Exploring Data Collection Innovations by Examining the Effects of Relationship Marketing on Performance in Times of Crisis

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EXPLORACIÓN DE LAS INNOVACIONES EN CUANTO A RECOLECCIÓN DE DATOS MEDIANTE UN EXAMEN DE LOS EFECTOS DEL MARKETING RELACIONAL SOBRE EL DESEMPEÑO EN TIEMPOS DE CRISIS

RESUMEN: La calidad científica, el rigor y el impacto de una cantidad considerable, por no decir la vasta mayoría, de estudios de marketing dependen de un proceso efectivo de recolección de datos. La mayoría de los investigadores de estas áreas y áreas relacionadas, confían en las formas tradicionales de recolección de datos, como los cuestionarios cara a cara, de lápiz y papel, o en línea, que no son muy efectivos en términos del tiempo y dinero necesarios para recolectar una cantidad razonable de observaciones. Teniendo en cuenta que las crisis también deben ser oportunidades para que los investigadores y las instituciones desarrollen herramientas y procedimientos de investigación más productivos y efectivos, esta investigación tiene dos objetivos: i) probar un modelo que relaciona los esfuerzos del marketing relacional (MR) con el desempeño; y ii) explorar métodos de recolección de datos innovadores y más efectivos para emplearlos en un contexto de investigación de mercados. Con este fin, este estudio propone y prueba un modelo de los efectos de los antecedentes y mediadores del MR sobre el desempeño objetivo. El trabajo empírico se basa en las percepciones de 4389 representantes empresariales sobre sus relaciones con sus contrapartes en hoteles, que recolectamos usando Npolls de Appgeneration. Los resultados de los modelos de ecuaciones estructurales sugieren que el compromiso es el determinante más poderoso de la participación en los negocios, y media por completo el impacto de la calidad de las relaciones (con la satisfacción y la confianza como dimensiones de primer orden) sobre el desempeño objetivo. Desde una perspectiva metodológica innovadora, este estudio demuestra que es posible recolectar una cantidad significativamente grande de observaciones en un período de tiempo muy corto, con ventajas considerables versus los procedimientos tradicionales de recolección de datos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Innovación, recolección de datos, marketing relacional, objetivo de rendimiento del vendedor, modelación de ecuaciones estructurales.

EXPLORATION DES INNOVATIONS SUR LA COLLECTE DE DONNÉES PAR UN EXAMEN DES EFFETS DU MARKETING RELATIONNEL SUR LE RENDEMENT EN PÉRIODE DE CRISE

RÉSUMÉ : La qualité scientifique, la rigueur et l'impact d'un nombre considérable, pour ne pas dire de la majorité, des études de marketing dépendent d'un processus effectif de collecte de données. La majorité des chercheurs de ces domaines, et de ceux qui leur sont liés, se fient aux méthodes traditionnelles de collecte de données, comme les questionnaires en tête-à-tête, avec crayon et papier, ou en ligne, qui ne sont pas très effectives en termes de temps et d'argent pour recueillir une quantité raisonnable d'observations. Considérant que les crises doivent aussi être des occasions pour que les chercheurs et les institutions mettent en place des outils et des procédures de recherche plus efficients, cette investigation a deux objectifs : i) Expérimenter un modèle qui associe les efforts du Marketing Relationnel (MR) avec le rendement ; et ii) rechercher des méthodes de collecte de données innovatrices et plus effectives pour les employer dans un contexte d'investigation de marchés. Pour cela, cette étude propose et expérimente un modèle des effets des antécédents et intermédiaires du MR sur le rendement objectif. Le travail empirique est basé sur les perceptions de 4389 représentants d'entreprise sur leurs relations avec leurs interlocuteurs dans des hôtels, que nous recueillons en utilisant Npolls d'Appgeneration. Les résultats des modèles d'équations structurelles suggèrent que l'engagement est le facteur le plus puissant de la participation dans les affaires, et modère complètement l'impact de la qualité des relations (avec la satisfaction et la confiance en premier lieu) sur le rendement objectif. Dans une perspective méthodologique innovatrice, cette étude démontre qu'il est possible de collecter une quantité significativement importante d'observations dans un temps très court, avec des avantages considérables par rapport aux procédures traditionnelles de collecte de données.

MOTS-CLÉS : Innovation ; collecte de données ; marketing relationnel ; objectif de rendement du vendeur ; modélisation d'équations structurelles.

EXPLORAÇÃO DAS INOVAÇÕES QUANTO À COLETA DE DADOS MEDIANTE UM EXAME DOS EFEITOS DO MARKETING RELACIONAL SOBRE O DESEMPENHO EM TEMPOS DE CRISE

RESUMO: A qualidade científica, o rigor e o impacto de uma quantidade considerável, para não dizer a grande maioria, de estudos de marketing dependem de um processo efetivo de coleta de dados. A maioria dos pesquisadores destas áreas, e áreas relacionadas, confiam nos métodos tradicionais de coleta de dados, como os questionários face a face, de lápis e papel, ou on line, que não são muito efetivos em termos do tempo e dinheiro necessários para coletar uma quantidade razoável de observações. Levando em conta que as crises também devem ser oportunidades para os pesquisadores e as instituições desenvolverem recursos e procedimentos de pesquisa mais produtivos e efetivos, esta pesquisa tem dois objetivos: i) experimentar um modelo que relaciona os esforços do Marketing Relacional (MR) com o desempenho; e ii) explorar métodos de coleta de dados inovadores e mais efetivos para utilizá-los em um contexto de estudo de mercados. Com esta finalidade, este estudo propõe e experimenta um modelo dos efeitos dos antecedentes e mediadores do MR sobre o desempenho objetivo. O trabalho empírico se baseia nas percepções de 4389 representantes empresariais sobre as suas relações com as suas congêneres em hotéis, que coletamos usando Npolls de Appgeneration. Os resultados dos modelos de equações estruturais sugerem que o compromisso é o determinante mais poderoso da participação nos negócios e intermedia inteiramente o impacto da qualidade das relações (com a satisfação e a confiança como dimensões de primeira ordem) sobre o desempenho objetivo. De uma perspectiva metodológica inovadora, este estudo demonstra que é possível coletar uma quantidade significativamente grande de observações em um período de tempo muito curto, com vantagens consideráveis versus os procedimentos tradicionais de coleta de dados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: inovação, coleta de dados, marketing relacional, objetivo de rendimento do vendedor, modelagem de equações estruturais.

ABSTRACT: The scientific quality, rigour, and impact of a considerable number, if not the vast majority, of marketing studies depend on an effective data collection process. Most of the researchers in these and related areas rely on traditional data collection tools, such as face-to-face, pen-and-paper, or online questionnaires, which are not very effective, both in terms of the time and money required to gather a reasonable number of observations. Bearing in mind that crises should also be an opportunity for researchers and institutions to develop more productive and effective research tools and procedures, the aim of this research is twofold: 1) to test a model that relates relationship marketing (RM) efforts with performance; and 2) to explore innovative, more effective, data collection tools to be employed in a marketing research context. To this end, this study proposes and tests a model of the effects of RM antecedents and mediators on objective performance. The empirical work draws on the perceptions of 4,389 firm representatives in terms of their relationships with their counterparts in hotels, collected by using AppGeneration Npolls . Structural equation modelling results suggest that commitment is the strongest determinant of share of business, and fully mediates the impact of relationship quality (with satisfaction and trust as first-order dimensions) on objective performance. From an innovative, methodological perspective, this study demonstrates that it is possible to collect a significantly high number of observations in a very short period of time, with considerable advantages when compared to traditional data collection procedures.

KEYWORDS: Innovation; Data collection; Relationship marketing; Seller objective performance; Structural Equation Modelling.

Introduction

In a macroeconomic recession context, where intense price competition and decreased demand have increased pressure on margins, customer loyalty is increasingly under threat, as buyers tend to look for the lowest cost alternatives (LaPlaca, 2009). Providers who are not able or willing to compete via sales promotions or price wars, need to put even more emphasis on nurturing customer relationships with key clients, to develop meaningful differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage. The literature on buyer-seller relationships is implicitly predicated on the expectation that improvements in the quality of the relationship with a buyer will lead to a higher share of its business and ideally to a better financial performance. However, both managers and scholars have been increasingly reporting their disappointment, because relationship marketing (RM) efforts yield unclear results (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal & Evans, 2006; Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff & Kardes, 2009), rarely meet expectations (Henderson, Beck & Palmatier, 2011), and may even influence performance negatively (DeWulf, Odekerken-Schröder

& Iacobucci, 2001; Palmatier, Dant & Grewal, 2007). RM efforts are commonly referred to as the behaviours and actions taken by business partners to develop and enhance mutual beneficial interactions (e.g., Grönroos 2000; Hunt et al. 2006). Although, as the expression implies, this concept is connoted with the social level of relationships, building on the notion that buyers derive utility from social capital (Granoveter 1985; Hughes, Le Bon & Rapp, 2013), RM efforts are also viewed as important determinants of objective seller performance (Leuthesser, 1997; Palmatier et al., 2009).

While there is widespread agreement that the effects of RM efforts on performance are mediated by relational constructs, seller objective performance has typically been neglected in previous studies, although it is regarded as a particularly important outcome of relational efforts (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Palmatier et al., 2006). A meta-analysis by Palmatier et al. (2006) showed that RM is more effective in improving the provider's performance and building loyalty when buyers perceive relationships to be more important, and specifically, in service settings, in channel exchanges as compared to direct exchanges, and in business markets as compared to consumer markets. The present research focuses on business-to-business (B2B) service contexts characterised by frequent interaction between key firm representatives, which for the most part correspond to the above mentioned 'ideal' circumstances. Indeed, notwithstanding the old and recurring alerts to services and B2B marketing being neglected, although they account for the majority of marketing expense (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012), and despite the wealth of literature on RM, empirical work is fragmented and only two studies (Boles, Johnson, & Barksdale, 2000; Huntley, 2006) were undertaken in a B2B services context examining the full link between relational efforts/firm characteristics, relational mediators, and objective outcomes.

Moreover, although the scientific quality, rigour, and impact of a considerable number, if not the vast majority, of marketing studies depend on effective data collection processes (Churchill, 1999; Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998), most of the researchers in these and related areas rely on traditional data collection tools, such as face-to-face, pen-and-paper, or online questionnaires, which are not very effective, both in terms of the time and money required to gather a reasonable number of observations. This is particularly critical in times of crisis, when researchers and institutions should take the opportunity to develop more productive and effective research tools and procedures. Against this background, the aim of this research is twofold: i) to test a model that relates relationship marketing (RM) efforts with performance; and ii) to explore innovative, more effective, data collection tools to be employed in a marketing research context.

The following sections provide a theoretical overview on relational antecedents and mediators, their interlinkages, followed by a proposed model of their impacts on share of business. After describing the adopted methodology, the paper will proceed by systematising the main results. The analysis suggests that commitment is the strongest determinant of share of business and fully mediates the impact of relationship quality on share of business. From an innovative, methodological perspective, the study demonstrates that it is possible to collect a significantly high number of observations in a very short period of time, with considerable advantages versus the traditional data collection procedures. The paper finalises with the main contributions, both theoretical and managerial, as well as the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

Background

Building on some degree of consensus on the type of relational determinants of firms/customer performance (e.g., Athanasopoulou, 2009; Palmatier et al., 2006), the following constructs were employed in the present research as a basis for conducting the analysis.

Relational Antecedents

Communication is defined as the ability to use unique combinations of code, content, and communication rules to communicate effectively (Williams & Spiro, 1985). Communication has been considered the most basic activity during exchange, and is essential to the interaction established between the individuals involved (Williams, Spiro & Fine, 1990). Effective communication enhances trust, notably within channel dyads (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Communication has also been suggested as an antecedent of commitment (Friman, Garling, Millet, Mattsson, & Johnston, 2002) and satisfaction (Leuthesser, 1997).

Domain expertise, also referred to as salesperson expertise, is defined as the customer's perception of the other party's level of technical knowledge and the ability to demonstrate such knowledge (Boles et al., 2000; Palmer & Bejou, 1994). This concept has been frequently used in the literature as a driver of RQ, both when the latter has been conceptualised as a higher-order construct comprising trust and satisfaction (e.g., Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990), and as a direct antecedent of those two dimensions of RQ (Bejou, Ennew & Palmer, 1998). In addition,

a meta-analysis by Palmatier et al. (2006) showed that seller expertise also influences commitment.

Relational value refers to the party's expected net benefits from a relationship resulting from balancing relational benefits and sacrifices (Grönroos, 2000). Partners stay in relationships as long as they can expect to receive the promised benefits (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). These relational benefits extend beyond just immediate economic benefits and also include social benefits, which arise from social bonds (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002). Commitment increases when buyers perceive both that they can receive superior benefits from their partnerships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and that the alternatives to their current relationships are relatively poor (Rusbult, 1983). The literature suggests a positive association between relationship-specific investments and commitment (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Palmatier et al., 2007). This is in line with the idea that commitment is driven by value and that each partner's commitment depends on the motivation for entering into a relationship, which is in part influenced by the assessment of expected (intrinsic) benefits and sacrifices (Geyskens, Steenkamp, Sheer & Kumar, 1996). The

concept of relational value has also been linked to trust and satisfaction in previous investigations, either individually (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), or as part of RQ conceptualised as a higher-order construct (DeWulf et al., 2001).

Mutual goals is another proposed relational antecedent in this study. The existence of goal congruity offers the right conditions for both parties to benefit from participating in a relationship (McQuiston, 2001). Mutual goals have been defined as the degree to which parties share goals that can only be achieved through joint action and the maintenance of the relationship (Wilson, 1995), and as such, point to a process in which both parties work as equals toward the definition of a common long-term achievement. The literature generally recognizes that trust is enhanced when channel partners have similar goals (Anderson & Weitz, 1989), that commitment is positively influenced by shared values, defined as "the extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviours, goals, and policies are important or unimportant" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 25), and that the existence of mutual goals may also enhance satisfaction with both the relationship and the performance of the seller (Wilson, 1995).

Relational Mediators

The most commonly used relational mediators are constructs capturing the level of trust, commitment, and satisfaction within a customer/firm relationship.

Trust is defined as the ability and willingness to rely on the relationship manager's integrity and behaviour (i.e., trustworthiness) so that the long-term expectations of the buyer will be met (Crosby et al., 1990; Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994); *commitment* captures the parties' firm and consistent motivation to maintain a relationship that is valued by them (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Hewett, Money & Sharma, 2002; Moorman et al., 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994); and *satisfaction* is frequently defined as the assurance, perceived by the buyer, regarding the supplier's future performance, given that past performance has been consistently satisfactory (Crosby et al., 1990; Naudé & Buttle, 2000).

Several authors treated RM mediators as first-order dimensions of *relationship quality* (RQ). Consistent with the purposes of this paper, RQ is defined as the joint cognitive assessment of business interactions by key individuals in a business-to-business (B2B) relationship (Holmlund, 2001). Classic, seminal work by Crosby et al. (1990) conceptualised RQ as comprising trust and satisfaction (see also Bejou, Wray & Ingram, 1996; Boles et al., 2000; Han, Wilson & Dant, 1993; Wray, Palmer & Bejou, 1994).

Modelling the Impacts On Share of Business

The proposed model is illustrated by Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Proposed Model
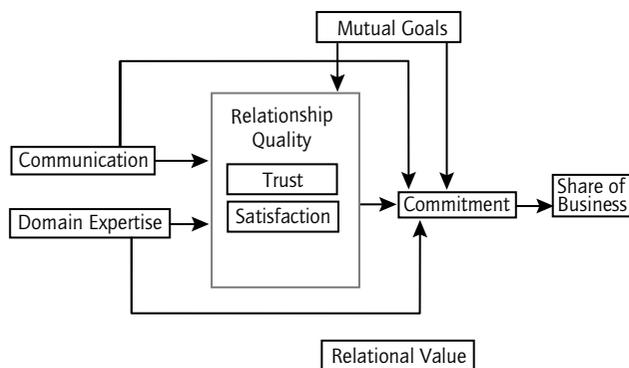
Source: Author's own.

The configuration of the proposed model is influenced by the KMV model proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994) which regards commitment as a mediator of the effect of satisfaction and trust on strategic performance (see also Ramaseshan et al., 2006; Venetis & Ghauri, 2004). Based

on this stream of literature, RQ is modelled as a second-order construct reflecting trust and satisfaction. As in the KMV model, commitment is proposed to mediate the effects of trust and satisfaction (via RQ) on share of business. Conceptualising RQ as a higher-order construct implies that trust and satisfaction act as indicators of the quality of the provider-client relationship. It has been argued that the more committed the client, the lower the probability of a switch to an alternative provider due to a price change; on the contrary, committed clients often show a relatively higher spending (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). The literature also suggests that commitment may play a particularly important role in improving share of business (e.g., Hewett et al., 2002; Palmatier et al., 2006; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Roberts, Varki & Brodie, 2003).

Bearing in mind the foregoing discussion, the broad organisation of the hypotheses underlying the proposed model is twofold: On the one hand, commitment acts both as driver of performance and as a mediator of the influence of RQ on share of business (illustrated in Figure 1 by the links among RQ, commitment and share of business). On the other, it is hypothesised that higher levels RM antecedents, i.e., goal congruity, communication effectiveness, domain expertise, and expected relational net benefits, influence positively and directly, not only RQ, but also commitment (illustrated in Figure 1 by the remaining links).

Methodology

The analysis is based on the perceptions of 4,389 firm representatives about their relationships with their counterparts in hotels, in a context characterised by recurring interaction between key individuals representing the parties and service customisation and co-ordination, i.e., a research setting that resembles the context where RM is more effective, as suggested by Palmatier et al. (2006). The data were collected using AppGeneration Npolls (more details on www.npolls.com and www.appgeneration.com). The previously mentioned considerably high number of observations was gathered in only 5 days. Indeed, Npolls operates on any device with the android system or equivalent (e.g., Iphone, Ipad). The researcher is able to create his/her own questionnaires, which will be answered by android (or equivalent) device users worldwide, and receive the results, via e-mail, in Excel/Csv format.

All measures included in the questionnaire were based on established measurement scales with slight adaptations to fit the research setting of the present study. The items measuring *trust* and *satisfaction* were based on the original scales developed by Crosby et al. (1990). *Commitment* was measured with seven indicators adapted from the

work of Bansal, Irving and Taylor (2004), and the *mutual goals* scale comprised of four items based on McQuiston (2001). The seven items measuring *domain expertise* were selected and adapted from the SOCO scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). *Communication* was measured using a 7-item scale including the items developed by Williams and Spiro (1985) to measure the interaction orientation dimension of communication. *Share of business* was measured by a single item asking client managers to indicate 'out of all the hotel services your company uses, what percentage is represented by this hotel chain?'

Table 1 includes the measurement items contained within in the questionnaire, and their respective reliability coefficients and factor loadings, based on SPSS and LISREL outputs. In responding to these items, the representatives of corporate clients were asked to consider the relationship with their respective hotel client manager. In line with previous research practice (e.g., Anderson & Narus, 1990), a key informant single respondent approach was adopted.

TABLE 1. Constructs and Scales Used

Trust ($\alpha = 0.91$)	Factor loadings
Our client manager can be relied upon to keep his/her promises	0.875
There are times when we find our client manager to be a bit insincere	0.869
We find it necessary to be cautious in dealing with our client manager	0.845
Our client manager is trustworthy	0.878
Our client manger is trying to sell us a lot of services and we are trying to avoid it*	
Our client manager puts our interests before his/her own*	0.856
Our client manager is capable of bending the facts to create the impression he/she wants.	0.863
Our client manager is dishonest*	
We suspect that our client manager has sometimes withheld certain pieces of information that might have affected my decision-making	0.873
Commitment ($\alpha = 0.92$)	
Even if it were to our advantage, we do not feel it would be right to leave our client manager now	0.740
This client manager deserves our loyalty	0.845
We would feel guilty if we left our client manager now*	
We would not leave this client manager right now because we have a sense of obligation to him	0.851
We do not feel 'emotionally attached' to our client manager	0.836
We do not feel like 'part of the family' with our client manager	0.815
We do not feel a strong sense of 'belonging' to our client manager	0.843
Satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.86$)	
We are satisfied with the performance of our client manager	0.837

We are pleased with the performance of our client manager	0.790
We have a favourable opinion on our client manager's performance	0.799
Mutual goals ($\alpha = 0.85$)	
We share a joint vision with our client manager of what is necessary for mutual success	0.802
We know with certainty what our client manager expects of us	0.783
We work proactively with our client manager to establish	0.715
We can state with certainty that our client manager has the same basic beliefs about running a business than we do	0.803
Communication ($\alpha = 0.88$)	
Our client manager genuinely enjoys helping us	0.769
Our client manager is easy to communicate with*	
Our client manager likes to help clients	0.722
Our client manager is a cooperative person	0.713
Our client manager tries to establish a personal relationship	0.692
Our client manager seems interested in us not only as a clients, but also as persons	0.741
Our client manager is friendly	0.737
Domain expertise ($\alpha = 91$)	
Our client manager recommends suitable solutions for us	0.846
Our client manager tries to find best services for us	0.857
Our client manager answers our questions correctly	0.828
Our client manager tries to match the hotel's solutions with our problems*	
Our client manager is willing to disagree with us in order to help us make a better decision	0.786
Our client manager tries to give us an accurate expectation of what the product will do for us	0.815
Our client manager tries to figure out our needs	0.721
Relational value ($\alpha = 0.85$)	
This relationship is extremely rewarding	0.797
This relationship is extremely costly	0.765
All things considered, there are many benefits associated with this relationship that we would lose if the relationship were to end	0.935

* item removed during measure purification.
Source: SPSS and LISREL outputs.

Results

The structural equation analysis based on LISREL outputs suggest that the model shows a very good overall fit and a substantive predictive power (see Table 2).

In terms of model interpretation, the effect of RQ (comprised of satisfaction and trust) on share of business is mediated by commitment. This finding highlights the pivotal role of commitment, and suggests support for its role as both driver of performance and mediator of the influence of RQ on share of business, as hypothesised. This is broadly in line with previous research adopting a similar approach to modelling the effects of relational efforts on seller objective performance (e.g., Hewett et al., 2002; Palmatier et

al., 2006; Palmatier et al., 2009; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Roberts et al., 2003).

TABLE 2. Standardised Coefficients and Model Fit

RQ	$R^2 = 0.425$
Mutual Goals →RQ	0.333
Communication → RQ	0.269
Domain Expertise → RQ	0.230
Relational Value → RQ	0.090
Commitment	$R^2 = 0.429$
Mutual Goals → Commitment	0.148
Communication → Commitment	0.167
Domain Expertise → Commitment	0.085
Relational Value → Commitment	0.211
RQ → Commitment	0.317
Performance (Share of business)	$R^2 = 0.162$
Commitment → Performance	0.409
Fit Indices	
RMSEA	0.031
CFI	0.98
NNFI	0.97
χ^2	967.5

Source: LISREL output.

Regarding the hypotheses concerning relational antecedents, results support the expectation that higher levels RM antecedents positively and directly influence, not only RQ, but also commitment. In addition, results suggest that mutual goals is the main driver of relational mediators. Relational value appears to be more important in enhancing commitment than for increasing the other relational mediators. Communication and domain expertise also exhibit relatively important impacts on RQ conceptualized as a higher-order construct. This is probably due to the above mentioned influence exerted by the latter relational mediators on RQ building blocks, namely the relatively important impacts of communication on trust (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and commitment (Friman et al., 2002), and of domain expertise on trust (Bejou et al., 1998).

These results were based on a considerably high number of observations collected in a relative short period of time, which suggests, from a methodological perspective, that it is possible to introduce a certain level of innovation while maintaining scientific rigour and effectiveness.

Conclusions

This study provides new insights on innovative data collection procedures as well as the structural relationships amongst relational constructs and objective seller performance, which are particularly relevant in times of crisis, both for researchers and practitioners. Indeed, most of the researchers in marketing and related areas rely on traditional data collection tools, such as face-to-face, pen-and-paper, or online questionnaires, which are not very effective, both in terms of the time and money required for gathering a reasonable number of observations. This research explored innovative, more effective, data collection tools to be employed in a marketing research context, and possibly extrapolated to other scientific areas. In effect, Npolls allows for the collection a considerably high number of observations in a short period of time, which are then possible to analyse from various data analysis perspectives, as illustrated by the present study.

From a modelling perspective, the results suggest that the model fits the data well, which suggests that the selected constructs and the associations among them are appropriate to explain the phenomena under analysis. The paper thus provides interesting theoretical contributions. Indeed, in line with the majority of extant studies, the findings demonstrate the role of commitment, satisfaction and trust as key mediators of the effects of relational efforts on seller objective performance. This study highlighted commitment as a key construct as far as the impacts of RM efforts on seller objective performance are concerned, and mutual goals as the most important antecedent of RM mediators. It is believed that, by devising and rigorously testing a model in an important services context, this investigation represents a valuable contribution to better understanding the effects of RM efforts on performance. It is thus expected that these results will spark researchers interested in replicating and testing both the model and the data collection innovation in other research settings, namely characterised by maturity and intense competition.

This paper also provides important contributions as far as managerial implications are concerned, especially in times of macroeconomic recession, and the consequent increased pressure on both demand and margins. Relational efforts are viewed as crucial to performance given that 'most firms must leverage other organizations' capabilities and resources to compete effectively' (Palmatier et al., 2007, p. 172). The role of relational mediators, i.e., RQ and its building blocks (trust and satisfaction), is widely acknowledged as pivotal in channelling the impact of RM efforts on performance. Relational antecedents, for example, communication, domain expertise, mutual goals, and relational value, as proposed in this study, represent another central pillar of RM activities, which are viewed as a means to achieving meaningful differentiation and competitive advantage. Managers need to bear in mind that the delivery of high quality goods and services is increasingly

considered a mere minimum requirement for competitiveness rather than being the source of superior performance. This is particularly true in times of crisis. In this context, managers need to identify the adequate tools to increase a firm's share of each customer's wallet, in order to achieve economies of scale and better financial performances. A better understanding of how RM antecedents, mediators and outcomes are related might improve marketing managers' decisions on practical aspects. According to these findings, managers should regard commitment as a central relational mediator and the most influential factor in enhancing seller objective performance. Since the product/service offered by companies in a given market can be essentially the same, differentiation is exerted through good quality, commitment-based relationships, which will enable the organisation to resist changes in the competitive environment, for example, via technology or price. The results suggest that commitment acts simultaneously as the mediator of all the other impacts exerted on share of business, i.e., not only by RM antecedents, but also by RQ comprising of trust and satisfaction. As far as RM antecedents are concerned, managers should pay particular attention to goal congruity, give that it emerges as the most important determinant of RQ and its building blocks. Communication seems to be particularly effective in increasing trust and commitment, while the importance of relational value seems to be confined to promoting commitment. Domain expertise appears to be more important in enhancing trust, than commitment and satisfaction. This study reiterates the need for managers to focus on what is most valuable to buyers in order to build high quality, mutually lucrative relationships. The relational perspective implies that organizations and their representatives evolve from a selling approach to a counseling, committed approach. This, in turn, draws the attention to issues as much obvious and important as often neglected, such as carefully selecting, training, empowering, motivating and compensating relationship managers—the 'face' of the organization—so that they can perform effectively, particularly, in terms of the influence of relational efforts on performance. By looking at the connections in the model, in addition to the constructs themselves, it is possible to apprehend how managers will be able to inspire commitment and improve performance, thereby developing mutually beneficial business relationships. Examples of benefits for the buyer range from a higher opportunity for customisation and, thus, for better satisfaction of needs and preferences, to a greater effectiveness in decision-making, and the reduction of the perceived risks related to future purchases. Relational efforts also provide the customer with safety. In time and with the development of committed-based relationships, parties build a 'healthy' atmosphere, provided

that, at the same time, the buyer can rely on a consistent level of service offered by the service provider. The benefits for the seller are also significant. The longer and increasingly committed the relationship, the higher the potential for performance maximization, as the customer will increase the number of purchases. In turn, the greater the repeat business, the more the buyer progresses in the experience curve, becoming more effective, and, consequently, bringing less costs and more profits.

Although it is perceived that this research has provided new and important insights on how RM activities and mediators affect objective performance, it should be acknowledged that there are some inherent limitations, not only in terms of the relatively low percentages of share of business' explained variance, but also in terms of the research approach. Exploring determinants of objective measures of performance—other than relational drivers—represents an important opportunity for future work, not least because business relationships seem to develop at different levels, in addition to the social level of business relationships (e.g., structural and economical). Given that relationships are intrinsically dynamic, replicating this study beyond the boundaries of a single organization, from a longitudinal approach, also constitutes an interesting avenue for future research. Although, as evidenced, Npolls allows for the collection of a relatively high number of observations in a rather short period of time, with considerable advantages when compared to traditional data collection procedures, there are still some limitations inherent to the fact that the number of potential respondents is limited to the number of android (or equivalent) device users (which is experiencing an exponential growth). Opportunities for future research are rather appealing, provided that the Npolls tool is appropriately explored and used.

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