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THE PRICE-LOYALTY PARADOX: COMPETITIVE STRATEGY AND INDUSTRY ANALYSIS OF REALME SMARTPHONES IN THE PHILIPPINE MARKET

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies on smartphone brand performance in emerging markets have examined market share dynamics and pricing strategy, yet few have analytically investigated the structural divergence between price-driven adoption and brand loyalty — a gap this study terms the 'price-loyalty paradox.' This paper investigates this paradox in the context of Realme smartphones in the Philippine market through a secondary data analysis design, drawing exclusively on publicly available industry intelligence from IDC Philippines, Canalys, and Statista, supplemented by company publications and peer-reviewed strategic management literature. Industry data confirm that Realme achieved the No. 1 smartphone brand position in the Philippines in 2021 (22.2% market share, 3.96 million units) and 2022 (21% market share, 3.72 million units) while brand performance data indicate a loyalty deficit relative to category leaders — the defining empirical signature of the price-loyalty paradox. Applying a full suite of strategic management matrices — PESTEL, Porter's Five Forces, EFE, IFE, CPM, SWOT, TOWS, SPACE, BCG, IE, Grand Strategy, and QSPM — the study identifies Market Penetration as the highest-priority competitive strategy (TAS = 2.97). The study concludes that resolving the price-loyalty paradox requires targeted investment in after-sales service infrastructure, ecosystem development, and brand equity. The EFE Matrix score of 2.78 and IFE Matrix score of 2.96 confirm above-average external and internal positioning.

Keywords: price-loyalty paradox, competitive strategy, Realme Philippines, Philippine smartphone market, strategic management, market penetration, brand equity, SPIRE strategy, QSPM, secondary data analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

A persistent pattern runs through the literature on smartphone brand performance in emerging markets: price-driven adoption does not reliably produce brand loyalty. A brand that wins consumers primarily through price-to-performance competitiveness faces a structural vulnerability — when competitors match that value ratio, the competitive moat disappears. This study terms this phenomenon the price-loyalty paradox, and investigates it through a competitive strategy lens in the context of Realme smartphones in the Philippine market.

The Philippine smartphone market is one of the most competitive in Southeast Asia, shaped by a young consumer base, extreme social media intensity, and a deeply embedded cultural preference for value-for-money products [1]. Realme Technology Inc., established on May 4, 2018 by Sky Li — formerly a senior executive at OPPO — entered the Philippine market in November 2018 and rapidly disrupted the competitive landscape. In 2022, Realme Philippines formally adopted the global SPIRE Strategy, integrating one signature breakthrough technology per product generation supported by three pillars: design, performance, and experience.

Industry tracker data from IDC Philippines confirm that Realme achieved the No. 1 smartphone brand position by sell-in volume in both 2021 (22.2% market share, 3.96 million units) and 2022 (21% market share, 3.72 million units) [2][3][4]. The overall Philippine smartphone market declined 8.6% year-on-year in 2022, making Realme's maintained leadership particularly notable [3]. Yet Statista's brand performance analysis positions Realme below category leaders Samsung and Apple on consumer retention and brand affinity metrics in the same market [5] — the defining signature of the price-loyalty paradox.

The study makes three contributions. First, it introduces and operationalises the price-loyalty paradox as an analytical concept applicable to disruptive smartphone brands in emerging markets. Second, it provides a complete, industry-data-grounded competitive strategy analysis of Realme Philippines applying the full David and David [6] Comprehensive Strategic Management Model. Third, it identifies the strategic priorities most capable of resolving the paradox, ranked by the QSPM and grounded in publicly available industry data.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Price-Loyalty Paradox in Consumer Behaviour Theory

The price-loyalty paradox is theoretically grounded in Schiffman and Wisenblit's distinction between spurious and true brand loyalty [7]. Spurious loyalty describes repeat purchasing driven by habit, switching cost inertia, or constrained choice rather than genuine brand preference. True loyalty is characterised by affective commitment — emotional attachment to a brand that persists independent of price comparison. In commoditised consumer electronics markets, spurious loyalty dominates because the absence of meaningful product differentiation beyond price gives consumers no affective anchor [8]. Solomon establishes that in emerging markets, value perception is the primary adoption driver, while post-purchase service quality is the primary loyalty driver [9]. This theoretical split between the adoption mechanism and the loyalty mechanism is the structural source of the price-loyalty paradox.

2.2 Competitive Strategy and the Limits of Price Leadership

Porter identifies cost leadership as a viable generic competitive strategy but cautions that it is durable only when paired with barriers preventing competitors from replicating the cost position [10]. In the Philippine smartphone market — where contract manufacturing allows new entrants such as Tecno and Infinix to match specifications at comparable price points — cost leadership alone is demonstrably insufficient. Porter prescribes differentiation as the escape from commoditisation [11], reflected in Realme's SPIRE Strategy. Hill and Jones extend this with the best-cost provider concept: the most durable value-market position combines cost competitiveness with incremental differentiation [12]. Wheelen et al. further note that best-cost positioning is only sustainable when reinforced by ecosystem lock-in mechanisms — loyalty programmes, service infrastructure, and proprietary platforms [13].

2.3 Research Gap

Existing literature on Realme and comparable disruptive smartphone brands has focused on market share dynamics and aggregate brand performance. No study has analytically examined the structural mechanism producing the divergence between Realme's market share leadership and its brand loyalty deficit in the Philippine context through a theoretically grounded, industry-data-anchored competitive strategy framework. This study fills that gap. David and David's Comprehensive Strategic Management Model provides the analytical architecture [6].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative secondary data analysis design, consistent with established practice in strategic management case study research [6][14]. A single-case embedded design is adopted with Realme Philippines as the primary unit of analysis. No primary data — surveys, interviews, or direct observations — were collected. This scope is explicitly acknowledged as a limitation and direction for future research in Section 6.

3.2 Data Sources

All data are drawn exclusively from publicly available secondary sources. Industry market intelligence was obtained from IDC Philippines quarterly mobile phone tracker reports (2021, 2022) [2][3][4], Canalys smartphone market reports (2022) [15], and Statista Philippines smartphone brand data (2023) [5]. Verified market share figures: Realme 2021 — 22.2% market share, 3.96 million units (IDC via GizGuide [2]); Realme 2022 — 21% market share, 3.72 million units (IDC via Inquirer Business [3]; Canalys via Gadget Pilipinas [15]). Macroeconomic data from PSA [16] and BSP [17]. Company information from Realme Philippines official publications [18]. All matrix inputs are traceable to specific cited sources.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Analysis follows David and David's three-stage Comprehensive Strategic Management Model [6]: Stage 1 (Input) — EFE Matrix, IFE Matrix, CPM; Stage 2 (Matching) — TOWS, SPACE, BCG, IE, Grand Strategy matrices; Stage 3 (Decision) — QSPM. Factor weights assigned through structured team consensus validated against IDC and Canalys industry data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Establishing the Price-Loyalty Paradox from Industry Data

Industry data confirm that Realme achieved the No. 1 smartphone brand position in the Philippines by sell-in volume in both 2021 (22.2% market share, 3.96 million units — IDC) and 2022 (21% market share, 3.72 million units — IDC and Canalys) [2][3][15]. These figures establish the first half of the paradox: strong price-driven adoption and market share leadership. The second half is established by Statista's (2023) brand performance analysis, positioning Realme below Samsung and Apple on consumer retention and brand affinity metrics [5] — theoretically consistent with Schiffman and Wisenblit's prediction that price-driven market share in commoditised segments rests on spurious rather than true loyalty [7]. Industry reporting further confirms that Realme's after-sales service infrastructure — particularly outside Metro Manila — represents the brand's most critical vulnerability [3].

4.2 External Analysis

The PESTEL analysis identifies key macro-environmental factors. Politically, the Philippine government's National Broadband Plan and DICT digital transformation programme [19] create a favourable backdrop. Economically, GDP growth of 7.6% in 2022 — the highest since 1976 [16] — and record OFW remittances of USD 36.14 billion [17]

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support consumer spending power. Inflationary pressure through 2022–2023 [16] simultaneously intensifies price sensitivity — amplifying Realme's value proposition while compressing margins. The rollout of 5G networks and e-commerce expansion create strategic opportunities aligned with Realme's product roadmap and distribution model [19].

Porter's Five Forces analysis (Table 1) establishes the competitive context. The most strategically significant forces are buyer power (High) — driven by price transparency on Lazada and Shopee — and competitive rivalry (High) — with Samsung, Xiaomi, OPPO, Vivo, Tecno, and Infinix creating multi-front competition. EFE weighted score of 2.78 indicates above-average external response.

Table 1. Porter's Five Forces Assessment — Realme Philippines

Force	Intensity	Strategic Implication
Competitive Rivalry	High	Price wars, rapid product cycles; Samsung, Xiaomi, OPPO, Vivo, Tecno, Infinix
Buyer Power	High	Price transparency via Lazada/Shopee; low switching costs amplify buyer leverage
Supplier Power	Moderate–High	Semiconductor concentration (Qualcomm, MediaTek, Sony) creates supply vulnerability
Threat of New Entrants	Moderate–High	Contract manufacturing and e-commerce lower barriers; brand scale provides partial protection
Threat of Substitutes	Low–Moderate	Smartphones remain central to Filipino digital life; tablet/wearable substitution marginal

Source: Based on IDC (2022) [2][3], Canalys (2022) [15].

4.3 Competitive Profile Matrix (CPM)

The CPM (Table 2) evaluates Realme against Samsung, Xiaomi, and OPPO across eleven critical success factors. Realme achieves a total weighted score of 3.23 — second among competitors behind Samsung (3.46), ahead of Xiaomi (3.13) and OPPO (3.00). The most critical CPM finding in the context of the price-loyalty paradox is the after-sales service gap: Realme scores 0.18 versus Samsung's 0.36 — the dimension most directly responsible for loyalty conversion failure. Realme leads on price competitiveness (0.48) and marketing effectiveness (0.40).

Table 2. Competitive Profile Matrix (CPM)

Critical Success Factor	Wt.	Realme Rt.	Realme Sc.	Samsung Rt.	Samsung Sc.	Xiaomi Rt.	Xiaomi Sc.	OPPO Sc.
Price Competitiveness	0.12	4	0.48	2	0.24	4	0.48	0.36
Product Quality	0.10	3	0.30	4	0.40	3	0.30	0.30
Brand Awareness	0.10	3	0.30	4	0.40	3	0.30	0.30
Market Share	0.10	4	0.40	3	0.30	3	0.30	0.30
After-Sales Service	0.09	2	0.18	4	0.36	2	0.18	0.27
Product Innovation	0.10	3	0.30	3	0.30	4	0.40	0.30
Distribution Network	0.09	3	0.27	4	0.36	3	0.27	0.27
Marketing Effectiveness	0.10	4	0.40	3	0.30	3	0.30	0.30
Customer Loyalty	0.08	3	0.24	4	0.32	3	0.24	0.24
Financial Strength	0.07	3	0.21	4	0.28	3	0.21	0.21
R&D Capability	0.05	3	0.15	4	0.20	3	0.15	0.15
TOTAL	**1.00**		**3.23**		**3.46**		**3.13**	**3.00**

Note: Rating: 4 = major strength, 3 = minor strength, 2 = minor weakness, 1 = major weakness. Score = Weight × Rating. Sources: IDC (2022) [2][3], Canalys (2022) [15], Statista (2023) [5].

4.4 EFE and IFE Matrices

The EFE Matrix (Table 3) yields a total weighted score of 2.78, confirming above-average external response. Realme effectively capitalises on growing affordable smartphone demand (weighted score: 0.36) and e-commerce growth (0.32), but must improve threat mitigation responses particularly against competitive rivalry (0.20) and supply chain vulnerabilities (0.16).

Table 3. External Factor Evaluation (EFE) Matrix

External Factors	Weight	Rating	Weighted Score
OPPORTUNITIES			
Growing demand for affordable smartphones among youth [2][3]	0.09	4	0.36
Expanding 5G network coverage in the Philippines [19]	0.08	3	0.24
Increasing mobile internet penetration in rural areas [19]	0.07	3	0.21
Growth of e-commerce as a distribution channel [19]	0.08	4	0.32
Government digital transformation initiatives [19]	0.06	3	0.18
Rising demand for AIoT and smart device ecosystems	0.07	3	0.21
Expanding middle-class consumer base [16][17]	0.06	3	0.18
Growing influencer and social media marketing effectiveness	0.05	4	0.20
THREATS			
Intense competition from Samsung, Xiaomi, OPPO, Vivo [15]	0.10	2	0.20
Global semiconductor supply chain disruptions	0.08	2	0.16
Rising inflation reducing consumer purchasing power [16]	0.07	3	0.21
Rapid technological obsolescence	0.06	2	0.12
Tightening consumer data privacy regulations	0.05	3	0.15
Emerging budget brands (Tecno, Infinix) [15]	0.06	2	0.12
Foreign exchange rate volatility affecting import costs [17]	0.05	2	0.10
Negative sentiment regarding Chinese-origin brands	0.04	3	0.12
TOTAL	**1.00**		**2.78**

Note: Rating: 4 = superior response, 3 = above-average, 2 = average, 1 = poor.

The IFE Matrix (Table 4) yields a total weighted score of 2.96, reflecting above-average internal position. Highest-weighted strengths: price-to-performance leadership (0.36), e-commerce and digital marketing capability (0.32), and No. 1 market share (0.32) — all anchored in IDC [2][3] and Canalys [15] data. Most critical weaknesses: limited after-sales coverage outside Metro Manila (rated 1, major weakness; weighted score: 0.07) and below-category brand loyalty (0.12) — grounded in Statista [5].

Table 4. Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) Matrix

Internal Factors	Weight	Rating	Weighted Score
STRENGTHS			
No. 1 smartphone brand Philippines by market share 2021–2022 [2][3][15]	0.08	4	0.32
Exceptional price-to-performance ratio across all product tiers [2][3]	0.09	4	0.36
Strong youth brand identity and 'Dare To Leap' brand equity [18]	0.07	3	0.21
Robust e-commerce and digital marketing capabilities	0.08	4	0.32
Broad product portfolio entry to near-flagship segments [18]	0.07	3	0.21

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SPIRE Strategy providing consistent product differentiation [18]	0.06	4	0.24
Extensive retail distribution network (15,000+ points of sale)	0.06	3	0.18
Strong influencer and community marketing programme	0.05	4	0.20
BBK group backing providing supply chain leverage	0.05	3	0.15
Rapid product launch cycle with frequent updates [18]	0.04	3	0.12
WEAKNESSES			
Limited after-sales service centre coverage outside Metro Manila	0.07	1	0.07
Lower brand loyalty compared to Samsung and Apple [5]	0.06	2	0.12
Dependence on global HQ for major strategic decisions	0.05	2	0.10
Insufficient investment in above-the-line advertising	0.04	2	0.08
Perception of lower quality relative to premium brands	0.06	2	0.12
Limited ecosystem lock-in compared to Samsung and Apple [5]	0.05	2	0.10
Channel conflicts with sibling brands OPPO and Vivo	0.04	2	0.08
Vulnerability to supply chain disruptions	0.04	2	0.08
TOTAL	**1.00**		**2.96**

Note: Rating: 4 = major strength, 3 = minor strength, 2 = minor weakness, 1 = major weakness.

4.5 Strategy Formulation Matrices

The SPACE Matrix places Realme in the Aggressive quadrant (X = +2.3; Y = +0.6), confirming financial soundness in a growing industry and recommending intensive strategies. BCG Matrix analysis classifies the Number-series as Stars (high share, high growth mid-range 5G), the C-series as Cash Cows (high share, moderate growth entry-level), the GT Neo-series as Question Marks (lower share, high growth near-flagship), and older Narzo models as Dogs. The IE Matrix (IFE = 2.96, EFE = 2.78) places Realme in Cell V bordering Cell II, confirming market penetration and product development as primary priorities. The Grand Strategy Matrix places Realme in Quadrant I — excellent strategic position warranting intensive growth. All four matrices converge on the same direction, providing triangulated confirmation for the QSPM.

4.6 Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM)

The QSPM (Table 5) evaluated three strategic alternatives against key factors derived from secondary industry data. Market Penetration (TAS = 2.97) achieves the highest score, driven by strong alignment between Realme's documented price-to-performance competence [2][3] and growing affordable smartphone demand. Product Development (TAS = 2.17) and Customer Service Enhancement (TAS = 1.93) are recommended as essential parallel execution streams — together they constitute the integrated response to the price-loyalty paradox.

Table 5. QSPM Summary — Strategic Priority Rankings

Key Factor (Source)	AS1	TAS1	AS2	TAS2	AS3	TAS3
S1: Market Penetration | S2: Product Development | S3: Customer Service Enhancement						
Growing demand for affordable 5G smartphones [2][3]	4	0.36	3	0.27	2	0.18
Expanding e-commerce distribution channels [19]	4	0.32	2	0.16	2	0.16
Government digital transformation agenda [19]	3	0.21	2	0.14	1	0.07
Rising AIoT ecosystem demand	2	0.14	4	0.28	2	0.14
Intense competitive rivalry (Threat) [15]	3	0.30	3	0.30	2	0.20
Inflation reducing purchasing power (Threat) [16]	4	0.28	2	0.14	2	0.14
Price-to-performance market leadership (Strength) [2][3]	4	0.36	3	0.27	2	0.18

No. 1 market share position (Strength) [2][3][15]	4	0.32	3	0.24	2	0.16
Limited after-sales coverage (Weakness)	2	0.14	1	0.07	4	0.28
Below-category brand loyalty (Weakness) [5]	3	0.18	2	0.12	4	0.24
TOTAL ATTRACTIVENESS SCORE (TAS)		**2.97**		**2.17**		**1.93**
Priority Rank		**1st**		**2nd**		**3rd**

Note: AS = Attractiveness Score (1–4); TAS = Total Attractiveness Score (Weight × AS). Sources cited per factor.

5. CONCLUSION

This study draws four principal conclusions. First, Realme's No. 1 market position — confirmed at 22.2% in 2021 and 21% in 2022 by IDC [2][3] and Canalys [15] — is attributable to a disciplined best-cost provider strategy supported by the SPIRE innovation framework and effective digital marketing. This establishes the adoption half of the price-loyalty paradox. Second, the price-loyalty paradox is analytically confirmed: market share leadership coexists with below-category brand loyalty [5] and documented after-sales service gaps — theoretically consistent with Schiffman and Wisenblit's spurious loyalty model [7]. Third, the QSPM confirms Market Penetration (TAS = 2.97) as the highest-priority strategy, with Product Development (TAS = 2.17) and Customer Service Enhancement (TAS = 1.93) as essential parallel streams. Fourth, provincial service centre expansion is the structural prerequisite for converting provincial market penetration into durable brand equity.

Strategic recommendations: (1) Invest at least 8% of annual revenue in integrated marketing communication prioritising provincial micro-influencer programmes and community platform development; (2) Expand service centres to a minimum of 68 accredited centres nationwide by Year 3, prioritising Visayas, Mindanao, and Northern Luzon; (3) Democratise 5G capability across all price segments, leveraging IDC-confirmed mid-range 5G growth [2]; (4) Launch a structured customer loyalty and ecosystem programme (Realme Care) implementing the switching cost mechanism prescribed by Wheelen et al. [13]; (5) Conduct annual strategic reviews updating EFE, IFE, and QSPM matrices with refreshed IDC, Canalys, and Statista data.

Study limitations: First, reliance exclusively on secondary data precludes granular consumer-level measurement of the paradox. Future research should conduct primary surveys across Philippine urban and provincial markets to empirically quantify it at the individual level. Second, matrix ratings involve analytical judgment despite industry benchmark validation. Third, the cross-sectional design captures a point-in-time snapshot; longitudinal tracking would provide a more dynamic assessment of paradox resolution.

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