitudinal Loyalty	0.22	Medium
Organizational Cynicism → Behavioral Loyalty	0.07	Small
Brand Authenticity → Behavioral Loyalty	0.15	Medium
Trust in the Company → Behavioral Loyalty	0.10	Small

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The blindfolding procedure was used to assess the predictive relevance of the endogenous constructs. All Q^2 values exceeded the 0.15, indicating satisfactory predictive capability. In particular, Attitudinal Loyalty achieved a Q^2 value of 0.39, which can be considered high (Table 10).

Table 10
Predictive relevance (Q^2)

Dependent Construct	Q^2	Interpretation
Attitudinal Loyalty	0.39	High predictive relevance
Behavioral Loyalty	0.24	Moderate predictive relevance

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

STRUCTURAL MODEL ASSESSMENT – PATH COEFFICIENTS

The structural model was estimated using PLS-SEM based on the survey data ($n = 412$). Age, gender, and educational level were included as control variables and modeled as additional predictors of both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. None of these control variables were statistically significant (Table 11).

Table 11
Effects of sociodemographic variables on loyalty

Variable	Attitudinal Loyalty (β)	p	Behavioral Loyalty (β)	P
Age	0.04	0.52	-0.02	0.71
Gender	0.06	0.31	0.03	0.59
Education	-0.05	0.41	0.07	0.28

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The path coefficients revealed statistically significant effects for all hypothesized relationships, with directions and magnitudes consistent with the theoretical expectations (Table 12).

Table 12
Structural Model results

Relationship	B	SD	t	P	Results
H1: Brand Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Attitudinal Loyalty	0.622	0.105	5.93	<0.01	Supported
H2: Brand Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Behavioral Loyalty	0.315	0.093	3.39	<0.01	Supported
H3: Trust in the Company $\rightarrow$ Attitudinal Loyalty	0.475	0.119	3.99	<0.01	Supported
H4: Trust in the Company $\rightarrow$ Behavioral Loyalty	0.227	0.104	2.18	<0.01	Supported
H5: Organizational Cynicism $\rightarrow$ Attitudinal Loyalty	-0.386	0.078	-4.95	<0.01	Supported
H6: Organizational Cynicism $\rightarrow$ Behavioral Loyalty	-0.209	0.065	-3.21	<0.01	Supported
H7: Attitudinal Loyalty $\rightarrow$ Behavioral Loyalty	0.482	0.045	9.76	<.001	Supported

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The findings indicate that customer-perceived organizational cynicism has a negative and statistically significant effect on both attitudinal loyalty ($\beta = -0.386$, $p < .01$) and behavioral loyalty ($\beta = -0.209$, $p < .01$). Conversely, perceived brand authenticity exerts a very strong positive effect on attitudinal loyalty ($\beta = .622$, $p < .01$) and a moderately positive effect on behavioral loyalty ($\beta = .315$, $p < .01$). Similarly, trust in the company is positively associated with higher levels of both attitudinal loyalty ($\beta = .475$, $p < .01$) and behavioral loyalty ($\beta = .227$, $p < .01$). Overall, the model demonstrated satisfactory fit, with an SRMR value of .048 (below the recommended threshold of .08) and an NFI value of .91 (above the recommended threshold of .90).

In Figure 2, organizational cynicism, brand authenticity, and trust in the company function as exogenous constructs, whereas attitudinal and behavioral loyalty constitute the primary endogenous constructs. The arrows represent the hypothesized structural relationships among the study variables.

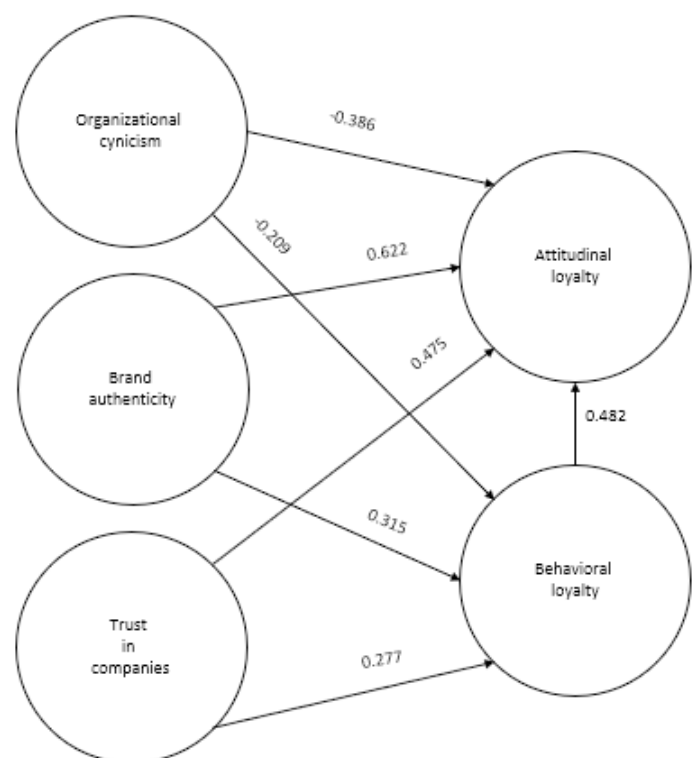


Figure 2
Proposed hypothetical model
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

These findings corroborate and complement the evidence obtained from the focus groups, providing empirical confirmation that customer-perceived organizational cynicism significantly undermines customer loyalty, whereas brand authenticity and trust in the company operate as powerful drivers that strengthen loyalty, even in the presence of cynical attitudes.

Brand authenticity emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by trust in the company, while organizational cynicism functioned as an inhibiting factor. Collectively, the model explained 61% of the variance in attitudinal loyalty and 38% in behavioral loyalty,

demonstrating substantial explanatory power within the context of consumer behavior toward Colombian SMEs.

These empirical findings reinforce previous qualitative results and provide robust evidence regarding how consumers' perceptions of corporate ethics, consistency, and authenticity shape their attitudes and behaviors toward brands in the context of Colombian SMEs.

Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) results

To complement the PLS-SEM findings, a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) was conducted to identify causal configurations of sufficient conditions associated with high levels of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. This configurational approach recognizes that multiple combinations of conditions may lead to the same outcome (equifinality), making it particularly suitable for capturing the complexity of consumer behavior.

CALIBRATION AND THRESHOLDS

The data were calibrated following the direct method proposed by Ragin (2009), transforming the original Likert-scale values (1-7) into fuzzy-set membership scores ranging from 0 to 1. The following calibration thresholds were applied to each variable:

- Full membership threshold: 6
- Crossover point: 4
- Full non-membership threshold: 2

This calibration logic allowed each case to be mapped according to its degree of membership in the sets of high brand authenticity, high trust, high organizational cynicism, and high customer loyalty.

Analysis of necessary conditions

Before examining causal configurations, potential necessary conditions for high loyalty were assessed. A condition is considered necessary when its consistency value is equal to or greater than .90 (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2009). Consistency indicates the degree to which a condition is reliably associated with the outcome. Values above .90 indicate necessity, whereas values above .80 generally indicate sufficiency (Table 13).

Table 13

Necessary Conditions for High Attitudinal and Behavioral Loyalty

Condition	Attitudinal Loyalty (Consistency)	Behavioral Loyalty (Consistency)
Brand Authenticity (BA)	0.91 ✓	0.87
Trust in the Company (TC)	0.89	0.86
~Organizational Cynicism (~OC)	0.88	0.90 ✓

Note: ✓ indicates consistency $\geq .90$.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The results indicate that brand authenticity constitutes a necessary condition for high attitudinal loyalty, whereas the absence of organizational cynicism emerges as a necessary condition for high behavioral loyalty. These findings reinforce the results obtained from the PLS-SEM analysis.

ANALYSIS OF SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS (TRUTH TABLE ANALYSIS)

Subsequently, a truth table was constructed, and causal configurations were refined according to established fsQCA standards (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2009). A consistency threshold of $\geq .80$ was adopted to identify sufficient solutions, while a coverage threshold of $\geq .25$ was applied to ensure empirical relevance (table 14). Parsimonious and conservative solutions were compared to assess the stability and robustness of the findings.

Table 14

Causal configurations for high attitudinal loyalty

Configuration	OC	BA	TC	Consistency	Coverage
1	~OC	BA	TC	0.89	0.41
2	~OC	BA	—	0.85	0.36
3	—	BA	TC	0.83	0.33

Note: Overall solution: Consistency = 0.88 | Coverage = 0.57.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The three configurations reveal that brand authenticity (BA) appears as a core condition in all pathways leading to high attitudinal loyalty. Trust in the company (TC) and the absence of organizational cynicism (~OC) function as complementary conditions across different combinations.

Table 15

Causal configurations for High behavioral loyalty

Configuration	OC	BA	TC	Consistency	Coverage
1	~OC	BA	TC	0.86	0.39
2	~OC	BA	—	0.81	0.31

Note: Overall Solution: Consistency = 0.85 | Coverage = 0.52.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Behavioral loyalty is likewise facilitated by the combination of high brand authenticity, trust in the company, and the absence of organizational cynicism. However, consistent with the quantitative findings, the explanatory coverage for behavioral loyalty is slightly lower than that observed for attitudinal loyalty, suggesting that attitudinal loyalty may be more readily influenced by perceptual factors.

INTEGRATED INTERPRETATION

The fsQCA results confirm that there is no single pathway leading to customer loyalty. Instead, multiple equivalent routes were identified, all centered on two fundamental pillars:

- The presence of brand authenticity as a core condition (present in all configurations).
- The absence of organizational cynicism as a condition that strengthens willingness to be loyal

Furthermore, trust in the company, although not always necessary, operates as an important reinforcing condition in most configurations. These causal pathways reflect a logic of complementarity among the constructs: when authenticity, trust, and

the absence of cynicism coexist, virtuous cycles are activated that strengthen both emotional commitment (attitudinal loyalty) and repeated behavioral support (behavioral loyalty).

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that customer-perceived organizational cynicism constitutes a critical factor in shaping brand loyalty, exerting a negative influence on both its attitudinal and behavioral dimensions. These results are consistent with and complement the qualitative findings, in which participants expressed feelings of distrust, anger, and disappointment toward brands perceived as unethical or dishonest, explicitly reporting a lower willingness to recommend such brands or remain loyal to them.

A key explanation lies in the violation of the implicit psychological contract that customers expect organizations to uphold. When consumers perceive that their expectations regarding integrity, transparency, and genuine concern for their well-being have been betrayed, they develop cynical attitudes as a defensive mechanism to protect themselves from future abuses and disappointments.

Organizational cynicism erodes customer trust, undermining the emotional and cognitive bonds that sustain loyalty. This erosion affects not only loyalty toward a specific brand but may also generalize across the marketplace, making consumers more skeptical toward organizations in general, reducing their willingness to establish loyal relationships in the future.

In contrast, brand authenticity and trust in the company emerge as stabilizing mechanisms within the customer–brand relationship. When customers perceive consistency between a firm's communications and its actions, as well as a genuine commitment to its stated values, they are more likely to maintain loyal attitudes and behaviors. These findings confirm the conclusions reported by Chylinski and Chu (2010) and suggest that authenticity functions as a protective mechanism that shields brands from the corrosive effects of cynicism. Likewise, the results underscore the fundamental importance of building and maintaining trust in the company as a cornerstone of customer loyalty. As cynicism increases and trust deteriorates, customers become more likely to switch brands or engage in negative word-of-mouth communication. Conversely, when a brand is perceived as trustworthy, ethical, and genuinely concerned about customer well-being, consumers are more likely to remain loyal and committed.

The fsQCA analysis complements these findings by demonstrating that there is no single causal pathway leading to customer loyalty. Rather, multiple equifinal configurations were identified. This configurational logic suggests that different combinations of trust, authenticity, and low levels of organizational cynicism can generate similar loyalty outcomes through distinct causal pathways, thereby enriching both the theoretical and practical understanding of the phenomenon (Ragin, 2009; Fiss, 2011).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by integrating three key constructs —brand authenticity, trust in the company, and organizational cynicism— into an explanatory framework of customer loyalty that combines quan-

titative, qualitative, and configurational analyses. The findings confirm that organizational cynicism is not a unidimensional phenomenon but rather encompasses interrelated beliefs, emotions, and behavioral tendencies that significantly influence the customer–brand relationship.

This contribution is particularly valuable given that the study was conducted in the Colombian context, an environment characterized by relatively high levels of institutional distrust and consumer skepticism toward organizations, as well as a notable underrepresentation in the relationship marketing literature. Consequently, the study helps address an important empirical gap in the literature on customer loyalty in emerging economies while providing contextually grounded and culturally sensitive evidence.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that transactional loyalty programs alone are insufficient to sustain customer loyalty. Organizations must cultivate authentic relationships grounded in ethical values, integrity, and social responsibility. Consistency between what a brand communicates and what it actually does emerges as a critical strategic factor. Achieving this requires the implementation of marketing strategies and organizational cultures that foster transparency, accountability, and a genuine commitment to customer well-being.

Similarly, establishing mechanisms for active listening and continuous dialogue with consumers may help prevent the emergence of customer-perceived organizational cynicism or, when such cynicism has already developed, facilitate the restoration of trust. Organizations should adopt a proactive approach to accountability, acknowledge mistakes when they occur, and demonstrate through concrete actions their willingness to correct them and rebuild damaged relationships.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although this study employs a robust methodological triangulation, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was non-probabilistic, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the sample exhibited: (a) an age concentration between 31 and 40 years (48%), with limited representation of younger aged 18-30 (12%), which may bias perceptions toward individuals with greater brand experience and potentially higher accumulated cynicism; (b) a high educational profile (67% holding university-level qualifications or higher), which may be associated with greater critical scrutiny of corporate practices; and (c) a predominance of middle- and upper-income socioeconomic groups. Future research should incorporate multigenerational and multi-strata research designs.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents the establishment of strictly causal relationships over time. Furthermore, although fsQCA provides valuable configurational insights, the technique is sensitive to calibration decisions, requiring caution when interpreting causal configurations.

An additional limitation concerns the partial overlap between attitudinal loyalty, intention, and behavior in some items, particularly in the recommendation, which may be interpreted as either an intention or an behavior.

Although the classification proposed by Becker *et al.* (2024) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) was followed and actual recommendation behavior was prioritized as a behavioral manifestation, future studies could employ more objective measures (e.g., purchase records or observed behaviors) to improve conceptual clarity and measurement precision.

Furthermore, future research should continue exploring the strategic role of corporate social responsibility and value co-creation as mechanisms for strengthening trust and reducing organizational cynicism. Additional studies could examine how social media, artificial intelligence, and data analytics influence the formation of perceptions of authenticity and credibility, particularly among younger consumers.

Likewise, future investigations could explore cultural, generational, and contextual differences in the relationships among cynicism, trust, and loyalty. Such studies may also incorporate dimensions that were beyond the scope of the present research, including the temporal nature of cynicism (gradual versus sudden) and the influence of prior experiences with other brands. Integrating factors such as brand communities, influencers, online reputation, and crisis management into this line of inquiry would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Finally, the use of longitudinal or experimental designs, as well as the replication of the proposed model across different sectors, would help assess the stability and generalizability of the observed relationships.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that customer-perceived organizational cynicism constitutes a critical obstacle to the development of loyal and sustainable relationships with brands. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that perceptions of dishonesty, hypocrisy, or lack of integrity on the part of organizations undermine both attitudinal loyalty (emotional attachment) and behavioral loyalty (repurchase and recommendation behaviors), consistent with recent studies such as Aydın (2021) and Gökerik *et al.* (2024).

A central explanation lies in the disruption of the implicit psychological contract established between consumers and brands. When customers perceive that a company has violated their ethical expectations, a cynical response is activated as a self-protective mechanism, leading to a substantial deterioration of trust. This corrosive dynamic not only compromises the relationship with a specific brand but may also extend to a broader distrust of the business environment as a whole (Khan *et al.*, 2023).

However, the findings also highlight the protective role of perceived brand authenticity. As suggested by Morhart *et al.* (2015) and Darmawan *et al.* (2019), brands perceived as genuine, consistent, and faithful to their values are more capable of sustaining customer loyalty even in contexts characterized by high levels of distrust. In this sense, authenticity functions as a form of “reputational shield,” mitigating the adverse effects of cynicism by providing clear signals of integrity, commitment, and purpose.

Similarly, trust in the company emerged as a necessary condition for strengthening loyal customer relationships. When consumers perceive a company as trustworthy, honest, and genuinely concerned about their well-being, they are more likely to remain loyal even in the face of mistakes or organizational crises, as demonstrated by Kähkönen *et al.* (2021) and Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005). Trust therefore occupies a central position as a relational mechanism that not only mitigates the impact of cynicism but also amplifies the positive effects of authenticity.

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the demonstration of a reciprocal and reinforcing dynamic among organizational cynicism, brand authenticity, and trust in the company. This complex interrelationship suggests that the erosion of any one of these pillars may negatively affect the others, whereas their simultaneous strengthening creates a synergistic protective system that consolidates customer loyalty.

In this context, organizations’ ability to reduce cynicism, project authenticity, and cultivate trust will be a decisive factor in achieving long-term sustainability and competitiveness. In markets increasingly characterized by consumer empowerment and social skepticism, only those organizations capable of building genuine emotional and cognitive bonds with their customers will be able to establish enduring loyalty relationships (Beverland *et al.*, 2021; Indibara & Varshney, 2020).

8. AUTHORSHIP

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