

The Effect of Service Context in Consumer Relationship Proneness and Behavior

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Abstract

Objective: The paper discusses the effect of context on service relationships. Considering the customers' point of view, we argue that customers may hold different proneness to establish a relationship with the provider depending on the specific service context. Different relationship proneness will, in turn, influence the more or less favorable behavior of the consumer in the relationship. As such, this paper aims to increase understanding of consumer relationship proneness and its role in different service settings.

Methodology: Data were collected in two contexts, high and low contact services (health services and wholesales, respectively). Through a convenience sample of 516 consumers, we conducted a survey to examine differences in consumer proneness and behaviors in both contexts.

Conclusion: Results revealed that consumer relationship proneness and behaviors vary significantly among the contexts studied. In the high contact service (healthcare services), customers exhibit higher relationship proneness and show more favorable behaviors towards the relationship, when compared with the low contact service (wholesales). It was also found that the majority of consumer behaviors are, in both contexts, correlated with relationship proneness.

Implications: This research aims to fill an existing gap in the RM literature by taking consumer relationship proneness into consideration. Additionally, the effect of service types has not yet been fully explored, particularly in the customer relationship field. In managerial terms, the results of this study provide guidance to managers to differentiate customer relationship strategies according to the specific service context that they operate in.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, Service Context, Relationship Proneness

1. Introduction

During the 1980s, relationships became one of the main issues in marketing, with several authors emphasizing the importance of relationships in business. A new term, “Relationship Marketing” (RM), has entered the marketing literature. Berry (1983) first introduced the term relationship marketing, defining it as attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships.

Today, RM is embraced by both practitioners and academics in a wide range of markets and contexts (O’Malley and Tynan 2000). But RM practices may not be effective in every situation (Pressey and Mathews, 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2009) since differences between contexts may affect the existing buyer-seller relationships patterns and relationship proneness. Grönroos (1995) stated that the marketing strategies available may be seen as a continuum between a relationship-oriented strategy and a transaction-oriented strategy, and that one orientation makes more sense than another depending on the situation. However, the role of context in relationships has not yet been fully explored, particularly in the customer relationship field.

We thus offer a new direction by investigating differences in customer relationships based on different contexts. Namely, the empirical research was conducted in service contexts given its inherently relational nature (Grönroos, 2000) and since much of the current understanding of RM is due to advances in these settings (Lindgreen and Pels, 2002). Additionally, though it has been recognized that the nature of customer relationships is influenced by the nature of services, very little empirical research exists that takes into account the effect of service contexts on customer relationships (Galetza et al, 2006; Veloutsou et al, 2002; Paolo and Laurent, 2010).

Considering the customers’ point of view, we argue that customers may hold different proneness to establish a relationship with the provider depending on the specific service context. With low contact, reduced and commoditized services, consumers may not attach much value to relationships. Conversely, in contexts characterized by high contact and service components and customization, customers may be more relationship prone. Different relationship proneness will, in turn, influence the more or less favorable behavior of the consumer in the relationship. As such, this paper aims to increase understanding of consumer relationship proneness and its role in different service settings.

The paper begins with a brief literature review. We then test our hypothesis through data collected in two contexts, high and low contact services. A self-administered, cross-sectional survey was conducted to examine differences in consumer relationship proneness and behaviors (e.g. word-of-mouth and repurchase intention) in both contexts. A convenience sample of 516 consumers was used to perform significance and correlation tests. We end up concluding that consumer relationship proneness and behaviors vary significantly among the contexts studied and that the majority of consumer behaviors are, in both contexts, correlated with relationship proneness.

2. Relationship Marketing and Consumer Relationship Proneness

Since the early 1980s, a new phrase has entered the marketing literature: “Relationship Marketing” (RM). This philosophy is said to have replaced the old short term marketing practices, defined as stressing sales and promotions instead of relationship enhancement, and conveniently labeled “transactional marketing” by RM proponents (Fernandes and Proença, 2008). According to Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), marketers started realizing the limitations of their transaction-oriented strategies under pressure of eroding repeat purchases and intensified competitive pressures in increasingly saturated markets.

Though in marketing there is a long lasting tradition that has always valorized relationships - Grönroos (2004) states the phenomenon itself is as old as the history of trade and commerce - the roots of RM can be found over three decades ago (Möller and Halinen 2000). In a conference paper on service marketing, Berry (1983) first introduced the term relationship marketing, defining it as attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships. Two years after, Jackson (1985) used it in a business-to-business context. During the 70s, the channels literature introduces the discussion about efficient channel relationships (Dwyer et al. 1987). Later, Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggested that relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges and Gummesson (2002) described relationship marketing as marketing based on interaction within networks of relationships.

Today, RM is embraced by both practitioners and academics in a wide range of markets and contexts (O'Malley and Tynan 2000). But is the concept of RM ubiquitous and can it be applied to any context? (Zolkiewski 2004) Some scholars argue that RM is context-specific (Egan, 2003). In this discussion, it is important to underline that relationships both drive and are driven by the context where they take place (Fournier et al. 1998), that marketing is context driven (Egan, 2003) and that it is important to recognize the context in which exchanges take place (Möller and Halinen 2000).

Thus, RM practices may not be effective in every situation (Thompson et al 2000; Egan and Harker, 2006; Grayson and Ambler, 1999; Pressey and Mathews, 2000; Shrivastava and Kale 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2009) since differences between contexts may affect the existing buyer-seller relationships patterns. Each product-market may exhibit different levels of relationship-friendliness or proneness (Bahia et al., 2005), since enhancing relationships is generally easier in high involvement contexts as opposed to low involvement ones (deWulf et al., 2001; Pressey and Mathews, 2000). Also product categories characterized by high service components and customization (Gronroos, 2000) may help the formation of relationships. The context may not only alter the status quo, but also the actor's disposition and behavior (Pels, 1999).

From the seller's perspective, relational benefits are widely discussed in the literature. By adopting relational marketing strategies, the company gets benefits such as increased customer retention and duration of the relationship, increasing profitability and therefore greater stability and security (Gummesson, 1997). Moreover, customer loyalty also becomes profitable because retaining customers is less expensive than to conquer new ones (Berry, 1995). The literature often discusses activities the firm should engage in to develop relationships with customers (e.g., CRM strategies, loyalty programs), following the assumption that a relationship can be formed with any customer, in any situation (Blois, 1997).

However, firms are often surrounded by incorrect beliefs about what matters to customers and their reaction to relational strategies. Not all customers wish to engage in close relationships, nor are they willing participants in RM strategies or equally receptive (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). Customers can be transactional in some situations and relational in others (Benamour and Prim, 2000; Pels, 1999; Bloemer et al., 2003; Grönroos, 2004). Customers may perceive some advantages in maintaining a relationship, such as confidence (reduced anxiety and comfort), social (personal recognition and familiarity) and special treatment (customization) benefits (Gwinner et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). But when the drawbacks of engaging in a relationship (e.g. loss of privacy and freedom of choice, upkeep, commitment) are perceived as too high by the consumer, relationship formation might be avoided (Noble and Philips, 2004). For instance, deWulf et al. (2001) claim that while in high-involvement situations, customers desire more personal treatment, in low-involvement situations the treatment of customers as individuals would not probably pay off (Han et al, 2008) and, however well-intentioned, could even be regarded by

the customer as undesirable (Christy et al, 1996). Also situations when consumers play a passive role and interactive communication is lacking do not facilitate a relational environment (Pressey and Mathews, 2000). The clients' receptivity to engage in relationships is believed to affect the success of relational strategies (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Bahia et al., 2005). When the RM concept is applied too broadly or where it is misapplied, valuable company resources may be wasted (Barnes, 2003). Yet, little work has been done to explore why consumers may be interested in, or more prone to, form a relationship with their company (Noble and Philips, 2004).

3. Consumer Relationship Proneness and Behavioral Intentions

Some customers are more likely to create and commit to relationships with a company, in a long-term basis. These consumers exhibit high consumer relationship proneness (Parish and Holloway, 2010; Bouguerra and Mzougha, 2011).

In this study, we define consumer relationship proneness as a consumer's tendency to engage in relationships with providers of a particular product category. According to Barnes (1997), in some situations a relationship can't be formed because customers do not want one or because the circumstances surrounding the firm's interaction with its customers are not conducive. Consumer relationship proneness can vary according to a variety of factors. Besides consumer individual traits (e.g. personal characteristics, individual preferences, demographic variables, consumer lifestyle), the literature mainly discusses the importance of contextual factors.

Customers with higher relationship proneness tend to exhibit behaviors more favorable to the development of the relationship (Odekerken-Schröder, deWulf and Schumacher, 2001). Repeat purchasing is more likely in relationship prone customers (Zeithaml et al. 1996). These customers also tend to recommend more and to generate positive word of mouth (Zeithaml et al. 1996). In terms of price sensitivity, relationship prone customers tend to be less sensitive to the price, since the connection that the company establishes with its clients turns them less sensitive to price changes in the company or in the competition (Grönroos, 1994). Regarding complaints, relationship prone customers tend to express their complaints to the provider instead of third parties (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). The important role played by customers in the production of services, and the importance of keeping customers loyal makes the handling of complaints a critical moment in the development and maintenance of relationships (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991).

4. Problem definition and research methodology

Research problem

According to our literature review, the aim of this study is to investigate differences in customer relationships based on contextual factors. We argue that customers may hold different proneness to establish a relationship given the context considered and that these differences, in turn, affect the more or less favorable behavior of the consumer in the relationship.

The empirical research was conducted in service contexts given its inherently relational nature (Grönroos, 2000) and since much of the current understanding of RM is due to advances in these settings (Lindgreen and Pels, 2002). Two distinct service contexts were considered, defined according to the level of customer contact with the service provider (Lovelock and Wright, 2004). The first is the healthcare context, where the consumer has a high degree of contact with the service provider, the service is personalized and is centered on people. The second context is retailing/wholesales, where the degree of contact with the customer is lower (Lovelock and Wright, 2004). Since this is a mass service, the main emphasis is the standardization of processes (Silpakit and Fisk, 1985). The degree of contact affects several aspects of service operations.

When a service has a lower degree of contact with the client, the use of physical resources tends to be a priority, thus encouraging the standardization of processes. On the other hand, services with a high degree of contact with the customer tend to minimize the importance of highly structured actions to stimulate new business and are based mostly on the personal relations between the client and the provider (Lovelock and Wright, 2004).

Taking into account the contexts chosen, it becomes relevant to try to understand how consumer behavioral intentions and their relationship proneness differ according to the context analyzed. It is thus significant (i) firstly, to assess the differences in consumers relationship proneness between the contexts presented in order to understand if this proneness changes from context to context; and (ii) secondly, to make the same analysis for consumer behavioral intentions.

The second part of the study analyzes the correlation, in both contexts, between consumer relationship proneness and the different dimensions of behavioral intentions previously mentioned (namely repeat purchase, word of mouth, price sensitivity and complaints) in order to verify whether this correlation is statistically significant.

Research hypotheses

As discussed in the literature review, contextual factors can affect the nature of relationships and the behavior of the parties involved. From the point of view of the consumer, with reduced services, commoditized products, increased availability and reduced switching costs, consumers may not attach much value to relationships (Pressey and Mathews, 2000). Conversely, highly complex and salient purchases may be situations for which customers may desire to be relational due to complexity and perceived costs associated with incorrect decision making (Burnham et al., 2003; Venetis and Ghauri, 2004). Also, highly emotional and personalized purchases may also be an indicator of the willingness to be involved in relationships (Sheaves and Barnes, 1996; Yu and Dean, 2001; Coulter and Ligas, 2004).

Several studies have analyzed the behavior of consumers and relational orientation from context to context, in services as diverse as hairdressing, health, retail or banking (Han et al, 2008; Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder (2007); Bloemer et al. (2003); Odekerken-Schröder et al. (2001); Pressey and Mathews, 2000; Gwinner et. al, 1998; Grönroos, 1995). However, to date the majority of these studies are based on one service industry and cross-validation across different service industries is lacking (Paolo and Laurent, 2010). In this study, the first hypotheses are based on the comparison between consumer behavioral intentions in the healthcare context (high-touch and high involvement service) and in the retailing/wholesales context (low contact and involvement service), as well as the distinction of consumer relationship proneness between both contexts:

H1: There are significant differences between behavioral intentions in the healthcare context when compared with the retailing/wholesales context

H2: There are significant differences between consumer relationship proneness in the healthcare context when compared with the retailing/wholesales context

The existence of a correlation between consumers' relational orientation and their future behavioral intentions was explored by Bloemer et al. (2003) in a context of high contact services, and Odekerken-Schröder et al. (2001) in an industrial context. While Odekerken-Schröder et al. (2001) introduced the relational propensity of the consumer as a variable capable of influencing behavioral intentions of consumers, Bloemer et al. (2003) proved the existence of a relationship between relational propensity of consumers and their behavioral intentions, albeit limited. Based on literature review, our third hypothesis intends to verify the existence of a correlation between consumer behavioral intentions and their relationship proneness in both contexts:

H3: Consumer relationship proneness is correlated with behavioral intentions in both contexts

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a self-administered, on-line, cross-sectional survey. A convenience sample of 516 consumers was used to perform significance and correlation tests. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the first part aims to characterize the sample; the second part evaluates consumer relationship proneness and behaviors in the healthcare service; and finally the third part evaluates consumer relationship proneness and behaviors in the retailing/wholesales context. All constructs were measured based on multi-item scales established in previous research (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Bloemer et al., 2003; Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2003) and assessed in a 7-point Likert scale.

Data analysis begins with the characterization of the sample, followed by a comparative analysis of relationship proneness (H1) and behavioral intentions (H2) in both contexts. Later, an exploratory factor and a correlation analysis are performed in order to determine if behavioral intentions and consumer relationship proneness are related in both contexts (H3).

5. Research findings

The majority of the respondents (59.3%) were female, aged between 25 to 34 (49.2%) and with a bachelor degree (40.9%) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Description: respondents profile

Variables	Frequency	Percentage of total
<i>Gender:</i>		
Male	210	40,7%
Female	306	59,3%
<i>Age:</i>		
From 18 to 24 years old	159	30,8%
From 25 to 34 years old	254	49,2%
From 35 to 44 years old	67	13,0%
From 45 to 54 years old	26	5,0%
From 55 to 64 years old	10	1,9%
<i>Education:</i>		
Primary School	1	0,2%
Secondary School	95	18,4%
Bachelors/Licenciatura	211	40,9%
Master's degree	190	36,8%
PhD	19	3,7%
<i>Annual Income:</i>		
Less Than 6790€	99	19,2%
6791€ - 14000€	190	36,8%
14001€ - 21000€	92	17,8%
21001€ - 35000€	44	8,5%
35000€ and more	31	6,0%
Not Stated	60	11,6%

Hypothesis testing

To verify H1 and H2, respectively, we have performed the t-Student independence test in order to analyze differences between behavioral intentions (Table 2) and consumer relationship proneness (Table 3) in both contexts, item by item. For all items and dimensions, the average value assigned to the healthcare context is different to the average value assigned to the retailing context and the differences observed are statistically significant ($p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$). The only exception is the second item of the “Repeat Purchase” dimension.

Table 2: H1 Testing Results: t-Student test performed to behavioral intentions in both contexts

Behavioral Intentions	Items description	Average Healthcare Context	Average Retailing Context	t-student
Word of Mouth (WOM)	WOM1 Say positive things	5,11	4,64	✓
	WOM2 Recommend XYZ to someone who seeks your advice	5,08	4,74	✓
	WOM3 Encourage friends and relatives to do business with XYZ	4,71	4,25	✓
Repeat Purchase (RP)	RP1 Consider XYZ your first choice to buy services	5,33	4,92	✓
	RP2 Do more business with XYZ in the next few years	4,14	4,17	x
	RP3 Do less business with XYZ in the next few years	2,92	3,16	✓
Price Sensitivity (PS)	PS1 Take some of your business to a competitor that offers better prices	3,33	5,63	✓
	PS2 Continue to do business with XYZ if its prices increase somewhat	4,64	3,09	✓
	PS3 Pay a higher price than competitors charge for the benefits you currently receive from XYZ	4,14	2,74	✓
Complaints (C)	C1 Switch to a competitor if you experience a problem with XYZ's service	4,97	5,21	✓
	C2 Complain to other customers if you experience a problem with XYZ's service	4,89	5,38	✓
	C3 Complain to external agencies, such as consumer organizations, if you experience a problem with XYZ's service	3,55	4,33	✓
	C4 Complain to XYZ's employees if you experience a problem with XYZ's service	4,42	5,16	✓

✓ (X) - The difference is (not) statistically significant for a significance level of 5%

Sources: Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. and Parasuraman, A. (1996); Bloemer, J., Odekerken-Schröder, G. and Kestens, L. (2003)

Table 3: H2 Testing Results: t-Student test performed to consumer relationship proneness in both contexts

	Items description	Average Healthcare Context	Average Retailing Context	t-student
Consumer Relationship Proneness (CRP)	CRP1 Generally, I am someone who likes to be a regular customer of a service provider	5,19	4,69	✓
	CRP2 Generally, I am someone who wants to be a steady customer of the same service provider	5,33	4,52	✓
	CRP3 Generally, I am someone who is willing to 'go the extra mile' to purchase at the same service provider	4,98	3,56	✓

✓ (X) - The difference is (not) statistically significant for a significance level of 5%

Source: Odekerken-Schröder, G., De Wulf, K. and Schumacher, P. (2003)

To verify H3, we first performed an exploratory factorial analysis. This analysis aims to simplify the relationships between groups of items, resulting in the definition of a new set of factors which explain the parametric correlations between the variables (Hill and Hill, 2005). Four new factors were extracted, referring to each one of the four behavioral intentions considered. The same was

done for consumer relationship proneness, with one factor extracted (Table 4), reaching accepted values for all constructs.

Table 4: Exploratory factorial analysis results for behavioral intentions and consumer relationship proneness

Behavioral Intentions	Context	Number of Components	KMO	Variance Extracted	Cronbach's Alpha
Word of Mouth	Healthcare	3	0,71	82,67%	0,892
	Retailing	3	0,75	84,02%	0,903
Repeat Purchase	Healthcare	3	0,67	64,13%	0,718
	Retailing	3	0,6	61,23%	0,68
Price Sensitivity	Healthcare	3	0,64	65,58%	0,727
	Retailing	3	0,66	68,17%	0,765
Complaints	Healthcare	4	0,62	53,35%	0,706
	Retailing	4	0,7	56,96%	0,74

Consumer Relationship Proneness	Context	Number of Components	KMO	Variance Extracted	Cronbach's Alpha
	Healthcare	3	0,73	79,02%	0,866
	Retailing	3	0,68	81,74%	0,886

In order to verify the existence of a positive relationship between consumer relationship proneness and their behavioral intentions in both contexts (H3), a correlation analysis was performed. The results are presented in Table 5:

Table 5: Correlation analysis results: consumer relationship proneness and behavioral intentions

	Consumer Relationship Proneness			
	Healthcare Context		Retailing Context	
	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Word of Mouth	0,506	0	0,511	0
Repeat Purchase	0,559	0	0,563	0
Price Sensitivity	0,463	0	0,452	0
Complaints	0,02	0,649	0,109	0,013

In both contexts, the correlations between consumer relationship proneness and word of mouth, repeat purchase and price sensitivity are significant (p-value < 0.01). Repeat purchase and word of mouth have correlation coefficients larger than 0.5, which means that there is a strong correlation in both contexts. Price sensitivity presents a moderate correlation with consumer relationship proneness. In the case of complaints, both contexts show low, non-significant correlation coefficients (below 0.25).

6. Discussion of results

Our study shows there are statistically significant differences in consumer behavioral intentions between the contexts analyzed (H1), with the exception of one item on the “Repeat Purchase” dimension. Healthcare customers tend to exhibit behaviors more favorable to the development of the relationship than retailing customers for all behavior intentions where the differences were significant, since context conditions are more conducive. It was also possible to verify that there are significant differences in consumer relationship proneness between the contexts analyzed (H2), in favor of the healthcare context, where customers have direct contact with the service provider

and the degree of customization is higher. Finally, it was also concluded that consumer behavioral intentions are correlated with relationship proneness in both contexts, except for complaints. This situation may be related to internal complaints. According to Zeithaml et al. (1996), authors of the scale in which the analysis was based, clients that demonstrate a more favorable disposition towards the company may be more likely to make complaints internally to give a second chance to the company.

However, this study is not without its limitations. First, the limitations of data collection warrant caution in generalizing these results beyond the population sampled. Replication of this study with random sampling procedures would clearly add weight to the reported results. Second, further research using a longitudinal design could better address relationship dynamics. This study could also be improved with access to database information on customer actual behavior history since measurements were based on self-reports. Additionally, a number of factors, such as consumer personal characteristics, individual preferences, demographic variables or lifestyle, not investigated here may prove to be significant to future studies. Future researchers may also consider replicating this study across other service contexts or even consumer goods to examine how our conclusions can apply in other purchase contexts.

7. Conclusion

While the service sector is growing and becoming more competitive, service providers have to start focusing more on increasing their competitive advantage by strategically managing their customer relationships. However, a review of the RM literature still reveals a focus on the seller's perspective. Also, few authors have explored why consumers may be more or less interested to form a relationship with their company. Additionally, the effect of service types has not yet been fully explored, particularly in the customer relationship field.

We thus offer a new direction by investigating differences in customer relationships based on different service types (e.g. high and low contact services). The results of this study provide guidance to managers to differentiate customer relationship strategies according to the specific service context that they operate in. Namely, results revealed that consumer relationship proneness and behaviors vary significantly among the contexts studied. In the high contact service (healthcare services), customers exhibit higher relationship proneness and show more favorable behaviors towards the relationship, when compared with the low contact service (wholesales). It was also found that the majority of consumer behaviors are, in both contexts, correlated with relationship proneness.

On a managerial level, we identify contextual conditions conducive to relationship formation for firms to fine-tune their relational efforts. Instead of wasting resources with non-prone consumers, firms should realistically recognize the possibility of building a relationship or not by analyzing those circumstances and situations into which the customer enters and remains because perceives obvious benefits.

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