The Role of Relationship Marketing Activities Carried out by Cargo Companies During The Covid-19 Pandemic on the Service Quality Perception of Corporate Customers[1]

Mükremin YİĞİT (ID) ᵃ **Murat ÇAKIRKAYA** (ID) ᵇ *

ᵃNecmettin Erbakan University, Institute of Social Sciences, Konya, Türkiye. mukreminyigit@outlook.com
ᵇNecmettin Erbakan University, Academy of Applied Sciences, Department of Logistic Management, Konya, Türkiye.
murat.cakirkaya39@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Purpose – In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this study aims to investigate how relationship marketing initiatives implemented by cargo companies influence the service quality perceptions of their corporate clientele. **Design/methodology/approach** – This research focused on corporate customers located in Konya who utilized cargo services amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Data belonging to 156 companies operating in Konya were collected by online or face-to-face survey method and analyzes were carried out on the answers given by the participants. In this study, various statistical techniques were utilized to analyze the data comprehensively. These techniques included factor analysis to uncover underlying latent variables, reliability analysis to assess the consistency of measurements, correlation analysis to explore relationships between variables, and regression analysis to understand the predictive power of certain factors on the outcome variable. **Findings** – The study revealed that social bonds, a component of relationship marketing, have a moderate and statistically significant positive impact (r=0.506, p<0.05) on customers' perception of service quality. Structural bonds were found to have a weaker yet still significant positive influence (r=0.338, p<0.05) on service quality perception. However, economic bonds showed no significant relationship (p=0.072, p>0.05) with service quality perception. In addition, it was determined that while social bonds were a significant predictor of service quality perception (f=18.952; p<.001), economic and structural bonds did not significantly predict service quality perception. **Discussion** – Amidst the challenging landscape of the Covid-19 pandemic, cargo companies emerged as unsung heroes, tirelessly ensuring the flow of essential goods even as communities stayed indoors. Despite the intensifying competitive environment, these companies prioritize fostering strong relationships with customers, striving to cultivate loyalty amidst uncertainty. Providing quality products and services is another important factor that enables businesses to compete in a tough competitive environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 (coronavirus) emerged in the Chinese province of Vuhan in the last months of 2019. It quickly affected the whole world and was declared as a global epidemic (pandemic). Covid-19 has negatively affected many industries. The logistics sector is also among the sectors affected by Covid-19. During the Covid-19 period, cargo companies have taken various precautions. These can be given as various examples such as contactless delivery, disinfection of workplaces, disinfection of the outer part of the product to be delivered, compliance with social distance rules in businesses. For this reason, cargo transportation has become one of the busiest sectors in the Covid-19 period. Since the products are delivered via cargo, there has been a great increase in e-commerce and the workload of the sector has increased.

Relationship marketing is considered as a very important marketing technique to establish strong bonds with customers and increase their loyalty to the business, especially in service businesses. In the case of the correct

<u>Önerilen Atıf/Suggested Citation</u>
Yiğit, M., Çakırkaya, M. (2024). The Role of Relationship Marketing Activities Carried out by Cargo Companies During The Covid-19 Pandemic on the Service Quality Perception of Corporate Customers, *Journal of Business Research-Turk*, 16 (1), 30-43.

application of relationship marketing, there are various benefits for both businesses and customers (Rizan et al. 2014:8).

The growth of the service sector with each passing day thanks to technological developments and the increase in its share in GNP have also led to an increase in service quality expectations in this area. In this respect, it has become a necessity to focus on service quality and measure the quality of the service provided. Service quality can be described as the variance between the level of service customers anticipate receiving and the actual level of service they experience (Parasuraman et al., 1985:45). Businesses should try to give more importance to service quality. Because during the Covid-19 period, customers are more meticulous and prefer higher quality products/services. Customers are now paying more attention to factors such as the attitudes and behaviors of the employees in terms of cleanliness and hygiene, the quality levels of the products and services offered.

In the study, the role of relationship marketing activities carried out by cargo companies during the Covid19 pandemic on the service quality perception of corporate customers was investigated in the context of corporate customers operating in Konya.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Logistics Activities and Cargo Sector in the Covid 19 Pandemic Period

The measures taken as a result of the increase in the spread of Covid-19 in the beginning of 2020 brought about problems in the whole world economy. Global markets have come to a stopping point with the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic. There was a decrease in the trade in goods and services (Kaya, 2020:221). In addition to all these, passenger transportation and freight shipment services have been gradually interrupted all over the world during the pandemic period, and all types of transportation have been adversely affected by this situation.

In terms of haulage road and passenger transportation, countries have closed their border gates or imposed various restrictions due to the pandemic. As additional controls were started at border entrances and exits, vehicles had to wait in line and delays were experienced. In passenger transportation, people have postponed or canceled their travels and holidays due to the crowd. Companies had to reduce the number of passengers by half within the framework of epidemic measures. In maritime transport, almost half of the ships trading between the Asian-European continents have canceled their trade. Ships carrying cargo had to wait for long periods at the ports, their cargo was discharged late, and the goods to be loaded could not be loaded on time. These negativities caused delays of ships and increased freight prices. There has also been a decrease in rail freight and passenger transport. There has also been a significant reduction in air transport. In this context, flights to some regions were canceled and some routes were used partially. For this reason, the mode of transportation in which the negativities were felt the most was air transportation (Akçacı and Çınaroğlu, 2020:451).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people have been careful not to leave their homes. However, when it is a necessity to meet the needs, people have preferred e-commerce sites intensively. In this context, they have provided most of their needs, especially cleaning, food, books, clothing, etc., via the internet. Due to all these developments, there has been a great increase in e-commerce volume compared to previous years (Güven, 2020:258). Since online shopping is carried out through cargo companies, the increase in the amount of e-commerce naturally increased the workload of the cargo sector. As a matter of fact, in a study conducted in Bartın Province, 22 PTT cargo employees were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique, and as a result of the study, it was concluded that there was a 26% increase in cargo deliveries compared to the period before the pandemic. In the same study, it was also determined that the increased workload negatively affected the motivation and job satisfaction of the employees. (Topçuoğlu and Genç, 2021:373)

2.2. Relationship Marketing Activities and Cargo Sector During the Covid 19 Pandemic Period

Relationship marketing, rooted in the symbiotic marketing concept proposed by Adler in 1966, was formally introduced to marketing literature by Berry in 1983 (Kim et al., 2001:274). This approach emphasizes fostering enduring connections and mutual benefits between businesses and their customers. Numerous definitions encapsulate the essence of relationship marketing. The intersection point of the definitions made is the

relationship established between the parties. The basis of relationship marketing is based on obtaining personal information of customers and information related to the field of activity of the business and establishing long-term relationships with customers through this information. According to Grönroos (1990:5), relationship marketing is a type of marketing that occurs as a result of establishing, maintaining, developing and commercializing customer relationships in order for a business to achieve its goals. Relationship marketing activities primarily aim to cultivate strong, enduring connections with customers, fostering loyalty and sustained engagement over time. In addition, studies have shown that long-term customer loyalty increases business profitability (Rizan et al. 2014:9). According to another researcher, the aim of relationship marketing is to maximize the information exchange established between the business and the customer. Two of the basic conditions for the realization of this aim are mutual trust and goodwill between the parties (Deniz and Kamer, 2013:6). On the other hand, the fact that the cost of acquiring customers is higher than the cost of retaining the customer has made relationship marketing even more important. In addition, positive reflections such as continuous customer loyalty, high customer lifetime value, more frequent shopping, etc. make relationship marketing more and more important day by day (Ilban et al., 2009:123). Adding value to customers and providing convenience to businesses in terms of product/service delivery are among the other important factors that increase interest in relationship marketing. Relationship marketing is also important because it mediates the increase of trust and loyalty, and as a result, it provides the improvement of marketing effectiveness and efficiency (Kılıç and Erdoğan, 2016:462). The condition of benefiting from all these gains of relationship marketing is to ensure the continuity of the bonds formed as a result of the relations established with the customers (Hoşgör, 2019:23).

It is possible to talk about three types of bonds that are generally accepted in the relations to be established with customers within the scope of relationship marketing. The *economic bond* is the first bond to be created between the business and the customer. This bond aims to establish customer loyalty with financial incentives. It is a price-based approach. The economic advantages provided by businesses in most sectors affect customers' choice of goods and services. Customers are affected by the financial opportunities provided by the business to them, they prefer companies that they think will provide more benefits to them and continue to purchase the products and services of the relevant company due to these benefits. This shows that financial promotions positively affect customers' value judgments about the business and enable them to develop repeat purchasing behavior (Yılmaz, 2014:23). Businesses frequently show appreciation to their loyal customers by offering special incentives. For instance, airlines and prominent hotel chains often provide points or rewards to frequent patrons who utilize various additional services offered by the company (Chiu et al., 2005:1683). While establishing economic bonds, the business has to choose the right strategy. A wrong strategy can lead to misunderstanding of the product or service of the business and therefore increase the cost. This situation may cause a serious disadvantage in the effort to acquire customers in a competitive environment (Yılmaz, 2014:23). *Social Bond* is the bond based on the formation and development of personal relationships between the business and its customers (Venetis and Ghauri, 2004:1582). Social bonds are intermediate level in the hierarchy and focus on some service dimensions that include interpersonal interactions between customers and businesses (e.g. response time, claims processing, and so forth). Relationship marketing literature suggests that strong social bonds help protect against competitive pricing pressures (Peltier and Westfall, 2000:6). In summary, this strategy includes constantly interacting with customers, providing information about their needs and maintaining positive relationships with them. When the social bond is used effectively and correctly together with the economic bond, it can also affect the customers psychologically and emotionally and meet their expectations in this direction. However, it should not be ignored that as the business grows, personalized applications will become more difficult, and the necessity of using data-based applications will arise in the recognition of the customer, and this will bring an extra cost to the business (Yılmaz, 2014:54). *Structural bonds* are difficult or expensive bonds to form between customers and businesses. Because businesses that can establish a structural bond with their customers offer them value-added benefits that cannot be easily found elsewhere. According to some authors, a structural bond significantly increases the cost of switching to another competitor. For this reason, it can be said that structural bonds are at the top of the bond hierarchy. In addition, strong structural bonds can strengthen customers' perceptions of utilitarian value, which consists of convenience and product quality (Chiu et al., 2005:1683). The understanding of providing valuable service to the customer is essential in the structural bonding approach. For this reason, the service offered is usually designed as a part of the communication system (Chou, 2009:997)

In service-oriented industries, where human interaction plays a crucial role, businesses often rely on labor-intensive methods to deliver their services directly to customers. This face-to-face communication presents a valuable opportunity to enhance customer satisfaction and foster loyalty. Consequently, companies in these sectors prioritize building lasting connections with their clientele. This emphasis on relationship-building is central to the concept of relationship marketing, as it underscores the importance of nurturing and maintaining strong bonds between businesses and their customers over time. In a study conducted in 2018, the importance of relationship marketing in the service sector was examined, and as a result of the study, it was seen that relationship marketing helps to retain existing customers in terms of service businesses, increases the profitability of the business, and has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Karaman 2018:23). In another study conducted in 2014, it was determined that the relationship marketing activities used by banks have a positive and significant effect on customers' repurchase intentions and quality perceptions (Yılmaz 2014:2). In a study conducted in Istanbul in 2005, the effect of relationship marketing on the perception of service quality was examined specifically for airline companies. As a result, it has been observed that respectability and safety criteria are important in the perception of the service quality offered for Turkish Airlines, and that the member cards given to continue the consumer interaction after the service is provided create satisfaction for the customers. It has been observed that customers are more satisfied with the service of Turkish Airlines compared to the services of other companies (Çelik, 2005:162-170).

The global spread of Covid-19 has necessitated widespread adherence to regulations and guidelines across all sectors, as the pandemic has exerted its impact on a worldwide scale. In times of crisis, it is extremely important for businesses to seek ways to further strengthen their relations with their customers. Because these people, who have great psychological distress, can be happy even with a birthday message from businesses and they can sympathize with the business. During times of epidemic outbreaks, it's crucial for businesses to assess and refine their relationship marketing strategies, addressing any shortcomings that may exist. Because customers prefer businesses that take care of themselves and meet their needs in difficult times.

During the Covid-19 period, people wanted to meet their needs without going out, and they generally used online platforms for this. They bought many of their needs, from food to clothing, from books to accessories, using the internet. All these developments have increased the use of cargo companies. Cargo companies, whose workload has increased so much, have also made an effort to ensure that the problems arising from this density do not adversely affect their relations with their customers. Because the correct perception of customers' requests by the business and meeting their needs has become even more important during the pandemic period. As a result, it would not be wrong to say that well-established relational bonds will provide an advantage for the business in such crisis periods. Accurate and timely delivery of shipments is also a part of communication with customers for cargo businesses. For this reason, the good relations that the cargo companies will establish with the customers will also increase their performance regarding their logistics activities. On the other hand, it is much more important for businesses to establish long-term relationships to gain competitive advantage rather than short-term relationships. As a matter of fact, in the study carried out by Akdoğan and Durak (2017:632), it was concluded that there is a significant and positive relationship between the orientation of logistics enterprises to relationship marketing and their performance.

2.3. Service Quality Perception and Cargo Sector in the Covid 19 Pandemic Period

Service quality is the difference between the performance that customers expect to get from a service and the performance they get (Parasuraman et al., 1985:45; Ghobehei et al., 2019:349; Sultan and Wong, 2019:333). Zeithaml (1988:3) defined service quality perception as "the consumer's judgment about the overall excellence or superiority of a product". In another study, service quality was defined as "the ability of an organization to meet customer expectations" (Durmaz, 2010:50-51). Service quality models are primarily examined under two main headings: "models that explain service quality" and "models that measure service quality". There are two types of models describing service quality: the perceived service quality model and the service quality gap model. Models that measure service quality can be evaluated under two headings: Servqual and Servperf models (Altunışık, 2015:67). The Servqual Model, developed by Parasuraman et al. in 1988, assesses service quality through five key dimensions: (1) Tangibles: This dimension evaluates the physical aspects of the service, including facilities, equipment, and the appearance of staff. (2) Reliability: It gauges the consistency and accuracy of service delivery, focusing on the provider's ability to fulfill promises reliably. (3) Responsiveness: This dimension measures the willingness of service providers to assist customers promptly

and effectively. (4) Assurance: It reflects the competence, courtesy, and trustworthiness of employees, and their capacity to instill confidence in customers. (5) Empathy: This dimension concerns the level of personalized care and attention that the service provider extends to each customer, demonstrating a genuine concern for their individual needs and experiences.
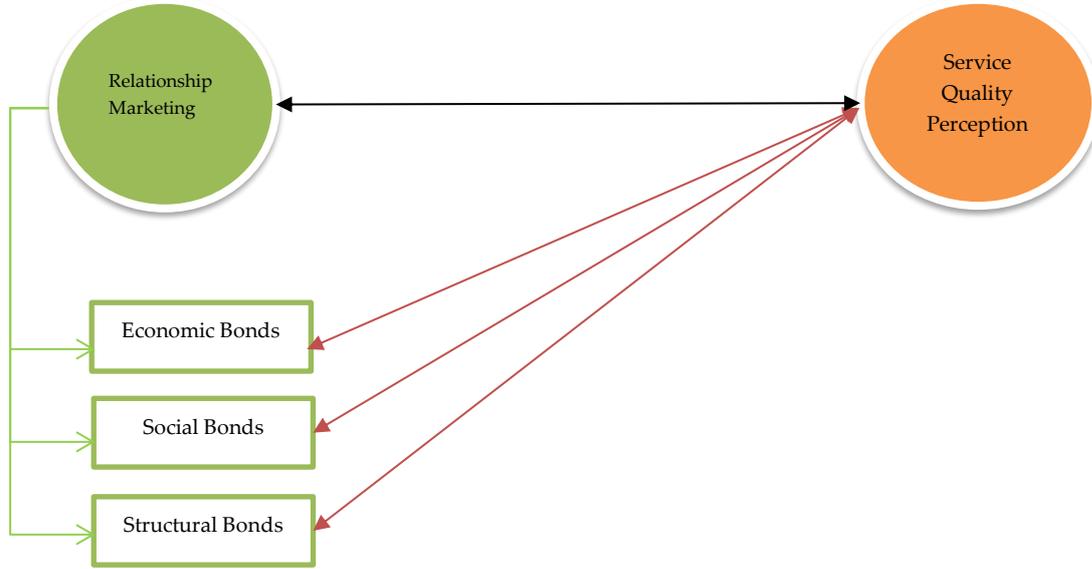
In today's fiercely competitive landscape, businesses strive to distinguish themselves by prioritizing quality. By meticulously understanding customer needs and tailoring services accordingly, companies not only elevate but also fortify the perception of service excellence. Cargo companies should also prioritize service quality. Because customers feel safe in the quality environment and trust the business, which can turn customers into loyal customers. As a matter of fact, in a study conducted in Istanbul in 2013, the service quality perception of a cargo company was examined and as a result; It has been seen that the cargo company meets the expectations of its customers, and the gender, education level, occupation and income status of the customers do not make a significant difference on the level of satisfaction (Ayçil 2013). In the study, in which the effect of service quality perceptions of cargo companies operating in Konya province organized industrial zone on customer satisfaction, it was concluded that cargo companies have high expectations for cargo transportation services, but corporate customer satisfaction regarding the services they receive does not meet their expectations (Songur, 2016:2). In the study conducted by Büyükkeklik et al. (2014:33), it was found that cargo companies' service quality is comprised of five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Notably, the dimensions of reliability and responsiveness were identified as having a greater impact on customers' overall perceptions of service quality compared to tangibles, empathy, and assurance. The study conducted in 2020 specifically focused on Cargo customers residing in Istanbul and aimed to examine the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction. The findings revealed that several dimensions of service quality, including responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and physical properties, significantly impacted customer satisfaction. Notably, reliability exhibited the most substantial effect on customer satisfaction compared to the other dimensions. However, the effects of responsiveness, assurance, and physical properties were found to be significant but relatively weaker. Interestingly, the research did not establish a significant relationship between empathy, another dimension of service quality, and customer satisfaction (Onurlubaş and Gümüş, 2020). In a study conducted on consumers residing in Kastamonu province, the problems faced by consumers receiving cargo service and possible solutions to overcome these problems were investigated. As a result of the study, it has been determined that the most common problems faced by customers are long delivery times and delays. In order to improve the service quality, customers made the following suggestions; qualified employees, customer-oriented, fast delivery and effective communication, etc. (Yıldız, 2020:1).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, customers have heightened their scrutiny of the products and services they engage with, prioritizing quality and hygiene standards over lower prices. This shift has elevated the significance of quality as a decisive factor in consumer decision-making. In a recent study, customer satisfaction regarding hospital service quality perceptions was assessed amidst the pandemic. The findings revealed that customers' expectations of service quality during the pandemic significantly deviate from those in normal circumstances. Since this process may cause changes in the preferences of the customers, customer relations gain even more importance (Özden 2021:42). In a study, the service quality perceptions of passengers traveling with airlines during the Covid-19 period were compared with their perceptions before the pandemic. As a result of the analyzes made, it was determined that there were no significant differences in the perceptions of the five dimensions of service quality in terms of gender, age, marital status, income levels and the airline company traveled to. On the other hand, it was observed that the perceptions of "reliability" and "assurance" dimensions, which are among the dimensions of service quality, differ in terms of "education level variable". In addition, it has been observed that the perceptions of the dimensions of "reliability" and "responsiveness", which are among the dimensions of service quality, differ in terms of the occupational group variable. As a result of the study, it was also seen that the measures implemented during the Covid-19 epidemic did not increase the service quality perceptions of air passengers (Oruç, 2022:116). In 2020, a study was conducted based on the SERVQUAL scale to measure the quality of education service provided by high school teachers during the Covid-19 process. According to the findings, it was concluded that the teachers who provide services in the distance education platform in general think that they are sufficient and they try to provide a quality education by making special efforts, but they have problems in some technical issues and feedback (Karaca and Kelam 2020:7).

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Model

The model of the study is presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1. The Relationship Between Relationship Marketing and Service Quality Perception Concepts

H_1:   *Relationship marketing is statistically significant in the predicting the service quality perceptions of customers who get service from the cargo sector.*

$H_{1.a}$: Economic bonds from relationship marketing sub-dimensions are statistically significant in predicting the service quality perceptions of customers who get service from the cargo sector.

$H_{1.b}$: Social bonds from relationship marketing sub-dimensions are statistically significant in predicting the service quality perceptions of customers who get service from the cargo sector.

$H_{1.c}$: Structural bonds from relationship marketing sub-dimensions are statistically significant in predicting the service quality perceptions of customers who get service from the cargo sector.

H_2:   *There is a positive and significant relationship between relationship marketing activities and the service quality perceptions of the customers who get service from the cargo sector.*

$H_{2.a}$: There is a positive and significant relationship between activities aimed at strengthening economic bonds from relationship marketing sub-dimensions and service quality perceptions of customers who get service from the cargo sector.

$H_{2.b}$: There is a positive and significant relationship between activities aimed at strengthening social bonds from relationship marketing sub-dimensions and service quality perceptions of customers who get service from the cargo sector.

$H_{2.c}$: There is a positive and significant relationship between activities aimed at strengthening structural bonds from relationship marketing sub-dimensions and service quality perceptions of customers who get serivice from the cargo sector.

3.2. Population and Sample, Data Collection Tools, Analysis of Data

This study delves into how relationship marketing initiatives implemented by cargo companies during the Covid-19 pandemic impact corporate customers' perceptions of service quality. It also aims to offer insights to shape upcoming research endeavors. Focusing on corporate clients utilizing cargo services in Konya during the pandemic, the study explores the intricate dynamics between relationship marketing efforts and customer service quality perceptions. In this context, the relationships between the variables were tested and the hypotheses put forward theoretically were tested by using the data of the survey applied with the purposeful sampling method on corporate customers operating in Konya and purchasing services from cargo companies during the Covid-19 period. Survey method was used in the research. The survey form is composed of three

parts. In the first part, demographic characteristics were questioned. A total of 43 questions were asked to the participants by using the service quality perception scale in the second part and the relations marketing scale in the third part. Within the scope of the research, data belonging to 156 companies operating in Konya were collected by online or face-to-face survey method and analyzes were carried out on the answers given by the participants. (*The data collection process was completed in June and July 2021, and the ethics committee report for the related study in Necmettin Erbakan University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research Ethics Committee- decision no: 2021/307 - decision date is 21.05.2021.*) Within the scope of this study, factor analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis and regression analysis were performed.

3.3. Findings and Comments

3.3.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The distribution of age, education level, and the sector in which they work is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=156)

Demographic Variables	Value	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Age	18-24	46	29,5	29,5
	25-40	73	46,8	76,3
	41-56	37	23.7	100,0
Education Level	Elementary school	24	15,4	15,4
	High school	27	17,3	32,7
	Associate Degree	59	37,8	70,5
	University	36	23,1	93,6
	Master's degree	10	6,4	100,0
Industry Served	Optical-Medical	30	19,2	19,2
	IT-Technology Accessories	44	28,2	47,4
	Souvenirs/Jewelry	32	20,5	67,9
	Clothing-textile-shoes	50	32,1	100

As can be seen in Figure 1, the distribution of 156 participants is as follows: 29.5 percent are in the 18-24 age range, 46 percent are in the 25-40 age range, and 23.7 percent are in the 41-56 age range. When the education levels are examined, it is seen that the majority of the participants (37.8%) are associate degree graduates. It is followed by undergraduates (23.1%) and high school graduates (17.3%), respectively. On the other hand, it can be said that there is an equal distribution in terms of industry served. Clothing-textile-shoes workers constitute the largest group in terms of the sectors they work in. As a result, when the participant profile is examined, it is possible to say that there is a reasonable distribution.

3.3.2. Factor Analysis

3.3.2.1. Relationship Marketing Scale Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted to determine how many sub-dimensions the relationship marketing scale was perceived. In addition, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was tested with the KMO and Bartlett tests. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that the relationship marketing scale was divided into three sub-dimensions. These dimensions consist of economic bonds, social bonds and structural bonds.

Table 2. Relationship Marketing Scale Factor Analysis

Variables	Factor Loadings			Cronbach Alpha
	1	2	3	
Economic Bonds				
EB1: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo offered extra incentives (such as bonus, paro card, points) for transactions made.	0,832			0,875
EB2: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo gave me gifts (extra installments, deferred installments, etc.) in return for regular transactions.	0,738			
EB3: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo offered extra opportunities for transactions over a certain amount.	0,743			
EB4: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo offered me some discounts when I transacted over a certain amount.	0,743			
EB5: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo offered faster services for regular customers. (giving a special queue in the transaction queue, etc.)	0,738			
Social Bonds				
SB1: Yurtiçi Kargo was in contact with me during the Covid-19 period.		0,847		0,848
SB2: Yurtiçi Kargo took care of my needs during the Covid-19 period.		0,546		
SB3: Yurtiçi Kargo employees helped me solve my personal problems during the Covid19 period.		0,691		
SB4: Yurtiçi Kargo applied for my opinions for the services it provided during the Covid-19 period.		0,537		
SB5: Yurtiçi Kargo remembered me on my special days during the Covid-19 period. (birthday message, card, etc.).		0,565		
SB6: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo offered its members the opportunity to exchange ideas.		0,619		
Structural Bonds				
STB1: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo offered me special services according to my needs. (special installment, special cargo service, etc.).			0,678	0,679
STB2: Yurtiçi Kargo provided information about its new services during the Covid-19 period.			0,671	
STB3: Yurtiçi Kargo provided innovative services during the Covid-19 period.			0,660	
STB4: When I made a complaint to Yurtiçi Kargo during the Covid-19 period, I was able to get an immediate response.			0,472	
STB5: During the Covid-19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo used different products or services to solve my problem.			0,555	
Eigenvalue	6,288	2,426	1,828	
Variance Explained	39,303	15,167	11,431	
Total Variance Explained		65,901		

(EB: Economic Bonds, SB: Social Bonds, STB: Structural Bonds)

Based on the information provided: Anti-image Correlation Matrix: All variables have Multicollinearity Tolerance (MSA) values above 0.50, indicating a sufficient level of multicollinearity. Cronbach's Alpha Analysis: The results presented in Table 2 show that the internal consistency levels of all dimensions of the relationship marketing scale used in the research are above the acceptance limit of 0.60. This suggests that the items within each dimension of the scale are reliably measuring the same underlying construct. Factor Analysis: Factor analysis was conducted on the expressions of the relationship marketing scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was found to be 0.827, which is well above the acceptable

threshold of 0.5, indicating that the data is suitable for factor analysis. Additionally, the significance level (p-value) associated with the factor analysis was less than 0.001, suggesting that the obtained factors are statistically significant. Three sub-factors were identified, indicating that the scale expressions were consistent and could be grouped into three distinct dimensions or factors. Among these dimensions, there are 5 expressions belonging to the dimension of "economic bonds", 6 expressions belonging to the dimension of "social bonds" and 5 expressions belonging to the dimension of "structural bonds". The three factors obtained as a result of the factor analysis explained 65.90% of the total variance.

3.3.2.2. Service Quality Perception Exploratory Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted to determine how many sub-dimensions the service quality perception scale was perceived. In addition, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was tested with the KMO and Barlett tests. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that the service quality perception scale was divided into five sub-dimensions. These dimensions consist of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empaty.

Table 3. Service Quality Perception Exploratory Factor Analysis

	Variables	Factor Loadings					Cronbach Alpha
		1	2	3	4	5	
Tangibles	TAN1: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo had up-to-date equipment / tools.	0,633					0,785
	TAN2: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo's physical facilities were visually attractive.	0,646					
	TAN3: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees were well-dressed and clean-looking.	0,473					
	TAN4: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo's physical facilities were compatible with the type of service provided.	0,639					
Reliability	REL1: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo fulfilled the services it promised and on time.		0,683				0,797
	REL2: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo showed sincere interest to solve a problem when there was a problem.		0,588				
	REL3: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo had a reliable structure.		0,664				
	REL4: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo fulfilled its services at the time it promised to perform.		0,707				
	REL5: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo kept its records correctly.		0,619				
Responsiveness	RES1: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo had said exactly when it would provide its service.			0,605			0,753
	RES2: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees were eager to provide the service immediately.			0,649			
	RES3: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees were always willing to help customers.			0,687			
	RES4: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees were not too busy to			0,494			

	respond immediately to customers' requests.					
Assurance	ASS1: During the Covid19 period, I trusted Yurtiçi Kargo employees.				0,733	
	ASS2:During the Covid19 period, I felt safe about my transactions with Yurtiçi Kargo.				0,699	
	ASS3: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees were kind to me.				0,730	0,811
	ASS4: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees were knowledgeable about the answers to my questions.				0,615	
Empaty	EMP1: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo showed me personal attention.					0,552
	EMP2: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees showed personal attention to me.					0,663
	EMP3: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees knew what my need was.					0,577	0,722
	EMP4: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo employees took care of my interests.					0,642
	EMP5: During the Covid19 period, Yurtiçi Kargo's working hours were convenient for me.					0,589
	Eigenvalue	8,638	1,631	1,373	1,265	1,092
	Variance Explained	39,264	7,414	6,242	5,752	4,962
	Total Variance Explained			63,634		

When the MSA values in the anti-image correlation matrix were examined, it was seen that all variables were above 0.50. The results of the Cronbach's Alpha analysis performed for the service quality perception scale used in the research are presented in Table 3. It was observed that the internal consistency levels of all dimensions were above the acceptance limit (0.60). Factor analysis was performed for the expressions of the service quality perception scale used in the research (KMO=0,882; p<0.001). Five sub-factors were obtained in which the scale expressions were consistent: Among these dimensions, there are 4 expressions belonging to the dimension of "tangibles", 5 expressions belonging to the dimension of "reliability", 4 expressions belonging to the dimension of "responsiveness" 4 expressions belonging to the dimension of "assurance"and 5 expressions belonging to the dimension of "empaty". The five factors obtained as a result of the factor analysis explained 63.63% of the total variance.

3.3.3. Relationship Marketing and Service Quality Perception Relationship Correlation Analysis

Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted to determine the relationships between relationship marketing sub-dimensions and service quality perception. Analysis results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Relationship Marketing Sub-Dimensions and Service Quality Perception Correlation Analysis

		Service Quality Perception	Economic Bonds	Social Bonds	Structural Bonds
Service Quality Perception	Pearson r	1	0,144	,506**	,338**
	P		0,072	<,001	<,001
	N	156	156	156	156
Economic Bonds	Pearson r	0,144	1	,440**	,556**
	p	0,072		<,001	<,001
	N	156	156	156	156

Social Bonds	Pearson r	,506**	,440**	1	,591**
	p	<,001	<,001		<,001
	N	156	156	156	156
Structural Bonds	Pearson r	,338**	,556**	,591**	1
	p	<,001	<,001	<,001	
	N	156	156	156	156

In the examination of the relationship between various aspects of relationship marketing and how customers perceive service quality, it was found that there exists a moderately positive correlation (correlation coefficient = 0.506) between Social Bonds and customers' perception of service quality. This correlation was statistically significant at a confidence level of $p < 0.05$, indicating that stronger social bonds between the customer and the service provider are associated with higher perceptions of service quality. In other words, the social bonds to be established with corporate customers will increase the service quality perceptions of these customers in a meaningful and positive way. On the other hand, there is a weak positive (=,338) and significant (p<0,05) relationship between structural bonds and service quality perception. Thanks to this relationship, the structural bonds that will be established with corporate customers will increase the service quality perceptions of these customers in a meaningful and positive way, albeit at a weak level. According to this result, H_2, H_{2b} and H_{2c} hypotheses were supported. No significant relationship was found between economic bonds and service quality perception (p=,072; p>0,05). According to this result, the H_{2a} hypothesis was not supported.

3.3.4. Relationship Marketing and Service Quality Perception Relationship Regression Analysis

The regression coefficients of relationship marketing sub-dimensions and service quality perception are presented below:

Table 5. Relationship Marketing Sub-Dimensions and Service Quality Perception Regression Coefficients

Independent Variable	**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardized Coefficients**	**Statistics**	**p Value**	**R**	**R2**	**Statistics**	**p Value**
	B	**Standard Error**	**Beta**	**t**				**F**	
Economic Bonds	-0,088	0,052	-143	-1,96	0,092				
Social Bonds	0,42	0,074	0,495	5,692	<,001	0,552	0,272	18,952	<,001
Structural Bonds	0,099	0,075	0,125	1,329	0,186				

As it can be seen in Table 5, since the F statistic is 95,398 and the p value is .000, it can be said that the regression model formed is generally meaningful. In other words, it is statistically possible to predict the service quality perception with at least one of the 3 sub-dimensions of the relationship marketing scale. As can be seen from Table 5, social bonds, one of the sub-dimensions of relationship marketing, affect service quality perception in a statistically significant way (f=18,952; p=<,005). In other words, social bonds are a significant predictor of service quality perception. Social bonds explain 27 percent of the variance in service quality perception. According to these results, H_1 and H_{1b} hypotheses were supported. On the other hand, it was determined that economic bonds (p=,092>,005) and structural bonds (p=,186>,005) did not significantly predict service quality perception. According to these results, H_{1a} and H_{1c} hypotheses were not supported.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study examining how cargo companies' relationship marketing efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic influenced corporate customers' perceptions of service quality, several findings emerged: Social bonds between the cargo companies and their corporate customers were found to have a moderately positive correlation (r = 0.506) with service quality perception, indicating that stronger social connections positively influenced how customers perceived the quality of service provided. Structural bonds, which include elements such as contractual agreements and shared systems, showed a weak positive correlation (r = 0.338) with service quality perception. Although the relationship was not as strong as social bonds, it remained significant, suggesting that certain structural factors also contributed positively to service quality perception. In contrast,

economic bonds, which typically involve financial aspects of the relationship, did not show a significant relationship with service quality perception ($p = 0.072$; $p > 0.05$). This implies that financial incentives or considerations alone may not significantly impact how corporate customers perceive the quality of service provided by cargo companies during the pandemic. In summary, the study highlights the importance of building strong social and structural bonds between cargo companies and their corporate customers for enhancing service quality perceptions during challenging times like the Covid-19 pandemic, while suggesting that economic bonds may have less influence in this context. According to these results, although the H_2, H_{2b} and H_{2c} hypotheses were supported, the H_{2a} hypothesis was not supported. This result clearly shows the importance of social bonds to be established with corporate customers. It should not be forgotten that the social bond dimension of relationship marketing includes strong, protective relationships against competitive price pressure. For this reason, it is vital for businesses to be in constant interaction with customers, to learn about their needs and to maintain positive relationships with them (Er and Cengiz, 2009, 294). It is clear that this relationship means much more when customers spend most of their time at home, take protective measures, and have high levels of anxiety about the pandemic. However, the same cannot be said for the economic bonds to be established with corporate customers. Therefore, it can be said that in such crisis periods, customers prefer companies that they can trust and have close interaction with them, rather than economic gains.

As a result of the regression analysis, although social bonds, one of the relationship marketing sub-dimensions, are a significant predictor of service quality perception ($f=18.952$), $p<.001$, the same cannot be said for economic bonds and structural bonds. It was determined that economic bonds ($p=,092>,005$) and structural bonds ($p=,186>,005$) did not significantly predict service quality perception. According to these results, although the H_1 and H_{1b} hypotheses were supported, the H_{1a} and H_{1c} hypotheses were not supported. The result of the study that the social bonds have a positive effect on the perception of service quality is in line with Özden's (2021:42) and Yımaz's (2014:170) studies. In both studies, the importance of customer relationship management is remarkable. A customer with a positive service quality perception also has a high level of satisfaction. When evaluated in this respect, it can be said that this study gives similar results with the studies of Onurlubaş and Gümüş (2020:1). Similarly, in the studies of Er and Cengiz (2009:306), it was concluded that the effect of social ties on "hedonic value" is positive and significant. On the other hand, Yılmaz (2014:169) concluded in his study on bank customers that the effect of "financial ties" on "relational quality perception" was not statistically significant. Therefore, there is parallelism between the results of both studies.

It is thought that this study is a rare study both in terms of its subject and in terms of being carried out among corporate customers and in the period of Covid-19. Future studies can be carried out in different provinces other than the center of Konya, on different sample groups, or by using qualitative methods instead of quantitative methods. It is thought that the study will be beneficial for academicians working on the related subject, cargo companies operating in the field and experts working on the subject.

REFERENCES

Akçacı, T. and Çınaroğlu, M. S. (2020). The effect of the new Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak on logistics and trade. *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 19 (2), 447-456. https://doi.org/10.21547/jss.766159

Akdoğan, M.Ş. and Durak, A. (2017). Effect of relationship marketing tendency of logistics companies on logistic performance and marketing performance. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 10 (50), 621-633.

Altunışık, R. (2015). *Service Marketing and Strategies*, 1st Edition, İstanbul, Beta Printing Publishing Distribution Inc.

Ayçil, S. (2013). *Evaluation of service quality based on customer satisfaction: An evalution cargo PTT.* (Publication No. 333638) (Master's dissertation, Dumlupınar University). YOK Thesis Center.

Berry, L.L. (1983). Relationship marketing. In L. L. Berry, G. L. Shostack, & G. Upah. (Eds.), Emerging Perspectives on Services Marketing (pp. 25-28). Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association.

Büyükkeklik, A. Özoğlu, B. and Bülbül, H. (2014). The impact of service quality on customer behaviour for cargo firms: Individual consumer research. *The Journal of Selcuk University Social Sciences Institute*, 31 (1), 33-43.

Chiu, H. C. Hsieh, Y. C. Li, Y. C. and Lee, M. (2005). Relationship marketing and consumer switching behavior. *Journal of Business Research*, 58 (12), 1681-1689. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2004.11.005

Chou, H. J. (2009). The effect of experiential and relationship marketing on customer value: A case study of International American Casual Dining Chains in Taiwan. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 37(7), 993-1007. https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2009.37.7.993

Çelik, S. (2005). *Effect of The Relationship Marketing on Service Quality-A Practice in Airline Industry on Service Quality Perception of The Consumers* (Publication No. 160894) (Doctoral dissertation, Marmara University). YOK Thesis Center.

Deniz, S. and Kamer, H. (2013). The concept of relationship marketing. *Journal of Anadolu Bil Vocational School of Higher Education*, (29), 3-16.

Durmaz, Y. (2010). *The Role of Service Quality of Logistic Transportation Activities on Creating Customer Value: A Showcase at the Yurtiçi Kargo Company in Kütahya*. (Publication No. 257223) (Master's dissertation, Dumlupınar University). YOK Thesis Center.

Er, B. and Cengiz, E. (2009). The Effect of Relational Bonding Strategies on Consumer Loyalty in Banks. *Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences*, 13(2), 291-308.

Ghobehei, M. Sadeghvaziri, F. Ebrahimi, E. and Afshar Bakeshloo, K. (2019). The effects of perceived brand orientation and perceived service quality in the higher education sector. *Eurasian Business Review*, 9, 347-365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40821-018-00115-4

Grönroos, C. (1990). Relationship approach to marketing in service contexts: The marketing and organizational behavior interface. *Journal of Business Research*, 20 (1), 3-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(90)90037-E

Güven, H. (2020). Changes in e-commerce in the Covid-19 Pandemic crisis process. *Eurasian Journal of Social and Economic Research*, 7 (5), 251-268.

Hoşgör, H. (2019). *A study of the relation between the relationship marketing strategies and the behavioral intentions of patients in healthcare institutions using structural equation modeling*. (Publication No. 545027) (Doctoral dissertation, İstanbul University-Cerrahpasa). YOK Thesis Center.

Ilban, M. O. Doğdubay, M. and Gürsoy, H. (2009). A comparative study of relationship marketing on hotel companies. *Eskişehir Osmangazi University Journal of Social Sciences*, 10 (2), 117-144.

Karaca, S. and Kelam, D. (2020). Investigation of distance education service quality in shade of COVID-19. *Journal of Sivas Interdisciplinary Tourism Research*, (5), 7-18.

Karaman, D. (2018). The importance of relationship marketing in the service sector: A theoretical research. *Bingol University Journal of Economics and Administrative Sciences*, 2 (1), 23-40.

Kaya, D.G. (2020). Traces of Coronavirus Pandemia in global economy: Public finance balance, trade volume, inflation, unemployment and economic growth. *Eurasian Journal of Social and Economic Research*, 7 (5), 221-237.

Kılıç, H.Ö. and Erdoğan, B.Z. (2016). Contextual marketing as a tool for a relationship marketing: The case of the website formdakal. *Journal of the Human and Social Science Researches*, 5 (3), 460-477.

Kim, W.G. Han, J.S. and Lee, E. (2001). Effects of relationship marketing on repeat purchase and word of mouth. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 25 (3), 272-288. https://doi.org/10.1177/109634800102500303

Onurlubaş, E. and Gümüş, N. (2020). Investigation of the effect of cargo companies on customer satisfaction with Servqual Scale. *Kırklareli University Journal of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences*, 9 (1), 30-46.

Oruç, E. (2022). *The Effect of Wearing A COVID 19 Mask on The Perceived Service Quality* (Publication No. 709725) (Master's dissertation, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University). YOK Thesis Center.

Özden, A. T. (2021). A research on service quality in hospitals during the Covid-19 pandemic period. *Journal of Business and Economics Studies (JBES)*, 9 (2), 42-66.

Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V.A. and Berry, L.L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, 49 (4), 41-50. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298504900403

Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V. A. and Berry, L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64 (1), 12-40.

Peltier, J. W. and Westfall, J. (2000). Dissecting the HMO-benefits managers relationship: What to measure and why. *Marketing Health Services*, 20 (2).

Rizan, M. Warokka, A. and Listyawati, D. (2014). Relationship marketing and customer loyalty: do customer satisfaction and customer trust really serve as intervening variables?. *Journal of Marketing Research & Case Studies*, 2014, 1. https://doi.org/10.5171/2014.724178

Songur, G. (2016). *Measuring of Service Quality and Corporate Customer Satisfaction in Cargo Transportation: A Research in Konya*. (Publication No. 428102) (Master's dissertation, Niğde University). YOK Thesis Center.

Sultan, P. and Wong, H. Y. (2019). How service quality affects university brand performance, university brand image and behavioural intention: The mediating effects of satisfaction and trust and moderating roles of gender and study mode. *Journal of Brand Management*, 26, 332-347. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-018-0131-3

Topçuoğlu, D.D. and Genç, E. (2021). The effects of COVID-19 on cargo workers' attitudes towards work: A case study of PTT. *Optimum Journal of Economics and Management Sciences*, 8 (2), 373-396. https://doi.org/10.17541/optimum.875531

Venetis, K. A. and Ghauri, P. N. (2004). Service quality and customer retention: building long-term relationships. *European Journal of Marketing*, 38 (11/12), 1577-1598. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560410560254

Yildiz, B. (2020). Content analysis of service quality of cargo companies. *Karamanoglu Mehmetbey University Journal of Social and Economic Research*, 22 (38), 42-57.

Yılmaz, Ö. (2014). *The Effect of Relationship Marketing Activities on Creating Word of Mouth (WOM): A Field Research on Banking Sector*, (Publication No. 357775) (Doctoral dissertation, Balıkesir University). YOK Thesis Center.

Zeithaml, V. A. (1988). Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value: a means-end model and synthesis of evidence. *Journal of Marketing*, 52 (3), 2-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298805200302.