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Email marketing in the era of the empowered consumer

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# Email marketing in the era of the empowered consumer

## Introduction

There seems to be a paradox related to email marketing. On the one hand, email is currently a very popular and profitable communication channel. According to the Direct Marketing Association's 2012 Response Rate Report, ROI of email was 28.50 USD in sales per dollar spent, compared to 7 USD of direct mail, making email the most cost-effective direct marketing channel (Schiff, 2012). It is 40 times better at acquiring new customers than Facebook and Twitter combined (Aufreiter et al., 2014), and its' growth rate is estimated to be 10% annually up to year 2016 (VanBoskirk, 2011), suggesting that marketers will not abandon the channel within the next few years either. At the same time, intrusive unsolicited commercial email (spam) has decreased the acceptance (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2007) and performance of email marketing (FEDMA, 2010), filtering software block also desired emails (Pavlov et al., 2008), and it is predicted that a new communication channel will replace email by 2020 (Brandon, 2015).

To be able to understand the viability of email marketing, it is important to study in which circumstances email marketing has potential to survive, and which characteristics of email marketing support its' existence for the time being and in the future. Instead of the persuasion skills (see e.g., Cheung, 2011, Dufrene et al., 2005, Sigurdsson et al., 2013), technical capabilities (e.g. Ansari and Mela, 2003, Bonfrer and Dreze, 2009) or creative solutions of marketers (e.g. Lewis et al., 2013, Cases et al., 2006, Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty, 2012), the perspective in this paper is the recipient end of the communication. The core theme of the paper is the idea of using consumer empowerment as a lens for understanding email marketing. The paper assumes that if email marketing supports consumer empowerment, it has better opportunities to succeed also in the future. A systematic literature review is used as a method to examine how the concept "empowerment" has been used in relation to email marketing in the previous research. The purpose is to clarify why, when, and how email marketing can be used to empower consumers. By doing so, the paper aims to provide directions for future research.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following section briefly discusses the conceptual background of the study. After that, the research methodology is explained and results of the literature review are presented. Finally, the discussion section provides some research gaps and topical areas of interest, and the concluding section summarizes the study.

## Conceptual background

Several researchers report that there has been a change in power dynamics between consumers and companies (see e.g., Pires et al., 2006, Labrecque et al., 2013, Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Power has been defined in various ways (for definition, see Denegri-Knott et al., 2006), but dominant in the marketing literature is the liberal perspective, in which power is understood as something that may

be exercised by someone who has power over someone who does not (Shankar et al., 2006). According to this view, information revolution is enabling consumer empowerment, where power is shifted from marketers to consumers.

Empowerment, in short, means gaining mastery over one's life. The theory of empowerment suggests "that actions, activities or structures may be empowering, and that the outcome of such processes result in a level of being empowered" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 45). Essentially, empowerment is positive in nature, directing attention towards solutions instead of problems (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is a familiar concept in several disciplines. For example, in the field of health care, empowerment describes how patients can be guided to make autonomous, informed decisions that affect their health, instead of just complying with the advices of health professionals (see, e.g. Feste and Anderson, 1995, Anderson and Funnell, 2005, Aujoulat et al., 2007). In the management literature, empowerment is associated with trusting employees and holding them accountable for their actions, which will contribute to their competence, satisfaction and motivation (e.g. Coleman, 1996, Gomez and Rosen, 2001). In the domain of information systems, user empowerment is suggested to contribute to systems that function better, and that are successfully infused into users' everyday working life (e.g. Clement, 1994, Hee-Woong and Gupta, 2014). In this paper, empowerment refers to the Internet-enabled changes in the knowledge and skills of consumers that cause companies to adapt their marketing strategies towards consumers.

Internet-led consumer empowerment has had a significant impact on contemporary marketing communication. Market information is now almost equally accessible for consumers, communication is possible in both directions, there are many alternative ways of communicating, and increasingly, consumers can decide which channel to use to interact with companies, as well as influence the quantity and type of communication (Berthon and Holbrook, 2000, Urban, 2005). Networking further strengthens the power of consumers by giving individuals the opportunity to share their opinions, experiences and attitudes, if desired, with a wide range of audiences (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). On the other hand, companies today have better means of listening to their customers as well as the capability to tailor their communications, products and services for individuals, on a one-to-one rather than one-to-many basis (Day, 2011, Rezabakhsh et al., 2006).

In general, the forms of marketing communication that enable interactivity are considered to perform well in the era of the empowered consumer. The traditional firm-controlled, one-way mass media marketing communication model is losing ground to more personal and networked media forms, which respond better to the requirements of the empowered consumer (Bacile et al., 2014). Although basic assumptions of the classical information processing and communication theory (cf. the model of communication of Shannon and Weaver, 1949) are still applicable today, there is an emergent need to incorporate more interactivity and personalization in the communication. Social media especially meets the requirements of the modern communication (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008), but also digital personal media such as email (for definition of personal media, see

Lüders, 2008) may have the potential to fulfil these needs. In order to understand the empowerment-related factors that influence email marketing, a systematic literature review was conducted. The methodology of this study is described next.

## Methodology

Adopting a systematic review of the literature, this article analyses and synthesizes existing email marketing and consumer empowerment research published in variety of academic journals. A systematic literature review is suitable for making sense of large bodies of information, identifying gaps in current research and providing an overall picture of the topic area to direct future research (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). The distinguishing feature of a systematic review compared to other types of literature reviews is its scope and rigor (Okoli and Schabram, 2011). It consists of identifying the purpose and goals of the review, developing a review protocol, searching for the literature, screening the literature to find those that meet the inclusion criteria, assessing the quality of the studies, extracting the applicable information, synthesizing the studies and writing the review in sufficient detail (Brereton et al., 2007, Okoli and Schabram, 2011, Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). Following all the steps is essential for a review to be scientifically rigorous (Okoli and Schabram, 2011).

The protocol for the review, specifying the process to be followed, appropriate key terms and databases, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a design for organizing and presenting the studies, was first used when searching for the literature. For the review, the following databases were used: ABI/INFORM Global (ProQuest), Business Source Complete (EBSCO), ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Emerald Journals (Emerald), IEEE/IEE Electronic Library, ACM – Association for Computing Machinery Digital Library, Scopus (Elsevier) and Web of Science/Web of Knowledge (ISI). Papers were selected for review if they were published in a peer-reviewed journal and had one or more of the key terms in the title, abstract or keywords. As combining all the key search terms into one query did not yield to any relevant results, three separate queries were conducted with the following terms:

- *Empowerment and marketing or advertising.* Different forms of empowerment, e.g. “empowered consumer” and “customer empowerment” were used.
- *Email marketing or email advertising.* Both ”e-mail” with the hyphen and ”email” without it needed to be included, otherwise papers using the other form would have fallen out of the results in some databases.
- *Marketing communication and Internet and email* so that also other forms such as ”electronic direct marketing” could be found.

The search carried out in October-November 2014 resulted in 716 articles, which were exported to EndNote reference management software. After this, the screening process of articles to be included started. The steps of the filtering process are described in Figure 1.

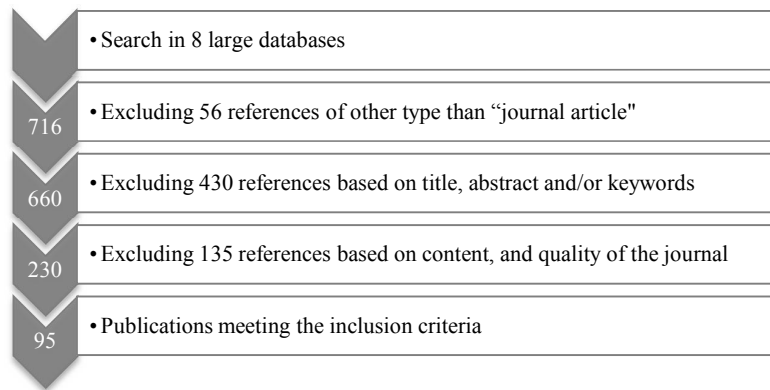


Figure 1 Literature inclusion process

After three rounds of filtering, 95 articles met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 41 were related to email marketing and 54 to consumer empowerment. The references were then exported to Excel for further analysis. Contents of the papers were analysed and categorized next. Finally, the papers were studied thoroughly in order to conceptualize the intersection of email marketing and consumer empowerment, and give recommendations for future research.

## Results of the literature categorization

The articles were published between 1998 and 2014, 33% being published during the last five years. The peak year for empowerment related papers was in 2006, which was mostly due to the special issue of consumer empowerment in European Journal of Marketing; seven of the published ten articles were published in this journal. The peak year for email marketing was in 2005, the largest amount being eight articles. The distribution of articles by year is shown in Figure 2.

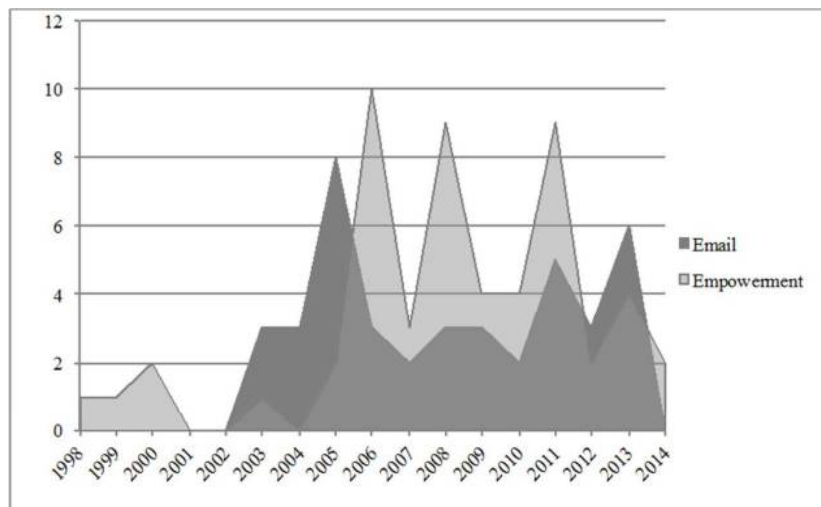


Figure 2 Articles published by year

### ***Categorization by key terms***

Only one article somewhat cross referenced the relationship between empowerment and email marketing: Bacile et al. (2014) explored consumer co-production approach as a communication strategy in personal media marketing communication. Their research concentrated on a text message mobile coupon marketing campaign, but the findings may also be applicable to email marketing, which is similarly a personal medium (Lüders, 2008).

Empowerment has thus far been mostly handled in the broader context of the Internet, especially relating to social media. Both “Internet” and “empowerment” could be found as key terms in 27 articles. Even though email marketing is generally assumed to be a form of Internet advertising (e.g., Breuer et al., 2011, Danaher and Dagger, 2013), none of these 27 studies specifically addressed emails.

### **Classification by research approach**

Email marketing literature is clearly empirical in nature (88%), while literature concerning empowerment is more conceptual (78%). From a methodological perspective, a clear majority of email marketing studies employed quantitative methods (72%), while empowerment studies were more evenly distributed between quantitative (58%) and qualitative (42%) methods. Mixed methods were applied to 11% of email marketing studies but none of the empowerment studies.

### ***Categorization by research topic***

Grounding the classification on the content analysis of the articles, and adapting the categorization model from Rodriguez et al. (2014), ten different topic categories were formed, shown in Table 1.

In several cases, two or more topics could have been addressed in the article, but for simplicity, the researcher determined only one primary topic based on the overall impression of the article.

Table 1 Research topics

	Research topic	N	Description	Reference articles
<b>Empowerment</b>	Strategic approaches	20	How to take consumer empowerment into account when designing marketing strategies	Andersen and Johansen (2014), Bacile et al. (2014), Bhardwaj et al. (2008), Deighton and Kornfeld (2009), Denegri-Knott et al. (2006), Fuchs et al. (2010), Fuchs and Schreier (2011), Kucuk (2011), Lawer and Knox (2006), Mitchell (2012), Niinen et al. (2007), O'Brien (2011), O'Casey and Viet Ngo (2011), O'Connor (2008), Pehlivan et al. (2011), Quinton (2013), Siano et al. (2011), Urban (2005), Wind (2008), Wright et al. (2006)
	Impact of the Internet	9	Internet related technologies impacting contemporary marketing	Anderson (2009), Constantinides (2008), Constantinides and Fountain (2008), Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick (2010), Heller Baird and Gonzalez-Wertz (2011), Kucuk (2009), Rezabakhsh et al. (2006), Simmons (2008), Varnali (2010)
	Sources of consumer power	8	Power sources, embodiments of consumer empowerment	Kucuk (2008), Kucuk (2012), Kucuk and Krishnamurthy (2007), Labrecque et al. (2013), Pires et al. (2006), Shaw et al. (2006), Thrassou and Vrontis (2009), Vrontis and Thrassou (2007)
	Opposite views	7	Opposite views of consumer empowerment	Bonsu and Darmody (2008), Brennan and Coppack (2008), Davies and Elliott (2006), Howells (2005), Newholm et al. (2006), Saren (2011), Shankar et al. (2006)
	Change in markets & marketing	6	History and changes in markets and marketing	Berthon and Holbrook (2000), Day and Montgomery (1999), Day (2011), Ramani and Kumar (2008), Slater and Narver (1998), Wind (2006)
	Consumer data and privacy concerns	4	Factors related to consumer data utilization, CRM and privacy	Fletcher (2003), Henshall (2000), Micheaux (2013), Mitchell (2010)

<b>Email marketing</b>	Content relevance	14	Factors related to layout, content and format of an email	Ansari and Mela (2003), Baek and Morimoto (2012), Cases et al. (2006), Cheung (2011), Chittenden and Rettie (2003), Drèze and Bonfrer (2008), Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012), Haq (2009), Lewis et al. (2013), Martin et al. (2003), Micheaux (2011), Park et al. (2005), Park and Lee (2012), Sigurdsson et al. (2013)
	Permission marketing & spam	12	Focus on solicited/unsolicited commercial email	Abrahams et al. (2010), Chang and Morimoto (2011), Clarke et al. (2005), Melville et al. (2006), Moustakas et al. (2006), Nettleton (2004), O'Connor (2008), Pavlov et al. (2005), Pavlov et al. (2008), Sipior et al. (2004), Yildiz (2007), Nettleton (2005)
	Email as a channel	8	Email in relation to other traditional and new marketing channels	Breuer et al. (2011), Cheng et al. (2009), Danaher and Rossiter (2011), Danaher and Dagger (2013), Heinonen and Strandvik (2005), Heinonen and Strandvik (2007), Reichhart et al. (2013), Spilker-Attig and Brettel (2010)
	Email effectiveness	7	Results of using email marketing, measurement of the results	Bonfrer and Dreze (2009), Dufrene et al. (2005), Geyer (2005), Hanna et al. (2005), Chang et al. (2013), Jolley et al. (2013), Merisavo and Raulas (2004)

In terms of empowerment, the topic of strategic approaches was the most popular one (n=20). Many of these articles also mentioned the Internet as the driving force behind empowerment, but in nine of the papers the Internet was emphasized even more, taking a central role in the research

setting. Sources of consumer power consisted of eight papers, although they were mentioned in almost all of the papers, in one way or another. The category presenting opposing views to empowerment consisted of seven articles, and six articles reviewed change in markets and marketing in general. Four articles studied consumer data related issues such as customer relationship management (CRM) and privacy.

As regards to email marketing, topics related to content relevance were the most popular (n=14), but unsolicited commercial emails (spam) and their counterforce permission marketing were almost as popular (n=12). Spam research gained popularity after the European Parliament adopted the Directive on Privacy and Electronic Communications in 2003 (Nettleton, 2004) and American CAN-SPAM Act became effective in 2004 (Clarke et al., 2005); 70% of the spam-related research was conducted during 2004-2006. Eight papers studied and compared different marketing channels, including both offline and online channels. Effectiveness of email marketing, and different metrics and models to measure its performance were the primary topic in seven studies.

### Intersection of email marketing and empowerment

None of the studied 95 papers concentrated on the intersection of email marketing and empowerment. However, to be able to fulfil the purpose of this study – understanding why, when and how email marketing can be used to empower consumers – the two areas had to be studied contemporaneously. Figure 3 describes the connections between empowerment and email marketing, based on the studied literature. It presents a four-stage framework, in which the first two stages form the background and reasoning for the following stages. The third stage explains the consequences of empowerment for marketing communication, answering the question why email can be used to empower consumers. The fourth stage presents some empowering strategies for email marketing, answering the questions of when and how email can be used to empower consumers.

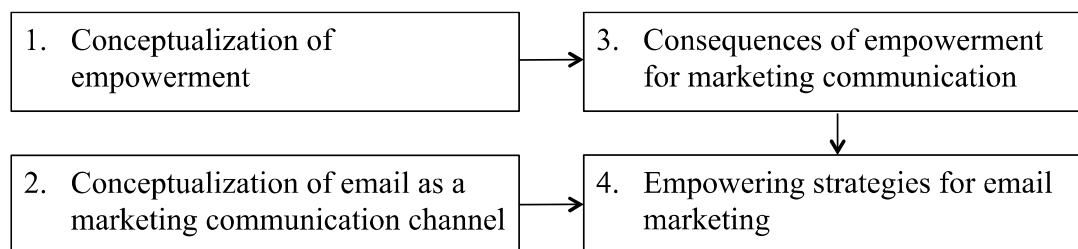


Figure 3 Connections between email marketing and empowerment

The research topics shown in Table 1 were grouped based on the framework presented in Figure 3. The outcome of the grouping is described in Table 2 and the results are presented in the following sections.



Table 2 Topics grouped together

Stage	Topics related to	Research topics
1. Conceptualization of empowerment	General changes in the business environment that have enabled consumer empowerment, and opposing arguments stating that empowerment is partial, unevenly distributed among consumers, and does not inevitably lead to changes in the consumer-marketer relationship.	Change in markets & marketing
		Opposite views
2. Conceptualization of email as a marketing communication channel	Email as a marketing communication channel, its' viability in general, and how to measure the success of email marketing.	Email as a channel
		Email effectiveness
3. Consequences of empowerment for marketing communication	Consequences of empowerment, especially in the context of marketing communication; answering the question <i>why</i> email marketing can be used to empower consumers.	Impact of the Internet
		Sources of consumer power
4. Empowering strategies for email marketing	Strategic approaches and proposed solutions to manage empowerment: answering the questions <i>when</i> and <i>how</i> email marketing can be used to empower consumers.	Strategic approaches
		Content relevance
		Permission marketing & spam
		Consumer data and privacy concerns

### ***Stages 1 and 2 - background and reasoning***

Markets have changed due to several political, technological, social and economic reasons (Berthon and Holbrook, 2000). According to many scholars, these changes have empowered consumers (see e.g., Pires et al., 2006, Labrecque et al., 2013, Micheaux, 2013, Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2007). Consequently, today's consumers are knowledgeable and well informed (Pires et al., 2006), have skills to make use of the Internet (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006), resources to influence marketers and peers (Labrecque et al., 2013), ability to interact with them (Henshall, 2000), and a will to do so (O'Hern and Kahle, 2013).

While there seems to be a fairly uniform view of the forces affecting consumer empowerment, views differ on the direction of it. On the one hand, many academics believe that empowerment results in mutual benefit, as consumers get better service, convenience, control and bargaining power, and marketers get increased sales, loyalty and customer lifetime value (see e.g., Fletcher, 2003, Micheaux, 2013, Kucuk, 2009, Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2007). On the other hand, some argue that it is not necessarily advantageous to the consumer and that it does not inevitably lead to change in the consumer-marketer relationship at all (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008, Newholm et al., 2006, Saren, 2011, Shankar et al., 2006). As Pires et al. (2006, p. 939) put it: "While cited as customer empowerment, what consumers are allowed to do is determined, regulated and controlled by the supplier".

Whatever the true nature of empowerment is, it can be argued that if consumer empowerment influences the overall business environment, it should also affect marketing communication

(Mitchell, 2012). Email is only one of the possible channels for communication, but at the moment, a strong one. It is personal, digital, economical and effective, and consequently widely used for marketing (cf. the references listed on “Email as a channel” row in Table 1).

Naturally, marketers are interested in the results of using email marketing. Depending on the targets of the marketer, performance may be evaluated with attitude or behavioural-based measures, although combining these is recommended (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004, Heinonen and Strandvik, 2007). So far, the effectiveness of email has usually been defined from the marketers’ perspective: an effective channel provides a good return on investment (Breuer et al., 2011, Danaher and Dagger, 2013, Reichhart et al., 2013, Spilker-Attig and Brettel, 2010). When considering the empowered and active consumer, however, consumer responsiveness, i.e. the consumer’s willingness to receive and respond to marketing communication, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the success of communication (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2007). Other consequences of empowerment for marketing communication, drawn from the studied literature, are described in the following section. The section also answers the question *why* email can be used to empower consumers.

### ***Stage 3 - consequences of empowerment***

The Internet has empowered consumers and changed how we communicate today by allowing information ubiquity, communication networks and interactivity (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). These three characteristics also explain why email, which is based on the Internet technology, can be used to empower consumers. Firstly, email supports information ubiquity as both marketers and consumers can send and receive information anytime and anywhere (Berthon and Holbrook, 2000, Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Secondly, it supports communication networks as an email can be passed along to other consumers without the intervention of the marketer. Thirdly, email supports interactivity since consumers can control the information flow and actively search for information by contacting marketers or other consumers. At the same time, marketers can tailor communication according to individual preferences, as long as their CRM contains updated and correct information (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006, Urban, 2005).

The literature shows that information ubiquity, communication networks and interactivity have created new sources of consumer power: demand-based (possibility to exit from the relationship), information-based (ability to retrieve information and raise voice), network-based (ability to share information with peers), and crowd-based (gaining more resources by combining inputs) (Labrecque et al., 2013). When looking at email marketing through the lenses of empowerment, two consumer power sources are emphasized: information-based and network-based. The first is grounded on information ubiquity as the Internet grants consumers access to information that was previously difficult to obtain, and interactivity as consumers are empowered to search for information instead of just receiving it. Network-based power, in turn, is grounded on

communication networks that allow consumers to share information with other consumers, reducing dependence on marketers' communication (Pires et al., 2006).

According to the previous literature, possible marketing strategies in the new situation can be divided into three distinct categories: amplifying the traditional push/pull model of marketing, strengthening relationships with customers, or embracing true customer advocacy (Urban, 2005). The third one is suggested to be the strongest one in the era of the empowered consumer. Several academics emphasize the evident move from firm-centric and company-driven to consumer-centric and community driven approaches (see, e.g., Siano et al., 2011, Wind, 2008, Varnali, 2010, Lawer and Knox, 2006). This is taken as a starting point when considering *when* and *how* email marketing can be used to empower consumers, which are described next.

#### ***Stage 4 - empowering strategies for email marketing***

The systematic literature review indicates that email marketing can be used to empower consumers in three aspects: by obtaining permission before sending email (opt-in), by making consumers active participants in the communication process, and by making emails relevant for the recipients.

Email allows consumers to control the information flow. Research shows that consumers who have expressed their willingness to receive marketing messages are likely to consider them to be important and relevant (Chang and Morimoto, 2011, Danaher and Dagger, 2013, Yildiz, 2007). Obtaining permission plays an important role in a successful, empowering email marketing strategy, and is also required by law in many countries (Clarke et al., 2005, Nettleton, 2005).

Due to Internet-led empowerment, consumers are now able to tell their preferences and needs to marketers. It is possible that, in the future, enhanced relationships with consumers substitute for managerial perceptions of consumer behaviour (Pires et al., 2006). Marketers often utilize customer relationship management (CRM) systems that store and process consumer-related information, for example, clickstream and transactional data. CRM systems enable marketers to send the right message to the right customer at the right time, thus to optimize communication so that it yields to better performance. Despite the indisputable benefits of CRM systems, there are still several challenges left, such as data integration, consumer privacy and system usability (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2010). As long as mainly companies manage consumer data, there is a high risk of outdated databases that contain incomplete information (Mitchell, 2010). Instead, ideally, consumers control their own information and exchange it with marketers as part of a reciprocal process (Fletcher, 2003). Whereas Pires et al. (2006) call this the customer management of relationships (CMR), Mitchell (2010) names the phenomenon as "the rise of volunteered personal information", picturing a world where intrusive marketing communication would eventually be replaced by real-time response marketing. All in all, taking the consumer preferences into consideration and interactivity are essential in an empowering email marketing strategy.

An individual certainly has the best knowledge of his preferences, as well as of his communication and information needs. Without the exact knowledge, the marketer has to guess what the consumer thinks and why he acts like he acts, and it is more difficult to make email marketing relevant. If email marketing is not relevant, the empowered consumer has all the means to search for the information from somewhere else and unsubscribe from the marketer's email newsletters. A number of studies have shown that relevance has an effect on email marketing performance (Cases et al., 2006, Chittenden and Rettie, 2003, Drèze and Bonfrer, 2008, Haq, 2009, Lewis et al., 2013, Martin et al., 2003, Micheaux, 2011, Park et al., 2005, Park and Lee, 2012, Sigurdsson et al., 2013). Relevance is evaluated by the consumer at every step of the communication process: first when receiving the message, then when opening and reading it, finally when deciding whether to respond to it or not (Cases et al., 2006, Chittenden and Rettie, 2003). In email marketing, there are several executional factors (for a definition of these, see Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty, 2012) to take into account, and the literature has described different tactics to improve their effect: personalization, customization, and altering stimuli depending on the target response, to name a few (see, e.g., Baek and Morimoto, 2012, Cheng et al., 2009, Ansari and Mela, 2003, Micheaux, 2011, Cheung, 2011). In an empowering email marketing strategy, marketers would use the information the consumers provide, to make email marketing relevant for them.

Because of the insight gained from the literature review, it is now possible to present some potential research topics examining how to get the maximum benefit out of email marketing in the era of the empowered consumer. These, as well as the managerial implications of the study are briefly discussed next.

## **Discussion**

The research postulated that if email marketing supports consumer empowerment, it has better opportunities to succeed also in the future. Unlike prior research, the focus was on individual consumer's resources rather than on the resources of the marketer. This perspective supports true customer advocacy, which according to the previous literature is the strongest marketing strategy in the era of the empowered consumer (Urban, 2005).

## ***Implications***

The study developed a framework that clarifies the connection of email marketing and consumer empowerment, and defined why, when and how email can be used to empower consumers. It aims to provide a topical and comprehensive, yet manageable view of email marketing for both practitioners and scholars, and enhance marketing communication theory by expanding the understanding of email marketing as a communication channel from the viewpoint of an empowered consumer.

Paradoxically, from the marketer's point of view email marketing is usually economical and effective, and from the consumer's viewpoint often irritating and irrelevant. This contradiction needs a solution, one of which has been presented in this study: marketers can empower consumers by sending them emails only when permitted and by making them active participants in the communication process. That is how marketers would be able to offer more relevant emails to consumers, and possibly to make their email marketing programs more profitable.

The systematic literature review also showed that there is a lack of research combining email marketing and consumer empowerment, which provides a good reason for this study and for studying this phenomenon further. The study in hand is the initial step to fill this gap, and further empirical studies are to be conducted. These are described next.

### ***Future research***

As the majority of empowerment research has so far been conceptual in nature, empirical research is emphasized in the future recommendations. There are six potential areas of research, five of which concern stage 4 on the framework presented in Figure 3. The first two of them concentrate on relevance and last two study how consumers can become active participants in email marketing. Fifth one reviews psychological factors and consumers' resources in order to understand the effect of empowerment strategies on consumer response. One research topic concerns stage 2, reviewing channel acceptance and its' influence on consumer responsiveness in general.

First, several scholars have shown that the relevance of the message is a key influencer on the performance of email marketing. Since both content and format have an effect on relevance, it would be worthwhile to examine how different email newsletter characteristics influence the behaviour and/or attitudes of consumers, and possibly compare the weighted importance of each. Here, experimental tests could be coupled with an online survey and/or interviews to obtain more specific information about what the customer thinks and why he acts like he acts. The attitudinal data could then be compared with the clickstream data in order to understand how reliably consumer preferences can be inferred from the clickstream data.

Second, it would be interesting to know how much more relevant a newsletter based on valid consumer data is for consumers, compared to one in which this data is not exploited. Again, both behavioural and attitudinal measurements could be used, as mixed methods could help to obtain a more holistic view of relevance.

Third, the work of Bacile et al. (2014) provides an excellent benchmark for empirical research regarding how to activate consumers. Their research setting could be implemented in email marketing as such, testing whether a co-production approach as a communication strategy in email marketing communication yields the same kind of results as their text message mobile coupon campaign. As in Bacile et al. (2014) this study could consist of field experiments with a co-creational element, followed by an online survey investigating psychological responses to co-

producing some aspect of the communication process for an email. Co-creation has led to favourable outcomes also according to other pioneering experimentations (Bhardwaj et al., 2008, Fuchs et al., 2010, O'Cass and Viet Ngo, 2011). Furthermore, the current literature lacks this kind of research in relation to email marketing.

Fourth, it would be interesting to take a deeper look at what kind of opportunities and threats the changing technology brings to email marketing. Because CRM systems often contain incomplete information (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2010), they have not necessarily helped increase the effectiveness of marketing. One solution to the problem might be to shift the control of these systems from marketer to customer, as suggested in the empowerment literature (Mitchell, 2010). This emerging research topic provides several opportunities for research, one of which could study how consumer-controlled systems influence email marketing in general, and how they could help to optimize the relevance of the message.

Fifth, as psychological ownership plays a key role in understanding the effect of empowerment strategies on consumer response (Fuchs et al., 2010) especially in a digital context (Kirk et al., 2015b), it would be interesting to study if it is possible that email could be used to enhance consumers' sense of ownership of a product, brand or website. Further, it would be of future research interest to consider also the role of consumer motivations (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006), demographic differences such as gender (Stavrositu and Sundar, 2012) and age (Kirk et al., 2015a) or even personality differences such as need for control (Mathwick et al., 2010) or need for cognition (Sicilia et al., 2005) related to empowerment strategies.

Finally, as mobile devices develop and smartphones have become the standard, emails are increasingly read from the mobile phone. Therefore, it would be interesting to study channel acceptance/disturbance (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2007) in more detail and explore whether it matters to consumers if the direct marketing communication is sent as an email, text message or through social media to a mobile device. What are the expectations and requirements of consumers regarding to this? What is required from the CRM? Further, it could be fruitful to understand how these different digital personal mediums could be integrated, as well as this convergence as a whole, with respect to consumer empowerment.

### ***Limitations***

The limitation of the study is the broad domain of research. However, as the aim was to synthesize the scattered literature and to create an overall picture of the topic, this should not be seen as a major problem. The literature review pursued to give recommendations for the future email marketing research. Hopefully it will provoke new insights and academic research topics in the future.

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