Offline and Online Channels for Customer Relationship Management: An Investigation in the Inter-Organizational Context

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Abstract

This research examines the deployment of online and offline channels as means of interacting with customers to improve corporate customer retention in terms of contract renewal. Our study was held in collaboration with a leading business-to-business (B2B) corporation in Mainland China, which acts as an intermediary to connect local manufacturers to overseas corporate buyers. Three years of empirical data on the firm’s CRM has just been collected. Applying survival analysis, we conducted a pilot examination of the dataset, which unveiled the factors influencing the contract renewal of the local manufacturers. The results show that the frequency of utilizing the online F2F (FacetoFace) channel has a positive relationship with the probability of contract renewal. However, in contrast to what is commonly held, we identify negative relationship between the frequency of utilizing offline sales visits or online indirect inquiries and contract renewal probability.

Keywords: business-to-business, channels, customer retention, services
1 INTRODUCTION

Today, customer relationship management (CRM) has developed to the juncture where communication and interaction with a customer, who may be an individual consumer or a firm, are no longer restricted to physical visits and phone calls (Buttle 2012). The advancement of information technologies (IT), particularly the Internet, has created opportunities for a company to leverage on the online channel (cf. offline channel) to not only communicate with its customers, but also to provide marketing services to customers (Petre et al. 2006). In the inter-organizational context, scholars have considered the benefits of the Internet for CRM to include: allowing companies to exchange information with corporate partners in a quicker and more convenient way; and affording a significantly lower cost of communication compared to traditional communication modes such as face-to-face (FtF) (Bird 2000; Cai et al. 2006). Yet, it is also widely held that FtF interaction would be preferred for relationship building and management since it afford richer cues, higher social presence, and people tend to perceive FtF communication as posing fewer obstacles to effective communication than the online channel (Westmyer et al. 1998). While the trade-offs between the online and offline channels have been considerably explored in the business-to-consumer context (e.g., Pan and Lee 2003), there is a paucity of research that investigates the effects of the two channels on a firm’s CRM outcomes in an inter-organizational context. In the latter context, the relationships between firms are often characterized by exchange and power-dependency nature (Schmidt and Kochan 1977), and formal contracts are typically employed to mitigate risks from such relationships (Lui 2009). The nature of the inter-organizational relationship could introduce variability to the effects of the online and offline channels to CRM outcome, which is not well understood.

Thus motivated, this research seeks to investigate the effects of deploying the online and offline channels of interacting with corporate customers on a firm’s CRM outcomes in an inter-organizational context. We designed our research in collaboration with a leading B2B intermediary based in Mainland China (which we refer to as MarketMedium subsequently, to protect the identity of the intermediary). MarketMedium provides marketing services for corporate customers to connect them to potential buyers. Most customers of MarketMedium are small and medium enterprise (SME) manufacturers from Mainland China. They engage the marketing services of MarketMedium by signing a cooperation agreement (i.e. contract) to assist them in marketing their products to oversea buyers with a service fee. MarketMedium provides a web platform through which their customers can communicate information about their products and sale requirements with potential buyers (i.e. online channel). The B2B intermediary also has offline sales and marketing teams to visit the customers and assist them in connecting with potential buyers and marketing their products (i.e. offline channel). Furthermore, MarketMedium also provided online video conference and offline meet-ups for their customers to exhibit their products to potential buyers.

At the current stage, we have completed the collection of three years of CRM records in collaboration with MarketMedium. The records include the demographic information of the corporate customers (with real identity masked) e.g., size and sales volume, contract details, and the utilization of offline and online channels. Applying the survival analysis, we conducted a pilot examination of the dataset, which unveiled interesting initial observations. In particular, we found that the online video conferences has significantly positive impact on the contract renewing probability, but a negative effect was identified with the number of online inquiries and the contract renewing probability. Furthermore, more offline sales visits can also deter the customer retention. But the offline meet-up is not significantly related to the customer retention. In the next step, we plan to collect more comprehensive data from MarketMedium as well as its corporate customers (including qualitative data through interviews), and conduct in-depth analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data to obtain triangulated findings that afford a more holistic understanding of the focal research issue.
2 CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Compared with the acquisition of new customers, retention of the existing ones is considered to be more important (Xu and Walton 2005; Zineldin 1999). Kandampully and Duddy (1999), for instance, argued that it is five times more costly to acquire a new customer than to maintain an existing one. Besides being more cost-effective to retain customers than to acquire new ones, the retention of existing customers may also contribute to an enhanced corporate reputation and consumer confidence. For instance, Nakra (2000) advocated that CRM strategies emphasizing existing customers could enhance an organization’s reputation. Zineldin (1999) demonstrated that the reputation of a firm is based on its customers’ loyalty, which may be achieved through customer retention activities (Zineldin 2006). The importance of retaining existing customers may also be seen through the customer lifetime value model that aims at identifying the aggregated worth of a customer to an organization (Berger and Nasr 1998). Based on this model, Reicheld and Teal (2001) demonstrated that long-term customers are capable of creating more profitability for corporations; while Wheaton (2000) showed that older customers had longer customer life cycles, compared to the newly acquired customers. Encouraged by these studies, we, on our part, also emphasize and investigate customer relationship management from the perspective of retaining corporate customers.

With respect to this outcome of CRM (i.e., retaining customers), we focus on the means, or channels, of attaining effective communication and interaction with the customers, which constitutes the key to the success of CRM (Pan and Lee 2003). We build on the model for channel communication by Mohr and Nevin (1990), which was developed based on the mechanistic perspective of communication theory and organizational theory (Fisher 1978; Krone et al. 1987). The model treats communication as a transmission process that can be systematically examined in terms of a few pertinent communication facets, including the channel, content, direction, frequency, and communication effects (Jablin et al. 1987; Krone et al. 1987). Specific to our investigation context (inter-organizational communication revolving around a B2B intermediary), we hold the content to be products-, marketing-, and sales-related information, which is communicated in multi-way (direction) among the B2B intermediary, local manufacturers, and prospective buyers. We vary the channel (online and offline) and investigate the effects of their frequency in terms of retaining customers. Referring to previous literatures, the customer retention can be manifested as contract renewal probability (Bolton et al. 2000; Chen and Hitt 2002).

Frequency refers to the number of contacts or information exchanges among the communication parties (Mohr and Nevin 1990). The notion has been widely adopted by supply chain management (SCM) research as a key indicator of the intensity of inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Sivadasan and Efstathiou 2002). Similar concept has also been employed in the IS research, in terms of volume of electronic information exchanges among trading partners (e.g., Jun et al. 2000). Prior research has shown that a higher frequency of information exchange is beneficial to business outcomes such as purchasing performance (González-Benito and Spring 2000). The rationale is that a higher frequency of communication can improve the quality and comprehensiveness of communication, and enhance the coordination among the communicating parties (Mohr and Sohi 1995; Romano and Vinelli 2001). In line with the previous literature, we posit a general positive effect of frequency of communication on the CRM outcome of retaining customers, but further argue that the nature of the positive effect may vary according to the communication channel employed i.e., online or offline.

In terms of the online channel (i.e., web platform), we propose that a higher frequency of using this channel for communication among the organizations involved would lead to a better CRM outcome of retaining customers. Although previous research has argued for inadequacies of the online channel in enabling communication due to a lack of social cues and lower social presence (e.g., Westmyer et al. 1998), it is noted that people may adapt to and work around these limitations, and become accustomed to its use for more sophisticated communication over time (DeSanctis and Poole 1994; Walther 2006).
Williams (1985) also explained how computer-mediated communication may lack verbal and nonverbal aspects of interaction, but can encourage the exchange of information, meet personal needs, and help relationships develop. This is in line with research on inter-organizational communication which highlights the advantages of online channel in affording a low cost, quick, and convenient mode of communication for firms to exchange information with corporate partners (Bird 2000; Cai et al. 2006). Therefore, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** The frequency of communicating through the online channel has a positive relationship with CRM outcome in the inter-organizational context.

In terms of the offline channel (FtF), we propose a relationship between the frequency of using this channel and CRM outcome that is linearly negative. We formulate the proposition with consideration of the nature of FtF communication, organizational resources and the nature of inter-organizational relationship. With previous research that indicates FtF communication to be favorable for relationship building and management with its rich social cues and high social presence afforded (Westmyer et al. 1998), it may be expected that a higher frequency of using this channel of communication would lead to better CRM outcome. However, due also to its rich nature of communication afforded, an overly frequent use of the offline FtF channel that tends to promote close, intimate interaction may easily lead to pressure in the interaction among the B2B parties, in view of the typically instrumental, exchange-oriented inter-organizational relationship (Lui 2009). Furthermore, with the limited resources of most SEMs (Bacon and Hoque 2005), it is impossible for SMEs to arrange a specific person who is fully in charge of the case of MarketMedium. Thus, the use of offline FtF channel for inter-organizational communication may lead to a situation noted by Guetzkow (1967), where too much contact can overload organizational members and have dysfunctional consequences. Several prior studies have also indicated that extremely frequent visits by salespeople may annoy the customers (Cummings 2001; Gorman and Collis 2010). Such a situation is less likely for online channel given that it is convenient to use and firms can decide when to use it. The self-serve nature provides firms with a higher sense of control (Schutz 1958) that makes it less likely to result in pressure in the interaction among the B2B parties. The preceding discussion led us to the following proposition:

**Hypothesis 2.** The frequency of communicating through the offline channel has negative relationship with CRM outcome in the inter-organizational context.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Project Backgrounds

MarketMedium is a leading B2B marketing corporation in Mainland China, which is committed to establishing a network community between China’s local SME manufacturers and overseas buyers. Different from other intermediaries focusing on the entire SME population in China, such as Alibaba, MarketMedium focuses on niche markets by solely servicing manufacturing SMEs with certain credentials, which are verified by MarketMedium itself. A contractual agreement is signed between the manufacturing SME and MarketMedium, and this agreement constitutes the primary source of income for MarketMedium. As noted earlier, MarketMedium offers both online and offline communication modes among MarketMedium, SME manufacturers, and the potential customers of the SME manufacturers. In particular, the either channel has two types of communication methods. For online channel, the SME manufacturers can receive the inquiries forwarded by MarketMedium. And MarketMedium would also arrange an online meet-up with potential buyers for their customers. For

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1 Although there are some local large-scale manufacturers, most of them are SMEs.
offline channel, the offline meet-up with potential buyers would also be held for the SMEs and sales team from MarketMedium would also visit their corporate customers personally.

3.2 Data Description

The dataset comprises contact information on 1,135 individual local manufacturers, and the selected contract periods ranged from 3 months to 36 months, commencing from July-01-2008 to August-10-2011. Due to the extensive period of data collection, we were able to observe the renewal and termination of contracts among the SME manufacturers. In addition to the corporate demographic information, we included four main independent variables that may capture the frequency of using the online and offline channels of communication i.e., frequency of online video conference (ONVC) and frequency of online inquiries (ONIT), which denotes the potential business opportunities brought about by the marketing from online channel, as well as frequency of offline conference (OFFC) and frequency of offline visits (OFFVT), which reflects the establishment of the in-person relationship with the servicing manufacturers. Notably, with reference to the characteristics of the survival analysis, we made quarterly ONVC, ONIT, OFFC and OFFVT observations. Notably, all these counting variables have been logarithmically normalized.

The demographic variables include corporate capital (CORC), sales volume (SALV), and export percentages (EXPP). Due to the sensitivity of such firm-related information, CORC and SALV were provided as ordinal values, ranging from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). After consulting an expert from MarketMedium, he recommended us to classify CORC and SALV into three levels. For the values (CORC or SALV) between 1 (8) and 3 (10), these SMEs could be assigned as the mini (medium) manufacturers. Additionally, the rest can be labeled as the small manufacturers. Hence, both CORC and SALV were coded as categorical variables. Furthermore, for the export percentage, each scale indicates the continuous variable. For instance, if the export percentage of a manufacturer was 6, it translates into 60% of that manufacturer’s production for export. Hence, manufacturers with higher CORC and SALV values were classified as large-scale corporations. Remarkably, the correlation matrix is not available for the data to be deployed by survival analysis, which can be evidently found in the previous studies (Harrison and Ansell 2002; Clark et al. 1999; Ansell et al. 2007).

3.3 Survival Analysis

Survival analysis has its origins in research on death issues in biology or pharmacology (Collett 2003). Due to its suitability for accurate analysis of the timing of events, survival analysis has been widely adopted in research in multi-disciplinary fields, such as sociology or economics, other than bioscience research. For instance, Arrow (1996) utilized such an analysis technique to investigate the factors influencing the high unemployment rate in Germany; while Macran et al. (1996) discussed women’s employment rate on achieving motherhood, using a survival model, which was associated with several factors, such as educational level, age of the first child, etc.; while Schmidt and Witte (1989) deployed time-constants, such as years at school, gender, and whether hard drugs were used, as well as time-varying variables, such as age, to predict criminal recidivism by means of survival analysis. In summary, survival analysis is appropriate for response variables of events associated with the duration of events. Subsequently, we will elaborate on the nature of survival analysis as well as on how survival analysis is implemented in our context.

The survival analysis methods are required for compiling survival data, which includes the continuous time and discrete-time or discontinuous-time data formats. With regard to the continuous-time survival data, the analysis can only be undertaken when the survival and censoring times are precisely recorded in relatively fine time-units (Fleming and Harrington 1991). In the case of the discrete-time survival

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2 Generally, firms summarize and report corporate performance on a quarterly basis.
data, the events (e.g., renewal of contract) occur at relatively few time points; while the discrete-time survival models are designed in terms of the discrete-time hazard, which is defined as the conditional probability that the event could occur at time $s$, given that it has yet to occur. The mathematical expression of discrete-time hazard is shown in Formula 1. The survival probability at time $s$ is the cumulative non-hazard rate up to time $s$, which will be elaborated on subsequently.

$$h_s = \text{Prob}(T = s | T > s - 1)$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

The business contract renewing decision requires time for either negotiation or further consideration, and is not determined by a single offline visit or a one-time online inquiry by a potential buyer. Hence, the continuous-time survival mode is obviously not applicable for this research context. Consistent with the business context, we observed the contract status for each SME quarterly, i.e., every three months. There was a total of 12 observation points (during a 36-month period) in our discrete-time survival data. Furthermore, besides the contract information, we also incorporated seven additional variables, which can be classified as time-constant (CORC, SALV, and EXPP) and time-varying (ONIT, ONVC, OFFC and OFFVT) covariates. Based on these seven input variables, we thus constructed our empirical model:

$$\logit(Pr(y_{si} = 1 | x_{si}, x_0, x_1, x_2, x_3, x_4, x_5, x_6)) = \theta_{0i} + \sum_{j=1}^{7} \theta_j x_{j;i}$$

where $x_{0i} = (x_{0i}, x_{1i}, x_{2i}, x_{3i}, x_{4i}, x_{5i}) = (\text{ONIT, ONVC, OFFC, OFFVT, CORC, SALV, EXPP})$.

As we mentioned previously, the survival analysis was utilized to estimate the probability of the occurrence of a specific event. Therefore, the logistic regression model is deemed as the most appropriate to predict the outcome of a binary dependent variable (1 indicates that an event occurs; 0 indicates that the event does not occur). Note that in the left column of Formula 2, the $y_{si}$ is an indicator for an event (i.e., renewing the contract) occurring at timestamps (one-quarter of the observation point for unit i for one manufacturer). The right column of Formula 2 is divided into two parts. The first part, including $\beta_1$ and the summation sign, determines the discrete-time hazards from the second observation point to the last point (12th). The second part of the right column includes both the time-varying ($x_{2i}, x_{3i}, x_{4i}$, and $x_{5i}$) and time-constant ($x_{6i}, x_{7i}$ and $x_{8i}$) covariates.

### 3.4 Pilot Data Analysis Results and Discussion

The detailed results of our full model, including the coefficients and standard errors, are shown in Table 1. The results were arrived at by the estimation of the maximum likelihood parameter. Furthermore, we also conducted robustness test by eliminating the corporate demographic variables to verify the full model. The interpretation of the results is carried out in two parts, i.e., in terms of the dummy variables for each quarter and the covariates. It is not surprising that most of all the discrete-time dummy variables are significant except for the last quarter, because only three manufacturers were renewing the contract at the last quarter. Hence, the values at Quarter12 were omitted. For instance, regarding the coefficient for Quarter3, it is possible to conclude that the chances of the renewal of manufacturers’ contracts are $7.4\%$ times as great in the 3rd quarter than in the 1st quarter. Remarkably, we set the base of our analysis to the first quarter. For different interpretation, resetting the reference quarter is necessary for survival analysis (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008). It is to be noted that MarketMedium did not restrict the duration of their customers’ contracts initially. Hence, our results indicate that most of their customers preferred to renew their contracts after a period of approximately two years.

The time-varying and time-constant covariates appeared to be consistent after comprehensive robustness test. Regarding the time-constant variables, i.e., the corporate demographics, the small

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3 $7.4\%$ is calculated by $\text{Exp}(2.002)$
sized manufacturers showed little intention to continue the collaboration with MarketMedium but the medium sized ones seemed to continue the collaboration. For the time-varying focal predictors, three findings were made. First, we found a positive relationship between the frequency of online video conferences and the probability of contract renewal, which is in line with Hypothesis 1. Second, we found that there is a negative relationship between the online inquiries from potential buyers and the probability of the renewal of contracts which is not in line with Hypothesis 1. Third, we found a negative relationship between the frequency of sales offline visits and the probability of contract renewal, which is in line with Hypothesis 2. Notably, for the categorical variables, Quarter1, CORC (1), or SALV (1) was chosen as the baseline for each variable in the whole analysis respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input Variables</th>
<th>Full Model</th>
<th>Robustness Testing 1</th>
<th>Robustness Testing 2</th>
<th>Robustness Testing 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quarter2</td>
<td>1.443***</td>
<td>1.421***</td>
<td>1.437***</td>
<td>1.447***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.348)</td>
<td>(0.350)</td>
<td>(0.349)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quarter3</td>
<td>2.002***</td>
<td>1.970***</td>
<td>1.996***</td>
<td>2.006***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.369)</td>
<td>(0.371)</td>
<td>(0.371)</td>
<td>(0.369)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarter4</td>
<td>3.162***</td>
<td>3.123***</td>
<td>3.155***</td>
<td>3.166***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.400)</td>
<td>(0.403)</td>
<td>(0.402)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quarter5</td>
<td>5.188***</td>
<td>5.220***</td>
<td>5.187***</td>
<td>5.192***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.455)</td>
<td>(0.460)</td>
<td>(0.457)</td>
<td>(0.455)</td>
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<td>Quarter6</td>
<td>5.457***</td>
<td>5.544***</td>
<td>5.515***</td>
<td>5.470***</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.508)</td>
<td>(0.514)</td>
<td>(0.512)</td>
<td>(0.508)</td>
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<td>Quarter7</td>
<td>6.027***</td>
<td>6.153***</td>
<td>6.122***</td>
<td>6.045***</td>
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<td>(0.608)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quarter8</td>
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<td>7.296***</td>
<td>7.227***</td>
<td>7.148***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.732)</td>
<td>(0.727)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.863)</td>
<td>(0.873)</td>
<td>(0.871)</td>
<td>(0.863)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quarter10</td>
<td>8.652***</td>
<td>8.825***</td>
<td>8.794***</td>
<td>8.676***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1.096)</td>
<td>(1.106)</td>
<td>(1.107)</td>
<td>(1.096)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarter11</td>
<td>10.036***</td>
<td>10.206***</td>
<td>10.237***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Quarter12</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIT</td>
<td>-0.757***</td>
<td>-0.711***</td>
<td>-0.720***</td>
<td>-0.756***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.075)</td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
<td>(0.074)</td>
<td>(0.075)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ONVC</td>
<td>0.531*</td>
<td>0.491*</td>
<td>0.511*</td>
<td>0.528*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
<td>(0.299)</td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFC</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.273)</td>
<td>(0.276)</td>
<td>(0.272)</td>
<td>(0.273)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFVT</td>
<td>-0.501***</td>
<td>-0.506*</td>
<td>-0.494***</td>
<td>-0.500***</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.111)</td>
<td>(0.112)</td>
<td>(0.111)</td>
<td>(0.111)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CORC (2)</td>
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<td>-1.849***</td>
<td>-1.719***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.275)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>(0.276)</td>
<td>(0.275)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CORC (3)</td>
<td>0.172</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.568**</td>
<td>0.168</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.278)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>(0.272)</td>
<td>(0.278)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALV (2)</td>
<td>-0.524</td>
<td>-1.088***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.490</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.356)</td>
<td>(0.369)</td>
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<td>(0.353)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALV (3)</td>
<td>0.772**</td>
<td>0.687*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.809***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.366)</td>
<td>(0.367)</td>
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<td>(0.364)</td>
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<td>EXPP</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-1494.385</td>
<td>-1526.471</td>
<td>-1509.734</td>
<td>-1494.681</td>
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Table 1. Maximum likelihood estimation for purposed model
4  RESEARCH AGENDA AND POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The findings from this research, obtained from analysing the dataset containing corporate information, objective utilization of online and offline channels, and comprehensive contract details, could potentially inform how an organization can more effectively allocate its resources to the different channels to better manage and retain its customers. With respect to the initial findings, our research advocates attention to be paid to designing and implementing a comprehensive online channel for effective communication among the B2B parties. To gain a deeper understanding about this issue, we plan to conduct interviews with the SME manufacturers who are customers of MarketMedium to probe into their perceptions with regard to the use of the two channels for interaction. Besides, in the future research, the interaction between online and offline activities should be considered as a supplementary examination.

The focus of this research on the inter-organizational context may also augment the bulk of extant CRM literature that predominately built on the B2C context with a primary interest in individual consumers (e.g., Howard and Worboys 2003; Zineldin 2006). It seems that in the context of B2B communication, there is a limit in the positive effects of physical FtF communication, such that the frequency of utilizing the offline channel can weaken the CRM outcome. This raises a need to pay attention to the possible physical FtF paradox, rather than Internet paradox that is widely noted for general social communication (Kraut et al. 1998), in the inter-organizational communication context related to CRM. The finding is also consistent with the argument put forward by Rubin and Windahl (1986), that dependency on FtF channel may be ineffective, especially if used in the ritualized sense with today’s increased online channel options.

This research has certain limitations. First, it is probable that some SMEs might terminate their contracts owing to insolvency. Therefore, there is a need to obtain reliable information about the current state of the existing SME customers to refine our dataset. Second, some SMEs may have renewed their contracts prior to the expiry date of their contracts, but others may have signed the renewed contracts after the due date. In future research, we need to incorporate these differences to enrich our findings. Third, the pluralist methodology is necessary for a more holistic understanding of the organizational behaviors of the SMEs. To achieve these goals, there is a need for us to visit selected manufacturers to conduct interviews with the aim of obtaining better measurements. Future research may also assess the dynamics of the utilization of the two channels. Last but not least, due to the data limitation, we cannot perform a competitor analysis by investigating the information from MarketMedium’s competitors such as Alibaba.

5  CONCLUSION

This is a research in progress paper that provides initial insights into the effects of the use of offline and online channels on CRM outcome in an inter-organizational context. In future research, we plan to collect more comprehensive data from MarketMedium as well as the SME manufacturers regarding the use of the two channels. Finally, this ongoing study will be designed with a pluralist approach that leverages on both quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a more holistic understanding of the focal research issue.

References


