

**SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT**

A Qualitative Study on Online Music Consumption:

**How do Online Music Consumers Develop Loyalty Towards
Musicians as Brands in the Digital Era?**

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to explore and understand how online music consumers develop loyalty towards musicians as brands, along with potential reasons behind that process.

Methodology: The study explores the phenomenon of loyalty development of online music consumers towards musicians as brands. The exploratory, relativist and abductive perspectives have been adopted through a series of interviews with 17 respondents from different countries, cultures and backgrounds.

Findings: Our findings divulge several major aspects of brand loyalty development towards musicians. First, loyalty development is a nonlinear process. Second, it is almost impossible to predict or control that process since online music consumers follow completely randomized loyalty development patterns, which are influenced by several key factors.

Additionally, these factors can be divided into two major categories: internal and external. The internal factors are majorly dependent on the consumers while the external factors are out of the music consumers reach, and in which they take a passive stand. Moreover, the external factors can be tweaked by musicians to both understand their fans' perceptions and optimize their long term loyalty establishment. Most importantly, the study results in an '*Online Music Consumption Loyalty Development (OMCLD) Model*' representing a valuable tool and reference for musicians to refer to in their branding strategies development. The authors believe the study to be a first-mover within the research scope, enabling future research.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty, Digital Consumers, Online Streaming Platforms, Online Social Media, Music Industry

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I. Introduction

This chapter will introduce the background of this thesis, which is the digitalization of the music industry and how it affects consumer behaviors. Subsequently, the key research question of this thesis will be brought out after analysing the problems created by certain new behaviors. Eventually, our intended contribution to fulfill the existing research gap and an outline of the thesis structure will be elucidated.

1.1 Background

Music, one of the greatest treasures of human civilization, has been developing alongside cultural and technological evolution throughout human history. Tschmuck (2014) defines the music industry as one of the creative industries, given that the process of producing music cannot be satisfactorily explained without a concept of creativity. Although music is intangible and heavily dependent on the creativity of the musicians, it has been identified as a commodity to be sold and consumed just like any other manufactured product (Ahvenniemi, Finley, Estrada, Käki, Malik, Osti, & Litvinova, 2014).

In the past, people consumed music primarily by purchasing physical CDs and paying for live concerts. However, new digital technologies created new ways to consume music and disrupted these traditional revenue models. Global online streaming platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, and iTunes emerged and provided consumers with easy access to a vast content library with the option of paying an affordable monthly fee for unlimited features (Datta, Knox & Bronnenberg, 2018; Wikstrom, 2009). Chinese music customers can pay merely 5 RMB (about US\$0.75) for downloading a song from QQ music (Liang & Shen, 2016) instead of paying for a whole album at full price. In essence, consumers are no longer required to purchase the entire album from one artist and bear the risk of having to pay for disliked songs (Cronin-Wilesmith, 2018). Instead, they can choose whichever songs they like from various artists and create their own playlists and music library tailored to their personalized preference. These streaming platforms allow consumers to discover new music easily, listen to music at much greater freedom and with more personalization.

Music consumers, especially those tech-savvy millennials, flocked to streaming services and resulted in flourishing music streaming revenue, accounting for 11.4 million dollars market value in 2019 (Watson, 2020). Accordingly, the decline of physical records sales has been noticeable alongside this digital shift, experiencing a dramatic drop of 9.6 million worldwide each year (Savage, 2019).

As for the musicians, the digitalization of the music industry offered new ways of releasing music and reaching audiences. It is no longer necessary to go through big label companies to announce their debut, release physical albums. Musicians of the digital age can upload their works and distribute them to their audience freely and directly online (Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Wikstrom, 2009).

This change has reshaped the relationships between musicians and music customers in a positive way. Artists and fans have more opportunities and convenience to engage with each other through online streaming platforms (Cronin-Wilesmith, 2018). For example, in February 2021, Justin Bieber lived-streamed his #JournalsLive Concert on TikTok. He achieved fascinating engagement with his long-time fans and promoted his music works to an entirely new group of audience, the TikTok users (Zarczynski, 2021). Instead of buying a ticket to physically be at a concert and watch the performance in a crowd, consumers can enjoy the concert at the convenience of their digital devices and have real-time interaction.

Apart from these advantages, we identify an issue regarding consumers' brand loyalty-building given the digitalization of the music industry. Datta, Knox, and Bronnenberg (2018) suggest that variety-seeking is at the heart of consumer welfare regarding music consumption. This means that, although online streaming platforms allow them to interact with their favourite musicians, they may also become easily distracted by a vast music selection to fulfil their diversified tastes (Cronin-Wilesmith, 2018; Datta et al. 2018). For example, when a customer discovered the song *Dangerous Woman* by Ariana Grande on Spotify, he or she might go on to watch the musician's performance on YouTube. Before finishing watching the live video, he or she may suddenly get distracted by another song *Bang Bang* sung by Ariana Grande, Jessi J and Nicki Minaj in the recommendation lists on the side of the Youtube webpage. Then, instead of focusing on developing the interest and loyalty in Ariana Grande, this customer changed interest in Jessi J and started listening to her songs instead.

Although this indicates that musicians have more opportunities to expand their loyal fanbase by digital algorithmic, it also means that consumer's attitudes towards musicians and their intentions to build up a relationship with them become vague and unpredictable. As a result, brands are focusing on reaching out to customers and getting closer to them. The concept of brand loyalty has received more and more attention recently, and brands are striving to develop and maintain customer relationships based on loyalty (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000).

Plenty of scholars have pointed out that rather than reaching a wide range of new consumers whose behaviours are challenging to predict, it is more critical for brands to retain existing customers. It is less costly and more stable to ensure long-lasting prosperity (Lazarevic, 2012; Oliver, 1999). Reichheld and Sasser (1990) expand this point by suggesting that unlike the one-time costs (i.e. advertising, promotions, etc.) needed to acquire new customers, having long-time loyal customers provides free advertising. As a result, musicians need to understand how digital consumers, especially those tech-savvy millennials, develop and maintain their loyalty towards musicians by investigating their consumption behaviour.

1.2 Problematization

Considerable studies are investigating essential features of digital customers. In particular, there are two crucial features considered relevant in understanding digital music consumption and loyalty-building. First, digital consumers are variety-seeking. Thanks to the emergence of online streaming, digital music customers are able to select and switch amongst a wide range of musicians from different digital platforms easily without any costs (Datta et al. 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Wikstrom, 2009). In this setting, rather than sticking to one musician, digital customers seek a broad selection of music that satisfies the demand for variety at the individual level (Datta et al. 2018). Alternatively, digital customers are fickle, and they change their needs, tastes and websites quickly (Cronin-Wilesmith, 2018; Kerravala, 2021). A group of researchers investigated this fickleness of digital consumers and pointed out that they are difficult to capture and retain as loyal consumers (Lazarevic, 2015; Megehee, Dobie & Grant, 2003). Thus musicians need to encourage an emotional bond with their audience, further construct favourable brand-consumer relationships and eventually lead to brand loyalty (Lazarevic, 2015).

Given this variety-seeking feature and fickleness, it is important for musicians to understand how their audience builds up loyalty towards themselves to retain a solid fanbase. Existing studies have focused on giving practitioner-oriented suggestions concerning privacy issues and encouraging consumer repurchase intentions on music consumption (Kusumawati, Purnamasari & Sardiyo, 2013; Jones, 2020; Obiegbu, Larsen, Gretchen, Ellis & O'Reilly, 2019). In particular, Kusumawati, Purnamasari and Sardiyo (2013) emphasize the importance for music agencies to establish customer satisfaction to consume music products legally. In another research done by Jones (2020), the focus is on exploring user loyalty and willingness to pay for a music streaming platform and proposing a new pricing model to drive more revenue to musicians. These studies provide valuable information which enables us to expand the discussion towards brand loyalty issues. However, none have investigated the relationship and loyalty-building between musicians and their audience through a consumer perspective.

Still, the importance of consumer relationship management and brand loyalty has been receiving significant attention in many research works in celebrity study. In particular, Liang and Shen (2017) examine the brand-consumer relationship between celebrities and their fans by reviewing celebrities as brands. They address the importance of artists and enhance their “brand emotional capital,” which refers to their ability to manage emotional connection with their audience and retain fans’ loyalty to ensure long-term prosperity. Lunardo, Gergaud and Livat (2015) adopt the same techniques to perceive celebrities as human brands and investigate the importance of managing brand personality across culture fields to enhance emotional linkage with their customers. Therefore, this study develops an interest in exploring the brand loyalty issues in digital music consumption by perceiving musicians as brands. We believe that by viewing musicians as brands, this thesis can open up and add value to the existing discussion of brand loyalty concepts and explore possibilities of loyalty-building processes within the fields of music consumption.

Following this motivation, this study aims to perceive musicians as brands and expand the existing discussion on brand loyalty in a new context, which has not been investigated before. When exploring brand loyalty in a digital phrase, a group of scholars suggest the importance for brands to establish favourable relationships with customers and eventually transmit them into loyal customers (Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2018; Zhang, Benyoucef & Zhao, 2015; Zhang, Peng, Peng, Zhang, Ren & Chen, 2020). These scholars identify three essential brand relationship elements, including *brand satisfaction*, *trust and commitment*, and address their

importance in consumer loyalty-building. These studies adopt quantitative approaches and propose a linear and sequential relationship between three elements and generalize the loyalty-building process. Regarding this definition, a music customer first feels satisfied with a musician's music, and then they will consider trusting them and establishing an emotional linkage with them. Finally, brand commitment can be found and lead towards brand loyalty at the final stage. However, does consumer loyalty-building certainly follow this sequence? Are there any possibilities beyond these models?

Given that most of the existing studies adopted a quantitative approach to developing a testable model, this study aims to explore possible interactions between different brand elements and other potential factors affecting consumer loyalty-building. Considering consumers' variety-seeking features and fickleness, it is difficult to predict their loyalty-building by a lock-in model. We believe certain flexibility must be considered when exploring the branding concepts and loyalty relationship between musicians and music customers from consumers' perspective.

Still, these existing studies have provided insightful research directions for us to investigate how and why long-term brand loyalty gets developed. However, their focus is either on *music products* or *music streaming platforms* (Bhartyadhikara, 2020; Chiou, Huang & Lee, 2005; Kusumawati et al. 2013). None of the existing literature has perceived musicians as brands and investigated consumer loyalty-building towards these human brands. The relationship between digital consumers and musicians concerning brand loyalty remains relatively unresolved in the extant literature. In other words, there is a need to perceive musicians as human brands in order to expand the existing discussion to investigate consumer loyalty-building from different angles, especially from a consumer perspective.

As a result, we aim to fill in this research gap through an open-up discussion on how digital consumers develop loyalty towards musicians as brands. This thesis investigates and intends to find an answer to the following research question from a qualitative nature:

How do Online Music Consumers Develop Loyalty Towards Musicians As Brands in the Digital Era?

1.3 Aims and Intended Contributions

The purpose of this study is to enhance our understanding in brand loyalty and digital music consumption by answering the research question. Instead of fitting into boxes from existing models and discussion, this thesis investigates open-up interactions between different brand elements. It explores how and why the brand-consumer bond gets created within the consumer loyalty-building process through a qualitative lens.

With the main aim of developing brand loyalty concepts in a digital format, this thesis focuses on investigating consumers who are young, tech-savvy, and familiar with online streaming platforms, namely the Millennials and their consumption behaviours in digital streaming platforms. By exploring their intention and behaviour to develop a favourable relationship with musicians, we intend to enhance the understanding of how they develop loyalty towards the musician and how their loyalty-building can be affected by a comprehensive collection of musicians given by the online streaming platforms.

By adopting Oliver's Four-Stage Loyalty (1999) as a theoretical framework, this thesis aims to enhance the understanding of consumer loyalty-building, while opening up its lock-in linear discussion and explore more flexibility and interactivity between different brand elements within the loyalty-building process. Besides adding theoretical contributions to the existing discussion on digital music consumption, this thesis also seeks to provide practical insights and implications for musicians or business professionals who want to develop effective strategic marketing efforts to establish and retain loyal consumers over the long term.

1.4 Research Outline

Following the introduction, this thesis consists of a literature review chapter containing an in-depth analysis of the existing research concerning digital music consumption and brand loyalty concepts. That chapter ends with a theoretical framework for conducting the empirical research. Next, our methodology describes how the data is collected and analysed, followed by discussing and analysing the collected information. On the heels of that, results and conclusion with the study's main findings and recommendations for future research options and opportunities established by this study. The paper finishes by addressing the implications

at both theoretical and practical levels, leading up to the research limitations and prospective recommendations for future research.

II. Literature Review

In this chapter, insights from previous research about brand loyalty and music consumption will be represented. The first section focuses on music consumption and digital customers. Then, concepts of brand loyalty, brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand love are presented in the next section. To explain the interactions between different brand loyalty elements and digital consumption, the final section addresses the main models and frameworks to ground our research problem from a theoretical perspective.

2.1 Digital Music Consumption

Digitalisation is one of the most significant ever-happening transformations of contemporary society and the business world, including the music industry. As Parida, Sjodin and Wiebke Reim (2019) stated in their studies, such adoption of digital technologies offers new revenue and value-producing opportunities to brands.

Accordingly, the music industry is heading towards a digital form while abandoning the traditional model that has ruled the industry for a significant part of the past century. Online platforms such as Spotify, iTunes, and Youtube are flourishing, allowing customers to listen to a wide range of music all the time through a simple click without the need to purchase physical albums (Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Fly, 2016; Wikstrom, 2009). These emerging online platforms enhance consumers' ability to choose among various options and allow consumers to interact with their favourite musicians through liking, commenting, and sharing functions (Datta et al., 2018; Wikstrom, 2009).

Before investigating how consumers interact with the musicians and develop brand loyalty towards them, it is necessary to take a deeper look into the characteristics of digital music consumers and their consumption behaviour on various online platforms.

2.1.1 Digital Music Consumer

Digital consumers have been identified as consumers who frequently use mobile devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops (Persaud & Azhar, 2012). Tkaczyk (2016) expands this definition by suggesting that digital consumer encompasses both passive and active e-behaviour. This means that a digital consumer not only can visit websites and passively receive information online, they can also actively interact with brands and other consumers through liking commenting and sharing functions through online platforms (Cochoy, Licoppe, McIntyre & Sörum, 2019; Tkaczyk, 2016). Given the emergence of online streaming, digital consumers are able to fulfil their consumption needs through various online platforms without necessarily purchasing anything (Tkaczyk, 2016). In particular, digital consumers can enjoy music and switch amongst diversified online media without any costs.

Millennials born in an emerging world of technology between 1980s and 1990s are defined as the most significant proportion of digital consumers (Moreno, Lafuente, Carreon & Moreno, 2017). In many recent studies, scholars begin to include the name of Generation Z to join the discussion of the digital consumers. They suggest that Generation Z are digitally more active than any previous generation as their daily lives and even identities are strongly and permanently connected to online social platforms (Moreno et al. 2017; Omar, Sallehuddin, Hafizah & Hassan, 2016). As a result, this study focuses on digital customers labelled as millennials and also Generation Z. It aims to enhance the understanding of their loyalty-building towards musicians by investigating their characteristics.

Many scholars suggest that this new generation of consumers continuously seek more variety and frequently switch service providers (Han, Tyagi, Kim & Choi, 2015; Chuah, Rauschnabel, Marimuthu, Thurasamy & Nguyen, 2017). Adding on this, Datta, Knox and Bronnenberg (2018) address that streaming allows music consumers to freely fulfil their love of variety. This means music consumers are able to fulfil their variety-seeking tendencies with low or even zero switching cost. In other words, their tendencies to stay loyal to one musician are reducing. A considerable amount of literature has emphasised the need for brands to perceive variety-offering as a measure of enhancing customer satisfaction and enduring loyalty (Kahn, 1995; Sheorey, Joshi & Kulkarni, 2013).

Apart from the variety-seeking nature, another group of scholars suggest the “fickleness” of digital consumers and investigate its impact on consumer loyalty-building. These scholars

suggest that this new era of consumers rarely consider being loyal to a particular brand due to their ever-changing attitudes and needs (Lazarevic, 2012; Megehee et al. 2003). Meanwhile, their requirements for variety can be easily fulfilled by a brand-saturated environment. The internet and digital technology made it possible for anyone to produce and distribute their music without the need to go through record labels (Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Lazarevic, 2012). It results in a competitive industry that constantly provides digital consumers unlimited choices and possibilities to switch amongst diversified musicians, freely and quickly. This is in line with the discussion of consumer's variety-seeking nature and addresses the importance for musicians, whom we perceive as human brands, to investigate their relationship with music consumers and establish effective communications strategies to retain their loyalty.

2.1.2 Musicians as brands

In recent years, consumer and marketing researchers have shown great interest in studying consumer attachment to human brands (Orth, Limon & Rose, 2010). The term “human brands” refers to any persona who can be perceived as the subject of marketing communications efforts (Thomson, 2006). This means that CEOs (e.g. Steve Jobs), athletes (e.g. Kobe Bryant), and artists (e.g. Ariana Grande) can all be perceived as human brands, given their capability to deliver a candidate's message, public appearance, and endorsements (Thomson, 2006).

In reviewing brand loyalty literature in the music industry, none have investigated the antecedents of consumers' loyalty-building towards *musicians*. Instead, these existing studies focus on brand loyalty concepts concerning music service platforms and record label brands (Kusumawati et al. 2015; Jones, 2020). Fortunately, heated discussion in loyalty-building towards human brands can be found in similar fields of academic studies where scholars perceive celebrities as brands (Lunardo et al. 2015; Thomson, 2006; Tripp, Jensen & Carlson, 1994). For example, Lunardo, Gergaud and Livat (2015) investigate brand personality issues and their impact across cultural fields by considering celebrities as the brands. Tripp, Jensen and Carlson (1994) focus on the relationship between product endorsements and consumer buying attitudes and intentions. Their approaches to perceive celebrities as brands and explore related branding concepts inspire us to apply a similar way to investigate our specific research setting.

According to Thomson (2006)'s definition of human brands, musicians can be considered brands because they can be professionally managed and have additional associations and features of a brand (p.105). In particular, musicians are able to establish their brand identity and image (e.g. Singer-songwriter; Rap singer) through creating and distributing their music through online platforms. They are also influenced and even controlled by consultants and political parties (e.g. label companies, music copyright society) to manage their perceived quality and brand equity to increase their market share in the industry (Thomson, 2006). Therefore, we claim that the musicians can be perceived as brands, and the existing brand loyalty concepts can be used to assess their appeal on the establishment and maintenance of consumer loyalty-building.

As a result, this study considers musicians as brands and investigates how consumers develop and maintain loyalty towards them. By perceiving musicians as human brands, this research is able to incorporate brand loyalty concepts in the music industry and explore potential antecedents and moderators during their loyalty-building process. In the following session, we will first introduce the main theories of brand loyalty and essential brand relationship elements regarding these 'human brands' to ground our research topic with a solid theoretical base.

2.2 Brand Loyalty

Traditionally, researchers tend to define brand loyalty in either behavioural or attitudinal terms. On the behavioural site, scholars aim to develop a surrogate behavioural measure, which is mainly defined as repeated purchases, to operationalize brand loyalty (TaghiPourian & Bakhsh, 2015; Nenycz-Thiel & Romaniuk, 2010). On the attitudinal site, the academic literature focuses on incorporating the psychological level of brand loyalty and proposes that brand loyalty could also be expressed without actual acting (Day, 1969; Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2018; TaghiPourian & Bakhsh, 2015). Amongst many definitions, Jacoby and Kyner (1973) developed a comprehensive description of brand loyalty which has been mostly accepted by later research. The authors define brand loyalty as "the biased behavioural response expressed over time by some decision-making unit, concerning one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, and is a function of psychological processes" (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973, p.80).

While some scholars began to develop a deeper understanding of brand loyalty by only focusing on the duality of brand loyalty, there was another group of researchers that expanded the definition and proposed the multidimensionality of brand loyalty (Blut, Evanschitzky, Vogel & Ahlert, 2007; Dick & Basu, 1994; Oliver, 1999; Worthington, 2009). Noteworthy, Oliver (1999) developed the most doable theoretical expansion by introducing a new *Four-Stage Brand Loyalty* model. In his multi-dimensional framework, brand loyalty begins with the consumer's cognitive perception of the brand image (cognitive loyalty). After building an emotional attachment toward the brand (affective loyalty). Then, the consumer develops a commitment or a plan to repurchase the brand (conative loyalty), which may eventually lead to a strong willingness to actual buying (action loyalty) (*Figure 1*).

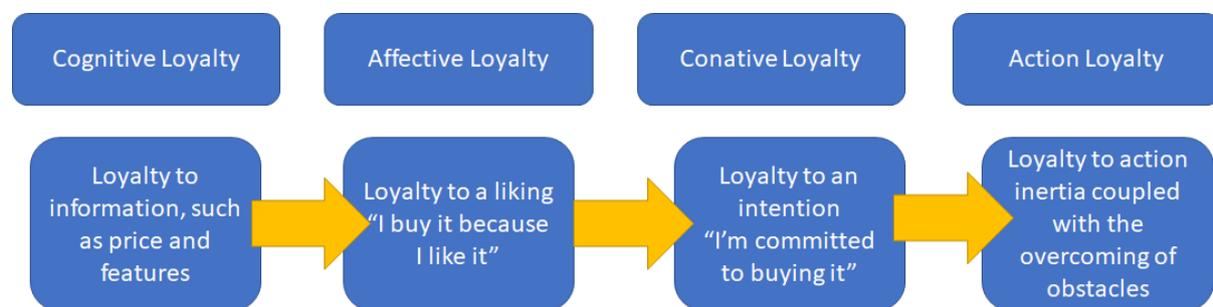


Figure 1: The Four-Stage Brand Loyalty (Oliver, 1999)

This definition is in line with the features of a music product, while mood and emotion linkage is one of the main reasons for consumers to start listening and consuming music (Wikstrom, 2009). A practical example is given to translate these theoretical languages into musical words and deepen the understanding of this theory: When a customer first listened to Doja Cat's *Say So* on TikTok, they might develop a cognitive sense that Doja Cat is an innovative young musician who produces psychedelic electronic music. Then, this customer may start liking the song because of the lyrics or match his or her music tastes. Consequently, this customer may begin searching for other songs from Doja Cat through different social platforms and even gaining interest in her daily lives. Next, this customer will consider buying Doja Cat's digital albums and even develop repurchase intentions and emotional attachment to the musician, eventually becoming a loyal audience.

The author identifies two main obstacles to transferring a cognitively loyal consumer into a behaviourally loyal one: consumer idiosyncrasies and switching incentives (Oliver, 1999). Specifically, consumer idiosyncrasies refer to consumers' variety-seeking characteristics and

their ever-changing needs. Switching incentives refer to the vulnerability to each loyalty stage, as consumers can be easily distracted by competitive offerings in the industry. The two variables are not introduced in the model. Instead, they serve as an insightful research direction for future studies to discover the potential obstacles for attaining ultimate loyalty.

Much existing literature expands Oliver's discussion on brand loyalty-building while perceiving Oliver's framework as a theoretical base (Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2006; Zhang, Benyoucef & Zhao, 2015; Zhang, Peng, Peng, Zhang, Ren, Chen, 2020). Various branding concepts are introduced to deepen the understanding of how consumers develop loyalty and what factors affect their loyalty-building. Among these studies, three brand relationship concepts have been discussed widely in investigating digital consumers, including consumers' feelings of satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Zhang et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2020).

Zhang, Benyoucef and Zhao (2015) define these three concepts as "relationship quality elements" and suggest that they are strongly interlinked during establishing consumer-brand relationships and maintaining brand loyalty. We decided to take a closer look at each of the three elements. We believe they serve as helpful guidance for us to investigate customer loyalty-building in a particular new context, which is digital music consumption.

2.2.1 Brand Satisfaction

In reviewing existing literature on music consumption, the term brand satisfaction has been discussed widely. In particular, Kusumawati, Purnamasari and Sardiyo (2013) emphasize the importance of brands establishing effective marketing strategies to enhance customer satisfaction and encourage consumers to purchase music products legally. Hensley and Kassios (2010) also highlight the need to deliver music services based on customer expectations and overall satisfaction attributes to develop successful digital music platforms. However, none of these studies has contributed to a deeper discussion on how brand satisfaction affects loyalty-building.

In other fields of study, many existing studies have identified brand satisfaction as an essential predictor of brand loyalty (Gures, Arslan & Yucel Tun, 2014; Nugroho, Dharmesti, Septiari & Gitosudarmo, 2015; Shankar, Smith & Rangaswamy, 2003). Traditionally, the term brand satisfaction is defined as consumer contentment when the brand fulfils his or her

expectations, which then possibly results in a positive emotional state occurring due to the brand-consumer relationship over time (Oliver, 1999). This discussion is also in line with the expectancy-disconfirmation model proposed by Oliver (1980). The model suggests that consumers who feel satisfied with the brands and their offerings tend to remain loyal in the future. Translate Oliver's model (1980) into music words, a music audience who are satisfied with Ariana Grande's new releasing songs are more likely to remain loyal to her and continue supporting her. In comparison, audiences who dislike her new song may not be loyal to her anymore due to negative experiences of listening.

However, in later research, Oliva, Oliver and MacMillan (1992) put a sceptical lens on investigating the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty and suggest that the two variables are nonlinear. The authors suggest that changes in satisfaction may increase intentions of repeated purchases, yet they have minimal impact on loyalty. This means that when a music customer feels satisfied with Ariana Grande's new releasing songs, they might decide to purchase this new album. However, this does not guarantee that this consumer will purchase her album again and support the musician in the future.

Gwee and Hui (2004) agree on this point by suggesting an indirect relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. In their views, contentment with a musician implies that the customers are more likely to avoid the risk of potential dissatisfaction in switching to alternative musicians, but this does not guarantee brand loyalty (Gwee & Hui, 2004). In other words, consumers only consider becoming loyal when they discover a need to build up emotional attachment and relationships with their favourite musician.

As Oliver (1999) emphasizes, satisfaction does not universally translate into loyalty. Thus, it should not be a reliable precursor to brand loyalty. This critical exploration has paved the way for a lot of later studies, encouraging researchers to take a forward step to investigate concepts of customer-brand relationship, which is mainly produced by brand trust, to gain a better understanding of brand loyalty concepts (Kabadayi & Kocak Alan, 2012; Tatar & Eren-Erdogmus, 2016; Setyawan & Imoronudin, 2015).

2.2.2 Brand Trust

Continued from the preceding session, Setyawan and Imoronudin (2015) identify the positive effects that brand satisfaction has on brand loyalty. However, these positive effects

cannot be achieved directly only through brand trust as a mediation variable. In other words, successful brand relationships entail brand trust and satisfaction. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define brand trust as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function. Another group of scholars expand this definition by suggesting that brand trust has both cognitive and affective elements, addressing that brand trust plays a vital role in long-term customer relationships (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Tatar & Eren-Erdogmus, 2016).

This discussion on brand trust is in line with the first two loyalty-building processes of Oliver's Four Loyalty Stages (1999), namely the cognitive and affective stage of loyalty-building. This means that to define a music customer as a 'loyal consumer', they have to build up emotional linkage with the musician through psychological contentment on their music products, rather than simply feeling satisfied. Reichheld (2001 cited in Taghipourian & Bakhsh, 2015) supports this point and adds that loyal customers show a more emotional level of attitude and behaviour to empower a relationship with brands.

Although most of the existing literature does not doubt the strong linkage of brand trust and brand loyalty, Morgan and Hunt (1994)'s earlier research introduces another important brand element inseparable from brand loyalty. The authors suggest that brand trust is a key determinant of brand commitment and brand loyalty by creating a highly valued exchange relationship. This means that, before a music customer turns into an actual loyal customer, they need to establish the need to be emotionally attached to this musician. More importantly, this need is continuous and long-lasting.

2.2.3 Brand Commitment

Brand commitment has been perceived to positively and directly impact the development of attitudinal and behavioural loyalty in much existing research (Zhang et al. 2020). The term is defined as a positive attitude toward the brand and a willingness to maintain a valuable relationship with the brand over the long term (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In particular, some scholars emphasized the strong tie between brand trust and brand commitment, suggesting that the affective attachment developed by the brand trust will eventually lead to an enduring desire to sustain a committed emotional bond with the brand (Unal & Aydin, 2013; Zhang et al. 2020).

Fullerton (2005) agrees on this point and theorizes two essential components to construct the definition of brand commitment: affective and *continuance*. This means that, in order to achieve brand commitment and further develop brand loyalty, a consumer not only needs to like the musician and his/her music (affective), but also consider continually maintaining this emotional attachment and supporting the musician both attitudinally and behaviourally (continuance). This discussion again recalls our attention to Oliver's Four Loyalty Stages (1999), the model indicates that after the establishment of cognitive and affective loyalty, there is a possibility for consumers to develop a sense of commitment to support the brands continuously. This long-lasting commitment may eventually contribute to stable buying behaviours.

Additionally, a group of existing literature investigates the interactions between different brand relationship elements during the loyalty-building process (Erciş, Ünal, Candan & Yildirim, 2012; Esch, Langner & Brunner, 2005; Zhang et al. 2015). In particular, Erciş, Unal, Candan and Yildirim (2012) propose a research model and suggest that brand satisfaction and brand trust are mutually interplayed. The two brand relationship concepts both have a favourable effect on affective and continuance commitment, which eventually lead to loyalty intention.

Zhang, Peng, Peng, Zhang, Ren and Chen (2020) expand the current discussion and suggests a quantitative research framework to investigate further the interactions between brand satisfaction, trust and commitment (Figure 2). They argue that consumer's loyalty-building follows a linear sequence, which means, after feeling satisfied with the songs, the consumer may seek a favourable relationship with the musician and increase trust in their music products. Then, the consumer may opt for a sustainable trading relationship that will continuously satisfy their emotional needs by listening to music (Zhang et al., 2020).

This conclusion is consistent with the findings in Oliver (1999)'s Four-Stage Loyalty model, as it suggests that brand commitment plays a vital role in the cognition-emotion-action process, thus having a significant impact on the development of brand loyalty (Zhang et al. 2020). Compared to other studies, their research framework emphasizes the linearity of the loyalty-building process while perceiving brand relationships as the main chain to link each element tightly.

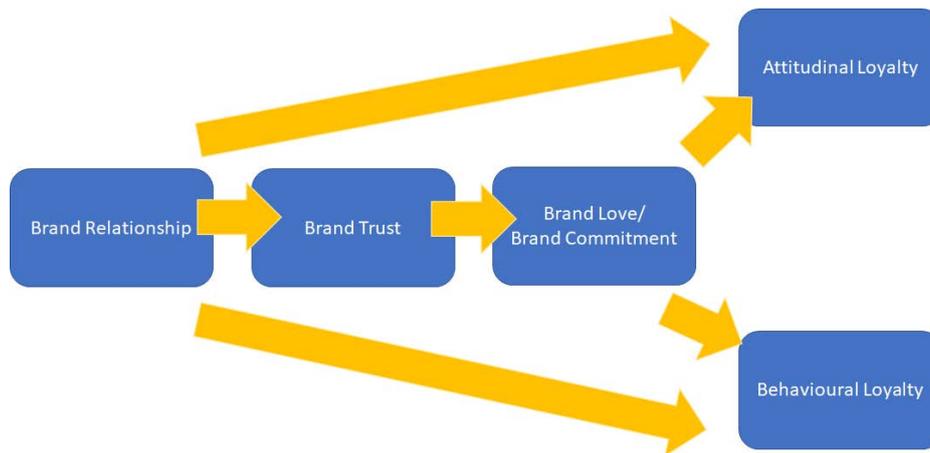


Figure 2: Zhang, Peng, Zhang, Ren and Chen (2020)'s Loyalty Research Framework

Although Zhang, Peng Peng, Zhang, Ren and Chen (2020)'s model is considered the most comprehensive model, its lock-in linear sequence dismisses the possibilities of the mutuality and bidirectionality between different brand elements which have been mentioned above in other existing research (Ercis et al. 2012; Esch et al.2005). Meanwhile, the majority of these current studies follow a quantitative perspective. They conclude their discussion by providing a closed testable model with fixed arrows, which may prevent us from discovering other potential interactions between different brand elements and other antecedents outside the framework that can have a notable impact on consumer loyalty building.

As a result, this study aims to put a sceptical lens to investigate the existing discussion and open up the theoretical debate through a qualitative perspective. Do digital consumers necessarily follow a sequence of satisfaction, trust, and commitment to developing loyalty towards musicians? Are there any critical factors outside the existing framework that are also valuable for us to strengthen our understanding of loyalty-building in the context of music consumption? How are these factors interacting with each other from a practical viewpoint? We believe these questions allow us to enrich our perspectives and discover open and vibrant discussion with respect to our research questions while not being constrained by existing literature.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Overall speaking, the presented literature review has been discussing what we believe to be the most important theories for investigating consumer's brand loyalty-building in music

consumption. To answer the research question with an open-up perspective, we intend to use a theoretical framework to generate the most exciting and relevant academic discussion from the above literature review.

We adopt Oliver's (1999) Four-Stage Loyalty Model as the core of our theoretical framework. The first reason for choosing this model is that it is well-grounded with many previous discussions. We perceive it as the most comprehensive model because it extends brand loyalty to four specific levels. Such expansion enriches our understanding of attitude and behavior loyalty as well as the dynamic interaction between them. The second reason is that Oliver's (1999) model paves the way for many recent studies on brand loyalty. Its recognition-emotion-action framework has been used in many discussions about the establishment of brand loyalty in the Internet age (Zhang et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2020).

We consider this theory highly suitable because it fits our research topic very well. The four stages of loyalty-building allow us to investigate how digital music customers develop their loyalty towards musicians, starting from their cognitive perception towards the intention of inertial rebuying. Oliver (1999) describes that the first stage, *cognitive loyalty*, is where the consumer indicates that one brand is preferable to its alternatives. At the next stage, *affective loyalty*, the consumer develops a liking attitude toward the brand after cumulatively feeling satisfied. Next, the consumer develops *conative loyalty*, which refers to a behavioural intention and commitment to repurchase. Finally, these intentions are converted into action loyalty. In particular, the action inertia is perceived as an ultimate goal in brand loyalty building.

Although Oliver's framework is relatively older than the emergence of music streaming and online platforms, it still has been serving as theoretical guidance for many current quantitative studies, which we have discussed in the previous session. Particularly, the brand relationship concepts, namely brand satisfaction, trust and commitment, are brought up in a wide range of literature. We believe they deserve highest attention, as the logic behind these brand relationship elements derives from Oliver (1999)'s four-phase loyalty. For example, a group of researchers concludes that brand trust consists of both *cognitive* and *affective* elements and plays an important role in long-term loyalty-building, according to Oliver's (1999) definition (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Tatar & Eren-Erdoğan, 2016). In the same vein, the *affective* and *continuance* components suggested by Fullerton (2005) in illustrating the

importance of brand commitment also resonate the second and third stage in Oliver's Four-Stage loyalty model. Noteworthily, Zhang, Peng, Peng, Zhang, Ren and Chen (2020) develop a more comprehensive framework to incorporate concepts of brand satisfaction, trust and commitment into Oliver's four-stage model. As a result, we perceive Oliver's model as still trendy in the discussion of modern brand loyalty.

Particularly, this thesis intends to explore how digital consumers develop loyalty and other unexpected findings on a theoretical basis, while not being constrained by any existing lock-in model. In other words, we are more interested in exploring more possibilities outside this loyalty-building process through gathered data in an open setting. In order to fulfil this ambition, we adopt an *abductive* research approach, with the purpose to blend our discussion based on various prominent theories. In particular, an abductive approach allows researchers to discover unexpected and initial empirical observation (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), which we believe will be highly valuable for us to discover unexpected and initial empirical observation on the basis of Oliver's Four-Loyalty stages.

The abduction setting encouraged us to explore the specific consumer loyalty-building in a digital music consumption setting. Thus, our theoretical framework also incorporates key theories listed in the literature review, and aims to analyze the empirical findings based on these valuable theoretical bases. Accordingly, we extract the most prominent themes, including brand satisfaction, trust and commitment listed in the earlier literature review and allocate them into Oliver's four phases of loyalty-building, which we call the extension of figure 1 (Oliver's model). Subsequently, we explain each loyalty stage and their extended subcategories of theoretical extension and eventually develop an extended version of Oliver's Four-Loyalty Model (Figure 3). We perceive this extended framework as a way to summarize our reviewed literature as well as a research toolbox for us to explore interesting findings from the gathered data in the methodology section.

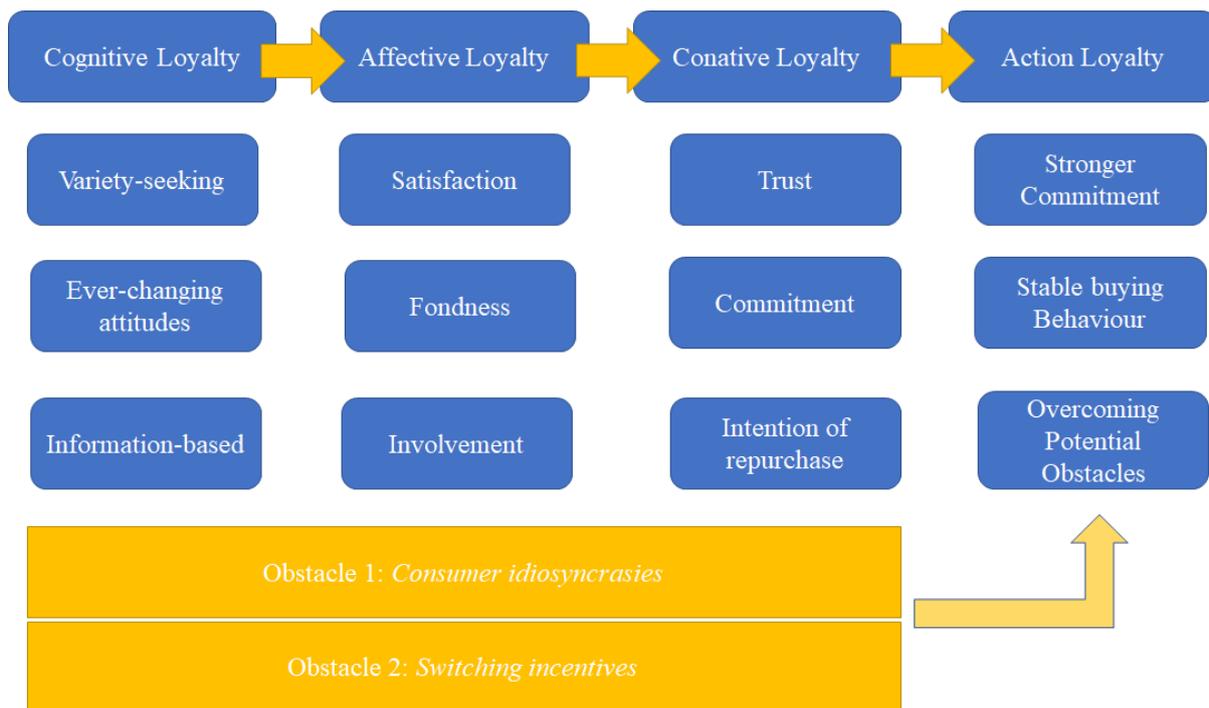


Figure 3. Extended Version of Oliver's Four-Stage Model

In the first phase, we aim to explore how consumers feel when they first listen to music. As defined by Oliver (1999), *cognitive loyalty* indicates that the variety-seeking consumer perceives a certain musician preferable to its alternatives or competitors. By considering the previous discussion of digital music consumers in the literature review, we incorporate the concepts of variety-seeking and ever-changing attitudes (fickleness) into the first stage of loyalty-building. This cognitive attachment can derive from consumers' prior or vicarious knowledge or on recent purchasing or listening experience. In other words, the first phrase of loyalty is strongly information-based. Then, this sense of cognitive attachment may or may not proceed to the feeling of satisfaction (Oliver, 1999).

The second phase, affective loyalty, refers to the development of a liking attitude toward the brand/musician due to cumulatively satisfying usage/listening occasions (Oliver, 1999). This stage of loyalty is strongly dependent on the concept of brand satisfaction. After feeling satisfied with the product/music, the consumer expresses intentions to develop emotional involvement with the brand/musician and seek a deeper level of commitment.

When it comes to the third phase, the consumer develops brand trust and intentions to build a long-lasting relationship with the musician. Compared with the second phase, the brand commitment is formed as the consumer continuously supports the brand/musician. This

strong commitment reflects on their intentions of repurchase. However, this intention of repeating a purchase is not yet realized at the *conative stage*.

Lastly, in the action *stage*, the motivating intention in the third phase is transformed into readiness to act (Oliver, 1999). Consumers at this stage develop a solid and robust commitment towards musicians, and endeavour to maintain a stable supporting behaviour. Moreover, according to Oliver (1999)'s definition, a behaviourally loyal consumer creates an additional desire to overcome obstacles that might prevent them from staying loyal towards the musicians.

In particular, Oliver defines *consumer idiosyncrasies* and *switching incentives* as the two main challenges which marketers or brands need to overcome to protect their loyal customer base (1999). Consumer idiosyncrasies represent that a variety-seeking consumer will keep searching for new experience until there is no variety to sample. Consumers rarely have loyalty to a single brand, they tend to change their needs frequently and obtain multi-brand loyalty, especially when their ever-changing needs can be fulfilled easily by a wide range of competitive offerings within the market (Oliver, 1999). As such, Oliver (1999) addresses that the switching incentives are another significant obstacle for remaining long-lasting loyalty as it leads to vulnerability to each loyalty episode before reaching the ultimate loyalty. In particular, switching incentives derive from dissatisfaction and motivation to consider competitive brands (Oliver, 1999). Thus, it is important for musicians to develop effective strategies to retain consumer loyalty to overcome threats and obstacles to this quest, which is also one of our research purposes to provide practical implications to the industry.

Noteworthy, we perceive that these discussions regarding obstacles are highly interesting and deserve further investigation in our particular research. We believe by adopting qualitative research with an abductive nature, we are able to explore potential obstacles to loyalty-building outside this model through a more open perspective. Noteworthy, the two obstacles are actually in line with our previous discussion about digital music customers' variety-seeking and fickleness features. Thus, we believe it is essential to include these two theoretical themes into our theoretical framework to explore how consumers develop loyalty and the possible reasons hindering them from growing or maintaining their loyalty.

In sum, we believe Oliver's Four-Stage Loyalty Model serves as a valuable theoretical framework in our content analysis. This thesis will not be constrained by the lock-in

framework and categorization boxes by adopting abductive research. Rather, the model and the theoretical themes can be adjusted and complemented according to the gathered data. We also intend to observe more interactions between different phases while adopting a digital music consumption setting from a qualitative approach. In other words, we seek to explore more about flexibilities and possibilities beyond the lock-in model. We believe that by adopting this extended version of Oliver's Four-Stage Loyalty model, this thesis is able to enhance the understanding of consumer's loyalty-building towards musicians as brands.

III. Methodology

In this chapter, the main goal is to present the methodology used in order to conduct the research. The first section focuses on the research design, consisting of research purpose, data collection method and sampling methods. Reasons for choosing a qualitative semi-structured interview and its respondents will be explained in detail. Then, data analysis alongside its procedures and materials are presented in the next session. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion on research quality, ethical considerations and limitations.

3.1 Philosophical Aspect

We believe that our philosophical approach through this study is highly relevant to mention. The philosophical aspect of the research is crucial enough to represent the essence of the study. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015) support this idea through their book. The research philosophy does not only help the researchers establish a better approach towards their research. In fact, it also makes it straightforward for the authors to calibrate their thinking for an optimal research design, which is a crucial part of the entire research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Based on the nature of this study, we believe that people's experiences and perceptions are a key focus and thereby highly relevant. For that reason, we would argue that social constructionism is the more appropriate description from an epistemological viewpoint. That means that this research is arguably leaning more towards the fact that the reality of things is not entirely objective. Yet, it is heavily shaped by people's experience and shared interactions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015).

Furthermore, there are two other aspects to consider: relativism and realism. Field (1982, p.553) calls this doctrine: "There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'", the metaphysical realism. This means that things exist the way they are regardless of outside forces. On the other hand, relativists believe that the world is purely influenced by people who can reach the 'truth' through interpersonal interactions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In our study, the central focus is on online consumers. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) definition, that truth is a result of the interpersonal interactions and dialogues between members of society. In our case, the interviews will be conducted with different individuals where they will be encouraged to share their viewpoints about music consumption, their 'relative truth' concerning this research topic, and how they perceive brand loyalty within the music industry context. We believe that people's interactions, perceptions and personal experiences are precious to this research, as it allows us to enhance our understanding of our research topic through an open qualitative lens. Hence, the relativist perspective is more suitable for this specific study.

3.2 Research Design

This section contains information about how the research was designed. Initially, the exploratory aspect of the research is discussed, followed by a discussion around interviews. Later, the focus is on the abductive aspect of the study.

3.2.1 Exploratory Research

The concept of exploratory research is perceived to have two meanings based on Stebbins' (2001) definition. "One sense is to study, examine, analyze, or investigate something [...] A second sense, which is far more specific, is to become familiar with something by testing it or experimenting with it" (Stebbins, 2001).

Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research suits our research topic best as it seeks different facets of a problem with demands that the researcher focuses on investigating on the basis of fewer units with more in-depth and open discussion (Jacobsen, 2002; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Given that the experiences in loyalty-building are rather individual and subjective, a quantitative method that demands a more significant number of

units to investigate and generalize an objective phenomenon does not fit our research purpose (Jacobsen, 2002). As the nature of our research necessitates adopting an exploratory approach to acquire valuable findings, qualitative research is more suitable for our study as its openness allows us to investigate how a particular phenomenon has occurred.

Meanwhile, this openness encourages proximity between researcher and respondents, enabling us to develop unexpected and exciting findings without being limited to a standardized research framework (Jacobsen, 2002). A qualitative approach in the exploratory study allows us to unearth respondents' opinions, thoughts, and feelings as their reasons and ideas behind their music consumption are requested (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015). Thus, we have decided to conduct individual interviews with online music consumers from Millennials to Generation Y in the earlier session. Since this study focuses on the online aspect of music consumption, another criterion for the interviewees is Tech Savvy, which means that they must be familiar with listening to music through online platforms. We elaborate more on our sampling method and criteria in section 3.3.2.

3.2.2 Interviews

We perceive conducting semi-structured individual interviews as the most appropriate method for this research, since it has the potential to allow for data with intrapersonal data. By conducting in-depth interviews with digital music consumers, this study is able to collect valuable data from their subjective experiences to enhance our understanding of how each person perceives musicians (Kvale, 1994). This could never be fulfilled by other ethnography approaches such as observations, as we can never know how an individual feels and thinks through simply observing their behaviours.

Another benefit of individual interviews is that the person will not be subject to any peer pressure. People can modify their opinions through external influence, and elements such as peer pressure remain core factors for that alteration (O'Keeffe, Buytaert, Mijic, Brozovic & Sinha, 2016). Thus, conducting group interviews or focus group discussion will not be efficient in our case since the possibility for an individual to lose his/her opinion and drift to the current is relatively high. Thus, it is essential to avoid any potential inefficiencies in collecting unauthentic data, and we believe conducting personal interviews is an appropriate method for that reason.

3.2.3 Abductive Research

From the researchers' perspective, deduction, induction, and abduction are usually the three main approaches (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Deduction refers to concluding generic theories to explain specific cases. In contrast, induction suggests making inferences from empirical findings with an attempt to draw generalized rules. When it comes to the abductive approach, Dubois and Gadde (2002) define it as an exploratory manner to develop or refine existing theories through initial empirical observation, instead of simply generating them.

As a result, we believe the abductive approach suits our research question and aims best. As mentioned in 2.3 Theoretical Framework, this study intends to enhance understanding of how online music consumers develop brand loyalty towards musicians, while perceiving flexibility and unexpected possibilities as top of our interests. It does not purely go from theories to empirics following a deductive manner, rather, it aims to add theoretical contributions to the existing framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). An inductive strategy represents that nothing should limit the flow of information collected by the researcher (Jacobsen, 2002). Which means, our theoretical framework only serves as a guidance for our data collection and analysis process, but will not limit our exploration of unexpected possibilities and interesting findings which do not appear in existing theories.

In order not to be constrained by the existing literature and model, we intend to reveal more possibilities and flexibilities outside the lock-in framework. We believe an abductive approach allows more potential than to be bound by the theoretical framework while encouraging us to explore the interactions between different loyalty phases and potential obstacles during their brand loyal-building process. It is important to note that this study aims at exploring and discovering potentially new and unexpected results. Thus we perceive that it is necessary to have an open scope for all types of hypothetically relevant findings.

3.3 Data collection

The data collection section contains information about the adopted method of this research along with the reasons behind that choice. The following section discusses our data collection procedure through online interviews. Then, the sampling whereabouts are elaborated on

further. The latter section sheds light on the interview questions that guided the discussion with the respondents.

3.3.1 Method Choice

As previously mentioned, this research was conducted based on personal semi-structured interviews. Choosing interviews as a method was not arbitrary, as they have several benefits that align with the scope of this research. On top of that, interviews served as a great way to obtain valuable insights about the respondents' experiences, which is highly significant since we were trying to identify and understand how people develop brand loyalty through an open-up discussion.

Acquiring historical events insights is another advantage of interviews, which allowed us to investigate how people rationalize and reason with respect to the topics discussed. In other words, the in-depth interviews allowed us to ask questions containing "how?" and "why?" to understand respondents' particular experiences and attitudes regarding loyalty-building. That is precisely the purpose of this study: to identify how and why online music customers develop brand loyalty with certain musicians.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) define three types of interviews, they are structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews. We adopted a semi-structured manner as we seek to obtain theoretically relevant responses while appreciating any input and piece of information that would add value to the research results. A completely structured interview was perceived to be less efficient in abductive research and might constrain us to obtain unexpected discussion and findings through follow-up questions (Saunders et al., 2007). We also perceived that certain guidance is needed in conducting an interview to reduce the risk of getting distracted by overly extensive and irrelevant discussion.

Different interviewees would have different perspectives based on their perceptions and experiences, thus it would be time and resource-efficient to gather the most theoretical relevant ideas while obtaining open-ended responses to develop potentially new insights to the study (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015; O'Keeffe et al. 2016). In particular, a semi-structured setting allowed us to prepare questions beforehand to ensure an accurate direction of the interview process and acquire the necessary insights to solve our research problem (Saunders

et al., 2007).

Another reason for choosing a semi-structured approach was closely related to the flexibility in data collection. The predetermined questions can be extended in a semi-structured manner by asking follow-up questions according to different circumstances. This flexibility is encouraged by the nature of this study as we embrace each piece of information and input from the interviewees as they are potentially valuable to our thesis, which adopts an abductive approach.

In some cases, follow up questions were asked for clarification of elaboration purposes. Specifically, before completing the interviews session, the last question was always incentivizing the respondent to add any relevant story or experience they would see relevant and they would like to share. It is our top responsibility to obtain free and open responses where interviewees feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences and opinions on the basis of theoretically relevant discussion. Overall, we put in endeavours to give each interview a flexible aspect which was also helpful in optimizing the quality and relevance of the obtained responses. Therefore, the duration of each interview was not constrained and varies depending on how deep the discussion goes.

3.3.2 Online Interviews

Initially, the interviews were meant to be conducted in a face-to-face settlement. However, due to the current Covid-19 situation along with its restrictions, it became necessary to conduct these interviews through the video conferencing platform Zoom.

There are six important practical issues to consider: obtaining trust, being aware of social interaction, using an appropriate language, getting access, recording the interviews, and choosing the proper location/means for the interview to be held (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). They served as necessary guidance and were considered from time to time during our data collection journey, given a specific online setting.

Notably, our research topic embraces cultural diversity since digital music consumption is becoming a global issue. Thus, we recruited interviewees from different cultural backgrounds, and we believe this diversification allows us to eliminate the bias elements as much as possible. We were also interested in exploring what potential obstacles and important elements can be perceived in consumer's loyalty-building in different cultural

contexts. Our sampling will be explained in more detail in the 3.3.3 session.

The main language we chose to use in the interviews is English. However, to ensure that our interviewees feel comfortable and relaxed in sharing their personal experiences, we allowed them to use their preferable languages, such as Arabic, French, Cantonese and Mandarin. All of the interviews were conducted by only one of the researchers of this thesis, either Zakariae and Simian, depending on the language usage. This is to eliminate the pressure of interviewees to share their personal experience, as some of the interviewees expressed that they feel less stressed when having one-to-one interviews. Even one of our interviewees said her concerns when we asked for her permission and preference in interviews: *'It feels like chatting with a friend when we are meeting alone. But if there were more than one interviewer, I feel like I am having a job interview.'*

During the interviews, it was essential for us to make the interviewee feel comfortable and welcomed to share whichever is on her/his mind. We have made it clear in the beginning through statements such as: 'You should know that any insight or thought you might have will be valuable to us, no matter how small or irrelevant you might perceive it. Please feel free to speak your mind and add anything that you might see relevant'. As a result, we were able to collect open-ended responses and obtain new aspects by capturing their pure opinions and perceptions.

Most of our interviews were recorded through Zoom's in-built feature after getting the interviewees' consent and will be kept as a record from each interview. Unfortunately, some of our interviewees refused to be recorded. They indicated that they feel pressure to share their personal experience, especially those who had experiences admiring and supporting their favourite musicians intensively or even blindly. In these cases, the main thoughts of the discussion were taken down and translated by the researchers of this thesis, either Zakariae and Simian. Immediately after the interview, both of us quickly reviewed the taken notes and share notable details and findings that we observed in the interview to avoid ignoring any important and interesting findings.

Conducting interviews usually involves the need for transcription. Thereby, we have decided to transcribe the interviews in a moderately selective manner based on the research topic and focus. This means that our main focus was on the most important notions and messages that each respondent was trying to transmit. In other words, we have also tried to read between the

lines and have taken the energy, body language and other communication cues into consideration. In our study, we were aiming at understanding how online music customers develop brand loyalty with musicians. We believed that this transcription method is the most fitting since the study focuses on getting purely qualitative insights to help answer the how and why questions.

Still, we cannot neglect the limitations of conducting interviews online. For example, interviewees may not express their body language naturally through talking in front of a computer. We will elaborate more on the study limitations later in the conclusion chapter. Connectivity problems sometimes occurred, making it time-consuming to solve the technical issue and ask them to repeat their responses. However, we still perceive the overall data collection process in nearly flawless conditions since all respondents were very familiar with Zoom's software. The interviewees were also feeling comfortable and shared what they felt and what they perceived without any restraint. This allowed us to gather a lot of valuable intrapersonal data and proceed to content analysis.

3.3.3 Sampling

This study aims at understanding the reasons and whereabouts of how online music consumers develop brand loyalty with musicians. The nature of this study steered us towards focusing on investigating individuals from Millennials and Generation Z, which we have mentioned in earlier sessions. Consumers of this generation tend to be the ones with the most experience and exposure to online digital platforms, internet usage, and the technological world in general.

The interviews aimed to conduct with individuals who fulfil the following two criteria: (1) They must be music enthusiasts or individuals who simply like to listen to music online. (2) They must be millennials or Generation Z who are tech-savvy and have experiences in using any types of online streaming platforms, such as YouTube, Spotify and TikTok.

In reviewing our first criteria, individuals who have experience in music consumption are more likely to provide valuable and relevant answers to meet the purpose of this research. Whether they are enthusiastic music lovers or just people who enjoy music through the online platforms, we believe that all of these individuals with digital music consumption experience will provide us with valuable answers. Therefore, we do not want to limit the research object

to the behavior of music lovers. Their experience as digital music consumers come in handy throughout the opinions they have to share, the different online experiences they went through with respect to their interaction with musicians and all the various aspects of their perception towards online music and musicians. This data is a major focus of the study, and it was collected from primary sources for optimal accuracy and reliability.

For the second criteria, we believe recruiting tech-savvy young adults who have sufficient experience in using online streaming platforms will provide valuable insights for this study. These individuals are always labelled as millennials or Generation Z and Y. It is fascinating for us to investigate their variety-seeking nature and fickleness in digital consumption, which has been listed in the literature review. We believe their experience in using and switching amongst various online music platforms will make an essential contribution to our empirical studies in studying a particular digital environment.

In addition, we believe that obtaining different information from different backgrounds would only add value to the relevance of the findings. Therefore, we have decided to not limit ourselves to a particular geographical area nor culture. In fact, we have interviewed people from different countries and even continents. Our interviewees are from Sweden, Morocco, Russia, China, and several other countries. The main reasons for this diversification are to lower the cultural bias as much as possible and to obtain different perspectives on the focus of our research, namely developing brand loyalty through online music consumption.

We also believe that another sampling criterion is that these individuals need to have relevant experience listening to music online. Their experience can range from using free online platforms such as YouTube, other subscription-based platforms such as Spotify, or simply listening to music through randomly browsing the internet on social media. We believe that by investigating how they behave and develop a liking attitude towards musicians, we are able to explore their loyalty-building, from simply liking a song to feeling committed to a particular musician. We aim to collect insights based on their personal experiences, opinions and related stories on listening to and consuming music online.

Our study adopted a two-step purposive sampling. In particular, purposive sampling allows us to select respondents who meet our specific sampling criteria based on our research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015). This is exceptional as our specific research topic focuses on the digital music consumption population, from which we have selected a moderately specific

sample. As Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) mentioned, purposive sampling will best enable us to answer our research question and obtain relevant findings. In particular, we developed a brief online questionnaire as a way to filter respondents who fit our sampling criteria. The questionnaire includes information about their age, gender, user experience and frequency of different music streaming platforms. This information helped to filter interviewees who are most relevant to our research topic. The pre-questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Moreover, we adopted a snowball technique to reach our respondents. The snowball purposive sampling refers to the situation where researchers select several individuals for specific research purposes and then get feedback from these individuals about other potential respondents that might be valuable to the study (Goodman, 1961; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In this approach, we were able to approach a significant number of individuals who also meet our sampling criteria quickly and efficiently. For example, after interviewing with an officer, she suggested her colleague as our next interviewee. The colleague is a big fan of music and has experience managing fan pages on social media. The snowball terminology helped us save a lot of time finding appropriate interviewees and assisted us in gathering as much valuable and high-quality data as we can (Bell et al. 2019). After sending the questionnaire to around 25 individuals from our surroundings, such as friends, colleagues, relatives and even other people within their approachable network, we filtered 17 respondents to participate in the interview.

Overall, these interviews were conducted with closer attention to the interviewees' experience, opinions, and perspectives on online music consumption. Based on their input, we draw the key results to develop a long-term loyalty relationship online with their favourite musicians. We believe 17 interviews is enough for content analysis as we have obtained a wide range of insightful data and observed similar responses from the interviewees' responses. A table that includes the interviewees and relevant information about their names, occupation, the date, and the duration of the interviews can be found in Appendix B.

3.3.4 Interview Questions

We have developed 12 interview questions, which are available to check in our Appendix C. The questions we asked the interviewees were based on our theoretical framework and other vital concepts listed in the literature review. Noteworthy, these questions were designed to

be open-up, flexible and allowed to be adjusted based on different circumstances. They worked as a guideline that allowed research moderators to steer the conversation on the relevant theoretical basis while allowing free and unexpected discussion, potentially adding value to our research topic.

The main reason for this openness in question setting is that we believe the loyalty-building could vary from different individuals as it is a rather emotional and subjective experience. With an aim to embrace any inputs which are potentially valuable in resolving our research question, we also conclude sub-questions which we expect to ask when we need further explanation. In particular, these follow-up questions apply the techniques of 'laddering up' (why?) and 'laddering down' (can you give me an example?) to discover how each interviewee develops loyalty towards musicians through online platforms (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015). Thus, this flexibility and openness in the setting of the interview questions allowed us to acquire valuable empirical data for content analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

Our empirical data derives from conducting in-depth individual interviews with people classified as heavy music consumers online. We perceive the empirical data gathered from the interviews are adequate due to two reasons:

- (1) We observed similar patterns and answers from the three interviewees that allow us to foster insightful perspectives regarding the research problems;
- (2) These data allow for a thorough examination of characteristics that address the research question and distinguish the different conceptual categories of interest.

We have adopted a series of steps throughout this study as part of the research analysis process. As illustrated in Figure 4, we adopted a nine-step analysis process. Initially, we have begun collecting primary data through one-on-one interviews with several online music consumers. Following that, we have transcribed those interviews and followed them with a pre-analysis stage to the data collected. This was performed to run the obtained information against the theoretical framework of the study. This stage was crucial since it revealed the necessity of making key modifications to the framework to consider all the important insights collected.

After transcribing the interviews, we followed three processes of sorting, reducing and arguing, which were suggested by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). Although we appreciated any input from our participants during interviews, it was necessary to keep the empirical material in a narrower scope to draw a clear focus on our research topic. We believe the *sorting* phase allowed us to understand our data better, and we were able to filter those with high value and relevance for our thesis. The next step was to start filtering the data with a more concentrated focus on the research topic, which we call *reducing*.

Regarding the arguing process, we developed our own coding system, which was inspired by the concept of Codebook by a group of scholars (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman & Beauchamp, 2001). We believe that creating a codebook for our study is an essential step for sorting and organizing the data and proceeding the empirical materials for further analysis to meet our thematic purpose. A codebook allows us to classify and organize the most relevant empirical materials while drawing linkage towards our theoretical framework. We will elaborate on how we develop the codebook from gathered data in section 3.4.3.

At this point, visualizing our findings was highly important, as it allowed us to develop a clear image of overall understanding and perceptions of the research findings. To clarify the overall added value of the research itself, we created our illustration based on the thesis to summarize our overall findings while adding new results and possible modifications to the original theoretical framework. The illustration can be found along with a detailed explanation later in Chapter IV.

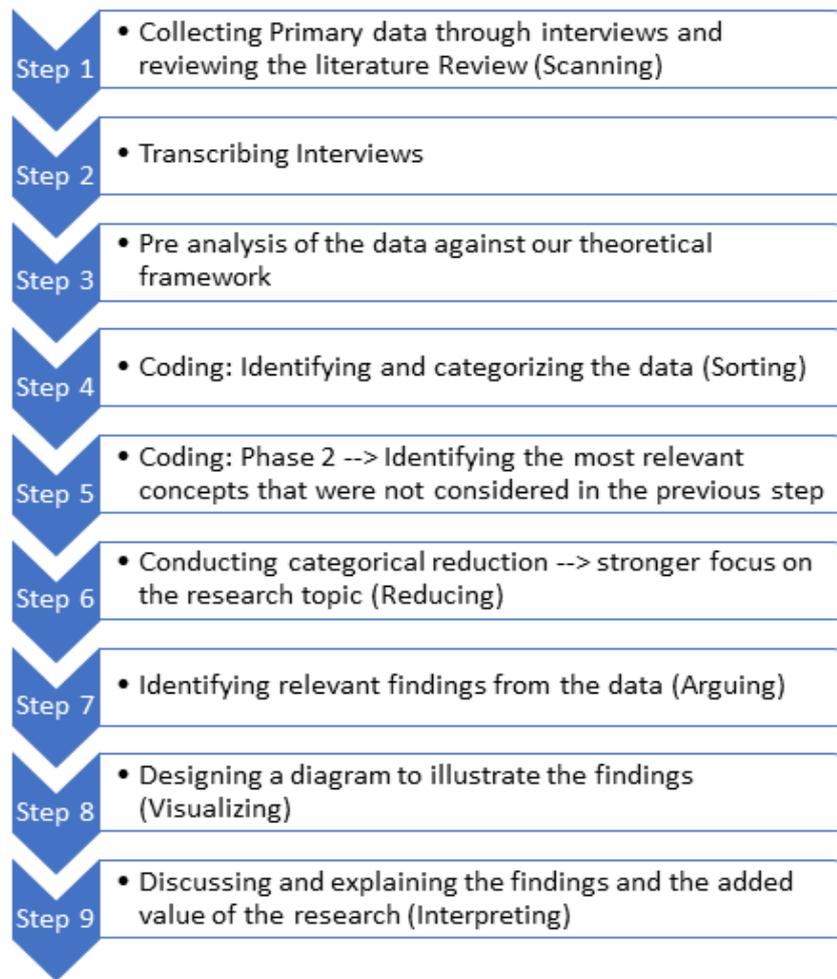


Figure 4: Data Analysis Process

3.4.1 Sorting

Our first step to sort the data was to distil the empirical material by grouping the interview transcripts into themes without altering the interviewee's own words. This means that interviewees' verbal and daily expression are kept and proceed to further categorization. We first classified and analyzed the dialogues through initial codes, which means that sentences will not be reduced or amended in sorting steps. By examining the patterns of each interview question and the answers, the total of fourteen questions were categorized and labelled as different sessions, with a higher level of abstraction, which built on our pre-understanding of theoretical concepts (Rennsatam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Given that consumers might accidentally provide answers to other interview questions, we sifted through each data and highlighted them in different colours rather than reducing them directly. Also, we kept an eye on responses that seem irrelevant to the theoretical framework as they may be unexpected and important findings that will add value to our study. For example, we highlighted answers that are relevant to consumer's 'variety-seeking nature' in red, and highlighted answers that are possible for expanding the theoretical framework in yellow. This approach allowed us to preserve important data and always go back to check them easily. Then, we developed more abstract codes to data which highlighted in the same colour and provided them with theoretical meanings, such as "Brand Satisfaction", "Brand Trust" and "Brand commitment". These theoretical meanings were referred to as the Themes or Labels to sort the chaotic data into a higher level of abstraction and proceed to a cross-case analysis (Rennsatam & Wästerfors, 2018). These themes and labels allowed us to conduct in-depth analysis following well-structured guidance with theoretical means and preserve important data that is strongly linked to our research aim.

3.4.2 Reducing

By examining these labels with theoretical values, we conducted categorical reduction to create a stronger focus on our research topic (Rennsatam & Wästerfors, 2018). Data reduction is helpful to sharpen data and information and eliminate irrelevant and distracting discussion. The labels we have developed in the sorting step allow us to reduce data effectively without any risks of deducting necessary and interesting findings. We used "[...]" to replace the reduced parts in the sentence, which offer no valuable insights in our discussion. Meanwhile, we understood that verbal expressions cannot be well-structured and even chaotic, thereby challenging to be understood. In these circumstances, we summarized the respondent's main ideas logically and expressed them in sentences in written format.

3.4.3 Arguing

The sorting and reducing process brought in important concepts and perspectives to our study, however, a need to increase the theoretical relevance of our data analysis is rendered important (Rennsatam & Wästerfors, 2018). This means that our data analysis follow our theoretical framework and illustrate interactions between different important theories and other insightful findings reserved after data sorting and reducing.

3.4.4 Coding

As Weston et al. (2001) described, designing a codebook is a highly suitable method for qualitative research as it aids in filtering the most relevant insights from the data collected. Initially, it is necessary to ‘conceptualise the coding’ to capture the most pertinent aspects of the study focus. This is usually followed by the ‘codes generating’, which we named *Themes/Phases*, as that helped us categorise the data so that it makes more theoretical sense. The next step is to develop the coding system as a way to guide the research analysis. Nevertheless, generating the codebook is not the last step of the process. It is usually necessary to have a “continuous cycle of tryouts and revision” as the research advances (Weston et al., 2001). For more details, the codebook of this research can be found in the Appendix D.

3.5 Research Ethics and Quality Criteria

The quality of a research study depends on three main factors: validity, reliability, and generalizability (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Initially, conducting any type of research requires a certain ethical code to be followed. This was a priority for this research. Thus, before conducting any interview, it was essential to gather the interviewees' consents before becoming part of the study. We sent an official consent form from Lund University (see Appendix E) to each participant to be aware of the whereabouts of the study. This allows us to ensure that our gathered data is reliable and authentic and is highly significant to solving our research question.

Furthermore, before each interview, we have intentionally avoided clarifying the purpose of the study, the themes, or topics simply not to alter with their personal input during the interview. We wanted to make sure that each individual provides us with insights that are purely theirs and that are based on their full subjective judgements. Still, we thought it was necessary to clearly get their permission for us to use their insights during their interview for our research. Then the moderator was making it clear that honesty and complete transparency are what we are looking for in this study. All respondents were highly cooperative and supportive, which we appreciate both personally and at the level of the data quality obtained. Consequently, we refer to each participant on a first name basis, since we believe protecting

the respondents' anonymity and confidentiality is compulsory for every research (Bell et al. 2019).

The nature data collected in this research requires careful interpretation at different levels. Our analysis focused on the linguistics aspect of the interviews, the voice tone, the energy transmitted by the respondents, and even the non-verbal expression since we believe that the body language also delivers strong messages through what the interviewee was feeling while speaking. It is important for us to include the concept of reflexivity which we believe is very useful to research in general. Reflexivity is “the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p.10). On this basis, we have been focusing on our interpretations to keep a holistic viewpoint derived from the different themes and separate elements gathered from each interview. Micro-analyses, or paying attention to details such as the body language and the energy that the interviewees have been using while answering the questions, are doubtlessly important, still putting them within the research context is an added value of the study.

The research was conducted by us, two individuals from different backgrounds and mindsets. Thus, we have tried to use this detail to our advantage, meaning that we have been analysing and interpreting the data separately to ensure that we cover all the aspects of the obtained insights from each respondent. This adds to the quality of this entire study. Furthermore, we have been conducting one-on-one interviews. As we previously mentioned, the language aspect is a reason for that, yet it was not the only motive. We believe that people might get a bit nervous during interviews and therefore subconsciously adopt a defensive standpoint. We wanted to avoid that by individually conducting interviews so that each respondent would feel comfortable enough to speak their minds and share their experiences, stories, and other information valuable to the research.

Furthermore, the validity of research refers to whether a researcher can gain access to respondents' experiences in the research setting (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). According to this definition, our study has high levels of validity as our qualitative semi-structured interviews with respondents, who are selected by supportive sampling, enable us to reach our research aims. We can explore how they develop feelings of satisfaction, trust and

commitment that contribute to their loyalty-building towards a musician and how these elements interact with each other behind the digital music consumption.

Second, the reliability of our study is considerably high as we can express the transparency of data collection and its interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). We describe how the study was designed, conducted to pursue a research purpose while explaining reasons behind our choice of both sampling and data collection method. Given that our research adopts a completely qualitative approach, we understand that our empirical findings will be unable to be generalised to a bigger population. However, we believe our theoretical discussion and practical results are able to offer insightful viewpoints for future studies and settings in other fields. Although our context focuses specifically on digital music consumption, our discussion on digital consumers and their loyalty-building will be valuable for academic professionals or other business students who are also interested in exploring brand loyalty issues in the digital era.

Subsequently, Guba and Lincoln (1994) mention two main criterias to conduct the qualitative research assessment: Authenticity and Trustworthiness. This last criterion expands into four sub-measures reflected in Transferability, Credibility, Dependability and Confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As a matter of fact, authenticity is a key criterion in our research since the beginning of the study. We have been focusing on obtaining authentic findings since we believe that the artistic context of our study enforces that criterion. During each interview, the respondent was never interrupted or influenced in any shape or form. Obtaining spontaneous insights was a significant focus of the moderator. In addition, the interviewees were strongly encouraged to use their terms and vocabulary in which they feel more comfortable at and mostly expressive with. Thus, we can pledge authenticity through the circumstances and whereabouts of this study.

Transferability is another criterion within the qualitative research assessment. It describes the expansion ability for the information obtained within this research into different contexts. Our research is mainly focused on brand loyalty development within online music consumption. We believe that the study is specific and might not be completely transferrable. That is a major reason for us to adopt the abductive approach as opposed to the inductive one.

Hence, transferability might not wholly be met in our study. Still, that would be an incentive for future research opportunities.

Then comes credibility which Tobin and Begley (2004) refer to as the extent to which what has the respondent in a certain research and what has been communicated by the researchers align. In this research, credibility was a major focus while analyzing the data. Though the research was conducted by two researchers with different assessment perspectives and analysis, we confidently argue that this does not affect the credibility of the study. The obtained primary data was interpreted with high transparency. In fact, this opinion diversity does enhance the credibility of research (Bell & Bryman & Harley, 2019).

In addition, dependability is defined as whether the researchers have been documenting the study while conducting it or not (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, researchers are required to have dependable proof documenting the research that has been performed. In our case, this is exactly how the study has been performed. As previously discussed, the interviewees were clearly asked for their consent to both share the information and for that information to be recorded, kept, and used as required by the research. The transcribed forms of each interview have been kept and are easily accessible either through Dropbox, Google Drive, and other local drives.

At this stage, objectivity is another concept that must exist in most, if not all, types of research. That is referred to as confirmability Guba and Lincoln (1994). Though it has been previously discussed in earlier sections, this research has been conducted in complete transparency and without any subjective behaviour from either researcher. The data were interpreted with the sole purpose of understanding and exploring, as opposed to proving or convincing. We recognised the fact that a complete objective is almost impossible in qualitative research, by definition (Easterby-Smith et al. 2015). Nevertheless, we did pledge that confirmability was met, within reason, since it has been conducted in complete good faith (Bell et al. 2019).

IV. Empirical Findings

This chapter is divided into three sections to introduce our main findings. After summarizing consumers' development process of brand loyalty, we expound the

factors influencing the establishment and maintenance of loyalty from the internal and external aspects.

4.1 Loyalty development process

Through the findings of this research, we discovered that online music consumers develop brand loyalty towards musicians through a relatively randomized process. This means that those online music listeners do not necessarily follow a particular structure while developing that sense of fondness while becoming fans of their favourite musicians.

Through the conducted interviews, several respondents have been providing exciting insights that enforced that opinion. For example, Jason from the USA honestly expressed his perception of loyalty to musicians. The opinion goes as: *“I personally do not believe in that aspect of becoming a loyal fan of another person. I feel like I just like a song because of the music itself. I do not get any attachment to the people behind it”*. The thing that makes Jason’s answer specific is that he also mentioned that he does listen to music on a regular basis. He even described himself as a heavy online music consumer *“I listen to music a lot, every single day”*. Another interviewee Ming from Malaysia agreed on this point by saying that *“I have been buying his album for almost ten years. The thing is that I am still not interested in his daily life or personality. I mean, I just like his music but not him”*.

On the other hand, there were also interviewees indicating that they are “extremely loyal” to their preferred musicians. This includes Jolene, who is also from the USA. She expressed her willingness to pay for the music depending on how she likes the musician. She expressed her desire to engage with her favourite musicians on different social media platforms, such as commenting, sharing and liking. Another interviewee John from Hong Kong, also pointed out a solid emotional linkage between himself and his favourite musician guarantees his stable purchasing behaviour of music. *“If I admire the musician, then, of course, I am willing to pay for their music to support their career; But if I just enjoy listening to their music, why don’t I just listen to it freely through online platforms?”* John said that.

To put it differently, for some consumers, it is possible for them to maintain stable buying behaviour, without gaining interest in the musicians on an effective level. In contrast, the fondness towards the musicians also guarantees some other consumers’ repurchase

intentions. This controversy allows us to conclude that developing brand loyalty is not necessarily a linear process in a digital age. This means that neither time nor any other dimension can assure certain results concerning that. Instead, it is a more complex structure that is affected by many different factors, both internal and external, from the consumers' perspective.

4.2 Internal factors

Over the course of the research, we have observed that the loyalty-building process is strongly affected by an individual's subjective perception and emotional building. Whether or not a consumer develops his or her satisfying feelings, liking attitudes or intentions of the repurchase is hard to predict. We use the term "internal factors" to integrate our main findings on how consumers develop loyalty towards musicians.

The internal factors have either *supportive* or *binary* nature. Supportive internal factors mean that they are purely supportive of the loyalty-building process. They are perceived to be positive internal factors that encourage consumers to develop loyalty towards the musicians. In contrast, binary internal factors refer to elements with unknown effects on consumer's loyalty building. They can either prohibit or motivate consumers to develop emotional bonds or loyalty towards the musicians.

The research showed that many factors are standing out more at the cognitive level of the online music consumer. These factors are purely binary, and it depends on brand information, including price, features and so forth. They allow consumers to analyze and judge based on their needs. Initially, consumers developed a curiosity of looking for more information about a song, a musician or even an entire music genre. Our interviewees expressed their significant preference on brand information: "*I look for songs sung in Cantonese and Mandarin only*", "*I look for music that is free on Spotify*", and "*I usually search for songs with quick rhythm and I hate sad songs*". Their needs for information can both be positive and negative to a particular musician. For example, a consumer may develop an interest in a musician who produces music genres that fits his or her specific taste. However, it also means that the consumer eliminates other musicians whose music do not match his/her preference.

Next, consumers' daily *activities and tasks* have been brought up a few times by the

respondents. Aitor was one of the respondents who brought up this aspect when he said: “*Music helps me go throughout the day especially with my personal routine habits*”. Katty from Hong Kong also indicated that: “*I listen to ambient music when I am working. It helps me concentrate on what I am doing. Before going to bed, I listen to romantic songs with relaxing melodies. I believe it’s a good way to release my stress*”. This means that people’s music choices tend to be influenced by what they are doing at a specific moment of the day. Different people might have different songs or musicians that they prefer to listen to while, for example, working out or taking long walks.

Furthermore, it has been made clear that *comparing* different songs and musicians against each other does happen often. That can also be positive or negative from the musicians’ perspective, depending on the final choice, considering that all musicians want their fans to choose their work over the competition’s. This was clear through Fadi’s statement: “*I do check out different musicians if I am looking for songs. For example, I like: SumINMusic, LondonOnDaTrack, Zaytoven, Timbaland, Scott Storch, and Swiss Beatz.*”. That comparison is usually followed by what we call the *judgement* or the perception establishment within the consumer’s mind. Jolene said: “*My favourite musician has the talent, appearance, and the lyrics*”. Her statement makes it clear that her judgement of her favourite artist does affect her overall perception. She clearly is convinced that she is a fan of a musician for different reasons. We perceive this factor to be necessary, especially from a marketing perspective since this study does perceive musicians as brands.

Another purely positive factor is *satisfaction*. “*You could say that I feel satisfied with the talent of my favourite musicians*”, is what Jolene said. This simply means that the more satisfied a person is after listening to a song, the more chance there is that the person would start developing affection towards that musician.

Moreover, there are two binary factors: *Mood* and *perception/image development*. It is important, at this level, to clearly differentiate between the judgment factor and the perception development. The key difference is the fact both factors are consecutive.

First, *mood* is another factor that heavily affects online music consumption and the bond between a musician and his/her listeners. Venus explicitly described that situation: “*I choose music based on how I feel at that time. For example, I search for sad songs when I am feeling down*”. Ming also supported this point by saying: “*I won’t be interested in any songs with a*

happy or energetic vibe when I feel like I need to concentrate or when I feel down. That would only make me feel annoyed”.

Second, perceptions of the musician’s image also have an influential impact on the construction of affective loyalty. As the naming suggests, perception of image refers to a stage where the consumer has already established an image of a certain musician. Compared to the comparison and judgement phrase in cognitive loyalty, perception on image investigates a more psychological level of matching than simply cognitive information. In other words, we argue that building loyalty through perceived images is less rational than loyalty-building based purely on cognitive information. Omar did have an opinion on that subject when he said: *“In a musician, I do appreciate talent. Also, possible positive energy in other fields such as sports, social community events, movies”.*

These two factors are both binary. A person’s choice can be purely controlled by their mood at a certain moment, as well as the fact that their perception can be in favor of the musician or against them.

Then there is *fondness* which refers to the level to which the consumers are fond of the musician’s work. Then there is *involvement* that can be translated into different actions ranging from online engagement to a simple word-of-mouth. Anastasia expressed that: *“I would say I always feel emerged when listening to songs with sad melodies and beautiful lyrics. It feels like the singer is gently telling a story near your ears. That always makes me feel relaxed, and I want to be closer to this musician.”* Hence, we can perceive that music makes her feel involved physically, and she looks for a higher degree of engagement with the musicians. The more involved are the people, the better it is for the musicians and their brands.

The next factor is the *tolerance to the product*, which is the level of tolerance that consumers have towards certain musicians at the level of the music itself. Omar brought up this factor: *“if I do not like a song he recently released, I’ll wait for his next release”.* John also supported this point by saying: *“If there’s one of her songs that I don’t like. It is probably because I couldn’t resonate with the song at that particular moment. I believe I will like it in the future. I really like her, and I believe in what she creates.”* This indicates that a strong liking attitude towards a musician may foster the consumers to be more open and tolerant to the risks of feeling dissatisfied with the music products.

Interestingly, we also observed an opposite factor of tolerance to behaviour. It refers to consumers' attitudes towards the musician itself. Specifically, it reflects the extent to which people are ready to overlook the different types of inconsistencies and being let down 'musically speaking' by the musicians they follow. Sam illustrated this idea by saying that: *"Of course I feel very disappointed with him being disloyal to his girlfriend. But honestly, you know that slang in Chinese, 'we judge a person based on his talents'. I think I would still buy his albums if he shows his passion for creating high-quality music again"*. Jason supported this point by addressing that: *"If there were negative buzz around a musician, of course, I would keep supporting them. [...] I do not care about these things. Music is the only thing that I pay attention to."* As such, we perceive tolerance to behaviour as the extent to which people are willing to overlook the musicians' unusual or unaccepted behaviour. An example would be a leaked video of that musician doing drugs. The higher this tolerance is, the better it is for the musician.

Furthermore, there is *trust*. This factor refers to the people's perception of the extent to which their favourite musicians deserve their trust. Few of our interviewees expressed the trust factors when sharing their experience of liking a musician. For example, Jolene said: *"My favourite musician has the talent, appearance, and the lyrics"*. John also expressed a stronger form of trust by saying: *"I trust her. I appreciate everything that she could offer. I know she will never disappoint us."* Their responses can both be related to music and/or other aspects such as the musicians' behavior and ideologies.

In addition, there are other factors that have been revealed through the findings of this research. *Commitment* is an important one. It is closely related to the loyalty development towards musicians as Jolene mentioned during her interview: *"I share their content and like their Instagram posts."* Being committed to a certain musician means listening to their music on a regular basis. This regularity is also expressed in the *buying behavior stability*. Based on the findings, this factor is positive since it turned out that the more stable the behavior is towards a certain musician, the more predictable they can be and therefore the easier it is to meet their expectations. Jolene touched on that when she mentioned: *"I'll subscribe to platforms that will let me listen to their music offline"*.

Another factor we observed is the intention of repurchase. This factor touches on the intention of both re-consuming the music online, and paying money to different digital platforms to enjoy a wide range of music. One of our interviewees Omar said that: *"I'll*

subscribe to platforms that will let me listen to their music offline". Meanwhile, another interviewee Katy also expressed her great intention of repurchase by saying that: *"Of course, I definitely consider purchasing his albums over and over again as a way to support his career. Though only when I have enough money to afford that"*. Remarkably, even though this intention of the repurchase is not yet realized, we can observe a high level of commitment towards the musicians from these consumers.

Then, *Consumption Habits/Frequency* are also a factor that does have an impact at the level of the conative loyalty. People listen to or consume music online differently depending on their own preferences and other external factors that will be further discussed later in this section. Omar was one of the respondents who touched on that when he said: *"Yes, I listen to music a lot: every single day"*. These consumption patterns can also either be in favor of the musician in question, if the people choose their music, or it can negatively affect their bond in case people start developing new patterns where they would listen more to other music. *"I love to listen to and even purchase music playlists which consist of a wide range of musicians. In particular, the suggestion function in YouTube is just amazing. It's always a good way for me to explore new musicians suggested by the system based on my past listening history"*. Ming from Malaysia illustrates how he appreciates the convenient suggestion system. This is heavily related to the online platforms' algorithm, how they sometimes push or 'suggest' different content, as well as the *User Convenience*.

This convenience factor means that different people choose to consume music on various digital platforms and through different devices. This is important to many respondents, such as Luke when he said that: *"I use YouTube because it is convenient for me as I use it on the computer"*. That purely depends on the consumers' choice and their personal convenience.

4.3 External factors

At this stage, the external factors mainly relate to and influence, to some extent, the internal factors that have been previously discussed. This link is what we refer to as the external *Switching Incentives*, since people would be more likely to switch to other musicians due to one of the external factors that will be discussed further in this section. As previously mentioned, different platforms have different algorithms that try to analyze different people's consumption patterns while using those platforms. Spotify is an obvious example. The

platform has been hiring dedicated engineers who keep updating the Platform's algorithms in order to add potentially interesting songs to the queue of the listeners. Katy emphasized the difficulty to avoid these switching incentives by pointing that: *"You know, it's a very competitive industry. Nobody could guarantee the fact that you would be loyal to someone forever. We always want to have new experiences, we are always easily distracted."*

Then, the technological factors were frequently brought into discussion when interviewees expressed their feelings about switching towards brands. We believe the technological factors are purely external, since the average online music consumer would not have any control or influence over. What we mean by technology is the level of influence that the technological aspect has on the entire online music consumption experience. Few people prefer using their laptops, while others might like to use tablets or mobile phones. Luke is one of those people. He said: *"I like using YouTube because it is more convenient for me to use on my laptop"*. These devices do not provide the same experience when listening to music. Another factor is the *music availability* on different platforms. This factor is also crucial since people might prefer different platforms over others, e.g., Spotify over YouTube Music. This factor does have a significant impact on the brand loyalty development towards musicians. It might even motivate people to start listening to other musicians simply because their music is available on a particular platform.

Moreover, there is *Diversity vs. Career focus*. Venus said: *"I think I won't continue to like them if they only produce music. There are too many musicians we can choose from. The reason why I remain loyal to Girls' Generation is because I love to see them appearing in different platforms, including K-drama, TV shows, Entertainment Shows, and their performance in social media. [...] I can feel how passionate they feel about their career and seek to achieve diversity in the future."* Some musicians choose to diversify their activities such as become actors or start a clothing business, while others decide to solely focus on their music. For example, Sam said: *"I hate seeing musicians who consider acting, writing books or other stuff. Musicians just need to focus on their own talents in their professional field. That is how you maintain your loyal customers. To be honest, I would question if they really loved music or if they just wanted to make more profits."* This controversial finding has shown that different consumers have different perceptions of musicians' career development, and it significantly affects their intentions to maintain long-lasting loyalty.

In addition to diversification, *the musicians' personality, attitudes towards fans, and overall*

charm has been discovered to be important as well. John thinks that way, and he made it clear through: “*I would say, after I started liking IU (a South Korean female singer), I consider her to be very important in my life. Her personality and moral attitudes influence the way I perceive my own life as well. How she treats her fans becomes guidance in my own life and influences my way to communicate with people surrounding me as well. [...] I would say I will stand for her forever.*”. Several people think that it is even as important as the *musical talent* itself, which is included in the next factor we call Music Authenticity, Talent and Consistency. John also shared his experience of being disloyal to a musician : “*The reason why I don’t support Gloria Tang (A Hong Kong female singer) anymore is that her image is no more consistent. She used to be a very local singer in Hong Kong. She used to only sing songs in Cantonese. But she decided to develop her career in mainland China. [...] I do not listen to her songs now. She forgot her home. She is not authentic anymore. You can also get a feeling that she does not care about her original fans anymore. What she cares about now is obviously money and more fame.*”.

In addition to talent, this factor includes *authenticity*, which refers to the extent to which a musician stands out from the crowd or how unique they are. Moreover, there is *consistency* that is mainly relative to the initial type of music, attitude, ideology, and other traits that the musician has initially started communicating to their fans. In particular, few interviewees expressed great concerns in authenticity and consistency when they considered long-term loyalty-building. One of the most significant responses we found is from John, who expressed his disloyal experience by saying: “*The reason why I don’t support Gloria Tang (A Hong Kong female singer) anymore is that her image is no more consistent. [...] I do not listen to her songs now. She forgot her home. She is not authentic anymore. You can also get a feeling that she does not care about her original fans anymore. What she cares about now is obviously money and more fame*”.

Overall, these external factors have been frequently mentioned when our interviewees expressed their personal experience in establishing loyalty towards a particular musician in the long term, saying more than five years. It is worth noting that these external factors require additional attention, as many interviewees indicated that the lack of certain external factors was the main reason for their experience of losing loyalty. This includes lack of authenticity and consistency, low accessibility on online platforms and so forth.

V. Discussion

This chapter aims to draw a linkage between our empirical findings with the theoretical framework. We interpret and discuss our empirical findings in the light of our theoretical framework to provide answers to our research problem. In particular, we represent an own-developed illustration to summarize our main empirical findings and serve as a comprehensive framework to develop our understanding of the research topic. Finally, key findings, as well as their contributions at theoretical and practical levels, will be highlighted.

Recalling our research problem, this thesis intends to understand how online music consumers develop loyalty with musicians as brands in the digital era. In particular, our study started by investigating consumers' loyalty-building through a theoretical framework on the basis of Oliver's (1999) Four-Stage Loyalty and other key theories listed in the literature review. Consequently, after the data collection and analysis, we discovered new empirical findings that are interestingly different regarding the initial framework. In particular, we can answer the posed research question by arguing that digital consumers' loyalty-building towards a musician is a complicated process that does not follow a specific phase or sequence.

This new finding is disruptive to our theoretical framework, and we believe it is highly valuable for theoretical expansion on brand loyalty issues. Originally, the theoretical framework (Figure 1) identifies four phases of loyalty-building, including Cognitive Loyalty, Affective Loyalty, Conative Loyalty and Action Loyalty. Particularly, action loyalty is perceived to be the ultimate goal for musicians to achieve, as it represents that the digital consumers have overcome obstacles and committed to stable buying behaviour. The original framework suggests that loyalty-building follows a phase-by-phase progress, which means a consumer needs first to feel satisfied with the music to develop cognitive and affective loyalty, hence developing interest in maintaining a favourable relationship with the musicians conatively. Finally, this consumer overcomes potential obstacles (*switching incentives* and *consumer idiosyncrasies*) to stick loyal to the musician and develops a solid commitment to stable buying behaviour, namely action loyalty (Oliver, 1999).

Noteworthy, as mentioned in the above chapter, we explore valuable empirical findings through an open qualitative perspective, which significantly disrupts the existing theoretical framework. One of the most significant findings is that loyalty-building does not necessarily follow a process or phase. Instead, it is more complicated and unpredictable than how we expected from the original theoretical framework.

As a result, we developed our own illustration to portray our empirical findings on the basis of our theoretical framework (Figure 5: *Online Music Consumption Loyalty Development (OMCLD) Model*). As our empirical results are disruptive, we believe this newly developed illustration allows us to free the loyalty-building process from a lock-in model and incorporate other exciting findings. The illustration will be explained in detail in the later sections.

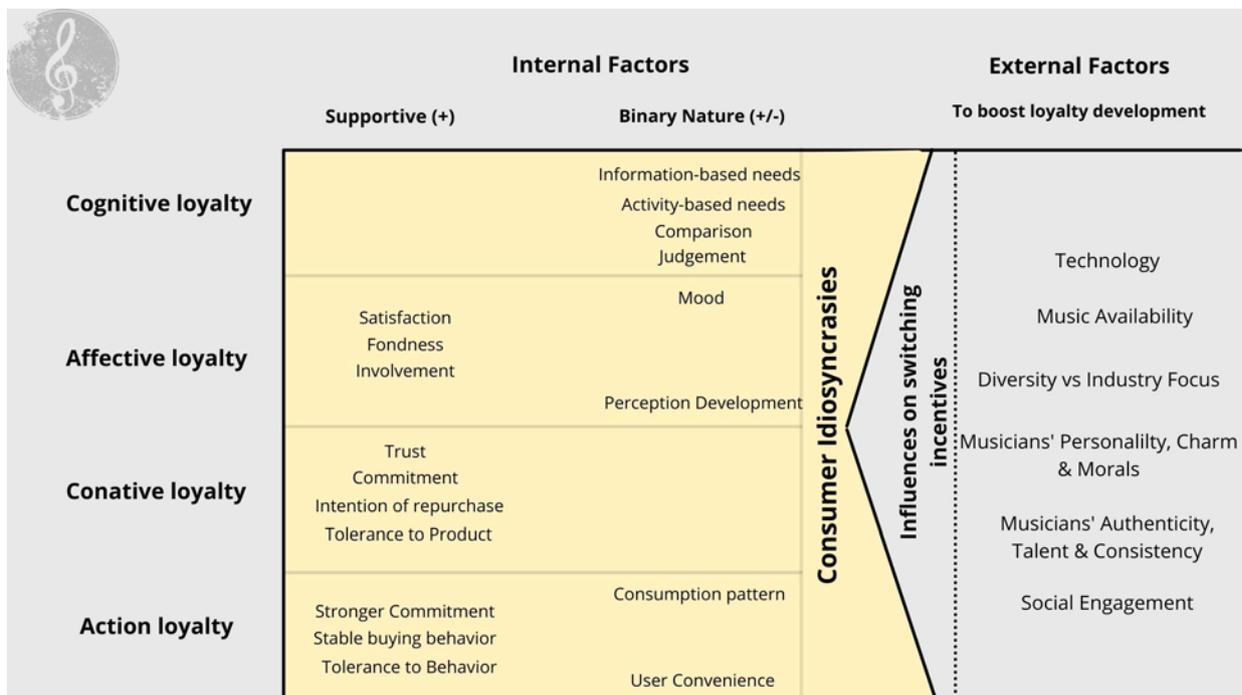


Figure 5: Online Music Consumption Loyalty Development (OMCLD) Model

In the following, we explain how our model differs from the original theoretical framework and how it adds new value to the discussion on brand-loyalty concepts. We also emphasize the most exciting empirical findings and address their contribution to understanding brand loyalty-building from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

5.1 An Open Model

As previously mentioned, our empirical findings interrupt the original theoretical framework. Instead of following a linear sequential model, we suggest a two-axe model to describe our findings. On the one hand, the vertical axis on the left side contains the four types of loyalty by Oliver's (1999) Four-Stage Loyalty model. They are cognitive, affective, conative and action loyalty. Noteworthily, the arrows between each stage which contains sequential meaning was taken away as we perceive them to be independent loyalty concepts. Thus, instead of calling them "loyalty stages", we decide to name them as four types of loyalty. On the other hand, our horizontal axis contains two main categories, namely internal and external factors. These factors refer to the different elements that have an impact on the consumer's loyalty development. We explain internal and external factors respectively as below.

First, the internal aspect of these factors concerns mainly the elements that primarily depend on the consumers themselves, such as their mood and actions. This means that these factors are usually out of brands' control. These internal factors strongly depend on the individual's subjective experience and opinions, which is challenging to be expected and measured by brands.

Second, the external factors cover the elements that are dependent on the musicians themselves such as the availability of their music on different platforms. Therefore, we perceive these external factors as elements that the consumers do not have any control over. In other words, the internal factors represent the side of the spectrum on which online music consumers take an active position. At the same time, they have a purely passive stand with respect to external factors. These factors will be discussed in further details further within this section.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that both sides are interrelated through consumer idiosyncrasies. In other words, the external factors such as technological convenience, the musicians' personality traits, and their social engagement do have an influence on the internal factors. That impact happens through what we refer to as the 'influences on switching incentives' concerning *consumers' idiosyncrasies*, or their personal perceptions. We will elaborate more on those interrelations between the different elements of the model later in this section.

The internal factors can be divided into two major sections: First, the supportive factors, which refer to positive elements in establishing and maintaining brand loyalty from the

perspective of the musicians. Second, the binary factors, which can be both positive and negative for musicians, depending on the situation. In the following, we start by introducing each type of loyalty and drawing relationships between its related internal factors, which are either supportive or binary. At the same time, we explain how the newly-added findings contribute to the original theoretical framework and our research topic.

5.1.1 Cognitive Loyalty

By interpreting Oliver (1999)'s initial definition in our research topic, cognitive loyalty refers to the step when the variety-seeking consumer develops loyalty towards a musician, based on the price, features, genre and so forth of their music products. Digital consumers change their needs frequently, thus their loyalty towards the musician in the cognitive aspect is purely information-based.

Our empirical findings identified another internal factor that influences the consumer's perceptions of a certain musician, which we call *activity-based needs*. Despite the basic information of the musician and his or her music, digital consumers may develop a cognitive sense of attachment towards the musician depending on what activities they are doing.

In accordance, we identified *Comparison and Judgement* as two other essential internal factors to the construction of cognitive loyalty. Digital consumers always compare different musicians and make a judgement of which musician best matches their information or activity-based needs. Afterwards, they are able to indicate that a particular musician is preferable to its alternatives.

Compared to Oliver's definition of cognitive loyalty, where he defines it as the first step in loyalty-building, we believe cognitive loyalty can be established at any stage. In particular, consumers may develop cognitive attachment towards a musician after stable repurchase. For example, our interviewee Ming indicated that: "*I used to purchase their albums, but honestly, I never really listen to it. It was just a way for me to support them as I was firstly attracted by their visuals. [...] But I started to listen to those albums recently, and it was surprising to find that their songs are actually good.*" As such, we identify cognitive as a rational type of loyalty that can be established at any stage.

5.1.2 Affective Loyalty

Compared to cognitive loyalty, affective loyalty refers to a more psychological and emotional level of loyalty. Its establishment and maintenance strongly depend on the digital consumers' internal factors, which we identify as *Satisfaction*, *Fondness* and *Involvement* in the theoretical framework. Our empirical findings expected results in 2.3 Theoretical framework, as most interviewees indicated that they continuously develop a liking attitude and sense of involvement with a certain musician after cumulatively feeling satisfied with his or her music. These three internal factors serve as supportive elements to the construction of affective loyalty.

Remarkably, our empirical findings disapprove of the hierarchical sequence between affective loyalty and cognitive loyalty, which is suggested by Oliver (1999). A consumer may develop a strong emotional attachment to a certain song and thus develop interest in the musician without comparing or judging whether this musician fulfills their cognitive needs. As mentioned above, cognitive loyalty is a more rational form of loyalty as consumers proceed with analyzing and judging processes when developing loyalty. However, affective loyalty refers to a psychological level, where consumers develop interest in the musician simply because it matches their mood or preferable image. In other words, the two types of loyalty can be interrelated but also can be independent to each other.

During our data collection and analysis, we also found that consumers' loyalty-building is complex and unexpected. Whether consumers like the music and feel satisfied with it, is strongly subjective to their emotional feelings and perceptions upon the musician. As indicated in our empirical findings, consumers select music based on how they perceive the musicians and how they feel at a specific moment. In this case, we identify two binary factors to explain this complexity and subjectivity of their loyalty-building towards musicians: *Mood* and *Perceptions of the image*.

We define *Mood* and *Perceptions on the image* as binary because they have either positive or negative impact on consumer's loyalty-building. To illustrate, some interviewees indicated that they prefer to listen to certain songs from musicians as the melodies do match their particular mood (i.e. happy or sad). At the same time, this means that they reject musicians whose songs do not match their mood. Similarly, interviewees may develop positive or negative perceptions of the musician's image, significantly influencing their loyalty-building.

“I used to listen to a lot of songs from Justin Bieber, but not in later years. I guess the main reason is that his music genre does not match my personal references. Also I don’t like his voice, his style and his overall image. It is what hinders me to take a forward step to develop a liking attitude towards him.” ---- Katy, Hong Kong, China

As indicated by Katy, if a consumer finds the musicians mismatched their preferable image, they will feel discouraged to develop affective loyalty towards them. In both cases, musicians may either obtain affective loyalty from their consumers or get eliminated due to the mismatch of consumers’ mood and perceptions. Thus, we perceive these two elements as binary factors instead of supportive factors.

5.1.3 Conative Loyalty

As mentioned in our theoretical framework, conative loyalty refers to a loyalty state where consumers develop trust and commitment with a certain musician and enhance intentions of repurchasing their music products. Initially, Oliver (1999) defines conative loyalty as the next stage of affective loyalty, pointing out that consumers will consider establishing a deeper level of commitment after reaching a sufficient degree of liking. In Fullerton (2005)’s definition, conative loyalty, which he called brand commitment stage, represents a continuous format of affective loyalty.

Our empirical data support that conative loyalty represents *trust* and *commitment*, and further intentions of repurchase. In particular, we defined these three elements as supportive factors regarding the construction of conative loyalty. When a consumer develops trust towards the musician and his or her music, they may also establish commitment to spend money to support this musician and even establish *repurchasing intentions*.

Further, cognitive loyalty represents consumers’ willingness to *tolerate dissatisfaction* with their purchased music products. When we asked how consumers feel considering the risk of paying for unsatisfied music, most of our interviewees indicated they are still willing to support the musician despite the fact that they create songs that do not suit their preferences. This is because they believe in their musicians, and they tolerate music they don’t like. Primarily, our interviewees expressed that they feel unsatisfied with the song because they cannot resonate with it at the moment. But they rarely question the musician or regard it to influence their fondness towards the musicians.

"If my favorite musician releases a song that I do not like, it does not affect my bond or perception of them because I already know they have the ability to make music that I enjoy so I try to be patient for more new music." ---- Jolene, USA

"If there's one of her songs that I don't like. It is probably because I couldn't resonate with the song at that particular moment. I believe I will like it in the future. I really like her and I believe in what she creates." ---- John, Hong Kong, China

According to their previous purchasing experience, they do not expect they would like every song in their purchased playlist or digital album. Thus they are tolerant of songs that do not fit in their expectations or preferences. Moreover, they perceive it as an excellent chance to discover new music genres and expand their music tastes. Noteworthy, this commitment reflects on strong emotional support, but they may not be realized yet on a behavioural level.

5.1.4 Action Loyalty

Action loyalty has been identified as the accomplishment of repurchasing intention which built in the conative loyalty stage (Oliver, 1999). Oliver (1999) addresses that this *realized action of stable buying* represents a stronger form of *commitment*, which is remarkably accompanied by the consumer's desire to overcome obstacles that might prevent the act. In other words, action loyalty was defined as the ultimate goal for musicians to achieve as it indicates that the consumer has transferred their repurchase intentions to actual behaviour.

In addition, our empirical findings have brought disruptive discussion upon the original theoretical framework. We discovered that action loyalty does not necessarily guarantee the overcoming of obstacles. This includes *tolerance to behaviour*. Specifically, this means that a loyal consumer might tend to tolerate negative news about their favourite musicians or accept their behaviour which is inconsistent with their original image. This is because they have already established a stronger commitment to the musicians and formed stable purchasing behaviour to support them.

"I would say it depends on how serious the mistakes they make. Show Lo (A Taiwanese musician) is a good example. Of course I feel very disappointed with him being disloyal to his girlfriend. But honestly, you know that slang in Chinese, 'we judge a person based on his talents'. I think I would still buy his albums if he shows his passion in creating high-quality music again." ---- Sam, Hong Kong, China

Remarkably, a stable buying behaviour may develop from their emotional attachment towards the brand or simply from their habitual behaviours of repurchasing. Some interviewees have addressed that their fondness towards a musician encourages them to commit to a stable purchasing behaviour.

"I mean, I really like her as a whole person. That's the main reason why I continuously purchase her albums both online and offline. I think she became more and more important in my life." ---- John, Hong Kong, China

At the same time, some other respondents also pointed out that the main motivation of their stable purchase behavior was only the love of music on the rational level, not the love of musicians on the emotional level.

"Yeah, I purchase his album every single year, restless. Even though he was having some bad news at that time, I still support him. Because his music means everything to me." ---- Sam, Hong Kong, China

As a result, we perceive that action loyalty can be developed from both an emotional or simply behavioural basis. And this finding again proves that loyalty-building is not following a linear sequence.

Furthermore, we also identified two internal factors which are binary to the building of action loyalty. They are *consumption frequency* and *user convenience*. Particularly, they refer to how consumers' consumption patterns and experiences through digital platforms contribute to or discourage consumers to develop action loyalty. For example, some interviews indicated that although they committed to purchasing a certain musician's work, the inaccessibility of their songs on online platforms may hinder them to establish action loyalty.

"I usually use Joox. This is the only app I like. So if I can't get her songs through Joox, despite how much I love her, I may have to apologize to her (for not supporting her anymore)" ---- Ming, Malaysia

In sum, action loyalty could be perceived as a delightful phase of loyalty, as consumers become tolerant to dissatisfaction and have launched stable purchasing behaviour to support the musician. Though, our empirical findings suggest that a stable purchase cannot be an absolute guarantee that the obstacles will be overcome. On the contrary, these obstacles exist

permanently during the loyalty-building and proposed vulnerability to each type of loyalty. We explain our empirical findings about the long-lasting obstacles in the next session.

5.2 Long-lasting Obstacles

In Oliver's (1999) original definition, there are two significant obstacles to consumers' loyalty-building. They are *consumer idiosyncrasies* and *switching incentives*. The first obstacle, consumer idiosyncrasies, refers to consumers' variety-seeking needs. Oliver (1999) defines that this obstacle can be overcome when the consumer reaches action inertia of a particular brand and finds no temptation other new experiences provided by alternatives. The second obstacle, switching incentives, indicates that consumers may be lured away from competitors who offer persuasive messages and more delightful offerings (Oliver, 1999).

These definitions of two obstacles have resonated with our previous discussion on digital music customers in Chapter II. Consumers' variety-seeking needs and ever-changing attitudes reflect their ease of switching brands, making their loyalty-building unexpected and challenging to maintain (Datta et al. 2018; Kahn, 1995; Sheorey et al. 2013).

Our empirical study also found that digital music consumers fulfil the two characteristics: variety-seeking and fickle. However, different from the original definition of Oliver (1999), these two characteristics or namely, two obstacles, are persistent and can never be overcome. The main reason is that the loyalty construction of digital consumers no longer follows the linear and hierarchical sequence. This means that we cannot easily tell which loyalty is the first step and which is the last. Therefore, we represent these two obstacles as vertical axes, and examine their impact on the development process of each loyalty type.

Our empirical findings of the first three types of loyalty and their vulnerability towards the two obstacles is in line with Oliver (1999)'s original definition. Particularly, the first type of cognitive loyalty is vulnerable as consumers may be distracted when they find that another musician offers preferable music which better meet their information-based or activity-based needs. When it comes to affective loyalty, consumers may induce attitudinal shifts to alternatives when they feel dissatisfied with a musician or find that the musician's image does not match their mood-based preferences or expected perceptions. Similarly, consumers may

feel discouraged to develop conative loyalty towards the musician when barrages of competitive messages wear down their motivation to remain committed.

Noteworthy, our empirical findings also suggest that action loyalty has a certain vulnerability with respect to consumer idiosyncrasies and switching incentives. Although digital consumers may commit to repurchase, the ever-existing obstacles disable their ability to tune out competitive messages. This may occur when musicians fail to grab and maintain consumers' attention, while other competitors are offering higher standards of music work and fans engagement, as well as greater accessibility through online platforms. For example, several interviewees agreed on this point by saying: *"I found it is always difficult to concentrate on only one musician when you have access to so many other musicians through online platforms."* *"Last month, it was my first time not buying his album in 10 years. One reason is that the songs are not so attractive to me. Another reason is that another musician released a new album, and I got totally distracted and I thought it's better to save my money to purchase another album this time."*

As a result, we believe these two long-lasting obstacles exist permanently, and we suggest they are never easy to be overcome. Especially, in such a highly competitive industry where consumers are always easily distracted by a wide range of selection amongst musicians and their music in the digital era. It is thus remarkably important for musicians to notice that consumer loyalty-building is always unexpected and difficult to control phase-by-phase.

5.3 Loyalty-building as a controversial process

During our empirical findings, it is also interesting and exciting to discover that loyalty-building is a controversial process. This means that, the internal factors which were perceived to be essential in the loyalty-building in a particular type may be proved invalid on another kind of loyalty-building. To illustrate this idea, we observed three significant controversies that vigorously renewed our understanding of consumers' loyalty building.

The first controversial finding occurs in the discussion of cognitive loyalty and conative loyalty. In our empirical results, cognitive loyalty is established after the consumer compares and judges the cognitive characteristics of musicians and their music. This means that the variety-seeking consumers are sceptical and rational when choosing their preferable musician

and music. Therefore, to foster consumers' cognitive loyalty, it is important for musicians to first create high-quality music products that meet consumers' taste.

"I will check whether this musician provides music with high quality, and belongs to a genre that I personally prefer. The matching between their image and my preference is important." ---- Ming, Malaysia

"I used to listen to a lot of songs from Justin Bieber, but not in later years. I guess the main reason is that his music genre does not match my personal references. Also I don't like his voice, his style and his overall image. It is what hinders me to take a forward step to develop a liking attitude towards him." ---- Katy, Hong Kong, China

Interestingly, when it comes to conative loyalty, consumers become tolerant of music products they are not satisfied with. As mentioned in the above session, consumers who have established trust and commitment towards the musician expressed emotional attachment, and this emotional attachment cultivates their irrational supportiveness towards the musicians.

"If my favorite musician releases a song that I do not like, it does not affect my bond or perception of them because I already know they have the ability to make music that I enjoy so I try to be patient for more new music." ---- Jolene, USA

"I still want to support her because I trust her. Although this new song does not match her original image at all, I believe it is because I cannot resonate with it at the moment, and I believe I will in the future." ---- John, Hong Kong, China.

Our second controversial finding is similar to the first one, it represents the different focuses of the construction of affective and action loyalty. As discussed above, affective loyalty is established based on consumers' satisfaction and fondness towards the musicians. Which means, after feeling satisfied with the music, the consumers may take a forward step to care about the musicians' personality and personal charms. Speaking of fondness, our interviewees interpreted their personal experience regarding the development of affective loyalty.

"I feel satisfied and relaxed when listening to her songs, that's when I feel like connecting to her personally but not simply enjoying the music." ---- John, Hong Kong, China

"I was first attracted by their appearance. Then I started to listen to their songs to see if they match my music preference. Then I will start evaluating their personality, to see whether or not I want to like them as a whole person." ---- Venus, Hong Kong, China

Interestingly, maintaining a favourable image is perceived to be less important in conative loyalty building. Particularly, this type of loyalty refers to the fact that consumers have developed trust and commitment towards a musician. Moreover, this trust and commitment guarantee their support, despite possible mistakes and inconsistencies in their undesirable behaviours in affective loyalty building.

"If there were negative buzz around a musician, of course I would keep supporting them. And that is usually because I would not even know about it lol. I do not care about these things. Music is the only thing that I pay attention to." ---- Jason, USA

"I would say it depends on how serious the mistakes they make. Show Lo (A Taiwanese musician) is a good example. Of course I feel very disappointed with him being disloyal to his girlfriend. But honestly, you know that slang in chinese, 'we judge a person based on his talents'. I think I would still buy his albums if he shows his passion in creating high-quality music again" ---- Sam, Hong Kong, China

The third controversial finding could be perceived as the most exciting finding in our empirical research, and it strongly reflects on the unpredictability and complexity of consumer's loyalty-building. During the interviews, many of the participants provided interesting discussion when we asked them to provide certain criteria of defining oneself as a loyal fan. Specifically, we observed two groups of discussion with respect to it. The first group of interviewees represents the need for musicians to diversify their career and increase exposure through different online platforms.

"I think their ability to pursue diversity is essential for me. Because in such a competitive industry, we are always easily distracted by other talented musicians. You cannot just rely on music, there will always be someone who performs better than you." ---- Katy, Hong Kong, China

On the contrary, the second group of interviewees remain sceptical of musicians who diversify their career, especially those cross-border expansions on their career development.

This includes musicians who go on the stage and become an actor, blogger, or book writer.

“I hate seeing musicians who consider acting, writing books or other stuff. You know, musicians just need to focus on their own talents in their professional field. That is how you maintain your loyal customers. To be honest, I would question if they really loved music or do, they just wanted to make more profits.” ---- Sam, Hong Kong, China

Remarkably, all of these controversial findings emphasize that the digital consumers' brand loyalty building process is unpredictable and complicated. This significantly contributes to the existing theoretical discussion, where scholars tend to generalize the brand loyalty-process and assume that loyalty-building is following a cognitive-affective-conative sequence and realized in action form. In our research topic, loyalty-building is not a linear and testable process, but it contains controversial factors which increase the complexity and unpredictability for us to understand how consumers develop loyalty towards certain musicians in a digital era.

5.4 Gender Influence on Loyalty

Another interesting and unexpected aspect of this study's findings is the potential influence of gender on loyalty. Remarkably, we had balancing amounts of respondents, with nine male interviewees and eight female interviewees in total. We have noticed certain perception and behaviour patterns that differentiate both sides.

First, we discovered that the factors influencing customers' long-term attention to musicians vary according to gender. Males tend to focus on songs and the musical aspect, while females pay more attention to other aspects of the musicians as brands. For instance, many female respondents talked about how much they value the musicians' appearance and career diversification during the interviews. This last aspect refers to when musicians become actors or start their clothing line. Particularly, we defined the term Diversity and Industry Focus to describe these opposite discussions.

We use several interesting responses to illustrate the above ideas. For the female side, Venus and Katy expressed that seeing musicians diverse in their career development is fascinating

as they feel like they know better on their personality and talents through a different aspect, and it constantly attracts their attention and thus they are able to remain long-lasting loyalty towards these musicians. Interestingly, Sam and Jason expressed negative attitudes to such diversification. They emphasized that they only appreciate and stay loyal to musicians who focus on creating high-quality music.

Additionally, our second interesting finding on gender difference is about music consumption. In other words, paying for music is another factor that distinguishes males from females during the interviews. The majority of the male respondents said that they are not ready and will not be anytime soon to pay for music online. On the other hand, females do have online subscriptions on different platforms such as Spotify and Youtube Music. Furthermore, this opinion division has been shared by several respondents from the same gender throughout most interviews.

Most female respondents do describe themselves as being loyal to certain musicians. Few of them were more explicit about it such as Jolene who said: *“I am extremely loyal”*. Nevertheless, most male respondents expressed their indifference towards the musicians. Some of them even said that they *“do not care about who is making the music”*. For example, a typically non loyal respondent would be Luke who clearly stated that: *“I personally do not believe in that aspect of becoming a loyal fan of another person. I feel like I just like a song because of the music itself. I do not get any attachment to the people behind it”*.

Consequently, while male respondents feel that they do not believe in loyalty, females might have a more detailed definition and perception of the loyalty concept. Jolene did cover that in her interview responses through her personal definition of loyalty: *“To me, a loyal fan is someone who learns every lyric and learns every song and has gone to at least one concert and has been a fan of that musician for many years”*.

This loyalty perception includes engaging with musicians online, sharing their songs, commenting on their social media accounts, and discussing their music with friends and relatives. Though, male respondents have clearly expressed their lack of engagement and interaction with musicians on digital platforms.

5.5 Consumers are loyal to the music, not to the musicians

In our empirical study, we have discovered that consumers' loyalty-building towards a musician is derived, developed and maintained on the basis of his or her music. In particular, most of our interviewees expressed that their main focus is always on the music itself. They rarely develop intentions to develop the emotional need for personal engagement with their favourite musicians.

Consumers rarely develop loyalty towards a musician because their choice of music is highly activity-based or information-based. This refers to music genres, instruments or other functional features of the music itself. Even though consumers may select music based on their mood, it is still perceived that this emotional resonance derives from the melodies, lyrics and so forth of the music. Consumers rarely discover a direct linkage between the musicians. In particular, most of our interviewees expressed their low motivation to develop an interest in musicians, not to say establish emotional attachment and seek in-depth engagement with them. Just like one of our interviewees Ming expressed: *"Well, to be honest, I don't see the necessity to know their personal life. I like them because of their music. That's the only thing."*

This also recalls our attention to the discussion of the long-lasting obstacles. We believe that consumers' ever-changing attitudes and variety-seeking needs make it more difficult for them to develop loyalty towards a certain musician. Take cognitive and action loyalty as examples, we can observe that consumers' loyalty towards the musician may simply derive from the enjoyment in music. Only when consumers have a certain interest in the musicians, will they consider cultivating loyalty to these humanized brands, rather than simply enjoying music products.

In other words, in most cases, consumers are loyal to music and listening experience, but they seldom develop loyalty towards musicians. Whether or not a consumer will consider developing interest and loyalty towards a musician is also hard to expect, and is impossible to control. However, most of our interviewees indicated that once the loyalty towards a musician is formed due to a certain reason, the personal charm, morality and attitudes are what remains their attention to the musician and continue supporting them. And these elements are perceived as external factors which are controllable in musicians' hands in the previous chapter.

“ My own experience of loving a musician is that I was firstly attracted by her songs, her voice is so soft and the melodies are relaxing. There was a time that I listened to her songs for a long while, though not yet gaining interest in this musician. [...] After seeing her appearance on social media, I developed an interest in knowing more about her as a person. That is the time when I then get attracted by her personality, styles and attitudes towards fans.” ---- John, Hong Kong, China

“You know, in a Chinese society, morality is the most important thing when you judge a person. It is really important for musicians to acknowledge it and utilize it as a weapon to defend themselves and protect their fanbase.” ---- Sam, Hong Kong, China

This finding indicates that consumers can always change their attitudes towards the musicians and even switch their loyalty types. Thus, it is always difficult and unpredictable for consumers to cultivate loyalty towards a musician. However, optimistically speaking, there are chances for musicians to defend their own fate by establishing favourable external factors, to reduce consumers’ switching incentives and enhance their fondness towards themselves. In the next session, we explain in detail the role of musicians during the process of consumers’ brand loyalty building.

5.6 Implications for Brands/Musicians

The previously discussed findings are crucial in theoretical contribution. However, we argue that these findings also provide valuable practical implications to musicians regarding their career development. We believe the model to be highly useful to musicians, as the logic behind this model reveals important clues about the online music consumers. These clues can be used as a framework for musicians, which we believe can make the difference in acquiring more valuable fans. Here, valuable refers to fans with higher chances of developing long-term loyalty. A wide array of possibilities and opportunities could be discovered through the model obtained from his study. Musicians can use it to understand how their target market positioning is affecting their bond with their fans. They would also be able to gain valuable insights on whether their fans appreciate their talent more, their attitude, their ideology, their personality, their appearance and so forth.

Many musicians define success as the number of followers they have. This would mean gaining more loyal fans might be their ultimate goal throughout their career. We believe that

our model is perfectly made for that reason. Moreover, it helps musicians/brands establish a more suitable attitude towards their fans and their career as a whole. The model supports the fact that people develop loyalty in a complex and relatively unpredictable manner. Still, it shows important factors that would definitely optimize the chances of establishing that brand loyalty.

The model reveals that internal factors such as mood and trust cannot be directly controlled by musicians. Nevertheless, the model does point out factors that can be controlled by the musicians themselves, namely the external factors. Furthermore, these factors do have an influence on the internal ones and therefore can be a bridge between the consumers and the musicians branding efforts.

Additionally, from the musicians' perspective, the external factors are significantly important as well. This importance increases based on the fact that musicians do have a certain amount of influence on these factors. Based on this study, several respondents mentioned the fact that they do value the availability of their favorite music on different online platforms.

Consequently, musicians can focus on making their music available on as many platforms as possible, which would probably increase their fans' satisfaction.

Moreover, other external factors can also contribute to the optimization of the fans' loyalty development with musicians. Personal charm and technology are clear examples of that. Online music consumers do believe that the musicians' different personality traits have an impact on how these people perceive them. These traits can be either physical attraction, charisma, or education, among others.

Furthermore, when we discuss online consumption, the concept of technology is naturally concerned. Musicians are, therefore, strongly recommended to consider the different technological devices that their fans might be using. Video clips are a direct example of this implication. The format and image or sound quality should be thoroughly thought through before publishing any music related work. In other words, people who listen to music on their mobile phone, laptops, or cars might have drastically different experiences. Hence, it is important for musicians to be aware of the implication of these factors so that they make the necessary adjustments beforehand depending on their target audience.

It is important to highlight that through this model, musicians would be able to take valuable steps in order to optimize their fans' loyalty and strengthen that bond. As previously mentioned, musicians would use the model to understand what their fans appreciate more. At that point, those musicians would be able to satisfy their consumers better. For example, if a musician discovers that his/her fans appreciate appearance more or the fact that he/she is more socially involved than others, then these musicians can focus more on these two factors. This would enhance the potential of developing long-term loyalty with his fans.

Overall, the model obtained from this study aids musicians significantly to obtain a more generic look over their relationship with their fans. This gives them an edge of control, better understanding and insights on which factors to consider while branding themselves as musicians. In other words, the model can be defined as a personal guiding map for musicians towards a wider and more loyal fanbase.

VI. Conclusion

The final session represents and concludes the results of the study that have emerged from investigating consumers' development of loyalty towards musicians in a digital age. After representing how our research question can be answered from our findings and discussion, we highlight its theoretical contribution and propose limitations of this study. Then, future research and recommendations will be represented to close the thesis.

Initially, we have started conducting our empirical research to enhance our theoretical understanding of our particular research question: *How do Online Music Consumers Develop Loyalty Towards Musicians as Brands in the Digital Era?* Throughout our study, we have investigated what aspects are influencing their loyalty-building process and discovered potential obstacles in constructing different types of loyalty. During our data collection and analysis process, we have investigated interesting and even disruptive findings comparing the existing literature review. These empirical studies allow us to answer our research question with an open and insightful perspective.

7.1 Theoretical Implications to the Research Question

The main focus of our research question is to investigate how music consumers develop

loyalty towards musicians through online platforms, while perceiving them as brands in a digital age. To answer this question, we examined each element in the research question and investigated interactions between each element to enhance our understanding of the brand loyalty concepts. Further, we selected Oliver (1999)'s Four-Stage Loyalty as our theoretical foundation and developed our own qualitative research plan to explore answers of our particular research topic.

With regards to the first element, *digital consumers*, we perceive them as our main study object. In our study, we defined digital consumers as millennials born in both Generation Y and Z. These new types of consumers are variety-seeking, and they change their needs frequently and quickly. Oliver (1999) suggested these customer idiosyncrasies can potentially increase consumers switching incentives, thus posing obstacles to the development of brand loyalty. In a particular music industry setting, these consumers develop a liking attitude towards music and musicians due to a lot of different reasons: activities, mood, feelings, perception of musicians and so forth.

Particularly, how digital consumers perform today is strongly interrelated to the development of online platforms, which is also the second important element in our research question. We have conducted literature research to investigate how digitalization has transformed the music industry, and how it influences music consumers' consumption behaviours. In particular, the highly developed online platforms enhance the possibility for consumers to choose from a variety of music products and musicians, and interact with their favourite musicians through the functions of liking, commenting and sharing (Datta et al., 2017; Wikstrom, 2009).

The second element, brand loyalty, serves as the core of our empirical research. Initially, many existing literature have identified that brand loyalty-building processes follow a certain sequence. The theoretical discussion starts with representing the two types of behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Specifically, Oliver (1999) developed a most comprehensive model to illustrate four phases of loyalty-building, which follow by cognitive, affective, conative and action sequence. Oliver defines action loyalty as the ultimate goal for musicians to achieve, as it represents overcoming obstacles.

At the same time, we also found interesting literature that emphasized the importance of brand relationship elements in loyalty-building. This includes brand satisfaction, trust and

commitment. We incorporated these brand elements into Oliver's theoretical framework and developed our own theoretical framework to conduct. Our initial purpose is to utilize this theoretical framework to design interview questions and content-analysis. We intended to not be constrained with any existing theoretical models and conduct in-depth interviews which allow us to explore interesting and even unexpected discussion. The reason why we choose to conduct in-depth interviews is to closely capture online music consumers' personal insights, experiences, and their own perception about the development of brand loyalty towards their favorite musicians. As previously discussed, this study is purely empirical with a relativist approach focusing on how people view and construct their own truths about our topic.

Interestingly, our empirical data discovered exciting and disruptive findings to the existing literature. We discovered that digital consumers' loyalty-building does not necessarily follow a linear sequence, but it is a rather open and flexible process which is difficult to expect and control. Cognitive loyalty focuses on the musician's performance and information, affective loyalty is directed on the basis of the musician's likableness, conative loyalty is constructed when the consumer committed on wanting to repurchase the brand, action loyalty is the realization of repurchase intentions and the accomplishment of stable buying behaviour. The four types of loyalty have a strong linkage with each other, yet they are not necessarily tied in a phase-gate sequence.

Though our findings have shown the high complexity of loyalty development, we believe that it is important to point out that the process has several dimensions to it. Developing loyalty is not only complex, it is also unpredictable and non-linear. People develop loyalty in highly randomized patterns where it becomes almost impossible, from a research perspective, to predict the outcome. Hence, our model represents a tool that significantly helps musicians understand better how their potential loyal fans perceive and therefore behave with respect to their music. Furthermore, we perceive these findings to also be valuable from a marketing perspective since the model touches on branding from establishment to evaluation.

We believe our empirical study is highly valuable to the existing discussion on the digital music industry. Remarkably, our thesis could be perceived as a first-mover that perceives musicians as human brands and investigates specifically on consumers' loyalty-building towards them. We believe our study will add a significant theoretical contribution to the existing literature, both to music industry context or brand loyalty themes.

7.2 Study Limitations

Similar to other studies, this research has limitations which simultaneously provide opportunities for future research. As previously discussed, the quality of a research can be assessed through three main factors: validity, reliability, and generalizability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The third criterion represents a limitation in this case since the research is exploratory with a purely relativist aspect. Nevertheless, we perceive this limitation as an opportunity to explore the topic of brand loyalty development within online music consumption from different angles.

Moreover, this study has mainly focused on collecting data through conducting one-on-one interviews with respondents. Despite the relevance and the previously discussed reasoning behind the methodology choice, having a single method with respect to the research topic might be perceived as a limitation. This emphasis increases knowing that this research is considered to be a first-mover within the brand loyalty concept in the music industry. We believe that the topic has much more to offer to the research field. Also, we would encourage conducting research with different study approaches, design, and methodologies.

Likewise, the research has been conducted through interviews with 17 people from different cultures and backgrounds. Through potential advancements regarding the scope of this research, the number of participants might represent a limitation. Hence, we vividly encourage future researchers to conduct interviews with as many people as possible.

7.3 Future Research & Recommendations

This study has unveiled significantly relevant findings that were not initially expected. Moreover, we believe that these findings also represent an ignition for future research opportunities. Based on the results obtained from this study, there were several topics which we believe to have high potential and would add significantly to the research field. While analysing the data, we perceived a need for further research concerning the potential correlation between loyalty and gender. We believe that there is much more to explore within that topic. We have noticed that most respondents do not feel that they are loyal to any musicians, thus we would recommend further research to focus on how online music consumers develop brand loyalty from a managerial perspective.

Moreover, another correlation that might add value to the topic is between loyalty and pricing. Many respondents have expressed their willingness to pay for music online and the majority of those people have relatively aligned positions when it comes to their perception of loyalty. In other terms, most people who believe they are loyal to certain musicians are mostly willing to pay for their music online. Thus, it would be interesting for future studies to discover the relationship between pricing and brand loyalty-building.

Additionally, we believe that exploring the relationship between loyalty and convenience on online social platforms, with respect to the music availability on different platforms, seemed to have good potential for further research.

Despite the fact that the interviewees' cultural background and tastes diversification did not seem to affect the online music consumption to a considerable extent, we would recommend conducting further research with a narrower scope. An example would be on a single music genre (e.g. Soul, Jazz, Rap, etc.), or a particular geographical area (e.g. Hong Kong, Mainland China, Sweden, etc.)

Subsequently, we believe that this research has revealed a significantly valuable research path which we highly recommend exploring further. This would be the potential obstacles that obstruct the development of loyalty between online music consumers and the musicians. This research has shown the importance of these obstacles within the entire process of building loyalty. Still, we believe that there is much to discover within that area. What are these obstacles? To which extent do they influence brand loyalty development? How can musicians hedge against them, if that is a possibility? All these questions represent valuable future research incentives which we believe will add value to the research world. Furthermore, we strongly encourage conducting further research considering people from different age groups, more geographically centralized samples, and different qualitative methodologies.

In sum, this study has been mainly focusing on the perspective of online music consumers. Though, we believe that it is also important to explore brand loyalty development from the perspective of musicians and creators themselves. As previously discussed, the loyalty development of online music consumers towards musicians is a complex process. This points out the need for more research to gain better insights for and therefore a more thorough understanding. Hence, we pledge and argue that further research, especially from a different

perspective will significantly contribute to adding to the overall online brand loyalty development puzzle within the music industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-Selection Questionnaire

- 1- How old are you?
- 2- With which gender do you identify?
- 3- Do you listen to Music? How often?
- 4- How would you describe your internet usage?
- 5- Do you listen to Music online?
 - a. If yes, do you prefer using only one platform (e.g., YouTube) or using multiple platforms simultaneously (e.g., YouTube & Spotify)? Why?

Appendix B: Information about the interviewees

As previously mentioned, the interviewees share few traits and characteristics that make them the most suitable sample for the purpose of this study. They all are either millennials or from generation Z, they are highly knowledgeable about the internet usage and the different aspects in general, and they do listen to music at a high frequency using the different online tools.

Interviewees	Home Country	Age	Gender	Occupation	Date	Duration
Sam	Hong Kong, China	21	Male	Student with part-time job	18/5/2021	40 min
Katy	Hong Kong, China	22	Female	Officer	16/5/2021	34 min
Venus	Hong Kong, China	22	Female	Officer	16/5/2021	18 min
John	Hong Kong, China	21	Male	Student	22/5/2021	19 min
Ming	Malaysia	25	Male	Officer	21/5/2021	15 min
Luke	USA	19	Male	Student	19/5/2021	19 min
Jolene	USA	20	Female	Student	19/5/2021	24 min
Jason	USA	23	Male	Student	19/5/2021	15 min
Sara	Italy	25	Female	Student	10/5/2021	30 min
Omar	Sweden	31	Male	Student with part-time job	14/5/2021	20 min
Anastasiia	Russia	28	Female	Student	12/5/2021	35 min

Nikoleta	Bulgaria	24	Female	Student	11/5/2021	30 min
Jonathan	Columbia	34	Male	Full-time job	23/5/2021	20 min
Fadi	Morocco	26	Male	Student	20/5/2021	25 min
Amna	Pakistan	25	Female	Student	13/5/2021	18 min
Sana	Pakistan	25	Female	Student	13/5/2021	18 min
Aitor	Spain	22	Male	Engineer	18/5/2021	20 min

Appendix C: Interview Questions Guideline

- 1- Do you prioritize certain online platforms over others to listen to music online? Why (why not)?
 - a. Could you elaborate more on that?
- 2- Why do you listen to music? Does it mean / represent something to you? If yes, what would that be?
- 3- When you like a song, are you usually satisfied with simply listening to it or does that push you to search more about the artist themselves?
 - a. Could you elaborate more on that?
- 4- Do you consider yourself a fan of any musician(s)? Why is that?
 - a. If yes, what does your favorite musician(s) have that made you like them that much? (Talent, vocals, instruments, sounds, appearance, lyrics...)
 - b. Do you usually focus on / get attracted to a certain member of the band (lead singer, guitarist...), or do you enjoy the music as a package?
- 5- How would you describe your online engagement on your favorite musician(s)' online platforms? (Sharing, commenting, liking...)
- 6- Do you spend money on online music? (buying songs/albums, paying for subscriptions...)
- 7- What are/would be the reasons for you to spend money on music online?
- 8- Imagine the following situation: Your favorite musician just released a new song, but you do not like this new song at all. How would you feel? Would it affect your bond / perception of the musician?
- 9- Would you keep supporting your favorite musicians despite the potential negative buzz around them? Why (why not)?
- 10- Which do you think is the most intolerable behavior of musicians?
 - a. How would you feel/react if your favorite musician behaves that way?
- 11- To which extent would you say that you are a loyal fan of your favorite musician?
 - a. What criteria do you think are essential that makes a person a committed and loyal music consumer?
- 12- Are there any experiences / stories that you have encountered as an online music consumer you would want to share with us?

Appendix D: The Codebook and Thematic Analysis

Stage	Internal Factors		External Factors	Description / Coding Guidelines	Interviews Extracts
	Positive	Binary Nature			
<p style="text-align: center;">Cognitive Loyalty</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>At this stage, online music consumers start getting aware of the musicians' work. It can be referred to as their first initial contact with those artists' songs.</i></p>		Information		<p>Feeling curious about music and wanting to obtain more information can be an ignition to starting to look for music and thereby consuming it online</p>	<p><i>"I usually like to listen more from an artist rather than once I have heard something I really liked because I tend to like their music style and singing, which is usually consistent with most of their music" (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"When I like a song, I would always go look for more out there." (Aitor, Spain)</i></p> <p><i>"I use YouTube when I feel curious about the music video of a particular song that I might like... The songs I like have also increased my interests in their artists, causing me to search more of their songs and more on artists that might make the same kind of music" (Omar, Sweden)</i></p> <p><i>"I love exploring different musicians by listening to a playlist on YouTube. If I find a musician in the playlist that fits my music taste well, I might start searching for his/her other songs, and may also develop interest in the musicians themselves." (Katty, Hong Kong, China).</i></p> <p><i>"I use KKBOX (a music app) because it contains a wide range of music which the other apps do not have. That also encourages me to pay a monthly fee for it as it allows me to explore amazing music. (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>

		Activity		Sometimes, people assign different types of music genres, songs, or playlists to the different daily activities they perform. This category focuses on that specific aspect.	<i>“Music...helps me go throughout the day especially with my personal routine habits.” (Aitor, Spain)</i>
					<i>“I feel like music allows me to focus on what I am doing. I always listen to songs in a quick rhythm while I am on the way to work. It makes me feel energetic” (John, Hong Kong, China)</i>
					<i>“I enjoy music multiple times a day, while doing chores or walking’ (Amna, Pakistan)</i>
					<i>“I listen to music in different occasions, while cooking, studying, training, and socializing” (Omar, Sweden)</i>
		Analysis - Comparison		This is the stage at which a person analyses and compares certain musicians against others to rate their compatibility with personal taste	<i>“I do check out different musicians if I am looking for songs. For example, I like: SumINMusic, LondonOnDaTrack, Zaytoven, Timbaland, Scott Storch, and Swiss Beatz.” (Fadi, Morocco)</i>
					<i>“I will compare them, yes. Usually, when you are listening to many songs from one playlist, you always know which you would like to listen to more than one time and which you don't want to listen to it anymore.” (Katy, Hong Kong, China)</i>
		Judgement		This category focuses on when a person decides whether they would become a fan of the musician, and to what extent	<i>“My favorite musician has the talent, appearance, and the lyrics.” (Jolene, USA)</i>
					<i>“I used to purchase their albums, but honestly, I never really listen to it. It was just a way for me to support them as I was firstly attracted by their visuals. [...] But I started to listen to those albums recently, and it was surprising to find that their songs are actually good.” (Ming, Malaysia)</i>
					<i>“I will click in the songs which I feel like I love more, and check who is the singer. At that time I might search a playlist consisting</i>

					<p><i>all of his or her songs." (Venus, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"I only appreciate musicians who can focus on their career." (Jason, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"Of course, I always found one to two musicians that I like to follow from listening to a playlist." (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>
<p>Affective Loyalty</p> <p>At the second phase, online music consumers start developing a certain level of affection / cognition of both the musicians and their music. We have discovered that this phase has three main sub-categories: Satisfaction, Fondness, and Involvement.</p>		<p>Mood</p>		<p>This category refers to when people make the choice of listening to and/or discovering new music both due to feelings-based incentives at a certain moment, or when they want to put themselves in specific moods.</p>	<p><i>"Music helps to distract me, relieves stress, and puts me in a different mood" (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"They have nice songs, I like the sound and it makes me feel good." (Luke, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"Music puts me in a good mood... Also, I like dancing a lot. So, I feel like music brings me a lot of joy and enjoyment" (Aitor, Spain)</i></p> <p><i>"I choose music based on how I feel at that time. For example, I search for sad songs when I am feeling down" (Venus, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>I won't be interested in any songs with a happy or energetic vibe when I feel like I need to concentrate or when I feel down. That would only make me feel annoyed". (Ming, Malaysia)</i></p> <p><i>"I think listening to music is a way to talk to yourself, is a way for you to express how you feel and think" (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"I think that Music is nice, fun, and sometimes relaxing" (Jason, USA)</i></p>
	<p>Satisfaction</p>			<p>This category focuses on a certain glimpse of satisfaction that online music consumers get through the music they are exploring</p>	<p><i>"You could say that I feel satisfied with the talent of my favorite musicians, and that makes me like them." (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"I feel satisfied and relaxed when listening to her songs, that's when I feel like connecting to her personally but not simply</i></p>

					<p><i>enjoying the music." (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"Sometimes, listening to music with incredible vocals gives me goosebumps. That feeling is simply amazing" (Fadi, Morocco)</i></p>	
				<p>Several interviewees have expressed the importance of their tendencies towards liking new music as well as the musicians</p>	<p><i>"I usually like indie music. Most of the time I look for new songs on YouTube or Spotify and the first time I hear the song is mostly when I know whether I like a song or not" (Fadi, Morocco)</i></p> <p><i>"I was first attracted by their appearance. Then I started to listen to their songs to see if they match my music preference. Then I will start evaluating their personality, to see whether or not I want to like them as a whole person." (Venus, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>	
	Fondness				<p>Usually, after the analysis, people establish their personal perception towards those musicians.</p>	<p><i>"I used to listen to a lot of songs from Justin Bieber, but not in later years. I guess the main reason is that his music genre does not match my personal references. Also I don't like his voice, his style and his overall image. It is what hinders me to take a forward step to develop a liking attitude towards him." (Katy, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"Her image is what attract me most. She is very cute, beautiful and warm-hearted.</i></p> <p><i>"In a musician, I do appreciate talent. Also, possible positive energy in other fields such as sports, social community events, movies" (Omar, Sweden)</i></p>
					Perception of the image	
Involvement						

					<p><i>always makes me feel relaxed, and I really want to be closer to this musician." (Anastasiia, Russia)</i></p> <p><i>"I like dancing a lot so I feel that music brings me a lot of joy and enjoyment, especially when I feel like dancing along" (Aitor, Spain)</i></p>
<p>Conative Loyalty</p> <p>This phase describes the stage where people start developing that readiness for taking the initiative and act towards certain musicians such as commenting on social media, sharing their work, and buying their music online, and/or listening to their music through subscription-based platforms.</p>	Trust			<p>This category emphasizes that consumer start building trust with musicians and consider developing a favorable emotional linkage with them</p>	<p><i>"My favorite musician has the talent, appearance, and the lyrics." (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"I trust her. I appreciate everything that she could offer. I know she will never disappoint us." (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>
	Commitment			<p>At this stage, the respondent feels motivated to engage with their favourite musicians and committed to support them</p>	<p><i>"I am not sure how to explain it but sometimes I like the music so much that it makes me feel that I really want to do something as a way for me to show my appreciation. I guess I do that through commenting on their YouTube channel, liking and sharing the songs I like. Of course, waiting for the upcoming albums and songs goes without saying" (Anastasiia, Russia)</i></p>
	Intention of Repurchase			<p>This refers to the respondent's willingness to keep consuming and/or purchasing the music they usually listen to</p>	<p><i>"I'll subscribe to platforms that will let me listen to their music offline." (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"Of course, I consider purchasing his albums over and over again as a way to support his career. Though only when I have enough money to afford that." (Katy, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"I have a premium subscription on SoundCloud in order to be able to listen to his music" (Omar, Sweden)</i></p>

	<p>Tolerance to Product</p>			<p>This section focuses on that aspect when respondents have shown a certain level of tolerance towards their favorite musicians in cases where they might not be satisfied with their product.</p>	<p><i>“If my favorite musician releases a song that I do not like, it does not affect my bond or perception of them because I already know they have the ability to make music that I enjoy so I try to be patient for more new music.” (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"If there's one of her songs that I don't like. It is probably because I couldn't resonate with the song at that particular moment. I believe I will like it in the future. I really like her and I believe in what she creates."(John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>“If I do not like a song he recently released, I'll wait for his next release” (Omar, Sweden)</i></p>	
<p>Action Loyalty</p> <p>At this stage online people do act towards musicians either through online interaction or by spending money on those musicians’ work.</p>		<p>Stronger Commitment</p>			<p>At this stage, the respondent feels motivated to go the extra mile for their favorite musicians such as engaging on social media platforms and develop great intentions to constantly support the musician in the future</p>	<p><i>“I share their content and like their Instagram posts. I am curious about their daily lives.” (Jolene, USA)</i></p> <p><i>"I subscribe them on YouTube Channel and I also turn on notifications to make sure I don't miss any of their updates. (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>
		<p>Buying Behavior Stability</p>			<p>This stage focuses on the respondents’ intention to keep their online buying behavior (whether they do pay for music or not) towards the musicians they like.</p>	<p><i>"Yeah, I purchase his album every single year, restless. Even though he was having some bad news at that time, I still support him. Because his music means everything to me." (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"I mean, I really like her as a whole person. That's the main reason why I continuously purchase her albums both online and offline. I think she has become more and more important in my life." (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>

	Tolerance to behaviour				<i>“I’ll subscribe to platforms that will let me listen to their music offline” (Jolene, USA)</i>
				This stage focuses on that aspect when respondents have shown a certain level of tolerance towards their favorite musician	<i>“If there were negative buzz around a musician, of course I would keep supporting them. And that is usually because I would not even know about it lol. I do not care about these things. Music is the only thing that I pay attention to.” (Jason, USA)</i>
					<i>“Nowadays, a lot of people just want to create a certain negative buzz around celebrities for obvious reasons. To me that does not count” (Aitor, Spain)</i>
	User Convenience			This section focuses on the fact that people would usually opt for the most convenient way for them to listen to music online. That might differ from a person to another based on their personal preferences.	<i>“I would say it depends on how serious the mistakes they make. Show Lo (A Taiwanese musician) is a good example. Of course, I feel very disappointed with him being disloyal to his girlfriend. But honestly, you know that slang in Chinese, ‘we judge a person based on his talents’. I think I would still buy his albums if he shows his passion in creating high-quality music again” (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i>
					<i>“I would prefer one single platform for convenience reasons. I prefer when the content is centralized in one single location for better accessibility.” (Aitor, Spain)</i>
					<i>“Well, I use YouTube because it is convenient for me as I use it on the computer.” (Luke, USA)</i>
				<i>“I use KKBOX, as it contains songs in Cantonese, Mandarin and Korean, which are my favorite. I don’t use Spotify because I am not a fan of Western pop music. But if I gain interest in a song, I will also search it on YouTube to see their live performance.” (John, Hong Kong, China)</i>	

		Consumption Frequency		<p>This category focuses on the aspect of high online music consumption, this concept has been mentioned several times by interviewees.</p>	<p><i>“Yes, I listen to music a lot: every single day.” (Omar, Sweden)</i></p> <p><i>“I listen to music anytime any day. I would say it’s a way to energize myself. I listen to music on my way to work, during the work, and after the work. I even listen to music very often before sleep.” (Ming, Malaysia)</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Findings about Musicians</p> <p>This phase represents our main findings regarding musicians. Most interviewees represented that how musicians behave and engage with them strongly affect their loyalty-building</p>			Diversification Vs. Industry Focus	<p>This refers to whether a consumer perceives diversification or professionalism is important in remaining long-lasting loyalty towards the musicians. Specifically, we observed the differences of different genders: female consumers prefer to see musicians diversify in their career development; In contrast, male consumers prefer musicians, who focus on their careers and only create music.</p>	<p><i>“I think their ability to pursue diversity is essential for me. Because in such a competitive industry, we are always easily distracted by other talented musicians. You cannot just rely on music, there will always be someone who performs better than you. [...] Take Tiffany from Girls’ Generation (a K-pop girl group) as an example. She now attends many TV shows and opens her own YouTube Channel to promote herself. I get to know how she likes after stages - I mean, she is a passionate and kind person, just like my friend- but I never got to know this when I just purely listen to her music. That is why I still remember her, follow her, and support her. Because she shows her other talents, her personality by diversifying in her career.” (Katy, Hong Kong, China [female])</i></p> <p><i>“I think I won’t continue to like them if they only produce music. There are too many musicians we can choose from. The reason why I remain loyal to Girls’ Generation is because I love to see them appearing in different platforms, including K-drama, TV shows, Entertainment Shows, and their performance in social media. [...] I can feel how passionate they feel about their career</i></p>

					<p><i>and seek to achieve diversity in the future.” (Venus, Hong Kong, China [female])</i></p> <p><i>“No, absolutely no. I hate seeing musicians who consider acting, writing books or other stuff. You know, musicians just need to focus on their own talents in their professional field. That is how you maintain your loyal customers. To be honest, I would question if they really loved music or do, they just want to make more profits.” (Sam, Hong Kong, China [male])</i></p> <p><i>“I would prefer seeing them continuously creating music. I love them because of their music, I don’t care about their other talents.” (Ming, Malaysia [male])</i></p>
				Attention Attraction & Engagement	<p>In this category, consumers discover “something” which keeps attracting their attention on the musicians without losing interest in them.</p> <p><i>“I have been her loyal fan for many years. Obviously, her musical talent is not the only thing that keeps attracting my attention. [...] I would say her personality and her attitude towards life is what reminds me that she is such a wonderful person to follow.” (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>
				Musicians' Authenticity and Consistency	<p>This refers to whether a musician always maintains an authentic and consistent image.</p> <p>We have observed that the change of the musician's political statement and sense of value also directly affects whether the loyal consumer supports him / her.</p> <p><i>“Do you know why I don’t like Miriam Yang (a Hong Kong female singer) anymore? I used to be her loyal friend for almost ten years. [...] The main reason people like her is because she is so ‘real’, her lyrics, her music videos, all represent what a true ‘Hong Kong girl’ looks like. Sometimes cute, sometimes annoying. That allows us to resonate with our pieces of daily life in Hong Kong, our home. [...] When I saw that she changed her political statement (refer to Hong Kong-Mainland China Contradictions), I felt really betrayed and disappointed. She did something that does not fit her image at all. It feels like she</i></p>

					<p><i>breaks the promise with her fans.” (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>“The reason why I don’t support Gloria Tang (A Hong Kong female singer) anymore is that her image is no more consistent. She used to be a very local singer in Hong Kong. She used to only sing songs in Cantonese. But she decided to go to mainland China and develop her career. [...] I do not listen to her songs now. She forgot her home. She is not authentic anymore. You can also get a feeling that she does not care about her original fans anymore. What she cares about now is obviously money and more fame.” (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>
				<p>This category suggests that only musicians who have personal charm and good morals can remain in love with their loyal consumers. This includes the person’s personality, manner and how they treat their fans. We observed that this is significantly important in Asian society, as an individual’s character and moral is highly appreciated.</p>	<p><i>“I would say, after I started liking IU (a South Korean female singer), I consider her to be very important in my life. Her personality and moral attitudes influence the way I perceive my own life as well. How she treats her fans becomes guidance in my own life and influences my way to communicate with people surrounding me as well. [...] I would say I will stand for her forever.” (John, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>“You know, in a Chinese society, morality is the most important thing when you judge a person. It is really important for musicians to acknowledge it and utilize it as a weapon to defend themselves and protect their fanbase.” (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, let me make it clear. So I usually listen to songs, and I might or might not develop an interest in the musicians. Then, I will look up their information online, such as their live performance. At that time, I always get a chance to see them appearing in different TV programs. [...] I used to only</i></p>

					<i>listen to ITZY's songs, and I was watching a TV show called "Knowing Bros" on YouTube. I just felt like, wow, these girls are not only talented in singing and dancing, their personalities are also charming and unique. That's the time when I fall in love with them." (Venus, Hong Kong, China)</i>
			Music Availability	This refers to the music availability through different online platforms	<p><i>"I prefer using different platform because there are some songs which I cannot find on YouTube or Spotify so I simply like using multiple platforms" (Omar, Sweden)</i></p> <p><i>"KKBox is definitely my first pick. You just need to pay an affordable monthly fee, then you would enjoy a wide range of songs, from Korean songs, Cantonese songs, to Mandarin songs. [...] The other platforms, such as Joox, I would say I always fail to find music that I like there." (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p>
			Technology	Technology is about the different aspect of technology that are involved in the online music consumption. An example would be the type of devices used to listen to Music.	<p><i>"The main reason why I use KKBOX is because it contains most of the songs that I love. Especially, songs from Taiwanese artists." (Sam, Hong Kong, China)</i></p> <p><i>"I usually use Joox. This is the only app I like. So, if I can't get her songs through Joox, despite how much I love her, I may have to apologize to her (for not supporting her anymore)" (Ming, Malaysia)</i></p> <p><i>"I like using YouTube because it is more convenient for me to use on my laptop" (Jason, USA)</i></p>
Other Valuable findings	Variety Seeking			This category refers to the need that several online music consumers might have towards diversifying the music	<i>"I personally use multiple platforms mainly because some songs are not available on all platforms." (Omar, Sweden)</i>

				they listen to, based on their personal likings	<i>"I do check out producers of most of the songs I like as I also like to see them composing beats." (Omar, Sweden)</i>	
				<i>"I do check out producers of most of the songs I like as I also like to see them composing beats." (Sara, Sweden)</i>		
				Switching Incentives	This category refers to consumers incentives to switch to another musician, especially when the competitors provide more preferable offering	<i>"You know, it's a very competitive industry. Nobody could guarantee the fact that you would be loyal to someone forever. We always want to have new experiences; we are always easily distracted." (Katy, Hong Kong, China)</i>
				Long-lasting Relationship	This represent that a strong intention for consumers to maintain the emotional linkage and relationship with the musicians	<i>"Yes, I always make sure to keep myself updated on them (musicians). I am extremely loyal" (Jolene, USA)</i>
	<i>"I subscribe them on YouTube Channel so I can always keep an eye on their daily lives and other interesting news about them." (Sara, Italy)</i>					
	Perceptions on musicians and music				This represent how the consumers perceive music and musicians. Some of our interviewees addressed that they are mainly interested in music itself and rarely develop intentions to engage with a certain musician	<i>"I only care about listening to the song. I don't generally care about artists or other people involved."(Jason, USA)</i>
						<i>"Well, to be honest, I don't see the necessity to know their personal life. I like them because of their music. That's the only thing." (Ming, Malaysia)</i>
						<i>"I always feel interested in knowing their personality. I think it's an essential criterion for me to decide whether or not I will be a fan of them." (Katy, Hong Kong, China)</i>

Source: This Codebook was inspired by Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp J., McAlpine, Wiseman, & Beauchamp C., (2001)

Appendix E: LUSEM Consent Form



LUNDS UNIVERSITET

A Qualitative Study on the Online Music Consumption in today's digital era: How do digital music customers develop loyalty towards musicians as brands on online platforms? By Zakariae FOUZBI & SiMian YANG

Interview Consent Form

I have been contacted concerning 'A *Qualitative Study on Online Music Consumption in today's digital era: How do Online Music Consumers Develop Loyalty Towards Musicians as Brands in the Digital Era?*' and discussed the research project with *Zakariae FOUZBI & SiMian Yang* who are conducting this research as a part of a Master's in *International Marketing & Brand Management* supervised by *Veronika Tarnovskaya*.

I hereby consent to participate in this study and provide the researchers with my personal opinions, viewpoints for an average duration of *40 minutes*.

I, hereby, am fully aware of the fact that my participation in this study is voluntary, I am free to decline my participation and have the full privileges to withdraw my participation and/or reject access to the information I have shared at any time.

By signing below, I openly declare my consent to be part of this study as it has been described to me. I consent for all the information I have shared within the context of this study to be used as data for the thesis and journal publications, and I agree for it to be used accordingly.

Name:

Email:

Signed: