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Impact of marketing activities on relationship quality in the Malaysian banking sector

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the impact of marketing activities on relationship quality in the Malaysian banking sector. Analysis of survey results show that greater client and employees' relational orientation yields higher relationship quality and results in better relationship continuity. Results also show that committed client relationships lead to client satisfaction, loyalty, positive word of mouth and promotion. However, mutual disclosure was found to have no significant relationship with relationship quality. This may indicate that bank customers in Malaysia do not feel that having close relationships with the bank will have any positive impact on relationship quality. This particular finding may serve as a warning signal to practitioners and scholars alike that thorough research must be carried out on the use of relationship marketing prior to implementation.

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1. Introduction

Fierce competition among commercial banks has meant that even the most innovative products and services are duplicated by rivals, thus denying banks the opportunity to maintain sustainable competitive advantage (Gordon et al., 2008). The commercial banking environment in Malaysia is no different. According to Bank Negara Malaysia (Central Bank of Malaysia) there are 23 licensed commercial banks in the country (<http://www.bnm.gov.my>). Of these banks, ten are Malaysian-controlled institutions, and thirteen are foreign-controlled institutions. These banks offer almost identical (standardized) products and services to their clients. Competition among these banks is fierce to the extent that innovative products and services have very short life cycle, as they are often copied by rival banks (<http://www.mifc.com>). Attempts have been made by some of these banks to go beyond the core bank product and service by concentrating on what is called relationship marketing. However, with the proliferation of internet expansion and computer usage, Malaysian banks have been concentrating on the provision of e-banking services to

clients. Although this trend is in harmony with knowledge economy, it is believed that obsession with e-banking by Malaysian banks is done at the expense of client-oriented traditional banking, as e-banking widens the gap between service providers and clients, thus resulting in much weaker relationship marketing (Al-alak and Alnawas, 2010). As e-banking services are getting standardized already, banks have to think of ways and means of enhancing their relationships with clients through innovative relational marketing activities as opposed to transactional marketing activities.

Since Berry (1983) introduced the concept of relationship marketing, many scholars and researchers (e.g. Gronroos, 1990, 1994; Gordon et al., 2008; Palmatier et al., 2009) have theorized and empirically tested the underlying principles of relationship marketing theory. Building a profitable and sustainable long term relationship with customers (de Wulf et al., 2001), increasing customers retention, developing and maintaining trust and commitment between sellers and customers (Gaur and Xu, 2009), achieving more customers satisfaction and high customers loyalty (Gaurav, 2008), cost reduction due to the better understanding of customers needs (Ndubisi, 2004), and expanding use of loyalty marketing programs to build long-term profitable relationships with customers that lead to growth (Ferguson and Hlavinka, 2007) are central to the relationship marketing theory. The application of relationship marketing theory has even extended into financial services, due to the deregulation policy (Yavas and Yasin, 2001), the removal of restrictions between banks, building societies and insurance companies (Speed and Smith, 1992), and the vast expansion in the adoption and use of information technologies (Bergeron et al., 2008). Yet, voices have been raised against

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overindulgence in IT-based relationship marketing programs as these programs may jeopardize the essence of relationship marketing-i.e. the personal, face-to-face service encounters between providers and clients that are believed to generate client satisfaction (Eisingerich and Bell, 2006). Furthermore, the state of maturity experienced by the banking sector coupled with the inability of the majority of commercial banks to differentiate their offerings have driven banks to pursue relational marketing strategies as opposed to the traditional transactional strategies (Jham and Khan, 2008). This paradigm shift from transactional strategies to relational strategies has obliged the banks to invest in relationship marketing strategies (Claik and Balta, 2006). As far as e-banking is concerned, banks have been keen to investigate the determinants of users' adoption momentum of e-banking in order to formulate appropriate strategies aimed at meeting the needs and wants of e-banking users and achieving better levels of customer satisfaction and higher loyalty (Poon, 2008).

Therefore, the primary purpose of this paper is to examine the marketing actions (antecedents) affecting relationship quality between Malaysian commercial banks employees and their clients, and the performances (consequences) influenced by relationship quality. It is expected that the higher the bank's relationship marketing efforts such as client orientation, relational orientation, mutual disclosure, and financial service providers' attributes, the higher the relationship quality between financial service providers and clients. As the relationship quality increases, it is likely to have a significant influence on the clients' behavior demonstrated through increased relationship continuity, and word of mouth. However, it is important to note that although the majority of studies attempt to establish a relationship between "higher relationship quality" and "increased relationship continuity" there are other factors that could influence the duration of the relationship. The existence of "behavioural loyalty" or so-called "spurious loyalty" is also documented in the financial services literature and as such needs to be addressed too.

This research makes an important contribution to the literature on bank marketing since it is the only study to extend application of relationship quality to the banking context in Malaysia. The current study also contributes to the banking literature as it provides certain managerial implications. The study's results and recommendations may help management gain a better understanding of factors that contribute to the enhancement of mutually beneficial banking relationship marketing. This may in turn aid in the process of decision-making and strategy formulation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Relationship marketing

It is quite evident from the literature review covering relationship marketing that as a longer-term approach to marketing (Berry, 1983), relationship marketing is more concerned with the lifetime value of the customer than the value of a single transaction. Indeed, the orientation of relationship marketing is toward gaining a share of the customer, not a share of the market (Peppers and Rogers, 1994). It is assumed that establishing and maintaining relationships with customers will enhance customer retention (Gwinner et al., 1998), customer share development (Verhoef, 2003), and increased profit and recovery should a problem occur (Barnes, 1997; Jensen, 1997; Riley and Chernatony, 1997). In this context, relationship marketing can be viewed as an important business strategy (Verhoef, 2003; Gronroos, 1997). Berry (1983) first defined relationship marketing as business providing service to attract, maintain and enhance their relationships with the customers. He believes that the real focus of marketing is for

firms to master ways and means of not only retaining customers but also ensuring that these customers are made to feel a sense of loyalty to their brands.

As related to the above argument, it has been suggested that firms' offering can be customized through a mutual relationship of communication and learning process between firms and their customers (Eisingerich and Bell, 2006). In the financial sector, where some clients have rejected the use of information technology as an alternative approach for personal contact (Prendergast and Marr, 1994), the role of clients have become more active in the service production/delivery process (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2000). It has also been concluded that the more the client participates in the financial institution service delivery process, the higher the opportunity to use cross selling and up selling with the client effectively (Salazar et al., 2007). This depends, however on the ability of banks to customize their relationship-building strategies to create value propositions as unique as the customers they serve (Ferguson and Hlavinka, 2007). Moreover, as financial service offerings are hard to be distinguished among competitors, clients have become more price conscious (Claik and Balta, 2006). Therefore, it is argued that relationship marketing could mediate such effect (Jham and Khan, 2008). Furthermore, since most services are delivered from frontline employees, then the quality of interaction which Craig and Ramaseshan, (1994) called 'the moment of the truth' becomes very important. Relationship quality- moment of truth- refers to customer perceptions and evaluations of individual service employees' communication and behavior, such as respect, courtesy, warmth, empathy, and helpfulness (Al-alak, 2006). This involves inducing feelings and emotional states through customer- employee interactions (or service encounters in the services sector). In the financial sector, whenever clients interact personally with financial service providers-that is 'moment of truth'-, they have the opportunity to evaluate, reevaluate or confirm previously held perceptions of their relationships with the service provider (Menon and O'Connor, 2007). This implies that relationships are more likely to develop in situations where the customer comes in more frequent contact with the service provider (Bove and Johnson, 2000; Barnes, 1979; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Crosby et al., 1990), where the service is continuously delivered over an extended time period (Bennett, 1990; Berry, 1995) and where the customer perceives the relationship to be important (Ward et al., 1997).

2.2. Relationship quality

Crosby et al. (1990) studied the relationship quality in services selling and found that a strong buyer-seller relationship is contingent upon cooperative intentions, mutual disclosure and intensive follow up contact. Bergeron et al. (2003) investigated the role of client knowledge, service quality and expertise. The results of the study showed that the relationship between expertise and satisfaction was insignificant. Satisfied customers were less likely to purchase financial products in the future compared with trusting customers, while trusting customers were found to be generating less positive word of mouth in terms of recommending the bank to other people compared with satisfied customers. Eisingerich and Bell (2006) reported that clients' involvement in service delivery process means that clients would shoulder responsibility of both 'blame' and "credits" of the negative/positive service outcome and this in return could lead to a decrease in clients switching. Clients' involvement helped in developing a social relationship with financial service providers which resulted in reduced service failure. Ferguson and Hlavinka (2007) show that when banks use loyalty programs to engender trust and build confidence in the brand, the customer relationship will develop organically, and so will profits. Yazly (2009) quotes

Miguel Pa'ez, senior Vice President Marketing and Business Knowledge Banco Popular as saying 'loyalty and relationship building is the result of the delivery of an integrated value proposition that includes service, price and rewards. The emphasis on each of these elements changes with the individual banking institution and its objectives...p.39'. Finally, an educated client who is knowledgeable about financial institution offerings helped in improving service quality and increased client loyalty. Bergeron et al. (2008) found that a financial institution with a strong customer orientation had a strong effect on "clients' experience of pleasant surprise". In addition, the familiarity (i.e. knowing his/her birthday) with a client was found to have a strong impact on client pleasant. Continuous innovative practices that are not easily copied by other financial services providers had led to higher client satisfaction. Finally, surprising clients (i.e. sending an invitation to attend a particular event) tend to generate a positive word of mouth.

However, Yavas, (2006) studied the extent of congruency of frontline bank employees' perceptions of service quality to their customers. The author found a contrasting result of how clients perceived and evaluated service quality compared to frontline employees. The justifications for that were the weak assessment of clients' service quality perception and the lack of sales staff training. Van Dolen et al. (2004) demonstrated that both client encounter and relationship satisfaction are mainly influenced by employee performance. Chaio et al. (2008) concluded that a frontline employee was the main factor that influenced clients' loyalty, regardless of the relationship length with client-service provider. Sami (2009) argues that banks' obsessions with traditional marketing practices has denied these banks the opportunity to customize their strategies and offerings, and to build truly enduring client relationships that maximize profits and enhance clients' satisfaction which in turn leads to client loyalty and positive word of mouth. Furthermore, O'Loughlin and Szmigin (2007) found that, although financial service providers recognized the significant impact of internal marketing and staff development in delivering a highly satisfactory banking experience for clients, most of them did not pair their activities with effective internal marketing or employee training programs, due to the difficulty of managing multi-channel with different clients. Al-alak and Alnawas (2010) showed that relationship quality was strongly and positively influenced by relational orientation, followed by client orientation and financial service providers' attributes. The study suggested that bank managers emphasizing relational orientation, client orientation, and financial service providers attributes should be equipped with expertise, experience and professional appearance to enhance client trust and satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data source and scale

The required primary data was collected through a self-administrated questionnaire which was originally developed and employed for the purpose of the study. A pilot study was first conducted to improve questionnaire structure and content. To achieve this purpose, fifty questionnaires were sent to academicians who work in finance and marketing departments in different Malaysian universities, and another twenty were sent to financial advisors and experts who work in the financial sector. Several statements were revised based on the input from the academicians and experts, and the comments were considered in the final version. Of the original 47 statements, 38 were then selected and used for the research instrument. A convenient sample of the ten top and largest commercial banks according to their 2009 net

profit was included in the study's survey. Of these selected banks, six are Malaysian and four are foreign. The names of these banks were concealed upon management request. The chosen banks were all located in Kuala Lumpur. The banks-client's sample contained 1733 respondents. Out of the 1733 distributed questionnaire a total of 1240 or a response rate of 71.5 per cent was returned. The process of distributing the questionnaire was drop-off approach (Aaker et al., 2004). Based on the logic of this method, the researcher and his assistants hand delivered the questionnaire randomly in different day's time to the clients in the above mentioned banks after explaining to them the purpose of the study, the required procedure to fill out the questionnaire and answering any question with regard to any of the questionnaire's statements. The questionnaire was made available in English and translated into Malay language. Respondents were given the choice to fill in the questionnaire in the language they desired. Some respondents refused to fill the questionnaire due to the time factor, while respondents who showed interest to participate were offered non-monetary incentives such as pens and other stationary. Dunning and Cahalan, 1973 state that offering non-monetary incentives could result in increasing response rate. However, after removing the invalid questionnaires, 1190 questionnaires were used in our empirical research. The 50 questionnaires were considered invalid because respondents skipped many items. As cited in Hinkin (1995), an ideal sample size should have an item-to-response ratios ranging from as low as 1:4 to as high as 1:10 for each set of scales to be factor analyzed. In this research, there were 38 items to be measured; hence sample size from 152 to 380 respondents would be sufficient for factor analysis.

Questions asked respondents to rate their degree of agreement using a 7-point Likert scale. Seven point scales are neat because they have a clear middle point and between the middle and end points there are just two choices. That makes them capture variations in opinions without presenting too many choices (leading to vacillation) or too few (meaning that too much data is lost) [Hair et al., 1992]. With the exceptions of mutual disclosure, relationship continuity, and word of mouth, all constructs had multiple indexes. Some of the indicators such as X_1 through Y_2 are themselves multi-item scale, while other indicators such as Y_3 through Y_7 were single items (see Fig. 1 and Table 1). Several statistical techniques including an exploratory, confirmatory factor analysis, correlation analysis, reliability test, and linear structural relationship (LISREL) were used in this study. Substantive use of structural equation modeling has been growing in psychology and the social sciences. One reason for this is that these confirmatory methods provide researchers with a comprehensive means for assessing and modifying theoretical models. As such, they offer great potential for furthering theory development. In order to test the model and hypotheses that were previously stated, structural equation modeling was used. Data were analyzed by employing LISREL in order to identify structural characteristics of relationship management between the bank employees and customers. To check for the possible presence of non-response bias, a comparison was made between early respondents (interviewed during the weekday) and late respondents (interviewed during the weekend) using independent sample t-tests on the constructs of interest for the study. No differences were found, suggesting that non-response bias for these bank account holders was not a matter to worry about.

3.2. Development of measures

A list of variables that may influence relationship quality and may be affected by relationship quality was developed. These variables were carefully selected in the light of previous empirical studies on the subject matter, with slight adaptation by the

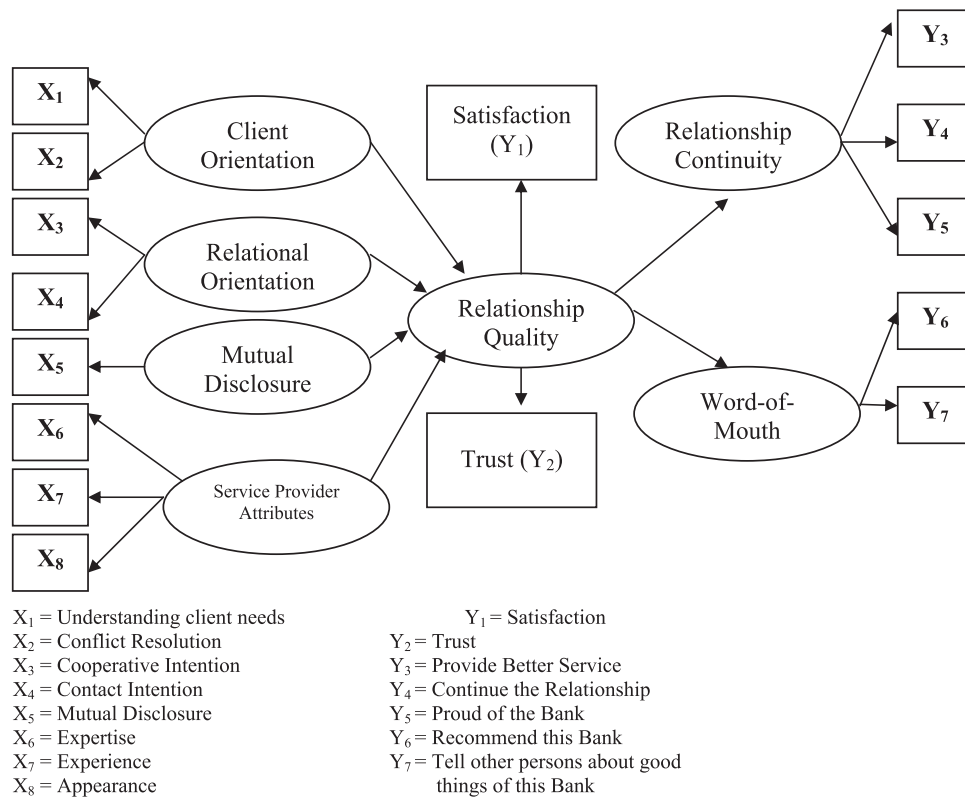


Fig. 1. Relationship quality model. X₁=Understanding client needs; X₂=Conflict Resolution; X₃=Cooperative Intention; X₄=Contact Intention; X₅=Mutual Disclosure; X₆=Expertise; X₇=Experience; X₈=Appearance., Y₁=Satisfaction; Y₂=Trust; Y₃=Provide Better Service; Y₄=Continue the Relationship; Y₅=Proud of the Bank; Y₆=Recommend this Bank; Y₇=Tell other persons about good; things of this Bank.

researcher of this study in order to express more clearly the uniqueness of the banking sector as service providers. All antecedent items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from '1=strongly disagree' to '7=strongly agree'. Numerous advantages have been illustrated in the use of scaling techniques including the meaningful comparison of two results at a specific stage in time and the subsequent measure over time to check stability (Rajeccki, 1990). One of the main values of a scale is its ability to measure a concept by using multi items rather than one, which facilitate tapping the complexity of concepts (De Vaus, 1996). A single observation may be misleading and lacking in context thus multi-item measurement scales can help overcome these distortions.

Client orientation was measured by two indicators such as understanding clients needs (X₁) and conflict resolution (X₂). These two indicators consist of multi-items of two and three respectively. Understanding client needs is measured by (1) a bank employee is knowledgeable about clients' needs and (2) a bank employee tries to understand the change of clients needs. Conflict resolution is measured by (1) a bank employee deals with your inquiry and complaint courteously; (2) a bank employee deals with your inquiry and complaint expeditiously; and (3) a bank employee resolves your inquiry or complaint even though these are not in his or her direct responsibility.

Relational orientation was measured by two indicators such as cooperative intention (X₃) and contact intention (X₄). The two indicators consist of multi-items of two and four, respectively. Cooperative intention was measured by (1) a bank employee treats you equally and (2) a bank employee helps you make a decision. Contact intention was measured by (1) a bank employee devotes time for you; (2) a bank employee is in constant contact with you;

(3) a bank employee provides information about new services; and (4) a bank employee contacts you when necessary.

As an exogenous construct influencing relationship quality, mutual disclosure (X₅) is measured by four items including (1) I ask a bank employee extensive questions; (2) a bank employee helps you dealing with a new tech-service; (3) a bank employee solves your problem in error transactions; and (4) I have expressed to a bank employee dissatisfaction with service.

Bank employees' attributes consist of three variables namely expertise (X₆), experience (X₇), and appearance (X₈). Each variable consists of four, two, and three items, respectively. Expertise consists of (1) a bank employee is professional in providing highly satisfactory service; (2) a bank employee demonstrates adequate knowledge and skills about all services provided by a bank; (3) a bank employee shows interest in self-development to provide better service; and (4) a bank employee is competent in providing service. Experience consists of (1) a bank employee seems to have a lot of experience and (2) a bank employee seems to reflect excellent career potentials. Appearance consists of (1) a bank employee's appearance is professional; (2) a bank employee is well dressed; and (3) a bank employee has a nice manner.

The focal variable in this study was the quality of the bank employee- client relationship as perceived by the client. Relationship quality from the clients' perspective is achieved through the employee's ability to reduce perceived uncertainty. High relationship quality means that the client is able to rely on the service providers' future performance since the level of past performance was satisfactory. Relationship quality was a construct consisting of two indicators, trust and satisfaction. Measurement scales for trust and satisfaction were based on the Crosby, Evans, and Cowles study (1990). Five items including (1) keeping promises, (2) sincere,

Table 1
Summary of measures.

<i>Client orientation</i>		
$\alpha=0.88$	Index of understanding client needs (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee is knowledgeable about clients' needs
		A bank employee tries to understand the change of clients' needs
$\alpha=0.79$	Index of conflict resolution (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee deals with your inquiry and complaint courteously
		A bank employee deals with your inquiry and complaint expeditiously
		A bank employee resolves your inquiry or complaint even though these are not in his or her direct responsibility
<i>Relational orientation</i>		
$\alpha=0.80$	Index of cooperative intention (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee treats you equally
		A bank employee helps you make a decision
$\alpha=0.81$	Index of contact intention (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee devotes time for you
		A bank employee is in constant contact with you (phone, fax, e-mail, letter, etc).
		A bank employee provides information about new events or activities
		I receive invitations to attend special events from a bank employee
<i>Mutual disclosure</i>		
$\alpha=0.84$	(strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	I ask a bank employee detailed questions
		A bank employee tells you about the mistakes that he or she made
		I show respect to a bank employee
		I have expressed to a bank employee dissatisfaction with service
<i>Bank employees' attributes (service providers' attributes)</i>		
$\alpha=0.80$	Index of expertise (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee is professional in his, her field of interest and specialization
		A bank employee demonstrates adequate knowledge and skills about his, her field of specialization, interest and overall services provided by a bank
		A bank employee shows interest in self- development to provide better service
$\alpha=0.84$	Index of experience (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee is competent in providing service
		A bank employee seems to have a lot of experience
$\alpha=0.84$	Index of appearance (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee seems to reflect excellent career potentials
		A bank employee's appearance is professional
		A bank employee is well dressed
		A bank employee has a nice manner
<i>Relationship quality</i>		
$\alpha=0.80$	Index of satisfaction (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	I think a service provider is favorable
		I am pleased with a bank employee
		I am satisfied with bank employees
		I am satisfied with bank's overall services
$\alpha=0.81$	Index of trust (strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	A bank employee keeps promises
		A bank employee is sincere
		A bank employee is reliable
		A bank employee is honest
		A bank employee puts clients' interests first
<i>Relationship continuity</i>		
$\alpha=0.80$	(strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	I believe a bank employee will provide better service in the future
		I will not switch to another bank
		I will always be proud of this bank
<i>Word of mouth</i>		
$\alpha=0.79$	(strongly agree 7... strongly disagree 1)	I want to recommend this bank to others
		I want to tell other persons about good things of this bank

(3) reliable, (4) honest, and (5) puts clients' interests first, were used to measure trust. Four items were used to measure satisfaction, namely (1) favorable, (2) pleased, (3) satisfied with bank employee, and (4) satisfied with bank's overall services.

In order to measure consequences of relationship quality, relationship continuity, and word-of-mouth were used. Three items on a Likert scale were used to measure relationship continuity: (1) I believe a bank employee will provide better service in the future; (2) I will not switch to another bank; and (3) I will always be proud of this bank. Two items were used to measure word of mouth namely (1) I want to recommend this

bank to others and (2) I want to tell other persons about good things of this bank.

3.3. Model and hypotheses

3.3.1. Antecedents (marketing actions)

Al-alak (2004) defined variables affecting relationship quality as service provider attributes (e.g. expertise and know-how) and relational selling behavior (e.g. contact intensity, mutual disclosure, and cooperative intention). Crosby et al. (1990) defined exogenous variables affecting relationship quality as similarity,

service domain expertise, and relational selling behavior. Kim et al., 2001 developed three relationship management activities (exogenous variables) affecting relationship quality: guest confidence, guest contact, and effective communication. Sami (2009) defined variables impacting relationship quality as providers' customized relationship-building strategies, cooperative intention and business integrity. Bahathly (2010) showed that relationship quality was influenced by service providers' attributes (e.g. integrity and competency) and promotional efforts (e.g. personal selling, public relations and advertising)

A list of variables that may influence relationship quality was developed in this study. These four exogenous constructs were client orientation, relational orientation, mutual disclosure, and service providers' attributes.

Client-oriented service providers provide service that goes beyond customer expectations (Chiao et al., 2008) and continue to put clients' needs and interests ahead of any other interest (Al-alak and Al-taie, 2002). Firms that understand the real needs of clients and pay increasing attention to client value have a competitive advantage over those which do not. This is regarded as one of the keys to success in business management (Day, 1991; Porter, 1980). It is also a business practice that is highly appreciated by clients (Sami, 2009). Client orientation appears to have a direct relationship with relationship quality.

Relational orientation refers to "customer's psychological attachment, loyalty, concern for future welfare, identification, and pride in being associated with the organization" (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999, p.73). Relational exchange characteristics of the buyer and seller were hypothesized to influence relationship quality (Crosby et al., 1990). It is evident that, customers' intentions to remain loyal to a firm become stronger, if the customers treasured highly the relationship with the firm (Walter, 2000). A relational-oriented and zero error service offered to customers was found to be critical for the service provider to achieve a competitive advantage, increase customer loyalty, enhance corporate image, and increase business performance (Choi and Chu, 2001). In the banking sector, we would expect the same. A bank providing excellent services, or when services exceed clients' expectations, especially when such services cannot possibly be matched in terms of perceived quality, could achieve a competitive advantage, enhance its image, and increase client loyalty. An analysis by the Bank Administration Institute (BAI) (2005) found that, while banks view relationships in terms of the number of products a customer has with the bank, customers view relationships in terms of confidence and trust. Investigating this issue, Al-alak and Alnawas (2010) found that clients' confidence and trust enhance client loyalty. This positive state would make the bank in question more popular, as a quality service provider, in the eyes of not only the clients but also the community at large.

Mutual disclosure is a two-way interaction- i.e. between bank employees and clients. In traditional banking, as opposed to e-banking, this kind of interaction is important in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Paulin et al., 1998). Unlike e-banking, mutual disclosure provides face-to-face contact in what is essentially a two-way relationship that is highly valued by clients. Mutual disclosure was also shown to have a positive impact on relationship quality in a traditional banking setting (Prendergast and Marr, 1994).

Whenever a client interacts with a bank by phone, e-mail, in person, or via technology, a service encounter occurs. During these encounters or moments of truth, clients receive a snapshot of the bank quality and each encounter contributes to the clients' overall satisfaction. Among several service providers' attributes physical appearance and the way the service is delivered by bank employees (service process) are important determinants of client satisfaction. Several banks have policies regarding the physical

appearance of their employees, especially managers. Banks are also keen on the training of their employees on a continuous basis in order to ensure that they can deliver the service in a professional manner. The service providers' attributes and their performance are important to build good relationship quality in the service encounter.

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis and sub-hypotheses.

H1. There is a positive relationship between antecedents (clients- orientation, relational orientation, mutual disclosure, and service providers' attributes) and relationship quality.

H1-1. There is a positive relationship between client orientation and relationship quality.

H1-2. There is a positive relationship between relational orientation and relationship quality.

H1-3. There is a positive relationship between mutual disclosure and relationship quality.

H1-4. There is a positive relationship between the service providers' attributes and relationship quality.

3.3.2. Consequences (performances)

Empirical findings of Al-alak and Al-taie (2002) study for quality services provided by hotels in Jordan to foreign guests showed that guest satisfaction had a positive relationship with repurchase intention (i.e. dealing with the hotel on a regular basis) and word of mouth. Satisfied customers show stronger repeat purchase intention and spread word-of-mouth referral. In a banking setting, Al-alak and Alnawas (2010) found that enhanced client trust and satisfaction eventually had led to improved performance related to relationship continuity and word of mouth. The findings of another study by Al-alak (2010) in the healthcare sector showed that relationship quality was positively associated with relationship continuity and word of mouth, and that word of mouth was related to satisfaction, i.e. satisfied customers were better equipped to promote the business. Relationship quality is proposed to have a positive relationship with the following two consequences:

3.3.2.1. Word of mouth. Bendapudi and Berry (1997) suggested that relationship advocacy resulted from dedication-based relationship: the relationship that customers wanted it to continue rather than feeling like he or she has no other choice. Al-alak (2004) showed that satisfied customers in his study appeared to engage in extensive word-of-mouth advertising, acting as true promotion agents for the service provider. Previous literatures that discussed the involvement of emotional and task focused shopping experience provide findings that propose a direct relationship between these environments and patronage behavior. Other findings indicate "that one's emotional shopping experience and task focused shopping successes are involved in complex views of oneself and word mouth of communication" (Paridon, 2008, P.84). In the banking sector, we expect word of mouth to be a powerful form of communication.

3.3.2.2. Relationship continuity. The value of a relationship in the banking sector is assumed to be rooted in the continuity of the relationship between the bank and client. Relationship continuity not only indicates client satisfaction but also shows that clients are willing to prolong relationships with their banks. This will enable banks to maximize the client life time value that constitutes a cornerstone of relationship marketing (Phillips et al., 2004; Reinartz and Kumar, 2003; Bolton, 1998; Ward and Dagger,

2007). Relationship continuity is the parties' willingness to prolong the cooperation or agreement to cooperate for a specific period of time. One would expect satisfied clients to remain dealing with the bank without having to think of switching to other competing financial service providers.

Therefore, we offer the following hypotheses and sub-hypotheses:

H2. There is a positive relationship between relationship quality and consequences (relationship continuity and word of mouth).

H2.1. There is a positive relationship between relationship quality and relationship continuity.

H2.2. There is a positive relationship between relationship quality and word of mouth.

H2.3. There is a positive relationship between relationship continuity and word of mouth.

4. Results

The data obtained from the survey were analyzed for frequency analysis. Among respondents, male was 74 per cent and female was 26 per cent. 30 per cent of respondents were between the ages of 19 and 34. Respondents at the age of 35 and above constituted 70 per cent of total respondents. Respondents' income below RM 2500 (per month) {1\$=3.48 RM} was 19 per cent; 52 per cent of respondents' income was between RM 2500 and RM 5000, and the rest of respondents' income (29 per cent) was above RM 5000. Respondents who have had a relationship with their banks for less than 3 years were 710 respondents (57 per cent), 127 respondents (10.5 per cent) have had a relationship for 3 to 5 years, and 403 respondents (32.5 per cent) have had a relationship for more than 5 years.

4.1. Confirmative factor analysis and correlation analysis

Initially, the set of items corresponding to each theoretical construct was subjected to examination of matrix correlation and exploratory factor analysis (Churchill, 1979). The items were reduced according to Eigen Value of loading factor (see Table 2).

Table 2
Item purification.

Constructs		Initial items	Final items
Antecedents	Client orientation	7	6
	Relational orientation	8	7
	Mutual disclosure	5	6
	Service providers' attributes	13	11
Relationship quality	Satisfaction	7	6
	Trust	6	5
Consequences	Relationship continuity	2	4
	Word of mouth	2	2

Table 3
Correlation matrix.

	Mean	SD	SO	RO	MD	SA	RQ	RC	WM
Client orientation	6.44	1.06	1						
Relational orientation	6.23	1.19	0.56	1					
Mutual disclosure	5.20	1.28	0.23	0.30	1				
Service providers' attributes	6.33	1.22	0.70	0.55	0.30	1			
Relationship quality	6.76	1.23	0.72	0.77	0.29	0.46	1		
Relationship continuity	4.61	1.16	0.31	0.42	0.22	0.25	0.62	1	
Word of mouth	5.36	1.08	0.38	0.48	0.12	0.21	0.34	0.23	1

After this initial analysis, the entire set of items was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to verify unidimensionality. Specifically, a measurement model was estimated in which every item was restricted to load on its a priori specified factor, and the factors themselves were allowed to correlate (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for all seven constructs and their indicators. An adequate degree of model fit was obtained ($\chi^2=301.48$, $P=0.09$, $GFI=0.96$, $AGFI=0.86$, $RMSR=0.041$). Overall the global measurement model provided satisfactory evidence of unidimensionality for the measure.

Table 3 represents the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations for all constructs. The correlation among each construct was significant at the 0.01 level.

4.2. Reliability test

The final step in the measurement validation involved computing coefficient alpha for each set of measures to test reliability. Cronbach's alpha is most often used to test the reliability of a multi-item scale. The cut-off point is generally 0.6 (Hair et al., 1992). Since all the α values were in between 0.79 and 0.88 and all above 0.78 the construct in our model resulted in being very reliable (see Table 1). In sum, the evidence suggested that our scale had adequate measurement properties.

4.3. Overall model fit

The relationships among the variables were assessed simultaneously via covariance analysis. Maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was used to estimate model parameters. The ML estimation method is suited to theory testing and development. For model fit assessment, several diagnostics were used to judge the simultaneous fit of the measurement and structural models to the data collected for the study. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI) for the overall model was 0.96 and adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) was 0.86. The model showed significant chi square value ($\chi^2=301.408$, Value=0.09). Other diagnostics such as root mean square residual (RMSR) was 0.041. This model had the normed fit index (NFI) value of 0.99 (See Table 4). This means that 96% of the observed-measure covariance is explained by the composition model. The structural model fit is within an acceptable level.

With the exception of the path from mutual disclosure to relationship quality, all hypothesized paths were supported at the 0.05 level of significance. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, mutual disclosure was not found to be significantly related to relationship quality ($\gamma_{13}=-0.06$, $t=-1.00$). Thus, the results indicate that H1-3 was not supported. This may be attributed to respondent' unwillingness to get deeply involved in interpersonal relationships with service providers. It seems that bank account holders in Malaysia do not feel that having close relationships with the bank will have any positive impact on relationship quality. This attitude is well reflected in Malaysian culture. Client orientation, relational orientation, and service providers' attributes were all positively

Table 4
Structural model results.

Model parameter	Symbol Unstandardized Estimates			Hypothesis testing	
	γ & β	S.E	T-value		
Exogenous constructs					
Client orientation → relationship quality	(γ_{11})	0.34	0.15	4.55**	H1-1:supported
Relational orientation → relationship quality	(γ_{12})	1.58	0.26	5.84**	H1-2:supported
Mutual disclosure → relationship quality	(γ_{13})	−0.06	0.06	−1.00	H1-3:not supported
service providers' attributes → relationship quality	(γ_{14})	0.27	0.14	1.68*	H1-4:supported
Endogenous constructs					
relationship quality → relationship continuity	(β_{31})	0.13	0.01	3.95**	H2-1:supported
relationship quality → word of mouth	(β_{41})	0.11	0.02	3.71**	H2-2:supported
relationship quality → word of mouth	(β_{34})	0.87	0.13	7.56**	H3:supported
χ^2		301.408			
<i>p</i>		0.09			
Goodness-of-fit index		0.96			
Root mean square residual		0.041			

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

related to relationship quality ($\gamma_{11}=0.34$, $t=4.55$, $\gamma_{12}=1.58$, $t=5.84$, $\gamma_{14}=0.27$ $t=1.68$) at the 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the results supported H1-1, H1-2, and H1-4 and client orientation, relational orientation, and service providers' attributes had a positive influence on relationship quality.

Relationship quality was positively related to relationship continuity ($\beta_{31}=0.13$, $t=3.95$), and word of mouth ($\beta_{41}=0.11$, $t=3.71$) at the 0.01 level of significance. Thus, these results supported H2-1 and H2-2. Relationship continuity was found to be significantly related to word of mouth ($\beta_{34}=0.87$ $t=7.56$) at the 0.01 level. Thus the results supported H3.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study adds to the growing literature on relationship marketing by examining the impact of marketing activities on relationship quality in the Malaysian banking sector. The findings revealed that greater client and employees' relational orientation not only yield higher relationship quality but also result in better relationship continuity. In addition, committed client relationships were found to result in client satisfaction, loyalty, positive word of mouth, and promotion. However, mutual disclosure was found to have no significant relationship with relationship quality. This may indicate that bank customers in Malaysia do not feel that having close relationships with the bank will have any positive impact on relationship quality. This particular finding may serve as a warning signal to practitioners and scholars alike that thorough research must be carried out on the use of relationship marketing prior to implementation. Failure to do so may result in a state where money and resources are wasted developing a relationship with customers when they do not perceive or regard such a relationship with certain service providers. It should be clearly stated that forging and developing closer lengthy relationships with customers is very costly on the part of the banks and the sheer volume of customers might make this strategy prohibitive. Therefore a more realistic strategy may be for banks to be more selective in terms of which customers they forge and maintain closer relationships with.

The findings of the current study show how each of the proposed marketing actions provides an opportunity to bank managers who should develop and implement relationship marketing strategy with the general goal of increasing marketing efficiency and effectiveness. It seems that relationships are more likely to develop where the client perceives the relationship to be important.

This perception is often based on past client experiences with the service provider, and the rewards gained by the client from such relationships. It is therefore imperative that bank management clearly understands what relationship marketing is and the ramifications of its application in varied situations and among different segments and customers. For example, in order to enhance the employee's relational orientation, bank managers (e.g. assistants, supervisors and tellers) must maintain well-planned and organized interactions with clients. This is so because relationship orientation approach implies that relationships are more likely to develop and endure in situations where the client comes in more frequent contact with the service provider, and /or when he/she believes that such kind of relationship is mutually beneficial.

In order to improve client orientation, the bank should translate the detailed information about their clients into actionable practices. One-to-one marketing seems to be reasonable in helping banks to generate the required information about their clients' behavior. This information then could be aligned with the bank strategy to deliver high quality service, resulting in high client satisfaction.

Finally, relationship quality in the bank setting should be considered by those in charge of the bank (e.g. general managers, assistants, tellers) as the ability to meet the stated and implied requirements of the clients and employees alike rather than elegance. Ideal relationship quality in our case may enable the bank to develop ties of trust and long term commitment with their clients. Such commitment may increase the length of client-service relationship, allowing the bank to increase its credibility and enhance its brand name and position itself as a market leader in delivering zero error financial services. Indeed, endured relationships may lead to the maximization of customer life time value, which is the cornerstone of relationship marketing. Research has shown that strong relationships contribute to the perceptions of quality, and increase customer satisfaction and loyalty to the service firm (Goodwin and Gremler, 1996). However, banks will need to be more selective in terms of which customers they forge and maintain closer relationships with. For example, they might have to target high income or high net worth customers. This suggests that they have the means to segregate the customer base.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

The current research was conducted among bank account holders in Malaysia and whether the findings from this work would be

consistent with other countries' bank account holders would need to be verified through further research. Thus, it will be necessary to test the study's predictions in cross-cultures studies. Furthermore, since the sample size is limited, the results can be taken only as indicative results and the findings need to be compared and confirmed with other research work with much bigger and more diversified sample size to obtain better accuracy. The employment of a non-probability convenient sample may also limit the generalizability of our findings: while the sampling technique helped to gather necessary data from respondents, the findings from this research are limited in that the data are taken from narrow sampling frames of primary bank account holders in Malaysia. Further research within a much broader sampling frame should further investigate differences related to socio-economic, demographic and cultural factors. Besides, our structural equation tests of sequences among the antecedents and consequences might not be final, and other causal sequences not tested in this study might in fact be plausible and worth investigating in future research.

Another limitation is that we only measured a limited number of variables in the current research. It is conceivable that there may be additional factors that impact relationship quality in the Malaysian banking sector. New constructs such as "behavioural loyalty" or so-called "spurious loyalty" which have been validated in previous studies could be considered in future research. While there is some indication that the study's independent variables have an impact on the strength of relationship perceived by the customer there is insufficient support for claiming that a causal relationship exists. In the case of the length of the relationship, there is certainly evidence of the time order of variables, but there is insufficient evidence concerning concomitant variation and elimination of other possible factors. It will also be interesting to investigate whether psychographic and / or personality traits affect relationship strength and can be used to identify consumers who have a greater propensity to form strong and durable relationships. Furthermore, although there is an assumption that improved performance is related to relationship continuity and word of mouth, there is evidence to show that lengthy relationships are not always profitable, implying that banks will need to be more selective in terms of which customers they forge closer relationships with. Therefore, further research is needed to qualify this particular issue. Also, it is important to note that face-to-face self-administered questionnaires do not capture information from survey avoiders (bank account holders who refuse to participate in the survey) [Keillor and Sutton, 1993] or from customers who do not visit banks (Sudman, 1980). Research shows that these individuals differ from customers who frequently visit the banks and who agree to participate in surveys (Keillor and Sutton, 1993). Therefore, results cannot be generalized to such customers. Future research querying customers should consider multiple data collection methods.

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