

**SPECIAL PAPER****A Conceptual Analysis of Personality Traits and Customer-Oriented Behaviour in the Health Tourism Hospitals****Ong Choon Hee, DBA**

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**Correspondence:** Ong Choon Hee, School of Business and Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia. Email: ongchoonhee@gmail.com**Abstract**

**Introduction:** Customer-oriented behaviour refers to particular behaviours exhibited by individuals during service encounters and such behaviours will lead to satisfying customers. Since the introduction of customer-oriented behaviour, it has received much attention in the area of enhancing service performance. However, previous literature provides limited discussion on the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour especially in the health tourism industry. Given the paucity of research on this subject, this study attempts to explain customer-oriented behaviour by using personality traits in the health tourism hospitals.

**Aim:** The aim of this paper is to provide a conceptual analysis of personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism hospitals. This paper applies trait theory to examine the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour.

**Results:** Our conceptual analysis suggests that individuals who possess high level of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness will demonstrate high level of customer-oriented behaviour whereas individuals who possess high level of neuroticism will demonstrate no or low level of customer-oriented behaviour.

**Research Implications:** This paper attempts to examine customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism hospitals by applying trait theory. It adds to the literature of customer-oriented behaviour and may guide future empirical research in this industry. In addition, measuring and identifying the existing state of customer-oriented behaviour can essentially aid managers in designing training programs to improve the level of service behaviour among various levels of personnel in the health tourism hospitals.

**Keywords:** customer-oriented behaviour, personality traits, health tourism hospitals

**Introduction**

Since the introduction of customer-oriented behaviour, it has received much attention in the area of enhancing service performance (Chen, Chou & Hung, 2008) and exerting a positive influence on business performance (Yoon, Choi & Park, 2007). According to Farrell, Souchon and Furden (2001), Customer-oriented behaviour refers to particular behaviours exhibited by individuals during service encounters and such behaviours will

lead to satisfying customers. It was discovered that previous studies examined customer-oriented behaviour in various industries such as retailing (Samad, 2011), financial institution (Chen & Chen, 2010; Rafaeli, Ziklik & Doucet, 2008), commercial industries (Stock & Hoyer, 2005), insurance agency (Mohd Noor & Mohammad, 2005), logistic organization (Periatt, Chakrabarty & Lemay, 2007), supermarkets (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2001) and hotels and restaurants (Liu & Chen, 2006). Some antecedents of customer-oriented behaviour

include organizational commitment and intrinsic motivation (Mohd Noor & Mohammad, 2005), distributive justice (Kim, Moon, Ham & Tikoo, 2004), procedural justice (Altaf, Afzal, Hamid & Jamil, 2011), psychological empowerment (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2001) and personality traits (Periatt, Chakrabarty & Lemay, 2007). However, previous literature provides limited discussion on the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour especially in the health tourism industry. There is also lack of theoretical guidance in this specific area of research. Given the paucity of research on this subject, this study attempts to explain customer-oriented behaviour by using personality traits.

### Literature Review

#### *Customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism hospitals*

Health tourism is about people with health concern travelling abroad for medical treatment. In the health tourism hospitals, medical facilities and well-trained doctors are generally the important factors which could attract the health tourists. However, the increasing expectation of health tourists on the healthcare services has caused the healthcare providers to operate in a highly competitive environment to sustain their business and reputation. The rising consumer affluence and advanced communication network influenced the well-informed patients to view the healthcare services from different angles and perspectives. Nowadays, patients are focusing on the standard of services delivered by the healthcare providers. The patient's evaluation is often gained from service behaviour of the caregivers rather than the technical dimensions of the treatment. More specifically, their expectation is no longer limited to accurate diagnosis and treatment but embracing all types of services during their stay in the hospitals (Angelopoulou, Kangis & Babis, 1998).

Scholars have defined customer-oriented behaviour as employee's predisposition or tendency to meet customer needs in a workplace context (Donavan, Brown & Mowen, 2004). It is also view as understanding customer needs, trying to assist to attain customer's goals and influencing customers by providing information (Stock & Hoyer, 2005). Most of the researchers have conceptualized this construct in terms of behavioural approach.

According to Farrell, Souchon and Furden (2001), customer-oriented behaviour relates to particular behaviours exhibited by employees during service encounters and such behaviours will lead to customer satisfaction. Previous study by Hartline, Maxham and McKee (2000) suggested that most managers in service industries should give priority to frontline employee's customer-oriented behaviour. This is because frontline employees usually interact with customers and they are considered as the windows to the customers.

In the health tourism hospitals, the standard or expectation of serving customers maybe higher due to there are more interacting elements and longer interaction time between patients and the caregivers (Darby & Daniel, 1999). In order to fulfil patient's needs in terms of intimate and complex service means, customer-oriented behaviour has to be accommodated into the process of co-producing a service. This is because it focuses specifically on understanding patient's needs and interests by delivering proper solutions (Daniel & Darby, 1997). As patient's evaluation towards a hospital is referring to the patient's sentimental reaction of their experience, customer-oriented behaviour is relevant in this context to attain better relationship and rapport between the caregivers and the patients (Pascoe, 1983). Additionally, it is also classified as one of the service behaviours dedicated to achieving patient's expectation. Given the nature of customer-oriented behaviour, it is argued that customer-oriented behaviour makes the healthcare organizations more efficient in gaining competitive advantage and patient's preference in the health tourism industry.

As customer-oriented behaviour play an important role in determining performance of the healthcare organizations, it is imperative to pay much attention to the factors affecting an individual's willingness to engage in customer-oriented behaviour. When attempting to understand customer-oriented behaviour, scholars have indicated that personality traits could affect customer-oriented behaviour (Lanjananda & Patterson, 2009; Michinda & Patterson, 2011). In addition, drawing upon the trait theory by Allport (1961) that a person's behaviour will be generated consistent with his or her personality traits, it is

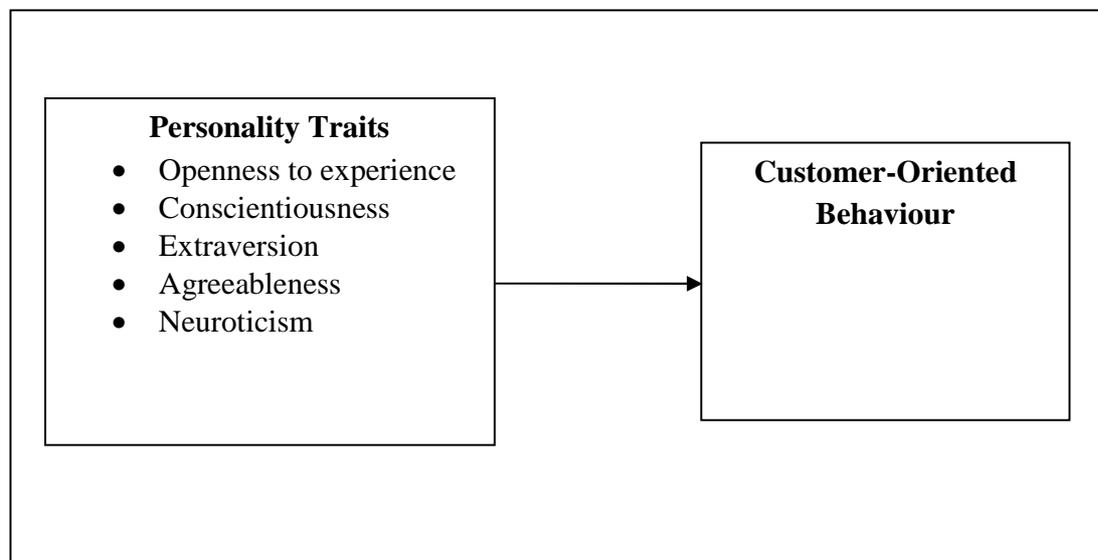
suggested that personality traits are potential predictors of customer-oriented behaviour.

### ***Theoretical Framework and Research Proposition***

One of the main approaches to study human personality traits and to predict their behaviours will be Allport's Trait Theory. The Trait Theory identifies and explains the underlying traits that describe much of an individual's behaviour. Allport (1961) stated that traits guide a person's behaviour and also in a way that make the behaviour consistent. Traits tend to cut across situations and therefore account for the more

permanent, enduring, and general features of our behaviour. Trait theory allows an in-depth understanding of a person's personality and his personality traits could potentially affect his behaviour in an organization. Traits can be defined as thought, emotion and habitual patterns of behaviour (Kassin, 2003). Traits are relatively stable over time; differ across people and influence their behaviour. Trait Theory asserted the needs to study the unique personality of individuals as a predictor to their behaviours. Additionally, it also indicates that one could understand human nature by identifying individual trait differences (McCrae & John, 1992).

**Figure 1: Proposed Theoretical Framework**



From the Trait Theory perspective, Hogan (1991) defined personality as a predisposition to behave systematically. A trait is some unique dimensions of behaviour and reflects stylistic consistencies in a person's behaviour (Hogan, 1991). Trait theory can provide constructive information about a person's behaviour in the organization. It implies that how personality traits can influence a person for a task specific behaviour. For instance, shy and introverted personnel will find it difficult to engage

in customer-oriented behaviour. Conversely, friendly and extroverted personnel will have more confidence to exhibit customer-oriented behaviour. Apparently, trait theory indicates that a person's behaviour will be generated consistent with his or her personality traits.

According to Allport (1961), basic traits respond to numerous stimuli as well as producing fairly broad consistencies in behaviour. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) which frequently labelled by openness to

experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism have been discovered as a trait descriptive adjective (Saucier, 1997) and implicitly adopts the basic tenets of trait theory (McCrae & John, 1992). The FFM is an established tool in measuring personality traits and summarized much of what psychologists mean by the term personality. A person's behaviour will be influenced by FFM personality traits in various situations and lead to consistency in his or her behaviour (Walter, 1973). Feist and Feist (2002) stated that trait theory provides a clear description of personality that can be used to depict and explain human behaviours. Scholars such as Liao and Chuang (2004), Schneider and Smith (2004) have indicated that personality traits affect the behaviour of service personnel in an organization. In short, Trait Theory supported the present study in postulating the constructs of personality traits as predictors to customer-oriented behaviour. Hence, our proposed theoretical framework is established and shown in Figure 1.

#### ***Personality Traits and Customer-Oriented Behaviour***

The element of openness to experience is referring to intellectually curious and imaginative personnel (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Individuals who are high on openness to experience have multiplicity of interests, flexibility of thought and receptivity of new ideas. They are prone to involve in their work actively as their work can be treated as an arena to entertain their curiosity, new perspectives and genuine interests (Nikos, 2004). They think outside the box and are more incline to think of alternative ways to solve a problem especially during a stressful encounter (Mount, Barrick & Stewart, 1998). Openness to experience is likely to generate customer-oriented behaviour. On this basis, we propose that:

***Proposition 1:*** Individuals who possess high level of openness to experience will demonstrate high level of customer-oriented behaviour.

Conscientiousness is defined as individuals who tend to be dependable, responsible and persistent. People who possess high levels of conscientiousness are careful, thorough, organized and exhibit goal-directed behaviour. Barrick and Mount (1991) viewed this trait as associated with

educational performance and motivation whereas McCrae and John (1992) interpreted conscientiousness as individuals who are able to contain their impulsive behaviours. Individuals scoring high in conscientiousness were identified as motivated, careful and purposeful in their actions (Costa & McCrae, 1992). They are good at depersonalizing stressful encounters and committed to work performance. Therefore, conscientiousness is likely to generate customer-oriented behaviour and this supports our second proposition:

***Proposition 2:*** Individuals who possess high level of conscientiousness will demonstrate high level of customer-oriented behaviour.

Extraversion denotes an individual's tendency to be talkative, gregarious, sociable, assertive and active (Salgado, 1997). Extroverted people are friendly, outspoken, confident and overbearing (Lin, Chiu & Hsieh, 2001; Ehrhart, 2006). These characteristics are specifically related to customer-oriented behaviour. Barrick and Mount's (1993) in their study emphasized that there is a positive relationship between extraversion and task involving high-social interaction. Extroverted personnel tend to enjoy their interaction with people and put them at ease with their easy conversational style. They are personable and outgoing. On this basis, it is proposed that:

***Proposition 3:*** Individuals who possess high level of extraversion will demonstrate high level of customer-oriented behaviour.

Agreeableness can be described as likeability and compliance. Seibert and Kraimer (2001) defined agreeableness as a continuum ranging from helpful, trusting, good-natured, soft-hearted, warm and cooperative. Agreeable individuals have the tendency to do more than is required and generally appreciated for their actions (Ehrhart, 2006; Lin et al., 2001). Previous study by Barrick, Stewart and Piotrowski (2002) suggested that agreeable employees tend to be successful in occupation where team work and customer service are the key performance indicators. This is because agreeable individuals are usually friendly, empathic and altruistic in performing their job and polite in handling their peers (Salgado, 1997). Based on the above mentioned, we propose that:

**Proposition 4:** Individuals who possess high level of agreeableness will demonstrate high level of customer-oriented behaviour.

Neuroticism is viewed as a negative trait. It is related with tension, irritability and anxiety. People who possess this trait are being seen as negative and lack of positive psychological adjustment and emotional stability. They are more prone to be moody and discontented (John & Srivastava, 1999). Neurotic people have the propensity to experience distress that could affect their cognitive and behaviour actions (McCrae & John, 1992). Individuals who score high on neuroticism, pay more attention to negative events and develop a variety of psychiatric disorders. According to Ehrhant (2006), neurotic personnel are tense, indecisive and insecure. Given the nature of work in the hospital setting, inconsistency of emotions will definitely not serve the patients well. Those possess high neuroticism are less likely to exhibit customer-oriented behaviour. Therefore, it is proposed that:

**Proposition 5:** Individuals who possess high level of neuroticism will demonstrate no or low level of customer-oriented behaviour.

## Research Implications

### *Theoretical Implications*

This study intends to show a better understanding and the importance of customer-oriented behaviour in fulfilling patients' needs in the health tourism hospitals. Past literatures have generally agreed that customer-oriented behaviour has significant impact on hospital performance as attested by several studies such as Yoon, Choi and Park (2007); Chien, Chou and Hung (2008); Lanjananda

and Patterson (2009); Altaf, Afzal, Hamid and Jamil (2011) and Mechinda and Patterson (2011). However, many of these studies were only focused on general healthcare context instead of health tourism hospitals.

Therefore, this paper is one of the few studies attempts to examine customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism context by applying Trait Theory to support the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour. In addition, this study also adds to the literature of customer-oriented behaviour especially in the area

of health tourism which may guide future empirical research in this context.

### *Practical Implications*

In terms of practical contribution, the findings of this study are expected to provide relevant information about which dimensions of personality traits are significant predictors for customer-oriented behaviour. Recruitment managers can use this information as a basis to select the right candidate for customer-oriented personnel. In addition, measuring and identifying the existing state of customer-oriented behaviour can essentially aid managers in designing training programs to improve the level of service behaviour among various levels of personnel in the health tourism hospitals.

### **Future Research**

Our proposed theoretical framework provides a predictive approach to examine customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism hospitals. Although the objective of this paper is to introduce new perspective in understanding customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism context, future research may include other potential individual factors such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction to strengthen the proposed theoretical framework.

Nevertheless, Tett and Burnett (2003) suggested that organizational culture moderates the relationship between personality traits and work behaviour. Hence, organizational culture can be included as a potential moderator in the link between personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour in order to make the proposed theoretical framework more practicable and insightful.

### **Conclusion**

To date, the state of customer-oriented behaviour and its antecedents in the health tourism hospitals has received little attention.

By examining the influence of personality traits on customer-oriented behaviour, this study not only provides propositions that may guide future research but also offers healthcare managers suggestions in generating and enhancing customer-oriented behaviour in the health tourism hospitals.

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