



Research Article

Relationship Marketing and Customer Loyalty: A Quantitative Analysis in the Retail Sector

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Abstract

In a business environment that is constantly evolving and changing, retailers operate in an environment full of challenging scenarios such as a global recession, political conflicts, and wars. In this sense, the retail sector is one of the most affected, but, at the same time, it is one of the mainstays of local economies. In response to this problem, it is necessary to explore the effects of disruptive marketing techniques, such as relationship marketing, and its impact on the determinants of competitiveness, such as customer loyalty. The main objective of this research is to determine the relationship between relationship marketing and its dimensions in the customer loyalty variable in the retail sector. The methodology has a transversal approach - non-experimental, descriptive scope; the sample is made up of 120 customers who were applied a validated questionnaire that addresses the variables described. The results found a positive relationship between the independent and the dependent variable; this finding was validated with Spearman's Rho correlation test ($Rho=0.639$, Sig. (Bilateral) $=0.000$; ($p \leq 0.000$). Regarding the dimensions of the independent variable and its relationship with Loyalty, the following was found: customer benefit ($Rho = 0.318$; $p = .000 < .05$), service quality ($Rho = 0.334$; $p = .000 < 0.05$), vision towards the customer ($Rho = 0.457$; $p = .000 < .05$) and communication ($Rho = 0.475$; $p = .000 < .05$). The findings of this study are relevant for companies in the sector, as they demonstrate a direct relationship between the variables analyzed and underline the importance of using relationship marketing strategies.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, Loyalty, Retail.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, the retail industry has played a significant role in the economy of countries (Arévalo and Ascoy, 2017). In a constantly evolving and changing business environment, retailers operate in challenging scenarios such as

a global recession, political conflicts, and war. In this sense, the retail sector is one of the most affected, but at the same time, it is one of the mainstays of local economies (Ruzzo, 2023). Retail has grown steadily over the last decades (Thaipradit and Tantong, 2021). The main global retail companies report an 8.5% annual revenue

growth and are sustainably expanding their market position. (Pasamon, 2023).

Companies in the retail industry face challenges in developing effective marketing strategies for their customers. They have greater access to information and comparison, making providers seek marketing tactics to impact satisfaction and generate a bond with their customers. Customer profile changes and industry-impacting factors make it more competitive (Alkufahy et al., 2023; Thaipradit and Tantong, 2021).

Companies must develop the capacity to understand the demands and needs of their actual and potential consumers. The dynamics and behavior of customers will continue to evolve and the validated way to continue economic transactions is to generate a sustainable link between the purchaser and the supplier (Suarniki and Lukiyanto, 2020). In a commercial organization, customers are considered a competitiveness-generating asset; loyalty is a significant factor that affects the determination of prices and creates a barrier to entry for competitors (Aaker 1991:1996). In this line, companies must develop a good relationship with their customers, to validate the impact on other factors such as satisfaction, profitability, and loyalty (Kho, 2020).

Organizations require better pre-sales and post-sales services to maintain and enhance sales, being the relationship strength a determining factor that guides customer behavior (Lee and Peng, 2021); that is, companies need to investigate and validate the impact of different strategies to maintain their relationship and obtain more value from customers in the form of loyalty (Menidjel et al., 2020).

In recent decades, relationship marketing research has gained relevance, focusing on studying the connection between the company and its consumers (Heiens et al., 2019). Deloitte (2017) revealed that 35% of institutions value the experience lived by their customers, considering relationship marketing as a fundamental element; however, 26% of companies use these strategies, and, in Latin America, 74% do not know the importance of loyalty (Peru-retail., 2018).

Much of the research in relationship marketing focuses on large wholesale businesses or the tourism sector and its related industries; few focus on retail marketing. In that line, the benefit they can perceive is a little-explored topic. Regarding loyalty, broader marketing theories are focused on, so the process and strategies that strengthen a sustainable customer bond with a

retail company continue to be misunderstood (Lee and Peng, 2021). Kotler and Keller (2012) state that an organization requires much more investment to attract a new customer than to keep an existing one. Thus, it should focus on building and maintaining lasting customer relationships (Rosa and Rua, 2020).

Consequently, this research aims to minimize the knowledge gap described above by determining the link between relationship marketing, its dimensions, and customer loyalty in retail markets. This research would allow us to broaden the theoretical bases for conceptualizing the variables described, their dimensions, and the relationship between them, as well as to validate the impact of relationship marketing strategies.

Relationship Marketing

There has been significant growth in research on Relationship Marketing in recent years, although a commonly established definition is yet to be agreed upon. However, it can be stated that it is a process that includes tactics and strategies that build relationships with the customer at every point of the business interaction (Heiens et al., 2019).

Relationship marketing is conceptualized as an effort to establish and strengthen relationships with customers, developing strategies for organizations to meet customer expectations, in addition to generating a bidirectional relationship (Suarniki and Lukiyanto, 2020), long-term sustainable relationship (Yang et al., 2019), this by analyzing the needs of the current customer and their association with marketing decision making in the organization; furthermore, seeking to have a more efficient impact than competitors (Levy et al., 2019).

Several authors state that relationship marketing is an extension of marketing that proposes that decisions about marketing tactics should be oriented to meet the needs of companies (Levy et al., 2019; Rosa and Rua, 2020). In this context, we can define relationship marketing as a disruptive marketing strategy seeking a sustainable competitive advantage based on customer knowledge, creating bidirectional communication, and managing solid links (Hidayat and Idrus, 2023).

Therefore, relationship marketing is essential for developing long-term sustainable customer relationships and is considered a very effective strategy (Cortez et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is based on the information exchange between the customer and the company, where not only the

monetary aspect is present but also a continuous communication that seeks a gain through a lasting relationship, employing strategies (Peel, 2002). It arises from questions attributed to transactional marketing influenced by its processes and concepts, where the main motivation is the exchange of products and services but not the market (Baptista and Leon, 2013).

Customer relationship management allows for generating a strategic plan thanks to the information obtained from customers, such as their preferences, to improve the processes within the organization going hand in hand with self-diagnosis (Montoya and Boyero, 2013). In addition to building a business relationship that is maintained over time and that allows achieving a significant increase in the engagement generated in the consumer's mind, through the added value along with the products and services (Cremer, 2015). Relationship marketing has market orientation as an essential pillar since its objective is to maintain solid long-term relationships with its target market through economic and social ties (Valenzuela, 2007; Castillo, 2011).

In the retail sector, adopting the relationship marketing approach proposes that marketers move from focusing exclusively on attracting new customers to caring for and preserving the existing ones by providing them with additional and relational benefits (Heiens et al., 2019). The impact on satisfaction has been validated as one of the benefits for the organization.

Relationship marketing is formed through 4 dimensions that allow its correct development: customer benefits, service quality, vision with the customer, and communication.

- (1) The customer benefits dimension shows us that, to apply adequate relationship management, in this sense, to provide different benefits to certain customers such as birthday cards, lunch invitations, and discounts, they encourage loyalty to the company (Ascoy and Arevalo, 2017).
- (2) The service quality dimension defines how customers perceive the performance of their expectations on secondary, quantitative, and qualitative elements of the service provided; the secondary, quantitative, and qualitative elements on the performance of their expectations of the organization (Atención and Gonzales, 2007).
- (3) The dimension Vision with the Customer refers to how the company anticipates the

customer's needs through information gathering. This dimension implies that the company knows the tastes and preferences of customers, and adequately satisfies their needs (Sandoval, 2020).

- (4) The communication dimension is how we interact with the customer directly and indirectly, where communication must be effective to generate lasting bonds over time (Sarmiento, 2022).

It is important to note that relationship marketing strengthens marketing strategies and impacts organizational sustainability. Disruptive marketing practices, such as relationship marketing, are considered part of the strategies that should be used to awaken customer interest in today's competitive world.

Customer Loyalty

The business scenario in the commercial sphere presents more and more challenges for entrepreneurs. In this sense, one of the main objectives of marketing specialists is to generate repurchases by their customers. To create consumer loyalty to products and the organization's brand, it is necessary to strengthen the commercial link by implementing different strategies that foster a positive environment (Espinoza et al., 2020).

Customer loyalty is conceptualized as the consumer's bond with the organization that generates the continuity of business transactions; this must be a long-term bond (Suharto et al., 2022; Arghashi et al., 2021). The importance of loyalty lies in the conception of the customer as an asset for the company (Chen et al., 2020) through the effective management of customer relationships, which is one of the key strengths of modern business management (Benzaquen, 2018). In other words, it is based on the provision of a service that highlights the qualities of the product or service, supported by the efficient assistance of the company's staff (Baduy et al., 2017), enabling portfolio improvement and increased revenue by encouraging higher sales to the most lucrative customers, promoting cross-selling, and offering various benefits. In addition, they contribute to reducing the costs associated with customer service, thus creating a comprehensive strategy that enhances the long-term company-customer relationship (Peña et al., 2015).

The main objective is to benefit the company since a committed customer would imply a constant consumption or a periodic increase in the purchase of products or services. It is worth

noting that loyal customers can become the most effective form of advertising for any company. Therefore, the greater the number of loyal customers, the greater the number of individuals motivated to choose the products or services of the company instead of opting for the competition (Pierrend, 2020). It also involves considering several key components to maintain strong and lasting relationships. These elements include product or service quality, as high-quality products are more likely to satisfy customer needs. In addition, customer experience plays a key role, as customers want to feel valued and appreciated in their interactions with the company. Effective communication is another essential aspect, as it determines the quality of customer service. Finally, customer satisfaction plays a central role in customer loyalty, as satisfied customers are more likely to repeat purchases and recommend the company to others, thus contributing to its long-term growth and success (Flores-Bautista et al., 2023).

Strategies aimed at customer loyalty comprise various aspects, including the technology facilitating interaction and communication with customers. In this context, the main objective is to establish a strong bond that generates a high level of trust between customers and the company, which, in turn, contributes to strengthening loyalty (Arias et al., 2019; Miranda et al., 2022). Likewise, according to the commonality of the studies reviewed, it is proposed that the dimensions that make up the dependent variable are: customer experience and internal marketing.

- (1) Customer experience: It is the cognitive and emotional outcome that arises from the customer's interaction with a company's employees, as well as their exposure to the processes, technologies, products, and services it offers (Vallejo-Bojorque et al., 2021).
- (2) Internal Marketing: Internal marketing seems to be a strategic practice focused on relationships, designed to support the organization's top management. Its main objective is to promote internal communication patterns within the team to generate significant advantages in organizational processes. It makes employees aware of how crucial it is to maintain high-quality standards in the information that circulates within the

company. Doing so establishes a solid foundation to optimize the flow of information, thus fostering a more effective and cohesive organizational culture (Payares et al., 2020).

Loyalty involves implementing strategies that guide decisions, generating an experience that satisfies the customer, and balancing quality service with high-quality products or services. Customer loyalty is built through careful planning that involves all processes, from production to post-sales service (Seminario et al., 2022). Today's markets have a significantly higher level of saturation. The sector requires the development of new strategies to make the organization competitive, and one of the elements that allow the healthy growth of an organization is the consolidation of a customer portfolio, which, in turn, adds to its assets. In this line, the objective is to determine the relationship between relationship marketing, its dimensions, and customer loyalty in the retail sector.

Methodology

This is a descriptive quantitative research study with a non-experimental design. It also has a correlational approach since it seeks to understand the relationship or level of connection between two or more variables in a specific framework. In addition, it has a cross-sectional design since the information will be compiled and studied in a given time. In this line, a limited period has been established for data collection. Likewise, non-probabilistic convenience sampling will be used to select participants based on the accessibility and intentionality of the researcher (Hernández Sampieri, 2004). 120 participants were randomly selected for the sample.

A questionnaire made by Sandoval (2020) was used in this research since it evaluated its variables in particular. The instrument was analyzed by doctors who are experts in methodology and subject matter, who corroborated its validity. Furthermore, according to the reliability statistics, the result obtained for the independent variable was 0.081, indicating that it has acceptable reliability, and, for the customer loyalty variable, it was 0.91, which suggests that it can be applied because it has a high-reliability rate.

Table 1. Structure of Operationalization of Variables

VARIABLES	DIMENSIONS	INDICATORS
Relationship Marketing	Customer Benefits	Appropriate customer strategy
		Promotions for each customer
	Service Quality	Service provided to each customer
		Responsiveness
		Security
	Vision with the customer	Identification of customer needs
		Building credibility and trust
		Perception of social approval
	Communication	Interest in listening to the customer
		A continuous dialogue with the customer
		Coordinate meetings with the customer
	Customer Loyalty	Customer Experience
Customer satisfaction		
Service Quality		
Internal Marketing		Incentive

Result and Discussion

The results presented from the operationalization structure of the variables and the statement of objectives allow answering the

hypothesis of the study, concluding that there is a positive relationship between the two variables (Relationship Marketing and Customer Loyalty in the retail sector), a result achieved with the Spearman's Rho correlation statistical test (Rho=0.639, Sig. (Bilateral) =0.000; ($p \leq 0.000$) (See Fig. 01).

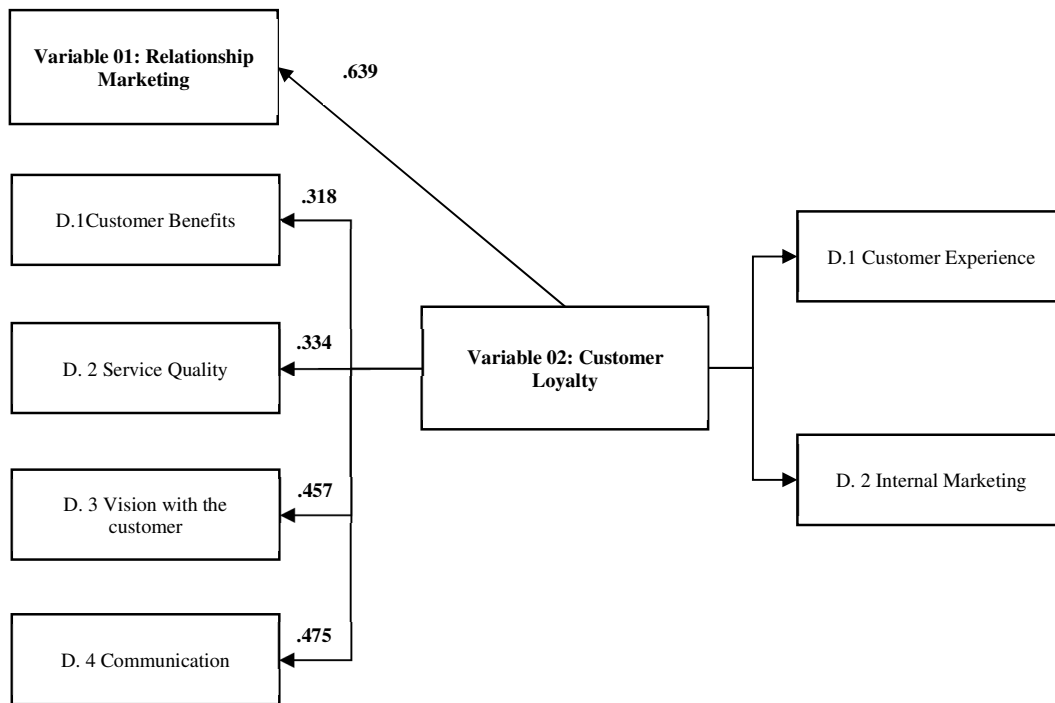


Figure 1. Variables Construct and Correlation Result

Regarding the objectives of this research that relate the dimensions of relationship marketing with the dependent variable of Customer Loyalty:

(D.1) Regarding the Customer Benefits dimension, it is shown as a correlation of 0.318 (Low positive correlation) with a p-value =0.000<0.05, being a significant correlation.

(D.2) Regarding the Service Quality dimension, a correlation of 0.334p (low positive correlation) was obtained, with a p-value =0.000<0.05, being a significant correlation.

(D.3) Regarding the Vision with the Customer dimension, a correlation of 0.457 (mean positive correlation) was obtained, with a p-value =0.000<0.05, being a significant correlation at the 0.01 level.

(D.4) Regarding the Communication dimension, a correlation of 0.475 was obtained, with a p-value =0.000<0.05, being a significant correlation at the 0.01 level.

Concerning the findings, the positive impact of implementing relationship marketing strategies on customer loyalty levels in the retail sector is established. Consequently, increasing customer

loyalty positively impacts the customer portfolio structure in relationship marketing.

The above coincides with Zulkifli (2012), who proposes that relationship marketing impacts customer loyalty, determining the existence of a positive and significant relationship between the proposed variables. In that sense, relationship marketing is conceptualized as an effort to attract and improve bonds with customers, improving the experience so that organizations can satisfy the needs and desires of their consumers. In that line, Suarniki and Lukiyanto (2020) support the findings of this research by concluding that relationship marketing affects customer satisfaction, valuation, and loyalty.

The authors mention that relationship marketing is one of the pillars of companies so that they can manage to retain their customers (Guzmán, 2014), since the Relationship Marketing theory emphasizes the relevance of trust in building and maintaining long-term business relationships (Sarmiento, 2018). In addition to strengthening bonds, relationship marketing maintains profitable and high-value customer relationships (Kotler, 2019). Other studies sought to establish the effects of relationship marketing on different variables, finding that it impacts consumer

satisfaction and, in turn, loyalty, acting as a mediating variable (Alkufahy et al., 2023). The role of marketing strategies in organizational management, especially relationship marketing, is becoming even more relevant, as its effectiveness in building relationships with consumers is identified (Thaipradit and Tantong, 2021). The effects of perceived value on customer loyalty are direct and indirect (Hänninen, N. & Karjaluoto, 2017).

Rosa and Rua (2020) argue that relationship marketing is constituted as a lever for the valuation of intangible resources, such as customer belonging, considering loyalty; that is, relationship marketing intervenes through the mediation of customer loyalty in the growth of relational and reputational resources of companies. Hidayat and Idrus (2023), in their research that connects the effect of relationship marketing with customer retention, revealed that the route of influence of relationship marketing on customer retention is through customer trust and satisfaction. Consequently, relationship marketing is proposed as an antecedent variable that affects customer retention, positioning it as the main exogenous variable to be investigated to enhance the generation of value in the commercial area of companies.

Conclusions

The findings of this research show a positive relationship between relationship marketing and customer loyalty in the retail sector. This conclusion comes from the results of the Rho Spearman statistical test (Rho=0.639, Sig. (Bilateral) =0.000; (p ≤0.000). Concerning the relationship between the dimensions of Relationship Marketing and the Customer Loyalty variable, the following is shown: customer benefit (Rho = 0.318; p = .000< .05), service quality (Rho = 0.334; p = .385>.05), customer vision (Rho = 0.457; p = .000< .05), and communication (Rho = 0.475; p = .000< .05). The results reveal that relationship marketing practices based on tactics at the level of enhancing customer perceived benefit, service quality delivery that accompanies the shopping experience, customer vision, and communication effectiveness will positively impact customer loyalty levels. These findings have relevance for strengthening the retail sector's commercial areas.

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