



Customer loyalty to a commercial website: Descriptive meta-analysis of the empirical literature and proposal of an integrative model

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of academic studies about online customer loyalty shows that diversity, if not divergence, exists regarding the measurement and conceptualization of online loyalty. By multiplying the theoretical foundations for the study of online loyalty, researchers have identified different determinants of online loyalty and different impacts on business relationships. Considering this theoretical and conceptual diversity, the purpose of this paper is to systematically review and summarize the literature dealing with loyalty to a commercial website. Specifically, the goal is to realize a descriptive meta-analysis of the empirical literature focusing on the conceptualization, measurement, antecedents, and consequences of e-loyalty, and to provide an integrative model for these antecedents and consequences. This framework provides us with a cohesive view of online customer loyalty and helps identify potential unexplored research opportunities in this area. The paper ends with a research agenda for future studies.

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1. Introduction

The concept of customer loyalty occupies a central place in marketing. Customer loyalty, as a field of research, remains a primary interest in the academic community. Review of the literature shows that research in customer loyalty focuses primarily on loyalty to a brand or product (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Uncles, Dowling, & Hammond, 2003), loyalty to a store (e.g., Corstjens & Lal, 2000) and loyalty to an organization (Brown & Peterson, 1993). Loyalty in the context of services constitutes a more specific area of research, particularly in terms of operationalization (e.g., Rundle-Thiele & Bennett, 2001).

The conceptualization of loyalty evolves from a behavioral approach, defining and measuring loyalty by repeat purchase behaviors (Frank, 1967; McConnell, 1968), to a cognitive approach, focusing primarily on the attitudinal dimensions of loyalty (Day, 1969; Lalaberba & Marzusky, 1973), to a composite approach, which shows that

attitudinal preference and repeat purchase behavior are two conditions essential to the concept of loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). From this latter approach, Jacoby and Kyner (1973) define brand loyalty using six necessary and collectively sufficient conditions. According to the authors, brand loyalty is: a biased (i.e., nonrandom) response; a behavioral response (i.e., purchase); expressed over time; by one or more decision-making units; where several alternatives are possible; and brand loyalty is a function of a psychological process (evaluation of alternatives, decision-making, etc.). True brand loyalty means meeting these six conditions (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). Recently, investigators adopted a processual approach (McMullan & Gilmore, 2003; Oliver, 1999) to conceptualize loyalty. The basic principle of this conceptualization is that loyalty develops in a sequential manner following a process consisting of four phases (i.e., cognition, affection, conation and action) and this occurs despite the influence of situational factors and marketing actions.

On the other hand, the emergence of the paradigm of exchange via the Internet increases the need to develop a theoretical and empirical corpus that leads to a better understanding of the scale of trading within this evolving context (Allagui & Temessek, 2004). Increasingly, more research focuses on the concept of loyalty within the context of electronic commerce, or e-loyalty. These studies appear as articles in a variety of journals and conference proceedings in the fields of marketing, information systems, management and psychology. The review of these articles shows that diversity, if not divergence, exists regarding the measurement and conceptualization of online loyalty. By multiplying the theoretical foundations to study online loyalty, researchers identify different determinants of online loyalty and different impacts on business relationships (Luarn & Lin, 2003; Ribbink, Van Riel, Liljander, & Streukens, 2004).

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Considering this theoretical and conceptual diversity, this paper systematically reviews and summarizes the literature dealing with loyalty to a commercial website. Specifically, the goal is to realize a descriptive meta-analysis of the empirical literature focusing on the conceptualization, measurement, antecedents and consequences of e-loyalty. This article collects and analyzes studies dealing with the notion of online loyalty with the following objectives: to identify the various definitions and underlying theories presented by the literature and propose a more precise definition of e-loyalty; to identify the type of scales/measurements used to study e-loyalty; to evaluate the frequency of occurrence of the different constructs that determine e-loyalty; and to evaluate the frequency of occurrence of the different constructs that result from e-loyalty. This article proposes a general model that integrates various antecedents and consequences in the literature, a model that would help improve the understanding of the academic and managerial community of the factors that affect the development of online loyalty as well as the consequences of that loyalty. Also, this study helps identify potential unexplored research opportunities in this area.

To achieve these objectives, this paper first outlines the methodology. The second section describes the results and the literature analysis. The third section presents the integrative framework of the antecedents and consequences of online loyalty. Finally, the last section addresses the discussion and offers a research agenda for future studies in this field.

2. Methodology

Because the article is a descriptive meta-analysis (Glass, 1978), the investigation begins by specifying the procedure used in the selection of the relevant references. This allows the reader to correctly position the magnitude of the results.

The validity of a meta-analysis depends on the integration of the findings of individual researchers (Swan, Bowers, & Richardson, 1999). To accomplish this meta-analysis, this study conducted an exhaustive and systematic electronic search, using ABI/Inform database (a database of 1800 journals), based on the themes appropriate to the thematic of this research: online loyalty, electronic loyalty, Internet loyalty, website loyalty and online retention. Sixty-nine references appeared, and each one analyzed to ensure the relevance of the study. This study eliminated those references that did not match the objectives of the meta-analysis. This study also searched for literature in marketing and electronic commerce journals including the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Electronic Commerce in Organizations*, and others. In addition, this investigation consulted and added references from doctoral theses, master's theses, unpublished research papers from digital libraries and conference proceedings from the American Marketing Association, and the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada.

The investigation selected 44 scientific studies in the area of online loyalty. All studies focus primarily on customer loyalty in the context of electronic commerce, and include information relating to the different goals of the research (i.e., antecedents and consequences, measures and theories).

3. Characteristics of the studies

To present the profile of studies focused on the theme of online customer loyalty, this investigation classifies the 44 selected studies according to year of publication (Fig. 1); to the type of study; the type of relationship (i.e., B2B, B2C or B2B and B2C); the dyad specifications (i.e., emphasis on the buyer, emphasis on the seller or emphasis on the buyer and the seller); the category of product/service; the object of loyalty; and the geographic location of the research (Table 1).

Fig. 1 shows that the concern for online customer loyalty began only in the early 2000s. The relatively recent emergence of electronic commerce, around the mid 1990s, explains this. Since the beginning of the 21st century, customer loyalty to a website, to an online service, and/or to a virtual seller/retailer is a primary objective for research.

Table 1 shows that among the 44 studies, 38 appeared in scientific journals (see appendix A), two were conference proceedings, and four were essays—two doctoral theses from two American universities and two master's theses from a Canadian university.

To identify the different scales of measurement of e-loyalty, all are empirical quantitative studies. The studies focus mostly on only one aspect of the dyad—the buyer (42/44).

Only one study analyses the vendor's perception (Lawson-Body & O'Keefe, 2006), and one study takes both sides of the dyad into consideration (Huang, 2008). For the most part, the context of the studies links to the "B2C" relationship. Contrary to the expectations of researchers, and despite the significant development of electronic commerce in a business-to-business (B2B) context, few studies on electronic loyalty were noteworthy in this sector.

With regard to the products/service categories of the studies, durable products are the most commonly chosen subject of research. In addition, the service industry is based on new technologies, mostly in the tourism and financial sectors. Furthermore, the studies generally focus on loyalty to the online retailer, online store or online vendor (24/44), without specifying whether the business is strictly virtual or virtual with a physical presence. Two studies focus on customer loyalty to a strictly virtual business, and more specifically, loyalty to a virtual bank (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Floh & Treiblmaier, 2006). Eleven studies focus on loyalty to a retailer's website, but not to the retailer itself. Table 1 also shows that North American studies are the most prevalent in literature on online loyalty (20/44), followed by East Asian studies (11/44).

A significant number of articles deal with online loyalty in recent years, especially in the B2C context (42 studies). They are mostly North American and focus on technological products or books, or on services (travel or banking). The next section shows the results of the analysis of these studies.

4. Analysis of the literature and results

Part of this analysis examines the theoretical foundations of online loyalty studies. Then the analysis focuses on the concept of e-loyalty based on the different conceptualizations found in various literature, and proposes a definition of e-loyalty specific to this paper. Finally,

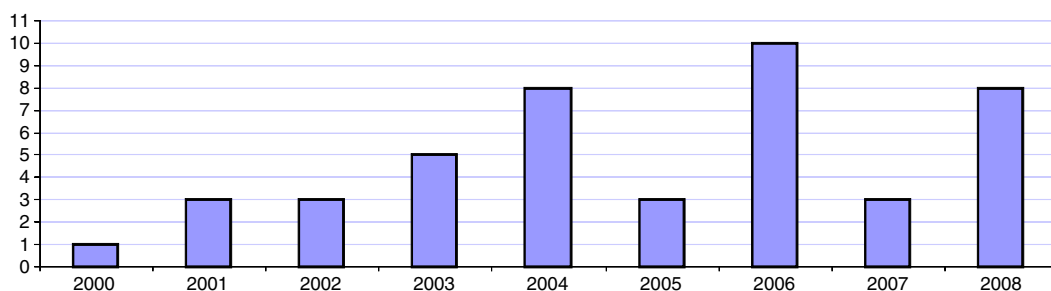


Fig. 1. Number of studies per year.

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