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Thesis abstract

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Sustainability is an emerging phenomenon in the modern world, and it has been an indispensable concern in customer relationships due to evolutionary changes in consumer demand. Hence, this study investigates how to maintain a sustainable customer relationship. It follows subjectivism and interpretivism research philosophies based on ontology, epistemology, and the constructivist paradigm. Then, it applies an inductive approach, a qualitative research strategy, and a case study research design. Consequently, primary data was collected through surveys of four employees and eight customers of a case company in Bangladesh. In addition, two executives were interviewed using an open-ended questionnaire via Microsoft Forms and Teams. Finally, the study accumulates the data to make a pattern of knowledge using thematic analysis.

The research findings indicate that sustainable customer relationships mean customer satisfaction with business ethics, better experience, product quality, and services that encourage customers to return to the business. Challenges include fulfilling customer expectations, supply chain complexities, and business competition, which hinder long-term sustainability. The company applies a customer-centric strategy to overcome these challenges, including customer engagement, personalized customer support, trust, customer advocacy, loyalty programs, and digital shopping experiences. The study suggests that social exchange theory must consider cultural and social norms in the exchange, along with costs and benefits.

The study suggests that companies must focus on customer-centric mindsets like listening to customers and solving their problems. Likewise, they must provide more value than the cost the consumer pays. The government should also maintain consumer rights legislation for sustainable customer relationships.

¹ Keywords: customer relationship management, customer satisfaction, sustainability

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Terms and Abbreviations

CRM	Customer Relationship Management
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
MIS	Management Information System
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
SET	Social Exchange Theory

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the thesis topic, beginning with its relevance and importance to how companies achieve sustainable customer relationships. It then highlights the background of the research. Then, it provides research gaps by reviewing earlier studies, the study purpose, and the research objectives, considering the available earlier literature. Furthermore, it elaborates on the scope of this study. Lastly, it discusses the key concepts and outlines the framework of this study.

1.1 Background

Sustainable customer relationship management (CRM) is a relatively innovative concept. It addresses the issues or complaints of customers and provides a proper solution based on the customers' evolving needs. This achieves customer satisfaction and enforces customer loyalty. Sustainable CRM is essential for businesses to thrive and survive in a globally competitive market. Especially for businesses that are involved in the online market (Li et al., 2023). Additionally, businesses that focus on customer retention must focus on customer relationship-building. Thus, relationship marketing can enhance customer satisfaction through good quality service and product delivery. If businesses create an engagement with customers, it increases customer satisfaction and results in a sustainable relationship (Seturi, 2024).

Mohammadi et al. (2023) stated that happy customers often become loyal customers of a company by positively influencing the customers through green marketing strategies, and listening to customers' concerns. Also, presenting an environment-friendly brand and distributing products or services that are not harmful to the environment increases customer satisfaction and loyalty. This initiate word-of-mouth promotions through satisfied customers, proving the brand's satisfaction and quality. This can achieve higher sustainability and customer retention due to customer satisfaction. Then, customer advocacy impacts customer promotions and word-of-mouth recommendations that measure customers' satisfaction, loyalty, and intention to recommend (Putera & Famiola, 2024). It indicates that satisfied customers are more willing to engage with the company and suggest their products or services to acquaintances. This indicates how customer satisfaction can achieve brand loyalty and sustainable customer relations. Gremler et al. (2020) also stated that increasing social interactions with customers can positively impact the customer experience. Relational benefits for customers can boost both customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Moreover, sustainable customer relationships mutually benefit companies and their customers (Vágási et al., 2002). This provides insight into how customer relationships with companies can be sustainable. A sustainable relationship between customers and businesses should be mutually beneficial. It means the customers benefit from the product and services they receive, and the company gives the product or service to the customer by earning financial profit, customer loyalty, and a good reputation. Sustainable customer relationships can be achieved through loyal customers who are likely to engage with the specific company for longer, thus making it sustainable. Companies must maintain sustainable customer relationships, especially in a competitive global market where customers can switch from brand to brand if unsatisfied. This is an excruciating challenge for companies in retaining customers. This implies that achieving satisfaction is one of the primary goals of companies that compete in a global market. Companies that maintain effective customer relationships are more likely to achieve higher customer satisfaction. Maintaining customer relationships can provide insights into customers' expectations of that company's product or service, impacting customer satisfaction. CRM is an effective tool that helps companies manage customer connections and achieve that precise outcome. It helps companies with customer involvement and customizing their products or services to meet customer expectations, leading to greater satisfaction.

Additionally, Oluseye et al. (2014) stated that maintaining customer relationships through CRM is important in achieving customer satisfaction, leading to customer retention and recommendations to other customers. It implies that satisfied customers are likely to engage more with the dedicated company, which leads to organizational expansion while achieving sustainable customer relations. In addition, customer relationship management means maintaining and retaining customers those has the potential to be faithful and profitable, since the business success strongly relies on them (Rahman et al., 2021). Additionally, CRM is a necessary tool for maintaining sustainable customer relationships and leads to customer retention through customer satisfaction. In this case, understanding the customer needs and tailoring the service to achieve their satisfaction by focusing on them, taking feedback, and implementing their recommendations on their service. According to Soltani et al. (2018), effective customer relations depend on information technology, organizational capacity, customer orientation, and customer knowledge management. Successful CRM leads to organizational performance, fostering growth and sustainable customer relationships. It only improves the potential of good customer relations in a company focusing on customer engagement.

By implementing these factors, CRM tools can more effectively engage with customers to understand customer behavior and requirements. It helps the company devise a proper strategy to maintain sustainable customer relationships. Moreover, managing good customer relations and a good corporate reputation has a positive influence on customer loyalty, as well as customer satisfaction, which drives the interconnection among customer relationship management, customer loyalty, and organizational commitment (Khan et al., 2020). The previous studies claim that CRM is tied to customer loyalty and a company's commitment. In addition, customer satisfaction is the pathway to achieving customer loyalty. This is a goal CRM does achieve, which can lead to customer recommendations resulting in customer relationship sustainability. Again, Ulu (2022) mentioned that CRM can modify services to meet customers' needs and wants, which could lead to customer satisfaction and retention. This provides insights into customer behavior and can be utilized to become a customer's choice of brand.

1.2 Research gaps and aim

A few recent studies have been reviewed on sustainable customer relationship management (CRM). For instance, Seturi (2024) explored the relationship between customer satisfaction and relationship marketing. That research primarily focused on existing businesses' theoretical perspectives and practices. However, the research does not have empirical validation through primary data. A detailed exploration of CRM strategies catered to various industries and market conditions is essential. Furthermore, that research prioritizes loyalty programs like point accumulation. On the other hand, it does not evaluate the long-term effectiveness of loyalty programs compared to tailored customer engagement strategies. Even though the research mentioned digital transformation, it does not sufficiently address the impact of new technologies on customer retention.

That research is mainly based on secondary sources, which limit the realistic insights into customer satisfaction and behavior. Moreover, as the research focused only on the Georgia market, that's why the findings did not address the challenges of a diverse business environment. The research might include mixed data comparing traditional and digital relationship-building strategies in various markets. Analyzing customer psychology and emotional engagement in long-term relationships could provide a better understanding of customer retention. On the contrary, Akter (2024) examined the strategies for creating long-term customer relationships, maintaining transparent communication, emphasizing trust, and focusing on innovation.

Additionally, that research demonstrates how businesses can increase customer loyalty and retention through unique experiences and engagement. Also, that research determines that tailored interactions, loyalty programs, and constant innovation contribute significantly to long-term customer connections. Even so, the research relies on the theoretical discussion, restricting empirical data. Additionally, the research does consider various industries. However, it does not address the sustainability and cultural influences on relationship marketing. A diverse and data-driven approach integrating various industries, digital engagement trends, and multiple customer demographics is crucial to strengthen the research. Similarly, Kosasih et al. (2024) analyzed sustainable customer loyalty in petrochemical industries while integrating corporate image, service innovation, and product quality, making customer satisfaction a mediator. That research concludes by emphasizing the product quality's direct effect on loyalty through achieving customer satisfaction.

Moreover, that research also suggests that the long-term impact of service innovation and the significance of corporate image have an impact on customer satisfaction and sustainable customer relationships. It is insightful, but the research has some limitations. The sample size is relatively small, a total of 120 corporate clients of a specific company, which limits generalizability; since it is in a specific industry, the data gathered has a possible bias in the data stream. In addition, it also overlooks the role of sustainability in manipulating customer perceptions and does not consider CRM initiatives. To overcome these constraints, the research could integrate a longitudinal approach to track customer loyalty patterns and integrate a more generalized sample across various industries. Likewise, the research could analyze digital strategies and sustainability as key drivers. By including these dimensions, the research should focus on developing a more enriched framework to enhance sustainable customer loyalty in a dynamic business environment.

On the flip side, Li et al. (2023) deeply examined the impact of sustainable CRM in online shopping, mainly looking into the effectiveness of management information systems (MIS), customer satisfaction, loyalty, and employee behavior. The study results demonstrate that MIS, employee behavior, and customer loyalty significantly increase sustainable CRM. Meanwhile, customer satisfaction has a massive impact on CRM success. However, that research has some restraints. That research was conducted on a limited sample. There is a possibility of sample bias and lack of generalizability due to the sample being from a private company.

In addition, that research primarily focuses on technological aspects and employee-related factors. The study overlooks sustainability-driven customer behavior, ethical considerations, and long-term environmental impacts. It might include a larger sample from multiple industries to cover these gaps. In addition, that research might include sustainability metrics and analyze how customer preferences evolve toward ethical consumption, which impacts sustainable CRM. This approach might provide a better understanding of sustainable CRM's impact in creating long-term customer engagement.

In a similar stream, Ottolenghi et al. (2022) researched the interrelation of sustainability with CRM by focusing on how emerging technology assists in achieving sustainable business relationships. The research assumes that sustainability significantly impacts building CRM strategies and customer needs, focusing on the triple-bottom-line approach. In contrast, the research is limited to bibliometric data, which lacks empirical insights from customers and businesses. Furthermore, the research does not explore how firms incorporate sustainability in CRM. It is new and ongoing. Hence, there is much scope for drawing a proper inference. To cover these research constraints, researchers might include primary data from professionals in various industries, explore practical, sustainable CRM applications, and analyze customer perspectives for a more holistic understanding.

After reviewing the earlier studies, these research studies highlight a significant gap in understanding how companies maintain sustainable customer relationships. Previous research studies have explored various fundamentals of customer relationship management (CRM), including customer satisfaction, loyalty, digital transformation, and sustainability. However, there is still a need for empirical insights into diverse industries, customer demographics, and changing market trends. For instance, Seturi (2024) emphasized customer satisfaction, and Li et al. (2023) pointed out evolutionary market trends and digital transformation. Consequently, this study explores businesses' strategies to maintain sustainable customer relationships by addressing key challenges. It is significant because integrating these aspects could enhance academic literature and practical business strategies. It also offers valuable insights for companies looking to establish strong, long-term, sustainable customer relationships. Ottolenghi et al. (2022) also indicated companies' processes for establishing long-term, sustainable customer relationships.

1.3 Research question and objectives

The earlier discussion on sustainable CRM indicates that companies in the competitive global market must look for explanations for the following question: How does a company maintain a sustainable customer relationship? To answer this question, the following objectives were set systematically:

- To understand sustainable customer relationships
- To identify the challenges of sustainable customer relationships
- To find strategies for sustainable customer relationships

The three objectives were answered theoretically and empirically. The findings tried to explain the company's strategies to maintain sustainable customer relationships by overcoming the challenges. The social exchange theory (SET) was applied to guide this research. Along with that, qualitative data were collected via open-ended interviews. This empirical evaluation was appropriate because it allowed a detailed exploration of the company's and customers' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in maintaining sustainable relationships. Combining SET and empirical data provided a complete understanding of how a company maintains sustainable customer relationships.

1.4 Study scope

This study investigates the company's strategies for sustaining customer relationships and identifies challenges in achieving them. Furthermore, it provides an effective method for achieving sustainable customer relationships. According to Ottolenghi et al. (2022), CRM's relationship with sustainable customer relationships is relatively new. Maintaining sustainable customer relationships has become one of the primary objectives of globally competitive businesses, so there is much scope for research on this topic. This study primarily focuses on a clothing brand in the apparel sector situated in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This is a case company, from where the employees and clients were taken as samples for research. This study expands its findings by tracking how effective CRM strategies impact sustainable customer relationships by collecting qualitative data through open-ended questionnaires and interviews from employees and clients. The study tried to generalize the data, remove probable biases, and gather in-depth perspectives.

Four employees and eight customers were selected for open-ended questionnaires, which are surveys, and among the four employees, two were called for an interview. Data was collected through a Microsoft Forms survey to gather insights directly from participants, and respondents answered open-ended questions. The study used Microsoft Teams for interviews. This approach enables a clearer view of customer experiences and perspectives. The research is based on empirical data, and thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and trends. Under the focal lenses of the social exchange theory (SET) frame, the study focuses on CRM with cost-benefit analysis that customers have with the businesses, focusing on the factors that motivate creating a sustainable relationship between the customers and businesses. The research was conducted for five months to gather and observe data and analyze the information. The geographical scope is limited to Dhaka in Bangladesh, and the participants are only the employees and customers of the case company.

1.5 Important concepts

Table 1 explains the key concepts of this study: sustainable customer relationships, customer relationship management (CRM), customer satisfaction, and XYZ.

Table 1. Key concepts.

Terms	Explanation	Sources
Sustainable Customer Relationships	A relationship is mutually profitable or beneficial for the customer and the product or service provider.	(Vágási et al., 2002)
Customer Relationship Management (CRM)	Customer relationship management involves obtaining and retaining customers by tracking their service progress, gathering and utilizing their feedback, and catering to their needs.	(Rahman et al., 2021)
Customer Satisfaction	Catering to customers' needs can achieve customer satisfaction. For example, customer expectations can be maintained by maintaining proper relationships, tracking their progress, and making changes based on their progress.	(Altinay et al., 2024)
XYZ	XYZ Company is a selected clothing brand for the case study. Data for the study is gathered through interviews and surveys with its employees.	The company's name remains confidential.

1.6 Development of the research

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one introduces the research topic, followed by chapter two, which analyzes theoretical perspectives on maintaining sustainable customer relationships. Chapter three outlines the research methodology, and chapter four provides a general overview of the company case. Chapters five and six present the results, findings, and discussion. Lastly, chapter seven summarizes the findings and their implications.

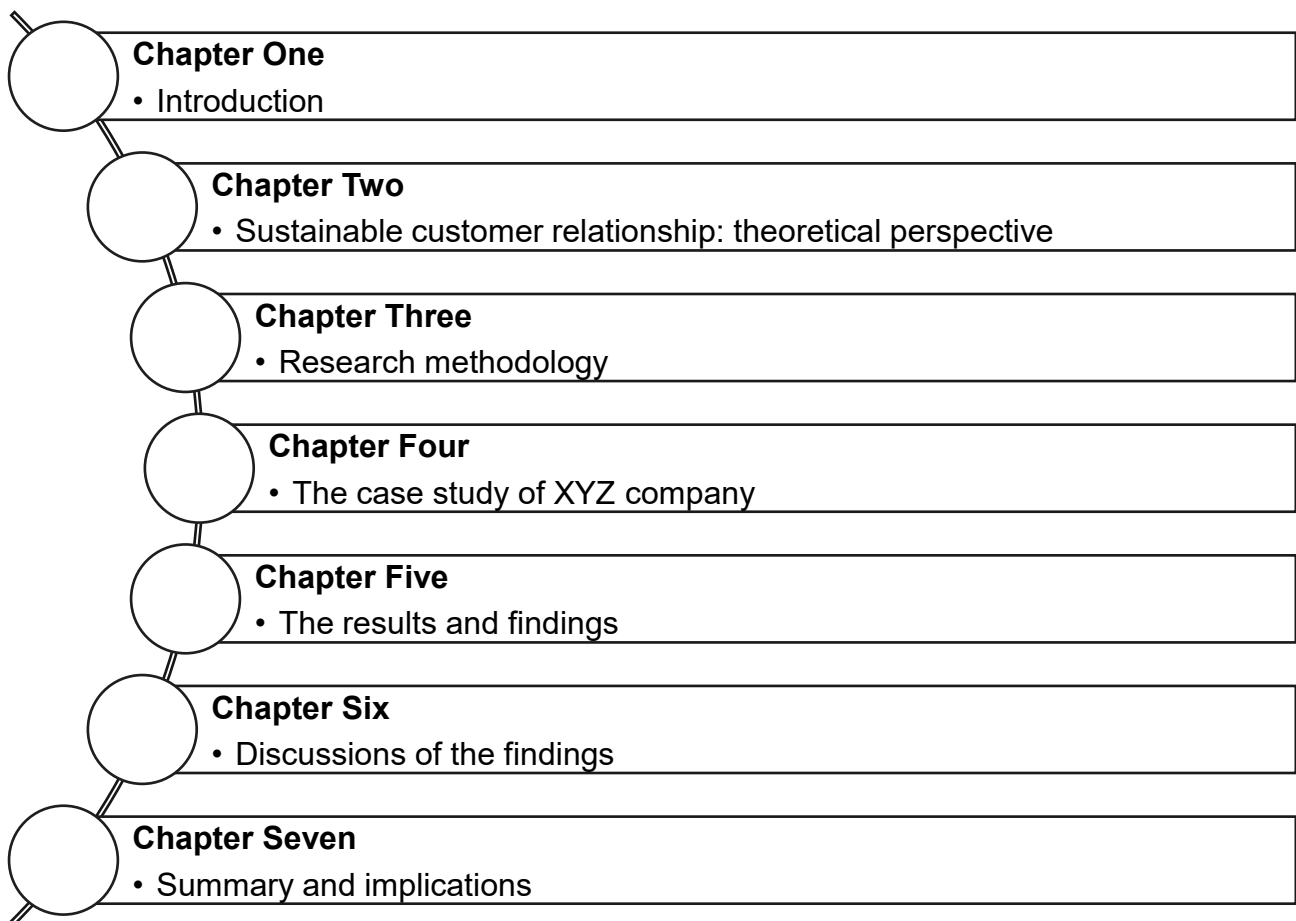


Figure 1. Structure of the study.

2 SUSTAINABLE CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter explains theoretical viewpoints on sustainable customer relationships, focusing on social exchange theory (SET). It is relevant as it explains how the interactions between businesses and customers are sustained over time through a balance of costs and benefits. The section also defines sustainable customer relationships, explores the strategies contributing to their long-term success, and discusses the challenges companies face in maintaining them. The subsequent segments provide a detailed explanation of these aspects and their importance to the research question.

2.1 Social exchange theory (SET)

Social exchange theory (SET) is an important concept in which everything is valued in terms of costs and benefits (Homans, 1958). This theory takes social interaction in a linear, simplistic paradigm, which is classified into costs and benefits. In a relationship or a social interaction, a person invests time, resources, and mental capabilities, valued as the cost, and what that person gets in return as rewards, e.g., prestige, recognition, trust, resources, and bonds. The purpose of the theory is to explore the pattern of natural human psychological behavior towards anything. It explains how humans maximize rewards at a minimal cost, even in social interactions. If the costs exceed the benefits, they look for alternatives; if the benefits balance the costs, they tend to stay and continue the relationship. This theory can provide insights into relationships. Social exchange theory mainly explores people's interactions as matters of exchange regarding costs and rewards in the behavioral sciences and sociology framework. Its origins are from psychological and economic models, and social exchange theory evolved into a broader theoretical framework, adopting anthropology, political science, organizational behavior, and multiple domains from various angles (Emerson, 1976).

SET implies that human interactions are focused on rational calculations, such as costs and rewards. It is more like the actions of each individual, motivated by something in return (Blau, 1986). This indicates that everyone engaged in exchanges focuses on gaining benefits as much as possible at a minimal cost. Also, exchange behavior is highlighted by principles that integrate psychology with SET (Homans, 1958). This promotes the perception that individuals tend to increase their expected utility, especially from an economic perspective.

On the contrary, Cropanzano et al. (2002) argued that social exchanges, which are shaped through sequential transactions, guide behavior through obligation and trust. In addition, satisfaction and trust influence customer engagement regarding value co-creation (Farhana, 2021). Meanwhile, this rationalist framework faced many criticisms. According to Zafirovski (2005), the reliance upon the rational choice assumption of SET is a problem because emotion, structural constraints, and social norms often drive human behavior more than properly calculated social exchanges. Furthermore, Emerson (1976) presumed that social actions are always self-interested and intentional. In addition to that, SET's conceptual uncertainty, especially in differentiating between social and economic exchanges, is criticized (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Similarly, SET is very simplistic in explaining human behavior; motivation drives customers and employees rather than punishments and rewards.

A crucial strength of SET is its capacity to explain reciprocity in human interactions. This principle states that individuals who receive benefits feel obligated to return them. This principle is implied in various ways, for example, through gift-giving, maintaining workplace relationships, and different political systems (Emerson, 1976). Based on this perspective, SET provides a strong explanation for why social structures are occasionally sustained through mutual exchanges. Furthermore, Homans (1958) suggested that individuals continue the reinforcement principles of reciprocal behavior, as repeated exchanges are likely to occur due to positive reinforcements. In addition, firms that leverage SET to increase collaboration and trust among customer relationships through influence strategies (Zhou et al., 2024).

On the contrary, key factors like fairness and reciprocity maintain strong customer bonds as SET is the focal point of CRM. However, the idea of reciprocity being entirely economic, like transactions, is controversial, and most social exchanges and interactions are conducted through reward exchanges (Zafirovski, 2005). The concept known as oppositional pairs implies that research on reciprocity mainly focuses on positive constructs, leaving negative constructs, such as injustice and force, untouched (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Likewise, trust alone is not enough to influence role behaviors, such as providing feedback, which complicates the reciprocity framework of SET (Farhana, 2021). To explain long-term relationships by focusing on commitment and trust, SET reaches beyond immediate exchanges. Additionally, repeated exchanges gain trust, which leads to better and more stable relationships (Cropanzano et al., 2002). This relates to workplaces where employees receive fair treatment from their employers, leading to more outstanding organizational commitment.

Moreover, social exchange relationships are far beyond economic transactions, which involve the expectation of reciprocation in the future rather than instant rewards (Blau, 1986). Also, trust-based exchanges often lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty, emphasizing the importance of SET in business relationships (Yi & Gong, 2009). On the contrary, SET's exchange models cannot explain commitment and trust. Moreover, positive and negative exchanges must be clarified to increase theoretical accuracy (Cropanzano et al., 2017). While trust motivates participation, it does not lead to loyal behavior, such as advocacy for a company (Farhana, 2021). Even though SET provides a compelling framework, its limitations must be acknowledged. At first, SET's significance for economic models and rational decision-making does not correctly cover norm-driven behaviors (Zafirovski, 2005). Second, assumptions that exchanges are based on reciprocation do not explain selfless acts or interactions that focus on natural motivations instead of expected returns (Kaur & Mukherjee, 2013).

SET should be implemented with other models, considering purpose-driven behavior instead of solely transactional motivations. A nuanced approach can include various insights on SET. Exchanges that are not economic follow their tailored sets of social laws, which are not dependent on cost-benefit calculations (Zafirovski, 2005). Two-dimensional frameworks are needed to cover these limitations, enabling more accurate exchange constructs (Cropanzano et al., 2017). CRM strategies should include other behavioral models alongside SET to understand a more transparent customer engagement (Debnath et al., 2016). In conclusion, SET is a fundamental theory in social sciences that provides crucial insights into reciprocity, social interactions, and trust. However, many scholars challenge their behavioristic and economic foundations and criticize a more diverse sociologically grounded definition.

2.2 Sustainable customer relationships

Companies prioritize customer retention in a competitive global market to gain an advantage. A sustainable customer relationship integrates business strategies, effective and efficient technologies, and customer-oriented processes, focusing on achieving and maintaining sustainable customer management (Li et al., 2023). It focuses on achieving customer satisfaction by understanding their expectations and developing strategies to deliver the product or service that meets them, which assists companies in retaining customers. That research also adds that sustainable customer relationships can occur by removing issues that create customer dissatisfaction and generating new customer needs and demands.

It makes customers feel their opinions are being heard, and they can have a sense of progression and achievement by purchasing products or services that cater to the newer demands. Furthermore, sustainable customer relationships occur when a company cultivates its product or service market with social and environmental responsibility, as well as integrates customer satisfaction (Müller, 2014). This allows the company to adopt sustainable practices within the company and with their service and products. This encourages customers to engage with this type of company because of their increased brand value due to the sustainable practices they maintain. Additionally, customer loyalty can be achieved by providing services or additional benefits to the customers besides the products or services they are receiving (Mohammadi et al., 2023). Maintaining sustainable customer relationships is integrated with customer satisfaction and loyalty. Loyal customers purchase from a specific company and initiate positive word-of-mouth recommendations to their known associates, building sustainable relationships.

Furthermore, building a strong customer relationship leads to customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers usually stay loyal because their expectations are being met (Oluseye et al., 2014). Thus, it results in a sustainable relationship. This occurs because the company provides additional benefits like getting customer feedback on their product or service and listening to the customers' opinions, then providing a more tailored product or service designed on the customer's opinions. So, the company profits from sales, customer loyalty, and satisfaction. Conversely, customers profit from the company by getting precisely what they want. Thus, it makes a sustainable relationship. Moreover, to achieve sustainable customer relationships, companies must be reactive to the evolution of the environment, culture, economy, and social factors (Vágási et al., 2002). Companies must provide efficient, sustainable products or services that meet customers' new demands and expectations. Companies capable of doing this can develop and maintain sustainable customer relationships.

2.3 Challenges of sustainable customer relationships

Maintaining sustainable customer relationships is quite a difficult task for companies. It is expensive and requires a great deal of effort to achieve, which can be very difficult for companies that do not have the required resources. Companies face difficulties like highly competitive opponents, integrating digital technologies, and maintaining long-term customer relationships to develop and maintain sustainable customer relationships (Seturi, 2024).

It means that sustainability comes with evolution, integrating digital technologies into CRMs to understand customer behavior, and forming a long-term customer relationship, which can also be a challenge due to competitors looking to swipe unsatisfied customers on their side by providing products or services that meet customer expectations. Additionally, a sustainable customer relationship occurs when issues that create customer dissatisfaction are resolved, as well as new demands, needs, and wants are generated by the company (Li et al., 2023). This is a difficult task because companies need to spend many resources on CRM to understand customer behavior and collaborate with the marketing strategic teams to initiate innovation in their products or services based on the information CRM can gather. This lengthy and expensive process can fail at any point, thus making it almost impossible to achieve sustainable customer relationships.

Moreover, a company must adopt sustainable policies before achieving sustainable customer relationships. This provides a challenge for newly formed companies because, in the competitive market, well-established companies have already addressed this issue and have started to adopt these policies earlier (Li et al., 2023). Companies that follow sustainable policies have a renowned brand value to attract and retain customers, which results in sustainable customer relationships. It is a complex challenge for new companies to invest in sustainable policies due to their expense, and to try to regain customers who are already satisfied with their preferred sustainable company.

2.4 Strategies for sustainable customer relationships

Integrating the core factors of CRM, such as sales, marketing, and service, with ecological, economic, and social sustainability factors is quite a complicated process. However, this process enables a CRM to achieve sustainable customer relationships (Müller, 2014). A company that practices sustainable practices gets higher brand values because it is concerned with environmental, economic, and social factors. This impresses each customer and makes them aware of the environmental, ecological, and economic situation. An impressive customer is likely to engage and form a long-lasting relationship that has the potential to be sustainable. Likewise, customer satisfaction is the key to achieving and retaining customers (Seturi, 2024). It is crucial for forming a sustainable customer relationship. Especially in a globally competitive market, a loyal customer and their repetitive purchases are key to surviving and thriving in a globally competitive market.

Accordingly, satisfied customers have no reason to switch to a competitor because all their demands and expectations are met by the company where they are currently engaged. Seturi (2024) stated that providing good products or services boosts customer satisfaction and results in customer retention, meaning retaining customers leads to strong, long-term customer relationships with companies that provide a good service or product. This long-term customer relationship can develop into a sustainable customer relationship. Furthermore, another strategy includes making customers feel they are getting more than they are paying for. For example, providing additional products or services can help a company form a long-lasting relationship with the customer by achieving satisfaction and loyalty (Putera & Famiola, 2024). Here, the research mentions cross-buying strategies, which means encouraging customers to buy multiple products from the same company by giving the customers additional benefits like discounts, offers, point system recognition, etc. This can achieve customer satisfaction as the customer progresses to get more and more additional benefits offered by the company. It also retains customers and forms a sustainable relationship between the customers and the company.

In addition to that, building strong relationships with customers can help the company retain customers (Khan et al., 2020). CRMs have great potential for building strong customer relationships. They engage with customers and gain valuable insights into their needs to create a strong and sustainable relationship. Oluseye et al. (2014) agreed that maintaining strong customer relationships, gaining feedback, and changing products and services based on customer opinion can achieve customer satisfaction. This makes a customer feel valued due to the tailored product and service based on customer preferences. CRM makes this possible by analyzing customer behavior and feedback, which facilitates creating strong, satisfied, and loyal customer relationships.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology, beginning with the research philosophy and afterwards, explaining the research approach and strategy. Next, it also discusses research design, data collection, and analysis processes. The final sub-chapter addresses the concepts of validity, reliability, and ethics.

3.1 Philosophy and methodology

Research philosophy is the foundation of any study, focusing on the construction of its purpose, the significance of knowledge, how the data are gathered and analyzed, what the research is expected to uncover, and how it should be implemented (Mwita, 2025). All these aspects are organized in specific terms: ontology, epistemology, research paradigm, methodology, and method. These terms provide accurate guidance for research to move in the correct direction toward an effective conclusion. This research uncovers ways to maintain sustainable customer relationships that require various factors, such as achieving customer satisfaction, retaining customers, engaging customers, etc. However, various problems occur regarding these factors, especially in a competitive market. So, from the ontological perspective, multiple problems regarding the research topic make it a subjective reality since sustainable customer relationships are based on customer experience. Furthermore, interpretable epistemology is applied since the research objectives are based on customer experiences like satisfaction, relationship maintenance, and expectations. Interpretable epistemology believes that reality is subjective and can only be understood and measured by scenarios based on human experience and values (Mwita, 2025). A subjective reality and an interpretable epistemology call for a constructivist research paradigm to build a theory, which lays an outline or direction for the research's progress.

In addition, the constructivist research paradigm is connected to qualitative research, especially when the research problem requires a deeper understanding, but limited knowledge is available (Gamage, 2025). This indicates that this research follows a constructivist paradigm. Since the research objective concentrates on customer experience, a qualitative data collection methodology is applied to gather information that is not linear. Qualitative research is based on data focused on human behavior and experiences (Patel & Patel, 2019). This explains that qualitative data contains insights from multiple perspectives that a quantitative research strategy cannot gather.

Primarily, the data is based on customer experience; each customer and employee who participated in this research shared their opinions and answers in their own words instead of answering a rigid framework of questionnaires. So, open-ended questions provide descriptive data tailored to each customer and employee experience. Furthermore, this research uses a case study research design focusing on a selected company and what they are doing to form sustainable customer relationships. It gathered information from employees, especially those working with CRMs and customers engaged with that company. Thus, it contains open-ended interviews and surveys, etc.

3.2 An inductive research approach and qualitative research strategy

The progression of the study depends on the data it gathered; the research follows an inductive approach. The deductive approach is not used because it uses quantitative data to determine multiple hypotheses. Then, acting on the quantitative data to come to an expected conclusion that can be rationalized with one or more of the hypotheses (Gamage, 2025). Furthermore, an inductive approach is more suitable for qualitative data that are being gathered during research (Gamage, 2025). Since the data is based on human experience and the outcome cannot be predicted to form a proper hypothesis, this research progressed, led by the nature of the data available. Based on the information gathered, the research sets a theory, guidelines, and principles. Afterwards, it draws a conclusion—a bottom-to-top approach.

A well-constructed research strategy helps the research progress toward accurate conclusions (Gamage, 2025). The research focuses on understanding sustainable customer relationships within a company and their challenges and effectiveness. This means the data for this research is based on customer and employee experience. Generally, research applies two types of methods, either qualitative or quantitative. Quantitative research strategy is a series of structured questions or closed-ended surveys that result in numerical values (Patel & Patel, 2019). This method takes many participants to provide a general idea from the data received from the participants. On the other hand, qualitative methods use interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questions to gather more descriptive information that cannot be defined by numerical values, which means this is a method usually used for analyzing psychological factors or experiences (Patel & Patel, 2019). The research topic is purely based on human experience and aims to determine sustainable customer relationships. Therefore, the qualitative method is prioritized.

A quantitative research strategy cannot be selected to gather proper data because everyone related to this research tends to have unique experiences, each different from another person. Quantitative data tends to be linear and mainly carries closed-ended questions, limiting the participants from properly sharing their information. For that reason, qualitative data was selected so that participants could freely share their exact information based on their perceptions in open-ended surveys and interviews. Since customer and employee experience needs to be analyzed to determine the factors that can achieve and maintain sustainable customer relationships between customers and the company, qualitative data is required to get proper information and to draw a proper proposition.

3.3 A case study research design, data collection, and analysis

The design of this study is based on a case study following a qualitative research strategy. The data is mainly collected from primary sources, which are the participants in this research. Qualitative data is gathered in various ways: interviews, focus groups, case studies, open-ended surveys, etc. For this research, a case company was selected. Additionally, interviews and open-ended surveys were the primary data collection methods. The participants are mainly regular customers and employees of a specific company. Two employees working in CRM of the case company with a good understanding and experience of consumer behavior and the potential of CRM were selected to conduct interviews.

Meanwhile, overall, four employees were also selected for open-ended surveys. Furthermore, a total of eight consumers who are engaged with that case company, especially have an established relationship with that company through CRM, and newer consumers who are also in the process of establishing an effective relationship with the company were also selected for open-ended surveys that diversified the data and that created no scope for data biases. The open-ended survey questions were designed based on two groups, which are the employees and the customers. The two groups were given seven days to complete these surveys. The surveys were conducted through Microsoft Forms and email. Each participant was notified beforehand of how their information is utilized in the research, and their consent was also obtained before they were allowed to participate. They were also informed about the purpose of this research and how it contributes to sustainable customer relationships. Their contact information remained confidential because of their preference.

The interview and survey questions were related to CRM, customer satisfaction, customer engagement, customer feedback, and expectations. After that, the two employees were selected for interviews because the interview method is an excellent strategy to gather in-depth, detailed, and descriptive information directly from those employees who are involved in impacting the relationship between their company and customers. The interview and survey questions were directly connected with the research goals and were designed according to the information required for this study. The interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams. Before conducting the interview, the two employees were informed about the goals and aims of the research, objectives, contributions, and how their given information would be utilized. The open-ended interview questions left scope for discussion, providing valuable insights from the company's perspective on sustaining customer relationships.

The thematic analysis was conducted with the collected data using Microsoft Office. This analysis consists of classifying data into different labels or codes and then generating themes based on their nature and characteristics (Braun & Clarke, 2024). These themes are generated by grouping data with similar codes or labels. Later, these themes are labeled according to the nature of the data. Afterward, these themes are analyzed to determine their relevance to the research objectives. Lastly, the report concludes by explaining these themes and their contributions. This analysis is evident for analyzing qualitative data and the flexibility it provides researchers to conduct research efficiently and effectively.

3.4 Validity, reliability, and ethical standards

This study emphasizes maintaining validity, reliability, and ethical standards (Patel & Patel, 2019). Firstly, it is important to ensure that the research participants have relevant research perceptions, which means the selected participants are the right people with accurate and authentic information to provide for this research. Secondly, to confirm the validity and reliability of data, all participants were divided into two groups: the case company's employees and customers. Also, there are two different subgroups among customers: regular customers with an established relationship with the case company and occasional customers with whom the case company is developing a potential relationship. This is done to diversify the data, considering multiple angles and perspectives, and reduce data biases as much as possible. Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed to get as much essential information as possible from the participants.

Afterward, interviews with two employees were conducted based on the data provided from the surveys to extract better and more effective information from the participants. On the other hand, significant literature on the topic is also reviewed to provide a solid framework for working, which has fewer errors in the research progression. Previous studies provided proper direction and research gaps to work with so that this research uncovers newly explored information. It provides an inference that has a significant contribution to this research topic. This confirms that the research data and key concepts are reliable, as the intense literature review shows. The research aims to brief the participants and obtain their consent before letting them participate in the research. This research ensures authenticity through a university-authorized Microsoft Form and IDs. The results and findings were shared with the case company while maintaining academic and ethical considerations. Finally, information about research participants and their data was kept confidential.

4 THE CASE STUDY OF XYZ COMPANY IN BANGLADESH

This chapter describes the selected case company, focusing on the products, profile, and market positioning. The selected company was named XYZ because its identity remains confidential. XYZ is situated in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The company consented and supported this thesis by sharing internal information regarding its company, marketing strategies, and customer engagement processes.

4.1 The XYZ company and its products and services

XYZ is one of the most reputable retail brands in Bangladesh. It sells artisans and traditional crafts and maintains a strong consumer base. It is also one of Bangladesh's most prominent non-governmental organizations (NGO). The purpose of the XYZ company is to uplift rural artisans by providing a sustainable livelihood. XYZ is a retail chain that has established multiple outlets in key urban areas. The company follows a vertical supply chain model, collaborating with rural artisans in its extensive network. XYZ company was selected because its business model prioritizes sustainability, innovation, and community development. XYZ company is known for turning anyone into a loyal customer base by providing traditional and contemporary products that cater to a diverse customer base. XYZ company focused on sustainability in its business approach. This creates a long-term positive impact by positioning itself as a socially responsible brand. XYZ has created a remarkable reputation by valuing customers who are concerned about ethical consumption.

XYZ provides various products, including home decor, handcrafted apparel, jewellery, textile products, and accessories. The brand specializes in traditional Bangladeshi textile techniques like jamdani, block printing, and nakshi katha. These products are integrated with the traditional cultural heritage. The products of XYZ company are categorized into segments like clothing, jewellery, home decor, crafts, and leather products. The apparel segment includes menswear, womenswear, and children's wear. The design of the apparel products is a mixture of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary fashion trends. The company highlights traditional Bangladeshi crafts with a wide range of home decor products like rugs, brassware, pottery, and furniture. The jewellery section of XYZ company features handmade brass, pearls, and silver ornaments.

This brand also offers high-quality leather accessories like bags, wallets, and shoes. In addition, XYZ company has expanded its product range with products like skincare and organic food, focusing on the rising demand for sustainable living. It designed its services to achieve customer loyalty and satisfaction. The company has adopted digital transformation by offering online shopping through mobile applications and websites, ensuring its products reach global audiences. Furthermore, XYZ follows customer-friendly policies by offering easy returns, personalized shopping experiences, and loyalty programs, and ensuring smooth customer experience.

4.2 Market positioning of XYZ company

When a company strategically distinguishes itself from competitors and creates a presence in the consumer's mind, it refers to market positioning. XYZ became one of Bangladesh's leading lifestyle and ethical fashion brands by emphasizing sustainability, quality, and cultural heritage. Their market positioning strategy focused on key factors like ethical sourcing, brand identity, quality and craftsmanship, design and innovation, digital expansion and retail, and, most importantly, customer engagement. XYZ company became one of the most distinguished brands in Bangladesh, focusing on unique designs and innovation of products, fusing cultural heritage with modernistic arts, providing incomparable products, and their customer engagement tactics are very active with online services, additional benefits, and offers. They created brand value by focusing on sustainable practices that cater to various customers who have the potential to become brand-loyal customers.

XYZ company became popular for its ethical sourcing and fair trade. By supporting rural communities and artisans, XYZ created a strong emotional bond with customers who value social impact. Since the brand provides products that meet premium standards by maintaining strict quality, XYZ has become a distinguished industry player. XYZ company's product innovation, fusing modern design with traditional techniques, appeals to mature and young customers. This company has expanded its retail presence all over Bangladesh and strengthened its online presence to reach local and international markets. Customer satisfaction is a significant aspect of XYZ company's market catering strategies. The company creates sustainable customer relationships by offering membership programs, exclusive previews, and product discounts for loyal customers. This approach has enhanced brand loyalty and achieved repetitive purchases.

XYZ company has successfully retained customers through its variety of products. Additionally, XYZ company embraced digital transformation to smooth the customer experience by ensuring accessibility with online platforms and digital payments. By embracing technology and infusing it into their business, XYZ company makes a more substantial market presence that caters to evolving customer preferences. Behind XYZ company's prominence in the market and sustaining customer relationships is its adaptability to ever-changing market dynamics. XYZ thrives in competitive retail by ensuring premium quality, diversified products, and a strong brand identity.

Furthermore, XYZ company's emphasis on sustainability has aligned with global demand and movement toward ethical, environment-friendly product consumption, enabling XYZ company to retain a brand-loyal customer base while attracting new customers who are environment-conscious and prioritize responsible shopping. XYZ company's exceptional ability to harmonize traditions with modernity, commercial success with ethical sourcing, and local heritage with global appeal enabled it to hold a leading position in the Bangladeshi retail industry. The company's dedication to sustainability, innovation, and customer engagement makes it a preferred choice among consumers seeking authenticity, quality, and ethical business practices.

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results and information gathered from surveys and interview sessions conducted among the employees and customers of XYZ company. Four employees and eight customers of the case company were surveyed. Also, the two executives were interviewed. Additionally, two online interviews were conducted with two employees via Microsoft Teams to get deeper qualitative insights. Comparisons have been made among all the responses, and recommendations are provided to help maintain sustainable customer relationships.

5.1 Study results

This research followed a qualitative research strategy and analyzed data through thematic analysis. The data was gathered from surveys and interviews with the company's employees. The responses were sorted into various themes that align with research objectives. The employees' responses to the interviews and surveys contained insights into how the company engages with customers and focuses on customer retention and sustainability. Also, customer responses reflected customer expectations, experiences, and satisfaction levels regarding sustainable customer-company relationships. Key themes that emerged from the analysis include trust, transparency, customer advocacy, and personalized customer support.

The study found that customers value communication with staff, taking and following their feedback, ethical business practices, and being responsive towards resolving issues. Employees focus on training programs like efficient customer behavior, customer relationship management, and loyalty programs to generate long-term customer relationships. These findings align with social exchange theory (SET), stating that every relationship should be mutually beneficial to foster and maintain sustainable customer relationships. In the research, a survey of four employees and eight customers was conducted, focusing on strategies to develop sustainable customer relationships with the customers and employees of the company. The collected data is incorporated into the text. Interviews of two employees are considered H1 and H2.

5.2 Sustainable customer relationships

Based on the empirical findings of the open-ended surveys, the participants gave insights into the factors influencing XYZ company to form a sustainable relationship with its customers. The survey findings indicate that customers have become long-term or at least initiated repetitive purchases due to product quality, customer service, and trust. The uniqueness of the product designs and the value and meaning behind the designs that highlight cultural and traditional designs fused with modernistic ideas draw customers towards repetitive purchases and loyalty. Furthermore, loyalty programs, offers, and campaigns motivate customers to engage more with the company. Additionally, sustainable customer relationships form when a customer feels valued; the surveys also highlight that, based on the participants' answers. Loyalty programs, excellent customer experience and services, brand values, and company visions regarding traditional and cultural aspects make customers feel valued.

Product pricing also influences a customer who feels valued, especially when the customer is aware that such high-quality products are available at a reasonable and affordable price, enabling customers from various financial statuses to enjoy such products. Additionally, the survey conducted on the employees also aligned with the customer findings, explaining that delivering high-quality products, loyalty programs, and good behavior fosters sustainable customer relationships. The survey data of four employees and eight customers is incorporated into the text. Two employees of the company were also interviewed. Employee one is considered H1, and the other employee is considered H2. The research question is: What key values does your company uphold in maintaining sustainable customer relationships?

XYZ company believes in honesty, quality, and good service. We always try to give customers the best experience, so they return. XYZ also ensures that customers receive high-quality handmade products because customer satisfaction and ethical business are the company's core values. (H1 & H2)

The interview responses indicate that XYZ company focuses on customer satisfaction by providing high-quality products and good customer service, ensuring smooth customer experience, and maintaining ethical business practices. These company attributes ensure customer satisfaction, leading to sustainable customer relationships.

5.3 Challenges of sustainable customer relationships

This study explores factors regarding the challenges of sustainable customer relationship management. Mainly, when sustainable customer relationships heavily depend on customer satisfaction. The challenge is to maintain customer satisfaction with the service provided to the customer. XYZ company indicates that customers face difficulties or challenges in getting customer services regarding peak seasons or festivities due to high customer presence in outlets and orders on online websites, as well as the unavailability of certain products in certain outlets. Some customers were dissatisfied when they did not get the desired products. A few customers also complained about not receiving proper information about the whereabouts of specific products they desire. This indicates that XYZ faces challenges in maintaining customer flow and product demand during times like festivities. Since XYZ company cannot provide proper customer service during festivities, customer satisfaction is hampered, affecting the sustainability of customer relations.

The survey conducted with the employees explains that balancing sustainability against customer satisfaction is a complex challenge for the XYZ company. Customers expect the best quality product at a minimal price, so meeting their expectations is challenging. Some also aligned with this finding, saying that taking costs, product quality, and product availability into account and being able to provide promptly is quite a challenge. Others focus on fashion trends that have become fast-paced, but XYZ focuses on fashion that is primarily handmade and slow. It has careful designs that highlight tradition and fuse modern abstract designs. Even though the design is good, it takes a lot of time and resources, which contradicts customer expectations of pricing and product availability. XYZ company must face challenges balancing high production costs against affordable pricing, demanding fast fashion against slow, handmade production, and online shopping experience against eco-friendly packaging. These challenges are significant obstacles to maintaining sustainable customer relationships. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the employees of XZY company regarding this matter. The interview question was: Have you encountered conflict with company policy and customer expectations? How did you handle them? The responses of the participants are highlighted below:

Some customers expect returns on items that are non-refundable. At that time, I usually tried to explain the policy and suggested other solutions, like exchanges, if possible. (H1)

A customer once wanted a product that was out of stock. I noted their request and informed them when it was restored, and they appreciated the effort. (H2)

Based on the interview responses, XYZ company deals with challenges like fulfilling customer demands without contradicting company policies. However, XYZ company offers alternative solutions to fulfill customers' expectations.

5.4 Strategies for sustainable customer relationships

The questionnaire focuses on strengthening customer relationships, customer service, and whether customers recommend the brand to others. The findings were that loyalty rewards and special product discounts offered early access to new collections and exclusive deals, impacting customer relationships. XYZ should also focus on better stock management to ensure popular designs and sizes are available in all outlets and online; the website must be more integrated, including faster delivery and easier product return services. Following that, customer service should be more personalized, focusing on customer feedback and resolving customer issues. Focusing on the aspects that make customers valuable is when they receive personalized attention, like staff remembering customers' earlier product preferences, assisting with product selection, and brands offering recommendations based on previous purchases. Also, suggesting different products quite like a customer's preferences makes the customer feel that the brand understands and values their choices. Furthermore, loyalty programs and rewards like exclusive deals, early release to newer collections, and good customer service, which involves engaging with customers, focusing on what customer needs, and delivering the customer's expected service or product, make the customers feel valued.

Besides, factors of customer support influencing purchasing decisions are highlighted based on the survey findings. These are customer service, which is responsive, helpful, and friendly customer service that a customer receives in times of engaging with XYZ company, as well as responsive and knowledgeable staff who know the products and could provide accurate and efficient solutions to issues of the customers regarding styling advice, product availability, product details and so on. Furthermore, quick and responsive customer service provides solutions to inquiries online and in the stores, making shopping more convenient. Also, with easy return options, customers feel more comfortable ordering products, knowing they can be quickly returned or exchanged if they do not suit their expectations.

Additionally, factors like high-quality products, reasonable pricing, excellent customer service, an enriched shopping experience, and the brand's traditional and economic value enable customers to share their positive shopping experience with XYZ company with their known acquaintances and recommend the brand to them. On the other hand, employees of XYZ company participated in a survey focusing on strategies the company should implement in building long-term customer relationships, how customer feedback impacts customer relationships, and how the company ensures customized customer experiences while maintaining customer sustainability. The survey findings explain the strategies that companies implement to ensure long-term customer relationships by giving fast customer service, forming customer service plans to focus on achieving customer satisfaction by customizing staff behavior and sales policies, as well as building strong relationships forged by integrating high-quality products, customer-centric initiatives, and digital innovations.

Moreover, the survey explores what the XYZ company does with customer feedback to achieve sustainable customer relationships, which is to take customer feedback and analyze the feedback, focusing on improving products and services, personalizing products and services according to customer demands, training staff, building brand trust and gaining insights in innovation and expansion. XYZ company's strategy to maintain sustainable customer relationships while providing proper customer experience is to integrate ethical production, product personalization, and eco-friendly practices. The company focuses on ensuring customers' smooth and excellent shopping experience, enabling the company to achieve sustainable customer relationships. Furthermore, the survey responses of the XYZ company employees also explain how XYZ differentiates itself from its competitors.

The company focuses on the quality of products, building trust, and smooth customer experiences. These product designs are inspired by culture, tradition, and heritage, providing products at a rational price and giving value to customers' needs and wants. The company developed deep roots with cultures and ethical values, making the brand something more than a fashion brand. Lastly, to understand the factors related to strategies that can enhance sustainable customer relationships, two questions were asked by the employees of XYZ company at the interview. The first question is: What strategies can be used to engage and retain customers? The answers are given in the following:

We greet every customer warmly, help them find what they need, and keep them updated on new products. Also, we build relationships by offering loyalty programs and special promotions. (H1 & H2)

Based on the responses, XYZ company focuses on customer support with personalized customer services and gives exclusive offers to customers. The second question is: How do we utilize customer feedback to improve relationships? The answers are given in the following:

When customers give suggestions, we share them in our official meetings. If many customers ask for something, the company tries to improve. Also, when we receive complaints or negative feedback about product quality, we instantly report them to our headquarters. The company then works with management to fix issues. (H1 & H2)

Looking at the responses, XYZ takes customer feedback very seriously. The company analyzes the feedback, seeking opportunities to improve its products and services. By doing this, XYZ makes a customer feel valuable and strategies and alternates its products based on customer preferences to offer products suitable for new and upcoming trends.

6 DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

This chapter discusses findings of the collected data. The study gathered data from interviews and surveys of the case company. It comprehensively analyses and compares the data and outcomes with the earlier literature.

6.1 Discussion of the study

This research investigated how companies form and maintain sustainable customer relationships. The study achieved its milestones by determining and explaining three sub-objectives: sustainable customer relationships, their challenges, and strategies. Furthermore, the study followed a qualitative research strategy where data were gathered from open-ended surveys and interviews with customers and employees of a case company. Based on an inductive research approach, the data were analyzed by thematic data analysis, and the findings were drawn into a statement. The research aimed to understand how customers and the company formed and maintained sustainable customer relationships. The literature brings insights into how social exchange theory can explain the crucial phenomena behind sustainable customer relationships. Social exchange theory pointed out the mutual benefit of the customer and the companies via trust, commitment, and long-term relationships.

Moreover, the research highlights how customer satisfaction is necessary and how this factor can affect specific outcomes of sustainable customer relationships. Satisfied customers always stay loyal and return to the company again. Furthermore, the respondents replied that the company initiates specific strategies that influence customer satisfaction, like customer advocacy and personalized customer support, which are also customer demands. The importance of personalized experience and emotional engagement in customer relationship strategies is highlighted in these findings, which have also been referred to in previous studies. Transparency, quick response to problems, and customer support are important factors in building customer satisfaction, which respondents point out. Therefore, sustainable customer relationships cannot be built on a single factor. However, it is a process of multiple factors.

6.2 Sustainable customer relationships

Based on the findings, sustainable customer relationships occur when the company gives customers additional benefits besides the regulatory product or services. When a customer is satisfied, it means that when the company achieves customer satisfaction through its product or services, customers are likely to become loyal and make repetitive purchases. When a customer also feels valued by the brand, the customer engages more with the brand. XYZ forms long-term customer relationships by providing premium-quality products and customer support to ensure customers feel valued. The company forms good relationships with its customers by providing customer support that engages them to achieve customer demands, addresses the issues customers face, and provides fast, efficient solutions that make them feel valued and gain customer satisfaction. On the other hand, XYZ provides customers with loyalty programs and exclusive offers, so they feel satisfied when purchasing products from XYZ. Also, XYZ is a brand that encompasses traditional and cultural aspects of the country, ethical businesses, and is quite distinguishable in its products; customers who purchase those products feel connected to the culture and heritage of the country. It helps XYZ company to form a deep bond with its customers, resulting in a sustainable relationship.

The literature also supports this statement, if a business engages with customers, it creates customer satisfaction, resulting in sustainable customer relationships (Seturi, 2024). This indicates that the more businesses stay in touch with their customers, the more customers feel valued, and businesses gain insight into their expectations and demands. Additionally, customer feedback is collected to satisfy customer expectations, who are likely to become loyal customers and initiate environment-friendly solutions (Mohammadi et al., 2023). This aligns with the XYZ companies' strategies, as the brand presents a vision of cultural, traditional, and economic heritage. The company also focuses on customer support and values customer insights.

6.3 Challenges of sustainable customer relationships

The finding states that XYZ faces challenges in providing customer support and products during high-customer peak seasons like festivities. The customer faces uncomfortable shopping experiences due to overcrowded shopping outlets, unavailable products, and delayed customer support, which hampers customer satisfaction. This affects sustainable customer relationships with the XYZ company.

On the contrary, customers expect fast-paced, fashionable products. However, XYZ company designs slow-paced products, integrating cultural and traditional heritage with modern and abstract design, which creates a challenge in product stocking. Furthermore, these products also cost many resources to make. Even though products are reasonably priced, the customers expect even cheaper pricing, which is hard for the XYZ company to maintain. The literature suggests that sustainable customer relationships must mutually benefit the customers and the companies (Vágási et al., 2002). If customers are dissatisfied with getting products or services from the company and the company cannot maintain profitable margins, it cannot establish sustainable relationships. In addition to that, customer relationship management is crucial for establishing customer satisfaction, leading to customer retention and recommendations, and attracting other customers (Oluseye et al., 2014). This also indicates that companies that cannot give prompt and effective customer support on time are not getting customer satisfaction, which is also the case for the XYZ company.

6.4 Strategies for sustainable customer relationships

The survey findings highlight that XYZ company considers strategies that enhance sustainable customer relationships, like providing exceptional customer support. Oluseye et al. (2014) agreed that maintaining customer relationships is essential and can increase customer satisfaction and retention. Additionally, Gremler et al. (2020) also aligned with it by mentioning that social interaction with customers can positively impact the customer experience. Relational benefits for the customers include increased customer satisfaction and loyalty. XYZ company provides customer support by taking customer feedback and providing trained staff to interact with customers in terms of the customers themselves.

Furthermore, XYZ company also provides loyalty rewards, exclusive discounts, and personalized customer service, which positively impact sustainable customer relationships. Putera and Famiola (2024) supported the argument by stating that customer advocacy impacts promotions through customers themselves and word-of-mouth recommendations, which measure customer satisfaction and retention. Providing high-quality products at a reasonable price also positively impacts customer satisfaction. Alongside it, smooth customer experience, personalized customer service, convenient shopping from online websites, and product design, which incorporates cultural heritage with modernistic designs, attract customers and increase customer retention.

This indicates that customer advocacy occurs among XYZ customers, who receive additional benefits alongside the product they are paying for. This supports Putera and Famiola (2024) stated that customer advocacy positively impacts customer satisfaction and thus leads to generating sustainable customer relationships. On the other hand, the XYZ company has also benefited from word-of-mouth recommendations from its customers and repetitive purchases from loyal customers. This is also similar to what Vágási et al. (2002) mentioned, both parties must mutually benefit to form a sustainable relationship between customers and companies. Moreover, the survey findings indicate that XYZ company is keen to form long-term customer relationships by providing interactive customer support, engaging customers, and taking their feedback rather than strategizing their products or marketing strategies based on customer feedback, which makes customers feel valued. Mohammadi et al. (2023) agreed that listening to customer feedback and increasing customer interaction can positively impact customer satisfaction and create a long-lasting relationship between a company and its customers. Gremler et al. (2020) also mentioned something similar, increasing social interaction with customers can positively influence customer experience, which results in customer satisfaction and loyalty.

7 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter summarizes the findings and explains their implications. It then discusses what the results imply for managers and policymakers. Finally, it emphasizes the study's limitations and suggests future research.

7.1 Summary

The research explored sustainable customer relationships under the perception of a case company, focusing on strategies, challenges, and factors that influence sustainable customer relationships, as well as the effectiveness of sustainability practices that focus on fostering long-term engagement. Detailed literature was reviewed, and then empirical analysis was conducted on the company case and its approach toward advancing sustainable customer relationships. The study considers a survey and an interview for data collection. A survey was conducted among the eight customers and the four employees of the case company, and two employees of the same case company were selected for an interview. By investigating the research objectives, some conclusions are drawn based on the perception of customers alongside the company's employees.

So, it could be stated that factors like proper customer relationship management, advocacy, satisfaction, loyalty programs, and exclusive offers influence sustainable customer relationships. The customers indicated that intensive and engaging customer support from staff makes them feel valued, and offering products based on their preferences satisfies them when shopping. Employees also focus on providing services that enrich customer satisfaction and smooth shopping experiences. Furthermore, the study also mentions the company's challenges in balancing profitability with sustainable customer relationships. This is where social exchange theory sheds light on how a case company maintains sustainable customer relationships. The company provides additional customer benefits in exchange for customer loyalty and repetitive purchases, benefiting both customers and the company. Lastly, this research provides insights into how sustainable customer relationships contribute to business expansion and brand loyalty.

7.2 Theoretical and managerial implications

To understand the framework behind sustainable customer relationships, the relationship between customers and the company was put under the focal lens for the analysis. Social exchange theory (SET) was chosen for this research because SET insists that relationships are formed through both parties achieving mutual benefits from the relationship. Social exchange theory (SET) is a concept where everything is valued in terms of costs and benefits (Homans, 1958). Also, SET implies that human interactions are focused on rational calculations, such as costs and rewards. It is more like the actions of each individual, motivated by something in return (Blau, 1986). The theory helps to look at both parts of the relationship between the chosen case company and customers separately and investigate factors that influence the relationship. The findings illustrate that SET's implications highlight that customer satisfaction is key to building sustainable customer relationships. They also explain that customer engagement and CRM are prime factors that positively influence customer satisfaction, which can achieve customer loyalty. The theory also highlighted the role of ethical and emotional considerations in the company's strategic planning based on customer preferences and forming sustainable customer relationships.

The findings from primary sources, which are interviews and surveys, provided insights into how a company gained sustainable customer relationships. XYZ company implements strategies focusing on high customer satisfaction and sustainable customer relationships by making customers feel valued through customer support and various product campaigns. XYZ company also takes customer feedback seriously; they analyze it and strategize based on it, making customers feel valued. The company is a customer satisfaction-driven company. However, this research also suggests many scopes for managerial implications for companies in the apparel industry. For example, like XYZ, other companies could integrate sustainability with their brand value, building customer trust and long-term relationships between companies and customers. Furthermore, while integrating sustainability, companies should be transparent with their customers, which could help customers make a more informed purchase decision. Companies should focus on establishing practical customer relationship management tools to deliver more personalized customer service and increase engagement with customers, as well as extracting valuable customer insights regarding the customer shopping experience and feedback, which could also be utilized in the future decision-making process of the companies. Also, companies should consider giving their staff intensive training focusing on achieving customer satisfaction through customer engagement.

For example, understanding customer behavior, preferences, needs, and wants. Then, we need to be able to provide products based on each customer's preferences and be well-informed regarding the products and services of the company so that the customers can receive accurate information regarding a specific product.

7.3 Company and government policies

The research findings from the empirical and literature of the study provide important factors that impact building sustainable customer relationships. XYZ faces challenges in meeting customer demands due to the contradiction of its policies. Based on this study, companies could adopt specific policies to promote sustainability regarding customer relationships. Companies must establish policies that integrate their brand with sustainable principles that help customers become loyal to their brands. Companies can include customer-centric policies, like customer satisfaction, customer-tailored customer support, loyalty programs, and exclusive offers. Companies should also include a framework in their key performance indicators (KPI) that calculates sustainable customer relations among their employees and customers and sustainable initiatives that indicate the brand image going forward as a sustainable company. The study also indicates that the government can motivate companies to adopt sustainability practices. XYZ promotes itself as an NGO, providing employment and business opportunities for people struggling to find employment or starting and running businesses. XYZ is aligned with the government in some campaigns to motivate entrepreneurs. The government could assist companies willing to practice sustainability and form sustainable customer relationships, which could boost a country's economy. For example, providing tax benefits for sustainability-practicing companies, launching public awareness campaigns, and initiating collaboration through partnering with private companies. Those could help companies receive more capital and freer them from various legal formalities that allow them to expand faster.

7.4 Limitations and suggestions

Even though the study was systematic, it has some limitations; first, the theory that the research was based on, the social exchange theory (SET), puts relationships in a linear perception, which measures relationships in only two factors: benefits and costs. Though sustainable relationships require both parties to be beneficial, and SET puts insights into that, the theory does not cover all the factors of relationships, including cultural values and social norms.

Afterward, the research was purely dependent on qualitative research. Even though qualitative research provides more detailed data, this limits the sample size and research time. Due to the limited sample size, there is a high probability of sample bias, resulting in data bias. The research surveyed employees and customers of a specific company; this also poses a single perspective of a single company, which limits a holistic approach, providing a proper view of customer and organizational behavior. Also, this does not show the actual scenario based on industries and regions. Lastly, this research might not guide long-term progress on sustainable customer relationships.

Future research could include quantitative or mixed strategies, including various companies and their customers, and involve many participants to generalize the data for future study. Additionally, social exchange theory (SET) was selected as the basis for research, which measures relationships in a linear angle concerning costs and benefits, excluding variables like social norms, cultural values, psychological variables, and emotions. People often behave irrationally when it comes to personal relationships, and the same goes for having a bond or attachment to a brand. For that case, future research could include attachment theory. Attachment theory is suitable to cover some of the gaps that social exchange theory leaves as it tends to work on the variables that social exchange theory neglected like emotions, sense of security, reliability, and trust. That can cover some of the scope for future research. Attachment theory is based on two negative and two positive factors, and it is categorized into four attachment styles, which are secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment based on positive and negative factors (Thompson et al., 2022). Furthermore, companies from various industries might clarify how sustainable customer relationships occur and how companies from different industries strategize to obtain sustainable customer relationships. Then, research could focus on customer-centric behaviors toward brands that practice sustainability and focus on sustainable customer relationships.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Survey of four employees

Appendix 2. Survey of eight customers

Appendix 3. Two employees' interview transcripts

Appendix 1. Survey of four case company employees

Questions	Responses
How would you define a sustainable customer relationship in your company?	It means consistency to me. Whatever the customer needs new collections, they always come to our company. They trust us as we serve them with the best.
	My company's sustainable customer relationship is built on trust, transparency, and shared value. It fosters long-term loyalty and mutual benefit by consistently exceeding expectations and adapting to evolving customer needs.
	Priority and best service to the customer are the most sustainable relationships between customers and my company. XYZ company prioritizes customers are the most, and there is a quote in sales—the Customer is always right.
	My XYZ company has a long-term, mutually beneficial connection between the brand and its customers which is built on trust, quality, and ethical values.
What factors do you think contribute to long-term customer loyalty at your company?	Quality products, best services, greetings.
	At my company, long-term customer loyalty is fostered through consistently delivering high-quality products and services, prioritizing customer satisfaction, building strong relationships, and providing personalized experiences, all while maintaining transparency and ethical practices.
	Behavior toward the customer is the most important factor in building a long-term relationship with them; if the company offers the best products and services, then customer loyalty grows.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High-quality products & craftsmanship. 2. Ethical & fair-trade practices. 3. Strong brand identity & cultural relevance. 4. Customer-centric loyalty programs (my rewards). 5. Excellent customer service (in all branches). 6. Seasonal & exclusive collections. 7. Emotional & social connection.
What are the biggest challenges in maintaining sustainable customer relationships?	We must provide prompt service to keep sustainable customers. Sometimes, this is difficult during festivals, new collections, store management, or customer pressure.
	Maintaining sustainable customer relationships presents challenges such as balancing short-term gains with long-term sustainability, adapting to evolving consumer expectations, and managing ethical sourcing and supply chain complexities.
	Maintaining the highest quality and providing the best to the customer are the biggest challenges to a sustainable customer Relationship.

	To maintain sustainable customer relationships in XYZ company, we had to balance quality, pricing, innovation, and digital transformation while staying true to our ethical and cultural roots.
What are some difficulties in balancing sustainability with customer expectations?	Cost sensitivity, regulatory and supply chain challenges, fast-paced trends vs. long-term sustainability.
	Balancing sustainability with customer expectations presents difficulties due to potential conflicts in priorities, costs, and consumer behavior, including concerns about price, perceived quality, and the availability of sustainable options.
	Customers always need the best quality at minimal prices. If we balance it adequately, then it is easy, but if not, then it is tough to balance sustainability between customer expectations and the company.
	Balancing sustainability with customer expectations is a complex challenge for XYZ company, as XYZ strives to uphold ethical values while meeting market demands. Some of them are- <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Higher production costs vs. affordable pricing 2. Demand for fast fashion vs. slow, handmade production 3. Maintaining traditional craftsmanship vs. modern designs 4. Online shopping expectations vs. eco-friendly packaging
What strategies does your company implement to build strong, long-term customer relationships?	Greetings, best prompt service, loyalty.
	My company always tried to build trust, show personality, inspire confidence, and deliver great customer experience for building strong long-term customer relationships.
	By maintaining some customer satisfaction plans, behavior, and sales policies, my company builds a substantial and long-term relationship between customers and the company.
	XYZ company builds a strong, long-term relationship by combining quality, ethical values, customer-centric initiatives, and digital innovation. These strategies drive loyalty and create an emotional connection with the brand.
How does customer feedback impact your approach to customer relationship management?	We receive customer feedback often. Moreover, we try to fix the problem by walking through their shoe.
	Customer feedback is crucial in my customer relationship management (CRM) approach. It helps me understand customer needs, identify areas for improvement, and build stronger relationships by allowing me to personalize interactions and tailor my responses.
	When customers give us feedback, it is a lesson for us. We learn from feedback and try to improve our approach to it; I need to improve my approach to customer feedback.
	Customer feedback shapes XYZ company's customer relationship management (CRM) approach. Here is how: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving products and services

	<p>2. Enhancing customer experience</p> <p>3. Personalized marketing and engagement</p> <p>4. Service training for staff</p> <p>5. Building brand trust and loyalty</p> <p>6. Innovation and expansion</p>
How does your company ensure customized customer experience while maintaining sustainability?	XYZ company balances customized customer experiences with sustainability through a strategic approach that integrates ethical production, personalization, and eco-friendly practices.
	Value of customer experience and sustainability: gaining a competitive edge. Businesses prioritizing customer experience and sustainability gain a competitive advantage in the market. They build a strong brand reputation, attract a loyal customer base, and increase customer retention rates.
	Customer is the main factor of every company; if we do not have customers, it is zero. So, we must identify what customers want and need the most and modify or customize things according to the customers' feedback. In this way, my company ensures a Sustainable relationship with our customers.
	XYZ company ensures customized customer experience while maintaining sustainability through a balanced approach that prioritizes personalization, ethical sourcing, and eco-friendly practices, like online and in-store assistance.
In your opinion, how does your company differentiate itself in the market in terms of customer relationships?	XYZ company differentiates itself in the market through strong customer relationships built on trust, quality, heritage, and personalized experiences.
	Our XYZ company has six primary ways to differentiate: product, service, distribution channels, relationships, reputation/image, and price.
	My company prioritizes customers the most, then thinks about sales and marketing. This makes my company different in the market because everyone thinks about sales first, then about the customers, so my company is different in this way.
	XYZ blends premium customer service, sustainability, ethical values, and a deep cultural connection. This makes it more than just a fashion brand—it is a movement that resonates with customers personally.

Appendix 2. Survey of eight case company's customers

Questions	Responses
<p>How do you define yourself as a regular or occasional customer of the XYZ company?</p>	<p>I am a regular customer of XYZ company, frequently purchasing their products for their quality, unique designs, and cultural authenticity.</p>
	<p>I would say I am somewhere between a regular and an occasional customer. I do not shop there every month, but I do visit XYZ company reasonably often, especially when I need something high-quality or a unique ethnic style. Their designs and craftsmanship draw me in, but I am also mindful of the prices.</p>
	<p>I frequently purchase from XYZ company, in-store or online, and prefer their products for clothing, home decor, or lifestyle needs. I am a member of their loyalty program and stay updated with their latest collections.</p>
	<p>Yes, I am an occasional customer of the XYZ company. I typically visit their stores or explore their offerings during special occasions, such as Eid, when I look for unique and high-quality products to celebrate the festivities. XYZ's reputation for traditional and culturally rich items makes it a preferred choice for such events.</p>
	<p>I am a regular customer of XYZ company because I frequently shop for their high-quality, beautifully designed products.</p>
	<p>I am an occasional customer of the XYZ company.</p>
	<p>Occasional</p>
	<p>Occasional customer</p>
<p>What do you value most in a long-term relationship with a clothing brand? Alternatively, why you like that brand.</p>	<p>I prioritize quality, consistency, and authenticity in a clothing brand. I also value trust, ethical practices, and good shopping experience.</p>
	<p>I value consistent quality, fair pricing that matches the quality, and designs that blend tradition with current trends. XYZ excels in offering ethnic styles that still feel modern, which makes it one of my go-to brands. Over time, I have trusted that their materials and artistry will hold up well.</p>
	<p>In a long-term relationship with a clothing brand, the most valuable aspects are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality & craftsmanship 2. Unique & traditional designs 3. Consistency & trust 4. Ethical & sustainable practices 5. Customer experience & service 6. Variety & innovation
	<p>Mostly cultural value, they consistently introduce new and innovative fashion trends yearly, yet they skillfully maintain their products' essence and traditional themes. This balance between modernity and tradition resonates deeply</p>

	with me, allowing me to stay connected to my cultural roots while embracing contemporary styles.
	I value consistent quality, unique designs, and a reliable shopping experience when building a long-term relationship with a clothing brand.
	I value the quality of clothing brands. XYZ company maintains this quality and follows the trends.
	I value product quality and design the most, and XYZ company has a unique way of designing its clothes.
	High-quality craftsmanship, unique design.
Have you faced any difficulties or challenges while interacting as a customer? If so, what were they?	I have faced difficulties with the huge crowd, especially during sales or festive seasons.
	I have not faced any significant challenges. The only minor issue I have experienced was occasionally not finding the size I wanted in-store. It happened once or twice, but it was not a significant inconvenience. Generally, my shopping experience with the XYZ company has been smooth.
	You might have had good and challenging experiences with the XYZ company as a regular customer. Some common challenges customers face with clothing brands include Pricing Concerns, Stock Availability, Online Shopping Issues, and Customer Service Response.
	Yes, I have faced challenges while interacting as a customer, particularly during peak times such as festivals or special events. One of the main issues is the lack of adequate customer service during these busy periods. Given that the brand is aware of the increased footfall and demand during such times, I believe there is room for more effective improvement in managing the rush.
	The large crowd sometimes makes shopping uncomfortable, especially during peak seasons.
	Sometimes, there are some products of the same quality that I cannot decide which to pick. And sometimes there is a new product group that I do not know about
	Not really.
	High pricing basically.
In your experience, what could a company do better to strengthen its customer relationship?	A company could focus on enhancing personalized customer service, reducing waiting times, and ensuring better crowd management during peak times.
	A company can- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collect and act on feedback regularly - Offer personalized updates or loyalty rewards - Train staff to address questions or issues promptly - Expand size ranges or special collections to be more inclusive
	To strengthen customer relationships, a company like XYZ could focus on the following improvements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loyalty rewards & special discounts: Offering exclusive

	<p>deals, early access to new collections, or birthday discounts for regular customers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Better stock management: Ensuring popular designs and sizes are restocked faster, reducing customer disappointment. - Enhanced online shopping experience: Improving website/app functionality, faster deliveries, and more straightforward returns/exchanges. - More personalized customer service: Quick response times, better in-store assistance, and proactive communication. - Exclusive events & engagement: Hosting VIP shopping events, artisan meet-and-greets, or styling sessions for loyal customers. <p>A company like XYZ could strengthen its customer relationships in several ways. First, implementing regular feedback sessions would be highly beneficial. This would allow customers to share their thoughts and suggestions, making them feel valued and heard. Second, a warm and personalized greeting can go a long way in creating a positive first impression and fostering a welcoming atmosphere. Lastly, ensuring prompt and efficient service would significantly enhance customer experience, especially during peak times. In my experience, the company can build stronger, more lasting relationships with its customers by addressing these areas.</p> <p>A company can strengthen customer relationships by improving crowd management, offering personalized services, and actively listening to customer feedback.</p> <p>Good communication, good feedback, and after-sales service.</p> <p>Take care of customer satisfaction; it covers almost everything.</p> <p>Loyalty programs, more straightforward returns</p>
<p>What customer service practices or policies make you feel valued as a customer?</p>	<p>Prompt responses, easy returns, personalized attention, and clear communication make me feel valued as a customer.</p> <p>I appreciate yearly offerings or loyalty programs that reward repeat purchases. XYZ company's consistent service quality, such as friendly staff, organized store layouts, and helpful advice, makes me feel acknowledged. A transparent and fair return/exchange policy also makes me trust the brand more.</p> <p>I feel valued by excellent customer service and thoughtful policies as a regular customer. Some key practices that enhance customer experience include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personalized attention: Staff remember preferences, greet warmly, and assist with selections. - Loyalty programs & rewards: Special discounts, birthday

	<p>offers, and exclusive deals for long-term customers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hassle-free returns & exchanges: Easy return/exchange policies with no unnecessary delays or strict conditions. <p>One customer service practice that makes me feel valued as a customer is when a brand offers personalized recommendations based on my past purchases. For instance, receiving suggestions for similar yet new items that align with my preferences would enhance my shopping experience. Additionally, being presented with options that slightly differ from my usual taste while still staying within my comfort zone would feel thoughtful and tailored to my needs. This level of personalization saves time and shows that the brand understands and values my individual preferences.</p> <p>Good customer service policies prioritizing quick assistance, smooth returns, and a respectful approach make me feel valued.</p> <p>The discount card or a membership card that they give me offers some extra prices cuts on my next purchase.</p> <p>Their attention to customers and their offers.</p> <p>Quick service, friendly staff.</p>
<p>What customer support influences your purchasing decisions the most?</p>	<p>Responsive, helpful, and friendly customer support influences my decision the most, as it ensures a smooth and positive shopping experience.</p> <p>The responsive and knowledgeable staff greatly influenced my decision to purchase. If I know I can easily reach out for assistance, get accurate product information, and have issues resolved quickly, I will be more confident about buying. Positive words of mouth—online and from friends—also play a huge role.</p> <p>The customer support that influences purchasing decisions the most includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helpful & knowledgeable staff: Whether in-store or online, having friendly and well-informed representatives who assist with product details, styling advice, or availability. - Quick & responsive service: Fast replies to inquiries, whether on social media, phone, or live chat, make shopping easier. - Easy returns & exchanges: A hassle-free return/exchange policy encourages confidence in purchasing. <p>The customer support that most influences my purchasing decisions is a combination of promptness, personalization, and proactive assistance. A brand's quick and efficient responses to my queries or concerns build trust and confidence in their service. Personalized support, such as tailored recommendations or follow-ups based on my preferences, also makes me feel valued as a customer. Lastly, proactive assistance, like anticipating my needs or offering solutions before I ask, significantly enhances my overall</p>

	<p>experience and encourages me to choose that brand over others.</p>
	<p>Helpful and responsive support that quickly resolves issues makes a big difference in my decision to continue shopping with a brand.</p>
	<p>I can change the product within 30 days if it feels like it is not the perfect one.</p>
	<p>Quick response time, polite staff.</p>
	<p>Quick issue resolution and a smooth exchange process.</p>
<p>When do you recommend clothing brands to others?</p>	<p>I recommend clothing brands when I am happy with their quality, customer service, and value, especially if they have unique designs and ethical practices.</p>
	<p>I usually recommend clothing brands when I have had a consistently good experience, especially if a friend or family member is looking for something specific that I know the brand does well. If there is a sale or new collection, I am excited about, I will mention it. If I trust the brand and love what it offers, I am happy to pass along the recommendation.</p>
	<p>I recommend clothing brands to others when they meet specific key criteria, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High-quality products: When the fabric, stitching, and craftsmanship are durable and worth the price. - Unique & stylish designs: It is worth sharing if the brand offers something special, like traditional yet modern styles. - Excellent customer service: If the shopping experience (in-store or online) is smooth and hassle-free. - Value for money: When the pricing matches the quality and is worth the investment. - Positive personal experience: If I have had a great experience with the brand, I feel confident recommending it.
	<p>I recommend clothing brands to others primarily in two scenarios. First, when my friends or family compliment my outfit and inquire about where I purchased it, I naturally share my positive experience with the brand. Second, I recommend brands when someone is looking for gift ideas or shopping for themselves, especially if I know the brand offers high-quality, stylish, and culturally relevant products that align with their preferences. In both cases, I aim to suggest brands I trust and believe meet their expectations.</p>
	<p>I recommend a brand that impresses with its product quality, reasonable pricing, and excellent customer service.</p>
	<p>When I feel that the quality of the product is worth it and is also fashionably reasonable, I recommend it to others.</p>
	<p>When I have a great experience with quality and service, and also if I get compliments on what I wear.</p>
	<p>I feel comfortable and love the quality of the design, and I also like the overall shopping experience.</p>

Appendix 3. Two employees' interview transcripts

Interview with employee one (H1)

What key values does your company uphold in maintaining sustainable customer relationships?

XYZ company believes in honesty, quality, and good service. We always try to give customers the best experience, so they keep coming back.

Have you encountered situations where company policy and customer expectations conflicted? How did you handle them?

Some customers expect returns on non-refundable items. At that time, I usually tried to explain the policy and suggested other solutions, like exchanges, if possible.

What specific strategies can be used to engage and retain customers?

We greet every customer warmly, help them find what they need, and keep them updated on new products.

How do we utilize customer feedback to improve relationships?

When customers give suggestions, we share them in our official meetings. If many customers ask for something, the company tries to improve.

Interview with employee two (H2)

What key values does your company uphold in maintaining sustainable customer relationships?

We ensure that customers get high-quality handmade products, and our core values are customer satisfaction and ethical business.

Have you encountered situations where company policy and customer expectations conflicted? How did you handle them?

A customer once wanted a product that was out of stock. I noted their request and informed them when it was restocked, and they appreciated the effort.

What specific strategies can be used to engage and retain customers?

We build relationships by offering loyalty programs and special promotions.

How do we utilize customer feedback to improve relationships?

If we receive complaints or negative feedback about product quality, we instantly report them to our headquarters. The company then works with management to fix issues.