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Article

Pricing, Quality, and Engagement as Relationship Marketing Strategies in Sri Lanka's Online Clothing Sector

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ABSTRACT

E-commerce has become a vital platform for small-scale entrepreneurship, with clothing businesses in Sri Lanka increasingly relying on online retail channels. While relationship marketing has been widely studied in developed contexts, its application among small-scale online retailers in emerging economies remains underexplored. This study examines how small-scale online clothing businesses in Sri Lanka employ relationship marketing strategies—focusing on pricing, product quality, and customer engagement—to enhance customer retention. A qualitative case study design was adopted and data were generated through semi-structured interviews with eight entrepreneurs, selected through purposive and snowball sampling, and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that pricing practices such as competitive pricing, discounts, and flexible payment options foster trust and perceived fairness. Product quality and consistency were shown to be central to credibility and loyalty, with regular updates sustaining customer interest. Customer engagement via social media emerged as the most dynamic relational strategy, where responsiveness, personalization, and transparency cultivated strong relational bonds. Together, these strategies, while traditionally considered part of the marketing mix, functioned as relationship marketing mechanisms that contributed to trust, satisfaction, and long-term loyalty. The study extends relationship marketing theory by showing how small-scale entrepreneurs operationalize relational constructs in practice and offers practical guidance for strengthening online businesses in resource-constrained contexts. Limitations include the small sample size and focus on a single sector, suggesting opportunities for comparative and longitudinal studies. Overall, the study highlights the adaptability and importance of relationship marketing in sustaining small-scale online retail businesses in Sri Lanka.

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Introduction to the Study

E-commerce has fundamentally reshaped how businesses interact with consumers worldwide, providing opportunities for cost-effective operations, wider market reach, and innovative marketing strategies (Bosze, 2020; American Marketing Association, 2021). Social media, in particular, has become a powerful medium for promoting brands, engaging customers, and managing relationships, often replacing traditional marketing methods due to its interactive and cost-efficient nature (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Chaffey, 2024). In Sri Lanka, e-commerce has witnessed significant expansion, driven by rising internet penetration, smartphone adoption, and shifting consumer behavior, with fashion and apparel emerging as one of the most active sectors (ITA, 2022; Chandrasekaran, 2023). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok are widely used by small-scale entrepreneurs to market clothing products, supported by third-party delivery services to facilitate distribution (Mudalige, 2023.; Kemp, 2023).

Starting and running an online business requires comparatively low investment, flexible working arrangements, and the possibility of operating around the clock, making it especially attractive to small entrepreneurs (Bosze, 2020; Patrick, 2012). The clothing industry is particularly suited to online platforms due to its dynamic nature, fast-changing trends, and high demand for fashionable yet affordable products (Bosze, 2020; Shahid, 2019). These conditions have enabled many small-scale clothing businesses in Sri Lanka to establish an online presence despite prevailing economic challenges (Chandrasekaran, 2023).

Within this competitive environment, marketing strategies are essential not only for attracting customers but also for ensuring long-term retention and loyalty. Traditional transactional marketing, focused on short-term sales, often fails to secure sustainable growth (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Relationship marketing, introduced by Berry (1983) and further developed by Grönroos (1999), emphasizes building, maintaining, and enhancing long-term relationships with customers through trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Christopher et al., 1995; Hunt et al., 2006). For online businesses, which lack face-to-face interactions, relationship marketing is particularly crucial, as credibility, transparency, and engagement directly influence customer retention (Verma et al., 2015; Hugoboom, 2024).

In practice, many strategies that enhance customer relationships overlap with elements of the marketing mix.

Pricing practices, such as offering discounts and flexible payment methods, can strengthen trust and perceived value (Koi-Akrofi et al., 2013). Product quality, consistency, and timely updates are essential for satisfaction and loyalty (Kumar, 2016). Similarly, social media engagement, customer feedback sharing, and personalized communication foster trust and long-term relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006; Birkett, 2023). These strategies, though operational, represent important relationship marketing mechanisms in the context of small-scale online retail.

In Sri Lanka, where small businesses face heightened economic pressures, exploring such strategies is both timely and important. Despite global research on relationship marketing, most studies emphasize customer perspectives or larger industries, leaving a gap in understanding how small-scale online clothing stores apply relationship marketing principles in practice (Abtin & Pouramiri, 2016; Ohuche, 2021). Addressing this gap, the present study examines how small-scale online clothing businesses in Sri Lanka employ relationship marketing strategies—focusing on pricing, product quality, and customer engagement—to enhance customer retention.

Literature Review

The Growth of E-Commerce and Online Retailing

The rise of e-commerce has transformed global business landscapes by providing new opportunities for firms to reach broader audiences at lower costs while offering consumers greater convenience and choice. According to global statistics, more than 5 billion people use the internet, and nearly 60% of these users engage in online shopping activities (DataReportal, 2023). This growth has been particularly significant in developing economies, where online retail is emerging as a driver of entrepreneurship and economic resilience (Chaffey, 2024). Online businesses offer distinct advantages compared to traditional brick-and-mortar retail, such as reduced start-up costs, around-the-clock accessibility, and the ability to scale operations rapidly across geographic boundaries (Amazon, 2021; Patrick, 2012). Consumers also benefit from access to a wider range of products, transparent comparisons, and flexible payment options, while firms can rely on customer reviews, ratings, and digital advertising to enhance credibility (Cyr, 2008; Hollingsworth, 2019).

Sri Lanka has mirrored this global trajectory, though at a smaller scale, with the e-commerce sector contributing 4.37% to the national GDP in 2022 (ITA, 2022). By early 2023, the country had achieved an internet penetration rate of 66.7% and over 36 million mobile connections, exceeding

its population (Kemp, 2023). Fashion and apparel represent one of the most active online retail categories, with demand rising for affordable, trend-driven clothing that can be marketed effectively through social media platforms (Shahid, 2019; Bosze, 2020). Small-scale entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka increasingly leverage platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to engage customers, display their products, and manage transactions, often using third-party logistics to complete the delivery process (Mudalige, 2023). The convenience and affordability of digital commerce have encouraged many individuals, especially women and youth entrepreneurs, to enter the clothing business despite economic constraints (Chandrasekaran, 2023). However, customer trust remains fragile in these markets, given rising concerns about fraudulent sellers, delivery delays, and product mismatches. As such, the success of online businesses depends not only on competitive pricing and visual appeal but also on the ability to establish lasting customer relationships.

Foundations and Applications of Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing emerged in the 1980s as a response to the limitations of transactional marketing, which emphasized short-term sales over long-term customer value. Berry (1983) defined relationship marketing as a strategy for attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships. Grönroos (1999) further expanded this concept, arguing that businesses must focus on trust, satisfaction, and commitment to sustain customer loyalty over time. Relationship marketing therefore goes beyond the act of selling; it represents a long-term orientation that seeks to maximize customer lifetime value while simultaneously strengthening competitive advantage (Christopher et al., 1995; Hunt et al., 2006).

Key constructs of relationship marketing—trust, loyalty, commitment, communication, and customer satisfaction—are essential for understanding how firms achieve sustainable growth (Palmatier et al., 2006; Harker & Egan, 2006). Trust is built when businesses consistently deliver on promises, reduce risks for customers, and create transparency in transactions (Cyr, 2008). Loyalty develops through repeated positive experiences, enhanced by loyalty programs, personalized offers, and after-sales support (Birkett, 2023). Commitment reflects a firm's long-term dedication to serving customer needs, often through investments in quality, responsiveness, and communication (Hunt et al., 2006). In online retailing, where physical interaction is absent, these constructs become even more critical. Research shows that strategies such as flexible payment terms, accurate product descriptions, personalized engagement, and fast conflict resolution are highly effective in online environments because they reduce customer uncertainty and build

credibility (Verma et al., 2015; Cademan et al., 2012).

Interestingly, many strategies traditionally categorized as elements of the marketing mix—such as pricing, product quality, and promotional engagement—function as relationship marketing mechanisms in practice. Competitive pricing and discounts not only attract customers but also build perceived fairness, which enhances trust and satisfaction (Koi-Akrofi et al., 2013). Consistent product quality ensures reliability and encourages repeat purchases, thereby reinforcing loyalty (Kumar, 2016). Customer engagement through social media platforms fosters open communication, encourages feedback, and builds a sense of community, aligning with the relational bonds emphasized in relationship marketing theory (Palmatier et al., 2006; Hugoboom, 2024). These examples demonstrate that marketing mix elements, when strategically applied, contribute directly to relational outcomes such as retention, referrals, and brand advocacy.

Empirical Evidence and Research Gap

Empirical studies across multiple industries confirm the value of relationship marketing for improving competitiveness and long-term sustainability. In the apparel sector, Kumar (2016) showed that customer satisfaction is strongly tied to relationship marketing practices such as communication and trust-building. Similarly, Cademan et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of communication, commitment, and trust in ensuring repeat purchases in the fashion industry. In telecommunications, Koi-Akrofi et al. (2013) demonstrated that customer loyalty was significantly influenced by pricing fairness, reliability, and service quality, while Bansal et al. (2005, as cited in Abdullah et al., 2014) found similar results in retail banking, where trust and commitment were primary drivers of loyalty. Studies in insurance (Abtin & Pouramiri, 2016), banking (Sayed et al., 2015), and retail (Shariful et al., 2015) consistently reveal that relationship marketing strategies—ranging from personalized services to loyalty programs—translate into tangible competitive advantage.

Despite these contributions, gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding small-scale online businesses in emerging economies. Most existing research focuses on customer perspectives, with limited attention paid to the strategies that entrepreneurs themselves employ in resource-constrained environments (Ohuche, 2021). Moreover, while global literature establishes the relevance of relationship marketing, little empirical work explores how pricing, product quality, and engagement—commonly seen as operational tactics—act as relationship marketing mechanisms in practice. In Sri Lanka, where small-scale clothing businesses face economic instability, rising competition, and trust issues in digital commerce, examining these strategies is particularly timely. By focusing on the intersection of marketing mix practices and relationship marketing outcomes, this study addresses a clear gap in the

literature. It provides insights into how entrepreneurs in small-scale online clothing businesses in Sri Lanka develop and sustain long-term relationships with their customers, thereby contributing to both academic knowledge and practical entrepreneurship.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the relationship marketing strategies of small-scale online clothing stores in Sri Lanka. A qualitative design was chosen because the aim was not to test hypotheses statistically but to capture in-depth perspectives on how entrepreneurs use strategies such as pricing, product quality, and customer engagement to build long-term customer relationships. The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding how individuals construct meaning in social and organizational contexts (Nickerson, 2024). This philosophical orientation is appropriate given that marketing strategies are shaped not only by business logic but also by entrepreneurs' lived experiences, cultural conditions, and economic realities. The case study method was particularly suitable as it allows the examination of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts and provides rich descriptions that connect theory to practice (McCombes, 2019; Tracy, 2013). In this research, each online clothing store was treated as a case, and together the cases offered insights into broader patterns of relationship marketing in Sri Lanka's digital retail sector.

Participants and the generation of data

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, which are well established in qualitative research for their ability to identify information-rich cases (Dudovskiy, 2022). The selection criteria required that participants be owners or managers of small-scale online clothing businesses operating in Sri Lanka, actively engaged in digital platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, and involved in customer relationship practices. Eight participants (Table 1) were ultimately interviewed. While the sample size may appear small, it is consistent with qualitative research norms, where depth of inquiry is prioritized over breadth, and data saturation determines adequacy (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Saunders & Townsend, 2016). The participants varied in business scale and orientation: some specialized in children's wear, others in women's fashion or casual apparel, and some managed home-based businesses while others operated with production facilities. This variation provided a cross-section of perspectives within the small-scale online clothing sector. The unit of analysis was the business itself, represented by its owner or manager, since the research was concerned with organizational strategies rather than individual

consumer experiences.

The primary method of data generation was semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researchers to pursue consistency across participants while also leaving space for probing and elaboration. The interview guide covered areas such as pricing strategies, product quality, social media engagement, and perceptions of customer retention. Interviews were conducted in both face-to-face and online formats, depending on accessibility and participant convenience. Four interviews were held physically, while the rest were conducted via Zoom. Each session lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and all were audio recorded with participant consent. Interviews were conducted in Sinhala and later transcribed and translated into English. Google Translator was used for initial translation, but the transcripts were subsequently reviewed and cross-checked by bilingual speakers to ensure accuracy and contextual fidelity.

Participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and how their data would be used. Consent was obtained prior to each session. Pseudonyms were assigned to both participants and store names to maintain confidentiality. Notes were also taken during and after interviews to capture reflections, non-verbal cues, and contextual observations. This approach enabled a holistic understanding of participant experiences while safeguarding ethical standards.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is well suited to identifying recurring patterns across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulfield, 2019). The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by initial coding. A total of 256 initial codes were generated and subsequently grouped 34 first order grouping and then into 14 second order groups. These were then refined into 3 overarching themes that directly addressed the research objectives. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used: inductive to allow themes to emerge from participant narratives, and deductive to align findings with relationship marketing concepts identified in the literature.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and their consent was obtained for recording and using data. All information was stored securely and used only for academic purposes. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms, and participants were informed they could request access to findings. This ethical protocol ensured transparency and protected participant rights while also strengthening trust between researchers and participants.

Table 1: Details of Research Participants

Participant	Store Name	Business Description
1	Tulip Boutique	Started in 2022 due to financial struggles; sews and markets baby clothes, later expanding to kids' and women's wear.
2	Bella Store	Entered the industry in September; designs and stitches ladies' clothing while balancing studies and work.
3	Infinity Store	Owns a garment factory, specializes in T-shirts and crop tops, markets through Facebook, and uses courier services.
4	Style House	A chartered accountant who co-founded a fashion business in 2018; exclusively sells ladies' frocks.
5	Upstyle	A hotelier who started a home-based business selling ladies' dresses and blouses, catering to retail and wholesale customers.
6	Fashion Hub	Identified market trends and began selling T-shirts and gowns; self-designs clothing.
7	Galleria	Previously owned a physical store but transitioned online due to location constraints; stitches clothes and sells them online.
8	Primprose	Runs the business with her husband while maintaining full-time jobs; and outsources photography and sewing due to resource limitations.

Source: Interview Data, 2024

Findings

This study aimed to explore how small-scale online clothing businesses in Sri Lanka apply relationship marketing strategies to enhance customer retention. The findings are presented under three major themes that emerged from the interviews: **pricing as a relationship marketing strategy, product quality and consistency, and customer engagement through social media platforms.** While these themes are often considered part of the marketing mix, participants emphasized that they were central to cultivating trust, loyalty, and long-term relationships with customers, which are the essence of relationship marketing.

Pricing as a Relationship Marketing Strategy

Pricing was consistently identified by participants as a critical strategy for attracting and retaining customers. Participants noted that customers in the Sri Lankan online clothing market are highly price sensitive, which requires entrepreneurs to offer competitive and fair pricing in order to build trust. One participant explained:

“Customers always compare prices before buying. If I keep my prices too high, they immediately go to another page. But if I offer a fair price and maybe a discount, they stay and even recommend me to their friends.” (Participant 4)

Several participants stressed the importance of offering discounts and seasonal sales to foster loyalty and repeat purchases. These practices not only encouraged initial purchases but also built a perception of fairness and

appreciation, which participants linked directly to long-term retention. As one store owner commented:

“I do seasonal promotions for New Year and December. Many customers wait for those. They feel happy that I give something back, and then they continue to shop with me even afterwards.” (Participant 6)

Flexibility in payment options also emerged as an important relational strategy. A few participants highlighted that allowing installment-based payments for higher-value clothing items helped reduce perceived financial risk and enhanced customer trust. For example:

“Some customers cannot pay at once, especially for expensive dresses. I allow them to pay in two parts. That makes them trust me more because I understand their situation.” (Participant 2)

These findings suggest that pricing practices, while traditionally viewed as transactional tools, are instrumental in building long-term trust and relational bonds. Entrepreneurs perceived pricing not simply as a mechanism for sales but as a relational device that signaled fairness, empathy, and reliability.

Product Quality and Consistency

Product quality was another theme strongly emphasized by participants. In the competitive online clothing market, quality assurance was seen as essential for cultivating loyalty and sustaining customer relationships. A recurring point was that customers often mistrust online sellers because of experiences with products that do not match

advertised images. Participants indicated that ensuring product consistency was a way to overcome this barrier and strengthen relational bonds.

As one participant explained:

“If the customer gets what they see in the photo, they come back. But if they get something different, they never return. Quality is what makes them loyal.” (Participant 5)

Another participant highlighted the connection between product quality and word-of-mouth referrals:

“When customers are happy with the product, they share pictures on their own Facebook. That brings more people to me. But this only happens if the quality is good.” (Participant 7)

Several participants also emphasized the importance of regularly updating product designs and maintaining variety to match the fast-changing trends in fashion. For instance:

“In clothing, trends change very quickly. If I don’t update, customers lose interest. But when I show new arrivals every week, they stay engaged.” (Participant 1)

These findings indicate that quality and variety are not just operational necessities but are also relational strategies. By consistently delivering quality products, participants cultivated trust and reliability, while frequent product updates sustained customer interest and engagement. This created a cycle of loyalty and retention that participants viewed as central to their business success.

Customer Engagement through Social Media Platforms

The third major theme concerned the use of social media for customer engagement. All participants highlighted that Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok were their primary channels for interacting with customers. Engagement went beyond simple advertising; it involved building relationships through responsiveness, personalized communication, and the creation of an online community.

For example, one participant explained:

“Customers ask questions all the time, sometimes late at night. If I reply quickly, they feel valued. Even if they don’t buy immediately, they remember me for next time.” (Participant 3)

Another participant emphasized how personalized messages built relational bonds:

“I call my repeat customers by their first names when they message me. They feel special, and then they continue to buy from me. It is not just selling; it is about knowing them.” (Participant 8)

Participants also used social media to share customer feedback and photos, which enhanced credibility and built trust among potential buyers. As one store owner noted:

“When new customers see comments and reviews from others, they feel safe to buy from me. Engagement builds trust better than any advertisement.” (Participant 6)

In addition, entrepreneurs highlighted the importance of transparency, such as informing customers about delivery delays or product availability. This honesty was seen as key to maintaining credibility and long-term relationships.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that engagement practices on social media are not merely promotional tactics but are deeply relational, fostering trust, commitment, and loyalty.

Discussion

The findings provide strong evidence that pricing, product quality, and customer engagement—while conventionally treated as elements of the marketing mix—function as relationship marketing strategies in the context of small-scale online clothing businesses in Sri Lanka. These strategies contribute to the core relational constructs of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty, thereby confirming and extending existing theoretical perspectives.

The role of pricing in relationship marketing has been highlighted in prior studies, where fairness and transparency are linked to customer trust and satisfaction (Koi-Akrofi et al., 2013). The findings of this study confirm that competitive and fair pricing practices are not only tools for customer acquisition but also mechanisms for long-term retention. Discounts and flexible payment options created perceptions of empathy and care, aligning with Berry’s (1983) conceptualization of relationship marketing as a strategy for building enduring relationships. This suggests that even in small-scale businesses, pricing is relational rather than purely transactional, supporting Kumar’s (2016) assertion that value-based pricing enhances loyalty in fashion retailing.

Product quality has long been recognized as a determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Christopher et al., 1995; Cyr, 2008). The findings of this study reinforce these arguments by showing that consistent delivery of quality products strengthens trust, while regular updates to match fashion trends maintain engagement. Importantly, product quality was also linked to word-of-mouth referrals, a relational outcome emphasized in relationship marketing

literature (Palmatier et al., 2006). This indicates that quality assurance in online clothing retail is not merely operational but is a key relational practice that cultivates long-term customer loyalty.

Customer engagement emerged as perhaps the most relationally significant strategy in this study. Prior literature has underscored the importance of communication, responsiveness, and personalization in relationship marketing (Grönroos, 1999; Palmatier et al., 2006). The findings align closely with these insights: participants described how responsiveness to customer queries, personalized communication, and transparent interactions built relational bonds of trust and commitment. Social media platforms enabled entrepreneurs to engage in two-way communication, creating relational experiences that went beyond sales. This supports Hugoboom's (2024) argument that digital engagement is a cornerstone of contemporary relationship marketing, especially for small businesses that lack physical interaction with customers.

The study adds to the literature by situating relationship marketing in the context of Sri Lanka's small-scale online clothing sector. Unlike larger corporations that rely on formal CRM systems, these entrepreneurs employed simple but effective relational strategies—competitive pricing, consistent quality, and personalized engagement—to build customer loyalty. The findings underscore the adaptability of relationship marketing principles across different economic and cultural contexts, echoing calls by scholars such as Abtin and Pouramiri (2016) for more research on relationship marketing in small and emerging markets.

At the same time, the study highlights challenges specific to the Sri Lankan context, such as consumer mistrust of online transactions, economic instability, and the fast-changing nature of fashion trends. By demonstrating how entrepreneurs address these challenges through relational strategies, the findings contribute new insights to the relationship marketing literature. They show that even in resource-constrained environments, small businesses can leverage relationship marketing to sustain growth and competitiveness.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how small-scale online clothing businesses in Sri Lanka apply relationship marketing strategies to enhance customer retention, with particular attention to pricing, product quality, and customer engagement. The research was motivated by the recognition that while relationship marketing is widely studied in the global literature, its application in small-scale online businesses in developing economies remains underexplored. The findings of the study provide clear evidence that strategies often associated with the

marketing mix are deeply relational in nature, functioning as mechanisms through which trust, loyalty, and commitment are cultivated. By situating the analysis within the Sri Lankan context, the study contributes both to theory and to practice, offering insights that are relevant for academics, policymakers, and entrepreneurs alike.

One of the key contributions of this study is the demonstration that pricing is not merely a transactional element but a relational strategy. Participants consistently emphasized that competitive pricing, discounts, and flexible payment options played a central role in retaining customers by signaling fairness and empathy. This finding resonates with existing literature that links pricing fairness to trust and satisfaction but extends it by showing how small-scale entrepreneurs use pricing flexibility as a relational device in resource-constrained environments. Similarly, product quality and consistency were shown to be vital not only for meeting customer expectations but also for ensuring loyalty and word-of-mouth referrals. The study highlights how consistency in delivering quality builds credibility in an online environment where mistrust is common. Finally, customer engagement through social media emerged as the most dynamic relational strategy. Entrepreneurs leveraged responsiveness, personalization, and transparency on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to foster bonds with customers, reinforcing the idea that digital communication is now at the core of relationship marketing.

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the relevance of relationship marketing constructs such as trust, satisfaction, and loyalty while showing how these constructs are operationalized in practice by small-scale online retailers. The findings provide empirical support for the argument that relationship marketing should not be viewed as separate from the marketing mix but as an approach that is embedded within everyday business practices. Pricing, product, and engagement—while often categorized as transactional tools—were shown here to be relational mechanisms that enable businesses to achieve long-term retention. In this way, the study bridges the gap between theoretical concepts of relationship marketing and the practical realities faced by small-scale entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka.

The study also offers practical recommendations for small-scale entrepreneurs. First, business owners should adopt a value-based approach to pricing, ensuring transparency and fairness while exploring flexible payment methods to accommodate customer needs. Seasonal discounts and promotions can be strategically used not only to increase sales but to signal appreciation and foster loyalty. Second, entrepreneurs must prioritize product quality and consistency, recognizing that credibility in online retail is built on delivering what is promised. Investing in reliable suppliers, quality control, and timely updates of product lines is essential for sustaining customer trust. Third, effective customer engagement through social media should

be treated as a core business strategy rather than a peripheral activity. Prompt responsiveness, personalized messages, and transparency in addressing challenges are powerful ways of deepening relationships with customers. By institutionalizing these practices, small businesses can achieve greater sustainability and competitiveness even in uncertain economic contexts.

At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations. The research was conducted with eight participants, which, while sufficient for qualitative analysis and thematic saturation, limits the breadth of perspectives. The study also focused exclusively on the clothing sector, meaning the findings cannot be directly generalized to other industries without caution. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced biases, as participants could understate challenges or emphasize successes. Finally, the study was cross-sectional, capturing practices within a specific time frame without accounting for how strategies evolve over time. These limitations highlight the importance of interpreting the findings within their contextual boundaries.

Future research should build on these findings by expanding the scope of inquiry. Comparative studies across industries such as food, beauty, or electronics would reveal whether similar strategies function as relationship marketing mechanisms in other contexts. Larger-scale studies incorporating a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods could provide broader generalizability while maintaining depth of insight. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how strategies evolve over time, particularly in response to economic shifts or technological innovations. In addition, future research could explore the role of advanced digital tools—such as artificial intelligence, customer relationship management systems, and automation—in shaping relationship marketing strategies for small-scale businesses. These avenues would enrich understanding and further bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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