The influence of relationship marketing investments on customer gratitude and satisfaction in Shahrvand chain stores in Tehran, Iran

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ABSTRACT

The growing competition in the business world requires stores to create and maintain competitive benefits and establish long-term relationships with customers and Relationship marketing is a response to chain stores' need for establishing long-term win-win relationships which provoke repurchase by satisfied and appreciative customers.

The present descriptive survey was conducted to investigate the influence of relationship marketing investments on customer gratitude and satisfaction in Shahrvand chain stores in Tehran, Iran. Cluster sampling was used to randomly select 385 customers. The study model was developed using structural equation modeling, and the results obtained confirmed that this model is applicable to the statistical population.

Given the non-normal distribution of the data as per the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, they were analyzed in SPSS and SMART-PLS2 using structural equations. Except for tangible rewards, different relationship marketing tactics, including direct mail, interpersonal communication and preferential treatment, were found to affect customer gratitude and satisfaction. Satisfaction was also found to have the maximum effect on behavioral loyalty, whereas gratitude did not affect on customer loyalty.

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1. Introduction

With the growing competition in most of today's world markets, firms require to obtain considerable competitive advantage and modern marketing methods to survive in the market. Relationship marketing is a marketing paradigm (Beetles and Harris, 2010) in which the significance of developing and sustaining long-lasting customer relationships has become a norm in the marketing literature (Jin-Soo Lee, Seongseop Kim and Steven Pan, 2013). Long-term relationships with customers constitute the core of relationship marketing. Making efforts to establish long-term relationships is crucial, especially in most international markets, and the organization-customer relationship makes up a major organizational strategy. In the past decade, the existing literature has established the theory in relationship marketing and posited that relationship marketing investments enhance customer trust , commitment , relationship satisfaction and in turn these relational mediators influence seller performance outcomes (Palmatier et al. , 2006 ; Min-Hsin Huang , 2015). A recent study by Palmatier et al. (2009) indicated that othr relational mediating mechanisms are at work. Palmatier et al. (2009) proposes that gratitude mediates the relationship between a seller's relationship marketing investments and seller performance outcomes. The mediating role of satisfaction also is extensively discussed in the domains of customer behavior and relationship marketing , given that " the key to customer retention is customer satisfaction.(Kotler , 1994 , p.20)

In sectors such as retails characterized by high competition, it is difficult to attract new customers and consequently companies have to intensify efforts to retain current customers. Stores should therefore do their best to retain their existing customers. (Migueis et Al , 2013) Therefore, an increasing number of companies are shifting from a transactional to a relational approach (Eriksson & Vaghult, 2000) and adopting relationship management practices to promote closer relationships with customer. (Ranjan & Bhatnagar , 2008)

Given the points discussed, the current study was conducted to investigate the differential influences of four relationship marketing investments tactics; i.e., direct mail, tangible rewards, preferential treatment and interpersonal communication on customer satisfaction and gratitude in Shahrvand chain stores in Tehran, and determine the effect of gratitude and satisfaction on behavioral loyalty within the following conceptual model.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model
Relationship Marketing Investments
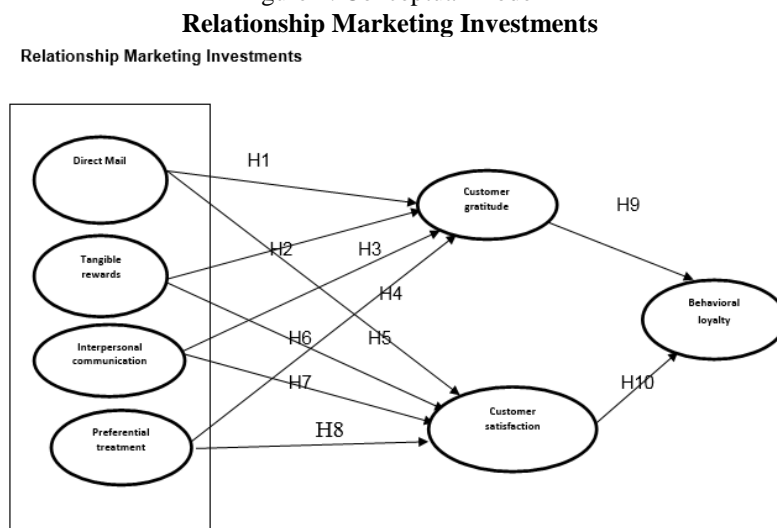
The theoretical foundation of this conceptual framework is based on the social exchange theory which explains why retailers' relationship marketing investments may enhance behavioral loyalty (Palmatier et al., 2009).

Literature review

Customer Gratitude

Customer gratitude is defined as the customer's purchasing behaviors being motivated by a felt obligation to reciprocate seller-provided benefits. (Morales, 2005 ; Palmatier et al., 2009; Wetzel , Hammerschmidt & Zablah, 2014)

Gratitude is a positive emotion which promotes the formation and maintenance of the relationship (Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008 ; Ames, Flynn & Weber, 2004). Raggio and Folse (2009), further suggest that expression of gratitude may help buyer-seller relationships to evolve from the expansion stage to the commitment stage.

The customer's perception of the seller's additional attempts or investments in relationship marketing brings about intentional attentions in the seller and incites gratitude in the customer.(Palmatier et al., 2009)

Customer Satisfaction

It has been stated that customer satisfaction is the most influential factor on customer loyalty (Hoq and Amin, , 2010). Elissavet et al. (2013), quoting Oliver, defined customer satisfaction as the difference between the individual's expectations before the consumption of product or service and the actual experience that result the consumption.

Additionally, Satisfaction can be defined as the evaluation that occurs after the consumption of a product or service and at what degree it has met or exceeded the customers expectation. (Akhtar et. Al, 2011 , Elissavet et. Al , 2013)

Customer satisfaction is seen as a key determinant of customer retention (Kotler , 1994), thus it is treated as a key (mediating) construct that is extensively discussed in relationship marketing (Jin-Soo Lee, Seongseop Kim and

Steve Pan, 2013). Although satisfaction is a key structure of relationship marketing literature, some studies point out its limitation in predicting reciprocity. (Jin-Soo Lee, Seongseop Kim and Steve Pan, 2013)

Gratitude leads to reciprocal behaviors, whereas satisfaction does not always result in loyalty/ reciprocity (Jin-Soo Lee, Seongseop Kim and Steve Pan, 2013). The limited role of satisfaction in reciprocity can arise from its difficulty to measure complete satisfaction to the extent that customers feel obligated to reciprocate. This wide range of satisfaction cause asymmetric and nonlinear relationship between loyalty and satisfaction.(Anderson and Mittal, 2000)

The present study integrates gratitude in parallel with satisfaction into the conceptual model to determine which of the mediating variables are more effective in maintaining reciprocity with customers.

Tactics of relationship marketing investment

Berry (1995), defines three levels of relationship marketing : Level 1 relationship marketing, using pricing stimuli or tangible benefits to maintain customer loyalty, and is reflected as the weakest level of relation marketing because this strategy can be copied by competitors. Level 2 relationship marketing, adopting the social perspectives of a relationship, is conducted by regularly communicating with customers. Level 3 of relationship marketing offers solutions to the customer's problem and is designed into the service-delivery system rather than relying on relationship-buildings skills.

The present study adopts one type of relationship marketing tactic allocated in the first level of relationship marketing (tangible rewards) and three other types allocated in the second level of relationship marketing (direct mail, interpersonal communication and preferential behavior).

Direct mail

Direct mail refers to customer's perception regarding retailers' regular direct mails for information (De Wulf et al., 2001). Retailers use direct mail to keep their customer informed. Retailers also utilize direct mail as a regular communication tool to target specific customer groups (Min-Hsin Huang, 2015)

The personalized direct mailings offer immediate rewards , create interest in a new product (or service) and appeal to customers' specific needs which provide concrete benefits to customer. According to exchange theory\s reciprocity norm, customers should be motivated by a felt obligation to reciprocate these benefits provided by retailers (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)   The personalization of customers contacted by direct mail can enhance the perceived relationship quality of customers (De Wulf et al., 2001). A customer's recognition of retailers using direct mail as a relationship marketing activity will create symptoms of the seller's motivations and leads to consumers' feelings of gratitude (Palmatier et al., 2009).

Hypotheses 1 and 5: Direct mail positively affects customer gratitude and satisfaction.

Tangible Rewards

Tangible or material rewards refer to customer's perception regarding retailers' offerings for tangible benefits such as free gifts and discount coupons. Retailers invest marketing

expenditure in providing these tangible benefits to customers and set an anticipation of reciprocation because customers may repay retailers for retailer-provided benefits to follow the norm of reciprocity in social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) . Moreover, as cited by De Wulf et al., (2001), retailers offer tangible rewards to their regular customers to increase perceived relationship investments and consequently to maintain behavioral loyalty.

Hypotheses 2 and 6: Tangible rewards positively affect gratitude and satisfaction.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication refers to customer's perception of the extent to which a retailer interacts with its regular customers in warm and personal way (De Wulf et al., 2001). The tactic of interpersonal communication in relationship marketing investment provides several relational benefits including social benefits to customers (Min-Hsin Huang, 2015). According to social exchange theory's reciprocity norm, customers should feel obligation to reciprocate these retailer-provided benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Hypotheses 3 and 7: Interpersonal communication positively affects gratitude and satisfaction.

Preferential Treatment

Preferential treatment refers to a customer's perception regarding retailers' treatments and services to their regular byers being better than to their non-regular buyers (De Wulf et al., 2001). Preferential treatment shows that regular customers receive a higher service level compared to non-regular customers (Min-Hsin Huang, 2015). Doaei et al. (2001) has stated that the customers encountered with preferential treatments o stores , will be more satisfaction.

Following the social exchange theory, preferential treatment such as gift card certificate and discounts provides compound (concrete and symbolic) benefits in ongoing exchanges between customers and retailers.(Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The norm of reciprocity in social exchange theory suggests that customers should be motivated to repay retailers in the future for reciprocating these retailer-provided benefits (Min-Hsin Huang, 2015).

Hypotheses 4 and 8: Preferential treatment positively affects gratitude and satisfaction.

Behavioral Loyalty

In the present study, behavioral loyalty is defined as a customer's commitment to re patronize the retailer's product (service) consistently in the future (Oliver, 1999). Experts believe that loyalty is created when customers feel that an organization or a seller can best meet their needs, and therefore they exclusively prefer to buy from this specific organization rather than from rival organizations and sellers. Customer loyalty is crucial to improve the budget share and customer retention in terms of its positive effects on sale.

Hypotheses 9 and 10: gratitude and satisfaction positively affect behavioral loyalty.

Methodology

The statistical population comprised the customers of Shahrvand chain stores in Tehran. The sample size was

estimated as 385 using the Cochran's formula for infinite populations, and the subjects were selected using random cluster sampling. The respondents were tracked after their purchase and only those customers who had purchased by themselves and at least once were targeted.

All variables used in the current study were adopted from past researches. Direct mail, Tangible rewards, interpersonal communication, preferential tretment , gratitude and behavioral loyalty of this study model, were adopted from the model proposed by Min-Hsin Huang (2015), and satisfaction was adopted from the model proposed by Jin-Soo Lee, Seongseop Kim and Steve Pan (2013).

The data collection tools comprised a 34-item questionnaire, which was translated from English to Persian. The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "completely agree" to "completely disagree".

To enhance translation validity, first nine informed experts were asked to comment on the content validity of the questionnaire and their remarks were implemented and to investigate the qualitative content validity of the tool, content validity ratio (CVR) was analyzed for each variable using Lawshe's formula and all the items were found to be within the acceptable range.

Moreover, with a sample size of 60, a coefficient alpha of over 0.70 for each variable confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire for the statistical population.

The model developed was analyzed in SMART-PLS2 using structural equation modeling with a partial least square approach

Analytical Results

The present descriptive correlational study used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the obtained data.

Descriptive Results

The descriptive statistics section used frequency, relative frequency and mode in SPSS 16.0 to present personal and demographic information of this group, including gender, level of education, age group, income and membership status in the customer club of Shahrvand stores (Table 2).

Table 2: The study demographic variables

Variable	Subgroup	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Gender	Male	197	51.2%
	Female	188	48.8%
Level of Education	Below high school diploma	40	10.4%
	High school diploma	89	23.1%
	Bachelor's degree	215	55.8%
	Master's degree	29	7.5%
	PhD	12	3.1%
Age Group (year)	Under 20	48	12.5%
	20-35	235	61.0%
	35-45	73	19.0%
	45-55	18	4.7%
	Over 55	11	2.9%
Income (IRR)	Under 10 million	109	28.3%
	10-20 million	189	49.1%
	20-30 million	41	10.6%
Membership status in Shahrvand Customer Club	Yes	305	79.2%
	No	80	20.8%

Inferential Results:

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used in the inferential statistics section to investigate the distribution of the observed variables. According to the results, the significance level calculated for all the items was below 0.05, suggesting the non-normal distribution of all the variables.

Testing for reliability , validity , Measurement and structural models

To examine the overall fitness of the model, the goodness-of-fit (GOF) index was used and given that the absolute index of 0.625 calculated for the model is larger than the proposed value of 0.36, the overall fitness of the model is acceptable.

The measurement model shows good reliability as the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability for all constructs were grater than the cutoff point of 0.70. To assess the model measurement, the results of confirmatory factor analysis show that all factors loadings exceed 0.50 and each indicator t-value was significant (shown in table 1).

Table 1: Measurements of model

factors		Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Composite Reliability (cr)	factor loadings	t-value
Direct mail	1	0.791356	0.877926	0.888657	59.161908
	2			0.848888	27.362910
	3			0.779996	23.490211
Tangible rewards	4	0.835527	0.883513	0.794651	33.769984
	5			0.775401	28.893584
	6			0.807295	32.572829
	7			0.768217	25.391588
	8			0.734902	17.885657
Interpersonal communication	9	0.765367	0.812555	0.698043	16.476653
	10			0.826980	45.427638
	11			0.778007	18.864465
Preferential treatmnet	12	0.838427	0.885632	0.803821	42.651114
	13			0.744450	24.334077
	14			0.813420	36.372459
	15			0.767344	21.990543
	16			0.767288	22.935584
Customer gratitude	17	0.866073	0.899855	0.760237	31.203729
	18			0.692986	15.633982
	19			0.787250	27.781386
	20			0.834492	49.968246
	21			0.785752	29.341563
	22			0.781189	26.204849
Customer satisfaction	23	0.893604	0.921544	0.822404	38.366091
	24			0.854903	50.237892
	25			0.843818	46.331181
	26			0.843015	45.177834
	27			0.823068	42.274226
Behavioral loyalty	28	0.924331	0.939317	0.823864	38.172743
	29			0.825523	45.083461
	30			0.891316	77.935608
	31			0.842778	55.810133
	32			0.841458	47.796853
	33			0.830632	46.798869
	34			0.748707	22.546206

Convergent Validity of study was supported by evidence that all average variance extracted (AVE) and communality (Table 2) values were above 0.5. Additionally, the AEV for each construct was higher than the squared correlation coefficient under corresponding inter-construct, supporting discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 2: AVE , Communality , Convergent and discriminant validity

Construct	BL	CG	DMP	IC	PT	SAT	TR	communality
Behavioral Loyalty	0.8301							0.689075
Customer Gratitude	0.746822	0.7748						0.600332
Direct Mail	0.631199	0.629835	0.8404					0.706238
Interpersonal communication	0.622101	0.666244	0.577122	0.7695				0.592152
Preferential treatment	0.594136	0.700051	0.517237	0.738779	0.7797			0.607907
Satisfaction	0.844135	0.844498	0.605442	0.611133	0.600706	0.8375		0.70147
Tangible rewards	0.554176	0.610519	0.721277	0.596853	0.570432	0.547610	0.7765	0.602936

The structural modeling and the partial least square approach were used to examine the study model in the model measurement section . Figure 2 presents the statistical test indices associated with the correlation coefficients between the indicators and the model constructs in the measurement section as well as the correlation coefficients between the effective and affected factors in the structural model.

Figure 2: The results of the statistical test for the effect of effective constructs in the study model (the model in the significant mode)
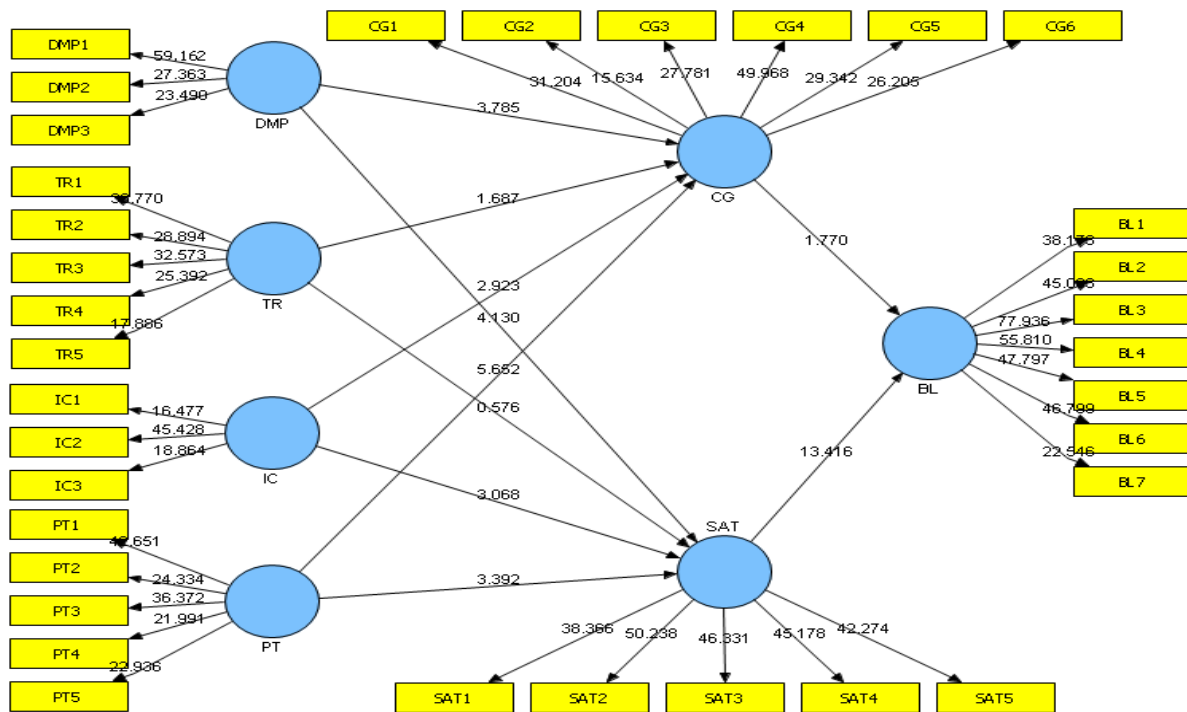
Besides, according to Figure 3, the coefficients between the indicators and the relevant constructs were larger than 0.50, suggesting the appropriateness of the indictors for measuring the study constructs. In addition, the correlation coefficients of all paths in the construct section are positive, suggesting the positive effect of relationship marketing investment on customer gratitude and satisfaction and the positive effect of customer gratitude and satisfaction on behavioral loyalty.

Figure 3: Correlation coefficients of the effective constructs in the study model (model in the standard mode)
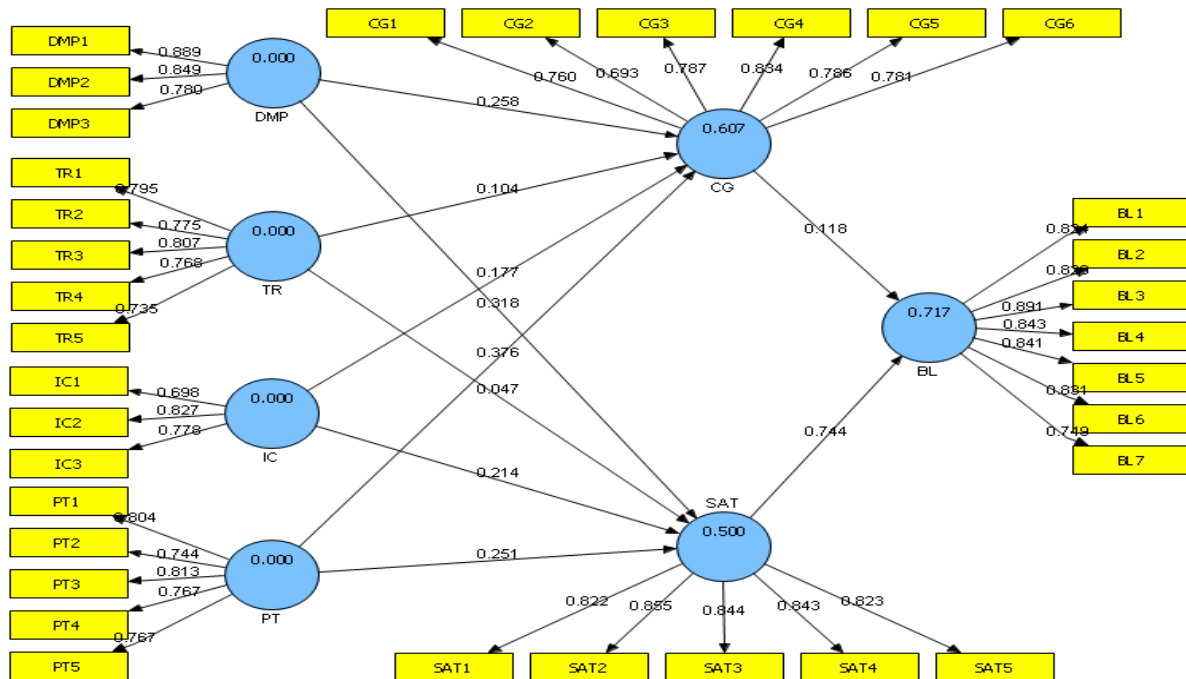
Hypothesis testing

According to the results obtained from the structural section of the model, the t-value of direct mail on gratitude and satisfaction were respectively higher than the critical value of 1.96 by 3.78 and 4.13, suggesting its positive effect with a confidence interval of 95%. The first and fifth hypotheses were therefore approved.

However, the t-value of tangible rewards with gratitude and satisfaction were respectively lower than the critical value of 1.96 by 1.69 and 0.58, rejecting its positive effect with a confidence interval of 95% and thus rejecting the second and sixth hypotheses.

The t-value of interpersonal communication with gratitude and satisfaction were respectively higher than the critical value of 1.96 by 2.92 and 3.07, suggesting its positive effect with a confidence interval of 95%. The third and seventh hypotheses were therefore approved.

The t-value of preferential treatment with gratitude and satisfaction were respectively higher than the critical value of 1.96 by 5.65 and 3.39, suggesting its positive effect with a confidence interval of 95%. The fourth and eighth hypotheses were therefore approved.

The t-value between gratitude and loyalty was lower than the critical value of 1.96 by 1.77, rejecting its positive effect with a confidence interval of 95% and thus rejecting the ninth hypothesis.

The t-value between satisfaction and loyalty was higher than the critical value of 1.96 by 13.42, supporting its positive effect with a confidence interval of 95% and approving the tenth hypothesis.

Table 3 presents the overall results associated with the hypotheses.

Table 3: The results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Constructs of the study hypothesis		β	t-values	Null Hypothesis	Alternative Hypothesis	Test Results
	Effective	Affected			β =0	β≠0	
First	Direct mail	Customer gratitude	0.257765	3.785301	✘	✔	Significant and positive
Second	Tangible rewards	Customer gratitude	0.177318	2.923317	✔	✘	Insignificant effect
Third	Interpersonal communication	Customer gratitude	0.376356	5.652462	✘	✔	Significant and positive
Fourth	Preferential treatment	Customer gratitude	0.104080	1.686944	✘	✔	Significant and positive
Fifth	Direct mail	Customer satisfaction	0.317953	4.130043	✘	✔	Significant and positive
Sixth	Tangible rewards	Customer satisfaction	0.213637	3.068257	✔	✘	Insignificant effect

Seventh	Interpersonal communication	Customer satisfaction	0.251404	3.391756	✖	✔	Significant and positive
Eighth	Preferential treatment	Customer satisfaction	0.047359	0.576143	✖	✔	Significant and positive
Ninth	Customer appreciation	behavioral loyalty	0.118372	1.769910	✔	✖	Insignificant effect
Tenth	Customer satisfaction	behavioral loyalty	0.744170	13.416375	✖	✔	Significant and positive

Conclusion and Discussion

The goal of this study is to investigate whether the four relationship marketing tactics have a distinguished effect on customer gratitude and satisfaction and consequent behavioral loyalty. The present findings can provide marketing managers with beneficial information.

The results obtained revealed that three of the tactics proposed positively affect customer gratitude and satisfaction except for tangible rewards. Of two mediating variables of gratitude and satisfaction, only the latter was found to significantly and positively affect customer behavioral loyalty.

Tangible rewards were found to non-significant effect customer gratitude. This finding is in contrast to Min-Hsin Hung (2015), indicating that tangible rewards has positive influence on customer gratitude. Tangible rewards also has non-significant effect on customer satisfaction and this result is not similar to the findings of Jin-Soo Lee et al. (2013). A possible explanation for this result might be that this chain store does not propose considerable rewards, discounts and awards or their presentation fails to cause satisfaction and gratitude. The managers of these stores are therefore recommended to diversify the rewards proportionally to the purchase volume, and offer discounts for the next purchases and conduct a survey of customers about the reward and discount system to cause customer satisfaction and gratitude followed by behavioral loyalty.

Direct mail was found to effectively contribute to improving customer gratitude and this result is in contrast to Min-Hsin Hung (2015), inferring that direct mail has significant effect on customer gratitude. Direct mail was also found to effectively contribute to improving customer satisfaction. This may signal that notifying customers through brochures, invitations and mass communication systems such as Telegram can enhance customer loyalty. To improve the effect of this tactic, marketers and store managers are recommended to update it using state-of-the-art technology, and regularly send information about goods and services and discounts at appropriate intervals, and use culture-specific methods and simply be available.

Interpersonal communication was found to positively affect customer gratitude. This result is similar to that of Min-Hsin Hung (2015) , inferring that interpersonal communication has positive effect on customer gratitude. Interpersonal communication was also found to positively affect customer satisfaction and this finding is similar to the finding of Jin-Soo Lee et al. (2013). Given that show the customer's inclination for having a more effective and beneficial purchase through establishing purposeful relationships with the store. To improve the positive effects of this strategy, trained workforce is recommended to be employed to guide customers around the store. Public relations departments are also recommended to be created and communication tools to be properly utilized and updated and customers to be enabled to contact the store managers.

Preferential treatment was found to positively affect customer gratitude. This result is the same as the result of Min-Hsin Hung (2015), indicating that preferential treatment has positive influence on customer gratitude. Meanwhile, preferential treatment was found to positively affect customer satisfaction accordingly and this result is similar to the findings of Jin-Soo Lee et al. (2013). These findings indicate the major effect of proper attitudes of the store staff towards customers on customer behavioral loyalty. To provide distinctive services, customer orientation principles are recommended to be taught to the staff and the customers' age, gender and favorites to be considered when dealing with them.

The present results suggested the highest positive correlation between satisfaction and behavioral loyalty which is in contrast to Jin-Soo Lee et al. (2013) finding, whereas no relationships were observed between gratitude and loyalty and this result is also in contrast to the results of Min-Hsin Hung (2015) and Jin-Soo Lee et al. (2013). It is worth noting that, according to Kotler, satisfaction is the key to customer retention, although some studies demonstrated the limitations of satisfaction in predicting the reciprocal behavior. The word "gratitude" appears to make no sense in the Iranian culture and the customers do not sense gratitude given the current facilities used by the stores.

Limitations

The present study limitations comprised failing to examine relationship marketing tools other than the four currently analyzed. In addition, the study population consisted of only the customers of Shahrvand chain stores in Tehran, which limits the generalizability of the results. This study is therefore recommended to be carried out on other chain stores in other Iranian cities and other countries and the results to be compared with the present findings. Given the growing number of online stores, virtual transactions are also recommended to be simulated and studied.

Although three of the relationship marketing tactics were found to positively and significantly affect customer satisfaction and gratitude, the former was the only mediating variable affecting customer loyalty. Satisfaction is also considered sensitive to cultural context in compare to

gratitude. Additionally, Given the lack of studies comparing the effect of mediating variables of satisfaction and gratitude on loyalty, further future studies is encouraged to explore these effects in different cultures.

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