

The Influence of Marketing Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility on E-loyalty: A Review

Trine Vederhus

Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway
trineved@hotmail.com

Atanu Nath

Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Department of Business Administration, Norway
Atanu.k.nath@hvl.no

Abstract. In recent years consumers have become more aware of what they buy and consume (Deloitte 2020; 2021), consequently becoming more demanding as to which brand's product or services they choose to buy. Alongside, due to the mass market evolution and consumptions rising, consumers have gained more power than before (Freire de Mello and de Paula 2019) while with technological developments becoming increasingly accessible, it has become more popular to shop online. This has made it difficult for marketers to reach their consumers; as it has become easier for consumers to compare competitive products, services, and brands online and further leading to customer empowerment. As sustainability becomes more and more a household word, many consumers are becoming active contributors for change, and expecting businesses to help build a better and sustainable future for them (Deloitte 2021). With the preponderance of the digital marketplace, issues related to ethics are also arising, in areas such as online auctions (Kracher and Corritore 2004) and e-commerce (Marcoux 2003).

Against this backdrop, this paper explores the relationship between marketing ethics, corporate social responsibility, and consumer e-loyalty. The specific research question arrived at is 'Do firms that behave ethically correct and socially responsible in their marketing practices affect consumer e-loyalty?' Firms' marketing ethics and social responsibility (CSR) are independent constructs, particularly in practice (Ferrell et al. 2019; Weller 2017); they are however interrelated as studies have shown that firms that make ethical decisions and pay heed to social responsibilities enjoy increased perceptions of sustainability (Ferrell and Ferrell 2021; Schwartz and Carroll 2008). Conversely, with a much larger information permeation than ever before, unethical conducts and practices can also lead to larger social and economic costs for a firm (Wade 2020). While there is no universal definition of what marketing ethics is (or is not) (Schlegelmilch and Öberseder 2010), this paper adopts (Laczniak 1983; 2012)'s definition of ethics as the moral standards that are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors and institutions; and proposes a research model integrating CSR and marketing ethics as two of the factors of attitudinal (during-purchase) loyalty to enhance behavioral loyalty among digital consumers. Further research is outlined for empirical testing to find the veracity of the claims.

Keywords: marketing ethics, corporate social responsibility, e-loyalty, digital marketplace

1 Introduction

In recent years, consumers have become increasingly more aware of what they buy and consume (Deloitte, 2020, 2021), and in the process becoming more demanding as to which brand's product or services they choose to buy. With mass market evolution and consumptions rising, consumers have gained more power than ever before (Freire de Mello & de Paula, 2019), while technological

developments have made shopping online more popular. This has in effect made it difficult for marketers to reach their customers and influence them as they find it easier to compare competitive products, services, and brands online. It remains, however, important for organizations to develop a way of standing out to reach their potential digital consumers. More so since in highlight of the United Nations sustainability goals (2015) and with increasing awareness of global warming, many consumers have become active contributors for change. According to Deloitte's global survey (2021), climate change is considered a top concern for generation Z. They expect businesses to help build a better and sustainable future for them (Deloitte, 2021). Also, in part due to the influence of the digital marketplace, different ethical issues have risen, for example in online auctions (Kracher & Corritore, 2004) and e-commerce (Marcoux, 2003). As such, this article focuses on social responsibility and sustainability as well as marketing ethics in generating loyalty in the e-marketplace.

Against this background, the paper poses the following research question: do firms that behave ethically correct and socially responsible affect consumer e-loyalty? To discuss this question, the article begins with a literature review exploring the link between marketing ethics and social responsibility. Then, it addresses the importance and the different suggested theories regarding marketing ethics. It further discusses the importance of social responsibility and sustainability and concludes with a discussion surrounding the research question on creating e-loyal consumers and with suggestions for further research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Are ethics and social responsibility the same?

Marketing ethics and social responsibility have often been treated as sharing similar attributes, despite these subjects differing from each other in practice (Ferrell et al., 2019; Weller, 2017). They are in fact interrelated, meaning that firms can make ethical decisions regarding social responsibilities, for instance sustainability (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021; Schwartz & Carroll, 2008). Moreover, marketing ethics have been identified as internal and required, whereas social responsibility has been identified as external and more voluntary (Ferrell et al., 2016). On one hand, social responsibility is visible for consumers because organizations openly communicate their actions on this subject (Ferrell et al. 2019). On the other hand, ethical matters are often not visible for consumers before an unethical behaviour has occurred. This unethical behaviour can be damaging enough for companies that its social responsibility actions can be ignored, creating a bad reputation (Stonkutė et al., 2018). According to Weller (2017), ethics can be simplified as to being good while CSR is about doing good. This underlines the importance of marketing ethics and its consideration with social responsibility strategies.

Ferrell & Ferrell (2021); Laczniaik & Murphy (2019) all suggest further research into the interface between CSR and marketing ethics and developing descriptive models in both areas in order to adapt to a changing dynamic in marketing. This article is an attempt to understand the connection between CSR and marketing ethics, while treating them as separate topics.

2.2 The state of marketing ethics frameworks and theoretical field

Consumers may assume firms behave in ethical ways, but that is not always the case (Gilbertson, 1999). Marketing ethics is described as “the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviours and institutions” (Laczniaik, 2012). Consumer concerns are often associated with activities related to marketing (Gilbertson, 1999). There have been no dearth of studies for over half a century on marketing ethics (Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010) however, there is still not a clear agreement on a universal theoretical framework. Scholars over the years have contributed towards such an end, Laczniaik (1983) suggested three frameworks from a moral philosophical perspective, while Ferrell & Gresham (1985) advanced a framework for understanding marketing ethics decision making.

However, Bush et al. (2017) emphasized that it is not enough to see marketing ethics from a general perspective. Rather, it is needed to address the challenges posed by the different components of marketing and have leaders that are willing to face these challenges (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021). It may be noted that since the year 2000, only one substantial new theme has evolved and that is marketing ethics in the context of the internet (Bush et al., 2000; Palmer, 2005; Stead & Gilbert, 2001). As said earlier in this article, this leaves open possibilities for further research into the areas of ethics and religion, green marketing, internet marketing ethics, as well as marketing to vulnerable consumers and the ethical consumer (Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010). While there have been studies on normative marketing (Gaski, 1999; Laczniak & Murphy, 2019), further research scope remains in normative as well as descriptive marketing ethics to establish guidelines for marketers, instead of merely investigating their behaviour (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021; Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010).

While ethical issues and dilemmas have been a part of marketing since the beginning in the 1960s, digital marketing has created new ways for marketers to sell their products or services posing added ethical issues related to consumer privacy, copyright infringement, personal information security, advertisements on ethical websites and in using social media influencers to advertise products or services (Micheal, 2021). To address the problems of ethical dilemmas evolving from modern day marketing, the American Marketing Association (AMA) developed a statement of ethics, which acts as a basis for ethical conduct (American Marketing Association, 2008). In earlier research, the standards of conduct were only regarded as proposed moral standards. However, as the environment changed, organizations have often implemented and made their own codes of conduct regarding right and wrong and ways to act and respond in different settings (Gilbertson, 1999). Of particular concern is the lack of suggestions or guidelines on e-commerce codes of conduct.

2.3 Marketing ethics: is it a concern in practice?

The importance of ethical marketing has been pointed out numerous times (Gilbertson, 1999). However, in recent years the importance has increased because of different issues that have emerged through digital consumerism and mass market. As it becomes easier for consumers to publish and spread news of a firm's unethical behaviours, it puts pressure on marketers to behave ethically in the marketplace, since unethical behaviour can contribute to the loss of loyal consumers (Whysall, 1998, 2000). According to Harrison et al. (2005, p. 2) consumers are becoming more ethical because of sustainability, spiritual, social, religious or political motives. Social responsibility motives such as sustainability contributes to consumers being more ethical. While the ethical consumer is not ignoring price and quality, they are adding more criteria to the consumer decision-making process influencing choice of brands. This suggests that ethical marketing is an increasingly important part of the businesses strategy to become successful and to gain the ethical consumer's trust, and firms may ignore it at their eventual peril.

2.4 Corporate social responsibility and sustainability

CSR is a powerful marketing tool and there are many definitions of CSR. This paper adopts the definition developed by the European Commission (2019): "A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis". The CSR concept was first defined by Bowen (1953), however there have been multiple studies on CSR since then (Mason & Simmons, 2011). CSR has become a strategic necessity and not just a strategic advantage (Falkenberg & Brunsæl, 2011). Moreover, there are different outcomes on CSR actions, like firm performance (Cochran & Wood, 1984), its reputation (Brammer & Pavelin, 2006), and the corporate image (Arendt & Brettel, 2010). The impact CSR has on consumers (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Ricks, 2005) indicates that companies' investments in CSR pays off (Story et al., 2016). There are both internal and external CSR strategies

and it is suggested that organizations implement both of these (Brammer et al., 2007; Hameed et al., 2016; W.-M. Hur et al., 2019). The internal and external strategies have a positive impact on the firm's reputations that leads to popularity in the marketplace (Story et al., 2016). However, the results may vary across contexts (Orlitzky et al., 2003; Vishwanathan et al., 2020). Freeman (2010) as well as Porter & Kramer (2006) identified that it is strategically important to fulfil the interests of internal- and external stakeholders. Aguinis & Glavas (2012) developed a multilevel and multidisciplinary model of CSR (see Figure 1), involving predictors, outcomes, mediators, and moderators. This is considered a guiding framework that makes it possible to identifying and adding further variables in the future. However, Aguinis & Glavas (2012) suggested further research using a multilevel approach to understand the micro foundations of CSR and develop methodological approaches to realize the micro foundations.

According to Stobierski (2021a) there are several types of CSR, such as environmental responsibility (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011), ethical responsibility, philanthropic responsibility (Porter & Kramer, 2002) and economic responsibility (Heal, 2005). Wade (2020) states that the corporate digital responsibility has evolved due to technology and there is a renewed need to use digital technology in a way that is socially, economically, technologically, and environmentally sustainable. This strategy is important for the safety of organizations and consumers alike. According to Baumgartner (2014), the question is how a company can be more sustainable, not why a company should be more sustainable.

2.5 Importance of corporate social responsibility and sustainability

Technology and the growing types of coverage through mass media, have given consumers unlimited access on information regarding organisational CSR behaviours (Wagner et al., 2009). In earlier years, businesses often focused on how to maximize profit and increase the bottom line. Over the last decade or so, a triple bottom line strategy has evolved. The purpose of this strategy is to measure social and environmental impacts, as well as generating profits. The three focal factors in this strategy are profit, people, and planet. A successful implementation of the strategy is deemed to lead businesses to become successful and at the same time contribute to change. Traditionally, businesses have had their focus on shareholder value, but the "new normal" is ensuring value for all stakeholders, including consumers, employees, and community members (Buysse & Verbeke, 2003; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008). An example of such efforts for businesses to engage in a strategic partnership with non-profit organizations. Miller (2020) mentions it is now possible to do the right thing and make money at the same time. Consumers are now able and willing to look at firms' CSR initiatives such as sustainability before making purchase decisions (Stobierski, 2021b). According to Nkamnebe (2011), sustainability has become an important tool for organizations, and the ones neglecting it will fail. The different factors influencing sustainability being important for organizations include saving costs, increasing productivity, reducing environmental impacts, entrance to new markets, reducing risk, improving reputation, better access to capital and developing human capital (Prakash-Mani et al 2002). Acknowledging this trend, it has become normal in recent years for companies to annually publish CSR- or sustainability reports to communicate their CSR efforts and impact assessments of their contributions toward the environment and the communities (Cote, 2021; Moravcikova et al., 2015). This has also become a tool for companies to incorporate social responsibilities into their brand identities. The EU commission (2019) encourage member states to invest in CSR and have developed CSR handbooks and manuals for companies that do not know where to start. Studies have argued that organizations increase their competitiveness, image, and consumer loyalty by implementing an CSR- and sustainable strategy (Nadanyiova & Gajanova, 2020). Against this background, it can be said that CSR has become an important factor for businesses to both stand out and become successful, while at the same time for consumers to be able to choose a socially responsible brand.

2.6 Creating e-loyalty

Brand loyalty studies for long have had repeat purchase behaviour as their principal focus (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007). While some researchers developed several suggested frameworks based on loyalty, others focused on its behavioural aspects (Kahn et al., 1986; Ehrenberg et al., 1990). Other researchers (Dick & Basu, 1994; Rundle-Thiele, 2005; Rundle-Thiele & Bennett, 2001) have suggested to include the attitude aspect along with behaviour, in defining loyalty. There is wide agreement on the subject that attitudinal loyalty leads to behavioural loyalty, meaning that attitude towards a brand affect brand loyalty (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007; Khan & Bagram, 2012; Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014). Srivastava & Kaul (2016) conducted a study on behavioural- and attitudinal loyalty derived from the customer experience. Based on Dick & Basu's (1994) attitude-behaviour framework, Srivastava & Kaul (2016) suggest adding a behaviour related to consumer spending. In addition, Oliver (2010) developed a detailed four phase of loyalty containing cognitive, affective, conative and action loyalty (Oliver, 2010, pp. 433–434). However, this framework lacks empirical evaluation, and was complemented by Harris & Goode (2004) in their study who tested the framework collecting empirical data. Their results showed evidence in support of the loyalty framework proposed by Oliver (2010). Moreover, a customer engagement cycle to implement in the customer engagement matrix has also been developed, where the goal is to create many consumer fans (Sashi, 2012). However, Sashi (2012) encourages to study customer engagement more closely and develop more understanding on how to best pursue this in the future.

2.7 Brand loyalty and communities on digispace

According to Chevalier (2020), consumers spent 4,2 trillion dollars on e-commerce in 2020. So, the significance of e-commerce marketplaces is enormous. The rapid expansion of online shopping urged on by the development of technology has led to a good amount of research in the field of e-loyalty. The increasing interest in marketplaces is due to more competition, higher demands from consumers and the expense of getting new consumers (Wu & Hsu, 2015). In addition, it has become important for businesses to develop brand loyalty in the e-commerce setting, because competitors are only a mouse click away and makes it easier to choose other brand's products or services (Nielsen, 1997). On one hand, the increase of e-commerce enables firms to grow faster and expand their consumer base (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021). On the other, it is more difficult to generate loyal consumers online (Nielsen, 1997). Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become an important factor in developing e-loyalty (Yoo et al., 2013). Furthermore, the types as well as frequency of communications have increased tremendously due to the development of technological platforms such as social media and virtual communities. E-WOM means that "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). There are both positive and negative e-WOM and as Chatterjee (2006) highlights, price sensitive consumers are more likely to seek negative e-WOM and be influenced by it. However, Oliver (1999, 2010) argues that e-WOM is not a factor contributing to e-loyalty, but rather a consequence taking place because of loyalty and satisfaction.

Moreover, with e-markets online brand communities have emerged, and several studies have emphasised that brand communities strengthen value, brand trust, brand loyalty and the feeling of being a part of a community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). It is easier and more efficient for organizations to reach out to a group of loyal consumers, rather than engaging in just one-on-one relationship marketing efforts. Such communities can also be used to spread CSR results and different ethical choices and practices the organizations encounter and engage in, to not just keep the consumers loyal, but also to encourage them to share these positive sides about the brand (Laroche et al., 2012). However, it is emphasised that organizations must do it properly and there are several misunderstandings about how these communities work (Fournier & Lee, 2009). In addition,

marketers want to learn how to organize and facilitate these communities to breed the benefits from them (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to develop more knowledge before establishing a digital brand community (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

There have been different studies on loyalty and satisfaction regarding the digital marketplaces. Valvi & Fragkos (2012) suggested a conceptual framework that was developed by combining earlier research. Much of the earlier research, however, is based on Dick & Basu's (1994) as well as Oliver's (2010) attitudinal and behaviour loyalty approach (as mentioned under theory on brand loyalty). Thus, Valvi & Fragkos' (2012) framework, (see Figure 2), consists of factors that are divided into pre-, during- and after-purchase. Pre-purchase consists of initial factors before purchase, divided into e-competitors' attitude, e-reputation, customer characteristics and PC knowledge. During-purchase containing attitudinal concepts that can lead to loyalty both during- and after-purchase, with factors like web-servQual and customer e-pleasure. Finally, after-purchase with attitudinal- and behavioural concepts related to e-loyalty, like e-trust, e-satisfaction, perceived value, and convenience motivations. All these factors play an important part in contributing to e-loyalty (Valvi & Fragkos, 2012).

There are as mentioned, varied factors that influence brand loyalty. However, in this article the focus has been on how marketing ethics and CSR can contribute to consumer loyalty in e-commerce. It is viewed that marketing ethics and CSR in tandem play a huge role in shaping perceptions towards a brand by developing strong consumer relationships and loyalty (Johnston, 2008; Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997; Vitell et al., 1991). However, it is not easy to attain because of the modern societal demands on companies to be ethical and responsible towards their stakeholders and the rapid change of technology (Hur et al., 2011; Islam et al., 2020; Tanveer et al., 2021; Ul Islam & Rahman, 2017).

3 Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been to explore the linkage between social responsibility and ethics on the part of operating firms which in turn may lead to e-loyalty among consumers. To aid the effort, different theoretical perspectives based upon both empirical and conceptual studies have been addressed. In other words, this article has debated whether marketing ethics and social responsibility are or should be treated the same as marketing ethics, CSR, and brand loyalty.

The primary discussion was based on similarities regarding marketing ethics and CSR. The findings suggested that while many view these terms to be the same, they are perhaps better off separated into two related but equally important themes. The second discourse centered around marketing ethics and its importance. It helps identify while there have been many studies on the topic, a lack of agreement on the theoretical fields of marketing ethics still exists. Alongside, the reviews suggest that marketing ethics is important to gain trust because of consumers becoming more ethically conscious and aware with respect to practices such as sustainability. Regarding CSR, the findings related to firms shifting their focus from only generating profit to the triple bottom line consisting of people, planet, and profit. The social and environmental focus contribute to gain trust from the sustainable consumer. The last aspect discussed in this article was regarding brand loyalty, how technology has changed the views on brand loyalty and lastly how it is possible to contribute to e-loyalty by focusing on social responsibility and marketing ethics. The discussion regarding loyalty indicated it has evolved from traditional offline brand loyalty to the new online brand loyalty, referred to as e-loyalty. There have been wide agreement around Dick & Basu's (1994) as well as Oliver's (2010) approach on attitudinal- and behavioural loyalty. Valvi & Fragkos (2012) conceptual framework is viewed as an useful tool in this regard. This paper highlights the centrality of CSR and marketing ethics as two of the factors of attitudinal (during-purchase) loyalty to enhance behavioural loyalty among digital consumers. However, there is need for further research involving these two factors.

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Multilevel and Multidisciplinary Model of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Predictors, Outcomes, Mediators, and Moderators

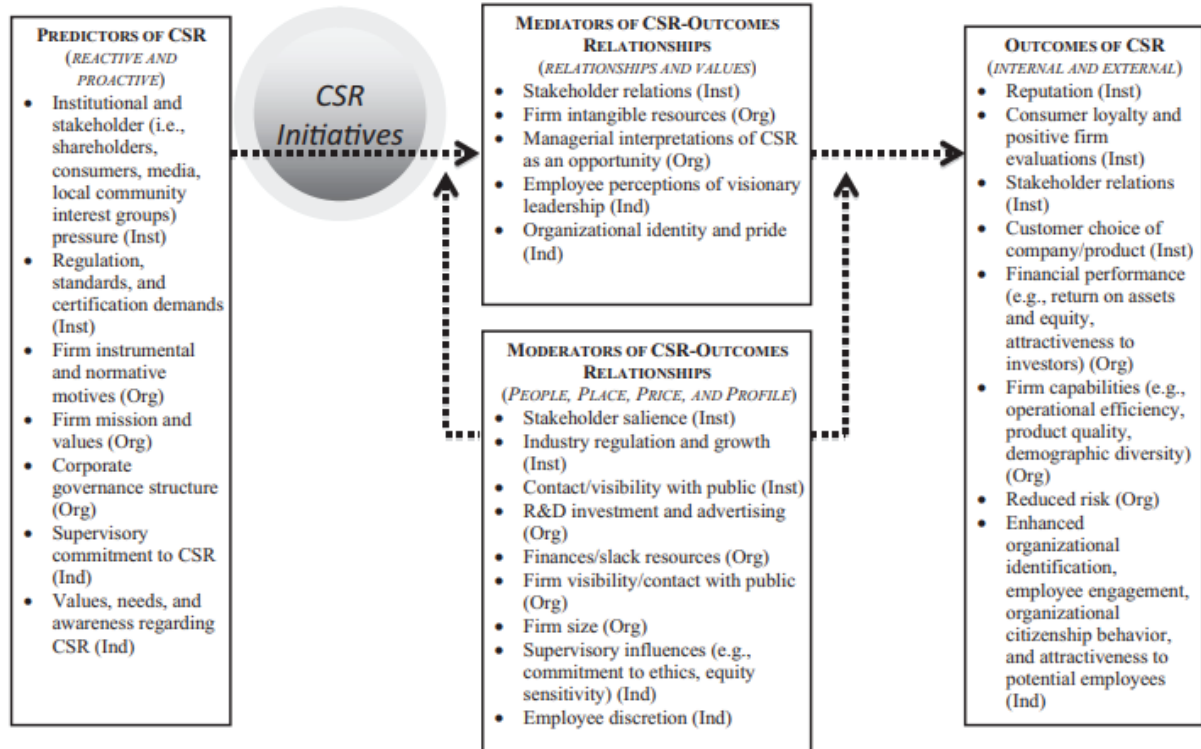


Figure 1: Multilevel model of CSR (sourced from Aguinis & Glavas, 2012)

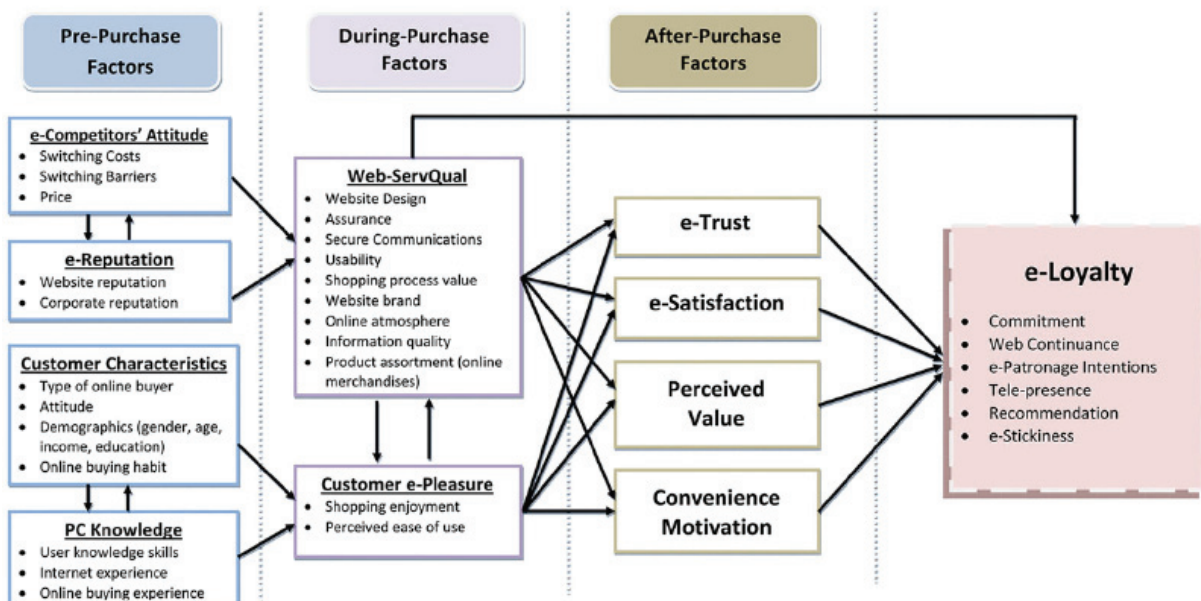


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of antecedents leading to e-loyalty (source: Valvi & Fragkos, 2012)