

# An Exploration of the Key Indicators of Relationship Strength

Mohammad Hamdi Al Khasawneh<sup>1</sup>, Husam Mustafa Alnaimi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>College of Commerce and Business, Lusail University. Doha, Qatar

**Abstract:** While relationship marketing is seeking to build a strong relationship with customers, there is little research into exploring the construct of relationship strength. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the key indicators of the relationship strength, specifically from the Saudi internet customers' perspective. Qualitative research method has conducted in this paper to explore this construct and content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

**Keywords:** Marketing, Strong Relationships, Communication, Trust, Cooperation, Respect.

## 1 Introduction

Many relationship marketing researchers conclude that service providers are considered the vital role of building strong relationships with (e.g. Bove & Smith, 2006; Dagger, Danaher & Gibbs, 2009; Gummesson, 2017; Sheth & Parvatiyar 2002; Shi et al. 2009, Park et al. 2010, Wiedmann et al., 2018). The relationship marketing literature highlights the significance of having good long-term relationships with customers (e.g. Crosby et al. 1990; Shi et al. 2009 Palmer et al., 2013). The construct that would describe the importance of customers' relationship to the service provider and their customers is relationship strength.

Previous research (e.g. Bove & Johnson, 2001; Bove & Smith, 2006; Herington, Johnson, & Scott, 2009; Dagger, Danaher & Gibbs, 2009; Payne. A, 2017) has addressed relationship strength, an important element to achieve successful relationship marketing. However, there is a crucial empirical need to explore this construct. In this respect, the current research aims to explore the key elements for indicating the strength of relationships, specifically from the customer's perspective.

The present research does not compare Saudi internet customers with other internet customers. The current exploration is important as this approach has not been previously empirically evaluated (Abu-Roman, 2005). The focus and results, therefore, will contribute much to the literature related to internet customers and relationship marketing literature. Further, the study will also provide internet industry managers with information and recommendations that will assist them in improving their relationship marketing programs.

Hence, it is vital to explore the main elements of relationship strength from the customer's perspective, especially as there is limited empirically investigation for this concept in the relationship marketing literature. Therefore, the following research question has been developed to explore the key factors that indicate the relationship strength between the two parties:

Q1. Within relationship marketing, what are the indicators of relationship strength are the most important, from an internet user's perspective?

## 2 Literature Review

### 1. Relationship Strength in Relationship Marketing Literature

Relationship marketing authors agreed that service providers can achieve strong relationship with their customers by conducting relationship building (e.g. Barnes, 1995; Park et al. 2010, Wiedmann et al., 2018). That is, more customer loyalty and retention with service providers could be achieved by acquiring a strong relationship with customers (Gwinner et al., 1998; Palmer & Bejou, 1994) and, eventually, higher sales, market share, and profits (Crosby et al., 1990, Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, according to Bove and Johnson (2001), relationship strength is the most suitable construct to investigate the relationship from the customer perspective. Indeed, Barnes (1997) argued that the relationship partners themselves can provide the best description of a strong relationship. Because of the behavioral nature of this concept, the strength or weakness of the relationships is rely on the consideration of customers. For this reason, relationship strength was chosen, in this research, to represent the depth of the relationship that will continue.

While researchers within the relationship marketing literature agree that customer satisfaction, loyalty and commitment are the main elements of the relationship marketing models, it is essential to explore the construct of relationship strength (as a new area of interest within relationship marketing literature), between the two parties. In order to gain an understanding of the nature of the strength of the relationship, it is essential to discuss the different ideas by which to measure the relationship between customers and service provider.

In the relationship marketing literature, relationship strength has been used to explain the degree to which a relationship will endure (e.g. Barnes, 1995; Barnes & Howlett, 1998; Crosby et al., 1990; Crosby & Stephens, 1987; Donaldson & Toole, 2000; Kandampully & Duddy, 1999; Zineldin, 1999). Barnes (1995) concluded that the “depth” or “intensity” of the relationship could be represented by strong relationships. To measure the extent of the association between the service providers and customers, relationship strength is the most representative term. Importantly, relationship strength has been defined as “the extent, degree or magnitude of the relationship between a customer and service provider” (e.g., Barnes, 1997; Bove & Johnson, 2001; Bove & Smith, 2006; Dagger et al., 2009; Herington et al., 2007, 2009; Shemwell & Cronin, 1995). Barnes (1997) noted, however, that several terms have been utilized to describe relationship strength, including relationship closeness, quality, intensity, and depth. Further, relationship strength is considered as a higher-order construct, involving several distinct, though related, dimensions (Bove & Johnson, 2001; Crosby et al., 1990; De Cannière et al., 2010; Dorsch et al., 1998; Dwyer et al., 1987; Kumar et al., 1995).

From a customer’s perspective, Dagger et al.’s (2009) model shows that relationship strength is achieved through relationship quality and customer contact frequency. They concluded that a strong relationship means that the customer has high contact frequency and long relationship duration. Further, the relationship quality variables are important drivers of the relationship strength. Barry, Dion and Johnson (2008) concluded that firms should be able to monitor the strength of their consumers’ relationship with them, as well as the effectiveness of their relationship programs, aimed at building strong relationships, since relationship strength provides a metric for such assessment.

Relationship strength has been measured by combining the behavioral (belief) and economic (action) components of relationships (Donaldson & Toole, 2000). These behavioral variables include trust, commitment, cooperation, mutuality and equity, while

the economic variables represent power, risk avoidance and opportunism. Other relationship marketing authors have utilized social contract theory, represented by Macneil (1980), to measure relationship strength (e.g., Paulin, Ferguson, & Payaud, 2000). They operationalized relational norms to measure relationship strength, arguing that the appropriate variables to measure relationship strength are represented by identified relational norms, which include trust, commitment, information sharing, benefits, joint working and relationship specific assets. Paulin et al. (1997) and Paulin et al. (2000) determined relationship strength by evaluating role integrity, communication, flexibility and solidarity. However, these measures are considered problematic for the current research as because there is no evaluation for the validity of the method as a typical exploration of relationship strength concept. Also, while they used single items to measure trust and commitment, Bagozzi, Yi and Phillips (1991) argued that using multi-items measures would be more superior.

Other authors have measured service provider-customer relationship strength by utilizing trust and commitment (e.g., Bove & Johnson, 2000; Bove & Smith, 2006, Shemwell & Cronin, 1995). Thus, there is wide agreement within relationship marketing for assessing relationship strength by trust and commitment because of the mediating effect of trust and commitment (e.g., Chenet, Tynan, & Money, 1999; Dorsch et al., 1998; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Moore, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). However, these two concepts also have an effect on a continuous strong relationship. For instance, Liljander (2000) used concepts, such as quality, satisfaction, loyalty, benefits and bonds, as determinants that influence buyer-seller relationship strength. Furthermore, while there is a general belief, between the relationship marketing literature, that commitment and trust are indicators for the relationship strength, there is a lack of acceptance about other possible key indicators.

Further, Morgan and Hunt's (1994) model is the most frequently used model for measuring relationships. However, no researcher has presented an alternative test of the model, as recommended by the authors. Also, no other measure has been examined and compared, nor has any evaluation been made of alternative scales or the additional terms, as recommended by Morgan and Hunt (1994).

In addition, several studies have been investigating the relationship strength concept in Western countries. Since theoretical or practical information about this concept in Saudi Arabia are too limited, this study aims to investigate the key elements of the relationship strength. Additionally, limited practical studies have been conducted to explore this concept with the context of relationship marketing. Thus, in order to answer the main research question, in this study "Within relationship marketing, what are the indicators of relationship strength are the most important, from an internet user's perspective?"

In this way, the key indicators of relationship strength are investigated from a customer's perspective, within the Saudi Arabia context. A qualitative research method has been launched with a focus group. In fact, we aim to identify the main indicators of the relationship strength and how they will be used as a higher-order construct.

## **2. Research Method**

Qualitative research is used in many disciplines and fields; it includes a range of approaches, methods and techniques (Bryman, 2006; Myers, 1997), such as focus groups, observation, informal, unstructured, and in-depth interviews, and participant observation (Creswell, 1994, 2009). A study based upon qualitative research has the ability to provide detailed

information about a relatively small number of objects under examination (Patton, 1990); this is achieved by exploring people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviors and interactions through a closer understanding of the subject's perspective (Falconer & Mackay, 1999; Hoepfl, 1997). Consequently, we were geared in this study towards an approach based on a qualitative research.

The open-ended and responsive questioning techniques utilized are particularly appropriate for encouraging participants to describe their behaviors, to identify the main indicators of the relationship strength (Fossey et al., 2002; Patton, 2002).

Qualitative research has a distinctive inductive nature, which can be used to investigate the strength of the relationship between the two parties. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) concluded that when an original sin (relationship strength) is vague, the qualitative research approach is the suitable instrument. Therefore, a qualitative method was utilized to intensely discover this phenomenon and then create ideas before assessing them.

As a key component in social science research, a series of interviews were organized to collect the focus group members (Cook, 2005). This technique was an important tool to understand the social original sin (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), mainly in the marketing domain (Neuman, 2006).

Furthermore, they are one of the major sources of data collection commonly used in exploratory and descriptive research (Garee & Schori, 1996; Lawrence & Berger, 1999; McDonald, 1993). Interviewing involves a purposeful conversation and verbal communication in which the researcher asks pre-prepared questions and the participants answer them; the result is a specific collection of information (Cook, 2005; Garee & Schori, 1996). Also, it is a conversation and/or interaction between members around the subject being discussed. Moreover, focus group, survey and other methodologies can be considered as complementary tools to collect information (Neuman, 2006).

After reviewing the literature, two issues justify the use of this qualitative approach in the current research. Firstly, in any non-western cultural context such as Saudi Arabia, there was limited earlier theoretical and practical investigation for the concept of relationship strength. Secondly, it was shown from the literature review that there are limited practical studies for the concept of relationship strength. Hence, other indicators could be considered as critical from customer's point of view.

### **3. Research Design**

Conducting two to four focus groups till reaching saturation point is recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000). The number of participants for each focus group could be 8-12 (Cook, 2005; Garee, & Schori, 1996). Therefore, the total number of participants in the three focus groups were 27 with eight to twelve participants, in each focus group.

Data were collected from Saudi internet customers, who subscribe to different internet service providers and who had been long-time subscribers with those providers. To achieve heterogeneity among the groups of participants (Cook, 2005), a range of internet customers of different ages and experiences were participated in the focus group interviews. To collect relevant information about relationship marketing, purposeful sampling technique was utilized which depending on the relationship experience of the participants with their internet service providers.

Aspects that not explored in the relationship marketing literature have been investigated by conducting three completed exploratory focus groups and no new aspects was being exposed. In the current research framework, the number of the focus groups were

appropriate as the validity of the current approach has achieved after three focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

A sample of eight Saudi internet customer were participated in the first focus group. These participants were recruited by using the mall intercept technique. Within the second focus group, a convenience sample of 10 Saudi internet customers participated; they were recruited by using the mall intercept technique. The third focus group, a sample of nine Saudi internet customer were recruited by using the mall intercept technique. This approach involved the researcher meeting customers in front of internet company offices, in different cities and regions in Saudi Arabia, and inviting them to take part in the study. An invitation folder comprised a summary about the study, focus group's purposes, the significance of their participation in the study, and an invitation letter was prepared and presented to the possible participants. The participants indicated their worthiness and significance in joining the focus groups. Focus group interviews included the 27 participants (15 male and 12 female) were conducted and the age of the participants varied from 23 to 60 years, with a mean age of 33.7 years with average experience 3.5 years with their internet service providers.

Each focus group continued for about one and a half hours and audiotape has been used to record the focus group. In the current research semi-structured focus groups were conducted, and open-ended questions, introduced by the moderator to the participants. The participants defined what a strong relationship with a service provider would entail. According to Dick (1990), asking an appropriate opening question is important in defining the nature of the study, as it allows more information to be given, and allows the exploration of the participant's opinions about the research topic. Hence, the opening question should be designed in such a way to provide a broad starting point that may provide insights for further probing questions (Cook, 2005). Hence, the opening question was carefully crafted to establish the research agenda, without limiting the extent of the potential responses. Therefore, the question was comprehensive, namely: "Could you please explain your relationship experience with your internet service provider?"

Then, probing questions were used to allow further detailed and descriptive responses to be obtained, and to clarify points raised by the participants in the focus groups (Cook, 2005). These questions were used to more clearly elicit participants' ideas and to focus on the issues at hand, rather than diverging onto unrelated topics. Probing questions, such as 'Can you tell me more about this issue?', 'Can you explain more?' and the why? how? and what? questions (Yin, 2003) were used during focus groups.

Importantly, previous research highlighted the importance for interviewers to establish rapport and trust with the participants (Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Morgan, 1998). Hence, the initial rapport was developed by explaining several fundamental issues at the beginning of each group (Byers & Wilcox, 1991), including: informing the participants about the research; the purpose of the focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990); assuring participants of the preservation of their anonymity; and informing them of the confidentiality of their responses. Permission was also sought from interviewees to audio record the interview.

At the end of the focus group interviews, when no more data or information was provided by the participants, they were asked to give a definition of the concept of relationship strength. In order to gain higher quality of the responses and internal validity, accurate sample were selected (Winter, 2000) in the current study. Also, to achieve external validity in this research, the findings of the focus groups were compared with the existing relevant literature.

A structured and operational process such as (recording, writing, and interpreting of the focus groups data) was utilized to optimize the reliability of the results. This step agrees with (Creswell, 2003, 2009; Morgan, 1998; Zikmund, 2000, 2003) who considered the importance of consistent techniques and procedures remained during the interviewing stages.

Participants of the focus groups were coded from 1 to 27; these codes were crucial in the data analysis process as they confirmed the themes explored and emphasized evidence of rising categories. The researches translated cautiously each audio-taped focus group interview to the English language. Also, in order to check the validity of the results and findings, careful reviewing was made by the researchers and the themes were recognized and aligned for clarity. After all, to guarantee that the discovered themes and collected data indicated the views of the participants, the information was sent to the participants.

The analysis of the qualitative data has been performed using content analysis of the theme. In fact, this procedure become an extensively used research approach within relationship marketing (Herington et al., 2005). Content analysis is often performed without definite rule. The development of a superior categorization scheme requires attentive review of the data, with interest in identifying concepts and concept clusters. Nevertheless, during content analysis, researchers primarily initiate a three steps process to reorganize data into simpler more accessible to interpretation, and retrieval format. The first step is to determine a meaning unit, namely: to a content entity, concept, notion, word, perception, and sentence or paragraph that mirror a distinct interpretation within the circumstantial data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Sayre, 1992; Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). Thus, in the recent study, the transcripts of the targeted group were studied several times, by the researcher, to reach a significance and determine the frequent experiences as well as the participants' diverse prospects. Next, the textual data about the participants' experience of relationship marketing were withdrawn and recorded into a table (representing the code or verbatim of the analysis) these meaning units (verbatim) were withdrawn and condensed into subcategories.

In the following step, categories and subcategories have been generated. A category is by definition a compilation of ideas, thoughts, and contents regarded as having particular shared experience or meaning and expose one concept within the textual data (Neuman, 2006; Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). Therefore, data were retrieved and condensed into subcategories, that have been reorganized and classified to form the larger unit called categories. Further attentive consideration and thorough consultation with the focus group participants were completed to find and extract the subcategories. The participants' involvement and opinions were reflected at the subcategories level and the extraction and classification process continued until all subcategories were grouped within categories that reflects their meaning.

The third and final step consists of grouping all categories under a common theme following a thorough examination. The participants' shared experiences and commonalities are identified in a domain that captures the categories into a meaningful whole (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The end result combined the first five linked categories together into the theme being studied, and another five categories into a second theme. The level of interaction, relationships among the distinctive categories, and their ability to be arranged together were the criteria used to channel the categories under one theme (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

### 3 Results

The study and examination of the three focus groups highlighted that trust, communication, cooperation, respect and caring were the primary elements of the relationship strength between customers and their service provider. The primary theme was determined from the focus group study case: Items that refers to strong-relationships between customers and service”

Table (1.1): The focus group participants highlighted the following categories and subcategories as being the main elements of the relationship strength with their internet service providers.

**Table 1.** Relationship Strength Elements

Category	Subcategory
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Integrity</li> <li>▪ Honesty</li> <li>▪ Understanding of problems</li> <li>▪ Fairness</li> </ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Listening</li> <li>▪ Feedback and information sharing</li> </ul>
Cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Working together</li> <li>▪ Helping one another</li> <li>▪ Join problem solving</li> </ul>
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Equal treatment</li> <li>▪ Providing promised services</li> <li>▪ Feeling valued, appreciated and being involved</li> </ul>
Caring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emotionally attached</li> <li>▪ Caring about customers’ personal needs and wants</li> <li>▪ Caring about customers more than profits.</li> </ul>

Source: Developed from focus group interviews for this research

#### 1. Trust:

Among the substantial indicators of the relationship strength with the service provider, trust has been featured consistently by participants. Other trust-related elements such as integrity, honesty, understanding of problems and fairness were also mentioned on several occasions. Mutual trust between customers and service provider along with the intention of building trust were crucial to most participants. For example, one participant (J) mentioned this “... I trust them blindly...”

Moreover, focus group participants emphasized the necessity of the service provider integrity in building this strong relationship with customers. For example, participant B stated that, “...I used the internet frequently because I was doing my Masters, so I used the internet from my home for study and searching. For example, the internet speed was exactly as the service provided had informed me. So, they follow all the conditions in the contract”.

Another mentioned essential sign of trust was honesty. For example, the following was mentioned: “...they are so clear with me, everything, every step, every condition in the contract, they did that for me” (M). Fairness has been named by participants (M, P and S)

as another meaningful way of increasing the level of trust. One participant (P) said that “They were me fair to me as they didn’t steal my money... It’s not stealing or anything; so, they are fair: there is trust between the customers and the company itself”. Another idea linked to trust is being considerate and perceptive to problems. Participant (S) indicate that “...when I’m going or calling my internet service provider, to complaining sometimes,...sometimes there are mistakes from the staff and that sort of these thing; so, they give me a clear idea of the problem”.

## **2. Communication:**

This notion has been recognized by many participants as another compelling element that suggests the relationship strength. They described it as needing to “listen, give opinions and exchange information”. Participants also expressed the seriousness of listening to their concerns and address them in a timely manner. For instance, participant (B) mentioned that “...they accept discussion, listen well to complaints and also fix the matter.”. Other participants (B, E and H) observed the relevance of feedback and information sharing with their service provider to grow the level of strength of the relationship.

For example, one participant (B) commented that, “they asked me ‘If this act will influence on me’ in this case we can share opinion; I think that they will send the same message to the rest of the customer, to explore the influence of the process on customers.”

## **3. Cooperation:**

Cooperation has been described by both focus groups as joint work and problem solving along with helping one another. Participant (I) described cooperation as “...me and the employees are sharing the solution to the problem, as I am providing them with the correct information and after that they will amend to solve the problem quickly”. Participant (J) had a different point of view when it comes to helping one another and joint problem solving. He explained that the customer should provide accurate information and it is up the provider to solve the problem. “...my turn here as a customer is to provide only the right information and the staff will fix the problem. Cooperation here is to ensure that the correct information is given.”

## **4. Respect:**

Another far-reaching concept in the development and growth of the relationship strength that has been indicated within the focus group discussions was respect. All participants seem to agree on its significance, emphasizing on several of its elements to include equality, kept promises, feeling valued, appreciated and being involved in the company’s activities and decision making. Several participants agreed that being treated fairly and equally by the employees of the service provider would have a meaningful impact on the strength of the relationship. For example, one participant (F) stated that, “...I suspect that my strong relationship with the company lies in its capability to deal fairly with all customers without distinguishing between them”.

Moreover, the important element of “providing promised services” has seen an undivided attention by many of the participants. For example, one participant (E) concluded that: “In fact, I want to get the service as they promised me.”. In addition to that, participants as customers want to be valued and appreciated for their contribution to the internet company.

Feeling my value with the company not only through the discounts that they provide to me, ever, but also by their appreciation of me as a customer in the company.” (B). Participant H explained how significant it is for him to be involved in the company new services or changes. He indicated that: “I think my relationship is strong with my internet provider because they always provide me all the information related to the company’s developments”

## **5. Caring:**

Most participants emphasized the importance role of a caring service provider, and how this care developed an emotional attachment to the company. For instance, the service provider is expected to prioritize the customers' needs and expectations over making profit.

In her statement, participant (S) displayed an exemplary emotional attachment to her provider: “I feel very grateful for their approach, I am passionately attached and therefore I appreciate my internet provider”. Same participant (S) also explained that by reflecting care about her needs and wants, the company is strengthening the bond with the customer. She indicated that “... I consider that the relationship will be weak if my internet provider does not know my needs and desires”. To put it differently, all participants agreed that the service provider should focus more on the quality of its care about its customer, instead of just thinking about making profit. In this context, participant R claimed that companies’ strategies and plans that focus on increasing profits at the expense of their customers are in the wrong direction. He explained that his service provider was considered the importance of making more profit, but, “in a good way. I believe that customer care is greater than their consideration of profit”.

Accordingly, the relationship strength construct has been defined in comparable terms as those used in the consulted literature. As such, based on all the information gathered from the two focus groups, relationship strength can be defined as “the extent, degree or magnitude of the relationship between a customer and service provider” (e.g., Barnes, 1997; Bove & Johnson, 2001; Bove & Smith, 2006; Dagger et al., 2009; Herington et al., 2009, Shemwell & Cronin, 1995). Likewise, the focus group participants defined relationship strength in terms of the elements identified in Table 1 above. Participant B defined relationship strength as having “...a strong relationship with the company if they respond very well, as a provider, to my problems, respect me, value me as a customer (not only as a business or money maker for them), and if they are honest, are concerned about my comments, give me feedback, listen carefully, and communicate very well with me, whether face-to-face or by email, and always keep in touch with me about any update”.

## **4 Discussion**

The concept of relationship strength from the Saudi internet customers’ perspectives has been explored in the past in several relation marketing literature, but with very limited information from an empirical base. The purpose of this study is to elaborate on the exploration of this concept, but with more emphasis on empirical data. The findings of the search are discussed in more details.

As shown in Table 1., the analysis of both focus group discussions resulted in five elements that constitute the foundation of relationship strength between customers and service provider. Trust, communication, cooperation, respect and caring were the indicators which constituted the center of the discussion among participants.

Additional attention was given to those who found a positive relationship between each of these elements separately, and customer loyalty (the main outcome of the relationship marketing, including trust (e.g. Lau & Lee, 1999), communication (e.g. Balaji, Roy & Wei, 2016; Lee & Hsu, 2010), cooperation (e.g. Anderson & Narus, 1990; Payan et al., 2016), respect (e.g. Athanasopoulou, & Giovanis, 2015; Bourassa et al. 2018; Lewis, 1998), and caring (e.g. Barnes, 1995).

In buyer-seller long-term relationships literature, scholars seem to agree that the most significant element that builds a strong relationship between seller and buyer is trust. For instance, the value the customer places on the relationship increases with the increase in trust of the relationship itself. In return, the customer would prefer keeping a trusting relationship rather than risking the uncertainty of a new relationship (Chow and Holden 1997). Furthermore, trust influences positively the strength relationship (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

The element of communication also has been considered as a key construct of the relationship in many other literature (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Lewis, 1998; Perella, 1999; Wilson & Vlosky, 1997; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). For example, Reichheld (2001, p. 149) states that “long-term relationships require honest, two-way communication”. Anderson and Narus (1990) agree that trust and communication work hand in hand to ameliorate the initial relationship, once entrenched. Thus, and in order for this study to remain consistent with preceding relationship marketing research, this definition was embraced; communication is defined as the formal, as well as the informal, sharing of meaningful and timely information between partners.

Moreover, earlier marketing research literature highlights cooperation as another significant element of relationship strength (e.g., Anderson & Narus, 1990; Håkansson, 1982; Lewis, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Perella, 1999; Skinner, Gassenheimer & Kelley, 1992). Several empirical examinations of the concept of cooperation resulted in an agreement that cooperation is the work of two parties towards a common goal (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). As an essential element of the relationship strength between customer and service provider, cooperation is represented in two different ways: working collectively and joint problem solving.

It is the degree to which customers feel they are apt to work together with the company’s employees to attain shared goals and solve the problems that are facing the customers. In this study, cooperation designates the eagerness of both parties to expand their exchanges beyond transactions only, towards building a more meaningful relationship (Mavondo & Rodrigo, 2001, p. 114)

An equally important element is “respect”. A concept that has been defined as the customer’s comprehensive feeling of being valued, appreciated, being treated equally, being involved, and satisfied with the service provided. Past research in the field of marketing and non-marketing did not seem to put enough attention to this concept. Nevertheless, in interpersonal relationships literature “respect” was considered a key element (Hinde, 1979; Lewis, 1998; Perrella, 1999). Therefore, and given the importance placed on this notion by participants in both focus groups, “respect” could be a major factor in building a solid relationship, unlike what the academic literature had previously shown.

At the same time, the concept of “Caring” and its impact on the relationship strength, did not seem to receive enough attention in previous research about relationship marketing, neither. Most literature discussed the concept of caring in the field of health care (e.g., Caldwell & Atwal, 2001; Rao & Kelleher, 2000) and the field of psychology (e.g., Van Hoof, 1995). Yet in the field of marketing also, customers are always seeking a strong relationship with their service provider (Barnes, 1995; Bove & Johnson, 2001), because that

gives them a feeling of being valued and cared for. Van Hoof (1995) expanded on the concept of caring and identified deep caring that reaches all the way down to one's central character and becomes permanent in nature. In this way, he strongly ties deep care to action. And consequently, if a service provider deeply cares about its customers, they will start to feel a strengthening of that relationship.

The current study of the focus group discussions led to the development of the following definition of caring: caring is the customer's perception that their service provider cares about their complaints, their relationship's future, and them more than profits.

## **5 Limitations and Future Research**

This study has certainly provided some promising insights into customer and service provider relationship strength, yet the cultural context may limit its validity, especially, if we consider the way customers perceive this relationship. The focus groups of this study represent a low individualist culture, namely, Saudi customers of an internet service provider, for this reason, generalizing these results may be irrelevant.

The different elements examined in this study could be of high relevance to future research. In other words, relationship marketing research is in need to expand in other directions like the complexity underpinning an investigation into relationships, or the greater use of a population of interest to inform the research. For example, "caring" has been overlooked as a significant indicator of customer-service provider relationship strength. As mentioned early, the concept has been addressed within the health care services (e.g., Caldwell & Atwal, 2001; Rao & Kelleher, 2000) and psychology domains, but neglected within the business to customer service context.

This study could also be used as a tool to assess and measure relationship strength and potential improvement areas by numerous service providers. Exploring the relationships between the main indicators of relationship strength (identified in the result section) and other elements of the relationship marketing models would help the identification of new focus point to develop a more lasting relations between two parties. Besides that, this research contains valuable information that could assist in the empirical examination of managers' claims that they are already practicing relationship building (Storbacka et al., 1994), a critical part of business success.

The cultural context of this study is limited to Saudi internet customers and could be expanded in many ways. The same research could be done using focus groups from different cultures or applied to different industries. Moreover, the concept of relationship strength could be tested and explored in other developed and developing countries. The generalizability of the current results will be valid, if the outcomes remain the same in other cultures; global and international businesses can use these results in many different ways to foster consumer-business relationships (Sheth & Partivayar, 1995; Arnold & Bianchi, 2001).

## **6 Conclusion**

Research in the field of relationship marketing has helped businesses over the years to understand, develop, and implement several procedures to strengthen their relationship with their customers, gain repeat business, and hold a strong base of loyal customers. The current research outcome, built on previous knowledge, have enhanced and broadened our

understanding of relationship marketing development in the context of Saudi customers and the internet sector. Our knowledge now carries recognition of the significance of building solid relationships with customers by emphasizing on customers' trust, communication, cooperation, respect, and caring.

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