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THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL, SOCIOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES ON RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT IN RETAIL BANKING

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ABSTRACT

Previous research in the domain of relationship marketing has focused mainly on the antecedents of loyalty and commitment in the industrial market, distribution channel or consumer goods. This study however, models the antecedents of consumer's relationship commitment in the context of a retail banking service. The impact of the four key explanatory variables (personal influences, sociological influences, institutional influences, and trust) are examined. The results support the hypothesized model and shows sociological influences to be a key driver of all antecedent variables, and the most powerful determinant of the relationship commitment.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the motivations of consumers to engage in relationship with marketers is important for both practitioners and marketing scholars. Several established consumer behavior literature suggest that consumers engage in relational market behavior due to personal influences, sociological influences and institutional influences (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

Consumers reduce their available choices and engage in relational market behavior because they want to simplify their buying and consuming tasks (Reily & Parkinson, 1985), simplify information processing (Howard & Sheth, 1969), reduce perceived risks (Bauer, 1960; Taylor, 1974), and maintain cognitive consistency and the state of psychological comfort. They also engage in relational market behavior because of family and social norms, peer group pressures, government mandates, religious tenets, employer influences, and marketer policies (Childers & Rao, 1992). The willingness and ability of both consumer and marketers to engage in relational marketing will lead to greater marketing productivity, unless either consumers or marketers abuse the mutual interdependence and cooperation (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The nature of the service business is relationship based. There is always a direct contact between a customer and the service firm. This contact makes it possible to create a relationship with the consumer, if both parties are interested in doing business (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

As such, the primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of personal, sociological and institutional influences on relationship commitment in developing relationship marketing (relationship banking) strategies in the retail banking sector. In doing so we examine the impact of three exogenous constructs: (1) personal influences, (2) sociological influences, (3) institutional influences, and one endogenous, mediating construct, i.e. trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Commitment

Anderson and Weitz (1992) suggest that "commitment" is a long-term orientation in a relationship. They indicate that each party's commitment is affected by perceived commitment of the other party. Mutual commitment results in independent channel members working together to serve customers' needs better and increase mutual profitability. A common theme emerges from the various literature on relationships. Parties identify commitment among themselves, and they endeavour to develop and maintain this precious attribute in their relationships. Therefore commitment is proposed to be central to all relational exchanges between firm and its various partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

More specifically, the present study represents an attempt to resolve the following questions:

- What is the relative impact of personal and sociological influences in shaping consumer's relationship commitment.
- Does the institutional influences on the consumer affect the influences on personal as well as sociological, and relationship commitment.

Answers to these questions will add to our understanding of the factors underlying the foundation of long term bank-consumer relationships.

Mediating Variable (Trust)

Trust has been treated as one of the two distinct ways in the literature. First, trust has been conceptualized as a feature or an aspect of relationship quality. Dwyer and Oh (1987), and Crosby, Evans, and Cowless (1990), for example, describe trust as a feature of relationship quality, along with satisfaction and opportunism; Anderson, Lodish and Weitz (1987) view trust as a feature of relationship, in addition to power, communication, and goal compatibility.

In our conceptual model, in Figure 1, trust is positioned as a mediating variable (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), i.e. mediating the relationship between the personal influences, sociological influences and institutional influences. Trust plays a critical role in banking services where consumers are motivated to continue the relationship when they have confidence in and trust the competencies and abilities of their bank (Sharma & Patterson, 1999), but if this trust should ever be in doubt, then so could the relationship commitment (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman, 1993; Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpande, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) in consumer banking services. This view is the basis of the development of our first hypothesis which is as follows:

H1: The greater the trust in the bank, the stronger the relationship commitment.

Personal Influences

Several consumer behaviour models that are anchored to learning theories have focused on how consumers make choice decision over time (Andreasen, 1965; Engel, Blackwell & Maniard, 1986; Hansen, 1972; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1966). In essence, these models try to explain how consumers, over time, reduce choices regarding purchase and consumption. As originally proposed by Howard and Sheth (1969), consumers like to simplify their extensive and limited problem-solving situations into routinized behavior by learning to reduce the number of products and brands under consideration into an evoked set, which is a fraction of the alternatives available and familiar to the consumer (Reilly & Parkinson, 1985).

The underlying motive for reducing choices into an evoked set is the consumers' desire to reduce the complexity of the buying situation. Limiting the choices into the evoked set allows easy information processing and, therefore, simplifies the task of choosing (Hoyer, 1984; Shugan, 1980). In addition, consumers also routinize other shopping and consuming task into habitual actions and loyalty behavior. Consequently, consumers become more and more efficient in dealing with the buying task. The central argument of these theories is that consumers, due to the limited capacities of information processing, use a variety of heuristics to simplify their decision-making tasks and manage information overload (Bettman, 1979; Jacoby, Speller & Kohn, 1974). One of these simplification processes is the use of memory (in particular working or short-term memory) where consumers typically retain a few attributes and alternatives in memory to be retrieved for future choices (Miller, 1956; Simon, 1974). Not all that is stored in the memory may be invoked for inclusion in a consideration set in every purchase or consumption decision, but as observed by Alba, Hutchinson and Lunch (1991), memory plays an important role in the formation of the consideration set.

Consumer behavior is also motivated by the need to reduce risk (Bauer, 1960; Taylor, 1974). Perceived risk is associated with the uncertainty and magnitude of outcomes. Consumers develop a variety of strategies to reduce perceived risk. Of these, the two most general strategies adopted by them are (1) engaging in an external search for information, especially through word-of-mouth communication and developing a greater confidence in their own ability to judge and evaluate choices (Cox, 1967; Beatty & Smith, 1987; Dowling & Stealin, 1994), and (2) becoming loyal to a brand, product, store, or marketer (Howard, 1965; Locander & Hermann, 1979).

Cognitive consistency theories, such as the balance theory (Heider, 1946) and congruity theory (Osgood & Tannembaum, 1955), suggest that consumers strive for harmonious relationships in their beliefs, feelings, and behaviors (McGuire, 1976; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Inconsistency in this cognitive system is presumed to generate psychological tension. Therefore, consumers tend to avoid choosing alternatives or information that would be inconsistent or dissonant with their current belief system. Indeed as a perceptual vigilance, consumers will selectively pay more attention to such products, information, and persons for whom there is a favorable attitude. This has been the subject of investigation under the confirmation-disconfirmation theory of consumer attitudes (Oliver, 1993; Stayman, Alden & Smith, 1992).

Personal influences are hypothesized to have a close relationship with customer trust and relationship commitment. Such a relationship can be seen in the following hypotheses.

H2: The greater the personal influences on customers, the stronger the trust in the bank.

H3: The greater the personal influences on customers, the stronger the relationship commitment.

Sociological Influences

The influence of society, family, and reference groups on consumer behavior is profound (Coleman, 1983; Levy, 1966; Nicosia & Mayer, 1976; Sheth, 1974a; Stanford & Cocanougher, 1977; Tan & Chua, 1986). Through the process of socialization, the consumer becomes a member of multiple social institutions and social groups (Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Ward, Klees & Robertson, 1987). These social institutions and groups have powerful influences on consumers in terms of what they purchase and consume. Conforming to such social influences and pressures, consumers consciously reduce their choices and continue to engage in certain types of consumption patterns that are acceptable to the social groups to which they belong (Park & Lessig, 1977). Such group influences are also captured in the normative component in attitude-behavior models (Miniard & Cohen, 1983; Ryan, 1982; Sheth, 1974b; Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991).

In conclusion, sociological theories of consumer behavior suggest that consumers reduce choices to comply with group norms. Such compliance is motivated by the consumer's desires to develop a close relationship with the group, to attain the benefits of socialization and the rewards associated with social compliance, and to avoid conflict and punishment associated with noncompliance of norms. Consumers also reduce choices in order to fulfill aspirations and reduce perceived risk. They have a desire to be socially connected and give credence to information that has strong social ties. Those who have greater social orientations are likely to be more relationship oriented than the others.

The above discussion leads to the development of the following hypotheses:

H4: The greater the sociological influences on customers, the stronger the trust in the bank.

H5: The greater the sociological influences on customers, the stronger the relationship commitment.

Institutional Influences

There are at least four institutions that influence consumer behavior and play an active role in reducing consumer choice. They are government, religion, employer, and marketer (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Consumers have to restrict their choices to those that are within the government policy and guidelines (Sheth & Frazier, 1982).

On the other hand, employers not only prescribe guidelines on employee usage of products and services for the organization, they also influence employees as to what they should purchase and consume and whether the products and services are used for their personal or family purposes (Whyte, 1961). Marketing management literature illustrate how marketers influence consumers to reduce their choices through the use of advertising, pricing, merchandising, and other marketing mix variables (Kotler, 1994). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H6: The greater the institutional influences on customers, the stronger the relationship commitment.

H7: The greater the institutional influences on customers, the stronger the trust in the bank.

Institutions are the most powerful mechanism of generating behavior in consumers because they have legitimized power to reward and punish certain types of behavior (Sheth & Partivayar 1995). Reference groups, including cohorts such as coworkers, are the next most powerful influencing body. Their influences are both aspirational and coercive.

Conceptual Model

As shown in Figure 1, relationship commitment is conceptualized to be a function of personal, sociological, and institutional influences, and trust.

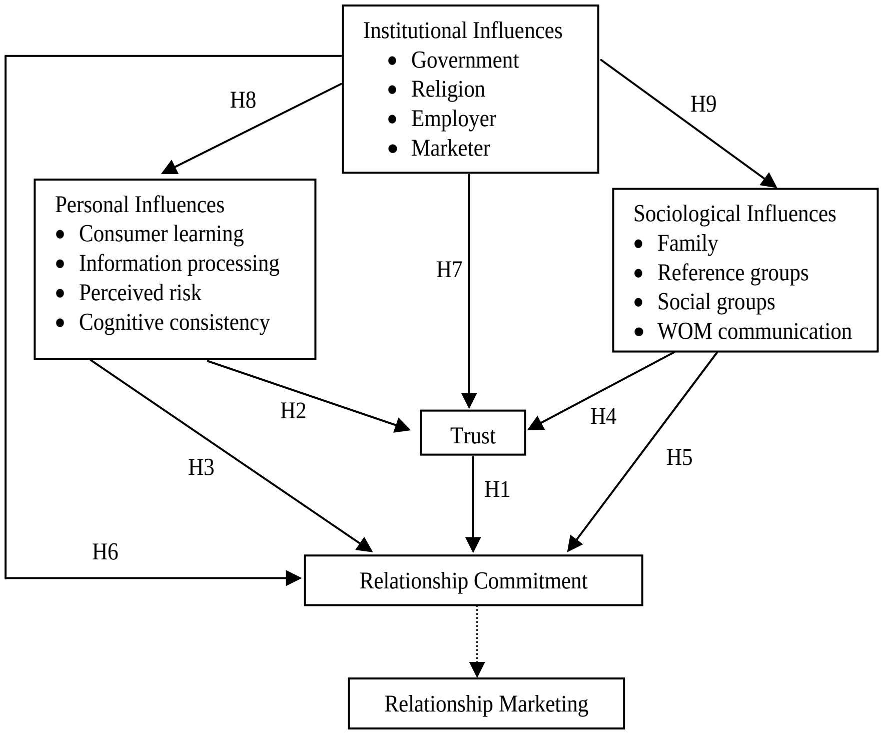

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model of Determinants of Relationship Commitment

Individuals, although personally inclined towards involvement in relationships, are the least powerful influences of such behavior. Rather, societal and institutional motivations are stronger in inducing relationship formation and maintenance (Sheth & Partivayar, 1995). Therefore, we predict that relationship-marketing activities that are institutionally based will be more stable than those based on individuals. We hypothesized that:

H8: Institutional influences do affect personal influences.

H9: Institutional influences do affect sociological influences.

METHODOLOGY

Selection of the sample – The population under study consists of all general retail bank consumers in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. A sample population of 600 dwelling units were targeted, whereby the general retail bank consumers occupying the dwelling units selected were chosen as respondents.

Questionnaire design and administration – Pretesting the questionnaires was conducted by randomly selecting 30 respondents from the sample. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed by 6 enumerators under the supervision of the researcher. The respondents were randomly selected based on the convenience of both researchers and respondents. A total of 578 usable questionnaires were returned and used to test the hypotheses of the study.

Development of measures – Most measures were either adopted from previously published works, or developed specifically for our analysis. The measure of personal, sociological, and institutional influences was constructed by combining the scales of Anderson, Cox, and Fulcher (1976); Rignall (1980); Haron and Ahmad (1992); Laroche et al. (1986); Ying and Ah Lak (1989), and the new items developed from the qualitative interviews. The measure of relationship commitment was developed by modifying the scales established by Anderson and Weitz (1992), and Morgan and Hunt (1994). The scale of trust was constructed by combining the scales developed by Crosby et al. (1990) and Moorman et al. (1992). Reliability was assessed using the Cronbach alpha coefficient.

RESULTS

The results of the respondents' profile are presented in Table 1.

The Analysis

A regression analysis was done to see the relationship between the dependent variable (relationship commitment), the ultimate independent variables (personal, sociological, and institutional), and the mediating variable (trust) of the study. In this case it provided some support to all hypothesized relationships (see Table 2). In fact, the model explains small variances in the ultimate dependent variable, relationship commitment (25.2%) and in the mediating construct, trust (9.1%).

TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

	Frequency	Percentage (%)		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Race			**Age**		
Malay	371	64.2	Less than 20 years	41	7.1
Chinese	131	22.7	20–29 years	277	47.9
Indian	63	10.9	30–39 years	154	26.6
Others	13	2.2	40–49 years	86	14.9
			More than 50 year	20	3.5
Level of Education			**Type of Job**		
Nil to primary	19	3.3	Professional	159	27.5
Secondary	147	25.4	Management	163	28.2
University/ College	361	62.5	White Collar	71	12.3
			Blue Collar	107	18.5
Professional	47	8.1	Others	78	13.5
Others	4	0.7			
Years in Job			**Monthly Income (RM)**		
			Less than 1000	45	7.8
Less than 5 years	217	37.5	1000–1999	226	39.1
5–9 years	124	21.5	2000–2999	178	30.8
10–15 years	108	18.7	3000–3999	61	10.6
16–20 years	53	9.2	More than 4000	37	6.4
More than 20 years	45	7.8	No answers	31	5.4
No answers	31	5.4			

Source: Survey

Causal path analysis was performed in order to investigate the impact of independent variables on the ultimate dependent variable. The path model derived is as shown in Figure 2. The path coefficients are standardized beta coefficients taken from the regression analysis in Table 2.

It is noted from Table 2 that trust displays a small but positive linkage with relationship commitment with a beta coefficient of 0.232 ($p < 0.000$), thus supporting the first hypothesis, H1 (The greater the trust in the bank, the stronger the relationship commitment).

For H2 (The greater the personal influences on customers, the stronger the trust in the bank), the standardized beta coefficient implies that personal influences exert a significant, direct influence on trust (0.167).

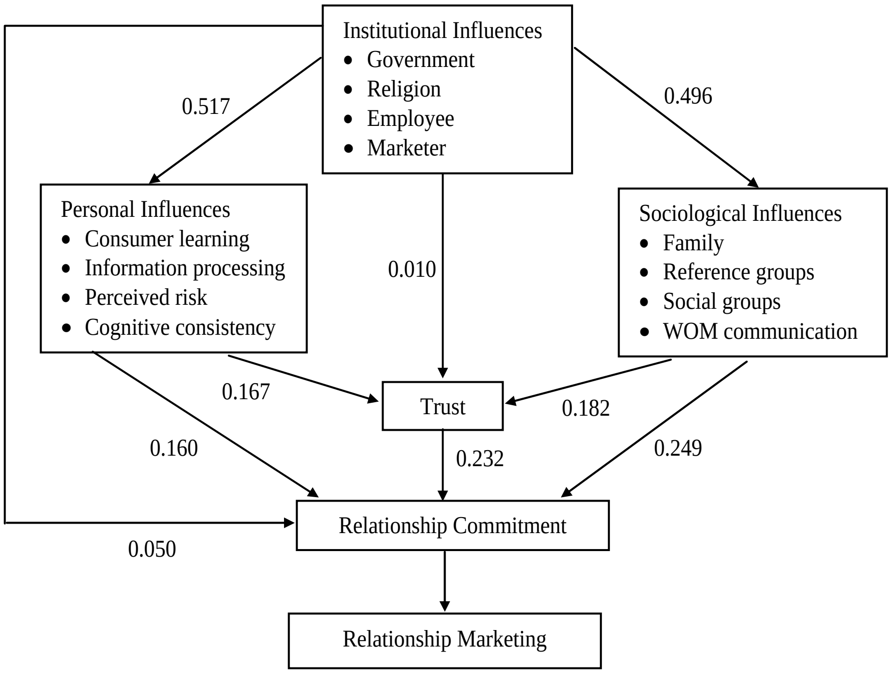

Figure 2. Path model of determinants of relationship commitment

TABLE 2
THE RESULTS OF THE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Dependent variables	Independent variables	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standardized Beta	T	Significance	F
Relationship commitment	1. Trust	0.252	0.247	0.232	6.109	0.000	48.326
	2. Personal influence			0.160	3.633	0.000	
	3. Sociological influence			0.249	5.732	0.000	
	4. Institutional influence			0.050	1.107	0.269	
Trust	1. Sociological influence	0.091	0.087	0.182	3.847	0.000	19.229
	2. Institutional influence			0.010	0.196	0.844	
	3. Personal influence			0.167	3.489	0.000	
Sociological influence	1. Institutional influence	0.246	0.245	0.496	13.706	0.000	187.844
Personal influence	1. Institutional influence	0.267	0.266	0.517	14.490	0.000	209.969

Source: SPSS Output

On the other hand, for H3 (The greater the personal influences on customers, the stronger the relationship commitment), the standardized beta coefficient of 0.160, implies that personal influences give a significant direct impact on relationship commitment. The results clearly show that personal influences have a greater impact on trust than on relationship commitment.

As for H4 (The greater the sociological influences on customers, the stronger the trust in the bank), the standardized beta coefficient implies that sociological influence exert a small influence on trust (0.182). With regards to H5 (The greater the sociological influences on customers, the stronger the relationship commitment), the regression coefficient for institutional influence is 0.249 ($p < 0.000$) thus providing some support for this hypothesis. In this case, it proves that sociological influences have a greater impact on relationship commitment compared to trust.

In the case of H6, (The greater the institutional influences on customers, the stronger the relationship commitment) and H7 (The greater the institutional influences on customers, the stronger the trust in bank) the results show that, the institutional influences have an insignificant impact on both relationship commitment and trust, with a beta coefficient of 0.050 ($p < 0.269$) and 0.010 ($p < 0.844$) respectively. Thus, H6 and H7 are not supported.

However, institutional influences display a strong and significant impact on sociological and personal influences (betas = 0.496 and 0.517 respectively). Therefore, H8 (institutional influences do affect personal influences) and H9 (institutional influences do affect sociological influences) are supported.

The direct, indirect and total effects of each variable on the dependent variable, relationship commitment, are depicted in Table 3. The indirect effects are calculated by multiplying the sequential beta coefficient weights along any given path following the method devised by Asher (1976). To illustrate, the indirect effects of personal influences on relationship commitment is as follows: $0.167 \times 0.232 = 0.038744$ since it is mediated via trust.

Table 3 clearly shows that trust and sociological influences have the largest direct effects on relationship commitment, but overall only sociological influences have the greatest impact from the combination of the direct and indirect effects. The overall effect of 0.3297 shows that it has by far the largest effect on commitment.

The results of the path analysis have extended our understanding of relationship marketing in consumer retail banking services by examining the relative impact of four key variables (personal, sociological and institutional influences, as well as trust).

TABLE 3
EFFECTS OF THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES ON RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

Variable	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Trust	0.232	0.0000	0.232
Institutional influence	0.050	0.00232	0.05232
Sociological influence	0.249	0.0422	0.2912
Personal influence	0.160	0.0387	0.1987

Sources: The SPSS Output.

Trust shows a significant direct impact on relationship commitment. The sense of trust must exist in any relationship and this holds true in the case of retail banking in Malaysia. Although the impact of trust on relationship commitment is not as expected, it is still significant. Such a phenomenon happens because most of the banks in Malaysia are reliable and trustworthy although Malaysian customers have almost ignored this factor (trust).

Sociological influences seemed to give a greater direct impact on relationship commitment as compared to their indirect impact (mediated via trust). This situation implies that trust does not strongly mediate customers' sociological influences and their relationship commitment towards their banks. This means that sociological influences directly impact customer relationship commitment towards their banks.

Personal influences also give a significant impact on relationship commitment, but there is also a great difference between its direct and indirect (mediated by trust) impact. This means that the direct impact of personal influences on relationship commitment is greater than its impact on relationship commitment if mediated by trust. Again, the current study proves that trust is not a good mediating variable.

Institutional influences show insignificant direct and indirect impact on customer relationship commitment. This means that the idea of Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) which suggests that institutions are the most powerful mechanism of generating relationship behavior on customers is not true, at least in the context of the current study. The results imply that the four institutions studied (government, employer, religion and marketer) do not impact the customer relationship commitment towards their banks. But, these situations do not mean that the banks' marketers should ignore these four institutions in generating customer relationship commitment with their banks.

In short, it can be concluded that three out of the four hypothesized variables namely; personal influences, sociological influence, and trust show a small but significant impact on relationship commitment. Institutional influence, however, does not show any significant impact on relationship commitment.

The results imply that the customers are more influenced by the sociological factors as compared to the personal factors. Such a finding indicates that in the Malaysian culture, social and family ties are closer. The customers are more vulnerable to the influences of family, social and reference groups.

The study shows that sociological motivations for inducing relationship formation and maintenance are stronger than individual motivations. Therefore, it is predicted that relationship marketing activities that are more sociologically based will be more stable than those based on individuals or institutions.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is obvious that customers who are committed towards their relationship with their banks do not only perceive the bank as reliable and trustworthy, but also as business partners and team members. To retain consumer loyalty, the bankers must be up-dated on the impact of a wide range of variables, and it is important to note that the relationship must be mutually beneficial.

Relationship commitment is directly influenced by the sociological reasons, whereby the customers who have greater social orientations are likely to be more relationship oriented than the others. So, it is important to note that social ties need to be built with the customers to attract them to be more committed to the bank. In this case the banks can make use of their own employees as the social contact with the customers. The employees need to be reminded that, it is not only corporate and business clients but also end-customers that are the major determinants of their existence.

In spite of that, personal influences also have a great direct influence on the relationship commitment towards banks. Customers tend to engage in the relationship with the bank because of several personal reasons. The location of the bank itself may influence the customer to choose the particular bank. For instance, the customers may prefer the bank which is easily accessible to simplify their decision making task. The customers would also prefer banks that are computerized and integrated, and which have a strong financial background to reduce their perceived risks. This is because the retail customers are those who normally do not want to be involved with financial risks. In addition to that, several other personal influences may affect the consumer decision in choosing their retail banks as discussed earlier.

Other than sociological and personal influences, trust does play an important role in relationship commitment. With the beta coefficient of 0.145 ($p < 0.000$), it can be said that trust has a significant effect on customer relationship commitment. Consumer trust can be gained from various areas in the business dealings, but obviously the daily banking transaction is the most critical point where the customer may judge the trustworthiness of the bank. Therefore, it is important for the bank to ensure that no mistakes are made in the banking transactions.

Institutional influence does not give a direct impact to the relationship commitment, but it does have a significant effect on personal and sociological influences. Although the institutional influences do not have a direct impact on the relationship commitment, their impact on the personal and sociological influences need to be noted.

In short, the study has shown there is no one single factor that is the sole determinant of consumer relationship commitment. The relationship occurs as a result of the interactions of a set of factors. The research results show that the four hypothesized variables investigated only represent 25.2% of the customer relationship commitment among the banks.

From the managerial perspective, it is important to know the orientations of the client towards the retail bank in the prevailing environment. Sociological and personal influences, as well as trust can affect the customer relationship commitment in various ways. Specifically, the bank's ability to provide the promised benefits reliably can change the customers' orientation, thus creating high exit barriers.

In addition, regular and effective communication with the customers is essential in order to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty, shape expectations, educate the customers, resolve any misunderstanding, and explain the options in a jargon-free manner. Given the pivotal role of sociological and personal influences, intensive training in interpersonal and communications skills would seem warranted. Finally, it should be noted that effective interpersonal communication is also important in the long run to ensure strong social and emotional bonds between the banks, employees and customers.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is a cross-sectional study. A similar study should be conducted from time to time to uncover the changes in the factors that influence the customer relationship commitment among the banks. The lack of literature on the subject of relationship commitment in the consumer markets also suggests that even more such studies need to be done. When the world becomes more borderless, and the customers become more literate in information technology, it would be more interesting to see how the borderless business environment affect the customer relationship commitment among the banks.

While this study focused only on the four major factors, namely; personal influences, sociological influences, institutional influences and trust, future research should look at other factors that may influence consumer relationship commitment towards their banks. With such information, the bank can better design their approach in building a strong relationship with their customers.

Since samples from other parts of the country may yield different results, the samples of the study can also be extended throughout Malaysia in order to make the results more representative of Malaysia. Instead of using self-administered questionnaires, future research can also utilize mail or Internet survey in order to reduce the cost of collecting data and to increase the coverage of the study.

In addition, the samples of the study can also be focused only on wage-earners since working people may have different expectations of their banks compared to non-working people or businessmen.

Since the current study is the first to categorize the criteria determining customer-bank relationship into three (personal, sociological and institutional influences) and examine their impact on trust and relationship commitment, more studies should be done to test the proposed conceptual model.

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