

# A Framework for Relationships in eCommerce Websites

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## ABSTRACT

Consumers are increasingly shifting their purchase patterns from in-store to online. Consequently, retailers have had to go online to remain competitive. Research pundits argued the success of going online lies in the website's ability to create and maintain relationships with customers. This research aimed at investigating the relationship development process from the perspective of merchants to point out independent variables that influence such relation. The study is picking on the dyadic nature of the interaction in building relationship among people and apply it to the online relationships. In particular, the role of self-disclosure and privacy for enhancing this relationship was investigated. A deductive thematic approach was used based on a predefined themes informed by the literature guided the information collection through a semi-structured interview with eCommerce website owners. The study offers useful insights in establishing the pathway to creating and maintaining a loyal customer through a framework with propositions that are useful for eCommerce website managers.

## KEYWORDS

Loyalty, Privacy, Relationship Development Process, Relationship Marketing, Relationships, Self-Disclosure, Trust

## INTRODUCTION

The past two years have shown unprecedented growth in eCommerce and a host of new opportunities has emerged because of the global COVID19 pandemic. Consumers shifted their purchase patterns from in-store to online. Consequently, retailers have had to go online to remain competitive (Al-maaitah, Tha'er Majali, & Almaaitah, 2021). Research pundits argue the success of going online lies in the website's ability to create and maintain relationships with customers through direct interaction (Adjei & Clark, 2010; Campbell, 2019; Ha & Lee, 2012; Otieno & Getuno, 2016). Adam and Deans (2000) observed that firms used websites for a variety of purposes that includes communications, transactions and relationship building. They found firms moving from one type of usage to another

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according to their marketing strategy and the responsiveness of their customers. Typically, firms would pursue one of two usages, depending on the target market. In most cases, they set up the websites for communication purposes, and over time use them for online transactions and relationship building. Firms may also start using websites for building trusted relationships that then move on to facilitate transactions. However, increasingly firms are recognizing the need to be relational focused, evident in the shift from a transactional basis to a relationship one (Campbell, 2019).

Indeed, the increasing use of websites in B2C is experiencing a paradigm shift from transitional to relationship marketing. While relationship marketing is well established in offline setting, the paradigm shift is warranting examining the key elements of building relationships with customers on the Internet. The act of establishing, developing, and maintaining successful online relational exchanges or relational marketing constitutes a major shift in marketing theory and practice (Adjei & Clark, 2010; Akrouf, Diallo Mbaye Fall, Akrouf Wafa, & Chandon Jean-Louis, 2016; Al-Adwan, Kokash, Adwan, Alhorani, & Yaseen, 2020; van Tonder & Petzer, 2018).

The aim of building relationship when selling is to foster trust in customers to enable the delivery of value over an extended period (Agariya & Singh, 2011). Mimicking the same in an online context is challenging, that is, to get eCommerce websites foster trust with customers for the exchange of mutual benefits. While it can be argued that the way relationships formed offline are different to offline, a common thread between them is the dyadic nature of the interactions (Storch, 2002). However, this has not been studied in the context of managing or advancing online relationships. Although online relationships have been discussed in the psychology literature, they were mostly interpersonal relationships, not in the context of eCommerce (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Cozby, 1973; Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). The current research lies at the intersection of relationship-building theory (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; O. N. Ndubisi, 2007) and eCommerce theory (Al-Adwan et al., 2020; Bhagat, 2009; Joinson, Reips, Buchanan, & Schofield, 2010; Metzger, 2004; N. O. Ndubisi, Malhotra, & Wah, 2008; Noble & Phillips, 2004). Interaction, however, appears to be independent, that is, individuals decide on the amount of interaction to advance the relationship. Therefore, there is a need to examine the relationship development process in its entirety to determine independent variables for creating customer relationships in the online context. The current study considered the role of self-disclosure and privacy for managing online relationships for new and repeat purchase customers from the vendor's perspective.

This article is structured as follows. First, we review the relationship development process with regard to the variables (dependent and independent) incorporated in our proposed model and discuss their interrelationships. This is followed by a description of the methodology, results and analysis and finally discussion and conclusions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

This study aims at understanding the building block of relationships with online customers for the purpose of establishing the pathway to creating and maintaining loyal customers. Owing to the exploratory nature of the research, the suggestions from previous studies in the relationship-building literature were used as the theoretical basis for the online relational development process and the formulation of the proposition in this research.

The literature on relationship marketing recognizes trust and commitment as the building blocks of a relationship (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer, & Kumar, 1996; Kumar, Hibbard, & Stern, 1995; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1994). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust and commitment are at the heart of any successful relationship with customers. Trust is considered as the key element in long term relationships. It is the confidence placed on the word or promise of another (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Schurr & Ozanne, 1985) and a key determinant of a relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Otieno & Getuno, 2016; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Wilson, 1994). When a promise is kept, it leads to a healthy

relationship between the two parties (Doney & Cannon, 2007). In an online setting, trust may be viewed as a sense of confidence that one's vulnerability will not be exploited (Corritore, Kracher, & Wiedenbeck, 2003). In an ecommerce context that is reliant on the security the website owner offers for carrying out the transaction (V. Shankar, Urban, & Sultan, 2002).

Commitment refers to the motivation to stay with a supplier (Geyskens et al., 1996), or as Moorman et al. (1992) have defined it as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (p. 316). Literature recognizes at least two types of commitment (Bowden, 2009; De Ruyter, Moorman, & Lemmink, 2001; Geyskens et al., 1996; Kumar et al., 1995; Taddei & Contena, 2013). The first type is calculative commitment and the second is affective commitment. Calculative commitment, occurs when trust is reduced or weakened to the point that future association is based on cost-benefit rather than relationship (De Ruyter et al., 2001). A calculative commitment is usually maintained when there is no other alternative available and has a significant role to play for new customers (Bowden, 2009). This can happen in an online context when service providers (e.g mobile services) force customers into a term contract. When customers realise the service is not meeting their expectation, they may remain in a calculative commitment until the contract ends.

Affective commitment, on the other hand, is the extent to which one member of the distribution channel wants to maintain a relationship with another and is characterized by positive emotions that members have for one another. As a result, it has a significant role to play for regular purchasers where their total experience is derived from emotional elements rather than tangible attributes of a product or service (Zhou, Dai, & Zhang, 2007). This type of commitment may be extended to the B2C context, where customers are relying on suppliers for the delivery of services such as Internet connection and mobile phone.

The format of the relationship building process is trust preceding commitment (parties will seek only trustworthy partners) and this has been confirmed in a variety of situations. For example, Farrelly and Quester (2003) observed, based on a structural equation model, trust as preceding commitment in a sponsorship relationship within the Australian Football League. Based on qualitative data, Plewa, Quester, and Baaken (2005) reported the same format for a university–industry relationship. However, Bilgihan and Bujisic (2015) reversed the format and had commitment preceding trust. Regardless, antecedents of trust (commitment) could be altered to improve the situation in the commitment (trust) stage. The need to define the complete process of relationship building, particularly for the online context, became evident from the commitment-trust literature (Al-Adwan et al., 2020). A limitation of the commitment-trust framework is that trust and commitment are dependent variables (Langerak, 2001). They are mediating variables to loyalty, which is the desired result of all relationships (Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Loyalty can be elusive as its assessment requires behavioral data that is not easily obtained (Hart, Smith, Sparks, & Tzokas, 1999), but it is central to the relationship marketing paradigm (Al-Adwan & Al-Horani, 2019; Raval & Grönroos, 1996; Wetsch, 2006). A strong correlation between loyalty and satisfaction has been observed in a variety of situations: both online and off line (Venkatesh Shankar, Smith, & Rangaswamy, 2003); consumer-brand relationships (Bowden, 2009) to the point that it is assumed that total customer satisfaction is the key for creating loyal customers. As loyalty is the expected outcome of relationships (O. N. Ndubisi, 2007) the satisfaction–loyalty part relates to the maintenance of relationships (N. O. Ndubisi et al., 2008). However, as loyalty is a dependent variable it has little to offer in the management of relationships. Loyalty being the expected outcome of relations is dependent on the antecedents, hence may have little to offer in the management of a relationship. Also, the extent of mediation offered rests on the antecedents of commitment and trust. Thus, unless the entire process of relationship building is known, it is difficult to apply remedial measures. Bhagat (2009) suggests the existence of antecedents to the commitment-trust framework that are independent in nature. Future research is required to identify them.

The following section discusses the antecedents of commitment and trust identified from the literature and recognized to be part of the relationship development process.

There are many empirical studies on the determinants of the trust related to relationship building in the online context (Engelmann & Schwabe, 2021). In this paper, two variables related to online relationship are considered, the role of self-disclosure and privacy.

Privacy refers to the perception that legal requirements and good practices exist to manage personal data (Casalo, Carlos Flavián, & Guinalú, 2007). Drawn from the law literature of the 1960s and 1970s, Fried (1968) and Rachels (1975), the earliest proponents of privacy as a factor of relationship, contended that by controlling the flow of information (privacy) one can maintain a variety of relationships. When individuals acted on the information released, relationships start to form. As more information is exchanged and acted upon, the relationship progresses toward intimacy. The role of privacy suggested here is to provide a control of the flow of information. Thus privacy has the potential to be an independent variable within the relationship building process (Fried, 1968; Gerstein, 1978; Reiman, 1976). Whether privacy can serve in the same manner in an online setting requires investigation. Privacy as a concept, examined from a theoretical perspective in the law literature, suggests a modulating effect on a relationship (Fried, 1968). If that is true, then firms and individuals could use privacy to manage relationships.

Privacy is a key element in the structural framework for securing online environments (Belanger, Hiller, & Smith, 2002; Floridi, 2006). It is integral to a trust management approach used in online security against unauthorized people (Blaze, Feigenbaum, & Lacy, 1996; Luo, 2002; McCole, Ramsey, & Williams, 2010). The approach consists of a system that gives access to individuals by matching a privacy policy against their credentials. Information disclosed based on the privacy policy legitimizes subsequent interactions with the individuals. Andrade, Kaltcheva, and Weitz (2002) showed that having an online security system, a complete description of the privacy policy and the reputation of the company encouraged respondents to disclose personal information. From a marketing perspective such encouragement given to customers could be a way to collect personal information that could provide the basis for subsequent interactions. Thus, privacy not only creates security in conjunction with trust, but it also assists in developing ongoing relationship by facilitating subsequent interactions.

A similar notion to privacy in the literature is the self-disclosure reciprocity or mutual disclosure that is, volunteering to give information to obtain certain benefits (Andrade et al., 2002; Bauer & Schiffinger, 2015; Chou, Teng, & Lo, 2009). For a relationship to develop, it is essential for individuals to disclose information to one another thereby opening up a two-way communication (Engelmann & Schwabe, 2021; Grönroos, 1995; O. N. Ndubisi, 2007). In a sense the trust management approach mentioned above secures such a communication channel to allow mutual disclosure (Blaze et al., 1996). The two way communication of mutual disclosure was shown by Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) in a personal selling context, to comprise of disclosure from both the agent and the customer. When self-disclosure is reciprocated within the two way communication, the relationship advances progressively towards intimacy (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). The studies cited in this discussion suggest that mutual disclosure has an important role in the formation of relationships.

In the online context, the inevitable risk of losing money during the exchange and the threat of privacy betrayal may necessitate the cultivation of trust to gain the benefits claimed by the website. The willingness of internet users to disclose higher risk information such as credit card information, would be dependent not only on the benefits but also on the reliability of the electronic commerce system (Grabner-Krauter, 2002). Internet users, however, assess their partners based on the criteria of competence, benevolence, and integrity (Beldad, Menno de Jong, & Steehouder, 2010).

Based on the studies above, privacy and mutual disclosure are proposed as additional variables to the commitment–trust framework of the relationship building process. Privacy and mutual disclosure can be increased or decreased as and when required, making them independent in nature. While the contribution of the two variables to a relationship is not questioned, as they were drawn from separate literature it was necessary to analyze them in the context of the same relationship to justify further extension to the commitment-trust framework. Furthermore the current thinking in the relationship

marketing literature is very much in terms of interpersonal relationship between individual members of an organization and their customers (Grönroos, 1995; Guenzi & Pelloni, 2004; Price & Arnould, 1999).

In summary, the formation of online relationships facilitated by self-disclosure, privacy, trust, commitment and loyalty and these are the themes that will be used in the methodology. The remainder of the paper reports an exploratory study carried out to discover the role and position of self-disclosure and privacy within the context of developing an online relationship. The study investigated the relationship process from the firm's perspective.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used an exploratory approach comprised of semi-structured interviews with owners of eCommerce websites operating in the city of Abu Dhabi in the UAE. The value of using semi-structured interviews was derived from the flexibility it offers to explore the complexity of the topic (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). The assumption behind this type of research is that the issues to be explored are complex and dynamic. A non-parametric purposive sampling technique was used to select cases that are particularly informative. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve individuals who owned and operated eCommerce websites. The small size sample suited the focus on meaning and the quest for an in-depth understanding of the online relationship phenomenon. The concept of saturation was used for deciding the sample size. Saturation was reached after interviews were held with 12 eCommerce operators ( $n = 12$ ). For maintain confidentiality agreement with the operators, they will be referred to as eC1 to eC12.

To select the firms, first a list of operators of eCommerce website was prepared from UAE Business Directory – List of Companies in UAE ([www.yello.ae](http://www.yello.ae)) and approached by telephone. A convenient time and place were arranged for a meeting with the owners who expressed interest to partake the interview. The selection criteria of the interviewees were based on ownership of an eCommerce website. The interview structure and pre-developed themes were prepared based on the literature review and sent to the participants prior to the interview. Additional discussion topics were allowed during the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The detailed analysis using Thematic Content Analysis were guided by the following six themes:

Theme 1: Customer levels: what different relationships have you had in the past.

Theme 2: Time

Theme 3: Trust & Commitment

Theme 4: Loyalty

Theme 5: Interactions. What triggers a relationship to initiate?

Theme 6: Privacy

The corpus of the 12 responses for each question (theme) was analyzed by the three authors individually. The first author then summarized the three analysis and sent back to each author for confirmation.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Analyzing the data that has been collected through the key informant interviews using thematic analysis.

### **Theme 1: Customer Interaction Levels**

The first topic of conversation was broad. Respondents were asked to talk about their experience in developing online relationships. Analysis of this opening conversation revealed three levels of

customers' interactions: visitors, first time buyers and regular buyers. Note, at each interaction level, a customer is receptive to slightly different messages hence the marketing method varies accordingly. At each of the levels the interaction increased which in turn increased the amount of information released. This observation was an early indication of a moderating effect on the flow of information, which in essence is the idea of privacy where individuals release information on their own accord.

### **Theme 2: Time Factor**

Time was observed to be an important factor for a relationship to develop as respondents suggested. While different activities mentioned in the context of 'time consumed', the time dedicated to these activities was justified as the outcomes paved the way forward for a relationship. As such it would be appropriate to assign a gestation period for relationship to form. During this period, individuals looked for opportunities to prove themselves to one another.

### **Theme 3: Trust and Commitment**

In the interviews, trust and commitment were the most discussed topics in a relationship. Trust and commitment were viewed as closely related constructs. Although responses could not reveal the relationship between these two concepts, respondents insinuated that trust preceded commitment. It was also noted that there are two level of commitment: first time buyer and a regular or a repeat buyer. Respondents also noted that once commitment was established for the first-time buyer, barriers that inhibit trust were removed. The way to remove barriers is by exhibiting the triggers reported above in theme one. In other words, the willingness of a first-time user who lacks the experience with online organizations to disclose risky information such as credit card details is dependent on the website being beneficial, compassionate, and credible. In the literature, this level of commitment is referred to as calculative, where the consumer is an opportunistic buyer who weighs the probability of making a poor decision along with the importance associated with the potentially negative consequences of that decision (Taddei & Contena, 2013).

Conversely, website regulars (repeat purchasers) with enough experience are seeking to develop an enduring relationship with the website (Bowden, 2009).

### **Theme 4: Privacy**

Privacy was viewed as a central component of relationship. It appears to exhibit a regulatory role in relationship as suggested in the literature (Rachels 1975; Fried 1968), which was inferred from eC1. This idea of entrusting information supports Rachels' (1975) argument of privacy being used to manage a relationship by controlling the flow of information. The regulatory role of privacy appears to operate when individuals willingly release information for others to act upon. This means that an ecommerce store can be trusted if they have testimonials and reviews online, as consumers access these before buying.

The regulatory role of privacy can also be noticed through "sharing" and "trusted agreeable person" (eC6) which are acts of releasing personal information to the individual on the receiving end. A customer would buy from a web store if they liked it as they will start trusting it and eventually buy from it. In other words, people want content that they can relate to at an emotional level before they start trusting it.

Thus, privacy is operationalized by two functions, the flow of information and keeping that information private. In the literature they are reviewed in separate contexts, flow of information in the context of relationship moderating (Fried, 1968; Rachels, 1975) and keeping information private in the context of eCommerce security (Floridi, 2006; Tavani, 2008). In the current study they appeared to co-exist to start a relationship.

## Theme 5: Engaging / Disengaging in Relational Exchanges

A question of how a relationship might be initiated formed a theme in which the notion of relationship triggers emerged during the interviews. The process was initiated by the visitor and its success defined the direction of the relationship. Three triggers defined the direction of the relationship: shared benefit, reliability and interest (benevolence).

For the first trigger ‘shared benefit’ or ‘give and take’, visitors indicate their unique needs and, in return, receive specialized content. These clearly are aspects of mutuality (Berry, 1995; Czepiel, 1990). Berry (1995) identified three levels of relationship according to the benefits offered to customers, depending on the type of bond(s) to foster customer loyalty; financial, social and structural. A financial bond is low level and relies primarily on pricing incentives to secure customers’ loyalty while structural is high level where it relies primarily on value-adding benefits to important customer problems. The medium level bond is social when it involves personalization and customization. Thus, for a relationship-oriented website to exist, it has to be mutually beneficial and involve a two-way flow of information.

For the second trigger ‘reliability’ we considered the notions of “being there for you” and “rely on” as the key activities for a relationship to survive (Martin & Sohi, 1993) as quoted by eC7. Time and resources were available to invest in helping prospects make the right choice, maintain customer enthusiasm, and to create customer loyalty (eC3).

The third trigger, ‘interest’ can be explained as the sincerity in meeting customers’ needs (eC5). In the literature, interest in the context of sincerity is referred to as benevolence (Kumar et al., 1995; Mayer, J.H. Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; McKnight, V. Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Selnes & Gønhaug, 2000). Some researchers see sincerity as part of the trust construct (Doney & Cannon, 2007) but in the current study it was observed as a trigger. Selnes and Gønhaug (2000) studied “benevolence” of suppliers and observed that it created the positivity necessary for transactions to take place. In the current study “benevolence” and “reliability” were observed to have the same bearing in a buyer–seller relationship. Further, Selnes and Gønhaug (2000) defined “reliability” as the ability to keep promises. Selnes and Gønhaug (2000) study indicated that “benevolence” and “reliability” were not mutually exclusive but rather essential ingredients of the relationship. In the current study, the two were represented and a third trigger “interest” is proposed.

Triggers therefore provide an opportunity to exchange information and when reciprocated, mutual disclosure occurred leading to a level of relationship to commence. However when it is not reciprocated, the relationship tended to become stale (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987; O. N. Ndubisi, 2007). Hence, it is essential to exhibit these characteristics in relational websites. Further, while these triggers act as a ‘green light’ for relationship, a ‘red light’ could also be triggered. The respondents in the study were in agreement with the notion of relationship avoidance (eC7, eC11). It was also suggested that there may be other sets of triggers disengaging visitors from the website, however this is beyond the scope of this study and were not pursued.

## Theme 6: Loyalty

Repeat purchase consumers are usually labelled as loyal customer and receive special attention and retention of such customers is the objective. While affective commitment is considered to be the basis for repeat purchase, it ultimately grows into the an enduring loyal relationship (Bowden, 2009). (eC1, eC7, eC12). Loyalty was stated as being essential for the continuance of a relationship (eC8). It appears that loyalty is what carries the relationship through the bumps eC8 continued.

Respondents noted that loyalty is essential for the maintenance of a relationship and to that end, its role is at the end of the relationship building process.

Table 1 shows results and analysis of the data that has been collected through the key informant interviews using thematic analysis.

Table 1.

Theme	Results	Quotation from respondents
<b>Theme 1: Customer Interaction Levels</b>	Three levels of customers' interactions: visitors, first time buyers and regular buyers were revealed	eC9: "Our website is open for the whole world, customers visit our website to explore our offering which leads them to buy. Some of them return and become our loyal customer. We communicate with our visitors differently according to their level of interaction"
<b>Theme 2: Time Factor</b>	Time as an important factor of relationship (eC9, eC5). Activities mentioned in the context of 'time consumed' (eC1, eC3, eC8, eC12). The time dedicated to these activities was justified as the outcomes paved the way forward for a relationship. As such it would be appropriate to assign a gestation period for relationship to form. During this period, individuals looked for opportunities to prove themselves to one another.	eC9: "...it doesn't just happen straight away; it takes time and a lot of effort". eC5: "building a relationship will always take time", eC1 "caring for a customer eC3 "waiting for opportunities", eC8 "educating customers" and eC12 "doing things for each other"
<b>Theme 3: Trust and Commitment</b>	The most discussed topics in a relationship as captured by eC11 and viewed as closely related constructs. Trust preceded commitment although no relationship between the two was revealed. It was also noted that there are two level of commitment (eC2, eC11). Once commitment was established for the first-time buyer, barriers that inhibit trust were removed. The way to remove barriers is by exhibiting the triggers reported above in theme one as exemplified by one respondent (eC4). The willingness of a first-time user who lacks the experience with online organizations to disclose risky information such as credit card details is dependent on the website being beneficial, compassionate, and credible. Conversely, website regulars (repeat purchasers) with enough experience are seeking to develop an enduring relationship with the website (eC10).	eC11: "You wouldn't have a committed customer if you don't have an element of trust". eC2: "The level of commitment for the first timers, who lack the experience with the online organization, is different compared with regulars who have enough experience". eC11: "The commitment for the first-time buyer, who is looking for a cost-benefit relation, is different to the repeat purchase customer who is looking for an ongoing and deeper relation with us". eC4: "If you don't act in your customer's best interests, lie to hide your flaws and make heaps of dumb mistakes, your customer will realize you can't be trusted, and abandon your business relationship". eC10: "People who return to our website for a purchase will be looking for a personal connection and therefore special attention".
<b>Theme 4: Privacy</b>	- A central component of relationship and it exhibits a regulatory role in relationship (eC1). Hence, an ecommerce store can be entrusted if they have testimonials and reviews online, as consumers access these before buying. - Another example of the regulatory role of privacy was stated by eC6. As per eC6, "sharing" and "trusted agreeable person" are acts of releasing personal information to the individual on the receiving end. A customer would buy from a web store if they liked it as they will start trusting it and eventually buy from it. In other words, people want content that they can relate to at an emotional level before they start trusting it. - Privacy is operationalized by two functions, the flow of information and keeping that information private.	eC1: "How strong that relationship is, is dependent on what you entrust to that customer, ... and how they respond to him/her". eC6: "I think sharing is a key part of close relationship...that [of] being connected at emotional level and... that [of] trust as well. That is, you wouldn't trust someone whom you didn't find too agreeable. Our main focus is to get potential customers to like our website."

continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

Theme	Results	Quotation from respondents
<p><i>Theme 5: Engaging / Disengaging in Relational Exchanges</i></p>	<p>Three triggers defined the direction of the relationship: shared benefit, reliability and interest (benevolence).                      - <b>1<sup>st</sup> trigger</b> ‘shared benefit’ or ‘give and take’,                      - <b>2<sup>nd</sup> trigger</b> ‘reliability’ (the notions of “being there for you” and “rely on”) (eC7, eC4). Time and resources were available to invest in helping prospects make the right choice, maintain customer enthusiasm, and to create customer loyalty (eC3).                      - <b>3<sup>rd</sup> trigger</b>, ‘interest’ can be explained as the sincerity in meeting customers’ needs (eC5). “reliability” as the ability to keep promises. These triggers act as a ‘green light’ for relationship, a ‘red light’ could also be triggered. The respondents in the study were in agreement with the notion of relationship avoidance. eC7 and eC11 are excerpts from respondents’ description of the ‘red light’. These quotes suggests that there may be other sets of triggers disengaging visitors from the website, however this is beyond the scope of this study and were not pursued.</p>	<p>eC3: “our website learns as much as possible about visitors needs as our goal is to create long-term relationships, hence, less of a ‘Buy Now’ emphasis”                      eC7: “whatever is on your website should be true and deliverable”,                      eC4 “we mean what we say”,                      eC4 “our website has no jargons but information customer can relate to”.                      eC5: “showing compassion in our action makes a difference”                      eC7: “Some are regular customers but for unknown reasons they don’t want to form a relationship”                      eC11: “Some visitors bounced off the site, and I guess they landed at our website by mistake.”</p>
<p><i>Theme 6: Loyalty</i></p>	<p>Repeat purchase consumers are usually labelled as loyal customer and receive special attention and retention of such customers is the objective. While affective commitment is considered to be the basis for repeat purchase, it ultimately grows into the an enduring loyal relationship. eC1, eC7 and eC12 emphasized loyalty as the final result. Loyalty was stated as being essential for the continuance of a relationship, as inferred from eC8. It appears that loyalty is what carries the relationship through the bumps eC8. Respondents noted that loyalty is essential for the maintenance of a relationship and to that end, its role is at the end of the relationship building process.</p>	<p>eC1: “We retain our customers by providing them with the ultimate shopping experience through digital solutions”,                      eC7: “We secure our long-term loyalty through emotional engagement” and,                      eC12: “Customer loyalty keeps us alive in this competitive market”,                      eC8: “I think that relationships quite depend on loyalty because you both have to be loyal, you know, [to] one another- like in a friendship.”                      eC8: “...once you’ve got that relationship, there might be ups and downs, but you always need to have customer incentivization, but it should have little to do with monetary incentives.”</p>

## DISCUSSION

While ‘customer interaction levels and ‘time’ were among the themes discussed, five categories of themes that facilitate the formation of online relationships emerged. They were self-disclosure, privacy, trust, commitment, and loyalty. This study revealed not only the relationship building process but also the characteristics of relationship-oriented websites. In summarizing, self-disclosure reciprocity initiates the process followed by privacy operationalized by sharing and keeping information secure. When the individuals acted on the shared information trust comes into existence, and this then produces commitment which in turn produces loyalty.

While the relationship building process was observed to occur on three levels of customers: visitor, subscriber/first buyer, and regular; self-disclosure reciprocity occurred with three types of interactions: benevolence, reliability, and shared benefits. This was observed to commence at the “visitor” level in which individuals attempted to determine the future of the relationship in the form of a to-and-fro over a period. Time however, was viewed as a gestation period for the relationship to be born, in line with Doney & Cannon’s (1997) prediction of the future of the relationship. According

to Doney and Cannon (2007), individuals use the experience gained from initial interactions to predict the future of the relationship.

The three types of interactions observed: ‘benevolence’, ‘reliability’, and ‘shared benefits’ were part of a “self-disclosure reciprocity” discussed in the psychology literature (Cozby, 1973; Derlega et al., 1987) and sales literature (Crosby et al., 1990). As such the three items need to correlate positively with self-disclosure reciprocity for them to be part of the relationship building process.

The following propositions are suggested to confirm their association with mutual disclosure.

### Proposition 1

Proposition 1a: When parties demonstrate *reliability* there will be an increase of *self-disclosure reciprocity*.

Proposition 1b: When parties express genuine *benevolence* there will be an increase of *self-disclosure reciprocity*.

Proposition 1c: When the *benefits* are obvious there will be more *self-disclosure reciprocity* of personal information.

Proposition 1d: *Reliability*, *benevolence* and *benefits* exhibit positive correlation to one another.

A consequence of the interactions during the gestation period is the disclosure of personal information and this disclosure was fueled by specific foreseen benefits. Once disclosed, information is no longer private to any single individual. When information was consistently maintained, private trust came into existence. Thus, privacy and trust can be viewed as state-of-beings that follow self-disclosure reciprocity of information. The ability to control the flow of information in privacy makes it an independent variable with trust being the outcome or a dependent variable. In the current study, privacy and trust appeared to be related, which is confirmed in the eCommerce literature (Blaze et al., 1996; Casalo et al., 2007; McCole et al., 2010). If privacy is assured in sharing information on a website, online trust is enhanced (Bart, Venkatesh Shankar, Fareena Sultan, & Urban, 2005). Therefore, the sequence suggested is privacy operating first, followed by trust. Once trust is formed, individuals have the opportunity to act on the information disclosed to derive value out of the relationship. Floridi (2006) suggests privacy as a structural requirement (system) in eCommence where the structural aspect is provided by the individuals’ commitment to maintain information private.

To confirm causal pathways between the variables within the relationship building process, the following propositions are proposed for testing.

### Proposition 2

Proposition 2a: For a relationship to progress, *self-disclosure reciprocity* and *privacy* must be positively correlated.

Proposition 2b: Within a relationship, *privacy* and *trust* should be positively correlated.

Online trust has frequently been conceptualized in the eCommerce literature as a mediator between selected antecedents (e.g. privacy) and consequences (e.g. loyalty) (Kim & Peterson, 2017). In contrast to the offline environment where customers build trust with the seller, internet users have to trust not only the website, the company behind the site, but also the explanation of why the site is trustworthy (Beldad et al., 2010). While trust is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ dimension, there are nevertheless trust factors that have universal appeal. Different studies have identified different determinants that could influence online internet users’ trust.

Commitment and loyalty are the maintenance variables of a relationship and are considered to be closely related constructs yet also distinct (Bowden, 2009). Both constructs elucidate the mechanism by which an enduring state of loyalty may develop among new versus repeat purchase customers. A relationship with prospects who are new to the website and lack the experience, is maintained through

the calculative commitment – that is, when the customer is motivated by their cost-benefit evaluation. This will transform into affective forms of commitment and result in an intention to return. The return purchase customer enters into a state of enduring relationship, or loyalty. The essential activities in the trust-commitment phase of a relationship include maintenance of privacy and trust. When either of them are breached, the relationship deteriorates into a ‘no relationship’ situation. Customers can also exit this relationship depending on their negative experience anywhere in the process.

**Proposition 3**

Proposition 3a: *Trust and calculative commitment* must be positively correlated.

Proposition 3b: *Affective commitment and loyalty* must be positively correlated.

The above propositions could well be tested in an online business context to suggest a relationship marketing management model as in Figure 1.

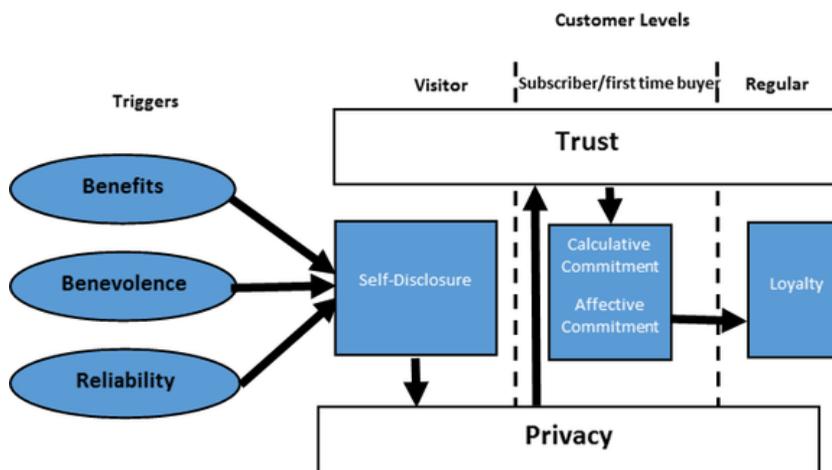
**CONCLUSION**

The aim of the current study was to discover dependent and independent variables to manage relationships in the online context. Through a qualitative study, self-disclosure reciprocity and privacy were identified as independent variables. This is an important and practical contribution to eCommerce managers in particular and the marketing relationship literature in general. Being exploratory in nature, the study was limited to identifying potential independent variables in a B2C relationship. Propositions were generated to confirm the position of *self-disclosure*, *reciprocity* and *privacy* and to establish their directional pathway within a relationship development model.

In this study, several themes were identified in the online relationship development process. Although further work is needed, the current study offers useful insights in establishing the pathway to creating and maintaining a loyal customer.

These insights should allow eCommerce managers to critically examine their relationship building blocks.

Figure 1. Relationships in eCommerce Websites Framework



Online relationships are based on individuals visiting a website and the critical function of the website is to generate in the product/service offering and the value proposition of the website. Websites with few visitors and high bounce rates are less likely to benefit from this approach.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

As always with work of this nature, there are some limitations. First, the development of the extracted model was based on twelve 12 of website owners in Abu Dhabi/UAE who had experiences of relationships with their customers. This suggests that not only validating the model empirically on a larger sample but also an extension of the study to other countries would be desirable. The limited sampling approach might also suggest caution in generalizing the findings, although the framework developed from the data is robust.

As a next step would be to evaluate the practices found in this study post the pandemic together with Big Data and AI/ML in the analysis to better understand the applicability of the framework. Future works could continue to investigate ways to inform building eCommerce relationships.

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