Exploring the Meaning of Employee Loyalty through the Lens of Organizational Behavior: A Phenomenological Study in Digital Start-up Firms

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of employee loyalty within digital start-up firms from the perspective of organizational behavior. In an era where employee retention and engagement are critical, especially in dynamic digital start-up environments, understanding how loyalty is formed and interpreted by individuals becomes vital. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with employees from various Indonesian digital start-ups to uncover the underlying meanings and personal interpretations of loyalty. The findings reveal that employee loyalty is perceived as a complex, evolving construct influenced by emotional attachment, shared values, autonomy, and mutual commitment. Loyalty was not merely transactional or tenure-based, but rather closely linked to personal growth, identity, and value alignment, especially among Millennial and Gen Z employees. This study contributes to organizational behavior literature by offering a nuanced view of loyalty that transcends traditional models, emphasizing the importance of intrinsic motivation and purpose-driven work in fostering long-term commitment. The results also offer practical implications for digital start-up leaders to cultivate environments that support psychological engagement, employee well-being, and sustainable loyalty.

Keywords: Employee Loyalty; Organizational Behavior; Phenomenology; Digital Start-up Firms; Workplace Commitment; Millennial Workforce; Intrinsic Motivation
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic business environment, digital start-up firms face unique challenges in attracting and retaining committed employees (Ammirato et al., 2024). Unlike established corporations, digital start-ups often operate in uncertain and resource-constrained conditions which demand a high degree of employee loyalty and engagement. However, the concept of loyalty in the context of digital start-ups remains poorly understood, particularly from the subjective perspective of the employees themselves.

Organizational behavior theories have long emphasized the importance of loyalty as a critical component of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee performance. Yet, in the fluid and often informal culture of digital start-ups (Junaedi et al., 2023), traditional metrics of loyalty may not fully capture the underlying behavioral dynamics. Furthermore, generational shifts in workplace expectations (Al-Somaidaee et al., 2023), especially with the rise of Millennials and Generation Z, have transformed how loyalty is perceived and enacted in the workplace (Renaldo et al., 2024), (Suhardjo, Sun, et al., 2023).

This study employs a phenomenological approach to uncover how employees in digital start-up firms interpret and give meaning to the concept of loyalty. By understanding their lived experiences, this research aims to provide deeper insight into the behavioral patterns, motivational drivers (Sukmawaty et al., 2021), and socio-cultural influences that shape employee loyalty in modern digital start-up environments (Juprizon et al., 2022).

Primary questions in this research are: (1) How do employees in digital start-up companies interpret and experience loyalty within the framework of organizational behavior? (2) What factors influence the formation of loyalty in digital start-up environments? (3) How does perceived organizational support affect employee loyalty in digital start-ups? (4) In what ways do personal values and organizational culture intersect in shaping loyalty behavior?

The purpose of this study is to explore and interpret the meaning of employee loyalty as experienced by individuals working in digital start-up firms. By adopting a phenomenological methodology, the study seeks to: (1) Understand the subjective experiences and perceptions of loyalty among digital start-up employees; (2) Identify the organizational and individual-level factors that contribute to the development of loyalty; (3)

Contribute to the theoretical discourse on organizational behavior by providing contextual insights specific to emerging business environments.

This study offers several novel contributions: (1) Contextual Innovation: Unlike most existing studies focused on large or traditional organizations, this research examines loyalty specifically in the high-risk, fast-paced, and fluid environment of digital start-up firms; (2) Subjective Insight: By using a phenomenological lens, the study captures rich, first-person accounts of loyalty, uncovering emotional and cognitive dimensions often overlooked in quantitative research; (3) Behavioral Perspective: The research bridges organizational behavior theory with contemporary workplace dynamics, offering fresh insights into how modern employees construct and negotiate loyalty in non-conventional organizational settings (Mukhsin et al., 2024); (4) Generational Relevance: The study addresses how generational characteristics, especially among Millennials and Gen Z, influence the formation and expression of loyalty, a timely issue in today's evolving workforce.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Loyalty: Concept and Dimension

Employee loyalty has traditionally been defined as the emotional and psychological attachment an employee feels toward their organization (Lo et al., 2024). It encompasses both affective commitment (emotional attachment) and continuance commitment (perceived costs of leaving). In modern organizational settings, loyalty is no longer merely about long tenure but increasingly about employee engagement, advocacy, and alignment with organizational values (Koeswayo et al., 2024).

Scholars have also explored loyalty as behavioral loyalty (observable actions such as staying with the company) versus attitudinal loyalty (internal belief and identification) (Renaldo et al., 2021), (Suhardjo, Suharti, et al., 2023). In digital start-up environments, the manifestation of these forms of loyalty may be influenced by flexibility, autonomy, and the degree of perceived purpose at work.

Organizational Behavior and Loyalty

Organizational behavior (OB) frameworks offer insight into the psychological and social processes that influence employee loyalty. According to (Ginting et al., 2024), factors such as leadership style (Hafni et al., 2024), organizational culture, communication patterns, and reward systems significantly shape employee behavior and commitment. Specifically, perceived organizational support (Maan et al., 2020) has been shown to positively correlate with loyalty, as employees who feel valued (Wati et al., 2023) and supported are more likely to remain engaged and committed.

In the context of digital start-ups, where hierarchical structures are often flat and informal, traditional OB theories require contextual adaptation. High levels of role ambiguity, task interdependence, and rapid change may both challenge and enhance loyalty depending on how they are managed.

Loyalty in the Digital Start-up Environment

Digital start-up firms are characterized by volatility, innovation (Renaldo, Murwaningsari, et al., 2024), and non-traditional work environments. According to (Berg et al., 2020) the digital start-up culture prioritizes agility (Mukhsin et al., 2025), experimentation, and customer development. Employees are often drawn to these companies by intrinsic motivators such as learning opportunities, impact potential, and mission alignment rather than stability or monetary compensation.

Studies have shown that employees in digital start-ups may exhibit episodic loyalty, intense but temporary commitment tied to specific projects or milestones. Moreover, emotional labor and founder influence play significant roles in shaping employee experiences and perceived loyalty in early-stage ventures (Noreen et al., 2021), (Putra & Renaldo, 2024).

Generational Influence on Loyalty

Millennials and Gen Z, who dominate the digital start-up workforce, tend to approach loyalty differently from previous generations. Research by (Tanoto & Go Tami, 2024) indicates that younger employees are more likely to prioritize personal development, work-life balance, and value alignment over long-term job security (Renaldo, Fransisca, et al., 2024). Their loyalty is often conditional, based on ongoing fulfillment of expectations rather than blind allegiance.

This generational shift calls for a reevaluation of how loyalty is conceptualized in organizational behavior, particularly in entrepreneurial contexts.

Gaps in the Literature

While extensive research has been conducted on employee loyalty in large, stable organizations, few studies have qualitatively explored how employees in digital start-ups construct and interpret loyalty. There is a particular lack of phenomenological research that captures the lived experiences of employees in dynamic, high-

risk environments. Furthermore, most loyalty studies use quantitative methods, potentially overlooking the rich, subjective meanings that underlie loyal behavior.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study employs a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Phenomenology is chosen to explore and understand the lived experiences of employees regarding the meaning of loyalty within digital start-up environments (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). This approach allows the researcher to delve into the subjective perceptions, emotions, and meanings that employees attach to the concept of loyalty, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures (Syahputra et al., 2023).

Research Setting and Participants
The research will be conducted in selected digital start-up companies located in Indonesia, particularly those operating in the digital (Junaedi et al., 2024), creative (Junaedi et al., 2023), or technology sectors (Susanti et al., 2025). These firms are chosen due to their dynamic work environments and relevance to the Millennial and Gen Z workforce.
Sampling technique using purposive sampling, to select participants who:
1. Have worked at the digital start-up for a minimum of 1 year.
2. Hold either staff, supervisory, or managerial roles.
3. Are willing to share personal experiences and perceptions regarding loyalty.
Number of participants are between 8–12 participants will be selected to ensure sufficient depth and variation in responses while maintaining manageability for phenomenological analysis.

Data Collection
Instrument uses semi-structured in-depth interviews will be the primary method of data collection. An interview guide with open-ended questions will be developed to explore:
1. Personal understanding of loyalty.
2. Experiences that shaped their sense of loyalty.
3. Factors that influence their loyalty toward the company.
4. Perceptions of organizational behavior, leadership (Panjaitan et al., 2023), and culture.
Procedure:
1. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms.
2. Each session will last approximately 45–60 minutes.
3. All interviews will be audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis
The data will be analyzed using the phenomenological method of Moustakas (1994), particularly the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, involving the following steps:
1. Epoche: The researcher will set aside personal biases and assumptions.
2. Horizontalization: All significant statements related to loyalty will be identified.
3. Clustering: Meaning units will be grouped into themes and subthemes.
4. Textural Description: Describes what the participants experienced.
5. Structural Description: Describes how the experience happened (context and setting).
6. Essence Description: A composite synthesis of the essence of loyalty as experienced by participants.
NVivo or other qualitative analysis software may be used to assist with coding and thematic development.

Trustworthiness and Rigor
To ensure the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the research, the following strategies will be applied:
Member checking: Participants will review transcripts and interpretations to verify accuracy.
1. Triangulation: Data from different participants and roles will be compared for pattern consistency.
2. Audit trail: The researcher will maintain detailed documentation of the research process and decision-making.
3. Reflexive journaling: To manage researcher bias throughout the process.

Ethical Considerations
Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity will be protected using pseudonyms. Ethical approval will be secured from the relevant university or institutional review board prior to data collection.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Loyalty as Emotional Attachment and Identity

Participants consistently described loyalty as a deep emotional connection with their digital start-up company, which often went beyond mere job responsibilities. For many, loyalty was intertwined with their personal identity and values.

"I feel like I'm part of something bigger here, not just an employee. The company's mission feels like my own." (Participant 3)

This finding aligns with affective commitment theories in organizational behavior, suggesting that emotional attachment significantly influences loyalty (Adhim & Riani, 2024). In the digital start-up context, this emotional bond is often strengthened by shared vision and the close-knit work culture.

Theme 2: Loyalty Driven by Shared Purpose and Impact

Participants emphasized that loyalty stemmed from the sense of purpose and the visible impact of their work. "Knowing that what I do directly affects the product and our customers motivates me to stay loyal, even when times are tough." (Participant 7)

This supports prior research on intrinsic motivation and organizational support (Li et al., 2022), highlighting how meaningful work enhances employees' commitment. Digital start-ups often offer this unique clarity of impact that fosters loyalty beyond financial rewards.

Theme 3: Flexibility and Autonomy as Loyalty Facilitators

Many employees noted that flexibility in work arrangements and autonomy over their tasks were key factors that fostered loyalty. "The freedom to manage my work and the trust they give me makes me feel valued and loyal." (Participant 5)

This echoes organizational behavior research emphasizing job autonomy and empowerment as critical drivers of employee engagement and loyalty (Jang & Kim, 2025).

Theme 4: Conditional Loyalty and Generational Expectations

While participants expressed strong loyalty, many acknowledged it was conditional on continuous fulfillment of expectations, reflecting a generational shift. "I'm loyal as long as I feel my growth is supported. If I don't see opportunities, I will consider moving on." (Participant 10)

This theme confirms findings about Millennials and Gen Z employees prioritizing development and value alignment (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022), indicating that loyalty in digital start-ups is dynamic and requires ongoing organizational investment.

Discussion

The findings reveal that employee loyalty in digital start-ups is a multi-dimensional and evolving construct deeply rooted in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors. The phenomenological approach uncovered how employees make meaning of loyalty not just as a static trait but as a lived experience shaped by organizational culture, leadership, and personal values.

The emotional attachment and identity component underscores the importance of cultivating a strong organizational culture and shared vision, consistent with (Morales-Huamán et al., 2023) affective commitment framework. In digital start-ups, where formal systems and job security may be limited, emotional bonds play an outsized role.

The significance of shared purpose and visible impact supports self-determination theory (Chiu, 2022) by emphasizing intrinsic motivation as a loyalty driver. Digital start-ups' ability to connect employees directly to outcomes creates a powerful loyalty mechanism often lacking in larger firms.

Flexibility and autonomy emerged as critical facilitators of loyalty, validating organizational behavior theories on job design and empowerment (Vo et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in digital start-ups, where dynamic roles and informal structures demand trust-based relationships.

Finally, the theme of conditional loyalty highlights the need for continuous investment in employee development and engagement, reflecting generational workplace values (Tjahjana et al., 2023). Organizations must recognize that loyalty is not guaranteed but earned through sustained support and alignment.

Novelty Discussion

This study contributes several novel insights to the understanding of employee loyalty, particularly within the context of digital start-up firms, an area that remains underexplored in organizational behavior research.

First, by employing a phenomenological approach, this research uniquely captures the lived experiences and personal meanings that employees assign to loyalty. Unlike prior studies that predominantly use quantitative surveys to measure loyalty as a variable, this qualitative inquiry provides rich, in-depth perspectives that reveal the complex, dynamic nature of loyalty as an evolving psychological and emotional process.

Second, this study situates loyalty within the digital start-up environment, a setting marked by volatility, rapid change, and non-traditional work arrangements. The findings illustrate how traditional organizational behavior theories on loyalty require contextual adaptation, as factors like flexibility, autonomy, and impact take on heightened importance compared to more stable, hierarchical organizations. This contextualization broadens the theoretical understanding of loyalty beyond conventional corporate settings.

Third, the research uncovers the conditional nature of loyalty among younger generations, Millennials and Gen Z, who dominate the digital start-up workforce. This nuance challenges the classical notion of loyalty as long-term and unwavering, showing instead that loyalty is contingent upon ongoing value alignment, personal growth, and organizational support. This generational perspective adds a contemporary dimension to loyalty theory, reflecting evolving workforce expectations.

Finally, the study bridges organizational behavior theories, such as affective commitment, intrinsic motivation, and job autonomy, with the lived realities of employees in innovative (Mukhsin et al., 2023) and agile firms, offering a holistic framework that integrates psychological, behavioral, and contextual factors influencing loyalty.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This phenomenological study reveals that employee loyalty in digital start-up firms is a multifaceted and dynamic experience shaped by emotional attachment, shared purpose, autonomy, and conditional expectations. Employees perceive loyalty not just as a behavioral commitment but as an integral part of their identity and values, strongly influenced by the unique culture and flexible work environment of digital start-ups. Furthermore, loyalty among Millennials and Gen Z is found to be contingent on continuous personal growth opportunities and value alignment, underscoring the need for organizations to actively nurture and sustain this commitment. Overall, loyalty in digital start-ups emerges as a meaningful, evolving phenomenon rather than a static trait.

Implications

Theoretical Implications: The study enriches organizational behavior theory by providing an in-depth understanding of loyalty through the lens of lived employee experiences in digital start-up contexts, highlighting the need to adapt traditional commitment models. It integrates generational insights into loyalty research, emphasizing conditional loyalty and the role of intrinsic motivators in new workforce dynamics.

Practical Implications: Digital start-up leaders should focus on cultivating a strong organizational culture that aligns with employee values and fosters emotional attachment. Offering flexibility, autonomy, and clear opportunities for personal and professional growth is essential to maintaining loyalty (Putra et al., 2024). Organizations should recognize loyalty as a dynamic construct and continuously engage employees through meaningful work, transparent communication, and support systems.

Limitations

The study's qualitative design and purposive sampling limit the generalizability of findings beyond the specific digital start-up firms and geographic location studied. The relatively small sample size may not capture the full diversity of employee experiences within different types of digital start-ups or industries. Data collection relied on self-reported interviews, which might be influenced by social desirability bias or participants' retrospective interpretation.

Recommendations

Digital start-up managers should develop programs that enhance employee engagement by aligning work roles with personal values and providing autonomy. Human resource policies should emphasize continuous learning and development tailored to the expectations of younger generations. Leaders need to maintain open communication channels to understand evolving employee needs and adapt loyalty-building strategies accordingly.

Future Research

Future studies could employ mixed methods to quantitatively test the identified themes on a larger, more diverse sample of digital start-ups across different regions and industries. Comparative research between digital start-ups and established companies could further elucidate contextual differences in loyalty formation. Investigating the impact of remote and hybrid work models on employee loyalty in digital start-ups would be valuable given ongoing changes in work arrangements. Longitudinal studies could explore how employee loyalty evolves over time in rapidly changing organizational environments.

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