

Facebook: The Holy Grail of Relationship Marketing?

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Abstract: Relationship marketing has been a focus of online studies for a number of years. These studies have indicated that relationships in these environments are driven by commitment, trust, privacy concerns and stickiness. However, research on the use of Facebook as a relationship marketing building platform has received little attention. Therefore, this paper focuses on the constructs of relationship marketing and how they impact on relationships in the Facebook context. Questionnaires were distributed to a convenience sample of 300 students. The study confirmed that the factors influencing relationships on Facebook were similar to the factors influencing relationships in other online environments. The implications of the results of the study are discussed.

Keywords: *Facebook, Relationship Marketing, Stickiness, Trust, Commitment*

1. Introduction

In an era where technology dominates marketing as a field and is becoming increasingly important to companies in order to remain competitive, Facebook may represent a vehicle for building strong customer relationships. This is particularly the case because Facebook is a highly interactive platform, consisting of a network of users, where users converse with one another, allowing the other parties to reply and make comments to their posts, share information, and develop friendships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). A point often overlooked, however, in the marketing field as Hsu (2012) recalls is that online technologies like Facebook are able to provide companies with one-on-one interactions with customers. Such interactive dialogues are generally thought to play a role in maintaining valued customer relationships (Jayachandran, Sharma, Kaufman & Raman, 2005; Grönroos, 2000) and as Bendapudi and Berry (1997) remarked, interactions with customers are viewed as being of significance, as organisations who constantly interact with their customers build relationships with those customers. Based on this background, Facebook can be a valuable tool for those marketers who have a high desire to interact and engage with their customers, with the intention of developing and maintaining relationships. Therefore, the recognition of the importance of Facebook in relationship marketing represents a step towards Hennig-Thurau and Hansen's (2000) call for marketing scholars to discuss the role of new technologies in relationship marketing. This call has been supported by Zineldin (2000), who noted that technology encourages companies to create long-term relationships with customers.

Therefore, in this paper, Hennig-Thurau and Hansen's (2000) call is taken up and that gap is addressed by developing and empirically testing a conceptual model that examines Facebook as a possible platform that may play a significant role in the understanding and building relationships with customers. The proposed Facebook model integrates commitment, trust, privacy and stickiness and examines relationships between the constructs of the model. Also, this paper demonstrates the way in which interactions between privacy and commitment, a connection not apparent in previous research, might influence our understanding of the phenomena of relationship marketing on Facebook. Finally, the paper tests a relationship between privacy and stickiness, which is also not apparent in previous research. The paper begins with a definition of relationship marketing, where the subsequent sections review relationship marketing literature with regard to the variables of trust, commitment, privacy and stickiness incorporated in the conceptual model developed for this paper. Furthermore, an interrelationship of the variables of the conceptual model and research hypotheses will be discussed. Finally, the paper presents findings and discusses implications for researchers and practitioners, limitations to the study, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual framework

This section provides a definition of relationship marketing followed by a brief overview of the key concepts of relationship marketing.

Definition of relationship marketing: Relationship marketing is described as “all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:22), requiring constant communication with customers to meet future customer needs (Evans & Laskin, 1994). Another conceptualisation of relationship marketing identifies understanding, explanation and management of collaborative relationships between organisations and customers (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995) including the formation of networks (Gummesson, 1994) as key elements to relationship marketing. These authors espoused three main elements in the definition of relationship marketing, namely, interactions, collaborations and networking, which they maintain to be crucial in building long-term, trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with customers (Kim & Cha, 2002).

Trust: The fundamental principle underpinning any form of relationship is trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust begins when parties believe that one party will act in the best interest of the other (Wilson, 1995; Yousafzai, Pallister & Foxall, 2009), and there is a general belief that the other party can be trusted consistently (Gefen, 2002) and relied upon (Kim, Kim & Hwang, 2009), where belief in ability, integrity and benevolence serve as antecedents to trust (Gefen, 2002). Such trust usually reduces customers’ sense of risk and doubt (Sharma, Tzokas, Saren, & Kyziridis, 1999) and is often based on past behaviour (Cater & Zabkar, 2009). Trust develops only when parties believe that the risk inherent in a particular situation is offset by the degree to which trust is maintained by the other party (Kim & Kim, 2005). Therefore, Moorman, Deshpande and Zaltman (1993:315) define trust as the “willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence”.

Commitment: Commitment has been widely recognised as the basis for forming long-term relationships (Cater & Zabkar, 2009). Rusbult, Martz and Agnew (1998:359) defined commitment as the “intent to persist in a relationship, including long-term orientation toward the involvement as well as feelings of psychological attachment”. In the context of an organisation, individuals often show their commitment to an organisation by repeatedly engaging in a relationship with such organisation (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). The engagements, as Anderson and Weitz (1992) noted, resemble what has been observed in committed relationships where both parties are expected to make short-term sacrifices to realise long-term relationship benefits, while at the same time maintaining relationships (Wilson, 1995; Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In such instances, parties are more concerned with the value they receive in a relationship (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Essentially, creating such value enhances the feeling of association (Mukherjee & Nath, 2003) among parties. From the discussions so far, one can draw the conclusion that commitment is “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman et al., 1993), and being persistent in such relationships (Li, Browne & Wetherbe, 2006).

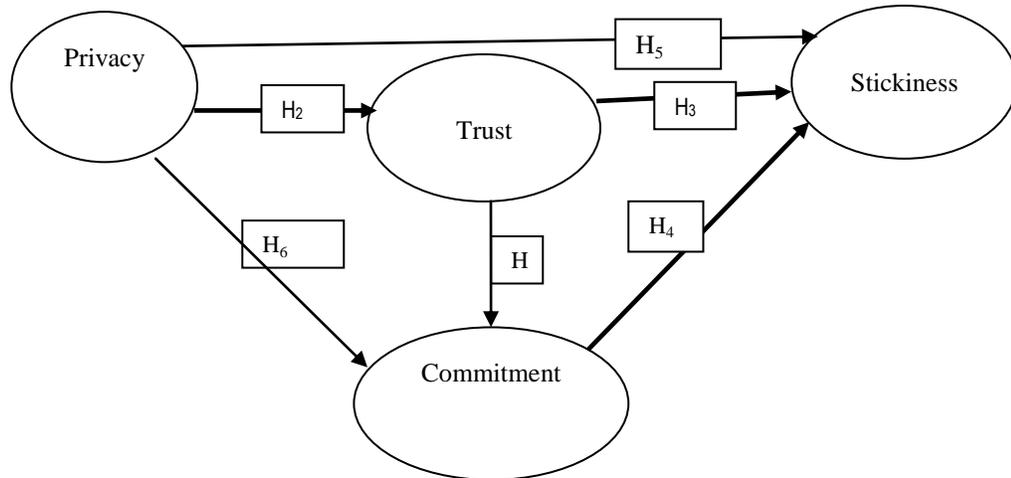
Considering numerous definitions of the concept of commitment, however, it is not surprising that some researchers (Meyer, Allen & Smith, 1993; De Ruyter & Semeijn, 2002; Colquitt, Scott & LePine, 2007) have attached multiple understandings to the concept. These researchers have suggested that a definition of commitment ought to incorporate dimensions such as affective, calculative and normative components. Affective commitment, for instance, is more closely related to a strong desire to maintain and continue a relationship (Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer & Kumar, 1996). Thus, the decision to stay in a relationship is based on affective commitment (De Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink, 2001). With affective commitment, parties stay in a relationship because they like each other, and because they enjoy the partnership (Cater & Zabkar, 2009). As for calculative commitment, De Ruyter and Semeijn (2002) maintain that parties stay in a relationship when lacking alternatives. Yet another component of commitment is normative commitment. In normative commitment, parties stay in a relationship because they believe they have an obligation to stay (Cater & Zabkar, 2009). From these definitions, affective commitment emerges as the most widely used in measuring employee commitment to an organisation (Shore & Wayne, 1993).

Privacy concerns: Smith, Milberg and Burke (1996:169) defined privacy concerns as “individuals’ concerns about organisational information privacy practices”. Privacy concerns have been the main reason why consumers are reluctant to submit their personal information online (Malhotra, Kim & Agarwal, 2004). Culnan and Armstrong (1999) describe personal information as that information individuals recognise as pertaining to themselves. Such information includes names, addresses, lifestyle characteristics and purchasing habits (Lwin & Williams, 2003). Research indicates that individuals have always been concerned about information provided to organisations. Ordinarily, individuals feel vulnerable and worry that the organisation might use their information unfairly (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999). Such concerns regard the unauthorised secondary use of data, invasion of privacy and errors in personal information (Brown & Muchira, 2004). Unauthorised secondary use is based on concerns that individual’s personal data collected for one purpose might be used for another purpose without such individuals authorising its use (Smith et al., 1996). Errors in personal data represent an individual’s perceptions that organisations are not doing enough to reduce problems when capturing their personal data (Brown, Gottlieba & Muchira, 2005). Invasion means that individuals who have not requested contacts from the organisation are nonetheless contacted (Brown & Muchira, 2004). More often than not, such unsolicited communication is unwanted (Brown et al., 2005). Therefore, the improper sharing of personal information may result in an unwillingness to provide information that reveals ones self-identity and self-expression (Goldie, 2006).

Stickiness: Stickiness has long been used in the marketing field as an important aspect in understanding customer retention. From a marketer’s perspective, stickiness may be driven by a strong sense of cooperation between the organisation and its customers and may prove beneficial and useful in attracting and retaining customers (Zott, Amit & Donlevy, 2000; Xu & Liu, 2010). Normally, the concept is used in the context of online environments, and refers to users’ repeated visits to a site, while spending more time on such a site compared to an ordinary user (Hsu & Liao, 2014). The purpose of creating stickiness is to convert visitors of a site to customers (Nemzow, 1999), encouraging the number of repeated visits (Wu, Chen & Chung, 2010) and retaining prior customers with repeat business (Zott et al., 2000). Nemzow (1999) points out that a site has stickiness when it serves an important role in the buying of goods and services, and when consumers re-visit the site, but not necessarily with the intention to purchase from such a site. As is the case with Facebook, more often than not, individuals visit the site so as to browse for non-commerce activities, such as sharing information, passing time or for entertainment. Therefore, in the context of Facebook, stickiness could refer to the amount of time spent on a company’s Facebook site.

Conceptual model for Facebook relationship marketing and hypotheses formulation: Inspired by literature on Relationship Marketing, this paper develops and tests a model that should lead to an understanding of how Facebook might be used as a vehicle for relationship building. Although the literature identifies a myriad of factors influencing relationship marketing, including trust, commitment, and relationship quality, customer satisfaction, cooperation, shared values, communication and keeping promises, proponents of relationship marketing believe that understanding relationship marketing is contingent upon the Morgan and Hunt (1994) Commitment-Trust theory. The key determinants of relationship building and relationship maintenance in the Morgan and Hunt (1994) theory are commitment and trust. Apart from commitment and trust identified by Morgan and Hunt (1994), other authors like Li, Browne and Wetherbe (2006) found stickiness to have explaining powers on relationships in the online environments. Therefore, this paper proposes and tests a model of relationships between trust and commitment; trust and privacy; trust and stickiness; commitment and stickiness; privacy and stickiness; and privacy and commitment. The model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The proposed Facebook relationship marketing model



Hypotheses formulation: In this section, the hypotheses of the study are formulated.

Trust and commitment: Trust is important in the context of online environments, which are often characterised by mistrust, suggesting that in order for online users to share information and to prolong their interactions with each other, trust must prevail. This rationale is consistent with the assertion shared by Morgan and Hunt (1994), who opined that trust complements commitment in exchange relationships. Therefore, trust determines the level of commitment in a relationship (Gundlach, Achrol & Mentzer, 1995), and increases commitment (Selnes, 1998). Eastlick, Lotz and Warrington (2006) studied online business to customer relationships. The subjects in their study believed that trust and commitment are important relationship variables, especially in the online environment. This finding is further supported by a number of researchers (Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994 and Wu et al., 2010), who suggested that the underlying manner in which an individual may trust others might depend on whether the parties involved demonstrate the required level of commitment. Therefore, this paper hypothesises the following:

H1: *As trust to Facebook site increases, commitment to the site increases*

Privacy and Trust: It is believed that trust would not be needed if parties in a relationship respected each other and protected each other’s personal information. There is a view that customers’ relational behaviour tends to be influenced by their lower levels of willingness to provide personal information, especially when they believe such information might be misused by the organisation (Hoffman, Novak & Peralta, 1999). This is a notion, and in the context of social media, it is further exacerbated by Facebook’s announcement that it will monitor and record users’ browsing history for targeting purposes (eMarketer, 2014) and sell this information to marketers. While this is commendable for many organisations, it also begs the question of how these organisations will protect consumers’ information, which, Wu Chen and Chung (2010) rightly pointed out, is a necessary condition in the online environment. Therefore, this paper hypothesises the following:

H2: *Willingness to provide personal information on Facebook is associated with trust*

Trust and stickiness: In consumer contexts, consumers are more likely to re-visit the organisation’s site when they believe that the organisation will act in their best interest (Yousafzai et al., 2009) and protect their personal information. This will be true even in the context of Facebook, where consumers share huge amounts of information. According to Wu et al. (2010), trust reflects the depth of a relationship, and may lead to repeat site visits, herein referred to as stickiness. Similarly, Li et al. (2006) agree that stickiness is an important factor in relationship marketing; as such, they attribute stickiness to trust. Thus, the degree to which consumers visit the organisation’s Facebook site is likely to be influenced by the degree of trust for the site. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *As trust to the Facebook site increases, stickiness increases.*

Commitment and Stickiness: The broader literature hypothesises a relationship between commitment and stickiness. Mukherjee and Nath (2003), for example, asserts that prolonged interactions with customers

increases the level of commitment. Concurrent with these views, Hsu and Liao (2014) maintain that in the contexts of online environments, a customer who is likely to spend more time on a site, and who visit the site repeatedly, portray their commitment to the site (Yan, 2013). Evidently, the duration of the time users spend online suggest their commitment to the site (Yan, 2013). Hence, Li et al. (2006) noted that in online contexts, stickiness is an outcome of commitment. Based on the foregoing arguments, the following is hypothesised:

H4: *Commitment to a relationship with a Facebook site is positively associated with stickiness.*

Privacy and stickiness: There is a consensus on the influence of consumers' privacy concerns and stickiness on online relationships. Also, stickiness is generally believed to influence online behaviours. Since these variables are both drivers of online relationships, it is important to understand how privacy influences stickiness, although literature revealed no apparent research on the effects of privacy on stickiness. The rationale for including this relationship is that users of a site may choose to re-visit and prolong their stay (Hsu & Liao, 2014) in the site when they believe the organisation will not share their personal information improperly (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999). That is, user's perceptions of security may increase the hours spent on Facebook. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: *Willingness to provide personal information on Facebook is positively associated with the user's willingness to return to and prolong the duration of stay on the site.*

Privacy and Commitment: In a typical online environment, individuals always feel vulnerable and have opinions that the organisation might use their information unfairly (Malhotra et al., 2004). As such, an individual's decision to engage in online environments might be linked to their willingness to make short term sacrifices, engaging online with the view of maintaining such relationships, while building long-term relationships. From this reasoning, this paper hypothesises that privacy will influence commitment. Given the importance of privacy in online behaviours, this paper holds that examining a relationship between privacy and commitment is worthwhile. This relationship is not apparent in previous studies, but is crucial to understand, especially when one considers the amount of time users spend on Facebook. Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: *Willingness to provide personal information on Facebook increases commitment to the site.*

3. Methodology

Data was collected from undergraduate students. Lecturers were contacted and asked if they would allow the questionnaires to be distributed to students during class time. The lecturers granted permission. Questionnaires were collected from lecturers' offices after the class period. The students were informed of keeping their responses confidential and were asked not to provide their names or reveal their identity in any way. Furthermore, students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point should they wish to do so. No incentives were offered for participation.

Sample: Subjects of this study were solicited from undergraduate students at two higher education institutions in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. The student sample was deemed appropriate for two reasons: (i) since Facebook was developed as a communication tool among students (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), it has long been identified that students are primary users of Facebook (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010; Nicholas, Rowlands, Clark & Williams, 2010; Park, Song & Lee, 2014). (ii) The purpose of this paper was to examine and empirically test whether factors identified in relationship marketing theories could be used in understanding the Facebook relationship marketing phenomenon, rather than to generalise findings about Facebook relationship marketing. According to Calder, Phillips and Tybout (1981), in instances like these, where theory testing is the aim, student sample may be used. Questionnaires were distributed to a convenience sample of 300 students. Of these, 258 were usable. Only those students 18 and above were allowed to participate in the study.

Measurement instrument: The questionnaire consisted of items taken from trust-commitment literature and had two parts. Part A asked respondents about their demographic information. In part B, there were four constructs, namely, trust, commitment, privacy and stickiness. The trust construct consisted of four items, adapted from McKnight and Chervany (2002) scale. Commitment was measured by four items adapted from Kang, Lee, Lee, and Choi (2007) scale. The scale to measure privacy was adapted from Liu, Marchewka, Lu and

Yu's (2004) scale. It consisted of three items. The stickiness construct consisted of four items adapted from Liu et al. (2004) scale. The participants were asked to respond on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6) as end points.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The data in this study was analysed using SPSS and Amos 24. To test the hypothesised relationships, a two-step analytic process was followed by assessing the measurement and the structural model (McDonald & Ho, 2002). Descriptive statistics were performed using SPSS. Furthermore, tests on confirmatory factor analysis, model fit, reliability and validity were performed.

Response rate: The sample consisted of 258 students, of which 54 percent were female and 41 percent male. The sample of this study consisted of participants ranging in age from 18 years old (7%), 19 years old (11%), 20 years old (21%), 21 years old (25%), 22 years old (17%), 23 years old (8%), to 24 years old (11%). Of these respondents, 58 percent accessed Facebook daily, 18 percent accessed it a few times a week, four percent once a week, nine percent a few times per month, and 11 percent once a month. Over 55 percent spend less than an hour on Facebook, 19 percent spend up to two hours per day on Facebook, 11 percent spend two to four hours on Facebook per day, eight percent spend more than eight hours, three percent spend four to six hours, and three percent spend six to eight hours on Facebook per day.

Measurement model: The measurement model was estimated using a maximum likelihood method. Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to test the measurement model. The results indicated that the items had factor loadings exceeding the 0.50 threshold. The model fit was evaluated using the global fit indices. Table 1 presents fit indices for the measurement model.

Table 1: Fit indices

Fit Indices	Value	Recommended value
CMIN/DF	1.936	<5,preferably <3
NFI	0.942	>0.90
CFI	0.971	>0.93
GFI	0.929	>0.90
RMSEA	0.060	>0.05
PCLOSE	0.126	>0.05

As shown in Table 1, the measurement model displayed good fit with the data collected. All the fit indices demonstrated the acceptable values. The measurement model was further tested for reliability and validity.

Reliability and validity: Table 2 presents factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and variance extracted, all used to test for reliability and validity.

Table 2: Standardised factor loadings, Cronbach alpha, CR and AVE

Construct	Item	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Privacy	P1	0.73	0.82	0.97	0.92
	P2	0.77			
	P3	0.85			
Trust	T1	0.65	0.87	0.98	0.93
	T2	0.83			
	T3	0.84			
	T4	0.84			
Commitment	C1	0.71	0.87	0.98	0.93
	C2	0.81			
	C3	0.80			
	C4	0.83			

Stickiness	S1	0.75			
	S2	0.83			
	S3	0.80			
	S4	0.84	0.88	0.99	0.94

P=Privacy; T=Trust; C=Commitment; S=Stickiness

One of the measures of reliability used in this paper was Cronbach's alpha. The values of Cronbach alpha in the current study ranged from 0.826 to 0.882, thereby demonstrating internal consistency. The values are above 0.70, as recommended by Nunnally (1978). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to examine composite reliability (CR), convergent validity and discriminate validity. Convergent validity was examined using average variance extracted (AVE). Bagozzi and Yi (1988) indicate that a popular rule of thumb for accepting CR and AVE occurs when the values are greater than 0.60 and 0.50, respectively. The values of composite reliability and average variance extracted were greater than the values recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). Factor loadings exceeded Bagozzi and Yi (1988) recommended threshold of 0.50, ranging from 0.662 to 0.852, thereby indicating the existence of convergent validity. To establish discriminant validity, correlation analysis was performed and the values were assessed. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix of the constructs.

Table 3: Construct correlation matrix and discriminant validity

	Privacy	Trust	Commitment	Stickiness
Privacy	0.95			
Trust	0.56	0.96		
Commitment	0.46	0.54	0.96	
Stickiness	0.49	0.58	0.85	0.97

**p<0.01 (two-tailed)

Correlations are all positive and significant at $p<0.01$. The coefficients range from 0.46 to 0.85. Although commitment and stickiness are highly correlated ($r=0.85$) and may raise multicollinearity concerns, the constructs demonstrated different results when correlated with other constructs. For example, when commitment was correlated with privacy and trust, the results delivered lower values of 0.46 and 0.54, respectively. Also, when stickiness was correlated with privacy and trust, values of 0.49 and 0.58 were obtained. According to Ryff (1989), this suggests that such constructs are distinct from one another. Again, Ryff (1989) suggested that distinctiveness could be achieved when items of a scale are correlated with each other. In fact, Ryff (1989) noted that when the items of a scale correlate highly with one another, then "the item pools of the separate scales are empirically differentiated" (p.1074). Therefore, the items of commitment were correlated. When the items of the commitment scales were correlated, the results delivered high coefficients ranging from 0.575 to 0.671. Also, the items of the stickiness scale were correlated with one another. The stickiness scale also delivered high inter-item correlation values ranging from 0.555 to 0.727. These results indicate that commitment and stickiness are two distinct constructs, thereby demonstrating the presence of discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was further assessed using a method suggested by Malhotra (2010), which involves calculating the square root of AVE and comparing it to the values of the correlations of the related constructs. This approach suggests that the square root of AVE ought to exceed the values of correlation of the related construct. As shown in Table 3, the square root of average variance extracted as depicted in diagonal exceeds the values of the construct correlations, thus confirming discriminant validity. In conclusion, the model of this study demonstrated both reliability and validity.

Structural model: The hypothesised research model in Figure 1 was tested using a maximum likelihood method. Fit indices were computed with $CMIN/DF=1.921$, $NFI=0.948$, $CFI=0.974$, $GFI=0.936$, $RMSEA=0.060$ and $PCLOSE=0.158$. Path coefficients of a structural model were examined by assessing standardised coefficients. Table 4 shows the results of regression coefficients obtained when testing the structural equation model.

Table 4: SEM Regression coefficients

Hypothesised relationship	Regression coefficient	P-values	Decision
H ₁ : Trust → Commitment	0.398	0.000*	Supported
H ₂ : Privacy concern → Trust	0.619	0.000*	Supported
H ₃ : Trust → Stickiness	0.040	0.444	Rejected
H ₄ : Commitment → Stickiness	0.920	0.000*	Supported
H ₅ : Privacy concern → Stickiness	0.039	0.354	Rejected
H ₆ : Privacy concern → Commitment	0.235	0.000*	Supported

Significant at (*p<0.05); **p<0.01

As indicated in Table 4, paths between trust and commitment ($\beta=0.398$, $p=0.000<0.05$), privacy and trust ($\beta=0.619$, $p=0.000<0.05$); privacy and commitment ($\beta=0.235$, $p=0.000<0.05$) and commitment and stickiness ($\beta=0.920$, $p=0.000<0.05$) were all positive and significant. Therefore, hypotheses 1, 2, 4 and 6 were supported. Path between trust and stickiness ($\beta=0.04$, $p=0.444>0.05$) and path between privacy and commitment ($\beta=0.039$, $p=0.354>0.05$) were not supported by the data gathered in this study. Thus, there was no significant relationship between trust and stickiness. Again, no significant relationship was found between privacy and stickiness. Therefore, hypotheses 3 and 5 were rejected.

5. Conclusion

The current study sought to examine Facebook as a possible vehicle that may assist in the understanding and building customer relationships. There were several findings in this study that supported the use of Facebook in the relationship marketing context. Consistent to other studies that found support to the effects of trust to commitment (Moorman, et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wu, et al., 2010), privacy to trust (Malhotra et al., 2004) and commitment to stickiness (Li et al, 2006), this study found the same effect on these variables. As was the case in Morgan and Hunt (1994) commitment-trust theory, where they found that trust leads to a higher level of commitment in relationships, and in other studies (Li, et al., 2006; Wu, et al., 2010; Wang, Gu, An & Zhou, 2014), this study also supports such findings. Thus, as trust in Facebook site increases, the users will be more attached (Rusbult et al., 1998) to the site, and this will help in maintaining valued relationships with those users (Moorman et al., 1993). As in the study by Mukherjee and Nath (2007) who maintained privacy to have a more significant impact on trust, the relationship between privacy and trust is confirmed in the current study. This indicates that the respondents of this study feel more trusting of the organisation's Facebook site, especially when the site promises to provide well-developed data security mechanism. In contrast to studies that did not test the influence of privacy on commitment, this paper examined such influence. It emerged that there is a significant relationship between privacy and commitment. This may be explained by the fact that, generally speaking, users of online sites react differently when they believe their privacy is threatened. One such response might be the withdrawal from the site, which jeopardises the relationship a user has with the site. Therefore, the findings suggest that to build long term relationships with customers, organisations should focus more on building secured sites.

The findings that commitment influences stickiness support Li et al. (2006) findings of a significant relationship between commitment and stickiness. This suggests that those organisations that spend more time interacting with customers on Facebook will see more customers spending more time on the organisation's sites compared to an ordinary user of such site. Contrary to the expectations of this study, however, and similar to the findings of Xu and Liu (2010), who mention no observed relationship between trust and stickiness, the current study also found no support for this relationship. It appears that on Facebook, breach of trust may not necessarily mean that Facebook users will reduce time spent on the site. In retrospect, this finding is logical in view of the fact that initially, Facebook was established as a social interaction platform, where users spend more hours interacting with friends, and where trust does not matter much, as long as users believe their friends are trustworthy (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini, 2007). Finally, the results of hypothesis testing show that there is no relationship between privacy and stickiness. Unlike in other online environments where privacy concerns are a major issue, the respondents of this study do not seem too concerned with improper use of their personal information. One reason for this finding might be

that, Facebook was designed as a social networking site where users generally share information freely, at times disclosing personal information, thoughts and feelings to their “friends” and “followers”, and are rarely concerned about their privacy.

Contributions, implications and limitations: This paper is among the small amount of research that examined Facebook as a possible platform that may assist in the understanding and building of relationships with customers and thus opening up discussions on the importance of Facebook medium in relationship marketing. A significant contribution of this paper lies in the use of relationship marketing theories to empirically test a Facebook relationship marketing model. Also, the paper contributed by testing interactions between privacy and commitment, a connection not apparent in previous research. Lastly, this paper contributed to the relationship marketing literature by testing a relationship between privacy and stickiness, which is not apparent in previous research. The results of this study validated that even in the context of Facebook, in order to build relationships, trust, commitment, stickiness remain important. Having identified the influence of relationship marketing factors on Facebook, it is believed that Facebook may prove to be the best and perhaps most preferred channel to build marketing relationships. The findings of this study have implications for marketers. Literature indicates that interactions between companies and consumers have become essential especially when companies want to successfully implement their marketing strategies. These interactions develop and encourage growth of relationships (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 2002; Reinartz & Kumar, 2003). Since new technologies like Facebook are effective for encouraging interactions and allow people to speak their minds without fear of retribution, therefore, marketers must take cognisance of these technologies. Through interactions, conversations take place. Generally, on Facebook, conversations between customers and companies are public and are accessible to a larger group of people. Therefore, this study encourages companies to have a Facebook strategy, which monitors the communication among followers or fans on company’s Facebook page. Through monitoring communication among these users, the company can categorise and analyse all reviews and comments to determine which of those warrant immediate response. When all comments have been received, the company could provide personalised feedback to those individuals with problems and complaints. Results from the analysis may help companies foresee and handle future problems and complaints. This may help to build strong relationships. From the findings of this study, it appears, therefore and perhaps even likely that Facebook could prove to be a big part of the relationship marketing solution marketers have been eagerly waiting for ever since the term was coined in the early 1980s, making this highly interactive medium characterised by frequent exchange of volume of data an ideal and sought after vehicle to build strong customer relationships.

However, this study is not without limitations. As a recommendation, future research needs to investigate other variables likely to impact on the company’s ability to build successful relationships on Facebook. Such variables might include the effect of reputation and how it is likely to impact Facebook conversations, Word-of-Mouth and satisfaction with company’s Facebook page. Another limitation is that the model of the current study was tested using the student sample. Generally, student sample is regarded as unrepresentative possessing unique characteristics than the rest of the population (Wells, 1993). As such it is difficult to generalise the findings of such a sample (Peterson, 2001; Wang, Zhang, Zang & Ouyang, 2005). Therefore, future research should aim at non-student population. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that the Facebook model developed in this paper could be used as a guide to understand Facebook relationship marketing and perhaps this study can offer a step toward finding the Holy Grail of relationship marketing. But the race is still on.

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