Investigating farmers' brand loyalty towards agricultural businesses in the Free State Province of South Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate relationships between farmers' allegiance to agricultural businesses doing business in the Free State Province. The commitment of farmers is a crucial element that influences the viability and expansion of agricultural businesses in this area. Long-term success for farmers and agricultural enterprises depends on understanding the factors influencing farmer loyalty. This study assesses the importance of several loyalty variables, such as product quality, price, customer service, and trust, to establish and sustain loyalty among farmers in the Free State Province. It also investigated how socioeconomic and environmental aspects may differ throughout the province's various agricultural sectors and how it affects farmer loyalty. The study investigated farmers' brand loyalty towards agricultural enterprises using qualitative research design and interviews. The findings provide a valuable foundation for agricultural businesses, detailing the essential aspects that drive customer loyalty to a brand. When formulating and carrying out their customer loyalty marketing programmes, these companies are advised to prioritise these aspects. These findings show that quality customer service, trust, and perceived value drive farmers' loyalty to Free State, South African agricultural firms.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

South Africa's agricultural economic development plays a significant role and can positively influence its employment opportunities and household nutrition security, according to the Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (2017:2). The Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries is the core supplier of information been utilised towards this content. The agriculture, forestry, and fisheries industries contributed to the country's economic growth despite the worst droughts that the country experienced in 2017. South Africa's agricultural sector has seen a series of successful seasons from 2019/20. The gross value added to the industry had a growth rate of 14.9% in 2020, followed by a growth rate of 8.8% in 2021 and a more moderate growth rate of 0.3% in 2022. The main factor contributing to this phenomenon was the presence of suitable climatic conditions (Sihlobo, 2023). However, the 2023/24 summer crop season had a significant decline in maize (-25%) and soy (-35%) as the infamous La Nina weather phenomenon realised (Viljoen, 2024).

Processing agricultural products is one of South Africa's largest exports on a net basis. In 2022, South Africa exported goods with an approximate value of 122.9 billion U.S. dollars, while in the same year, it imported goods worth approximately 136.21 billion U.S. dollars (O'Neill, 2023). However, between 50 and 60% (1.8 million tonnes) of the country's wheat requirements are imported from Australia, Argentina, Poland, and Brazil (OEC, 2024). Russia (34%) and Ukraine (4%) are also suppliers; these exports are now at risk (Isilow, 2022).

South Africa, as a net agricultural products exporter, maintains a positive agricultural trade balance. From May 2022 to May 2023, South African exports increased by ZAR1.65 billion; this represents a growth rate of 0.94%. The value of exports climbed from ZAR175 billion to ZAR176 billion. In parallel, imports also experienced an upward trend, with a notable gain of ZAR23 billion, equivalent to a growth rate of 15.2%. The value of imports rose from ZAR151 billion to ZAR174 billion (South Africa Exports & Imports, 2023). The agricultural commerce of South Africa in the year 2022 saw a notable achievement, as the exports surged to a historic high of US$12.8 billion, reflecting a 4% increase compared to the preceding year. In 2022, notable exportable commodities were maize, wine, grapes, citrus fruits, berries, almonds, apples and pears, sugar, avocados, and wool. Significantly, the shipments were distributed across many crucial markets. In 2022, Africa maintained its prominent position as a primary market, constituting 37% of South Africa's agricultural exports (Agricultural Business Chamber of South Africa, 2022).

1.2. The Free State in Context

The Free State region is a primary producer of several agricultural commodities. During the preceding planting season, the Free State region had notable agricultural productivity, accounting for 45% of the

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

Agriculture is crucial to the province's prosperity, given that the Free State has 25% of the country's arable land (Agriculture in the Provinces, 2023). According to Sihlobo (2023), the province produces 15.2% of the nation's agricultural output. The Free State contributed R46,9 billion or 14,1% of agricultural revenue in the most recent Commercial Agriculture Census (2017), placing it second only to the Western Cape (Stats SA, 2020).

The Free State is a significant producer of both winter and summer crops. Maize (43.7%), grain sorghum (18%), groundnuts (40%), sunflower (56%), dry beans (28.5%), and soybeans (46.8%) are the primary grain and oilseed crops listed below, followed by the proportion that the Free State contributed to national output. This province also supplied 20.6% of the nation's wheat (Dalrrd, 2023). The nation's cherry and asparagus industries are in the east, which is hilly and has a moderate environment. Apples, berries, peaches, plums, and apricots thrive well here, as do other deciduous fruits. This province is home to around 28% of the nation's commercial potato growers (Potatoes SA, 2018). The vegetation in the south is karoo/semi-desert.

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

1.3. Problem Statement

South Africa's agribusiness sector is highly competitive and contributed 10% to exports, representing 2.57% towards the GDP in 2022 to the national economy (South Africa GDP Share of Agriculture, 2022). South Africa has a population of over 32,000 commercial farmers, with a subset of 5,000 to 7,000 individuals responsible for generating nearly 80% of the country's agricultural production. In the fiscal year 2021, the agricultural industry made a notable contribution of almost 10% to the overall export profits of South Africa, amounting to a significant value of $12.0 billion. The primary commodities that constituted the highest export value were citrus fruits, wine, table grapes, maize,

apples, pears, and wool. In addition to its primary exports, South Africa exports several commodities such as wool, nuts, sugar, mohair, and pears (Agricultural Sector, 2023). Global agribusinesses compete with local produce on world markets, while local agriculture faces increasing competition from international producers and agricultural equipment suppliers.

Agribusiness is big business. The industry is highly competitive, and one key competitive advantage is the development of strong brand equity. Specifically, one aspect, brand loyalty, can significantly improve the competitive advantage by actively managing consumers' brand loyalty. However, to actively manage brand loyalty, managers must first establish current loyalty levels and, as such, measure their customers' brand loyalty. Identifying crucial brand loyalty aspects of loyalty towards agricultural businesses can improve agribusinesses' competitiveness.

1.4. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify common brand loyalty themes among Free State farmers toward their agricultural businesses of choice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Loyalty Models

Although many brand loyalty models exist, this study selected three as the theoretical basis. They are Raj's (2013) six factors dealing with customer preferences, Anderson and Fornell's (2000) customer satisfaction approach to brand loyalty, and a local brand loyalty model by Bisschoff and Moolla (in Bisschoff, 2020), which was successfully applied in several South African quantitative brand loyalty studies. Table 1 depicts Raj's (2013) model with six brand loyalty factors.

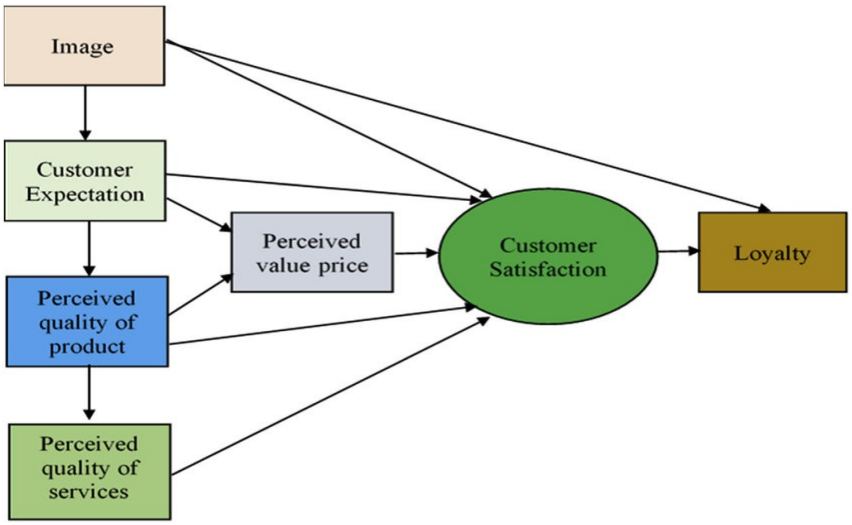
Table 1: Key determinant factors of customer preference

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

Source**:** Raj et al. (2013)

Anderson and Fornell's (2000) model (see Figure 1) shows that *Customer expectations* and *Perceived quality* lead to *Perceived value pricing*, which leads to *Customer satisfaction*. All the antecedents contribute to *Customer satisfact*ion, which is the main contributor to loyalty. Only the antecedent *Image* has a direct influence on loyalty.

Figure 1: Framework of study. Determinants of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty



Source: Anderson and Fornell (2000)

Anderson and Fornell's (2000) key determinant factors of customer preference are:

- **Product reliability**. They want your product to perform as predicted the whole time they anticipate it. Any item that a consumer purchases from you should never malfunction. The expectation then goes to your company making things right (Schenkelberg, 2021). In one study, 52% of customers say they will likely switch brands if they do not get the care they anticipate (Dethloff et al., 2023).
- **Price.** A price is the monetary value assigned to a product or service. Demand theory shows that demand decreases as prices rise (Indeed, 2023). Pricing will undoubtedly be crucial if a product is currently in high demand since a price rise may discourage buyers from purchasing it. Similarly, if prices are reduced under such market circumstances, customers' purchases will rise sharply (Zhao et al., 2021).
- **Brand uniqueness**. Quality is one of the most crucial elements that significantly affects consumer decisions (Dilley, 2022). Any successful firm is built on its brand identity. Forging strong relationships with your target market, delivering exceptional customer service, and increasing profitability is crucial (Brand Identity, 2023).
- **Trustworthiness**. After all, it makes it possible for you to provide better services, foster more customer loyalty, and keep more clients (Bishop, 2022). Without trust, business cannot be done, influence is lost, leaders risk losing their teams, and salespeople risk losing their customers. In this regard, Bromhall (2023) states that the currency of business is trust and personal connections, not money.
- **Product promotion**. Customer preferences are the hopes, desires, motives, and tendencies that lead customers to buy certain goods. Knowing consumer preferences enables you to

implement successful marketing tactics, enhance your brand's reputation, and build client loyalty (Pnadmin, 2023). Choosing to purchase a product or service is the most typical example of a customer preference. For example, a consumer decides to spend money on a less expensive product than their rivals, although it is of lesser quality (Williams, 2022).

- **Customer needs sensitivity.** Insensitivity may result in clientele loss, a poor review of your company, or even the loss of potential customers who will recommend you. Most significantly, our duty as businesspeople is to take excellent care of every client and customer who needs our products and services (D'Anna, 2019). Businesses must pay attention to what clients say during interaction to grasp their needs better. One may better understand the target market's expectations using the abovementioned methods. Understanding consumer wants may help you achieve some excellent outcomes. Along with customer loyalty, referrals and suggestions from pleased clients can help you build a better reputation (Team, 2023).

Figure 2 shows the refined local model by Bisschoff and Moolla (in Bisschoff, 2020).

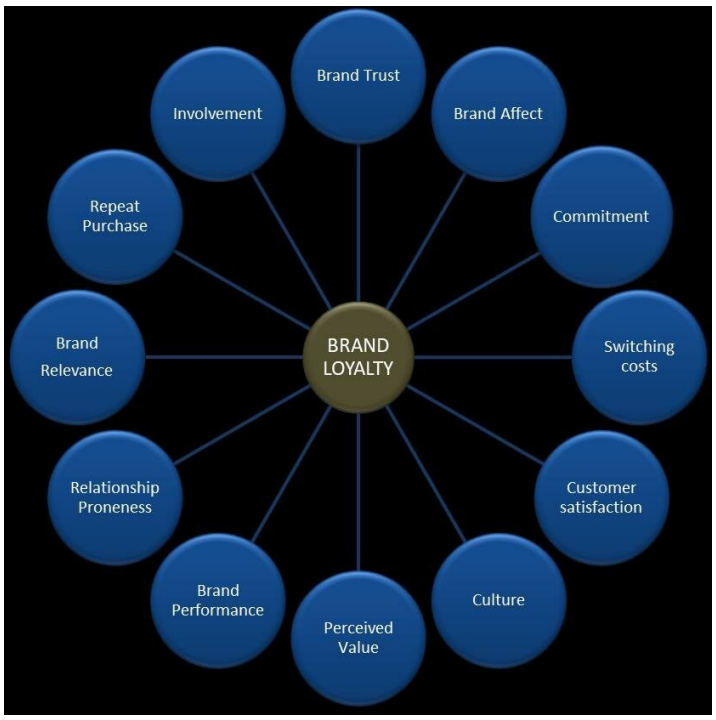


Figure 2: Bisschoff & Moolla's brand loyalty model

Source: Bisschoff (2020)

Several researchers have widely used and validated this model in agriculture. Hill (2018), for example, used these 12 brand loyalty antecedents to investigate loyalty towards chicken brands in the Free State province. These 12 antecedents are tabulated and shortly discussed in Table 2.

Table 2: Bisschoff and Moolla's Brand Loyalty Antecedents

Antecedent	Description
Customer satisfaction	Customer satisfaction is a metric used to evaluate the extent to which a company's offerings, whether goods or services, align with and fulfil the expectations of its customers. Purchase intentions and client loyalty are considered crucial indicators of consumer behaviour. Therefore, it aids in anticipating company expansion and generating income (Szyndlar, 2023). Consistently high-quality agricultural goods and services foster loyalty and confidence in farmers (Linkedin, 2023).
Brand effect	Organisations understand the importance of brand identity. This includes choosing a name, logo, and communication standards. The effect may be significant if every organisation feels compelled to do this. Innovation can keep consumers interested and devoted by consistently releasing new and better goods, services, and solutions (Fontanella, 2022). Brand effect refers to reputation's ability to affect conduct. In businesses, branded companies enjoy more sales at higher prices. However, a strong brand has an impact beyond business. Because people are more likely to support well-known groups. Names and logos help people track and remember reputations (Finkle & Finkle, 2023).
Brand Trust	Brand trust refers to the level of esteem and allegiance that consumers have towards a brand and the extent to which they see the company as capable of fulfilling its commitments. Public perception is often influenced by personal experiences and corporate messages, with marketing playing a significant role in both (Brand Trust, 2022).
Perceived Value	Perceived value pertains to a consumer's subjective viewpoint or assessment of a particular product or service, often shaped by the extent to which those products and services meet the customer's requirements and expectations. Perceived value, often called customer-perceived value, pertains to the assessment or rating that a consumer assigns to a product or service concerning other comparable offerings. Perceived value is vital for marketing professionals as it informs their strategic decision-making in effectively promoting and positioning items and services from the customer's perspective (Gordon, 2022).
Brand Performance	Quality brands perform better financially and provide higher returns on investment. Brand performance is how well a product or service meets customer needs. How does the brand do in objective quality evaluations? How well does the brand meet clients' utilitarian, aesthetic, and economic needs in the product or service category? (Apoorva, 2023). Dependability in terms of product availability and delivery times may assist in increasing customer loyalty to agricultural businesses (Global, 2022).
Brand Relevance	Brand relevance refers to the capacity of a firm to establish an emotional connection with individuals and attain personal significance in their lives. The preservation of brand integrity is no longer contingent upon factors like intellectual property, financial resources, or product differentiation. What strategies may ensure their businesses' long-term viability and resilience? In the contemporary landscape, establishing and sustaining brand relevance is paramount for safeguarding against various challenges (Clément, 2020). Excellent customer service within agriculture businesses develops a good connection with clients by providing timely answers to questions and resolving issues (Rana, 2023).
Brand Trust	Brand trust encompasses more than just confidence in the quality of a brand's goods. The establishment of customer trust in a brand is contingent upon three primary variables that play a crucial role in fostering confidence and trustworthiness in such a brand. One of the primary characteristics is the practice of transparency and sincerity. The second criterion pertains to the practice of inclusivity and respect, while the third criterion involves the provision of customer care and the ability to empathise with them. These elements have significance irrespective of the brand's novelty (Writer, 2022). Transparency: Being open and honest with customers about the sources, methods, and costs of your products will help you win their confidence (Nguyen, 2022).
Involvement	Customer participation encompasses diverse activities, including providing input on goods and services, engaging in focus groups or surveys, and collaborating with the firm to co-create or co-design products. The primary objective of customer

	participation is to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty by cultivating a feeling of cooperation and ownership between the consumer and the organisation. By engaging consumers, companies may better understand their customers' requirements, anticipate them, and develop goods and services that align with their expectations (Collaborators, 2023).
Repeat Purchase	A repeat buy refers to a customer acquiring a product from the same brand purchased previously. Making a repeat purchase may indicate client loyalty towards a specific brand. Additionally, it is a chance for marketers to cultivate enduring client connections. The company's repeat purchase rate can be enhanced via online and social media promotions, digital loyalty programmes, and excellent customer service (Active Demand, 2022).
Culture	Brand culture refers to the comprehensive framework of ideas, values, experiences, and tangible characteristics that define a corporation and are embraced collectively by its workers and society. A robust brand culture fosters a collective of micro-influencers that unite around common ideologies and actively endorse your merchandise. Suppose the brand culture has an appealing quality that resonates with workers, prospects, and customers. In that case, it is likely to generate a desire among individuals to become part of this culture and outwardly manifest these ideals to the broader society (Hansen, 2022). Many modern agribusiness clients share a dedication to sustainable and ecologically beneficial practices (Sustainable Agriculture, 2023).
Brand Commitment	Demonstrating a steadfast dedication to one's brand entails consistently conveying the same message throughout every consumer engagement. With regular implementation over a prolonged period, clients will clearly understand the expected standards and experiences associated with your organisation. Brand dedication is a distinguishing factor that sets your company apart from others (Bauman, 2022).
Switching cost	Switching costs refer to a consumer or organisation's financial obligations when switching from one brand, supplier, or product to another. Switching fees significantly influence customers' purchase decisions (Apoorva, 2023).

However, although all these models are quantitative, this qualitative study used the identified drivers of brand loyalty in the interviews to probe deeply into the farmers' brand loyalty behaviour.

2.2. Brand Loyalty in Agriculture

Studies of agricultural business growth and performance have found that successful agricultural businesses operate in a physically, economically, and politically conducive environment. Increasing labour, capital, and land productivity allows the industry to grow and make profits while keeping prices competitive (Adamowicz, 2020). Agriculture is not the only aspect of agribusiness. Agribusiness encompasses a broader scope through input supply, value-addition, marketing, entrepreneurship, microfinance, and agricultural extension (Desmond & Siebert, 2009). For brands to maintain customer loyalty, customers should receive the right value proposition based on the above characteristics. A positive brand image, product quality, and brand awareness help build brand loyalty (MBA Team, 2020). Customers develop brand loyalty by repeatedly using a particular product, service, or brand. As a result, loyal consumers tend to become regular customers and refer their friends and family to products and services they have benefited from (MBA Team, 2020).

2.3. Brand Loyalty in Agribusiness

Kohls et al.'s (1957) research found that brand loyalty is more critical than dealer loyalty. Several participants in this study repeated an 80-year-old finding, stating that they would not switch brands even if their dealers switched brand product sources. Oliver (1999:34) defines brand loyalty as "*a*

deeply held commitment to consistently rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service in the future, causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational antecedents and marketing efforts that can cause switching behaviour." More recently, brand loyalty has been regarded as essential to a company's survival and development, particularly for businesses that face fierce competition from regional and international brands (Babic-Hodovic et al., 2018).

Ferrell and Hartline (2011:204) describe brand loyalty in more detail and suggest that there are three levels:

1. **Brand Recognition**: Brand recognition is the weakest form of brand loyalty. It occurs when a customer is aware of a brand and considers it when buying a product or service.
2. **Brand Preference**: A customer prefers one brand over others. The brand is only preferred when readily accessible. If the customer's preferred brand is unavailable, they will buy an alternative.
3. **Brand Insistence**: Strongest brand loyalty. Customers are so loyal to a brand that they will pay a premium or make great efforts to obtain it. According to Bairrada et al. (2019), emotional affection for a brand is a strong indicator of brand loyalty, translated into behavioural intent, such as continuing to purchase the same brand at the expense of competing brands.

However, Huang et al.'s basic definition (2016:145) probably best defines brand loyalty as *"...a customer's repeated purchase of a brand and intention to buy it again*."

The significance of brand loyalty is embedded in its potential to establish a connection between the business and its consumer base. Furthermore, it facilitates the enhancement of client retention and the establishment of corporate growth (Kotler & Armstrong, 2023). Brand loyalty has many advantages, such as an amplified generation of word-of-mouth leads, increased volume of referrals, elevated rates of new product adoption, reduced costs associated with customer acquisition, enhanced profitability, and augmented lifetime value (Withers, 2023; Babic-Hodovic et al., 2018; Kotler & Armstrong, 2023; Hollebeek, 2011; Yeap et al., 2018; and others).

Therefore, agribusinesses must focus on branding as a competitive advantage. One aspect of branding that could significantly improve the competitive advantage is actively managing consumers' brand loyalty by implementing focused marketing strategies to initiate and maintain brand loyalty. However, to actively manage brand loyalty, managers must establish current loyalty levels and measure their customers' loyalty.

The survey divided Argentine farmer loyalty into four categories: performance, price, balance, and convenience. Feeney and Berardi (2013:33) define performance buyers as those who value product productivity and technically advanced machinery above cost. This focus on efficiency affects how

they see loyalty. The performance purchasers in this study followed this trend. However, Participant 4 stressed that being a performance buyer depends on the conditions, stating that specific irrigated farms with limited output potential would not justify the investment in genetically modified hybrids. The person is a price-conscious customer in a particular area. The author hypothesises that the high cost of technically advanced machinery, fertilisers, maize, and wheat hybrids does not affect pricing. Instead, the option may be made to match a field's yield potential with conservatively priced GM hybrid products and technically advanced machinery costs.

The sub-theme of product support in this study is related to Weitz and Jap (1995:308). Their findings support that agricultural business products are more valuable than traditional marketing. Comi (2019:172) supports the premise that farmers are loyal to their dealers' technical expertise. The research mentioned above agrees with this study's relationship-focused theme analysis. Several participants requested continuing technical help and prompt product grievance resolution throughout the season. This research found that trust is needed for behavioural loyalty. Loyal farmers' customers pay more for their goods and share their experiences via word-of-mouth marketing.

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

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews.

3.1. Population and sample

The study population comprised mixed farmers in the Northern Free State Province within the Mafube local municipality area. These farmers do crop and livestock farming. The study population's mixed farmers are knowledgeable and well-informed about the agricultural business in the Northern Free State. Following Berg's (2001:31) guideline that when large-scale surveys are not feasible, researchers may depend on non-probability samples (as is the case here, only a few mixed farmers were present), this study used non-probability judgemental sampling (Bryman *et al.*, 2015:172). Saturation plus two served as the point of interview termination. All the interviews and data adhered to the POPI Act. The following demographic data were collected for profiling purposes, namely, *Age,*

Gender, Ethnicity, Representative, Education, Style of farming, and *Time frame* within the farming sector.

3.2. Ethics

The anonymity of the analysis unit and participants' ability to decline to answer expressly specified questions were among the study's ethical issues. Interviews that were scheduled in advance and performed without violating participants' privacy in the comfort of their homes or workplaces were another ethical issue. Before the interview began, all participants signed the required consent forms. The Ethics Committee of North-West University approved the study and issued a formal ethics number (NWU-00610-23-A4).

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews using open-ended, prepared questions (avoiding yes/no questions), followed by probes and requests for further information. Participants could express themselves freely and define their perspectives independently in the semi-structured interviews (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40). In preparation for data for analysis, the researcher made an audio recording of the interview after obtaining permission from the interviewee. All interviewees agreed that they may be recorded. These interview recordings allowed the interviewer to adjust some of the interviews as the study progressed (Merriam, 2009:109). Additionally, field notes on body language and subtleties were taken throughout the interviews to be reviewed afterwards. The interviewer was able to start the data analysis and keep track of the information flow thanks to these notes.

Seven farmers were interviewed with ten questions and probing questions. Interviews continued until saturation plus two was reached. Saturation was reached at the fifth interviewee.

Table 3: Respondent details

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

3.4. Data analysis

The best source for analysis is verbatim interview transcriptions (Merriam, 2009:110). As such, all recorded interviews were transcribed. (Jenner et al., 2004:248). The transcript's analysis was categorised into themes and coded. Furthermore, the researchers' profound knowledge of farming and agribusiness (derived from extensive practical application and first-hand experience) assisted greatly in establishing credibility.

4. Results and Findings

The results culminated in four themes, namely 1) Loyalty, 2) Economic factors, 3) Relationships, and 4) Agricultural business preference. Each theme also comprises sub-themes.

4.1. Theme 1: Loyalty

4.1.1. Sub-theme 1: Agricultural business loyalty

Three of the seven participants said they are strongly loyalty to the agent who represent their agricultural business of choice. Participant 2 declared, "*My loyalty would rather be with the person than the business".* Spontaneously, this participant also emphasised the reliability of after-sales help and product support. Participants 5 and 7 expressed loyalty to the individual representing the agricultural businesses. Participant 7 said with certainty that the same agricultural business is represented in my region by two local representatives*." I don't buy from any of them; I only buy from the one. It's about the person; if he weren't available, I wouldn't buy from that business".* Participant 1 showed a loyalty preference towards the brand product instead of the representative, which was an intriguing result. Participant 1 said, "*I must continue to be economically relevant. Loyalty is not necessary for my survival if it entails switching to a new firm and cutting ties with my present agent".*

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

4.1.2. Sub-theme 2: Product and company loyalty

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

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

Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 agreed about the sentiment of product loyalty. Participant 6 had inconsistencies within this segment of the interview. When presented with a probing inquiry, a declaration was made expressing loyalty towards agricultural business individuals. Participant 6

expressed his intention to remain loyal to the business if the agent changes their allegiance, affirming their commitment to staying with the agriculture business brand.

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

4.2. Theme 2: Economic factors

4.2.1. Sub-theme 1: Price

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

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

The effect of price as a channel expectation has unambiguous outcomes. Although there were some linguistic variances in the replies, the consensus was that farmers were unconcerned about price effects if their product provided dependable yield and return gains.

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

4.2.2. Sub-theme 2: Yield and Return

The participants' input also demonstrated the significance of yield revenue and rate of return as crucial factors in decision-making regarding which agricultural business will be supported. All participants unanimously said that the first and most essential characteristic an agricultural product or equipment should possess is the ability to generate income via yield and investment rate. Participant 5 expressed his reluctance to use a product or equipment until it has shown its efficacy over an extended period inside his manufacturing practises, consistently yielding satisfactory results. This statement provides

essential details on agricultural businesses' goods and equipment and the agricultural business used. It emphasises the need for ongoing on-farm testing and demonstration to attract and retain new clients. Participant 5 further reinforces the sub-theme of the preamble by expressing their commitment to achieving a constantly improving growing yield objective.

4.2.3. Sub-theme 3: Technological Advances and Genetic Progress

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

Participant 1 supports this technology requirement by emphasising that technology in products and technically integrated equipment is very important for sustainability in farming. Participant 1 stated, "*If we can have genetic progress technology in a Product and equipment that can minimize stress during critical stages, we will be able to consistently achieve the yield objectives*."

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

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

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

Participant 4 agreed that in regions with lower agricultural productivity, they exercise caution in adopting sophisticated technological items and equipment. This cautious approach is based on the understanding that these high-tech hybrids would be limited by the current conditions, making their use unwise. In contrast to the participants mentioned above, who exhibit a strong dependence on technological advancements and genetic progress in their decision-making process for product

purchases and equipment choices within agricultural businesses, the findings of this study underscore the significance of agricultural businesses proactively staying ahead of the curve and continuously enhancing their product offerings to maintain a competitive edge and sustainability. Considering the viewpoints mentioned above, it is evident that the farmers in this study comprehend the significance technology brings to their agricultural practices. Furthermore, they intend to selectively employ this technology in their most productive fields, prioritising those that yield the highest investment returns through their preferred agricultural business.

4.3. Theme 3: Relationships

4.3.1. Sub-theme 1: Customer Engagement

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

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

Trust is related to the human connection theme and the agricultural business's confidence in its equipment and goods, including whether or not they would provide value and durability to its farmer, as stated by Participant 4. Participant 1," *expressed trust can only be built up over time".* Participant 5 said," *The agent you work with is what makes me build trust and loyalty in the company I work with".* Participants 1 and 2 recognised the significance of competent after-sales support as a noteworthy attribute of their preferred agricultural business. Participant 2 preferred to be challenged by their agent about equipment and product purchase selections, encouraging them to assess and consider various possibilities consistently.

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

Participant 4 amusingly highlighted the distinction between friendship and on-farm help by suggesting that some agents assist at the farm level for legitimate reasons. Still, others may prioritise supporting their acquaintances. Participant 6 also expressed the significance of interpersonal

connections by asserting that they would have a greater sense of ease in the presence of an individual who demonstrates respect, unlike an untrustworthy and oppressive individual who lacks alignment with their specific value system. Participant 4 *stated, "I am inclined to establish a strong bond and establish a sense of affinity with those that share similar ideals and beliefs as myself".*

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

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

4.3.2. Sub-theme 2: Product support

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

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

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

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

cycle and punctual delivery. The individual expressed his apprehensions by formulating the following inquiries: *"Does he fulfil his commitments*?" *Is it possible to get the required equipment and product volumes?" Is the delivery expected to be punctual? Is the consumer adequately notified in advance by the company or individual on any potential issues with the product, or are they informed about introducing a superior alternative?"*

Similarly, Participant 1 articulated his need for extensive product assistance, emphasising the importance of having access to all relevant information. He stressed the necessity of understanding which equipment and goods suit his specific geographical location, considering the varying seasonal and soil conditions. Participant 5 emphasised the importance of having specialist equipment and product support when addressing a complaint about technologically advanced equipment or products like animal feeds and poisons. In contrast, Participant 2 highlighted the significance of product support in terms of product placement and usage. The agricultural business and supply channel plays a crucial role in supporting the diverse needs of farmers by providing appropriate goods that align with the specific farming circumstances and needs.

4.4. Theme 4: Agricultural business preference

4.4.1. Sub-theme 1: Current preferences

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

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

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

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

Another discovery suggests the increasing usage of digital technologies in placing orders. Participant 1 emphasised the significance of digital applications in enhancing transparency and transaction efficiency. The questioned farmers in this research are recognised as prominent figures in their respective domains. Throughout the interviews, they consistently underscored the significance of using technology as a strategic approach to sustain a competitive edge. Hence, it is unsurprising that the incorporation of technology in marketing tactics had a significant role in their selection of an agricultural business.

4.4.2. Sub-theme 2: The role of marketing

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

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

Participants 3 and 4 emphasised the significance of marketing responsibilities associated with on-farm trialling initiatives and new product releases in their decision-making process regarding agricultural businesses. Participant 4 asserts that they thoroughly understand the businesses involved in the planting trials and those seeking to advertise their products. The significance of packaging and brand

design is sometimes disregarded in agricultural marketing where products are bought in bulk. Participant 5 emphasised the significance of the first visual impact of a fertiliser and seed bag's brand design, highlighting the need not to underestimate its attraction. Agricultural businesses should be aware that farmers place importance on branding fertiliser bags or genetically modified maize seeds, particularly when there are little yield disparities between competing products.

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

Table 4: Summary of the findings

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

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

5. Managerial Implications

The results emphasise the following managerial implications:

1. Free State farmers are dedicated to quality products accompanied by good services they can depend on. They are brand loyal if these attributes are satisfied.
2. Direct relationships exist between brand loyalty themes, the agribusiness environment, and farmers. Agribusinesses must manage these attributes collectively and not in isolation.
3. Agribusiness management should understand that brand loyalty mediates between farmers and corporate choices.

4. Farmers consider trust to be a crucial brand loyalty determinant because they depend on the agricultural business's support for the delivery of new technology and the essential technical support provided by a dedicated support team to help them with technical problems relating to equipment, software, or any other technology offered by the agricultural business.
5. Farmers do not like a directly employed representative or a commissioned agent that represents the agricultural business. They do not believe that this structure is an effective distribution channel. However, agribusinesses believe that distribution channel effectiveness is not reliant on whether the structure of the channel is direct or indirect.
6. Farmers tend to be loyal to agricultural businesses that can promptly provide technological advancements while offering on-site technical assistance. Notably, farmers' preferences remain unaffected by the presence or absence of a direct or indirect agricultural business.
7. Regarding the marketing mix, pricing had a minimal impact and did not significantly influence farmers' selection for agricultural businesses. Product quality and after-sales support significantly influence farmers' selection for agricultural businesses.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- Provide farmers with opportunities to embrace new technologies and digital tools, encouraging them to use data-driven decision-making, precision agriculture, and digital record-keeping tools.
- Tailor after-sales services and offerings to meet each farmer's specific needs and challenges, as different regions and individuals may have unique requirements.
- Ensure fair and transparent pricing for agricultural products so that Farmers feel they are getting a fair share of the profits. Establish a dedicated support team to assist farmers with technical issues related to equipment, software, or any technology the agricultural business provides.
- Promoting and supplying high-quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and technically advanced machinery to help farmers improve crop yields and product quality. By promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices, many farmers are increasingly concerned about the impact of agriculture on the environment.
- Streamline the supply chain to reduce post-harvest losses, improve storage facilities, and ensure efficient transportation and distribution. Digitization's transformative impact on distribution and the consequential challenges offered by online distribution compared to conventional brick-and-mortar channels have led the agricultural sector to continue placing significant importance on the physical presence and direct engagement of on-farm operations.

- Providing access to affordable credit or financing options for farmers to invest in their operations and manage cash flow.
- Collaborating with agricultural research businesses to develop innovative solutions that benefit the business and the farmers. The increasing significance of technically advanced machinery genetically modified (GM) products, such as GM wheat and maize hybrids, in South Africa's irrigated wheat seed market necessitates the active involvement of human factors to fully realise this technology's potential value. Facilitate access to broader markets, both domestic and international, for farmers' produce, providing them with opportunities for higher revenues. This involvement is crucial for ensuring that South African farmers remain globally competitive.

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This research was limited to a single geographic region inside the Free State Province. Only a selected sample of the farmer population from a specific district was used. Consequently, it was impossible to generalise the study's findings and outcomes. Future research can include more geographical regions and a more extensive sample of farmers engaged in mixed farming practices to generalise the results.

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