Email marketing in the era of the empowered consumer

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to clarify why, when and how e-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers and to give ideas for future scholarly research.

Design/methodology/approach – Systematic literature review studies 41 e-mail marketing and 54 consumer empowerment articles published in variety of academic journals between 1998 and 2014.

Findings – E-mail allows an active, interactive and personalized communication fulfilling the preferences of an empowered consumer. E-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers by sending e-mails based on permission, by making consumers active participants in the communication process and by making e-mails relevant for the recipients. However, current e-mail marketing strategies need to be updated to get the maximum benefit out of the channel.

Research limitations/implications – The limitation of the study is the broad domain of research, which hampered the in-depth analysis. However, the study was able to synthesize the scattered literature and create an overall picture of the topic as planned.

Practical implications – The paper encourages managers to use empowering e-mail marketing strategies and presents several suggestions for future e-mail marketing research.

Originality/value – The paper uses a new perspective, consumer empowerment as a lens for understanding e-mail marketing. Because e-mail marketing is currently very popular among marketers but is threatened by its negative image among consumers, it is important to understand how e-mail marketing can be developed so that it can also survive in the future.

Keywords Internet marketing, Systematic review, Consumer empowerment, Interactivity, Consumer behaviour internet, Email marketing

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

There seems to be a paradox related to e-mail marketing. On the one hand, e-mail is currently a very popular and profitable communication channel. According to the Direct Marketing Association's 2012 Response Rate Report, return on investment of e-mail was US$28.50 in sales per dollar spent, compared to US$7 of direct mail, making e-mail 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 per cent 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 e-mail (spam) has decreased the acceptance (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2007) and performance of e-mail marketing (FEDMA, 2010), filtering software block also desired e-mails (Pavlov *et al.*, 2008) and it

is predicted that a new communication channel will replace e-mail by 2020 (Brandon, 2015).

To be able to understand the viability of e-mail marketing, it is important to study under which circumstances e-mail marketing has potential to survive and which characteristics of e-mail marketing support its existence for the time being and in the future. Instead of the persuasion skills (Cheung, 2011; Dufrene *et al.*, 2005; Sigurdsson *et al.*, 2013), technical capabilities (Ansari and Mela, 2003, Bonfrer and Dreze, 2009) or creative solutions of marketers (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 e-mail marketing. The paper assumes that if e-mail 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 e-mail marketing in the previous research. The purpose is to clarify why, when and how e-mail 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 (Pires *et al.*, 2006; Labrecque *et al.*, 2013; Rezabakhsh *et al.*, 2006). Power has been defined in various ways (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 toward 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 (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 (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 (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 toward 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 e-mail (for definition of personal media, see Lüders, 2008), may have the potential to fulfil these requirements. To understand the empowerment-related factors that influence e-mail 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 e-mail 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:

(1) *Empowerment* and *marketing* or *advertising*: Different forms of empowerment, for example, "empowered consumer" and "customer empowerment" were used.

(2) *E-mail marketing* or *e-mail 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.

(3) *Marketing communication* and *internet* and *e-mail*: They were used 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 the articles to be included started. The steps of the filtering process are described in Figure 1.
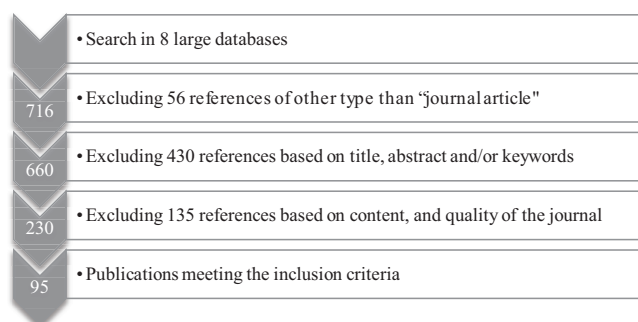
After three rounds of filtering, 95 articles met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 41 were related to e-mail marketing and 54 to consumer empowerment. The references were then exported to Excel for further analysis. Contents of the papers were analyzed and categorized next. Finally, the papers were studied thoroughly to conceptualize the intersection of e-mail marketing and consumer empowerment and give recommendations for future research.

Results of the literature categorization

The articles were published between 1998 and 2014; 33 per cent being published during the past five years. The peak year for empowerment-related papers was in 2006, which was mostly because of the special issue of consumer empowerment in *European Journal of Marketing*; seven of the ten published articles were published in this journal. The peak year for e-mail marketing was 2005, the largest amount being eight articles. The distribution of articles by year is shown in Figure 2.
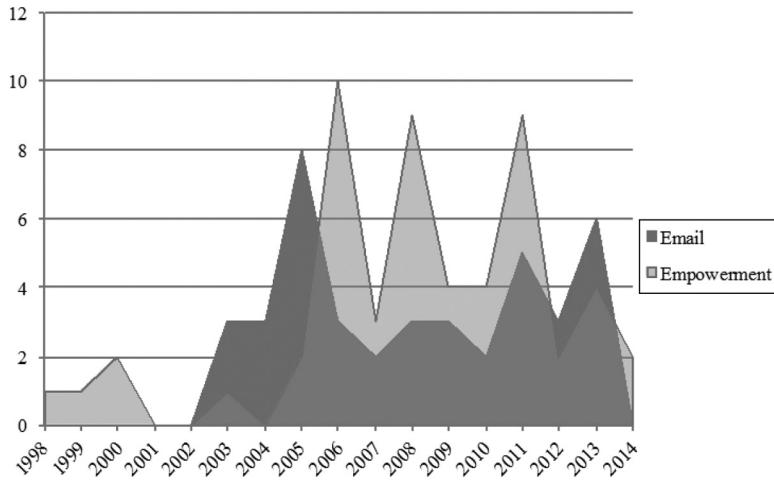
Categorization by key terms

Only one article somewhat cross referenced the relationship between empowerment and e-mail marketing; Bacile *et al.* (2014) explored consumer co-production approach as a communication strategy in personal media marketing communication. Their research

- Search in 8 large databases
- 716 • Excluding 56 references of other type than "journal article"
- 660 • Excluding 430 references based on title, abstract and/or keywords
- 230 • Excluding 135 references based on content, and quality of the journal
- 95 • Publications meeting the inclusion criteria

Figure 1.
Literature inclusion process

Figure 2.
Articles published by
year

concentrated on a text message mobile coupon marketing campaign, but the findings may also be applicable to e-mail 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 e-mail marketing is generally assumed to be a form of internet advertising (Breuer *et al.*, 2011; Danaher and Dagger, 2013), none of these 27 studies specifically addressed e-mails.

Classification by research approach
E-mail marketing literature is clearly empirical in nature (88 per cent), whereas literature concerning empowerment is more conceptual (78 per cent). From a methodological perspective, a clear majority of e-mail marketing studies used quantitative methods (72 per cent), whereas empowerment studies were more evenly distributed between quantitative (58 per cent) and qualitative (42 per cent) methods. Mixed methods were applied to 11 per cent of e-mail 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 I. 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.

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

Research topic	N	Description	Reference articles
Empowerment			
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 Kornfield (2009), Denegri-Knott *et al.* (2006), Fuchs *et al.* (2010), Fuchs and Schreier (2011), Kucuk (2011), Lawer and Knox (2006), Mitchell (2012), Niininen *et al.* (2007), O'Brien (2011), O'Cass 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, 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 and 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)
Email marketing			
Content relevance	14	Factors related to layout, content and format of an e-mail	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 and spam	12	Focus on solicited/unsolicited commercial e-mail	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, 2008), Sipior (2004), Yildiz (2007), Nettleton (2005)
E-mail as a channel	8	E-mail 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, 2007), Reichhart *et al.* (2013), Spilker-Attig and Brettel (2010)
E-mail effectiveness	7	Results of using e-mail 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)

Table I.
Research topics

consumer data-related issues such as customer relationship management (CRM) and privacy.

As regards to e-mail marketing, topics related to content relevance were the most popular ($n = 14$), but unsolicited commercial e-mails (spam) and their counterforce permission marketing were almost as popular ($n = 12$). Spam research gained popularity after the European Parliament (2002) adopted the Directive on Privacy and Electronic Communications in 2003 (Nettleton, 2004) and American CAN-SPAM Act (2003) became effective (Clarke *et al.*, 2005); 70 per cent 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 e-mail marketing and different metrics and models to measure its performance were the primary topic in seven studies.
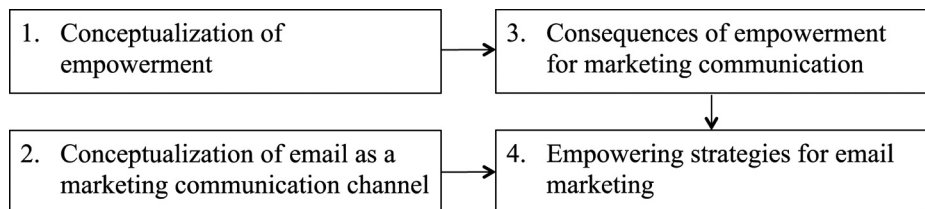
Intersection of e-mail marketing and empowerment

None of the studied 95 papers concentrated on the intersection of e-mail marketing and empowerment. However, to be able to fulfil the purpose of this study – understanding why, when and how e-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers – the two areas had to be studied contemporaneously. Figure 3 describes the connections between empowerment and e-mail 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 e-mail can be used to empower consumers. The fourth stage presents some empowering strategies for e-mail marketing, answering the questions of when and how e-mail can be used to empower consumers.

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

Stages 1 and 2 – background and reasoning

Markets have changed because of several political, technological, social and economic reasons (Berthon and Holbrook, 2000). According to many scholars, these changes have empowered consumers (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 because consumers get better service, convenience, control and bargaining power, and marketers get increased sales,

Figure 3.
Connections between e-mail marketing and empowerment

| 1. Conceptualization of empowerment | → | 3. Consequences of empowerment for marketing communication |
| 2. Conceptualization of email as a marketing communication channel | → | 4. Empowering strategies for email marketing |

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 and marketing Opposite views
2. Conceptualization of e-mail as a marketing communication channel	E-mail as a marketing communication channel, its viability in general and how to measure the success of e-mail marketing	E-mail as a channel E-mail effectiveness
3. Consequences of empowerment for marketing communication	Consequences of empowerment, especially in the context of marketing communication; answering the question *why* e-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers	Impact of the internet Sources of consumer power
4. Empowering strategies for e-mail marketing	Strategic approaches and proposed solutions to manage empowerment: answering the questions *when* and *how* e-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers	Strategic approaches Content relevance Permission marketing and spam Consumer data and privacy concerns

Table II.
Topics grouped together

loyalty and customer lifetime value (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). E-mail 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 I).

Naturally, marketers are interested in the results of using e-mail marketing. Depending on the targets of the marketer, performance may be evaluated with attitude or behavioral-based measures, although combining these is recommended (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2007). So far, the effectiveness of e-mail 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* e-mail 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 e-mail, which is based on the internet technology, can be used to empower consumers. First, e-mail supports information ubiquity because both marketers and consumers can send and receive information anytime and anywhere (Berthon and Holbrook, 2000; Rezabakhsh *et al.*, 2006). Second, it supports communication networks as an e-mail can be passed along to other consumers without the intervention of the marketer. Third, e-mail supports interactivity because 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 e-mail marketing through the lenses of empowerment, two consumer power sources are emphasized: information-based and network-based. The first is grounded on

information ubiquity because the internet grants consumers access to information that was previously difficult to obtain and interactivity because 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 in to 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 (Siano *et al.*, 2011; Wind, 2008; Varnali, 2010; Lawer and Knox, 2006). This is taken as a starting point when considering *when* and *how* e-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers, which are described next.

Stage 4 – empowering strategies for e-mail marketing
The systematic literature review indicates that e-mail marketing can be used to empower consumers in three aspects:

(1) by obtaining permission before sending e-mail (opt-in);

(2) by making consumers active participants in the communication process; and

(3) by making e-mails relevant for the recipients.

E-mail 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 e-mail marketing strategy and is also required by law in many countries (Clarke *et al.*, 2005; Nettleton, 2005).

Because of 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 behavior (Pires *et al.*, 2006). Marketers often utilize 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, 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 e-mail 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 e-mail marketing relevant. If e-mail 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 e-mail newsletters. A number of studies have shown that relevance has an effect on e-mail 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 and finally when deciding whether to respond to it or not (Cases *et al.*, 2006; Chittenden and Rettie, 2003). In e-mail marketing, there are several executional factors (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 (Baek and Morimoto, 2012; Cheng *et al.*, 2009; Ansari and Mela, 2003; Micheaux, 2011; Cheung, 2011). In an empowering e-mail marketing strategy, marketers would use the information the consumers provide to make e-mail 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 e-mail 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 e-mail 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 e-mail marketing and consumer empowerment and defined why, when and how e-mail can be used to empower consumers. It aims to provide a topical and comprehensive, yet manageable view of e-mail marketing for both practitioners and scholars and enhance marketing communication theory by expanding the understanding of e-mail marketing as a communication channel from the viewpoint of an empowered consumer.

Paradoxically, from the marketer's point of view e-mail 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 e-mails only when permitted and by making them active participants in the communication process. That is how marketers would be able to offer more relevant e-mails to consumers and possibly to make their e-mail marketing programs more profitable.

The systematic literature review also showed that there is a lack of research combining e-mail 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
Because 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 e-mail marketing. Fifth one reviews psychological factors and consumers' resources 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 e-mail marketing. Because both content and format have an effect on relevance, it would be worthwhile to examine how different e-mail newsletter characteristics influence the behavior 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 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 behavioral and attitudinal measurements could be used because 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 e-mail marketing as such, testing whether a co-production approach as a communication strategy in e-mail marketing communication yields the same kind of results as their text message mobile coupon campaign. As stated by 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 e-mail. Co-creation has led to favorable 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 e-mail marketing.

Fourth, it would be interesting to take a deeper look at what kind of opportunities and threats the changing technology brings to e-mail 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 e-mail marketing in general and how they could help to optimize the relevance of the message.

Fifth, because 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

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e-mail 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, e-mails 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 e-mail, 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 e-mail marketing research. Hopefully, it will provoke new insights and academic research topics in the future.

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