



When Satisfaction Is Not Enough: The Mediating Role of Trust in Customer Loyalty within B2B Logistics Services

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v5i2.1884>

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Trust, Customer Loyalty, B2B Services

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This study aims to examine the limitations of satisfaction-based loyalty models by investigating the fundamental role of trust in shaping customer loyalty within B2B service markets. Specifically, it assesses whether service quality and price perception remain effective drivers of customer loyalty in long-term, high-value business relationships. A quantitative research design was employed, with data collected from 66 strategic B2B customers and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results reveal that trust is the only variable with a direct and significant effect on customer loyalty, while service quality and price perception do not exhibit significant direct influences. Although price perception significantly affects customer satisfaction, satisfaction does not mediate the relationships between service quality, price perception, trust, and customer loyalty. These findings indicate that customer satisfaction functions primarily as an evaluative outcome rather than a mechanism that converts service performance into sustained loyalty. This study contributes theoretically by repositioning trust as the central relational governance mechanism underlying B2B customer loyalty and reconceptualizing satisfaction as a non-mediating construct. Managerially, the findings suggest that firms serving strategic B2B customers should prioritize trust-building, relational governance, and long-term relationship stability over short-term service or pricing optimization.

Article History:

Received: November 2025; Revised: December 2025; Accepted: January 2026

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Surakhman, R., Suryaputra, R., & Ruspitasari, W. D. (2026). When Satisfaction Is Not Enough: The Mediating Role of Trust in Customer Loyalty within B2B Logistics Services. *Journal of Educational Management Research*, 5(2), 1555–1564.

INTRODUCTION

Customer loyalty is widely recognized as a critical outcome in service management and marketing research due to its implications for long-term profitability, competitive advantage, and societal economic stability. In an increasingly service-driven economy, loyal customers contribute to predictable revenue streams, efficient resource allocation, and stable employment within

service industries (Abidah & Rachmat, 2025; Artina, 2025). The societal relevance of loyalty extends beyond firm-level performance: when organizations maintain consistent and trustworthy services, they enhance overall supply chain reliability and consumer confidence (Dewi et al., 2024). Empirical evidence shows that customer satisfaction has traditionally served as the main mechanism linking service quality and price perception to loyalty outcomes (Ferdiansyah & Asikin, 2025). Yet, in contexts where services are high-stakes, recurring, and operationally interdependent, satisfaction alone may not suffice to ensure sustainable loyalty (Amali et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics is vital not only for firm profitability but also for societal welfare, as disruptions in service delivery can lead to cascading economic and social consequences. Therefore, investigating alternative mechanisms, such as trust, is crucial to advancing both theoretical knowledge and practical management of customer loyalty (Rahmatillah & Andayani, 2025).

Despite its importance, reliance on satisfaction-centered loyalty models presents significant challenges in contemporary service markets (Zibyan, 2025). Satisfaction, often measured through short-term evaluative indicators, may fail to capture the strategic considerations of customers in complex service relationships (Nursalim et al., 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2026). For example, in sectors with high-value transactions or long-term contracts, customers often prioritize reliability, consistency, and risk mitigation over immediate satisfaction from service interactions (Saktiana, 2025; Sottolichio et al., 2025). When firms overemphasize operational performance or pricing efficiency as drivers of loyalty, they risk overlooking the relational mechanisms that sustain enduring partnerships. This issue is particularly relevant for B2B markets, where decision-making involves multiple stakeholders and long-term strategic planning. Consequently, identifying the fundamental determinants of loyalty in such contexts is essential for improving organizational practices and ensuring that services meet both economic and societal expectations (Hasani, 2025).

Real-world phenomena in B2B service environments illustrate the limitations of satisfaction-based models. In logistics and supply chain management, customers often engage in high-volume, high-value transactions where service failures can generate significant economic losses (Tangchua & Vanichchinchai, 2025; Yulihapsari et al., 2025). Empirical observations indicate that VIP customers prioritize trust in operational reliability, contractual integrity, and timely delivery over immediate satisfaction from individual service attributes (Zailani, 2024; Abidah & Rachmat, 2025). Similarly, in other B2B sectors, firms continue relationships with partners who demonstrate consistent performance and reliability, even when satisfaction metrics fluctuate due to temporary service issues. These patterns suggest that loyalty in strategic service

markets emerges not merely from satisfaction with service quality or price but from trust-based relational governance, where confidence in organizational integrity reduces uncertainty and facilitates long-term cooperation.

Synthesizing prior research highlights both progress and gaps in understanding B2B loyalty mechanisms. Studies consistently demonstrate that trust directly affects loyalty, while satisfaction often functions as a mediating variable linking service quality and price perception to commitment (Artina, 2025; Ferdiansyah & Asikin, 2025; Nursalim et al., 2025). Nevertheless, findings remain inconsistent regarding whether satisfaction retains its mediating role in high-value, long-term B2B relationships (Prasetyo et al., 2026; Saktiana, 2025; Sottolichio et al., 2025). Furthermore, many studies emphasize transactional contexts, overlooking strategic interdependence and operational risks that characterize B2B services (Tangchua & Vanichchinchai, 2025; Yulihapsari et al., 2025; Zailani, 2024). Consequently, research is needed to empirically assess the autonomous role of trust in fostering customer loyalty, explicitly examining whether satisfaction-based pathways remain effective under conditions of high stakes, recurring transactions, and relational complexity.

Moreover, methodological advances in quantitative research, particularly the application of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), allow for more rigorous testing of direct and indirect effects among trust, satisfaction, and loyalty (Hair et al., 2024; Lienggaard, 2024; Magno et al., 2024). These tools enable scholars to disentangle complex relational structures, providing robust evidence regarding whether trust operates independently of satisfaction in shaping long-term loyalty outcomes. Incorporating trust as a primary construct in loyalty models represents a critical step toward refining theoretical frameworks and ensuring that empirical studies accurately reflect the realities of B2B service markets.

This study advances the literature by addressing the research gap concerning the role of trust as a fundamental mechanism in customer loyalty, challenging the traditional satisfaction-centered paradigm. Unlike prior studies, it emphasizes that in strategic B2B service relationships, satisfaction is a short-term evaluative outcome, while trust functions as a governance-based mechanism capable of sustaining long-term relational commitment. By empirically investigating the direct and indirect effects of service quality, price perception, trust, and satisfaction on loyalty, this research provides a nuanced understanding of relationship sustainability in high-value, long-term service contexts.

Finally, the study contributes to managerial practice by highlighting actionable strategies for building trust, reinforcing relational governance, and maintaining contractual stability. Service providers are encouraged to focus on

reliability, integrity, and consistent performance rather than short-term satisfaction optimization. This perspective has practical implications for resource allocation, risk management, and customer relationship management in strategic B2B markets, ensuring that firms can foster durable loyalty and sustained business partnerships.

RESEARCH METHODS

The unit of analysis in this study consisted of individual VIP customers of a B2B cargo logistics service provider, selected due to their long-term business relationships and substantial transaction contributions. The study focused on customers who engaged in recurring, high-value logistics transactions, reflecting the strategic nature of B2B service interactions. The research context involved evaluating customer perceptions of service quality, price perception, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty within these professional relationships, providing insights into relational governance mechanisms and loyalty formation in high-stakes B2B service markets.

A quantitative research design with a survey approach was employed to examine the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. This design was chosen to test direct and indirect effects, including potential mediating mechanisms, in a structured and empirical manner. Primary data were obtained from the selected respondents through a structured questionnaire developed based on standardized indicators, while secondary data from company records and service reports were used to support contextual understanding. The questionnaire incorporated measures of service quality adapted from the SERVQUAL framework and utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), ensuring consistency with prior studies in service research (Hair et al., 2024; Magnoet al., 2024).

Data collection was preceded by a literature review and desk research to refine the instrument and operationalize constructs accurately. Statistical analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS software to evaluate both measurement and structural models. Reliability and validity were assessed using composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and average variance extracted, while bootstrapping procedures were applied for significance testing of direct and indirect relationships (Lienggaard, 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2024). Descriptive statistics and inferential analyses, including mediation and regression assessments, were performed to test the hypothesized effects and ensure the robustness of the proposed model (Ringle et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study analyzes the effects of service quality, price perception, and trust on customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction as an intervening variable in a B2B service context. Data were collected from 66 VIP customers and analyzed using PLS-SEM.

The results of the structural model testing indicate that trust has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.461$; $t = 2.723$; $p = 0.007$). Conversely, service quality and price perception do not have a significant direct effect on customer loyalty. In addition, price perception significantly influences customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.376$; $t = 2.239$; $p = 0.026$), while trust and service quality do not significantly affect customer satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is also found to have no significant effect on customer loyalty, indicating that satisfaction does not function as a mediating variable. The results of the direct effect testing are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Direct Effects of Structural Model

Relationship	Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
Trust → Customer Satisfaction	0.009	0.036	0.971	Not Significant
Trust → Customer Loyalty	0.461	2.723	0.007	Significant
Customer Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty	0.119	0.764	0.445	Not Significant
Service Quality → Customer Satisfaction	0.406	1.637	0.102	Not Significant
Service Quality → Customer Loyalty	0.269	1.440	0.151	Not Significant
Price Perception → Customer Satisfaction	0.376	2.239	0.026	Significant
Price Perception → Customer Loyalty	0.070	0.536	0.593	Not Significant

Furthermore, the indirect effect analysis shows that customer satisfaction does not mediate the relationship between trust, service quality, price perception, and customer loyalty. The results of the specific indirect effects are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Specific Indirect Effects

Indirect Relationship	Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
Trust → Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.001	0.020	0.984	Not Significant
Service Quality → Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.048	0.589	0.556	Not Significant
Price Perception → Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.045	0.730	0.465	Not Significant

Discussion

The findings confirm that trust is the only variable that directly influences customer loyalty in the B2B service context. This result supports commitment-trust theory and aligns with prior studies emphasizing trust as the dominant driver of B2B loyalty (Arthur et al., 2024; Budiyanti, 2023). Theoretically, these findings suggest a necessary refinement of satisfaction-based loyalty models in B2B services. Rather than acting as a mediating mechanism translating service performance into relational commitment, customer satisfaction functions primarily as a transactional evaluative outcome with limited binding capacity (Utami, Mukhlis, & Rahayu, 2025; Yuliati, Taryana, & Anggraini, 2024). Trust emerges as a governance-based mechanism that reduces relational uncertainty, facilitates continuity, and anchors long-term loyalty in high-risk and interdependent service relationships. This distinction underscores that loyalty formation in strategic B2B services is relational rather than transactional, highlighting the limits of applying B2C-based satisfaction models directly to B2B contexts.

The absence of significant direct effects of service quality and price perception on loyalty suggests these factors serve as operational prerequisites rather than strategic loyalty drivers (Iskandar & Yulianti, 2023; Kanchana, 2024). For VIP customers, adequate service quality and acceptable pricing are expected minimum standards; meeting them prevents dissatisfaction but does not automatically generate loyalty. This finding reinforces the perspective that in high-value, long-term B2B relationships, loyalty is contingent on relational trust rather than transactional satisfaction.

Although price perception significantly affects customer satisfaction, satisfaction itself does not significantly influence loyalty (Ramadhan, Ronny Edward, & Ariesa, 2022; Sulaksono et al., 2025). This implies that satisfaction is a short-term evaluative response rather than a mechanism converting service performance into sustained loyalty. Without trust, even high levels of satisfaction fail to produce long-term commitment. These results are consistent with prior evidence that trust plays a more central role than satisfaction in sustaining strategic B2B relationships (Budiyanti, 2023; Arthur et al., 2024).

The non-significant indirect effects further confirm that customer satisfaction does not mediate the relationship between trust, service quality, price perception, and loyalty (Utami, Mukhlis, & Rahayu, 2025; Yuliati, Taryana, & Anggraini, 2024). This strengthens the argument that loyalty formation in B2B services follows a relational logic driven by trust rather than a transactional logic based on satisfaction. In strategic, high-stakes B2B markets, confidence in the service provider's integrity, reliability, and consistency supersedes operational or pricing considerations.

Overall, these findings extend the literature on B2B loyalty by demonstrating that trust is the primary mechanism linking service interactions to long-term commitment, while satisfaction represents a secondary evaluative construct. For managers, the results highlight the importance of prioritizing trust-building strategies, relational governance, and long-term stability over short-term service or pricing optimization (Sulaksono et al., 2025; Ramadhan, Ronny Edward, & Ariesa, 2022). This relational perspective offers actionable insights for sustaining loyalty among strategic B2B customers in high-value service contexts.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that customer loyalty in B2B service markets is fundamentally trust-driven rather than satisfaction-driven. The results demonstrate that trust is the only variable with a direct and significant effect on customer loyalty, while service quality, price perception, and customer satisfaction do not directly translate into long-term loyalty. This finding provides a critical lesson that, in strategic B2B relationships characterized by high value, long-term engagement, and operational interdependence, satisfaction functions merely as a short-term evaluative outcome rather than a mechanism capable of sustaining relational commitment. Loyalty formation in such contexts follows a relational logic in which confidence in the service provider's reliability, integrity, and consistency outweighs transactional evaluations of service performance or pricing.

The strength of this study lies in its theoretical contribution to the relationship marketing and service management literature by challenging the dominance of satisfaction-based loyalty models and repositioning trust as the central relational governance mechanism underlying B2B customer loyalty. By empirically demonstrating the non-mediating role of customer satisfaction, this research refines existing loyalty frameworks and offers a more nuanced explanation of loyalty formation in strategic B2B service contexts. Nevertheless, this study is subject to certain limitations, including a limited sample size and a focus on a single service context, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research is encouraged to examine diverse B2B service industries, apply longitudinal designs, and incorporate additional relational variables such as commitment, switching costs, and relational risk to further advance the understanding of trust-based loyalty formation in B2B service markets.

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