# The effects of personalisation on e-loyalty in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey

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**Abstract**

Resulting from recent developments, such as the growth of the internet and the increasing competition between online and in-store retailing, online loyalty is becoming increasingly important for establishing and sustaining the profitability of online retailers. Research has studied online loyalty from the perspective of several stages in the customer journey, however, little to no research investigated the development of online loyalty when consumers receive their ordered products at home. This research paper aimed to investigate the effects of personalisation included in tertiary packaging on e-tail brand experience (the consumer's experiences towards the brand of the online store) and development of e-brand loyalty (loyalty towards the online store) in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. The experiment ($N$ = 301), was a 2 (type of communication: personalised message vs. personalised recommendation) X 2 (writing style: handwritten vs. printed) + 1 (control condition) between-subjects design. The study was employed by a survey and reported differences in e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty towards a fictional store. The results showed that a handwritten or a printed personalised communication led to a better e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication at all. Handwritten communications resulted in the most positive e-tail brand experiences. Furthermore, a positive relationship was found between e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty towards the online retailer. The findings provide new insights that can be used by online retailers to improve the loyalty of consumers in the future by personalising the packaging they send to their consumers.

*Keywords*: E-commerce, Tertiary packaging, Personalisation, E-tail brand experience, E-brand loyalty

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**Introduction**

In the past decades, the internet emerged and the number of internet users worldwide has not stopped growing ever since. To give an impression of this notorious growth, between 2005 and 2017 the number of internet users increased from 1,024 to 3,578 billion users (Statista, 2018a). Together with the use of the internet, electronic commerce (e-commerce) has become more popular and the e-commerce share of total global retail sales increased from 7.4% in 2015 to 11.9% in 2018 and is expected to grow to 17.5% in 2021 (Statista, 2018b).

Meanwhile, the retailing landscape becomes increasingly competitive (Brynjolfsson & Rahman, 2013). With this increasing competition between online retailing and in-store retailing comes an intense pressure for e-commerce companies not only in attracting new consumers, but also in retaining them (Boyer & Hult, 2005; Gommans, Krishnan & Scheffold, 2001). This pressure leads to challenges, as it is more difficult for online retailers to manage e-loyalty, referring to online consumer retention and purchase in the future (Gefen, 2002). Loyalty is seen as a qualitative indicator of profitability in services (Boyer & Hult, 2005) and an increase of it has a positive effect on profitability (Heskett, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1997). Prior research found that brand experience influences loyalty in the context of service (Morrison & Crane, 2007; Nysveen, Pedersen & Skard, 2013) and retail brands (Ishida & Taylor, 2012). Thus, positive brand experiences are needed in order to create and manage e-loyalty of the e-commerce companies' brand.

Up to now, research in the area of e-loyalty has focused on providing solutions in the phase of the buying process that occurs before a purchase is made, known as the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey. Research in this field has been limited to suggestions on how to build and manage commercial websites (Smith, 2000; Reichfeld & Schefter, 2000). This resulted in knowledge on improving the online experience in order to increase and manage e-loyalty (Kwon & Lennon, 2009; Pee, Jiang & Klein, 2018; Tsai, 2017). However, an essential part of e-loyalty towards the brand of the online retailer is formed during the phase of the

buying process that comes after the purchase is made. This phase is also known as the post-purchase stage of the customer journey and encompasses the interactions of the consumer with the brand of the online retailer following the actual purchase. It includes behaviours such as usage, consumption and engagement with the e-commerce company (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). After the purchase is done, ordered products are enveloped in tertiary packages that are designed by the retailer, after which they are send to the homes of the consumers. Theoretically, the post-purchase stage could last from the point that the purchase is made to the end of the consumer's life (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In addition, it is until eventual disposal of the product the last interaction the consumer has with the brand during the customer journey of a particular purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Recent research suggests that during this stage, some sort of trigger may occur that leads to the loyalty of the consumer, due to repurchase and further engagement with the company (Court, Elzinga, Mulder & Vetvik, 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). I propose that in this stage, final brand experiences, i.e. sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses towards the e-commerce brand can be influenced, and with that e-loyalty. When tertiary packaging is personalised in such a way that brand experiences of the consumer can be influenced, marketing efforts could become more efficient than ever before.

Thus, the current research will focus on the development of e-loyalty through brand experiences in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, by investigating two different applications of personalisation; customer relationship management and one-to-one marketing. Personalisation is commonly referred to as: "the adaptation of products and services by the producer for the consumer using information that has been inferred from the consumer's behaviour or transactions" (Montgomery & Smith, 2009, p. 4). In e-marketing literature, multiple studies have investigated personalisation (e.g. Arora et al., 2008; Deighton & Sorrell, 1996; Grewal, Lindsey-Mullikin & Munger, 2004; Montgomery & Smith, 2009; Wetzlinger, Auinger, Kindermann & Schönberger, 2017). Research on personalisation within this area of

research is mostly done with regard to web-specific knowledge, such as cookies and online profiling (Baker, Marn & Zawada 2001; Iyer, Miyazaki, Grewal & Giordano, 2002), as well as personalisation within the buying context (Wetzlinger, Auinger, Kindermann & Schönberger, 2017). Research on personalisation and online loyalty in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey is still limited. In order to fill this knowledge gap, the main research question is stated as: *What is the influence of personalisation in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey on consumers' e-loyalty?*

Personalisation in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey can be achieved by including personalised communications in the form of messages and recommendations within the tertiary packaging. These can either be handwritten by the employee, or printed by a printing machine (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018). Written communication is seen as an essential way of interacting with consumers in order to make sure that good feelings are created about doing business with the service provider (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018). The current research investigates whether a difference in type of communication, through inclusion of a personalised message or a personalised recommendation could influence brand experiences of the online retailer's brand. Besides that, this research investigates whether a difference in writing style (i.e. handwritten or printed), could moderate the relationships between personalised messages and personalised recommendations with the brand experience regarding the online retailer's brand. In the current research is expected that overall, personalised messages will have a positive effect on brand experience compared to including no communication in the tertiary package. Furthermore, it is expected that personalised recommendations will have a negative effect on brand experience compared to including no communication. The current research aims to gain knowledge and insights regarding the post-purchase stage of the customer journey and to investigate the lack of theoretical substantiation on how to create and manage e-loyalty via personalisation. This knowledge can be used by online retailers in order to improve their brand experiences and e-loyalty.

**Literature**

**The post-purchase stage of the customer journey of e-commerce**

Electronic commerce, shortly named e-commerce, is defined as "using the internet to purchase, sell, transport or trade data, goods or services" (Turban et al., 2018, p. 7). E-commerce has been growing in the past few decades and has recently taken the centre stage (Shemi & Procter, 2018). Compared to offline shopping, online shopping provides multiple advantages to consumers such as widespread selections, a lot of information about products, no temporal and special limitations (Wen, Prybutok & Xu, 2011), and hedonic consumption possibilities (Eroglu, Machleit & Davis, 1999). Hedonic consumption possibilities include the multisensory and emotional aspects of the consumer's interaction with products. E-commerce companies can profit from the advantages the online environment offers, such as lower cost structures, faster transactions, broader product lines and the possibility to provide more convenience (Srinivasan, Anderson & Ponnavolu, 2002). Thus, there are multiple benefits accompanied with e-commerce, which is represented in its growth over the past years (Statista, 2018b).

Furthermore, e-commerce literature relies on the concept of 'customer' as the end-user within the online retail supply chain, while in the current research the term 'consumer' is used. In my opinion, the term 'consumer' puts more emphasis on the end-user that buys and uses a product or service, and 'customer' is more commonly used to indicate any actor within the supply chain. Therefore, in the current research, the term 'customer' is only applied within the concepts of 'customer journey' and 'customer relationship management", since these are the generally accepted terms within literature. In addition, 'consumer' is the term used throughout the whole study.

Since consumers shop more and more online, the total number of sent packages for the consumer market in the Netherlands has increased from 186.9 million in 2014 to 295 million in 2016 (ACM, 2016; ACM, 2018). A packaging system within a supply chain consists of

primary, secondary and tertiary packaging (Palsson and Hellström, 2016). Primary packaging is used to directly protect the product. Secondary packaging is used to protect the primary packaging. And finally, tertiary packaging is used for transportation (Chung, Ma & Chan, 2018). Consequently, tertiary packaging is the packaging that consumers first encounter when the products are opened at their homes. It is the packaging that is designed by the e-commerce retailer, which sends it to the consumer. Considerable research has been done on the packaging of products (e.g. Palsson & Hellström, 2016; Solja, Liljander & Söderlund, 2018; Underwood, 2003). Research on tertiary packaging has been executed in the areas of sustainable efficiency (García-Arca, Prado-Prado & Gonzalez-Portela Garrido, 2014) and packaging costs (Lee & Lye, 2003). However, research towards tertiary packaging in relation to consumer responses in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, still lags behind. The reason for this is that with respect to packaging, the focus of research has primarily been on efficiency and costs (e.g. García-Arca, Prado-Prado & Gonzalez-Portela Garrido, 2014; Lee & Lye, 2003), while consumer responses to packaging and their effect on loyalty are just as important. Research in this particular area is needed to improve marketing efforts and to increase e-loyalty. Especially since e-loyalty is associated with the profitability of online sellers (Helgesen, 2006). Therefore, the current research will focus on marketing efforts to increase e-loyalty of consumers in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey.

**E-loyalty and e-tail brand experience**

Along with the increased sales and growing market opportunities for e-commerce, disadvantages emerged as well, reflected in the challenges that online retailing induces. For e-commerce companies, it is difficult to manage e-loyalty (Chou & Hsu, 2016), while it is seen as the core target of their marketing efforts (Dick & Basu, 1994; Evanschitzky et al., 2012). E-loyalty refers to consumer retention and purchase in the future (Gefen, 2002). Loyal consumers routinely revisit a small set of companies without considering others and are therefore valued by retailers and e-commerce companies (Goldman, 1977; Settle & Alreck, 1988). For this

reason, e-loyalty is associated with the profitability of online sellers (Helgesen, 2006). The growth of e-commerce has magnified the importance of e-loyalty concerning e-commerce websites (Gommans et al., 2001). The creation and maintenance of e-loyalty is needed to establish and sustain competitive advantages (Gommans et al., 2001; Kwon & Lennon, 2009). Examples of these advantages are maintaining premium pricing, greater bargaining power with distribution channels and reduced selling costs (Reichfeld, 1996). One of the challenges that makes managing e-loyalty so difficult is that there are low switching costs for the consumer (Brynjolfsson & Smith, 2000): it takes little effort for consumers to surf to a competing e-commerce website. This makes it easier to search for alternative information, which creates options such as the ability to easily compare prices with competing stores (Brynjolfsson & Smith, 2000; Chiu et al., 2009; Gefen, 2002). Furthermore, low switching costs can lead to uncertainty (such as lack of information in making an informed decision and trust in the online retailer), which could lead to difficulties in decision making for the consumer (Brynjolfsson & Smith, 2000; Chiu et al., 2009; Gefen, 2002). Thus, managing and creating e-loyalty of consumers is difficult for e-commerce companies, yet increasing it has benefits for profitability as well as creating and sustaining competitive advantages.

Besides the importance of e-loyalty, delivering a memorable and unique brand experience is also important for retailers (Verhoef et al., 2009). Brand experience is defined as consumers' "sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 52). In other words, these brand-related stimuli constitute the overall subjective and internal consumer responses (the sensations, feelings and cognitions) and the corresponding behaviour (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 52). Previous research found that delivering a good brand experience is important, because it influences the online buying behaviour of consumers (e.g., Ling, Chai & Piew, 2010; Rose et al., 2012). Branding as a concept within retail research has had different

forms in the past. It has changed from "product as a brand" to "store as a brand" and later on to "retailer as a brand" (Burt & Davies, 2010). Online retailing grew in the past years, following the growth of e-commerce and internet usage (Khan & Rhaman, 2015). Online retailing includes the sales of products in the consumer market over the internet (Kennedy and Coughlan, 2006). Alternative terms for online retailing are e-retailing, e-tailing and business to consumer (B2C) electronic commerce (Kolesar and Galbraith, 2000). In other words, online retailing is a type of e-commerce, however it only is focused on purchasing products and selling them to consumers. The current research will focus on the e-commerce companies that retail over the internet, and not, as stated in the definition of e-commerce, on companies that sell data and provide services such as banking and the hotel industry. Therefore, the term for online retailing that will be used throughout this research is 'e-tailing', following the typology of Kolesar and Galbraith (2000).

E-tailing has attracted many traditional retailers but has also attracted "pure players" (retailers that only sell online) which subsequently led to a rise in e-tail brands (Melis, Breugelmans & Lamey, 2015). Examples are Amazon, Coolblue and Bol.com. Following Kahn and Rahman (2015), the current research will use the concept 'e-tail brand experience', which refers to the total of brand experiences a consumer has towards the brand of the e-tailer. Previous literature supports the positive influence of e-tail brand experience on brand loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Lin and Bennet, 2014) and on e-brand loyalty (loyalty of consumers towards the e-tail brand) (Khan & Rahman, 2015).

Even though Khan and Rahman (2015) found this positive relation between e-brand loyalty and e-tail brand experience, they only found this in the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey (such as the website of the e-tailer). This entails that providing a unique e-tail brand experience, i.e. positive sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses, have a positive effect on e-brand loyalty (the loyalty towards the brand of the e-tailer). In order to measure e-brand loyalty, Khan and Rahman (2015) adopted four items from a study of

Horppu, Kuivalainen and Tarkianen (2008), that used the scale for measuring e-loyalty towards a store's website. The items were modified as such that they would fit to measure e-brand loyalty (Khan & Rhaman, 2015). Although the effects of e-tail brand experience on e-brand loyalty in this setting were significant and robust, there is currently no evidence that the same relationship would occur during the post-purchase stage of the customer journey.

I propose that when a consumer opens the tertiary packaging during the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, positive brand experiences can be perceived by the consumer, in accordance with the results (Khan & Rahman, 2015) found for the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey. The reason for this is that when opening this tertiary package, consumers will experience sensations, feelings and cognitions that are evoked by the stimuli of e-tail brands' identity, packaging and communications. When this experience is memorable and unique, consumers are more likely to repeat their behaviour and become loyal to a brand (Brakus et al., 2009). And according to Iglesias, Singh and Batista-Foguet (2011), brand experience influences brand loyalty because there is affective commitment. As described by Khan and Rahman (2015), providing a unique e-tail brand experience to consumers may be an effective way to develop e-brand loyalty and differentiate the e-tail brand in the consumers' mind in the pre-purchase stage. I argue that in the post-purchase stage also a unique e-tail brand experience can be provided to the consumer, when he or she is exposed to the brand-related stimuli evoked by the packaging and communications of the e-tail brand. Therefore, I argue that within the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, e-tail brand experience will also have a positive influence on e-brand loyalty.

H1. E-tail brand experience in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey has a positive influence on e-brand loyalty.

**Personalisation**

Within interactive marketing literature, personalisation is seen as an important element (Blattberg & Deighton, 1991). Interactive marketing includes the ability of companies to approach the consumer, the ability to gather and remember the response of that consumer and the ability to address the consumer in the future taking into account its unique response (Deighton & Sorrell, 1996). The knowledge of this particular field of marketing is used in the current research because there is an emphasis on experiences and personalisation of marketing activities. This connects with the subjects e-tail brand experience and e-loyalty that are investigated in the current research. For the current research, the definition of personalisation is adopted from the work of Montgomery & Smith (2009, p. 4) and adjusted to fit the current research, since it focuses on the communication the e-tailer uses to interact with the consumer. Personalisation is defined as: the adaptation of communication by the e-tailer for the consumer using information that has been inferred from the consumer's behaviour or transactions.

Multiple studies have investigated personalisation (e.g. Arora et al., 2008; Deighton & Sorrell, 1996; Grewal, Lindsey-Mullikin & Munger, 2004; Montgomery & Smith, 2009; Wetzlinger, Auinger, Kindermann & Schönberger, 2017). Research on personalisation is mostly done regarding web-specific knowledge, such as cookies and online profiling (Baker, Marn and Zawada 2001; Iyer, Miyazaki, Grewal & Giordano, 2002), as well as personalisation during the (online) purchase stage (Wetzlinger, Auinger, Kindermann & Schönberger, 2017). Research on personalisation in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey is still missing.

There are plentiful approaches to interactive marketing described in literature in which personalisation is a key aspect. These approaches include one-to-one marketing, customerization, customer relationship management, permission marketing, customer intimacy, real-time marketing, McKinsey's continuous relationship management, Garner Group's technology enabled marketing, enterprise relationship management, internet marketing, database marketing and e-marketing (Montgomery & Smith, 2009). Within all these

types of marketing, personalisation is defined in different ways. The knowledge types of interactive marketing that will be used for the current research are customer relationship management and one-to-one marketing, because these types apply the concept of personalisation in a suitable way with regard to communication in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. Reasons for choosing these concepts will be elaborated in their corresponding paragraphs.

      **Personalised message.** Customer relationship management is defined as "the comprehensive process of erecting and sustaining profitable customer relationships by delivering superior customer value and satisfaction" (Kotler, Armstrong & Harris, 2013, p. 13). Within customer relationship management, personalisation is seen as "the ability of a company to recognize and treat its customers as individuals through personal messaging, targeted banner ads, special offers on bills, or other personal transactions" (Imhoff, Loftis & Geiger, 2001, p. 467). Customer relationship management seems to fit well with the concept of e-tail brand experience, since delivering superior consumer experiences such as value and satisfaction corresponds with the importance of delivering a unique and memorable brand experience within marketing. In this, superior consumer experiences can be seen as experiences that are beyond what is expected by the consumer. These experiences occur when a consumer interacts with a company's physical environment, its policies, practices and its personnel (Hui & Bateson, 1991; Kerin, Jain & Howard, 2002). Several studies have investigated the interactions of consumers with salespeople and how these experiences affect the feelings of consumers, and their brand attitudes (e.g. Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder & Lueg, 2005; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin & Zeithaml, 1993; Grace & O'Cass, 2004; Jones 1999; Ofir & Simonson 2007). Important to note with regard to these interactions is that good relational communication is a crucial factor in encouraging loyalty and building long-term relationships with consumers (Godfrey, Seiders & Voss, 2011).

The previously discussed interactions between salespeople and consumers can be applied in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey by including a personal message within the tertiary package that is written by the employee. In this way, an interaction between the consumer and the employee is generated (Gremler, Gwinner & Brown, 2001). I propose that by creating this interaction in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey through the inclusion of a personalised message in the tertiary packaging, an experience is experienced which affects the feelings of the consumer (Hui & Bateson, 1991; Kerin, Jain & Howard, 2002) due to which the consumer perceives that he or she is treated as an individual (Tseng, Jiao & Wang, 2010). Consequently, this will create positive sensations, feelings and cognitions that are created by the brand-related stimuli from the employee (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009) and leads to a unique and memorable e-tail brand experience (Khan & Rahman, 2016). When this happens, I hypothesise that more positive experiences are created towards the e-tail brand in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey compared to including no communication.

H2. Including a personalised message in the tertiary packaging has a positive influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

**Personalised recommendation.** To accommodate to consumers' increased desire for personalisation, marketers have embraced the concept of one-to-one marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2015). One-to-one marketing includes the tailoring of one or more aspects of the company's marketing mix to the individual consumer (Peppers & Rogers 1997; Peppers, Rogers & Dorf 1999; Shaffer & Zhang, 2002). There are two types of one-to-one marketing: personalisation and customisation (Arora et al., 2008). Personalisation in one-to-one marketing is initiated by the firm and based on collected data of the consumer. The firm decides what marketing mix is suitable for the individual (Arora et al., 2008). Customisation differs from

personalisation in the sense that not the firm is the initiator, but instead the consumer proactively specifies one or more elements in the marketing mix (Arora et al., 2008). The marketing mix is referred to as the set of marketing tools that the firm uses to pursue its marketing objectives (Kotler, 2000, p. 9). An example of customisation is Dell, which allows its consumers to customise the computer that is ordered. In the current study, one-to-one marketing is initiated by the e-tailer through sending personal messages which are based on collected data of the consumer. Therefore, only the one-to-one marketing knowledge with regard to personalisation is consulted in the current research.

The purpose of personalisation in one-to-one marketing is to conform a product or service that is standardized, to an individual consumer's needs (Montgomery & Smith, 2009). Personalisation in online shopping is a strategy that may help in persuading consumers to select a product or service leading to a purchase (Pappas, Kourouthanassis, Giannakos & Lekakos, 2017). One of the applications in which this persuasion is used for future purchases is personalised recommendation (Wei, Tian & Shen, 2018). Personalised recommendation is already applied by a lot of companies in the form of collaborative filtering systems during the pre-purchase and the purchase stage of the customer journey. Examples of organizations that have incorporated personalised recommendation are Amazon, Netflix and iTunes to recommend books, movies and music. These sites have demonstrated the importance of recommender systems across a variety of settings (Montgomery & Smith, 2009). Thus, one-to-one marketing is used to conform a product or service to the consumer's needs and a commonly used application of one-to-one marketing is a recommender system that uses collaborative filtering.

Product recommendation makes it possible to fulfil the needs and expectations of the consumer and helps in maintaining loyal consumers (Rodrigues & Ferreira, 2016). Furthermore, it is widely implemented in e-commerce and besides maintaining loyal consumers, it has been proven to increase consumer loyalty (Kaminskas, Bridge, Foping &

Roche, 2017). Simultaneously, it directs consumers to new items in the assortment of the company (Dias, Locher, El-Deredy & Lisboa, 2008). Many e-tailers use recommender systems to help consumers locate products and content (Calandrino, Kilzer, Narayanan, Felten & Shmatikov, 2011). Collaborative filtering (CF) is the most applied function in these recommender systems and is used to predict the preferences of consumers by filtering patterns or information (Wei, Tian & Shen, 2018). Besides predicting and filtering, it provides users a personal recommendation by analysing historical transaction data and interests. However, with this type of recommender system the risk emerges that consumers' privacy is leaked. (Wei, Tian & Shen, 2018). This is because personal data is most of the times stored on a cloud, which gives rise to privacy concerns due to possible privacy attacks (Yang, Zhu, Xiang & Zhou, (2017). Then, the data may be used in a way that can violate the consumers' expectations of privacy, especially when not trusted parties or malicious agents have access to this data (Ricci, Rokach & Shapira, 2015). So, recommender systems filter and predict the data and interests of the consumer, which provides advantages with respect to consumer loyalty, but also leads to privacy concerns.

Besides online recommendation systems, another variant of providing recommendations is executed in the offline, in-store environment. Here, the salesperson is seen as one of the most crucial factors, and he or she attempts to influence the buying behaviour of the consumer (Cialdini, 2009). Besides recommendations, salespersons can provide various other services in order to create value for the consumer. A salesperson can offer expertise about a product in order to make the consumers' choice easier (Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2013) or reassure the consumer because the salesperson has similar taste and is seen as someone that can be trusted. (Busch & Wilson, 1976; Swan, Trawick Jr., Rink & Roberts, 1988). Employees can create strong bonds with the consumer by personalizing relationships (Kotler & Keller, 2015). It is not unusual that commercial friendships between consumers and salespeople occur, which is a result of the multiple interactions between them (Solomon,

Bamossy & Askegaard, 2013). In this, creating a strong and tight connection with consumers is often the key to long-term marketing success (Kotler & Keller, 2015). These commercial friendships also support marketing objectives such as satisfaction and loyalty (Price & Arnould, 1999). And lastly, more effective salespersons often know the traits and the preferences of the consumer better than less effective salespersons (Leong, Busch & John, 1989; Sujan, Sujan & Bettman 1988). Thus, salespersons are a crucial factor in the in-store environment, and through multiple interactions and activities they can create strong bonds or commercial friendships with the consumer which can lead to long-term marketing success.

Salespeople and recommender systems seem to be well-researched and well-supported with regard to their values for sales and marketing in the offline (e.g. Cialdini, 2009; Kotler & Keller, 2015; Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2013) and online environment (e.g. Montgomery & Smith, 2009; Rodrigues & Ferreira, 2016; Calandrino et al., 2011). However, in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, making recommendations can have a different effect on consumers' experience compared to the online and in-store environment. Even when the salesperson knows the traits and preferences of the consumer, still a feeling of distrust with regard to the sincerity of the recommendation can occur with the consumer in this stage. In this situation, a salesperson will make a recommendation about future purchases without having face-to-face contact with the consumer, because the salesperson is not able to meet the consumer at home. Adding to this, literature stresses that strong bonds or commercial friendship are important for success (Kotler & Keller, 2015; Price & Arnould, 1999; Solomon, Bamosky & Askegaard). It rarely happens that a commercial friendship or an employee-consumer bond is created by only sending a message within the tertiary package. Of course, the salesperson can still express similar tastes and try to reassure the consumer. However, I argue that the chances of making these kinds of recommendations successful, are small. The reason for this is that the salesperson cannot convince the consumer that he or she is someone that can be trusted, since the salesperson and consumer have not had any face-to-face

interactions with each other. As a result, no strong bonds or commercial friendships can be created, for which multiple interactions are required (Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2013). What follows, is that the consumer feels that he is approached for the reason of making sales, instead of sincere interest that would be created by these multiple interactions (Busch & Wilson, 1976; Swan, Trawick Jr., Rink & Roberts, 1988). I argue that this can lead to negative sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses, which will not be beneficial for the e-tail brand experience of the consumer. In order to make these recommendations successful, I suggest that multiple interactions must have occurred between the employee and the consumer, through which a relationship is established. However, this is not possible in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, since there are no possibilities for face-to-face contact or multiple interactions due to the fact that a tertiary package is only send at one specific point in time. Besides that, the expectations a consumer has with regard to privacy can be violated if non-trusted parties use the data coming forth from the recommender systems (Ricci, Rokach & Shapira, 2015). As a result, I hypothesise that including a recommendation message within the tertiary package will have a negative effect on e-tail brand experience.

H3. Including a personalised recommendation message written by the employee in the tertiary package has a negative influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

**Writing style: handwritten versus printed communication**

Effective relational communication can take different forms, such as face-to-face interactions, telephone calls and written formats (Godfrey, Seiders & Voss, 2011; Kumar, Venkatesan & Reinartz, 2008; Verhoef, 2003). Multiple articles have been written concerning the use of e-mail as written formats in order to influence personalisation (Byrom & Bennison, 2000; McCoy & Hargie, 2007; Parsons & Wethington, 1996). But regarding communication

in the post-purchase stage, substantial research is missing. When a tertiary package is sent to the consumer in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, only one of the previously stated forms of effective relational communication (Godfrey, Seiders & Voss, 2011; Kumar, Venkatesan & Reinartz, 2008; Verhoef, 2003) can be included, which is the written format. Of course, a face-to-face or telephone interaction cannot be implemented within packaging. Within the service industry, written communication is seen as an essential way of interacting with consumers in order to make sure that good feelings are created about doing business with the service provider (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018). Written communication in the relationship between the firm and the consumer can either be handwritten or printed. Little research has been devoted to the comparison between handwritten and print communication in general. Handwriting and print differ in three ways (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018). Firstly, they are written by different entities, namely humans create handwriting, and the handwriting reminds the consumer of the human behind it (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018). Computers and print machines create a print font, and with that mediate the messages that are sent between the sender and the receiver. Secondly, there is a difference in terms of aesthetics (Du, Xia & Ren, 2015). And last, the differences between handwritten and print messages can lead to a difference in feelings when receiving these messages. The study of Ren, Xia and Du (2018) shows that service providers' handwritten messages have an influence on feelings and consumers' behavioural intentions, such as word of mouth and satisfaction. A robust effect was found, but it has never been studied how these variables will affect the e-tail brand experience of the consumer in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. Thus, the subject of handwritten messages versus print messages with regard to their differences and their effect on the relationship between personal messages, personal recommendations, and e-tail brand experience have not been researched in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, and especially not in the e-tailing industry.

Previous research has revealed that consumers most of the time notice the effort level of the service provider and make inferences about it (Mohr & Bitner, 1995). In the current research, the e-tailer sends the tertiary package that can include a personalised handwritten message. Consequently, the consumer will notice that a certain level of effort is put into creating the message and consequently makes inferences. What follows, is that the consumer gives meaning to the social interaction that takes place and the consumer perceives that more effort is put in the service transaction by the employee (i.e. a handwritten message compared to a printed message). Then, the consumer is more likely to have a better quality perception of the service, leading to a positive experience (Mohr & Bitner, 1995). A service from which is perceived that it is executed with greater effort is perceived more sincere, without fraud and honest, while a lack of effort is seen as more insincere and superficial (Hollaway & Beatty, 2003). Therefore, I propose that when a handwritten personal message is included in the tertiary packaging sent to the consumer in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, the consumer will notice that more effort is put into the message and will make positive inferences. This in turn will lead to a positive e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication in the tertiary packaging.

Based on the previous argumentation, it is clear that making effort leads to positive inference making and a better perception of sincerity. Therefore, it is expected that when a printed personal message is included in the tertiary packaging during the post-purchase stage of the customer journey will also lead to a better e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

Given that handwritten communication is associated with the human being behind the message, makes the communication between the consumer and the firm a person-to-person communication (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018). Furthermore, I argue that consumers will perceive that a printed message takes less effort to create compared to a handwritten message, since creating a handwritten message consumes more time and physical effort compared to a printed message.

Consequently, this will lead to a positive perception of sincerity and the corresponding e-tail brand experience with the consumer when he or she receives a handwritten personal message compared to including a printed personal message. Based on the previously stated argumentations, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H4a. Including a handwritten personalised message in the tertiary packaging will have a positive influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

H4b. Including a printed personalised message in the tertiary packaging will have a positive influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

H4c. Including a handwritten personalised message in the tertiary packaging will have a positive influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including a printed personal message.

When people feel close to another person, they are less likely to question any ulterior motive of the action of that person (meaning an ambiguous or hidden purpose of the action that is not told to the other person) and will consider this action friendly and benevolent (Williams, Stein & Galguera, 2014). In the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, the respective action that is executed by the employee consists of including a personal recommendation in the tertiary package that is send to the consumer. The ulterior motive of this action is to recommend products for future purchases from the e-tail brand. In the current study, I argue that due to the lack of a commercial friendship (Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2013) and the lack of a strong and tight connection between the consumer and the employee (Kotler & Keller, 2015), the consumer will not feel close to the employee (Williams, Stein & Galguera, 2014). Consequently, the consumer is more likely to question the specified ulterior motive behind the action: recommending products for sales and marketing purposes. Therefore, I suggest that this will lead to negative sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses and

consequently a negative corresponding e-tail brand experience when a personal recommendation is included in the tertiary package.

Then again, there is the influence of the difference in writing style. When a handwritten communication and a printed communication are compared, the handwritten communication is seen as more personal (Clark & Kaminski, 1990), while the machine in the sense of a printer or computer, distances consumers from the service provider (Ren, Xia, Du, 2018), which is in this case the e-tailer. Because the machine creates a distant feeling with consumers towards the e-tailer, the consumer will be more likely to question the ulterior motive behind the action (Williams, Stein & Galguera, 2014), namely recommending products for sales and marketing purposes. This in turn, will lead to negative sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses and a negative corresponding e-tail brand experience when a printed personal recommendation is included in the tertiary package, compared to including no communication.

Furthermore, I argue that when a handwritten personal recommendation is sent to the consumer, the ulterior motive of making recommendations for sales and marketing purposes is present, simultaneously with the greater perceived effort (Mohr & Bitner, 1995) to create a handwritten recommendation compared to a printed recommendation. Due to these noticed matters, negative feelings, sensations and behavioural responses will be perceived by the consumer when the handwritten recommendation is included in the tertiary package. Compared to a printed recommendation and compared to including no communication, this will lead to a less positive e-tail brand experience. Normally, more effort leads to a greater feeling of sincerity (Busch & Wilson, 1976; Swan, Trawick Jr., Rink & Roberts, 1988), and a not fraudulent and honest perception (Hollaway & Beatty, 2003). When a negative ulterior motive is perceived, I believe that this will lead to a negative feeling of insincerity, because more effort is put into creating the message. Based on the previous stated argumentations, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H5a. Including a handwritten recommendation in the tertiary packaging will have a negative influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

H5b. Including a printed recommendation in the tertiary packaging will have a negative influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

H5c. Including a handwritten recommendation in the tertiary packaging will have a negative influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including a printed recommendation.

Based on the insights from literature and the stated hypotheses, a conceptual framework is presented in *figure 1*. Furthermore, a personalised message and personalised recommendation are both forms of communication and will therefore both be referred to as a type of communication throughout this paper.
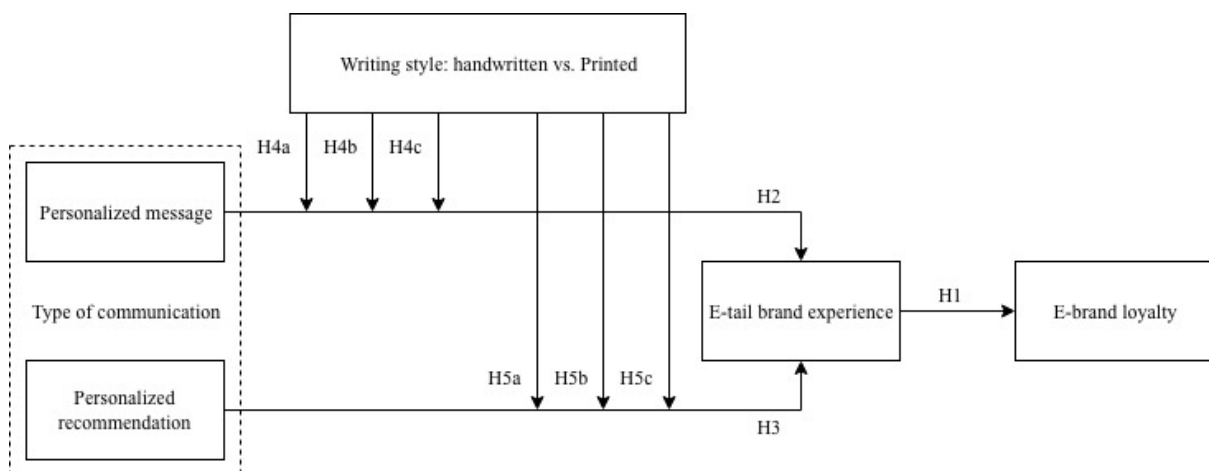


**Figure 1.** *Conceptual framework.*

# Method

## Participants and design

In the study, an experiment, 301 participants ($M_{age}$ = 21.57, $SD_{age}$ = 2.9, 58.5% female) were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a 2 (type of communication:

personalised message vs. personalised recommendation) X 2 (writing style: handwritten vs. printed) + 1 (control condition) between-subjects design. Respondents were recruited by the use of convenience sampling, and were approached by social media, word of mouth, and posters. Furthermore, students were personally approached by the researcher for 10 days on the campus of Wageningen University and were asked to join the experiment. Participation in the experiment was completely voluntary and anonymous. In return, participants could participate in a raffle of a €50 gift voucher to spend at Bol.com.

**Procedure and variables**

The experiment was executed in a computer room on the campus of Wageningen University and participants completed a 'Qualtrics' survey on a computer. Participants first read a short introduction about the research, an estimation of the duration of the survey and a statement regarding informed consent, which included several statements: a statement that participants had ordered at least one product online somewhere in the previous year, that they were 18 years or older and that the answers would be handled completely confidentially and anonymously. If participants did not agree with this statement, they were directed to the end of the survey and excluded from the sample. Participants that did agree with the statement, were assigned to one of the different conditions. To find a fictional e-tail brand name that was not known by participants and to make sure that they could not have had any previous interactions with the brand in terms of e-tail brand experience and loyalty, a two-question pre-test was conducted. The pre-test investigated whether or not 'Onlinebooks.com' as a fictional e-tail brand was known to participants and whether or not people had previously experienced any sensations, feelings or cognitions (e-tail brand experiences) related to Onlinebooks.com. For this pre-test, 18 persons from the Netherlands ($M_{age} = 28.72$, $SD_{age} = 12.21$, 44.4% female) were first asked the following question: 'Do you know an online retailer by the name of 'Onlinebooks.com'?' Results showed that 18 out of 18 participants did not know this fictional Onlinebooks.com. Thus, Onlinebooks.com was perceived as not known among the pre-test

participants. Secondly, participants were asked the following question: 'Do you perceive any sensations, feelings or cognitions related to 'Onlinebooks.com'?'. Results showed that 15 out of 18 participants did not perceive any sensations, feelings or cognitions related to Onlinebooks.com. Based on these two results, the name Onlinebooks.com was incorporated in the experiment as the online store and e-tail brand that is mentioned during the experiment.

During the experiment, participants were asked to imagine a scenario wherein they needed some relaxation. Therefore, participants had to imagine they had bought a book belonging to a specific genre (a novel) they liked from the website of the e-tailer Onlinebooks.com. Furthermore, they had chosen for a home delivery. The book was chosen as a product in the study, since books were perceived as neutral products that are frequently bought by men and women. Hereafter, the participants were asked to raise their hand, after which the researcher would give them a tertiary package as if he were the delivery man.

**The conditions.** After the respondents had received the package, they were asked to carefully open it and have a careful look at the contents of the package. The packages (*appendix A*) had a neutral and white colour and an address sticker on top of them to show that the package was specifically addressed to the participants. They would find the following things inside the package: the ordered book wrapped in plastic, a packing slip and depending on their condition, a personalised message (handwritten or printed), a personalised recommendation (handwritten or printed), or no further communication. All participants were asked to first have a careful look at the book, and thereafter carefully read the additional document(s) (in the control condition, the participants only had to read the packing slip). In *appendices B, C, D, E, F,* and *G,* the ordered book and the different types of communications are presented. Then participants were directed to the next questions.

**E-tail brand experience.** From this point on, all participants saw the same text and questions in the survey. Unless otherwise indicated, all items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale. First, they were asked four questions about their experiences with the e-tail brand

of Onlinebooks.com where the participants had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with multiple statements. To measure e-tail brand experience relevant items were used from the brand experience scale developed by Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello (2009). The questions were modified in this study such that they sought information on e-tail brand experience. For affective e-tail brand experience, participants were asked to rate three items ("this brand induces feelings and sentiments"; "I have strong emotions for this brand"; "This brand is an emotional brand"). For behavioural e-tail brand experience, participants were asked to rate two items ("I engage in physical actions and behaviours when I use this brand"; "This brand is not action oriented"). For intellectual e-tail brand experience, participants were asked to rate three items ("I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this brand"; "This brand makes me think"; "This brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving"). Lastly, for sensory e-tail brand experience, participants were asked to rate three items ("This brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses"; "I find this brand interesting in a sensory way"; "This brand does not appeal to my senses"). A factor analysis on e-tail brand experience with KMO = .87 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity $p < .05$ showed four components with respective eigenvalues of 5.73, 1.30, 1.07 and 1.06. The first component explained 52.09% of total variance (four factors 83.27%). While four factors were reported, they all measured a part of e-tail brand experience in terms of affective, behavioural, intellectual and sensory aspects. To know whether or not the items together would measure the construct e-tail brand experience, it was tested if the items could also be used as one component. As a result, one factor was selected based on the scree plot, the component matrix and the pattern matrix. This factor (*F1: e-tail brand experience*) contained all eleven items, with corresponding factor loadings between .56 and .81. The Cronbach's alpha for the factors was $\alpha = .91$, so it was reliable to converge all items into one scale using this single component in order to measure e-tail brand experience.

**E-brand Loyalty.** Next, the e-brand loyalty was measured with eight different questions. First, participants were asked a question with regard to their attitude towards Onlinebooks.com: "What would you think of Onlinebooks.com as a brand after the payment, receiving and unwrapping of your online order?". 5 items were adopted from the scale of MacKenzie & Lutz (1989) and slightly altered to measure the consumer's overall evaluation of Onlinebooks.com as an e-tailer. Furthermore, three items were adopted from the scale of Sirdeshmukh, Singh and Sabol (2002) in order to seek information concerning the integrity of the e-tailer Onlinebooks.com. Thus, for attitude and integrity, participants were asked to rate eight items on a seven-point bi-polar scale (1 = *very bad*, 7 = *very good*; 1 = *very unpleasant*, 7 = *very pleasant*; 1 = *very unfavourable*, 7 = *very favourable*; 1 = *very negative*, 7 = *very positive*; 1 = *very non-reputable*, 7 = *very reputable*; 1 = *very incompetent*, 7 = *very competent*; 1 = *very undependable*,  7 = *very dependable*; 1 = *of very low integrity*, 7 = *of very high integrity*).

Secondly, the participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statements about Onlinebooks.com in the described situation to measure commitment and loyalty towards the store. Three items were adopted from De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001) ("I am willing to go the extra mile to remain a customer of this online store"; "I feel loyal towards this online store"; "Even if this online store would be more difficult to reach, I would still continue buying products there") and one item from Cho (2006) ("I am willing to remain loyal to this store").

The third question asked the participants to indicate to what extent they agreed with a second set of statements about Onlinebooks.com in the described situation to measure attachment and recommendation. The first three items were adopted from the work of Swaminathan, Stilley & Ahluwalia (2009), in order to measure attachment. The last two items were adopted from the work of Maxham and Netemeyer (2002a, 2002b, 2003), in order to measure recommendation. Thus, for attachment and recommendation, participants were asked

to rate five items ("I would feel bonded to Onlinebooks.com"; "I would feel attached to Onlinebooks.com"; "I would feel connected to Onlinebooks.com"; "I would recommend Onlinebooks.com to my friends"; "If my friends were looking to purchase something, I would tell them to try out this Onlinebooks.com").

Both questions four and five measured the repurchase intention of the participants with Onlinebooks.com. Relevant items from the work of Dutta Biswas and Grewal (2007) were used. The questions were modified in this study such that they sought information on repurchase intention at Onlinebooks.com. All items were measured on a seven-point bi-polar scale. The fourth question was "How likely are you to revisit Onlinebooks.com for your shopping needs?". The fifth question was "If you ever purchase a product again, how likely are you to buy it from this Onlinebooks.com?". For repurchase intention, participants were asked to rate two items (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*; 1 = *very improbable*, 7 = *very probable*).

The sixth question measured the satisfaction of the participants with Onlinebooks.com. The question was: "How satisfied are you with Onlinebooks.com?". This item was taken from the work of Chun and Davies (2006). Not all items were adopted from this scale, since they were already covered by items in previous questions. Participants had to rate one item that was measured on a seven-point bi-polar scale (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 7 = *very satisfied*).

A factor analysis on e-brand loyalty with KMO = .93 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity $p < .05$ showed three components with respective eigenvalues of 9.10, 2.93 and 1.19. The first component explained 45.50% of total variance and the second component explained 14.66% (three factors 66.10%). Based on the scree plot, the component matrix and the pattern matrix, 3 factors were selected. The first factor (*F1: attitude,* α = .88) contained the items *goodness, pleasantness*, *favourability*, *positivity*, *reputability, competence, dependability and integrity* with corresponding factor loadings between .65 and .76. The second factor (*F2: loyalty*, α = .94)* contained the items *willingness, loyalty, shopping continuity, willingness to remain loyal, bondedness, attachment, connectedness* with corresponding factor loadings between .69 and

.89. The third factor (*F3: retention*, α = .87) included the items *recommend to purchase, recommend to try out, revisit likeliness and repurchase probability.* The item *store satisfaction* did not seem to fit well within the *retention* factor and was therefore deleted. A reliability analysis showed that the Cronbach's alpha for the three different factors was above α = .70. Therefore, it was reliable to converge the items corresponding to the factors in one scale in order to measure e-brand loyalty

The last two questions were aimed at a conclusion with regard to the evaluation of online shopping in general. Question seven was: "When you would evaluate the total of all elements of your online order in the described situation, how would you evaluate it?". This item was adopted from the scale of MacKenzie and Lutz (1998) and was slightly changed in order to grasp the total evaluation of Onlinebooks.com as an e-tailer. The item was measured on a seven-point bi-polar scale. For total evaluation, participants were asked to rate one item (1 = *very negative*, 7 = *very positive*). Question eight was: "Would your opinion concerning online shopping after this online experience have worsened, remained the same, or improved?". Participants had to choose between three options by filling in the blank space at the end of the sentence *"My opinion about online shopping would have…".* The three options for this item were: *(1) Worsened; (2) Remained the same; (3) improved.*

**Manipulation checks.** After all specific questions about the described situation and Onlinebooks.com, several manipulation checks questions were asked. First, participants were asked to indicate if the book and the packing slip were included in the tertiary package by answering *'yes'*, *'no'* or *'I don't know'* on two items ("The ordered book was included in the box"; "A packing slip/receipt was included in the box"). Then the participants were asked which communication they received by choosing between three options by filling in the blank space at the end of the sentence: "… was included in the box". The three options were: *(1) A personal message; (2) A personal recommendation; (3) No further communication.* If the participants chose the first option, they were directed to a question where they had to indicate

in which style the personal message was written by filling in the blank space after choosing between two options at the end of the sentence "The personal message was …". The two options were: *(1) Handwritten; (2) Printed.* If the participants chose the second option, they were directed to a question where they had to indicate in which style the personal recommendation was written by filling in the blank space after choosing between two options at the end of the sentence "The personal recommendation was …". The two options were: *(1) Handwritten; (2) Printed.* If the participants chose the third option, they were directed immediately to the questions regarding demographics.

**Demographics.** Following the manipulation checks, respondents had to answer several questions concerning demographics: age, gender and highest degree of education obtained (High school 47.2%; Bachelor's degree 44.9%; Master's degree 7%; Other 1%) After filling in these questions, participants were directed to the end of the survey, where they had the option to make remarks regarding the questionnaire, their answers or the topic online order in general. Then, the participants had the opportunity to leave their e-mail address in order to participate in the raffle of the Bol.com gift voucher. At last, they were debriefed and asked to submit their survey answers.

## Results

Preliminary checks were done to ensure that there was no violation of assumptions such as normality, kurtosis, skewness, linearity, homogeneity of variances (according to multiple Levene's tests), and homoscedasticity. All data met the assumptions of these tests. Unless otherwise indicated, all tests were conducted using a two-way between-groups analysis of variance, indicated with ANOVA.

**Manipulation checks**

To check whether the different conditions were successfully manipulated, I ran multiple

manipulation checks. The results of all manipulation checks were found by conducting a cross tabulation. *Table 1* presents the percentages of the participants' answers to the first two manipulation questions. Since all participants (even participants in the control condition) received a package in which both a book and a packing slip were included, for both of these questions $N = 301$ was applied in the cross tabulation.

Table 1.

Results cross tabulation manipulation check questions 1 and 2.

| Manipulation check question | Yes | No/I don't know |
|---|---|---|
| 1. The ordered book was included in the box | 98% | 2% |
| 2. A packing slip/receipt was included in the box | 98% | 2% |

*Note*: N = 301.

For the first manipulation check question a Chi-square test ($\chi^2$ (4) = .69, $p$ = .953, *phi* = .05) was conducted and no differences between conditions were reported. This indicates that 98% of the participants recognized and received the book they were supposed to order during the experiment. Again, for the second manipulation check question no differences between conditions were reported as result of a Chi-square test ($\chi^2$ (8) = 8.32, $p$ = .403, *phi* = .17), which indicated that 98% of the participants knew and recognized the packing slip they were supposed to receive during the experiment. *Table 2* presents the percentages of the participants' answers to manipulation checks three, four, and five corresponding with the conditions they were assigned to.

Table 2.

*Percentages of participants that answered questions 3, 4 and 5 correctly.*

| Condition | 3. Communication type | 4. Message type | 5. Recommendation type |
|---|---|---|---|
| Handwritten message | 98.3% | 98.3% | - |
| Printed message | 91.7% | 88.3% | - |
| Handwritten recommendation | 83.3% | - | 80% |
| Printed recommendation | 84.7% | - | 84.7% |
| Control condition | 80.6% | - | - |

*Note:* empty cells indicate that the corresponding question were not meant for the particular conditions and were therefore not shown to participants

The third manipulation check question asked the participants which type of communication was included in their package. A Chi-square test ($\chi^2(8) = 402.51$, $p < .001$, *phi* = 1.16) found significant differences between groups for type of communication, as was expected. The fourth manipulation check question asked the participants which type of personal message they had received. Only the participants who indicated that they received a personal message in question three were asked this question. A Chi-square test ($\chi^2(4) = 121.20$, $p < .001$, *phi* = .948) for message type indicated significant differences between groups, as was expected. Following the third and fourth questions, the fifth manipulation check question asked the participants which type of personal recommendation they received. Only the participants who indicated that they received a personal recommendation in question three were asked this question. Here, also a significant difference between groups was found through conducting a Chi-square test ($\chi^2(4) = 104.20$, $p < .001$, *phi* = .965).

According to the results of cross tabulation, the Chi-square tests and the high percentages of participants that answered the manipulation check questions correctly, it is assumed that all the manipulations have worked. Furthermore, a dataset was created in which all participants that did not answer the manipulation check questions correctly, were deleted ($N$ = 261). All analyses were also executed based on this dataset, however no large differences were found compared to the original dataset. Therefore, the original dataset ($N$ = 301) was preserved.

**E-tail brand experience**

First of all, the effects of the experimental conditions on e-tail brand experience compared to the control group were analysed. This was done using ANOVAs with E-tail brand experience as a dependent variable. The first ANOVA was executed with Type of communication as independent variable, with 0 = Recommendation, 1 = Message and 2 = Control. A significant main effect was found for the variable type of communication, $F(2, 298)$ = 10.43, $p$ < .001, $p_\eta^2$ = .065. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test further investigated whether mean scores significantly differed. A comprehensive overview of the different mean scores is presented in *figure 2*.
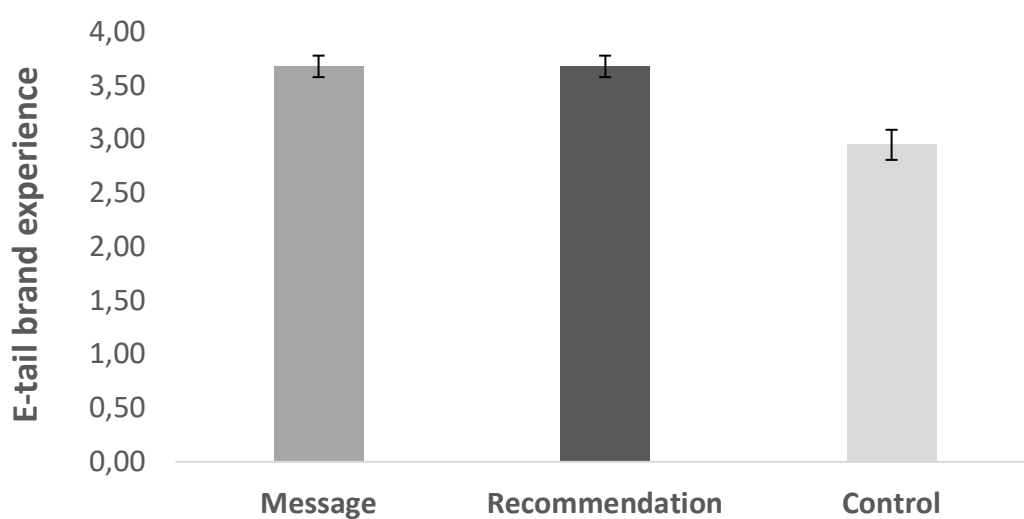


**Figure 2.** *Mean scores of E-tail brand experience for the message, recommendation and control conditions. Error bars denote one standard error around the mean.*

The post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean scores of the personal message group ($M_{\text{difference}}$ = .72, $SE_{\text{difference}}$ = .17, $p$ < .001) and the personal recommendation group ($M_{\text{difference}}$ = .72, $SE_{\text{difference}}$ = .17, $p$ < .001) were higher than the control group see *figure 2*. This implies that including a personal message or a personal recommendation in the tertiary packaging has a positive influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication. This is in line with hypothesis 2, which stated that including a personalised message in the tertiary packaging has a positive influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication. However, it is in contrast with hypothesis 3, which expected that including a recommendation message in the tertiary packaging has a negative influence on e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication.

For the second ANOVA, Condition (1 = Handwritten message, 2 = Printed message, 3 = Handwritten recommendation, 4 = Printed recommendation and 5 = Control) was selected as independent variable. The main effects were analysed for each condition compared to the control condition. A significant main effect was found for the variable Condition ($F$ (4, 296) = 8.73, $p$ < .001, $p_{\eta}^2$ = .106). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test further investigated whether mean scores significantly differed. A comprehensive overview of the mean scores is presented in *figure 3*.
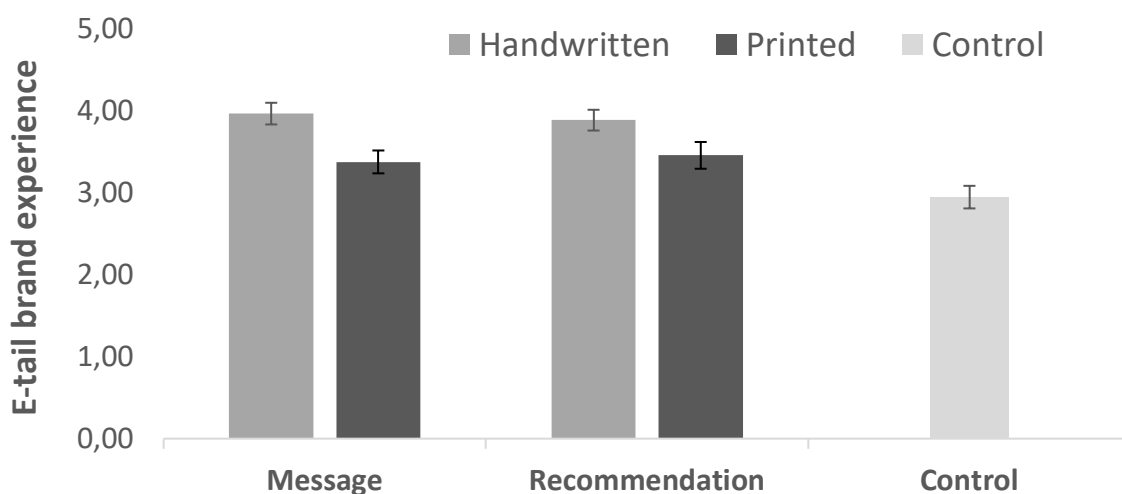


**Figure 3.** *Mean scores of E-tail brand experience for all five conditions. Error bars denote one standard error around the mean.*

The post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean score for the handwritten personal message group was significantly higher than the control group ($M_{\text{difference}}$ = 1.02, $SE_{\text{difference}}$ = .20, $p < .001$), as can be seen in *figure 3*. This is in line with hypothesis 4a, which expected that including a handwritten personal message in the tertiary package would lead to higher scores of e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication. Furthermore, the mean score for the handwritten personal recommendation group was significantly higher than the control group ($M_{\text{difference}}$ = .93, $SE_{\text{difference}}$ = .20, $p < .001$), see *figure 3*. This is in contrast with hypothesis 5a, which expected that including a handwritten recommendation in the tertiary packaging would lead to lower scores of e-tail brand experience compared to including no communication. Moreover, the printed personal message and printed personal recommendation groups (*figure 3*) were not significantly different from the control group. This was in contrast with hypothesis 4b and 5b, which expected that that including a printed message and a printed recommendation would be significantly different from the control group.

**Analyses between conditions**

After analysing the results of the condition effects on e-tail brand experience in comparison with the control group, the between-group effects were analysed. This was done using an ANOVA with E-tail brand experience as dependent variable and Writing style (0 = Handwritten communication, 1 = Printed communication) and Type of communication (0 = Message, 1 = Recommendation) as independent variables. No statistically significant interaction was found between Writing style and Type of communication ($F (1, 235) = .343, p = .559, p_\eta^2 = .559$). Subsequently, the main effects of Writing style and Type of communication were analysed. No significant main effect was found for Type of communication, $F (1, 235) = .001, p = .559, p_\eta^2 = .001$. This implies that there is no significant difference between including either a personal message or a personal recommendation in the tertiary package in terms of effect on e-tail brand experience. In contrast, a significant main effect was found for Writing style, $F (1, 235) = 12.90, p < .001, p_\eta^2 = .052$. This indicates that there was a significant

difference between printed and handwritten communications on the mean scores of e-tail brand experience, with handwritten communications leading to a higher mean of e-tail brand experience, as can be seen in *figure 3*. From the post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test in the ANOVA with Condition as independent variable also came forward that the mean score of the handwritten message group was significantly higher than the printed message group with *p* < .05, see *figure 3*. This was in line with hypothesis 4c, which expected that including a handwritten message in the tertiary packaging would have led to higher scores on e-tail brand experience compared to including a printed message. Furthermore, the same analysis reported no significant mean difference between the handwritten recommendation group and the printed recommendation group, *see figure 3*. This was in contrast with hypothesis 5c, which expected that including a handwritten recommendation in the tertiary packaging would have led to lower scores on e-tail brand experience compared to including a printed recommendation.

**The effect of e-tail brand experience on e-brand loyalty**

The relationship between e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty was investigated using three standard linear regression analyses, since e-brand loyalty was measured by the factors Attitude, Loyalty and Retention. In all three analyses, E-tail brand experience (*M* = 3.53, *SD* = 1.14) was used as independent variable. E-tail brand experience had a significant effect on Loyalty (*M* = 3.54, *SD* = 1.35) with $F(1, 299) = 274.54$, *p* <.001, $R^2$ =.48, Attitude (*M* = 5.41, *SD* = .82) with $F(1, 299) = 42.94$, *p* <.001, $R^2$ = .13) and Retention (*M* = 5.28, *SD* = 1.03) with $F(1, 299) = 79.42$, *p* < .001, $R^2$ = .21). E-tail brand experience explained 48% of the variance in loyalty (*B* = .81, *t* (299) = 16.57), 13% of the variance in Attitude (*B* = .26, *t* (299) = 6.55) and explained 21% of the variance in Retention (*B* = .41, *t* (299) = 8.91). What consequently follows, is that these effects indicate that the higher participants scored on e-tail brand experience, the higher they scored on Loyalty, Attitude and Retention, together forming e-brand loyalty. The results were in line with Hypothesis 1, that stated that e-tail brand

experience in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey has a positive influence on e-brand loyalty.

Furthermore, a Pearson correlation was conducted with the variables E-tail brand experience, Loyalty, Attitude and Retention, and the scores on the two concluding questions general opinion towards online shopping and total evaluation of the online order. Besides that, also demographic measures such as gender, age and education were included. The results are shown in *table 3*.

Table 3.

*Table of correlations for main variables, demographics and evaluation*

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Brand experience | - | | | | | | | |
| 2. Loyalty | .692*** | - | | | | | | |
| 3. Attitude | .354*** | .400*** | - | | | | | |
| 4. Retention | .458*** | .613*** | .640*** | - | | | | |
| 5. Gender | .080 | .088 | .122* | .135* | - | | | |
| 6. Age | .014 | .035 | .056 | .076 | .022 | - | | |
| 7. Education | .051 | .041 | .012 | .090 | .062 | .719*** | - | |
| 8. General opinion | .315*** | .334*** | .313*** | .401*** | -.019 | .050 | .094 | - |
| 9. Total evaluation | .320*** | .398*** | .631*** | .636*** | .166** | .029 | .023 | .382*** |

*Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$, two-tailed. $N = 301$.

The table shows that the Pearson correlation provided matching results in comparison with the three standard linear regression analyses for E-tail brand experience on Loyalty, Attitude and Retention. Furthermore, the variables Loyalty, Attitude and Retention were also mutually correlated at the $p < .001$ level. Besides that, Total evaluation was also correlated with E-tail brand experience at the $p < .001$ level, as well as Loyalty, Attitude and Retention.

This indicated that Total evaluation could also be a used as a measure for how people feel about the e-tailer. Lastly, General opinion towards online shopping was also highly correlated with the previously stated variables, however, in general it is difficult to relate an opinion to the formation of E-tail brand experience or E-brand loyalty.

## General discussion

A large number of studies have shed light on how to improve e-loyalty through marketing efforts in the online environment. The popularity of this research subject may rest with the influence improvements in e-loyalty have on profitability. Yet, past research with respect to e-loyalty has focused on providing solutions that target the pre-purchase experience of the buying process. However, an essential part of e-loyalty is formed during the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, specifically when the ordered products arrive in a tertiary package at the home of the consumer. Therefore, the current research has focused on the development of e-loyalty through e-tail brand experiences in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, by using the knowledge of two different applications of personalisation; customer relationship management and one-to-one marketing. Additionally, the effect of differentiating between writing styles on e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty was investigated. Consequently, the results of the current study found how the experiences of consumers with regard to sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses can be positively influenced by applying insights of customer relationship management and one-to-one marketing in combination with a personalised writing style. The findings of this study show that positive effects are created when personal communications are added to the tertiary packaging that is addressed to the consumer, as opposed to including no communication. Positive effects with regard to e-tail brand experience occur when either a printed personal communication or a handwritten personal communication is included, with handwritten communication leading to the most positive results on e-tail brand experience and e-brand

loyalty. Thus, by including personalised communications in the tertiary packages that are delivered to consumers, especially when these are handwritten, e-tailers can provide consumers with the most positive e-tail brand experience and with that influence their e-loyalty.

**Theoretical contributions**

The present study contributes to marketing and e-tailing literature mainly in five ways: first, it differentiates from other studies that have not studied the specific combination of the use of customer relationship management and one-to-one marketing included in a tertiary package to influence e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty. From the study came forward that applying the insights of these two types of knowledge to the communication that is sent to the consumer can lead to the formation of positive e-tail brand experiences. Especially within the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, when the consumer receives his or her package, this has not been researched. Therefore, the insights of this study are valuable for this particular segment of research.

Second, previous studies have investigated (e-tail) brand experience in a general context (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013) and in context of the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey (Khan & Rahman, 2015). However, these studies have not found how e-tail brand experience can be formed in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. The current study did, and the results can be seen as an extension of t e-tail brand experience knowledge in general.

Third, research in the field of e-loyalty has primarily focused on providing solutions in the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey (Kwon & Lennon, 2009; Pee, Jiang & Klein, 2018; Tankovic & Benazic, 2016; Tsai, 2017), while this research focused on the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. The current research provided new contributions to the theoretical knowledge and identified that e-loyalty can also be influenced by marketing efforts in the post-purchase stage. This indicates that investigating the development of e-loyalty in this stage leads to valuable results and is worth to research.

Fourth, past research has investigated tertiary packaging, but only in areas such as sustainable efficiency (García-Arca, Prado-Prado & Gonzalez-Portela Garrido, 2014) and packaging costs (Lee & Lye, 2003), however, not in terms of their contribution to e-loyalty in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. This study contributed to theoretical knowledge of this research area, in terms that it is valuable for the formation of e-tail brand experiences and e-loyalty to personalise communication and include this in the tertiary packaging that is sent to the consumer.

Fifth, past research has investigated the influence of differentiating between a printed and a handwritten writing style on e-loyalty in the service industry (Ren, Xia & Du, 2018; Du Xia & Ren, 2015). The current research applies this knowledge in the e-tailing industry, where this phenomenon has not yet been studied, and found that there is a difference in effect with regard to the two types of writing style on e-tail brand experience. The combination of these five stated points has not collectively been researched before. It makes this study unique and marks a contribution to marketing and e-tailing literature.

**Practical contributions**

This research provided interesting new prospects for marketing managers in terms of what strategies to pursue in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey to obtain better e-tail brand experiences and loyalty of consumers towards the e-brand. Firstly, existing academic knowledge on personalisation, one-to-one marketing and communication in the form of writing style were explored. This led to the development of several types of personalised communication, which were distributed to the participants in the different conditions of the study. The study brought forward that using a handwritten writing style has a positive effect on e-tail brand experience, which is positively related to e-brand loyalty. This provides marketing managers with directions on how to personalize the experience of the consumer in the after-purchase stage of the customer journey and may lead to positive effects with regard to the loyalty of the consumer to the store. According to the results of this study, including any

type of personalised communication in the tertiary packaging leads to a better e-tail brand experience of the consumer compared to including no communication at all. Furthermore, if possible, a handwritten personalised message is preferred above a printed personalised message, since this can lead to a more positive e-tail brand experience.

Secondly, the research found that e-tail brand experience has a positive influence on e-brand loyalty in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. This is an insight that can be used by managers. If they do, they may strive toward providing positive e-tail brand experiences which may ultimately lead to loyalty of consumers towards the e-tail brand.

Thus, marketers should incorporate any type of personalised communication in the tertiary packaging as part of their marketing strategy. Preferred are the use of messages or recommendations that are handwritten. Then positive e-tail brand experiences can be provided to the consumer. This can improve organizational efficiency, which may in the end be rewarded with increased e-brand loyalty of consumers. Eventually, this can be used as a competitive advantage by the e-tail brand.

**Limitations and future research**

This study has brought multiple theoretical as well as practical contributions to existing literature and practical marketing knowledge. However, the study has some limitations that give directions for future research.

First of all, loyalty makes a company less vulnerable to competitive market actions (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005), and its market share will increase when loyal customers make more repeated purchases (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). However, in this research, only hypothetical questions were asked for measuring the loyalty of the consumers, with questions that included phrases such as "how likely are you to revisit..." or "if you ever purchase a product again, how likely are you…" that were related to a fictional store. No real measures were done of actual purchase transactions, due to the fact that the store was non-existent. Future research should therefore investigate the relation between the formation of e-

loyalty and the actual behaviour that leads to purchases and transactions, in order to uncover what the actual relation of e-tail brand experience is with profitability.

Moreover, the study that has been done was an experiment in which participants received a package from the e-tailer. To investigate how e-brand loyalty is formed the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, some sort of physical interaction was needed in order to provide participants with a genuine and real formation of e-tail brand experience. A solution was found in providing participants with different packages that included different types of communication. Since these brand stimuli were tangible, participants were able to touch and see the packages and their contents. Consequently, participants were able to perceive actual feelings, sensations, cognitions and behavioural responses towards the e-tail brand's stimuli. In order to receive this package, they had to imagine that they purchased a product on the website of the e-tailer, as usually is the case when someone orders a package online in real life. However, it was not feasible to let participants actually order their products, since there was chosen to use a fictional e-tailer. This gives directions for future research, because investigating the formation of e-tail brand experiences with regard to both the purchase stage and the post-purchase stage of the customer journey could lead to more comprehensive results.

In addition, it would be interesting to investigate the aggregated effects of influencing e-tail brand experiences in the pre-purchase stage and the post-purchase stage of the customer journey in one study. Especially, since the current research focused on development of e-loyalty and e-tail brand experiences in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey solely. Future research could investigate multiple aspects of combining the pre- and post-purchase stage in one study. Researchers can find out whether or not personalisation in the pre-purchase stage and the post-purchase stage simultaneously have a synergetic effect on e-tail brand experience. In addition, it can be researched that focusing on one of these two stages leads to a more positive formation of e-tail brand experiences compared to the other. This gives more insights in which of the combinations of providing personalised communications in the

different stages of the customer journey will work best in the formation of e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty.

As already stated, the study considered the e-tail brand of a fictional store, from which was assumed that people did not have any previously formed associations, evaluations and experiences towards it. This was done to isolate the effect personalised communications have on e-tail brand experience. The results provided insights of how personalised communications affect e-tail brand experience for the less known e-tailers. However, it can also be valuable to investigate what the effects of providing personalised communications during the customer journey are on the e-tail brand experience formation for well-known e-tailers such as Bol.com or Amazon. This can be executed with a 2 (pre-purchase personalised communication vs. no pre-purchase communication) X 2 (post-purchase personalised communication vs. no post-purchase communication) between-subjects design. Executing this design in an empirical study can provide larger e-tailers with insights in what combinations of applying personalised communications in the different stages of the customer journey have the most positive effect on consumers' e-tail brand experience. It could be the case that because these e-tailers already have established a loyal consumer base, providing their consumers with additional positive e-tail brand experiences in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey would only lead to marginal effects of loyalty improvements. However, even a little positive marginal effect in e-tail brand experience for a company with hundreds of thousands of consumers, can be very valuable. Therefore, it is still worth to research.

Next to findings and implications that give directions for future research, previous research also found other interesting results, that together with the findings of the current research could be researched in the future. For example, Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello, (2009) investigated other related concepts in the offline context with respect to brand experience. They found that brand experience has a behavioural impact, in terms that it affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty directly and they found that brand experience mediates the

relationship between consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Although satisfaction is measured in this study with only one item, it was meant to measure a part of loyalty and not an individual construct. In addition, Iglesias, Sigh & Batista-Foguet (2011) conducted a study that investigated the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty in the offline context. They found that the construct affective commitment completely mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty in the offline context. It would be interesting to investigate whether affective commitment would moderate the relationship between e-tail brand experience and e-brand loyalty in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey, and how this interacts with a possible mediation of e-tail brand experience in the relation between consumer satisfaction and e-brand loyalty.

Altogether, it would be valuable to investigate the influence of the former mentioned concepts on the formation of e-loyalty in the pre-purchase and the post-purchase stage of the customer journey by integrating knowledge of studies executed in both the offline and online environment, as well as knowledge from studies executed on brand experience and e-tail brand experience in a more comprehensive study. A more integrative view of the antecedents of e-tail brand experience can lead to a better prediction of e-loyalty and optimization of related marketing strategies and improvements of profitability.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to gain knowledge and insights about the post-purchase stage of the customer journey and to investigate the lack of theoretical substantiation on how to create and manage e-loyalty via personalisation. Personalised communication was developed with insights of customer relationship management, one-to-one marketing, and writing style, which were applied in the tertiary packaging that is sent to the consumer after ordering a product from the website of an online retailer. The results showed that including any type of communication (a personal message or a personal recommendation) leads to a better experience with the brand of the online retailer compared to including no communication at all. More specifically, when

a handwritten type of communication is sent to the consumer, this will lead to the best e-tail brand experiences compared to the other types of communications. And at last, positive e-tail brand experiences have a positive effect on the loyalty of the consumer towards the e-brand of the online store. Thus, implementing personalisation in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey pays off to online retailers, putting effort into personalisation improves the brand experiences of consumers and makes them more loyal to the store.

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**Appendix A: The packages**
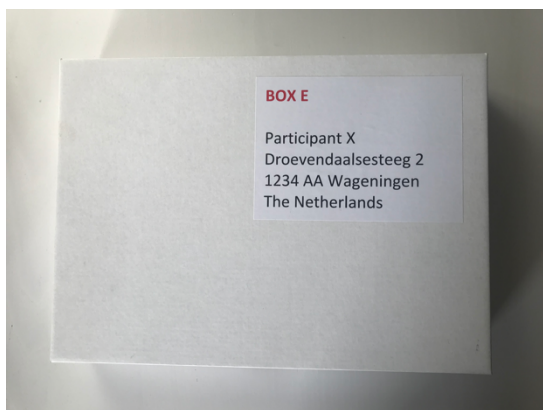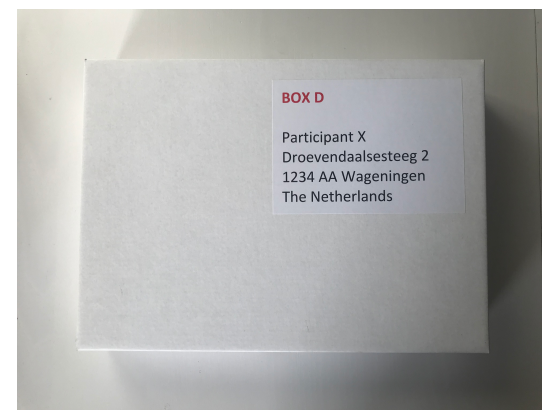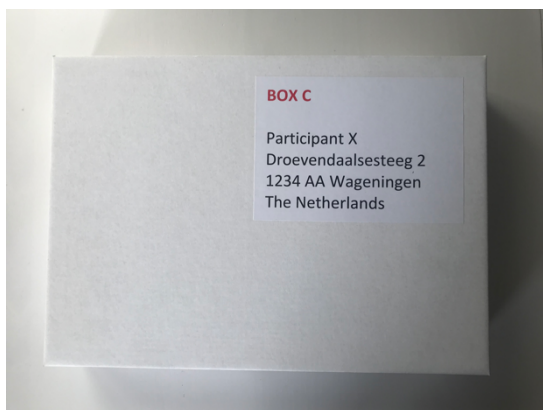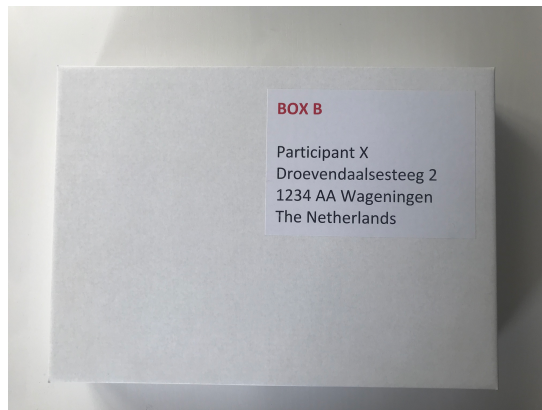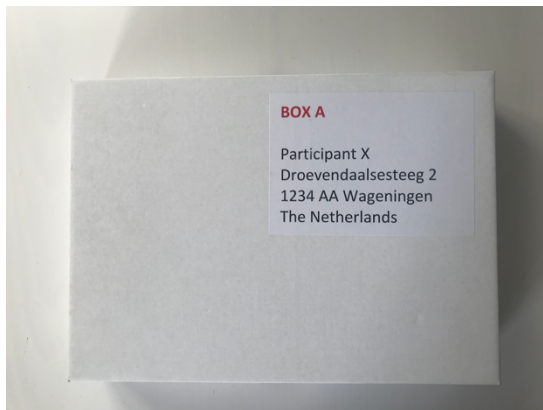
**Appendix B: The book wrapped in plastic**
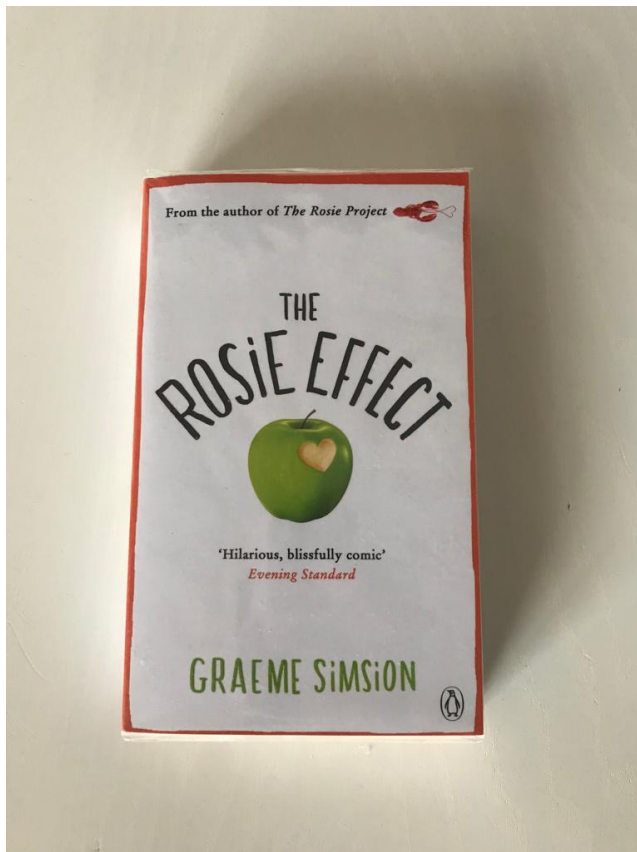
**Appendix C: Packing slip**

![Onlinebooks.com logo]

Participant X
Droevendaalsesteeg 2
1234AA Wageningen
The Netherlands

# Packing Slip

Order number: 3344556677

| Product description | ISBN/EAN | Amount |
|---|---|---|
| The Rosie Effect \| Paperback \| 2015 | 9781405919982 | 1 |

You can find the payment overview in your account.

**Do you want to return your product(s)?**
That is possible within 14 days after you have received your product(s)
- Log in on your account and find your order
- Look at the details of your order and click on "Return"
- Go through the return request and receive your retour label and instructions

**Do you have any questions?**
You can contact us via onlinebooks.com/customerservice. There we can answer all of your questions.

**Appendix D: Handwritten Personalised Message**

Onlinebooks.com

Dear Customer,

Thank you for shopping with Onlinebooks.com.
I packed your order with love and care. I
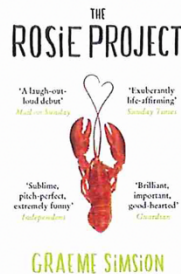hope you will continue to shop with us in the
future!

Kind regards,

Robin

**Appendix E: Printed Personalised Message**



Dear customer,

Thank you for shopping with Onlinebooks.com. I packed your order with love and care. I hope you will continue to shop with us in the future!

Kind regards,

Robin

**Appendix F: Handwritten Personalised Recommendation**



Onlinebooks.com

Dear Customer,
Thank you for shopping with Onlinebooks.com. Based on your previous purchase and transaction, I have selected some products you might be interested in.
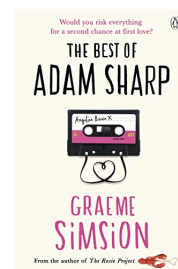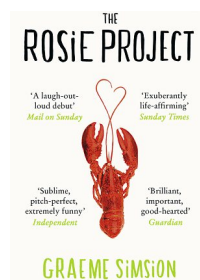


Kind regards,

Robin.

**Appendix G: Printed Personalised Recommendation**



Dear customer,

Thank you for shopping with Onlinebooks.com. Based on your previous purchase and transaction, I have selected some products you might be interested in.



Kind regards,

Robin