



CUSTOMER LOYALTY ANALYSIS OF AQUA FOLLOWING REPORTS THAT ITS WATER SOURCES DO NOT ORIGINATE FROM MOUNTAINS

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ABSTRACT

Main Objectives: To analyze consumer loyalty toward AQUA bottled drinking water following the emergence of reports in 2025 claiming that AQUA's water sources do not originate from mountain springs, and to understand how this issue influences consumer perceptions and loyalty behavior.

Research Methods: This study employed an interpretive qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The informants consisted of six AQUA consumers and two retail sellers selected using purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Novelty: Previous studies have predominantly used quantitative approaches to measure consumer loyalty and have mainly focused on variables such as satisfaction, brand image, and trust. This study qualitatively explores the dynamics of consumer loyalty within the context of media-related issues and the increasingly competitive bottled water industry.

Results: Most consumers remained loyal to AQUA. Consumer loyalty was influenced by long-term consumption experience, habitual usage, trust in product quality, and perceptions of AQUA's brand value. Nevertheless, some consumers expressed doubts and began considering or switching to alternative brands.

Conclusion: Consumer loyalty toward AQUA is dynamic and multidimensional, encompassing behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive aspects. Trust, consumption experience, and perceived quality are the primary factors in maintaining consumer loyalty.

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INTRODUCTION

The bottled drinking water (AMDK) industry in Indonesia has grown rapidly in line with increasing public awareness of the importance of consuming hygienic, practical, and safe drinking water. High demand has intensified competition within the industry, with various brands striving to build a strong image of quality and consumer trust. AQUA, as a leading bottled water brand, has dominated the market for more than 45 years

through its “mountain water” quality claim and has established a broad and loyal consumer base.

However, competition in the AMDK industry has become increasingly intense over the past five years. Although AQUA remains the leading brand, competitors such as Le Minerale continue to strengthen their market position and influence consumer preferences.

In addition to market competition, a news issue in 2025 regarding the authenticity of AQUA’s water sources also influenced consumer perceptions. This issue served as a trigger for consumers to re-evaluate their brand preferences, particularly among those who are sensitive to product quality and transparency, although it did not entirely undermine consumers who already possessed strong trust in the brand.

According to Kotler and Keller (2016), consumer loyalty represents a long-term commitment that encompasses behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive dimensions. In the context of the bottled water industry, loyalty is determined not only by product quality but also by trust, consumption experience, perceived value, and the influence of media and the competitive environment. Therefore, consumer loyalty needs to be examined in depth to capture the dynamic changes in consumer behavior amid increasing competition and emerging public issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various studies indicate that customer loyalty is the result of positive experiences, trust, and perceived value toward a brand. Mandasari et al. (2024) found that loyalty is formed through brand image, trust, and consumer experience, while Sitorus and Shelly (2022) emphasized that attachment to a brand develops from repeated usage experiences. Similar findings were reported by Tahir et al. (2024), who stated that loyalty is not limited to repeat purchases but also involves emotional attachment that leads consumers to continue choosing a brand despite the availability of alternatives.

Other studies, such as those by Gultom et al. (2025) and Munthe (2025), show that loyalty is influenced by trust, perceived benefits, emotional experiences, and long-term perceptions of a brand. Rahayu (2023) further emphasized that loyalty is multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. In general, previous studies conclude that loyalty is a complex concept involving psychological factors, experience, and perceptions of quality (Darmadi, 2021).

However, most previous studies have employed quantitative approaches to examine customer loyalty through variables such as brand image, satisfaction, and brand trust. Studies discussing consumer loyalty in the bottled drinking water (AMDK) industry, particularly toward AQUA following the 2025 news issue regarding water sources, remain limited. In addition, qualitative studies exploring the subjective meaning of loyalty within the context of public media issues are still rarely conducted. Therefore, this study aims to fill the research gap by exploring the dynamics of AQUA consumer loyalty through an interpretive qualitative approach.

Consumer loyalty refers to a consumer’s commitment to continuously use or repurchase a brand consistently in the future, despite the availability of various alternatives and situational factors (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Loyalty is not only reflected in repeat purchases but also in consumers’ attitudes, beliefs, and preferences toward a brand. In the highly competitive bottled drinking water (AMDK) industry, loyalty becomes a crucial factor, as consumers have many choices and can easily switch brands when the perceived value of a product declines.

According to Kotler and Keller (2016), consumer loyalty consists of several forms, including behavioral loyalty manifested through repeat purchases, attitudinal loyalty reflected in positive feelings and attachment to a brand, cognitive loyalty based on rational beliefs regarding brand superiority, and affective loyalty formed through repeated pleasurable experiences. These forms of loyalty are dynamic and may change along with consumer experiences, perceived value, and evolving market conditions. Consumer loyalty is influenced by trust, satisfaction, perceived value, and product quality (Kotler & Keller, 2016), as well as habits, product availability, and brand image, which strengthen consumer preferences (Wardani, 2023).

Loyal consumers are generally characterized by consistent repeat purchases, resistance to competitors’ promotions, continued purchasing despite price changes, and a willingness to recommend the brand to others (Widyana, 2021). They also demonstrate consistent satisfaction, strong emotional attachment, and high tolerance toward product-related issues. In the context of AQUA, consumer loyalty is reflected in continued purchasing decisions despite negative media coverage and increasing competition from other AMDK brands. Within the bottled water industry, loyalty is strongly shaped by perceptions of water quality, product safety,

water sources, and production processes. Although AQUA holds a strong image as a high-quality mountain water brand, public issues and intense competition have made consumers more critical of transparency and the authenticity of brand claims, indicating that loyalty is no longer driven solely by habitual purchasing but also by trust and emotional attachment to the values and commitments communicated by the brand.

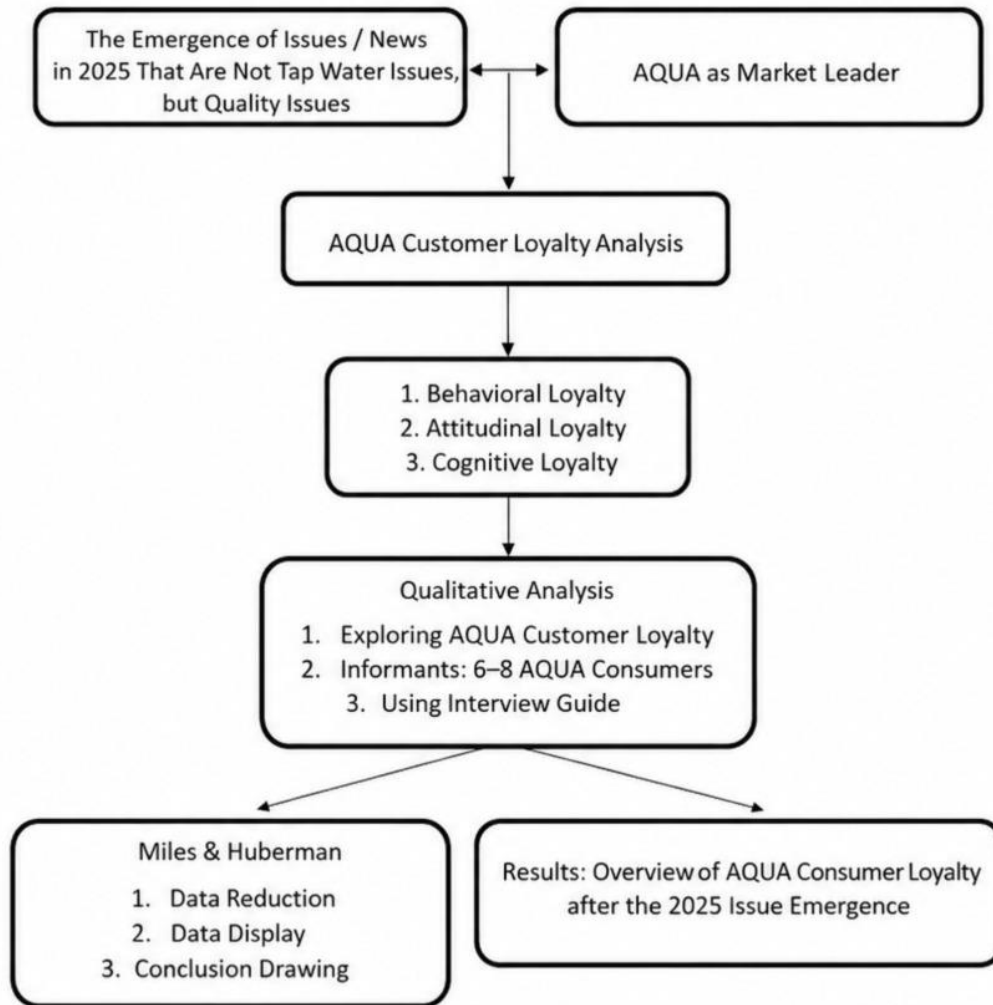


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive research design. The qualitative approach is chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of consumer loyalty behavior toward the AQUA bottled drinking water (AMDK) brand following the emergence of the 2025 news issue. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to explore consumers' experiences, perceptions, and meanings of loyalty without applying numerical measurements or testing causal relationships among variables, as commonly conducted in quantitative research. The interpretive perspective is used to understand how consumers interpret the AQUA brand and construct loyalty based on their personal experiences amid changing market conditions and emerging public issues.

The research was conducted in Gresik Regency, selected due to its relatively large number of AQUA consumers and its exposure to information regarding the 2025 AQUA water source issue. The study was carried out from January to March 2026, covering the stages of preliminary observation, data collection through interviews and documentation, as well as data analysis and the preparation of research findings.

The research subjects consisted of eight informants selected using purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the research objectives, with snowball sampling applied when necessary. The main informants comprised six AQUA consumers who had consumed the product for at least one year, were aware of the 2025 AQUA news issue, and were either still using AQUA or had switched to other brands. The supporting informants included two retail representatives who had sold AQUA products for at least one year and were

aware of changes in consumer purchasing behavior following the issue. The number of informants was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow informants to freely express their experiences and perspectives regarding loyalty toward AQUA before and after the news issue. Non-participant observation was carried out to examine consumer purchasing behavior, product availability, and brand choice tendencies at the retail level. Documentation was used as supporting data, including field notes, photographs of research activities, and news articles related to the 2025 AQUA issue.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from consumers and retail parties, as well as through member checking to confirm the accuracy of the data with the informants' intended meanings. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis process was carried out continuously from data collection until the completion of the study to ensure that the findings are valid and scientifically accountable.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Result

The research findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with six consumer informants and two retail informants, which were then analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Through these analytical stages, several main themes were identified that describe consumer loyalty toward AQUA following the emergence of the 2025 news issue related to water sources. The identified themes include behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, cognitive loyalty, and the impact of the news issue on consumer purchasing decisions.

Behavioral loyalty among AQUA consumers is reflected in consistent repeat purchases despite the emergence of the 2025 news issue in the public sphere. Long-term consumption habits, the influence of the family environment, and the ease and convenience of use have made AQUA an integral part of consumers' daily routines. However, this form of behavioral loyalty is not evenly distributed, as some consumers with weaker attachment show a tendency to change their purchasing behavior after being exposed to the issue.

One informant stated:

"My family has consumed AQUA for many years, so we continued purchasing it even after the issue emerged."

This statement indicates that behavioral loyalty is influenced by long-term consumption habits and family preferences.

In addition to behavioral aspects, attitudinal loyalty among AQUA consumers is evident in the continued presence of trust and emotional attachment to the brand despite negative media coverage. Consumers with strong positive experiences and high levels of trust tend to maintain positive attitudes toward AQUA and selectively filter external information. In contrast, consumers with lower levels of trust display more ambivalent attitudes and are more susceptible to the influence of ongoing news issues.

Another informant explained:

"I still trust AQUA because I have never experienced any problems while consuming the product." This finding shows that positive experiences strengthen emotional trust toward the brand.

Cognitive loyalty among AQUA consumers is formed through rational evaluations of various factors, such as water quality and taste, product safety, brand reputation, and ease of access. Most consumers continue to perceive AQUA as a superior brand compared to alternatives, although they acknowledge the existence of other brands with relatively comparable quality. This form of cognitive loyalty is flexible, as some consumers begin to reassess and consider alternative brands when the perceived superiority of AQUA weakens due to public issues.

Informant I2 stated:

"In my opinion, AQUA still has better quality and taste compared to other brands."

This statement reflects that cognitive loyalty is formed through rational evaluations of product quality and value.

Overall, the 2025 news issue functions as a trigger for re-evaluation and a test of the resilience of

consumer loyalty rather than as a single factor that directly diminishes loyalty. Consumers with strong behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive loyalty tend to remain loyal to AQUA, while those with weaker loyalty exhibit hesitation and a tendency to switch brands. From a retail perspective, AQUA sales remain relatively stable, indicating that the impact of the news issue is more pronounced at the individual consumer level than at the overall market level.

One informant mentioned:

“After hearing the news, I became more hesitant and started comparing AQUA with other brands.”

This indicates that the news issue encouraged consumers to re-evaluate their purchasing decisions.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that consumer loyalty toward AQUA products remains relatively strong despite the emergence of the 2025 news issue related to water sources. Consumers with long-term consumption experience tend to continue making repeat purchases, supported by trust in the brand, ease of use, and consistently positive experiences over many years. This is reflected in informant statements indicating that long-standing family habits have made AQUA the primary choice, and that the news issue did not significantly affect their purchasing decisions.

These findings are consistent with the perspective of Kotler and Keller (2016), who argue that consumer loyalty represents a deep commitment that is not only behavioral but also affective in nature. Loyalty formed through repeated satisfaction and positive experiences tends to be highly resilient to situational influences, including negative issues. Thus, consumer loyalty toward AQUA following the news coverage can be understood as a combination of behavioral and affective loyalty that has become deeply embedded in the long-term relationship between consumers and the brand.

Behavioral loyalty among AQUA consumers is reflected in relatively stable repeat-purchase patterns both before and after the emergence of the 2025 news issue. Long-term consumption habits have positioned AQUA as part of household routines, causing purchasing decisions to be largely automatic and not subject to frequent re-evaluation. Consumers tend to choose AQUA due to convenience, practicality, and habitual use that has been internalized in daily life.

However, the findings also reveal that behavioral loyalty is not always permanent. For some consumers, behavioral loyalty weakens when trust in the brand is disrupted by the news issue, prompting them to try alternative brands. This aligns with Kotler and Keller (2016), who state that behavioral loyalty without the support of attitudinal loyalty tends to be fragile and easily influenced by situational factors such as trust crises or negative information.

Attitudinal loyalty toward the AQUA brand is reflected in the persistence of positive attitudes despite the emergence of the 2025 news issue. The study shows that consumers with high levels of trust and strong positive experiences tend to selectively filter negative information. Trust in product quality and safety serves as the primary foundation that enables consumers to remain confident and not easily alter their attitudes toward the brand.

This finding is in line with Kotler and Keller's (2016) theory, which emphasizes that attitudinal loyalty is formed through trust and emotional attachment. Nevertheless, when trust begins to decline, attitudinal loyalty becomes more unstable and encourages consumers to re-evaluate their relationship with the brand. This indicates that the sustainability of attitudinal loyalty is highly dependent on consistent positive experiences and the maintenance of consumer trust.

Cognitive loyalty among AQUA consumers is built through rational evaluations of quality, taste, safety, and brand reputation that have developed over time. Consumers perceive AQUA as a brand with consistent quality standards, leading to a logical belief in continuing to choose the product. This form of loyalty is informational in nature, grounded in experience and objective perceptions of product attributes.

However, cognitive loyalty is flexible and easily subject to change when consumers become aware of alternative brands offering comparable value, particularly in terms of price and quality. The news issue further intensifies the re-evaluation process, especially regarding hygiene and safety concerns. From the perspective of Kotler and Keller (2016), this condition illustrates that cognitive loyalty is the most vulnerable form of loyalty, as it is heavily influenced by rational considerations and risk perceptions.

The 2025 news issue functions as a situational factor that tests the resilience of consumer loyalty toward

the AQUA brand. The findings show that the issue does not directly reduce loyalty overall but instead highlights differences in loyalty levels among consumers. Consumers with strong loyalty tend to maintain their trust and purchasing decisions despite exposure to negative information (Sumarni, 2023).

In contrast, for consumers with weaker loyalty, the news issue serves as a trigger to compare and try alternative brands. This finding aligns with Kotler and Keller (2016), who state that strong loyalty has high resilience to crises, whereas fragile loyalty is easily affected by situational changes. Accordingly, the news issue acts as a stress test that reveals the depth of consumer loyalty.

Overall, the findings confirm that consumer loyalty is multidimensional and dynamic, encompassing behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive dimensions. Consumer loyalty toward AQUA following the 2025 news issue is not homogeneous but is influenced by differences in consumption experience, levels of trust, and perceived value. Behavioral loyalty supported by strong attitudinal and cognitive loyalty is shown to be more resilient to situational issues.

The theoretical implications of these findings reinforce the view of Kotler and Keller (2016) that loyalty is formed through an ongoing process involving satisfaction, trust, and rational evaluation. The qualitative approach employed in this study allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of consumer loyalty amid public issues and intense competition in the bottled drinking water (AMDK) industry, while also affirming that consumer loyalty is not static but contextual and subject to change over time.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that consumer loyalty toward AQUA following the 2025 news issue generally remains strong, particularly among consumers with long-term consumption experience. This loyalty is reflected in relatively stable repeat-purchase behavior and consumption habits that have become part of daily routines. Brand trust plays a crucial role in shaping attitudinal loyalty, as consumers with high levels of trust are less easily influenced by negative issues and tend to rely more on their personal experiences.

However, consumers' cognitive loyalty is rational and relative in nature, as they continue to consider factors such as price, perceptions of hygiene, and the availability of alternative brands. The 2025 news issue functions as a test of loyalty rather than a single determining factor, revealing variations in loyalty levels among consumers. Conceptually, these findings reinforce the theory proposed by Kotler and Keller that consumer loyalty is a multidimensional and dynamic construct encompassing behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive aspects.

Suggestions for Future Research.

Future studies are recommended to examine consumer loyalty in the bottled drinking water industry using quantitative or mixed-method approaches involving larger numbers of respondents. Comparative studies between AQUA and competing brands such as Le Minerale may provide broader insights into consumer behavior following public media issues. Future researchers may also explore the role of crisis communication, digital media exposure, and brand transparency in maintaining consumer loyalty over time.

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