

# **The Antecedents and Influence of Consumer Relationship Proneness towards Perceived Relationship Quality and Customer Loyalty of Apparel Retailing Industry in Malaysia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Relationship marketing has been proven to have a positive influence on customer loyalty. However, relationship marketing practices itself is not enough in developing customer loyalty without targeting the program to the right customers who are prone to relationship. Retailers need to consider the individual differences, including the consumer's feelings about relationship marketing efforts. So, this study will investigate whether consumer relationship proneness (CRP) has a positive influence towards relationship quality and customer loyalty in apparel retailing industry. Although there are various studies investigating the importance of CRP in retail industry context, there are limited studies dealing with the antecedents of CRP. A conceptual framework has been developed to indicate that CRP is influenced by two dimensions of shopping orientation which is fashion consciousness and price consciousness as well as CRP that influenced relationship quality and customer loyalty. Data will be collected using mall intercept survey with systematic sampling of apparel retailer's consumers in Malaysia. It is important for retailers to understand that perspective because they can target the relationship marketing effort to the right customers. The retailer seeks understanding on what factors can influence CRP so that they can influence it over time. This paper is the first to explore the fashion consciousness and price consciousness as antecedents of CRP.

**Key Words:** consumer relationship proneness, shopping orientation, relationship quality, customer loyalty.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Customer loyalty always been a focus of retailers to stay competitive in the market. It is hard for domestic retailers to capture more value share with the highly competitive environment among retailers especially the large number of international players in the market. It is proven in the study done by Euromonitor (2013), customer is more likely to buy international branding. That is why customer loyalty has been focusing on most of activities in the marketing (Raza & Rehman, 2012). Furthermore, loyalty is also very important to the success of the business because of its capability to maximize profits. This is in conjunction with the statement that, loyal customers are usually less price sensitive, more unwilling to offers from competitors and love to establish word of mouth communication (Dick

& Basu, 1994; Jensen & Hansen, 2006; Krishnamurthi & Raj, 1991). In order to achieve customer loyalty, many organizations as well as retailers used relationship marketing as a strategy to maintain long-term relationship with customers (Bojei & Alwie, 2010). Relationship marketing success depends on relationship quality (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler, 2002), which is usually recognized as trust, commitment, and satisfaction that finally leads to customer loyalty. If relationship quality is high, it may develop a strong and long term relationship between customer and firm (Singh, 2008). Therefore, loyalty is considered as one of the most important goals of relationship marketing (Sheth, 1996) and the retailer will focus on how to strengthen the quality of relationship.

However, in spite of relationship marketing's popularity, researchers still have insufficient understanding to its concept and influence on customer relationship management (CRM) strategies (Parish & Holloway, 2010). This is because; some authors suggested that relationship marketing itself failed to consider what customer feel about relationship marketing efforts, thus reflected the quality of relationship and customer loyalty outcomes. Some customer loves it but the others feel annoying about it (Noble & Phillips, 2004). Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner (1998) stated that the success of relationship marketing activities depends partially on individual consumer traits and preferences. Some consumers are more "psychologically predisposed" to develop relationships as compared to others (Christy, Oliver & Penn, 1996). In fact, there are also some "non relationship" customers encountered by Beatty, Mayer and Coleman (1996). If customers love to develop relationship with retailers, it can help in influencing loyalty more easily in contrast to those who are not. Thus, researchers have examined more individual-level variables or consumer relationship proneness (CRP) as one trait affecting the relationship marketing outcomes that retailers struggle to achieve (e.g. Odekerken-schroder, Wulf, & Schumacher, 2003; Parish & Holloway, 2010; Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001) which later have a strong influence on customer loyalty. Essentially, CRP is also believed to have a direct positive affect towards loyalty and relationship quality. This can be supported by Parish & Holloway (2010) who stated that CRP can allocate higher customer share, and demonstrate greater compliance to marketing requests and policies compared to those who are not.

Moreover, apart from the importance of CRP towards relationship marketing especially how it influenced loyalty and relationship quality, there are still lack of study reviews on the antecedents or drivers of CRP so that the retailers have an idea on what makes customer prone to relationship. Shopping orientation could be one of the antecedents of CRP because it reflects customer attitudes or characteristics. As stated in Parish & Holloway (2010), antecedents of CRP will help retailers decide whether they can influence CRP, craft offerings and service processes that meet the differing preferences of high versus low CRP customers. Furthermore, Hedrick, Beverland, and Minahan (2007) stated that relationship prone customers develop higher levels of trust and commitment which considered as relationship quality that mediated the relationship between CRP and loyalty.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Customer Loyalty**

All activities in marketing are focused on customer to make him loyal. Hayes (2008) argues that customer is the only source of a profitable growth, and customer loyalty may contribute in it. Oliver (1997) defines it as the deep commitment of a customer to repurchase the same product or service and remain repetitive in this behaviour. Chu (2009) explains loyalty as a commitment to a certain product for repeat purchase. Customer loyalty is very important to the company as it has some encouraging outcomes such as positive word of mouth, less vulnerability of against competitive actions, reducing marketing costs, facing with fewer prices sensitive customers, preserving the market share and profits and positive effects on brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Amine, 1998; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, Yoo, Donthu and Lee, 2000). As a result, loyalty can be depicted as a long term investment for companies. Furthermore, to evaluate the effectiveness of relationship marketing efforts, firms should assess whether customer behaviour is affected (Sharp & Sharp, 1997). Customer loyalty is one of the customer behaviours that results from relationship marketing effort.

Literature reveals three approaches that measure loyalty. These are behavioural, attitudinal and composite approaches (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). According to behavioural approach, loyalty is defined as a behaviour and routinized buying behaviour of same brand, consider consistent repeat purchase behaviour as an indicator of loyalty (Odin, Odin & Valette-Florence, 2001; Boora & Singh, 2011). On the other hand, attitudinal approach focuses on not only the outcomes of behaviour but also on the explanatory factors generating loyalty (Back & Parks, 2003; Odin et. al, 2001). Furthermore, attitudinal concepts can be identified as providing positive word of mouth (e.g. Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman 1996; Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998), recommending the service to others (Zeithaml et al., 1996), and encouraging others to use the service (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997).

### **Consumer Relationship Proneness**

Wulf et al. (2001) firstly introduced the term consumer relationship proneness to describe a consumer's tendency to engage in relationships with retailers. It is defined as "the relatively stable and conscious tendency of a consumer to engage in relationships with sellers of a particular product category". (Bloemer, Odekerken-Schroder & Kestens, 2003; Wulf et al., 2001). Other researchers (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schroder, 2002; Bloemer et al., 2003; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003; Vazquez- Carrasco and Foxall, 2006) have explored the effects of CRP in a variety of contexts which are hairdressers, food retailers, apparel retailers, beauty shops and cosmetic departments of departments store and supermarkets. These researchers also collectively have studied several potential antecedents and consequences as well as considered CRP as a possible moderator in a number

of variable associations.

In a relationship marketing context, relationship prone consumer is very important to be addressed. Relationship marketing as defined by Shani and Chalasani (1992, p. 44) is an “effort to identify, build, and sustain a network of individual consumers, and the continuous strengthening of this network in the advantage of both parties by means of interactive, personal, and value-adding contacts during a long period”. Both parties are needed to maintain a relationship, supports the idea that relationship proneness of a consumer impacts behavioral intentions. Initial attempts have been made to investigate the impact of consumer relationship proneness on behavioral intentions (Beatty et al., 1996; Ellis, 1995). For example, in a study of Odekerken-Schroder et al., (2001) consumer relationship proneness showed a significant, positive indirect impact on buying behavior. Furthermore, (Vázquez-Carrasco & Foxall, 2006) found a significant relationship between CRP and passive loyalty. Thus, CRP is considered will have positive influence on customer loyalty since it is the behavioral intention for this study.

### **H1: CRP positively influences customer loyalty.**

#### **Shopping Orientation As Antecedents of CRP**

Shopping orientations has been a very compelling topic discussed by researchers. Consumer’s view of shopping or in other words their motivation for shopping is reflected by shopping orientation (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 1989). Shopping orientations are considered very important for retailers to understand because it can help in identifying type of shoppers. Workman and Cho (2012) said that, shopping orientation refers to a shopper’s general attitude. For example, a person with a recreational shopping orientation views shopping as a fun, social activity (Solomon & Rabolt, 2009). As stated by Mokhlis (2009) and Workman and Cho (2012), shopping orientation is used to classify consumers based on their shopping habits and styles and segment consumers into group who are share similar characteristics to better predict shopping behavior. Shopping orientation is also crucial in identifying customers’ choice and preference including product, store or loyalty program. For example, Seock and Bailey (2008) examined differences between males and females in terms of their shopping orientations and how it influence online information search and purchase behaviors. That is the reason for this study to investigate about the relationship between shopping orientation and CRP since shopping orientation considered as consumer’s attitude that believe to affect CRP. There are two dimensions of shopping orientation that are chosen for this model which is fashion consciousness, and price consciousness. Fashion consciousness refers to “a person’s degree of involvement with the styles or fashion of clothing is characterized by an interest in clothing and fashion, and in one’s appearance” (Nam et al., 2007, p.103). Fashion consciousness has been identified as an important dimension of a person’s lifestyle that affects purchase decision and consumption behavior (Lee et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2010). A fashion-conscious shopping orientation implies these consumers enjoy shopping,

are interested in fashion, are conscious of fashion, and are involved in fashion (Visser & du Preez, 2001). Fashion-conscious consumers were more sensitive to visual product esthetics (Workman & Caldwell, 2007), that is, the qualities that comprise a product's appearance, such as color, materials, and shape (Bloch, Brunel, & Arnold, 2003). These shoppers prefer the newest styles, are inclined toward variety seeking, and the need for something new (Gehrt et al., 2007; Workman & Johnson, 1993), prefer physical shopping channels, and are satisfied with information search via multichannel (Cho & Workman, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2008). So, this study posits following hypothesis:

## **H2a: Fashion consciousness positively influence CRP**

Price may be the most important factor for price oriented consumers. According to Vijayasathy (2003), price oriented (i.e., economic) shoppers search for the best value for their expenditure and consider it important to evaluate price aspects of a product before purchase. This group of consumers is sensitive to price fluctuation, averse to excessive spending, looks for sales and bargains, and prefers objective information about products such as price (Gehrt, Onzo, Fujita & Rajan, 2007). Price conscious consumers look for the best value for their money and, thus, need to engage in comparison shopping to fulfill their need. According to Seock and Bailey (2008), they found that price consciousness was positively related to information searches online, but negatively related to the purchases of apparel items online. Price conscious customer is concerned about price and, therefore, pays a great deal of attention to apparel prices. They also may visit Internet web sites to find out about sales or promotional deals or to compare prices from different companies' web sites. Low prices may be a critical factor causing consumers to select one web site over another. They will not stick to one retailer because they search for lower price. This also can be applied in offline context. So, this study posits following hypothesis:

## **H2b: Price consciousness positively influences customer relationship proneness.**

### **Perceived Relationship Quality**

Storbacka et al. (1994) indicated that a consumer's interest in relationships influences perceptions of their existing relationships in a positive way. Applying this proposition to the context, this study posits that CRP will positively influence a customer's evaluation of their relationship with chosen service providers, manifesting as satisfaction, trust and commitment. Indeed, recent studies have reported a significant positive association between CRP and commitment (Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003; Bloemer et al., 2003). Customers high in CRP see the value of being in relationships and want to trust others. In fact, because relationship prone consumers tend to view their relationships through "rose-colored glasses" (Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003), they are likely to be trusting

in service providers. Further, for some customers, maintaining a relationship with a service provider can make them reluctant to defect even after a service failure because of their higher levels of trust and commitment (Hedrick et al., 2007). Thus this study posits the following hypothesis:

**H3: CRP is positively influence perceived relationship quality**

Smith (1998) argues that relationship quality is important to measure the degree of relationship strength. Successful relationship leads to a smooth exchange process and proper treatment from both parties (Crosby et al., 1990). Li et al. (2008) stated that good relationship quality can decrease uncertainty in the mind of customers. If relationship quality is high, it may develop a strong and long term relationship between customer and firm (Singh, 2008). A good relationship quality between the customer and the service provider (Hennig-Thurau et. al, 2002), can leads to customers' loyalty. In particular, studies have suggested that a high level of relationship quality increases loyalty (Wulf et al., 2001; Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder & Van, 2003; Roberts et al., 2003). By definition, customers that have high relationship quality want to be engaged with their retailers, thus these customers should be more inclined to behave in ways that are favourable towards the retailer. That is, for a given retailer, customers with higher relationship quality will demonstrate stronger intention to remain in business with the retailer, allocate higher customer loyalty. Thus, this study posits the following hypothesis:

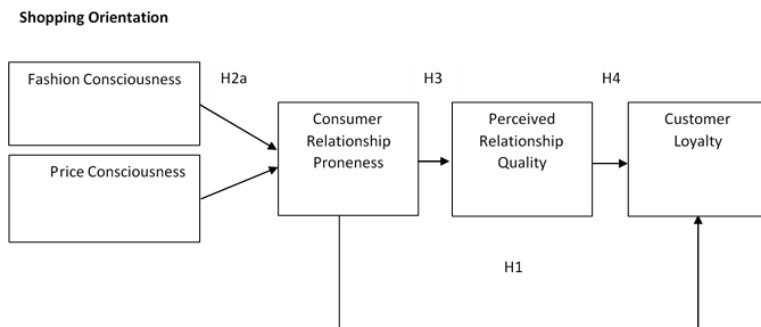
**H4: Perceived relationship quality has a positively influence towards customer loyalty.**

**H5: Relationship quality mediate the relationship between consumer relationship proneness and customer loyalty**

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Conceptual framework for this study is based upon three dimension of shopping orientation, act as antecedents of consumer relationship proneness and it influence on relationship quality and customer loyalty. (See Fig. 1)

**Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework on The Antecedents And Influence of Consumer Relationship Proneness on Relationship Quality and Customer Loyalty**





## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has proposed that the dimension of shopping orientation which is fashion consciousness, and price consciousness will influence CRP. It is suggested that the researcher and retailer aiming in developing customer loyalty should pay close attention to CRP and what influencing CRP. With a growing concern of retailers to develop customer loyalty in order to survive in the very competitive business environment, it is believed that these three dimensions will help retailers in segmenting their customers with appropriate personality traits and targeting the relationship marketing programs towards them. Thus, this will result to the effectiveness of relationship marketing program and success of developing customer loyalty. There are a number of studies investigating the antecedents of CRP but there are no studies including shopping orientation which is fashion consciousness, and price consciousness as the variable. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the influence of dimension of shopping orientation towards CRP specifically in retail industry.

## **IMPLICATION FOR MANAGERS**

The purpose of this study is to help the retail industry to understand the effect of shopping orientation dimension towards CRP in strengthening the success of relationship marketing program outcomes. Managers need to seek a greater understanding of individual consumer differences and identify CRP in order to better manage customer relationship. It is expected that managers will consider the fashion consciousness and price consciousness in segmenting their customers. Use of loyalty programs, in-store credit programs, and websites is a good opportunities and strategy for retailers to capture such information about customers and integrated it into increasingly customized strategies and communications. Targeting the relationship marketing program towards customer with high CRP will make the program meaningful. It will also have influence for customer relationship evaluation (e.g. commitment and trust). Customer will enjoy the relationship marketing effort offered by the retailer and will make them become loyal and spread positive word of mouth to other customer.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research could replicate this study in other industries and different countries. A consideration to conduct this study in retailing context should be taken into account since there are limited numbers of study taken place in considering the antecedents of CRP. This is imperative in order to lend sufficient generalization to the concept and theory of relationship marketing. Furthermore, future researcher may consider other variables to be included as antecedents of CRP to understand more about consumer traits. Moderating or mediating variables also should be taken into account in the relationship between CRP and relationship quality. Future research should also test this framework in order to contribute to a new theory that can be referred by practitioners.

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