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Beyond the First Purchase: An Integrated Framework for Customer Retention in Direct-to-Consumer E-Commerce

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Abstract

Customer retention is an important challenge for direct-to-consumer (D2C) e-commerce: digital channels enable repeated interactions, but they do not by themselves ensure repeat purchasing or durable loyalty. Research has examined D2C retail, customer journeys, online engagement, customer experience and loyalty programmes, including recent reviews and a 2026 meta-analysis of loyalty-programme effects across journey stages. This paper therefore does not claim that integrating these topics is inherently novel. Instead, it develops a measurement-aware conceptual framework that distinguishes lifecycle-oriented marketing activities, customer-response mechanisms and retention-related outcomes. Drawing on the customer-journey perspective, expectation-confirmation theory, commitment–trust theory, customer-engagement scholarship and customer lifetime value research, the framework clarifies how these constructs may relate and identifies contextual conditions that should shape evaluation. The paper uses a focused, purposive synthesis of selected scholarly sources identified through targeted publisher, repository and DOI searches and reference-list leads. It is not an exhaustive systematic review, and the proposed relationships have not been empirically tested. No confidential company records or private customer data are used.

Keywords: D2C e-commerce; customer retention; customer engagement; customer lifetime value.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

The growth of digital commerce has changed how brands communicate with consumers, distribute products and manage customer relationships. Direct-to-consumer (D2C) e-commerce is a model in which brands sell directly to consumers through their own digital channels, although some D2C businesses also use other distribution channels. This model can provide access to customer information and greater control over the buying experience, but it also creates challenges involving competition, service delivery and customer expectations.

McKee et al. (2023) reviewed 81 articles on the evolving D2C retail model and identified fragmentation in the academic literature. Their review highlighted opportunities to strengthen consumer-behaviour theory and investigate how technology influences relationships between brands, retailers and consumers. This provides a useful starting point for examining customer retention within the D2C context.

Attracting a customer and completing a transaction are not the same as maintaining a customer relationship. After the first purchase, consumers may evaluate product performance, service quality, the usefulness of subsequent communications and the overall experience of interacting with a brand. These experiences may influence whether customers purchase again, although the relationship will vary across products, customers and circumstances.



1.2 Customer retention and the customer journey

Customer journeys provide a way to examine the interactions that occur before, during and after a purchase. Tueanrat et al. (2021) analysed 147 papers and identified themes including satisfaction, service failure and recovery, co-creation, customer responses, channels and technological disruption. Their review also highlighted inconsistencies in how the customer journey was understood across the literature.

A journey map alone does not demonstrate that a particular interaction causes a repeat purchase. The relevance of an interaction, customer expectations and the quality of the product or service may also matter. Lifecycle-based marketing can be used to organise interactions according to customer needs and relationship stages, but its effectiveness must be evaluated rather than assumed.

1.3 Personalisation, engagement and loyalty programmes

Personalised marketing, digital engagement and loyalty programmes are related but distinct research areas. Personalisation seeks to make communications, recommendations or experiences more relevant to individual customers. Engagement concerns how customers respond to and interact with a brand. Loyalty programmes offer incentives or benefits intended to encourage repeat purchasing and strengthen customer relationships. These activities may complement one another, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

Chen et al. (2021) reviewed 131 articles on loyalty programmes. Their analysis identified gaps in the coverage of online and business-to-business contexts and highlighted the need to examine how technological developments affect loyalty-programme management. This supports examining loyalty programmes alongside other digital-retention mechanisms without claiming that integration is entirely new.

1.4 Research problem

Existing research offers substantial explanations of D2C retail, customer journeys, online experience, engagement and loyalty-programme effectiveness. McKee et al. (2023) identify theoretical and contextual fragmentation in D2C research; Sharma et al. (2026) synthesise online-retail engagement; Mele et al. (2025) map customer-journey research; and Chen et al. (2026) show that loyalty-programme effects vary across journey stages and contexts. The research problem addressed here is therefore not a claimed absence of integrated thinking. It is the need for a clear conceptual translation between (a) lifecycle-oriented marketing activities, (b) customer-response mechanisms such as perceived relevance, satisfaction, engagement and trust, and (c) distinct retention outcomes, while explicitly identifying boundary conditions and measurement limits. This is a focused synthesis gap and a proposed organising contribution, not proof that no prior model has addressed the same relationship.

1.5 Research aim and questions

Research aim: To develop an integrated conceptual framework explaining how lifecycle-based marketing activities may relate to customer retention in D2C e-commerce.

1. How does existing literature explain the relationship between lifecycle-based marketing and customer retention in D2C e-commerce?
2. How do personalisation, marketing automation and loyalty programmes relate to customer engagement and repeat purchasing?
3. What contextual factors and measurement approaches should be considered when evaluating retention outcomes?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Direct-to-consumer e-commerce and retention

D2C e-commerce offers brands opportunities to manage digital storefronts and interact directly with consumers. However, direct access to customers does not remove the challenges of sustaining relationships. Brands still need to provide satisfactory products and services, deliver relevant information and maintain a customer experience that supports continued engagement. McKee et al. (2023) show that D2C research spans multiple areas of marketing, management and information systems, with opportunities to strengthen the theoretical understanding of consumer behaviour.



Retention is treated here as a longer-term outcome involving the continuation of a customer relationship. Repeat purchasing is one observable indicator, but it is not equivalent to every dimension of retention. A consumer may purchase again because of convenience, necessity, incentives or limited alternatives without developing a strong emotional attachment to a brand.

2.2 Customer journeys and lifecycle interactions

Customer-journey research examines how customers interact with organisations across multiple touchpoints. Tueanrat et al. (2021) reviewed 147 studies and identified themes including satisfaction, service recovery, co-creation, customer responses, channels and technological disruption. Lifecycle-based marketing can complement this perspective by organising interactions according to customer needs and relationship stages.

For example, a potential customer may need product information, while a recent buyer may need product-use information or assistance. A returning customer may respond better to a relevant recommendation than to a generic introductory message. These are possible applications, not proven effects; their usefulness depends on context, timing, customer preferences and product or service quality.

2.3 Personalisation and marketing automation

Personalisation seeks to improve the relevance of marketing communications and customer experiences. Marketing automation can support the delivery of communications in response to predefined conditions or customer actions. Automated delivery does not necessarily mean a communication is relevant, and personalisation does not necessarily produce a positive customer response.

For the proposed framework, personalisation and automation are distinct but potentially complementary mechanisms. Personalisation concerns the relevance of content or experience; automation concerns how and when an interaction is delivered. Their relationship with retention must be assessed using empirical evidence, including the conditions under which they may work less effectively.

2.4 Loyalty programmes and customer behaviour

Loyalty programmes commonly provide rewards, benefits or recognition to encourage repeat purchasing and ongoing customer relationships. Chen et al. (2021) reviewed 131 loyalty-programme studies and identified gaps in online contexts and in understanding how technological changes affect programme design and outcomes.

Loyalty programmes should not be evaluated only by participation or redemption. These activities may demonstrate a response to an incentive, but further evidence is needed to establish whether they lead to additional purchasing or longer-term retention. The proposed framework places loyalty programmes alongside lifecycle communication and personalisation rather than treating rewards as a complete retention strategy.

2.5 Measuring retention-related outcomes

A central challenge is distinguishing marketing activity, customer engagement and business outcomes. These can be organised into four measurement levels:

Level	Example measures	What they indicate
Communication activity	Messages delivered; campaign reach	Whether marketing activity occurred
Customer engagement	Clicks; responses; interaction frequency	Whether customers interacted with communications
Behavioural outcomes	Repeat-purchase rate; time between purchases; observed retention	Whether purchasing behaviour continued
Longer-term value	Customer lifetime value; contribution over the relationship	Economic value under a defined measurement approach



These measures should not be treated as substitutes. A click does not establish a purchase, and a repeat purchase does not automatically demonstrate attitudinal loyalty. Customer lifetime value depends on the definition, time horizon and assumptions used to calculate it.

2.6 Theoretical foundations and their role in the framework

The framework is stronger when each construct has a theoretical role rather than appearing as a list of marketing tactics. It therefore uses complementary theories with distinct explanatory jobs. These are not merged into a single established theory; the proposed pathways remain conceptual propositions.

Expectation-confirmation theory (ECT). Bhattacherjee (2001) explains post-adoption continuance intention through confirmation of expectations, satisfaction and perceived usefulness. In D2C, this lens can help explain how customers evaluate product and service experience after an initial purchase. It must be applied carefully because intention to continue using an information system is not identical to repeat purchasing a physical product.

Commitment–trust theory of relationship marketing. Morgan and Hunt (1994) position trust and relationship commitment as central constructs in successful relationship marketing. This lens explains why relevant communication, reliable service and fair treatment may matter beyond an immediate transaction. Clicks, reward redemption or one repeat purchase should not be treated as direct proof of durable relationship commitment.

Customer journey perspective. Journey research organises interactions across touchpoints and stages, but a journey map alone does not establish causality. Tueanrat et al. (2021) reviewed 147 papers and documented the breadth and complexity of this literature. The framework uses journey stages to organise interventions, not as proof that a sequence of messages causes retention.

Customer engagement perspective. Engagement is treated as a customer response to brand-related interactions, not as a synonym for retention. Sharma et al. (2026) review online-retail engagement and propose a cyclical model. The present framework therefore defines its contribution more narrowly around separating marketing inputs, response mechanisms and retention outcome measures, rather than claiming to introduce a new integrated journey model.

Customer lifetime value (CLV). CLV is a longer-horizon economic outcome rather than an immediate engagement measure. Blattberg et al. (2009) review empirical generalisations and open questions concerning CLV, including links with marketing efforts and purchase behaviour. CLV requires a defined horizon and explicit margin/cost assumptions; it should not be inferred from engagement or repeat-purchase rate alone.

Theory integration decision. The customer-journey perspective organises the timeline; expectation-confirmation theory explains post-purchase evaluation and continuance; commitment–trust theory explains relational mechanisms; engagement scholarship clarifies intermediate responses; and customer lifetime value research informs outcome measurement. These roles are complementary but not interchangeable. The proposed contribution is therefore limited to making the links between these theoretical roles and retention measures explicit; it does not claim that the theories or their broad integration are new.

2.7 Cross-review comparison and the narrowing of the research gap

The comparison of selected reviews narrows the paper's positioning. McKee et al. (2023) show that D2C research spans several disciplines and identify opportunities for stronger consumer-behaviour theory. Sharma et al. (2026) synthesise online-retail engagement and propose a cyclical model. Srivastava et al. (2025) review digital customer engagement, Mele et al. (2025) map the customer-journey literature, and Chen et al. (2026) analyse loyalty-programme effectiveness across journey stages. These publications mean that a broad claim to newly connect customer journeys, engagement and loyalty would be overstated.

The same caution applies to post-purchase evaluation and online experience. Kacprzak and Hensel (2023) review online customer experience, while repurchase research has long examined satisfaction, expectations and related customer responses. These constructs are not new individually, and their presence in a D2C framework does not by itself establish novelty. The relevant question is whether a framework can make their roles and outcome definitions clearer for retention analysis.

Accordingly, the gap addressed in this paper is a conceptual and measurement-oriented one: to specify, in one D2C-focused framework, the distinction between lifecycle marketing inputs, customer-response mechanisms, behavioural retention indicators and longer-horizon economic value, and to identify conditions—such as product repurchase cycle,



customer preferences, privacy concerns and programme design—that may change their relationships. The proposed contribution is a theory-to-measurement map that makes these distinctions explicit. Because the present synthesis is focused rather than exhaustive, this should be presented as a reasoned contribution to organising the selected literature, not as a definitive claim of first-ever novelty. A journal submission should still check the final positioning against the target journal's most recent and directly comparable work.

Table 1. Comparator reviews and implications for positioning

Source	Scope reported by source	Overlap with this paper	Implication
McKee et al. (2023)	Review of 81 D2C retail articles	D2C context and need for stronger theory	Use as context; do not claim D2C retention integration is wholly unstudied.
Sharma et al. (2026)	Online-retail customer engagement review; cyclical model	Engagement, antecedents/outcomes and journey cycles	Differentiate retention measurement from engagement synthesis.
Srivastava et al. (2025)	Review of 139 digital customer-engagement articles	Digital engagement drivers, contexts and outcomes	Compare theory and outcome definitions before claiming a gap.
Chen et al. (2026)	Meta-analysis of loyalty-programme effectiveness across journey stages	Loyalty-programme effects vary by stage and context	Do not claim that stage-based loyalty analysis is new.
Kacprzak and Hensel (2023)	Review of 141 online customer-experience articles	Digital touchpoints and cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses	Clarify what the retention model adds beyond customer-experience models.
Liao et al. (2017)	Online repurchase intention study using expectation-confirmation and regret theory	Satisfaction, regret and repurchase intention	Treat ECT as an established explanatory lens, not a novel theory application.

Table 2. Theory-to-construct mapping used in the proposed framework

Theoretical lens	Constructs it helps explain	Proposed role	Boundary / caution
Expectation-confirmation theory	Expectation confirmation, satisfaction, continuance intention	Explain post-purchase evaluation and possible continuance	Continuance intention is not identical to observed repeat purchase.
Commitment–trust theory	Trust, relationship commitment	Explain relational conditions that may support relationship continuity	Do not assume every marketing contact builds trust.
Customer journey	Stages, touchpoints,	Organise the timeline and	A stage map is



perspective	transitions	touchpoint context	descriptive unless pathways are empirically tested.
Customer engagement perspective	Cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement	Describe customer responses to brand-related interactions	Engagement measures are not interchangeable with retention.
Customer lifetime value	Expected future economic contribution	Frame longer-horizon value as an outcome measure	CLV depends on model assumptions and time horizon.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study uses a focused, structured conceptual synthesis to develop a theory-informed framework for customer retention in D2C e-commerce. A conceptual synthesis is appropriate because the objective is to clarify relationships among established constructs and develop propositions, rather than estimate effects from a new dataset. The work integrates selected research on D2C retail, customer journeys, online customer experience, digital engagement, relationship marketing, loyalty programmes, repurchase and customer value. It uses no confidential employer records, internal campaign metrics, private customer information or identifiable company-specific procedures. It is not presented as a completed systematic review, meta-analysis or empirical study.

The method is deliberately scoped as a focused synthesis rather than a systematic review. PRISMA 2020 is a reporting guideline for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021); because this paper did not undertake an exhaustive database search and formal screening process, it does not claim PRISMA compliance. The methodology is complete for the stated conceptual purpose, but it does not support claims of exhaustive coverage or definitive proof that no comparable framework exists.

3.2 Literature identification and scope

Literature identification used targeted searches of scholarly publisher pages and repositories, DOI-based checks, and relevant reference-list leads. Searches and source checks were conducted for this manuscript on 29 October 2026, alongside sources already identified during manuscript development. The search was organised around four overlapping concept clusters: (1) D2C/DTC and online retail; (2) customer retention, repeat purchase, loyalty and customer lifetime value; (3) customer journey, online customer experience and engagement; and (4) personalisation/personalization, marketing automation and loyalty programmes. The process was targeted to identify core reviews, recent comparator frameworks and foundational theory papers, not to retrieve every publication in the field.

Illustrative combined search string: ("direct-to-consumer" OR D2C OR DTC OR e-commerce OR "online retail") AND ("customer retention" OR "repeat purchase" OR "customer loyalty" OR "customer lifetime value") AND (personalisation OR personalization OR "customer journey" OR "customer engagement" OR "marketing automation" OR "loyalty programme" OR "loyalty program"). Additional targeted searches used the individual concept clusters and known author/title/DOI combinations to locate and verify relevant review articles and foundational sources.

Sources were retained when they were relevant to at least one of the framework's core domains, offered a review or theoretical/empirical basis for a construct, or helped assess overlap with the proposed contribution. The synthesis prioritised peer-reviewed journal articles, recent reviews and meta-analyses, and foundational theory papers. No total records retrieved, duplicates removed or included-study count is reported because the process was not a database-by-database systematic search and did not use formal duplicate management or exhaustive screening. This avoids implying a level of reproducibility that the work did not undertake.



3.3 Scope and selection principles

The scope is English-language scholarly literature relevant to D2C or online retail, customer journeys and experience, digital engagement, relationship marketing, loyalty programmes, repurchase and customer value. Recent reviews were used to map the current research landscape and test for conceptual overlap; foundational works were included where they explain constructs used in the framework. Selection was purposive and based on relevance to the research questions, theoretical contribution and usefulness for comparison. The resulting synthesis is selective and should not be read as a complete census of the literature.

3.4 Analytical approach

The analysis compared sources by context, review or study design, theoretical lens, focal constructs, outcome definitions and implications for retention. The comparison followed three questions: (1) what role does each source assign to lifecycle activities or touchpoints; (2) does it distinguish customer responses from observed retention and economic outcomes; and (3) what contextual moderators or measurement cautions does it identify? The resulting framework separates marketing inputs, response mechanisms, behavioural outcomes and longer-term value, while recording boundary conditions. The propositions are derived from this conceptual comparison and remain untested.

Methodological limitations are explicit: the search was targeted rather than exhaustive; selection was purposive rather than governed by a preregistered protocol; no formal risk-of-bias assessment or meta-analysis was conducted; and the proposed framework has not been empirically validated. These boundaries are consistent with the stated conceptual-paper design and should guide interpretation of its contribution.

4. Conceptual Propositions

4. Lifecycle-based marketing that responds to customer needs may be associated with more relevant customer experiences.
5. Personalisation and marketing automation may complement one another when communications are relevant, appropriately timed and aligned with customer preferences.
6. Loyalty-programme design may influence customer responses and repeat-purchase behaviour, but repeat purchasing should not be treated as proof of attitudinal loyalty.
7. The relationship between marketing interactions and retention outcomes may vary according to product characteristics, customer preferences, trust and privacy concerns.
8. Evaluating retention through multiple outcome levels may provide a more informative assessment than relying on communication or engagement metrics alone.

These propositions are analytical expectations derived from the selected theories, not empirical findings. They are presented as propositions for future testing and do not imply that the proposed relationships have been established. The paper does not estimate causal effects.

5. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Customer insights and lifecycle segmentation: Customer needs, behaviour and journey stage.

Coordinated retention activities: Relevant communication, personalisation, automation and loyalty benefits.

Customer responses: Perceived relevance, customer experience, engagement and trust.

Retention-related outcomes: Repeat purchasing, behavioural retention and customer lifetime value.

Potential influencing factors include product repurchase cycle, privacy concerns, customer preferences and programme design. This is a conceptual model, not a proven causal sequence.

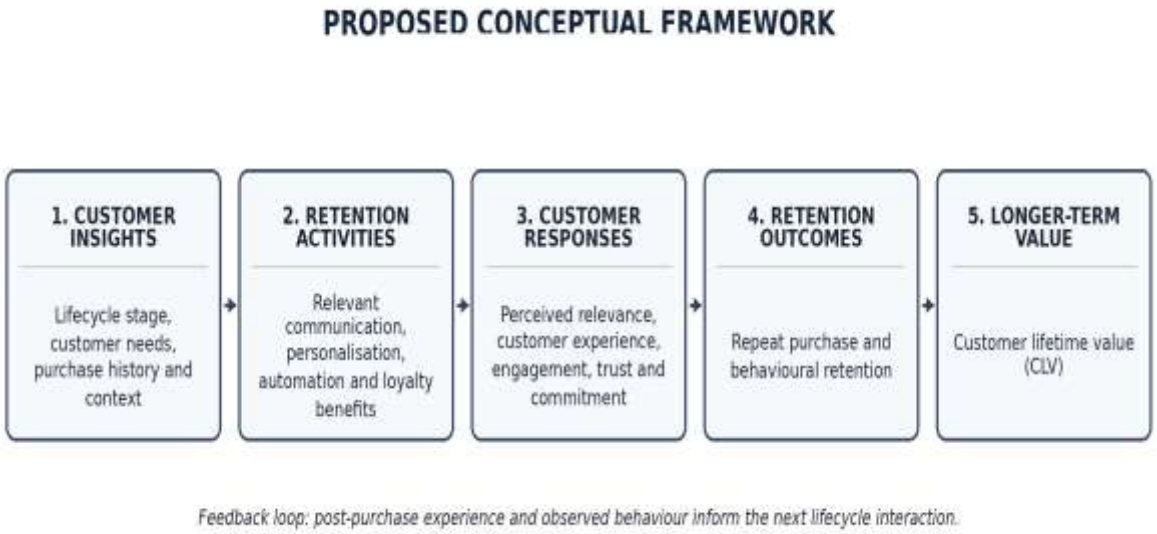


Figure 1. Proposed D2C customer-retention framework. Arrows represent hypothesised relationships, not established causal effects.

THEORY-TO-JOURNEY MAP

THEORETICAL LENS	EXPLANATORY FOCUS	ROLE IN THE FRAMEWORK
Expectation-confirmation theory (ECT)	Post-purchase evaluation	Compares expectations with experience; helps explain satisfaction, confirmation and continuance intention.
Commitment-trust theory	Relationship development	Explains trust and relationship commitment as mechanisms that may support durable exchanges.
Customer-journey perspective	Across touchpoints	Organises pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase interactions across channels.
Customer-engagement perspective	Customer responses	Distinguishes customer interaction and engagement from final behavioural outcomes.
Customer lifetime value (CLV)	Outcome measurement	Frames longer-term economic value; requires a defined time horizon and explicit assumptions.

Use theories as complementary lenses, not as one combined validated theory.

Figure 2. Theory-to-journey map showing the distinct explanatory role of each theoretical lens.

6. Discussion and Implications

The proposed framework has three conceptual implications. First, D2C retention can be examined as a relationship process rather than a collection of isolated campaigns. Second, customer-response mechanisms such as perceived relevance, satisfaction, engagement and trust should be measured separately from behavioural outcomes. Third, tactics should be evaluated against customer needs and product repurchase cycles; a reminder suitable for a frequently replenished product may be inappropriate for a durable product. These are reasoned propositions, not empirical findings.



A campaign may generate message delivery, clicks or responses without increasing incremental repeat purchases. A loyalty programme may improve purchase-stage outcomes without producing stronger attitudinal loyalty. Evaluation should therefore distinguish activity metrics, customer-response metrics, observed behaviour and longer-term economic value. Causal claims require appropriate comparison designs or longitudinal evidence, not descriptive dashboard changes alone.

The paper proposes a theory-to-measurement map that separates the explanatory role of lifecycle activities, customer responses and retention outcomes in D2C e-commerce. The contribution is conceptual and should be understood as a framework for future testing, not as an empirically established model.

6.1 Conclusion

Customer retention in D2C e-commerce can be examined as a relationship process rather than as the automatic result of sending more messages or offering more rewards. The proposed framework separates lifecycle-based marketing activities from customer responses and from outcomes such as repeat purchasing, behavioural retention and customer lifetime value. Expectation-confirmation theory, commitment–trust theory, the customer-journey perspective and customer-engagement research provide complementary explanations, but none alone establishes a causal path from a marketing activity to retention. The framework's practical value lies in clarifying what should be measured, why it may matter and which contextual conditions should be considered. Its contribution is a focused theory-to-measurement map for future testing, not a claim that the broad integration of journey, engagement and loyalty concepts has never been studied.

7. Limitations

This paper offers a focused conceptual synthesis, not a systematic review or empirical test. Its coverage may omit relevant studies, and the proposed theory-to-measurement map should be understood as a reasoned organising contribution rather than a definitive claim of novelty. Although recent reviews and a 2026 meta-analysis were considered to avoid duplicating established contributions, a journal-specific submission should include a final targeted check for directly comparable frameworks and any newly published work. No causal effects are estimated and the framework has not been empirically validated.

The framework should next be tested through empirical research. Suitable designs include longitudinal analysis of repeat purchase and retention, experiments comparing lifecycle communication approaches, or mixed-method research that combines customer interviews with behavioural data. Future work should predefine outcomes, control for purchase-cycle differences and distinguish association from causal effect.

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