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Brand Communities as Relational Assets: A Commercial Management Perspective on Value Creation

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Abstract

This study examines the shift from transactional marketing to relational marketing through the strategic creation and management of brand communities. Conceptualised as relational assets, brand communities are analysed for their role in generating long-term value and competitive advantage in commercial management. Grounded on a literature review, the study integrates tribal marketing and commitment–trust theories to explain how social cohesion, shared identity, and trust-based relationships foster durable customer loyalty. Illustrative cases, including LEGO, Sephora, Discord, and Reddit, are used to contrast firm-controlled brand ecosystems with third-party community platforms, highlighting the strategic implications of different governance models. The analysis demonstrates that brand communities create value not primarily through firm-to-customer transactions, but by enabling horizontal, member-to-member interactions that support co-creation, knowledge sharing, and relational commitment. These dynamics reduce relational uncertainty and enhance retention by positioning customers as active contributors rather than passive recipients of brand value. The study argues that sustainable commercial performance increasingly depends on managers' ability to cultivate and govern these relational assets, balancing control with authenticity and community autonomy. By reframing brand communities as economically relevant relational resources, this paper contributes to marketing and economics research and offers a commercially grounded perspective on value creation in relational marketing strategies.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, Brand Communities, Tribes, Consumer Engagement, Trust and Commitment

Introduction

This study focuses on the creation and management of brand communities as a response to the limitations of transaction-centred marketing in increasingly competitive and digitalised markets (Kurnia, 2025). As traditional transactional approaches lose effectiveness, firms are progressively adopting a relational paradigm that emphasises long-term bonds with consumers. Central to this shift is the recognition of consumers' intrinsic need for belonging, captured by Seth Godin's concept of the "tribe," which frames communities as socially cohesive groups rather than collections of isolated customers (Begemann, 2024). The paper first establishes a theoretical framework that distinguishes crowds from genuine communities, highlighting the roles of leadership, shared identity, and digital technologies in fostering cohesion and sustained engagement. It then examines key relational marketing practices, including customer relationship management systems, personalisation strategies, and loyalty programs, that support trust, commitment, and customer retention. To illustrate these dynamics in practice, the study analyses selected cases (LEGO, Sephora, Discord, and Reddit) to demonstrate how different community governance models create value for both firms and participants (Mendez et al, 2025).

Methodologically, the research adopts a narrative literature review, enabling the synthesis of existing theoretical and empirical insights on brand communities and relational marketing. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how communities function as strategic resources that enhance brand loyalty and support long-term value creation.

Theoretical Context

Relationship Marketing and the Dynamics of Tribes

Within the scope of relationship marketing, the evolution from a logic centred on the one-off transaction to the building of relationships with consumers finds a consistent framework in the concept of the "tribe" (Eisenbardt, 2025). The need for belonging, as an intrinsic human characteristic associated with social survival mechanisms, drives individuals to seek connections with others who share similar interests, values, and visions, as well as with leaders capable of mobilising ideas with transformative potential (Baillot et al., 2023).

According to Godin (2008), a tribe can be understood as a group of people connected to one another, linked to a leader, and united around a common idea. This perspective transcends the traditional notion of market segmentation by shifting the focus toward the creation of participatory communities, sustained by symbolic and ideological affinities.

For a group to effectively constitute a tribe rather than merely an undifferentiated crowd, two essential elements are required: a shared interest and a medium for communication among its members (Godin, 2008). Applying this logic to relationship marketing, it becomes evident that the role of brands must not be limited to unilateral message broadcasting but must extend to creating and facilitating spaces and mechanisms that promote continuous communication, not only between the brand and consumers but, crucially, among consumers themselves.

From Management to Leadership in Customer Relationship Management

The literature points to a clear distinction between management and leadership in the creation and activation of brand communities. While management tends to centre on maintaining the status quo and efficiently organising resources to execute pre-defined tasks-akin to a "factory" organisational model oriented toward operational efficiency and cost reduction, the development of communities in this realm requires, above all, leadership. In this sense, Godin (2008) argues that "managers manage processes; leaders promote change," underscoring the transformative role of leadership.

In the context of community-based strategies, the organisation's role transcends mere product or service provision, positioning it as the mobilising agent of a movement. Contemporary consumers, increasingly less interested in standardised offerings often described as "average stuff for average people," seek distinctive experiences, meaningful relationships, and a sense of belonging. Thus, loyalty no longer stems from passive satisfaction but rather emerges from active participation in a brand-led movement. Organisations that challenge the status quo and present a value proposition grounded in clear beliefs and purposes ("something to believe in") tend to generate higher levels of engagement, commitment, and loyalty than those whose relationship with consumers is limited to strictly transactional exchanges.

Figure 1 – The Tribal Leadership Cycle versus Mass Marketing

The Role of Technology in Community Cohesion

Technological evolution has had a decisive impact on the scalability of communities within the context of relationship marketing. While the formation and expansion of these communities were previously heavily constrained by geographic limitations, contemporary tribes benefit from the digital environment, which has eliminated physical barriers and enabled the emergence of multiple micro-communities organised around specific interests of both a vertical and horizontal nature. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that technology including social networks, blogs, and digital platforms must be understood as a facilitator rather than the generator of the tribe. The true engine of these communities remains the human factor, anchored in the desire for connection and belonging among individuals (Godin, 2008).

Digital tools allow for what Godin (2008) terms "tightening the tribe" that is, reinforcing the community's internal cohesion. A more cohesive tribe is characterized by more agile communication, more intense emotional sharing, and a greater capacity for collective coordination. Relationship marketing in a digital environment should place less emphasis on the indiscriminate quantitative growth of the community and concentrate, above all, on strengthening the existing bonds among its members, converting a common interest into a shared, engaging, and mobilizing purpose.

The Difference Between a Crowd and a Community

A crowd is a leaderless group lacking structured communication; it is an interesting, yet ephemeral, phenomenon. In contrast, a tribe is enduring and effective. The objective of relationship marketing must be to transform the crowd (the general market) into an interconnected tribe. This process involves four types of communication that the organisation must foster: From leader to tribe, from tribe to leader, from member to member, and from member to outsider. Most marketing strategies fail by focusing solely on numerical growth while neglecting lateral communication (member-to-member), where the true strength of retention and social validation of the community lies (Godin, 2008).

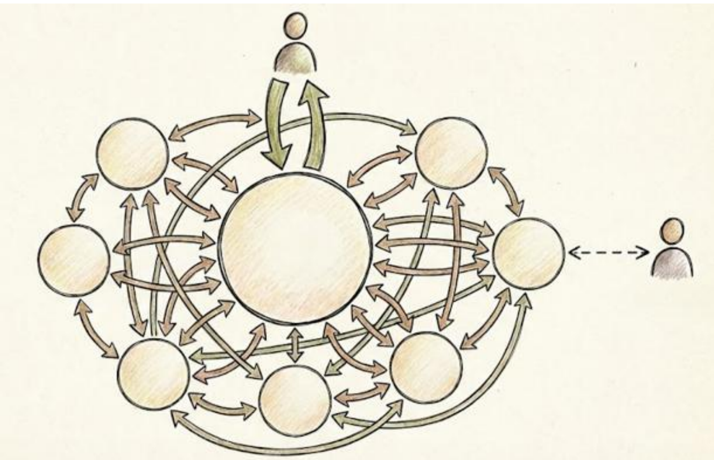

Figure 2 – Group Relation

The Concept of "True Fans" and Exclusivity

Within the context of community profitability and sustainability, the "1,000 True Fans" theory (referenced by Godin and based on Kevin Kelly's work) is central. A true fan is defined as a tribe member who cares deeply, consumes everything the organisation produces, and acts as a brand evangelist, bringing in new members.

Unlike mass marketing, which seeks a "majority" or "plurality," community marketing accepts that it does not need to please everyone. On the contrary, a tribe's strength often lies in its exclusivity and the clarity of its vision, which naturally alienates those who do not share it. Trying to lead everyone invariably results in leading no one in particular. Thus, the relational strategy must focus on serving the "heretics" and the "curious" who seek change, rather than the majority that conforms to mediocrity.

Implications for Strategy

In applying this theme, success depends not on conferred authority or large advertising budgets, but rather on the capacity to inspire, connect, and lead. Organizations operating as "factories" focused on stability face difficulties in a market that demands change. The effectiveness of modern relationship marketing lies in creating movements in which consumers are not merely passive recipients but active participants co-responsible for the brand's growth and vitality. As Godin (2008) concludes, the market demands generous leaders who operate for the benefit of the tribe, facilitating connections that individuals, in isolation, would be unable to make. Brand loyalty is, therefore, a natural consequence of the sense of belonging to something greater than the product itself.

Relational marketing has increasingly been recognised as a strategic approach in contemporary research on customer relationship management, particularly amid global competition, technological evolution, and growing consumer demands. The literature indicates that, beyond serving merely as a support function for transactional marketing, relational marketing represents a set of practices aimed at creating, maintaining, and strengthening long-term relationships with customers, thereby contributing to customer retention and long-term organisational performance.

In a systematic review of the literature on relationship marketing and customer retention, Rosário Albérico and Casaca (2023) identify that consolidated academic research on this topic emphasises a series of essential components that significantly impact customer retention, namely satisfaction, trust, commitment, and communication. These elements do not operate in isolation; they function as interconnected pillars that support the effectiveness of relational strategies.

Customer retention, the ability to keep customers active and satisfied over time, is often presented in the literature as one of the primary expected outcomes of effective relational marketing. Competitive pressures and increasingly informed and demanding consumers make retention a central strategic objective for companies seeking not only to attract customers but to secure their long-term loyalty.

Satisfaction as a Theoretical Basis for Retention

Customer satisfaction consistently emerges as a fundamental construct in the theoretical framework of relational marketing. In the conceptual model proposed by Rosário Albérico & Casaca (2023), satisfaction is not only an outcome of positive interactions between customers and companies but also a mechanism that feeds into other relational factors such as trust and commitment. Satisfied customers tend to trust the organisation more, demonstrate higher levels of commitment, and, consequently, remain loyal to the brand.

This reasoning aligns with earlier theoretical approaches suggesting that satisfaction serves as a mediator between relational practices and future purchase or recommendation behaviours. The overall experience of satisfaction encompasses elements such as service quality, responsiveness to specific needs, and the appropriateness of offerings, reinforcing the notion that satisfaction is not an isolated attribute but the result of multiple, integrated relational factors.

Trust and Commitment as Dynamic Constructs

Trust is frequently conceptualized as the customer's belief that the company will act reliably, transparently, and in mutual benefit. This dimension has been explored in the literature as an essential antecedent to customer commitment, a psychological state reflecting the customer's intention to maintain an ongoing relationship. Rosário Albérico & Casaca (2023) emphasise that trust and commitment are not only outcomes of effective relational practices but also facilitators of long-term retention.

Commitment refers to the customer's willingness to invest resources (time, money, effort) in the relationship with the organisation. When customers perceive that the relationship provides continuous value, the likelihood of their remaining loyal increases, even in the face of competitive offers or market alternatives.

Relational Communication and Strategic Relevance

Another theoretical aspect that recurs throughout the work of Rosário Albérico & Casaca (2023) is the importance of communication as a vehicle for maintaining and strengthening relational bonds. When systematically oriented toward customer needs, communication goes beyond promotional or transactional messages; it becomes an ongoing dialogue between the company and the customer that reinforces perceptions of attentiveness, empathy, and recognition.

Effective relational communication involves a feedback process in which both the company and the customer actively participate. This means that organisations that implement mechanisms to capture, interpret, and respond to feedback can adjust their offerings and services more precisely, thereby strengthening the established relationships.

A Systemic Approach to Relational Strategies

One of the important methodological and theoretical contributions of Rosário Albérico & Casaca (2023) is the adoption of a systemic and integrated perspective. Rather than considering each factor in isolation, the authors present a framework in which satisfaction, trust, commitment, and communication mutually reinforce one another, creating an environment conducive to customer retention.

This systemic focus aligns with the most contemporary approaches in the field of relational marketing, which advocate for a holistic view of customer relationships, where the sum of relationally managed elements is greater than their individual components. Strategies based on this logic tend to be more robust, as they do not rely solely on a single practice (e.g., a loyalty program) but rather on a network of practices that reinforce and amplify each other.

Research Trends and Practical Implications

The systematic review conducted by Rosário Albérico & Casaca (2023) also highlights that current literature has evolved to consider contextual and multidimensional aspects of relational marketing, including technological, digital, and behavioural factors, such as the impact of digital platforms on communication and the integration of customer data for more precise personalisation. The identification of these trends indicates that the field of relational marketing is undergoing a phase of conceptual expansion, moving from static theoretical models to dynamic approaches that reflect the complexity of contemporary consumption ecosystems. This includes the recognition that modern consumers expect more personalised interactions, rapid responses, and continuous value throughout their entire journey.

The Contribution of Morgan and Hunt to the Development of Relationship Marketing

Within the theoretical framework, it is necessary to highlight the contribution of Morgan and Hunt (1994). Their work, entitled The Commitment–Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing, is regarded as a key reference for understanding long-term relationships between organisations and customers. This article emerged in a context in which traditional marketing, strongly oriented towards isolated transactions, proved insufficient to sustain enduring relationships in an increasingly competitive environment. In response to this scenario, the authors propose a conceptual model to identify the central factors underlying the stability and continuity of market relationships.

The main objective of the article is to identify and understand the key determinants that sustain long-term relationships between organisations and their partners. This approach is particularly relevant for understanding the importance of customer retention, complementing contemporary discussions by authors such as Godin (2008) and Rosário Albérico and Casaca (2023), by positing that competitive advantage in the global economy does not stem from predatory competition, but rather from the ability to establish, develop, and maintain successful relational exchanges.

Relationship Marketing According to Morgan and Hunt

Relationship marketing can be understood as a set of activities oriented towards the establishment, development, and, above all, the maintenance of successful exchange relationships over time. This definition breaks with the traditional view by placing decisive emphasis on the preservation and continuity of relationships, suggesting that organisational success does not lie solely in creating new connections, but rather in actively managing an ongoing process of interactions.

The authors argue that a market relationship is effective only when it generates mutual benefits and encourages cooperation between the organisation and its partners or customers. In this sense, relationship marketing presupposes a commitment to relational stability, reducing opportunistic behaviours and promoting interactions based on collaboration and shared interests. This approach reinforces the idea that the value of the relationship is not confined to the moment of purchase but is built progressively through repeated, consistent interactions.

This model contributes to consolidating relationship marketing as a long-term-oriented paradigm in which customer retention plays a central role. By prioritising existing relationships over customer replacement, this perspective aligns with the literature, which recognises retention as one of the main strategic objectives of organisations.

Trust as a Central Pillar of Relationship Marketing

Trust is considered fundamental in explaining enduring marketing relationships. The authors describe trust as a situation in which one party has confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner. This definition assumes that the partner possesses essential qualities such as consistency, competence, honesty, responsibility, and benevolence, which underpin the belief that their future actions will benefit the organisation.

The importance of trust in relationship marketing lies primarily in its ability to reduce the uncertainty and risk associated with exchanges between organisations and customers. In a market characterised by information asymmetry and a wide range of alternatives, trust serves as a stabilising mechanism, enabling relationship partners to anticipate future behaviour and make decisions with greater confidence. Consequently, trust-based relationships tend to be more resilient in the face of occasional failures or competitive pressures.

The authors further argue that trust is a fundamental element for the continuity of long-term relationships, as it discourages opportunistic behaviours and promotes a cooperative orientation between the parties. When trust is present, organisations and customers demonstrate greater openness to communication, information sharing, and mutual adaptation, thereby creating favourable conditions for strengthening the relationship.

Commitment as the intention to maintain the relationship

Commitment is defined as the enduring desire of one party to maintain a relationship considered important. This concept is understood as the belief held by a partner that an ongoing relationship with another party is so significant that it justifies maximum efforts to maintain it. This perspective suggests that commitment only exists when the relationship is perceived as valuable by the parties involved. Unlike a single transaction, a commitment reflects a proactive stance in which the committed party believes that investing effort in the relationship is worthwhile to ensure its continuity (Vieira, 2011).

In relationship marketing, commitment implies a willingness to invest resources (time, effort, and capital) in maintaining the relationship, even in the presence of alternative options in the market. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that relationships characterised by high levels of commitment tend to be more stable and less prone to breakdown, as partners are willing to overcome temporary difficulties to maintain the relationship. In this way, commitment functions as a retention mechanism, reducing the likelihood of relationship termination.

In customer management, commitment is closely linked to loyalty and the development of long-term relationships. Committed customers are more likely to repeat purchases, resist competitive offers, and maintain an ongoing connection with the brand (Munaier, 2025).

The relationship between trust and commitment

In the model proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust and commitment are not isolated constructs but rather interdependent elements that together sustain long-term marketing relationships. The authors argue that trust plays an antecedent role to commitment, functioning as a necessary condition for its consistent development. Thus, without trust, it is unlikely that either party will be willing to sustain a commitment to the relationship.

The causal relationship established in the model demonstrates that the accumulation of trust over time, resulting from effective communication, leads to the intention to maintain the relationship, i.e., commitment. This idea is reinforced by the authors' assertion that trust represents the key to relational commitment.

In this way, the interaction between trust and commitment contributes to the consolidation of marketing relationships by promoting cooperative behaviours and reducing the propensity to dissolve relationships. In the context of relationship marketing, this relationship explains why relationships grounded in high levels of trust tend to generate stronger customer loyalty and retention.

Consequences of trust and commitment in Marketing Relationships

As previously discussed, trust and commitment are considered key determinants in the model proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), leading to a range of positive consequences within marketing relationships.

Among these consequences, an increase in cooperation between the parties involved stands out as particularly significant. Relationships characterised by high levels of trust and commitment tend to be marked by a greater willingness to collaborate. Additionally, a reduced likelihood of relationship termination represents another important outcome. According to the authors, when customers trust a brand and demonstrate commitment to the relationship, they become less susceptible to alternative offers.

Furthermore, trust and commitment contribute to the development of loyalty, understood not merely as repeat purchasing behaviour, but as a deeper relational bond. Several other positive consequences arising from these two factors are illustrated in the figure below.

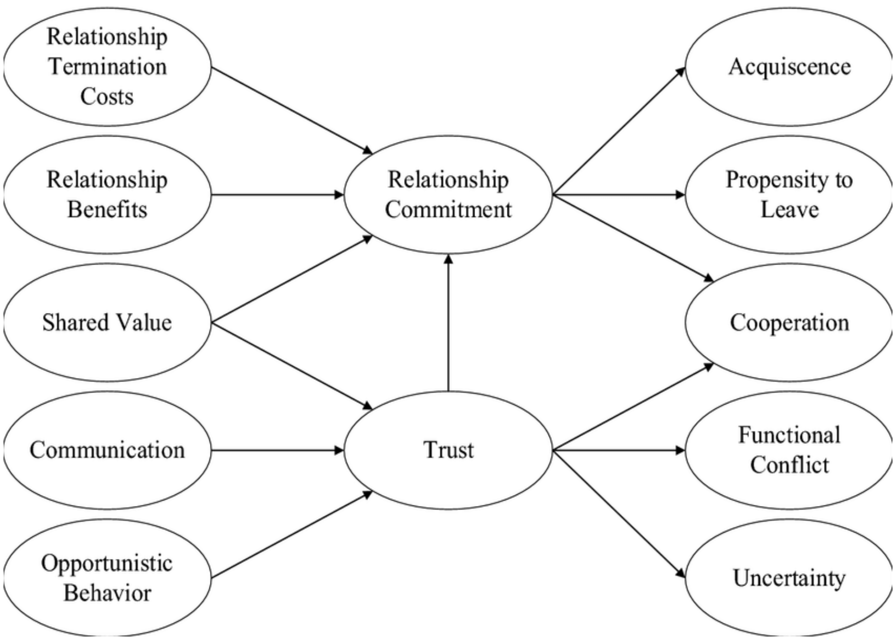

Figure 3 – Consequences of Trust and Commitment in Marketing Relationships.

Relevance of the Morgan and Hunt model in contemporary marketing

Although developed in the 1990s, the trust and commitment model proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994) remains highly relevant in contemporary marketing. The increasing complexity of markets, combined with intensified competition and the digitalisation of interactions, reinforces the importance of understanding the mechanisms that sustain long-term relationships between brands and consumers. In this regard, the model continues to be widely used as a theoretical foundation in studies on relationship marketing, customer loyalty, and relationship management (Ho, 2022).

In digital contexts, characterised by constant interactions, trust and commitment assume an even more critical role. Brand communities, as spaces for social interaction and the sharing of experiences, facilitate the development of these two constructs, thereby validating the model's applicability in online environments.

Moreover, the model aligns coherently with contemporary perspectives that emphasise the role of brands as facilitators of relationships, as advocated by Godin (2008). While Godin highlights the social and communal dimension of interactions, Morgan and Hunt provide the relational foundation that explains the quality and sustainability of these connections.

The Evolution of Tribes in the Age of AI

While Godin’s (2008) original framework emphasises human leadership as the primary driver of cohesion, contemporary scholarship argues that technology has shifted from a passive facilitator to an active participant in relationship management. According to Huang and Rust (2021), the evolution of marketing is moving towards a 'feeling economy', where AI handles the analytical and transactional tasks, pushing human agents and community leaders to focus strictly on emotional and empathetic connections.

This technological shift challenges the traditional definition of a brand community. Unlike traditional forums where users actively sought out communities based on clear shared interests, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram utilise predictive algorithms to assemble what can be termed 'algorithmic tribes'. These groups are often fluid and assembled based on behavioural patterns identified by AI rather than conscious self-selection by consumers. Consequently, the modern challenge for commercial management is not just leading the tribe but navigating the algorithmic infrastructure that sustains it. Brands that successfully integrate AI-driven insights to personalise community interactions without losing the 'human touch' essential for trust are better positioned to maintain engagement in an increasingly fragmented digital ecosystem.

Concept and Types of Communities

Understanding community in contemporary marketing requires moving beyond geographic definitions to focus on networks of shared interests and identity. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define a brand community as a specialised, non-geographically bound entity based on social relations and a "consciousness of kind" among admirers.

This shifts loyalty from transactional to emotional models; Seth Godin (2008) argues that brands must lead "tribes" by facilitating horizontal (member-to-member) connections, where true retention lies. Communities are categorised as organic (spontaneous) or sponsored (company-managed). Fournier and Lee (2009) warn that brands must act as facilitators, not controllers, to succeed in sponsored communities.

Value is generated through "collective practices" rather than passive consumption. Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) identify four domains of these practices: Social Networking, Impression Management, Community Engagement, and Brand Use, positioning members as active co-creators. Regarding member participation, Robert Kozinets (1999, 2002) provides a netnographic segmentation based on the intensity of relationships with the brand and the group, classifying members as 'Tourists', 'Minglers', 'Devotees', or 'Insiders', the latter being crucial for influence.

Currently, there is a shift from mass public networks to exclusive private platforms (e.g., Discord). Kotler et al. (2021) suggest that in this digital economy, exclusivity generates desire and intimacy builds trust, transforming customers into loyal defenders through a sense of privileged belonging. Ultimately, community marketing evolves into active ecosystems where emotional bonds replace competition.

Relationship Marketing Strategies

In today's competitive environment, organisations face ongoing challenges in maintaining and deepening long-term customer relationships, particularly through strategies that go beyond mere commercial transactions. Relational marketing strategies emerge as essential tools for building trust, fostering loyalty, and reducing customer churn, thereby contributing to the sustainability of business performance over time (Rosário & Casaca, 2023).

These strategies are based on the principle that satisfied and properly valued customers are more likely to remain with the same brand or organisation for longer periods, which is particularly valuable given the high level of competition and the growing consumer expectations regarding personalisation, experience, and ongoing engagement (Kumenda, 2025).

Furthermore, a central component of modern relational strategies is the use of integrated technologies and practices that enable the collection and analysis of customer data to personalise interactions, anticipate needs, and adapt marketing actions according to each customer's lifecycle (Silva et al., 2018; Rosário & Casaca, 2023).

Academic literature highlights that successful relational marketing strategies are not limited to isolated tactics but rather constitute coherent systems of actions that perform complementary functions: attracting, retaining, and developing customers over time, while simultaneously enhancing perceived value and brand commitment (Rosário & Casaca, 2023).

Following this perspective, the next section explores specific relational marketing strategies in detail, demonstrating how they can be organised and applied in real business contexts.

Communities in Relationship Marketing

Contemporary relationship marketing has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift, transitioning from traditional database management toward the orchestration of complex social ecosystems. In this context, brand communities serve as critical support structures in which the organisation facilitates connections among individuals who share common values and interests. The operationalisation of these communities varies significantly across platforms, as evidenced by the distinct approaches of LEGO, Sephora, Discord, and Reddit. LEGO utilises its community as a primary driver of open innovation, where relationship marketing manifests through value co-creation and the recognition of the technical expertise of its adult fans (Cova & Paranque, 2016). Conversely, Sephora's strategy emphasises authority and trust; by fostering a knowledge-sharing environment, the brand reduces perceived purchase risk through peer-to-peer evaluations, thus positioning loyalty as a byproduct of utility. In more decentralised environments like Discord and Reddit, marketing success relies on synchronous intimacy and social legitimacy. On Reddit, specifically, brands must abandon traditional intrusive advertising in favour of contributing genuine value to pre-existing conversations to gain community acceptance (Santos, 2019).

The strategic choice between developing proprietary communities or leveraging third-party platforms involves significant trade-offs regarding control and engagement. Proprietary environments, such as those maintained by LEGO and Sephora, grant the organisation full data sovereignty and seamless integration with Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems. This autonomy allows for precise tracking of the customer journey and direct attribution of community engagement to sales performance (Payne & Frow, 2013). However, these benefits are offset by substantial infrastructure costs and the high financial burden of member acquisition. In contrast, third-party platforms like Discord and Reddit offer superior social credibility and organic reach, as they are perceived as more authentic and less susceptible to corporate manipulation. Nevertheless, these external ecosystems introduce risks associated with algorithmic dependency and a lack of narrative control. Furthermore, the limited capacity for data extraction in these contexts complicates the measurement of return on investment (ROI), creating a tension between organic engagement and analytical accountability (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Cases

The evolutionary trajectory of organisations such as LEGO, Sephora, Discord, and Reddit demonstrates that effective community management transcends traditional engagement, fundamentally altering business models through multi-level value creation. In the case of LEGO, the transition from a "passive fan" model to an "architectural" partnership was a response to the financial instability of the early 2000s. By institutionalising active listening through platforms like LEGO Ideas, the organisation externalised a portion of its Research and Development (R&D) processes, significantly mitigating the risks of market failure and reducing market research costs. For the participant, this relationship provides a sense of self-actualisation and tangible rewards, such as royalty shares and brand recognition, which fosters profound psychological ownership and loyalty (Oliveira & Silva, 2021).

Sephora illustrates the transformation of relationship marketing into a socialized data science. Through the Beauty Insider Community, the brand moved beyond transactional loyalty cards to create a holistic digital ecosystem integrated into its e-commerce infrastructure. This strategic integration has resulted in a significant increase in Customer Lifetime Value (CLV), with highly engaged members spending substantially more than occasional consumers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018). Furthermore, the proliferation of User-Generated Content (UGC) within these spaces serves as a primary driver of social proof, allowing users to benefit from peer-led advisory networks that enhance purchasing confidence and satisfaction.

Finally, the adoption of Discord and Reddit by technology-driven firms like Adobe and Microsoft signals a shift toward real-time agility and radical authenticity. This progression from static support forums to dynamic, synchronous communication channels enables instantaneous feedback loops, allowing organisations to rectify technical issues or reputational threats with unprecedented speed. Consequently, the user experiences a heightened sense of exclusivity and influence over product development. This emotional bond acts as a competitive barrier, shielding the brand from price-centric market fluctuations and reinforcing its social capital within niche communities.

Methodology

This study primarily aims to analyse relational marketing strategies within communities, based on published scientific articles. The research does not involve collecting primary data from participants or conducting empirical case studies; instead, it employs a narrative literature review as its main method.

The methodology used corresponds to a narrative review of the scientific literature. The objective of the review was to map and synthesise the relational marketing strategies identified in scientific articles, with a particular focus on those applied in customer community contexts or in relational engagement between organisations and publics, and to correlate them with recurring themes such as trust, satisfaction, and retention.

The search for relevant articles was conducted in recognised academic databases, including Scopus and Web of Science, using keywords related to relational marketing, relationship marketing, community marketing, customer retention, and brand communities.

Following the initial search, titles and abstracts were screened to exclude irrelevant articles, and the selected papers were then read in full to confirm methodological and thematic relevance. This procedure is recommended in literature reviews to ensure that only relevant and high-quality studies are included.

Discussion and Results

The analysis underscores the strategic importance of relationship marketing in community-based contexts for building durable brand–consumer relationships. The literature converges on the view that relational marketing embedded in structured brand communities transcends transactional approaches by fostering trust, commitment, and sustained engagement, in line with the commitment–trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Brand communities emerge as relational assets within systematic customer relationship management strategies. As highlighted by Rosário Albérico and Casaca (2023), satisfaction, trust, commitment, and communication operate as interdependent drivers of customer retention, which communities reinforce by enabling continuous and multidirectional interaction among members.

The case analyses support this perspective. LEGO’s integration of its community into product development exemplifies co-creation, transforming consumers into active contributors and strengthening relational commitment (Cova & Paranque, 2016). Similarly, Sephora demonstrates how trust-based knowledge sharing reduces perceived risk and enhances satisfaction through ongoing relational communication. In contrast, platforms such as Discord and Reddit highlight the importance of authenticity and social legitimacy in externally governed communities, where brands act as facilitators rather than controllers, consistent with Godin’s (2008) leadership perspective. In these contexts, horizontal member-to-member interaction becomes the primary source of cohesion and trust.

Beyond relational benefits, community-based strategies generate tangible economic value. Strong brand communities reduce customer acquisition costs through peer advocacy while increasing customer lifetime value by creating emotional switching costs. Moreover, co-creation initiatives, as seen in LEGO's case, reduce R&D risk and accelerate innovation. From a commercial management perspective, investments in brand communities should therefore be viewed as strategic assets that support long-term value creation rather than as discretionary marketing expenditures.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyse the role of relationship marketing in the context of communities, drawing on the scientific literature and widely recognised success cases. The research concluded that relationship marketing, when structured around active and well-led communities, plays a central role in creating sustainable competitive advantage.

The results indicate that relationship marketing, when supported by structured communities, enhances value creation for both parties. Satisfaction, trust, commitment, and communication are identified in the literature as key determinants of customer retention. By fostering continuous interactions between consumers and the brand, communities build emotional bonds that go beyond transactional logic and reduce vulnerability to competitive pressures.

The analysis of the LEGO, Sephora, Discord, and Reddit cases demonstrates that communities function as strategic spaces for co-creation, knowledge sharing, and the construction of collective meaning. In proprietary communities, consumers' active participation in brand-related processes strengthens their sense of belonging and relational engagement. Conversely, in third-party communities, authenticity, active listening, and member-to-member communication play a central role, requiring brands to adopt a facilitative rather than controlling stance, in line with Godin's (2008) perspectives.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to reinforcing the relevance of relationship marketing as a long-term strategic approach, highlighting the role of communities as catalysts for trust, commitment, and cooperation. The articulation of the contributions of authors such as Rosário Albérico and Casaca (2023), Godin (2008), and Morgan and Hunt (1994) allows for the consolidation of an integrated view of brand–consumer relationships in contemporary contexts.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that organisations should view communities not merely as communication channels, but as strategic assets capable of sustaining long-term relationships and generating relational value. Investing in the creation of participatory, transparent, and genuinely interactive environments is essential for meeting the expectations of increasingly informed and demanding consumers.

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