

Emotional connection and customer orientation as moderators in improving the customer satisfaction–behavioral intention link: A moderated moderation service model

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ABSTRACT

Customer engagement is one of the significant operational and quality practices service providers use to build service experiential relationships with customers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the moderating role emotional connection and customer orientation play in customer relationship building. A quantitative survey method is carried out among 515 self-reported active members at a single fast-growing non-denominational faith-based organization in Southwestern United States. Using a hierarchical multiple regression to evaluate our research model, we find relationship satisfaction is positively associated with customers' behavioral intention in doing business with a service firm, while emotional connection shows no moderating effect on such a relationship. However, we found a significant three-way interaction effect of relationship satisfaction, emotional connection, and customer orientation on behavioral intentions. Customer orientation strengthens and fortifies the relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions for customers with high emotional connection than for customers with low emotional connection. The focus on customer orientation and emotional connection provides a framework that can assist service firms develop quality operational strategies that target the emotions and feelings of customers to value the relationship while supporting service employees with quality operational practices and customer orientated activities to better manage customers.

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Introduction

Service intense organizations deliver quality and attractive propositions *via* value co-creation processes to encourage customer participation and consumption (Davis et al. 2018; Yim et al. 2012). Organizations are well served when they transition from the passive approach to segmenting consumers based on relational and transactional outlooks (Verhoef 2003; Garbarino and Johnson 1999) to pursue an active approach that relies on customer involvement and participation in creating and delivering a service (Boakye et al. 2017; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Thus, customer engagement and participation are key to driving the process of value co-creation (Yi et al. 2011). To engage customers to participate in service delivery sets the stage for relationship building and behavioral intent.

Strategically close relationships can enhance a firm's competitive edge (Valsamakis and Sprague 2001; Piercy 2009). Service organizations bolster the value offering of their firms by building closer relationships with customers (Johnson and Selnes 2012), leading to behavioral-related outcomes. Indeed, prior research posits that employee performance during service encounters begets memorable customer experiences, leading to long-term and profitable relationships with customers (Keiningham et al. 2017; Ngo and O'Cass 2013).

Literature review reveals that customer experiences improve a service firm's bottom line (Sinha et al. 2020; Flint et al. 2011). Customers determine the value of their service experience since they participant in its creation (Kaur 2016; Yang et al. 2017). There are

factors that customers perceive to be important and necessary for a relational experience to manifest. For example, key factors such as relationship satisfaction, trust, commitment, and customer engagement are fundamental in creating close relationships with consumers (Barratt 2004). Many studies have examined antecedents of relationship satisfaction for the customer while others have investigated how these experiences affect loyalty and repurchase intentions (Boakye et al. 2017; Foroudi et al. 2016).

Research suggests that personality traits serve as mechanisms that moderate the experiential relationship between a customer and a business (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al. 2020; Kadic-Magljalic et al. 2017). Emotions are evoked when customers experience a service (Voss et al. 2008). These services are seen as platforms *via* which experiences are evoked (Candi et al. 2013). For an organization to thrive, all sections of the organization must embrace the phenomenal idea of creating and providing a satisfactory relational experience to the customer. Despite these initiatives, a pressing concern for service providers is how relationships with customers can be managed (Palmatier et al. 2008). This study seeks to address the following research question. *When does customer orientation and emotional connection moderate the established relationship between a satisfied customer and their behavioral intentions?* This study develops a conceptual model (see Figure 1) to investigate the boundary conditions of customer emotional connections and customer orientation in enhancing customer relationship experiences.

Literature review and hypotheses

The extant literature in the domains of quality management and service research recognizes the positive relational impact among customer satisfaction, behavioral intentions and customer loyalty (Ababneh et al. 2022; Kim et al. 2020; Iglesias et al. 2019; Hill and Alexander 2000). Scholars have established these

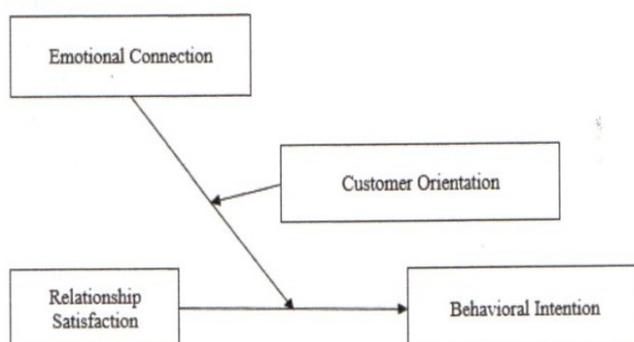


Figure 1. The conceptual research model.

relationships in numerous fields of discipline. Customers evaluate the benefits, value, and their experiences gained from such service encounters, to make loyalty decisions, with the firm. As a result, firms have sought to employ strategies to positively enhance and facilitate the decision-making processes of customers to stay engaged.

Customer co-creation and customer participation are some of the many strategic decisions firms have incorporated in their business model to enhance customer experiences (Vargo and Lusch 2004). These strategies help customers to play a central role in determining the quality of the service outcome they desire. Further, these processes tend to increase customer involvement, as well as, social interactions with employees of the firm and other customers in the service environment. Additional, implementing strategies that increase customer engagement and participation in the service process helps firms fend off competition from competitors for the same group of customers (Jaworski and Kohli (2006). While cross-disciplinary research offers strong support for the positive association between customer satisfaction and behavioral intention (Dash et al. 2021; Udo et al. 2010; Qin and Prybutok 2008), we argue that this positive relationship is shaped over time by a combination of 1) customer emotions and 2) quality of the firm's orientation to meet the customer needs. While customer emotions and customer orientation have both been used as antecedents to behavioral intentions and loyalty (Rychalski and Hudson 2017; Homburg et al. 2011), we believe they shape the decision-making process of the customer to act. As a result, they serve as boundary conditions for customer behavioral intentions since customer satisfaction changes over time due to varying conditions and competition from other firms.

Relationship satisfaction

Customer satisfaction can be considered the essence of success in today's highly competitive world of business. Customer satisfaction has significant implications for the firm's performance (Bolton 2004; Kalpande and Toke, 2023). For customers, satisfaction is a preceding behavior of customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction has attracted much attention in both public and private sectors in recent years, as well as in academic research (Evans and Jack 2003; Subramanian et al. 2016; Hill and Alexander 2000; Tam 2011; Vázquez-Casielles et al. 2010; Bock et al. 2005). In the extant literature, customer satisfaction has been consistently recognized as a predictor of customer

behavioral intention (Ababneh et al. 2022; Kim et al. 2020). Gundersen et al. (1996) define customer satisfaction as “post consumption evaluative judgment concerning a specific product or service”. Customer satisfaction adds value from the customer’s perspective (García-Bernal and Ramírez-Alesón 2015). In their study, Cronin et al. (2000) posit that customer satisfaction is highly associated with the value a customer receives from firm’s service or product. Thus, it is an indispensable factor for firms to gain a sustainable advantage (Jha et al. 2017) over their competitors. Indeed, the concept of satisfaction is a focal goal for firms in terms of building relationships. Therefore, focusing on strengthening this relationship is worth pursuing for firms.

Conceptually, satisfaction entails both an affective and a cognitive dimension (Westbrook and Oliver 1991). Satisfaction is either a positive feeling, a positive answer to an expectation, or exceeding expectations (Dano et al. 2006). For some customers, satisfaction seems to be a relative phenomenon and dependent on the individual experiences. Research suggests that, the extent of satisfaction for the customer may be affected by the customer’s effort used to acquire the service (Cardozo 1965).

Jones and Suh (2000) posit that there are two types of customer satisfaction namely transaction-specific and cumulative satisfaction. Gelbrich and Roschk (2011) note that transaction-specific satisfaction is satisfaction assessed after each service encounter with the service provider. Cumulative satisfaction captures satisfaction assessed in relations with the service provider, as well as, the customer’s experiences during the service encounter (Ekinici and Dawes 2009). Scholars have established cumulative satisfaction to be more fundamental and valuable than transaction-specific satisfaction when predicting customer behavioral intentions (Boakye et al. 2017). For relational customers, the ability to connect with firms is an important key source of satisfaction, leading to relationship satisfaction (Garbarino and Johnson 1999).

We define relationship satisfaction as the degree of aptness and sustainability of a relationship to satisfy customer needs. It deals with the customer’s affective state resulting from the customer’s overall positive evaluation of the relational aspect of the providers’ working relationship (Lages et al. 2005). In relationship satisfaction, customers assess their satisfaction with the firm’s trust and integrity levels during past performance to determine their loyalty and behavioral intentions. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) established in their research that relationship satisfaction affects behavioral-related outcomes. Customer satisfaction is

purported to induce behaviors that seek to help the firm’s efficiencies in terms of its bottom-line. For example, Szymanski and Henard (2001) and Brown et al. (2005), show that better customer satisfaction is associated with positive word-of-mouth. Zineldin (2006) found satisfied customers to be less price sensitive, and are less influenced by competitors and intend/willing to stay longer in a relationship with the firm. For firms, building a satisfactory relationship with customers can lead to lower transaction cost and advertising cost because it is cheaper to retain loyal customers than acquire new customers (Luo and Homburg 2007).

While satisfaction increases customer retention and repurchase behavior, behavioral intention or repurchase intention depends on the substance and/or dynamics of the relationship between the firm and customer (Eriksson and Vaghult 2000). In instances where customers are dissatisfied, customers complain, become disloyal through negative word-of-mouth, and switch to other competitors. On the other hand, satisfied customers demonstrate their satisfaction with a commitment to continue doing business with the firm through repurchase intentions. In service-intense organization, customers are motivated to stay in partnership with the service provider when they are satisfied with the relationship and improvement in the value offering of the service. Hence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Relationship satisfaction is positively related to behavioral intentions.

Emotional connection as a moderator

Customers are instinctive creatures of emotions. Emotions result from an assessment of the current situation facing an individual. As a result, customers tend to seek out emotional exchanges and experiences that are positive while avoiding negative emotional experiences (Martin et al. 2008; Wrightsman and Sanford 1975). While satisfaction has a cognitive process, it is also an outcome of an affective process (Oliver 1997). This affective process refers to the feeling responses. Feelings and connections play a key role in shaping both attitudinal formation and behavioral intent (Ferrand et al. 2016; Hoyer et al. 2001). Therefore, emotions serve as a quality characteristic to the customer in deciding their loyalty to the product or service. In their study, Qin et al. (2017) found positive emotions to influence patient satisfaction. As firms operate in this complex, dynamic, and competitive environment, they are well served by finding

ways of reducing any form of anxiety and uncertainty that customers potentially perceive and emotionally react to. Emotions have been shown to affect customer behavioral intentions and loyalty (DeWitt et al. 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Garbarino and Johnson 1999). It's been established emotions serve as a motivator to stay connected in a relationship with a firm's service or product (Zhao et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2017). While many studies have researched on the emotions as an antecedent to repurchase and/or behavioral intention and customer loyalty (Qin et al. 2017; Namkun and Jang, 2010; DeWitt et al. 2008), few studies, if any, have viewed it as a boundary condition on which loyalty resides (Van Hiel and Kossowska 2006). Magids et al. (2015) establish that firms which strategically target the emotions or feelings of customers increase their growth and financial performances.

Ahn and Kwon (2022) posit that customers evaluate relationship satisfaction based on emotions and social interactions. Consequently, emotions influence and connect individuals to many behaviors including word-of-mouth, complaint behaviors, and trust. Firms that develop strategies that target and positively enhance emotions of customers see an increase in market share and firm performance. Moreover, these firms arouse the feelings of their customers who positively respond to loyal-related behaviors. As individuals become satisfied with a relationship their behavioral intent or loyalty toward the relationship is shaped by the state and/or condition of their emotions. Thus, it would be interesting to determine at what point does customer emotions alter the relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intent. We argue that the positive association between satisfaction and behavioral intention strengthens for customers with high (positive) emotions and decreases for customers with low (negative) emotions.

H2. Emotional connection moderates the positive effect of relationship satisfaction on behavioral intentions, such that the effect will be stronger for customers with high emotional connection than for customers with low emotional connection.

Customer orientation as a moderator

Customer orientation is one aspect of quality management values used to improve service operations performance. It is established that customers interacting with employees and other customers impact satisfaction and loyalty (Guenzi and Pelloni 2004). Customer orientation is the firm's predisposition to

focus on and meet customer needs (Brown et al. 2002). Some articles suggest customer orientation activities are relational assets that firms use to strengthen customer relationship (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al. 2020; Thoumrungroje and Racela 2013). For example, firms with higher customer-oriented values produce better performance and growth measures relative to firms that do not have these values (Hennig-Thurau 2004). Goff et al. (1997) also found customer orientation to have a positive association with customer satisfaction with the salesperson and the dealer in their study using a sample of 522 new care purchasers. Moreover, customer orientation serves as a firm capability to deliver its services, driving satisfaction and customer behavior. Customer orientation is thus viewed as a competitive marketing strategy with the main goal of positively affecting the behavioral outcome of customers. Thus, firms that implement a culture of customer-oriented strategies are in a better position to understand the needs and wants of the customer. The knowledge that firms derive from being customer-oriented leads to more service development, creative service positioning and service personalization (Huang and Brown 2016; Blankson and Crawford 2012), resulting in positive future outcomes.

In their study, Hennig-Thurau (2004) asserts that customer orientation encompasses the attitude and behavior of service employees to understand customer needs and deliver an adaptive response to customer's delight. A plethora of research suggests focusing on customer-oriented values help firms to engage in identifying, understanding and effectively meeting the customer's needs (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al. 2020; Bagozzi et al. 2012). At the relationship level, Beatty et al. (1996) found empathy, understanding for the customer, interpersonal care, and trustworthy behavior, and provide augmented personal service to be critical to long-term relationship building. Thus, from a customer's perspective, we operationalize customer orientation as the extent to which customers believe that the service provider is committed to understanding and meeting their (Dean 2007). It is worthy to note that customer orientation must be embraced as a centerpiece of a quality improvement initiatives in transforming an organization's culture and commitment to affect customer behavioral outcomes (Toke and Kalpande 2020).

Customer orientation creates a platform to understand organizational strategies in addressing customer needs. During the service encounter, customer orientation helps firm employees to collect customer information and effectively manage customer needs. In the

process of effectively managing customer needs customer emotions are impacted. Levels of customer orientation trigger customer emotional experiences and attachment, leading to positive customer behavioral intention (Huang and Brown 2016; Hennig-Thurau 2004). In their study, Babakus et al. (2009) reveal that employees with high customer orientation naturally view their work environment as well as the people around them with a customer service focus. Thus, such employees are able to connect to the emotions of the customer during the service encounter because they display the required emotions to a higher degree than their less customer-oriented employees. On that level, customers see through the authentic display of emotions and empathy on display from the high customer-oriented employees and adopt the employee's emotional level (Hatfield et al. 1993). In the unlikely event of low customer orientation, customers display negative emotions toward the service which subsequently leading to dissatisfaction and a negative behavioral outcome. Therefore, employees with low customer orientation are less likely to emotionally connect with customers. On the other hand, employees with high and enthusiastic customer orientation connect positively with the customer emotions thereby strengthening the behavioral outcome of these customers toward the service. Thus, we present the following hypothesis:

H3. Relationship satisfaction, emotional connection, and customer orientation interact to relate to behavioral intentions such that, the relationship strengthens for customers with high emotional connection when customer orientation is high than for customers with high emotional connection in situations where customer orientation is low.

Methodology

Developing and testing instrument

We developed a pilot survey instrument using scales adapted from published literature. For example, scales for relationship satisfaction were adapted from Oliver (2006) and Gustafsson et al. (2005), customer orientation came from Garbarino and Johnson (1999) and Oliver (2006), while behavioral intentions were adapted from Garbarino and Johnson (1999) and Zeithaml et al. (1996). Because there were no appropriate scales for emotional connection, we developed a scale for this construct.

Prior to data collection, we asked four operations and marketing professors at a Southwestern university in the United States to review our questionnaire for

content validity. Next, we asked the leadership of the organization to assess appropriateness and "respondent-friendliness" of the questionnaire. We then conducted a pilot survey with a focus group of 185 non-denominational faith-based organization members. We explored the four-factor structure of the data using principal component analysis with a varimax rotation (Nunnally 1978). In this purification process, factor loadings below 0.5 were eliminated. We dropped one of the four items for customer orientation, and two of the six developed emotional connection items due to poor factor loadings. We found the Cronbach's alpha of our factors ranged from 0.65 to 0.93, above the minimum acceptable level of 0.6 for exploratory research (Nunnally 1994). Based on the positive evaluation and feedback from our focus group and academic experts, we refined the final survey instrument for the main data collection.

To collect data, we handed out surveys to congregants at all services of a large Southwestern, non-denominational faith-based organization located in United States (Dillman 2000). This non-denominational faith-based organization is considered one of the fastest growing non-denominational faith-based organizations since 2004 (Outreach Magazine 2018). Our choice of a non-denominational faith-based organization stems from the fact that it provides a variety of social services within the local community (O'Malley and Tynan 2003; Zatepilina-Monacell 2015). Moreover, it captures the connection (i.e., emotional) and volunteering attitude that individuals commit to serving their personal and community needs. Non-denominational faith-based organizations engage in many nonprofit, public sector activities that build and facilitate community engagement, improve quality interaction, and better-sustained relationships among community partners and members. The role of non-denominational faith-based organizations as nonprofit entities is quite extensive. Non-denominational faith-based organizations form a specialized subset of nonprofit organization that provide quality support for individuals with similar feelings of familiarity and connection to socially interact (Dorahy et al. 2009; Cyranowski et al. 2013). In addition, this Non-denominational faith-based organization platform offers social outreach programs through which customers socially interact and bond emotionally; thereby, increasing their customer involvement and engagement with the organization and other members to achieve a shared purpose (Sashi 2012). We observe that these social outreach initiatives are frequently personalized and customized in ways that embrace the values and goals of the faith-based group,

fostering a sense of trust and commitment among participants. This church's organizational leadership selected a weekend that would provide a sample representative of the general population. We distributed 1650 questionnaires during the Sunday service. We collected surveys that were completed during the service. We also gave the opportunity to those who wanted to return it to the church office at the next service. In the end, we received 1064 questionnaires. Because of the limited time given to us by the church leadership, we made a prior decision to eliminate any survey that was not 100% complete. At the end of data cleaning, we had 515 completed responses for further analysis. All scale items were anchored using the 7-point Likert-type scale. Appendix A shows scale items used in this study.

Data analyses and results

Using the two-step approach suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we performed structural equation modeling on the research model using Stata SE 15.0. In the first step, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the four-factor measurement model. Acceptable fit indices were established for our model [$\chi^2(71) = 220.74$, RMSEA = 0.064, CFI = 0.977, TLI = 0.971, and SRMR = 0.033] (Hu and Bentler 1999). We achieved with convergent validity significant factor loadings (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). We also found acceptable composite reliability values above the 0.7 threshold (Hulland 1999). We demonstrated discriminant validity with square root values of the average variance extracted (AVE) higher than the correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Cumulatively, the results shown in Tables 1 and 2 show support for acceptable psychometric properties. We subsequently averaged the scale items for each

construct to create a composite score for testing the hypothesized relationships (Paswan et al. 2017).

Common method variance and Non-Response bias. Because we used a single method of data collection for our study, we were mindful of common method variance and its effect on study results. Using the Harman's single-factor test, we did not find a single factor emerging from our principal component analysis that accounted for 50% of the variance or higher (Harman 1976). In fact, the results showed that four factors accounted for 69.9% of the variance, with the first factor accounting for 38.1%. Thus, we do not have to contend with the problems of common method variance. To ensure common method variance robust results, we followed the single-factor procedure of Malhotra et al. (2006) in examining if there was major amount of variance that was common among items for this study. This single factor analysis produced a poor fit results ($\chi^2(65) = 2479.31$, CFI = 0.534, TLI = 0.440, RMSEA = 0.257, and SRMR = 0.194.). We found highly significant results for the chi-square difference tests between the hypothesized model and the single factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 2379.46$; $\Delta df = 6$; $p < .001$). All our results indicate little to no effect of common method variance in our dataset (Podsakoff et al. 2003).

We performed a non-response bias test using Armstrong and Overton (1977) extrapolation method on our study data. Data were split into two samples, early respondents and late responders. We then performed *t*-tests ($p < 0.05$) on each respective response of the two groups. The two groups did not produce statistically significant mean differences. Hence, results show non-response bias was not of concern to this study (Wagner and Kemmerling 2010).

Table 1. Results of CFA measurement properties.

Construct	Items	Loading	Average variance extracted	Composite reliability
Relationship satisfaction	RS1	0.92	0.78	0.94
	RS2	0.89		
	RS3	0.87		
	RS4	0.83		
	RS5	0.89		
Emotional connection	EMC1	0.74	0.61	0.86
	EMC2	0.72		
	EMC3	0.79		
	EMC4	0.87		
Customer orientation	CO1	0.82	0.82	0.93
	CO2	0.93		
	CO3	0.95		
Behavioral intentions	BI1	0.93	0.80	0.94
	BI2	0.96		
	BI3	0.74		
	BI4	0.90		

Table 2. Means, latent variable correlations, and discriminant validity.

Construct	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	AVE
1. Relationship satisfaction	6.42	0.86	0.88				0.78
2. Emotional connection	4.20	1.56	0.40	0.78			0.61
3. Customer orientation	6.23	1.01	0.60	0.36	0.91		0.82
4. Behavioral intentions	5.53	1.35	0.51	0.30	0.39	0.89	0.80

Note. The diagonal elements are the square root of AVEs and the off-diagonal elements are ϕ estimates.

Table 3. Regression analyses results.

Variables	Behavioral intention			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	4.95(0.33)***	4.99(0.28)***	5.08(0.29)***	4.76(0.39)***
Young	0.39(0.31)	0.36(0.27)	0.35(0.26)	0.34(0.26)
Middle age	0.38(0.23)	0.39(0.21)*	0.44(0.20)**	0.45(0.20)**
Some college	0.24(0.18)	0.26(0.16)	0.28(0.16)*	0.27(0.16)*
College	-0.08(0.18)	0.08(0.16)	0.14(0.16)	0.12(0.16)
Graduate	-0.33(0.22)	-0.18(0.19)	-0.10(0.19)	-0.08(0.19)
Employed	0.14(0.16)	0.16(0.14)	0.14(0.14)	0.11(0.14)
Income < \$50,000	0.05(0.19)	-0.11(0.17)	-0.06(0.17)	-0.07(0.17)
\$50,000 <= Income < \$100,000	0.26(0.18)	-0.01(0.16)	0.07(0.16)	0.06(0.16)
\$100,000 <= Income < \$150,000	-0.06(0.20)	-0.12(0.18)	-0.07(0.18)	-0.05(0.18)
Relationship satisfaction (RS)		0.79(0.06)***	0.83(0.14)***	0.69(0.09)***
Emotional connection (EMC)			0.11(0.04)***	0.06(0.04)
RS x EMC			0.04(0.04)	0.12(0.06)
Customer Orientation (CO)				0.12(0.08)
RS x CO				0.06(0.04)**
EMC x CO				-0.01(0.04)
RS x EMC x CO				0.06(0.02)**
R ²	0.038	0.276	0.291	0.305
Δ R ²		0.238	0.015	0.014
F	2.22**	19.19***	17.14***	13.65***

Note. Coefficients are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors are in parentheses. $N=515$

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

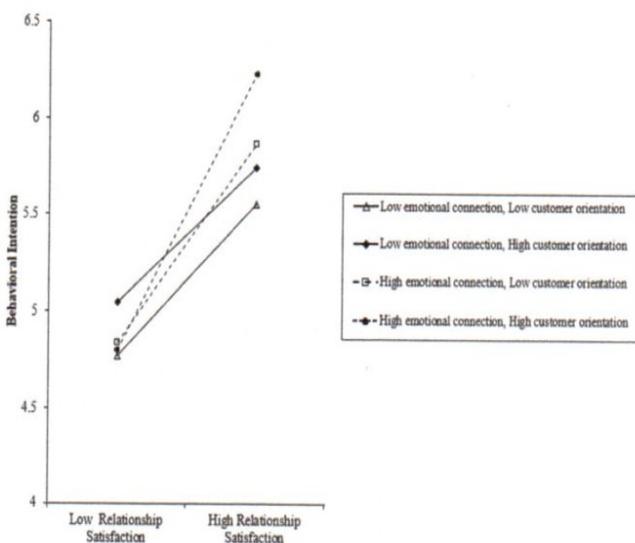


Figure 2. A visual three-way interaction between relationship satisfaction, emotional connection, and customer orientation on behavioral intention.

Hypothesis testing

Using StataSE 15, we conducted our regression analyses to test our hypotheses in a series of steps. First, we regressed behavioral intention on our control variables. As displayed in Table 3, none of the control

variables were significant in model 1. Next, together with the control variables we introduced relationship satisfaction, our independent variable. The model 2 results, shown in Table 3, establish a positive and significant relationship between relationship satisfaction and behavioral intention ($b = 0.79$, $t = 12.86$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

In our third step, we added emotional connection and its interaction with relationship satisfaction (i.e., RS x EMC) to the model to test the two-way interaction hypothesis. As depicted in model 3 of Table 3, the results reveal that an emotional connection was significantly related to behavioral intention ($b = 0.11$, $t = 2.94$, $p < 0.01$). Although the interaction between relationship satisfaction and emotional connection was positive as proposed, it was not significant ($b = 0.04$, $t = 1.00$, $p > 0.1$). Thus, hypothesis 2 is not supported. Lastly, in model 4, we included customer orientation, its interaction with relationship satisfaction, as well as its interaction, and the three-way interaction term (relationship satisfaction x emotional connection x customer orientation) to the elements in model 3. Results in Table 3 show the three-way interaction of relationship satisfaction, emotional connection, and

customer orientation was significant ($b=0.06$, $t=2.48$, $p<0.05$). Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported. We illustrate this three-way interaction in Figure 2.

To further examine the three-way interaction pattern, we followed Preacher et al. (2006) and Dawson and Richter (2006) recommendation to separately probe the relation of relationship satisfaction and emotional connection on behavioral intention at low and high customer orientation levels. Slopes were significant for individuals with low emotional connection at low customer orientation levels ($b=0.54$, $p<0.01$) and for individuals with low emotional connection at high customer orientation levels ($b=0.48$, $p<0.01$). In addition, we found significant slopes for individuals with high emotional connection at low customer orientation levels ($b=0.72$, $p<0.01$), and individuals with high emotional connection at high customer orientation levels ($b=1.03$, $p<0.01$). A t -test comparison of slope results shows that, in high customer orientation environments the slope for individuals with high emotional connection is significant compared to individuals in low customer orientation environments with high ($t=2.212$; $p<0.05$) and low ($t=2.397$; $p<0.05$) emotional connection. Moreover, the slope of individuals with high emotional connection in high customer orientation environments significantly differs from individuals with low emotional connection in high customer orientation environments ($t=2.447$; $p<0.05$). These results show that relationship satisfaction positively influences customer behavioral intentions, and that influence is amplified in high customer-oriented environments for individuals with high emotional connection than in low customer-oriented environments where individuals have low and high emotional connection. In addition, the satisfaction-behavioral intention relationship is stronger for individuals with high emotional connection in high customer-oriented environments over those with low emotional connection.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examined strategies marketing and operations managers can use to target and/or influence an individual's decision-making process to maintain a long-term relationship with the firm, particularly nonprofit, community-based organizations. Using an interactionist approach in a social service context within the nonprofit and public sectors, we further hypothesize and test how the effect of relationship satisfaction on behavioral intentions depends on the individual's emotional connection to the service and customer orientation, that is, the firm's approach to

managing customer needs. Although this study did not confirm emotional connection's ability to strengthen the positive effect of satisfaction on behavioral intentions, we found strong support for the three-way interaction (moderated-moderation) among satisfaction, emotional connection and customer orientation.

As expected, satisfaction was positively related to behavioral intentions, corroborating findings from prior studies (Subramanian et al. 2016). From a strategic viewpoint, this finding reinforces Bendapudi and Leone (2003) recommendation that firms must encourage customer participation in service production to foster strong partnership. Allowing customers to participate in service encounters enable them to contribute their knowledge and skill, furthering their business relationship with the firm. Such participations provide firms with customer insights on what and how customers want their desires and demands met. Interestingly, emotional connection did not moderate the effect of relationship satisfaction on behavioral intention as hypothesized. This finding is at odds with findings from Magids et al. (2015) who found that customer experience strategies must target the emotions of individuals to bolster the satisfaction-behavioral intention and loyalty link. One possible reason for our finding is that customers already satisfied with their service encounter experiences have no reason to refrain from their current behavior of doing business with the firm. In fact, such customers appear to have had their initial emotional needs inherently fulfilled and satisfied with memorable and pleasant experiences during the service encounter. Hence, implementing strategies to target and tap into such customer emotions do not intensify nor enhance their decision-making process of behaving in a particular way.

As a quality management value, customer orientation help shapes behavioral intentions of customers. While the two-way interaction between relationship satisfaction and emotional connection on behavioral intentions proved insignificant, the three-way interaction involving satisfaction, emotional connection and customer orientation showed positive and significant results on behavioral intentions. The findings show that customer orientation plays an important role in individuals with high and low emotional connection. It further suggests that customer experiences through customer-oriented activities triggers and connects with the emotions of the customer, strengthening the effect of relationship satisfaction on behavioral intentions (Huang and Brown 2016). With the right social situation and atmosphere coupled with select social service programs, customers embrace this sense

of belonging and connection with the organization. Because of such personal connection and emotions toward such nonprofit entities, customers have a positive behavioral intent toward the organization's goals and objectives. Moreover, in high customer-oriented environments, individuals with high emotional connection tend to delight more in their intention to do business with the firm than individuals with low emotional connection. Since behavioral-related outcomes such as loyalty and future repeat purchase intentions increase with relationship satisfaction, firms should pursue customer orientation proactive measures such as training employees to be active listeners, communicate effectively, and have adaptable skills. These proactive measures when applied makes customers feel emotionally connected and calm throughout their service encounter, thereby experiencing a level of excitement and appreciation. Since emotionally connected customers generate value, it is important for the firm to be very convincing in their interactions and communications with the customer in every journey of the service encounter.

Organizational leaders and managers could also increase the social programs to enhance social interactions and social ties among customers. This creates a sense of belonging environment for strong lasting relationships between customer and customer as well as between the organization and customer. Therefore, nonprofit organizations such as non-denominational faith-based organizations must capitalize on implementing strategic support programs and values that connect with customer emotions to foster a cooperative, collaborative, successful and sustainable relationship, allowing for positive customer behavioral intention within the organization.

Firms will benefit from creating a conducive climate that serves as a platform to attract and increase customer participation and interaction. To gather the customer's goodwill support, firms are encouraged to recruit and hire frontline works who are committed and experienced in interacting and relationship building to meet the varying customer demands. With the implementation of feedback systems, firms can solicit feedback from customers during and after service encounters. Finally, firms should target, tap, connect, and with the emotions of customers by weaving in customer orientation into everything they do.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. First, this study is based on the data from a single organization and service context, limiting the generalizability of our

findings to other work contexts and national cultures. Thus, future research could adapt and replicate this study from either multiple organizations, or other high relational service activity settings such as accounting firms, community theaters, physician's networks, and cultural contexts. Second, our use of cross-sectional data prevents us from drawing inferences of causality on our findings. Therefore, a stronger case for causality for our model could be achieved with longitudinal or experimental research data.

Third, measures taken from the same source at the same time are at a high risk of common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003), which could inflate our results. Although common method bias did not pose any significant risk to our study, future researchers should prioritize collecting data on self-reported measures at two different time points and at multiple sources to further reduce the risk of common method bias. Fourth, our development of items to measure emotional connection may not capture all the degrees of emotional involvement that underlie how customers relate to the service organization. Hence, future research on extending the measure of emotional connection to capture the wider latitude of emotional connection in its operationalization should be addressed. Lastly, the interaction between relationship satisfaction and emotional connection on behavioral intentions was not significant. Future researchers may consider additional relational factors such as subjective norms, commitment and other theoretical perspectives to better increase and enhance customer behavioral intent in service relationships.

Conclusion

As customer demands continue to evolve service, intense organizations, such as non-denominational faith-based organizations, should meticulously create an enabling service environment that strengthens and emboldens customers' decisions to continue doing business with the firm. The research model is empirically validated with consumers from a large non-denominational faith-based organization. The findings suggest that relationship satisfaction positively affects behavioral intentions. Although we did not find a two-way interaction effect between relationship satisfaction and emotional connection on behavioral intention, we found in the three-way interaction, customer orientation to trigger situations when emotions strengthen or intensify that satisfaction – behavioral link. Developing customized oriented activities can strategically serve various service offerings that increase customer emotional connection and value,

leading to stronger behavioral intentions. Leaders and managers within the nonprofit and public sectors must understand how social policy goals, social interactions, and social values influence consumers' behavioral intent, leading to future intention to use and subsequent commitment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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