

Category Management Roles and Their Influence on Retailer–Supplier Relationships in the Retail Sector: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction: Category Management (CM) is a strategic process designed to foster collaborative relationships between retailers and suppliers, aiming to enhance sales through the introduction of new competitive products. Traditionally, the perceived role of CM has been limited to operational functions within the retail sector. This paper addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive systematic review of the literature to elucidate the broader strategic importance of CM in nurturing supplier-retailer partnerships.

Objectives: The primary objective of this research is to synthesize existing scholarly work on Category Management to systematically identify and analyze its extended roles and the benefits of supplier-retailer collaboration. The study aims to move beyond the traditional view and establish CM as a fundamental structural component of this crucial business relationship.

Methods: A systematic literature review was conducted following a strict, well-defined screening protocol. This process identified 66 relevant peer-reviewed articles published in 38 major journals spanning a 30-year period from 1990 to 2020.

Results: The findings make substantial contributions to the literature. The analysis identified six significant roles of CM that extend beyond its conventional operational scope within the retail sector. Furthermore, the review distilled five key benefits derived from supplier and retailer collaboration through CM. These results collectively demonstrate that CM remains a foundational and structural element for a successful and strategic supplier-retailer relationship.

Conclusions: This review conclusively establishes that Category Management is a critical driver of strategic collaboration rather than a mere tactical tool. The study illuminates CM's vital role in managing supplier-retailer relationships, offering valuable insights and practical implications for retail managers, category managers, and suppliers. By understanding these key roles and benefits, practitioners can better leverage CM to achieve competitive advantage.

Keywords: Activities; Benefits; Collaboration; Competition; Category manager; Integration

INTRODUCTION

The retail industry is becoming the largest, most sophisticated, and globally expanding sector in the fast-moving trends of the technological environment (Arkader & Ferreira, 2004). As a result, the retail sector has become quite competitive over the last few years (Chen, 2013). Implementing new retail methods is imperative for retailers to

ensure their competitive edge, one of these key methods being category management (CM). CM is a process that offers a necessary competitive perspective that helps retailers enhance their performance. According to Han et al. (2014), “the basic idea of CM is managing product categories as business units and customizing them to satisfy customers’ needs”. The primary advantages of implementing CM in the retail industry include “better category performance and inventory management”, among others. (Glynn, 2007).

Given its advantages, the CM role has gained prominence in the academic literature since the 1990s (Landale, 2016). According to Dupre and Gruen (2004), CM is being employed by both retailers and suppliers as their business strategy with the aim of augmenting customer loyalty towards their business. According to Chimhundu (2018), “Category management is largely a joint process between manufacturers/suppliers and retailers. It can manifest itself in varying degrees of relationship/partnership/cooperation between the two”. Therefore, CM plays a pivotal role in assisting retailers in building a strong relationship with their suppliers. For instance, collecting information regarding the tastes and behavior of the customers and sharing it with suppliers. Building a collaborative, and mutually beneficial relationship with the supplier is their aim (win-win-win situation for the retailers-suppliers-customers), e.g. Improvements of new product development (NPD), private-label (PL), retail brands – to enhance the performance of the category.

CM is approaching a significant level among retailers, who are motivated by customer requirements and precise quality products with competitive prices. The studies across literature do not elaborate enough on the significance and role of CM (e.g., Hong et al., 2016; Alan et al., 2017; Musalem et al., 2018; Nakkas et al., 2020). It has been observed that none of the research studies focused exclusively on the role of CM, which highlights the exigency for research to validate the CM roles and its related activities.

OBJECTIVES

Rothstein and Hopewell (2009) state that a systematic literature review helps identify important factors and conduct focused research on the same, thereby contributing to the literature. Therefore, a search was conducted to identify pertinent articles from EBSCO and Scopus databases. Typically, evidence-based category management aims to enhance the collaborative relationship between retailers and suppliers to improve NPD and PL products. Consequently, observations of this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on CM roles aim at answering the research question.

RQ1: What are the major roles of CM in the retail sector with regard to the relationship between the retailer and the supplier?

The article consists of the following sections: The methodology used for the SLR is explained in the first section, and the results obtained from SLR are presented in the second section, which also outlines the basic details of the studies included and the roles of CM in developing relationships between retailers and suppliers. Finally, based on the contributions identified from the findings, the conclusions are presented along with the limitations of SLR.

METHODS

This section provides an outline for the SLR's methodology. The research study focuses on CM roles in managing categories in the retail sector. Nevertheless, it also locates studies conducted on other activities of category captains (CCs) and managers. Thus, the studies that address the key aspects of CM roles in management have been considered primary studies for the review.

1. SEARCH STRATEGY “PROTOCOL”

The guidelines provided by Pittaway et al. (2004) and Tranfield et al. (2003) were used in this study to include articles required for the research study. The strategy initiates with answering the research question and, subsequently, the research plan to evaluate and select the potential studies for inclusion. The research strategy was identified. The important reason for selecting such approaches is to provide empirical and practical support for the research study, which indicates a dearth of literature on CM roles in fostering the retailer and supplier relationship within the sector.

2. KEY WORDS AND TERMS

The keywords and terms used in the search have been sourced from:

- I. The study's research questions, from the aims and objectives of the subject articles.
- II. The titles of the articles considered for the study and their abstracts.
- III. The phrases of other CM literature used in the study.

The search criteria were defined using the symbol (*) to allow for variations in the searched keywords.

Table 1: Key Words & Terms of the Search.

Key Words	Related Terms used in the search
Category management	("category* Manag*")
Roles	("role*", "responsible*", "active*", "area*", "issue*", "tactic*")
Retailer–supplier relationships	("retail*", "supply*", "relation*", "collaborate*", "corporate*" "partner*")

3. DATABASE SEARCH

The study employed a three-step process to identify relevant articles. Initially, an electronic search was conducted using the EBSCO Business Source Database. This search utilized specific search terms in Table 1 to retrieve articles' titles, abstracts, keywords, and full texts. The database search was conducted under three categories: EBSCO, Scopus and citation (Calabrò et al., 2019). EBSCO and Scopus are considered as the significant sources because they consist of more articles covering different subjects and more standard journals such as Elsevier, Wiley and Springer.

- I. EBSCO Business Source with title and abstracts of the research paper, keywords mentioned in the research papers, and full text. (Table 1). The data source from EBSCO resulted in 446 research articles.
- II. Strings were searched in the Scopus. It resulted in 228 relevant journals.
- III. Using the hand search option and citation track resulted in 6 articles.

Therefore, the total number of articles found was 680.

4. INCLUSION CRITERIA

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach was employed by this research to validate the articles to be included in the analysis (Moher et al., 2009). The included articles conform to the following five criteria:

- I. **Publication type:** The articles were retrieved only from international peer-reviewed journals per the "Scimago Institutions Ranking" and represented only top quartiles, Q1 and Q2. Nevertheless, publication bias was pre-empted by extending the search beyond only indexed journals "due to the time required to publish, which precludes recent research to appear in the reviews" (Thomé et al., 2016).
- II. **Language:** Only articles written in the English language were included. The articles written in English improve the quality of research and are more frequently reviewed and cited (Söderlund & Borg, 2018).
- III. **Timespan:** The search was limited to articles published between 1990 and 2016. The concept of Category Management first appeared in the academic retail literature in the early 1990s, so the year was considered the outset for this study (O'Brien, 2015). A second search was conducted to ensure the inclusion of the latest findings in this area, and four articles published between 2017 and 2020 were found to be relevant to the research and included.
- IV. **Study design:** Empirical literature, including studies or articles addressing CM in the empirical context, was selected for this research since this SLR aimed primarily to present empirical evidence rather than theoretical conjecture.

- V. **Topic:** The articles that provided information on CM and its role have been selected as the topic of the articles.

5. EXCLUSION CRITERIA

This research sought related studies in the literature while excluding non-refereed publications like book chapters, books, papers published in conferences, etc. The articles were first scrutinized using inclusion criteria, and duplicate articles were excluded from the research. Further, articles with no mention of CM in the review of literature section and articles which do not discuss the importance of CM roles were not included in the research. The articles which deviate from the primary subject of CM roles and those which present CM as merely a supporting element for retail business development were identified and excluded from the research. Skim reading of the full texts of manuscripts was conducted to ensure the elimination of related concepts.

6. REVIEW METHOD AND CODING SELECTION OF STUDIES

With the search resulting in 680 articles, the authors considered articles focused on the topic to be more significant. The first stage of the process involved screening articles focusing on CM roles based on their respective titles and abstracts (Pukall & Calabrò, 2014). The full text of the articles was screened in the second to analyze the study's potency in presenting the CM roles within the retail sector (Rashman et al., 2009). The third stage of the screening involved assessing whether the articles included reveal the role of CM within the retail sector. The whole selection process has been mentioned using the PRISMA flow chart, as shown in Figure 1.

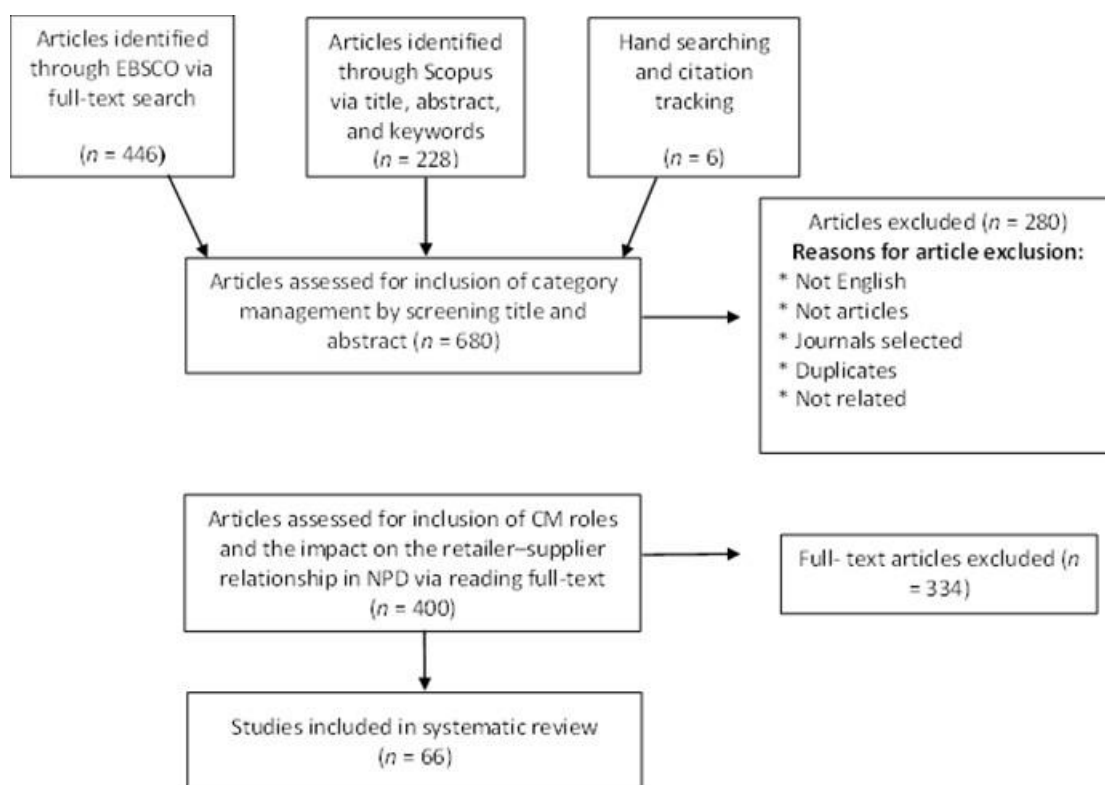


Figure 1: The Process of the Systematic Literature Review.

The fourth and final stage comprised coding the final selection of articles through analysis and a conventional synthesis approach applied to SLRs to present a comprehensive representation of the subject matter being studied.

This stage of the process comprised examining the synthesis and delivery of the research topic comprehensively and descriptively by using conventional synthesis approaches used for other SLRs (Thune & Mina, 2016). The NVivo software was used to collate all the codes used in the review into a coding book, which was further enhanced. The authors also independently reviewed and coded five articles according to their predefined themes while assessing their reliability. The authors discussed the dissimilarities in the coding until a 90% agreement was achieved. Several

SLRs have implemented this practice as an analytical method of classifying data from studies (Nolan & Garavan, 2016; Stirman et al., 2012). The last stage of screening resulted in a further reduction of the number of articles to a final of 66 studies to be included in the study (Table 2). The journals where all the 66 included articles were published are summarized in Supplementary Table A.1. While the main findings of all the articles are provided in Supplementary Table B.1.

Table 2: Records Found in Different Research Phases.

Phase	Databases		Hand searching and citation tracking	Results
	EBSCO (Full Text)	Scopus (Abstract, Key & Titles)		
Phase 1	446	228	0	
Phase 2	274	121	0	
Phase 3	38	22	6	66

DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The information on the descriptive elements extracted from the articles has been discussed in this section

1. PUBLICATION YEAR

The evolution of the studies from 1990 to 2020 has been depicted in Figure 2. The study distribution clearly indicates the earliest publication to be in 1991, followed by seven studies (10%) published between 1991 and 1999. The trend indicates a sharp increase in the number of studies from the year 2000 with the highest number of publications observed in 2007. The total number of studies published between the years 2000 and 2010 was 38(57.5%), while around 21% of the articles were published between 2011 and 2020. Though the reviewed articles did not explore CM's influence on the retailer-supplier relationship in the retail sector, these trends highlight the significance of this topic, with CM being explicitly mentioned in several articles.

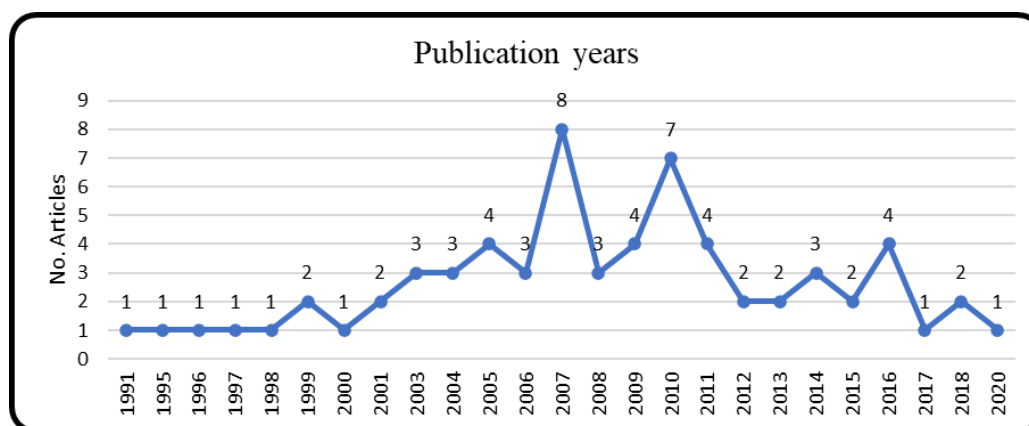


Figure 2: Year of Publication.

2. JOURNALS

The articles included for review appeared in 38 distinct journals (Appendix B), with the best journals ranked in the Q1 and Q2 quartiles. Most of the articles have been published in three journals, namely, Journal of Retailing (6), Journal of Marketing (6), and Marketing Science (5).

3. COUNTRIES

Nearly 38% of the articles used for this review were from European countries (Table 3), followed by 25.7% articles from the United States of America, and only 9% articles include studies involving multiple countries.

Table 3: Articles listed based on country.

Country	No. of Articles
European Countries	25 Articles
United States of America	17 Articles
Multiple Countries	6 Articles

4. METHODS USED

Half of the reviewed articles predominantly utilised quantitative methods to investigate CM. In contrast, qualitative studies employed comparative case studies, semi-structured or in-depth interviews, and document analysis as their primary research approaches (33%). The articles chosen have different research methods, while only 1 article applied a combination of methods. Some methodologies used in the articles included game theory, algorithms, testing, comparative-statistics analysis, developing models, and ethnographic methods.

ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

1. INFORMATION EXTRACTION

As Ellström and Rehme (2016) state, “There are discrepancies concerning what activities and decisions should be included in category management.”

The SLR reveals the requirement of research encompassing all CM roles. The roles mentioned in the articles reviewed were inconsistent, with many strongly resembling others. Hence, four CM roles were discerned to limit the number of roles by making them as distinct as possible (Ellström & Rehme, 2016). The specific roles pertained to pricing management, marketing management, assortment management, and inventory management. This study also identified two new roles, namely category performance and relationship management (Table 4).

Table 4: Roles of CM and its Activities, and the Percentage of These Roles in the Reviewed Articles Based on the Number of Papers or Fragments.

CM roles	CM activities	Frequency	Percentage
Assortment management	Activities about what categories to carry, selecting a variety of products, new products, product type (national brands, PL products), similar kinds of items (value, premium, mass) and product packaging.	46	69.6%
Pricing management	Activities about optimal pricing decisions and pricing decisions based on the category's competitive structures.	41	62.1%
Marketing management	Sales promotions and advertisements, shelf allocation strategies include space allocations and shelf placements, signage and visual hints, and store layout.	48	72.7%
Inventory management	Logistic management issues say, for example, stock-out, replacement methods and order rate; proper forecasting techniques used to avoid conditions like excessive inventory and stock.	25	37.8%

Category performance management	Activities to improve category sales, profits, profitability, growth, higher retailer margins, category volume, customer penetration and supply-oriented activities.	36	54.5%
Relationship management	Activities to do with the retailer–supplier relationship, mutual benefits, cooperation, collaboration, sharing of knowledge, CC arrangements, negotiating skills, cross-functional integration between supplier and retailer, networking and quick response.	39	59.0%

2. SYNTHESIS OF INFORMATION

The review has observed that, there are many disagreements among the journals regarding CM roles. Due to the existence of such differences, CM roles have been studied as per different criteria which led to the six CM roles mentioned above. The activities of these CM roles are discussed in a detailed manner in the results section.

RESULTS

1. CATEGORY MANAGEMENT ROLES AND ITS ASSOCIATION

The results section includes six management techniques to answer the research question.

1.1. ASSORTMENT MANAGEMENT

Assortment Management plays a significant role in CM; it is the key to business trends in the retail industry, and it enhances the capacity of the retail industries (Gajanan et al., 2007 and Waller et al., 2010). A total of 46 (69.9%) articles reported the advantages of this CM role (Table 4).

In 2007, Gajanan et al. explained that Assortment Management is a management technique that elaborates on delisting products from the shelf based on sales and adding new product varieties to increase the organization's profit.

Assortment management consists of many sub-elements obtained through the systematic review of articles. Supplementary Table 1 lists the sub-elements and their roles within the category.

Romat and Biliavska (2018) determined that retail marketers use several business strategies to enhance the performance of assortment management, Category Captain (CC) being one such role. Elaborating on the importance of CC, Lindblom and Olkkonen (2008) explain that it remains a convergence point by using an expert or advisor for the retail segment, and this role of CC is developed by the supplier. This feature can predict future developments using the customer data, their experience and purchase intention. Kurtuluş and Nakkas (2011) explain that the role of CC is to execute various studies for new product introduction and development of products that already exist for the benefit of both the retailer and that of the suppliers.

1.2. PRICING MANAGEMENT

CM's second most critical function is Pricing. Pricing is the second most important role of CM. Musalem et al. (2018) observed that most retailers take on the role of fixing the price of products. Pricing management develops from this point in the CM role, and it monitors the change in price and indices.

The retailer margin increases with the category management role by involving product pricing, which in turn is expected to increase the retailers' profit (Nijs et al., 2007).

Ellström and Rehme (2016) conjectured that product pricing decisions can be influenced by the retailer's implementing CM in their organisations. It has a drawback, though; the involvement of CM in pricing can affect the final price of the product, which can reduce the sales of that product (Free, 2008). This issue can effectively be resolved by defining the price with the brand representatives, thereby benefitting both the retailers and suppliers (Gooner et al., 2011). The articles used for the study consist of many details regarding the management of price in the CM role (Supplementary Table 2).

1.3. MARKETING MANAGEMENT

Strategies are imperative in marketing management to comprehend the customers and products via the CM role (Ellström & Rehme, 2016). Walters and Bommer (1996) elucidated the importance of the CM role in marketing trends and business strategies. Category managers implement several tools, such as competitive maps and a “prototype” system, to optimize their marketing strategies and manage all the variables in the marketing mix of individual product categories. This prototype system is a user-friendly interface for category managers and simplifies using the BVAR tool.

Category managers conventionally use an eight-step process to develop business strategies in marketing for CM: category definition, role assignment, category access, performance definition and scores, marketing strategy development, choosing relevant methods, plan implementation, and review (Han et al., 2014).

Moorthy (2005) segregated the main marketing activities into four major segments: promotional, advertisement, shelf management, and merchandising. Supplementary Table 3 depicts these four segments of Marketing Management.

1.4. INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

Inventory management is another CM role that manages the timing and quantity of inventory purchases (Ellström and Rehme, 2016). While Dupre and Gruen (2004) consider inventory management a demand-side strategy of ECR, several authors attribute it as a supply-side activity (Lindblom et al., 2009; Subramanian et al., 2010).

The inventory Management roles of CM are inventory optimization, maintenance of stocks in the supermarket, logistics and optimization of the costs involved in the delivery. This method provides an edge over the competitors in the same segment (Beneke et al., 2013; Chun & Cadeaux, 2010). CM uses electronic point scale data for developing SKUs for every preference (Holweg et al., 2009). CM also uses the CATMAN method, which suggests strict following of the strategies in the operation for restocking. This ensures success for the stores in terms of profits. Supplementary Table 4 mentions the important articles which focus on this aspect of CM.

1.5. CATEGORY PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Choudhary and Tripathi (2012) accredit the improvement of organizational profit to the CM roles enhanced through category performance. The important business decisions, for example, the promotion of products, price and inventory, depend on Category Performance (Chun & Cadeaux, 2010).

The Category performance role of CM increases business profit improves investment methods and sales and reduces costs. Dhar et al. (2001) propounded that the important role of the category manager is to improve category performance using PL products by allowing customers variety.

1.6. RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Johnson and Pinnington (1998) elaborated that the supplier and retailer together develop customer satisfaction through CM, and it makes an overall success strategy in the business environment through relationship development while reducing the cost involved. CM develops business strategies for future success using supply chain development by developing relationships between different segments.

The retailers and suppliers need proper cooperation in spite of various obstacles they face in achieving the organizational goals with the aid of CM (Holweg et al., 2009). The negotiating skills and meeting atmosphere between manufacturers and suppliers with the stakeholders, business entities and retailers are important requirements for achieving the benefits. Thus, CM's role in relationship management benefits competition and consumer units by developing relationship channels (Castaldo et al., 2009; Collins, 1997).

2. SUPPLIER INTEGRATION WITHIN CM

Supplier integration within CM is achieved using CC wherein “a single supplier in a category becomes a partner to the retailer and favoured resource that is relied on to provide input on both the marketplace and category decisions” (Desrochers et al., 2003). The CC have many roles to play in CM, such as allocating space for shelving products,

location, launching and stock. It makes a considerable contribution to developing benefits for the supplier and retailer. These benefits include enhancing category presentation, designing innovative category displays (planograms), supporting consumer education programs, and determining the optimal store location for the category

The CM provides an advantage by developing a cooperative management practice between suppliers and retail units. Therefore, further research on CM can help understand collaboration within PL-NPD projects, specifically when we compare the same category competition.

DISCUSSION

The SLR results have highlighted the importance of Category Managers and their role in retail business. Assortment, price, inventory, market, performance of category and relationship are the management advantages of Category Managers. Gruen and Shah (2000) stated that CM is the key to the structural development of retailer and supplier relationships. Figure 3 shows the roles of CM and the related advantages for the retailer and supplier association.

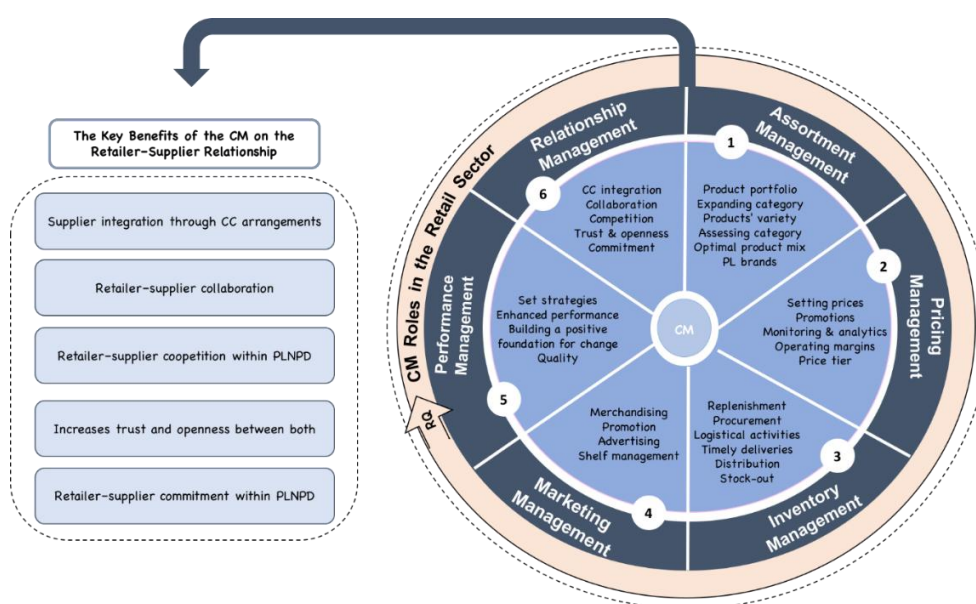


Figure 3: The Roles and Benefits of CM to Retailer–Supplier Relationships in the Retail Sector.

From the SLR, observations indicate the performance of the CM role in sales and its advantages. CC arrangement is the most important method that helps CM to achieve supplier-retailer integration. CM creates a mutually beneficial situation for both the supplier and retailer, say for example, price decrease, value increase and development in PL products. It is observed that CM is an internal competition between the retailer and supplier within the categories. This helps the business entities to compete more in the market with more products on shelves with an increased number of customers from different segments. This means that the suppliers and retailers may simultaneously compete and collaborate. Therefore, CM can lead to retailer–supplier competition in the retail sector. Cooptition can hence be defined as a paradoxical relationship between two or more actors simultaneously involved in cooperative and competitive interactions' (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014).

The results obtained explain the importance of the CM role and its significant contribution to the development of the retail unit of business entities in a non-adversarial collaboration by equally sharing the risks and rewards. It enhances the coordination between the supplier and retailer to cooperate within them for better business prospects, and it also increases the value of commitment because both of them get positive benefits.

The CM provides an advantage by developing a cooperative management practice between the suppliers and retail units. The supplier starts using spare production capacity for the PL projects to boost sales volumes and market share, besides gaining the retailer's preference when they develop PL products (Alan et al., 2017). Because PL products are important aspects of the retail segment, the production of PL products is proving to be a pivotal strategy in the retail

sector. Therefore, González-Benito et al. (2010) explained that support and cooperation from the suppliers are needed for the category managers to develop the PL products.

The research study identifies the significant dearth of studies on CM roles in the available academic research literature. Also, no study talks about the details of the CM roles and their effect on the relationship between the retailer and the supplier in the retail sector. The usage of CM in the retail industry for retailer and supplier relations has been largely overlooked. Therefore, this systematic literature review was aimed at identifying the roles of category management across different stages of supply chain management. Hence, the purpose of undertaking this SLR was to discern the CM's roles in various supply chain management stages. It aims to develop methods to advance these roles and understand their impact on retailer-supplier relations through previously published articles.

The observations of this study revealed the significance of the category manager role in the retailer segment. The different management roles played by the CM in the retail sector are assortment, price, marketing and inventory management. Apart from the previous study findings, which mention 4 roles of CM, two new roles, namely, category performance and relationship management, were propounded in this research. Including these two variables is important to discern the relationship between the supplier and the retailer in the retail market segment of the business entities. Future researchers should include the study of the relationship between the suppliers and the retailers to completely explore the mutual benefits and to improve the performance of sales owing to the dearth of pertinent discussions in previous research.

Therefore, exploring the CM role to understand the retailer-supplier relationship contributes to the current body of literature, specifically in the area of CM, while also giving specific importance to the fields of marketing management and retail relationship management. This paper primarily focuses on identifying new roles of CM, which in turn examines its impact on the relationship between retailers and suppliers in the retail sector.

This SLR contains several limitations. The research is based on limited number of studies which do not cover a wider geographical sample. Therefore, for this topic, future research should concentrate on other global areas.

The study might have benefitted from future articles through analysis, but the utilization of 66 research articles from top publishers in the CM field is sufficient. The CM roles are not clearly identified. The articles do not mention the CM role for PL NPD projects, in which the supplier associates with the retailer for the production of PL products. Also, these segments are competing within the same category. It is theoretically vital, and the managerial aspects were not addressed properly in this literature.

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