International Journal of Commerce and Economics
www.commercejournal.in
E-ISSN: 2664-7540
Received: 02-10-2026, Accepted: 01-11-2026, Published: 16-11-2026
Volume 8, Issue 4, 2026, Page No. 23-26

Consumer perception and brand loyalty towards flagship smartphones in Kerala: A Comparative Study of IQOO, Vivo, OPPO, Samsung, Apple, Xiaomi, and OnePlus

Dr. Dean Martin C
Associate Professor, Department of Research Guide & Head, Department of Commerce, Govt. Arts & Science College Ollur, Thrissur, Kerala, India
DOI: https://doi.org/10.66856/ijce.2026.8.4.8071

Abstract
The Kerala smartphone market is a unique paradox, characterized by high literacy, tech-savvy consumers, and a strong preference for premium experiences, yet it remains highly price-sensitive. This study investigates consumer perception and brand loyalty towards flagship smartphones from seven leading brands: IQOO, Vivo, OPPO, Samsung, Apple, Xiaomi, and OnePlus. The research adopts a descriptive design, collecting primary data from 450 respondents across major districts of Kerala using a structured questionnaire. The study tests parameters including brand image, perceived value, feature preference (camera, battery, processor), after-sales service, and price sensitivity. Analytical tools employed include ANOVA, Chi-square tests, and weighted average scores. The findings reveal that Apple and Samsung lead in brand loyalty and perceived prestige, while OnePlus and IQOO score high on performance-to-price ratio. Xiaomi and OPPO show strong presence in the mid-premium segment, but face challenges in retaining flagship customers. The study concludes that while Kerala consumers are willing to pay a premium, their loyalty is increasingly driven by tangible technological innovation and service reliability rather than brand name alone. The future scope suggests exploring the impact of AI integration and the refurbished smartphone market on flagship sales.

Keywords: Flagship smartphones, Kerala market, consumer perception, brand loyalty, premium segment, buying behaviour

Introduction

The smartphone has evolved from a mere communication device to an integral organ of modern life. In Kerala, a state with the highest literacy rate in India (96.2%) and high digital penetration, the smartphone is the primary gateway to the internet, banking, and entertainment. The flagship smartphone segment—devices priced above ₹40,000—is the most contested battleground for technology giants.

Kerala presents a unique consumer profile. Unlike metro cities in other states, the Kerala consumer is highly informed, reads technical specifications, and relies heavily on word-of-mouth and online reviews. Historically, brands like Nokia and Samsung dominated the landscape. However, the last five years have seen a tectonic shift. Chinese brands (Xiaomi, OPPO, Vivo, OnePlus, IQOO) have aggressively captured market share through high-specification offerings, while Apple has maintained a strong aspirational hold. Samsung has fought back with its "S" and "Z" series foldables. This research article seeks to dissect the performance of seven major flagship players in Kerala: Apple, Samsung, OnePlus, Xiaomi, OPPO, Vivo, and IQOO. By analyzing consumer perception, this study aims to provide a roadmap for brands to navigate the sophisticated and demanding Kerala market.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Kerala being a high-potential market for premium electronics, there is a discrepancy between intention to buy a flagship device and actual brand loyalty. While brands like IQOO and OnePlus offer superior processors at lower price points, Apple and Samsung dominate the high-end market share.

The core problem is the volatility of brand loyalty in the Kerala market. A significant portion of consumers switch brands during their next upgrade, citing issues ranging from software support to after-sales service. There is a lack of comprehensive, region-specific research analyzing why a consumer in Kochi chooses an iPhone over a OnePlus, or vice versa.

Therefore, the problem statement is: "Is there a significant difference in consumer perception across flagship smartphone brands in Kerala, and how does this perception translate into brand loyalty, given the state's unique socio-economic demographics?"

Literature Review

1. **Consumer Perception in Technology:** Kotler and Keller (2016) [2] define perception as the process by which individuals select and interpret stimuli. In technology, this is heavily influenced by "Technological Fetishism" (Harvey, 2003), where consumers desire the latest features. In the Indian context, Bhardwaj (2021) [1] noted that Indian consumers are transitioning from "price-sensitive" to "value-sensitive," seeking a balance between cost and status.

2. **Brand Loyalty in Smartphones:** Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy. The smartphone market exhibits "brand switching" behavior due to the lack of interoperability between iOS and Android. However, Samsung and Xiaomi have built ecosystems (SmartThings, Mi Home) that lock users in.

3. **The Kerala Context:** Studies specific to Kerala (e.g., Nair, 2020) [3] indicate that Malayali consumers are pragmatic. They are influenced by "Gulf-return" trends, historically favoring brands with strong Middle East market presence (Sony, Samsung). However, recent literature shows a surge in adoption of value-flagships from OnePlus and IQOO, particularly among the youth aged 18-35.

4. **Research Gap:** Existing literature compares Apple vs. Samsung globally. However, there is a paucity of research that includes IQOO, Vivo, and OPPO simultaneously as flagship contenders alongside Apple and Samsung in a specific regional context like Kerala.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the brand perception of seven major flagship smartphone brands in Kerala.
2. To evaluate the key parameters (camera, performance, price, service) that influence purchase decisions in this segment.
3. To measure the level of brand loyalty among users of these specific brands in Kerala.
4. To identify the reasons for brand switching in the premium segment.

Methodology

1. **Research Design:** Descriptive research design was adopted.

2. **Data Collection**

- **Primary Data:** Collected via a structured questionnaire (Google Forms) distributed across major districts (Ernakulam, Trivandrum, Thrissur, Kozhikode).
- **Secondary Data:** Reports from Statista, Counterpoint Research, and economic reviews of Kerala.

3. **Sample Size:** A total of **450** valid responses were collected. Only users who currently own a flagship device (priced >₹40,000) were considered.

4. **Sampling Technique:** Purposive sampling (filtering question: Do you own a smartphone priced above ₹40,000?).

5. **Period of Study:** June 2024 – December 2024.

Parameters Tested

1. **Brand Image:** Perception of prestige and social status.
2. **Perceived Value:** The balance between features offered and the price paid.
3. **Camera Quality:** A primary driver for Malayali consumers (social media usage).
4. **Battery & Charging:** Important for travel-heavy demographic.
5. **After-Sales Service:** Reliability of service Centers in Kerala.
6. **Software Experience:** OS stability (iOS vs. Funtouch OS vs. OxygenOS/Color OS).

Analytical Tools

- **Weighted Average Score:** To rank brand performance on specific parameters.
- **Chi-Square Test:** To test the association between brand usage and income levels.
- **One-Way ANOVA:** To test if the loyalty scores differ significantly between the seven brands.

Tables and Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=450)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	265	58.9%
	Female	185	41.1%
Age Group	18-25	180	40.0%
	26-35	160	35.6%
	36-50	80	17.8%
	Above 50	30	6.6%
Occupation	Student	150	33.3%
	IT/Professional	170	37.8%
	Business	60	13.3%
	Gulf Returnee/Others	70	15.6%
Monthly Income	Below ₹30k	120	26.7%
	₹30k - ₹60k	180	40.0%
	₹60k - ₹1L	100	22.2%
	Above ₹1L	50	11.1%

Interpretation: The sample is dominated by youth and professionals, reflecting the typical premium smartphone buyer demographic in Kerala.

Table 2: Brand Performance on Key Parameters (Weighted Average Score out of 5)

Brand	Camera	Battery	Performance	Brand Image	After-Sales	VFM*
Apple	4.6	4.0	4.8	4.9	4.2	3.5
Samsung	4.4	4.2	4.5	4.6	4.4	3.8
OnePlus	4.2	4.5	4.7	4.3	3.9	4.5
IQOO	4.0	4.8	4.9	3.8	3.5	4.8
Xiaomi	4.3	4.3	4.4	3.9	3.6	4.6
OPPO	4.1	4.4	4.2	4.0	4.0	4.1
Vivo	4.2	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.1	4.2

*VFM = Value for Money (Perceived)

Interpretation: Apple leads in Brand Image and Performance. IQOO leads in Battery and Value for Money but lags in After-Sales. OnePlus balances performance and VFM well.

Table 3: Brand Loyalty Index (Willingness to Repurchase)

Brand	Loyalty Score (Out of 100)	% of Users Likely to Switch
Apple	92	8%
Samsung	85	15%
OnePlus	78	22%
Xiaomi	65	35%
OPPO	62	38%
Vivo	60	40%
IQOO	58	42%

Interpretation: Apple has the highest retention rate. IQOO, despite high performance scores, has the lowest loyalty, indicating users treat it as a "performance tool" rather than a long-term brand partner. Xiaomi and OPPO face significant switching intent, likely towards Apple or OnePlus.

Results

1. **Dominance of Apple and Samsung:** Apple and Samsung together account for 65% of the flagship user base in the sample. Apple is perceived as a "status symbol" (89% agreement), while Samsung is preferred for its "display and service reliability" (78% agreement).

2. **The "Value Flagship" Challenge:** IQOO and OnePlus scored highest on *Performance-to-Price* ratio. However, 42% of IQOO users and 35% of Xiaomi users indicated they would switch to another brand in their next purchase. The primary reason cited was "lack of premium brand feel" and "poor resale value".

3. **The Camera Factor:** 72% of respondents stated the camera is the *most critical* feature. Vivo and OPPO, despite heavy marketing, were rated lower than Apple and Samsung in "Real-world Camera Consistency" by professional users.

4. **After-Sales Service Gap:** This is the Achilles' heel for Chinese brands in Kerala. While Samsung has service centers in almost every district, IQOO and OnePlus users in rural Kerala reported delays. This correlates negatively with loyalty for these brands.

5. **ANOVA Result:** The calculated F-value (12.45) is greater than the critical value (2.10) at a 0.05 significance level, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant difference in brand loyalty across the seven brands.

Discussion

The findings paint a fascinating picture of the Kerala consumer. The state is not just a price-sensitive market; it is a "value-and-experience" driven market.

The Apple Halo Effect: Apple's dominance in loyalty (92%) is difficult to disrupt. The ecosystem lock-in (iMessage, iCloud, Watch) and the high resale value in Kerala's active used-market (Olx/Quikr) make it a "safe" financial investment.

The OnePlus/IQOO Conundrum: These brands are victims of their own success. By targeting "specs-nerds," they have created a user base that is inherently analytical and disloyal. If a competitor releases a phone with a newer chipset six months later, the IQOO user will switch. This is transactional loyalty, not emotional loyalty. To counter this, OnePlus must focus on software experience (OxygenOS) and IQOO must urgently expand its service network in Tier-2 Kerala cities like Kollam and Kannur.

The OPPO/Vivo Reality: Despite massive offline presence (they are in every mall in Kochi), OPPO and Vivo struggle to justify their flagship prices. Consumers perceive them as "overpriced mid-rangers." Their loyalty scores (62 and 60) reflect this. They need to create distinct "Ultra" flagship identities (like the X-series) and separate them from their budget lines.

The Samsung Fortress: Samsung is the only brand that bridges the gap between the "premium aspirational" (Apple) and the "value flagship" (OnePlus). Its foldables (Z Flip/Fold) have created a new category of loyalists—the "innovators."

Conclusion

The flagship smartphone market in Kerala is maturing. The era of buying a phone just for the brand logo is fading, replaced by a demand for tangible innovation and service assurance.

1. **Apple** remains the undisputed king of loyalty and aspiration.
2. **Samsung** is the most trusted "all-rounder."
3. **OnePlus** and **IQOO** are winning the "performance war" but losing the "loyalty war."
4. **Xiaomi, OPPO, and Vivo** are stuck in the mid-premium perception trap.

To win in Kerala, brands must look beyond spec-sheets. They must invest in after-sales infrastructure (especially for Chinese brands) and build ecosystems that make switching difficult. The Kerala consumer is willing to pay a premium, but they will not tolerate a sub-par experience.

Future Scope

1. **AI Integration:** Future research must analyze how on-device AI (like Samsung's Galaxy AI or Apple Intelligence) influences brand loyalty among tech-savvy Malayalis.

2. **The Refurbished Market:** Kerala has a booming refurbished electronics market. Research is needed on how the availability of cheap second-hand iPhones cannibalizes new flagship sales for brands like OnePlus and IQOO.

3. **Foldable Durability:** A longitudinal study on the durability of foldable phones in Kerala's humid climate

would be a valuable contribution to material science and consumer behavior.

4. **Gulf Remittance Influence:** A deeper study into how NRI relatives influence flagship brand choices (gifting culture) in Kerala.

References

1. Bhardwaj R. Consumer Behaviour in Indian Tech Markets. Himalaya Publishing, 2021.
2. Kotler P, Keller K. Marketing Management. Pearson, 2016.
3. Nair S. Digital Consumption Patterns in Kerala. Journal of Indian Business Research,2020:12(3):45–60.
4. Counterpoint Research. India Smartphone Market Share Q2 2024. Counterpoint Research,2024.
5. Statista. Premium Smartphone Penetration in India. Statista, 2024.