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# The Roles of Member Relationship Proneness (MRP) and Programme Relationship Orientation (PRO) in Creating Store Loyalty: Evidence from Retail Loyalty Programmes in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

*Investigations to determine whether member relationship proneness and programme relationship orientation could influence satisfaction, commitment and ultimately store loyalty are critical to elucidate the roles and significance of the constructs and advancing management practise. Accordingly, in line with this direction, our research aims to assess the effects of relationship proneness and relationship orientation offered by few leading retail stores in Malaysia on its members' loyalty towards the store. What is more, we also attempt to explore the roles of programme satisfaction and programme commitment in the hypothesised framework. The data set utilised in this study has been obtained via drop-off and collect technique, where a sample of 400 retail loyalty programmes' members was analysed. An integrative conceptual model was developed and tested using structural equation modelling analysis approach. The results exemplify that member relationship proneness is a strong driver of programme satisfaction as well as programme commitment. Unexpectedly, programme satisfaction is not a significant predictor of store loyalty but, it has an indirect effect on store loyalty mediated by programme commitment. Our findings bring to light important implications for future research and management practice.*

**Keywords:** *Loyalty programme, customer satisfaction and loyalty, structural equation model*

## **Introduction**

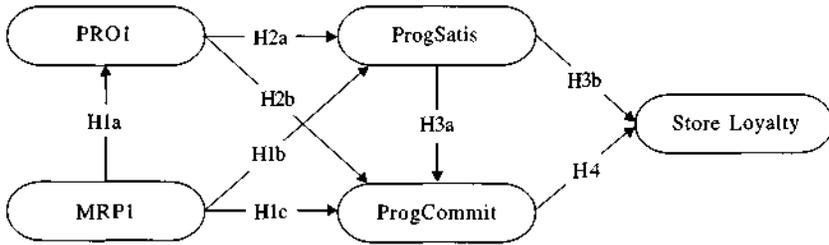
Customer loyalty has received overwhelming attention and profound investigations have been conducted by several industries in the last decade (Lewis, 1997). Companies in most industries are studying, evaluating or implementing loyalty strategies and programmes aimed at cultivating strong relationship base with their best customers. The rationale behind this research stream is that firms that achieve higher customer loyalty should prevail in the marketplace due to retained customers through referrals, higher price tolerance and cross and up buying (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). In the late eighties and throughout most of the nineties, relationship marketing became a focal point in much of the business-to-business (Blois, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and services literature (Berry, 1995; Tax et al., 1998). In comparison with manufacturers, retailers have an advantage in establishing enduring relationships with consumers because they are in a better position to detect consumer purchase patterns and apply this knowledge in a cost-efficient way (Sweeney, Soutar and Johnson, 1999).

Worthington (1990) posits that retailers have viewed retail loyalty programme as a vehicle to develop a relationship with their customers. Liebermann (1999) contended that loyalty programme has a potential of maintaining long-term interaction with customer. On the other hand, other scholars assert loyalty programmes as an imaginative way to instil and maintain loyalty (Dowling and Uncles, 1997). In spite of proliferation of loyalty programme in business circles, research on the influence of loyalty programmes on customers' loyalty towards the retailer are scarce and show contradictory results. Interestingly, Fournier et al. (1998) noted that, less attention has been given to the willingness of the customer as a relational partner (Fournier et al., 1998). Buttle (1996) asserts that the 'voice' of the customer is absent from much relationship marketing. Hence, a number of scholars have started to introduce the customers' side of relationship marketing (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Fournier and Yao, 1997; Gwinner et al., 1998; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Because relationships are inherently two-sided, this study includes two constructs, programme relationship orientation and buyer/member relationship proneness based on the study done by prior scholars (De Wulf et al., 2001; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003). Our interest in this paper is focused in analysing the effect of member relationship proneness and programme relationship orientation on attitudinal and behavioural loyalty in a loyalty programme setting.

## **Conceptualisation of Constructs and Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework depicts the hypothesised relationships among constructs in a path diagram format (see Figure 1). The framework comprises of

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**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Retail Loyalty Programme**

member relationship proneness, programme relationship orientation, programme satisfaction, programme commitment and store loyalty.

**Member Relationship Proneness**

There is considerable merit to the view that not all customers want to establish a relationship with sellers (Barnes, 1997; Pine, Peppers and Rogers, 1995; Christy et al. 1996). Similarly, Ginner et al. (1998) recognized that relationship marketing success may depend not only on its strategy implementation but also on the preferences of the individual customer. Interestingly, few researchers suggested that careful customer segmentation has to be carried out in order to identify clients who may appreciate a relationship (Lacey, 2003; Sollner, 1999; Stauss, Schmidt and Schoeler, 2005). Consumer relationship proneness is defined by few researchers (e.g., Bloemer et al., 2003; De Wulf et al., 2001; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003) as, “*the relatively stable and conscious tendency of a consumer to engage in relationships with sellers of a particular product category*” (p. 179). In line with De Wulf et al. (2001) and Odekerken-Schroder et al. (2003), the authors defined member relationship proneness as: programme member’s relative tendency to participate in a relationship with the loyalty programme of a specific store.

**Programme Relationship Orientation**

Programme relationship orientation (PRO) is closely related to the concept of ‘relational selling behaviour’ (De Wulf, 1999; De Wulf et al., 2001; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003). There seems to be a growing consensus that relationship orientation comprises of a seller’s continuous efforts in providing superior customer value. For example, Narver and Slater (1990) state,

*“A seller creates value for a buyer in only two ways: by increasing benefits to the buyer in relation to the buyer’s costs and by decreasing the buyer’s cost in relation to the buyer’s benefits” (p. 21).*

Hence, in the current study, programme relationship orientation is defined as: an overall customer's perception towards seller continuous efforts in providing superior value to its programme's members.

### **Programme Satisfaction**

Satisfaction is a measure of how a customer's expectations are met and often been perceived as the final result of all activities carried out during the process of purchase and consumption (Oliver, 1996). In fact, few researchers (e.g. Fornell, 1992) suggest that customer satisfaction is an overall evaluation based on the total experience with a good or service over time. Therefore, in the current study we specifically established that the consumer experience with the retail loyalty programme must occur at least within twelve months prior to data collection. Accordingly, we define programme satisfaction as programme member's affective state as result of cumulative evaluation of experience with the loyalty programme.

### **Programme Commitment**

Commitment has been viewed as an implicit or explicit pledge of continuity between relational partners (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987). According to Gundlach et al. (1995), commitments by both parties act as powerful indicators of the quality of the relationship. Commitment is the desire for continuity manifested by the willingness to invest resources into a relationship (Gounaris, 2005). Moorman et al. (1992), defined commitment as: "*an enduring desires to maintain a valued relationship*" (p. 317). Parallel with the previous studies (Moorman et al. 1992; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), we believe that the desire for continuity and the willingness to make an effort are a necessary condition for relationship commitment. Hence, in this particular study the authors define programme commitment as: member willingness to make additional efforts in continuing and maintaining their valuable relationship with a particular loyalty programme.

### **Store Loyalty**

The ultimate goal of any business is to establish a loyal and profitable customer base in order to ensure future profits and longevity of the business. Retail stores are no different and the degree to which customers are motivated to repatronise the store can mean the difference between sustained prosperity and growth of the retail store or its permanent failure (Grace and O'Cass, 2005). Indeed, Buttle (2004) noted that, the most important aspect of relationship marketing is the new central role given to the concept of customer loyalty as a marketing goal of a firm. Loyalty refers to the positive attitude towards supplier combined with a willingness to further perform transactions (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). In fact,

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Gomez et al. (2006) noted that loyalty programmes are a marketing strategy based on offering an incentive with the aim of seeking customer loyalty to a retailer. In a comparative research carried out in Netherlands and Singapore by Noordhoff et al. (2004), the researchers detect a positive relationship between holding a loyalty programme and loyalty towards the retailers in both countries. Therefore, in this study, store loyalty is the final outcome desired and is defined as: a high commitment to repurchase products and services or/and repatronise the same retailer consistently in the future. There by causing repetitive patronising and purchasing from the particular retail store, where situational influences and marketing efforts by the competitors could not cause switching behaviour. Table 1 reveals the sources of items used in the constructs which were incorporated in the research framework. These items were adopted and fine tune to suit the present research context.

**Table 1: Source of Items in the Constructs**

Construct	Number of items	Source of Items of the Construct
Member Relationship Proneness (MRP)	3	De Wulf, 1999; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003
Programme Relationship Orientation (PRO)	3	De Wulf, 1999; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003
Programme Satisfaction	4	Oliver, 1980; Musa, 2004
Programme Commitment	3	Morgan and Hunt, 1994; De Wulf et al., 2001
Store Loyalty	3	Zeithaml et al., 1996; Yoon and Kim 2000

## **Formulation of Hypotheses**

Researchers have argued that not all customers are prone to engage in relationships (Berry 1995; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995) and that this bias or predisposition may be intrinsic to an individual (Christy, Oliver, and Penn, 1996). Interestingly, De Wulf (1999) in his study on the retail environment argues that a buyer's perception of a seller's endeavour to develop and maintain a relationship is influenced by the buyer's so called proneness to engage in the relationship. Thus, there is considerable merit to the view that member characterized by a high level of relationship proneness may express a more positive perception of a programme's efforts compared to a member showing a low level of relationship proneness. In view of this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1a:** In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of member relationship proneness leads to higher programme relationship orientation.

On the surface, there is considerable merit to the view that relationship will be strongest when both partners desire and focus on building a strong relationship (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). Similarly, Storbacka et al., (1994) noted that buyers who are interested in a relationship perceive satisfaction with a relationship to be vital. It was also empirically found that buyers characterized by higher levels of relationship proneness were more satisfied with and committed to their relationship with a seller (Bloemer et al., 2003; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003; Vazquez-Carrasco and Foxall, 2006). The hypotheses to capture these associations are formally stated as follows:

H1b: In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of member relationship proneness leads to higher programme satisfaction.

H1c: In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of member relationship proneness leads to higher programme commitment.

Previous researchers (e.g., Anderson and Narus, 1990; Fournier 1998) suggested that performance judgments such as seller relationship orientation play an important role in influencing relationship satisfaction. Moreover, relationship orientation also plays an important role in determining relationship quality and commitment (De Wulf, 1999; De Wulf et al., 2001). Given the conceptual and empirical support mentioned above, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H2a: In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of programme relationship orientation leads to a higher level of programme satisfaction.

H2b: In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of programme relationship orientation leads to a higher level of programme commitment.

Indeed, several researchers hypothesised a positive path from relationship satisfaction to commitment and supported that commitment is the attitudinal outcome in relationship with satisfaction (Ganesan, 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler, 2002). Similarly many researchers (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Musa, 2004) come out with empirical evidence that there is a direct relationship between satisfaction and commitment. Accordingly few researchers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002) noted that a high level of satisfaction provides the customer with a repeated positive reinforcement, thus creating commitment-inducing emotional bonds. Referring to these arguments and the supporting evidence presented above, therefore, the direct relationships between satisfaction and commitment is hypothesised in the present conceptual model. This specific hypothesis is formally stated as follows:

H3a: In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of programme satisfaction leads to a higher level of programme commitment.

Satisfaction has the strongest overall effect on loyalty, both directly and indirectly. Anderson and Sullivan (1993), identify repurchase intentions as an

outcome of consumer satisfaction. In addition, several other outcomes have been proposed. For instance, Szymanski and Henard's (2001) meta-analysis of 15 satisfaction studies found that satisfaction influences multiple behaviours, including repeat purchase, word of mouth, and complaining behaviours. An additional consequence of satisfaction, a higher share of purchase, was found by Reynolds and Beatty (1999). It is also verified in the retail literature that satisfaction has a positive relationship with store loyalty (Bloemer and de Ruyter, 1998; Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997). Hence, based on past literature the following relationship is predicted:

**H3b:** In the retail loyalty programme card context, a higher level of programme satisfaction leads to a higher level of store loyalty.

A recent study by Bloemer et al. (2003), found that commitment to be strongly correlated with customer loyalty. Considerable conceptual and empirical outcome supports the notion that there exist a positive relationship between relationship commitment and behavioural loyalty (Bloemer et al., 2003; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Several scholars (Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998; Bendapudi and Berry, 1997) found that a customer's commitment to the organization results not only in repeat purchases but also a greater willingness to become an advocate for the organizations. Based on the preceding discussion, consumers who have greater levels of commitment are expected to be more willing to be loyal towards the store. Hence, a hypothesis to capture the association between programme commitment and store loyalty is formally stated as:

**H4:** In the retail loyalty programme context, higher programme commitment leads to higher store loyalty.

## **Research Methodology**

The data for this study were collected in Malaysia using self-administered questionnaires distributed via the 'drop off and collect' technique. The population of interest for this study was defined as consumers (over 16 years of age) who a member of any retail loyalty programme within the last twelve months prior to data collection (June 2006-August 2006) and who live or work within Klang Valley, Malaysia. A sample of 400 survey respondents was obtained using a quota sampling technique. The ratio of men to women in the sample was set at 1:3, based on few studies conducted in Malaysia and many other countries that suggested that women make up a significantly larger percentage of purchasers (AcNielsen, 2002; Harmon and Hill, 2003) compared to men.

## **Data Analysis and Results**

The measures utilised in this study were initially purified via item-to-total correlation and exploratory factor analyses with varimax rotation. Item which loads 0.50 or greater on one factor and did not have cross-loadings greater than 0.30 on other factors were accepted for further analysis (Rentz et al., 2002). The pool of items was further refined using confirmatory factor analysis (via AMOS 5 and the maximum likelihood estimation technique). Table 2, presents the correlation matrix, descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients, square multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ) for the measures and sources of items. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were above 0.7, which concur with Nunnally's (1978) minimum suggestion level of 0.7. In addition, the correlation index among factors are low and moderate, this implies that discriminant validity is attained (Churchill, 1995). As a rigorous test of discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was computed and found to be greater than the squared correlation between that construct. It is reasonable to claim that the measures possess adequate psychometric properties.

Structural equation modelling was utilised to test the eight hypothesized relationships among the constructs postulated in the conceptual model. Accordingly, the assessment of the model fit in this paper was based on multiple criteria; the normed  $\chi^2$  or  $\chi^2/df$  ratio, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), and the Relative Fit Index (RFI) (Hair et al., 1998, Schumacker and Lomax, 2004, Byrne, 2001). Table 3, shows the acceptable fit criteria and the model fit indices values. All of the statistical values of the final measurement model indicated that the model fitted well in representing the data. The results for the hypothesised structural paths are reported in Table 4.

It is important to highlight that in this study two relationship marketing constructs (member relationship proneness and programme relationship orientation) were incorporated in the model as suggested by few scholars (e.g. De Wulf et al., 2001; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2003). This allowed the author to examine, test and ultimately generate knowledge on the effects of these constructs on the formation of programme satisfaction, commitment and loyalty toward the store. As highlighted in Table 4, the current study has found strong empirical support of the hypothesised path of member relationship proneness and programme relationship orientation. In essence, this findings offer empirical evidence that relationship orientation is relatively more dependent on member relationship proneness. Consequently, retailers should not focus at optimizing their effort towards customers, but should equally pay attention in finding the right customers (De Wulf, 1999). This might be an indication of the fact that, perceptions of a programme's efforts to enhance the relationship with members

Table 2: Constructs Assessment

Construct	Mean <sup>b</sup>	SD	$\alpha$	R <sup>2</sup>	Mrp1	Pro1	PSat1	PCommit	SLoyal1
Mrp1	3.66	0.65	0.76	-	0.65				
Pro1	3.49	0.72	0.92	0.37	0.50**	0.77			
PSat1	3.62	0.68	0.89	0.29	0.40**	0.41**	0.89		
PCommit	3.34	0.76	0.90	0.57	0.54**	0.47**	0.52**	0.77	
SLoyal1	3.63	0.73	0.87	0.46	0.53**	0.43**	0.39**	0.56**	0.73

Note: Mrp1 (Member Relationship Proneness), Pro1 (Programme Relationship Orientation), PSat1 (Programme Satisfaction), PCommit (Programme Commitment), SLoyal1 (Store Loyalty).

n = number of items  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha SD = Standard Deviation

<sup>b</sup> = These mean figures are based on each summated scale score divided by the number of items in each scale, for ease of interpretation.  
AVE is represented on the diagonal \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 3: Goodness of Fit Indices for Model**

Goodness of fit indices	Fit Criteria	Model
$\chi^2$		141.53
df		96
$\chi^2/df$	3	1.47
RMSEA	0.08	0.034
CFI	0.9	0.987
TLI	0.9	0.984
NFI	0.9	0.961
IFI	0.9	0.987
RFI	0.9	0.951

Adapted from Hair et al 1995; Schumacker and Lomax 1996, Byrne 2001

**Table 4: Results of the Hypotheses Tested**

Hypothesised Path	Standardised Coefficient (t-value)	Critical Ratio	Results
H1a Member Relationship Proneness- Programme Relationship Orientation	0.61	10.30****	Supported
H1b Member Relationship Proneness- Programme Satisfaction	0.31	4.18****	Supported
H1c Member Relationship Proneness- Programme Commitment	0.45	6.51****	Supported
H2a Programme Relationship Orientation- Programme Satisfaction	0.29	4.13****	Supported
H2b Programme Relationship Orientation- Programme Commitment	0.15	2.37**	Supported
H3a Programme Satisfaction-Programme Commitment	0.31	5.50****	Supported
H3b Programme Satisfaction-Store Loyalty	0.09	1.43 <sup>a</sup>	Not Supported
H4 Programme Commitment-Store Loyalty	0.62	9.04****	Supported

Note: \*\*\*\* Significant at  $p < 0.001$  ( $t > \pm 3.29$ ) \* Significant at  $p < 0.10$  ( $t > \pm 1.65$ )  
 \*\*\* Significant at  $p < 0.01$  ( $t > \pm 2.57$ ) <sup>a</sup> Non-significant  
 \*\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$  ( $t > \pm 1.96$ )

can be inflated by the inherent proneness of members to engage in relationships with programmes. It appears that relationship prone members may see a programme's efforts more favourable than less prone members.

Moreover, our empirical studies show that the direct effects of member relationship proneness on programme satisfaction and commitment are relatively larger than the total effect of programme relationship orientation on satisfaction and commitment. This might be an indication of the fact that the effectiveness of

programme strategies is largely affected by the proneness of members to engage in relationships. With respect to programme satisfaction and commitment, we provide strong support that satisfaction positively influences commitment in a loyalty programme context. However, with respect to the programme satisfaction-store loyalty the relationship is not significant. Consequently, researchers should be aware of the fact that, while satisfaction is often regarded as the ultimate outcome of loyalty programme, it is actually not related to store loyalty. In fact our results show the importance of programme commitment in influencing store loyalty among members in a loyalty programme setting. Clearly, this finding lends support to the notion that programme commitment is one of the important factors in making programme member loyal to the store. It should be emphasised here that this link has been unexplored by previous studies, thus, it is strongly recommended that future research should validate this link in another study.

## **Limitations**

The study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted in Malaysia, hence the research findings were based on Malaysians' people perception, whose cultural background, socio-economic and lifestyle have influenced their perceptions and behaviour. These differences can hinder the generalizability of these research findings to other countries and cultures such as Western. Moreover, the study was conducted within the area of Klang Valley. Thus, expanding the population frame will produce a richer and a more representative sample of the Malaysian population generally. Secondly, the current study was confined to one context (retail loyalty card programmes), hence, the generalization of findings will be limited by the characteristics of the products, service, and stores within this specific industry. Finally the research design of the current study used cross-sectional which was carried out once and represent a snapshot of one point in time. In particular, relationship orientation, relationship proneness and commitment are constructs that can change over time. Thus, a longitudinal study can capture the dynamic process of these constructs.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study enable us to clarify the structural relationships among core constructs as postulated in the relationship marketing literature. Importantly, the major findings of this study enhance the understanding of the interrelationships among the constructs which were incorporated in the hypothesised model. It is believed that the new findings derived by the current study will be of relevance to the advancement of relationship marketing theory

particularly in the customers' retention strategy, specifically the retail loyalty programme (Buttle, 2004).

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