
Connections Unveiled: A Bibliometric Study of Relationship Marketing

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Abstract:

Over the past four decades, relationship marketing has captured the interest of scholars, resulting in a vast amount of literature. Thus, the field merits a review article that can help scholars navigate the cumulated research. This study employs bibliometric analysis of the Scopus database from 1987–2022. The data was then analysed using Microsoft Excel, R software’s “bibliometrix” package, and the Publish or Perish applications. The results reveal key trends as well as the intellectual, knowledge, and conceptual structure in the field that give scholars a comprehensive outline of the relationship marketing field as well as insights about future research.

Keywords: *Relationship Marketing, Bibliometric Analysis, Performance Analysis, Intellectual Structure Analysis, Knowledge Structure Analysis, Conceptual Structure Analysis.*

1. Introduction

Building strong, long-lasting relationships with key constituents is increasingly vital for the success of a business (Kotler, et al., 2021). Thus, put forward the importance of relationship marketing. Indeed, the positive effects and dynamics of relationship marketing have been well established in the literature (Cortez, et al., 2023). Its significance even changed the marketing paradigm from a transactional to a relational perspective (Sheth, 2017). Given the recognition of the practice as a sustainable competitive advantage (Hidayat & Idrus, 2023), it is hardly a surprise relationship marketing has become the subject of study by scholars for a substantial period (Payne & Frow, 2017). The concept expanded globally unlike other schools of marketing thought, with scholars from all over the world offering their findings and perspectives (Sheth, 2017).

As the concept grows, review articles become beneficial as they help scholars navigate the accumulated research. Bibliometric analysis, in particular, has gained immense popularity as it grants large-scale reviews (Kumar, et al., 2022). Thus, the analysis benefits scholars as the one-stop overview gives them insights into emerging trends, knowledge gaps, and new research ideas that can guide them in their future research (Donthu, et al., 2021).

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Despite the benefit, an initial review reveals that no literature identifies and analyses the development of the concept by applying bibliometric analysis. Accordingly, this bibliometric analysis is conducted to give a comprehensive outline of the relationship marketing concept. This objective manifests in two research questions:

RQ1. What is the present state-of-the-art profile of the relationship marketing field?

RQ2. What are the evolving intellectual, knowledge, and thematic structures of the relationship marketing field?

By addressing the questions, our study contributes to the field by providing general guidelines about the topic and insights about future research. The subsequent section of the paper delves into the literature review followed by the research methodology. We then present results and discussions and finally, wrap up the article with the conclusions and implications of the study.

2. Theoretical Background

A. Relationship Marketing

It has been four decades since relationship marketing captured the interest of scholars and practitioners (Payne & Frow, 2017). So prevalent was the concept, that it resulted in a paradigm shift from transactional marketing toward relationship marketing (Kotler, 1992). Originating in the areas of industrial marketing and services marketing, relationship marketing came to light and has been recognized to be the bedrock of many flourishing businesses ever since, leading to the instigation of different themes and focal points in research (Payne & Frow, 2017).

Accordingly, Kotler et al. (2021) define relationship marketing as marketing activities designed to establish deep, lasting relationships with key constituents that affect the success of the business which comprised of customers, employees, marketing partners (channels, suppliers, distributors, dealers, agencies), and members of the financial community (shareholders, investors, analysts). The activities result in a unique company asset called a marketing network (Kotler, et al., 2021). In practice, these activities are carried out, among others, through owning a brand, crafting separate offers to individual customers, and loyalty programs (Kotler, et al., 2021). The activities have been positively tied to repurchase intention, word-of-mouth marketing, business performance, and customer loyalty (Yildirim, et al., 2022). Thus, granting the recognition of relationship marketing as a sustainable competitive advantage.

B. Bibliometric Analysis

Bibliometric analysis has gained immense popularity among scholars as it facilitates large-scale reviews that otherwise wouldn't be possible using classic narratives or meta-analysis (Kumar, et al., 2022). Thus, granting an opportunity to zoom out and get the bigger picture of a topic. In practice, bibliometric analysis manifests across two categories, performance analysis and science mapping (Donthu, et al., 2021). Performance analysis accounts for the existing state-of-the-art profile of a concept and

is conducted by looking into different research constituents including authors, institutions, countries, and journals. Science mapping, on the other hand, delves into the dynamics between research constituents and can reveal the intellectual, knowledge, and thematic structure of a field (Donthu, et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

The current research begins with the search for “relationship marketing” in the article title, abstract, and keywords section of the Scopus database. The database was chosen for its reputation. The keyword search resulted in 4,023 documents published found on early December 2023. The search was then refined by limiting it to journal articles in English published until 2022 only and resulted in 2,924 documents. Figure 1 presents the research design and methodology in this study.

We then conducted analysis by processing the bibliometric data using Microsoft Excel, R software’s “bibliometrix” package, and the Publish or Perish applications to answer the research questions. Specifically, we performed co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and co-word analysis of the author keywords to answer the second research question as advocated by Donthu et al. (2021) as the analyses align with the purpose of uncovering the themes in general by examining the intellectual, knowledge, and thematic structure of the field.

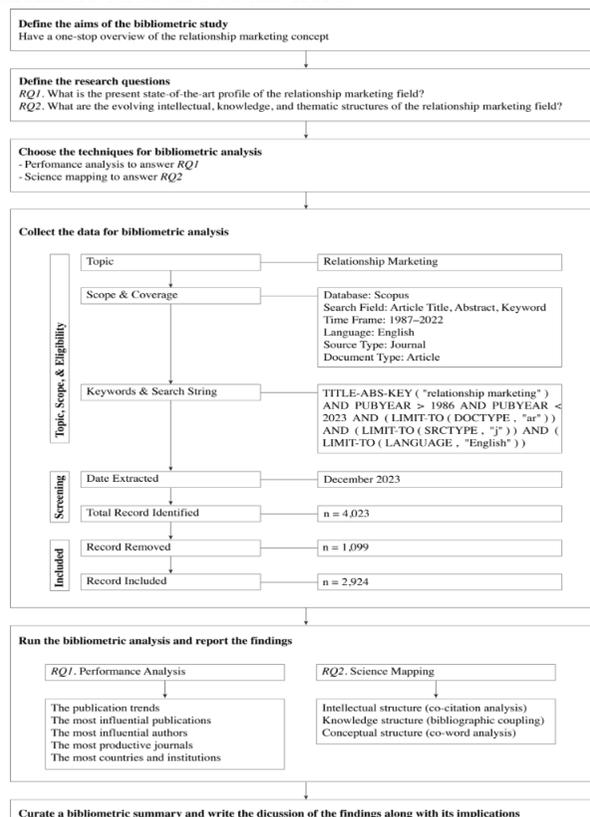


Figure 1. Research Design and Methodology

4. Empirical Findings/Result

Performance Analysis

a. The Publication Trends

The analyses reveal the first article on relationship marketing was published in 1987. The number of articles has grown with an annual growth rate of 15%, resulting in 2,924 articles published in 687 journals. In the early stages, the article was limited, with no more than 10 articles per year. The number of articles started to go up in 1994, with the number doubling the previous year. The most publications are in 2009 ($n = 143$), followed by 2019 ($n = 142$) and 2011 and 2022 ($n = 133$). 5,051 authors have contributed, with 488 single authors undertaking research in the field. In the context of citation, the statistics show the total citations of 156,624 with the average citations per document of 53.56, average citations per year of 4350.67, and average citations per author of 81,404.12. The cumulative impact of the research in this study is reflected in the h-index of 174. Further, the g-index evidence the extended influence of 311 highly cited articles.

b. The Most Influential Publications

Total citations (TC) and citations received per year (TC/Y) are used in this study to explore the most influential publications, which is illustrated in Table 1. As presented in the table, Garbarino and Johnson's research (1999) is the most influential publication, followed by Payne, et al.'s research (2008) and Brodie, et al.'s publication.

Table 1. The Most Influential Publications

Authors	Title	Year	TC	TC/Y
E. Garbarino, M.S. Johnson	The different roles of satisfaction, trust, and commitment in customer relationships	1999	2,765	110,60
A.F. Payne, K. Storbacka, P. Frow	Managing the co-creation of value	2008	2,259	141,19
R.J. Brodie, L.D. Hollebeek, B. Jurić, A. Ilić	Customer engagement: Conceptual domain, fundamental propositions, and implications for research	2011	2,217	170,54

c. The Most Influential Authors

The influence of authors in this study is analysed by measuring the number of publications they produce and the number of citations they receive over the year which is reflected in Figure 2, with the lines representing the timeline, the size of the nodes representing the number of publications, and the colour intensity of the nodes representing the number of citations they receive. As illustrated in the figure, Palmatier is the most influential author, followed by Gronroos, and Svensson.

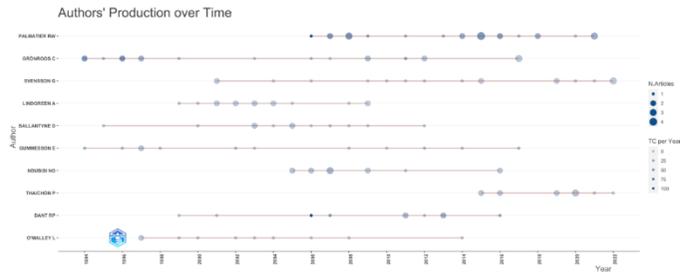


Figure 2. The most influential authors

d. The Most Productive Journals

Studies about relationship marketing are published in a wide range of journals. In this case, *Journal of Relationship Marketing* houses the most publications of holistic marketing (127 articles), followed by *Industrial Marketing Management* (126 articles) and *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing* (119 articles).

e. The Most Contributing Countries and Institutions

Since its first publication in 1987, around 160 institutions from 101 countries have contributed to the growth of the relationship marketing field. The statistics reveal that scholars from the USA have contributed the most ($n = 862$), followed by the United Kingdom ($n = 457$), and Australia ($n = 261$). Further examinations reveal the Hanken School of Economics in Finland is the most productive institution ($n = 39$), followed by Griffith University in Australia ($n = 29$), and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University ($n = 28$).

Science Mapping

a. Intellectual Structure Analysis

The intellectual structure of the field is examined through co-citation analysis as looking into publications that are jointly cited reveals the intellectual foundation of the respective subfields (Cobo, et al., 2011). The analysis reveals three distinct clusters within the research landscape as evidenced by Figure 3. Christopher (1991) has the highest betweenness centrality in Cluster 1 (0.727) with his publication on the concept of relationship marketing; Morgan (1994) published an article related to commitment and trust in relationship marketing in Cluster 2 (0.264), and Garbarino (1999) in Cluster 3 explored different roles of satisfaction, trust, and commitment in customer relationship. The result indicates the authors as highly co-cited by others in their respective groups and suggests their roles as intellectual foundations.

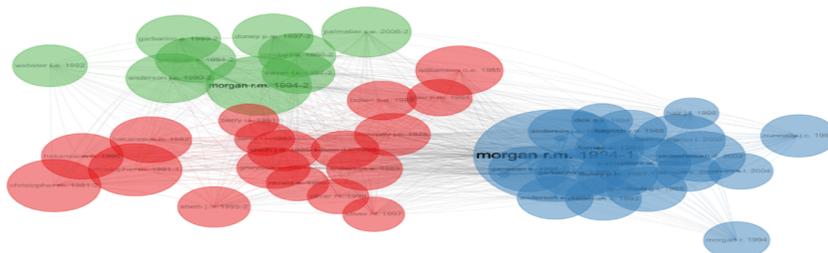


Figure 3. Co-citation network by documents

b. Knowledge Structure Analysis

The knowledge structure of the field is examined through bibliographic coupling by investigating common references of publications with a measure of the author's keywords. The coupling map formed three clusters illustrated in Figure 4. The investigation reveals that relationship marketing-trust-customer jointly appear in publications and form the most influential cluster in the field.

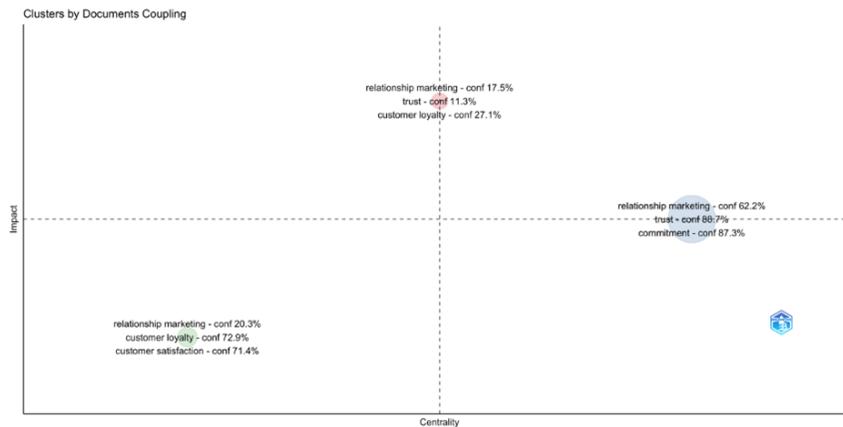


Figure 4. Bibliographic Coupling By Measures Of Author's Keywords

c. Conceptual Structure Analysis

The conceptual structure of the field is examined through co-word analysis by looking into the author's keywords co-occurrences and lay them into a thematic map. Cobo et al. (2011) posit that a thematic map elucidates the conceptual evolution in a field by dividing the themes into four quadrants based on centrality, which reflects the theme's distinction, and density, which reflects the theme's continuation.

Themes in quadrant 1 present strong centrality and high density. Thus, identified as motor themes to denote their substantive and established qualities. Quadrant 2 comprised themes with strong centrality and low density. Thus, known as basic themes to reflect their importance but low-developed nature. Quadrant 3 includes themes with weak centrality and high density. Thus, recognized as niche themes given their mature yet lightly relevant characters. Lastly, themes in quadrant 4 have weak centrality and low density. Indicating their disposition as emerging or declining themes.

In this study, we examined the co-occurrence of the author's keywords. The result is presented in Figure 5. As illustrated by the figure, "relationship marketing", "customer loyalty", and "customer satisfaction" comprise the motor themes. Meanwhile, "business-to-business marketing", "consumer behaviour", and "marketing strategy" make up the basic themes. "Industrial marketing", "customer lifetime value" and "business marketing" constitute the niche themes. Lastly, "trust", "commitment", and "relationship quality" are the emerging or declining themes in the field.

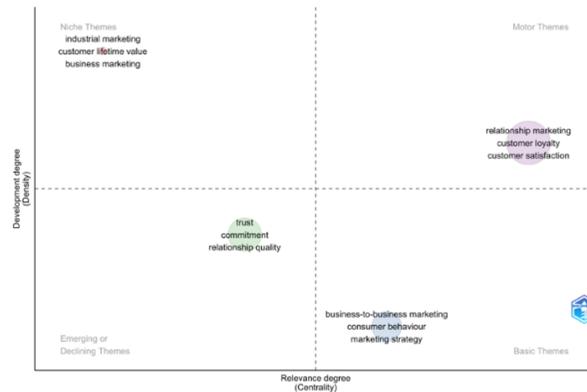


Figure 5. Thematic map by author's keywords

Additionally, we conducted a chronological-thematic analysis to get a more comprehensive view of the evolution in the field. Following Jayaswal and Parida (2003), we divided the period into three-time slices comprising the “embryonic stage” from 1987–1993 which saw the lowest number of publications; the “emergent stage” from 1994–2009 when the number of research started to increase and reached the highest number of publications; and the “expansion stage” from 2010–2022. The evolution is summarized in Figure 6. The alluvial graph elucidates how subthemes in the field emerge, disappear, merge with other themes, or reappear over time (Khare & Jain, 2022), which will be elaborated through the thematic maps of each period illustrated in Figure 7.

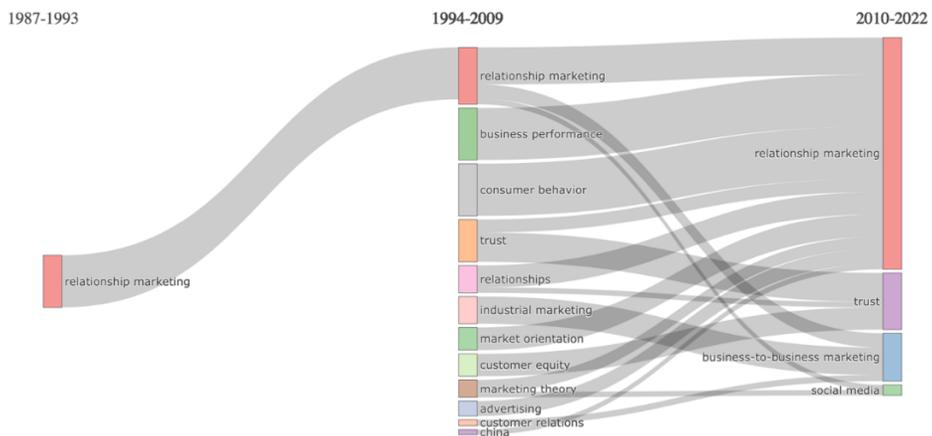
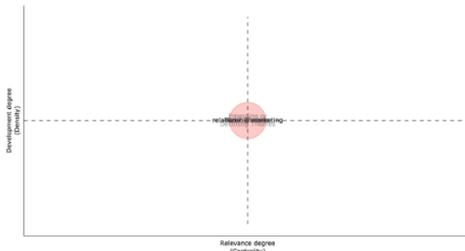


Figure 6. Thematic evolution by author's keywords

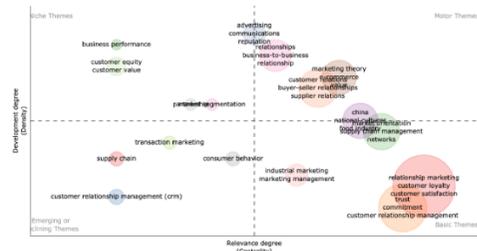
As illustrated by Figure 7, “relationship marketing” emerged as the only theme in the time slice. It’s to be expected given the field has just started to develop. A lot of themes were developed during the “emergent stage”. Payne and Frow (2017) posit that scholarly works in the field started to grow exponentially during the period, to the point of resulting in the argument of whether the field should concentrate on customers or broader stakeholders. Indeed, it’s reflected in the broad diversity of themes in this period. The “expansion stage” bears fewer themes. The alluvial graph in Figure 6

elucidates that a lot of themes in the previous stage merge into one. Among other themes, “relationship marketing”, “business performance”, and “consumer behaviour”, for instance, merge into “relationship marketing”.

1987–1993



1994–2009



2010–2022

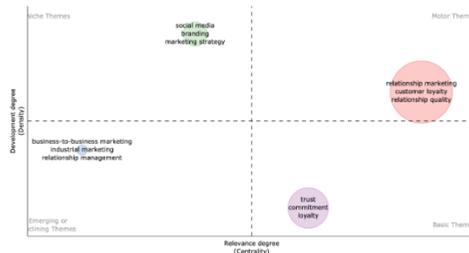


Figure 7. Chronological Thematic Map

Thematic map paints a picture of the development of a field as well as suggestions about future research. In this context, scholars are advised to examine the underdeveloped themes and refrain from the widely studied ones. Thus, advised to take the topics from emerging or declining and basic themes to further advance the field. In this case, the thematic maps suggest “trust” and “commitment” to be among the potential themes. Generally considered as declining themes as depicted in Figure 5, the themes comprise the basic themes both in the emergent and the expansion stage, staying in the lower quadrants over time. This indicates that the themes remain underdeveloped, even saw less relevance as illustrated in Figure 7. Given that the themes were the themes of one of the influential papers as elaborated in the intellectual structure analysis, studying them may uncover the intrinsic values worth exploring to further advance the field. Indeed, “trust” and “commitment” are said to be among the key constructs in the study of relationship marketing (Palmatier, et al., 2006).

5. Conclusions

In sum, the current study aims to provide a comprehensive review that helps scholars make sense and further the field. The investigation identifies key trends as well as explores the intellectual, knowledge, and thematic structure that give insights about the past, present, and future of the field. The present study is not without limitations. For once, the analysis in this study relies solely on the Scopus database. Therefore, we suggest future research to employ other databases to enrich the analysis. The database also updates its data periodically, making the search results subject to

change. Scholars can thus make another assessment in different periods. Moreover, the study covers only articles in the English language, resulting in the probability of missing important contributions in other languages. We also rely on R software's "bibliometrix" package so future research can look into other analytical tools such as VoSViewer. Despite the shortcomings, the present study will help academics navigate the vast information and make sense of the field as well as provide insights about future research direction.

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