

Cultural norms, commercial friendship, and customer citizenship behaviour

Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4 Q5 Q6

Acknowledgment: This is the accepted manuscript, not the final copyedited version.
Please cite as: Osakwe, C.N., Adeola, O., & Maduku, D.K. (2025). Cultural norms, commercial friendship, and customer citizenship behaviour. International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-07-2024-0317>


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Purpose

This study investigates the relationships between cultural norms, including personal cultural orientations and religiosity, commercial friendship, and customer citizenship behaviour in the subsistence retail marketplace – an underexplored context in retail and marketing research.

Design/methodology/approach

Following a positivist philosophical stance and a deductive approach, survey data were gathered from 414 participants using self-administered questionnaires.

Findings

The findings underscore the significant impact of cultural norms on friendship development, specifically with regard to independence, power distance, long-term orientation, and religiosity. Furthermore, the results indicate a positive relationship between commercial friendships and customer citizenship behaviours, including resistance to negative information, feedback provision, tolerance, and word-of-mouth communication.

Originality/value

This research offers an original contribution to literature by examining the influence of cultural norms on customer-firm relationships and the role of commercial friendship in fostering customer citizenship behaviours. This study is the first to investigate these relationships within the context of the subsistence retail marketplace, thereby advancing scholarship in retail and marketing.

Keywords:

1. Introduction

Q7 Commercial friendship, defined as “regular and ongoing interactions over time and entailing some form of mutual dependence” between merchants and customers (Price and Arnould, 1999, p. 51), is a key outcome of strengthened customer-firm relationships (Chi *et al.*, 2020; Pamacheche and Duh, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022). For small and micro-sized retailers, cultivating such friendships is vital for success, as they often rely heavily on their customers for marketing and survival (Osakwe, 2019).

Over the past decade, academic interest in commercial friendships has grown significantly. While researchers have primarily examined the influence of service attributes and relational variables, such as perceived service quality and customised service (Chi *et al.*, 2020; Osakwe, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2023), there remains a notable gap in literature. Specifically, limited attention has been given to the antecedents and customer-related outcomes of commercial friendships, particularly within the subsistence retail marketplaces prevalent in many African economies (Osakwe, 2019).

Drawing on relational exchange theory (RET; Macneil, 1980), this study examines how cultural norms – specifically personal values and religiosity – influence commercial friendship. We operationalise these norms using established cultural models (Hofstede, 2001; Sharma, 2010) and insights from consumer religiosity literature (Deb, 2018; Jamal and Sharifuddin, 2015; Minton, 2023) to understand their impact on relational dynamics in subsistence retail marketplace in an African country.

Taken together, this study investigates the influence of cultural norms on commercial friendship and its subsequent impact on customer citizenship behaviours. The study contributes to retail and marketing literature in two important ways. First, it bridges a gap in commercial friendship research by linking it to personal cultural orientations and consumer religiosity, thereby highlighting the influence of micro-level cultural context on commercial friendships. Second, it expands understanding of customer citizenship behaviours by demonstrating the broad influence of commercial friendship on these behaviours, moving beyond specific behaviours, such as word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, to encompass a wider range of potential outcomes.

2. Theoretical background – relational exchange theory

First conceptualised by Macneil (1980), RET emphasises the importance of long-term, trust-based relationships in economic and social exchanges. Unlike traditional transaction-based models that focus on short-term, market-driven interactions, RET views exchanges as ongoing relationships where mutual trust, commitment, and understanding evolve over time. Macneil’s framework posits that these exchanges are governed by relational norms, such as flexibility, mutuality, and reciprocity, that shape interactions between exchange partners. These norms serve as informal rules, guiding participant behaviour, fostering relational stability, and reducing transactional risks (Hansen, 2021).

RET has proven instrumental in understanding business relationships, particularly in contexts where trust, reciprocity, and social bonds are crucial for successful interactions (Hunt and Morgan, 1994; Joshi and Stump, 1999; Shanka and Buvik, 2019). In contrast to more transactional or economic approaches, RET suggests that enduring relationships are driven not only by economic self-interest, but also by emotional and social connections. Grounded in RET, commercial friendship emerges as more than a byproduct of repeated interactions; it is a relational strategy that fosters both economic value and social connection (Hunt and Morgan, 1994). Integrating cultural norms into RET’s framework highlights the unique dynamics of commercial friendship in culturally embedded and relationally rich contexts, underscoring its importance in sustaining trust and mutual benefit in subsistence marketplaces.

2.1 Commercial friendship

Grounded in RET, commercial friendship explores the relational dynamics between customers and firms. It emphasises trust, emotional attachment, and mutual respect (Chi *et al.*, 2020; Price and Arnould, 1999), cultivating customer satisfaction, retention, and repurchase intentions – offering strategic advantages for businesses (Wang *et al.*, 2022). However, these relationships are inherently complex, shaped by service quality, social support, and contextual factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Busser and Shulga, 2019; Storr *et al.*, 2023).

Service quality emerges as a foundational antecedent of commercial friendship, enhancing trust and satisfaction (Chi *et al.*, 2020). Perceived relatedness, the emotional connection between customers and service providers, is equally critical (Busser and Shulga, 2019). These relationships often involve a mutual exchange of social and emotional support, extending beyond transactional interactions. However, external disruptions, such as the shift to remote engagement during the pandemic, highlight the fragility of these bonds in the absence of personalised interactions (Storr *et al.*, 2023).

While much is understood about commercial friendships in structured retail settings, their role in subsistence markets, where cultural norms and personal orientations significantly influence relationships, remains underexplored. In contexts like South Africa, spaza shops (i.e., subsistence and unstructured retail outlets) are deeply influenced by cultural values, which significantly shape customers' expectations and engagement.

Spaza shops, informal retail outlets in townships, historically arose as entrepreneurial responses to apartheid-era restrictions. These family-run businesses prioritise affordability, personalised service, and credit, fostering strong community ties. Beyond their economic role, they serve as social hubs, embodying resilience and cultural identity. Understanding the interplay of cultural norms and commercial friendship in these settings contributes to a nuanced conceptualisation of the construct, emphasising its adaptability and relevance in diverse, resource-constrained environments.

2.2 Cultural norms

In African markets, where communal values and strong interpersonal ties dominate, the relational dynamics of RET are particularly relevant. Deeply ingrained cultural norms, such as respect for elders, social obligations, and religiosity, profoundly influence business practices and the development of commercial friendships (Deb, 2018; Sharma, 2010). These cultural dimensions offer rich insights into how relational exchanges unfold in subsistence retail contexts, where business practices are often intertwined with personal relationships. The interdependence between culture and relational exchanges underscores the importance of understanding how cultural norms shape relational dynamics and the development of commercial friendships in diverse marketplaces.

As highlighted earlier, this study considers personal cultural orientations and religiosity as key elements of cultural norms. These components are explored in greater detail next.

2.2.1 Personal cultural orientations

It is well established that consumer behaviour is influenced by cultural factors (De Mooij, 2019; Sharma, 2010). While the Hofstede national cultural dimensions have been foundational in highlighting the role of culture in human decision-making, they offer limited explanatory power for individual-level behaviour across diverse contexts (Sharma, 2010). The Sharma (2010) personal cultural orientation framework addresses this gap, providing a nuanced understanding of individual actions and behaviours, accounting for personal experiences and evolving beliefs.

Research has applied this framework to understand how individual-level cultural values influence brand love (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022), loyalty programmes (Su *et al.*, 2023), nonverbal communication (Ellis, 2021), intercultural service encounters (Sharma *et al.*, 2016), marketing research participation (Osakwe *et al.*, 2024), and behaviour towards products and services (Do and Do, 2024; Kwarteng *et al.*, 2023). These studies motivate us to explain commercial friendship development from the lens of personal cultural orientations.

2.2.2 Religiosity

Defined as the “degree to which beliefs in specific religious values and ideals are held and practiced” (Delener, 1990, p. 27), religiosity influences beliefs and behaviours (Agarwala *et al.*, 2019; Minton and Cabano, 2023), often becoming a core part of one's identity, whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Jamal and Sharifuddin, 2015; Minton,

2023). This profound influence shapes attitudes, values, and consumer decisions (Agarwala *et al.*, 2019; Minton, 2023), while also impacting behaviours, including cultural consumption, charitable giving, and relationship building (Deb, 2018; Jamal and Sharifuddin, 2015; Jin *et al.*, 2024; Minton and Cabano, 2023).

Despite its recognised impact on various aspects of consumer behaviour, the role of religiosity in fostering commercial friendship – the close bonds between businesses and customers – remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the unique connection between religiosity and commercial friendship.

2.3 Customer citizenship behaviour

Customer citizenship behaviour refers to voluntary actions by customers that exceed service delivery requirements, such as providing feedback or recommending a business (Fernandes and Cruzeiro, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2023). These actions, also known as “customer voluntary performance” or “customer extra-role behaviours” (Tung *et al.*, 2017, p. 24), often involve personal sacrifice, but signify customer support for the firm (Gorji *et al.*, 2021).

Social exchange theory, which centres on reciprocity, is the primary explanation for this behaviour (Habib *et al.*, 2024; Hossain *et al.*, 2023). Customers who perceive a valuable relationship with a company are more likely to engage in positive customer citizenship behaviours, believing their actions will be reciprocated, leading to mutual benefit (Delton *et al.*, 2011; Fernandes and Cruzeiro, 2023). Thus, nurturing warm relationships with customers encourages them to reciprocate with beneficial behaviours.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1 Cultural norms as antecedents of commercial friendship

This study highlights cultural norms, often overlooked yet potentially influential, in understanding the development of commercial friendship with firms. Although commercial friendship is recognised as important (Osakwe, 2019; Price and Arnould, 1999), the role of cultural norms remains understudied, despite theoretical support for their influence on relationship marketing (Deb, 2018; Samaha *et al.*, 2014; Osakwe *et al.*, 2024) and consumer behaviour (De Mooij, 2019; Sharma, 2010). We examine seven cultural norms – six personal orientations (Sharma, 2010) and religiosity (Deb, 2018; Jamal and Sharifuddin, 2015; Minton and Cabano, 2023) – theorising these as crucial determinants of commercial friendship. Next, we discuss the expected links between each cultural norm and commercial friendship.

3.1.1 Tradition orientation and commercial friendship

Based on the extant literature, Sharma (2010) defined tradition orientation as a belief system emphasising cultural pride, community well-being, and reverence for traditions. Individuals with a strong tradition orientation value respect, community spirit, and commitment (Sharma, 2010). They prioritise deeper connections and warmth in relationships, potentially fostering friendly ties with merchants in the subsistence retail marketplace. Accordingly, we hypothesise that:

H1a. There is a significant relationship between tradition orientation and commercial friendship.

3.1.2 Interdependence orientation and commercial friendship

Interdependence orientation refers to individuals' preference for group actions (Sharma, 2010). It fosters identity and belonging, emphasising group goals and collective achievements. This aligns with Hofstede's concept of collectivism. Studies show that in societies with high collectivism/interdependence, service quality perception enhances commercial friendships (Osakwe, 2019). Individuals in these societies value relational harmony, including with firms (Arnold and Bianchi, 2001; Samaha *et al.*, 2014). In line with this reasoning, we hypothesise that:

H1b. There is a significant relationship between interdependence orientation and commercial friendship.

3.1.3 Gender equality orientation and commercial friendship

Gender equality orientation reflects the extent to which individuals view men and women as equal in social roles, capabilities, and responsibilities (Sharma, 2010). This orientation is associated with communal values such as cooperation, expressiveness, and relational engagement (Ellis, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2023). Prior research links gender

equality to traits that support trust and long-term relationship development in marketing contexts (cf. [Arnold and Bianchi, 2001](#)). Individuals high in gender equality orientation are more likely to value social connectedness and solidarity, thereby enhancing their capacity to develop commercial friendships grounded in trust, mutual understanding, and commitment ([Hunt and Morgan, 1994](#); [Isaacson et al., 2018](#); [Osakwe et al., 2024](#)). Against this backdrop, we hypothesise that:

H1c. There is a significant relationship between gender equality orientation and commercial friendship.

3.1.4 Independence orientation and commercial friendship

Drawing on [Sharma \(2010\)](#), this study distinguishes between independence orientation, which reflects values such as autonomy, personal achievement, and freedom, and interdependence, which reflects collectivist inclinations. In cultures with a strong independence orientation, consumers tend to prefer transactional exchanges over long-term relational engagements, prioritizing instrumental benefits over emotional or social ties ([Arnold and Bianchi, 2001](#); [Samaha et al., 2014](#)). [Osakwe et al. \(2024\)](#) found that individuals with an independence orientation often demonstrate lower levels of cooperation, while [Rodrigues et al. \(2022\)](#) reported weaker interpersonal commitment and brand loyalty among such consumers. However, [Sharma et al. \(2016\)](#) observed that independently oriented individuals may feel more comfortable in commercial interactions that align with their personal goals and minimize cultural dissonance. These findings suggest that independence orientation may either hinder or facilitate the formation of commercial friendships, depending on how well such relationships align with individual self-interest. Given the nature of the research context, it is important to note that spaza stores often serve as the most accessible and reliable retail option within underserved communities. In this regard, individuals with a strong independence orientation, who typically seek autonomy in life decisions yet remain comfortable engaging with others (cf. [Sharma et al., 2016](#)), may view commercial friendships with store owner-managers as instrumental in achieving their goals in the marketplace. In sum, we hypothesise that:

H1d. There is a significant relationship between independence orientation and commercial friendship.

3.1.5 Power distance orientation and commercial friendship

Power distance orientation refers to the extent to which individuals accept and expect an unequal distribution of power, status, and resources within a social system ([Hofstede, 2001](#); [Sharma, 2010](#)). This cultural orientation has been shown to shape consumer behaviour and expectations in commercial relationships ([Arnold and Bianchi, 2001](#); [Kim and Zhang, 2014](#); [Mattison Thompson and Brouthers, 2021](#); [Osakwe et al., 2024](#)). In the context of relationship marketing, the effects of power distance are nuanced. For instance, [Arnold and Bianchi \(2001\)](#) found that low power distance fosters more egalitarian relationships, thereby promoting relationship building. In contrast, [Samaha et al. \(2014\)](#) argued that relationship marketing is often more effective in high power distance cultures, where business owners are perceived as authority figures. Supporting this latter view, [Rodrigues et al. \(2022\)](#) reported that power distance was positively associated with brand loyalty and interpersonal commitment. In light of these findings, the role of power distance in commercial settings appears to be context-dependent. In the present research context that is seemingly characterized by high power distance norms, spaza store customers may perceive store owners as legitimate authority figures within their communities. These stores often represent one of the few accessible retail options in underserved areas, which may elevate the store owner's social and economic status. Consequently, customers may actively seek to cultivate strong commercial relationships with these owners, motivated by practical benefits such as preferential treatment, better pricing, or informal credit arrangements. Based on this perspective, we hypothesise that:

H1e. There is a significant relationship between power distance orientation and commercial friendship.

3.1.6 Long-term orientation and commercial friendship

Long-term orientation refers to a cultural emphasis on future rewards, perseverance, and thrift ([Kueh and Voon, 2007](#)). Individuals with this orientation prioritise long-term benefits and place significant value on relationship building in personal and professional contexts ([Park et al., 2013](#); [Ryu et al., 2007](#); [Yilmaz and Hunt, 2001](#)). In business relationships, long-term orientation suggests a tendency to develop enduring, mutually beneficial connections with retail merchants. Trust, a fundamental element for sustaining commercial relationships, is inherently strengthened by long-term orientation ([Hallikainen and Laukkanen, 2018](#); [Osakwe, 2019](#); [Price and Arnould, 1999](#)). Furthermore, previous

research utilising RET has shown that long-term orientation is positively correlated with commitment, a key factor in fostering successful business partnerships (Joshi and Stump, 1999). In sum, we hypothesise that:

H1f. There is a significant relationship between long-term orientation and commercial friendship.

3.1.7 Religiosity and commercial friendship

Religious teachings often emphasise principles like community, mutual care, and reciprocal relationships, fostering values that enhance trust, cooperation, and a predisposition for building strong interpersonal connections (Deb, 2018; Minton, 2023; Valente and Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2021). These values are likely to extend into commercial relationships, where the openness, kindness, and reciprocity promoted by religious doctrines (Minton and Cabano, 2023) may facilitate positive and collaborative interactions. Based on these insights, we hypothesise that:

H1g. There is a significant relationship between religiosity and commercial friendship.

3.2 Outcomes of commercial friendship

3.2.1 Commercial friendship and resistance to negative information

Eisingerich *et al.* (2010) defined resistance to negative information as “the extent to which consumers do not allow negative information to diminish their general view of a firm” (p. 62), arguing that it reflects the strength of the consumer-firm relationship. They suggested that strong relationships foster resistance to negativity. This aligns with social exchange theory (Delton *et al.*, 2011; Habib *et al.*, 2024; Hossain *et al.*, 2023), where customers, driven by reciprocity, may defend retail merchants against negative publicity in exchange for perceived reciprocal benefits. Furthermore, Ahluwalia *et al.* (2000) suggested that committed customers construct counterarguments against negative publicity. It is plausible that customers with deeper connections to a firm might tolerate negative publicity, seeing it as incongruent with their relationship objectives. We propose that stronger commercial friendships positively influence resistance to negative information through increased reciprocity and overall positive sentiments towards the retail merchant, thereby mitigating the impact of negativity. Hence, we hypothesise that:

H2a. There is a significant relationship between commercial friendship and resistance to negative information.

3.2.2 Commercial friendship and customer tolerance

Customer tolerance, the willingness to accept service shortcomings (Yi and Gong, 2013), is crucial for organisations facing service failures, which can lead to customer churn and reduced profitability. Positive customer-firm interactions often foster tolerance, acting as a protective shield for firms (Fernandes and Cruzeiro, 2023). Relationship quality influences tolerance levels. For instance, Ahn *et al.* (2014) suggested that customers viewing their interaction with a firm as a friendship extend a wider “zone of tolerance” for organisational shortcomings. Building on this premise, we hypothesise that:

H2b. There is a significant relationship between commercial friendship and customers’ tolerance towards a retail merchant.

3.2.3 Commercial friendship and word-of-mouth communication

In today’s competitive landscape, fostering customer advocacy through positive WOM communication is crucial for firms aiming to attract new customers and enhance profitability (Fullerton and Taylor, 2002; Yi and Gong, 2013). Research consistently identifies WOM as a valuable marketing tool. Notably, Osakwe (2019) highlighted a strong connection between commercial friendships and positive WOM marketing in Nigeria’s under-regulated retail setting. Hence, we hypothesise that:

H2c. There is a significant relationship between commercial friendship and WOM communication.

3.2.4 Commercial friendship and customer feedback

Encompassing both solicited and unsolicited information that aids service delivery and value creation (Yi and Gong, 2013), customer feedback is gathered through surveys, reviews, social media, and customer support. It plays a crucial role in improving products/services, enhancing satisfaction, and fostering loyalty (Fernandes and Cruzeiro, 2023;

Milner and Furnham, 2017; Yi and Gong, 2013). This study proposes that customers engaged in strong commercial friendships with retail merchants are more likely to provide feedback as a form of reciprocity, viewing it as a way to strengthen their relationship by reciprocating benefits received. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H2d. There is a significant relationship between commercial friendship and customers' willingness to provide feedback.

Building on broader literature (Dagger *et al.*, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2022) and the reviewer team's suggestions, we included relationship duration and demographic factors as control variables in the model. These factors may influence commercial friendship and its subsequent outcomes (Gao *et al.*, 2016).

4. Methods

4.1 Data and procedure

This study employed a field-based survey using a store intercept approach to test hypotheses, a well-established method in literature (Demoulin and Willems, 2019; Moharana and Pattanaik, 2023; Osakwe, 2019, 2022). Data collection was outsourced to an independent party. The study focused on spaza shops, prevalent in Africa's informal economies (Osakwe, 2022), and conducted in Gauteng, South Africa. The questionnaire was administered at various times and locations, targeting a representative sample of customers over 18 years old with basic English proficiency.

To mitigate nonresponse bias, questionnaires were self-administered by the data collection team to consenting participants. Data were collected between January and February 2020.

The sample comprised various age groups, with majority (27.3%) aged 24–34. Gender was almost evenly split, with 51% male and 47.3% female respondents. Most respondents (65.5%) had a high school education, and were employed (44.7%) or students (23.9%). Households typically consisted of three to five people (58.5%).

4.2 Survey measures and scales

Measurement scales were adapted from existing research to suit the study's context. Gender equality, independence, interdependence, and tradition orientation were based on Sharma (2010), while power distance and long-term orientation were from Kueh and Voon (2007). The commercial friendship measures came from Price and Arnould (1999), while religiosity was from Jamal and Sharifuddin (2015). Customer feedback, tolerance, and WOM were drawn from Fullerton and Taylor (2002) and Yi and Gong (2013), with resistance to negative information being from Eisingerich *et al.* (2010). The items, detailed in Table A1, used a five-point Likert scale to prevent straight lining.

5. Data analysis and results


This study employed a factor-based partial least squares structural equation modelling (FB-PLS-SEM) approach for its efficiency and robustness against model misspecifications (Kock, 2019). This method, suitable for explorative-predictive research (Hair *et al.*, 2021; Kock and Moqbel, 2021), accounts for measurement error in coefficient estimation (Kock and Moqbel, 2021). WarpPLS version 8 (Kock, 2022) was used for data analysis, utilising the FB PLS-SEM Type REG2 for outer-model analysis and Warp3 for inner-model analysis.

5.1 Common-method bias assessment

The study assessed common-method bias using Harman's one-factor test and a full collinearity test (Kock, 2015), with results indicating no significant bias (VIF = 1.630 < 3.3). Preventive measures such as anonymity, voluntary participation, and clarity of purpose were also implemented during data collection. Thus, common-method bias was deemed inconsequential.

5.2 Measurement model evaluation

The measurement model showed strong reliability and validity (Hair *et al.*, 2021), though AVE for gender equality orientation and customer feedback was slightly below 0.5 (see Table 1 for details). Additionally, Table 2 confirms discriminant validity via HTMT2 ratios below 0.85/0.9 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015; Roemer *et al.*, 2021).

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Reliability and convergent validity of measurement constructs

Constructs	Indicators code	Standardised loadings ^a	CR	CA	AVE
Customer feedback	FBACK1	0.663	0.725	0.723	0.468
	FBACK2	0.737			
	FBACK3	0.644			
Resistance to negative information	RN11	0.866	0.915	0.914	0.783
	RNI2	0.880			
	RNI3	0.908			
Customer tolerance	TOL1	0.784	0.806	0.803	0.582
	TOL2	0.801			
	TOL3	0.697			
WOM communication	WoM1	0.802	0.771	0.770	0.627
	WoM2	0.783			
Religiosity	RELIG1	0.749	0.872	0.870	0.630
	RELIG2	0.793			
	RELIG3	0.823			
	RELIG4	0.808			
Commercial friendship	FRIEND1	0.834	0.900	0.898	0.692
	FRIEND2	0.858			
	FRIEND3	0.827			
	FRIEND4	0.807			
Tradition orientation	TRAD1	0.768	0.825	0.824	0.612
	TRAD2	0.798			
	TRAD3	0.781			
Independence orientation	INDEP1	0.744	0.877	0.868	0.642
	INDEP2	0.803			
	INDEP3	0.841			
	INDEP4	0.812			
Gender equality orientation	GEQ1	0.660	0.699	0.688	0.437
	GEQ2	0.606			
	GEQ3	0.714			
Interdependence orientation	INTERD1	0.770	0.814	0.810	0.593
	INTERD2	0.807			
	INTERD3	0.732			

Power distance orientation	POWER1	0.936	0.970	0.959	0.891
	POWER2	0.965			
	POWER3	0.950			
	POWER4	0.925			
Long-term orientation	LTO1	0.737	0.793	0.775	0.560
	LTO2	0.775			
	LTO3	0.732			


Source(s): Authors' own work

Table Footnotes

Note(s): CA = Cronbach's alpha

^aAll loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$

Table 2

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Discriminant validity of measurement constructs based on HTMT2 approach


Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Resistance to negative information												
2. Commercial friendship	0.654											
3. Religiosity	0.426	0.429										
4. Tradition orientation	0.248	0.293	0.336									
5. Power distance orientation	0.074	0.038	0.036	0.030								
6. Independence orientation	0.117	0.130	0.105	0.212	0.040							
7. Gender equality orientation	0.134	0.146	0.119	0.166	0.048	0.193						
8. Interdependence orientation	0.195	0.260	0.201	0.253	0.032	0.280	0.348					
9. Long-term orientation	0.110	0.226	0.096	0.182	0.039	0.306	0.327	0.500				
10. Customer feedback	0.322	0.521	0.236	0.344	0.032	0.270	0.060	0.221	0.303			
11. Customer tolerance	0.413	0.521	0.209	0.178	0.017	0.162	0.171	0.267	0.149	0.730		
12. WOM communication	0.286	0.449	0.205	0.315	0.059	0.192	0.077	0.317	0.177	0.496	0.504	

Source(s): Authors' own work

5.3 Structural model evaluation and hypotheses tests

Model quality met [Kock's \(2022\)](#) thresholds and showed strong explanatory power, accounting for 26–42.9% variance across outcomes. Predictive relevance was confirmed by $Q^2 = 0.231$ ([Table 3](#)).

Table 3

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Results of the structural model estimates

	Paths	β (t-value)	β - value	CI	R^2	Q ²	Criterion
H1a	Tradition orientation → commercial friendship	0.087 (1.798)	0.036	[-0.008, 0.183]	34.0%	0.343	R
H1b	Interdependence orientation → commercial friendship	0.058 (1.183)	0.119	[-0.038, 0.153]			R
H1c	Gender equality orientation → commercial friendship	0.036 (0.739)	0.230	[-0.060, 0.132]			R
H1d	Independence orientation → commercial friendship	0.108 (2.231)	0.013	[0.013, 0.203]			SS
H1e	Power distance orientation → commercial friendship	0.098 (2.022)	0.022	[0.003, 0.193]			SS
H1f	Long-term orientation → commercial friendship	0.096 (1.988)	0.024	[0.001, 0.192]			SS
H1g	Religiosity → commercial friendship	0.323 (6.855)	<0.001	[0.230, 0.415]			SS
H2a	Commercial friendship → resistance to negative information	0.611 (13.479)	<0.001	[0.522, 0.699]	44.7%	0.448	SS
H2b	Commercial friendship → tolerance	0.479 (10.381)	<0.001	[0.388, 0.569]	31.0%	0.313	SS
H2c	Commercial friendship → WOM communication	0.425 (9.160)	<0.001	[0.334, 0.516]	25.4%	0.248	SS
H2d	Commercial friendship → customer feedback	0.501 (10.901)	<0.001	[0.411, 0.591]	29.0%	0.287	SS
<i>Control variables</i>							
	Relationship duration → commercial friendship	0.187 (3.893)	<0.001	[0.093, 0.281]			*
	Gender → commercial friendship	-0.065 (-1.329)	0.092	[-0.160, 0.031]			
	Age → commercial friendship	0.134 (2.772)	0.003	[0.039, 0.228]			*
	Educational status → commercial friendship	-0.068 (-1.399)	0.081	[-0.164, 0.027]			
	Relationship duration → resistance to negative information	0.143 (2.969)	0.002	[0.049, 0.238]			*
	Gender → resistance to negative information	0.012 (0.246)	0.403	[-0.084, 0.108]			
	Age → resistance to negative information	0.012 (0.242)	0.405	[-0.084, 0.108]			
	Educational status → resistance to negative information	-0.047 (-0.968)	0.167	[-0.143, 0.048]			
	Relationship duration → tolerance	0.075 (1.542)	0.062	[-0.057, 0.135]			
	Gender → tolerance	0.110 (2.265)	0.012	[0.015, 0.205]			*

Age → tolerance	0.136 (2.826)	0.002	[0.042, 0.274]			*
Educational status → tolerance	-0.015 (-0.304)	0.381	[-0.111, 0.081]			
Relationship duration → WOM communication	0.016 (0.327)	0.372	[-0.080, 0.112]			
Gender → WOM communication	0.092 (1.891)	0.030	[-0.003, 0.187]			
Age → WOM communication	0.180 (3.749)	<0.001	[0.086, 0.274]			*
Educational status → WOM communication	-0.014 (-0.294)	0.384	[-0.111, 0.082]			
Relationship duration → customer feedback	0.039 (0.794)	0.214	[-0.057, 0.135]			
Gender → customer feedback	0.113 (2.340)	0.010	[0.018, 0.208]			*
Age → customer feedback	0.077 (1.592)	0.056	[-0.018, 0.173]			
Educational status → customer feedback	-0.027 (-0.548)	0.292	[-0.123, 0.069]			

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table Footnotes

Note(s): Estimates based on two-tailed tests; CI = confidence interval estimates [lower bound, upper bound]. SS = statistical support, R = reject decision. *Denotes statistical relationships between the control variable and the study's focal constructs

The results showed that tradition orientation, interdependence orientation, and gender equality orientation did not significantly influence commercial friendship, suggesting these cultural values do not drive relational bonds in the subsistence marketplace. Consequently, H1a-c are not supported. Conversely, independence orientation, power distance orientation, and long-term orientation had positive, significant impact on commercial friendship. Thus, H1d-f are supported. Interestingly, religiosity emerged as the strongest predictor. Thus, there was also support for H1g. Regarding outcomes, commercial friendship strongly predicted resistance to negative information (H2a), tolerance (H2b), WOM communication (H2c), and customer feedback (H2d).

The results in relation to control variables suggest that relationship duration positively influenced commercial friendship and resistance to negative information. Age significantly predicted commercial friendship, tolerance, and WOM communication, while gender influenced tolerance and feedback. Education had no significant impacts.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study empirically examines the relationships between cultural norms (encompassing personal cultural orientations and religiosity), commercial friendship, and customer citizenship behaviours. The findings offer novel empirical evidence that cultural norms particularly religiosity, independence orientation, power distance orientation, and long-term orientation significantly contribute to the development of commercial friendships with retail merchants. Among these cultural factors, religiosity emerges as the most influential predictor of commercial friendship, reinforcing prior literature that underscores the role of religiosity in fostering consumer-firm relationships (Deb, 2018; Minton and Cabano, 2023).

The results reveal that independence orientation and power distance orientation also positively predict commercial friendship. The finding challenges traditional assumptions that independence undermines relational engagement (Arnold and Bianchi, 2001; Samaha *et al.*, 2014), suggesting instead that consumers who value autonomy still actively cultivate interpersonal bonds, even in subsistence marketplaces. Similarly, the positive association between power distance orientation and commercial friendship corroborates the findings of Osakwe *et al.* (2024), indicating that

structured, hierarchical relationships may foster trust and relational continuity in informal retail settings. These insights contribute to a more complex understanding of how autonomy and hierarchy coexist in facilitating customer–merchant relationships.

Furthermore, the study establishes a significant relationship between long-term orientation and commercial friendship. In line with prior business-to-business research (Joshi and Stump, 1999), this result suggests that future-oriented consumers are inclined to prioritise relational stability over short-term gains, emphasising the importance of enduring bonds in retail exchanges. While tradition orientation showed a positive but statistically insignificant effect, this unexpected finding highlights a paradox that may stem from the unique characteristics of the spaza store context compared to more formal retail settings. Although tradition-oriented consumers are generally expected to value stable, community-centric commerce, the weak relationship observed suggests that other sociocultural factors such as nostalgia, cultural identity, or ritual practices might play a moderating role in the formation of commercial friendships in subsistence marketplaces. Future research could examine these dimensions further to better understand the nuanced influence of traditional orientation in informal retail environments as well as in the more formal retail context.

Unexpectedly, interdependence orientation and gender equality orientation did not significantly predict commercial friendship, which may be due to the unique characteristics of the subsistence marketplace examined in this study. This lack of significance raises important theoretical questions that warrant further exploration. For instance, interdependence may manifest more strongly through broader community networks rather than direct customer–merchant relationships in subsistence contexts, thereby weakening its direct effect. Similarly, the absence of a significant link between gender equality orientation and commercial friendship suggests that relational development in informal retail settings may operate independently of gender-based cultural values. Future qualitative research could offer deeper insight into whether these orientations serve as moderators or interact with contextual factors such as community integration or cultural cohesion.

Beyond examining antecedents, the study also demonstrates that commercial friendship significantly enhances customer citizenship behaviours. Specifically, commercial friendship positively influences resistance to negative information, customer tolerance, word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, and constructive feedback. These findings consistent with and extend relational marketing theory (Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Price and Arnould, 1999; Osakwe, 2019), revealing that relational bonds foster not only transactional loyalty but also non-transactional, cooperative behaviours that contribute to retailer resilience and growth. Notably, this research provides some of the first empirical evidence linking commercial friendship to customer tolerance and resistance to market negativity, an important extension of the citizenship behaviour literature within retailing.

Finally, control variables yielded additional insights. Age and relationship duration positively predicted commercial friendship, suggesting that longer and more mature customer–merchant interactions deepen relational bonds. Relationship duration also enhanced resistance to negative information, indicating that consumers with long-standing ties are less susceptible to market disruptions. Gender differences emerged in tolerance and feedback, supporting prior research emphasizing how socialization processes shape relational behaviours across demographic groups (Dagger *et al.*, 2009; Gao *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2022). Collectively, these findings offer a comprehensive perspective on how cultural orientations, commercial friendship, and demographic characteristics collectively shape customer citizenship behaviours in subsistence retail markets.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

This study makes significant theoretical contributions to retail management, consumer behaviour, and relationship marketing research by advancing the understanding of commercial friendship and its antecedents, consequences, and broader implications within a subsistence retail context. These contributions unfold in three key areas.

First, this study contributes to relationship marketing by addressing calls for a deeper examination of commercial friendship antecedents (Chi *et al.*, 2020; Osakwe *et al.*, 2024), specifically through the integration of cultural orientations and religiosity. Findings show that independence orientation significantly predicts commercial friendship, challenging the dominant view that relational ties in subsistence contexts are primarily driven by interdependence (cf. Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022). In informal marketplaces, even highly independent individuals strategically form commercial bonds to navigate retail constraints. Power distance also emerges as a key predictor, suggesting that customers who view Spaza shop owners as authority figures are more inclined to form close ties, likely to secure preferential treatment.

This marks the first known empirical evidence linking power distance to commercial friendship formation in such settings. Religiosity and long-term orientation are further confirmed as significant antecedents, aligning with prior research on their roles in shaping customer–firm relationships (Deb, 2018; Minton, 2023; Park *et al.*, 2013; Ryu *et al.*, 2007). Religiosity, in particular, is the strongest predictor among all variables examined. Conversely, traditional orientation, gender equality orientation, and interdependence orientation did not significantly influence commercial friendship, likely due to the unique characteristics of the spaza store context. These inconclusive findings offer opportunities for future research. Overall, the study extends the RET by emphasizing the cultural and religious embeddedness of commercial friendships in subsistence marketplace.

Second, this study extends relationship marketing theory by demonstrating the central role of commercial friendship in fostering customer citizenship behaviours (Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Chi *et al.*, 2020; Osakwe, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2022). While earlier research focused mainly on commercial friendship’s impact on word-of-mouth, our findings reveal that it also enhances resistance to negative information, increases tolerance for service failures, and encourages constructive customer feedback. These results not only confirm that relational bonds drive positive consumer behaviours in subsistence retail contexts, but also align with similar observations in (more) formal retail environments (Wu *et al.*, 2023). By highlighting the broad behavioural benefits of commercial friendship in unique settings like Spaza shops, this study reinforces the importance of incorporating relational constructs into subsistence marketplace and emerging market retail research.

Third, this study advances cultural theory by demonstrating the relevance of Sharma’s (2010) personal cultural framework and Hofstede’s cultural model in explaining relationship marketing constructs within informal, resource-constrained retail environments. Traditionally applied at the national level, these frameworks are shown here to influence individual consumer relational behaviour in subsistence markets, highlighting their applicability beyond conventional contexts. This finding emphasizes that businesses operating in culturally diverse settings must tailor relationship marketing strategies to align with customers’ cultural values to strengthen commercial ties. By integrating cultural perspectives with relationship marketing theory, the study positions commercial friendship as a culturally embedded and behaviourally significant construct, thereby opening new directions for research on customer-firm relationships, cultural effects in subsistence markets, and strategic retail management.

6.2 Managerial implications

This study provides valuable insights for retailers, particularly those in less organised sectors, emphasising the importance of understanding cultural norms to cultivate and sustain long-term customer relationships, echoing insights from Deb (2018). Our research identifies customer religiosity as pivotal in fostering strong bonds between customers and merchants, with other cultural factors like long-term orientation, power distance, and tradition also playing significant roles. Considering the findings, we recommend that businesses conduct surveys to grasp their customers’ belief systems, attitudes, and values, facilitating the identification of cultural profiles to prioritise in relationship building.

Relatedly, our findings underscore the importance of building commercial friendships—personal connections between merchants and customers—for sustaining long-term relationships in settings like spaza shops. This supports prior research (Chi *et al.*, 2020; Osakwe, 2019; Price and Arnould, 1999) showing that such connections foster customer citizenship behaviours, including constructive feedback, tolerance of service failures, positive recommendations, and defending the business against negative publicity. These behaviours, indicative of reciprocal value creation, highlight the strategic importance of cultivating strong interpersonal ties with customers, particularly for owner-managers in the subsistence retail context. Consequently, retail operators should prioritise relationship building with their customers, as this practice carries profound implications for their operational resilience and economic sustainability, especially in settings like subsistence (retail) marketplaces that remain dominant in Africa.


6.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

Like any study, this research has limitations that suggest avenues for further exploration. First, the focus on the subsistence retail marketplace in a single African country warrants caution when generalising the findings to other sectors or regions. Therefore, further research is needed to validate these insights across diverse settings. Second, the study did not examine the relative contributions of cultural norms versus service-related attributes (e.g. service fairness, perceived value, and service quality) in shaping commercial friendships. Future studies should explore this gap, as such

research could offer deeper insights into the interaction between cultural influences and service attributes. Moreover, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between variables. Longitudinal research tracking the development of commercial friendships over time could address this limitation and provide a more nuanced understanding of these relationships.

Appendix

Table A1

 The table layout displayed in this section is not how it will appear in the final version. The representation below is solely purposed for providing corrections to the table. To view the actual presentation of the table, please click on the [PDF](#) located at the top of the page.

Measurement variables and their corresponding items

Measurement variables	Items
Tradition orientation	Respect for tradition is important to me.
	I value a strong link to my past.
	Traditional values are important to me.
Independence orientation	I would rather depend on myself than others.
	My personal identity, independent of others, is important to me.
	I rely on myself most of the time, and rarely on others.
	In general, I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects.
Gender equality orientation	Men can be as caring as women.
	Women can be as ambitious as men.
	Men and women can be equally aggressive.
Interdependence orientation	The well-being of my group members is important to me.
	I feel good when I cooperate with my group members.
	It is my duty to take care of my family members, whatever it takes.
Power distance orientation	People in higher positions should make most decisions without consulting people in lower positions.
	People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently.
	People in higher positions should not delegate important tasks to people in lower positions.
	People in lower positions should not disagree with decisions made by people in higher positions.
Long-term orientation	I believe it is important for me to carefully manage my money.
	I can easily describe myself as persistent, even when faced with unpleasant circumstances.
	I believe long-term planning is important for my life.
Religiosity	It is important to me to spend time in private religious thought and prayer.
	Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.
	I enjoy participating in the activities of my religious organisation.
Commercial friendship	I feel a sense of familiarity with the owner and/or employees of this spaza shop.
	Over time, I have had this feeling of warmth and closeness with the store owner and/or its employees.
	Interacting with the owner and/or employees of this store makes me feel that I am speaking with a

	friend
	The owner of this store seems to care enough about me
Customer feedback	If I have a useful idea on how to improve this store's service, I will let the owner or employee(s) know about it
	When I experience any problem with the items bought here, I will let this spaza shop know about it
	When I receive good service from this store, I will comment about it
Customer tolerance	If this store does not deliver as expected, I will be willing to put up with it
	If I have to wait longer than I normally expected to make purchases from this store, I will be willing to adapt
	If the owner/employee of this store makes a mistake when calculating the items bought, I will be willing to show patience
WOM communication	I say positive things about this store/kiosk to other people
	I encourage close friends and relatives to make purchases in this store
	Overall, I would recommend the store to someone who seeks my opinion/advice
Resistance to negative information	Negative information about this shop does not change my general view of the shop
	Negative information about the shop has no effect on me
	Even when I hear negative information about this shop it will not change the way I think of the shop

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Queries and Answers

Q1

Query: Please confirm that given name(s) [yellow] and surname(s) [green] have been identified correctly and are presented in the desired order, and please carefully verify the spelling of all authors' names, including all special characters and accents.

Please note that no changes can be made to authorship at this point in the publication process.

Answer: Correct

Q2

Query: Please ensure the accuracy of the affiliation(s) of each author. Affiliations cannot be changed once the article has been published online.

Answer: Affiliations are OK.

Q3

Query: If you wish to edit the affiliation details, please consider the following house style requirements to avoid any further queries and to speed up publication: (a) city and country names, in English, are mandatory; (b) state name is required only for the USA and not to be included for any other countries; (c) address lines, such as Avenue, Boulevard, Street, should not be included; (d) postal codes are not allowed; (e) degrees, roles, and titles (e.g. Dr., Professor, student, scholar, etc.) are not allowed. Please note that any details that do not conform to the house style requirements will not be retained in the modified/newly included affiliations.

Answer: Not applicable.

Q4

Query: Please be advised that affiliations are fixed at submission. If you wish to note a changed affiliation since submission but prior to acceptance, please advise of this affiliation in full (including department, city, state if based in the US, and country) **as well as the date your association with this new institution began. Failure to provide this date may cause significant delay to the publication of your article.** Once this change has been confirmed, this affiliation will either be added as a dual affiliation or as part of the author biography information, using the wording “The author is also affiliated with [AFFILIATION DETAILS]”.

Answer: NA

Q5

Query: Please check the institute and university name "Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria" in AFF2, and correct if necessary.

Answer: Check is OK.

Q6

Query: Please confirm that the provided email “christian-nedu.osakwe@uir.ac.ma” is the correct address for official communication.

Answer: Correct.

Q7

Query: There is currently no funding/acknowledgements included. Please confirm if this is correct or provide the funding/acknowledgements section.

Answer: Acknowledgement : In addition to employing two professional language editors at different stages of manuscript preparation, the authors also utilized large language models (LLMs), including ChatGPT-3.5 and Microsoft Copilot, to enhance the fluency and clarity of the manuscript. All edits were carefully reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content. Notably, we sincerely thank the Editor-in-Chief, reviewers, and colleagues for their invaluable contributions and constructive criticism, which significantly improved our article. Their input was instrumental in shaping the final product. We are deeply grateful for their efforts.

Q8

Query: Reference “Hofstede, 1991” is cited in the text but not provided in the reference list. Please provide it in the reference list or delete these citations from the text.

Answer: Please it should reflect as Hofstede, 2001.

Thank you.

Q9

Query: The citations “Arnold and Bianchi, 2021; Milner and Furnham, 2015; Minton and Cabano, 2021; Osakwe *et al.*, 2019” have been changed to match the date in the reference list. Please check.

Answer: Good.