

**Louvain School of Management
and Vytautas Magnus University**

THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

George Ifeanyichukwu Ohuche. THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY: Final Master Thesis in Marketing and international commerce/ Supervisor Kristina Zikienė / Vytautas Magnus University, Faculty of Economics and Management, Graduate studies. – Kaunas, 2021. – 69 pages.

This diploma paper investigated the impact of relationship marketing and its components on customer loyalty. The paper consists of three main parts- the theoretical, empirical and recommendation parts. The **research aim** of this paper is to provide recommendations for the use of relationship marketing and its components based on the theoretical analysis, survey and qualitative analysis of the Vinted brand.

The **research problem** was to identify what impact does relationship marketing have on customer loyalty. The **research object** is the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty. The **research methodology** utilized in this paper is firstly a literature review was done using articles and journal publications, and then a content analysis was done to get knowledge of existing practices of the Vinted brand and lastly survey was conducted to collect data from customers of the Vinted brand in the Lithuania market. The **main results** showed that all the components of relationships marketing are essential to achieve customer loyalty but proved customer satisfaction to be the component with the highest impact on the customer. Then followed by trust, communication while commitment and conflict handling showed a lesser impact compared to the other components. The **main conclusions** obtained from the analysis of this research is that all of the constructs are essential in achieving the loyalty of customers, customers are impacted greatly when they gain satisfaction with a certain brand's product/services, relationship marketing is also beneficial to the customers as it is to the company, the effective application of the different relational components will not only keep customer loyal but turn them to natural ambassadors of the brand and will recommend to their friends and relatives.

Keywords: Business, Customer, Loyalty, Marketing, Relationship, Satisfaction, Trust.

SANTRAUKA

George Ifeanyichukwu Ohuche. SANTYKIŲ RINKODAROS POVEIKIS KLIENTŲ LOJALUMUI: Rinkodaros ir tarptautinės prekybos magistro baigiamasis darbas/ Prižiūrėtojas Kristina Zikienė / Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Ekonomikos ir vadybos fakultetas, Magistrantūros studijos. – Kaunas, 2021. – 69 psl.

Šiame diplominiame darbe tiriamas santykių rinkodaros ir jos sudedamųjų dalių poveikis klientų lojalumui. Darbą sudaro trys pagrindinės dalys - teorinė, empirinė ir rekomendacinė. **Šio straipsnio** tyrimo tikslas yra pateikti santykių rinkodaros ir jos komponentų naudojimo rekomendacijas, pagrįstas „Vinted“ prekės ženklo teorine analize, apklausa ir kokybine analize.

Tyrimo problema buvo nustatyti, kokį poveikį santykių rinkodara turi klientų lojalumui. **Tyrimo objektas** yra santykių rinkodaros poveikis klientų lojalumui. Šiame darbe naudojama **tyrimo metodika**: pirmiausia buvo atlikta literatūros apžvalga, pasitelkiant straipsnius ir žurnalų publikacijas, po to buvo atlikta turinio analizė, siekiant sužinoti apie esamą "Vinted" prekės ženklo praktiką, ir galiausiai buvo atlikta apklausa, siekiant surinkti duomenis iš "Vinted" prekės ženklo klientų Lietuvos rinkoje. **Pagrindiniai rezultatai** parodė, kad visi santykių rinkodaros komponentai yra labai svarbūs siekiant klientų lojalumo, tačiau paaiškėjo, kad klientų pasitenkinimas yra didžiausią poveikį klientui darantis komponentas. Po to sekė pasitikėjimas, bendravimas, o įsipareigojimas ir konfliktų sprendimas turėjo mažesnę poveikį, palyginti su kitais komponentais. **Pagrindinės išvados**, padarytos atlikus šio tyrimo analizę, yra tai, kad visi konstruktai yra labai svarbūs siekiant klientų lojalumo, klientai patiria didelį poveikį, kai yra patenkinti tam tikro prekės ženklo produktu ir (arba) paslaugomis, santykių rinkodara taip pat naudinga ne tik klientams, bet ir įmonei, veiksmingas įvairių santykių komponentų taikymas ne tik išlaikys klientų lojalumą, bet ir pavers juos natūraliais prekės ženklo ambasadoriais, kurie rekomenduos savo draugams ir artimiesiems.

Raktiniai žodžiai: Verslas, Klientas, Lojalumas, Rinkodara, Santykiai, Pasitenkinimas, Pasitikėjimas.

INTRODUCTION

The customer is the only revenue source and continued growth for the organizations (Keller and Kotler, 2012). With fierce competition and expanding business global trade, we have a more dynamic, competitive, and vibrant marketplace. Customer loyalty building has become a major element for organization as customers are the central point to all business operations and marketing activities all over the world.

Today customers have become much more effective, more informed than ever, as competing firms try to attract the same customers in different ways, even when they offer the same or similar product or a service. Customers can easily switch to a different option that guarantees better offerings at lower costs. At the same time, organizations realized the strong importance of retaining already existing customers rather than bringing in new ones to achieve competitive advantage over competitors in a sustainable way.

The challenge faced by today's organization is that the today's dynamic business environment is categorized by progressively soaked markets triggered by the dynamics of fierce competition and the growing need for a thorough understanding of the needs of consumers. Coordinating the growing importance of the expanding business environment has led to an increasingly varied and mandating customer base. Another identified challenge that organization confronts these days is seeking ways of expanding customer loyalty, retention and maintenance. Also changing the passive into the steadfast and building strong relationships with customers is vital to organizational performance. However, there is no huge distinction between commodities and from the point of view of the customer, so that if the customer asks for a brand name that is not accessible, it could easily replace other brands that demonstrates a downturn in customer loyalty. Cost competition has lost its previous significance and customers and market-oriented organizations are trying to increase and maintain customer loyalty as a modern, price-driven promotion device.

Marketing and business studies researchers have formed, reviewed and characterized loyalty in various ways for countless years, while also stating its significance. Building on this substantial body of knowledge, this study aims to determine the effect and relevance of the relationship marketing techniques and components as it impacts loyalty. In order to address this goal of the study, it is important to understand the dynamic and ever - changing nature of loyalty-oriented research. Wymer (2013) in his current study simply described loyalty in terms of re-purchasing a specific brand and product or otherwise the commitment of a supporter to the cause. While the author Goldfarb (2011) interpreted loyalty as

behavior and attitude. In order to attain all the above-mentioned customer loyalty objectives, organizations have developed an innovative strategy known as relationship marketing (Mudie, 2006).

Relationship marketing is basically about establishing relationships in each point of contact with the organization with the aim of creating distinct advantages for both the firm and the customer. According to Liang (2009), it has been found that investing in customer relationships forms the framework for enhancing customer value, adopting organizational strategies, because such strategies provide the basis for a firm's competitive advantage, which in turn leads to sound business performance. Moreover, common wisdom suggests that sustained long-term customers have the biggest and greatest-paying relationships (Palmatier, 2008).

In Summary gaining customer loyalty through the usage of efficient and effective relationship marketing has become the need of time, that's why organizations and businesses are always seeking new ways of gaining customer loyalty as a means of competitive advantage in the heat of competition. Also due to the changing global marketplace and rapidly changing business environment, organizations cannot keep up demeanors identified by customer attraction or extending in global marketplaces rather the key to survival in these evolving markets is to maintain long-term relationships with your customers and stakeholder groups.

The research problem: what impact does relationship marketing have on customer loyalty.

The object: Impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty.

The aim: To identify, analyze what impact relationship marketing has on customer loyalty and provide recommendations based on the theoretical analysis and empirical research.

Objectives:

- To conduct theoretical analysis on relationship marketing and its concept
- To develop research methodology and conduct empirical research on the impact of relationship on customer loyalty
- To provide recommendations based on the analysis made on the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty.

Logic of paper: This diploma paper consists of three main parts. The first part focused on the literature review of relationship marketing and its concept, relationship marketing definitions, its possibilities and significance, relationship marketing construct, customer loyalty formation as well as the impact of relationship on customer loyalty. The second part presents the research methodology, introducing the

vinted brand, the results of the qualitative analysis, reporting the insights gotten content analysis as well as the results of the survey. The third part of the paper shows the recommendations provided based on the analysis made on the impact of relationship marketing and the effects on customer loyalty.

Methods of research: A literature review was done on the basis of journals, scientific articles, and online databases. Quantitative data was collected using online survey i.e. questionnaires. Due to the current pandemic situation and proximity, qualitative data was done through content analysis. The third part used projection method to provide recommendations based on the results of the analysis.

Information Sources:

Information was sourced through secondary sources which was used for the analysis such as journals, articles and online publications. The Vinted website was also used to obtain information used for the content analysis as well as their social media pages.

I.LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY

1.1 The concept of relationship marketing

This part of this research paper focuses on analyzing the scientific literature about relationship marketing variables and significance. First, it discusses the definition of relationship marketing, what it is about and all that it entails the various possibilities and peculiarities of relationship marketing. It also discusses relationship marketing construct where it identified the various components and then the concept of customer loyalty. The last part focuses on the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty.

The concept of relationship marketing is going by past exchange since it is based mostly on expectation of organizations to provide prevalent and preferred value by recognizing the point of view of the customer as the basic point of the relationship building exercise. Relationship marketing refers to all marketing exercises coordinated toward setting up, creating, and maintaining successful relationship exchanges (Mishra & Liy, 2008). Therefore, Relationship marketing theory implies that consumers enter into service relationships with businesses if they feel that the beneficial effects of such exchange relationships outweigh the cost (Hunt & Arnett, 2006).

1.1.1 Definition of relationship marketing

Mudie et al (2006) defined relationship marketing as a logic of doing business with a strategic intention that focuses on keeping and advancing current customers instead of obtaining recruiting new customers. Groonos (1997) defines relationship marketing as a strategy "to achieve all the commercial destinations and organizational goals of both parties through a shared consent, while at the same time generating, upgrading, strengthening and closing the relationship at the proper time." In the same vein, Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000) defined the terminology of relationship marketing as a "formulation of activities and programmers that ensure value for consumers and stakeholder groups through the creation, development and maintenance of strong relationships.

As described by Ndubisi et al (2009), the expense of attracting, engaging and maintaining new consumers is five to six times higher than that of constant and loyal customers. Researchers also justify

the reasons behind these occurrences, i.e. loyal customers are exceptionally less expensive than existing customers, and additionally exchange behavior is exceptionally less likely to happen in loyal customers.

In order for organizations to thrive on growing markets, it is essential to build long-term relationships with customers, because having a loyal customer base is very significant and essentially the need of time (Demadarige and Valor, 2007). By building and keeping up solid and profile relationship with customers, firms have to pick up substantial data source for compelling showcasing insights in arrange to define and formulate sales models for their market segment.

In defining and analyzing relationship marketing concepts, Verhoef (2003), describes that relationship marketing success is largely dependent on how relationship marketing programmes are utilized or strategically used. Dash et al (2009) proposes relationship bonds as methodology for an organization to develop a long-term sustainable relationship with customers which has shown to be vital in enhanced relationship performance. These programmes can be spread into three different types namely *financial bond*, *social bond* and the third *structural bond* (Kim and Kim, 2018; Berry, 1995). We would briefly give an insight on each of them.

Financial bond - This refers to the economic gains customers could obtain from the firms offering the product or service usually in exchange for continued patronage or otherwise loyalty (Palmatier et al, 2007). Organizations usually engage and motivate customers through incentives, free gifts, offering discounts and bonuses to sus and enhance their loyalty with its brand. it is observed that these economic rewards as part of creating a relationship marketing bond motivates and strengthens the customers perception of the value proposition of the organization offering the product or service (Lovelock and Weirz, 2011).

Social bond - This simply refers to social and interpersonal connections and ties created between the organization and the customers and this can be done through engagements and interactions such as events, birthdays and special occasions. Lee et al (2015) further explains that building up relationships through interaction creates emotional engagement between the organization and customers and have proven to benefit the organization as regards competitive advantages and loyalty of the customers.

Structural bond – Wang (2014), describes this as an organization creating unique values and innovative services that meets the customer's needs. This is usually done by structurally providing technological enabled services and valued added and customized that ordinarily would have been difficult to obtain. Shammout and Algharabat (2013) considered this type of bond in relationship marketing as the top degree level of bonding. This is because it creates added value and benefits for the customers as it brings about easiness with its product or services thereby enhancing and strengthening their relationship.

Moving forward, exceptionally frequently marketers utilize relationship marketing to ensure customer loyalty in order to ensure that customers come back to the product or service supplier yet again for the comparable benefit necessity; Customer loyalty is foundational to the relationship marketing. In addition, as relationship marketing endeavors to enable and connect consumers, providers and stakeholders who are included, all these parties take parts into a firm's formative and marketing exercises. Such association infers near interactive connections among parties involved resulting in near financial, enthusiastic and structural bonds among them. This leads to higher esteem creation and gets to be a competitive advantage.

In summary, a whole lot of definitions may have been proposed but it is important to note that the main theme of all the authors is the identification of the relationship between the organization/business/firms with its customers/stakeholders. So, all defining concepts, in general, are important for organizations to worth noting while attempting to implement relationship marketing techniques and practices. Also, it is important to note that pay close attention to these various defining structures, identify their target customer base and implement basic relationship marketing techniques to enhance productivity and gain competitive advantage.

1.1.2 Possibilities and significance of relationship marketing

In the recent global marketplace, having exclusivity is like a privileged thing organization ever wish of while the harsh reality is fierce competition that burdens those organizations that are unable to satisfy the needs and wants of customers, resulting in loss of loyal customer base. Customers are at the center of the concern of organizations, and their satisfaction is the most significant factor in gaining competitiveness. The key requirement for customer satisfaction is to sufficiently match or exceed their demands, expectations, needs, desires and willingness to purchase items. In order to gain a competitive advantage, organizations should pay more attention to the needs of their customers and fulfill them higher than their rival firms and competitors.

Like every unused transition in the advancement of marketing, there are facilitators and error-finders in the focus of the relationship. In any case, the scope of marketing relationships is broad enough to describe a wide variety of sub-disciplinary marketing disciplines, including channels, business-to-business marketing, marketing services, marketing research, customer behavior, marketing communication, marketing strategy, universal marketing and direct marketing (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000). Relationships are still exceptionally vital, indeed taking under consideration the by and large digitalization.

According to Sheth and Sisodia (2000) the significance and relevance of relationship marketing is, therefore, to improve marketing efficiency by accomplishing proficiency and productivity. The author Nwakanma (2007) in his journal suggested that the significance and benefit relationship marketing has varies from the firm's point of view and the customer's point of view. He identified these indicators:

- Profitability,
- Competitive advantage and product differentiation.
- Brand loyalty.

And from the customer's points of view:

- Personalized marketing,
- Anticipated customers need,
- Relevant information and suggestions.

Sheth and Sisodia (2000) argues that a few relationship marketing techniques can help to achieve productivity, such as customer engagement, loyalty, promotion, effective return on marketing ventures. According to Reichheld (2000) when there is a 5% enhancement of an organization's customer retention rate, it can increase organizations revenue up to 75% bigger. This increased revenue is an outcome of advanced cross-selling, a high referral rate, decrease in recruiting cost and less price sensitivity. Moss Kanter (2011) also suggests that relationship marketing has given rise to interpersonal possibilities between the contracting parties and this is visually demonstrated in the transition from value-in-exchange to value-in-use. Hence Grönroos and Voima, (2013) agrees and states that co-creating value-in-use in a "joint area of concern and responsibility" is both a customer's and a business's concern and is essential to reinforcing customer-firm interaction. Another author Payne (2008) also observed that relationship marketing has given rise to the creation and development of sustainable relationships through the various opportunities presented by technological innovations, transformations in business logic and variations in customer preferences and habits. Gaurav (2008) in his opinion says efficient relationship marketing techniques allows the organization to understand the expectations of its consumers so that organizations can meet their needs better than its rivals, which inevitably leads to cost reduction and customer loyalty. Sheth (2000) in another study also identifies that relationship marketing is customer centric based relation and as such its outcome is significant to the both parties and highlighted five of these outcomes:

- Customer differentiation,
- Long-term emphasis,
- Continuing transaction,

- Retention focus,
- Share of values,
- Two-way communication.

Frow (2013) identifies that the advancements in computerized, portable and social innovation are affecting not just the elements of the customer-firm relationships yet additionally the organization's relationship with every one of its partners and associates. As a result, conversations about the firm, its brands, its item and offers and its customer relationship experience execution are presently in a split second accessible to a lot bigger number of partners, whose relationship might be profoundly imperative to the association's future achievement. Hunt and Madhavaram (2005) in his study states that successful relationship marketing is the natural consequence of those elements of cooperative relationships that characterize successful relationship transactions between the contracting parties. Mishra and Liy (2008) by and large expresses that the reason and criticalness of relationship marketing is to recognize and build up, keep up, and upgrade relationships with customers and different partners, at a benefit, so the targets of all parties included are met" and this outcome is shown by a shared trade and guarantee of satisfaction

In summary, after theoretically analyzing various authors opinions regarding the significance and possibilities of relationship marketing, it can be seen that despite varied opinion the theme is that an effective and continuous development of an organizations relationship marketing technique is mutually beneficial for both parties and gives rise for enhanced productivity and ultimately customer loyalty.

1.1.3 Relationship marketing construct

Customer loyalty is believed to be a crucial marketing strategy and a valuable asset that every organization owns that guarantees its productivity and survival and improves its level of performance. In this current fast timed world of consistent reform, making and sustaining customer loyalty requires so much effort to compete favorably. Additionally, Organizations should not conclude that customer loyalty management is a break even with the productivity of customer relationship management. Maghsoudi (2003) says that Loyal customers are recognized to become a phenomenal marketer and a productive source of sales and author Sargeant & Jay (2004) says just significant adjustments in loyalty can have a profound effect on the profitability and competitive edge of the organization.

In this chapter, we will discuss the best practice-oriented components that form the relationship marketing construct. These components are what essentially affects engagements, interactions, continued buying and the overall loyalty of customers. Ndubisi (2005) highlights the components thus below

- Trust,

- Commitment,
- Communication,
- Conflict handling,
- Satisfaction.

We would try to discuss and analyze the individual components and how they are linked in the overall objective of achieving customer loyalty by organizations. Also note that all of the components are distinctively essential in achieving this objective and organization should know what strategic measures to take to ensure successful application.

Trust – This is a vital element in any organization's customer relationships and foundation in building and sustaining long-term relationship as well as a fundamental element of relational commitment of customers. It is a crucial aspect of customer loyalty formation as well as relationship management. Chaudhuri (2002) defined trust as the willingness of the average customer (customer / benefactor) to depend upon its capacity of the brand (business / organization) to carry out its functions. Randall et al., (2011) best describes trust as the overall customers confidence in an organization that they will efficiently and reliably provide satisfactory service in the most appropriate way that is competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful, and kind. Another author, Kumra (2004) however stated that trust in authenticity means trust in the openness and honesty of the partner i.e. organization and customers in business communication. In the same vein Chaudhuri (2001) highlights the relevance of trust in explaining loyalty as Lawrence (2010) says more trust between the contracting parties creates more productivity and sustainable longer-term relationships that benefits both parties distinctively. Ball (2004) found credibility trust to be stirring loyalty and contended that in an intensely developed and competitive market environment, lack of trust hinders the formation of customer loyalty.

Summarily, it is important to state that loyalty of customers cannot be achieved without first gaining the trust of your customers thus organization must strive to establish transparent relationships when handling business communications and activities. Shainesh (2012) perceived trust as a critical element of customer loyalty and observed it to be a fundamental condition for long-term building and development of sustainable marketing relationships. Ball et al (2004) also observed from previous studies that establishing trust in customer mind is most significant for organization because trust breeds commitment and as such is an important antecedent of loyalty and in sustaining and increasing its levels, organization must have the interest of the customers at heart, show transparency and remain reliable by keeping to its promises.

Commitment- Another very important component in relationship marketing is commitment. It is also a vital component as the first factor we discussed as successful application leads to the overall objective of achieving the loyalty of customers. According to Quester (2003) mutual responsibility between partners and shareholders is consented and in business relationship produces relevant advantages for organizations. Bhagat (2009) explains that commitment in a business relationships can happen over a brief time frame and impact the results of exchange and as such purchasers and dealers should pay attention to each contact as they are essential in building it all up. Gruen et al, Sweeney and Webb, (2007) highlighted that commitment is the level of the partner's mental or psychological connection to the organization and mentioned that a partner can be submitted in three different ways:

- i. Psychological fortified to the association/partner based on the apparent costs,
- ii. Having an individual feeling of good commitment toward the association/partner and,
- iii. Psychological attached to the association based on how positive it feels about the association/partner.

The author Jones (2010) in his opinion examined the dimensionality of commitment as a build and focused on the variable effects of full of feeling, regularizing and duration measurements on a variety of buyer reactions implying loyalty, for example, repurchase expectations, readiness to pay more, constancy, promotion and selflessness.

Summing up, the analysis of this factor shows commitment is as vital as trust in relationship marketing as it is linked to the overall objective of sustaining the loyalty of customers. From the studies of the authors mentioned, you can see that customers stay committed to a brand or a service provider because of the value that it obtains and benefits from the organization which is directly linked to the different levels of relationship bonds that we had earlier discussed. Also, Quester (2003) explains commitment and how it is crucial and fundamental component of relationship marketing. He posits that commitment is indispensable to relationship marketing construct since it is not just signaling continuing steadiness at the conceptual level, However, it also fills the operational and contextual level of long-term relationship as a reliable indicator. Similarly, Frow (2007), observes that a successful application of the component has been found to reduce the likelihood of switching as well ultimately customer loyalty.

Communication- This is also fundamental component of relationship marketing as loyalty can be groomed sustained when organizations provide reliable and timely information to their customers. According to Hutt (2000), communication among personnel with boundaries delivers a mutual understanding of desires and objectives, and a typical of the procedures and duties important to accomplish those objectives which links this component directly with the levels discussed when creating

relationship bonds. In fact, when organizations keep timely communication with the customers, it reflects their values, shows and shows they have the customers interest at heart. Farrelly and Quester (2003) in his opinion said by highlighting common interests and shared objectives, cooperative communication can produce volitional consistence among partners and in this way reinforce relationship execution. However, O'Toole (2004) mentioned that the role of communication in setting up and keeping up productive stakeholder connections and engagements is vital, and that communication assumes a significant role in pulling in and holding customers.

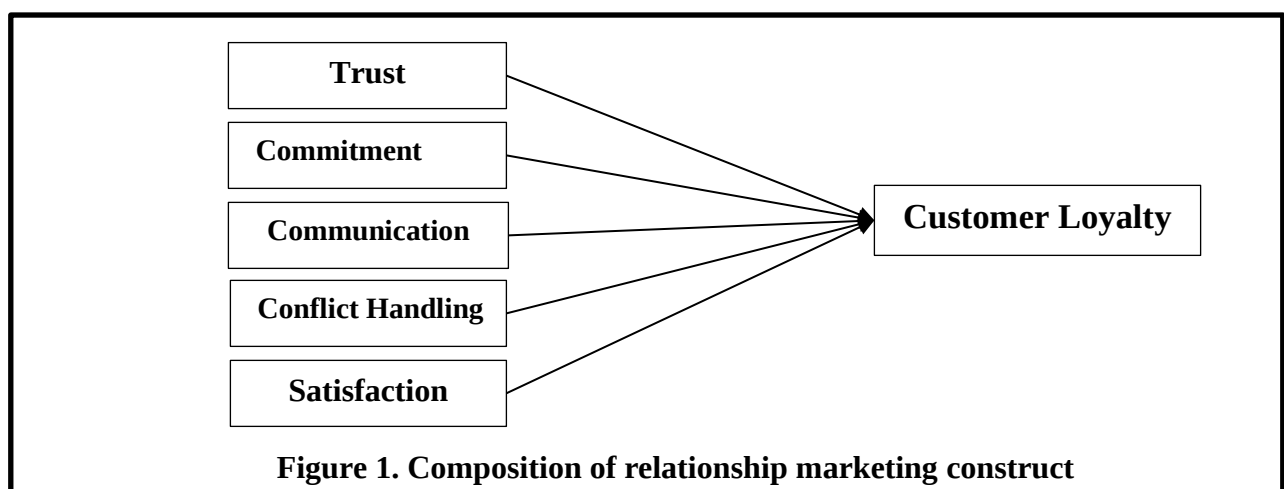
Summarily Garbarino (2007) argues that communication is often neglected in marketing relationships especially new relationships are established and it is quite frustrating and could be detrimental in sustaining such relationship. All other components discussed previously are dependent on effective communication between partners in business relationships. He further explains that communication, particularly timely communication, enhances and sustain customers trust whether it is done before or after purchase or delivering a service or by attempting to resolve conflicts and to produce results, it does enhance mutual value between the contracting parties and thus is linked in achieving the ultimate goal of customer loyalty.

Conflict Handling- In every established interpersonal relationship, conflicts are unavoidable and are bound to happen. When one of the party's needs are not met or there seem to a breach or misalignment of their objectives, goals or values, it leads to conflicts. However, handling of the conflict that arises is what makes this component vital in sustaining business relationships. Organizations show always display the courage to handle and resolve complaints from customers as this is a critical aspect of sustaining a long-term relationship. Jerving (2000), indicates that conflict can be seen as a "characteristic outgrowth of the assorted variety of impression of the parties involved". Conflict is by all accounts normal to relational exchanges and, ordinarily, is identified with ventures, fulfillment, and commitment. Song et al (2000) however indicated that organizations can use three cooperative tools for conflict resolution (collaboration, accommodation, and compromise) as well avoiding behaviors and increasing collaborative conflict resolution behaviors ensured successful performance as two uncooperative tools (forcing and avoiding) and that these techniques all contribute to sustaining relationships between organizations and customers. Jerving (2000) argued that subsequently, productive conflict resolution can explain as opposed to sabotage a banding partnering relationship.

Summing up, just as the other discussed components, conflict handling is as vital and each of them as it is linked to the ultimate objective of relationship marketing. When a conflict is effectively managed and handled or a customer complaint is resolved satisfactorily it leaves a happy and satisfied

customer which thus breeds their loyalty. Even more, if a proactive approach is adopted by organizations like having strategic planning to identify and mitigate against potential conflicts that may arise, it would clearly translate to decrease in switching and enhanced sustained relationship and leave a positive attitude towards the organization.

Satisfaction- We would finally discuss the last fundamental component or otherwise factor of relationship marketing. A lot comes to mind when satisfaction is mentioned in a business setting like how organization measure the satisfaction if a customer is satisfied and what does it entail. According to Palmatier (2006), in his opinion explains relationship satisfaction as the heartfelt state of the customer towards a relationship and it only reflects the customer's satisfaction with the relationship and differs from the customer's satisfaction with the overall exchange. Chu (2002) gives a broader definition of customer satisfaction and explains “that it is an enthusiastic reaction to the utilization of a certain product or service: and it is additionally an unpredictable human procedure, which includes subjective and effective process, just as other mental and physiological impacts”. However, Lovelock and Weirz (2011), explains that successful business relationships between organization and customers are formed by exchanges that mutually satisfying by the both parties and when they both gain value from such exchange. In measuring the extent, Chen and Wang (2016), posits that satisfied customers are gradually dedicated and ready to repeat the purchase of the product or service from the same company and also to recommend it. In the same vein, the enthusiasm for assessing customer satisfaction is depicted in the ability to help build relationships with customers, improve positive verbal exchange and improve the market position and productivity of an organization (Chu, 2002). Below is a diagrammatic representation showing of these components of relationship marketing showing the interconnectedness and how they are directly linked to its primary goal which is customer loyalty (fig 1).



Source: Ndubuisi and Wah (2005).

To sum it all up, in building and sustaining successful business relationships, organizations must put into consideration these vital components of relationship marketing or otherwise its construct as it linked to the ultimate goal of achieving customer loyalty and also the studies examined observed that loyal customers turn out to be exceptional promoters of the brand and an effective strategy drawn from the analysis of these components would have a significant effect on organizational productivity.

1.2 The concept of customer loyalty

The purpose of this diploma is to critical examine and analyze relationship marketing and how it impacts and is directly linked to the loyalty of customers. In doing so we have to discuss customer loyalty concepts, its essence and why it is organizations strive to achieve this ultimate goal. Taking a quick insight into what loyalty or in business terms “customer loyalty” implies. Loyalty is the willingness of anyone – a customer, a worker, a colleague – to make an expenditure or make a personal commitment in order to solidify a relationship. Loyal customers don't just come for repeated purchase, they speak great more about firm to their family, friends and acquaintances. It was observed that customers who purchase due to an individual recommendation are very loyal than customers who buy due to a previous promotion. One of the best indicators of consumer loyalty is recommendations made by existing customers (Reichheld, 2003). Customer loyalty is in fact a very important aspect of relationship marketing as they have been a hard shift by organization to focus on methods and strategies to offer value in whatever aspect whether it is selling a brand or offering a service rather than being profit oriented and the focus on getting more and new customers (Dennis, 2005).

According to Abubakar et al (2014), customer loyalty is defined as a firm commitment to a certain brand, service or product in such a way that the customer only desires to make continued purchase of the product in the future without resorting to switching even in intense competition. Yim (2008) described loyalty as a relatively passive improvement in any situation. One strongly believes that frightening things are going to change for the good in the long run. A loyal customer has adaptability to support a situation that is also inconvenient such as a bad price-quality, poor service delivery etc. Comparing definitions, Li (2012) explains loyalty is an "instrument that produces long-lasting mutually beneficial relationships". The potential of loyal customers to introduce new customers without charge to the company-is especially advantageous as a company develops, particularly on the off chance that it works in a develop industry. Customer recommendation results in an increase in the ultimate good of organizations because it reduces the cost of acquiring and retaining customers. In the same vein Sarwari and Minar (2014) examined the suggestion of a previous study and urged that loyalty is one of the outputs

of successful relational bonds. He further explained that “customer loyalty is the primary goal” for most businesses today. It is also the ultimate goal of relationship marketing applications by organization as its long-term benefits cannot be overlooked.

Long term customer loyalty is the focus of this diploma paper as we intend to examine and analyze the direct link and impact of relationship marketing application to achieve this objective. Organizations have in a bid to achieve this objective of sustaining relationships with its customer by creating strategies and schemes incorporated in their visions, policies and overall functionality towards this ultimate goal. McMullan & Gilmore (2008), Posits that a customer loyalty scheme is a structure that leads organization in choices that becomes a determinant in establishing, sustaining and enhancing the behaviors of customers characterized by a positive buying sequence and view point of the organization, the product or service over time by rewarding loyal customers. In the midst of fierce and increased competition, it has become a fundamental need for organization to sustain business developments and foster the commitment and trust of its customers by engaging in good and valuable practices when conducting its operations. In fact, the success of businesses is only likely to result in a continuous synch of short-term operational activities with long-term strategic intention (Levy & Weitz, 2007).

Moving forward, Lucas (2005), describe customer loyalty as an emotional thing rather than logical. He further explained that it is mainly based on the express interest of the customer in sustaining the relationship often because of the positive and satisfactory experiences gained from the operations and interactions with the organization. It is shown when the customer makes continued and repeated purchases, positive recommendations, create interactions and engagements with the organization in form of feedbacks and show zero likelihood and immunity to switch even when faced with conflict or pulled by competition.

In summary, customer loyalty encompasses the successful applications of the various fundamental components of relationship marketing and is the bedrock and ultimate objective of establishing and sustaining relationships in business. Its measure is indicated in the repetitive purchase pattern of customers, positive attitude towards the brand as shown in the brands advocacy to other people and reduced chance of switching even the face of fierce competitive market.

1.3 The impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty

Examining the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty in the current market and ever global competitive environment we ought to understand the its significance and how it is relationship-based marketing has had an impact on customer loyalty. Also, it is worthy to note how innovative and successful application of relationship marketing techniques have mutually benefited both the organization and the customers and created a long-term business relationship amongst the both parties. In this chapter, we will theoretically examine the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty.

According to Peng and Wang (2006) relationship marketing is a key tool for transforming diverse target groups into loyal customers through the creation, development and maintenance of enduring customer relationships characterized by offering value in the overall functionality of the organization. Author Buttle (2009) in his study suggest that customers-based relationship marketing is a fundamental business strategy that summarizes both internal and external capacities and procedures that are useful for the production and creation of value-added services / products for the benefit of targeted customers.

Discussing its concept, organizations have to understand the interconnectedness of the various elements that helps to form and establish a relationship that leads to the ultimate objective or goal. Just as every interpersonal relationship, the actions and inactions determine how long it can be sustained and when value is offered and positive experiences are obtained, such relationships are said to stand the test of time. Kim and Kim (2018) portrayed that organization can build successful business relationships through creating certain type of bonds that would be experienced between the parties. Whether it is a financial, social or structural bond, it has to be understood that this concept is interconnected and is linked to the primary goal of relationship marketing. The successful creation of this bonds helps to form, solidify and sustain that relationship over a long period of time.

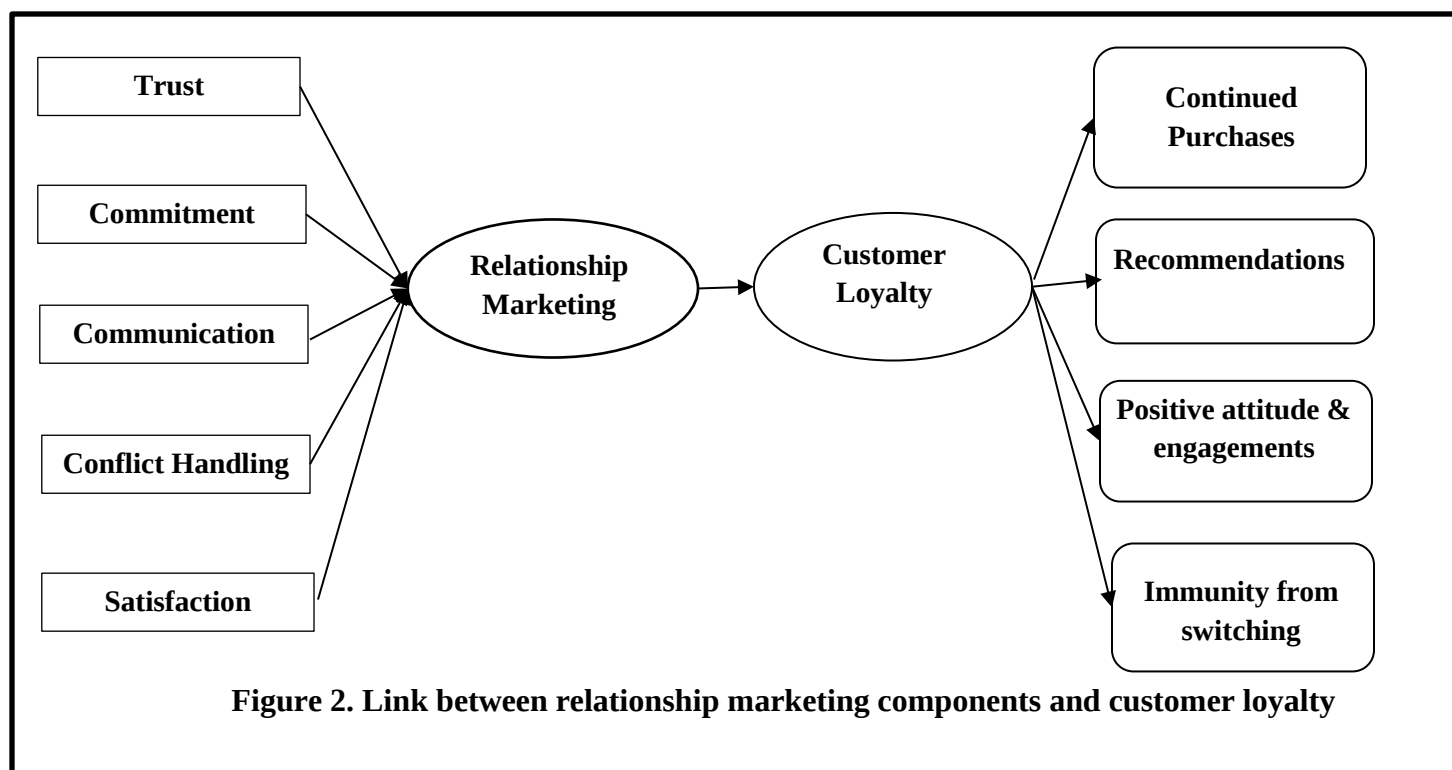
Another author Jamil (2012) reiterates that the main focus of the relationship-based marketing techniques and its application is drive and sustain the loyalty of customers over a long period of time. He adds that relationship marketing also helps organizations to create a unique identity for themselves as it shapes their value proposition which in turn influences its operations and functionality. In analyzing the significance, Wu (2011) examined the development of customer relationship management and application of various schemes and its visibility on positive business relationship, competitive strength and overall organizational effectiveness and productivity. Likewise, Peng and Wang (2006) also posits that relationship marketing also benefits the customers as well as it does the organization. One key

advantage is that it directs the functionality of the organization and keeps them more organized as its application is characterized by providing key data, updates and that coordinates their functionality, keep them at an advantage and offer room for innovation as they set to meet customer needs and satisfy them. For the customers it affords them reduced cost, optimized purchase experiences and knowing that their interest is being valued and protected.

Sweeney (2008) in his study while analyzing significance and customer satisfaction measures stated that with reference to the existence of shared common values, trust and commitment, customers tend to waste less time make a purchase with a company they have valuable relationship with as a result of the fact that the product of service rendered are readily tailored to meet their needs or desires at the time and just with to complement such high valued functionality rewards the organization with highly reliable interactions as honest and positive feedback, timely information on the assessment of product changes, price assessments, innovative strategies for marketing campaigns, creative innovation and efficient delivery. Peng and wang (2006) also added that the measure of a good and successful relationship is often demonstrated by repetitive buying behavior and positive word of mouth.

Discussing further on the impact and measures, we have to link the components of relationship marketing and its connectedness with the primary goal. Amir S (2013) identifies factors such as trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling and overall customer satisfaction which are of crucial importance when establishing and sustaining relationships. A careful application of these factors is significant for any successful relationship. Webb (2011) suggests that all of the components are equally essential and connected but the primary goal of relation-based marketing is to enhance and guarantee the satisfaction of customers which ultimately leads to gaining the loyalty of customers.

Dushyenthan (2012) solidifies that point and says that all of the components are fundamental in creating and sustaining relationship. Take for example, building trust and conflict handling are dependent on effective communication which in turn enhance customer experience and drives satisfaction. Below is a diagrammatic representation showing the interconnectedness and the link between the various components of relationship marketing and how they lead to the achieving its ultimate objective (fig 2).



Source: Tsu-Wei Yu & Feng-Cheng Tung (2013).

From the above diagram you can clearly see that there is a link between the construct or the components that make up relationship marketing and how it directly impacts on the loyalty of customer. Just as it was mentioned the application of these components drives the attitude of customer towards the product or service offered by the organization and impacted various positive outcomes by the customers.

In summary, all these factors discussed above as indicated by the opinions of various researchers does have an impact on the customer loyalty as well as it does to the organization as it is clearly seen in the company enhanced performance and productivity. Thus, an effective and sustained relationship-based technique adopted over a long period of time not only sustains and increase the organization's profitability but also turns the customers to steadfast buyers as well as advocates for the company, so it is mutually beneficial for the contracting parties.

II. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY (A STUDY OF VINTED)

This part of this research paper investigates the detailed analysis of what impact relationship marketing has on customer loyalty using the study of the Vinted company. This part of the paper also describes the methodology of the research that includes its goals, aims, object, objectives and data collection methods. It analyzes and present results using quantitative analysis to obtain and examine results from survey.

2.1 Introducing the Brand Vinted

Vinted can be best described as an online marketplace and community that provides the users with the opportunity to buy and exchange secondhand clothing otherwise called used items as well as other accessories. Vinted is a Lithuania brand that was founded in 2008 in the country's capital Vilnius by a Lithuanian couple, Milda Mitkute and Justas Janauskas. An interesting fact about the brand Vinted is that it was initially just operating sales for just women's clothing and then it grew and extended sales to include sales of Men and children's clothing as well as accessories that included jewelry, handbags, children furniture's, books and other home accessories, (Vinted 2020).

The company's purpose is to create very easy and simple ways for people to buy and sell clothing items that have already being slightly used. In so doing, they contribute their quota in minimizing the fashion industry's impact on the environments so instead of disposing it off, rather trade it off and make extra bucks off it. Vinted also have a strong value proposition for its brand and have described that they are aimed at proving that used clothing can be as good as new ones and so by creating this innovation platform, people can be able to sell off clothes they no longer wear and rather that dispose them and also customers can be able to buy at affordable prices things they don't find in stores. The company is open to anyone who thinks quality clothing deserves to last a long time (Vinted, 2020).

Furthermore, the company has a very fashionable and user-friendly e-commerce platform where it conducts its business and operations. Participants of the website/app are divided into visitors and users. Visitors are considered are natural persons who are not registered to the website but navigate through its products to find interest. They are only able to view articles but cannot make purchases or any

transactions. A user can be either a seller or a buyer. All you need to do is create a user account upon which registration is entirely free then you could either buy or trade your used clothing. For the seller, a section on the platform which says “Dressing room” is where the items for sale are being posted for prospective buyers to view and make purchases. The process from the point of purchase to the point of delivery is quite simple and clear to the users. The prices and details are shown so if a buyer is interested, he can purchase immediately. Items are either delivered or sent through a courier to the buyers. Vinted’s has a user-friendly website and also an easy to use app to enable their user to have a great experience.

Vinted currently operates in 12 markets namely Germany, Austria, France, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Luxemburg, Spain, Belgium, US, UK and the Netherlands. The major offices are based in Vilnius, Berlin and Prague and from these locations they are able to control the 12 operating markets. The company also has a continuously growing community of about 25 million members spread across and have over 100 million listed items on its platform globally and this generates about 1 billion euros annually. Speaking about finance and the company’s market position, it is important to indicate that Vinted is Lithuania’s first tech unicorn and attracted about 128 million euros in funding to be able to do expand on product development as well as aid the company’s growth across Europe. The company also secured a valuation of about 1 billion euros and has since kept growing. Furthermore, Vinted’s unicorn status has some great features it presents. Firstly, this development sparks a spotlight on the startup ecosystem of Lithuania which has proven to be a progressively inventive entrepreneurial center. Secondly, the green startup has taken advantage of the expanding concerns of numerous millennials that borders around the impact of “fast fashion” (Charlotte, 2019). This achievement not only puts the company in a great market position and even greater competitive advantage but also boost its growth and the commitment to do more.

Speaking about the secure and good business environment provided by Vinted to its customers, the company has made sure to tackle the shortcomings and shortfalls of transactions, mediation between buyer/seller, products that don’t meet expectations and or in cases where either the buyer/seller aren’t satisfied with its delivery. Commercial activities aren’t permitted on Vinted i.e. in cases where a seller present himself as a consumer or a non-professional seller when he/she is indeed a professional, sanctions are provided. Vinted encourages buyers to make purchases using its integrated systems to ensure safety and offers collects for additional services like shipping of the good and offers additional protection to the buyers. Also, in a case where the buyer chooses to make a face to face transactions. The parties are solely

responsible for the transaction without a possibility of requiring the assistance of the company and they charges no fees.

Additionally, the company also provides a platform where all users (Buyers & Sellers) can meet and interact and can have discussion on various topic ranging from beauty and fashion, Entertainment, social and personal subjects as they please. The users are nicknamed “Vinties” and use this platform actively to interact with each other and share views and ideas about desired topics amongst them. This shows that the company puts significant efforts and techniques in place to be able to create and sustain relationships between the company and the customers and as well as within the members of its community.

2.2 Research Methodology

In the world today, understanding the effect and the real impact effective relationship marketing has on customer loyalty has been a major drive on many organizations. Vinted’s relationship marketing to its customers is a way of building trust, showing commitment as well as making sure they are satisfied with the products and services that they provide.

Object: The impact of relationship marketing components on customer loyalty in the Vinted company.

The aim: To determine the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty in the Vinted company.

Objectives:

- To prepare research methodology.
- To investigate and determine the use of relationship marketing and the impact on customer loyalty in the Vinted company.
- To summarize results and provide recommendations

Research type

In analyzing the use of relationship marketing and what impact it has on customer loyalty using Vinted brand as a case both quantitative and qualitative research method were adopted and this was selected because it would properly help to define, describe and conclude as well as measure the necessary approaches to find out the facts of the situation analysis. The survey targeted the customers in the Lithuania market therefore took results of customers living in Lithuania. Also, the nature of this research is exploratory because of the theoretical ideas that will help conduct the research.

Data source and collection methods

In this research study, primary data collections were used and analyzed such as survey to obtain data from respondents as well as secondary sources gotten from websites, articles, journals and publications.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research is said to give the researcher the chance to investigate and get top of the bottom information into the perspectives as well as given the comprehension of a given context with basic inspirations and qualities through a detailed depiction. It likewise gives the researcher the opportunity to add further interpretation and significance to the discoveries and findings made. This research did some content analysis on already existing methods and techniques that Vinted uses to communicate with its customers. The purpose is to examine the extent and efforts used by the brand to ensure that relationships are established and sustained. This study is to understand the impact of relationship marketing and its components and even much more effective ways vinted can adopt to guarantee customer loyalty.

Questionnaire design

In designing this questionnaire, the researcher made sure it contained all the relevant aspects of the study. The questionnaire was also completely self-developed and contained clear, understandable and standardize questions aimed at getting the clear view of the respondent on the subject. The use of Likert scale was adopted, and respondent had to choose from a scale ranging 1-5 which stretched from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The purpose is to examine how each of the component individually impact customers behavior and attitude towards the brand and also to give a firm opinion on what they feel about the brand's relationship marketing constructs and how it affected their loyalty. Each of the components had two questions tailored at assessing the opinion of each of them. Relationship marketing constructs such as trust, commitment, communication , conflict handling and satisfaction as earlier identified are essential in forming and sustaining long term relationship with customers so to measure its extent, question were asked to be able to measure and compare each of these components and which of them had a more greater/lesser impact on the loyalty of customers.

Customer survey method

In this paper, the survey method was chosen. The survey was distributed online using digital channels like emails, Facebook, Instagram etc. The platform used for this distribution was google forms and it provided a user-friendly user interface and also gave the opportunity to choose from different question types. Surveys are essential and helps obtain results and data from different demographic attributes.

Sample size

This research chose the entire Lithuanian population as the sample while adopting the formula of De Vaus (2016) for finding the minimum sample size for the analysis taking note of 95% confidence level and 7% error.

$$n = \frac{1}{\Delta^2 + \frac{1}{N}}$$

Where n= sample size

Δ = margin of error

N= Population

$$n = \frac{1}{\Delta^2 + \frac{1}{N}} = \frac{1}{0.07^2 + \frac{1}{2,794,000}} = 204$$

Based on the formula, the minimum sample size would be 204 achieving the confidence level of 95% and 7% error.

2.3 Content analysis results

In other to give a comprehensive insight in the analysis of the research subject, the different means of communication actively used, engagements, interactions, payments and safety of the customers by the Vinted company will be discussed. Vinted uses different means and channels to communicate effectively

with its customers. However, its uses are not exclusive to just direct communication between the brand and the customer, but they also create contents for engagement and some of them pleasurable just to enhance customer engagement. Top of them is the vinted forum, Facebook and Instagram. According to Kapadia (2019), it serves as an electronic means for companies to engage and communicate with its customers and receive feedbacks, recommendations as well as portray the brand in positive light. More insights on the various channels below.

Firstly, taking a look at different factors in this analysis like the topics discussed, the activeness and frequency of users in this platform, buyers/seller protection, safety and dispute resolution. One of the reasons why the forum is used as analysis object is because it is this virtual place where customers can express their opinion of Vinted. The Vinted forum (see annex) is created and managed internally by Vinted brand to build and sustain a community of its customers. The users of Vinted are called the “vinties” and this forum is used to communicate, enhance engagements, share experiences and advise amongst them. The forum discusses different topics from the rules, beauty and trends, relationships, culture, health and wellbeing, animals, travels, a space for parents, advertisement and a welcoming section for new members. It also does have a section for up to date news and a section where new members are welcomed. Most of the topics are engaged actively and have members giving opinions on topics of their choice. For example, for the section where the new “vinties” are welcomed, they are directed how to present themselves, gain more visibility and pricing to help them get the best experience while using the company.

The forum is frequently visited by the members and have thousands of **topics and posts** made in different sections. It is fairly engaged, and the members usually interact more with topics of personal Interest. The findings show that the beauty and fashion trend section are actively used as that is where opinions about matching fit, current trends, design ideas and tips are shared. Another frequently engaged section is the advertisement section. In this part, members advertise their clothing items, accessories, catalogues and exchange services to other members. The other topics like personal well-being, relationships, culture, lifestyle etc. also receives interaction from members who find them interesting and want to engage with members. The question and answer section of the forum is where members meet to share opinions and suggestions and make recommendations on different topics like price, write timing of sales, cost to send sales and tax and if they have any complain. It has very strong active interactions from members and have recorded millions of posts made under it with comments from members every five minutes on the average.

Moving forward, we looked at the **safety and protective measures** and procedures used by the brand to ensure that the members feels safe and are protected of their sale or purchase of a product. Vinted describes that if users or pro users infringe or breach the brand's terms and conditions, use a different identity, sell prohibited items, initiate transactions outside of the site, they may be warned, removed and deactivated completely. They also urge users to reports listings or members that violate this rule by clicking a flag symbol beside the listing or sending an email. However, members in the forum suggest that this measure isn't functional or maybe ineffective. A recent user by name "luxury_boss" stated in the forum that she made a sale to a buyer but unfortunately it didn't meet the desire as claimed by the intending buyer when received and therefore made arrangements to cancel and return but didn't give information to the seller on how to receive. She had followed the due procedure given and reported to vinted but didn't get any prompt response. Another user in the forum gave a suggestion and stated that if product was sent and validated, it probably is a scam.

Protection for users of the vinted brand was also highlighted as Vinted describes that buyers benefit from Vinted's buyers protection when they purchase items on the site using the brand's integrated payment and shipping services. The terms for which they can be protected and when they will not be protected as stated. The service is charged together with the price of the order and it is displayed on the website or in the app before the order completion. It comprises of a fixed amount of 0.7 euros and 5% of the item price including VAT. When a member opt for this service, payments for a product/service is held and will be not transferred until the transaction is completed, enables you to track your order using integrated shipping services, refund policies, reimbursements in case of loss or late delivery. Opinions of a user by name "hellicates" stated that there is no protection for the sellers as they have a mandate to send the package within five days while the buyer has plenty of time of up to fourteen days to receive. Another recent post by user by name "jabrown" reiterates that the seller has no protection in place and buyers could make claims that the packages are damaged or lost and they get refunded. Seller then proceed to email the company and get just an apology. He also states that he trusts the application but the measures are ineffective.

Conflict and resolution of dispute amongst users by the Vinted brand was also analyzed and findings showed that the company will not be involved or mediate with settlements of disputes between buyers and sellers that do not benefit from the buyers protection services. If a user opt for the buyers protection then the company can mediate in different ways such as requesting for reimbursement under certain conditions, the right to withdrawal if users isn't satisfied with the product for whatever reason,

can opt for a consumer mediator to resolve the dispute and an official written complaint to the customer service department of which the company will try to resolve it in the most amicable manner. Examining the opinion of a user by name “houda337” in the forum suggest that she had made and completed an authentic sale of a sneaker. However, the seller upon receiving claimed it was a fake and open a dispute and in the end was refunded and sent back a fake pair different from what she originally sold. Another user by name “alliek12” stated that a buyer claimed that the product she sold was in a pitiful condition, but she had made a video at the time of packaging and had made a dispute but was speaking to bots. A user named “neomietrnr” also commented via the forum and indicated that despite paying for the buyers protection she followed the procedures and reported to Vinted after she didn’t receive her product and it was returned back to seller. She made the report about four times about and no response was given, or the refund made.

Furthermore, Vinted also uses other digital channels such as Facebook and Instagram as one of its communicative tools with its customers. They utilize these channels to create contents, pass information such as announcing promotions, policy changes, send good wishes amongst others. The Facebook page for example has over one million members and is actively running. Unlike the brand’s forum, communications in this channel are rather mostly done weekly or sometimes monthly. Based on the number of active members of this channel and its potential reach, the brand uses the opportunity to communicate new policy changes, additional features as well as suggestions and recommendations made for the customers. However, comments and opinions made by customers in this channels are often not promptly responded to or neglected. The channel Instagram on the other hand is equally used to post and create interesting content for its customers. The Instagram page actively operates and has about a hundred thousand (100k) followers. This tool is utilized to portray the brand’s delightful product variety and showcase different customer photos and videos displaying them on a vinted product looking happy and excited. Customers photos are posted with hashtags as it shows different styling ideas, new products displayed by the customers and the likes. Contrary to the other channels used by the brand, this channel focuses on motivating, encouraging customers and are tailored to interact more with the use of the brand’s product/services.

Conclusively we can see that the brand is putting significant efforts to establish and foster effective communication with its customers in order to continuously get the feedback, sustain the relationship and keep the customers loyal to the brand. In the ever-changing market environment, it

strives to remain innovative and adopt easy to use platform to ease and make communications of any sort easier to communicate between the parties.

2.4 Customer survey results

To investigate research question, customers of Vinted were focused on and had question filters to help differentiate loyal and non-loyal customers. The survey also had questions aimed at examining the impact of the various components of relationship marketing on the loyalty of its customers. Only responses from loyal customers were used for data analysis; in this way to assess the impact of relationship marketing components on their loyalty. Vinted wasn't a new mention for the respondents and this greatly facilitated the responses.

The survey was conducted in the month of March and the forms of distribution included digital channels such as emails, Facebook, Instagram etc. Analyzing the outcome of this survey it is essential to state that the respondents reacted in different ways, but it established that the research had a great support from respondents. Questionnaire included a total of 12 questions and took about 3 weeks. Out of total 350 sent out, question filters were used to identify and distinguish loyal and disloyal customers. The filter was used to examine the attitudinal and behavioral expressions of customers. The first filter used asked if the customer would recommend the brand Vinted to their families/relatives. This is a key indicator to distinguish the two parties as it establishes ties and shows a positive attitude towards the brand. The second filter asked if customers used Vinted products/services at least more than once a month. This was used to measure the behavioral pattern of the customers and if they made repeated purchases with the brand which is a clear indicator to distinguish the two parties as it does demonstrate loyalty. This survey identified 276 responses from loyal customers, and this will be used for this analysis.

The First question of this survey focused on whether customers relied on vinted to be able to deliver them great products and services. It was intended to examine if the customers trust the brand to be able to deliver them a great product or service figure 3 shows the results obtained from the respondents below.

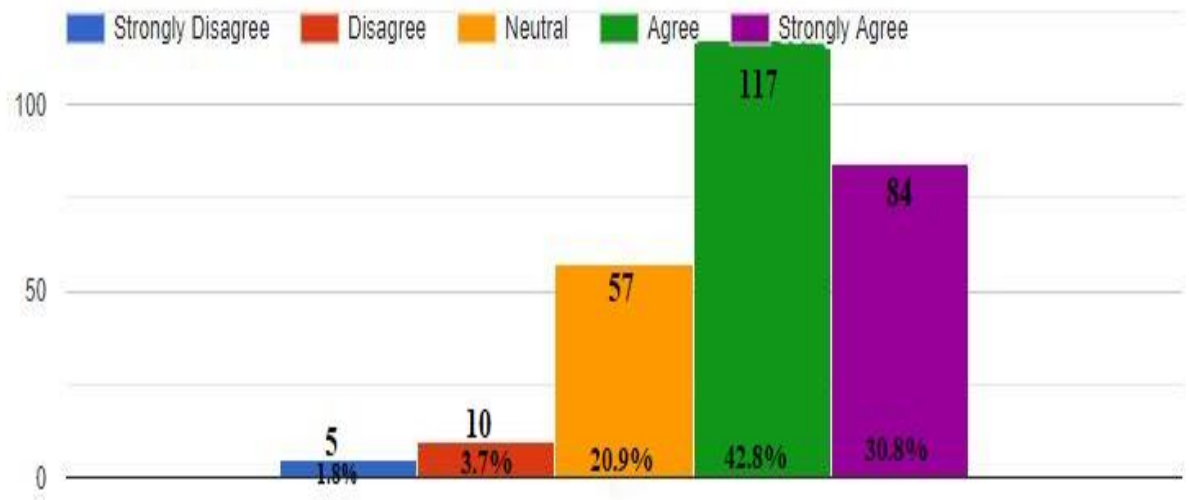


Figure 3 – Distribution of residents' opinion assessing if they rely on vinted to deliver a good product

In analyzing the percentages from different customers of this survey. We can observe that 84 of the total number of respondents strongly agree which represents 30.8%, 117 agree that they rely and trust the brand to deliver a great product or service and this represents 42.8%, 57 of the respondents were neutral about it which could translate that they patronize the brand's product/service but cannot determine if they trust the delivery or not, 3.7% disagree while 1.8% strongly disagree. However, in this research we are trying to determine the impact of the various relationship marketing components on the loyalty of customers, so the averages could be presented as follows: 5, 10, 57, 117, 84 /276 resulting in an estimating of 3.9, it can be then be concluded that the respondents trust the brand to deliver a good product/service and thus has an impact on their loyalty.

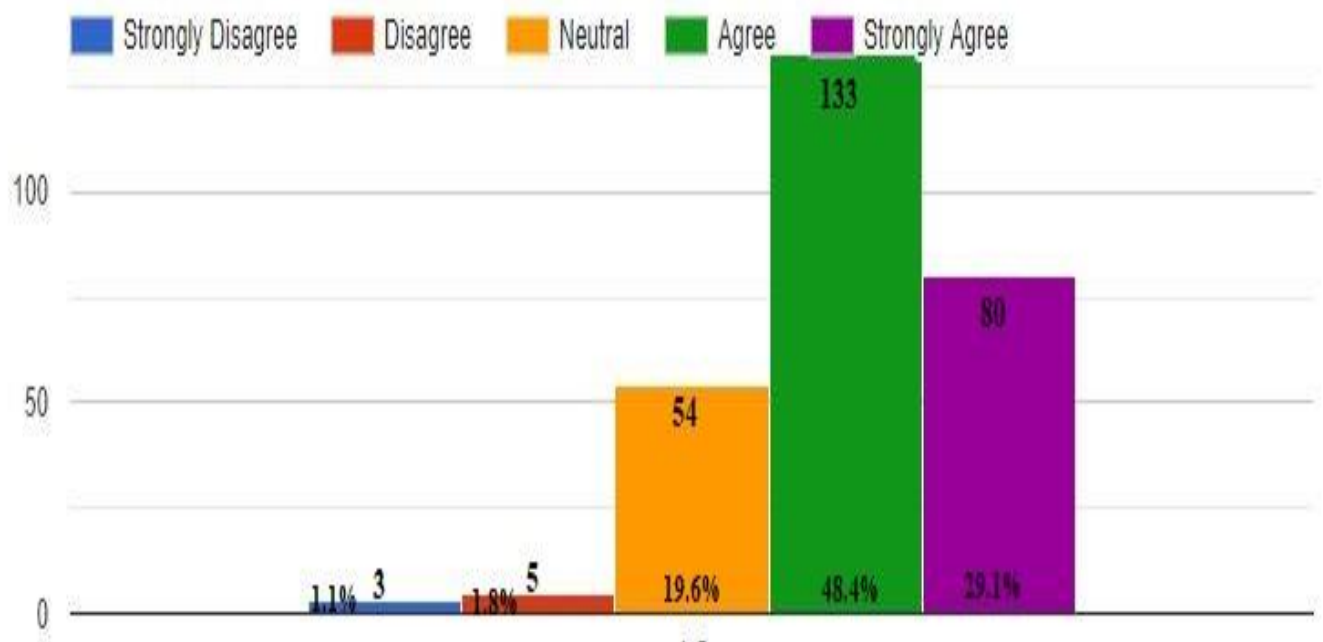
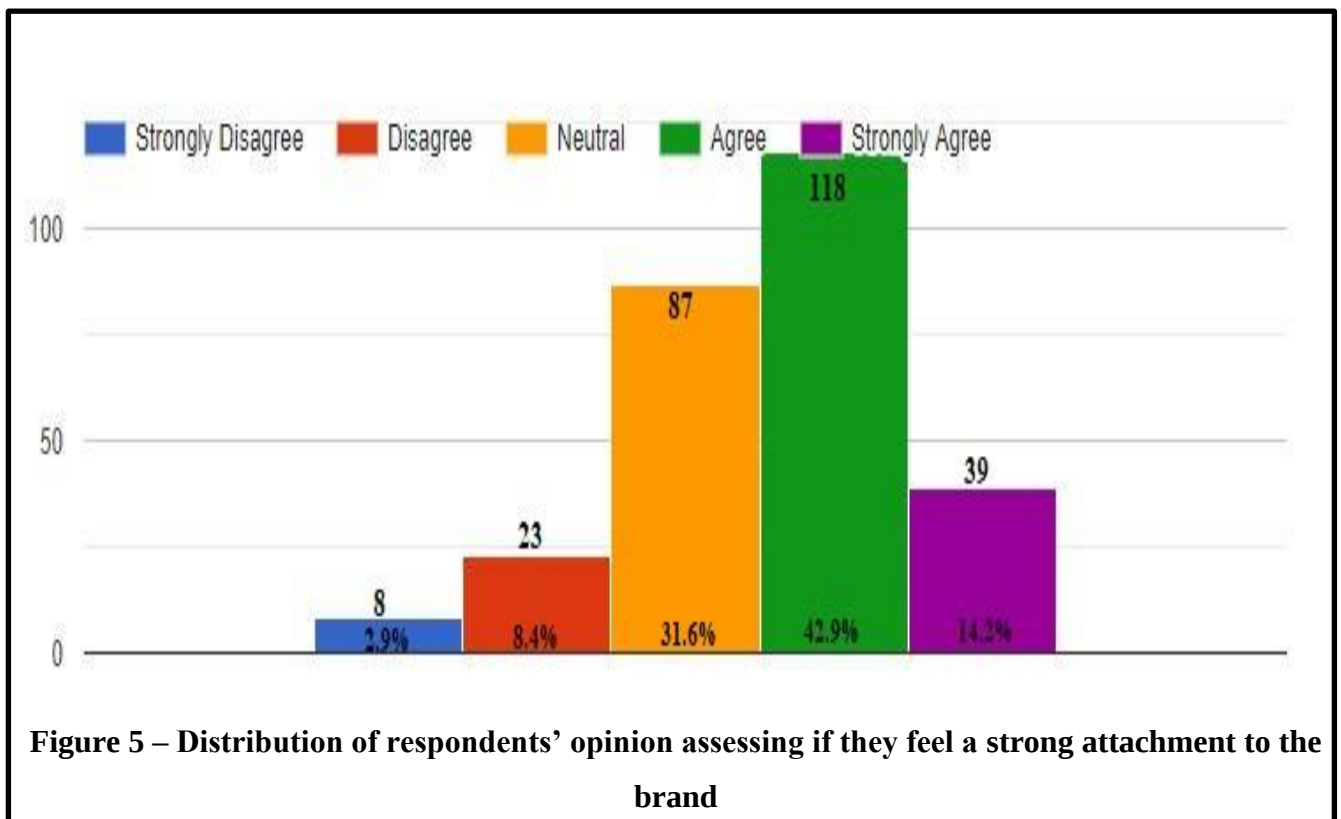


Figure 4 – Distribution of respondent's opinion assessing if they have confidence in the product/service offered by Vinted

Figure 4 shows the responses from customers when asked if they are confident in the product/service offered by the brand. This question was also aimed at determining if the customer trust and are confident with the brand product. Percentage distribution shows that 80 of the total number of respondents strongly agree representing 29.1%. 133 agree that they are confident in the brand's product/service representing 48.4%. 54 indicates they are neutral with 19.6%, 1.8% disagree while 1.1% strongly disagree. Computing the averages of the second statement as follows $\frac{3 + 5 + 54 + 133 + 80}{276}$ resulting in an estimate of 4.0, so it can be concluded that the respondent does have confidence in the offerings of the brand's product/service.



The result of the question as displayed in figure 5 shows the result respondents gave when asked if they are a customer because they feel a strong attachment to it. This was aimed determining if the customers are committed to the brand and are feel a sense of attachment. 39 respondents representing 14.2% strongly agree. 118 agree which represents 42.9%, 87 stayed neutral which account for 31.6% of the total respondents, the percentage difference isn't so wide to the respondents that indicated that they agree, this could mean that they are great customers of the brand but maybe do not feel so attach to the brand as the reason why they are customers. 23 respondents disagree representing 8.4% while 2.9% strongly disagree. Computing the average as follows $\frac{8 + 23 + 87 + 118 + 39}{276}$ resulting in an estimate of 3.6 which demonstrate averagely that they are committed to the brand.

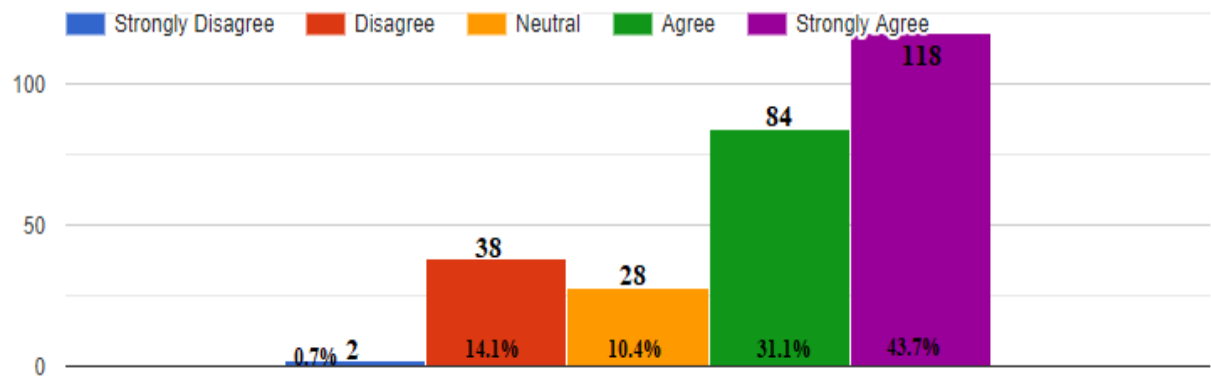


Figure 6 – Distribution of respondents' opinion assessing if they will not leave because they have a sense of obligation to the brand

The results in figure 6 shows how respondents reacted when they were asked if they would not leave the brand right now because they have a sense of obligation to it. Again, the aim of this question was ascertaining how committed the customers to the brand. 118 respondents strongly agree that they wouldn't leave right now which translates to the activities and operations they have with the brand. 84 out of the respondents agree representing 31.1%, 28 chose neutral which accounts for 10.4%, 38 disagree which accounts for 14.1% while 2 strongly disagree. Computing the averages as follows; $2, 38, 28, 84, 118 / 276$ resulting in an estimate of 3.6, so it can be concluded that respondents feel a sense of obligation to the brand.

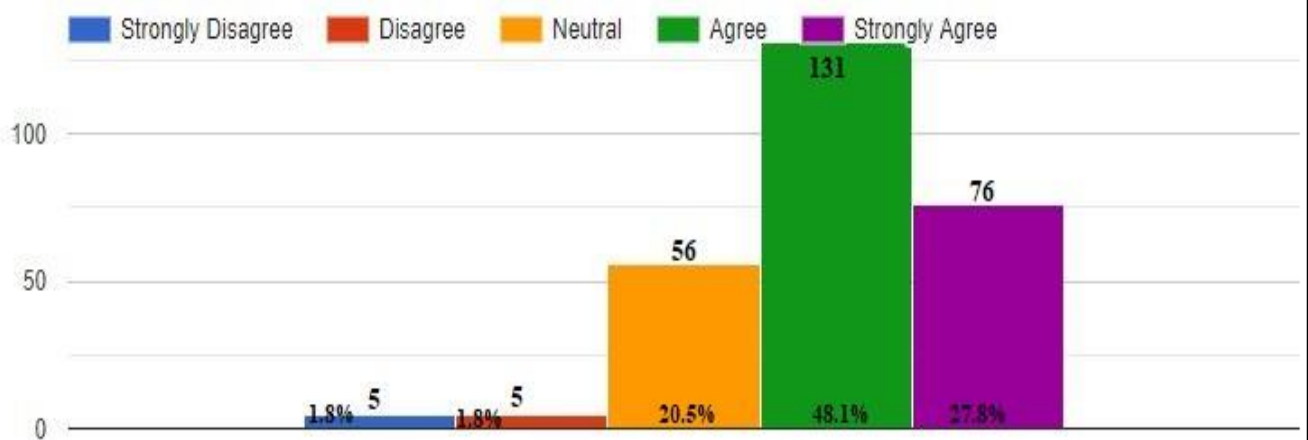


Figure 7 – Distribution of respondents' opinion assessing if customer representative was helpful answering question/inquiries

Communication as we have earlier discussed is a vital part of establishing and sustaining relationships. Respondents here in figure 7 were asked if the customer representative they came in contact with was helpful in handling their questions or inquiries that they requested. 27.8% representing 76 of the total number of respondents strongly agree to it. 131 of those respondents representing 48.1% agree that the representative that answered to them are helpful in handling their questions which is slightly almost half of the total number of respondents. 56 of the respondents stayed neutral amounting to 20.5% while 1.8% disagree as well strongly disagree. Computing the average; thus, $5, 5, 56, 131, 76 / 276$ resulting in an estimate of 3.9, so it can be concluded that the brand's representative was indeed helpful to the customers.

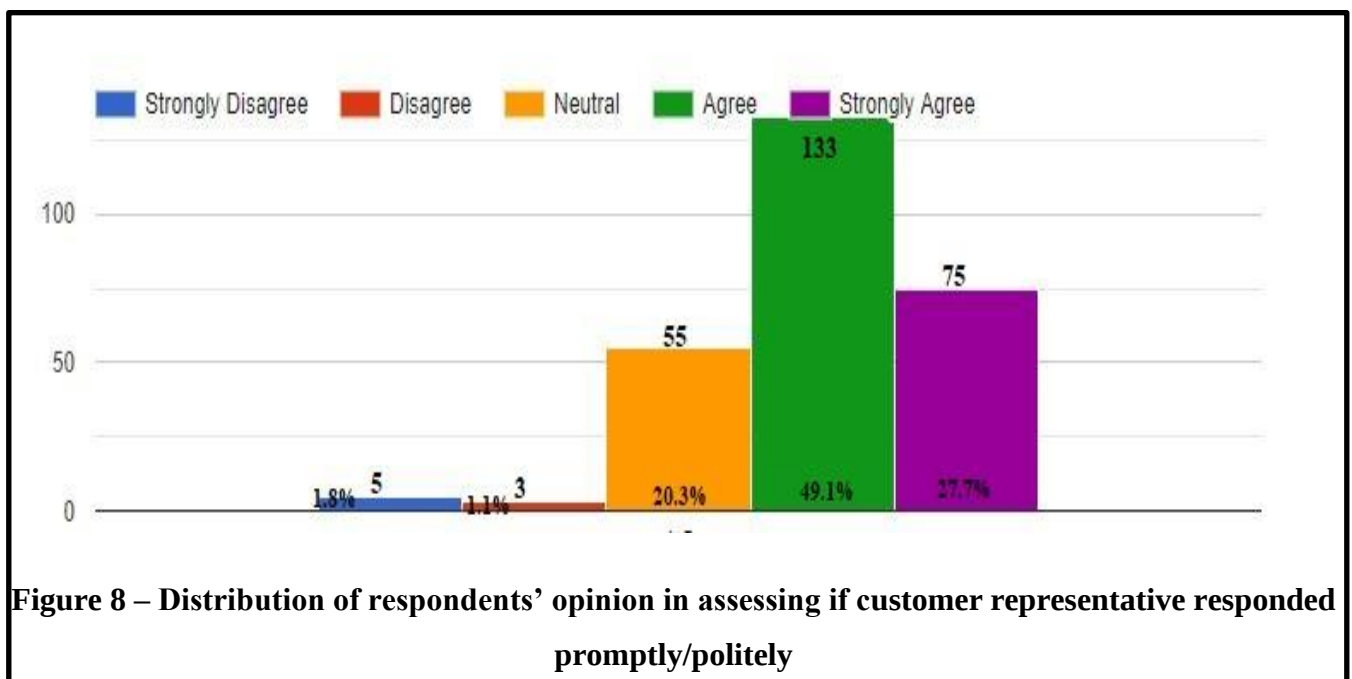
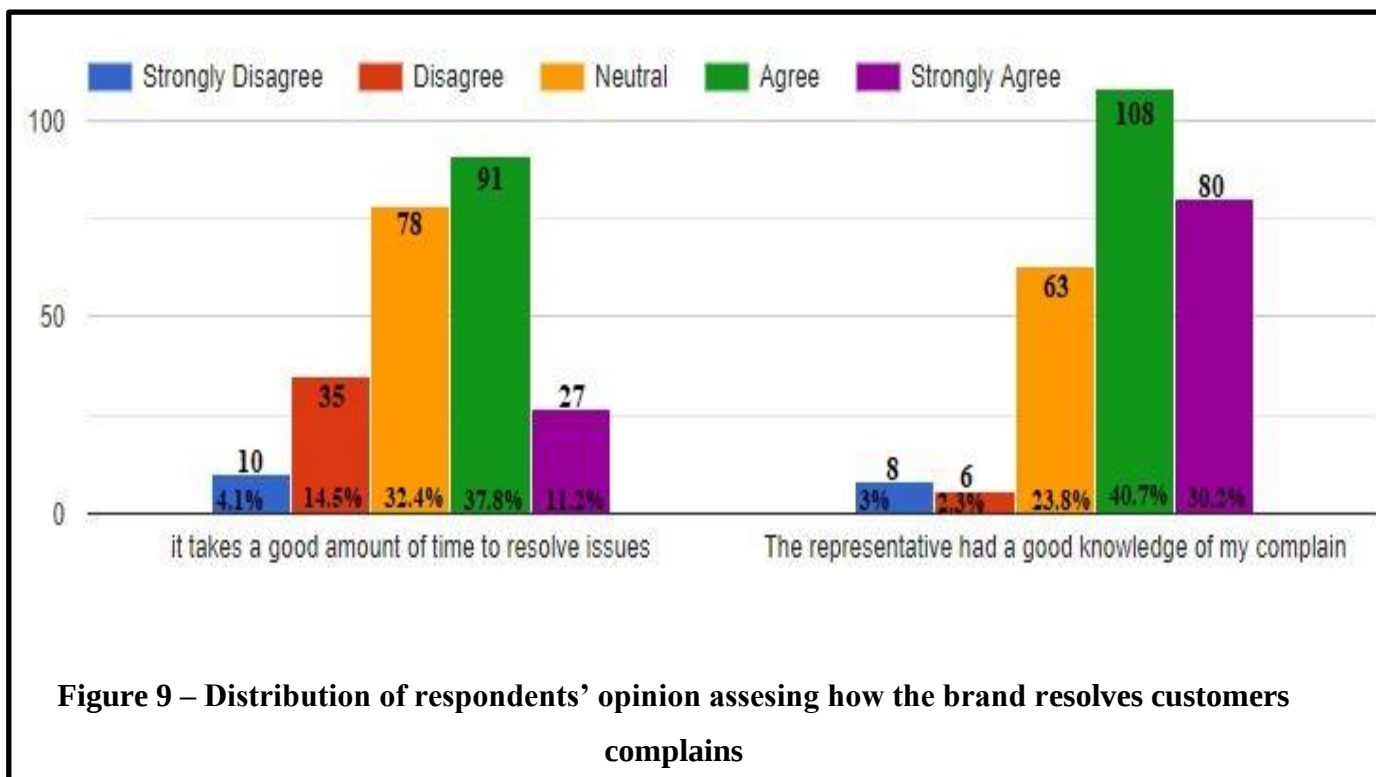
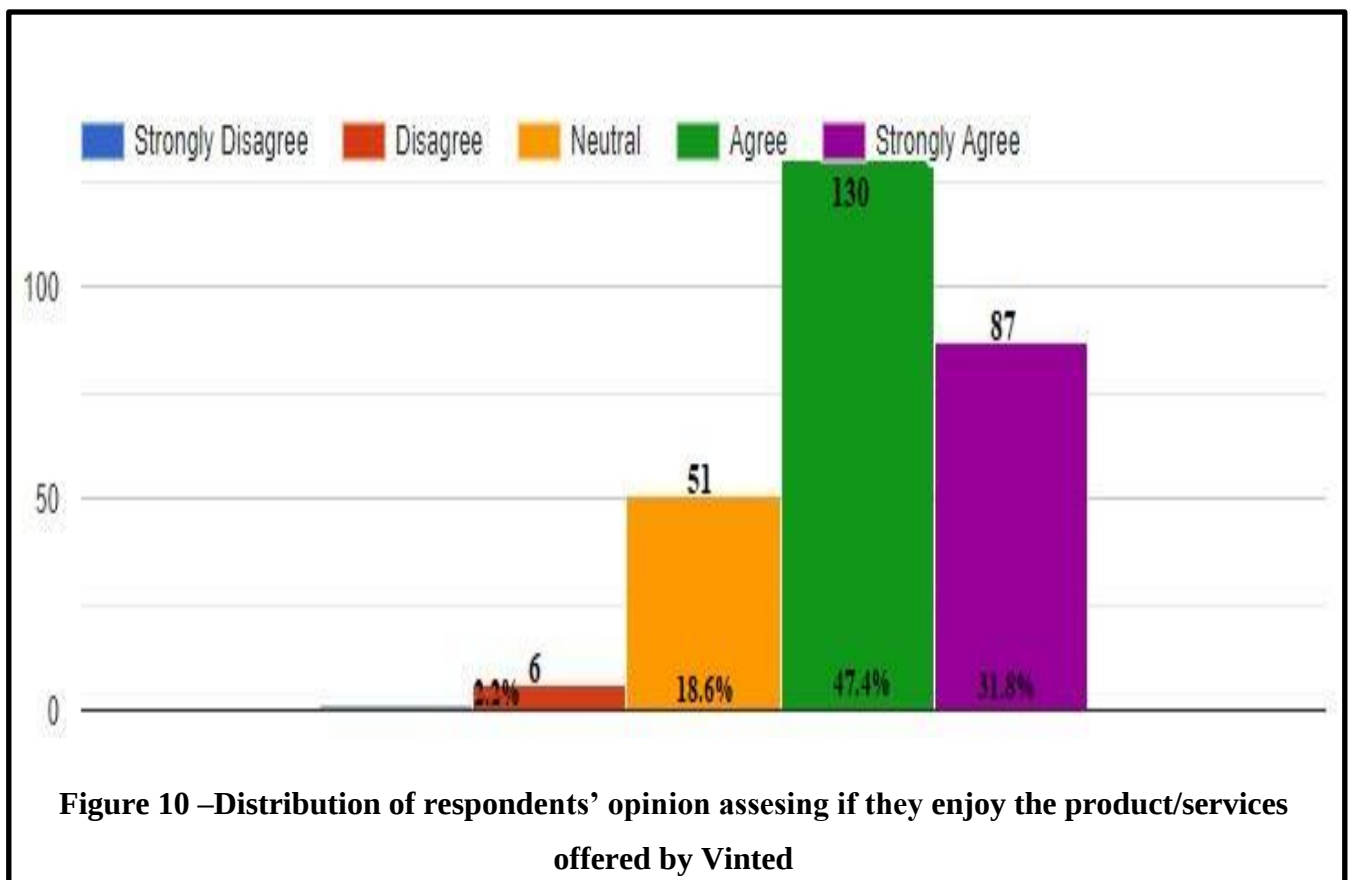


Figure 8 shows the results of the answers respondents gave when asked if the customer representative responded to them promptly and politely. Again, this question was aimed at determining the quality of communication between the brand and customers. 75 which accounts for 27.7% of the total respondents strongly agree to this, 133 which accounts for 49.1% agree that indeed the representatives are prompt and politely when they get contacted. 55 which represents 20.3% stayed neutral to this. 1.4% disagreed and 1.8% of the respondents strongly disagreed. Calculating the averages; thus, $5, 3, 55, 133, 75 / 276$ amounting to an estimate 3.9, so in conclusion the respondents averagely agree that the brand representative answered to them promptly.



The results here in figure 9 seeks to find respondents opinion of the inetractions with customer representative of the brand and describes the results gotten from respondents when asked about how the brand resolves complains and issues presented by customers. The first question was if it takes a good amount of time for their issues to be resolved and 27 which indicates 11.2% of the respondents say they strongly agree, 91 which represents 37.8% agree that it does takes a good amount of time to get their complains fixed, 78 that accounts for 32.4% chose neutral while 35% which represents 14.5 of the total respondents disagree, 4.1% strongly disagree with this statement. Also when respondents were ask if the customer representative had a good knowledge of the complains made by them 80 of the total respondents strongly agree that indeed they did have a good knowledge and this amounts for 30.2%, 108 which describes 40.7% agree to the statement, 63 stayed neutral and this represents 23.8%, 6 of the respondents disagreed while 8 strongly disagreed. The averages can be presened as follows: 10,35,78,91,27/276 resulting to an estimate of 2.9 and for the second statement thus: 8, 6, 63, 108, 80 /276 resulting to an estimare of 3.8. So it can be concluded that respondents agree that the brand reprentative does have a good idea of what complains they have as well as it took a good amount of time to have it fixed.



Achieving customer satisfaction is the bedrock by which brands strive to deliver great value of product/services that they offer. Figure 10 shows respondents' answers when asked if they enjoy the product and service offered by Vinted. 87 of the total respondents strongly agree that they do enjoy the brand's product/services representing 31.8%. 130 chose agree amounting to 47.4%, 51 stayed neutral amounting to 18.6% while 6 respondents disagree. The averages can be computed as follows; $0, 6, 51, 130, 87 / 276$ resulting to an estimate of 4.1 which in conclusion demonstrates averagely that respondents enjoy the offerings provided by the brand.

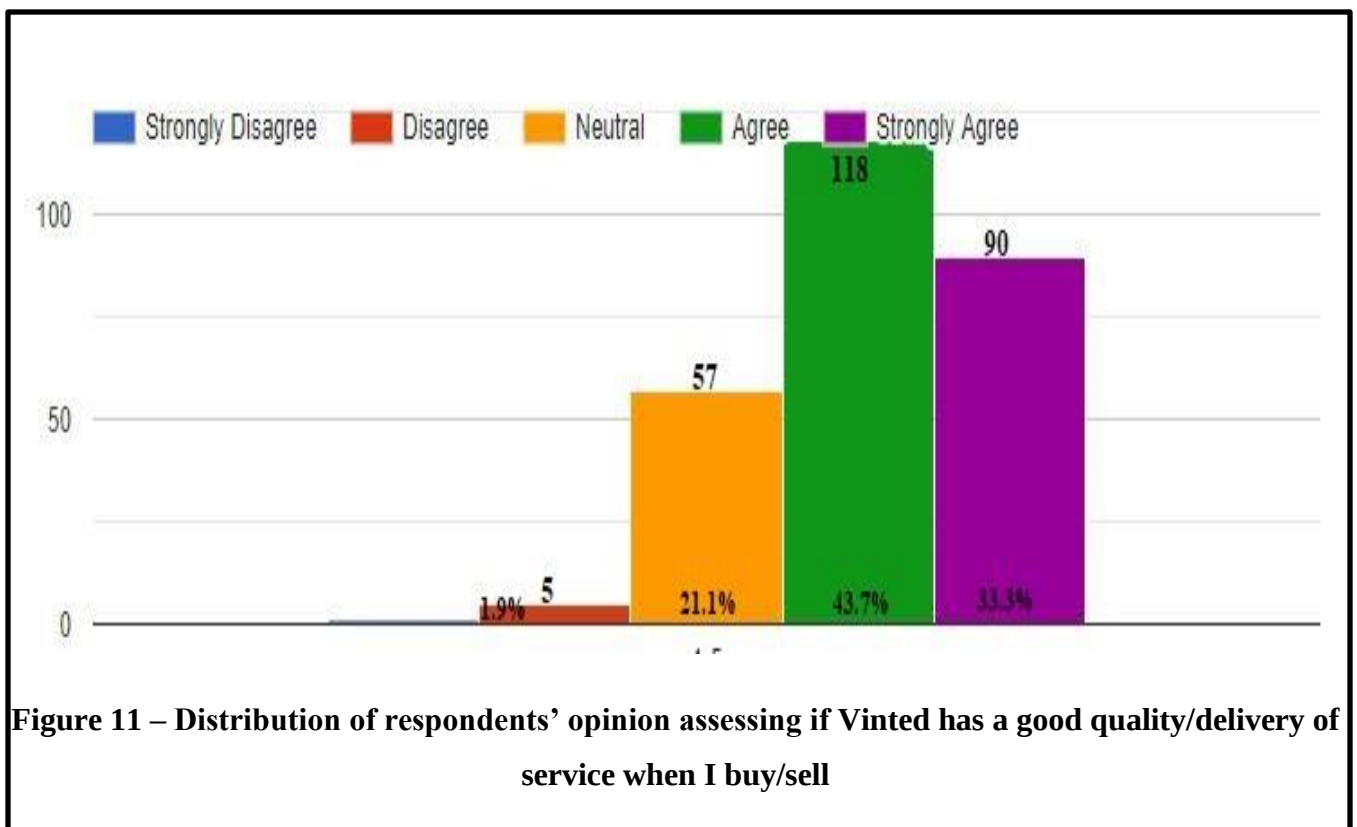


Figure 11 shows the results of respondents when asked if the brand has a good quality and delivery of service when they buy/sell products. 90 which represents 33.3% strongly agree, 118 showed that they agree and the brand did offer quality and great delivery of service if they buy/sell, 57 respondents amounting to 21.1% chose neutral while 5% disagreed to the statement. The averages can be computed as follows: $0, 5, 57, 118, 90 / 276$ resulting to an estimate of 4.0. so in conclusion, respondents do agree the brand have a great deliver of product/service whey they patronize them.

Figure 12 shows the results of respondent when they were asked a key loyalty question if they will recommend the brand to friends and relatives. The aim of the question is to examine the percieved attitude of the customers towards the brand. 99 of the respondents strongly agree which amounts to 36.4%, 110 chose agree that they will recommed the brand to their friends and relatives representing 40.4%, 49 of respondent chose neutral, 3.7% disagreed while 1.4% stronglt dissagree.

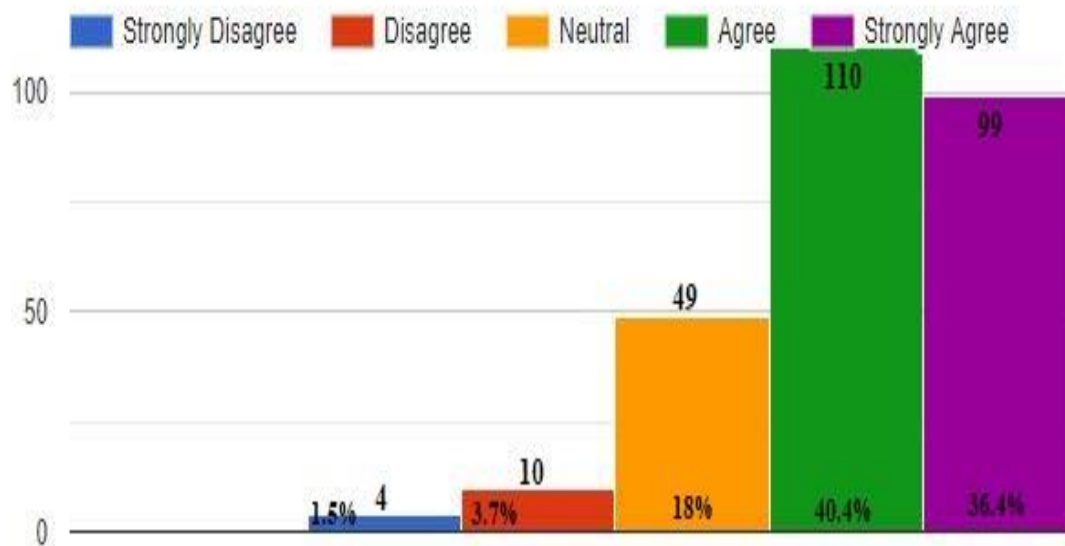


Figure 12 – Distribution of respondents' assessing if they will recommend Vinted to friends/relatives

The behavior of customers were also examined and respondents were asked if they make purchases with the brand more than once a month. The aim of this question was to determine the purchasing behaviour of the customer and how often they use the brand to make transactions. This also served as a question filter to separate the loyal from the non-loyal customers. The results as shown in figure 13 shows that 66 of the respondents strongly agree that they will recommend the brand to their relatives demonstrating 23.9% of the total respondents. 91 strongly agree representing 33%, 71 are neutral amounting to 25.7%, 38 disagree which describes 13.8% while 3.6% strongly disagree of the total respondents.

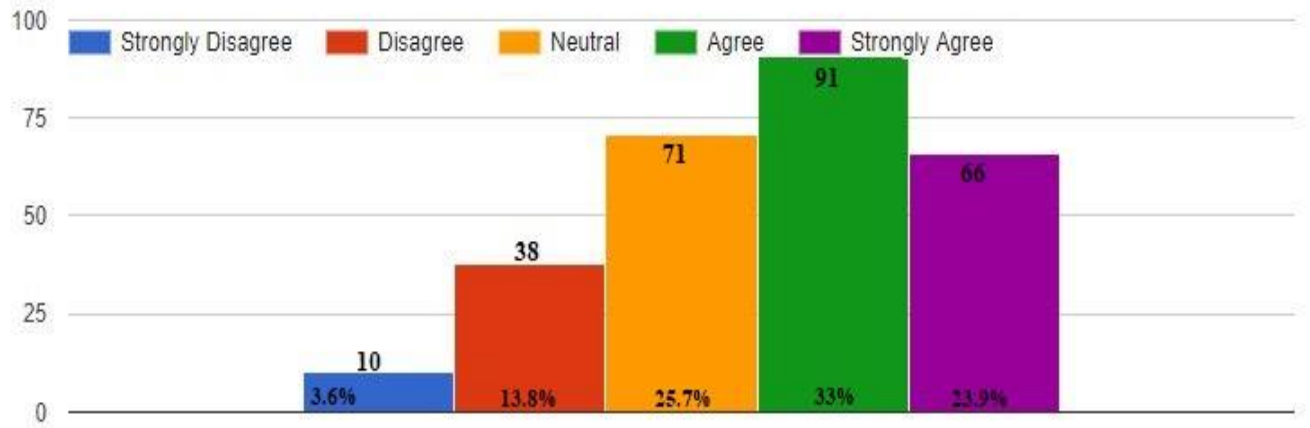


Figure 13 – I use Vinted to buy/sell more than once a month

The survey ended with demographical question to determine the gender of the respondents. I received results from 61.9% female and 38.1% as shown in figure 14. This isn't surprising because in fact considering the history of the brand, more females patronize the brand and are more active than the males.

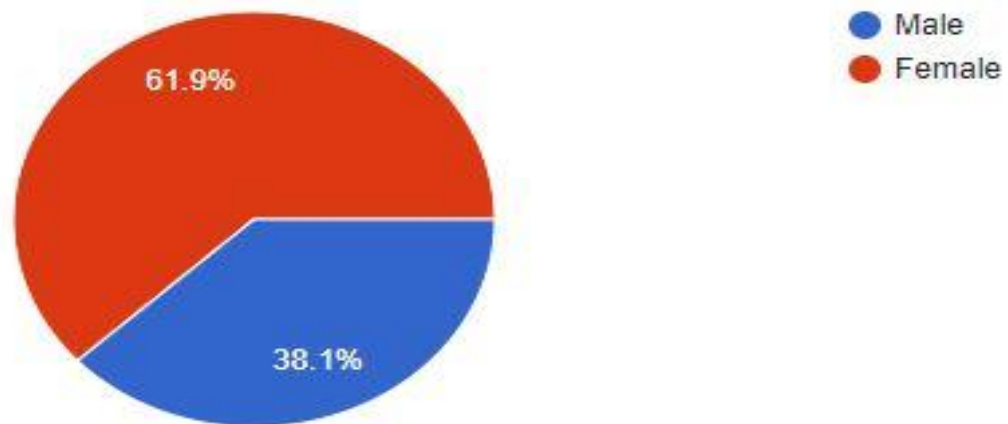


Figure 14 – Gender distribution of respondents

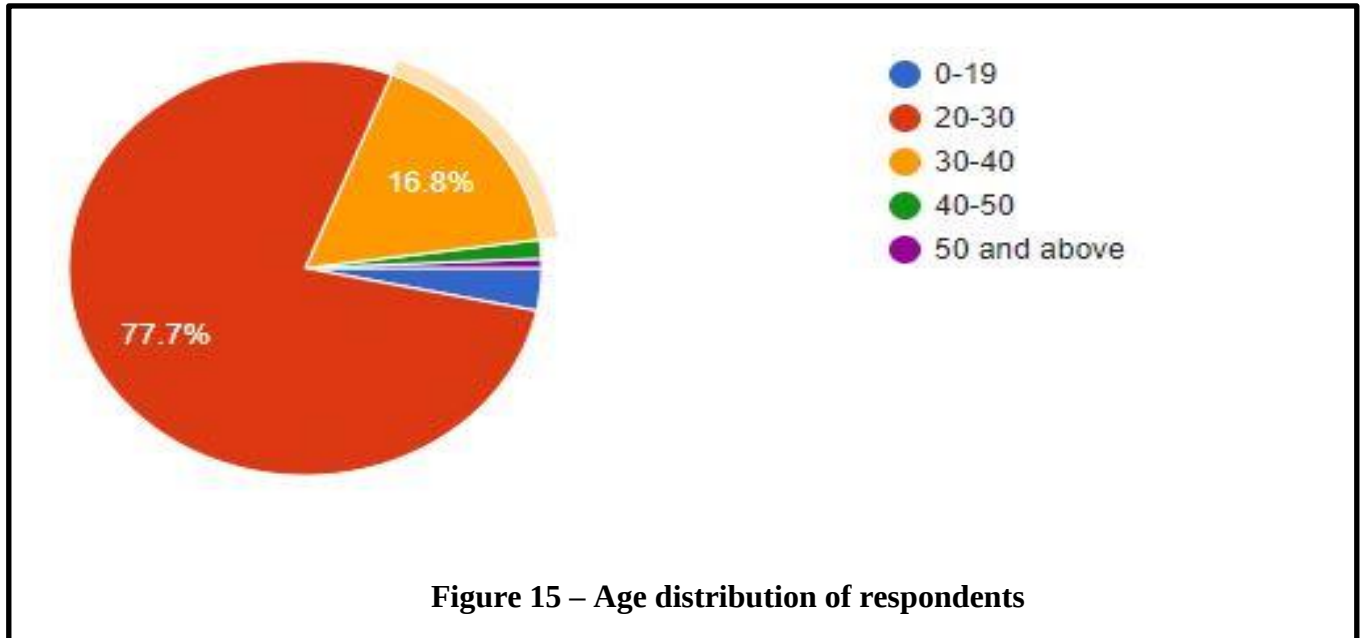


Figure 15 shows the age distribution of the respondents. Most of the respondent where between the age group of 20-30 (77.7%), Just about 16.8% were between the age 30 -40 while just a few were less than 19 years of age. Again, this is not surprising as it is people within that age range that are mostly enthusiastic about fashion are always on the look for the best place and brand to patronize to get them what they want and be satisfied.

2.4.1 Mean distribution table

Table 1

Relationship Marketing Components	Mean
Trust	3.95
Commitment	3.6
Communication	3.9
Conflict Handling	3.35
Satisfaction	4.05

Note: This table has been created by the author, based on data from the analysis made in the conduct of this study (2021).

The table above illustrates the various averages gotten from the different questions asked on each relationship marketing component. In understanding the development of the different components of relationship marketing, you would observe that despite the fact that each of the components is as significant and important as the other, respondents reacted differently as they felt and with this we were able to determine which of the components had a greater impact and the one with a lesser impact to the loyalty of the customers. So here in this table, the averages of the various components were calculated using the data gotten from the Likert scale and divided by the total number of loyal respondents, with this we were able to compare and analyze how respondents feel about each construct and the impact it has on their loyalty.

The first component asked two questions that determined if they trusted the brand Vinted. The average from the first question which asked to examine if the customer trusted Vinted to deliver a great product/service showed 3.9 and the second question showed a 4.0 when asked if they have confidence in the brand product/service, this clearly shows that the respondent expresses a positive show of trust while some respondent expressed an indifferent opinion and this construct. When the averages were divided by two it gave a mean of 3.95 which was then used to compare the impact of the other components. The next component that was examined was commitment. Similarly, two questions were asked and first question indicated an average of 3.6 when respondents were asked if they feel a sense of attachment and second question indicated the same average of 3.6 when asked if they feel a sense of obligation to the brand. The averages of the two components were divided by two to obtain a mean of 3.6 and this was used to draw comparison between the other components and analyze the impact. The next component on the table is communication and as have earlier assessed that this is also a vital component in sustaining relationships with customer. The two questions asked to determine how customer felt about the aspect of communicating with the brand they both indicated an average of 3.9. Respondents were asked if the customer representative was helpful with their questions/inquiries and if they responded to them promptly and politely. The calculated mean brought about a mean of 3.9 which was used in the analysis. The next component was conflict handling, As in any formal and informal relationships are inevitable, respondents were similarly asked two questions, the first bother on if it takes a good amount of time to resolve their issues and indicated an average of 2.9 and if the representative had a good knowledge of what was asked and showed an average of 3.8. calculating both averages brought about a mean of 3.35 which was used to draw comparison.

The next component as shown in the table is satisfaction. Guaranteeing positive customer experience and overall satisfaction is always at the bedrock of organizational goals. Businesses strive to keep customer loyalty in order to form a bond and bring about their loyalty. Question asked determined if customers enjoy the product/service offered by the brand if the brand has a great delivery of its products/services, the averages indicated averages of 4.0 and 4.1 respectively. Calculating the averages shows a mean of 4.05. When comparing the total average of each of the components, it is interpreted that the component that indicates the most impact on customer loyalty is satisfaction. Again, customers have demonstrated that a positive and overall satisfaction is a major elements that guarantees their loyalty. The next component with a greater impact is trust. It showed the highest average after mean which indicates that the respondents affirm that they believe the brand to deliver a great product and have confidence in them as this determines and ensure the impact on their loyalty. Closely followed is communication which we have described as an integral part of sustaining relationships that results in loyalty. The least two components that according to the respondents have lesser impact on customer loyalty is commitment and conflict handling. This can be interpreted as that the fact that an application of the other construct in building these relationships determines how commitment they stay with the brand and attach more and also since conflicts and short coming are inevitable customers grow positive attitude with a brand when their issues are solved within a considerable period of time as well as if they do understand and can easily relate what their complaints is about.

2.5 Conclusion on the research

This research has helped to analyze the impact of relationship marketing and its components on customer loyalty. It also did identify the attitudinal and behavioral pattern of customers when these components are effectively adopted and put into use. It is clear that the each of the components is as vital as the other in establishing and sustaining long term business relationships with the customers. Results indicate that customers may have answered questions based on their personal encounter and overall purchase experience with the brand. It also described how the various components such as trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling and satisfaction and how each bring about the ultimate goal of achieving loyalty.

We could briefly analyze the demographic results obtained and see that the age group of the customers for the survey are mostly young people who are between the ages 20-30 which is no surprise

as they are the group more inclined and visible to the digital world transactions and also they are more females than the males as the result revealed.

This research also showed diverse opinions of respondents on each of the construct that was measured. The results also show that Vinted needs to work more on their commitment and conflict handling techniques as these components showed that they had lesser impact on the customers' loyalty. Discussing the results of the components that showed the greater impact which are satisfaction and trust proved that customers are very much influenced and impacted by the overall experience they get from patronizing a brand and they want to also feel and be guaranteed that the brand will always offer them quality product as this clearly greatly influences their relational attitude. Satisfaction of customers is at the bedrock of business and organizational operations and that is why they strive to offer great value of both in its product/services. The results also presented the opinions regarding communication and it portrayed that the brand has to pay close attention to prompt response to customers as well as being polite with them. This is a vital part of sustaining any form of relationships as businesses have to ensure effective communication between its customers. Customers want to be assured that they can freely communicate with their chosen brand whenever they have questions, inquiries or complaints.

In conflict handling respondents showed also that the brand needs to be conscious of time management when resolving issues and also have knowledge of the form of questions/inquiries from customers. The results also described more loyal customers who strongly agree that they are obligated to the brand and as well enjoy the product and that is because Vinted also offers some range of services and have made efforts to bring the community together to further establish healthy and friendly relationship between its users to be able to achieve satisfaction and ultimately the loyalty of customers.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP MARKETING TO IMPACT CUSTOMER LOYALTY

This part of the diploma paper mainly focuses on the projected decision based on the empirical research to adopting effective relationship marketing strategies and ensuring that each of the components are well applied to impact and guarantee the loyalty of customers.

In the wake of the fierce competition in the global business environment, different businesses could adopt different ways and strategies to keep their customers glued to their products/services but often times we observe that it may not seem enough or it wasn't properly applied or maybe a new trend emerged? What actually keeps and sustains a customer's continued patronage? It has been observed that customers love and enjoy when they have got a sense of relationship and a positive overall customer experience with a brand's product/services. This perceived bond impacts and brings about a positive attitude and behavior towards that brand giving it less chances for them to switch or just stop patronage. Customer is still king and is the reason why businesses operates so here suggestions will be made how to adopt and apply effective relationship marketing techniques and the impact on the loyalty of customers. Firstly, a summary of the problem areas observed during the research will be discussed afterwards a relationship marketing model and the customer marketing model used in relationship marketing will be discussed to showcase insights of other markets and stakeholders that can affect the implementation of the different constructs and lastly recommendations for relationship marketing techniques that impact customer loyalty.

3.1 Problem areas identified in the research

It is clear that there have been a sharp shift for businesses to move from solely transactional business model to relational business model thanks to the advent of relationship marketing which has proven to be mutually beneficial for both the customers and business as well. However, building these relationships and putting together effective means to apply all the relationship marketing components aren't so easy as it would be desired and sometimes may appear complex . Businesses have to deal with these complexities or otherwise face difficulties in keeping a customers and making them loyal. As the analysis of the results portraayed we identified some factors that affects the constructs of relationship marketing and how best to mitigate against them to guarantee the loyalty of customers. No matter the case, maintaining and enhacing that human touch and bond with customers, clients, colleagues and even

competitors is rather considered an investment than it is seen on a negative light. We will discuss some of the problematic areas identified in this research that may have influenced and impacted the respondents' decisions hence the results.

Looking at the results of the research and understanding the possible factor areas that may have contributed to its outcome is essential in formulating suggestions and suitable solutions for implementing effective relational constructs to gear towards achieving the ultimate aim of customer loyalty. One of the problem areas observed is that the brand Vinted doesn't have a standard measure of the quality of items that are displayed in its platform and rely or hope that the users will ultimately display quality items to align with the value of offerings the brand has promised in its proposition. The results proved trust to be a component that has a high impact on the loyalty of customers when compared with the other components but it also showcased a varying difference in customers that just agree and those that strongly agree when they were asked if they trusted and relied on the brand to deliver a quality product. This could mean that so far so good, they have been offered quality items or services but that could change anytime as it is not guaranteed and the brand in itself doesn't have a standard measure to make sure of this offerings and not leave it to chance. Trusting and having confidence in the quality of a product that a brand offers is a key component that has displayed a great impact on sustaining a customer and so mitigating measures have to be in place to ensure its effectiveness.

Analyzing insights at another area bothering on trust and the confidence of the customers with the Vinted brand is the security and safety of a customer product and payments if it doesn't meet the requirements and desires of the buyer. Vinted doesn't have an adequate structure to protect sellers product or buyers finances if an issue of dissatisfaction arises and either of the party needs to be refunded or the product returned. The result of this analysis showed variability in customers opinion when asked about confidence in the brand's product/service. 31% of these customers stayed neutral while there was a significant difference between respondents who just agree and those who strongly agree. This could mean that although they are loyal and have maintained confidence in the brand's offerings, some areas still need to be looked into as they in turn influence and impact on the purchasing behaviour and attitude of the customer with the brand.

Another input from the analysis of the results obtained also showed that Vinted do not have a go to centre to receive questions, inquiries or complaints and this has caused ineffectiveness in communication, proper conflict resolutions and overall customer satisfaction. Results obtained showed 48.1% respondents who agree that the brand was helpful with questions and inquiries, the result also

showed a lesser percentage of respondents who strongly agreed while some remained neutral. The results are varying and could mean that there isn't an effective system or process to further support the effective implementation of the components. This is also the case when respondents gave their opinion on if they enjoyed the brand's delivery. Straying away from the human touch hinders the proper communication between customers, could bring about distrust as well as make customers lose confidence in the brand and thus isn't an ideal technique in ensuring that the relationship marketing components are effectively implemented. The results have proved these components to impact on customer loyalty formation and therefore, this problem area has to be considered.

Moving forward, the results of the research showed the Vinted may have been ineffective in the engaging and interaction pattern and strategy adopted when relating with its customers. Communication, both in formal and informal relationships have proven to be an integral part in building long term relationships and measuring its impact to how a customer stays loyal to the brand is the core of this paper. It was observed Vinted contents that was created in the different channels that it is present on aren't engaging or interactive by this, if a post is made by the brand and customers want to ask a question or make a suggestion in a bid to interact, they are often left with less engaging response or none at all. The analysis of the outcome showed that some respondents remained neutral when trying to get their opinion of how prompt they get response from representatives. Another question also showed similar opinion of the respondents when trying to figure if they feel some sense of attachment to the brand. A customer's feeling of attachment or obligation to the brand isn't limited to just its product or service offering but could be influenced by its style of interactions and how it communicates. The contents created by Vinted are often not made to encourage interactions or engagements so despite its potential reach, customers might not feel that closeness and thus may influence their behaviour.

Discussing another area that was observed from the analysis of these results is the provision of different variety of services or events that grow and strengthens the commitment, obligation and guarantees the overall satisfaction of customers. The outcome of the results done on this study revealed the opinion of customers when asked if they enjoyed the offerings of the brand and while a certain percentage stayed neutral and other varied, it goes to show that satisfying a customer could go beyond the traditional offering of your product but also encompass the other activities that keeps them glued with the brand and since satisfaction indicated the component with the greater impact on loyalty of customers, it means that customers paid attention to the overall offerings of the brand that includes the products, services and the community that both encourages and influences their patronages.

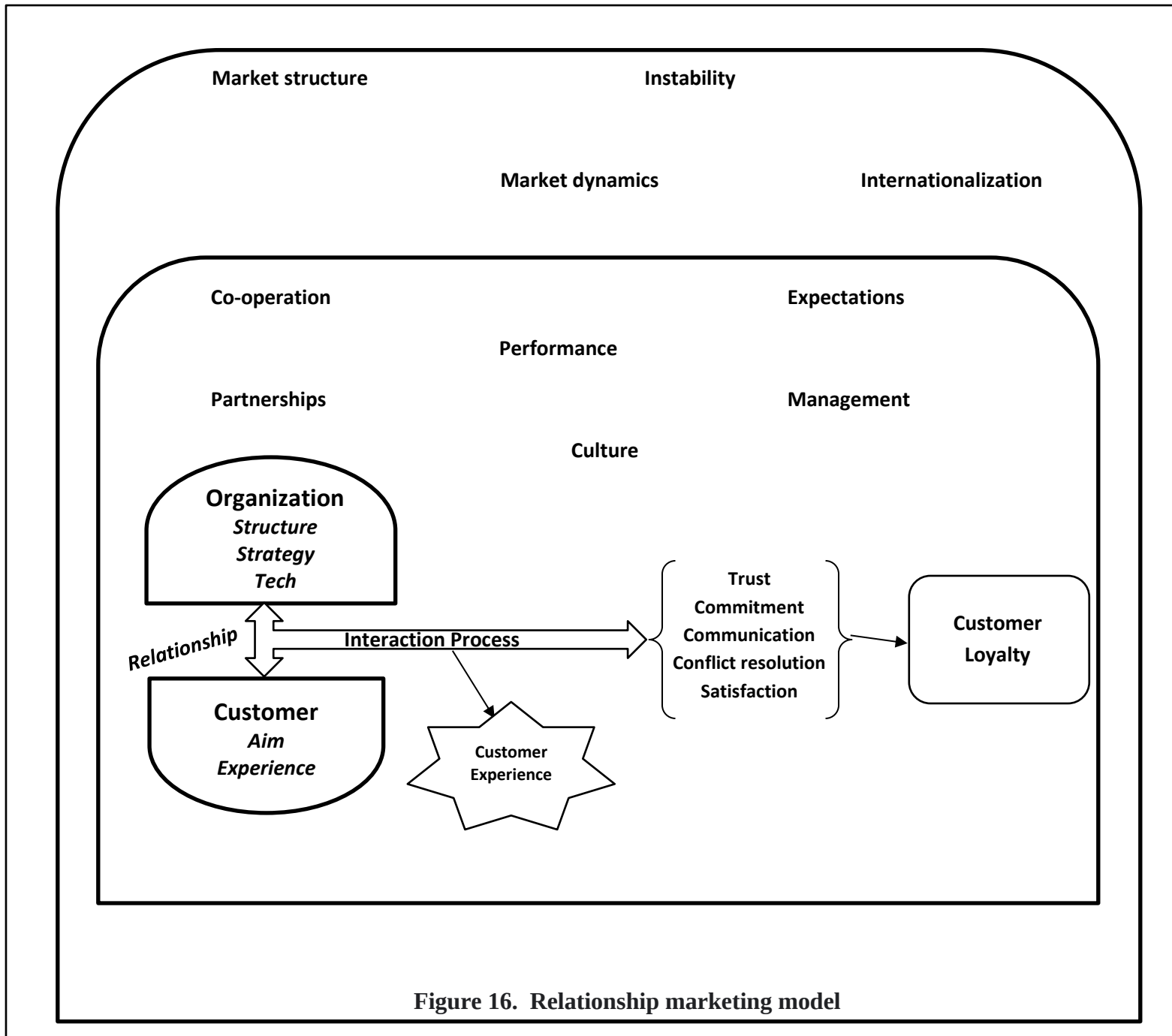
Furthermore on areas that needs to be looked into is the fact that Vinted do not have indicators or standard ways to measure the satisfaction of customers and how they percieve their offerings. Getting timely periodic information from customers is one effective way to improve the relationships and this is also effective on each of the components that make up relationship marketing. The business evironment is always changing with trends and to stay abreast with these changes, brands have to always be on the know. This research did ask respondents opinions about if the representative had a good knowledge of what they intended to ask or their complains, it also did find out if the customers will recommend the brand to relatives and friends and the results revealed varying opinions. They are no indicators or measure to know if they are on the right path and how they can adjust to remain flexible so as to apply the right technique to sustain the relationships with customers and the negligence of this is what impacts on the loyalty of customers.

Conclusively, customers basically tend to act and respond similarly towards the right implementation of the constructs of relationship marketing. The results of this research revealed clear varying opinions of respondents to what forms their loyalty and some of the factors discussed here have to be considered for effectiveness in each component. Customers want to know that they matter and are cherished, they desire to have a chance to make a difference and to be certain that their voice will be heard and presence acknowledged. Customer behavior regarding feedback, suggestions and referrals to other people or in social setting is often determined by their personal encounter or overall customer experience they had with the brand. Holding solid relationships is usually a long-drawn affair as building trust and keeping constant and necessary communication requires its strategy, technologies and technique.

3.2 Relationship marketing Model

In addressing the measures that can be taken to ensure effective relationship marketing done by brands, they have to consider the environmental, socio-economic, political factors amongst other factors that can impact relationships between brands and their customers. For example, we can take the case of the Covid 19 Pandemic that plague the world and affected the global business environment. This forced businesses, some of which even didn't have their core business activities online to quickly adapt processes and alternatives to manage their operations online. In so doing, management of relationships were affected, and brands had to find ways and strategies to still provide quality and enjoyable services for their customer in any way possible while trying to manage the company's economic value. Other external factors can equally directly or indirectly affect the effectiveness of relationships between brands

and their customer and therefore must be put into perspective when formulating strategies. This model demonstrates the different factors and how the impacts relationships with customers.



The Figure above illustrates a relationship marketing model that identifies the various factors to be taken into consideration when establishing and managing effective relationship marketing. Unlike formal relationships, business relationships between brand and customer must identify and take into

consideration internal and external factors that directly or indirectly impact forming and sustaining relationships with customers.

The diagram demonstrates that when organization wants to establish relationships, it adopts a planned organizational structure with its vision and value and then follows up with a strategy or technique and adopts the technology best suited to achieve the goal while on the other hand customers often times have their aims and anticipation of the outcome of the relational transaction. Studies also shows that customers attributes experiences of previous or similar brands when forming relationships, so this allows for some form of comparison when forming and managing the relationship. The interaction process which can be translated to all the activities and purchase action between the brand and the customer makes up for the experience that the customers is going to gain with the brand so all the adopted strategy and technique that is utilized by the brand in this chain allows for the overall customer experience. It is in the process that the components of relationships are determined because the actions and inactions of the brand constitutes for if the customer will trust, show commitment and be satisfied with the brand's offerings.

Successful implementation of the different components as shown in this model ultimately leads to satisfaction and like the analysis in this study have shown, satisfaction indicates the component with the highest impact on the attitude and behavior of customers as regards their loyalty. All of the actions during the interaction process from the communication, ways of handling conflict and its resolution allows the customer to trust and show commitment in response. However, some internal factors could influence and affect the effective implementation. Factors such as management, partnerships, expectations, organizational culture, performance could directly or indirectly impact its effectiveness. Having a management that have a have a robust plan and remains flexible and innovative could impact on how the brand communicates with its customers. Also, partnerships are encouraged while establishing relationships with customers but a con show that third parties may or may not follow the structure and strategy planned and adopted by the brand. What this means is that third parties can influence and impact the implementation of effective business relationship but sometimes may be out of the direct control of the brand. However, it can be managed and measured. Other internal factors like the performance and effort shown by the brand, the expectations of the customer and the organizational culture are also to be considered when forming business relationship. These factors play a big role when giving a sense of feeling to customers. The performance level, the values of the brand and what culture they practice affects its output and ultimately will influence the behavior. Also often times the expectations of customers is a

factor that can influence effective relationship marketing. The brand through technology and learned behavior can measure and predict the actions of customers. This way they are able to offer personalized or customized product/services, know what offerings are tailored and unique to a customer and so on but while these also cannot be guaranteed it can be effectively measured and managed and evidently impacts on the satisfaction and ultimately on the loyalty of customers.

The diagram also illustrates external factors that directly or indirectly would influence and impact effective relationship marketing when dealing with customers. Factors like market structure, Instability, social systems, internationalization amongst others also play a huge role in how business relationships are formed and sustained. Brands in certain industries have to study the structure and dynamics of the market to know how best to adapt and respond to trends to suit their customers. Also, brands have to consider the instability of the business environment in general, a lot of things change over time and brand's strategy in implementing relationships have to remain flexible and have contingency plans to respond to those trends. This also applies to internalizations and social systems as building relationships although structural could so be heterogeneous. Relationships between customers sometimes may be different and unique depending on the needs so brand must maintain flexibility in the entire process to be able to achieve effectiveness in the output.

3.3 Interconnectedness of the six marketing models

To further examine and discuss how best to effectively establish and sustain business relationships in the long run, we must take a look at the different marketing models and practices that are applicable but not limited to relationship marketing. There are six marketing models in relationship marketing and these models help businesses to study, understand and analyze their key stakeholders and domain that may be essential to them. In order for a brand to grow, sustain and ensure competitive advantage, the relation between the internal and external environment has to be adequately maintained. Through the understanding of the six marketing models, organization can find the opportunities and externalities in each of them which give an edge for effective implementation. We will briefly discuss them,

Customer Markets – This represents and contains the entirety of people that buy products/service from the business. They can be referred to as customers or intermediaries, so they are considered the most vital entity in any business. Adopting effective strategy to keep people in the market loyal is the ultimate goal of business as they directly influence and impact organization's decisions and strategy.

Influencer Markets – This market includes of all the people i.e. third parties and stakeholder that posses the ability to influence the marketing environment or industry that your brand is in and actively competes in. They can possibly positively or negatively influence people depending on the experience gotten from the brand. Good business relationship must be established and sustained with people in this market as they provide feedback and suggestions to relatives, friends and social groups which can impact on the behavior and how the brand is perceived.

Referral Markets – Referrals are an active source to generate new leads in business. Often times people make purchases because they were referred and recommended by relatives or friends. People in this market offer suggestions and advice that can greatly influence other customers to patronize your brand. This term can also be referred to as “word of mouth”. It is very common and as well very essential so in ensuring customer satisfaction brand have to ensure effectiveness in this market and make it a vital part of their relational strategy.

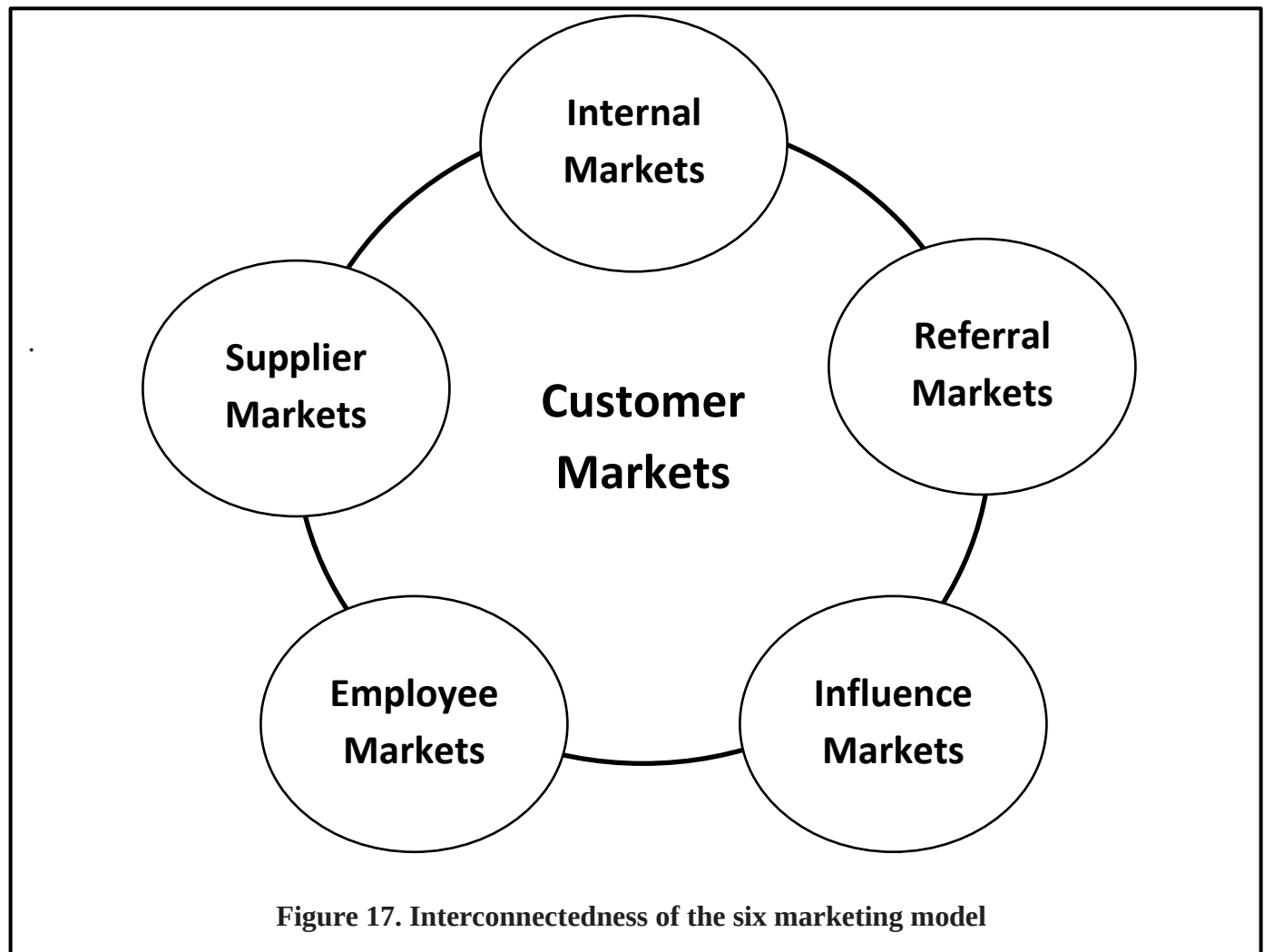
Supplier markets – People in this marketing can be classified as partners of the organization or brand i.e. people provide services or product for the organization. Developing and sustaining a good allegiance with them is crucial to effective relationship marketing. These people play a vital role in the smooth operation of different services that may be needed and valued by your customers so maintaining great relationships will be highly mutually beneficial to both parties.

Employee Markets – People in this market play an essential role and describes a focal point for relationship marketing. Recruiting and maintain the best people who holds and operates on the values of the organization is an important part of relationship marketing. People in this market affects profitability and influences the business environment of the organization so efforts must be made to recruit people who are skilled, talented, enthusiastic and experienced in the various fields/departments that they may be active in the business. Recall that in our analysis, customers were asked questions bothering on the attitude and response gotten from representatives such as if they are replied to in a polite and prompt manner, this shows that good training is essential to having the best people for the job as this constitutes effectiveness in relationship marketing.

Internal Markets – This market refers to all the people including employees and customers within the firm. Organizing people with shared core values and harmony is what reflects in the attitude when discharging duties. People in this market such as employees posses the ability to determine the structure, style and ethics in an organization and it is important to support and build relational corporate structure

as it would be impactful in the sustained success in the competitive business environment. Organizations must understand this impact and make efforts to harness and support customer oriented long-term goals and resolve issues regarding conflict of interest accordingly to ensure a sustainable working culture.

Below is a diagram illustrating the interconnectedness of the six marketing models



Source: Lindgreen, Adam (2004).

3.4 Recommendations for effective relationship marketing that impacts customer loyalty

Vinted offers a platform for customers to display their product and offer varying services to its users. As a service industry, it has to be keenly invested in the relational approaches with its customers in order to guarantee their satisfaction and sustain them for a long time. I will discuss some of the

recommendations for the Vinted brand and how to improve on each of the components that formulates customer loyalty.

The first and essential recommendation for Vinted that will impact on trust and every other component is to increase and enhance its communication and interaction with its customers. Improved and increased communication with its customers definitely enhances the sense of belongingness, bring about increased awareness and visibility and afford the customers a feeling of closeness with the brand and also lets them know the customers better to be able to provide tailored needs. Vinted can improve communication through advertising, campaigns, congratulatory wishes etc. to customers. Another way to enhance and maintain trust with customers to ensure and develop stronger customer protection strategies as customer have indicated that they rely and have confidence in the brand, Vinted have to in turn make sure they buyers of the product receive the desired quality of service and the sellers are protected of their revenue.

In enhancing commitment of the customers with the brand, Vinted can formulate and create loyalty programs and campaigns to initiate a call to action for customer to continually patronize the brand. Loyalty programs can be in form of vouchers, discounts or even gift even though it is conditional. This will bring about increased interactions with the brand, a sense of attachment and a positive from the customers that they are rewarded for their continued patronage.

Communication as identified is an integral part of the relationship marketing construct and also impacts on other components as well. To improve on this aspect, the brand should develop and enhance engagement through its digital channels. A strong media presence is vital to any marketing approach. It simply cannot be ignored. Vinted have to keep people abreast about its varieties of product/services and any other related content that might interest their audience. As an industry that is into fashion and other household items, more contents and promotions have to be done on the media space to keep the interactions and engagement of the customers alive. Content analysis done in this study shows that some of the media channels are seldomly used, some weekly, some even monthly and the channels have wide reach and can be used to even recruit new customer that may come in contact with the contents displayed. If valuable contents are supplied to customers on a scheduled basis, it develops their interest and can influence relational behavior.

Additionally, to improve on the effective communication between the brand and the customers, the human touch is still very important for any business. Vinted should reduce too much dependence on

IT and automated bots and adopt human means to respond and resolve issues with customers. A helpline for customers shouldn't be too far or take too long before an actual human respond. Why this could be quite complex and ambiguous but it achievable with proper planning and strategy in place. Customers who wants to communicate with the brand to offer feedback, inquiries or even complaints shouldn't always be met with bots or automated messages for most of the time but in a timely manner, they have someone respond to them. That way, there's a sense of responsibility and enhanced interaction.

In dealing with issues bothering on conflict and complaints resolution, the brand needs to adopt new technology that will handle time management as well as keep track of frequent issues that re occur. This way it is easier and time efficient to handle and manage. As the customer base and reach for the brand increases, they will be more needs to attend to the issue concerning customers transactions and inquiries. To better improve concerns of prompt response time, Vinted can create a separate hotline and email contact that will receive and attend to this promptly. The advantage of this is that customers both existing and new ones may contact the company for different reasons according to their needs and desires some of which may not actually be complaints made. This makes it complex for customers with pressing issues not being attended to or resolved promptly so a dedicated channel to absorb and resolve customer complaints will be ideal to maintaining a long-term relationship also keeping track of customer database, understanding the capabilities of customers to enhance predictive models and all of the processes involves the input of technology to ensure its smooth running so the right technology must be adopted to better influence the impact of the components on customers.

Also, in suggesting effective solutions to ensuring effective communication and proper ways of conflict resolutions, Vinted should also utilize and expand its social media channels to be able receive this information faster. Considering the age groups of the main customers of the brand, they are more inclined to interacting and engaging through the use of social media channels as it appears to be easy to use, faster and flexible. So, utilizing the channels to be able to allow customers send and respond to whatever they may want to will be effective and also enhance the prompt nature of the brand communication techniques.

Satisfaction as a marketing component as proven by this study is the one with highest impact on the loyalty of customer so in order to stay in the know and get abreast with the trends and needs of the customers, Vinted has implore customer market research such as surveys, suggestions boxes or other techniques to get information from their customers. The markets are always changing, and surveys serves as an effective relationship marketing technique to learn and analyze what the customers wants and what

the brand could improve and develop on. That way you get to know the customers better and easily adapt to changes easily. Conducting market research is mutually beneficial to the both parties as customers appreciate when they see changes in the feedback they provided, and this can positively affect and influence their behavior and attitude with the brand. Another solution to guarantee customer satisfaction of having standard recovery strategy of customer's product or services rendered if it does not meet expectations of the buyer. This way both the buyer and the seller are protected which will impact trust, commitment and in turn foster a feeling of satisfaction with the brand's offerings.

Another recommendation offered to Vinted is the diversity in languages in their overall business operations i.e. in communicating with customers, providing information through their digital channels etc. As the market for Vinted keeps growing, there is a need to infuse other diverse language as English to afford foreign users the opportunity to try and patronize their products/services. Vinted is present in 11 countries and still expanding and the use of diverse languages encourage prospective customers to not have the need to find translations or get confused when they visit the platform of Vinted.

Conclusively, another recommendation vital to Vinted is to establish more partners to work, network and collaborate with. Vinted can outsource some of its operation to bodies that have shared objectives and knowledge. Establishing and maintaining relations with important players in your business environment increases awareness, performance and effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

After the theoretical analysis, the following conclusions can be made:

- ✓ Relationship marketing is an essential part of every marketing strategy and for brands to survive and sustain their operations in the fierce competitive business environment, effective relational marketing is what guarantees the loyalty of customers.
- ✓ All of components of relationship marketing are interconnected and complement each other and all of them have to be strategically applied for it to impact on the loyalty of customers
- ✓ The benefits of a successful and effective application of relationship is mutually shared amongst all the parties involved. As such it is beneficial to the organization as well as the customers and even extend to partners and third parties.
- ✓ Based on the different views of different authors, it is still revealed that customer is still king in every business setting and organization have to creates and adopt customer service approach in their marketing strategy to remain and sustain themselves in the market.
- ✓ Relationship marketing is an investment that pays off in the long-run and despite its complexities, it is cheaper and effective to develop and maintain existing customers than to recruit news ones. So, organizations have to be keen on providing real value products/services to keep the customers satisfied.
- ✓ The impact of effective relational marketing is visible and can be measure through increased profitability, feedback from customers and immunity from switching
- ✓ Customer's turn to natural advertisers and influencers when they are satisfied with a company's offerings. When a customer gains an overall pleasant customer experience with a brand, they would usually recommend, persuade and recruit new customers for the brand at no cost.
- ✓ The success of relationship marketing is largely dependent on how relational marketing programmes are strategically utilized as that creates the bond that allows the customer committed and loyal to the brand.
- ✓ Since loyalty is an emotional thing rather than logical, it can only be gotten from the satisfactory experiences obtained by the customer.
- ✓ Customers who come to brand because of a recommendation or referral from a family or friend are more likely to be loyal customer than ones that was recruited through an organization's promotion and campaigns

Based on the analysis done in this study, the following conclusions can be made:

- ✓ Customers are unique and as such have unique needs or perception about a brand which is brought about from the personal customer experience they have gained with the brand, that is why it is essential to know your customer better to be able to offer tailored needs to have them satisfied
- ✓ Overall customer satisfaction is the key element that impact greatly on the loyalty of customers, so organization's strategy(s) have to be tailored in guaranteeing that it is achieved
- ✓ In analyzing the different relationship marketing components, it was clear that despite the interconnectedness of them, there is some that give a high impact feel and the ones with a lower impact to the loyalty of the customers.
- ✓ Customers pay attention to the little details when interacting with brands. The approach in communicating, the conflict resolution attitude and time is all part of what influencing their behavior with the brand so brand must also pay attention to this.
- ✓ Continuous customer engagement and interactions is essential in establishing and sustaining the relationships in the long run.
- ✓ When customer enjoy the offerings of a brand's product/service it gives them the immunity to switch, will continue the purchase with the brand and recommend to friends and this is what distinguishes them from non-loyal customers.
- ✓ Prompt communication and feedback are important parts of the relational construct practice as it boosts confidence and trust in the customers.
- ✓ The analysis indicates that every of the component of relationship marketing measured were as important as the other as respondents reacts differently based off on personal experience and which impacts them the more.

Based on the recommendations made, we can conclude that:

- ✓ Vinted needs to improve more in effectively communicating with its customers. They have to device means and use new technology to actively connect and learn more about their customers.
- ✓ They also have to make more customer market research to stay in the know of what customer needs and to better understanding and learn best approaches to meet them as it also helps to mitigate against uncertainties.

- ✓ The brand didn't have a technique to keep customer committed and obligated which is why it was recommended to adopt loyalty programs and campaigns for its customers to boost retention rate.
- ✓ They also need more partners with shared values and objectives to enhance awareness and promote effectiveness.
- ✓ An effective strategy has been adopted in handling the questions and inquiries as well as dealing with issues/complaints and with that a separate department was recommended to ensure prompt response and guarantee efficiency.
- ✓ They also need to properly train and motivate more employees as they reflect the image of the brand when communicating with customers.
- ✓ They have to be more creative with its contents that are aimed at engaging with its customers. It was recommended to increase its communication level with more interesting and engaging contents that will make the customers more involved.
- ✓ There is enough use of technology or strategy to verify and guarantee the quality of the products displayed in its platform and therefore have to adopt means to make sure that it offers value as promised in the value proposition to keep the customer retained and satisfied
- ✓ Appropriate safety measures have to be used to protect both buyers and sellers for product/services offered that do not meet the desires of the customers. Customer have to be guaranteed that their monies or products are safe in any case.
- ✓ Innovation is key to staying relevant and to gain competitive advantage which is why it was recommended to use effective communication means like social media to reduce time and utilize its reach.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1

Dear Respondent,

This questionnaire is done by a master's student of Vytautas Magnus University and it focuses on examining the impact of relationship marketing on customer loyalty.

Relationship marketing refers to the various ways and techniques businesses and brands establish and sustain business relationship with its customers to keep them loyal and frequent buyers. For this survey, we are analyzing the case of Vinted which is an online clothing retail store that provides a platform for buyers and sellers to meet and sell their product or services.

This survey is anonymous, and the data collected will be used for statistical analysis. Thank you

1. I rely on Vinted to deliver a great product / service *Trust

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
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2. I have confidence in the product/ service offered by Vinted *Trust

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

3. I am a customer of Vinted because I feel a strong attachment to it *Commitment

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

4. I would not leave vinted right now because I have a sense of obligation to it *Commitment

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

5. The representative responded to me promptly and politely *communication

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

6. The customer support representative was helpful in handling my questions/inquiries
*communication

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

7. How would you rate Vinted's customer support representative in terms of resolving your issues? *Conflict handling

	Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Disagree 5
it takes a good amount of time to resolve issues					
The representative had a good knowledge of my complain					

8. I enjoy the product/Services offered by Vinted*Satisfaction

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

9. Vinted has a good quality and delivery of service when you buy/sell products*Satisfaction

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

10. Gender

- Male
- Female

11. Age group

- 0-19
- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50 and above

12. I will recommend Vinted to my friends/relatives *attitudinal loyalty

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

13. I use Vinted to buy/sell clothing more than once a month *behavioral loyalty

Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
------------------------	---------------	--------------	------------	---------------------

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Forums

Information about Vinted

Title	Last Post	Topics	Posts
Forum Rules The Vinted Forum is a place where members of our community come together to publicly discuss and help each other by sharing their experiences and advice.	catherineclara16 5 years ago	7	117
Welcome girls! Introduce yourself :) » Vinted volunteers	italia_cam 9 minutes ago	46511	686460
NEW IN VINTED [ARCHIVED] This category is now archived and the support team is no longer involved. All announcements on new Vinted features will be posted here: https://www.vinted.fr/tableau-de-bord	ellay3332 3 months ago	17	2039
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS BETWEEN VINTIES Here, ask your question on the site: a vintie will certainly come through to help you! Also consult the Help Center to expand your knowledge of Vinted and get to know Vinted like the back of	lafouinette71 9 minutes ago	141519	1039681

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Annex 4

	1	2	3	4	5
I rely on Vinted to deliver a great product / service	5 (1.8%)	10 (3.7%)	57 (20.9%)	117 (42.8%)	84 (30.8%)
I have confidence in the product/ service offered by Vinted	3 (1.1%)	5 (1.8%)	54 (19.6%)	133 (48.4)	80 (29.1)
I am a customer of Vinted because I feel a strong attachment to it	8 (2.9%)	23 (8.4%)	87 (39.6%)	118 (42.9%)	39 (14.2%)
I would not leave vinted right now because I have a sense of obligation to it	2 (0.7%)	38 (14.1%)	28 (10.4%)	84 (31.1%)	118 (43.7%)
The representative responded to me promptly and politely	5 (1.8%)	3 (1.1%)	55 (20.3%)	133 (49.1%)	75 (27.7%)
The customer support representative was helpful in handling my questions/inquiries	5 (1.8%)	5 (1.8%)	56 (20.5%)	131 (48.1%)	76 (27.8%)
it takes a good amount of time to resolve issues	10 (4.1%)	35 (14.5%)	78 (32.4%)	91 (37.8%)	27 (11.2%)
The representative had a good knowledge of my complain	8 (3%)	6 (2.3%)	63 (23.8%)	108 (40.7%)	80 (30.2%)
Vinted has a good quality and delivery of service when you buy/sell products	0	5 (1.9%)	57 (21.1%)	118 (43.7%)	90 (33.3%)
I enjoy the product/Services offered by Vinted	0	6 (2.2%)	51 (18.6%)	130 (47.4%)	87 (31.8%)
I will recommend Vinted to my friends/relatives	4 (1.5%)	10 (3.7%)	49 (18%)	110 (40.4%)	99 (36.4%)
I use Vinted to buy/sell clothing more than once a month	10 (3.6%)	38 (13.8%)	71 (25.7%)	91 (33%)	66 (23.9%)