

The Effects of Relational Benefits on Retail Satisfaction

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Abstract

Interest in the subjects of relational benefits and satisfaction has been growing among marketing researchers and practitioners. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of relational benefits on retail satisfaction. This study presents a causal model that identifies a connection between relational benefits, achieved through a stable and long-term relationship with a given establishment, and retail satisfaction. Based on a theoretical discussion regarding the relationship between relational benefits and retail satisfaction, an empirical research among European customers was conducted using convenience sampling to test the hypothesized relationships. Multiple item indicators from prior studies were employed to measure the constructs. The results show that confidence, special treatment and social benefits identified by literature on the matter have a direct positive effect on the satisfaction of regular consumers with their retailers.

Introduction

Many innovations have recently modified the concept of commercial distribution, due to new forms of commercialization and distribution of goods and services, as well as to the evolution of 21st century consumers (Verhoef et al., 2002).

This study is justified by the importance of commercial distribution, service quality and consumer satisfaction as key elements for the success of retail businesses facing increasing competition and recent market changes. Nowadays, many retailers across the world fear "cut-throat" price battles, however, they have realized that the relationship with customers is vital to the success of almost every retailer in order to secure satisfied customers (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). This current situation is due to the nature of retailing activities that are based on the relationship with the customer, in so much as these activities imply direct contact. A review of related literature has revealed that there already exist numerous studies focusing on retailing, relationship marketing and satisfaction. Nevertheless, there is a significant lack of practical and empirical works analyzing the actual consequences of relational benefits for individual consumers. Related literature has also shown that an insufficient number of works have dealt with business efforts to establish stable and long-lasting rela-

tionships with consumers as well as with the connection between satisfaction and relational benefits between regular customers and their preferred businesses (Henning-Thurau et al., 2002).

To date, the study of satisfaction has dominated retailing and services literature, however not many views are to be found regarding the influence of relational benefits on retail satisfaction. The basic rationale behind this paper stems from the fact that, although the concept of satisfaction has received much attention and acceptance (Homburg, et al., 2006), almost without question, it is surprising to realize that after many years of interest in the concept, retailing issues regarding any connection between relationship marketing and satisfaction remain unresolved. Therefore, this paper intends to propose a model to describe the relationship between the two concepts mentioned above: satisfaction and relational benefits in retailing.

The central goals of this research are to identify and describe the relational benefits perceived by consumers in commercial distribution, to define the main components of retail satisfaction and to determine what is the relationship between relational benefits and satisfaction. In order to do this, a previous analysis of the features of relationship marketing and retail satisfaction as fundamental factors in commercial exchange is needed. In order to make a contribution

towards understanding the parameters of this relationship, this paper attempts to investigate the relationship from a sample of European consumers. Hypotheses pertaining to the relationship between relational benefits and satisfaction will be tested using multivariable analysis based on existing literature in retailing, relationship marketing and satisfaction. This paper is organized in four parts as follows: Part One is the introduction, Part Two explains and develops the concepts of relational benefits and satisfaction, Part Three discusses the research methods and empirical results and Part Four presents the main conclusions of the study.

Literature Review

Relational benefits

Relationship marketing is the leading position in the strategic plans and marketing research efforts of many companies. This is a consequence of the total redefinition of the function of marketing, which many authors agree supersedes the transactional paradigm. According to this approach, organizations should be more interested in keeping stable relationships with their customers than in accumulating occasional exchanges (Beatty et al. 1996). Nevertheless, there are few empirical works which have explored the motivations and benefits consumers get from keeping a long-term relationship with a specific retailer or service provider (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner, 1998; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). This occurs even though it is obvious that, in practice, such benefits are interpreted as advantages by consumers and the benefits analysis may render more efficient competitive strategies.

In this sense, researchers on relationship marketing have mainly concentrated their efforts on the analysis of benefits gained by customer loyalty from the point of view of retailers, and, in general, in the context of the relationships among companies. This line of work has produced a group of studies that examine the benefits obtained by retailers who have developed a collection of loyal customers through relationship marketing. Here, Bendapudi and Berry (1997) suggest four factors that affect consumer receptivity when deciding whether to maintain the connection with regular

retailers: (1) environmental dynamism, (2) perception of competing businesses, (3) consumer variables and (4) interaction between the consumer and retailer. In order to facilitate the application of these factors to any company, Berry (1983) delineates the five strategic elements that relationship marketing is based on: (1) to develop a central element around which the stable relationship with the customer is constructed, (2) to personalize the relationship, (3) to increase the central element by offering extra benefits, (4) to augment loyalty to the retailer through price fixation, and (5) to make employees aware that they are immediately responsible in front of customers. Moreover, the use of relationship marketing in commercial distribution activities has some advantages, for instance: increased consumer loyalty, benefits for consumers as well and improved promotion of complementary goods or services.

Following this line, Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner (1998) pointed out that motivated consumers who maintain long-term relationships with their providers expect not only to receive a satisfactory service but additional benefits from maintaining that relationship such as social, confidence and special treatment benefits. Academic literature terms these "relational benefits" (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Dwyer and Schurr, 1997; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Gwinner et al. (1998) define "relational benefits" as those benefits customers are likely to receive as a result of engaging in long-term relationships with a service provider. In addition to this, Beatty et al. (1996) affirmed that these benefits received by consumers can be classified in two categories: functional and social benefits. Functional benefits include confidence and special treatment benefits, and social benefits of Gwinner et al. (1998).

At any rate, it is remarkable that, in recent years, relationship marketing activities are preferably evaluated in relation to business profitability. However, as business profitability may be influenced by many other variables, it seems more appropriate to define the concept of relationship marketing more specifically when attempting a thorough approach. At least two key elements stand out in the literature of relationship marketing: customer loyalty and word-of-mouth (Henning-Thurau et al., 2002; Wong and Zhou, 2006).

For that reason, a key challenge is to identify and understand how managerially controlled antecedent variables influence relationship marketing outcomes. In this sense, Henning-Thurau et al. (2002) propose satisfaction as a mediator in the relationship between relational benefits and the two outcomes mentioned above (customer loyalty and word-of-mouth). Consumer satisfaction is a central element in the marketing exchange process, because it undoubtedly contributes to providers' success (Darian et al., 2001). The recognition that there are positive (although not perfect) links between satisfaction and loyalty and word-of-mouth and repurchase, highlights the importance of identifying and explaining the conditions under which satisfaction develops (Bejou et al., 1998). While the concept of customer satisfaction consists of many factors, relational benefits may be the most directly influential.

Satisfaction

During the last four decades, satisfaction has been considered as one of the most important concepts of marketing. As a result, it has been widely analyzed both by academics and practitioners. However, a revision of the literature reveals two clearly differentiated research periods. During the 1960s and 1970s, the main concern was to identify the major variables of the satisfaction process. From the 1980s to the present, research has focused on analyzing the consequences of opinion formation on satisfaction.

No single definition of satisfaction has been unanimously accepted by literature. All definitions proposed, however, agree that the concept of satisfaction implies the necessary presence of a goal that the consumer wants to achieve. Only a comparison standard can be used to evaluate whether the goal has been achieved. The evaluation process involves the intervention of at least two stimuli (benefit or result and reference of comparison standard). According to Homburg, Koschate and Hoyer (2006), previous research has recognized that both cognition (Oliver 1980; Bearden and Teel 1983; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988) and affect (Westbrook 1987; Westbrook and Oliver 1991;

Mano and Oliver 1993) significantly predict satisfaction judgments. Consumer satisfaction is thus a central element in the marketing exchange process, because it definitely contributes to retailers' success (Darian, Tucci y Wiman, 2001). Furthermore, satisfaction is one of the essential factors in predicting consumer behavior and, more specifically, purchase repetition. The more consumers fulfill their expectations during the purchase or service use, the higher the probability that consumers will repeat the purchase in that establishment (Wong and Sohal, 2003).

In general, research on satisfaction has centered upon expectations, results or perceived benefit, and satisfaction itself as a model inside the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1981; Krampf, Ueltschy and d'Amico, 2003), according to which satisfaction is the result of a comparison process. In addition, research has approached the issue of how to make satisfaction a useful concept for commercial distribution in two main lines. The first approach proposes that consumer satisfaction can be explained in connection with various positive and negative aspects experienced during good purchase, consumption and use. The second approach affirms that consumer satisfaction can be understood as the individual emotional response to the overall evaluation of the contact with a given establishment. Oliver (1981) argues that consumer satisfaction is determined by the emotional response experienced by an individual after purchase and as a result of the disconformity (positive or negative) between expectations and actual experience. It is thus logical to expect that affective evaluation will play a significant part in the satisfaction derived from experiences, contacts and exchanges between distributors and consumers. The role affective dimension in establishment evaluation has not been overlooked by research (Burns and Neisner, 2006). More precisely, establishment image is considered essential for consumer purchase decision. Consequently, this element is associated with the affective component of consumer satisfaction, and has an influence on establishment success in the long term (Samli, 1989; Sirgy and Samli, 1985; San Martin, 2005). The comparison between expectations and the final benefits or results perceived after an exchange must be under-

stood both from the affective and cognitive dimensions (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997). These two evaluation processes separately influence the degree of satisfaction (Oliver, 1993; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). It can thus be stated that consumers are satisfied when purchase results exceed their expectations in accordance with the "disconfirmatory paradigm" (Oliver, 1980). It is also necessary to point out that consumers use a set of elements or attributes in order to build an overall feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with retail businesses (Westbrook, 1981).

Overall, consumer satisfaction thus reveals the general evaluation of the actions carried out by a given business in relation to expectations accumulated after several encounters between consumer and retail business (Bitner and Hubber, 1994). If customers perceive that they are obtaining additional benefits from their relationship with establishment employees, their satisfaction level with the retailer will increase (Beatty et al. 1996). Relational benefits can then be considered as an important factor for the satisfaction with retail businesses. Therefore, relational benefits meaning special treatment, confidence and social benefits, identified by Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner (1998) will have a great influence on customer satisfaction with their habitual establishments. Consequently, the following general hypothesis can be proposed:

H1: *There is a direct and positive relationship between relational benefits and retail satisfaction.*

Likewise, research literature has considered confidence as a factor that greatly influences the degree of satisfaction at the level of the relationship between producers and consumers through distribution channels (Anderson and Narus, 1990). Besides this, the analysis of the role played by expectations in satisfaction evaluation leads to the deduction that there is a positive relationship between the confidence relational benefit and satisfaction (Szymanski and Henard, 2001). Similarly, it is also logical to expect that the benefit of special treatment will have a great influence on satisfaction, because special treatment provided by a retailer can be perceived as a part of the overall service, and so this benefit will increase customer satisfaction (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Equally, it is

reasonable to anticipate that social benefits will have a positive influence on satisfaction even though these benefits tend to focus more on relationship than on results (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler, 2002). This is due to the importance attributed by customers to social interaction with retail frontline employees more than to any other functional benefits (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). As a result of this discussion, the following sub-hypothesis can also put forward:

H1a: There is a direct and positive relationship between confidence benefits and retail satisfaction.

H1b: There is a direct and positive relationship between preferential treatment benefits and retail satisfaction.

H1c: There is a direct and positive relationship between social benefits and retail satisfaction.

Methodology

Sample data

An empirical study was conducted in five European cities located in three different countries. Data was collected by using a convenience sampling method. The questionnaire was administered by personal interview in retail establishments and within normal retailing hours. In order to evaluate the stability of the relationship between the customer and the retailer, the interviewee was asked to offer an evaluation of the said relationship on a 5-point scale. Afterwards, all those questionnaires which did not reach the minimum scoring of three on the scale were ruled out. In this way, those cases which accord little value in their relationship with the retailer were eliminated. The procedure resulted in a sample of 693 usable questionnaires with regard to satisfaction and the relational benefits the customers obtain from their relationship with the retailer. The demographic and background information data gathered in this study were compared with the population characteristics and the background information of the cities where the study was undertaken. No significant differences were found for most of the variables.

Measures

The questionnaire included questions, adapted to suit the specific characteristic of a retailing study, relating to different related benefits, consumer satisfaction, as well as the length, continuity and degree of relationship with the retailer.

In order to analyze the different related benefits, 22 items or statements were included in the questionnaire. Most of them were taken and adapted for the purpose of the study because of its applicability to the service sector from Gwinner et al. (1998) and other studies in the field of relationship marketing and the marketing of retailing (Beatty et al., 1996; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Peterson, 1995; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). The statements were composed of a series of aspects referring to possible benefits perceived by the customer as a result of the maintenance of interactions and long-term relationships with their habitual retailer. These items were measured on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

With regards to satisfaction with the retailer, items were based on the retail satisfaction and retailing literature in general (i.e., Westbrook, 1981; McDonald, 1991; Bolton, 1998; Voss, Parasuraman and Grewal, 1998; Millan and Esteban, 2004; Anselmsson, 2006). Although some studies had used one statement to measure satisfaction, most research in this field had included a multi-item scale to reflect its real dimensionality. Therefore, the retail satisfaction was measured with a scale containing thirty, 7-point Likert-scale items ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

The questionnaire was pre-tested and based on the debriefing of the pre-test respondents. Minor changes were made to improve the clarity and visual layout of the questionnaire.

Results

This section will provide results of the analysis on the variables described. This will be followed by subsequent analyses of the relationship between the relational benefits and the customer satisfaction with the retailer. In addition to descriptive statistics, analysis

multivariable techniques were used in the data with the objective of contrasting the posited hypotheses and verifying the possible results, in agreement with the objectives.

Exploratory phase

Before going any deeper into the relationship between relation benefits and retail satisfaction in retailing, the fit of the scales in relation to the data was analyzed. Initially, the scales used in this study were factor analyzed to assess their psychometric properties. Exploratory factoring was based upon a principal components analysis with varimax rotation of 22 and 30 items that describe the different relational benefits and retail satisfaction dimensions suggested by literature, respectively. Before conducting the exploratory factor analysis, a test was carried out to establish whether variables correlated with each other. According to Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\text{sig}=0.000$) relational benefits and satisfaction variables correlated with each other respectively, which meant it was possible to perform a factor analysis. Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measures of sampling adequacy (score 0.944 and 0.886 respectively) indicated a practical level of common variance and therefore factoring was appropriate.

The factors whose eigenvalues were greater than 1 were selected according to the criteria developed by Kaiser (1958). In addition, only factor loadings greater than 0.5 were included in the analysis (Hair et al., 1999) and items with extractions lower than 0.5 were not included in the analysis.

The relational benefits principal components factor analysis showed the securing of three factors. The three diverse types of relational benefits, identified in previous literature, were in the following terms: first factor 25.01 percent, second factor 20.96 percent, and third factor 14.42 percent. In this regard, 60.38 percent of the variance is obtained. According to literature (Gwinner et al., 1998; Patterson and Smith, 2001; Henning-Thurau et al., 2002; Martin-Consuegra et al., 2006), the three dimensions derived from the exploratory factor analysis were labeled "Special Treatment Benefits" (STB), "Confidence Benefits" (CB),

and "Social Benefits" (SB).

Also regarding retail satisfaction, a principal axis factoring with Varimax-rotation extraction technique was used. Items that did not load heavily on the primary factor (i.e., < 0.5) and items that had significant cross loadings were removed. This resulted in the removal of seven items. The remaining items were factor analyzed again. The resulting factor structure consisted of five factors. In this regard, only 52.99 percent of the variance was obtained, although it clearly allowed for the identification of five retail satisfaction dimensions. Five items loaded on the first dimension with a variance of 11.27 percent, the second dimension with five items contributed a variance of 11.18 percent, the third one with five items contributed 11.07 percent variance, four items loaded on the fourth dimension with a variance of 10.68 and the fifth one with four items contributed a variance of 8.79 percent. According to a review of the literature on this topic (i.e. Oliver, 1980;

Westbrook, 1981; Parasuraman, et al., 1991; Levesque and McDougall, 1996; Lassar, et al., 2000; Anselmsson, 2006), the five dimensions derived from the exploratory factor analysis were labeled "Merchandising policy" (MP), "Service policy" (SP), "Store environment" (SE) "Frontline employee satisfaction" (FES), and "Accessibility" (A),.

Confirmatory phase

Next, an assessment of the relational benefits and consumer satisfaction scales for unidimensionality and internal consistency was conducted. Confirmatory factor analyses were used to test relational benefits and retail satisfaction dimensions were identified respectively. The measures were then analyzed for reliability and validity following the main guidelines offered by Hair et al. (1999) At this point, items that did not load at 0.4 or above on any factor were candidates for deletion.

Table 1
Assessment of Relational Benefits Unidimensionality

Factor	Item	Loadings (<i>t</i> -value)	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Special Treatment Benefits (STB)	RB18 Quicker service	0.86 (21.020)	0.91	0.92	0.61
	RB14 Priority treatment in queues	0.80 (19.863)			
	RB10 They offered me special services/products	0.82 (20.360)			
	RB7 More advantageous special treatment	0.79 (19.585)			
	RB19 Levels of first-rate services	0.75 (18.788)			
	RB21 They offer me new services/products	0.66 (15.746)			
	RB3 Better prices	0.78 (19.411)			
Social Benefits (SB)	RB6 The staff know me	0.82 (25.655)	0.90	0.90	0.65
	RB2 Familiar with the employees	0.79 (23.385)			
	RB13 They know my name	0.82 (25.461)			
	RB9 Friendship with the employees	0.87 (27.625)			
	RB17 Enjoy aspects of the social relations	0.71 (21.366)			
Confidence Benefits (CB)	RB16 Greater confidence, correct functioning	0.76 (19.162)	0.86	0.87	0.56
	RB15 Clear and reasonable offering of services	0.61 (15.772)			
	RB51 feel that I can confide in the retailer	0.82 (20.436)			
	RB20 Work well done	0.73 (18.501)			
	RB12 I know what I can obtain	0.61 (15.784)			
	RB11 I don't have to look for another retailer	0.59 (15.105)			
	RB4 Comfort during operations	0.68 (17.578)			
	RB1 Less risk about something functioning badly	0.57 (14.738)			

Chi-square = 975.690 with 167 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.00$), CFI = 0.917, RMSEA = 0.07, NNFI = 0.905

According to the previous analysis and following the procedure suggested by Gerbing and Anderson (1988), the optimum relational benefits and retail satisfaction confirmatory factor analysis were estimated, saturated in three and four critical dimensions, respectively, corresponding to those which were identified previously (see Tables 1 and 2). Seven retail satisfaction statements were deleted due to low loadings. The resulting factor structure and model fit was excellent. All indicators are above their recommended minimum figures (Hair et al. 1999). The internal consistency was assessed by means of Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The coefficient alphas of each dimension exceed the threshold value because all are above 0.7. Using the criterion set forth by Hair et al. (1999), an examination was carried out to establish whether the average variance extracted and the composite reliability for the measures was greater than 0.5 and 0.7 respectively. The average variance extracted and composite reliabilities in all cases exceed the respective thresh-

old values (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), which provide the evidence of convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity was tested between all constructs according to Fornell and Larcker (1981) recommendations and confirmed for all pairs of constructs. To sum up, the data show satisfactory empirical support for our conceptualization of the constructs of relational benefits and consumer satisfaction.

Relational benefits and customer satisfaction model paths

The hypothesized relationships were tested simultaneously using structural equation modeling. In particular, the model paths were estimated using EQS 6.1 following the recommendations of Bentler (1995) and Byrne (1994). The standardized path coefficients of the structural model as estimated by EQS are given in Figure I. Chi-square was used to test the hypotheses proposed. In addition to chi-square test and its associated p-values, the comparative fit index (CFI),

Table 2
Assessment of Customer Satisfaction Unidimensionality

Factor	Item	Loadings (t-value)	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Merchandising Policy (MP)	S18 Quality level	0.68 (14.326)	0.73	0.73	0.51
	S19 Well-stocked departments	0.63 (13.594)			
	S13 Assortment of departments	0.60 (12.687)			
	S14 Cleanliness	0.66 (13.977)			
Service Policy (SP)	S25 Willingness to exchange	0.52 (12.657)	0.77	0.75	0.48
	S20 Promotions	0.55 (13.480)			
	S26 Fairness of adjustments	0.61 (14.526)			
	S5 Price level	0.66 (15.696)			
Store environment (SE)	S23 Value for money	0.73 (16.498)	0.7	0.7	0.47
	S15 Atmosphere	0.57 (11.953)			
	S24 Store layout	0.56 (11.876)			
	S16 Roominess	0.68 (13.260)			
Frontline employee satisfaction (FES)	S4 Interior appearance	0.62 (12.587)	0.76	0.77	0.53
	S1 Friendliness and politeness of employee	0.78 (17.853)			
	S2 Accuracy of employee	0.80 (18.121)			
	S6 Individual attention	0.60 (15.317)	0.76	0.77	0.53
Chi-square = 124.683 with 58 degrees of freedom ($p = 0.00$), NFI = 0.903, CFI = 0.945, RMSEA = 0.07, NNFI = 0.926					

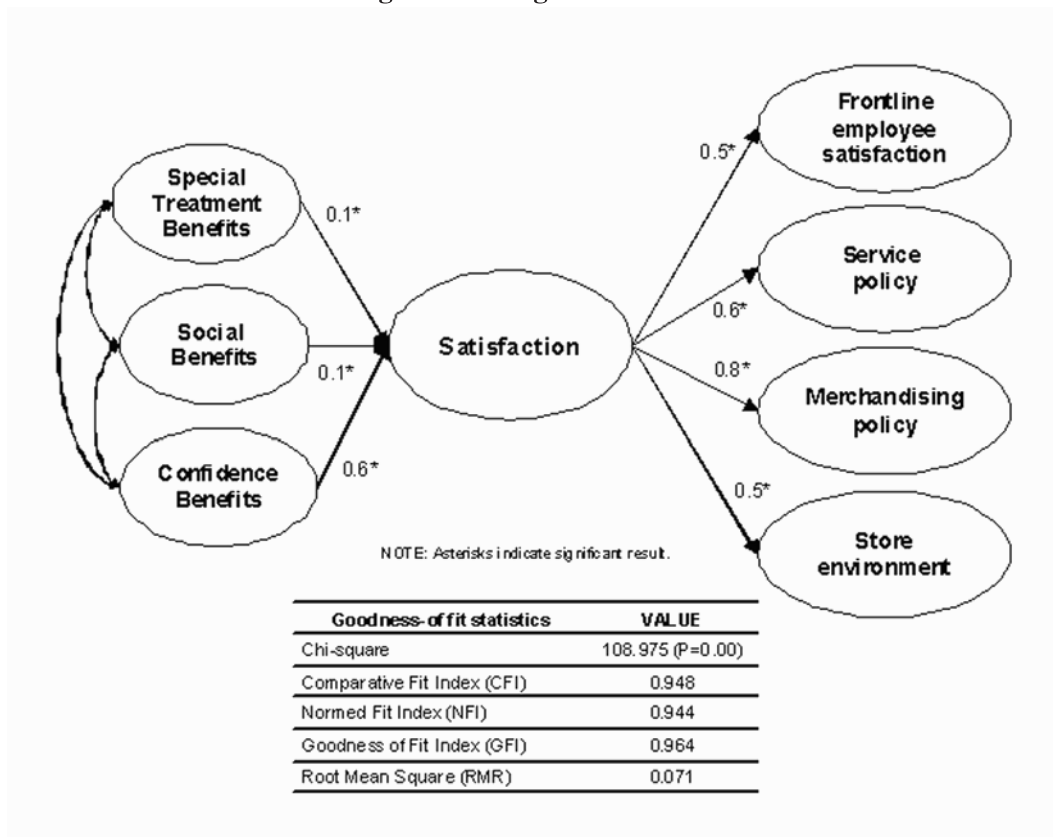
the normed fit index (NFI), the non-normed fit index (NNFI), and the root mean square residuals (RMR), are reported as tests of model fit. Bentler (1995) indicates that values of above 0.9 suggest adequate fit. As illustrated in Figure I, the global goodness-of fit statistics indicate that the structural model represents the data structure well. In the examination of the relationship between the relational benefits identified and satisfaction, all of the relational benefits constructs have a significant direct impact. The results support confidence, special treatment and social benefits having a significant and positive impact on retail satisfaction. In addition, the results presented in Figure 1 attest to the significance of confidence benefits as one of the strongest retail satisfaction antecedents. The magnitude of the significant positive correlation relational benefits coefficient shown in Figure 1 offers strong support for all the hypotheses.

Discussion and Implications

The main objective of this study was to analyze the relationship between relational benefits and retail satisfaction after a service/product has been rendered through commercial distribution. To be more precise, the analysis has focused on the relationship between customers and their regular establishments. The theoretical approach to each of these concepts first and their empirical application to retail business later has achieved this objective.

Results of this research lead to some relevant conclusions. First of all, the results of the study of relational benefits confirm those obtained by Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner (1998) and have been similar to those yielded by other research, although these works have generally centered upon the service sector (Patterson and Smith, 2001; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler, 2002; Colgate, Buchanan-Oliver and

Figure 1.
Path Diagram of Integrative Model Results



Elmsly, 2005). The special treatment, confidence and social benefits can also be applied to commercial distribution, as this paper has demonstrated. Consequently, due to the current situation of commercial distribution and to the importance of relationship marketing for its development, it is essential to include consumer perspective in the analysis of this relationship.

This study has also proved, however, that even if preferential treatment and confidence and social benefits are all present in commercial distribution, only confidence benefits seems to be of definitive importance. In this sense, this paper coincides with the results from reviewed research, so it reinforces the premise that confidence in good service rendered by an establishment is the key for a good long-term relationship between this establishment and its customers. Results from the empirical analysis have made it possible to describe the structure of satisfaction in retail establishments. Its components are based on the evaluation of experiences by the consumers in the establishment. Consequently, customer satisfaction in retail businesses depends on the products and their presentation, on the price/quality relationship, on the overall atmosphere and on personal treatment by the salespeople. The use of a causal model has facilitated information about the relationship between relational benefits and satisfaction. This research has empirically validated the relationship between relational benefits and the satisfaction of a customer with his/her habitual store. Even though some previous works had centered upon relational benefits, only the studies by Reynolds and Beatty (1999) and Marzo, Pedraja and Rivera (2004) had proved the relationship between relational benefits and satisfaction. However, these works had focused on one kind of business establishment or on one type of product. Contrarily, this research has promoted the analysis of this relationship in commercial distribution. Considering the results obtained here, it is possible to affirm that relational benefits are a predicting element of satisfaction when a service is rendered directly by the distributor to the end consumer.

However, there are some limits to results in this study. From a theoretical point of view, the framework of this research is restricted to its own objectives. This study has pondered the relationship between relational ben-

efits and satisfaction, while other factors which have an influence on consumer satisfaction have not been considered. This research and the model it proposes have been devised as a basis for future work. From a methodological perspective, the results from this study can only be generalized for retail, grocery and miscellaneous stores because it has only been applied to these businesses.

Some suggestions can be made after considering the results from this study. First, retail businesses are advised to apply relationship marketing in order to enhance the number of regular and satisfied customers. Second, it is necessary to establish which are the most important dimensions of customer satisfaction. Last, because retail businesses are heterogeneous, presenting a wide variety of sizes and forms, it is desirable that further research should be done and that it concentrate on analyzing the relationship between the two concepts used in this study, and the degree or intensity of this relationship.

To conclude, the information provided by this research can be better used when designing marketing strategies for retail businesses, and more precisely, for traditional retailers. Traditional stores need to continue their basic strategy of maintaining a stable and close relationship with their customers in order to improve customer satisfaction.

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