

**AI CHATBOTS AND CONVERSATIONAL MARKETING: BUILDING
CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS AT SCALE**

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Abstract: *AI chatbots are now everywhere in customer communication. They answer questions, guide purchases, and increasingly represent the “voice” of brands in real time. This article looks at what that shift means for conversational marketing and customer relationships, especially at scale. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of studies from 2018 to 2026, the paper identifies patterns in what researchers agree on and where debates remain. The findings suggest that chatbots are most useful when they improve responsiveness, reduce customer effort, and keep interaction open at any time. However, the literature also shows that scaling conversation is easier than scaling trust. Relationship outcomes are strongly shaped by customer perceptions of tone, fairness, privacy boundaries, and transparency, especially in service recovery situations where emotions run high. Evidence also highlights risks linked to over-humanisation, data discomfort, and confident but incorrect AI responses, particularly in high-stakes service settings. Overall, chatbots can support stronger relationships, but loyalty depends on responsible design, clear boundaries, and human support when needed. This review explains when chatbots help conversational marketing and when they weaken it.*

Keywords: *AI chatbots; conversational marketing; customer relationships; trust; privacy; service recovery*

INTRODUCTION

Digital commerce has increasingly pushed marketing away from one-way promotion and toward interactive, dialogue-based engagement. In online purchasing contexts, customers frequently experience uncertainty at critical decision points, particularly when they require immediate clarification regarding delivery timelines, return policies, or seller reliability. These micro-level concerns, although practical in nature, can strongly influence purchase completion and customer retention. As a result, firms increasingly rely on communication strategies that reduce customer hesitation and support decision-making in real time.

Within this context, conversational marketing has emerged as an increasingly relevant approach. Instead of relying mainly on one-way promotional messages, conversational marketing is built around two-way interaction between brands and customers through chat-

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based channels, such as website messaging tools and social media platforms (Chaffey, 2019). This type of interaction allows companies to respond while customers are still deciding, which can reduce uncertainty and make the purchase process feel less risky. According to Cancel and Gerhardt (2019), conversational marketing is designed to feel immediate and personal. In practice, its value shows up in small moments: when a customer is unsure, asks a question, and receives a clear reply without delay. Those moments reduce friction and build confidence, which helps explain why conversational marketing is increasingly treated as a relationship-building strategy in competitive online environments.

However, conversation does not scale easily. The communication workload is not stable. Messages can come at any time and from many platforms, so companies often turn to chatbots to handle the basic interaction. For that reason, AI chatbots have become increasingly common in digital marketing practice. Chatbots are now used for more than answering FAQs. Many firms place them at several points in the customer journey: they welcome visitors, respond to product questions, offer recommendations, help during checkout, and sometimes follow up after the purchase to reduce churn (Ramesh, 2022). The improved performance of conversational AI, particularly after the development of generative models, has expanded what chatbots can do in natural language interaction and contextual response (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). However, a debate remains in the literature. Even in academic discussions, there is no full agreement about what chatbots really contribute to relationship-building. Some studies report that chatbot use can improve engagement and perceived service quality, particularly when the system reduces friction and provides fast, relevant answers (Ramesh, 2022). At the same time, a more critical view remains present in the literature. Several scholars suggest that relationships in marketing are not built purely through convenience or fast response, but through relational qualities such as empathy, attentiveness, and social understanding. So in the end, it’s not the chatbot technology itself that decides the outcome. What matters more is how people experience it. If the chatbot feels helpful and respectful, customers usually don’t mind that it’s automated. But if it feels like a barrier, or if it answers in a cold way, the whole experience turns negative very quickly.

And then there’s privacy. Chatbots often depend on personal data to give “smart” and personalised responses, but customers can react badly when they don’t know what data is being used or why. Sometimes personalisation feels useful, but sometimes it feels like the chatbot is watching too closely. That’s why researchers keep focusing on trust. A correct answer helps, but it’s not everything. People usually don’t judge these interactions only by whether the answer is correct. What stays in their mind is whether the conversation felt safe and respectful, especially when they share something personal. Because of that, trust becomes a major issue in AI-based communication. Trust often depends less on the chatbot itself and more on the company using it. People usually want a simple explanation: what data is being collected, what it is used for, and where the boundaries are. This becomes even more sensitive when the chatbot is personalised using customer information, because

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customers may start worrying about privacy and misuse (Azzah, 2026). That is also why researchers often argue that chatbots should not be left to run fully on their own. Monitoring tools and clear options for switching to a human agent are often recommended, so responsibility stays with the organisation and customers do not feel abandoned by automation (Sulaeman, 2025). In short, chatbots can increase the scale of interaction, but relationship quality is shaped by how responsibly the system is designed, managed, and supported by humans.

Literature review

Research on AI chatbots in marketing has grown fast, almost like a flood. But it has grown in many directions at once, not as one neat storyline that everyone agrees on. Some studies approach chatbots mainly as a technological tool for service efficiency, while others treat them as a communication actor that reshapes the relationship between firms and customers. This split is important because scholars end up talking about different things even when they use the same word “success.” Some papers treat a chatbot as successful when it is efficient, meaning fast replies, constant availability, and fewer routine tasks for staff. Other studies care less about speed and more about what happens to the relationship, such as whether customers feel satisfied, engaged, and willing to trust the brand. Ramesh (2022), for example, discusses marketing chatbots not only as automation systems but also as part of a broader customer-facing marketing practice. In that view, chatbots belong to the same world as customer experience management and relationship marketing, not only customer service.

To help readers see the evidence clearly, the key studies were mapped and summarised by where they were conducted, how they were researched, what themes they focused on, and what each one added to the discussion. This matters in an SLR because readers should be able to see what evidence the review is built on, and how it varies across sectors like e-commerce, banking, and customer service. Table 1 brings together the main studies used in this review. It includes research on how chatbots work in real customer interactions, along with theory that helps explain trust and relationship-building in marketing. Putting these studies together in one place helps show how knowledge in the field has evolved, and where the main tensions and debates still remain.

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Table 1. Summary of Key Studies Included in the Review

Author(s) / Year	Context / Sector	Method	Sample / Data	Main focus	Key findings
Chaffey (2019)	Digital marketing	Conceptual / practitioner framework	Digital marketing cases	Conversational marketing	Defines conversational marketing as real-time brand-customer dialogue via chat platforms to reduce uncertainty during decision-making.
Cancel & Gerhardt (2019)	Online marketing	Conceptual / applied guide	Business applications	Conversational marketing strategy	Argues conversational marketing supports lead generation and engagement through fast, personal interaction and timely support.
Ramesh & Chawla (2022)	Marketing / e-commerce	Literature review (morphological + co-occurrence)	Prior chatbot marketing studies	Chatbots in marketing funnel	Shows chatbots expanding across customer journey (pre- to post-purchase) and highlights trust, experience, and adoption as key themes.
McKinsey Global Institute (2023)	Cross-industry	Report / analytics	Industry cases & macro analysis	Generative AI capability	Notes generative models improve language flexibility and context handling, enabling broader conversational AI adoption in customer interaction.
Agnihotri & Bhattacharya (2024)	Customer service	Empirical study	Customer service scenarios	Service recovery	Finds chatbot communication style influences trust and customer forgiveness after service failures; emotional tone matters in recovery.
Lappeman et al. (2023)	Banking	Empirical study	Customer interaction & privacy perceptions	Privacy & trust	Shows privacy concerns significantly affect willingness to disclose personal information to chatbots; trust shapes engagement.
Markou (2025)	AI marketing	Empirical study	Consumer acceptance data	Ethics, identity, trust	Finds acceptance shaped by trust and ethical concerns; personalisation can support relevance but raises identity/privacy tension.
Ribeiro (2025)	Consumer behaviour	Systematic review	AI-consumer research cluster	AI risk & acceptance	Highlights recurring privacy/trust risks; warns AI can appear confident even when incorrect; stresses need for governance.
Huang & Rust (2021)	Service marketing	Conceptual framework	Service systems	AI in service	Explains AI’s role in service delivery; recommends hybrid designs where humans
			research		remain important for complex/emotional contexts.
Morgan & Hunt (1994)	Relationship marketing	Theory	Relationship marketing literature	Commitment–Trust Theory	Establishes trust and commitment as core drivers of relationship marketing outcomes and loyalty.
Mayer et al. (1995)	Trust theory	Theory	Organizational trust literature	Trust formation	Provides integrative model of trust emphasizing ability, benevolence, integrity as key trust antecedents.
Gefen et al. (2003)	E-commerce	Empirical model	Online shopping data	Trust in online systems	Links trust with technology acceptance in online contexts, explaining why trust strongly influences adoption and continued use.
Araujo (2018)	Human–AI interaction	Experiment	Consumer response experiment	Anthropomorphism	Finds human-like design cues shape customer perceptions of both the chatbot and the company; affects engagement and credibility.
Lemon & Verhoef (2016)	Customer journey	Conceptual	Customer experience research	Journey-based experience	Highlights experience across journey stages; supports chatbot value as friction reduction tool at key decision points.
Parasuraman et al. (2005)	E-service quality	Scale development	E-service measurement	E-service quality	Develops E-S-QUAL scale; supports evaluating chatbot performance via service quality and perceived efficiency indicators.
The Guardian (2024)	Public discourse	Media analysis	Consumer reports / cases	Automation backlash	Describes customer frustration when automation blocks human access; shows reputational risk of poor escalation pathways.

A useful starting point in this discussion is conversational marketing itself. Conversational marketing, in simple terms, is when marketing starts behaving like a conversation. Instead of throwing one-way messages, firms communicate with customers in real time through chat tools on websites or messaging apps, so questions can be answered while the customer is still deciding (Chaffey, 2019). Cancel and Gerhardt (2019) also explain that conversational marketing can build trust and reduce uncertainty, because it allows customers to get clarification at the exact moment they hesitate. In real life, it simply turns conversation into part of the selling process. Rather than waiting and hoping customers figure everything out on their own, firms can step in, answer questions, clear up doubts, and help people move forward. Still, researchers argue about what this actually

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creates. Is it a real relationship, or just a useful exchange that ends once the purchase is done? Not every chat turns into a relationship. Sometimes it is just a quick, practical exchange to solve one problem, and that may help the customer buy something without creating any real loyalty afterward.

When AI chatbots entered this space, the motivation was not only innovation, but also scale. It is difficult for a company to maintain real-time conversation with large numbers of customers, especially across multiple platforms and outside office hours. Chatbots offered an alternative: automated communication that can operate 24/7. As Ramesh (2022) notes, chatbot adoption has spread because it creates the possibility of always-on interaction at relatively low cost. Yet the literature also makes it clear that a chatbot is not simply a neutral channel. In many cases, customers treat the chatbot as part of the brand. Sometimes it works like a helpful assistant. Other times it works like a wall that blocks access to real support.

Older chatbots were often stiff and predictable. With older chatbots, you could almost hear the script in the background. The conversation was predictable, like walking through a menu. Newer conversational AI is more flexible. It can handle questions that are phrased badly, follow the customer’s wording, and respond in a way that feels closer to how people normally talk (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). Because of this, firms are no longer using chatbots only for basic FAQs. In many companies, chatbots are no longer used only for simple questions. They appear in different parts of the customer journey, from suggesting products and answering doubts to helping during checkout, and even following up after purchase when the brand is trying to keep the customer from disappearing (Ramesh, 2022). This change makes chatbots more visible in marketing strategy, but it also increases the level of risk. When chatbots were limited to simple tasks, failures were less damaging. When they start shaping purchase decisions, the consequences of wrong or misleading responses become more serious.

After reviewing the main studies, it becomes necessary to step back and organise the literature into a clearer picture. The chatbot and conversational marketing field is not built around one single argument; instead, it is shaped by several recurring discussions that intersect across marketing, customer service, and human–AI interaction research. As a result, the same study can contribute to more than one theme, and many findings overlap rather than appearing in isolated categories. To handle this complexity, the review groups the studies into a set of recurring themes. This makes it easier to see the bigger picture, not just what each paper says on its own. Instead of treating every finding as separate, the thematic map shows where researchers generally agree, where they disagree, and which issues keep shaping customer experience across different contexts. Across the reviewed studies, certain themes appear repeatedly: the role of chatbots in real-time engagement, how they reduce friction in the customer journey, the importance of trust and privacy, the challenges of service recovery, debates about how “human” chatbots should sound, and the need for monitoring and human support to prevent negative outcomes. The thematic map

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presented in Table 2 therefore provides a structured way to understand the field, showing how these themes connect to one another and how they collectively explain the conditions under which chatbots can (or cannot) support relationship-building at scale.

Table 2. Thematic Map of Literature

Theme	What the literature broadly argues	Typical indicators / concepts	Key supporting sources
Conversational marketing as real-time engagement	Conversational marketing shifts marketing communication from one-way promotion to interactive dialogue, supporting customers at decision points.	Real-time interaction, dialogic marketing, immediate support, reduced hesitation	Chaffey (2019); Cancel & Gerhardt (2019)
Responsiveness and friction reduction	Chatbots often improve customer experience by answering quickly and reducing “effort costs” in the customer journey, especially during product inquiry and checkout.	Speed, convenience, reduced customer effort, journey smoothness	Ramesh & Chawla (2022); Lemon & Verhoef (2016); Blut (2016)
Chatbots across the customer journey (funnel integration)	Chatbots are increasingly used throughout the customer journey (pre-purchase to post-purchase), not only for FAQs, due to stronger AI language capability.	Product recommendation, lead qualification, checkout support, retention	Ramesh & Chawla (2022); McKinsey Global Institute (2023)
Trust as a core condition for engagement	Trust is repeatedly identified as a key factor determining whether customers continue interacting with chatbots and share useful information.	Trust beliefs, perceived reliability, continued use, willingness to engage	Lappeman et al. (2023); Gefen et al. (2003); Mayer et al. (1995)
Privacy, data boundaries, and transparency	Customer trust is closely linked to privacy. Personalisation can support relevance but may reduce comfort when data use feels unclear or excessive.	Privacy concerns, transparency, consent, perceived intrusiveness	Lappeman et al. (2023); Markou (2025); Ribeiro (2025)
Service recovery and emotional dynamics	Chatbot service recovery depends heavily on communication style and tone. In failure contexts, customers evaluate not only solutions but also emotional experience.	Service recovery quality, customer forgiveness, emotional comfort, fairness	Agnihotri & Bhattacharya (2024); Emerald (2025); The Guardian (2024)
Anthropomorphism (“human-likeness”) debate	Human-like chatbots may increase comfort and trust, but excessive humanisation can backfire if customers feel deceived or emotionally “played.”	Human-like tone, empathy cues, authenticity, deception concerns	Araujo (2018); Agnihotri & Bhattacharya (2024); Ribeiro (2025)
Hybrid systems and governance	Many studies recommend hybrid human-AI models, emphasising monitoring, escalation pathways, and accountability to prevent customer harm and reputation risk.	Human takeover, monitoring systems, accountability, governance	Huang & Rust (2021); Lin (2024); Page et al. (2021)
Relationship marketing theory tension	Chatbots can scale interaction, but relationship marketing depends on authenticity and long-term trust; therefore, relational impact is conditional and context-dependent.	Relationship quality, loyalty, authenticity, commitment-trust	Morgan & Hunt (1994); Roy et al. (2025); Markou (2025)

When you read chatbot studies, many of them end up circling back to one basic issue: what do customers actually think and feel after using the chatbot? Most research pays close attention to outcomes like satisfaction and engagement, because those are the signals companies care about in real life. A number of studies suggest that when a chatbot responds quickly and actually answers what the customer is asking, people tend to judge the service more positively. In those situations, the chatbot does not feel like a random piece of software. It feels like part of the service itself. When it replies quickly and gives a clear answer, customers often relax. They think something like, “Alright, this is not complicated,” and that little feeling of ease matters more than people admit. It lowers resistance. It makes the whole brand feel smoother, more reliable, and easier to return to next time. Agnihotri (2024) goes further and shows that chatbot behaviour also shapes trust, not just satisfaction. You notice it most when something breaks. That’s when people stop being “customers” and become real humans with real frustration. If the order is late, or the payment fails, they are already tense. Then the chatbot replies, and its tone either lowers the temperature or makes it boil. A warm, clear response can calm the person down, almost like someone saying, “I hear you, let’s fix this.” But if the bot sounds cold, repeats itself, or gives that useless copy-paste answer, it feels insulting. Like the company is hiding behind a machine. And at that point, the customer is no longer angry only about the late delivery. They are angry because they feel dismissed. They are upset about how the brand treated them. That is why chatbots are not only tools for giving information. The way they “talk” shapes how customers feel. They can also affect emotions and attitudes during stressful moments. Still, these positive

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effects are not automatic, and satisfaction is not guaranteed. The problem is that customers lose patience quickly. If the chatbot cannot understand the question, or keeps offering useless options, the “nice experience” disappears fast and turns into annoyance. This is why many studies treat chatbot success as conditional rather than automatic.

Trust appears in the literature as a central theme, and it is not difficult to understand why. Conversation is not neutral. Even small questions carry personal meaning. When customers ask something, they are showing what they need, what they worry about, and sometimes what situation they are in. This is especially true in sectors like banking, insurance, and healthcare where chat topics can involve sensitive information. Lappeman et al. (2022) show that privacy concerns and trust strongly affect whether people are willing to share personal information in chatbot conversations. And honestly, this makes perfect sense. Trust is not something that lives only inside journal articles. You can actually see it happening in real time while the chat is going on. If customers feel unsure, or if the chatbot starts asking questions that feel too personal too soon, people immediately become cautious. They reply with less detail, skip certain topics, or give very general answers just to protect themselves. Sometimes they do not even argue or complain. They simply exit the chat and disappear. So, in many cases, trust becomes the invisible factor that decides whether a conversation continues smoothly or ends without reaching any solution.

More recent studies link trust not only to the system’s performance but also to ethical perception. Markou (2025) argues that consumer acceptance of AI-based marketing is shaped by trust and ethical concerns, including perceptions of fairness and identity-related issues. Other research makes a similar point: privacy concerns shape the whole chatbot experience, especially when personalisation feels unclear or too aggressive (Markou, 2025; Lappeman et al., 2022). So, personalisation is not automatically a good thing. It can make interaction easier and more relevant, but it can also make customers uncomfortable when it feels like the system is overstepping. In practice, this is where customers begin to ask silent questions, such as why the chatbot knows what it knows, and whether the company can be trusted to use that information responsibly.

One of the most interesting debates is about how “human” chatbots should sound. Some scholars argue that a chatbot becomes more engaging when it speaks naturally, because customers find the interaction smoother and less tiring. But not everyone agrees that making chatbots sound more human is automatically a good thing. Some researchers warn that it can backfire. When a chatbot uses warm, emotional language but clearly does not understand what the customer is saying, the interaction starts to feel fake. Instead of “friendly service,” it feels like performance. This debate matters because it touches the core idea of relationship marketing. Relationships are not built only by being fast. They come from real understanding and trust, and from that feeling that the other side actually cares. A chatbot can copy the surface of conversation, but copying is not the same as connection. So, researchers still disagree on the main point: are chatbots building real relationships, or are they mainly producing efficient interactions that only look relational?

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So, because of all this, a lot of scholars are basically saying: don’t go “full robot.” Hybrid is safer. Let the chatbot do the basic work, but make it easy for a real human to take over when the customer has a serious issue or the conversation becomes messy. This is not only academic advice. In real business settings, companies learn quickly that full automation can backfire. Customer relationships are fragile. A positive interaction is easy to forget, but a frustrating one sticks in memory. Once customers lose trust, it is hard to rebuild it. Public discussions reflect this risk, because automation is often criticised not for existing, but because it sometimes makes people feel abandoned, as if the company is hiding behind machines instead of helping (The Guardian, 2024). For that reason, many studies argue that chatbot success depends heavily on design choices: transparency, respectful tone, clear escalation to humans, and governance systems that keep responsibility inside the organisation rather than pushing it onto the customer.

If you step back and look at the studies together, one thing becomes quite clear. Chatbots can help conversational marketing, especially by making responses quicker, reducing friction in the customer journey, and keeping interaction “on” at all hours. At the same time, the literature consistently shows that these benefits are not guaranteed. Chatbots can definitely make the customer experience smoother when they are designed and managed properly. But when privacy feels unclear, ethics are ignored, or the system keeps failing again and again, the same chatbot can quickly become a reason for customers to lose trust. That is why the research still does not feel fully settled. Chatbots are pulled in two directions at once. On one side, they are supposed to make everything faster and cheaper. On the other side, they are expected to support relationships, trust, and customer experience. The literature suggests that scaling conversation is already possible, but the quality of those relationships is much harder to guarantee. Ultimately, outcomes depend on design quality, governance, and human oversight of chatbot systems (Ramesh, 2022; Lappeman et al., 2022; Agnihotri, 2024; Markou, 2025).

Methodology

This study applies a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to examine how AI chatbots support conversational marketing and shape customer relationship-building at scale. The SLR method was selected because the literature on marketing chatbots is growing quickly but remains scattered across marketing, information systems, and human–computer interaction research. A systematic approach allows the evidence to be gathered and synthesised in a structured way, reducing the risk of relying only on a few popular or highly cited studies (Snyder, 2019).

The literature search was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search strings were developed by combining key terms such as “AI chatbot,” “conversational AI,” “conversational marketing,” “customer engagement,” “relationship marketing,” and “customer experience.” To ensure relevance to current chatbot capabilities, studies published between 2018 and 2026 were prioritised. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers written in English

were included. Publications focused purely on technical engineering performance, without marketing or customer interaction outcomes, were excluded.

After the initial retrieval, all studies were screened in two stages. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to remove clearly irrelevant papers. Second, full-text screening was performed to confirm that each study addressed chatbot use in marketing, customer service, or relationship-based outcomes. The final set of articles was then analysed using thematic synthesis, which allows repeated patterns across studies to be identified and organised into clear categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were coded around key concepts such as responsiveness, personalisation, trust, privacy concerns, customer satisfaction, engagement, and hybrid human–AI service models. Finally, the results were interpreted critically to highlight dominant findings, tensions in the literature, and research gaps that require further investigation.

Findings and Discussion

Across the studies reviewed, one idea comes up again and again: AI chatbots can support conversational marketing in a useful way, but the benefits are not guaranteed. In many papers, chatbots are valued because they remove small obstacles in the customer journey, especially at those “hesitation moments” when people are unsure and just need a quick answer before moving forward. If a chatbot replies fast, stays relevant, and does not trap users in confusing menu options, customers often experience the brand as more helpful and more organised. When that kind of smooth experience happens repeatedly, it can leave customers feeling satisfied and make them more willing to come back and buy again (Ramesh, 2022; Alagarsamy, 2023). This also helps explain why many firms no longer treat chatbots as optional add-ons. Instead, they are built into the marketing system itself, particularly in digital markets where switching to a competitor is effortless and takes only seconds (Chaffey, 2019). At the same time, the evidence is clear on one point: speed is helpful, but it is not enough. A quick chatbot reply does not automatically translate into relationship building, especially when customers still question trust, empathy, and genuine support. Some papers show that customers may accept chatbot interaction for quick tasks, yet still prefer humans for complex questions, complaints, or emotionally sensitive issues (Ramesh, 2022; Lin, 2024). In other words, scaling conversation is easier than scaling meaningful connection.

A second major finding is that the placement of chatbots across the customer journey has expanded in recent years, particularly with the rise of more advanced conversational AI. Several studies point out that companies are now using chatbots for much more than FAQs. They are placed in different parts of the customer journey. Sometimes the bot recommends products, sometimes it helps qualify leads, sometimes it guides checkout, and in some cases it even follows up after purchase when the company is trying to keep the customer from quietly disappearing (Ramesh, 2022). This expansion is not surprising, especially now that conversational AI has improved. Older bots often felt stiff. Older bots were so scripted that you could guess the next line before it even showed up. Newer chatbots are better with

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language, so the chat feels more like a real back-and-forth and less like fighting your way through a customer service menu (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023).

At the same time, studies warn that there is a trade-off. When firms start relying heavily on chatbots for marketing decisions, mistakes become more likely and the risks grow. When a chatbot makes mistakes, it is no longer a small technical issue. If the bot gives incorrect information, misunderstands intent, or pushes the wrong recommendation, customers do not just forget it. The error can spread into trust. In other words, what looks like one failed interaction can become a wider negative impression of the brand. Another warning in the literature is that AI can be fluent and still wrong. And the scary part is that it may sound confident while doing it. In high-stakes service contexts, that is not just inconvenient, it can become a serious risk (Ribeiro, 2025). Ribeiro (2025) also points out something else: privacy and trust concerns appear again and again in consumer research on AI. So these are not minor complaints. They are often the core barrier that decides whether customers accept chatbot interaction or reject it. Because of this, several scholars argue that chatbot systems should not be treated as fully autonomous actors. Instead, governance and human supervision are frequently recommended, so responsibility remains visible and controllable (Lin, 2024).

One of the strongest themes in the literature is the role of chatbots in service recovery. Customers rarely contact support when everything is going fine. Usually, something has already gone wrong. Here, tone is everything. Agnihotri (2024) shows that the way a chatbot responds can affect whether customers still trust the company and whether they are willing to forgive it after something goes wrong. This finding is important because it shows that chatbots do more than deliver information. They influence emotions. When customers are already annoyed or disappointed, tone is not a small detail. In that kind of moment, the chatbot stops being “technology.” It becomes the brand’s voice, right in front of the customer. If it answers clearly and respectfully, it can actually calm the person down. It makes the customer feel seen for a second, like, “Alright, maybe they’ll fix this.” But if the chatbot repeats the same nonsense again and again, or replies like it did not even read the message, frustration builds instantly. The interaction stops feeling like support. It feels like the brand is shutting the door in the customer’s face. People start thinking, “They don’t care,” or even worse, “They’re hiding behind a bot.” And once that thought appears, it can stay in the customer’s mind long after the delivery is fixed or the refund is processed (Agnihotri, 2024). That is why recent research on chatbot service recovery keeps coming back to communication style, not only technical performance. Customers do not judge recovery only by the final result. They also remember what the conversation felt like while it was happening, whether the tone was respectful, whether the process seemed fair, and whether the interaction felt emotionally safe instead of stressful or humiliating (Emerald study on AI chatbot service recovery quality, 2025).

At the same time, the review makes it clear that service recovery is where automation is most fragile. When everything goes smoothly, customers may not mind talking to a bot.

But when something fails, people usually want real help, not scripted replies. This is why service recovery is the worst place for chatbots to fail. Customers are already annoyed, and then they get stuck in automation. Media reports describe this exact situation: people can’t reach a real person, and the frustration turns into backlash almost instantly (The Guardian, 2024). Academic or not, that public reaction matters, because reputation spreads through people’s stories, not through company presentations. So when automation creates a feeling of abandonment, the impact is not only operational. It becomes a marketing problem as well. The review therefore suggests that service recovery may be one of the most sensitive areas in which firms must use hybrid models, not purely automated ones.

Privacy and trust emerge as another dominant theme, and the literature treats them as more than background issues. Several studies show that trust shapes the entire conversational dynamic, particularly in contexts where customers are asked to provide personal information. Lappeman et al. (2022) found that when customers worry about privacy, they are less willing to share personal data with banking chatbots. If they do not feel safe, they simply become careful and disclose less. This matches other findings that trust plays a big role in whether customers keep using chatbots and continue the conversation (Alagarsamy, 2023). When trust is low, people hold back and keep responses short, so the interaction stays shallow. This may explain why results differ across studies: a chatbot can work technically, but customers may still feel uncomfortable when transparency and consent are unclear.

Another theme that keeps coming up is personalisation. Marketers like it because it makes the conversation feel more relevant and saves customer’s time. But research is clear that personalisation is not always positive. It can help, but it can also make customers uncomfortable. Markou (2025) shows that acceptance of AI-based marketing is shaped by trust and ethical perceptions, including identity concerns, not only by functional usefulness. Customers evaluate both chatbot responses and perceived data use. If the chatbot seems to know too much, trust may decrease. Ribeiro (2025) similarly notes privacy and security as key clusters in AI-driven consumer behaviour research, indicating that these concerns cut across different contexts (Ribeiro, 2025). Therefore, conversational marketing strategies that depend heavily on AI personalisation must treat transparency and data governance as core design principles, not optional add-ons.

One debate that keeps coming up in the literature is how “human” a chatbot should sound. In practice, many companies assume that the more human-like the chatbot is, the better the experience will be. But research does not fully agree with that idea. Research suggests that human-like chatbots can work best when customers are upset and the situation is tense. Agnihotri (2024) shows that a warmer communication style can increase trust and sometimes even lead to forgiveness after service failure.

At the same time, other research warns that humanisation can also create problems. The trouble is, human-like language can backfire. A chatbot can speak softly and politely, but if it keeps misunderstanding the customer, the whole tone starts to feel like a costume.

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Nice words, no real understanding. Customers may leave the chat not just disappointed, but uncomfortable, thinking, “So you’re pretending to understand me.” Ribeiro (2025) talks about this directly, warning that “excessive humanization” can lead to negative reactions in AI-consumer behaviour research. And that is why this tension matters so much. Relationship marketing is not only about sounding nice or adding emotional words. Real relationships are built on authenticity. People can tell the difference between genuine understanding and a smooth, polite act. And this is where the issue becomes bigger than chatbot design. Relationship marketing is more than sounding friendly in a conversation. It depends on authenticity. Customers want real understanding, not just polite words that look like empathy. A chatbot can copy the surface language of empathy, but if the interaction does not feel genuine, customers may interpret it as fake care or manipulation rather than support.

Overall, the findings suggest a clear overall pattern. AI chatbots can clearly enable conversational marketing by increasing responsiveness, supporting always-on interaction, and reducing customer effort (Ramesh, 2022; McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). But the relationship side of it depends on the situation and on how the chatbot is actually used. When you read these studies side by side, the pattern becomes hard to ignore. The same requirements keep coming up: customers need to trust the system, privacy rules must feel clear (not hidden in fine print), service recovery has to be handled with care, and there should always be a simple way to reach a real person when the situation becomes serious (Lappeman et al., 2022; Agnihotri, 2024; Markou, 2025; Lin, 2024). This is why chatbots do not automatically “create relationships.” At best, they create the space for relationships to grow. But loyalty only develops when customers still feel human attention behind the automation, and when the whole system is managed in a responsible way rather than leaving people alone with a machine.

Conclusion

This article shows that AI chatbots have become more than a simple support tool. In many businesses, they now shape conversational marketing directly, because they are often the first “voice” customers meet when they ask questions, hesitate at checkout, or face uncertainty. When chatbots respond quickly, communicate clearly, and reduce small frustrations, they can make the whole customer experience feel smoother, and when people repeatedly experience that kind of ease, they are more likely to return. At the same time, the discussion makes one thing obvious: scaling conversation is easier than scaling trust. A chatbot can answer instantly, but instant answers do not automatically create loyalty. When chatbots misunderstand customers, repeat useless responses, or block access to real human help, the interaction stops feeling supportive and starts feeling dismissive, and that is when trust breaks. Privacy and ethics also matter. Customers may appreciate personalisation, but only when it feels transparent and respectful; if the system appears to know too much or uses data in unclear ways, discomfort rises quickly. In the end, chatbots can open the door

to stronger relationships, but real relationship-building still depends on responsible design, clear boundaries, and human care behind the automation.

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