

# Strengthening outcomes of retailer–consumer relationships The dual impact of relationship marketing tactics and consumer personality

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## Abstract

Literature suggests that strong relationship outcomes not only depend upon successful relationship marketing tactics, but also upon consumer personality. Based upon face-to-face interviews with 246 visitors of a German shopping mall, reporting on their relationships with beauty product retailers, this study contributes to relationship marketing literature in three ways. First, we demonstrate that different relationship marketing tactics have a differential impact on the overall perceived loyalty efforts retailers are making (customer retention orientation). Second, it indicates that product category involvement as a personality trait underlies a consumer's intrinsic proneness to engage in retail relationships (consumer relationship proneness). Third, it reveals that the strength of relationship outcomes depends upon both customer retention orientation and consumer relationship proneness.

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## 1. Introduction

This study investigates how consumer perceptions of a retailer's customer retention orientation affect relationship outcomes. In order to investigate what determines these perceptions, we measure the impact of four different relationship marketing tactics as perceived by the consumer. While several conceptual efforts have been made to explain processes of enhancing buyer–seller relationships (e.g., Beatty et al., 1996), relatively few attempts have been aimed at actually measuring the impact of different relationship marketing tactics (Biong and Selnes, 1995). Retailers can apply a variety of tactics aimed at showing their dedication to customer retention. However, most of them still struggle with the question of which specific tactics can be successfully applied to enhance customer loyalty, following incorrect beliefs and uncertainty about what matters to customers (Sirohi et al., 1998).

A second key objective of our study is to examine the effect of consumer relationship proneness, as a personality trait, on relationship outcomes. Moreover, in order to investigate the drivers of consumer relationship proneness, we assess how this construct is influenced by four other personality traits. Personality traits are based on inner psychological characteristics that exert relatively universal effects on attitudes and behavior, fairly independent of the environmental situation (Kassarjian and Sheffet, 1991). More specifically, Sheth et al. (1999) indicated that personality types differ in their loyalty to stores and that some personalities focus more on seeking relationships with sellers. However, to the authors' knowledge, no empirical research has yet investigated the role of personality in affecting relationship outcomes (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997).

Our study explicitly focuses upon the retailer–consumer relationship and, within this dyad, it takes the consumer perspective given two observations in existing literature. First, empirical research on relationship marketing has strongly emphasized channel and industrial relationships. Systematic research on relationship marketing in a retail environment is practically lacking (Beatty et al., 1996;

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Fournier, 1998; Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Nevertheless, the importance of relationship marketing research in a retail setting is generally acknowledged. Taher et al. (1996), for instance, stressed that traditional store patronage is weakening due to new technologies, the appearance of internet stores, and consumers' time impoverishment. Second, relationship marketing has mainly been studied from a seller's perspective to the neglect of the buyer's perspective (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Nevertheless, several academics recognize the importance of taking a buyer perspective in investigating relationships (Gruen, 1995; Naidu et al., 1999). The assumption that a relationship can be formed with any buyer often leads sellers to waste valuable resources, simply because the buyer does not want a relationship.

## 2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

As adequate relationship marketing research is impossible without knowledge on the meaning of its core variable of interest, we define a relationship as "one or more exchanges between a consumer and a retailer that are perceived by the consumer as being interrelated to potential past and future exchanges with the retailer." First, in line with Webster (1992), we regard one exchange as a necessary and sufficient condition for a relationship to exist, marking the beginning of a continuum of relationships. Second, inspired by Barnes (1997) postulating that no relationship will exist unless the customer feels that one exists, our definition focuses on the consumer's perspective. Third, it is generally recognized that a relationship exists if a buyer perceives his exchange(s) with the seller to be interrelated with potential past and future exchanges (Czepiel, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996). As we regard relationships on a continuum, the objective of our study is to assess how relationship outcomes can be strengthened. Therefore, we include relationship satisfaction, trust, relationship commitment, and buying behavior as relationship outcomes.

As to the factors determining the strength of relationship outcomes, Gwinner et al. (1998) claimed that strong relationship outcomes may depend not only upon the seller's strategy or implementation, but also on the preferences of the individual buyer. In line with their ideas, Fig. 1 shows our conceptual model integrating both potential drivers of retailer–consumer relationship outcomes. In order to enhance the interpretability of the model, we delineated three submodels within this overall model. Submodel 1 deals with relationship marketing tactics initiated by the retailer and their impact on this retailer's customer retention orientation. These aspects can be categorized as 'strategy or implementation' referred to by Gwinner et al. (1998). Submodel 2 is related to a consumer's personality traits and their impact on this consumer's relationship proneness. This part of the model should reflect Gwinner et al.'s (1998) idea of 'individual buyer preferences.' Submodel 3 includes the relationship outcomes relationship satisfaction, trust,

relationship commitment, and buying behavior, as well as the interrelationships between them. The variables included in Submodels 1 and 3 are related to consumer perceptions towards one specific retailer, while the variables included in Submodel 2 are retailer independent, representing general personality traits instead.

### 2.1. Submodel 1: the impact of relationship marketing tactics on customer retention orientation of the retailer

Literature does hardly provide guidelines related to the effect of different relationship marketing tactics on consumers' perceptions of a retailer's dedication towards customer loyalty. In order to address this issue, we assess the impact of four different types of relationship marketing tactics (communication, preferential treatment, personalization, and rewarding) on the customer retention orientation of the retailer.

#### 2.1.1. Customer retention orientation of the retailer

We define customer retention orientation of a retailer as "a consumer's overall perception of the extent to which a retailer actively makes efforts that are intended to retain regular customers." Such efforts can relate to the product or service proposition, as well as to aspects of the relationship itself. We believe that this construct builds upon related concepts, such as "relational selling behavior" in a customer–salesperson relationship context (Crosby et al., 1990) and "market orientation" (Narver and Slater, 1990). Nevertheless, it differs in several ways. First, the concept of customer retention orientation of the retailer goes beyond the limited scope of salespersons' efforts emphasized in studies investigating relational selling behavior. Second, the difference between customer retention orientation of the retailer and market orientation primarily relates to the focal perspective that is taken. While both constructs share some underlying thoughts, consumer perceptions are at the basis of customer retention orientation (i.e., a consumer's perspective), whereas, in this context, the construct of market orientation would refer to an internal assessment a retailer makes related to the extent to which this retailer is oriented towards the market (i.e., ultimately a retailer's perspective). The concept of customer retention orientation most probably shows the strongest similarities with the construct of "relationship investment" often investigated in studies focusing upon a business-to-business (e.g., Smith and Barclay, 1997) or channel (e.g., Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Ganesan, 1994) context. Relationship investment is generally defined as the dedication of resources, efforts, and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships that do not have outside value and cannot be recovered if these relationships are terminated (e.g., Smith, 1998).

#### 2.1.2. Communication

We define communication as "a consumer's perception of the extent to which a retailer keeps its regular customers

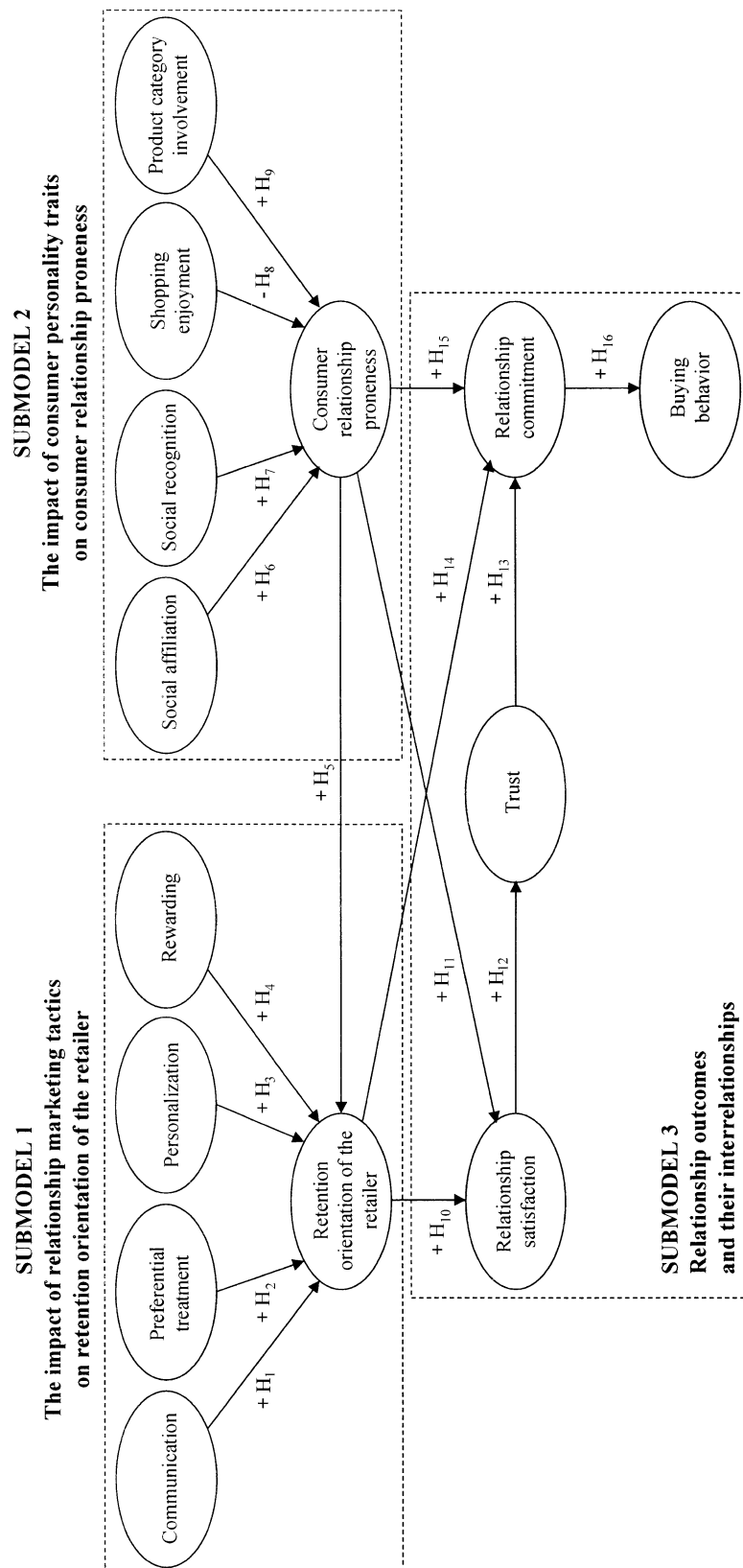


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

informed through direct communication media.” By conveying interest in the customer, communication is often considered to be a necessary condition for the existence of a relationship (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). As a result, we seek to establish that communication should be a strong precursor for enhanced customer perceptions of retention efforts. Thus, our hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** A higher level of communication leads to a higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer.

#### 2.1.3. Preferential treatment

We define preferential treatment as “a consumer’s perception of the extent to which a retailer treats and serves its regular customers better than its nonregular customers” (e.g., Gwinner et al., 1998). Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995, p. 264) recognized that “implicit in the idea of relationship marketing is consumer focus and consumer selectivity — that is, all consumers do not need to be served in the same way.” Peterson (1995) argued that such distinctive treatment enables a seller to address a person’s basic human need to feel important. Thus, we expect to be able to demonstrate that customers will perceive their special treatment as a retailer’s retention effort. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 2:** A higher level of preferential treatment leads to a higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer.

#### 2.1.4. Personalization

We define personalization as “a consumer’s perception of the extent to which a retailer interacts with its regular customers in a warm and personal way” (cf. Metcalf et al., 1992). The importance of personal exchanges between buyers and sellers in influencing relationship outcomes should not be surprising given that relationships are inherently social processes (Beatty et al., 1996). Evans et al. (1996, p. 208) stated that the social interaction afforded by shopping has been suggested to be “the prime motivator for some consumers to visit retail establishments.” Examples of social relationship benefits are feelings of familiarity, friendship, and social support (Berry, 1995), personal recognition, and use of the customer’s name (Howard et al., 1995), knowing the customer as a person, engaging in friendly conversations, and exhibiting personal warmth (Crosby et al., 1990). This theorizing is summarized in the hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** A higher level of personalization leads to a higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer.

#### 2.1.5. Rewarding

We define rewarding as “a consumer’s perception of the extent to which a retailer offers tangible benefits such as pricing or gift incentives to its regular customers in return for their loyalty.” Frequent flyer programs, customer loyalty bonuses, free gifts, personalized cent-off coupons, and other

point-for-benefit “clubs” are examples of rewarding tactics (Peterson, 1995). Trying to earn points — on such things as hotel stays, movie tickets, and car washes — would help customers to remain loyal, regardless of service enhancement or price promotions of competitors (Sharp and Sharp, 1997). Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** A higher level of rewarding leads to a higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer.

### 2.2. Submodel 2: the impact of personality traits on consumer relationship proneness

Recently, several authors recognized that it is important to understand what types of consumers are inclined to engage in retail relationships (Barnes, 1997; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). In order to address this issue, we assess the impact of four different consumer personality traits (social affiliation, social recognition, shopping enjoyment, and product category involvement) on consumer relationship proneness.

#### 2.2.1. Consumer relationship proneness

Christy et al. (1996) used the term “psychologically predisposed” in order to express the idea that some buyers are intrinsically inclined to engage in relationships. In this study, we introduce the term consumer relationship proneness as “a consumer’s relatively stable and conscious tendency to engage in relationships with retailers of a particular product category.” Consumer relationship proneness refers to the *stable* tendency of a consumer to engage in relationships with retailers and can therefore be considered as a personality trait. In addition, we emphasize a *conscious* tendency to engage in relationships as opposed to loyalty based more on inertia or convenience (e.g., Dick and Basu, 1994). Moreover, the concept of proneness is focused on the tendency to *engage* in relationships as opposed to the tendency to maintain or enhance relationships. The latter would not be generic as it would be contingent upon a particular seller, leading to a close resemblance to the construct of relationship commitment. Finally, since several authors stress that a buyer’s proneness to engage in relationships might vary across groups of sellers (Barnes, 1997; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Christy et al., 1996) (e.g., beauty stores vs. supermarkets), we postulate that consumer relationship proneness has to be defined within a *particular product category*.

Perceptions of a retailer’s customer retention orientation could be inflated by a consumer’s inherent proneness to engage in relationships with retailers in general. Relationship prone consumers may see a retailer’s efforts through more rose-colored glasses. As this hypothesis involves relating two new constructs, we only found tentative support for a relationship between both in the literature on interpersonal relationships. Research analyzing interpersonal attraction is considered to provide a suitable frame-

work for describing buyer–seller relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987). For example, Simpson et al. (1990) demonstrated that people in search of a romantic relationship find potential partners to be more attractive than do people already involved in romantic relationships. Analogously, we hypothesize that consumers who are more relationship prone perceive retailers to be more retention oriented.

**Hypothesis 5:** A higher level of consumer relationship proneness leads to a higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer.

#### 2.2.2. Social affiliation

In line with Cheek and Buss (1981), we define social affiliation as “a consumer’s personality trait representing the tendency to affiliate with others and to prefer being with others to remaining alone.” While studies already indicated that the social affiliation of employees has a positive influence on employee–customer relationships (e.g., Day and Silverman, 1989; Hogan et al., 1984; Rosse et al., 1991), the social affiliation related to the other side of the dyad — the customer himself — has not yet been investigated in a relationship context. Different authors stated that engaging in buyer–seller relationships might be one of the ways to satisfy the need for exchanges with other people (e.g., Ellis, 1995; Forman and Sriram, 1991; Shim and Eastlick, 1998). For example, by regularly patronizing the same store, customers are likely to meet the same sales associates repeatedly. This is likely to facilitate the development of intense social contact with these sales persons. Consequently, a sociable person may perceive a relationship with a retailer as being conducive for generating social encounters and interaction. Thus, we postulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 6:** A higher level of social affiliation leads to a higher level of consumer relationship proneness.

#### 2.2.3. Social recognition

In line with Brock et al. (1998), we define social recognition as “a consumer’s personality trait representing the desire of being well respected by others.” Social recognition is assumed to guide relationship development and to define the resulting type of relationship (Kirkpatrick and Davis, 1994). Forman and Sriram (1991) claimed that some people engage in buyer–seller relationships in their search for social recognition. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) referred to reference group theory in postulating that people’s propensity to engage in marketing relationships depends on their desire to get closer associated to a reference group, to reap the benefits of such an association, and to avoid negative consequences relating to noncompliance of norms. In other words, consumers’ inclination to engage in retail relationships would be stronger in case these relationships help to satisfy the need for social recognition. This argument suggests that Tauber’s (1972) finding is still applicable in today’s context. Tauber (1972) discovered that

the patronage of a particular store is sometimes driven by a desire to belong to a peer or reference group one aspires. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 7:** A higher need for social recognition leads to a higher level of consumer relationship proneness.

#### 2.2.4. Shopping enjoyment

In line with Bellenger and Korgaonkar (1980), we define shopping enjoyment as “a consumer’s personality trait representing the tendency to find shopping more enjoyable and to experience greater shopping pleasure than others.” The construct of shopping enjoyment relates to the difference between hedonic and utilitarian shoppers. While utilitarian shoppers aim at accomplishing the consumption task, hedonic shoppers strive for fun and entertainment in shopping (Babin et al., 1994; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Bellenger and Korgaonkar (1980) proved that people who enjoy shopping hardly ever have a preplanned purchase in mind, potentially reducing their desire to commit themselves to one specific store. Moreover, people who enjoy shopping like to shop in many different stores (Ellis, 1995; Gutman and Mills, 1982). As being loyal to a few stores would reduce the number of outlets a consumer patronizes, this could lead to a reduced pleasure value of shopping. In addition, Beatty et al. (1996) discovered that consumers who did not engage in a relationship with a sales associate enjoyed shopping more than others, as these consumers indicated that a sales associate relationship would not offer significant benefits. In correspondence with Forsythe et al. (1990), we hypothesize that consumers who lack shopping enjoyment are interested in relationships with stores as these relationships might mitigate their unpleasant shopping task. The following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 8:** A lower level of shopping enjoyment leads to a higher level of consumer relationship proneness.

#### 2.2.5. Product category involvement

In line with Mittal (1995), we define product category involvement as “a consumer’s personality trait representing an enduring perceived importance of the product category based on the consumer’s inherent needs, values, and interests.” We consider product category involvement as a personality trait as several authors have suggested that, for any particular product class, levels of involvement will differ across consumers (Bloch, 1981). Researchers have suggested that individuals who are highly involved with a product category reveal a tendency to be more loyal (King and Ring, 1980). Christy et al. (1996) stressed that highly involved consumers provide a strong basis for extending the relationship. In addition, Gordon et al. (1998) stated that involved buyers are more likely to participate in marketing relationships and to attach more importance to the continuity of these relationships. Consequently, approaches by the retailer, however well intended, could be regarded by the consumer as



invasive, annoying, or undesirable when the consumer's involvement is low. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 9:** A higher level of product category involvement leads to a higher level of consumer relationship proneness.

### 2.3. Submodel 3: relationship outcomes and their interrelationships

Frequently reported relationship outcomes are relationship satisfaction, trust, and relationship commitment (Baker et al., 1999; Crosby et al., 1990; Doney and Cannon, 1997). However, conceptual models that theorize both attitudinal and behavioral relationship outcomes have strong precedence in relationship marketing studies (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In line with this, Sharp and Sharp (1997) explicitly suggested to complement attitudinal relationship outcomes with the behavioral changes they create, underlying our choice to include buying behavior as an additional parameter.

#### 2.3.1. Relationship satisfaction

Satisfaction with the relationship is regarded as an important outcome of buyer–seller relationships (Smith and Barclay, 1997). We define relationship satisfaction as “a consumer's affective state resulting from an overall appraisal of his relationship with a retailer” (cf. Anderson and Narus, 1984). In business (e.g., Ganesan, 1994), as well as in consumer markets (e.g., Baker et al., 1999), customers tend to be more satisfied with sellers who make deliberate efforts towards them. Consequently, we posit the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 10:** A higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer leads to a higher level of relationship satisfaction.

Moreover, there are reasons to assume that satisfaction is not merely dependent upon the perception of a retailer's actions. Storbacka et al. (1994) stated that buyers who are interested in relationships perceive satisfaction with a relationship to be important. In our view, this statement could be interpreted in one of two ways. First, relationship prone consumers could be *more difficult to satisfy* as a result of a more critical attitude towards relationships with retailers. This view corresponds with Kalwani and Narayandas (1995) who stated that buyers who are willing to engage in relationships are the most difficult to satisfy. Second, relationship prone consumers could be *easier to satisfy* as a result of a higher receptivity towards a retailer's retention efforts. In line with the second explanation, our assumption is that people who are relationship prone, are easier to satisfy. As a result, we posit that:

**Hypothesis 11:** A higher level of consumer relationship proneness leads to a higher level of relationship satisfaction.

#### 2.3.2. Trust

The development of trust is thought to be an important result of dyadic buyer–seller relationships (e.g., Gundlach et al., 1995). Consistent with Morgan and Hunt (1994), we define trust as “a consumer's confident belief in a retailer's honesty towards the consumer.” A recent meta-analysis in a channel marketing context (Geyskens et al., 1999) suggests that relationship satisfaction precedes trust, so we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 12:** A higher level of relationship satisfaction leads to a higher level of trust.

#### 2.3.3. Relationship commitment

Commitment is generally regarded as an important result of good relational interactions (Dwyer et al., 1987). We define relationship commitment as “a consumer's enduring desire to continue a relationship with a retailer accompanied by the willingness to make efforts at maintaining it” (cf. Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Relationships characterized by trust are so highly appreciated that parties will desire to commit themselves to such relationships, so several marketers indicate that trust should positively affect commitment (e.g., Doney and Cannon, 1997). Strong empirical evidence exists for a positive path from trust to relationship commitment (e.g., Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Thus, we postulate the hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 13:** A higher level of trust leads to a higher level of relationship commitment.

Moreover, Dwyer et al. (1987, p. 19) suggested that high relational performance is necessary for commitment to occur. They stated that commitment is “... fueled by the ongoing benefits accruing to each partner.” In line with this, Bennett (1996) argued that the strength of a buyer's commitment depends on his perceptions of efforts made by the seller. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 14:** A higher level of customer retention orientation of the retailer leads to a higher level of relationship commitment.

There are reasons to assume that relationship commitment is not merely dependent upon perceived retention efforts. Some support can be found that consumer relationship proneness influences commitment as well. Individual characteristics often have been considered as antecedents of commitment (Rylander et al., 1997). Storbacka et al. (1994) further indicated that a buyer's general interest in relationships influences the level of commitment to a relationship in which the buyer is engaged. Consequently, we posit:

**Hypothesis 15:** A higher level of consumer relationship proneness leads to a higher level of relationship commitment.

#### 2.3.4. Buying behavior

Moorman et al. (1993) suggested that customers who are committed to a relationship may have a greater propensity to

act because of their need to remain consistent with their commitment. Nevertheless, Pritchard et al. (1999) recently indicated that the link between commitment and loyalty has received little empirical attention. In this study, buying behavior was defined as “a consumer’s purchasing frequency and amount spent at a retailer relative to other retailers the consumer buys at.” Inspired by these ideas and findings, we investigate the hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 16:** A higher level of relationship commitment leads to increased buying behavior.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Setting

This study relates to German consumers reporting on retailers selling beauty products, comprising aftershaves, cosmetics, fragrances, hairstyling products, and skincare products. Beauty shops, as well as cosmetic departments of department stores, were investigated. In order to increase internal validity, mail order buying, drugstores, supermarkets, and pharmacies were excluded. We focused only on beauty shops and cosmetics departments of department stores as these tend to expend more relationship efforts towards their customers as opposed to, e.g., drugstores and supermarkets. Moreover, we believe that testing the model in this context is appropriate since consumers tend to purchase beauty products relatively frequently, which is conducive to our purposes as repeated contact enables consumers to better assess a retailer’s retention efforts. Finally, while other environments might provide larger relationship potential, this setting provides a conservative environment to test the notion of a direct relationship between the constructs included in the conceptual model. If effects are found in this retail setting, it would suggest that work related to the topic of our research would also be fruitful in other retail contexts.

#### 3.2. Sample

A total of 246 mall intercept personal interviews were administered in a large German shopping mall. We admit that this sample, conducted in one regional mall, is obviously neither truly random nor necessarily representative of any larger population. Given our interest in relationships between variables rather than population descriptions, we feel that this is not a major problem, although it should be clearly noted. The sample was drawn from shopping mall visitors to obtain coverage on age (18–25 years: 19.9%; 26–40: 29.3%; 41–55: 24.4%; and 55 years and over: 26.4%), gender (male: 30%; female: 69.9%), and allocated share-of-wallet for the store reported on (0–20%: 11.0%; 21–40%: 17.5%; 41–60%: 38.6%;

61–80%: 18.3%; and 81–100%: 14.6%). These criteria are often mentioned to influence shopping attitudes and behavior (e.g., Carman, 1970), so we consider them to be relevant for the study’s objectives. We also sought even coverage over interviewing time of day (morning, early afternoon, and late afternoon) and interviewing day of week (Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday) so as to reduce possible shopping pattern biases.

#### 3.3. Procedure

Visitors were approached in the shopping mall with the request to participate in a survey concerning shopping. Those who agreed to participate comprised 21.2%. Participants were first asked whether they ever bought beauty products themselves. Only visitors responding positively (80.4%) were asked to indicate the names of five stores in which they usually bought beauty products. Next, respondents indicated their approximate share-of-wallet for each store listed (measured on a continuous scale from 0% to 100%). The interviewers picked one store out of the list reported by a particular respondent to which the remaining questions were related. They ensured that ultimately a normal distribution for the share-of-wallet variable was obtained across all respondents. In order to make sure that even respondents reporting share-of-wallet figures of, e.g., 10% had sufficient information to answer all questions in a valid way, only a store was selected for which respondents indicated at least 4 on the seven-point scale measuring their “being a regular customer” of that particular store. As a result, this provided us with sufficient confidence in the internal validity of the answers. The questions addressed all constructs included in the conceptual model.

#### 3.4. Measure development

The items related to all variables are included in Table 1. Most measures represent a combination and synthesis of past formulations revealing comparable reliability scores (see Appendix A). For the constructs of customer retention orientation of the retailer, communication, rewarding, consumer relationship proneness, and social recognition, scales were not available and had to be developed for the purpose of this study. After having organized four focus groups, a group of expert judges (four academics and three practitioners) qualitatively tested an initial pool of items intended to measure different relationship marketing tactics discussed in the focus groups. Experts were provided with the definitions of the different relationship marketing tactics and asked to classify each item to the most appropriate tactic. Items improperly classified were reformulated or deleted. Finally, we pretested the items (for all constructs) on a sample of 60 consumers via personal in-home interviews. The pretest sample of consumers was evenly spread across age and gender. We

Table 1  
Measurement model

		Composite reliability	Variance explained	Loading	R <sup>2</sup>
Customer retention orientation of the retailer	This store makes efforts to increase regular customer's loyalty	0.91	0.77	.88	.77
	This store makes various efforts to improve its tie with regular customers			.86	.75
	This store really cares about keeping regular customers			.89	.80
Communication	This store often sends mailings to regular customers	0.90	0.76	.73	.54
	This store keeps regular customers informed through mailings			.94	.88
	This store often informs regular customers through brochures			.92	.85
Preferential treatment	This store makes greater efforts for regular customers than for nonregular customers	0.88	0.70	.80	.64
	This store offers better service to regular customers than to nonregular customers			.83	.69
	This store does more for regular customers than for nonregular customers			.88	.77
Personalization	This store takes the time to personally get to know regular customers	0.84	0.64	.65	.42
	This store often holds personal conversations with regular customers			.88	.78
	This store often inquires about the personal welfare of regular customers			.85	.73
Rewarding	This store rewards regular customers for their patronage	0.86	0.75	.90	.81
	This store offers discounts to regular customers for their patronage			.83	.68
Consumer relationship proneness	Generally, I am someone who likes to be a regular customer of an apparel store	0.89	0.72	.81	.66
	Generally, I am someone who wants to be a steady customer of the same apparel store			.90	.81
	Generally, I am someone who is willing to 'go the extra mile' to purchase at the same apparel store			.83	.69
Social affiliation	Generally, I am someone who has no difficulty mingling in a group	0.75	0.50	.57	.33
	Generally, I am someone who, given the chance, seeks contact with others			.78	.61
Social recognition	Generally, I am someone who likes to seek contact with others	0.84	0.64	.75	.56
	Generally, I am someone who likes to be appreciated by others			.83	.70
	Generally, I am someone who likes to be respected by others			.79	.62
Shopping enjoyment	Generally, I am someone who likes to be appreciated by acquaintances	0.80	0.57	.78	.61
	Generally, I am someone who enjoys shopping			.76	.58
	Generally, I am someone who enjoys shopping to see whether there is anything new			.82	.67
Product category involvement	Generally, I am someone who considers shopping as a pleasant way to spend his or her spare time	0.88	0.71	.68	.46
	Generally, I am someone who finds it important what clothes he or she buys			.86	.73
	Generally, I am someone who is interested in the kind of clothing he or she buys			.80	.64
Relationship satisfaction	Generally, I am someone for whom it means a lot what clothes he or she buys	0.83	0.63	.87	.76
	As a regular customer, I have a high quality relationship with this store			.91	.82
	I am happy with the efforts this store is making towards regular customers like me			.68	.46
Trust	I am satisfied with the relationship I have with this store	0.92	0.78	.77	.59
	This store gives me a feeling of trust			.91	.83
	I have trust in this store			.86	.74
Relationship commitment	This store gives me a trustworthy impression	0.76	0.52	.88	.78
	I am willing 'to go the extra mile' to remain a customer of this store			.86	.74
	I feel loyal towards this store			.68	.46
Buying behavior	Even if this store would be more difficult to reach, I would still keep buying there	0.87	0.70	.61	.37
	What percentage of your total expenditures for clothing do you spend in this store?			.76	.58
	Of the 10 times you select a store to buy clothes at, how many times do you select this store?			.86	.73
	How often do you buy clothes in this store compared to other stores where you buy clothes?			.88	.77



asked respondents to complete the questionnaire, after which they were asked to describe the meaning of each question, to explain their answer, and to state any problems that they encountered while answering questions. Small adjustments to the questionnaire were made on the basis of the pretest.

#### 4. Results

A maximum likelihood estimation was applied to the covariance matrix in order to test the structural equations model.

##### 4.1. Measurement model evaluation

Table 1 reports the results of a confirmatory factor analysis related to the measurement model. We assessed the quality of the measurement model on unidimensionality, convergent validity, reliability, and discriminant validity. Evidence for the unidimensionality of each construct was based upon a principal components analysis revealing that the appropriate items loaded at least .65 on their respective hypothesized component, with a loading no larger than .30 on other components. Convergent validity was supported by a good overall model fit, all loadings being significant ( $P < .01$ ), and nearly all  $R^2$

exceeding .50 (Hildebrandt, 1987). Reliability was indicated by composite reliability measures all exceeding .75. Discriminant validity was tested in a series of nested confirmatory factor model comparisons in which correlations between latent constructs were constrained to 1 (each of the 84 off-diagonal elements constrained and the model reestimated in turn), and indeed chi-square differences were significant for all model comparisons ( $P < .01$ ). In addition, the average percentage of variance extracted for each construct was greater than 0.50. In summary, the measurement model is clean, with evidence for unidimensionality, convergent validity, reliability, and discriminant validity.

##### 4.2. Overall model evaluation

The chi-square value is significant (1372 with 735 degrees of freedom), a finding not unusual with large sample sizes (Doney and Cannon, 1997). The ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom is 1.87, which can be considered as adequate. While the values of GFI (0.79) and AGFI (0.75) are somewhat lower than those of CFI (0.91), this result is mainly due to the former measures being more easily affected by model complexity. In general, the indicated fits are good, including RMSEA, which is 0.059, and SRMR, being 0.087. Given the adequacy of these indices, given the fact that the

Table 2  
Structural model

Parameter	Hypothesis	Symbol	ML estimate	<i>t</i> Value
Communication → customer retention orientation of the retailer	Hypothesis 1 (+)	$\gamma_{11}$	−0.04	−0.56
Preferential treatment → customer retention orientation of the retailer	Hypothesis 2 (+)	$\gamma_{12}$	−0.27**	−2.71
Personalization → customer retention orientation of the retailer	Hypothesis 3 (+)	$\gamma_{13}$	0.51**	4.84
Rewarding → customer retention orientation of the retailer	Hypothesis 4 (+)	$\gamma_{14}$	0.43**	4.52
Social recognition → consumer relationship proneness	Hypothesis 7 (+)	$\gamma_{25}$	0.02	0.23
Social affiliation → consumer relationship proneness	Hypothesis 6 (+)	$\gamma_{26}$	0.16	1.36
Shopping enjoyment → consumer relationship proneness	Hypothesis 8 (−)	$\gamma_{27}$	−0.05	−0.51
Product category involvement → consumer relationship proneness	Hypothesis 9 (+)	$\gamma_{28}$	0.53**	6.82
Consumer relationship proneness → customer retention orientation of the retailer	Hypothesis 5 (+)	$\beta_{12}$	0.26**	4.32
Customer retention orientation of the retailer → relationship satisfaction	Hypothesis 10 (+)	$\beta_{31}$	0.61**	8.04
Consumer relationship proneness → relationship satisfaction	Hypothesis 11 (+)	$\beta_{32}$	0.28**	4.78
Relationship satisfaction → trust	Hypothesis 12 (+)	$\beta_{43}$	0.92**	7.11
Customer retention orientation of the retailer → relationship commitment	Hypothesis 14 (+)	$\beta_{51}$	0.19**	2.77
Consumer relationship proneness → relationship commitment	Hypothesis 15 (+)	$\beta_{52}$	0.35**	4.44
Trust → relationship commitment	Hypothesis 13 (+)	$\beta_{54}$	0.58**	4.45
Relationship commitment → buying behavior	Hypothesis 16 (+)	$\beta_{65}$	0.27**	3.24
Squared multiple correlations for structural equations	Symbol	Estimate		
Customer retention orientation of the retailer	$\Psi_{11}$	0.52		
Consumer relationship proneness	$\Psi_{22}$	0.34		
Relationship satisfaction	$\Psi_{33}$	0.57		
Trust	$\Psi_{44}$	0.86		
Relationship commitment	$\Psi_{55}$	0.87		
Buying behavior	$\Psi_{66}$	0.07		

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

model was developed on theoretical bases, and given the relative complexity of the model, no model respecifications were made.

#### 4.3. Structural model evaluation

Table 2 contains the detailed results related to the structural model. Twelve out of sixteen hypothesized paths were significant and in the hypothesized direction, except for one path revealing an opposite direction compared to its hypothesis.

With respect to Submodel 1, consumer perceptions of personalization and rewarding tactics initiated by the retailer significantly increased consumers' overall perceptions of the retailer's customer retention orientation. No support was found for the path from communication to customer retention orientation and counter-evidence was found for the path from preferential treatment to customer retention orientation. Concerning Submodel 2, relating the four personality traits to a consumer's relationship proneness, the overall results were somewhat disappointing. The expected relationships from social affiliation, social recognition, and shopping enjoyment to consumer relationship proneness could not be supported. However, the results convincingly supported that consumers for whom beauty products are important reveal higher tendencies to engage in long-term relationships with retailers selling beauty products. With respect to Submodel 3, we found strong support for the relationships from relationship satisfaction to trust, from trust to relationship commitment, and from relationship commitment to buying behavior.

Fig. 1 shows that there are five hypotheses relating the three submodels. All of these hypotheses were confirmed. Consumers perceiving a stronger customer retention orientation of the retailer were more satisfied with and more committed to their retail relationship. Moreover, consumers who are inclined to engage in retail relationships in general are more satisfied with and committed towards their relationship with a specific retailer. Finally, consumers with higher levels of relationship proneness have a tendency to perceive a stronger customer retention orientation of a specific retailer.

## 5. Discussion of results

This study makes a contribution to relationship marketing literature in three ways. First, we demonstrate that different relationship marketing tactics have a differential impact on the overall perceived loyalty efforts retailers are making. Second, it indicates that product category involvement as a personality trait underlies a consumer's intrinsic proneness to engage in retail relationships. Third, it reveals that the strength of relationship outcomes depends upon both customer retention orientation and consumer relation-

ship proneness. Each of these contributions is discussed in turn.

#### 5.1. The impact of relationship marketing tactics on customer retention orientation of the retailer

What is the effect of different relationship marketing tactics on consumers' overall perceptions of customer retention care? This is a question that has been relatively under explored in existing literature. Until now, only partial attempts have been made to classify different types of relationship marketing tactics and confusion still exists about the specific tactics that comprise a relationship marketing strategy (Beatty et al., 1996; Gordon et al., 1998; Gwinner et al., 1998). Focus groups contributed to the delineation of four types of relationship marketing tactics examined in this study: communication, preferential treatment, personalization, and rewarding. In line with, e.g., Howard et al. (1995) and Peterson (1995), our study suggests that retailers treating customers in a personal way and rewarding them for their loyalty can reap benefits in terms of enhanced consumer perceptions of customer retention care. This demonstrates the crucial role of retail employees who are in direct contact with customers. Retailers capable of training and motivating their employees to show warm and personal feelings towards customers can reap the resulting benefits in terms of improved perceptions of customer retention orientation. In addition, when hiring store personnel, store management needs to focus on social abilities of the candidates that facilitate social interactions with target consumers (Weitz and Bradford, 1999). This is especially important, as the emergence of automated retailing has gradually reduced opportunities for social interaction in the store. Furthermore, contrary to our expectations, a negative relationship was found between preferential treatment and customer retention orientation of the retailer. This contradicts the common opinion that regular customers should be treated in a different way than nonregular customers (Barlow, 1992). A potential explanation for this finding might be that consumers do not appreciate to be openly favored above other consumers. If this were true, it would hold important implications for retailers as it underlines that relationship marketing tactics directed at consumers should be made "delicately" in order to avoid bringing consumers in an uncomfortable position. Finally, consumers perceiving communication tactics do not seem to "frame" these tactics in the context of loyalty enhancement, as no significant relationship exists between communication and customer retention orientation of the retailer. A likely explanation for this is that the strong tradition of directly communicating with consumers in Germany has worn out the effects of communication on customer retention orientation of the retailer. In 1997, German consumers found an average of 83 pieces of addressed mail in their mailbox, the second highest number in Europe (FEDMA, 1998).

### 5.2. The impact of consumer personality traits on consumer relationship proneness

Considering the question of why some consumers are prone to engage in relationships while others are not, our results show the importance of product category involvement as a strong precursor of consumer relationship proneness. This confirms King and Ring's (1980) assumption that consumers are likely to be willing to enter relationships with retailers when their involvement is high for certain product categories. It also provides support for the notion that product category involvement underlies other individual characteristics of consumers (Beatty et al., 1988) such as consumer relationship proneness. Furthermore, our result is in line with Gordon et al. (1998) who provided empirical evidence for the impact of involvement on the importance consumers attach to relationship continuity with a particular retailer. Notwithstanding the crucial effect of product category involvement on consumer relationship proneness, social affiliation and social recognition were not found to underlie a consumer's intrinsic inclination to establish relationships with retailers. This is in contrast to several authors stressing that findings of studies on interpersonal relationships can be transferred to buyer–seller relationships (Shim and Eastlick, 1998). People looking for social contact and appreciation are apparently not necessarily looking for relationships with stores of a particular product category. This is in contrast to Ellis' (1995) findings showing that highly sociable people are looking for social relationships with sales associates. Finally, no significant correspondence was found between people who enjoy shopping and people being relationship prone. This finding is in line with Beatty et al. (1996) who stated that shopping motivations are different from relationship motivations. Consequently, the reasons that consumers have for shopping are not necessarily related to the reasons that consumers have for engaging in relationships with stores. Another potential reason for not finding a significant path might be related to the fact that the shopping enjoyment variable was somewhat skewed towards more hedonist shoppers, causing restriction in variation in the shopping enjoyment construct.

### 5.3. The impact of customer retention orientation of the retailer and consumer relationship proneness on relationship outcomes

In response to recent requests for directing more attention to the buyer perspective (Barnes, 1997; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997), our empirical results provide evidence for the consumer's crucial impact on relationship outcomes. This is not only apparent from the dominant influence of consumer relationship proneness, but also a consumer's perceptions of customer retention orientation of the retailer reveal a significant impact on

relationship satisfaction and commitment, ultimately helping to put a stop to declining retention rates or to further stimulate loyalty.

With respect to the influence of consumer relationship proneness on relationship outcomes, our results contradict Kalwani and Narayandas' (1995) conceptual idea that buyers who are relationship prone are relatively more difficult to serve satisfactorily. Moreover, our data support the belief that a personality trait such as consumer relationship proneness affects relationship commitment (Storbacka et al., 1994). Previous studies on relationship marketing might suffer from the omission of consumer relationship proneness as an important construct. Our results imply that the effectiveness of relationship marketing strategies is largely affected by the proneness of consumers to engage in relationships. Failing to include consumer relationship proneness in future studies on relationship marketing could result in flawed conclusions related to the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction with and commitment to buyer–seller relationships. Our study is also valuable from a managerial point of view. Woodside and Trappey (1996) already referred to the value of performing customer portfolio analysis for developing a better understanding of why customers buy. While relationship proneness cannot be controlled by the retailer, segmenting consumers according to levels of consumer relationship proneness could affect expected share-of-market and share-of-customer values, given that relationship-prone consumers have a higher tendency to remain loyal to stores. This is in line with a recent recommendation by Söllner (1999), stating that careful customer segmentation has to be carried out in order to identify clients who may appreciate a relationship.

With respect to the influence of perceived customer retention orientation of the retailer on relationship outcomes, we found results that are in line with researchers previously indicating that performance judgments such as perceived customer retention orientation play an important role in influencing relationship satisfaction and commitment (Smith and Barclay, 1997). Consumers perceiving that retailers care for customer loyalty seem to respond equitably by adjusting their attitudes in terms of improved satisfaction and commitment.

An interesting observation is that relationship satisfaction is relatively stronger influenced by the perceived customer retention orientation of the retailer, whereas relationship commitment is relatively stronger affected by consumer relationship proneness. This leads to the conclusion that it will be very hard to establish relationship satisfaction without consumers perceiving that the retailer cares for customer retention. It would be equally hard to create relationship commitment without consumers being prone to engage in relationships with retailers in general. This seems plausible as relationship satisfaction refers to “the overall appraisal of a relationship with a retailer” and relationship commitment refers to “an

enduring desire to continue a relationship.” From a nomological point of view, one would indeed expect retailer-related variables such as customer retention orientation of the retailer to be related stronger to relationship satisfaction, while consumer-specific variables such as consumer relationship proneness are expected to reveal strong ties with relationship commitment.

Finally, the hypotheses that relationship satisfaction positively influences trust, which, in turn, positively affects relationship commitment, ultimately leading to buying behavior, are all confirmed. While these relationships have been explored to a large extent in previous research (e.g., Morgan and Hunt, 1994), we provide strong support for their existence in retail environments. While it is not surprising that a consumer’s purchasing behavior is determined by additional influencing factors not measured in this study (e.g., distance to the store, store assortment, and other elements of the retail mix), 7% in the variation of buying behavior could be explained on basis of relationship commitment only.

## 6. Limitations and directions for future research

Some limitations may be related to the way we collected our data and interpreted our results, which could inspire researchers to define their future research agendas. A first limitation may be the omission of important variables. For example, more tangible elements in the retail mix such as pricing and promotion, product quality and assortment, and service quality could be added as additional antecedents of the customer retention orientation of the retailer. Another potential shortcoming in the study is common method bias. As we used one single questionnaire to measure all constructs included, the strength of the relationships between these constructs may be somewhat inflated. A third potential limitation is related to the measurement of buying behavior. The true meaning of buying behavior may only be partially captured as its measure was self-declared by respondents. No database information could be used as input for measuring actual purchasing behavior. This study could be improved with access to more substantial data on customer purchase histories that are not subject to potential recall loss. It would then be possible to look at longer strings of purchases and to perhaps incorporate contextual information. Finally, it must be recognized that our sample of German consumers reporting on retailers selling beauty products cannot necessarily be generalized to other retail contexts. This limits the findings as relevant only to these types of consumers and retailers. Future studies need to assess the generalizability of our findings to other consumer groups in other contexts. For example, how similar is the described model in a food or apparel shopping context?

## Appendix A.

Construct	Source
Social affiliation	Cheek and Buss, 1981; Villani and Wind, 1975
Social recognition	Developed for this study
Shopping enjoyment	Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980; Gutman and Mills, 1982; Mittal and Lee, 1989
Product category involvement	Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Mittal, 1995
Consumer relationship proneness	Developed for this study
Communication	Developed for this study
Preferential treatment	Gwinner et al., 1998
Personalization	Mittal and Lassar, 1996
Rewarding	Developed for this study
Customer retention orientation	Developed for this study
Relationship satisfaction	Anderson and Narus, 1984; Frazier et al., 1989; Kumar et al., 1992; Ping, 1993, 1997; Smith and Barclay, 1997
Trust	Dahlstrom and Nygaard, 1995; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Geyskens et al., 1996; Kumar et al., 1995; Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Scheer and Stern, 1992
Relationship commitment	Mohr et al., 1996; Morgan and Hunt, 1994
Buying behavior	Sirohi et al., 1998

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