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How Does Customer Personality Shape Customer-Employee and Customer-Firm Interactions?

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the banking industry has undergone several changes implying the need for banks to differentiate themselves This research examines the effect of the Big Five on relationship quality and customer loyalty on both employee and firm levels in retail banks. A total of 210 online surveys were collected via the convenient sampling method. The findings showed that openness to experience, extroversion and neuroticism influence relationship quality on both levels. Conscientiousness affects relationship quality at the bank level while agreeableness affects relationship quality at the customer contact employee level. Relationship quality displayed significant influence on customer loyalty on both levels. Several implications are derived for service research and service encounter management. The findings provide valuable insight for matching retail bank customers and customer-contact employees based on their personality profiles to ensure long-term relationship quality and customer loyalty. Insights into the relationship quality-customer loyalty link can act as a starting point for academics who are interested in understanding the role of frontline employees in services management.

Keywords: customer personality, relationship quality, customer loyalty, social exchange theory.

INTRODUCTION

With proliferation of financial technology, banking industry need to devote resources on technologies at scale to remain relevant. As the digital banking and automates technology become popular, the number of bank branches decreases, changing the way customers interact with their banks and frontline customer contact employee (CCE). Banks are keen on moving toward technology (customer-bank interactions) while continuing cutting branches, implying less customer-employee interactions. The drop in customer-employee interactions may not be good from customer perspective as the preference of customer interactions depends on the transactions types and the social bonds built with the CCE (Farida & Ardyan, 2018). Through ongoing relational exchanges, CCE help to develop and maintain close relationships with existing customers (Macintosh, 2007; Nora, 2019) which can foster customer loyalty. Research revealed that the most satisfied consumers are those who regularly interact with frontline staffs in branches and also use digital channels (Streeter, 2019), implying both customer-firm and customer-employee interactions are equally important. Currently, the banking industry has over-focused on customer-firm relationships and under-weighted the importance of customer-

employee interactions (Farida & Ardyan, 2018). It is time for the banking industry to re-position the role of front-line staffs and re-design strategies to strike a balance between customer-employee and customer-firm interactions. To provide a comprehensive picture, this study aims to investigate the relational variables on both customer-employee level (person-to-person) and customer-firm level (person-to-firm level). Splitting the relationship variables at two different levels allows the banking industry to identify the basic differences in person-to-person (interpersonal) as well as person-to-firm (company) relationships. Realizing the differences can help the banking industry to direct their efforts to improve important attributes on both levels (Ho & Wong, 2019).

Literature suggests customer personality affects customer-employee and customer-firm interactions (Andleeb, 2017; Bhat et al., 2018; Bhatnagar et al., 2017; Boonlertvanich, 2019; Valipour et al., 2019), yet few have focused on customer personality and customer loyalty in relational exchanges. Vazquez-Carrasco and Foxall (2006) recommended that future studies should consider investigating customer personality attributes to determine the nature of their relationships with companies, as customers might select certain brands because of their expression of personality, social position, or satisfaction of specific psychological needs. Tsao and Hsieh (2012) advocated the need for further research on personal factors such as personality traits, while Brun et al. (2016) emphasized the need for examining customer characteristics and relationship quality in retail banks. As the link between customer personality and relational outcomes might vary depending on the service context, several scholars have called for further research on personality factors in different cultural contexts and industries (Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015; Mohammad, 2015; Purani et al., 2019). Within the personality literature, the Big Five is a widely adopted framework for understanding personality due to its consistency across culture, time and age group (Udo-Imeh et al., 2015). The five personality dimensions include openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

Although some scholars have investigated the links between personality attributes and relationship variables such as satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty (Choi & Hwang, 2019; Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015), very few has focused on customer personality as a predictor of relationship quality and customer loyalty. This paper addresses the void in the previous research by examining how customer personality affects relationship quality and loyalty in customer-to-employee (interpersonal) as well as customer-to-firm (company) relationships in retail banks in Hong Kong. In this paper, the literature review and research hypotheses are presented. Then, the method and findings are reported. Finally, the implications as well as limitations are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Social exchange theory (SET)

SET has been employed considerably by scholars to illustrate the relational exchange between individuals in consumer-company context. SET is a theory of social behavior which explains the interaction between two parties during the exchange of resources (Homans, 1958). As SET centers around exchanges between customers and firms, it is well-fitted to explain loyalty, particularly in customer service-oriented contexts (Lee et al., 2014). Although there are various streams of SET, one fundamental premise agreed by most scholars is that when people are faced

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with a choice, they will undergo cost-benefit analysis and weight all the available alternatives before making decisions (Lee et al., 2014).

SET is commonly used to explain reciprocity in customer-employee interactions (Jung & Yoo, 2019). SET suggested that exchange parties would stay in a relationship if satisfactory rewards continue. Most often, individuals enter into a relationship because they expect to capture the maximum amount of satisfaction via the relationship. In this instance, the satisfaction derived is usually measured as the difference between perceived reward and perceived cost. Within an exchange relationship, trust can be developed depending on the level of mutual reciprocation which happens when one party provides benefit to the other, and the other party would return the benefit at a later stage (Homans, 1958). Over time, these reciprocal behaviors contribute to the building of trust (Lambe et al., 2001).

SET, relationship quality and loyalty

Satisfaction and trust, which form the foundations of SET, have been widely examined in the relationship quality (RQ) literature (Hsu et al., 2018). Crosby et al. (1990) highlighted trust and satisfaction as the two major constructs that constituted relationship quality. Within the financial services context, Hall (2012) formulated a customer loyalty framework based on SET. According to the author, customer loyalty is affected by three antecedents including personal variables, boundary spanner variables and firm variables, which are posited as the financial and social based outcomes of loyalty. In view of this, SET formed the underlying basis of the conceptual models in studying relationship quality and loyalty.

Big Five personality

Within the personality literature, the Big Five Model proposed by McCrae and Costa (1987) is the mainstream and widely acknowledged framework for explaining personality (Udo-Imeh et al., 2015). Its five dimensions include openness to experience, extroversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and agreeableness. Earlier studies have looked into the associations among personality attributes, satisfaction, trust and loyalty in various industries globally (Castillo, 2017; Crawford et al., 2017; Ihtiyar, 2018; Mishra and Vaithianathan, 2015; Mohammad, 2015; Muhammad et al., 2019; Siddiqui, 2012, 2016). Given the consensus on the use of the dimensions (Block, 1995), the definitions of McCrae and Costa's Big Five are adopted in this study.

Openness to experience

Openness to experience (OE) describes the level which a person is open to new ways of doing things (Solomon, 2015). Previous studies presented a positive link between OE and customer satisfaction. For example, Castillo (2017) reported significant relationships between the Big Five, empowerment and satisfaction. In a retail context, the author found that customers with personality traits of OE tend to feel more satisfied in relational exchanges. In a survey of undergraduate students, OE was regarded as a happy personality trait which contributed to a positive impact on student satisfaction ratings (Crawford et al., 2017). Mishra and Vaithianathan (2015) confirmed the mediating effect of openness on customer relationship proneness and satisfaction, while Malik et al. (2018) reported that OE moderated the association between information quality and satisfaction level of internet users. Within the private banking industry in Kermanshah, Karbasi et al. (2014) confirmed a considerable effect of OE on satisfaction and loyalty. As such, we advance:

H1a. OE is positively related to RQ at the CCE level.
H1b. OE is positively related to RQ at the firm level.

Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness measures the level of organization and structure required by an individual (Solomon, 2015). Previous research reported positive relationships between conscientiousness, satisfaction and loyalty (Karbasi et al., 2014). Castillo (2017) found that customers with personality attributes of conscientiousness are likely to feel more satisfied in their interactions with employees in a consultative selling process in the retail industry. In a study of 849 undergraduate students, individuals with happy personality traits of conscientiousness were reported to have greater satisfaction (Crawford et al., 2017). In addition, Mishra and Vaithianathan (2015) reported that conscientiousness significantly affected customer relationship proneness in the banking industry. As banks often require precision and accuracy in data handling processes such as proper documentation and detailed proofs, such services fit the needs of conscientious customers who often demand logical reasoning and well-organized information, leading to higher level of customer relationship proneness and satisfaction. The authors found that customers high in conscientiousness have lower expectations of service quality when determining their bank loyalty. In other words, customers who scored high in conscientiousness displayed high levels of bank loyalty in spite of lower quality services. These loyal customers are likely to be committed by nature and possessed relational orientations (Mohammad, 2015). The preceding studies reinforced the positive associations among conscientiousness, customer satisfaction and loyalty. In a similar vein, we propose:
H2a. Conscientiousness is positively related to RQ at the CCE level.
H2b. Conscientiousness is positively related to RQ at the firm level.

Extroversion

Extroversion measures how well a person tolerates stimulation from others (Solomon, 2015). Mishra and Vaithianathan (2015) found that extroversion affects customer relationship proneness which influences relationship satisfaction, while Castillo (2017) found that consumers who are high in extroversion experienced greater empowerment when interacting with frontline employees in a consultative service experience. In another study within a college setting, extrovert students reported higher levels of satisfaction compared to introvert students (Crawford et al., 2017). Previous studies in the banking industry found positive interactions between extroversion, satisfaction and loyalty. Research in private banking in Kermanshah found significant effects of extroversion on satisfaction and loyalty (Karbasi et al., 2014). Mohammad (2015) investigated customer personality in a virtual banking context and confirmed the effects of customer personality on service quality and loyalty. The author found that customers with superior display of extroversion emphasized the importance of service quality. Further investigation showed that introverts (i.e. less sociable) had higher e-quality, e-satisfaction and e-loyalty than extroverts (i.e., highly sociable). Therefore, e-quality was considered as an important element by introverts, and introverts exhibited e-loyalty toward online banking services based on their perceptions of e-quality. Similarly, this quality-loyalty relationship was reported for extroverts (Karbasi et al., 2014). Thus, we posit:
H3a. Extroversion is positively related to RQ at the CCE level.
H3b. Extroversion is positively related to RQ at the firm level.

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Neuroticism

Neuroticism, or emotional instability, refers to how well an individual is able to cope with stress (Solomon, 2015). Previous research on neuroticism, satisfaction and loyalty reported mixed results. Mishra and Vaithianathan (2015) reported insignificant influence of neuroticism on relationship proneness of customer, possibly because customers were not able to distinguish between OE and extroversion from neuroticism (Karbasi et al., 2014). However, Castillo (2017) found a significant relationship between neuroticism and empowerment among consumers, while other studies reported relationships between emotional stability, satisfaction and loyalty (Crawford et al., 2017; Durukan & Bozaci, 2011). Further, Mohammad (2015) reported that the personality trait of neuroticism exerted an impact on the nature of the customer-employee interaction. Hence, we propose:

H4a. Neuroticism is positively related to RQ at the CCE level.

H4b. Neuroticism is positively related to RQ at the firm level.

Agreeableness

Agreeableness measures the degree to which an individual defers from others (Solomon, 2015). Several studies found that agreeableness is positively associated with customer satisfaction in relational exchanges. For example, Siddiqui (2012) reported that personality traits significantly affected customer satisfaction among users of handphones and credit cards, with agreeableness emerging as the best indicator of customer satisfaction in both types of services. In a survey on undergraduate students, Crawford et al. (2017) reported that agreeableness closely related to student satisfaction and customer loyalty, as agreeableness was regarded as one of the happy personality traits. Within the retail industry, Castillo (2017) found that sales assistants who displayed higher levels of agreeableness delivered higher levels of satisfaction in the selling process. In another study, Siddiqui (2016) reinforced the importance of agreeableness as the only significant predictor of trust and customer loyalty. Thus, we advance:

H5a. Agreeableness is positively related to RQ at the CCE level.

H5b. Agreeableness is positively related to RQ at the firm level.

Relationship quality

Relationship quality is commonly regarded as a holistic, multi-dimensional construct (Crosby et al., 1990; Finch et al., 2018; Wahid & Ismail, 2017). Some commonly discussed components of relationship quality include trust (Fernandes & Pinto 2019; Lagace et al., 1991), satisfaction (Fernandes & Pinto 2019), commitment (Olavarría-Jaraba et al., 2018), social benefit (Japutra et al., 2018), opportunism (Dorsch et al., 1998), conflict (Kumar et al., 1995), service quality (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997), relational attitudes and behavioral intention (Finch et al., 2018), and relationship strength and depth (Wu et al., 2019). Despite the numerous studies undertaken to shed light on understanding relationship quality, to date, there is lack of concurrence regarding the conceptualization and measurement of the construct (Rajaobelina, 2018).

Crosby et al. (1990) suggested two components of relationship quality: customer satisfaction and trust, and relationship quality can be achieved if a salesperson can reduce uncertainty. Superior relationship quality occurs when the customers can depend on an insurance agent's integrity and believe that the insurance agent can provide consistent satisfactory performance in the future due to proven past performance. Following Crosby et al. (1990), this study adopted the view that relationship quality comprised of two parts: customer satisfaction and trust.

Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a complex and multifaceted concept which consists of numerous elements including customer expectation, emotion (i.e., affective state) or cognition (Hansemark & Albinsson, 2004; Oliver, 1997). According to Oliver (1997), customer satisfaction refers to a "consumer's fulfilment response". It is a post consumption evaluation that a service provided a pleasing level of consumption associated fulfilment. The definition of Oliver (1997), which accounted for both the affective and cognitive approaches, is adopted in this study.

Trust

In terms of trust, there are generally two categories of consumer trust: consumer general trust and consumer-specific trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Consumer general trust is a personality trait that a consumer would presumable act out from one situation to another. Consumer-specific trust depends on a particular situation and a particular object, which might include organizations or employees. Consumer-specific trust can be further developed into multi-dimensional trust which may consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. For purposes of this study, the two-dimensional consumer trust, which consists of cognitive trust and affective trust is adopted. Attributes relating to cognitive trust such as integrity, competence, reliability and dependability, predictability, honesty and responsibility of exchange partners as well as elements relating to affective trust such as benevolence and faith were included.

Relationship quality and customer loyalty

Relationship quality, satisfaction and trust are highly related in the building of relationships (Martenson, 2008; Omoregie et al., 2019). Malhotra et al. (2016) suggested that satisfaction and trust constituted the basis for customer loyalty and formed the psychological outcomes of customer relationship management, while other authors suggested relationship quality thwould directly result in customer loyalty (Hall, 2012; Wong et al., 2007). Several studies reported strong linkages between satisfaction, trust, word of mouth and customer loyalty (Boonlertvanich, 2019; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). Reichheld (2003) reported customer satisfaction across product categories was strongly related to repurchase intentions and customers' willingness to recommend a company depended very much on how well they were being treated by employees of the company. Further, Martenson (2008) found that customer contact employees had a strong impact on composite loyalty.

Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty comprises behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty and composite loyalty. Behavioral loyalty refers to a repeat patronage, that is, a consumer repeatedly buys the same product or service, while attitudinal loyalty pertains to a particular inclination to continue in a relationship with a firm (Yang and Peterson, 2004). The focus on composite loyalty, which combines behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty, can lead to improved firm profitability (Ennew et al., 2018), hence this study adopted the combined approach to measure both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

Relationship quality-customer loyalty link

Several scholars have investigated the relationship quality- customer loyalty link at the firm and interpersonal levels. At the firm level, a significant relationship between relationship

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quality and loyalty was reported (Macintosh, 2007; Prayag et al., 2019; Rather & Hollebeek, 2019; Tahmasbizadeh et al., 2016; Wong & Sohal, 2006). At the interpersonal level, Rajaobelina and Bergeron (2009) identified a linkage between customer orientation and relationship quality for both relationship advisors and customers in retail banks. Further, the authors found that relationship quality led to buzz marketing and behavioral intentions. The study of Wong et al. (2007) proved that relationship quality mediated information sharing, future interaction anticipation and customer word-of-mouth. In view of the preceding studies, we posit:
H6a. RQ is positively related to customer loyalty at the CCE level.
H6b. RQ is positively related to customer loyalty at the firm level.

The mediating role of relationship quality

Within the service literature, the investigation of the mediation effect of relationship quality between personality and loyalty is scare. In a study of retail industry in Algeria, Menidjel et al. (2021) reported that customer personality affected relationship investment and customer loyalty. The authors further verified that relationship quality mediated personality-loyalty relationship. Within the catering industry in USA, Choi et al. (2017) found that brand personality traits had direct effects on brand prestige, which in turn influenced brand relationship quality and loyalty. They validated the mediating role of relationship quality in the relationship between personality and loyalty. In a study of retail store, Ibrahim and Najjar (2008) discovered the connection between personality traits, relationship quality and customer loyalty while relationship quality mediated personality-loyalty relationships. In view of the preceding studies, we put forth:
H7a. RQ mediates the relationship between personality and customer loyalty at the CCE level.
H7b. RQ mediates the relationship between personality and customer loyalty at the firm level.

Based on the literature review, we propose a hypothesized model with seven hypotheses. As seen in Figure 1, the framework examined the influence of the five dimensions of personality traits on relationship quality and customer loyalty on two levels, namely customer contact employee and company.

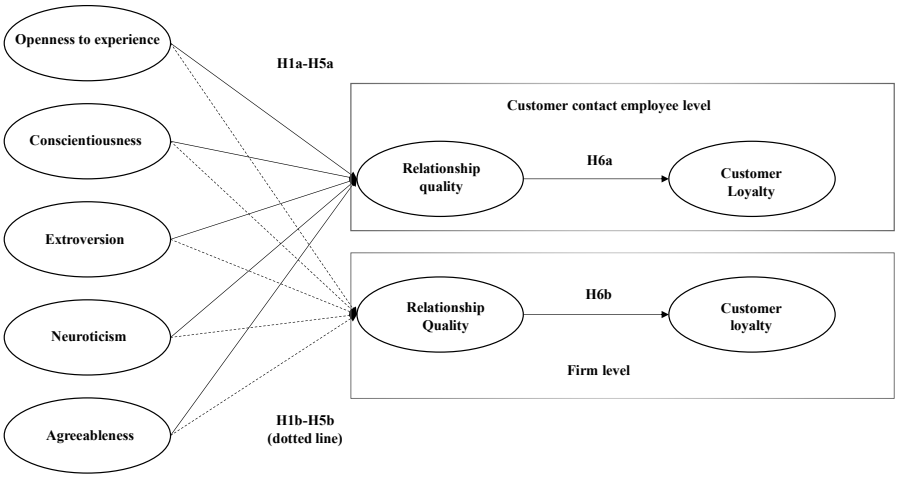


Figure 1. Hypothesized model

RESEARCH METHOD

Research setting

A total of 210 online surveys were collected via the convenient sampling method from customers of retail banks in Hong Kong. A major international financial centre, Hong Kong ranked third in the Global Financial Centres Index in 2019 (Z/Yen Group, 2019). In recent years, the financial marketplace of Hong Kong has become more dynamic and competitive. The rise of financial technology has changed the service consumption experience of customers in terms of product and service quality. Traditional brick-and-mortar banks are now facing keen competitions from new entries such as virtual banks, which increased customer switching or disloyalty behaviors. In addition, consumers are more sophisticated because of the access to information technology and demand for more efficient, convenient and high standards of service quality. Although banks in Hong Kong adopt relationship marketing strategies for customer retention (Debnath et al., 2016), there is still a tendency towards the commoditization of banking relationships (Hong Kong Monetary Authority, 2015).

Sample

The sample included high net worth customers who had at least HK$1 million assets under management with their bank and were assigned a relationship manager (i.e., customer contact employee). Following Eriksson and Hermansson (2017), a customer is considered as a relational customer if he or she had interacted with a designated customer contact employee in the preceding year. If the customer had no interaction with any customer contact employee, he or she is characterized as a transactional customer and is omitted from this study. To collect data, two contact methods, online and mobile survey, were implemented using a convenient sampling approach. Participants of the online survey were selected from publicly accessible listings on major company websites in Hong Kong. For the mobile survey, an invitation message was sent to the participants via WhatsApp or mobile text messages. Due to the restrictions on the use of mobile phone numbers covered by the data protection laws in Hong Kong, the mobile surveys were sent to the authors' friends and colleagues in the banking industry as well as soliciting referrals via social media platforms.

Table 1 shows the demographic information of all valid responses received. The sample consisted of mainly females (57.1%). Most of the respondents were between 35 and 44 years old (44.3%), 39.5 percent were between 45 and 54 years old, and 12.9 percent were above 55 years old. In terms of education level, 47.6 percent of the respondents held an undergraduate degree while 30 percent held a postgraduate degree. The respondents held different occupation such as clerical or administrative (21.4%), manager or executive (21.4%), and professional or consultant (18.6%). Regarding their relationships with their banks, respondents selected Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (42.4%) and Standard Chartered Bank (21%) as their major banks. This is not surprising given these banks are the two main note-issuing banks in Hong Kong, with a large local client base. The respondents maintained long term relationships with their relationship managers, with 41.9 percent of the respondents reported 6 to10 years of relationship with their relationship managers while 37.1 percent mentioned they had over 10 years of relationship with their relationship managers. After removing 11 invalid samples who did not contact any customer contact employee in the preceding year, all the 210 valid respondents had contacted their contact customer employee at least once within the previous year. Over half of the respondents (54.8%) contacted their relationship managers between

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three to five times in the past year, while another 39 percent contacted their relationship managers more than five times.

Table 1: Demographic profiles of the respondents. (n=210)

Variable	Range	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	90	42.9
	Female	120	57.1
Age	25-34	7	3.3
	35-44	93	44.3
	45-54	83	39.5
	over 55	27	12.9
Education	Primary or below	1	.5
	Secondary	10	4.8
	Diploma/high diploma/associate degree/certificates	36	17.1
	Tertiary/University	100	47.6
	Post-graduate or above	63	30.0
Occupation	Professional / consultant	39	18.6
	Academic	26	12.4
	Technician / Operator	24	11.4
	Clerical / Administrative	45	21.4
	Manager / Executive	45	21.4
	Retired	9	4.3
	Housewife	10	4.8
	Unemployed	1	.5
	Other	11	5.2
Bank	Standard Chartered Bank	44	21.0
	Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation	89	42.4
	Hang Seng Bank	28	13.3
	Bank of China	24	11.4
	Other	25	11.9
Relationship duration	1 - 5 years	43	20.5
	6 - 10 years	88	41.9
	Over 10 years	78	37.1
Frequency of contact in past year	Less than 3	13	6.2
	3 - 5 times	115	54.8
	More than 5 times	82	39.0

Measures

The questionnaire consists of three sections: first, a screening question, second, demographic information, while the third section comprised items relating to the constructs. The Big Five, namely OE, conscientiousness, extroversion, neuroticism and agreeableness, were measured with items adopted from Anjam et al. (2013). Customer satisfaction to the customer contact employee and the firm were measured with items adopted from Giovanis et al. (2015), Wahid and Ismail (2017), and Rajaobelina (2018). Trust to the customer contact employee and the firm were measured with items taken from Hall (2012), Giovanis et al. (2015), and Wahid and Ismail (2017). Finally, loyalty to the customer contact employee and the firm were measured

with items taken from Hall (2012), Givovanis et al. (2015), and Zeithaml et al. (1996). To operationalize the constructs, seven-point Likert scales were adopted.

The survey was pre-tested by professional bankers and academics with expertise in retailing. Based on their suggestions, minor modifications were made. The revised survey was pretested with four participants, two customers from the target group and two relationship managers from the local banks. The result of the pretest confirmed the face validity and content validity of the instruments. Further, a pilot test was conducted. Totally, there were 52 graduate students participated in the pilot test. This pilot study established the reliability of the scales, where the values of Cronbach alpha, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were satisfactory, achieving construct reliability and validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally, 1978).

FINDINGS

Reliability and validity

Cronbach alpha and CR were run to test the reliability of the scales. As seen in Table 2, the Cronbach alphas ranged from 0.875 to 0.986 and were above the recommended 0.70 threshold level (Nunnally, 1978), while CR ranged from 0.80 to 0.98, which exceeded the 0.60 threshold required for reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). In addition, convergent and discriminant validity were assessed by inspecting the AVE, factor loadings and CR. All the factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .01$), as most of the items demonstrated loadings larger than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2014). Items which displayed weak reliabilities and validities were subsequently deleted. In total, 16 items were deleted in the scale refinement stage to further improve the reliability of the constructs. As the AVE for all constructs were 0.5 and above while the CR were 0.7 and above, all the items exhibited good internal consistency and high degree of convergence, thus reliability and validity of the multiple item scales were supported (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As seen in Table 3, the inter-correlations between the constructs were all below 0.85 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). In addition, the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlations between them (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as such, discriminant validity was achieved. As a result, all the constructs were retained for further examination in the measurement model.

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Table 2: Reliability and validity of the constructs

Construct	Standardized factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Average Variance Extracted	Composite Reliability
Openness to experience	0.87-0.98	0.928	0.69	0.90
Conscientiousness	0.81-0.86	0.939	0.75	0.94
Extroversion	0.88-0.98	0.953	0.74	0.92
Neuroticism	0.80-0.91	0.875	0.57	0.80
Agreeableness	0.88-0.92	0.932	0.77	0.91
Satisfaction with customer contact employee	0.83-0.90	0.968	0.78	0.96
Satisfaction with bank	0.84-0.93	0.974	0.80	0.96
Trust in customer contact employee	0.82-0.91	0.985	0.83	0.98
Trust in bank	0.82-0.92	0.986	0.79	0.98
Loyalty to customer contact employee	0.85-0.92	0.985	0.74	0.97
Loyalty to bank	0.82-0.99	0.985	0.75	0.97

Table 3: Means, reliabilities and correlations between constructs

	Mean	Alpha	AVE	CR	Open	Cons	Extr	Neur	Agre	RQ to CCE	RQ to bank	Loy to CCE	Loy to bank
Open	5.315	.928	.69	.90	___								
Cons	5.357	.939	.75	.94	.60*	___							
Extr	5.290	.953	.74	.92	.69*	.55*	___						
Neur	2.575	.875	.57	.80	-.42*	-.36*	-.53*	___					
Agre	5.510	.932	.77	.91	.64*	.57*	.68*	-.50*	___				
RQ to CCE	5.076	.989	.75	.98	.64*	.56*	.63*	-.44*	.62*	___			
RQ to bank	5.224	.990	.77	.98	.63*	.56*	.64*	-.45*	.65*	.83*	___		
Loy to CCE	5.114	.985	.74	.97	.62*	.56*	.61*	-.42*	.59*	.79*	.76*	___	
Loy to bank	5.187	.985	.75	.97	.59*	.57*	.59*	-.43*	.59*	.76*	.78*	.84*	___

*** $p < .01$**

Open: Openness to experience; Cons: Conscientiousness; Extr: Extroversion; Neur: Neuroticism; Agre: Agreeableness; RQ: Relationship Quality;Loy: Customer loyalty

Table 4. Hypotheses testing results

Relationship	Standardized solution β	t-value	Hypothesis testing
H1a Openness → RQ employee	-0.54	-6.00	Support
H1b Openness → RQ bank	-0.64	-10.16	Support
H2a Conscientiousness → RQ employee	0.11	1.92	Reject
H2b Conscientiousness → RQ bank	0.19	3.36	Support
H3a Extroversion → RQ employee	1.94	17.97	Support
H3b Extroversion → RQ bank	1.69	17.09	Support
H4a Neuroticism → RQ employee	0.27	5.06	Support
H4b Neuroticism → RQ bank	0.25	5.33	Support
H5a Agreeableness → RQ employee	-0.38	-6.01	Support
H5b Agreeableness → RQ bank	-0.11	-1.76	Reject
H6a RQ employee → Loyalty to employee	0.95	39.31	Support
H6b RQ bank → Loyalty to bank	0.94	48.05	Support

Measurement model

To examine the hypotheses, a two-step procedure was adopted to test the model. Firstly, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was undertaken to confirm the measurement properties and psychometric adequacy, followed by structural model verification using Lisrel 10. The CFA results demonstrated an acceptable model fit (Chi-square = 775.764, df = 142; p < .001; CFI = 0.878, NFI = 0.855, GFI = 0.754, AGFI = 0.670, SRMR = 0.0422). Further, all the CFA loadings and AVE exceeded 0.50, suggesting convergent and discriminant validity (Kline, 2011). Moreover, Cronbach alpha and CR were all established, as seen in Table 2. Based on the high factor loadings, the measurement model was acceptable (Garrido et al., 2016; McNeish et al., 2018).

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Structural model

The hypotheses were verified concurrently in the structural model. The statistical results exposed a good model fit (Chi-square = 96.464, df = 6; $p < .001$; CFI = 0.985, NFI = 0.983, GFI = 0.967, AGFI = 0.702, SRMR = 0.0730). The standardized loadings and the t-values are presented in Table 4. To recap, H1 through H5 addressed the relationships between the five dimensions of personality and RQ. H1, which predicted a positive association between OE and RQ, was supported for both CCE ($\beta = 0.54$, $t = 6.00$) and firm levels ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 10.16$). H2, which proposed a positive linkage between conscientiousness and RQ, was not supported for the CCE level ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$) but supported for firm level ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 3.36$). There was a significant and positive association between extroversion and RQ on both CCE ($\beta = 1.94$, $t = 17.97$) and firm levels ($\beta = 1.69$, $t = 17.09$), hence providing support for H3. Similarly, H4, which suggested a positive connection between neuroticism and RQ was significant for both CCE ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 5.06$) and firm levels ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 5.33$). There was support for H5 which examines the relationship between agreeableness and RQ at the CCE ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 6.01$), but not at the firm level ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$). The relationships between loyalty to the CCE and loyalty to the bank were positive and significant for both CCE ($\beta = 0.95$, $t = 39.31$) and firm levels ($\beta = 0.94$, $t = 48.05$), providing support for H6a and H6b. Finally, H7, which posited that loyalty to the CCE could be transferred to the bank, was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.52$, $t = 17.24$).

Mediation analysis

To assess the mediation effect of relationship quality between personality and loyalty, Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation test was applied. First, the direct effects between both the independent and dependent variables were confirmed with and without the mediator variable (i.e., relationship quality). The path coefficient decreased with the inclusion of the mediator variable. It was then followed by a bootstrapping procedure, and the path coefficient and standard error were recorded. A Sobel test (1986) was then undertaken to test the indirect effect to determine whether the mediation effect was significant. The strength of the mediation was calculated via the variance accounted for (VAF) method (Hair et al., 2017). The VAF value presented in Table 5 was between 20 percent and 80 percent, hence the partial mediating role of satisfaction was established, providing support for H7a and H7b.

Table 5. Mediation analysis (Relationship Quality) On customer contact employee level

Effects	Path (Standardised coefficients)	Indirect effect (Standard deviation)	Total effect (VAF)	*t*-value (Sig)	Supported Yes/No
Direct without mediator	Personality→Loyalty (0.90)			74.75 (0.00)	
Indirect with mediator (H9)	Personality→Loyalty (0.58)		0.89 (31.17%)	78.72 (0.00)	Yes, partial mediator
	Personality→RQ (0.87)	0.32 (0.09)			
	RQ→Loyalty (0.38)				

***VAF = variance accounted for; VAF > 80% = full mediation, 20% ≤ VAF ≤ 80% = partial mediation, and VAF < 20% = no mediation**

On firm level

Effects	Path (Standardised coefficients)	Indirect effect (Standard deviation)	Total effect (VAF)	*t*-value (Sig)	Supported Yes/No
Direct without mediator	Personality→Loyalty (0.92)			75.46 (0.00)	
Indirect with mediator (H9)	Personality→Loyalty (0.62)		0.91 (32.43%)	78.24 (0.00)	Yes, partial mediator
	Personality→RQ (0.90)	0.31 (0.08)			
	RQ→Loyalty (0.34)				

***VAF = variance accounted for; VAF > 80% = full mediation, 20% ≤ VAF ≤ 80% = partial mediation, and VAF < 20% = no mediation**

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings demonstrated the influence of Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1987) on relationship quality and customer loyalty, while relationship quality significantly affected customer loyalty on both customer contact employee and company levels. These results reinforced the importance of customer personality in customer-employee interactions in the retail banking context (Castillo, 2017; Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015; Mohammad, 2014).

First, the results verified the predictive power of extroversion on relationship quality on both the employee and the bank level. This is not surprising, as extroverts are sociable, active, chatty and prefer to engage with others, leading to perceptions of relationship quality at both the employee and firm levels. In addition, an affirmative relationship between extroversion and relationship quality had been reported in previous studies (Castillo, 2017; Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015), where high levels of extroversion were evident in service encounters that require a great deal of social exchanges between the customer and the employee, resulting in formation of social bonds and friendships which contributed to relationship quality on both the employee and firm levels.

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Second, the findings showed that OE was linked to relationship quality on both levels while agreeableness was related to relationship quality at the customer contact employee level only. These results were similar to findings in previous studies (Castillo, 2017; Karbasi, et al., 2014; Malik, Hairuddin & Shuib, 2018). Karbasi et al. (2014) reported a positive correlation between OE and customer satisfaction to the bank, while Castillo (2017) found that customers with personality traits of OE and agreeableness were more satisfied with their interactions with the customer contact employees. Within the banking industry, relationship managers regularly communicate the latest information regarding market changes and portfolio updates to their customers on a frequent basis. As customers who are high in OE are more intellectually inquisitive and receptive to trying new experience or accepting a new idea, they are more willing to tolerate any differences in opinion, leading to higher levels of satisfaction derived from the customer-employee interactions. In addition, customers with high levels of agreeableness are extremely affectionate, cooperative and display prosocial behaviors, and their empathy, care, and concern for others often result in greater notions of trust and satisfaction during customer-employee interactions (Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015).

Third, the relationship between conscientiousness and relationship quality was supported on the firm level only. Similarly, in a study in private banks, Karbasi (2014) found that conscientiousness led to customer satisfaction and loyalty to the bank. As conscientiousness assessed a person's level of organization and perseverance, customers with high levels of conscientiousness often display a high preference for organization and reliability (Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015). Given that banking services commonly involve processes consisting of precious data, exhaustive documentation and comprehensive verifications, these detail-oriented services are likely to gratify conscientious customers in their quest for data, logical reasoning and determination, thereby resulting in greater relationship quality (Mishra & Vaithianathan, 2015).

Fourth, this study reported positive relationships between neuroticism and relationship quality at both customer contact employee and firm levels. This reinforced the findings of another study which found that neurotic customers would feel more empowered while interacting with frontline employees using a consultative selling process (Castillo, 2017). Although individuals high in neuroticism are more realistic and have greater self-awareness, they tend to experience stress and insecurity in uncertain situations. To build trust and satisfaction, the customer contact employee will need to put in more effort to deliver a caring and personalized service. As wealth banking services often include personalized solutions, investment advisory services, and lengthy consultative service interactions which produce deeper customer understanding, these customer-employee engagements can lead to greater relationship quality on both the contact employee and firm levels.

In terms of outcomes, this study supported the associations between relationship quality and customer loyalty at both customer contact employee (Agnihotri et al., 2019) and firm levels (Omoregie et al., 2019; Yildiz, 2017). Satisfied customers would purchase more, were more willingness to maintain a long-term relationship and recommend the agent to their friends (Agnihotri et al., 2019). They are more likely to refer their banks to their friends, continue to use the existing bank and less likely to switch to other banks, which in turn leads to increased profits for banks (Yildiz, 2017).

Theoretical implications

This study extended the field of services research by examining the Big Five personality traits (McCrae and Costa, 1987), relationship quality and customer loyalty in situations of different relational exchanges (i.e., interpersonal and firm). This study explored the predictive power customer personality traits on the relationship quality–customer loyalty link at both person-to-person and person-to-firm levels within the context of retail banks. The results supported the notion that customer personality affect feelings of relationship quality and customer loyalty at both customer contact employee and firm levels. Insights into the relationship quality-customer loyalty link can act as a starting point for academics who are interested in understanding the role of frontline employees in services management.

Practical implications

The findings render practical insights for banking industry in the management of customer contact employee interactions. Given the significant associations between relationship quality and customer loyalty at the customer contact employee and firm levels, banking industry should prioritize the salient role of the customer contact employee in establishing and sustaining long-term customer relationships.

Depending on the personality profiles of customers, employees with similar personalities can be recruited to meet customers' needs and service requirements. Recruitment strategies can be designed based on specific personality traits to match the personality between customers and contact employees for better performance and relationship success. Extensive customer service training can be implemented on a regular basis to ensure high customer-employee interaction competences, which can lead to customer satisfaction (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020). Further, communications training can be undertaken to develop complex job roles and scripts to help employees deal with obstacles and cope with job stress.

Attention should be paid to the empowerment of frontline employees while relational strategies can be implemented to help them deal with the different customer personalities encountered during the service delivery process. In order to optimize the customer experience, employees should be trained to listen attentively, observe the facial expressions and body languages of their customers, and use their intuition to assess and make sense of their customers' personalities consciously and systematically.

In view of the significant relationship between extroversion on relationship quality, banks should use different types of marketing communications to engage the extroverts and introverts. Banks can communicate via the telephone or face-to-face with extroverts, while email exchanges or messages via the online banking website can be used for communicating with introverts. To enhance service delivery, banks should provide different servicescapes (i.e., physical environment elements) for extrovert and introvert customers. Branches offering a comfortable face-to-face banking experience which encourages social interactions could fulfill the needs of extroverts while virtual banks with full banking facilities could engage introverts.

Based on the direct juxtaposition between relationship quality and customer loyalty, banks can improve their performance by equipping their employees with the tools to build relationships with customers. The effect of loyalty transfer implies the need for banks to focus on their employee retention programs, as there might be negative financial impacts if the customer

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contact employee quit their jobs and defect to the bank's competitors (Wang et al., 2014). To retain employees, banks will need to invest in professional training and development, create and maintain a service-oriented, open communication workplace culture, and encourage their customer contact employees to work as a team, prioritize healthy workloads and embrace work-life balance.

Limitations and future research

This research focused solely on relational customers who have an existing relationship with their relationship banker, hence future research should duplicate this study with transactional customers to examine whether such customers display similar relational attributes (Eriksson & Hermansson, 2017). In addition, data was collected via an online survey of 210 customers. To further generalize the findings, future studies could delve into the role of customer personality as well as additional dimensions such as risk aversion, commitment, empowerment and engagement from a dual-level perspective (i.e., customer contact employee and customer) in different industries or countries (i.e., developed to developing) with different cultures and sub-cultures (i.e., age, gender, social class).

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