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Satisfaction as the Gatekeeper of Loyalty: Marketing Stimuli and Paid Membership in Shopee VIP

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media marketing, price promotion, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and a fee-based loyalty program shape customer loyalty, and whether customer satisfaction transmits these effects, among subscribers of Shopee VIP, a paid membership program on Indonesia's most visited e-commerce platform. Grounded in customer loyalty theory and the stimulus–organism–response framework, the study surveyed 288 active Shopee VIP subscribers selected through purposive sampling and analysed the data using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with 5,000 bootstrap subsamples. All four marketing stimuli significantly increase satisfaction, with price promotion (β = 0.273) and the loyalty program (β = 0.254) as the strongest drivers. Satisfaction is the dominant antecedent of loyalty (β = 0.411). Only social media marketing has a significant direct effect on loyalty (β = 0.153); the direct effects of price promotion, CSR, and the loyalty program are non-significant. Satisfaction partially mediates the effect of social media marketing and fully mediates the effects of the other three stimuli. The model explains 41.4% of the variance in satisfaction and 40.0% in loyalty. The findings show that discounts, social initiatives, and paid membership benefits build loyalty only when they are converted into satisfying experiences.

Keywords: *Social Media Marketing; Price Promotion; Corporate Social Responsibility; Paid Loyalty Program; Customer Satisfaction; Customer Loyalty; E-Commerce*

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Abstract & Indexing

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INTRODUCTION

E-commerce has become a central channel of Indonesian retail, but intense competition and low switching costs make customer loyalty, rather than customer acquisition, the main determinant of a platform's long-term performance (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Srinivasan et al., 2002). Shopee illustrates this challenge. It is the most visited e-commerce platform in Indonesia, recording 150.8 million website visits in December 2025 against 58.8 million for Tokopedia, 29.7 million for Lazada, and 17.9 million for Blibli, yet traffic to all four platforms declined from the previous month (Ahdiat, 2026). In such a maturing market, leadership built on aggressive promotions is difficult to sustain because abundant alternatives encourage switching (Chou et al., 2016), so platforms must retain customers by building satisfaction and long-term loyalty (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Rita et al., 2019).

To retain customers, Shopee has moved beyond conventional free-to-join schemes by introducing Shopee VIP, a fee-based membership program that offers exclusive vouchers, additional discounts, free-shipping benefits, and service privileges in exchange for a subscription fee. Unlike free programs, which build loyalty through points, rewards, and switching costs (Bombaij & Dekimpe, 2020; Kim et al., 2021), a paid program requires members to pay upfront and therefore triggers a deliberate cost–benefit calculus in which members weigh the benefits they capture against the fee they have paid (Chen et al., 2021). Shopee VIP operates alongside three other instruments that platforms use to build loyalty: social media marketing, which enables interactivity, entertainment, customisation, and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Islam & Rahman, 2017; Yadav & Rahman, 2017); price promotions such as discounts, cashback, and vouchers, which deliver immediate economic utility (Garaus & Wagner, 2019); and corporate social responsibility (CSR), which signals the social values a brand represents (Baskentli et al., 2019; Latif et al., 2020). Whether a paid program builds loyalty directly, or only when its benefits are experienced as satisfying, and how it compares with these other instruments, remain open questions.

Three gaps motivate this study. First, prior research has mostly examined social media marketing, price promotion, and CSR in isolation or in limited combinations, rarely integrating them with loyalty programs in a single model (Steinhoff et al., 2019). Second, loyalty-program research remains concentrated on free, points-based schemes, and evidence on *fee-based* programs is scarce (Chen et al., 2021). The closest studies, Iyengar et al. (2022) for a United States online retailer and Beneš et al. (2026) for a Czech e-commerce retailer, used transaction data to show that customers purchase more after joining a paid program, but they did not examine the psychological mechanism behind this change or how the program works alongside other marketing instruments. Third, Indonesian consumers are highly price-sensitive and intensely active on social media, which may produce findings that diverge from those in developed markets (Verhoef et al., 2021). This study therefore differs from previous research in two respects: it models a paid loyalty program jointly with social media marketing, price promotion, and CSR rather than in isolation, and it tests customer satisfaction as the mechanism that converts each of these stimuli into loyalty in an emerging-market marketplace. Accordingly, this study asks (1) how social media marketing, price promotion, CSR, and a fee-based loyalty program affect customer satisfaction and loyalty, and (2) whether satisfaction mediates these effects, and if so, whether the mediation is partial or full.

The study makes three specific contributions. First, whereas earlier loyalty-program studies treated satisfaction mainly as an outcome of free program benefits (e.g., Vesel & Zabkar, 2009) and paid-program studies focused on purchase volume (Beneš et al., 2026; Iyengar et al., 2022), this study shows that the effect of a paid program on loyalty is fully transmitted through satisfaction, positioning satisfaction as a

gatekeeper rather than a by-product. Second, by estimating four stimuli simultaneously, it distinguishes stimuli that operate solely through satisfaction (price promotion, CSR, and the paid program) from a relational stimulus that also acts directly (social media marketing), extending customer loyalty theory (Oliver, 1999) and the S-O-R framework. Third, it adds survey-based evidence on a paid membership program from an emerging-market platform, a setting less studied than the United States and Europe, and offers guidance for designing membership value propositions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Oliver (1999, p. 34) defines customer loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future … despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior." Loyalty thus combines behavioural (repeat purchase) and attitudinal (preference, commitment, and advocacy) components (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Dick & Basu, 1994). Oliver's four-stage model holds that loyalty develops sequentially from *cognitive* loyalty, grounded in evaluations of benefits and price, to *affective* loyalty, grounded in satisfaction, then to *conative* loyalty, a committed intention to repurchase, and finally to *action* loyalty, in which intention becomes repeated behaviour. Satisfaction is therefore the affective engine that converts evaluations into commitment (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Rather & Hollebeek, 2021).

This sequence is consistent with the cognitive–affective–conative appraisal framework (Bagozzi, 1992) and the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) paradigm. Here, social media marketing, price promotion, CSR, and the loyalty program are external **stimuli**; customer satisfaction is the internal **organism** state; and customer loyalty is the **response** (Brady & Robertson, 2001). Online retailing studies similarly position e-satisfaction as the internal state that precedes e-loyalty (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Yalçınkaya & Çataldaş, 2025), and recent Indonesian e-commerce studies show that marketing cues operate through consumers' internal states, such as customer engagement, before producing purchase responses (Triyanto, 2026; Triyanto & Haryanto, 2026). Stimuli may also influence loyalty directly, for example through habit or switching costs, but loyalty formed without satisfaction tends to be short-lived (Kumar et al., 2013).

Hypotheses Development

Marketing stimuli and satisfaction. Social media enables personal, responsive, and transparent communication through which customers co-create value; interactive and entertaining content reduces information asymmetry and improves the overall experience (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Sohaib et al., 2022). Transaction utility theory suggests that consumers derive satisfaction not only from the product but also from the perceived merit of the deal, so discounts and cashback generate perceived savings and fairness (Chandon et al., 2000; Grewal et al., 1998). CSR acts as an ethical signal: through value congruence and a halo effect, favourable CSR perceptions spill over into evaluations of service quality and generate affective gratification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Loyalty programs deliver utilitarian benefits (vouchers and discounts) and symbolic benefits (status and recognition) that raise perceived value, and transparent programs with relevant rewards increase satisfaction (Henderson et al., 2011; Yi & Jeon, 2003).

H1: Social media marketing has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

H2: Price promotion has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

H3: CSR has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

H4: The loyalty program has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Marketing stimuli and loyalty. Brand communities on social media foster belonging, identification, and advocacy that shield customers from competitors' offers (Al-dwairi et al., 2024; Laroche et al., 2013). Regular, well-structured promotions can create habitual purchasing and repeat cycles (Alvarez & Casielles, 2005; Blattberg et al., 1995). Consumer–company identification suggests that customers remain loyal to firms whose moral values they share (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Loyalty programs, finally, engineer financial and psychological switching costs, because members would forgo accumulated benefits by moving to another platform (Burnham et al., 2003; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002).

H5: Social media marketing has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H6: Price promotion has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H7: CSR has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H8: The loyalty program has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

Satisfaction and its mediating role. Under the expectancy–disconfirmation paradigm, cumulative satisfaction builds trust, reduces perceived risk, and fosters repurchase, advocacy, and resistance to competing offers (Fornell, 1992; Oliver, 1999). In the S-O-R logic, marketing stimuli must first produce satisfaction before they translate into conative and action loyalty (Bagozzi, 1992; El-Adly, 2019). Engaging content yields enjoyable experiences; promotions build loyalty only if the purchase delivers value; CSR-induced pride must crystallise into affective satisfaction; and membership benefits must be judged worthwhile relative to the fee.

H9: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

H10: Customer satisfaction mediates the effect of social media marketing on customer loyalty.

H11: Customer satisfaction mediates the effect of price promotion on customer loyalty.

H12: Customer satisfaction mediates the effect of CSR on customer loyalty.

H13: Customer satisfaction mediates the effect of the loyalty program on customer loyalty.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study adopts a quantitative, explanatory design using a cross-sectional survey. The target population comprises Shopee users in Indonesia who subscribe to Shopee VIP and belong to online shopping communities. Because the number of subscribers is not published, the population was treated as infinite and purposive sampling was applied with four criteria: respondents (1) were active Shopee users currently subscribed to Shopee VIP; (2) belonged to a shopping community of Shopee VIP users on WhatsApp, Telegram, or Facebook; (3) had made at least one purchase in the previous three months; and (4) had used or were aware of Shopee VIP features such as exclusive vouchers and member-only promotions.

Following the guideline of five to ten observations per indicator (Memon et al., 2020), the 21 indicators implied a minimum sample of 105–210, and the upper bound was set as the target. A pilot test with respondents resembling the target population confirmed the clarity, validity, and reliability of the instrument. The questionnaire was then distributed via Google Forms through Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram during August–September 2026. All 288 responses received met the screening criteria and passed checks for missing values, outliers, and straight-lining, exceeding the minimum

requirement. Table 1 summarises the respondent profile.

Table 1. Respondent Profile (n = 288)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	166	57.6
	Male	122	42.4
Age (years)	18–23	133	46.2
	24–29	96	33.3
	30–35	35	12.2
	> 35	24	8.3
Education	Senior high school	93	32.3
	Diploma (D1–D3)	26	9.0
	Bachelor (D4/S1)	148	51.4
	Postgraduate (S2/S3)	21	7.3
Occupation	Employee	122	42.4
	Student	98	34.0
	Entrepreneur	39	13.5
	Homemaker	17	5.9
	Job seeker	12	4.2
Monthly online spending (IDR)	< 500,000	74	25.7
	500,000–1,000,000	72	25.0
	1,000,001–2,500,000	66	22.9
	> 2,500,000	76	26.4
Shopee transactions per month	1–3	95	33.0
	4–6	99	34.4
	7–9	33	11.5
	> 10	61	21.2
Main social media platform	TikTok	116	40.3
	Instagram	95	33.0
	YouTube	38	13.2
	Twitter/X	20	6.9
	Facebook	11	3.8
	Others	8	2.8
Daily social media use	< 1 hour	15	5.2
	1–3 hours	124	43.1
	4–6 hours	117	40.6
	> 6 hours	32	11.1

(Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

The sample is predominantly female (57.6%) and young (79.5% aged 18–29), mostly holds a bachelor's degree (51.4%), and consists mainly of employees (42.4%) and students (34.0%). Respondents are active shoppers: 67.0% transact on Shopee four or more times per month. TikTok (40.3%) and Instagram (33.0%) are their main social media platforms. These characteristics describe a young, digitally active, and frequent-shopping segment of Shopee VIP members, and the findings should be interpreted with

this profile in mind, because older or less active online shoppers may evaluate paid membership benefits differently.

All constructs were measured reflectively on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Following the e-commerce operationalisation of Yalçınkaya and Çataldaş (2025), social media marketing (four items) and price promotion (three items) were adapted from Hanaysha (2017), CSR (four items) from Kang and Hustvedt (2014), and customer satisfaction (three items) and customer loyalty (three items) from Leninkumar (2017); the loyalty program (four items) was adapted from Vesel and Zabkar (2009), capturing rewarding options, informative options, program transparency, and fairness. Items were translated into Bahasa Indonesia, adjusted to the Shopee VIP context, and refined after the pilot test (Table 2).

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was applied in SmartPLS 4 because the model is complex (six constructs, 13 hypotheses, and four mediation paths), prediction-oriented, and free of multivariate normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2022). The measurement model was assessed for indicator reliability (loadings ≥ 0.70), internal consistency (Cronbach's α and composite reliability > 0.70), convergent validity (AVE > 0.50), and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The structural model was assessed through collinearity (VIF < 5), R^2, Q^2predict, and the significance of path coefficients using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples (two-tailed, α = 0.05). Mediation was classified as partial (complementary) when both direct and indirect effects were significant and as full (indirect-only) when only the indirect effect was significant (Zhao et al., 2010).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1) Measurement Model

All 21 outer loadings exceed 0.70 (0.733–0.888), and outer VIF values range from 1.469 to 2.228, below the threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating adequate indicator reliability and no collinearity among indicators (Table 2).

Table 2. Measurement Items, Outer Loadings, and VIF

Construct and item	Loading	VIF
Social media marketing (SMM) – adapted from Hanaysha (2017)		
SMM1 Shopee's social media content attracts buyers' attention	0.812	1.757
SMM2 Shopee's social media content is more attractive than that of other platforms	0.748	1.488
SMM3 Shopee's promotional content on social media matches buyers' interests	0.818	1.769
SMM4 Shopee's social media content is easy for me to remember	0.773	1.469
Price promotion (PP) – adapted from Hanaysha (2017)		
PP1 The discounts and vouchers offered by Shopee satisfy buyers	0.878	2.066
PP2 Shopee frequently offers attractive price promotions	0.819	1.600
PP3 Shopee's promotions help me save money when shopping	0.869	1.966
Corporate social responsibility (CSR) – adapted from Kang and Hustvedt (2014)		
CSR1 Shopee contributes to social activities that benefit society	0.836	1.899
CSR2 Shopee makes a tangible contribution to society through CSR programs	0.836	1.692
CSR3 Shopee carries out social activities as part of its business activities	0.733	1.595
CSR4 Shopee plays an active role in improving the welfare of society	0.813	1.743
Loyalty program – Shopee VIP (LP) – adapted from Vesel and Zabkar (2009)		

Construct and item	Loading	VIF
LP1 Shopee VIP provides vouchers or rewards usable for various products or services	0.843	1.938
LP2 Shopee VIP clearly informs me of my transaction history and membership benefits	0.785	1.552
LP3 The terms and conditions of Shopee VIP are easy for members to understand	0.820	1.862
LP4 Shopee VIP gives benefits fairly by transaction value, regardless of payment method	0.797	1.747
Customer satisfaction (CS) – adapted from Leninkumar (2017)		
CS1 Choosing Shopee is the right decision for buyers	0.862	1.930
CS2 Overall, buyers are satisfied with using Shopee	0.888	2.228
CS3 Buyers feel that using Shopee for online shopping is the right decision	0.885	2.184
Customer loyalty (CL) – adapted from Leninkumar (2017)		
CL1 Buyers are willing to recommend Shopee to others	0.854	1.810
CL2 Buyers will invite friends or family to use Shopee	0.881	1.952
CL3 Shopee is my first choice when shopping online	0.839	1.784

(Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

Cronbach's α (0.797–0.852) and composite reliability (0.868–0.910) exceed 0.70, and all AVE values (0.622–0.772) exceed 0.50, establishing internal consistency and convergent validity (Table 3). Discriminant validity is supported because the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its correlations with all other constructs (Table 4). The standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) is 0.057, below the 0.08 cut-off (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating good approximate fit (d_ULS = 0.744; d_G = 0.291; NFI = 0.817).

Table 3. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability (ρc)	AVE
Customer loyalty (CL)	0.821	0.893	0.736
Customer satisfaction (CS)	0.852	0.910	0.772
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	0.822	0.881	0.649
Loyalty program (LP)	0.827	0.885	0.659
Price promotion (PP)	0.817	0.891	0.732
Social media marketing (SMM)	0.797	0.868	0.622

(Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

Table 4. Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	CL	CS	CSR	LP	PP	SMM
CL	**0.858**					
CS	0.593	**0.878**				
CSR	0.288	0.348	**0.806**			
LP	0.419	0.501	0.321	**0.812**		
PP	0.411	0.505	0.284	0.433	**0.856**	
SMM	0.437	0.477	0.338	0.400	0.389	**0.788**

Note: Bold diagonal values are the square roots of AVE. (Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

2) Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The model explains 41.4% of the variance in customer satisfaction (adjusted $R^2 = 0.406$) and 40.0%

in customer loyalty (adjusted $R^2 = 0.390$), both moderate levels (Hair et al., 2019). Q^2predict values of 0.393 for satisfaction and 0.276 for loyalty exceed zero, confirming predictive relevance. Social media marketing ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < 0.001$), price promotion ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$), CSR ($\beta = 0.110$, $p = 0.030$), and the loyalty program ($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.001$) positively affect satisfaction, supporting H1–H4. For loyalty, only social media marketing ($\beta = 0.153$, $p = 0.002$) and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$) have significant direct effects, supporting H5 and H9. The direct effects of price promotion ($p = 0.103$), CSR ($p = 0.537$), and the loyalty program ($p = 0.061$) are non-significant, so H6–H8 are not supported (Table 5 and Figure 1).

Table 5. Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-statistic	p-value	Decision
H1	SMM → CS	0.232	4.442	< 0.001	Supported
H2	PP → CS	0.273	5.571	< 0.001	Supported
H3	CSR → CS	0.110	2.175	0.030	Supported
H4	LP → CS	0.254	5.065	< 0.001	Supported
H5	SMM → CL	0.153	3.056	0.002	Supported
H6	PP → CL	0.091	1.631	0.103	Not supported
H7	CSR → CL	0.035	0.617	0.537	Not supported
H8	LP → CL	0.102	1.875	0.061	Not supported
H9	CS → CL	0.411	7.239	< 0.001	Supported

Note: Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, two-tailed. (Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

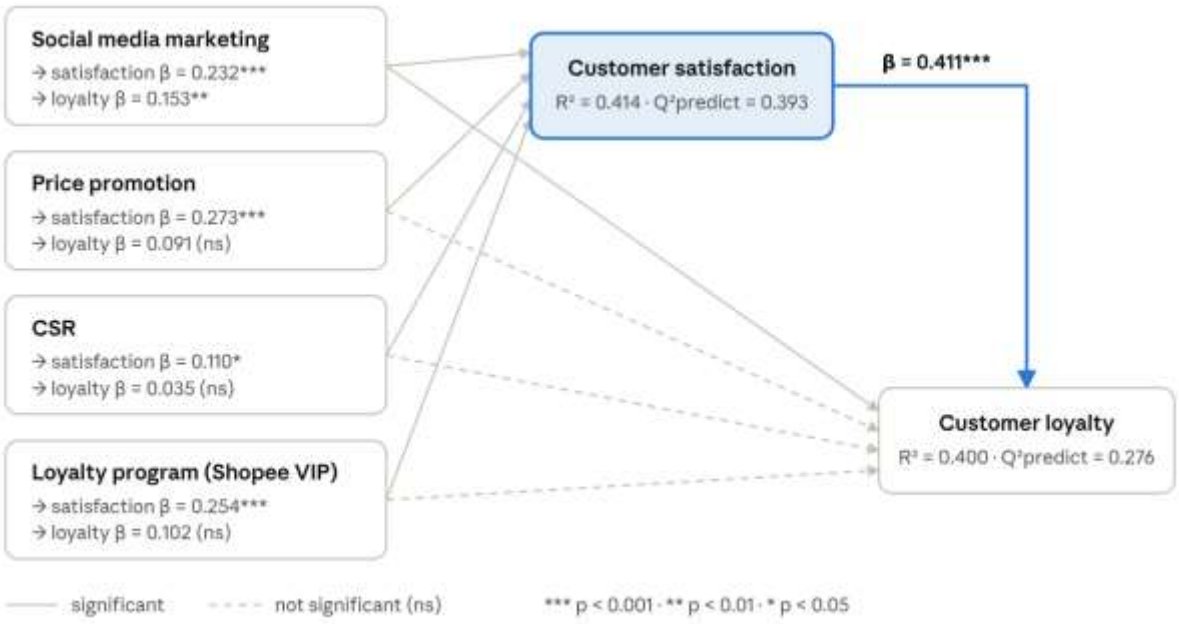


Figure 1. Research Model and Structural Estimates (PLS-SEM, n = 288)
(Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

3) Mediation Analysis

All four specific indirect effects through satisfaction are significant, supporting H10–H13 (Table 6). Because the direct effect of social media marketing on loyalty is also significant, satisfaction partially mediates that relationship. For price promotion, CSR, and the loyalty program the direct effects are non-

significant, so satisfaction fully mediates their effects on loyalty (Zhao et al., 2010). The share of the total effect transmitted through satisfaction ranges from 38% for social media marketing to 56% for CSR.

Table 6. Indirect (Mediation) Effects

H	Path	Indirect effect	t-statistic	p-value	Direct effect	Total effect	Mediation
H10	SMM → CS → CL	0.095	3.830	< 0.001	0.153*	0.248	Partial
H11	PP → CS → CL	0.112	4.422	< 0.001	0.091 (ns)	0.203	Full
H12	CSR → CS → CL	0.045	2.029	0.042	0.035 (ns)	0.080	Full
H13	LP → CS → CL	0.104	4.243	< 0.001	0.102 (ns)	0.206	Full

Note: Total effect = direct + indirect effect; * p < 0.05; ns = not significant. (Source: Primary data processed, 2026)

4) Discussion

The central finding is that satisfaction functions as a gatekeeper of loyalty: all four stimuli raise satisfaction, satisfaction is the strongest determinant of loyalty, and only social media marketing also bypasses the gate with a direct effect. The positive effect of social media marketing on satisfaction indicates that interactive and memorable content on TikTok and Instagram, the platforms respondents use most, enriches the shopping experience, consistent with Sohaib et al. (2022) and Hollebeek et al. (2014). Price promotion is the strongest predictor of satisfaction, as discounts and cashback meet the expectations of price-sensitive shoppers, in line with transaction utility theory (Grewal et al., 1998) and evidence on perceived savings (Sopian & Ketut, 2023). CSR increases satisfaction with the smallest coefficient, suggesting that Shopee's social initiatives support rather than drive evaluations in a utilitarian shopping context (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). The loyalty program is the second strongest driver, implying that rewarding, informative, transparent, and fair program features justify the membership fee in members' eyes (Henderson et al., 2011; Putri et al., 2024).

Satisfaction is the dominant antecedent of loyalty, confirming the core proposition of customer loyalty theory (Oliver, 1999). Social media marketing is the only stimulus that also builds loyalty directly, as continuous exposure, brand community, and e-WOM cultivate identification and advocacy (Al-dwairi et al., 2024; Laroche et al., 2013). In contrast, price promotion has no direct effect on loyalty. This result is consistent with the meta-analysis of DelVecchio et al. (2006), which found that sales promotions do not, on average, raise post-promotion brand preference, and with Pauwels et al. (2002), who showed that promotional effects on brand choice fade in the long run; it differs from Alvarez and Casielles (2005), who found that promotions shape brand choice in offline retail. A likely reason is that online promotions are easy to compare across platforms, so customers can switch when rivals offer better discounts or free shipping. CSR likewise has no direct effect, in line with Martínez and Rodríguez del Bosque (2013) and Ankush et al. (2025), who found that CSR influences loyalty mainly through satisfaction and trust rather than directly, because CSR shapes judgements of reputation rather than benefits experienced in each transaction.

Most notably, the paid loyalty program does not directly increase loyalty (p = 0.061). This pattern matches Vesel and Zabkar (2009), who found that satisfaction mediates the effect of a retail loyalty program on loyalty, but appears to contrast with Iyengar et al. (2022) and Beneš et al. (2026), who observed higher purchase frequency after customers joined paid programs. The difference may reflect the outcome measured: those studies tracked purchase behaviour, which can rise because members try to recover the fee they have already paid (a sunk-cost effect reported by Iyengar et al., 2022), whereas this study measured

attitudinal and conative loyalty, namely recommendation, referral, and first-choice preference. Membership of Shopee VIP thus does not automatically produce loyalty; members appear to compare vouchers and exclusive benefits with the fee they have paid, and VIP status alone does not prompt commitment unless the benefits are perceived as superior. These results suggest that, in a paid scheme, the fee may heighten benefit scrutiny rather than lock customers in (Chen et al., 2021). Because membership fees and switching costs were not measured directly in this model, this interpretation remains tentative (Burnham et al., 2003). The mediation results map onto Oliver's (1999) four-stage model: promotions and membership benefits act mainly on cognitive evaluations of value and CSR acts on affect, and all must pass through satisfaction before reaching conative and action loyalty, whereas social media marketing, which combines informational, entertaining, and relational elements, can also stimulate bonding and advocacy directly (El-Adly, 2019; Kumar et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION

Based on data from 288 Shopee VIP subscribers, this study shows that social media marketing, price promotion, CSR, and a fee-based loyalty program all enhance customer satisfaction, and that satisfaction is the most powerful driver of loyalty. Only social media marketing affects loyalty directly; the effects of price promotion, CSR, and the paid loyalty program on loyalty are fully mediated by satisfaction. Theoretically, the study extends customer loyalty theory to paid membership programs by positioning satisfaction as a gatekeeper and by distinguishing stimuli that operate solely through satisfaction from relational stimuli that also act directly. The results also suggest that a paid program may not work primarily through switching costs; because membership fees and switching costs were not measured directly, this possibility requires further testing. These conclusions are confined to Shopee VIP subscribers, a specific group of paying members on one platform, and should not be generalised to all e-commerce users or to free loyalty programs.

Managerially, platforms should shift from buying loyalty to earning it through satisfaction. The value of Shopee VIP should visibly exceed the fee, for example through guaranteed free-shipping vouchers, easy claim processes, a savings tracker that shows members their benefits relative to the fee, and priority customer service, with periodic reviews of the fee-to-benefit ratio. Social media marketing deserves sustained investment as the only lever that builds loyalty both directly and through satisfaction, using interactive, trend-based content and responsive live-commerce sessions. Promotions should be embedded in a satisfying shopping journey through tiered cashback and personalised offers rather than short-term discounts that encourage switching, and CSR initiatives such as empowering local MSMEs should be communicated transparently within the app.

This study has limitations. Purposive sampling through online communities yielded a predominantly female and young sample, and the cross-sectional, self-reported design limits causal inference and may be affected by common method variance. The model leaves about 60% of the variance in loyalty unexplained, and the single-platform setting restricts generalisability. Future studies should use probability sampling, longitudinal or transaction data, and additional constructs such as e-service quality, trust, perceived switching costs, and user experience, and should compare paid and free loyalty programs across platforms.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the research methodology, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the initial manuscript. The second author contributed to the supervision of the research, interpretation of the findings, and critical review, editing, and refinement of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and are responsible for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct of the research, data analysis, preparation, or publication of this article.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) USE STATEMENT

In preparing this article, the authors used artificial intelligence (AI) technology as an assisting tool for translation, language editing, and improving the structure and clarity of the manuscript based on the first author's master's thesis. AI was not used to generate, manipulate, or analyze the research data. The authors retain full responsibility for the content of the article, interpretation of the findings, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript.

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