

Strength and Quality of Relationships in Customer Services; Case of Retail Environments Based on Customers Perception

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Abstract: The present study aims to study the quality and strength of the relationships in customer services of retail environments and its relationship with some variables such as service quality and customer loyalty based on the customers' perception of their shopping experience. For this purpose, a sample of 445 customers who has had the experience of shopping at a chain store in Shiraz-Iran was used in order to collect data. The data were analyzed using LISREL 8.8 software program. The findings indicate the existence of the relationships between the variables based on the research hypotheses. Through this study, the effects of the variables such as service quality, trust and commitment on relationship strength and the effect of relationship strength on relationship quality and customer loyalty were investigated. The implemented sample of the research limits its generalizability and it is possible to enlarge the sample size in order to enhance the generalization. The findings may help the managers and executives to affect some variables such as relationship quality and customer loyalty behaviors through controlling the predictive variables such as quality level of the provided services. In addition, the findings, considering all aspects, can be generalized to the services that hold some common features with regard to the nature of customer relationships in retail industry such as travel agencies, insurance firms and banking.

Key words: Commitment, customer loyalty, relationship quality, relationship strength, trust

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the subject of relationships with customers has held an important position in marketing. The relationship marketing indicates that the marketers should make a long-term relationship with their customers and, in order for the development of customer loyalty, focus on the creation of the trust between the supplier and the customer. Relationship marketing consists of everything about identification, establishment, preservation and enhancement and, sometimes, ending of the relationships with customers (Sally, 2008). Since relationship marketing involves a long-term view to marketing, it focuses on the value of the lifetime of a customer, rather than the value of a single transaction. The tendency of relationship marketing is to achieve the customer share, not the market share (Peppers and Rogers, 1994; Tony and Tracy, 2007). The main assumption here is that the creation and preservation of relationships with the customer leads to the preservation of the customer himself (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998; Tony and Tracy, 2007), develops the customer share (Verhoef, 2003; Tony and Tracy, 2007) and increases the benefits.

Relationship marketing and long-term relationships with customers have been the topic of a great deal of marketing researches and the researchers have dealt with it from many aspects. The relationship between the customers and the employees who are in contact with customers has been under the consideration of many researches relating to the services and retail (Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Spies *et al.*, 1997; Amy and Amrik, 2006). The interaction of the employees who are in contact with customers affects customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, post-purchase behavior and the total service quality (Amy and Amrik, 2006).

While relationship marketing implies an effective strategy to attract, preserve and enhance the relationships with customers (Gronroos, 1994; Brodie *et al.*, 1997; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Tony and Tracy, 2007), the empirical studies are not enough to test the important hypotheses which relationship marketing has been built upon them. It is not yet completely clear whether this concept can be operational and the studies relating to relationship marketing are still subject to some shortcomings in consumer markets (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Amy and Amrik, 2006).

The noticeable challenge with which the marketing researchers confront is the identification and determination of the point that how controlling the precedent variables such as provided services can affect the nature and the degree of importance of relationship marketing results such as total relationship quality level and customer behaviors (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Amy and Amrik, 2006). This study studies the customer perceptions of the strength of the relationships that has been created between them and the suppliers in retail environments. Choosing relationship strength as the central variable in the study, we assume that those employees who are directly in contact with customers have a key role in the creation and preservation of a close and strong relationship with customers.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Relationship strength: The nature of a strong relationship depends on the mutual trust, commitment, high quality and abandonment of relationship. In strong relationships, comparing with poor relationships, both parties regard the relationship important and valuable and both parties want the relationship to continue with no limitation and they tend to try to preserve it (Tamer *et al.*, 2003). The relationships of the customers with the employees that are in contact with them are very important and the businesses should not regard the exchanges between customers and sellers as some separated events or transactions. They, rather, should regard them as interdependent relationships. Strong relationships are effective on the positive sayings of the customers about the business and its services, suggesting the business to others, transacting with the business and future repurchases.

Service quality: In the past two decades, numerous studies considered various aspects of service quality (Wetzels *et al.*, 1998; Qin and Prybuton, 2009). Service quality refers to the difference in customer expectations of a given thing that a company should provide (customer expectations) and the services that they perceived and receive in actual world (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Any previous experience regarding services can affect customer expectations while received services are the result of customer perceptions of the services themselves. Large and Konig (2009) suggest that customer expectations and perceptions are measured through five aspects of service quality, which are tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy. On the other hand, we can divide the service quality into two parts: Functional Service Quality (FSQ) (doing things correctly) and Technical Service Quality (TSQ) (doing correct things) (Maddern *et al.*, 2007). Thus, those employees who are in contact with the customers play important roles in service quality. Generally, service quality is recognized as an important factor in the efforts of companies to differentiate themselves from their rivals

and it helps them to differentiate themselves from other organizations and gain competitive advantage. The studies have shown that the good service quality leads to the preservation of the existing customers and the attraction of new ones, enhances the company image and enhances customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Managers are interested in customer satisfaction since it is a strong predictor of customer loyalty (Tuu and Olsen, 2009; Kue-Chien, 2010).

On the other hand, service quality is related to positive word-of-mouth advertisement (Caruana, 2002), reduces costs (Crosby, 1979) and finally enhances profitability (Santos, 2003).

Furthermore, service quality level affects the individuals' post-purchase behaviors and their future decisions (Jabnoun and Al-Tamimi, 2003). High service quality is necessary for the establishment of a strong relationship with customers and his loyalty. Thus, the following hypotheses are offered:

- H1:** With enhancement of service quality, customer loyalty enhances.
- H2:** With enhancement of service quality, relationship strength enhances.

Trust and commitment: Trust can be defined as "the belief in the trustworthiness, honesty and reliability of another person" (Dwyer and Tanner, 2002; Raechel and Bruce, 2008). Gwinner *et al.* (1998) suggest that trust is the confidence about the benefit that is at a high level related to the long-term exchange with service companies. Trust is an essential or facilitating element and an irrefutable aspect of social interactions. It is an important factor in facilitating many exchange relationships. Trust has drawn significant attentions in business relationship studies and it is regarded as one of the most important dimensions of the development and survival of complete business relationships (Goran, 2006). Trust can be at individual level (Rotter, 1967; Norizan and Abdel *et al.*, 2006), or at organizational level (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; McKnight *et al.*, 1998).

In service marketing, trust is necessary, especially due to the fact that service should be purchased before being experienced (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). In service marketing literature, trust can also be regarded as "trust in the services themselves" (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, 1988). Therefore, service quality can have a positive effect on trust. Generally, trust leads to relationship commitment (Raechel and Bruce, 2008), which the marketers in retail environments seek for. Trust is the key element in the success of relationship and it is also related to commitment. Trust can be created and enhanced through joint interactions in long-term with observing the shared values and transactions (Raechel and Bruce, 2008; Young and Wilkinson, 1989). Commitment can exist if only trust exists (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Therefore, trust is a key prerequisite for marketing relationships (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Relationship

commitment is defined as such the parties who exchange with each other believe that the strong relationships with the other is so important that the maximum of effort must be done to preserve it and this is the key for relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and service marketing.

The fragile nature of business relationships as well as their importance means that trust is the key for relationships development (Harris and Dibben, 1999) and the establishment and preservation of trust in retail environments is vitally important.

The existence of trust between the customer and retailer can be due to the fact that the seller and shopping center have proven their trustworthiness and can offer some solutions that may successfully lead to the creation of value for the customer. Therefore, in order to achieve customer commitment, the strategy of a retailer should be the benefits of mutual and long-term relationships with customers and putting customers at the center of attention. Therefore, with respect to the discussed literature, the following hypotheses are offered:

H3: With enhancement of service quality, the trust between the service exchange partners enhances.

H4: With enhancement of trust between the service exchange partners, commitment enhances.

Commitment has been defined variously in relationship marketing literature. Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggest that when a party of an existing relationship preserves it, there is commitment. Thus, commitment exists if the relationship between the two parties is preserved and the preservation of relationship occurs when the relationship is important and valuable. Gundlach *et al.* (1995) regard commitment as an assurance to continue the practices of the parties who have some relationships with each other. In addition, commitment may be considered as the attachment that one party feels towards the other party at the situation of exchange (Gruen *et al.*, 2000; Gordon, 2011).

According to the view of Berry and Parasuraman (1991), commitment is a vital component of successful relationships that leads to loyalty. Commitment shows that there exists a motivation to preserve a relationship (Wilson, 1994; Moorman *et al.*, 1992) and the missing of committed customers is reduced (Anderson and Narus, 1990). Commitment affects the tendency of the buyer to remain in relationship (Ruyter *et al.*, 2001). Commitment to build some long-term relationships also indicates the tendency of the parties to invest in some resources such as assets, time and effort so that the relationship can be continued (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Assael, 1987). Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H5: With the enhancement of commitment, relationship strength enhances.

Relationship quality and customer loyalty:

Relationship quality has been defined as “the degree of the correspondence of a relationship in order to meet the needs of customers who are involved in that relationship” (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997). Relationship quality is broadly regarded as a concept that is related to the satisfaction of customer from the service provider (Dorsch *et al.*, 1998; Yi-Shun *et al.*, 2011), the trust in the service provider and the commitment to continue relationships with him (Dorsch *et al.*, 1998; Hewett *et al.*, 2002; Kumar *et al.*, 1995; Yi-Shun, 2011). Generally, relationship quality describes the overall depth and climate of a relationship (Johnson, 1999; Amy and Amrik, 2006). Therefore, relationship quality indicates the features that a customer attributes to the relationship in different situations and it seems that with continuing of the relationship, the customer gains some more positive views about the features of the relationship. Thus, the following hypothesis is offered:

H6: With the enhancement of relationship strength, relationship quality enhances.

High quality relationships demonstrate that the customers trust in the present and future performance of the service provider and because of their satisfaction of the past performance, they tend to rely on the ability and trustworthiness of the service provider and continue their relationships with him and become loyal customers. The establishment of loyalty in customers calls for the investment in the processes that lead to a high level of relationship quality (Gianfranco *et al.*, 2010).

Whereas many drivers have been identified for loyalty, it has been widely determined that relationship quality plays the central role in customer loyalty (De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006). Thus, the following hypothesis is offered:

H7: With the enhancement of relationship quality, customer loyalty enhances.

Customer loyalty is a concept that has had a great expansion and use in the field of customer behavior. Customer loyalty has been defined as the repeated purchase behavior that is directed by desirable views, or as a sustainable purchase behavior that is the result of psychological evaluation and decision-making processes (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973; Shiang-Lih, 2005). Dick and Basu (1994) consider customer loyalty as continuance of relationship between the relative view of an individual about an entity (brand, service or shopping center) and the repeat of patronage behavior towards it.

Grant and Schlesinger (1995) claim that the preservation of customer loyalty through a good and strong relationship is directly enhances the company's benefits. It is clear that having a strong relationship with

customers is followed by higher profit, improvement of relationships, more satisfaction and the creation of customer loyalty (Petersen and Rajan, 1995). Loyal customers are less probable to turn towards the rivals with price incentives; they purchase more than less loyal customers. Customer loyalty is considered as the important source of the long-term success of a business and the establishment of relationships with customers is a good way to preserve loyal customers in long-term (Amy and Amrik, 2006). Thus, the following hypothesis is offered:

H8: With the enhancement of relationship strength, customer loyalty enhances.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data collection and sample: The tested sample of the research was the customers of a chain store in Shiraz-Iran. The participants have purchased at this chin store branches previously too and have re-purchases. Therefore, they have had relationships with the mentioned chin store. The research data were collected through a questionnaire that was completed during a week in October 2011 by 445 customers of branches of the store in Shiraz,-a city with population estimated 1,517,653 in 2011 in south-west of Iran-which were the basis of the study analysis. The questionnaire consists of three sections: in the first section, a screening question was asked to elicit whether they have had the experience of previous purchase in this store or not. If the answer was positive, showing their relationship with the store, they were asked to complete the following sections. The second section consists of 20

questions on a 5 item Lickert type scale. Finally, the third section had asked about some personal specifications of the respondents.

The questionnaire was designed based on the previous study of Amy and Amrik (2006). Regarding gender, 63.7% of respondents were female and 36.3% were male. Regarding education, 4.7% had high-school diploma or below, 77.6% had an associate or bachelor's degree and 17.7% had a degree higher than bachelor. Regarding age, 0.6% were below 20 years, 64.9% were between 20 to 39 years and 34.5% were over 40 years old.

Statistical analyses: In this study, model adequacy was evaluated by the comparative fit index, goodness of fit index, the non-normed fit index (Bentler and Bonnett, 1980), standardized root mean square residual, the root-mean-square error of approximation and the χ^2 test statistic (Bollen, 1989). When significant, the χ^2 statistic is indicative of a lack of fit. However, the χ^2 test being particularly sensitive to sample size, the use of relative fit indices such as the CFI, GFI, NNFI, SRMR and RMSEA is strongly recommended. Models whose SRMR and RMSEA is smaller than the threshold value of .05 are indicative of a close-fitting model, whereas values up to .08 represent acceptable errors of approximation and values above 0.10 are indicative of poor fit (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). This means that the model is an adequate representation of the sampled data. As for the GF, NNFI and the CFI, values above the criteria value of 0.90 are also indicative of a good fit (Hoyle, 1995).

Preliminary analyses: A measurement model was tested prior to the estimation of the structural model. In this

Table 1: Factor loadings, average variance extracted and construct reliability for the measurement model

Constructs	Std. factor loading	Composite reliability	AVE
Service quality		0.86	0.61
Q1: Has an excellent overall service	0.75		
Q2: Has a service of very high quality	0.79		
Q3: Provides a high standard of service	0.79		
Q4: Delivers superior service in every way	0.80		
Trust		0.85	0.66
Q5: The employees of retail store R can be trusted at all times.	0.79		
Q6: Retail store R can be counted on to do what is right	0.83		
Q7: The employees of retail store R have high integrity	0.82		
Commitment		0.88	0.71
Q8: I am very committed to maintain my relationship with the employees of retail store R.	0.84		
Q9: My relationship with the employees of retail store R is very important to me	0.81		
Q10: I plan to maintain my relationship with the employees of retail store R	0.88		
Customer loyalty		0.87	0.63
Q11: I say positive things about retail store R to other people	0.76		
Q12: I recommend retail store R to someone who seeks my advice.	0.81		
Q13: I encourage friends and relatives to shop at retail store R	0.76		
Q14: I consider retail store R my first choice in the next few years	0.84		
Relationship strength		0.82	0.53
Q15: What is your overall assessment of the strength of your relationship with the employees at retail store R?	0.76		
Q16: How strong would you like the strength of your relationship with the employees at retail store R to be?	0.78		
Q17: What is your overall assessment of the strength of your relationship with retail store R?	0.74		
Q18: How strong would you like the strength of your relationship with retail store R to be?	0.64		
Relationship quality		0.78	0.64
Q19: What is your overall assessment of the quality of your relationship with the employees at retail store R?	0.85		
Q20: What is your overall assessment of the quality of your relationship with retail store R?	0.75		

Table 2: Discriminant validity analyses

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Service quality (1)	0.61					
Trust (2)	0.36	0.66				
Commitment (3)	0.28	0.36	0.71			
Customer loyalty (4)	0.48	0.38	0.53	0.63		
Relationship strength (5)	0.46	0.38	0.40	0.46	0.53	
Relationship quality (6)	0.08	0.23	0.39	0.36	0.32	0.64

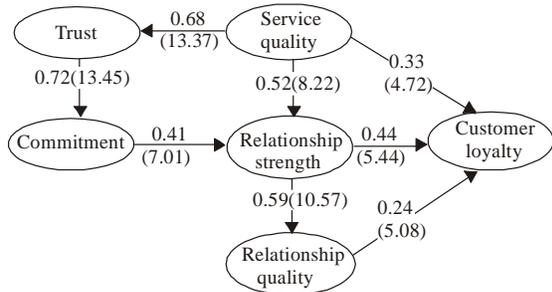


Fig. 1: Structural model

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), relations between latent variables and their corresponding indicators were estimated, with no specified structural relations. The fit of the model was good, $\chi^2 = 520.12$; GFI = 0.90, NNFI = 0.97; CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.057 and RMSEA = 0.074. Within each latent construct, the manifest indicators were inter-correlated, with standard loadings ranging from 0.64 to 0.88. Convergent validity of the measurement model was assessed by examining the magnitude, direction and statistical significance of the estimated standardized factor loadings (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). As it can be seen in Table 1, factor loadings were all significant and positive. In addition, Table 1 also shows Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the reliabilities; all criteria as outlined by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) were met, supporting proper reliability of the constructs.

We also assessed discriminant validity. Fornell and Larcker (1981) argued that the AVE of each constructs should be greater than its squared correlations with other constructs. As it is shown in Table 2, this criterion is met for all the constructs. We thus proceeded to test the proposed model.

Structural equation modeling: Following the satisfactory measurement evaluation, structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation using

LISREL 8.8 was performed to examine the integrated model. The final model is shown in Fig. 1.

Fit indices were satisfactory ($\chi^2 = 561.79$, GFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.97, NNFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.069 and RMSEA = 0.077). The results of hypotheses testing are presented in Table 3.

Results indicate a significant positive path connecting service quality and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.33$; $t = 4.72$; $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. H2 is also supported by data since the path coefficient from service quality to relationship strength is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.52$; $t = 8.22$; $p < 0.01$). The effect of Service quality on trust is also significant ($\beta = 0.68$; $t = 13.37$; $p < 0.01$), therefore H3 is confirmed. The path from commitment to relationship strength is significant at 0.01 level ($\beta = 0.72$; $t = 13.45$), thus H4 is supported by the data. H5, concerning the relationship between commitment and relationship strength is supported by the data with path coefficient of 0.41. Since the route from relationship strength to relationship quality is significant at 0.01 level ($t = 10.57$), it can be concluded that the data supported H6. As it is shown in Table 3, H7 and H8 are also supported by the findings of this study, confirming positive effect of relationship quality ($\beta = 0.24$; $t = 5.08$; $p < 0.01$) and Relationship strength ($\beta = 0.44$; $t = 5.44$; $p < 0.01$) on customer loyalty.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study has tested the effect of service quality, trust and commitment on relationship continuity and the effect of relationship continuity on perceived relationship quality and customer loyalty. The findings are in correspondence with the offered hypotheses. The research provides a broader study of insights in the effects of service quality. The findings justify the fact that the factors such as trust in customers; the necessary ability and knowledge to be responsive towards them; appropriate, respectful and sincere treatment, dealing with their complaints and prioritizing them, which are related to service quality, can establish a higher level of trust. On the other hand, by improving service quality levels and appropriate attention to the customers, the service providers can help them establish and preserve long-term relationships with them. This study, furthermore, indicate that with the enhancement of trust, commitment enhances.

Table 3: The results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesized path	Path coefficient	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Hypothesis 1: Service quality →customer loyalty	0.33	4.72	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 2: Service quality →relationship strength	0.52	8.22	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 3: Service quality →trust	0.68	13.37	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 4: Trust →commitment	0.72	13.45	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 5: Commitment →relationship strength	0.41	7.01	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 6: Relationship strength → Relationship quality	0.59	10.57	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 7: Relationship quality →customer loyalty	0.24	5.08	p<0.01	Supported
Hypothesis 8: Relationship strength →customer loyalty	0.44	5.44	p<0.01	Supported

Therefore, the ability of a retail company to offer technical service quality (doing correct things) to customers and appropriately understanding the customers and their needs, helps to establish trust and commitment in them. On the other hand, the employees that are in contact with customers can have an important role in the establishment of a high level of trust and commitment that customers have towards a retailer firm. They help to enhance the level of trust and commitment of customers by helping to offer functional service quality (doing things correctly) though such cases as preceding the customer to themselves, keeping their promises, being responsive, being empathic, sincere and honest and helping to solve their possible problems. The findings of the research also indicate that a high level of commitment is necessary for the establishment, development and preservation of continual relationships with customers. Therefore, the managers and marketers who want long-term relationships with their customers should emphasize the establishment and preservation of customer commitment. To achieve high level of customer commitment, a retailer firm should select its employees well, train them well and organize them well so that it will become confident of their job appropriateness. Especially, the employees that are in contact with the customers should be those who like to be in continual relationship and interaction with customers. In addition, rewarding the employees who have been successful in establishing long-term relationships with their customers, encouraging them and transferring the firm's strategies of customer relationships to them can be very useful in the establishment and preservation of the relationships based on trust and commitment concepts.

According to the findings, it is necessary for the managers of retailer firms to consider the appropriate opportunities for the training of employees in some fields such as the understanding of preferences and needs of customers, improvement of service providing standards, identification and analysis of customer complaints, relationships with customers regarding future purchases, information related to new products and services. These trainings should be for the purpose of the enhancement of customer trust and commitment so that they can lead to the continuity of the relationships with them. This research also indicates that besides provided service quality by a retailer company, the quality of relationships with customers is also very important and the managers of retails should investigate continually the changes in the quality of their relationships with customers and consider some appropriate strategies to enhance them. Because, relationship quality can enhance customer loyalty and having loyal customers is vital for being successful in today's highly competitive environment. On the other hand, with respect to the effect of relationship continuity on customer loyalty based on the findings of this study,

the managers of retails should attempt to develop and strengthen their relationships with customers. In this direction, the implementation of some methods based on information technology, such as providing various real-time services through the internet to the customers, can be very useful. On other hand, continual study in order to find efficient relationship methods with customers is necessary.

With regard to the nature of relationship with customers in retail activities, the findings of this study can be generalized to some similar services, such as banking, insurance firms and travel agencies that hold some general and common features. Considering the limitations of this research, some cautions should be considered in the generalization of its results just like other studies. It is possible to enhance the generalizability of the research by enlarging the sample. The future research may better measure the causal relationships of the variables through the identification of other variables that affect relationship continuity and through the improvement of the method of research conduction. It is possible to conduct this study with some alterations, or with no alteration, in various environments with different cultural backgrounds or in different retail industries in order to clarify the similarities and differences and enhance the generalizability of the research.

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