

Does relationship marketing matter in online retailing? A meta-analytic approach

Varsha Verma · Dheeraj Sharma · Jagdish Sheth

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Abstract Building on the meta-analytic model suggested by Palmatier et al. *Journal of Marketing*, 70, 136–153, (2006), this study extends the relationship marketing framework to the domain of online retailing to identify what strategies help build relationships with online customers. Specifically, this meta-analytic study identifies key antecedents and consequences of relationship marketing in online retailing. The study also examines the relationship between the four mediators—trust, commitment, relationship quality, and relationship satisfaction—and the antecedents and consequences of relationship marketing. Similarity and seller expertise were found to have the strongest impact on relational mediators, and word of mouth was the most critical outcome of relationship marketing efforts. The model proffered in this study will motivate hypotheses to be examined by future researchers. The model also helps managers to identify the key drivers of relationship marketing in online retailing.

Keywords Relationship marketing · Customer relationship management · Loyalty · Online retailing

V. Verma (✉)
Department of Marketing, Indian Institute
of Management-Ahmedabad, D34, R18, IIM New
Campus, IIM, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad, Gujarat 380015, India
e-mail: varshav@iimahd.ernet.in

D. Sharma
Department of Marketing, Indian Institute
of Management-Ahmedabad, Wing 9, IIM Old
Campus, IIM, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad, Gujarat 380015, India
e-mail: dsharma@iimahd.ernet.in

J. Sheth
Charles H. Kellstadt Professor of Marketing, Emory University,
Goizueta Business School, 1300 Clifton Road,
Atlanta, GA 30322-2710, USA
e-mail: jag@jagsheth.com

Relationship marketing in online retailing

Online retailing has grown exponentially in the last 10 years. Online retail sales have grown every year since 2000; in the past 5 years, global online retail sales have increased 17% yearly from \$236 billion in 2007 to \$521 billion in 2012 and are expected to reach \$1248.7 billion by the end of 2017 (Kearney 2013; MarketLine 2013). The consumers of today are increasingly sophisticated—they look up, analyze, and compare product features, prices, payment options, shipping information, and return policies before making an online purchase (Burke 2002; Song et al. 2012). Beyond computers, with increased web access and simple user applications, consumers can now not only access product information on their mobile phones but also make purchases. Retailers are quickly recognising the need to offer persuasive online propositions in order to attract potential consumers (Caruana and Ewing 2010). To this end, online retailer websites have evolved into information storehouses containing product information, images, videos, recommendations, and consumer reviews. Many retailers have tried to use online social networks in an attempt to form some form of relationship with their consumers (McWilliam 2012).

Parallel to its commercial success, e-commerce or online retailing has garnered interest from marketing researchers (Grewal and Levy 2009), who have tried to apply the models of traditional retail and have developed new ones when others have proved invalid in the online domain. This research in online retailing is, however, fairly recent; a meta-analysis (1997–2003) conducted by Straub et al. (2005) shows only 49 academic articles related to the B2C markets. In another study, Hwang et al. (2007) found only 61 articles related to e-commerce in their list of top five marketing journals (*Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Marketing Science*) between 1996 and 2005—a decade. Hence, we can conclude

that research in e-commerce has a broad scope but is still fragmented. In the domain of e-commerce technology, researchers have focused on a multitude of aspects, such as marketing strategy, technology adoption, online store formats, buyer behavior, mobile commerce, and CRM. However, despite these developments, research indicates that online retailers find it more difficult to build a relationship with consumers as compared to brick and mortar retailers (Chen et al. 2008).

We believe that concepts and practices of relationship marketing (RM) may be useful in establishing strong relationships with online retail customers (Bendapudi and Berry 1997). The relationship marketing concept has been useful in developing new definitions of concepts such as trust, commitment, closeness, and relationship quality (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Gronroos 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Past research has also identified various instruments that aid in relationship marketing efforts such as direct marketing, database marketing, customer partnering, CRM, services marketing, and more to achieve the objectives of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and customer retention. Various industry applications of relationship marketing have been identified, such as implementation programmes and new industry practices (Das 2009).

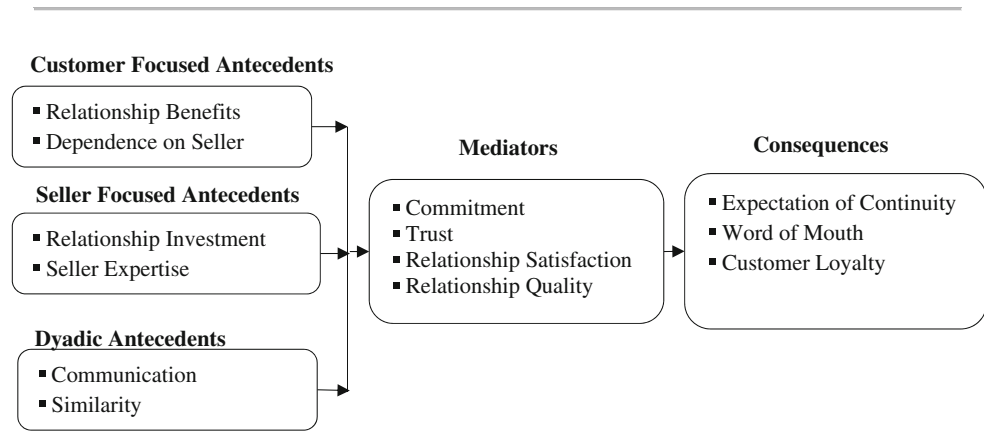
Although a plethora of literature exists in relationship marketing in both B2B and B2C contexts, literature on the application of relationship marketing to the online retail context has emerged only in the last decade and still remains fragmented in terms of the variables being investigated. A comprehensive model is needed to identify the various aspects of relationship marketing that have been investigated and those that need further scrutiny. This paper takes a meta-analytic approach to discover what works and what does not in establishing relationships with online customers. We employ the meta-analytic model proposed by Palmatier et al. (2006) as the basis for understanding how the relationship marketing concept may be applicable in online retailing. We chose Palmatier et al. (2006) model as it is predicated on a comprehensive

meta-analysis of extant literature in the domain of relationship marketing and identifies the key concepts that impact relationship marketing. In the study by Palmatier et al. (2006), 97 published and unpublished manuscripts on RM were analysed, and 637 correlations were identified to calculate the pairwise estimates. In our study we adapt this model to online retailing and identify the key concepts being researched in the domain. Our study sets out to (a) conduct a thorough review of the empirical studies pertaining to relationship marketing in the domain of online retailing; (b) identify what strategies help build customer relationships in the online domain; (c) identify the consequences of relationship marketing in online retailing; and (d) identify the potential gaps that would motivate hypotheses for further research.

A model of relationship marketing in online retailing

Among the various constructs in relationship marketing, Palmatier et al. (2006) propose the Relational Mediator Meta Analytic Framework, in which they identify 18 constructs. They classify nine antecedents as customer-focused, seller-focused, and dyadic antecedents. Commitment, trust, relationship satisfaction and relationship quality are identified as customer-focused relational mediators. Outcomes are classified as customer-focused, seller-focused, and dyadic outcomes. They also identify four moderators, service versus product based exchanges, channel versus direct exchanges, business versus consumer markets, and individual versus organisational relationships. Based on this theoretical model, Palmatier et al. conduct a meta-analysis to finally develop the causal model. We used this meta-analytic framework as the basis of our research. Based on our meta-analysis of empirical research in online marketing, we identify the following relational model for the online retailing context (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Relationship marketing in online retailing



We identify 13 constructs in our RM framework for online retailing. Six antecedents—relationship benefits, dependence on seller, relationship investment, seller expertise, communication, and similarity—are further classified into customer-focused (relationship benefits, dependence on seller), seller-focused (relationship investment, seller expertise), and dyadic (communication, similarity) antecedents. Further, as in the original model, in the context of online retailing also we identify commitment, trust, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality as customer-focused relational mediators. *Commitment* is defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Deshpande et al. 1993). *Trust* is defined as “confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Trust and commitment are the most frequently studied constructs, though they have been studied as antecedents, mediators, and even consequences. Trust has often been identified as an antecedent to commitment. *Relationship quality* is the “overall assessment of the strength of a relationship” (Crosby et al. 1990). *Relationship satisfaction* is defined as the satisfaction of the consumer from the overall relationship (Crosby et al. 1990). Finally, we identify three consequences of RM as expectation of continuity, word of mouth, and customer loyalty. The definitions of the various constructs are presented in Table 1.

Method

We conducted a literature search in various scientific databases in order to identify studies pertaining to relationship marketing in online retailing. Ebsco, Elsevier Science Direct, Proquest, and Google Scholar search engines were used to search abstracts and keywords. We searched for each construct present in the model offered by Palmatier et al. (2006) along with one of the following search terms: online retail(ing), internet retail(ing), electronic commerce, and e-commerce. The initial search generated more than 100 empirical studies that were examined for the constructs. To be included in the analysis, each study needed to meet the following criteria: the study was conducted in the online retailing setting, the study reported the sample size, and the study reported the Pearson correlation coefficient or a test-statistic that can be converted to correlation. Based on these criteria, a total of 50 empirical studies were identified from the last decade (2000–2013) that provided a total of 153 causal relationships (Table 2).

Empirical studies in online retailing have used multiple constructs and variables with similar definitions. To organize them as per Palmatier et al. (2006) framework, we coded, using standard procedures, the various antecedents, mediators, and consequences according to the definitions offered by Palmatier et al. (2006). Statistics were coded based on the results reported in each study and included sample size, means and standard deviations, correlation values, F-tests, and t-tests.

Out of the 153 causal relationships identified originally, we used 131 relationships in the model. The final list of studies used in the empirical analysis is available on request.

The first step in the analysis involved converting the effect size values to correlations (r). Correlation was taken as the primary metric as it is a scale-free measure and is easy to interpret. In order to include as many effect sizes as possible, we included studies using regression and structural equation modelling (SEM) (Peterson and Brown 2005). To convert coefficients of regression (β) we used the formula $r = 0.98\beta + 0.05\lambda$, where λ equals to 1 when the coefficient is non-negative and 0 when it is negative (Peterson and Brown 2005). For SEM r -values, we took direct effect r -values as is. Where there were indirect effects present, we incorporated the same and calculated the total effect size.

The effect sizes across studies were integrated by applying the Schmidt and Hunter’s Bare Bones approach (2004) that accounts for sampling error to the r -values. While Hunter and Schmidt suggest that the Bare Bones approach may be deficient, other researchers have demonstrated that applying corrections for all artefacts can be inaccurate especially when the number of studies is small (Spector and Levine 1987). Since we identified very few studies (1–2 in some cases) for some relationships in our model, a more conservative approach was necessary (Allen et al. 2004).

While r -values were corrected for sampling error, they were not corrected for measurement error. Durvasula et al. (2012) recommend that researchers should report disattenuated effect sizes. This is because disattenuating effect sizes increases the effect sizes and, assuming reliabilities are about equal, all effect sizes will increase by about the same amount. This we think will result in increasing the cut-off values for categorizing the effects into small, medium, and large but not change the category to which the effect size is assigned. No corrections were made for other artefacts; these corrections are generally required when researchers wish to aggregate the studies and analyse the multivariate causal model.

Online retailing as an area of study is a relatively young field in the domain of marketing. The objective of this study was to examine whether the constructs and relationships pertaining to relationship marketing are of relevance in online retailing, and to develop a framework indicating the key relationships being examined by researchers, which would motivate hypotheses to be examined by future researchers (Janiszewski et al. 2003). At this stage of research in relationship marketing in online retailing, a quantitative summary of the existing body of research can be a relevant contribution to literature. Schmidt et al. (1985) state that:

Even with small numbers of studies and small N ’s, meta-analysis is still the optimal method for integrating findings across studies. In the absence of such interim meta-analyses, psychologists would likely base judgments on

Table 1 Definitions of constructs included in framework

Construct	Definition	Commonly used terms	Reference
Antecedents			
Relationship benefits	The various functional or social benefits received from the exchange partner	Convenience motivation, information quality, price consciousness, website design	Morgan and Hunt 1994
Dependence on seller	The customer's evaluation of the value of seller-provided resources for which few alternatives are available from other sellers	Switching cost, termination cost	Mukherjee and Nath 2003
Relationship investment	As the investments made by the seller in terms of time, effort and resources employed for the purpose of building a relationship with the customer	Loyalty programs, transaction security	Ganesan 1994
Seller expertise	The overall competency, skills and knowledge of the seller	Fulfillment, reliability	Crosby et al. 1990
Communication	Information exchange occurring among the relationship partners	Interactivity	Feinberg et al. 2002; Cat and Jun 2003
Similarity	Commonality in status, appearance or lifestyle or similar cultures, shared values, and compatibility between buying and selling organisations	Shared values	Crosby et al. 1990
Mediators			
Commitment	An enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship		Deshpande et al. 1993
Trust	Confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity	online trust, e-trust	Morgan and Hunt 1994
Relationship satisfaction	The satisfaction of the consumer from the relationship	Customer satisfaction	Crosby et al. 1990
Relationship quality	Overall assessment of the strength of a relationship		Crosby et al. 1990
Consequences			
Expectation of continuity	Customer's intention to maintain the relationship in the future; the likelihood of continued purchases from the seller	shopping intention, purchase intention, repurchase intention, switching intention	Crosby et al. 1990
Word of mouth	Informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers	eWOM	Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Matos and Rossi 2008
Customer loyalty	A deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having potential to cause switching behaviour	Loyalty	Oliver 1999

Table 2 Summary of relationships identified

	Relationship quality	Relationship satisfaction	Trust	Commitment	Customer loyalty	Expectation of continuity	Word of mouth	Grand total
Antecedents								
Relationship benefits	2	16	4	2	4	4	2	34
Dependence on seller		1		1	1	1		4
Seller expertise	1	5	4			1		11
Relationship investment	3	14	5			2		24
Communication	1	9	1			1		12
Similarity			1	1				2
Trust	1				11	15	1	28
Commitment						3		3
Relationship quality					2	2		4
Relationship satisfaction			1	1	19	5	2	28
Customer loyalty						1	1	2
Expectation of continuity		1						1
Grand total	8	46	16	5	37	35	6	153

the findings of individual studies or nonquantitative (i.e., narrative) reviews of the literature—both of which are much more likely to lead to error. Thus, such meta-analyses are, in fact, very desirable (p. 749).

Using the above method, first, the weighted mean and variance of the r-values was calculated using the formulae

$$\bar{r} = \frac{\sum N_i r_i}{\sum N_i} \text{ and } s_r^2 = \frac{\sum [N_i (r_i - \bar{r})^2]}{\sum N_i}$$

(where N is sample size for each study) respectively. Next, the estimated variance

of the meta-analysis was calculated using the formula $\hat{\sigma}_e^2 = \frac{(1-\bar{r}^2)^2}{N-1}$ and this value was used to calculate the estimated population variance $\hat{\sigma}_\rho^2 = s_r^2 - \hat{\sigma}_e^2$. Finally, the confidence interval ($95\%CI = \bar{r} \pm 1.96\sqrt{\frac{s_r^2}{K}}$) and the credibility interval ($95\%CR = \bar{r} \pm 1.96\sigma_\rho$) were calculated. Descriptive statistics along with the above analysis are presented in Table 3.

Results

Following Lipsey and Wilson’s (2001) proposal for analysing the magnitude of effect sizes ($r < 0.10$ as small; $r = 0.25$ as medium, and $r > 0.40$ as large effect size), we present our results in Table 3. We find that the antecedents of relationship marketing have medium-to-large mean effects for the integrated effect size (corrected for sampling) with one exception, *Dependence on Seller* → *Relationship Satisfaction* (0.12). Among the identified antecedents, all effect sizes were found to be significant except for *Relationship Benefits* →

Commitment. The significant antecedents identified were relationship benefits, dependence on seller, relationship investment, seller expertise, communication, and similarity. The customer-focused antecedent relationship benefits was found to significantly affect trust ($\bar{r} = 0.21$), relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.36$), and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.63$), and dependence on seller was related to commitment ($\bar{r} = -0.28$) and relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.12$). Seller-focused antecedents relationship investment and seller expertise were both significantly related to trust ($\bar{r} = 0.29$ and 0.45 respectively), relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.31$ and 0.36 respectively), and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.61$ and 0.36 respectively). Only two significant dyadic antecedents were identified, namely, communication and similarity; these were found to significantly affect trust ($\bar{r} = 0.34$), relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.28$), and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.38$), commitment ($\bar{r} = 0.75$), and trust ($\bar{r} = 0.52$) respectively.

Similarly, for outcomes of relationship marketing we were able to identify three customer-focused outcomes: expectation of continuity, word of mouth, and customer loyalty. Commitment, trust, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality were significantly related to expectation of continuity ($\bar{r} = 0.45, 0.66, 0.42,$ and 0.50 respectively); trust and relationship satisfaction were significantly related to word of mouth ($\bar{r} = 0.89$ and 0.59 respectively); and trust, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality were significantly related to customer loyalty ($\bar{r} = 0.56, 0.61,$ and 0.78 respectively). We found medium to large effect sizes for these relationships. Analysis of confidence interval indicates that the same were significant. In the following sections we discuss the various constructs and relationships in light of our findings.

Table 3 Results: descriptive statistics and relationships

Relationships identified	No. of raw effects	Total N	Simple Avg. r	r-weighted S ²	Estimated Var of Meta	Var of Rho	95% Confidence interval		95% Credibility interval		
							Lower bound	Upper bound	Lower bound	Upper bound	
Customer focused antecedents											
Relationship benefits → commitment	2	1253	0.55	0.56	0.1781	0.0003	0.1778	-0.02	1.15	-0.26	1.39
Relationship benefits → trust	4	4639	0.29	0.21	0.0040	0.0005	0.0035	0.15	0.27	0.10	0.33
Relationship benefits → relationship satisfaction	16	6436	0.38	0.36	0.0603	0.0010	0.0593	0.24	0.49	-0.11	0.84
Relationship benefits → relationship quality	2	350	0.56	0.63	0.0259	0.0008	0.0251	0.40	0.85	0.32	0.94
Dependence on seller → commitment	1	651	-0.28	-0.28	0.0000	0.0025	-0.0025	-	-	-	-
Dependence on seller → relationship satisfaction	1	334	0.12	0.12	0.0000	0.0023	-0.0023	-	-	-	-
Seller focused antecedents											
Relationship investment → trust	5	1748	0.30	0.29	0.0176	0.0015	0.0162	0.17	0.40	0.04	0.54
Relationship investment → relationship satisfaction	14	4987	0.33	0.31	0.0299	0.0013	0.0286	0.22	0.40	-0.02	0.64
Relationship investment → relationship quality	3	1236	0.49	0.61	0.0813	0.0004	0.0809	0.29	0.94	0.05	1.17
Seller expertise → trust	4	1278	0.50	0.45	0.0213	0.0009	0.0204	0.31	0.60	0.17	0.73
Seller expertise → relationship satisfaction	5	1879	0.48	0.36	0.0424	0.0011	0.0413	0.18	0.54	-0.04	0.76
Seller expertise → relationship quality	1	360	0.36	0.36	0.0000	0.0011	-0.0011	-	-	-	-
Dyadic antecedents											
communication → trust	1	651	0.34	0.34	0.0000	0.0007	-0.0007	-	-	-	-
Communication → relationship satisfaction	9	4284	0.31	0.28	0.0257	0.0011	0.0246	0.18	0.39	-0.02	0.59
Communication → relationship quality	1	110	0.38	0.38	0.0000	0.0035	-0.0035	-	-	-	-
Similarity → commitment	1	651	0.75	0.75	0.0000	0.0001	-0.0001	-	-	-	-
Similarity → trust	1	651	0.52	0.52	0.0000	0.0004	-0.0004	-	-	-	-
Mediators											
Commitment → expectation of continuity	3	1483	0.40	0.45	0.0462	0.0006	0.0456	0.20	0.69	0.03	0.87
Trust → expectation of continuity	15	8036	0.49	0.66	0.1145	0.0002	0.1142	0.49	0.83	0.00	1.33
Relationship satisfaction → expectation of continuity	5	1238	0.45	0.42	0.0159	0.0014	0.0146	0.31	0.53	0.18	0.65
Relationship quality → expectation of continuity	2	1569	0.44	0.50	0.0078	0.0003	0.0075	0.38	0.62	0.33	0.67
Trust → word of mouth	1	3206	0.89	0.89	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	-	-	-	-
Relationship satisfaction → Word of mouth	2	412	0.60	0.59	0.0000	0.0008	-0.0008	0.59	0.60	-	-
Trust → customer loyalty	11	4939	0.54	0.56	0.0393	0.0004	0.0388	0.45	0.68	0.18	0.95
Relationship satisfaction → customer loyalty	19	7445	0.62	0.61	0.0354	0.0004	0.0351	0.53	0.70	0.25	0.98
Relationship quality → customer loyalty	2	1186	0.76	0.78	0.0045	0.0001	0.0044	0.69	0.87	0.65	0.91

Note. We assume that the correlations reported in the studies are attenuated and have not been disattenuated to measurement error. Disattenuating them would result in higher correlations

Antecedents of relationship marketing in online retailing

In their relational mediator meta-analytic framework, Palmatier et al. (2006) classify the nine antecedents into customer-focused, seller-focused, and dyadic antecedents, and each of these are linked to the four relational mediators, namely commitment, trust, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality. In our study were able to identify six antecedents.

Customer-focused antecedents

The two customer-focused antecedents are *relationship benefits* and *dependence on seller*.

Relationship benefits Relationship benefits may be identified as the various functional or social benefits received from the exchange partner. These include convenience, time saving, and reduced prices, which encourage them to form a relationship with their partner. Morgan and Hunt (1994) explain that relationship benefits lead to trust and commitment building among the relationship partners. The following variables were classified under the relationship benefits construct:

- (a) *Convenience motivation*. Convenience is perceived as one of the major benefits of shopping online (Jarvenpaa and Todd 1997). Internet shoppers, when compared to non-internet shoppers, seek more convenience. Convenience has been recognized as an important factor contributing to the growth of commerce (Anderson and Srinivasan 2003). Five types of convenience have been proposed by Darian (1987): flexibility in shopping time, reduction in shopping time, saving the effort of visiting the physical store, saving aggravation, and the option to buy on impulse or in response to an advertisement.
- (b) *Information quality*. The quality of information has been shown to lead to user satisfaction (DeLeone and McLean 1992). Information may be about product attributes, reviews, order and delivery information, frequently asked questions, and promotions (Park and Kim 2003). DeLeone and McLean (1992) note that relevancy, sufficiency, recency, consistency, understandability, and playfulness are the six components of information quality. The same attributes would apply to online stores as well and are manifest through online stores' focus on sharing product-related information in the form of text, images, and videos, recommending similar products, and displaying consumer reviews and ratings that consumers can sort by recency or popularity.
- (c) *Price consciousness*. Internet lowers the cost of acquiring information about the product, especially for price-conscious customers. Many online retailers offer price deals or low price guarantees and allow consumers to

compare prices across products and sellers. Consumers prefer websites that frequently update the product and price information (Gulati and Garino 1999). Since price-conscious customers attempt to find lowest price products and also reduce their search cost, they would be more likely to buy products through the online channel.

- (d) *Website design*. A pure-click retailer's (or an e-tailer's) website is the only connection or interface that the retailer has with its customers. As a result the web page should be representative and distinctive of the image that the e-tailer is seeking to portray (Galbraith and Kolesar 2000). Studies conducted in the US and Europe have reported that online shoppers have various issues with e-commerce websites (Alba et al. 1997; Saba 2000; Mintel 2001). Some of the commonly faced problems are poor design of the primary interface, lack of good security features, complex navigation, long download times, poor customer service, confusing return policies, and incorrect shipping information.

Relationship benefits is the most frequently studied antecedent in online retailing. Our review of the empirical research shows that relationship benefits lead to commitment ($\bar{r} = 0.56$), trust ($\bar{r} = 0.21$), relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.36$), and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.63$) (Park and Kim 2003; Cai and Jun 2003; Yen and Gwinner 2003; Yang and Peterson 2004; Lin and Sun 2009). We also find the concept of relationship benefits to be directly related to customer loyalty and expectation of continuity, the consequences of relationship marketing (Lin and Sun 2009; Palvia 2009). These were excluded from the meta-analysis as they were not present in Palmatier et al.'s model (2006).

Dependence on seller Dependence on seller is the "customer's evaluation of the value of seller-provided resources for which few alternatives are available from other sellers" (Palmatier et al. 2006). Dependence on the seller makes it difficult for the customer to switch to a different seller as such an action is costly to the customer (Jones et al. 2000). Dependence on the seller was found to be related to commitment ($\bar{r} = -0.28$) and relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.12$); however, empirical support was not found for its relationship with trust and relationship quality. We found only one study that examined this relationship.

Seller-focused antecedents

Relationship marketing research identifies various strategies that sellers adopt in order to form relationships with the customers. Palmatier et al. (2006) identify *relationship investment* and *seller expertise* as the two seller-focused antecedents. Relationship investment is defined as the investments made by

the seller in terms of time, effort, and resources employed for the purpose of building a relationship with the customer. This includes different types of efforts such as gifts and loyalty programs. Seller expertise is the overall competency, skills, and knowledge of the seller (Crosby et al. 1990). We find relationship investment and seller expertise both to affect trust ($\bar{r} = 0.29$ and 0.45 respectively), relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.31$ and 0.36 respectively), and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.61$ and 0.36 respectively).

Dyadic antecedents

Palmatier et al. (2006) classify five antecedents, namely *communication*, *similarity*, *relationship duration*, *interaction frequency*, and *conflict*, as dyadic antecedents. In the online marketing literature, we found only two dyadic antecedents: communication and similarity. Communication is the information exchange occurring among the relationship partners. It is the amount, frequency, and quality of information shared between the exchange partners. This would include CRM efforts made by the sellers such as site customization, alternative channels, local search engines, membership, mailing list, site map, site tour, chat, and electronic bulletin board (Feinberg et al. 2002). The relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.28$) has been widely studied in online marketing. This dyadic antecedent has also been linked to trust ($\bar{r} = 0.34$) and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.38$). An interesting point to note is that communication and its effect on commitment is not much investigated in online retailing. Similarity is the commonality in status, appearance or lifestyle or similar cultures, shared values, and compatibility between buying and selling organizations (Crosby et al. 1990). Similarity was found to lead to trust ($\bar{r} = 0.52$) and commitment ($\bar{r} = 0.75$).

Among the various antecedents, Palmatier et al. (2006) find conflict to have the largest absolute impact on the relational mediators; we did not identify this antecedent in the online retail context. Further, in Palmatier et al.'s study, seller expertise and communication are the two antecedents that had the greatest positive impact on the relational mediators, followed by relationship investment, similarity, and relationship benefits. As mentioned, we identified only 6 of the 9 antecedents present in the original model; antecedents not identified were relationship duration, interaction frequency, and conflict. Importantly, we found that similarity and seller expertise were the two antecedents with the strongest positive effect, followed by relationship investment, relationship benefits, and communication. This indicates that the order of importance of the various antecedents may be different for online retailing.

Consequences of relationship marketing in online retailing

Similar to the antecedent classification, Palmatier et al. (2006) categorize the five identified outcomes into customer-focused, seller-focused, and dyadic outcomes. Empirical studies in online retailing focus on only the customer-focused outcomes of relationship marketing. These are *expectation of continuity*, *word of mouth*, and *customer loyalty*. Expectation of continuity is the “customer’s intention to maintain the relationship in the future, and captures the likelihood of continued purchases from the seller” (Palmatier et al. 2006). This is a heavily investigated concept; empirical researchers use various similar constructs such as purchase intention or shopping intention and switching intention (reversed) to observe this concept. Shopping intention is the most widely studied consequence in online retailing. An important point to note here is that the likelihood of purchase may not necessarily mean that the customer has high loyalty toward the retailer. Earlier studies indicate that both loyals and non-loyals may exhibit high expectations of continuity under certain conditions (Oliver 1999). For example, high expectation of continuity can be demonstrated by consumers who perceive dependence on seller such as high switching costs or have time constraints. Customer loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having potential to cause switching behaviour” (Oliver 1997, p. 392). E-loyalty is often used as the extension of the traditional concept of loyalty in the domain of online retail. Word of mouth is the “likelihood of a customer positively referring the seller to another potential customer” (Palmatier et al. 2006). In their meta-analysis conducted across all retail channels, Matos and Rossi (2008) identify satisfaction, quality, commitment, trust, and perceived value as the antecedents for word of mouth.

Empirical research shows that commitment ($\bar{r} = 0.45$), trust ($\bar{r} = 0.66$), relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.42$), and relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.50$) all lead to expectation of continuity among consumers. Trust was more strongly related with expectation of continuity. Trust has been considered a critical determinant of success of online retailers and has been frequently examined by researchers. Trust is most important in maintaining relationship continuity, especially in services such as banking, utilities, and cell phone services. Online retailing is more like a service as compared to outlet retailing. Since only visual cues are present in online retailing, trust becomes a surrogate for other experiential cues such as the merchandise, atmosphere, and sales clerk in outlet relating. Customer loyalty has been shown as a consequence of relationship satisfaction ($\bar{r} = 0.61$), relationship quality ($\bar{r} = 0.78$), and trust ($\bar{r} = 0.56$). Empirical evidence shows that there is a causal relationship between trust and relationship satisfaction with the consumer related outcome variable word of mouth ($\bar{r} = 0.89, 0.59$ respectively). Palmatier et al. (2006) find that that strongest influence of the

relational mediators is on cooperation, followed by WOM, expectation of continuity, customer loyalty, and seller objective performance, in decreasing order of effect size. In our analysis we found that relational mediators had the strongest influence on WOM, followed by customer loyalty and expectation of continuity. The outcomes not identified in our study were seller objective performance and cooperation.

Discussion

There are two specific contributions of our study. First, it synthesizes and empirically measures how antecedents, mediators, and consequences impact one another. Second, it provides some non-intuitive findings specific to online retailing. For example, trust is most important in maintaining relationship continuity in online retailing. Similarly, relationship benefits matters more than dependence on seller, and relationship investment matters more than seller expertise. Finally, since relationship satisfaction matters most in building customer loyalty, it is interesting to note that the best investment by a company to enhance customer loyalty is relationship investment and not seller expertise or communication. Also, online retailing is the next frontier in marketing as e-commerce becomes more mainstream marketing. Our study provides a framework for future empirical research as well as meta-analysis in what is a growing field.

The nature of the relationships explored in online retailing is a general indicator of the focus of researchers in this relatively new field. We find that empirical research in online retailing has revolved around understanding online consumer behavior and attitudes, and the most commonly studied consumer outcomes in this domain are shopping intentions, trust, and loyalty. Online marketing, until recently, has been primarily focused on building a customer base, improving website quality, and developing price-based competition. The last decade, however, shows a shift in focus—marketing efforts are being directed toward building and maintaining relationships with online customers (Cyr 2008; Ray et al. 2012). A comparison of our analysis with that of Palmatier et al. (2006) indicates that, as in traditional retail, influence of RM strategies on outcomes is mediated by four relational mediators. Furthermore, as theorized by Palmatier et al. (2006), the relative effectiveness of the different antecedents varies across mediators. Similarity and seller expertise were found to have the strongest influence on relationship building. However, contrary to the original model, not all antecedents affected all of the RM mediators. This indicates potential gaps in research. For example, more empirical studies may be conducted to study the influence of RM strategies on commitment as it is the least investigated mediator. Our analysis also reveals that WOM was most strongly related to RM efforts, followed by customer loyalty and expectation of continuity. However, since we found few (three) studies examining WOM, further

investigation is required to verify the strength of the relationships; this indicates the importance of investigating all three customer-focused outcomes in order to better understand the impact of RM strategies.

More investigation is required to understand the impact of RM on seller-focused consequences such as objective performance, and on dyadic consequences such as cooperation. We discovered that little research exists to link relationship marketing efforts in the online retail context to cooperation and business performance. The growing popularity of online social media offers a new platform for marketing managers to relate to their customers. A recent exploratory study by Jung et al. (2013) suggests that online social networks could provide new RM opportunities and add value to the business. Word of mouth (WOM) has been identified as a consequence of RM efforts; platforms facilitating WOM provide a new arena for relationship marketing efforts. There is scope to develop more innovative ways to engage consumers on these platforms and identify metrics to monitor online social media activity. Further, a large number of studies have investigated the influence of electronic WOM on sales and revenue (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2003; Dellarocas et al. 2007; Zhu and Zhang 2010). As RM efforts have been established to strongly influence WOM, these studies indicate that RM efforts can indirectly affect objective performance.

We also found that little agreement exists on the various causal relationships reported in empirical research. Researchers have explored either the antecedents and consequences of RM or the antecedents and mediators in isolation. Our model identifies the various concepts that have already been investigated and can be used as the basis to design empirical research to study the various causal relationships, in order to improve the effectiveness of relationship marketing research and provide greater agreement in the literature. However, the presence of a model should not limit research entirely. During our initial analysis we eliminated those relationships that did not directly agree with the model. This included studies that linked antecedents of RM directly with the consequences. For example, relationship benefits has been directly linked to customer loyalty, expectation of continuity, and word of mouth (Janda et al. 2002; Lin and Sun 2009; Palvia 2009). Direct relationships were also found between dependence on seller and customer loyalty and expectation of continuity. Relationship investment, seller expertise, and communication were all directly linked to expectation of continuity in some studies. These findings can be interpreted in two ways: either the studies failed to incorporate the mediation effect, or the influence of RM efforts on outcomes might be partially mediated and requires further scrutiny.

Another issue identified was that of definitions and scales. We found that different scales have been developed to measure similar and in some cases the same construct. This issue was more prominent in the case of conceptualizations of

mediating variables, namely, trust, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. The scales were either borrowed from literature or were developed specifically for the study. The first step in identifying a comprehensive nomological framework and for greater agreement in the relationship marketing literature requires that we adopt consistent definitions and develop measures possessing cross-cultural validity.

Recent research also indicates that there may be reciprocal effects between offline and online stores of multichannel retailers (Kwon and Lennon 2009). Presence of a traditional store and customers' beliefs toward it may get transferred to the online store and vice versa. Further, research also indicates that there may be an overlap between the shopper segments of the offline and the online stores (Benedicktus et al. 2010; Ganesh et al. 2010). Future researchers could examine how principles of relationship marketing may be employed to attract offline customers with prior positive attitudes toward the (brick and mortar) store to the online store, and whether this would have a positive impact on the customer related consequences of RM and on seller performance.

Managerial implications

The model of relationship marketing in online retailing provides key areas where managers should focus to produce successful marketing strategies. The three antecedents with the greatest impact—relationship similarity, seller expertise, and relationship investment—are those factors that the marketers can control directly in order to build strong relationships with their consumers. Marketers need to develop offerings that are aligned with the tastes and preferences of their local consumers to create a perception of similarity. They need to make relationship investments and maintain a high level of competency and expertise in order to build trust and to increase relationship satisfaction and quality. In the absence of human contact, communication between the buyer and seller is essential to improve the relationship quality and build trust. This requires additional effort on the part of the retailer and is an important investment. By developing proper feedback mechanisms (such as prompt return policies) and by encouraging consumers to share their experience, they can improve on the communication dimension.

The model also identifies the various outcomes of the relationship building activities that may be monitored to measure the success rate of relationship marketing efforts. WOM has been identified as the most important way for managers to identify loyalty and commitment among customers (Matos and Rossi 2008). Online WOM, both negative and positive, is known to have a stronger impact on consumers as compared to other information sources (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Kotler 1967). Also, WOM cannot be directly controlled by the marketer as consumers can unrestrictedly share experiences

across various platforms. In addition to this, WOM has been directly linked to online retail sales. It, therefore, becomes critical for online retailers to develop successful RM strategies.

Limitations and further research

The suggested model borrows from both empirical and theoretical research conducted in the domain of online retailing. Several relationships such as dependence on the seller→trust, dependence on seller→relationship quality, seller expertise→commitment, and others could not be empirically tested due to unavailability of data; they provide scope for further research. Also, we found that in most studies, the focus is on only one or two causal relationships with different definitions for constructs and variables. This indicates that there is a need to consolidate definitions and scales of the various concepts being examined.

Further, our model is a collation of the various concepts and constructs identified from the literature available; it may not be exhaustive or exclusive. The keywords used in searching for articles were the same as the ones identified by Palmatier et al. (2006); topic and title searches yield different results. Palmatier et al. (2006), in their meta-analysis, identified several constructs in RM that are yet to be studied in online retailing and this leaves scope for further research.

Future researchers could examine the role of dyadic antecedents such as relationship duration, interaction frequency, and conflict in the context of RM in online retailing. Relationship duration, which is the length of time that the relationship between two partners has existed, and interaction frequency, which is the number of interactions per unit time between exchange partners, are both critical variables for managers focusing on developing and maintaining relationships with their online consumers. Conflict, which is a measure of the overall disagreement between the exchange partners, was found to have the largest absolute impact on all four relationship mediators in Palmatier et al.'s study. In the online retailing context, the same may be operationalized by tracking the number of product returns or complaints made by a specific customer and the incidence of a new sale afterwards. Among the consequences of RM in online retailing, seller's objective performance and level of cooperation between the retailer and customer could be examined in future research. Product characteristics such as price and involvement level are expected to affect the shopping intentions of online customers (Lin and Sun 2009) and require further examination.

Our framework can help researchers and managers to identify some of the critical aspects of RM in online retailing. It could help researchers to develop better models through empirical investigation and managers to increase their customer base and to improve their return on investment on their efforts in relationship marketing.

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