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## RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND CUSTOMER RETENTION - A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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### **Abstract:**

*Relationship marketing is the process of establishing, maintaining, and improving solid relationships with a company's customers and other stakeholders. Relationship marketing can significantly impact customer satisfaction, trust, commitment, and communication, which are critical in customer retention and increasing the probability of using a company's products or services in the future. With globalization and technological advancements, competition and consumer demands have become more complicated, prompting firms to employ strategies that strengthen customer loyalty and trust for long-term relationships. This paper aims to identify research trends in the field through a systematic bibliometric literature review of research on relationship marketing and customer retention. The review includes 61 articles published in the Scopus® database, presenting up-to-date knowledge on the topic. The bibliographic search included peer-reviewed articles published up to 2022. The findings indicate that relationship marketing provides a win-win solution: customers benefit from special and unique treatment under relationship marketing, and companies benefit from stronger customer relationships that eventually translate to higher profitability and performance in target markets' marketing initiatives. Relationship marketing produces multiple opportunities and benefits that facilitate the creation, maintenance, and improvement of customer retention programs.*

**Key words:** *trust; commitment; satisfaction; communication; VOSviewer*

### **1. Introduction**

In the current era of high competition and demanding customers, scholars and practitioners have recognized relationship marketing as a critical competitive advantage strategy. Marketing scholars have expanded their research on the nature and scope of relationship marketing and are increasingly developing conceptualizations exploring the value of collaborative relationships. The goal is to illustrate the significance of joint effort in creating and delivering customer value through collaboration between crucial marketing

players such as customers, distributors, and facilitators. Rootman et al. (2011) define relationship marketing as a core strategy firms employ to create, maintain, and improve mutually beneficial relationships with customers. It is a development from traditional transaction marketing that encourages marketers to focus on the efficiency and volume of individual sales. On the contrary, relationship marketing emphasizes building long-term relationships with customers by demonstrating a corporate commitment to prioritizing their needs, expectations, and demands (Payne & Frow, 2017). This transition from transaction to relationship marketing reflects a profound philosophical culture that creates a strategic vision redefining the relationship between buyers and sellers, thus contributing to the organizational goals of creating and keeping customers.

Retaining customers is a fundamental goal for many businesses. Therefore, most firms spend vast amounts of money and time developing long-term, cooperative relationships with their target consumers to enhance their performance in the highly competitive market environment (Trenggana & Cahyani, 2019). These conditions illustrate the significance of relationship marketing, which is concerned with identifying, growing, and maintaining customer relationships through long-term mutually beneficial engagements and connections. Research shows that relationship marketing can significantly impact customer satisfaction, trust, commitment, and communication, which are critical in customer retention and increasing the probability of using a company's products or services in the future (Sheth et al., 2012). However, Bataineh et al. (2015) found that the factors affecting relationship marketing and customer retention vary among researchers due to the diverse perspectives linked to the concepts. Consequently, most researchers and practitioners interested in multiple marketing sub-disciplines, including marketing channels, advertising, services marketing, and business-to-business marketing, are expanding their attention to relationship marketing to determine how they integrate its concepts into practice to improve organizational competitiveness and performance in current business environment. This paper aims to synthesize research findings to explain the conceptual foundations of relationship marketing and its impact on customer retention.

## **2. Methodological approach**

This research article intends to explain the developments in relationship marketing and its consequential impacts on customer retention. This goal is achieved through a systematic bibliometric literature review (LRSB) of 61 documents selected through the Scopus database. The LRSB method was chosen since it guarantees originality by enabling the researcher to synthesize representative data on relationship marketing and customer retention and develop insightful frameworks and perspectives. Rosário and Raimundo (2021) define LRSB as “a form of research that involves identifying an appropriate topic or problem, searching and retrieving relevant information sources to analyze and integrate literature to improve understanding” (p.3004). Based on this definition, LRSB contributes to knowledge development by allowing the researcher to combine research findings from multiple sources to place the study topic or problem in context by synthesizing relevant information, offering appropriate recommendations, and highlighting research gaps for further studies.

An LRSB involves thoroughly screening and selecting documents to ensure the validity and accuracy of data analyzed and presented. Therefore, this research adhered to the steps of conducting a systematic literature analysis that includes formulating the research question, searching for literature, assessing, and analyzing data, and interpreting and presenting the findings (Rosário & Raimundo, 2021; Raimundo & Rosário, 2021; Rosário, 2021; Rosário & Dias, 2022, Rosário, Moniz & Cruz, 2021). According to Linnenluecke et al. (2020), the value of a bibliometric analysis depends on the researcher's capability to use rigorous methods, clearly report the findings, and apply scientific strategies to reduce errors and biases. Thus, employing the scientific procedure for a systematic literature analysis was critical in ensuring the information presented in this research is replicable and accurate.

The database used for the literature search in this study was Scopus due to its popularity as a source of peer-reviewed articles in the academic world. However, the researcher acknowledges the study's potential limitation of relying on one database given the existence of multiple academic databases. The bibliographic search included peer-reviewed articles published up to 2022. The keywords "relationship marketing" were used to select titles and abstracts for the initial query. The investigation was limited to the subject area "business and management and accounting" and the exact keywords "customer retention" to narrow the search results further and identify the most appropriate documents discussing the research topic. As a result, 61 documents were identified for analysis and synthesis in the final report, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Screening methodology.

Database	Screening	Publications
Scopus		
Meta-search	Keyword: relationship marketing	3,844
First Inclusion Criterion	Keyword: relationship marketing Subject area: Business, Management and Accounting	3,235
Screening	Keyword: relationship marketing Subject area: Business, Management and Accounting Exact keywords: Customer Retention Published until May 2022	61

### 3. Publication distribution

Peer-reviewed articles on relationship marketing and customer retention until May 2022. The year 2015 had the highest number of peer-reviewed publications on the subject, reaching 7. Figure 1 summarizes the peer-reviewed literature published to May 2022.

The publications were sorted out as follows: Journal Of Relationship Marketing (9); Developments In Marketing Science Proceedings Of The Academy Of Marketing Science (7); with 2 (2011 International Conference On E-Business And E-Government Icee2011 Proceedings; African Journal Of Hospitality Tourism And Leisure; Industrial Marketing

Management; International Journal Of Bank Marketing; Journal Of Services Marketing; Journal Of Strategic Marketing; Marketing Science; Service Industries Journal) the remaining publications with 1. Interest in the topic has not been constant over the years.

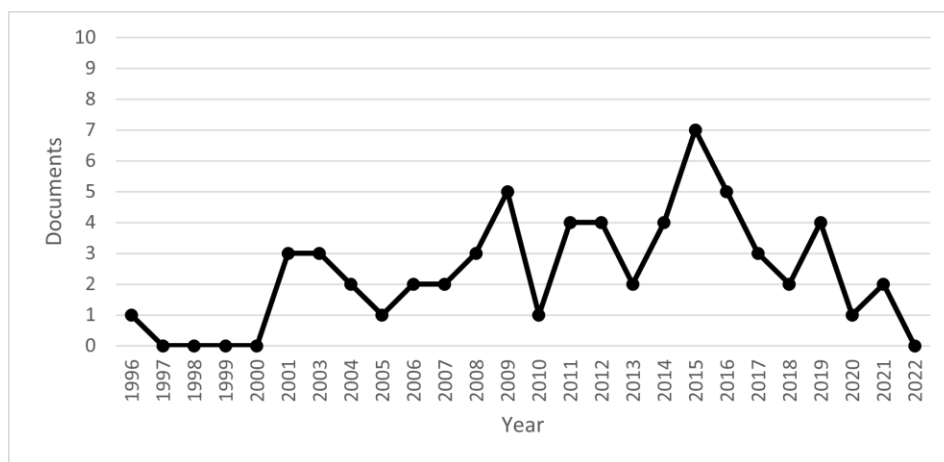


Figure 1. Documents by year.

In Table 2 we analyze for the Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR), the best quartile and the H index by publication Marketing Science is the most quoted publication with 5,940 (SJR), Q1 and H index 127.

There is a total of 12 publications in Q1, 7 publications in Q2 and 5 publications, Q3 and no publications in Q4. Publications from best quartile Q1 represent 32% of the 38 publications titles; best quartile Q2 represents 18%, best quartile Q3 represents 13%.

Finally, 14 publications without indexing data represented 37% of publications.

As evidenced in Table 2, the significant majority of publications on relationship marketing and customer retention still do not have unindexed data.

Table 2. Scimago journal & country rank impact factor.

Title	SJR	Best Quartile	H index
Marketing Science	5,940	Q1	127
Management Science	5,090	Q1	264
British Journal Of Management	2,050	Q1	115
Industrial Marketing Management	2,020	Q1	136
Marketing Theory	1,700	Q1	72
European Journal Of Marketing	1,480	Q1	110
Journal Of Services Marketing	1,230	Q1	102
Service Industries Journal	1,180	Q1	66
Journal Of Personal Selling And Sales Management	1,140	Q1	71
European Research On Management And Business Economics	1,040	Q1	24
International Journal Of Consumer Studies	0,990	Q1	77
International Journal Of Bank Marketing	0,790	Q2	81
Journal Of Business And Industrial Marketing	0,780	Q1	73

Operational Research	0,680	Q2	26
Journal Of International Consumer Marketing	0,650	Q2	48
Journal Of Business To Business Marketing	0,480	Q2	32
Journal Of Modelling In Management	0,470	Q2	32
International Journal Of Educational Management	0,460	Q2	55
International Review Of Retail Distribution And Consumer Research	0,460	Q2	43
Business Theory And Practice	0,370	Q3	19
Journal Of Relationship Marketing	0,290	Q3	25
International Journal Of Electronic Marketing And Retailing	0,260	Q3	13
Revista Brasileira De Marketing	0,260	Q3	14
African Journal Of Hospitality Tourism And Leisure	0,230	Q3	11
2019 16th International Conference On Service Systems And Service Management Icsssm 2019	0,110	-*	2
Espacios	0	-*	21
European Journal Of Economics Finance And Administrative Sciences	0	-*	20
International Conference On Management And Service Science Mass 2011	0	-*	8
Journal On Chain And Network Science	0	-*	23
Developments In Marketing Science Proceedings Of The Academy Of Marketing Science	-*	-*	-*
2011 International Conference On E Business And E Government Icee2011 Proceedings	-*	-*	-*
Asia Pacific Journal Of Marketing And Logistics	-*	-*	-*
Central European Management Journal	-*	-*	-*
Journal Of Business Industrial Marketing	-*	-*	-*
Managing Service Quality	-*	-*	-*
Managing Service Quality An International Journal	-*	-*	-*
Proceedings 2012 International Joint Conference On Service Sciences Service Innovation In Emerging Economy Cross Disciplinary And Cross Cultural Perspective Ijcss 2012	-*	-*	-*
Transformations In Business And Economics	-*	-*	-*

Note: \*data not available.

The subject areas covered by the 61 scientific and/or academic documents were: Business, Management and Accounting (61); Economics, Econometrics and Finance (6); Decision Sciences (5); Social Sciences (5); Computer Science (2); Psychology (2); Mathematics (1); and Medicine (1).

The most quoted article was "An integrated framework for customer value and customer-relationship-management performance: A customer-based perspective from China" from Wang et al. (2004) with 347 quotes published in *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*. This paper "develops an integrative framework for customer value

and CRM performance based on the identification of the key dimensions of customer value" (Wang et al., 2004, p. 169).

In Figure 2 we can analyze the evolution of citations of the documents published until May 2022. The number of citations shows a positive net growth with R2 of 12% for the period  $\leq 2012$ - May 2022.

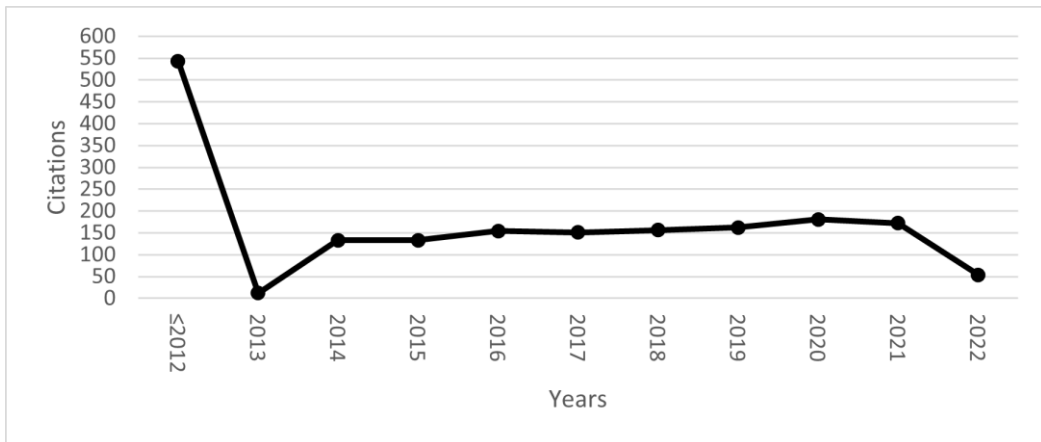


Figure 2: Evolution of citations between  $\leq 2012$  and May 2022.

The h-index was used to ascertain the productivity and impact of the published work. This metric indicates that a given author has had  $h$  articles published, each of which has  $h$  or more citations. Of the documents considered for the h-index, 6 have been cited at least 6 times.

The bibliometric study was carried out to investigate and identify indicators of the dynamics and evolution of scientific and/or academic information in documents based on the main keywords (Figure 3). The results were extracted from the scientific software VOSviewer, which aims to identify the main search keyword "customer retention".

The research was based on scientific and/or academic documents on future challenges of relationship marketing and customer retention. In Figure 4, we can examine the linked keywords, and thus, it is possible to discover linkages among subjects in this research field and trace its development, allowing us to identify the topics studied by research and identify trends in future research. Finally, Figure 5 presents a co-citation network, which allows identifying influential works and their interrelationships and thereby improve understanding of the evolution of this domain of research.

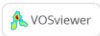
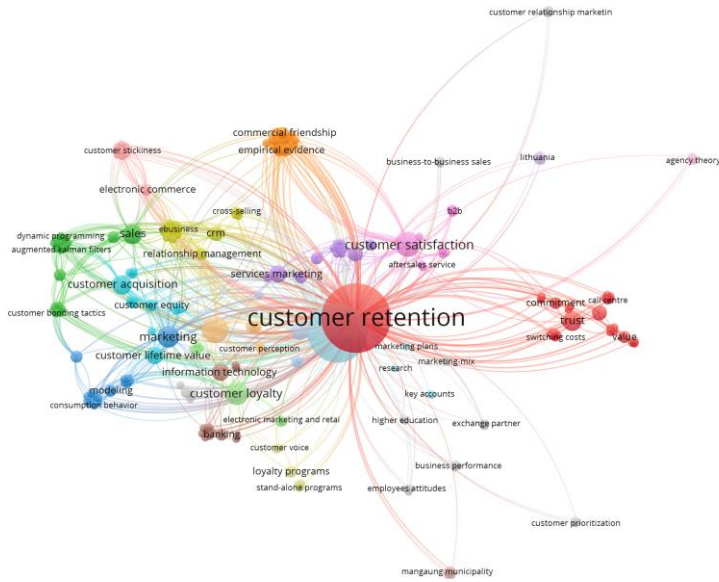


Figure 3: Network of all keywords.

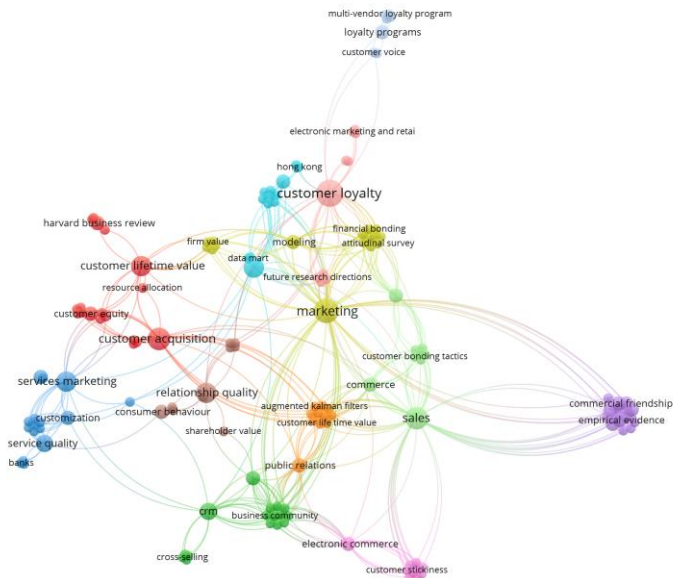


Figure 4: Network of linked keywords

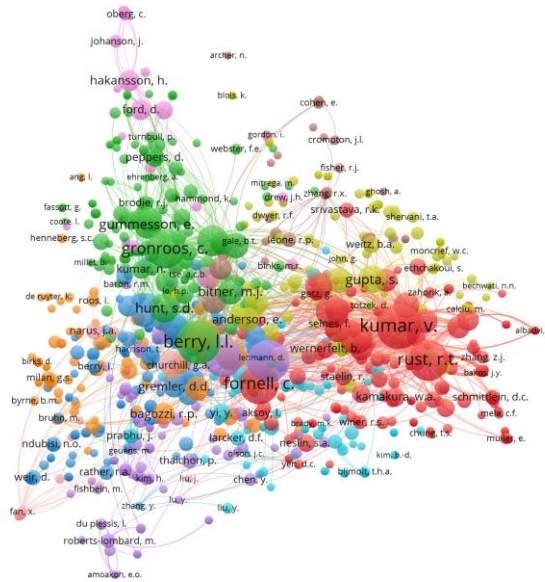


Figure 5: Network of co-citation.

#### 4. Theoretical perspectives

The competition in the current business environment has made losing customers very costly, encouraging firms to prioritize customer retention. Research shows that the cost of acquiring new customers is five times higher than keeping the existing ones (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Gaur and Bathula (2017) argue that an individual customer's profitability increases with the growing duration of the business-customer relationship. In this regard, customers that spend a long time purchasing from the same brand are more profitable than new customers. Thus, companies strive to develop long-term relationships with their customers and increase customer loyalty and profitability. According to Gaur and Bathula (2017), these companies are willing to invest in strategies and tools that help retain customers and maintain relationships. An example of such a strategy is relationship marketing which provides companies with effective methods of connecting and engaging with their target segments to build these long-term, successful, and mutually beneficial relationships that enhance their competitiveness, productivity, and performance (Rowley, 2003). This section synthesizes data on relationship marketing and customer retention to draw conclusions and illustrate how they affect organizational competitiveness and performance in the markets.

##### 4.1 Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing is the process of establishing, maintaining, and improving solid relationships with a company's customers and other stakeholders. De Seta et al. (2016) describe it as a contemporary marketing strategy used to prioritize and meet



customers' needs and desires through activities that aim to improve customer satisfaction and build trust and loyalty. Unlike traditional marketing, which focuses solely on customer acquisition and driving one-time sales, relationship marketing emphasizes customer retention and satisfaction to build long-term relationships and drive repeated sales (Echchakoui & Ghilal, 2019). Companies have embraced customized marketing strategies that provide customers with the exact information, products, or services they want in the current digital era and maintain proper communication to increase satisfaction levels. For example, some companies will make calls or send emails asking customers about the quality of their products or services after delivery (Echchakoui, 2014). This engagement builds customer-business relationships by assuring customers that their feedback and opinions are highly valued and considered throughout the business processes. Consequently, this relationship marketing technique results in long-term customer retention, and the company gains a competitive edge over the other competitors.

The history of relationship marketing can be traced to the end of distributive theory as a marketing focus after World War II. During this period, market research and producers began to shift focus to other aspects of marketing that would help influence consumers, such as pricing and merchandising (Chien & Moutinho, 2015). In addition, marketing literature began to pay attention to the significance of brand loyalty and repeat purchases, and marketing segmentation and targeting as tools of marketing planning gained prominence (Cartera et al., 2014). The shift led to the evolution of the concept, with the consumer becoming the focus of marketing attention instead of the distributor. However, despite these developments, marketing was still transactional, characterized by metrics such as sales volume and marketing share. The emphasis on customer satisfaction became prominent in the 1980s, with Leonard L. Berry introducing the concept of relationship marketing in 1983 (Sheth et al., 2012). Following this rediscovery and introduction of the concept in marketing research, relationship marketing became a popular concept in marketing practice and academic research.

Relationship marketing research began to grow in the 1990s substantially. For instance, Payne and Frow (2017) indicated that the first relationship marketing academic textbook and practitioner book was published in 1991. Following this growth in visibility, researchers and practitioners introduced multiple approaches and diverse perspectives on relationship marketing. For example, some scholars argued that relationship marketing should be limited to collaborative marketing activities that solely focus on satisfying customer needs, while others argued that it should be expanded to include other stakeholders (Payne & Frow, 2017). Sheth et al. (2012) identify multiple narrow and broad perspectives of relationship marketing, including database marketing, that involves focusing on the advertising aspects of marketing using database knowledge is considered a narrow perspective of relationship marketing. This database marketing is also referred to as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and is used as long-term customer retention and growth strategy (Debnath et al., 2016). The increased integration of information and communication technology such as big data, internet infrastructure, and affordable data warehouses in relationship marketing led to the development of CRM. Although the two concepts are often used interchangeably, Figure 6 below, adopted from Payne and Frow (2017), shows some critical differences.

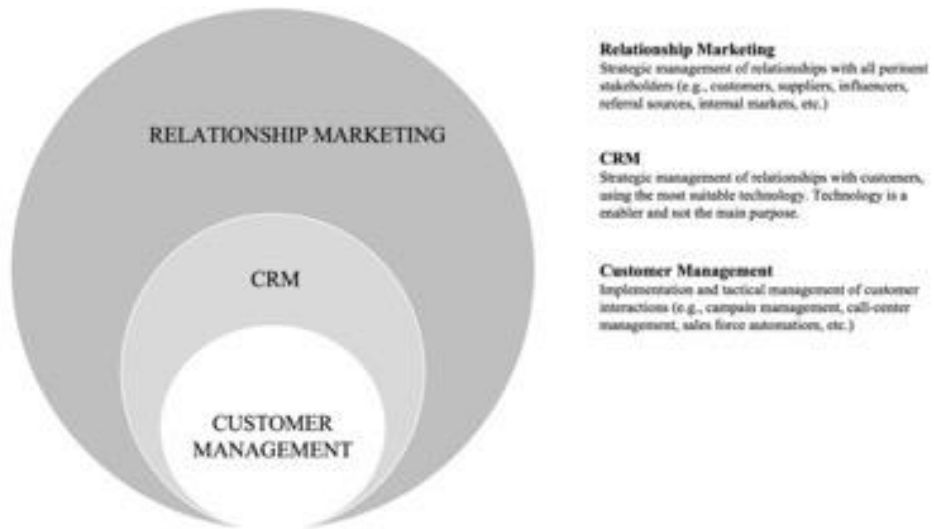


Figure 6: Relationship Marketing, CRM, and Customer Management (adapted from Payne & Frow, 2017)

Over the years, various factors have influenced the development of relationship marketing. The emergence of sophisticated computer and telecommunication technologies has enhanced producers' capability to directly interact with end-users without the use of intermediaries (Aksoy et al., 2007). This interaction was eliminated during the industrial era following the mass production that required companies to use intermediaries to deliver their products to target consumers. However, with technological developments such as the internet and social media, e-commerce platforms have become popular, allowing companies to directly engage consumers (Bruhn, 2005). Consequently, the de-intermediation process has significantly changed the nature of marketing and increased the acceptance of relationship marketing (Rui-Xue, 2011). For example, producers in the current digital markets are using databases and direct marketing to personalize marketing initiatives to build relationships with existing and potential customers (Echchakoui & Ghilal, 2019). In addition, the growth of the service industry has contributed to the development of relationship marketing by eliminating intermediaries. Service firms typically produce and deliver services without intermediaries, allowing them to emotionally bond with target customers and develop the need to maintain and improve their relationships.

Another major factor associated with the popularity of relationship marketing is the emergence of the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy. The philosophy, also referred to as the total quality movement emphasized improving quality and reducing costs to achieve customer satisfaction (Echchakoui, 2014). However, achieving this goal required creating an integrated system that prioritized building working relationships with all key stakeholders within the marketing infrastructure, including customers, suppliers, and distributors (Aksoy et al., 2007). This approach was backed up by the advent of digital technologies that facilitated the integration of systems that later expanded to consumer-packaged goods and services. Engaging these stakeholders throughout business processes allowed businesses to integrate diverse ideas and feedback to develop and sell

augmented products and services that addressed the specific needs of their customers (Bruhn, 2005). Besides, this approach allowed businesses to accommodate the rapidly changing customer expectations through collaborative relationships. Therefore, relationship marketing is seen as a flexible strategy that will enable companies to adjust their plans and objectives based on the changes in internal and external environments.

#### **4.1.1 The purpose of relationship marketing**

The overall purpose of relationship marketing is to improve the productivity of marketing initiatives and ensure that all parties involved in the processes gain mutual value. The approach uses integrated systems to organize, automate, and track business activities that generate leads, facilitate marketing, and sales forecasting, measure ROI, and promote customer service (Ennew & Binks, 1996). This practice allows firms to create marketing programs and selling activities to build solid, long-lasting relationships with customers. In addition, it enhances marketing effectiveness and efficiencies by enabling the companies to achieve strategic marketing goals, such as satisfying new and expanded customer needs, entering new markets, improving product quality, and developing new products (Rhouma & Zaccour, 2018). These activities redefine a company's competitiveness in the markets and enhance productivity, thus boosting its status in the industry.

Relationship marketing improves marketing efficiencies in multiple ways. For example, companies employ relationship marketing models to clarify the nature of marketing activities and programs that the firm and its business partners perform through specific objectives and purposes (Rese et al., 2013). By defining the purpose of the relationship marketing program, the company can identify partners with appropriate capabilities and skills to achieve mutual goals. This application is illustrated in Sheth et al.'s (2012) relationship marketing process framework that categorizes activities throughout the relationship marketing model into four sub-processes, namely, "formation, management and governance, performance evaluation, and relationship evolution or enhancement" (p.127). As shown in Figure 2, the framework indicates the significance of collaborative relationships in improving efficiencies throughout relationship marketing processes. For example, the model identifies activities such as role specification, communication, and process alignment, which are critical in facilitating collaboration among the functional groups involved in the marketing relationship processes, including marketing, financial, and operational. This cooperation can lead to greater marketing efficiencies since it helps streamline inventory management and order processing and reduce costs of distribution and acquiring customers (Rust & Chung, 2006). Thus, it is easier for firms to seek and achieve operational goals with relationship marketing.

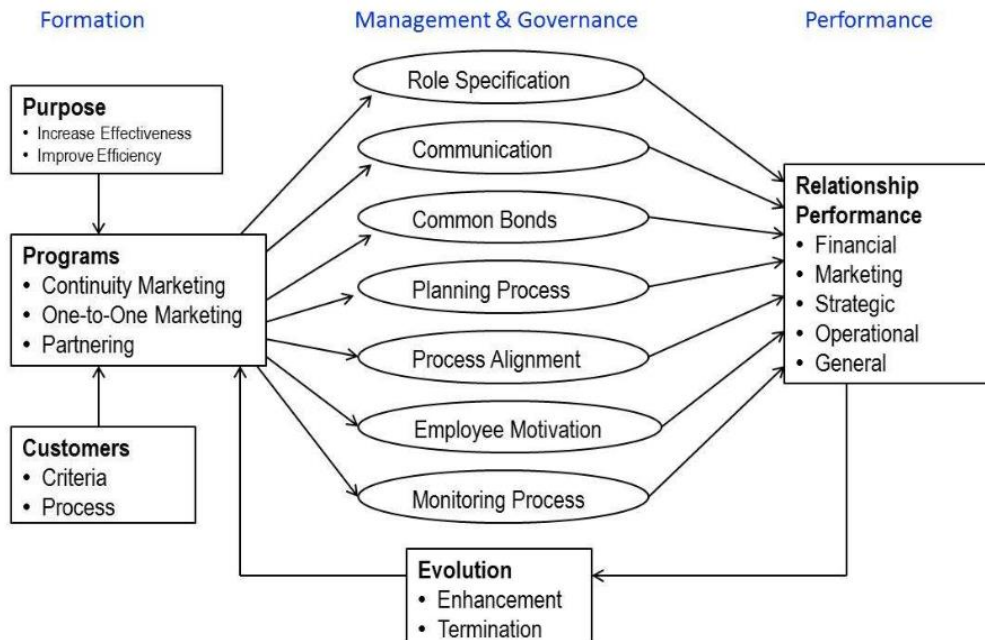


Figure 7: Relationship Marketing Process Framework (Sheth et al., 2012, p. 26).

Since relationship marketing aims to achieve customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention, the model prioritizes customer selection to enhance segmentation and personalization. Although companies can serve all types of customers, most lack the necessary resources to create and implement marketing strategies for all (Bhatnagar et al., 2007). In this case, the formation stage in the relationship marketing model helps companies narrow down their target markets by deciding which customer segments and type their relationship marketing strategies will target. This approach can help gather critical insights into existing and new customers' preferences, intentions, and behaviors, thus facilitating tailored experiences (Evanschitzky et al., 2014). Once the company gains knowledge and successfully achieves desired outcomes, the relationship marketing initiatives and strategies can be expanded to include other customers or develop broad programs that can accommodate all customers.

#### 4.1.2 Relationship marketing programs

Relationship marketing programs combine multiple tactics and methods to enhance customer experiences, leading to stronger relationships with customers. The primary goal of these programs is to ensure customer retention and promote lifetime brand loyalty (Iwuchukwu et al., 2019). A thorough literature review and analysis of corporate practices identify three main types of relationship marketing programs: continuity marketing, one-to-one marketing, and partnering programs (Sheth et al., 2012). Companies adopt either of these programs depending on the stakeholder they intend to build the relationship with, that is, whether the programs target end-user, distributors, or business-to-business customers (Friend & Johnson, 2014). However, most companies tend to combine strategies and ideas

from these programs to develop a competitive strategic approach that accommodates the needs and expectations of diverse customer segments.

#### **4.1.2.1 Relationship marketing programs**

Continuity marketing refers to a marketing technique that provides goods and services to customers through continuous programs, such as loyalty cards and membership programs. The programs offer various rewards such as redeemable bonus points and discounts to end customers who continue to purchase their products or services (Sheth et al., 2012). The subscription to these programs allows the company to continuously deliver advertising information and updates to customers. The successful adoption of these continuity marketing programs can be associated with the growing concern for new customer acquisition costs and challenges prompting companies to invest in customer retention strategies (Harrison-Walker & Coppett, 2003). Therefore, the programs are primarily established to retain customers and increase their loyalty. For distributors, the programs can include just-in-time inventory management programs, fast response, and automated order processing to improve efficiency (Hansen et al., 2010). Similarly, continuity marketing programs can be offered to business-to-business customers through various initiatives such as just-in-time sourcing arrangements and special sourcing arrangements. Therefore, continuity marketing programs provide exceptional services to customers that create mutual value to enhance satisfaction and loyalty.

#### **4.1.2.2 One-To-One Marketing Programs**

One-to-one marketing programs involve strategies that prioritize individual customer needs to establish long-term relationships and facilitate personalized engagements. It requires firms to adjust their behaviors towards a customer based on what they know about them or what they tell them. The programs are developed based on account-based marketing that aims to satisfy and meet each customer's unique and individual needs (Sheth et al., 2012). This marketing approach has rapidly grown due to developments in information technologies, data mining, and data warehouses that provide access to valuable consumer insights and technologies for personalization. For example, the key account management (KAM) program enables marketers to assign teams to align organizational resources to individual customer needs (Hui et al., 2011). However, companies must understand their target customers and assess resource availability to ensure they can implement these programs. Sheth et al. (2012) argue that these programs require extensive resource allocation and collaboration with key partners in planning. In this case, a company aiming to implement the one-to-one marketing programs must first ensure it has the necessary resources and interactive measures for joint planning to guarantee success.

#### **4.1.2.3 Partnering Programs**

Partnering programs rely on collaborative relationships between companies to create a marketing campaign that is mutually beneficial and enables both parties to achieve their strategic goals. Sheth et al. (2012) identify two types of partnering programs that exist in mass markets: co-branding and affinity partnering. Co-branding is a marketing strategy

that enables companies to combine resources and skills to create advanced products and services that satisfy a target market's needs and expectations (Ryals & Payne, 2001). It is part of a strategic alliance where multiple brand names are used to create a melded brand with a unique identity characterized by unique logos, brand identifiers, and color schemes (Kaur, 2016). Similarly, affinity partnering is a marketing strategy when partnering companies endorse each other's products. Unlike co-branding, where partnering companies develop new products, affinity partnerships use endorsement strategies to reach customers more effectively. The primary goal of affinity marketing is to promote cross-selling by taking advantage of the other party's customer membership. Other aspects of partnering programs include collaborative marketing efforts and inventory management or joint logistics planning (Koosha & Albadvi, 2020). These partnering programs offer multiple benefits, including improved brand reputation, the ability to enter a new market, and boosted brand awareness to enhance a company's performance and productivity.

#### **4.2. Customer retention**

Over the recent years, companies have recognized the significance of customer retention programs as a technique to overcome the challenges in the business environment. Some of these challenges relate to the rapid advancements in information technologies, higher competition levels, the growth of total quality initiatives, demand for product customization, globalization, and the development of the network economy (Ahmad & Buttle, 2001). These issues have prompted firms to adopt marketing strategies that connect customers with the company or brand to increase loyalty and satisfaction. One of these strategies is the customer retention programs, which refers to the activities and actions a company employs to maintain a continuous, long-term relationship with its customers (Alshurideh et al., 2012). The primary goal of these programs is to enable firms to retain as many customers as possible by investing in a mix of marketing, social media, and brand strategies that build customer trust. Throughout the customer retention process, one major aspect that businesses consider is customer experience since it influences how they think or feel about a brand (Dawes Farquhar, 2004). For example, a seamless experience that makes customers happy is more likely to influence positive attitudes and behaviors towards the brand, leading to continuous purchases and willingness to have a long-lasting relationship with a company. In addition, the company must ensure that it meets the consumers' expectations by continuously improving its products and services to meet the changing needs and demands of the consumer (Lacey, 2012). Thus, achieving desired customer retention levels is hugely dependent on the company's relationship with the customer and its ability to meet their expectations and satisfy their needs.

Customer retention programs are associated with multiple benefits and opportunities. For example, maintaining current customers is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones. Degbey (2015) indicated that acquiring new customers can be up to 25 times more expensive than retaining existing ones. Besides, current customers already trust the brand from previous purchases, making it easier and cheaper to turn them into loyal repeat buyers (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). On the contrary, new customers need more convincing, which may require the firm to invest in marketing, advertising, or sales outreach. While repeat purchases are the primary goal is customer retention, loyal

customers are also likely to promote business, including giving free recommendations to family, friends, and workmates (Aydinel & Esenyel, 2019). Thus, customer retention can lead to higher revenues. However, companies employing customer retention programs to exploit these opportunities must adopt various appropriate strategies. Examples of these strategies include delivering fast support, offering personalized interactions, and simplifying customer service workflows by empowering employees with resources, knowledge, and skills (Lacey & Morgan, 2008). In addition, providing omnichannel support to reach customers where they are and consistently gathering customer feedback and integrating it into business and marketing plans to improve processes, products, and services can lead to retention. These strategies can help improve customer experience and satisfaction, thus building the trust and loyalty needed for retention.

#### **4.2.1 Factors affecting customer retention**

Most companies consider customer retention a fundamental goal and competitive component in the current business environment. With globalization and technological advancements, competition and consumer demands have become more complicated, prompting firms to employ strategies that strengthen customer loyalty and trust for long-term relationships (Bardauskaite, 2014). However, a customer's intention to continuously purchase products or services from a particular provider can be influenced by multiple factors (Shalan et al., 2021). For instance, most studies indicate that customer satisfaction, trust, and corporate commitment can influence customer attitudes towards a company or a brand, affecting intentions to be part of the company-customer relationship that facilitates retention (Husnain & Akhtar, 2015). Therefore, this section aims to review previous studies and identify the main factors influencing customer retention. The various factors identified are summarized and analyzed below.

##### **4.2.1.1 Trust**

Customer trust is a critical component in establishing and maintaining long-lasting company-customer relationships to strengthen the company's competitive edge. Nguyen et al. (2013) define trust as the "level of reliability ensured by one party to another within a given exchange relationship" (p.99). In relationship marketing, trust is often associated with customers' expectations regarding its capability to assume its responsibilities and keep its promises. Customers usually base these expectations on a company's competence, goodwill, and honesty reflected in previous interactions (Lam & Burton, 2006). Consequently, trust results from an existing company-customer relationship and is built over time at every touchpoint and interaction. According to Hulliburton and Poenaru (2010), consumer trust helps strengthen relationships in that it facilitates emotional connection that significantly influences purchasing decisions and intentions. Besides, it is a critical element of success for businesses characterized by high risks, vulnerabilities, and uncertainties (Liang et al., 2008). For example, trust plays a crucial role in e-commerce, where customers only engage in online transactions if they can trust the sellers due to a lack of physical interactions. Customers who trust a firm expect it to respect its promises and act based on their interests. Therefore, trust is a critical component in developing and maintaining customer-brand relationships.

#### **4.2.1.2 Customer satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction occurs when a client's needs are met, and their concerns are addressed to ensure they are satisfied with the experience with the company and its products and services. It reflects on their attitude towards the brand or the products or services marketed and how they perceive them. Danish et al. (2015) defines customer satisfaction as "customer reaction and emotions towards expectation and performance appraisal" (p.29). This definition indicates that customers can either be satisfied or dissatisfied with a product or service by comparing results achieved to desired outcomes. Similarly, Climis (2016) defines it as a "person's sensing of liking or disliking that results from comparing the outcome of service or product perceived performance in relation to customer expectations" (p.53). These definitions indicate that customer satisfaction occurs when customers compare a product's performance with their expectations. Consequently, the primary aspects to consider when determining customer satisfaction are how happy they are with the products or services and how close these offerings meet their expectations and satisfy their needs (Lin & Wu, 2011). Delighted customers are more profitable and can increase a company's competitiveness in its respective industry since high customer satisfaction enhances repurchasing intentions and leads to customer retention (Husnain & Akhtar, 2015). In addition, increased customer satisfaction increases the company's success by lowering the costs of future transactions and increasing loyalty and brand reputation. Besides, customers may give word-of-mouth recommendations to their friends, family, and colleagues to share their positive experiences with the brand. These potential benefits can increase the company's performance, productivity, and profitability.

#### **4.2.1.3 Communication**

Good communication is the key to customer retention since it helps build trust, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Companies must learn to communicate their brand values appropriately to target customers to create long-term relationships by illustrating how they relate to their interests (Lindgreen, 2001). The success of consumer relationships in marketing is dependent on communication throughout the collaborative process since providing an excellent consumer experience requires business partners and their key stakeholders to work together (Husnain & Akhtar, 2015). In addition, effective communication ensures that customers have access to accurate information providing product or service information and company value proposition. This information is later used to compare product performance after purchase versus expectation, determining repurchasing decisions and directly influencing customer retention. Companies must realize that customer retention is about keeping the customer happy by ensuring that they are satisfied with the products or services they purchased (Liu et al., 2012). One major communication error they often make is failing to recognize communication as an ongoing process. For instance, companies will constantly communicate with prospective customers to purchase marketed products or services (Liu et al., 2011). However, this communication stops after the transaction, which often leads to the loss of a potential long-term client. Making communication an ongoing process helps build long-lasting relationships that help retain customers.



#### **4.2.1.4 Relationship Commitment**

Commitment is a critical element in creating successful relationships between the company and its customers. It is often driven by the desire to maintain valued customers and build mutually beneficial relationships. In the case of relationship marketing, both parties must have a desire to keep the relations (Luo et al., 2019). Commitment can be interpreted from two critical perspectives: affective commitment and calculative commitment. Affective commitment is associated with personal and emotional attachment between a customer and the brand (Mahmoud et al., 2018). Calculative commitment is primarily economic, where a customer commits to a relationship with a specific organization to avoid high switching costs. Regardless of the dimension of commitment defining the relationship, it can lead to customer retention.

#### **4.3 The impact of relationship marketing on customer retention**

Relationship marketing can have both direct and indirect impacts on customer retention since it involves building and maintaining customer relationships. Unlike traditional marketing, which focuses on one-time sales, relationship marketing emphasizes keeping customers engaged and happy, thus creating long-term connections that increase customer loyalty and trust (Mathur & Kumar, 2013). In addition, relationship marketing strategies such as loyalty programs and membership cards provide customers with additional benefits that encourage them to continuously purchase from the firm (Milan et al., 2015). As a result, these strategies ensure that the relationship is mutually beneficial as the customers access the additional value through special services such as discounts, while the company increases its profitability and competitiveness in its respective industry. Therefore, relationship marketing reflects its proactive effort to keep its loyal customers while attracting new potential ones.

Relationship marketing improves customer retention by ensuring that customers access personalized and meaningful experiences. While generating sales is vital in marketing, relationship marketing prioritizes establishing meaningful connections with customers through curated content and friendly interactions. In this case, the approach integrates marketing principles with customer service to provide high-quality services and meet customer demands (Musalem & Joshi, 2009). For example, the customer service agents handling calls are empowered with resources and skills to deal with customer questions or complaints and interactions in friendly and professional ways that lead to higher satisfaction (Palmer, 2015). In addition, this approach helps distinguish the company from its competitors by offering products and services based on customers' needs and preferences. Customer retention is more likely to occur if customers feel that the organization values them and their performance (Sliz & Delińska, 2021). For example, responding to customer feedback can build company-customer relationships and trust by creating a sense of belonging where customers feel like they are part of the company's processes or communities. Thus, the personalization and meaningful experiences created through relationship marketing influence customer retention.

Relationship marketing employs a collaborative approach that requires cooperation between the company's departments and other key stakeholders, including customers. This collaboration facilitates customer engagement, builds an emotional connection between the

customer and the company, and allows businesses to measure, understand, and enhance their relationships (Papazissimou & Georgopoulos, 2009). Companies must realize that every interaction they have with their customers can potentially build trust and lead to customer satisfaction and can be used to strengthen their emotional connection with the brand. Therefore, firms employing relationship marketing should prioritize quality interactions and services to appeal to target customers and build loyalty and trust (Quach et al., 2016). Customer engagement is associated with multiple factors, including commitment, loyalty, interest, and satisfaction, which are necessary for customer retention and business growth. Thus, marketers must acknowledge that an engaged customer will be loyal, happy, and more likely to value their long-term relationship with a brand.

Relationship marketing delivers a higher return on investment (ROI) and builds a better understanding of the customer for advanced products and services. Since relationship marketing is a long-term strategy and promotes repurchases through loyalty and retention, it helps generate consistent revenues leading to growth in overall profitability (Rakesh & Khare, 2009). Besides, the ongoing communication strategies employed under relationship marketing models enable constant customer engagement and interactions that improve the organization's understanding of its consumer base (Thaichon & Quach, 2015). For example, the feedback and reviews gathered through interactions with customers can help marketers understand their specific desires and needs. In addition, the marketers learn about consumers' preferences regarding content, communication models, and product or service qualities (Rese, 2003). Wang et al. (2004) argue that this information can be integrated into business processes to improve products and services curated for specific markets. This highly targeted marketing approach proves to consumers that the company understands and values them and is committed to addressing and satisfying their needs and demands. This unique treatment can lead to higher retention as consumers feel cherished and understood.

## **5. Conclusion**

Relationship marketing has become critical strategy companies use to create, maintain, and enhance mutually beneficial relationships with target markets in the current competitive markets. Unlike traditional marketing approaches that prioritize one-time sales, relationship marketing aims to build a long-term customer-company relationship that guarantees a company's financial performance for a long time. Under this model, companies focus on redefining their relationships with customers to build trust and loyalty and reinstating their commitment to delivering the promises guaranteed in the value proposition statement. These aspects lead to customer retention, which involves a company's capability to maintain a continuous on-term relationship with their customers. Relationship marketing improves customer retention by making the customer the focus of the marketing efforts. For instance, it involves collaborative activities to enhance customer satisfaction and experiences with the brand through frequent engagements, rewards, and participation in surveys where their insights are used to improve processes, products, and services. These activities can be offered through three major types of relationship marketing programs: continuity, one-to-one, and partnering marketing programs. The

choice of the program implemented in any company depends on the target customer segments, marketing goals, and resources.

Since relationship marketing is customer-centered, marketers provide personalized and meaningful experiences that lead to higher retention rates. The relationships created through this marketing approach build an emotional connection between customers and the company characterized by trust, commitment, satisfaction, and appropriate communication. For example, customer service agents maintain friendly interactions with customers and address customer queries to ensure customer satisfaction. The primary purpose of embracing such an approach is to ensure that customers feel valued and appreciated by the company and its employees. Besides, customer engagement can significantly contribute to organizational competitiveness due to increased access to market information. For instance, when customers provide feedback regarding a product or service, marketers and other internal teams within an organization can use this data to develop new products or improve existing ones to ensure that outcomes match consumers' desired and expected results. Thus, the approach can help companies adjust to the rapidly changing business environment by integrating up-to-date market insights. While customers benefit from special and unique treatment under relationship marketing, companies benefit from stronger customer relationships that eventually translate to higher profitability and performance in target markets' marketing initiatives. Therefore, relationship marketing provides multiple opportunities and benefits that facilitate the creation, maintenance, and improvement of customer retention programs.

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