



## Towards a Model of Reactivation of Relationships with Customers

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### Abstract

The threat of churn or defection is a growing concern of consumer-oriented businesses. Customers who remain with a business, whether through retention or by defection and subsequent reacquisition contribute to revenue, to reduce costs by being less expensive, to reduce the costs of attracting new customers and to decrease the uncertainty of exchange through the experience accumulated during the former relationship. Yet, there has been a scarce focus on why customers come back after the relationship ended. The existing research studied value determinants of the regain offer and price strategies and did not relate them to the process of dissolution and only a few studies have focused the key drivers of reactivation success.

This research aims to investigate ended relationships focusing the question: Why do some ended relationships reactivate? Determinants of a successful customer relationship reactivation are addressed. A theoretical framework is proposed based on ending literature and equity theory and a case study of a telecommunications company is described in order to illustrate the framework. It includes interviews in the marketing and customer service departments and with customers. The most relevant reactivation antecedents are considered to be customer characteristics (as age, involvement and variety seeking), cognitive factors (as offer's value, procedures and satisfaction), reasons to switch and alternatives. The contribution of this empirical study is to advance knowledge about determinants (as inertia, emotional factors and relationship characteristics) of successful reactivation strategies. The framework has proven to be useful in suggesting approaches to customer relationship reactivation.

### Keywords

Relationship reactivation; retention; dissolution; customer relationship management; services marketing.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dissolution and reactivation of relationships represent the main focus of this study. Dissolution provides the context while reactivation is the explored highly complex and multifactorial phenomenon. The purpose of this research is to identify and explore the factors that lead a lost customer to accept the reactivation of the relationship.

Research has shown that there is a negative correlation between the number of "lost customers" and business income (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Customers who remain with a business, whether through retention or by defection and subsequent reactivation are potentially interesting when, in addition to contributing to revenue contribute to reduce costs by being less expensive (Ganesh, Arnold, & Reynolds, 2000), to reduce the costs of attracting new customers through positive word of mouth referrals (Keaveney & Parthasarathy, 2001) and to decrease the uncertainty of exchange through the experience accumulated during the relationship (Heide & Weiss, 1995). Customer win back is an important part of a customer relationship management strategy. Stauss and Friege (1999) have found that the net return on investment from a new customer is 23% compared to a 214% return on investment from the reinstatement of a customer who has defected. Customer win back focuses on the re-initiation and management of relationships with customers that have lapsed or defected from a firm (Thomas, Blattberg, & Fox, 2004). The present research explores situations where relationship end is unplanned and unexpected and is initiated by the customer. Along with literature suggestions (Stauss & Seidel, 2008; Strandvik & Holmlund, 2000; Tähtinen & Halinen, 2002), this investigation aims to investigate ended relationships and not just intentions. The research question is: Why do some ended relationships reactivate? The objective is to investigate the determinants of a successful reactivation of a customer relationship.

This paper is organized in five main sections. The section which follows this introduction presents the research setting, the data collection and the data analyses processes. After this methodology, section three presents the literature review on relationship reactivation. After this, a theoretical framework is proposed for the understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, conclusions and implications for further research are drawn.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

We have chosen an empirical context where switching is common and where the customers have several and similar alternative service providers and service offerings to choose from, namely the telecommunication market in Portugal. The traditionally monopolistic market situation has changed dramatically for the majority of the Portuguese telecommunication companies during the past decade. They now face keen competition, where the most important strategic issue is to keep the existing customers happy and prevent them from switching as well as attracting new customers. As a result, this industry was highly competitive during the years (2011-2012) in which the data were gathered. As a result of industry deregulation in 2000, no fewer than five major groups with offers on all segments (PT Comunicações, ZON, Optimus, Vodafone, Cabovisão) were competing for the same customers in 2011 (ANACOM, 2012).

The overall research project that provides the context for this article employs a two-part data collection process. Quantitative and qualitative data are connected during the phases of research, yet a predominantly explanatory qualitative methodology is adopted following a case study approach. As a mixed method approach, it was a two-phase project beginning with a quantitative phase, where the analysis of the data and its results were used to identify participants for qualitative data collection in a follow-up phase (Creswell, 2009).

The First Part of the Study. The first part of the study consisted of, in October 2011, an exploratory survey conducted involving commercial, marketing and other managers of the Portuguese biggest firms using transactions volume as selection criteria (n=42). This procedure does not conflict with the case study



methodology since data diversity and triangulation strengthens constructs and hypotheses (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The Second Part of the Study. The second part of the study consisted of interviews with 18 employees who deal with retention and reactivation practice inside the Company and in a telemarketing partner (win back campaign). Another vague of interviews was conducted with 20 customers who had contacted the Company to defect. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analyzed. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data were categorized and transcripts repeatedly read during this analysis. With the support of the statistical tool webQDA, employees opinions and narratives and customers dissolution/reactivation processes were described, identified and categorized in terms of reactivation determinants (customer and relationship characteristics, reasons for switching, procedure, distributive and interaction justice, satisfaction, barriers, willingness to return...).

Based on the literature review and the exploratory survey, we selected, as said before, telecommunication services, an industry with high churn and with reactivation practices. With moderate contact, semi-customized and non-personal service in a market that is highly competitive and transparent, this set seems adequate for further research. We included business units of contractual and non-contractual nature (mobile telecommunications, mobile internet and fixed telephone). The empirical study was carried out in a large Portuguese telecommunication company—in this study referred to as The Company—and two different data collection techniques were chosen. Firstly, interviews were made with employees and, secondly, additional and separate interviews occurred with customers who had called the Company to end the relationship were analyzed. The qualitative study included 20 in dept-interviews with key informants (from marketing, retention, customer service departments and telemarketing partners) and with 20 customers with the purpose of knowing the influencing determinants and the complexity of the CRR process.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review includes the theoretical background of the theme as well as the problem and theoretical framework presentation.

#### 3.1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

The threat of "churn"<sup>1</sup> is a growing concern of consumer-oriented businesses. A competitive environment, price and tariffs wars, increasingly educated consumers and, in many situations, the progressive deterioration of customer service explains why national and international organizations are dealing with customers who are increasingly more difficult and "promiscuous", i.e. willing to switch providers (De Rojas, 2007). In mature markets, potential growth deceleration combined with the current economic environment and with the differential cost between keeping and winning a customer boosted the importance of managing churn. Havila and Wilkinson (2002) propose the analysis of ending relationships as a continuous and dynamic process, suggesting that the energy of the relationship that continues to exist between the parties after separation can awaken opportunities for reactivation. This study is interested, from a holistic perspective, in a dual analysis relating relationship dissolution and reactivation in B2C services. With few exceptions (Blömeke, Clement, & Bijmolt, *in press*; Feng, 2014; Michalski, 2002; Pick, 2010; Roos, 1999), most studies have examined these processes in isolation, either in terms of switching process (e. g. Bansal, Taylor, & James, 2005; Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Keaveney, 1995; Roos, Edvardsson, & Gustafsson, 2004; Stewart, 1998b; Wieringa & Verhoef, 2007) or in terms of customer regain (e. g. Griffin & Lowenstein, 2001; Helfert, Herrmann, & Zellner, 2003; Homburg, Hoyer, & Stock, 2007; Krafft & Pick, 2007b; Stauss & Friege, 1999; Thomas et al., 2004; Tokman, Davis, & Lemon, 2007) (see Table 1).

Moreover, in recent years, CRR has assumed more importance as the concept of regain management complements relationship marketing theory by focusing loyal customers that, for some reason, ended their

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<sup>1</sup> Churn rate or defection rate measures, on percentage, the customer's proportion that defects the firm relatively to the total number of customers.

relationships with the firm (Hennig-Thurau & Hansen, 2000). The existing research studied value determinants of the regain offer and price strategies in this offer (e. g. Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Tokman *et al.*, 2007) and did not relate them to the process of dissolution after elapse an, to the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have focused the key drivers of win back success (Homburg *et al.*, 2007; Krafft & Pick, 2007b; Tokman *et al.*, 2007).

Reactivation of relationships with a focus on retention occurs in relationships in rupture, weakened and troubled, while the reactivation of relationships with focus on customer reacquisition occurs after abandonment and replacement of the provider are consummated and intends to restart the relationship. The problem of this research is on better understanding of the phenomenon of reactivation of relationships to identify the main determinants of successful reactivation attempts originated in the service provider.

**Table 1 -Literature about dissolution and reactivation of relationships with customers**

<b>Dissolution process</b>	Tähtinen & Halinen-Kaila (1997); Stewart (1998a); Grønhaug <i>et al.</i> (1999); Roos (1999); Coulter & Ligas (2000); Tähtinen (2001); Halinen & Tähtinen (2002); Michalski (2002); Åkerlund (2004); Helm <i>et al.</i> (2006); Holmlund & Hobbs (2009); Havila & Medlin (2012); Mekonnen (2012); Pokorska <i>et al.</i> (2013)
<b>Switching behavior</b>	Keaveney (1995); Bansal & Taylor (1999); Roos (1999); Athanassopoulos (2000); Keaveney & Parthasarathy (2001); Edvardsson & Roos (2003); Roos <i>et al.</i> (2004); Bansal <i>et al.</i> (2005); Lopez <i>et al.</i> (2006); Roos & Gustafsson (2007); Wieringa & Verhoef (2007); Han <i>et al.</i> (2011); Moreira (2011); Marshall <i>et al.</i> (2011); (Roos, Edvardsson, Wägar, & Ravald, 2011); Malhotra & Malhotra (2013); Selos <i>et al.</i> (2013)
<b>Types of ending</b>	Roos & Strandvik (1997); Hocutt (1998); Roos (1999); Halinen & Tähtinen (2002); Pressey & Mathews (2003); Michalski (2004); Beloucif <i>et al.</i> (2006); Bowden <i>et al.</i> (2014)
<b>Customer recovery and recovery management (B2C)</b>	Stauss & Friege (1999); Griffin & Lowenstein (2001); Helfert <i>et al.</i> , (2003); Thomas <i>et al.</i> (2004); Homburg <i>et al.</i> (2007); Krafft & Pick (2007a); Tokman <i>et al.</i> (2007); Stauss & Seidel (2008); Blömeke <i>et al.</i> (no prelo); Kim <i>et al.</i> (2009); Pick (2011); Liu <i>et al.</i> (2012)
<b>B2B relationship recovery</b>	Tähtinen & Vaaland (2006); Tähtinen <i>et al.</i> (2007); Salo <i>et al.</i> (2009); Leach & Liu (2014)
<b>Switching process and reactivation intention (holistic perspective)</b>	Roos (1999); Michalski (2002); Pick (2010b, 2011); Feng (2014)

## 3.2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper proceeds with a presentation and discussion of the proposed model and related concepts. Relationship dissolution is the process that tends to end or extinguish an existing relationship between a customer and a service provider, considering that the final decision may either be consummated or inverted. CRR is conceptualized as the process that leads to a lost customer recovery. Reactivation or regain management includes customers that are inactive or lost whenever they either cease to purchase or explicitly terminate the relationship. Also, includes customers who give notice of termination but are legally still tied to the firm, these will be considered as lost, rather than current, because they decided to cease the relationship and took all steps necessary to do so (Stauss & Friege, 1999). Win back determinants are determinants that make a customer patronize the switched-from firm, considering that the success of reactivation activities depends not only on their design but also on other elements. CRR looks to resume relations of interest for both parties which have ended. Once the dissolution process is started, its subsequent path can be better described in terms of process, attributes, phases and types (Michalski, 2002). Rupture designates the end of the switching process. At this point exchange starts to decline and resource ties begin to weaken, still interaction may temporarily intensify to adjust the terms of decline in exchange



activities (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002). On this stage, called pos-dissolution, the customer reflects on the return possibility, sometimes in the future (Coulter & Ligas, 2000). After rupture happened, one can distinguish between relationships that can and cannot be reactivate – meaning that the implementation of customer recovery strategies is in some cases feasible (Michalski, 2002; Stauss & Friege, 1999). Roos (1999) enhances that managers should be aware of two customer groups with different expectations that require different training and diversified measures of damage repair: irrevocable-path and revocable-path.

## **Customer characteristics**

Customer characteristics as drivers of relationship revival performance are of fundamental relevance (Homburg *et al.*, 2007). Some studies concerned with win back determinants suggest some customer characteristics as variety seeking (Homburg *et al.*, 2007; Krafft & Pick, 2007b; Roos, 1999), perceived importance of the service (Tokman *et al.*, 2007), customer involvement and age (Homburg *et al.*, 2007), switching experience, customer expertise, and perceived control over behavior (Krafft & Pick, 2007b). Customers that regard offered services as being important to them are, at least, more likely to evaluate the win back offer closely and realize the benefits it may offer (Tokman *et al.*, 2007). Revival performance is lower in the case of a strong variety-seeking motive and higher in the case of highly involved customers and it is interesting to find that among all the customer and relationship characteristics, customer's age seems to have a particularly strong effect on revival performance (Homburg *et al.*, 2007).

## **Relationship characteristics**

Characteristics of the former relationship between customer and service provider have an impact on the end of that relationship. Social bonds than exist between actors and that last after exit may be transformed and transferred to other relationships providing opportunities for the same relationship to be reactivated at a later time (Havila & Wilkinson, 2002). Literature also holds that the conditions under which a customer-provider relationship is developed are likely to play an important role in the maintenance of long-term relationships (Ganesan, 1994), influencing those relationships duration and the subsequent customers switching decisions in a decisive way (Reinartz & Kumar, 2003). Relationship characteristics (such as overall customer satisfaction with the relationship, duration, quality of the relationship and commitment) may influence win back results (Homburg *et al.*, 2007; Krafft & Pick, 2007b). Thomas *et al.* (2004) examine the effects of the relationship between the time elapsed since the last purchase and customer recapture likelihood and show, using quantitative research, that the probability of a firm reacquiring a customer is higher if the lapse duration is shorter and/or if the first tenure is longer.

## **Attitude towards reactivation**

The willing to stay concerns a faculty felt by the individual according to what his spirit is inclined to action, feeling impelled to certain behavior on a previous state to the final decision. The intention is thus the result of the first evolution of the will after being admitted the idea. This distinction was suggested in recent literature (Krafft & Pick, 2007b).

## **Cognitive factors**

Homburg *et al.* (2007) suggest that applying equity theory is a useful approach for understanding customer reactivation in a way that distributive, procedural and interactional justice are to be considered. The way dissolution occurs seems to influence win back activities and results. Some researchers emphasize the importance of the type of communication strategies (direct or indirect) used during the dissolution process as having implications on the (ir)revocability of the ending decision (Giller & Matear, 2001; Pressey & Mathews, 2003). Helm (1998, cit in Michalski, 2002b) points some significant dissolution attributes, namely: directly or indirectly articulated dissatisfaction of the customer with a firm's products/services, very strong emotions, complaints, and efforts at holding a dialog or negative worth-of-mouth communication with third parties. Those may influence negatively the reactivation process. About reactivation influencing drivers, Bolton, Kannan and Bramlett (2000) conclude that a price gain (decrease in price) has a significant impact on repatronage, but a price loss (a price increase) does not. But is it just a question of money and financial incentives? Essential elements of regain actions are the customer specific dialogue and the related customer-specific regain offer, as long as the customer value is previously considered (Stauss & Friege, 1999). Price



(Thomas *et al.*, 2004) and win back offer worth (Homburg *et al.*, 2007; Tokman *et al.*, 2007) are considered relevant for reactivation success. Moreover, Sieben (2002, cit in Krafft and Pick, 2007) points out that the quality of the recovery process, the offer and interaction will have a direct impact on customers satisfaction with the recovery process. Homburg *et al.* (2007) state that the perceptions of equity play a pivotal role in explaining the success of revival efforts. According to them a perception that the offer is fair (distributive justice) has a significant influence on revival-specific customer satisfaction which, in turn, strongly affects revival performance.

## **Emotional factors**

The strength of the reaction refers to the “customer’s attitudes towards returning and their activities (e. g. worth-of-mouth behavior) after exiting” (Roos & Strandvik, 1997: 7). Roos and Strandvik (1997) suggest that a customer that shows a weak reaction may reconsider the exit decision while a customer exhibiting a strong reaction (has strong opinions about not returning and may be engaged in negative word-of-mouth) probably will not return. Roos (1999) confirms that strong emotions and reactions are associated with irrevocable switching decisions, while weak emotions are associated with revocable switching paths. Concerning repurchase behavior, Dick and Basu (1994) had already suggested that emotions have more importance than cognitive evaluation does.

## **Barriers to reactivation**

Translating the concept of switching cost into reactivation barriers (e.g. time, effort and cancelling of new relationship) one can expect that customers terminating a contract experience some kind of costs when rebuilding the former relationship (Krafft & Pick, 2007b). Sacrifices made in respect of reactivation may be measured in terms of alternatives attractiveness (Krafft & Pick, 2007b). Moreover, it is important to recognize that, in the services context, customers have prior experiences that may influence their perceptions of the win back offer and their intentions to switch-back to their original provider (Tokman *et al.*, 2007). Tokman *et al.* (2007) enhance that social capital (implicit within the customer’ past experience) plays an important role on the customers return intentions. In those cases where customers feel high levels of gratitude, the assessment of service benefits provided by the win back offer may play a lesser role in forming an intention to switch-back.

Based on the literature review, a conceptual model was developed in order to explain successful reactivation. It has been postulated that the acceptance of a reactivation proposal, in contractual relationships, is associated with the following factors: customer characteristics, previous relationship characteristics, customer’s initial will, cognitive and emotional factors, and barriers to reactivation. An illustration of the proposed conceptual framework is presented (Figure 1).

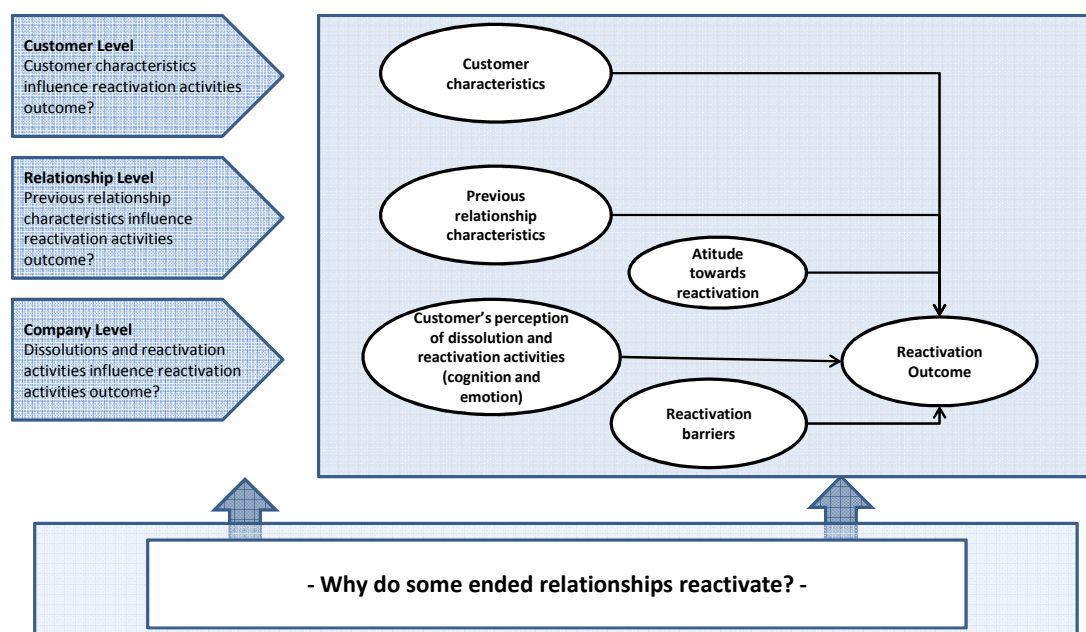


Figure 1 – Conceptual model of customer relationship reactivation (CRR)

#### 4. EMPIRICAL COMPONENT

A preliminary study was conducted nationwide in order to diagnose the practice of the dissolution and recovery activities in the Portuguese firms. Some metrics are presented below.

About dissolution activities (Table 2), 45,2% of all respondents acknowledge not to have an identification system of customers in risk of abandonment and 26,2% referred not having an activity (as phone call, interview or survey) to understand the customer's reason for switching to another provider.

Table 2 -Dissolution management activities

Question		Frequency	%
Does your Company/SBU has an identification system of customers in risk of abandonment?	<b>Yes</b>	23	54,8
	<b>No</b>	19	<b>45,2</b>
Your Company/SBU develops any action (phone call, interview, survey) to understand the reasons of abandonment?	<b>Yes</b>	31	73,8
	<b>No</b>	11	<b>26,2</b>
Does your Company/SBU accounts for lost customers?	<b>Yes</b>	37	88,1
	<b>No</b>	5	<b>13,2</b>

A quarter of the Portuguese companies surveyed reveals worrying levels of churn with rates above 10% (around 24% of total respondents). With rates between 10 and 19% are companies in the retail, telecommunications, food, paper and insurance. Between 20 and 29% are companies in the telecommunications sector and information and computer technologies. With over 40% of customer abandonment is the automobile industry (although one company does not represent the sector). Finally, crossing this variable with the type of customers, it appears that the higher levels of churn (above 20%) include more companies in the business to consumer context.

Relating to the reactivation activities (Table 3) the survey allowed us to conclude that an important number of companies does not analyze the number of potentially recoverable customers (31,0% of respondents), doesn't identify (47,6%) or segment (35,7,9%) lost customers for that purpose.

**Table 3 –Relationship reactivation activities**

Question		Frequency	%
Are you aware of the percentage of possible customers to recover?	Yes	29	69,0
	No	13	31,0
In your Company/SBU, for recovery purposes, customers are identified as lost?	Yes	22	52,4
	No	20	47,6
Do you know which competitor captured the customer?	Yes	30	71,4
	No	12	28,6
Do you make some kind of customer segmentation for recovery?	Yes	27	64,3
	No	15	35,7

The sectors with better recovery rates, i. e. above 20%, and in this sample, are the automobile, construction, manufacturing of gas cylinders, papermaking and board and transportation and logistics sectors, carrying out business to business (B2B) transactions and of tangible products.

Among those who contacted lost customers in order to reactivate old relationships, the majority (48.6%) recovered up to 19% of their former clients.

Given the sensitivity of these issues, a case study was the option with an exploratory and explanatory qualitative study (40 interviews) held within a telecommunications operator (devoted to mobile Internet access, mobile and fixed telephone services).

From the factors, discussed on the literature review, it was possible to obtain some empirical evidence confirming and suggesting different determinants of the success of reactivation. In qualitative research, coding and categorization are not, or should not be an end in itself, simply because resume all data in their proper categories allows the description, but does not allow the data interrogation. It is necessary to formulate questions and issues that relate and integrate the data and the categories with the issues of the investigation.

In a descriptive way, references are mentions to each category made by the informants. Considering the proposed model, the category "Customer characteristics" comprises three subcategories: i) age (34 references); ii) involvement (33 references); and, iii) inertia (19 references). The category "Previous relationship characteristics" encompasses the elements that characterize the previously developed relationship between the customer and the company providing the service. This category comprises three subcategories: i) duration (13 references); ii) quality of the relationship (47 references); and, iii) overall satisfaction (58 references). In the proposed model, the category "Attitude towards reactivation" categorized as willing to stay had some expression (27 references). The category "Cognitive and emotional factors" comprises five subcategories: perceptions of justice, specific satisfaction (65 references), emotions and switching reasons (76 references), and attributions (20 references). The category perceptions of justice, in the light of the Homburg *et al.* (2007) model and the theory of equity, has three subcategories: distributive justice (107 references), interactional justice (73 references) and procedural justice (64 references). The emotions category consists of two sub-categories: negative emotions (71 references) and positive emotions (19 references). The category "Barriers to reactivation" refers to the factors (barriers or constraints) that hinder the maintenance or customer return to the company. This category comprises two subcategories: i) attractiveness of the available alternatives (20 references) and ii) network effect (11 references).



## 5. DISCUSSION

Results from the exploratory survey suggest that services B2C firms have higher levels of churn, yet B2B firms offering tangibles are working ending and win back activities on a higher level. The highest churn rates are on automobile, telecommunications, information technologies, retail, food and insurance sectors. Outcome put forward, as Griffin and Lowenstein (2001) found on their study, that most companies are not informed about customer loss and do not have strong win back policies, programs and monitoring systems. At this point firms doing churn management, also manage win back but in a poorer manner.

In interviews with experts, we questioned them regard to dissolution aspects, reactivation activities and about customers' profile and relationship characteristics. Telecommunications explore reactivation possibilities mostly on the relationship's rupture phase and with a retention focus.

Here reactivation relevant determinants are some customer characteristics (age and involvement /service perceived importance), specific previous relationship characteristics (quality of the relationship and overall satisfaction), willing to stay, cognitive and emotional factors (perceptions of justice, specific satisfaction, negative emotions and switching reasons) and attractiveness of the available alternatives.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

It is possible to apply the theoretical framework in telecommunications companies delivering a mix of goods and services. Telecommunications explore reactivation possibilities mostly on the relationship's rupture phase and with a retention focus. Here, the relevant reactivation determinants are considered to be some customer characteristics (as age, involvement and service perceived importance) and cognitive factors (as offer's value and procedures and satisfaction), reasons to switch and available alternatives. The framework has proven to be useful in suggesting approaches to CRR. This is a promising side-effect of this study, at least from a managerial point of view. The contribution of our empirical study, given not only to the scientific community but also to the economic actors that engage the option of recovering lost customers, is to advance knowledge about the determinants of successful reactivation strategies.

Several limitations are acknowledged in this study. First, the qualitative data were obtained from only one industry in one country. However, the fact that it included three different services compensates (at least in some degree). It would, nevertheless, be interesting to have examined other industries and socio-cultural contexts. Further research should also study this phenomenon in the perspective of the regain customer's value, since there are some doubts about this negative consequence of the reactivation efforts. Also extend the present study to the reactivation determinants in terms of intentions and future loyalty (propensity to switch, return intention and recommendation).

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