Understanding and managing customer relational benefits in services: a meta-analysis

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Abstract

Recent meta-analyses provide clear insights into how service *firms* can benefit from relationship marketing, whereas investigations of *customers'* relational benefits (1) are unclear about the absolute and relative strengths by which different relational benefit dimensions induce different customer responses and (2) have not simultaneously examined the various mediating processes (including perceived value, relationship quality, and switching costs) through which relational benefits reportedly affect customer loyalty. To consolidate extant research on the benefits of relationship marketing for customers, this meta-analysis integrates 1242 effect sizes drawn from 235 independent samples across 224 papers disseminated in the past two decades. The results reveal that all three relational benefits affect loyalty, though confidence benefits and social benefits have the strongest effects. Among the three identified mediation paths through which relational benefits influence customer loyalty, the sequential path through perceived value and relationship quality is the strongest. From a service research perspective, this study provides novel empirical generalizations; managerially, the findings suggest that a primary goal for service managers should be strengthening confidence and social benefits.

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Understanding and managing customer loyalty has always been a top priority for both service researchers and managers. Recent industry reports that signal declining customer loyalty (e.g., Leinbach-Reyhle 2016) make this priority even more critical: In an era in which customers can easily shop around online for the best offer, determining how to increase customer loyalty becomes essential (Kumar and Reinartz 2018). The response to this need, in the form of increased research into customer loyalty, consists of two main literature research streams. The first adopts a *firm perspective*, examining the benefits to companies of engaging in relationship marketing activities (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Steinhoff and Palmatier 2016). The second takes a *customer perspective*, seeking to understand the benefits that customers obtain by being loyal to a service firm (e.g., Gwinner et al. 1998).

The current meta-analytic study examines the second stream and customer relational benefits. Relational benefits[1] originally were conceptualized as unidimensional (Morgan and Hunt

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[1] Several scholars use the term "relationship benefits" (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016) as a synonym for "relational benefits." Rather than switch terms, we use "relational benefits" throughout.

1994), but Gwinner et al. (1998) conceptualize and empirically validate a multidimensional nature. They propose that customers who remain loyal to an organization gain confidence (i.e., reduced anxiety or uncertainty about a service provider's performance), social (e.g., friendships or personal relationships with firm employees), or special treatment (e.g., better deals, lower prices, faster service) benefits. Although the concept of relational benefits was introduced more than two decades ago, and many studies have investigated it since then (Hult and Ferrell 2012; Zinkhan 2005), several issues continue to limit our understanding of customer relational benefits.

First, we lack a comprehensive overview of the absolute and relative strengths by which different relational benefit dimensions induce different customer responses. For example, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) report a stronger effect of confidence benefits on customer outcomes, relative to social or special treatment benefits, whereas Meldrum and Kaczynski (2007) find a stronger effect of social benefits. Prior meta-analyses (Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016) often conceptualize relational benefits as a single, general construct, discounting the potentially divergent effects of different relational benefits on customer outcomes. Thus, a meta-analysis that provides empirical generalizations about which specific relational benefit dimensions have the strongest effect can help scholars better understand these marketing instruments and help managers focus their attention on strengthening their offerings.

Second, in prior meta-analyses that have shaped relationship marketing theory (Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016), the authors identify relationship quality as a mediator of the relational benefits–customer loyalty relationship. We propose that another mediating variable (perceived value) should be included in the relationship quality path, along with another mediation path that includes switching costs. On the relationship quality path, research has shown that relational benefits contribute to the perceived value that customers receive from firms (e.g., Martin-Ruiz et al. 2008), which helps strengthen customer–firm relationships and improve customer loyalty (e.g., Gil-Saura et al. 2011; Ruiz-Molina et al. 2015). These studies accordingly suggest that perceived value should be considered when developing and testing nomological frameworks of the outcomes of relational benefits; we propose adding this construct to the relationship quality path. Furthermore, relational benefits might induce switching costs that can drive customer loyalty too (Chang and Chen 2007; Gremler and Gwinner 2015). To date, extant literature has not examined the extent to which these two paths simultaneously drive the connections between relational benefits and customer loyalty, which path has a stronger influence, or how these three mediators relate.

To address these issues, we conduct a meta-analysis to (1) study the absolute and relative strength of confidence, social, and special treatment benefits on various customer responses; (2) examine which types of processes—relationship quality,

perceived value, and/or switching costs—underlie the links between relational benefits and customer loyalty; and (3) investigate which contingency factors (i.e., type of service, type of market, and timing of study) influence these relationships. By establishing empirical generalizations about the manner in which the various relational benefit components influence responses from the customer's perspective, we extend prior meta-analyses, which consider relational benefits from a firm perspective, define it as a single or general construct, and include relationship quality as the sole mediator between the antecedents and outcome variables (Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016). With this effort, we also accommodate several calls to test the roles of perceived value (Kumar and Reinartz 2016) and switching costs (Pick and Eisend 2014, 2016) in relationship marketing frameworks. Accordingly, we contribute to relationship marketing literature by providing more fine-grained insights into how customers' relational benefits affect customers' responses.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that guides this meta-analysis is rooted in research that conceptualizes and tests outcomes of three distinct relational benefits: confidence, social, and special treatment benefits.[2] This literature stream is rooted in service research, whereby services are defined in the broadest sense, including services with high levels of tangibility (Vargo and Lusch 2004). An overwhelming majority of studies examine relational benefits as antecedents of customer loyalty (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002), though Gwinner et al. (1998) originally conceptualized them as a consequence of customers' demonstrations of loyalty. For relational benefits to be provided, customers need to exhibit some level of patronage; experiencing relational benefits from such patronage then reinforces that loyalty (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). However, due to a lack of empirical studies that examine relational benefits as consequences of loyalty, we do not discuss this link further.

Similar to prior meta-analyses (Palmatier et al. 2006; Scheer et al. 2015; Watson et al. 2015), we include a construct in our proposed model only if (1) there are at least five effect sizes and (2) a customer response variable can be observed. We group any highly related variables that would be difficult to separate in a composite construct. For example, relationship satisfaction, trust, and commitment are all indicators of the higher-order construct "relationship quality" (De Wulf et al.

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[2] Over time, additional relational benefits have emerged, including identity-related benefits (Fournier 1998), respect benefits (Chang and Chen 2007), hedonic benefits (Meyer-Waarden et al. 2013), and quality improvement benefits (Sweeney and Webb 2002). However, these additional benefits have not appeared frequently in empirical studies, so we limit our focus to confidence, social, and special treatment benefits.

2001), and attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty are both part of "customer loyalty" (Watson et al. 2015). Table 1 presents the constructs included in our conceptual model, their definitions, and common synonyms; we discuss them in more detail in the next section.

The causal ordering of the variables in our nomological framework (see Fig. 1) is based on existing research on relational benefits and theoretical considerations. Palmatier et al.'s (2006) relational mediators meta-analytic framework serves as a starting point for building a conceptual framework of the outcomes of relational benefits. In particular, they specify a relational benefits → relationship quality → customer loyalty path, and we seek to extend their framework in five ways, by drawing on insights from other empirical studies. First, we distinguish three types of relational benefits (Gwinner et al. 1998), rather than considering relational benefits as a unidimensional construct (Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016). Second, we model perceived value as a mediator of the relational benefits → relationship quality relationship (Gummesson 1987; Ravald and Grönroos 1996). Third, we consider switching costs as an additional mediation process underlying the relational benefits → customer loyalty relationship (Chang and Chen 2007). Fourth, we specify a path from relationship quality to switching costs (Pick and Eisend 2014). Fifth, in line with Watson et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis, we consider firm sales performance as an outcome of customer loyalty.

Relational benefits in services

Gwinner et al. (1998) seek to understand why customers might want to form and maintain relationships with service firms. The reasons firms would want to form relationships with customers had been well-documented (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Reichheld 1996), but customers' reasons and the benefits that they might derive had not been as well articulated prior to that study. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, Gwinner et al. (1998, p. 102) define relational benefits that "customers receive from long-term relationships above and beyond the core service performance," and they propose three types (see Table 1).

Confidence benefits[3] imply reduced anxiety and less perceived risk associated with purchasing the service, because the

customer has developed a relationship with the provider and knows what to expect (Gwinner et al. 1998). Confidence benefits are derived from an intimate relationship with the service provider and make a customer feel more secure, escalating the customer's trust level (Chou and Chen 2018). *Social benefits* run the spectrum from personal recognition by employees to familiarity to friendship—all gained by cultivating a relationship with the firm (Gwinner et al. 1998). Customers often value their social relationships with frontline service providers that result from repeated, interpersonal interactions. *Special treatment benefits* combine customization (e.g., preferential treatment, extra attention) and economic (e.g., price discounts, faster service) elements, such that customers with relationships with the service provider may get better deals, faster service, or more personalized offerings compared with others who lack a relationship with the provider (Gwinner et al. 1998). This special treatment might be structured (e.g., loyalty reward programs) or unstructured (e.g., occasional price break, special services). The concept of relational benefits gave rise to a continuing stream of research that has extensively examined customer responses associated with relational benefits. We develop hypotheses about the consequences of relational benefits next.

Perceived value

Customer perceived value is generally conceptualized as a customer's overall assessment of the utility of a relationship with a service provider based on perceptions of the benefits received and costs incurred (Zeithaml 1988). Several scholars propose a relationship between relational benefits and perceived value (e.g., Chen and Hu 2010). This relationship is theoretically rooted in utility theory, which holds that customers derive value according to the difference between the utility provided by buying a certain service (or engaging in a certain activity) and the disutility represented by the price paid or the sacrifices made to attain the service (or engaging in that particular activity) (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo 2007). In the context of our study, we contend that customers perceiving higher levels of confidence, social, and special treatment benefits likely perceive higher levels of utility from being loyal to an organization, increasing the difference in the utility/ disutility trade-off. Against this backdrop, we expect (Ulaga and Eggert 2006):

H1: (a) Confidence benefits, (b) social benefits and (c) special treatment benefits are positively associated with perceived value.

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[3] The terms "confidence" and "trust" are often used interchangeably. However, confidence explicitly refers to "perceived certainty about satisfactory partner cooperation" (Das and Teng 1998, p. 492) and the belief that the partner will behave in a desired manner (Scheer 2012), so it involves expectations about the partner's predictable behavior but does not address the underlying reasons. In contrast, "Trust is the belief that one's partner [*a service provider*] can be relied upon to fulfill its future obligations and to behave in a manner that will serve the firm's [*customer's*] needs and long-term interests" (Scheer and Stern 1992, p. 134), because the partner is motivated by more than its own immediate, direct self-interest, a motive that should persist in the future. Thus, trust and confidence are not equivalent; confidence may exist, despite a lack of trust. But trust and confidence also can be related, in that trust can generate general confidence in a business partner (Scheer 2012, p. 338).

Table 1 Definitions of key constructs

| Construct	Definition	Coding criteria	Common aliases
Confidence benefits	Customers' feelings of reduced anxiety and confidence in the service provider that result from being loyal to the organization. (Gwinner et al. 1998)	Includes customers having confidence that the service will be performed correctly, knowing what to expect when dealing with an organization, and perceiving less risk that something will go wrong based on their previous interactions with an organization.	Functional benefits*, psychological benefits, trust benefits, competence benefits
Social benefits	Level of fraternization and personal friendship between a customer and an employee, and/or the level of personal recognition by employees that result from being loyal to the organization. (Gwinner et al. 1998)	Includes customers being recognized and known by name by certain employees, and being familiar or even friends with the employees who perform the service.	Social bonds, interpersonal relationships, social rewards
Special treatment benefits	The amount of special deals, time savings, additional services, and/or preferential treatment that result from being loyal to the organization. (Gwinner et al. 1998)	Includes getting discounts, special deals, better prices, gifts, free products and services, preferential treatment, special communications or reports, faster service or other time savings, or special additional services because of the status as a loyal customer.	Economic benefits, preferential treatment, functional benefits*, customization benefits, financial bonds
Perceived value	The customer's overall assessment of the utility of a relationship with a service provider based on perceptions of the benefits received and the costs incurred. (Zeithaml 1988)	Includes customers' overall belief that they gain more from the current organization in comparison with their own investment. Customers receiving good products, services, and other gains in comparison with the time, effort, and money they have invested perceive good value.	Utilitarian value, perceived value, economic value
Relationship quality	Overall assessment of the strength of a relationship. (Crosby et al. 1990)	Includes customers' overall assessment of a relationship, based on relationship satisfaction, trust, and commitment, or a combination of these.	Relationship satisfaction, cumulative satisfaction, affective commitment, trust, relationship strength
Switching costs	Perceived, anticipated, and/or experienced costs of switching a relationship from one service provider to another. (Pick and Eisend 2014)	Includes the anticipated costs associated with losing friendly and comfortable relationships or personal benefits when switching to other organizations, wasting a lot of time in getting to know the new organization, and risking receiving services worse than the ones received from the current organization.	Switching barriers, calculative commitment, relationship termination costs
Customer loyalty	A collection of attitudes aligned with a series of purchase intentions and behaviors that systematically favor one service provider over competing providers. (Watson et al. 2015)	Includes customers' desire to stay in a relationship and considering the organization as their first preference, a willingness to purchase again from the organization in the future, and/or frequent and recent purchase from the organization.	Repurchase intention, company loyalty, buying behavior, attitudinal loyalty, behavioral loyalty, customer retention
Firm sales performance	Service provider performance enhancements including sales, share of wallet, or other changes to the provider's business. (Palmatier et al. 2006)	Includes changes in the number of services bought from a certain organization, and/or changes in the amount of money spent on a certain organization.	Sales, share of wallet, share of purchases, additional purchases, cross-buying

Synonyms marked with an asterisk (*) are classified as one of these relational benefits according to the content of the measurement items in that study

Relationship quality

Relationship quality represents a higher-order construct that reflects the strength of an exchange relationship (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Although debate continues about which dimensions constitute relationship quality, prior conceptualizations typically include

(relationship) satisfaction, trust, and commitment as indicators (e.g., De Wulf et al. 2001). Palmatier et al. (2006) define relationship quality as an affective state resulting from the overall assessment of a relationship, based on relationship satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Palmatier et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis reveals that the broad concept of relationship quality—rather than its specific dimensions—best captures
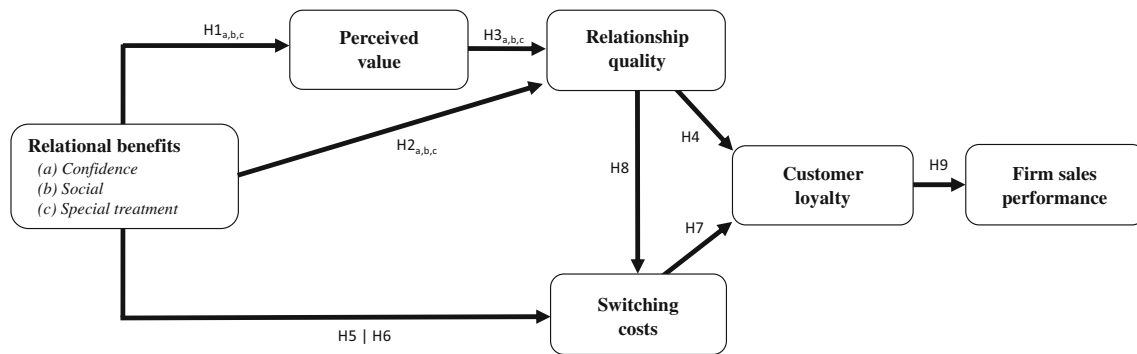
Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

the strength and breadth of a relationship between customers and service providers.

Drawing on social exchange theory as a theoretical anchor, we contend that relational benefits contribute to higher levels of relationship quality, as perceived by customers. The basic principle guiding social exchange in a relationship marketing context is reciprocity (Bagozzi 1995), in that a person who receives something favorable or valuable from another person wants to restore the balance by being more favorable toward that person and displaying more favorable behavior (Adams 1965). Investing time, effort, and other resources create psychological bonds (De Wulf et al. 2001) and cultivate mutual understanding, trust, satisfaction, and commitment (e.g., Gwinner et al. 1998; Palmatier et al. 2009). Therefore, we expect:

H2: (a) Confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits are positively and directly associated with relationship quality.

Perceived value as a mediator between relational benefits and relationship quality

Value is a core concept in social exchange theory, because each actor evaluates the input and output of another actor, against his or her own input and output, during an interaction (Adams 1965). Emerson's (1976, p. 340) value proposition (i.e., the more valuable the exchange is to a person, the more likely he or she is to perform that action) and rationality proposition (i.e., people tend to choose options with higher value and a higher chance of occurring) both suggest that if the outcome and the process of an exchange is valuable, people engage in more exchanges. If being loyal to a service provider brings several benefits to the table that make customers perceive this exchange relationship as more valuable, they prefer to restore the imbalance (i.e., having received several benefits) and reciprocate by developing a stronger relationship with that firm (Crosby et al. 1990). Gummesson (1987) accordingly considers relationship

quality a consequence of an accumulation of value over multiple interactions between a customer and a provider. Ravald and Grönroos (1996) similarly propose that relationships develop because of the value that customers extract from a relationship with a service provider. Because perceived value generally is considered an antecedent of relationship quality (Moliner 2009), relational benefits may be positively related to relationship quality through the mediating process of perceived value too.[4]

Whether perceived value fully or only partially mediates the relationship of relational benefits with relationship quality is unclear. Typically conceived of as the result of a rational decision-making process (Zeithaml 1988), perceived value primarily captures the utilitarian outcomes of being in a relationship with a service provider. We argue that relational benefits still have a direct effect on relationship quality (partial mediation of value), which captures the affective outcome of being in a relationship (Palmatier et al. 2006). The utilitarian notion of customer value cannot capture, for example, a close connection between customers and service providers that creates more enjoyable interactions or motivates customers to develop favorable perceptions of that relationship (Price and Arnould 1999). We expect that perceived value partially mediates this relationship, and a direct effect of relational benefits on relationship quality remains even after including perceived value as a mediating mechanism. Formally,

H3: Perceived value partially mediates the relationships of (a) confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits with relationship quality.

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[4] In several places herein, we refer to this sequential mediation path (relational benefits → perceived value → relationship quality → customer loyalty). Generally, if either perceived value or relationship quality is present, customers perceive them in a positive light, so these factors keep customers in relationships because they *want to* (cf. switching costs, often viewed in a negative light, such that they keep customers in the relationship because they *have to*) interact. We use "PV/RQ path" to refer to this sequential mediation path in the remainder of the text.

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Relationship quality as a mediator between perceived value and customer loyalty

Perceived value is positively associated with relationship quality (Moliner 2009; Ravald and Grönroos 1996), and several studies support a positive relationship between relationship quality and customer loyalty (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006). Therefore, we also contend that relationship quality mediates the relationship between perceived value and customer loyalty. Lam et al. (2004) conceptualize value as a cognition-based construct and suggest perceived value influences customer loyalty through a cognition–affect–behavior model. In a similar manner, Ulaga and Eggert (2006) rely on Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action to predict a relationship between customer value and loyalty, such that the effect of the cognitive variable (i.e., perceived value) is mediated by an affective variable (i.e., relationship quality) to result in a behavior (i.e., customer loyalty). Palmatier et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis also offers support for a positive relationship between relationship quality and customer loyalty.

H4: Relationship quality mediates the relationship between perceived value and customer loyalty.

Switching costs

Customers maintain relationships not only because they *want to* (PV/RQ perspective) but also because they *have to* (i.e., switching costs perspective; Geiger et al. 2012). Switching costs refer to the economic and psychological costs that people perceive, anticipate, or experience when changing a relationship from one provider to another (Jones et al. 2002), and they provide insights into why customers might be motivated to remain in relationships.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) assert that relational benefits increase customer-perceived switching costs. Lam et al. (2004, p. 297) suggest that switching decisions "may involve loyalty benefits that have to be given up by a customer when his or her relationship with the service provider ends." Relational benefits often create switching costs because when people decide to leave a service provider, they also risk losing all benefits they have accrued for being loyal to that particular organization (Chang and Chen 2007). In particular, Lam et al. (2004) predict higher switching costs when customers have developed well-known routines and procedures for dealing with a certain organization, which we consider confidence benefits. When they switch, customers must become familiar with a new organization, which invokes psychological (i.e., increased anxiety) and economic costs. Similarly, customers who enjoy social benefits due to friendly relations with employees often express loyalty toward a particular employee (Bove and Johnson 2006; Palmatier et al. 2007), which makes

it harder to switch (Jones et al. 2002). Finally, special treatment benefits imply better deals or lower prices for loyal customers, so if they switch, they would have to give up these benefits (Chang and Chen 2007).

We contend that the three relational benefits have different relationships with switching costs. Confidence benefits and social benefits build up gradually over the course of multiple interactions between customers and service providers, and both are very difficult for competitors to mimic when acquiring a new customer. In contrast, competitors often use price discounts or other promotions to attract new customers (Villanueva et al. 2008), making it easier for customers to attain similar special treatment benefits by switching to a competitor. As a result, we expect that confidence benefits and social benefits are more strongly related to switching costs than special treatment benefits are.

H5: (a) Confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits are positively associated with switching costs.

H6: Confidence benefits and social benefits are more strongly associated with switching costs than special treatment benefits are.

Switching costs also are associated with customer loyalty: Higher switching costs reduce the likelihood that customers leave the organization (Blut et al. 2015; Lam et al. 2004; Pick and Eisend 2014). Customers planning to switch from an organization risk not only incurring direct financial costs (i.e., set-up costs and monetary losses) but also losing knowledge (i.e., learning the service provider's processes), forgoing special benefits (e.g., customized services), and perhaps relinquishing personal relationships (Burnham et al. 2003). Accordingly, customers tend to remain loyal to an organization if they perceive the benefits they accrue from being loyal to that organization would be lost if they were to switch providers. We hypothesize:

H7: Switching costs mediate the relationships of (a) confidence, (b) social, and (c) special treatment benefits with customer loyalty.

Researchers have debated whether the PV/RQ perspective (i.e., perceived value → relationship quality → customer loyalty) and the switching costs perspective are independent or related processes. Lam et al. (2004) consider switching costs independent of the PV/RQ perspective; Scheer et al. (2010) support a bidimensional model, with separate paths from benefit-based dependence (i.e., relational benefits) versus cost-based dependence (i.e., switching costs) to loyalty. In contrast, Pick and Eisend (2014) propose a path from relationship quality to switching costs—suggesting that customers

lose the benefits from their relationship with a firm when they leave. Giving up valuable and high-quality relationships may be difficult and increase switching costs. Against this backdrop, we hypothesize:

H8: Relationship quality is positively associated with switching costs.

Consequences of customer loyalty

For completeness, we also specify a relationship between customer loyalty and firm sales performance (e.g., sales, share of wallet, cross-buying behavior). Watson et al. (2015) report a significant effect of a higher-order construct of customer loyalty, which includes both attitudinal and behavioral elements, on performance. We hypothesize:

H9: Customer loyalty is positively associated with firm sales performance.

Potential moderators

Our selection of moderator variables was guided by their emergence during our coding process. In particular, we observed that relational benefits have been examined in contexts where the potential for relationship formation is high (e.g., relationship service in which customers tend to interact with the same provider) or low (e.g., encounter service where customers interact with different providers). Moreover, relational benefits have been studied in both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) domains, with potential implications for the relationship marketing outcomes (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006). During the 20-year period in which research on relational benefits has emerged, a variety of relationship marketing practices also have emerged (Kumar and Reinartz 2018). Therefore, we examine how the importance of relational benefits for driving customer outcomes has evolved over time, using the differences in the methodological approaches adopted by prior studies as control variables (e.g., single versus multiple industries, student versus non-student samples, publication status).

In the following sections, we develop hypotheses regarding the moderating effects in the relationships of the three relational benefits with the entire set of *customer outcomes* (i.e., perceived value, relationship quality, switching costs, customer loyalty, and firm sales performance). This multivariate approach to the moderator analysis reflects a common constraint: In many cases, an insufficient number of effect sizes is available to test the moderators at the univariate level, resulting in unstable parameters for the moderator analysis. A multivariate approach thus is becoming increasingly common in meta-analyses in marketing (e.g., Pick and Eisend 2016; Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2018).

Type of service: Encounter versus relationship

The effect of relational benefits may differ depending on whether the service is encounter-based (e.g., fast food) or relationship-based (e.g., hairstylist) (Brown and Lam 2008). In encounter services—sometimes also referred to as transactional services—customers interact with a different service provider every time, in brief, impersonal interactions. The interactions with different employees create greater variability and uncertainty in service performance. In relationship services, customers seek out and mostly interact with the same service provider over an extended period of time, which provides more opportunities for the diffusion of affect and creation of social bonds (Brown and Lam 2008). Customers of relationship services likely know what to expect.

The accessibility–diagnosticity perspective also suggests that information that is more diagnostic and clearly discriminates among alternate categorizations strongly informs judgments and choice (e.g., Herr et al. 1991). The impact of a benefit likely differs in its diagnosticity for future relationship evaluations, depending on whether it is experienced in an encounter or a relationship setting. Specifically, high levels of confidence, social, or special treatment benefits may be more diagnostic (with more value) in an encounter setting, in which they are surprising and exceed customer expectations, versus a relationship setting, in which such benefits are expected. For example, customers of encounter services generally have weaker bonds with the service provider, and social interactions are less frequent (Brown and Lam 2008). Because relational benefits are thus both less frequent and more highly valued, they should be more diagnostic of future evaluations. In line with this accessibility–diagnosticity perspective, we hypothesize that confidence, social, and special treatment benefits have stronger relationships with customer outcomes in encounter services than in relationship services.[5]

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[5] Over time, firms providing encounter services may learn about the positive effects of relational benefits and move toward a shared industry norm of providing such benefits, tilting the transactional–relational balance more toward a relationship-based setting. Take Starbucks as an example: Buying a cup of coffee once was clearly an encounter service, but Starbucks added relationship elements to its service (e.g., remembering the names and favorite drinks of regular customers). Over time, coffee shops largely adopted these relationship elements, moving the entire industry toward a stronger relationship focus. Still, in the short run and in line with the accessibility–diagnosticity perspective, we predict that confidence, social, and special treatment benefits have stronger relationships with customer outcomes for encounter services than for relationship services.

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H10: (a) Confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits have a stronger relationship with customer outcomes in encounter services than in relationship services.

Type of market: B2B versus B2C

Relative to B2C customers, B2B customers tend to exhibit lower levels of customer loyalty, more carefully consider the trade-offs between costs and benefits, and focus more on long-term benefits (Lam et al. 2004; Palmatier et al. 2006; Ulaga and Eggert 2006). These customers also tend to invest more in long-term relationships once the relationship is established (Pick and Eisend 2014). The accessibility–diagnosticity perspective, which suggests that relational benefits are more diagnostic, implies they should be more valuable in a B2B setting, where relational benefits are more exceptional. That is,

H11: (a) Confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits have a stronger relationship with customer outcomes in B2B settings than in B2C settings.

Year of publication

In recent years, marketplaces have changed dramatically. Competition has increased significantly due to globalization, technology allows customers to make better comparisons across competitors, customers have increasing expectations regarding services, and customers are less loyal than ever (Kumar and Reinartz 2018). Customers also place greater emphasis on convenience and the value the organization adds beyond the core service (Kumar and Reinartz 2018). Three particular trends are noteworthy in the context of relational benefits. First, customers face more and more time constraints, meaning they do not always have time to engage in an extensive comparison of alternatives. Time-strapped customers might react more favorably to organizations that provide confidence benefits, which saves them time and effort rather than requiring them to search for other suitable alternatives. Second, marketing activities involve fewer customer–employee interactions (e.g., technology replacing customer-employee interactions), so social benefits may become more important to customers seeking a personal connection. Third, customers are increasingly price sensitive, looking for good deals and ways to save money. These features are key examples of special treatment benefits, which thus may grow more important over time. Many of these evolutions started emerging in the midst of the first decade of the twenty-first century, requiring marketers to rethink

their approaches to relationship marketing (Kumar and Reinartz 2018). Against this backdrop, we hypothesize:

H12: (a) Confidence benefits, (b) social benefits, and (c) special treatment benefits have stronger relationships with customer outcomes in more recent studies than in earlier studies.

Control variables

We include three control variables in our analysis. First, as Geyskens et al. (1998, p. 223) note, "multiple industries yield more variation in the data than a single industry … this should increase the range on the constructs of interest and consequently have a positive effect on the magnitude of the correlation coefficient." Therefore, relational benefits should have a stronger effect for multiple-industry samples. Second, studies of relational benefits differ in their use of a student or non-student sample. Students are atypical respondents in many contexts, due to their limited consumption experiences and different cognitive structures, leading them to weight attributes differently than other customers (Peterson and Merunka 2014). Consumer behavior research also reveals that older people tend to form habits more easily, rather than engaging in extensive information processing (Gilly and Zeithaml 1985). Students, who are typically young consumers, thus may evaluate the benefits they receive from an organization more extensively, whereas non-student, typically older consumers could rely more on habitual buying behavior. We then expect relational benefits to be more strongly related to customer outcomes in student samples than in non-student ones. Third, published papers typically report stronger effect sizes than unpublished papers (McAuley et al. 2000). We control for the publication status of a study.

Method

Literature search and criteria for inclusion

We used several approaches to retrieve published and unpublished articles examining relational benefits. We started with an ancestry approach, in which we examined more than 3000 papers that cite Gwinner et al.'s (1998) work on different types of relational benefits, as well as more than 2600 papers that cite a follow-up study by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002). All papers citing one of these two articles were examined in detail. In a second step, we conducted a computerized bibliographical search across all relevant databases (ScienceDirect, Ebsco, Social Science Research Network, Web of Knowledge,

Emerald) using search terms such as "relational benefits," "relationship benefits," "confidence benefits," "social benefits," "special treatment benefits," "functional benefits," "trust benefits," and "psychological benefits." In a third step, we repeated this computerized bibliographical search using Google Scholar and Google as search engines, which might help us identify unpublished studies. Fourth, we performed a manual search of marketing or marketing-related journals publishing papers on relational benefits (see Web Appendix A for a list of the manually searched journals). Fifth, we undertook these four steps again, using keywords similar to relational benefits, such as "relational bonds," "social bonds," "economic bonds," "relationship marketing investments," "relationship marketing efforts," and "relationship marketing strategies,"[6] to find additional pertinent articles that might not contain the precise term "relational benefits."

As defined in Table 1, relational benefits were conceptualized and measured as the confidence, social, and/or special treatment benefits that customers receive from being loyal to a service provider. In choosing studies for this meta-analysis, we applied four inclusion criteria. First, studies must have examined at least one of the three *distinct* relational benefits, as defined in Table 1, instead of conceptualizing and/or operationalizing relational benefits as a single, general construct. Second, studies must have examined at least one of the following constructs: perceived value, relationship quality, switching costs, customer loyalty, or firm sales performance. Third, the studies needed to be quantitative in nature and contain sufficient statistical information to extract effect sizes. Most studies report correlations, and the correlation coefficients serve as effect size metrics. We either extracted the correlations directly, using the zero-order correlation reported, or indirectly, by converting other statistical data (e.g., standardized beta coefficients, *t*-values) into a correlation coefficient using the relevant formula (Hunter and Schmidt 2004; Peterson and Brown 2005). Fourth, because we consider Gwinner et al.'s (1998) article as a starting point for research on *different* types of relational benefits, we include studies published from 1998 onward.

This procedure resulted in a set of 224 papers, some of which included more than one independent sample. Multiple papers presenting results from the same sample were treated as a single study. We coded the paper published earliest first, after which we coded any additional information from subsequent papers using the same set of data. Conversely, multiple independent samples presented in a single paper (e.g., multistudy papers with independent data sets) were treated as separate studies. Overall, this meta-analysis thus covers 235 independent samples, with a combined total of 97,803 respondents. Web Appendix B lists the papers included in this meta-

analysis; Web Appendix C offers some descriptive statistics about these studies.

Coding of studies

In a method similar to that described by Zablah et al. (2012), one experienced meta-analyst read each article and coded all available correlations (or other statistics) for relationships between any constructs in our conceptual framework, sample sizes, and construct reliabilities. Intercoder agreement about information from primary studies is a concern in meta-analysis but typically is not a problem for coding statistical information (Geyskens et al. 2006). Judgment calls during the coding process were discussed with the other authors as needed; two issues required particular attention. First, as we systematically reviewed the studies, measures of relational benefits, and the five outcome variables, we encountered highly similar measurement scales that were labeled differently. Therefore, we referred to the original scales and items in each study; studies sometimes use the same label for different relational benefits and/or outcome variables (see Table 1). We classified the different variables according to the construct definitions in Table 1, to avoid a situation in which we combined dissimilar constructs or separated conceptually equivalent or similar constructs. Second, if studies reported two or more correlations for the same relationships (e.g., associations of confidence benefits with trust and commitment, both of which indicate relationship quality), we combined them into a composite correlation, using Hunter and Schmidt's (2004) formulae.

Our final sample includes 1242 correlations. Thirty percent of the studies include only one of the three relational benefits in their research models, 33% include two relational benefits, and the remaining 37% examine all three relational benefits simultaneously. A detailed breakdown of the combination of relation benefits studied can be found in Web Appendix D.

In a next step, two independent reviewers coded the moderators using a predefined coding scheme (see Web Appendix E), with an agreement rate of 98%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. In particular, the coders were instructed to determine whether the study was conducted in a B2B or B2C market (i.e., the buyer is another firm or a consumer, respectively), whether the data were collected in a single industry (e.g., restaurants) or in multiple industries (e.g., restaurants, hotels, airlines, and banks in one study), and whether the data collection involved a student or nonstudent sample. In line with Brown and Lam (2008), coders also had to determine whether the service being studied can be defined as a relationship business (i.e., service in which customers typically seek out the same employee over the course of multiple interactions) or an encounter business (i.e., service in which customers typically encounter different employees

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[6] We are grateful to one of the reviewers for the suggestion to include these additional keywords.

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over the course of multiple interactions). In addition, we coded the year in which the study was published. Approaches to relationship marketing changed notably around the midpoint of the time of our sample (i.e., 2005/2006), due to the various changes in technology (e.g., introduction of Facebook and Twitter), consumer behavior, and markets, as we noted previously. Therefore, we created a dummy variable to capture this evolution. Imposing the time lag required for academic publication, we used 2009 as a cut-off date.[7]

Of the 224 papers, about 84% were published in academic journals; the remaining 16% include unpublished doctoral dissertations, master's theses, working papers, or conference proceedings. The study participants are students in 7% of the studies, and slightly less than 82% of the studies focus on a B2C setting. Eighty-six percent of studies examine relational benefits in a single industry. Studies focusing on encounter services in which customers interact with a different service provider each time account for 49% of our sample, while 37% refer to relationship services in which customers interact with the same employee for each service provision (Gutek et al. 1999). The remaining 14% of studies examine relational benefits in multi-industry settings. Web Appendix F provides an overview of the study characteristics.

Effect size integration

With a random-effects model, we integrate the correlations as a mean effect size. Following standard meta-analytic practices, we first correct the correlation coefficients for measurement error by dividing them by the product of the square root of the reliabilities for both constructs. If this information is missing, the sample size–weighted mean reliability provides an approximation (Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2018). In a next step, we correct for sampling error by weighting the reliability-corrected correlation coefficients by sample size (Hunter and Schmidt 2004). In line with Field's (2001) recommendation, we did not apply a Fisher z-transformation when integrating effect sizes, because these correlations would underestimate the coefficients' actual variance and overestimate the effect size of heterogeneous correlations (as are typical in marketing studies) by 15% to 45%.

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[7] We are grateful to the Associate Editor and a reviewer for their suggestion to include a dummy variable to represent changes in the relationship marketing environment. To define a reasonable time lag between the year of data collection and the year of publication, we calculated the differences between the date a paper was received and the date it was published in the May 2019 volume of *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (average: 1.7 years), then added an extra year to account for the manuscript writing process. Therefore, we anticipate an average time lag of about three years, such that a paper published in 2009 likely reflects data collected in 2006. Our results remain stable if we use two- or four-year time lags instead.

Path model estimation

To test the nomological model in Fig. 1, we use structural path analysis. This analysis requires a meta-analytically derived correlation matrix as input. In total, our conceptual framework contains eight variables, which means that 28 off-diagonal cells of a correlation matrix need to be filled. We calculated meta-analytic correlations among all constructs in our conceptual framework and used these correlations to create a meta-analytic correlation matrix. All constructs were observed variables. The relationships between the various constructs were specified as shown in Fig. 1. In addition, we allowed for correlations among the three relational benefits. We used the harmonic mean of the cumulative sample sizes across all relationships as the sample size for the analysis ($n = 11{,}633$). The harmonic mean assigns less weight to larger samples, so it offers a more conservative test than the arithmetic mean. Similar to Hong et al. (2013), we evaluate model fit using the chi square (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR).

Moderator analysis

We employed multivariate, multilevel meta-regressions to test for the effect of the moderators for two main reasons. First, meta-regressions often suffer from a lack of statistical power, due to the limited number of observations per individual relationship (Hox 2010), and we did not propose hypotheses specific to univariate relationships. Therefore, we test the moderating effects at the multivariate level. Second, the samples in our meta-analysis typically provide more than one effect size estimate. Multiple effect sizes provided by one sample cannot be considered independent (Hox 2010), and ignoring these dependencies can lead to an underestimation of standard errors. Multilevel meta-regressions account for these dependencies.

The multilevel model for this meta-analysis consists of two levels: the first incorporates information about the correlations, and the second provides information about the studies that provide these correlations. Basically, Level 1 includes information about relationships that vary within studies, whereas Level 2 includes information about study characteristics that vary between studies. We ran three models—one for each type of relational benefit.

We specified the model using Hox's (2010) guidelines, such that we regressed the reliability-corrected correlations on five dummy variables at Level 1, representing each dependent variable that correlated with relational benefits, as well as six moderators at Level 2. The moderators include the type of service (encounter versus relationship), type of market (B2C versus B2B), publication year (published before 2009 versus during/after 2009), sample (non-students versus students), the

number of industries sampled (single versus multiple), and publication status (published versus unpublished). Thus, the model is as follows:

(1) Level 1

$$ES_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} \times \left(Perceived\ value_{ij}\right) + \beta_{2j}$$
$$\times \left(Switching\ cost_{ij}\right) + \beta_{3j}$$
$$\times \left(Relationship\ quality_{ij}\right) + \beta_{4j}$$
$$\times \left(Customer\ loyalty_{ij}\right) + \beta_{5j}$$
$$\times \left(Firm\ sales\ performance_{ij}\right) + e_{ij};$$

(2) Level 2

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{01} \times \left(Type\ of\ service: Relationship\ versus\ encounter_j\right)$$
$$+ \gamma_{02} \times \left(B2C\ versus\ B2B\ setting_j\right) + \gamma_{03}$$
$$\times \left(Publication\ year_j\right) + \gamma_{04}$$
$$\times \left(Single\ versus\ multiple\ industries_j\right) + \gamma_{05}$$
$$\times \left(Non-student\ versus\ student\ samples_j\right) + \gamma_{06}$$
$$\times \left(Published\ versus\ unpublished\ study_j\right) + u_{0j},$$

where ES_{ij} is the ith reliability-corrected correlation coefficient reported in the jth sample. Equation 1 details the effect of different correlates of relational benefits that vary within studies. Equation 2 describes the impact of study-level variables on the intercept of the first-level equation, where e_{ij} refers to the effect size–level residual variance, and u_{0j} indicates study-level residual variance. Because we include a dummy variable for each correlate of relational benefits at the effect size level, we omit the intercept (Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2018). The dummy variables at the effect size level thus serve as outcome variable–specific intercepts. To estimate the multilevel model, we use an iterative generalized least squares procedure, which yields maximum likelihood estimates, and estimate it three times, once for each relational benefit we investigate. For our directional hypotheses regarding the moderating effects, we use one-sided hypotheses tests.

Results

Analysis of pairwise relations

Table 2 lists the reliability-corrected, sample size–weighted correlations among the eight variables in the conceptual framework (see Web Appendix G for full meta-analytic statistics). An inspection of the pairwise correlations among the three relational benefits reveals that they range from .51 to .55, suggesting the usefulness of treating these variables as separate constructs in our analysis.[8] The three relational benefits correlate significantly with perceived value, switching costs, relationship quality, customer loyalty, and firm sales performance.

Path model results

The correlation matrix in Table 2 provides the input for the path model estimation. The hypothesized model fits the data well ($\chi^2(11) = 1850.99$, $p < .001$; CFI = .96, TLI = .90, SRMR = .05). The model in Fig. 2 accounts for 46% of the variance in perceived value, 19% of the variance in switching costs, 65% of the variance in relationship quality, 52% of the variance in customer loyalty, and 36% of the variance in firm sales performance. Figure 2 includes the direct effects of our path model. We also compute indirect effects to assess the mediating effects of perceived value, relationship quality, and switching costs in the relationship between relational benefits and customer loyalty (see Table 3).

Confidence benefits (.42, $p < .001$), social benefits (.31, $p < .001$), and special treatment benefits (.06, $p < .001$) are significantly related to perceived value, in support of H1a–c. Perceived value, in turn, is positively associated with relationship quality (.52, $p < .001$). The analysis of the indirect effects (Table 3) reveals that perceived value mediates the relationships of all three relational benefits with relationship quality (confidence: .22, $p < .001$; social: .16, $p < .001$; special treatment: .03, $p < .001$). Confidence benefits (.24, $p < .001$), social benefits (.11, $p < .001$), and special treatment benefits (.07, $p < .001$) are still directly and positively associated with relationship quality too. Therefore, perceived value partially mediates the relationships of relational benefits with relationship quality, in support of H2a–c and H3a–c. Finally, relationship quality is directly and positively associated with customer loyalty (.66, $p < .001$). The analysis of the indirect effects (Table 3) reveals that relationship quality mediates the perceived value–customer loyalty relationship (.34, $p < .001$). These findings support H4. Overall, the results support a serial

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[8] We also coded the means and standard deviations of the three relational benefits reported in the 235 samples and recalibrated them to 0–100 scales. The average levels are 67 (SD = 16) for confidence benefits, 51 (SD = 19) for social benefits, and 49 (SD = 18) for special treatment benefits. The t-tests reveal that these average levels do not differ significantly between B2B and B2C contexts (all $p > .10$). The average level of confidence benefits also does not differ between encounter and relationship services ($p > .10$), whereas that of social benefits is significantly higher in relationship services (56) than in encounter services (48; t(77) = 2.404, $p < .05$). The average level of special treatment benefits is marginally significantly higher in relationship services (55) than in encounter services (47; t(77) = 1.929, $p < .06$). Web Appendix H provides further detail.

Table 2 Meta-analytic correlations among relational benefits and their consequences

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Confidence benefits	[.84]							
2. Social benefits	.51	[.86]						
3. Special treatment benefits	.52	.55	[.85]					
4. Perceived value	.61	.56	.45	[.82]				
5. Switching costs	.36	.33	.30	.30	[.82]			
6. Relationship quality	.65	.56	.49	.76	.39	[.87]		
7. Customer loyalty	.57	.47	.40	.61	.39	.71	[.84]	
8. Firm sales performance	.46	.28	.21	.36	.35	.52	.60	[.85]

Sample size–weighted, reliability-corrected correlation are reported. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$. Entries on the diagonal are weighted mean reliability coefficients. The harmonic mean of the cumulative sample sizes across all relationships is 11,633. Full results of the pairwise analyses can be found in Web Appendix E

mediation model of confidence benefits (.14, $p < .001$), social benefits (.11, $p < .001$), and special treatment benefits (.02, $p < .001$) on customer loyalty through both perceived value and relationship quality (see Table 3).

Confidence benefits (.13, $p < .001$), social benefits (.11, $p < .001$), and special treatment benefits (.07, $p < .001$) are significantly and positively related to switching costs, in support of H5a–c. To test H6 (i.e., confidence and social benefits have a stronger relationship with switching costs than special treatment benefits), we impose equality constraints. Model fit deteriorates significantly when constraining the confidence benefits → switching costs path and the special treatment benefits → switching costs path to equality ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 13.18$, $p < .001$). The same effect occurs when constraining the social benefits → switching costs path and the special treatment benefits → switching costs path to equality ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.35$, $p < .05$). These findings support H6.

Switching costs are significantly related to customer loyalty (.13, $p < .001$). The analysis of the indirect effects (Table 3) reveals that switching costs mediate the relationship between confidence benefits and customer loyalty (.02, $p < .001$), the relationship between social benefits and customer loyalty (.01, $p < .001$), and the relationship between special treatment benefits and customer loyalty (.01, $p < .001$). These findings support H7a–c.[9] In support of H8, we also find a significant relationship between relationship quality and switching costs (.21, $p < .001$). As expected, customer loyalty is positively associated with firm sales performance (.60, $p < .001$) and thus supports H9.

Moderator analysis

Table 4 contains the results of the moderator analysis on all customer outcomes, which (as described earlier) include perceived value, switching costs, relationship quality, customer loyalty, and firm sales performance. The effects of both confidence ($\gamma = -.03$, $p > .10$) and social ($\gamma = -.04$, $p > .10$) benefits on all customer outcomes do not differ across relationship or encounter services. In line with our expectations, the relationship between special treatment benefits and customer outcomes is weaker for relationship services than encounter services ($\gamma = -.08$, $p < .05$); these findings conflict with H10a and H10b but provide support for H10c. Confidence benefits ($\gamma = .11$, $p < .10$) and special treatment benefits ($\gamma = .08$, $p < .10$) are more strongly associated with customer outcomes in B2B settings than in B2C settings, though the difference is only marginally significant. The moderating effect of B2B versus B2C on the relationships between social benefits and customer outcomes is not significant ($\gamma = .05$, $p > .10$). Thus we find partial support for H11a and H11c but not H11b. The strength of relationships of confidence benefits ($-.03$, $p > .10$) and social benefits (.04, $p > .10$) with customer outcomes do not differ between papers released before 2009 or after 2009. However, special treatment benefits are more strongly associated with customer outcomes in papers published in or after 2009 than in those released before 2009 (.10, $p < .01$). These findings support H12c but not H12a and H12b.

We observe a significant difference in the strength of relationships between confidence benefits and customer outcomes for studies that use student versus non-student samples ($\gamma = .15$, $p < .05$), as well as marginally significant differences across these samples in the strength of the relationships of social benefits ($\gamma = .12$, $p < .10$) and special treatment benefits ($\gamma = .12$, $p < .10$) with customer outcomes. Confidence benefits are more strongly related to customer outcomes for studies conducted in multiple, as opposed to single, industries ($\gamma = .15$, $p < .01$); this relationship is marginally significant for special treatment benefits ($\gamma = .08$, $p < .10$). Finally, special

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[9] Although not hypothesized, the results reveal that the indirect effect from relational benefits to customer loyalty through perceived value and relationship quality (confidence: .14, $p < .001$; social: .11, $p < .001$; special treatment: .02, $p < .001$) is stronger than the indirect effect from relational benefits to customer loyalty through switching costs (confidence: .02, $p < .001$; social: .01, $p < .001$; special treatment: .01, $p < .001$). Imposing equality constraints on these indirect paths significantly worsens model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(3) = 2590.71$, $p < .001$).

Fig. 2 Path model results. Notes: *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Theoretical implications

We make three primary contributions with this meta-analytic study. First, we examine the extent to which each of three individual relational benefits components predicts customer responses, thereby determining which ones have the strongest impact. Our findings extend research on relational benefits that frequently studies outcomes using a single, one-dimensional relational benefit construct (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016). Second, we generate new knowledge about the processes (combined PV/RQ mediation path and/or switching costs mediation path) through which relational benefits affect customer loyalty. Illuminating these

treatment benefits are more strongly associated with customer outcomes in unpublished studies than in published studies ($\gamma = .10$, $p < .05$). No other effects are significant.

processes represents a contribution to relationship quality/ value literature (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Martin-Ruiz et al. 2008; Palmatier et al. 2006) and switching cost literature (e.g., Chang and Chen 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002; Lam et al. 2004); we specify these constructs as the mechanism through which relational benefits lead to customer loyalty. Third, we study which contingency factors (i.e., type of service, type of market, and timing of study) influence these relationships. By identifying these factors, this study helps provide guidelines for appropriate contexts in which to consider managerial implications. We elaborate on these contributions in the rest of this section.

With regard to the first contribution, our results provide empirical generalizations of how each of the three relational benefits components affects customer responses. Both confidence and social benefits exert significant impacts on loyalty, through customer perceived value, relationship quality, and switching costs—each of which serves as a mediator in the relationships. Special treatment benefits consistently have a much weaker, though significant, effect on perceived value,

Table 3 Mediation analysis

Relationship	Indirect effect via:	Test of:	Indirect effect	Mediation?
Confidence benefits → Relationship quality	Perceived value	H3a	.22***	Yes
Social benefits → Relationship quality	Perceived value	H3b	.16***	Yes
Special treatment benefits → Relationship quality	Perceived value	H3c	.03***	Yes
Perceived value → Customer loyalty	Relationship quality	H4	.34***	Yes
Confidence benefits → Customer loyalty	Perceived value and relationship quality	–	.14***	Yes
Social benefits → Customer loyalty	Perceived value and relationship quality	–	.11***	Yes
Special treatment benefits → Customer loyalty	Perceived value and relationship quality	–	.02***	Yes
Confidence benefits → Customer loyalty	Switching costs	H5a	.02***	Yes
Social benefits → Customer loyalty	Switching costs	H5b	.01***	Yes
Special treatment benefits → Customer loyalty	Switching costs	H5c	.01***	Yes

*** $p < .001$. [n.s.] not significant. One-tailed tests of significance

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Table 4 Moderator analyses results

Variables	Hypotheses	Confidence benefits			Social benefits			Special treatment benefits		
		γ	(S.E.)	p	γ	(S.E.)	p	γ	(S.E.)	p
Level 1 variables (Customer outcomes)										
Perceived value		.62	(.07)	***	.40	(.06)	***	.35	(.06)	***
Switching costs		.32	(.07)	***	.30	(.07)	***	.26	(.07)	***
Relationship quality		.61	(.05)	***	.46	(.04)	***	.37	(.04)	***
Customer loyalty		.54	(.05)	***	.39	(.04)	***	.31	(.04)	***
Firm sales performance		.35	(.07)	***	.40	(.06)	***	.21	(.05)	***
Level 2 variables (between-study moderators)										
Relationship (versus encounter) services	H10a,b,c	−.03	(.05)	n.s.	−.04	(.04)	n.s.	−.08	(.04)	*
B2B (versus B2C) setting	H11a,b,c	.11	(.07)	+	.05	(.05)	n.s.	.08	(.06)	+
Year of publication	H12a,b,c	−.03	(.05)	n.s.	.04	(.04)	n.s.	.10	(.04)	**
Level 2 covariates										
Student (versus non-student) sample		.15	(.07)	*	.12	(.08)	+	.12	(.08)	+
Multiple (versus single) industries		.15	(.06)	**	.04	(.05)	n.s.	.08	(.06)	+
Unpublished (versus published) research		.01	(.06)	n.s.	.03	(.05)	n.s.	.10	(.05)	*
Level 2: Number of studies		117			165			188		
Level 1: Number of effect sizes		205			270			309		

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. + $p < .10$. n.s. not significant. One-tailed tests of significance

relationship quality, switching costs, and thus on customer loyalty. Among the 224 papers included in this meta-analysis, we consistently find that special treatment is a weak contributor to the process of creating customer loyalty. The resulting insights are important from a theoretical standpoint, because they offer guidance about which relational benefits are most appropriate to include in relationship marketing models and frameworks: Scholars may want to emphasize confidence and social benefits and consider limiting the inclusion of special treatment benefits in their research. These results also suggest that a unidimensional approach to relational benefits (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2016) might not adequately capture the influence of each benefit component on customer loyalty.

As our second contribution, we offer insights into the processes through which relational benefits affect customer loyalty. Although prior literature has predicted that relational benefits operate on customer loyalty through a perceived value path (Martin-Ruiz et al. 2008), a relationship quality path (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002), or a switching costs path (Chang and Chen 2007; Geiger et al. 2012), no simultaneous test of these pathways exists, leaving the importance of each path and their interplay in question. In this study, we (1) model perceived value as a mediator of the relational benefits → relationship quality relationship, (2) consider switching costs as an additional process underlying the relational benefits → customer loyalty relationship, and (3) propose and then test a relationship between both mediating processes by specifying a path from relationship quality to switching costs.

Our examination of all of these mediation paths—the first meta-analysis to do so simultaneously—suggests that relational benefits influence customer loyalty through all three paths. Furthermore, as we noted in Footnote 9, the path to loyalty from relational benefits is stronger through the PV/RQ path. As such, we can conclude that a positive perspective (i.e., focus on why customers *want* to stay, based on value, trust, commitment, and satisfaction) rather than a negative perspective (i.e., focus on customers' perceptions that they *have to* stay in a relationship) provides greater insights into customer loyalty. With respect to the PV/RQ path, all three relational benefits strengthen customer perceived value and thus relationship quality, which in turn increases customer loyalty. In addition to the direct effect of relational benefits on relationship quality, perceived value partially mediates this relationship. Kumar and Reinartz (2016) observe that marketing literature often omits customer perceived value from conceptual models, despite its importance for practitioners; our findings provide empirical justification for including perceived value, in that it better reveals the manner in which relationship quality is influenced by the three relational benefit constructs.

According to the evidence we obtain of a switching costs path, driven by all three relational benefits, we also note that the presence of relational benefits makes it more difficult for customers to switch providers. These findings provide new insight into Gremler and Gwinner's (2015) question about whether relational benefits are equivalent to switching costs. Our findings suggest that they are distinct constructs—both

conceptually and empirically—and that switching costs are what customers perceive when they must relinquish relational benefits received. Thus, relational benefits may engender switching costs, but it appears that switching costs also entail other perceptions of the quality of the customer–firm relationship, beyond its relational benefits.

Then our findings extend relationship marketing theory by providing insights into the independence and interdependence of the mediation processes. Some studies assert that the PV/RQ and switching costs processes are independent (Lam et al. 2004); others specify a path from relationship quality to switching costs (Pick and Eisend 2014). Our findings suggest that even though both paths have direct effects on customer loyalty, the PV/RQ path also reinforces the switching costs path. Therefore, continued efforts to understand relationship marketing outcomes would benefit from modeling both processes simultaneously.

The third contribution comes from our examination of the relationships of relational benefits with customer outcomes in the presence of various contingency factors (i.e., type of service, type of market, and timing of study). Relational benefits are slightly more important in B2B than in B2C service contexts, in line with prior findings that B2B customers tend to exhibit lower customer loyalty, consider cost–benefit trade-offs more carefully, and focus more on long-term relationships (Lam et al. 2004; Palmatier et al. 2006; Ulaga and Eggert 2006). Across relationship and encounter services, we do not find any differences in the effects of confidence or social benefits on customer outcomes. However, in line with our expectations, the relationship between special treatment benefits and customer outcomes is not as strong in relationship services as it is in encounter services. Although we took an accessibility–diagnosticity perspective (Herr et al. 1991) to argue that relational benefits might be more important in encounter contexts, where they would be surprising and exceed customer expectations, we find that only special treatment benefits appear to exert this differential impact. It thus seems that confidence and social benefits are equally important across encounter and relationship services, but special treatments benefits provide a differential advantage for encounter services.

Our findings also indicate that the effect of relational benefits has changed over time. Specifically, relationships between special treatment benefits and customer outcomes appear stronger in more recent studies—suggesting perhaps that specific environmental trends (e.g., increasing self-service technology, social media influences) exhibit more powerful impacts on later studies than they did previously. The relationships of confidence and social benefits with customer outcomes remain equivalently strong over time though. In terms of methodological moderators, our findings suggest that the use of student samples (a relatively small percentage of studies in our data set) may lead to an overestimation of the effects of confidence and special treatment benefits. Researchers should

be cautious when generalizing findings obtained from such samples.

In summary, the moderator variables we examine suggest some boundary conditions for our conceptual model, highlighting where and in which conditions the model applies most effectively: The special treatment benefits–customer outcomes relationship is stronger in encounter services; confidence and special treatment benefits have marginally stronger impacts in B2B settings over B2C settings; and special treatment benefits' relationship with customer outcome variables is stronger in more recent papers (proxy for technology advances).

Managerial implications

When designing strategies to improve relational benefits, managers might focus more on establishing (or strengthening) confidence benefits and social benefits, both which have much stronger effects on perceived value, relationship quality, and switching costs—and therefore customer loyalty—than do special treatment benefits. To provide confidence benefits, firms must establish consistent, seamless, high-quality customer experiences (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), so that customers know what to expect and have confidence when interacting with the firm. Managers should clearly describe customers' roles in the service process and invest in developing customer skills to make the most of a service, as well as provide frontline employees with clear service scripts that specify the service delivery, while also training them to provide consistent delivery that instills confidence in customers. Offering service guarantees can help reduce purchase risks and increase confidence benefits (Hogreve and Gremler 2009). Managing expectations so that they can be delivered on is also critical. Some firms have found value in providing realistic service previews for their customers to clarify role expectations (Bitner et al. 1997). Advertising that accurately depicts an expected level of service, as long as it then gets delivered consistently, can also reinforce confidence benefits.

Social benefits are important for service firms that want to increase customer loyalty. Frontline employees need to be able to engage socially with customers, and the firm culture must encourage and reward their investments in such activities. To this end, setting measurable goals for interactions, rewarding progress, making social engagement with customers a part of job descriptions, and providing employee training on how to exert the most impact in such interactions is critical. Companies can facilitate the development of social benefits by structuring service delivery processes to encourage interactions of sufficient duration; longer interactions may provide more opportunities for social benefits to develop. However, encouraging longer interactions demands a strategic decision process for firms if industry norms instead embrace quick and efficient interactions to maximize the returns on employees' time. A more time-consuming but personal

approach can enable firms to set themselves apart in a crowded industry with many alternative service providers. To overcome the negative aspects of longer interactions, the use of technology may help some firms leverage their delivery of social benefits, from one to many. For example, a clothing retail firm might encourage employees to use company-branded Snapchat accounts to inform customers of new offerings, allowing each employee to interact with many customers online by establishing dialogues about their customer needs. Such an innovation would allow a single employee to reach multiple customers efficiently to cultivate social benefits.

As indicated previously, special treatment benefits appear less effective than the other relational benefits. It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the underlying reason, but a possible explanation is that special treatment benefits are relatively prevalent today, compared with confidence and social benefits. When customers contemplate switching service providers, they might assume that any special treatment benefits they have forfeited by leaving will be replaced by the new firm. Popular reward programs (e.g., airlines, hotels) reinforce this notion of special treatment being tied to patronage. For example, the auto insurer Allstate offers "accident forgiveness" to clients after a specified (relatively short) period of time with no further accidents; the insured qualifies for the benefit of not incurring a price increase for auto insurance, even in the event of a future accident, which represents a form of special treatment. In the past, this benefit would have been provided only to long-term customers. As an alternative explanation, we posit that the commonly used promotional incentives directed at new customers may be perceived as more valuable than any special treatment benefits, which might not appear all that "special" to customers. Managers might either place less emphasis on special treatment benefits or else develop special treatment options that are hard to replicate and valued by consumers.

In a sense, the low importance of special treatment benefits might represent good news for companies; these benefits can be expensive to provide, and firms that choose not to provide them may enjoy direct impacts on their bottom-line financial results. Because these benefits generally can be copied easily by competitors, they are less likely to lead to a sustainable competitive advantage. Customers driven by special treatment benefits may remain loyal only until a competitor offers better benefits; our findings suggest that a diminished emphasis on special treatment benefits can be a prudent strategy. One caveat though is that when the customer views a special treatment benefit as essential (i.e., benefit-based dependence, Scheer et al. 2010), failing to offer it might exclude the firm from the customer's consideration set. Such a scenario may arise if most competitors have enhanced their offering with this benefit, such that what was once viewed as a (differentiating) special treatment factor is now simply a point of parity and an industry standard.

Both processes for realizing the impact of relational benefits (PV/RQ path and switching costs path) drive the effect of relational benefits on customer outcomes. This finding is good news for managers, whose investments in relational benefits can pay off in two ways. On the one hand, all three relational benefits increase perceived value, which improves relationship quality and customer loyalty. On the other hand, confidence and social benefits increase customers' relationship dependency and raise the costs of switching to another organization. Those switching costs then increase customer loyalty. In terms of prioritizing one path over another, our analysis indicates that the PV/RQ path has a greater influence on customer loyalty. Even if both paths are beneficial, promotional messages emphasizing value and relational quality elements, driven by the presence of relational benefits, may be more effective.

Limitations and further research

The current research suffers the limitations inherent to any meta-analysis. First, the availability of information is limited, because some articles do not report sufficient statistical information to be included. For example, we identify seven distinct relational benefits in prior literature but had to exclude four that do not appear in a sufficient number of studies. More research on other relational benefits—including, but not limited to, identity-related, respect, hedonic, and quality improvement benefits—is necessary to understand their relative effectiveness for fostering customer loyalty. The notion of "relational costs," which could be conceived of, in line with relational benefits, as the costs that accrue when a customer is loyal, is an interesting one, virtually absent from prior literature. To understand the relationship between a customer and an organization, these costs should be accounted for and included in new studies. In addition, even though Palmatier et al. (2007) demonstrate differential effects of loyalty toward an organization and loyalty toward a frontline employee, this meta-analysis includes only customer loyalty toward an organization as an insufficient number of studies examine customer loyalty toward a frontline employee. However, such examination might be theoretically relevant to undertake. For example, switching costs may be less likely to drive customer loyalty when a customer's loyalty is focused toward an employee rather than an organization.

Second, differences in the strengths of the effects of the relational benefit variables could be attributed to measurement issues. Methodological problems can affect the results of any individual study, though they are unlikely to have had a significant impact on our empirical generalizations, which are based on 1242 correlations from 235 independent samples reported in 224 papers. The majority of papers in our meta-analysis have been published in peer-reviewed journals, which assures a certain level of quality. However,

methodological concerns cannot be ruled out completely and should receive more attention in further research. Related to this point, researchers examining relational benefits rely almost exclusively on survey-based methods. More studies using experimental designs are necessary to make causal inferences about the consequences of relational benefits.

Third, we call for more research on the moderators of the relationships we examine, especially studies that seek to identify conditions that moderate the mediation effects we assessed. In a meta-analysis, examining such conditions is not possible, because we rely on the summary statistics reported in each article rather than the original data. Our moderator analysis relies on a multivariate approach, which enhances its statistical power. As more data become available, particularly for the perceived value and switching costs constructs, continued research could examine whether the two mediation paths (PV/RQ and switching costs) operate differently across contingent factors. For example, the switching cost mechanism might exert a stronger influence in B2B than in B2C contexts. Also, there are other ways to classify types of service besides the "encounter-based vs. relationship-based" classification (Brown and Lam 2008) that we use. Future research might benefit from considering other service classifications and perhaps reveal additional moderating effects. And, we use publication year as a proxy for the year of data collection, which typically is not reported. Researchers might use longitudinal approaches to study how the effect of relational benefits on customer outcomes has evolved over time.

Fourth, relatively few studies examine antecedents of customer relational benefits, so we could not include them in the current study. More research examining how relational benefits develop is necessary. Even though relational benefits originally were conceptualized as a consequence of customer loyalty (Gwinner et al. 1998), virtually all studies examine customer loyalty as a consequence of relational benefits. Research with a longitudinal approach could examine these reciprocal relationships over time and might provide insights into which relational benefits contribute most to customer loyalty across the stages of a customer lifecycle. For example, perhaps confidence benefits are particularly important in the early stages of a relationship, whereas social benefits need to more time to develop. The type of service (encounter versus relationship, B2B versus B2C) also might drive the nature of the benefits. A related extension might examine the interactions of the various relational benefits. In this study, we consider relational benefits independent; testing their interactions would offer an interesting contribution. On this point, our meta-analysis is limited in that we must rely on statistics reported by other authors in their papers. Virtually all these studies examine only the main effects of relational benefits, so we cannot include interaction effects. We encourage scholars to test for potential interactions across the various relational benefits.

Fifth, factors such as products versus services or contractual versus non-contractual settings also could affect the results. Studies examining relational benefits are rooted in service research; further research should test relational benefits in product industries. Moreover, other mediating mechanisms may be at work, such as gratitude and entitlement (Wetzel et al. 2014). Our meta-analysis draws inferences from existing studies on relational benefits that have not addressed these context factors fully. We therefore encourage more research in these areas. Given our findings related to perceived value and switching costs, it may also be interesting for future research to examine the effects of relational benefits on both relationship value dependence and switching cost dependence (cf. Scheer et al. 2015). Dependence is seldom explicitly measured in services studies (see Scheer et al. 2015 for an exception), but there may be contributions to be made in more cross-pollination between service research and research on interdependence/dependence in marketing relationships.

Sixth, the use of technology to facilitate service delivery is an understudied consideration for relational benefits. With the help of artificial intelligence, technology delivers increasingly consistent service (perhaps fueling confidence benefits) and provides customized solutions (special treatment benefits) that seem personal to customers (social benefits). Services that once were possible only in face-to-face settings, such as personalized tourism recommendations (Ardissono et al. 2003) or medical diagnoses and treatment (Dilsizian and Siegel 2014), now are performed primarily with the help of artificial intelligence. A logical next step is for scholars to examine how to facilitate customer–technology interfaces that engender relational benefits.

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