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A framework of frameworks: theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological and impact frameworks

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Abstract

Purpose – Confusion and conflation about the components of research continue to hinder how scholars position, design, and communicate their research. In response, this article aims to clarify the components of research and how they can be effectively illustrated and written through the lens of frameworks.

Design/methodology/approach – This article adopts a conceptual approach to achieve its purpose by integrating allied literature and drawing on established theory-building heuristics to articulate a five-part research framework, with each part accompanied by a set of criteria (what it is, what it is not, what to do, and what to evaluate).

Findings – This article introduces the notion of research framework as a framework of frameworks comprising theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact frameworks. The article clarifies the distinct role of each component, sets out criteria for what each framework is and is not and what it should do and be evaluated on, and shows how alignment across the five parts connects explanation, scope, design, and stakeholder-relevant outcomes into a coherent whole. An exemplar on brand switching and brand loyalty in consumer goods traded across markets illustrates how this integrated framework can organize research questions, justify design choices, and foreground scholarly, managerial, and societal implications.

Originality/value – The notion of research framework introduced herein this article is an original conceptualization that should help both emerging and established researchers better position their research. More specifically, the article advances a framework of frameworks that differentiates and links theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact frameworks and, in doing so, addresses common confusion and conflation among them. The resulting criteria and visual tools enable authors, reviewers, and trainers to design, evaluate, and teach research in a more coherent and consistent way across business and trade domains.

Keywords Research framework, Theoretical framework, Conceptual framework, Contextual framework, Methodological framework, Impact framework, Business, Trade

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Research is about finding *answers we do not know* (e.g. factors discouraging brand switching and encouraging brand loyalty) to *questions we want to resolve* (e.g. how to avoid brand switching and strengthen brand loyalty). Such questions are motivated by *issues* that appear as *challenges* (e.g. brand switching) and/or *opportunities* (e.g. brand loyalty) that can be further substantiated by *critique* (e.g. existing fragmentation) and *change* (e.g. pursuing integration) (Lim, 2023). Worthy questions typically demonstrate a sense of *necessity* (i.e. negative

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implications if questions are unresolved), *importance* (i.e. positive implications if questions are resolved), *relevance* (i.e. stakeholders affected if questions are resolved or unresolved), and *urgency* (i.e. speed at which negative implications or opportunity costs of missing out on positive implications become dire for stakeholders if questions are left unresolved) (Lim, 2026).

Yet, research is often fraught with *complexity* (e.g. addressing debates, managing paradoxes) and, arguably, more so in academia than in practice, as academia, by nature, thrives on acts of *criticizing* (e.g. when mild, this may appear as “adequate but can be better,” and when harsh, this may manifest as “not good enough”) and *doubting* (e.g. have you, why so, what if), due to the assumption that such acts lead to *improvement* (e.g. ideas, methods, solutions) (Chong and Lin, 2024; Lim, 2021), whereas, practice, by nature, thrives on *returns* (e.g. return on investment, return on value), which justifies *investments* (e.g. cognitive effort, psychological commitment, monetary costs, time dedicated, travel emissions) and *value creation* (e.g. economic, environmental, and social benefits) (Nair *et al.*, 2022). While such an (academic) assumption may or may not necessarily always hold true, the *reality* that such an assumption *exists* signals the need to address, if not, mitigate, that assumption [1].

Against this backdrop, this article endeavors to establish the notion of a *research framework*, which, in essence, is defined herein as a *framework of frameworks*, comprising *theoretical*, *conceptual*, *contextual*, *methodological*, and *impact frameworks*. Such a notion is, arguably, *necessary* to avoid misunderstanding the intention of research, *important* to delineate the scope of research, *relevant* to emerging and established researchers and their stakeholders (e.g. editors, referees/reviewers, readers), and *urgent* to mitigate the costs (e.g. rejection) and opportunity costs (e.g. time) that may be associated with having to deal with the repercussions of (potential) criticisms or doubts, which often times can, arguably, be avoided if addressed upfront through a well-crafted research framework—one that explains how the various aspects of research are coherently interconnected.

Indeed, recent work explicitly notes that frameworks, especially theoretical and conceptual frameworks, are often used interchangeably and that their roles are applied and interpreted in inconsistent ways, yet at the same time subsumes contextual choices, methodological rationale, and impact considerations within a single research framework rather than articulating these as distinct yet connected frameworks in their own right (Hossan *et al.*, 2025), which, in turn, can perpetuate confusion when such frameworks are not clearly defined or systematically aligned. What is often missing, therefore, is precisely such a structure that integrates the diverse elements of research into a unified whole, which, to date, is either implied through editor and reviewer expectations (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2026; Lim *et al.*, 2024) or implemented in pockets of work that effectively do it without explicitly establishing what is being done and how it should be evaluated (e.g. Gupta *et al.*, 2026; Moriuchi *et al.*, 2025; Patil *et al.*, 2023). In this regard, the absence of a formal, criteria-driven how-to guide leaves the idea without shared vocabulary and evaluative anchors, which weakens its legitimacy as something that can be consistently taught, learned, and reviewed. Consequently, this lack of formal articulation means researchers are left to infer what good alignment looks like, which, in turn, fuels inconsistent positioning, uneven justification, and avoidable review cycles, including rejection (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2026).

To address the gap, this article sheds light on what constitutes a research framework and how each of its component adds greater clarity to research and its intended scope. To do so, this article adopts the common practice of crafting guidance based on the author’s 3*E*s—namely, *expertise* (i.e. disciplinary, methodology, and research practice), *experience* (e.g. writing how-to guides), and *exposure* (e.g. extant research and research practice)—in line with Kraus *et al.* (2022) and Lim (2026) [2]. In doing so, this article contributes to a better *understanding* of the systematic integration of the components of research (*theoretical contribution*) and how they can be better developed (i.e. illustrated, written) and more mindfully reviewed (*practical contribution*), particularly in business and trade research.

2. Research framework

At its core, a research framework provides the *scaffolding* through which research achieves *coherence* by showing *how its different parts fit together*, and thus, a research framework, which constitutes the *architecture that holds research together*, should not be treated as an afterthought or a superficial addition (Suddaby, 2010; Swanson, 2013; Whetten, 1989). In this regard, a research framework is best positioned as a *framework of frameworks*, encompassing *theoretical*, *conceptual*, *contextual*, *methodological*, and *impact frameworks*, which form the *structural foundations of research* and, when taken collectively, provide the *integrative lens* through which the *design and scope* of research can be understood in a *systematic and well-aligned* manner (Table 1). Without such scaffolding, research often appears fragmented, where problems are raised, theories are invoked, concepts are mapped, contexts are outlined, methods are described, findings are presented, and contributions are stated, yet the overall architecture remains unclear, leaving doubt about whether the components connect in a logical and meaningful way, or in other words, whether they appear loosely connected rather than systematically aligned (Edmondson and McManus, 2007; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2025; Johns, 2006).

Yet, confusion arises as the term "framework" is used loosely and inconsistently. Some employ a framework to refer to theoretical underpinnings (Grant and Osanloo, 2014), others to conceptual relationships (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024), and still others to methodological process (McMeekin *et al*., 2020). Such divergent uses, where terminology varies and is often applied interchangeably (Rocco and Plakhotnik, 2009), reveal underlying disciplinary variation (e.g. theory in management versus concept in marketing; MacInnis, 2011; Whetten, 1989) and, more fundamentally, signal the absence of a shared vocabulary. Authors are also frequently told to "add a framework" (Lederman and Lederman, 2015), yet the expectation behind that instruction varies (Carton, 2025), which leaves authors uncertain about what kind of framing is expected and evaluators (reviewers) divided on whether a manuscript is sufficiently framed. In turn, these inconsistencies produce recurring ambiguity that leaves scaffolding absent, incomplete, or mislabeled, thereby exposing manuscripts to criticism for weak positioning, unclear justification, or limited contribution (Lim, 2026; Lim *et al.*, 2024). What is required, arguably, is a more integrative view—one that distinguishes conceptual mapping from theoretical anchoring, recognizes contextual boundary conditions, and aligns methodological choices with research questions—so that risks are reduced and both originality and contribution are strengthened.

The next section explains the *components of a research framework* by distinguishing between its five elements—namely theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact frameworks—each of which serves a distinct purpose, wherein the *theoretical framework anchors research in established theory*, *conceptual framework establishes relationships among concepts*, *contextual framework defines boundary conditions*, *methodological framework outlines the research design*, and *impact framework clarifies intended beneficiaries or stakeholders* [3].

2.1 Theoretical framework

Theoretical framing anchors research in established theory and articulates the explanatory logic (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2025). This explanatory logic clarifies how underlying theoretical assumptions provide logical explanation, which advances understanding instead of settling for description (Bacharach, 1989; Corley and Gioia, 2011; Lim, 2026; Weick, 1989; Whetten, 1989).

Common missteps, however, undermine theoretical framing when theory is reduced to a string of citations, a path diagram, or a narrative that renames variables without specifying underlying logic, thereby conflating theory with literature review or conceptual mapping and, in doing so, inviting charges of weak explanation (Sutton and Staw, 1995). Instead, a disciplined approach to theorizing demands more than assembling references, emphasizing

Table 1. Frameworks at a glance

Framework	What it is (definitions)	What it is not (misconceptions)	What to do (authors)	What to evaluate (reviewers)
Research framework	• Acts as the scaffolding that holds research together by showing how parts fit • Functions as a framework of frameworks integrating theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact elements	• Any single framework • A diagram alone • A late-stage add-on	• Indicate all five elements • Explain the details and scope each element	• Coherence across the five frameworks • Consistency of terminology • Completeness without redundancy
Theoretical framework	• Anchors research in established theory • Articulates the logic of phenomenon	• Literature review • List of concepts • Mapping of relationships	• Select and justify the theoretical lens versus plausible alternatives • State theoretical boundaries ex ante • Specify subsequent propositions or hypotheses in a theory-aligned, mechanism-first manner	• Logical consistency across arguments • Parsimony without loss of explanatory power • Theoretical rigor with explicit assumptions, coherent reasoning, and evaluable claims
Conceptual framework	• Establishes the specific concepts and directional relationships that organize the investigation • Translates theoretical logic into a focused representational model of reasoned relationships	• Theoretical explanation • Methodological measurement	• Define concepts succinctly and contrast differences against closely related concepts • Include mechanism statements (underpinning rationales) for each proposed relationship • Present one clean diagram showing only essential concepts and relationships	• Concept clarity (precise, non-overlapping definitions) • Mechanism-led links that follow from the theoretical lens • Parsimony balanced with completeness

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Framework	What it is (definitions)	What it is not (misconceptions)	What to do (authors)	What to evaluate (reviewers)
Contextual framework	• Defines boundary conditions or scope within which the conceptual relationships are expected to hold • Specifies salient qualifying features	• List of controls • Sample description • Retrospective caveats	• Name the focal context precisely • Pre-specify context-sensitive expectations supported by theoretical reasoning • State inclusion/exclusion boundaries	• Anticipated heterogeneity is specified • Context features with theoretical leverage are identified • Explicit scope stated ex ante
Methodological framework	• Specifies and justifies a research design that aligns instrumentation or operationalization, data collection or sampling, and analytical techniques with conceptually mapped relationships within stated contextual boundaries	• A catalogue of tools • Analysis write-up • A substitute for theory or concept mapping	• Align sampling with contextual scope • Declare measurement models before estimation • Engage in remedies for common-method and endogeneity risks • Plan tests that can falsify core claims • Match generalization claims to design	• Appropriateness of sample • Discipline in operationalization (definitions → measurement, reflective/formative logic, validation) • Effort for bias control and identification planned ex ante • Techniques for analysis demonstrate coherence with theorized mechanisms (concepts, relationships, contexts)
Impact framework	• Specifies which outcomes are expected and for whom these outcomes create value	• Citations as sole evidence of value • Equating novelty to impact	• Provide a stakeholder map of outcome-by-audience	• Pathway clarity from concept to influence, in other words, value articulation linking conceptual relationships to outcomes stakeholders value • Stakeholder specificity through clear naming or signposting of intended beneficiaries

disciplined imagination that combines creativity in generating novel mechanisms with logical rigor to ensure plausibility (Weick, 1989), followed by rigorous specification that survives evaluation (Bacharach, 1989).

Strong theoretical framing follows three evaluative criteria. First, logical consistency necessitates that arguments cohere without contradiction; second, parsimony ensures explanation is concise without sacrificing explanatory power; and third, theoretical rigor demands that assumptions are explicit, reasoning is coherent, and claims are open to evaluation, which together provide baseline standards for assessing theoretical adequacy (Bacharach, 1989; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2024, 2025; Suddaby, 2010).

Practical guidance follows directly from these standards. Theory selection benefits from explicit contrast with plausible alternatives and a clear rationale for superiority given the focal phenomenon, subsequent proposition or hypothesis development benefits from mechanism-first reasoning that stems from theoretical logic, and theoretical boundaries stated ex ante reduce later accusations of post-hoc rescue. Collectively, these practices strengthen the coherence of the theoretical framework and the value of intended theoretical contributions (Lim, 2026).

While the theoretical framework anchors research in established theory by articulating the logic that underpins explanation, the conceptual framework serves a distinct role by mapping the specific concepts and relationships to be examined. The next section thus delineates how conceptual framing complements theoretical framing without being conflated with it.

2.2 Conceptual framework

Conceptual framing establishes the specific concepts and relationships that organize an investigation, translating theoretical logic into a focused representational model that guides what gets examined and how proposed links are reasoned, rather than measured, at this stage (MacInnis, 2011; Lim, 2026). Conceptual framing thus maps a nomological network of focal concepts (e.g. antecedents, consequences) so that propositions or hypotheses can be stated coherently and evaluated later, once research design is addressed.

A clear boundary separates conceptual from theoretical framing. While theoretical framing supplies the explanatory logic, conceptual framing specifies the concepts and the directional relationships that follow from that logic. Diagrams or lists of variables labeled as "theory" blur this line and weaken explanation, as such representations, when unanchored in theory, collapse into description rather than explanation (Sutton and Staw, 1995). Strong conceptual framing, therefore, remains derivative of theory in the strongest sense, namely relationships among concepts flow from theoretical reasoning rather than from convenience, data artifacts, or precedent alone (Corley and Gioia, 2011; MacInnis, 2011; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2025; Lim, 2026).

Strong conceptual framing follows three criteria. First, concept clarity is mandatory. Definitions must be precise, non-tautological, and non-overlapping, otherwise subsequent claims become ambiguous or inflated (MacKenzie, 2003; Suddaby, 2010). Second, relationship specification must be directional and mechanism-led, whereby proposed links among concepts should follow from the theoretical lens rather than appear as undirected associations or mere correlations (Weick, 1989; Whetten, 1989). Third, parsimony must be balanced against completeness, wherein essential concepts should be retained and redundancies removed, yet pruning must not amputate theoretically necessary elements (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2025).

Practical guidance follows from these criteria. Definitions should be stated succinctly and contrasted against close neighbors to prevent conceptual sprawl, every proposed link should be warranted with a short mechanism statement that traces back to the theoretical lens, and a single, clean diagram should show only those concepts and relationships required to answer the research question, whereas alternative conceptualizations should be acknowledged briefly with a rationale for preferring the present one to demonstrate superiority rather than familiarity (Lim, 2026; MacInnis, 2011; Yadav, 2010). When these practices are followed, conceptual framing sharpens scope, elevates argumentative clarity, and positions subsequent propositions or hypotheses for credible evaluation downstream, without trespassing into contextual boundaries or methodological design.

While the conceptual framework maps the focal concepts and their relationships derived from theory, the contextual framework serves a distinct role by defining the scope of conditions within which those relationships are expected to hold, and the next section, therefore, delineates these boundary conditions.

2.3 Contextual framework

Contextual framing defines the boundary conditions or scope within which conceptual relationships are expected to hold, thereby specifying the situational constraints and opportunities that shape the occurrence and meaning of observed relationships, as well as the legitimate reach of any generalization (Busse *et al.*, 2017; Gonzalez-Mulé and Aguinis, 2018).

Neglect of contextual framing encourages overclaiming and post-hoc repair, where sample description is presented as context and where generic calls for future research in other settings substitute for ex ante boundary specification—a practice that may be viewed as weak positioning. Rigorous research, therefore, requires contextualization conceived as an upfront task rather than an afterthought (Johns, 2006; Rousseau and Fried, 2001). In the same spirit, research often benefits from moving beyond token mention of contextual features toward explicit use of context theories that explain how surrounding conditions modify focal relationships, thereby narrowing the micro–macro gap and strengthening explanation (Bamberger, 2008).

Clear differentiation from adjacent frameworks prevents conflation. While theoretical framing supplies the explanatory lens and conceptual framing organizes the focal concepts and directional links, contextual framing states the boundaries of claims, namely when and where the claims hold and for whom they hold (Whetten, 1989), together with salient features that qualify those claims (e.g. culture, development status, geographic location, generational preference, seasonality, type of business, type of customer; Lim *et al.*, 2024). Contextual framing, therefore, remains about scope rather than sampling, about qualifying relationships (i.e. conditions under which the relationships are expected to hold) rather than adding controls (i.e. covariates, such as consumer demographics or firm characteristics, that are included in the model to adjust the estimated effect of one variable on another for other observed influences, with the aim of reducing confounding from omitted variables and, where possible, selection-related bias), and about *a priori* boundaries rather than retrospective caveats (Bamberger, 2008; Rousseau and Fried, 2001).

Strong contextual framing follows three criteria. First, scope statements must be explicit and theory-consistent, naming the populations (who), settings (where), and temporal windows (when) for which the proposed relationships are expected to hold, in other words, boundary conditions stated before any test or illustration (Whetten, 1989). Second, contextual features with theoretical leverage must be specified rather than gestured at, for example, level of analysis, strength of situation, institutional forces/logics, and environmental turbulence/uncertainty that plausibly alter relationship strength or even sign (Johns, 2006). Third, contextual heterogeneity must be anticipated rather than ignored, with rival plausible contexts acknowledged and contrasted so that claims remain transportable only under stated conditions rather than presented as universal by default (Busse *et al.*, 2017; Gonzalez-Mulé and Aguinis, 2018).

Practical guidance follows directly from these standards. Authors should name the focal context with precision, justify selection by contrasting against at least one plausible alternative context, articulate why the chosen setting enhances theoretical leverage, and state inclusion and exclusion boundaries that anchor interpretation (Lim *et al.*, 2025). Authors should also pre-specify context-sensitive expectations derived from the theoretical lens, for example, stronger or weaker effects under defined environmental or institutional conditions, thereby preventing post-hoc rescue and strengthening the credibility of scope claims (Johns, 2006; Rousseau and Fried, 2001).

While the contextual framework defines the boundary conditions within which conceptually mapped relationships are expected to hold, the methodological framework specifies and justifies the research design that examines those relationships within the stated conditions. The next section, therefore, sets out the methodological framework.

2.4 Methodological framework

Methodological framing justifies a research design that examines conceptually mapped relationships within stated contextual boundaries, aligns design choices with the theoretical lens, and defends those choices as the most credible route to evaluating the proposed claims (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Hence, methodological framing does not serve as a catalogue of procedures or tools nor substitute for theory or concept mapping. Rather, methodological framing provides coherence between theory-driven relationships, contextual scope, and the accompanying decisions on design, sampling, operationalization, and analysis.

Clear differentiation from adjacent frameworks prevents conflation. Theoretical framing supplies explanatory logic, conceptual framing specifies focal concepts and directional links, contextual framing defines where, when, and for whom claims hold, whereas methodological framing selects and justifies a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed design that credibly interrogates those links under the defined conditions. Early-stage questions that seek discovery favor inductive designs with disciplined qualitative rigor (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), whereas mature questions that seek stringent tests favor deductive designs like (quasi)experiments or longitudinal designs aligned to hypothesized mechanisms (Edmondson and McManus, 2007).

Strong methodological framing follows four criteria. First, design–question fit requires explicit alignment between question maturity and design choice (including research paradigm—see Lincoln and Guba, 2000), together with a short rationale for superiority over plausible alternatives, so that discovery, elaboration, or testing proceeds with methodological integrity rather than habit (Aguinis and Edwards, 2014; Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Second, operationalization discipline requires measurement models that follow concept definitions, including reflective versus formative specification, item selection, and validation procedures consistent with conceptual meaning, otherwise analysis risks misspecification and spurious inference (Jarvis *et al.*, 2003; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011). Third, bias control and identification strategy require design features (including criteria for ethical inquiry—see Declaration of Helsinki 1964) and diagnostics that address common method variance, confounds, and endogeneity risks ex ante rather than through post-hoc fixes, for example, source and temporal separation, experimental manipulation, instrumental or panel strategies, and robustness checks aligned to the focal mechanism (Calder *et al.*, 1982; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Fourth, analytic coherence requires analytical choices that mirror the theorized mechanism, for example, mediation, moderation, interaction, nonlinearity, or process tracing, with model assumptions, estimation, and inference justified against the theoretical claims rather than convenience or software defaults (Aguinis *et al.*, 2017).

Practical guidance follows directly from these standards. Design selection should be contrasted against at least one credible alternative design with a concise argument for inferential advantage. Sampling frames should reflect the contextual scope to avoid external validity inflation (Calder *et al.*, 1982). Measurement models should be declared and justified before estimation to prevent switching between formative and reflective logic (Jarvis *et al.*, 2003). Procedures that reduce common-method inflation should be embedded at design time rather than appended as statistical afterthoughts (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Analytical plans should trace the theorized mechanism with tests that are capable of falsifying core claims, not simply describing associations (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Generalization claims should follow the research design chosen, for example, theoretical rather than statistical generalization for case work (Eisenhardt, 1989) and population-level inference contingent on sampling realism for experiments or surveys (Calder *et al.*, 1982), with scope statements anchored in the contextual framework rather than appended as generic caveats.

While the methodological framework specifies and justifies a design that enables credible tests of the proposed claims, the impact framework serves a distinct role by clarifying whose outcomes count, which forms of value are expected, and how scholarly and practical effects will be evidenced. The next section, therefore, sets out that impact framework.

2.5 Impact framework

Impact framing clarifies which outcomes are expected and for whom these outcomes create value, thereby making contribution claims precise and relevant to stakeholders rather than generic aspirations (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2024; Jaakkola and Vargo, 2021; Lim and Bowman, 2023; Roberts *et al.*, 2014). Yet, research contributions are frequently stated in abstract or self-referential terms, such as novelty for novelty's sake, without specifying whose interests are served or how such novelty matters in practice (Kern *et al.*, 2026). In this regard, impact framing compels researchers to articulate value across audiences, thereby strengthening the credibility and resonance of contribution claims.

Clear differentiation from adjacent frameworks prevents conflation. While theoretical framing explains phenomena, conceptual framing specifies concepts and relationships, contextual framing defines the scope in which claims apply, and methodological framing outlines the research design that explores the concepts and examines those relationships under stated conditions, impact framing identifies the beneficiaries of research, specifies the forms of value created for each group, and establishes evidentiary standards for substantiating those claims. For scholarly audiences, this means emphasizing knowledge advancement that influences field-level thinking and withstands critical scrutiny, often assessed through problem importance, theoretical originality, and scholarly diffusion (Stremersch *et al.*, 2007; Tellis, 2017; Varadarajan, 2017). For managerial audiences, the focus shifts to improved decision-making and organizational outcomes, where conceptual relationships must translate into actionable tools or diagnostics that managers can implement (Roberts *et al.*, 2014). For societal and policy stakeholders, the emphasis is on observable outcomes like equity, wellbeing, and sustainability, supported by evidence of changes in individual-, communal-, or institutional-level behaviors (e.g. beliefs, values, perceptions, attitudes, intentions, actions) or practices (e.g. approaches, habits, norms, routines) (Lim and Bowman, 2023; Ozanne *et al.*, 2017).

Strong impact framing follows four criteria. First, stakeholder specificity requires naming the audiences whose outcomes matter, ensuring that contribution is not left undefined or one-dimensional (Lim and Bowman, 2023; Jaakkola and Vargo, 2021). Second, value articulation requires explicit links between conceptual relationships and the outcomes valued by those audiences, whether knowledge advancement for scholars, performance gains for managers, or improved wellbeing for society (Roberts *et al.*, 2014). Third, evidence standards require clarity about how impact will be assessed, using credible indicators tailored to each audience, for example, items measuring constructs in relationships relevant to each stakeholder (e.g. Patil *et al.*, 2023), citations and knowledge advancement for scholarly impact (Moed and Halevi, 2015; Mukherjee *et al.*, 2022; Stremersch *et al.*, 2007), adoption and performance gains for managerial impact (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2024; Roberts *et al.*, 2014), and evidence of institutional or social change for societal impact (Lim and Bowman, 2023; Ozanne *et al.*, 2017). Fourth, pathway clarity requires specifying how research will move from concept to influence, whether through reviews that shape scholarly fields (Palmatier *et al.*, 2018), translational tools that guide practice (Hidalgo and Albors, 2008; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015), or engagement processes that foster policy and societal outcomes (Hanssens, 2018; Lim and Bowman, 2023; Ozanne *et al.*, 2017).

Practical guidance follows directly from these criteria. Authors should provide a stakeholder map that identifies beneficiaries, articulate expected outcomes by audience in ways that link back to the conceptual framework, and outline evidence that enables verification of those claims. They should also distinguish short-term from long-term impact, recognizing that scholarly influence may precede managerial uptake, and that societal impact often requires extended engagement before it becomes visible. Following these practices thus enables impact framing to transform contribution claims from aspirational statements into structured, stakeholder-relevant outcomes that can be evaluated and, where appropriate, generalized.

While the impact framework clarifies beneficiaries, value creation, and evidences across audiences, the next section integrates the five frameworks to demonstrate how theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact elements cohere in unity as a research framework.

2.6 Research framework as a framework of frameworks

Having delineated the five component frameworks and their evaluative criteria, this section integrates them as a single research framework. Figure 1 illustrates the research framework as a framework of frameworks, where theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact frameworks are integrated to form a coherent and complete architecture of research. The figure is not intended to suggest a starting point or linear sequence but rather to demonstrate how the five frameworks collectively coherently define the research.

The *theoretical framework* anchors the research in established explanatory logics. Commitment theory is positioned as the main overarching theory as its affective, calculative, and normative dimensions (Meyer and Allen, 1991) capture well-established mechanisms of brand-related decision-making (Bansal *et al.*, 2004; Cater and Zabkar, 2009; Cifci and

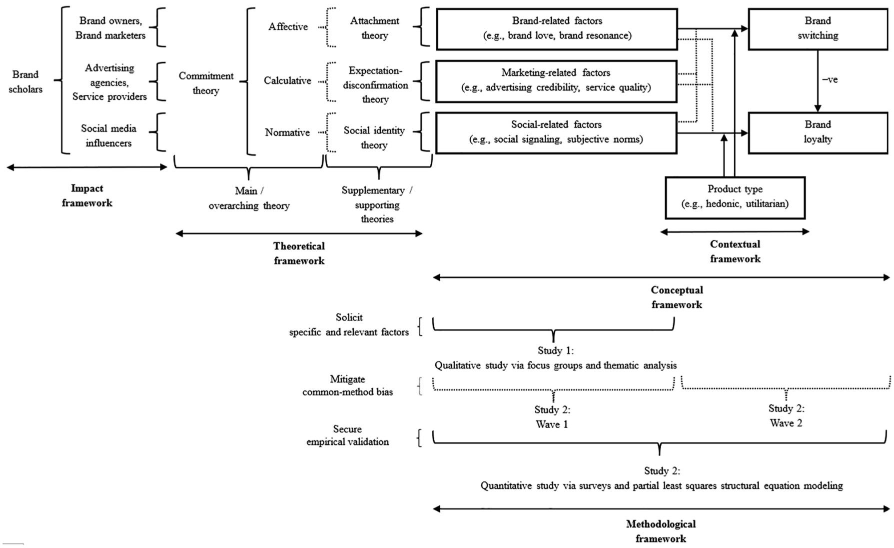

Figure 1. Illustration of a research framework. *Notes*: This figure shows how the five frameworks that make up a research framework operate not in isolation but in concert, wherein theories provide explanatory lenses (theoretical framework), concepts (antecedents, outcomes) are mapped into directional relationships (conceptual framework), contexts such as product type define boundary conditions or scope (contextual framework), research designs (multi-method, multi-wave) are specified and justified to evaluate claims credibly (methodological framework), and stakeholders are specified and their value clarified (impact framework). The integration of these frameworks, in turn, transforms research from a collection of disconnected parts into a logically aligned system that is theoretically grounded, conceptually precise, contextually bounded, methodologically justified, and impactful across audiences. Other similar examples could be seen in Gupta *et al.* (2026), Moriuchi *et al.* (2025), and Patil *et al.* (2023)

Erdogan, 2016; Shukla *et al.*, 2016). Supplementary theories are also included to strengthen explanatory power—namely, attachment theory explains the emotional bonds consumers develop with brands (Bowlby, 1969; Thomson *et al.*, 2005), whereas expectation-disconfirmation theory explains how satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise from performance relative to expectations, which can directly affect loyalty or switching (Oliver, 1980) while social identity theory provides a lens on how group membership, signaling, and social comparison influence consumer attitudes and behaviors (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In this regard, including both a main theory and supporting theories ensures that the research is not under-theorized and that complex consumer decision-making is captured with greater clarity and depth (nuance).

The *conceptual framework* translates these theoretical logics into reasoned relationships among focal concepts. The figure shows three clusters of antecedents: brand-related factors (e.g. brand love, brand resonance), marketing-related factors (e.g. advertising credibility, service quality), and social-related factors (e.g. social signaling, subjective norms). The inclusion of brand love and brand resonance reflects research showing their role in strengthening emotional attachment and loyalty (Batra *et al.*, 2012), whereas advertising credibility and service quality are well-documented marketing drivers of consumer trust and satisfaction (Erdem and Swait, 2004; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988) while social signaling and subjective norms capture the social pressures and identity-related dynamics that shape purchase and switching behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Berger and Heath, 2007; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). These antecedents connect to the key outcomes of brand switching and brand loyalty, which are negatively related. The conceptual framework, therefore, specifies how the theories operate through observable antecedents and how these antecedents connect to outcomes that matter to both firms and consumers.

The *contextual framework* defines the scope within which these relationships are expected to hold. Product type (e.g. hedonic, utilitarian), for instance, is highlighted as prior studies demonstrate that consumption motives, decision criteria, and loyalty processes differ across these categories, wherein hedonic products often emphasize affective or experiential qualities, whereas utilitarian products emphasize functional or performance-related qualities (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000; Chitturi *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, the contextual framework, which entails and explicitly includes product type, avoids overgeneralization and situates claims within conditions where they are most likely to be valid.

The *methodological framework* justifies the design chosen to examine the proposed relationships. In this case, a multi-stage approach is adopted. Study 1 uses qualitative focus groups and thematic analysis to solicit specific and relevant factors so as to ensure that conceptual antecedents are grounded in consumer perspectives rather than imposed arbitrarily. Study 2 adopts a multi-wave design for a quantitative survey analyzed with partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This design enables the mitigation of common-method bias through temporal separation and methodological triangulation (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) and secures empirical validation by testing propositions across qualitative and quantitative approaches (Edmondson and McManus, 2007; Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

The *impact framework* specifies the intended beneficiaries of the research via a deliberate and theory-consistent stakeholder map of outcome-by-audience. Brand owners and brand marketers align with brand-related factors like brand love and brand resonance as the strategic positioning of brands directly shapes loyalty and switching (Batra *et al.*, 2012). Advertising agencies and service providers align with marketing-related factors through execution responsibility, which ties campaign design and service process quality to the focal outcomes (Erdem and Swait, 2004; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Social media influencers align with social-related factors like social signaling and subjective norms, given their role in shaping perceived norms and identity expression (Ajzen, 1991; Berger and Heath, 2007; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Brand scholars appear as beneficiaries as knowledge advancement and measurement standards form a distinct outcome class for the academy or scholarly community, ensuring scientific impact is planned rather than presumed (Jaakkola and Vargo, 2021; Roberts *et al.*, 2014). Mapping beneficiaries to the corresponding antecedent clusters and outcomes, therefore, clarifies value pathways, aligns evidence standards with audiences, and prevents generic claims about impact, thereby keeping contribution claims precise and stakeholder-relevant.

3. Conclusion

This article advances a research framework as a framework of frameworks—theoretical, conceptual, contextual, methodological, and impact—so that research presents not disconnected parts but a coherent architecture that is theoretically grounded, conceptually precise, contextually bounded, methodologically justified, and stakeholder-relevant. The *distinction* matters as conflation wastes effort, invites predictable reviewer critiques, and delays knowledge progress. The *integration* matters as alignment across the five frameworks raises clarity, credibility, and contribution at once. This is *necessary* to prevent misunderstanding of intent, *important* to delineate scope and justify design, *relevant* to authors and evaluators who must assess manuscripts consistently, and *urgent* given the opportunity costs of avoidable rounds of review.

Action follows directly. Authors should draft with the five frameworks in view from the outset and use Table 1 as a pre-submission checklist, whereas evaluators should assess manuscripts against the same criteria to avoid moving goalposts while research training should adopt the framework of frameworks as a template for proposals and theses. Figure 1 complements Table 1 by visualizing the integrated architecture and offering a ready-to-adapt schematic, wherein theories anchor explanation, concepts and directional links are mapped, boundary conditions are made explicit, design choices are justified under those conditions, and stakeholder-relevant outcomes are specified. Applied to brand switching and brand loyalty in consumer goods traded across markets, the framework shows how the five components can organize research on brand building and, by extension, firm performance and market development, thereby linking theory selection, concept mapping, contextual scope, methodological design, and stakeholder outcomes directly to business and trade decision-making. Moving forward, future work can extend this exemplar to other business and trade-relevant contexts, such as cross-border electronic and social commerce, international management and marketing, and sustainable global supply chains; examine the effects of adopting this framework approach on review outcomes, time-to-decision, and downstream scholarly, managerial, and societal influence; as well as test domain-specific adaptations without diluting the core distinctions.

To this end, this article makes clear that research advances when parts cohere and a research framework worthy of that name aligns the parts rather than adding more so that explanation, scope, design, and value stand together.

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Notes

1. The logic behind this signal is extrapolated from the purpose of qualitative research, which emphasizes (establishing) existence, in contrast to quantitative research, which emphasizes (establishing) generalization (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).
2. This how-to guide develops conceptual arguments and uses illustrative exemplars rather than presenting new empirical evidence.
3. Stating these distinctions upfront is necessary to prevent conflation, sharpen focus and ensure that the scope of each framework is crystal clear.

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