



The Effect of Ethical Sales Behaviour on Customer Relationship Quality in Hotels

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ABSTRACT

Hotels face a significant challenge to build and maintain strong customer relationships. Therefore, it is essential to assess customer relationship quality (CRQ) and the factors that may influence it, i.e., hotel salespersons' ethical sales behaviour (ESB), which is a moral factor influencing customers' attitudes and behaviours. Gaining knowledge about the impact of ESB can help hotel managers to deal effectively with different behaviours of customers towards the organisation and make a difference in increasing CRQ. Although ESB and CRQ are critical for organisations and individuals, they have received minimal study, especially in the hospitality field. This paper investigates the extent to which hotel salespersons behave ethically and assesses the level of the CRQ. Besides, it explores the effect of ESB on CRQ dimensions and the influence of CRQ on selected relational outcomes. Moreover, the study assesses the impact of customers' moral identity (MI) as a moderating variable on the relationship between ESB and CRQ. Data were collected using questionnaires. A simple random sample of 387 tourism managers working in the travel agencies category (A) in Greater Cairo was chosen. Only 285 valid questionnaire forms were received, representing a response rate of 71.6 per cent. The main results showed that ESB had significant positive effects on all dimensions of CRQ; the customer CRQ positively influenced the selected relational outcomes. Furthermore, it was found that customer MI moderates the positive relationship between ESB and the three dimensions of CRQ. Thus, it was recommended that hotel management maintain the level of CRQ by continuing with the good practice of salespersons' ESB. In addition, hotel management should maintain employees' ESB by recruiting, hiring, retaining, training, and promoting ethical salespersons.

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1. Introduction

This research involves four variables: ESB, MI, CRQ, and relational outcomes. CRQ means the

strength of the relationship between customers and the organisation as decided by customers (He et al., 2018). It consists of three positive aspects, i.e., trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Taylor et al.,

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2018). Previous literature emphasised the importance of building permanent relationships with customers and identified many benefits for organisations. CRQ is an effective predictor of customer behaviours. It is the best predictor of customer loyalty (Japutra et al., 2018). It also plays a vital role in customers' decision-making and post-purchase processes (He et al., 2018).

Also, improving CRQ will motivate customers to provide referrals, pay a price premium, purchase more, and enhance their tolerance to price increases (Fernandes and Pinto, 2019). Furthermore, CRQ improves organisation performance outcomes, such as sales growth and profits (Casidya and Nyadzayob, 2019). Moreover, CRQ leads to several customer positive behaviours, such as sharing purchases, relationship continuity, and WOM (Sarawa and Mas'ud, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to improve CRQ in hotels and identify the factors that affect it, such as ESB, which can play a critical role in initiating and maintaining customer rapport with the organisation (Chandrarathne and Herath, 2020).

ESB means the kind of behaviour consistent with social norms, e.g., fairness, honesty, and full disclosure (Wedatama et al., 2019). Prior research in sales management has emphasised that ESB is critical in the current business environment (Charoensukmongkol and Suthatorn, 2020). However, salespersons' ESB has been constantly criticised (Laeheem, 2020).

Salespersons, as front-line employees, represent organisations in the eyes of their customers (Pezhman et al., 2013). They are essential elements of companies and play a crucial role in helping firms recognise and meet customer demands as they have direct contact with customers (Kaynak et al., 2016). Salespeople can significantly assist companies in achieving superior business performance if they can understand and make decisions that satisfy customer requirements (Diamantidis and Chatzoglou, 2019). However, they come across numerous ethical predicaments compared with other employees in the organisation due to several factors found in the unusual complex working environment in which they currently function (Tosun, 2020).

Firstly, if salespeople succeed, managers are often willing to ignore their misconduct, especially when the managers are faced with aggressive sales goals. Secondly, salespeople engage in negotiations that

may lead to dishonesty or overstatement (Yi et al., 2012). Thirdly, they often work for long periods in relatively unsupervised contexts. This leads them to disregard the organisation's ethical rules (Ou et al., 2015; Hui-Hsien et al., 2020).

Fourthly, salespersons' performance is frequently measured by management based on short-run objectives (Tolba et al., 2015). Lastly, salespersons can face pressure more than employees in many other professions, so they are obliged to conduct unethical behaviour (e.g., pushing for sales) to keep their jobs (Madhani, 2015). They are mainly in charge of generating the organisation's revenues and achieving monthly sales targets (Lacoste, 2018). Besides, there are other forms of salesperson stress, e.g., role uncertainty, role conflicts, excessive workload, and personal and ethical demands (Kraft et al., 2019).

All previously mentioned circumstances create opportunities for salespersons to breach the organisation's policies, values, and norms (White and Rezanian, 2019). Thus, examining hotel salespeople's ethical behaviour appears to be necessary. However, no study in the hotel industry has measured the effect of ethical salespersons' behaviours on CRQ.

It is a particular type of identity revolving around a set of moral traits regarding MI. It involves one's personal sense of morality. MI is a predictor of several ethical consequences (Boegershausen et al., 2015). For example, it was found to be positively related to moral judgment (Leavitt et al., 2016), prosocial behaviour (Reed et al., 2016), concern for others, and altruistic behaviour (Wu and Yang, 2018; Adekoya et al., 2020). In contrast, MI is negatively associated with antisocial behaviour, e.g., aggression (e.g., Hardy et al., 2015) and retaliatory actions due to unfair treatment (Bavik and Bavik, 2015; Sharma et al., 2020). Moreover, persons with a strong MI are more likely to refrain from moral disengagement (Wang and Hackett, 2020).

Despite the importance of employees' MI for organisations, few studies investigate this issue in the literature (e.g., Jennings et al., 2015). Thus, to better understand customers' MI, more research needs to be conducted in the organisational context, e.g., hotels (Huhtala et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2020). Accordingly, the objectives of the study involve: (1) assessing the degree to which sales employees in five-star hotels behave ethically with customers;

(2) examining to what extent CRQ is achieved in five-star hotels; (3) investigating to what extent customers have MIs; (4) examining how ESB of hotel salespersons impacts the three dimensions of CRQ (i.e. trust; satisfaction; commitment); (5) investigating how CRQ influences three customers' behaviours (i.e. WOM, the share of purchases, and relationship continuity); and (6) examining the role of customer MI as a moderating factor between ESB and CRQ.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ethical sales behaviour

Ethical personnel perform by moral principles (Wiley, 1995), obey the organisation's rules, and commit to high moral standards when dealing with customers (Laeheem, 2018). The ethical behaviour of salespeople positively affects customer loyalty and customer perceived confidence (Emaratkar et al., 2018). Additionally, ESB allows salespersons to promote enduring relationships with customers derived from customer satisfaction and trust (Chandrarathne and Herath, 2020; Sarawa and Mas'ud, 2020). ESB refers to the salespersons' actions that enhance customers' welfare (Marmat et al., 2020).

Ethical salespeople participate in behaviours such as communicating honestly with customers, selling only services and products they believe are valid for the customer, promising only what can be accomplished and dealing confidentially with customer information (Wedatama et al., 2019; Hui-Hsien et al., 2020).

Therefore, the ethical behaviour of hotel salespeople positively customer perceived confidence (Emaratkar et al., 2018). ESB also allows salespersons to promote enduring relationships with customers from customer satisfaction and trust (Chandrarathne and Herath, 2020; Sarawa and Mas'ud, 2020).

On the other hand, hotel personnel's misconduct has become one of the main issues constantly bothering the hotel business. It negatively influences hotel operations and causes enormous financial losses and undesirable results (Dimitriou and Ducette, 2018).

Unethical behaviour is defined as behaviours that hurt other people and are not illegally or morally accepted by society (Tseng, 2019). It is a short-term behaviour of a salesperson that can bring about an instant profit to the customer's detriment

(Tosun, 2020). Unethical salespersons lie about product availability and the competition, give answers when the answer is not known, make incorrect expense reports, sell unsuitable or worthless products, provide customers with misleading information, and use forceful methods and scheming strategies to sell products (Chandrarathne and Herath, 2020; Marmat et al., 2020).

Thus, a salesperson's unethical behaviour can harm customers' judgment of the organisation (Basnayake and Hassan, 2015). In addition, the ethical misconduct of salespeople leads to customer dissatisfaction and deteriorates brand image and customer loyalty (Ferrell et al., 2019). Moreover, salespersons' unethical behaviour may also result in undesirable consequences, e.g. poor WOM lost customers and reduced sales and profits (Tosun, 2020).

Customer relationship quality

CRQ was defined as "the degree of appropriateness of a relationship to fulfil the customer's needs associated with that relationship" (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997, p.751). CRQ is achieved if customers can trust and depend on the integrity of a who can decrease customers' doubts and provide consistently satisfactory performance (So et al., 2016; Japutra et al., 2018).

Previous literature emphasised that CRQ is very critical for organisations. Thus, it increasingly appears as a strategy for organisations. Moreover, customers can also achieve several benefits through a permanent relationship with a service provider, such as positive value, social and special treatment and confidence (Itani et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Le et al., 2020).

Ethical sales behaviour and customer relationship quality dimensions

There is a general agreement that CRQ comprises three highly correlated dimensions: trust, satisfaction, and commitment (e.g., Olavarría-Jaraba et al., 2018; Itani et al., 2019; Aljarah et al., 2020). CRQ was positively influenced by salespersons' ESB (e.g., Adekoya et al., 2020; Sarawa and Mas'ud, 2020).

2.2. Trust

Trust is the customer's confidence that a service provider is reliable (Japutra et al., 2018; Božič et al., 2020). Clients are more likely to trust a

company when they feel confident in the reliability and integrity of the services or products that the company offers (Aljarah et al., 2020).

If customers perceive employees as ethical, they will believe that employees have specific traits that constantly direct their behaviours. Hence, they will assume that the employees can be trusted (Hansen and Riggle, 2009). Several studies (e.g., Demirgunes, 2015; Božič et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020) indicated that customers are more apt to trust employees they believe to be ethical. Therefore, the following proposition is made:

H1: ESB is positively related to customer trust in salespersons.

2.3 Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to an overall assessment of a customer's experience with the organisation (Tolba et al., 2015). Another definition is the service provider's ability to meet customers' requirements or needs (Wu and Cheng, 2018). Customer satisfaction is an essential part of its strategy and a significant driver of its long-term commitment to its products/services (Aljarah et al., 2020).

Previous studies found that employees' ethical behaviour positively influenced customer satisfaction (e.g., Ou et al., 2015; Rita et al., 2019; Shokouhyar et al., 2020; Soyeun et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). Hence, the following proposition is made:

H2: ESB is positively related to customer satisfaction with salespersons.

2.4. Commitment

Commitment refers to the customer's desire to continue a valued relationship with an organisation (Grégoire et al., 2009). Customer commitment is a fundamental pillar of CRQ. It also plays a significant role in building and maintaining a long-term relationship (Su et al., 2017). Besides, it improves customer retention, justifies the price premium, and brings positive feedback (Aljarah et al., 2020).

Several researchers (e.g., Román and Ruiz, 2005; Tuan, 2015; Iglesiasa et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Le et al., 2020) found that ethical behaviour positively impact on the level of customer commitment. Considering this, and based on the

existing literature, customers' commitment is expected to be significantly linked with the salespersons' ethical behaviour. Therefore, the following proposition is made:

H3: ESB is positively related to customer commitment to salespersons.

2.5 Outcomes of customer relationship quality

As a result of the relationship with employees, customers usually participate in different behaviours towards the organisation, including positive behaviours (e.g., the share of purchases; relationship continuity; positive WOM) or harmful behaviours, such as reducing purchase behaviour. Hence, organisations identify these behaviours (Beatson et al., 2008).

2.5.1. Share of purchases

Share of purchases, one of the most important economic outcome variables, refers to the percentage of spending a customer dedicates to a specific organisation on a particular product or service (Hansen and Riggle, 2009). Because of CRQ, customers become more profitable, spend more frequently on the organisation, and purchase additional products or services (Parasuraman et al., 1991).

2.5.2 Relationship continuity

Relationship continuity means that the customers are willing to extend the interaction with the company for a limited or infinite time in the future. It is of critical importance as it guarantees the company's long-term success in a challenging and competitive marketplace (Hwang et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

2.5.3 Word of mouth

WOM is a well-known marketing instrument in business (Park et al., 2018). It may be more influential than advertising. Customers reap social and psychological benefits from WOM, e.g., reducing uncertainty in decision-making processes (Krishnamurthy and Kumarb, 2018). WOM refers to informal communications conveyed by potential, actual, or former customers to other customers regarding a brand, particular characteristics of a product or service, or an organisation (Yen and Tang, 2019). CRQ would engage customers in positive WOM (Tran and Strutton, 2020). Previous research found that CRQ

positively impacted the share of purchases, relationship continuity, and WOM (e.g., Kim et al., 2001; Kim and Cha, 2002; Fernandes and Pinto, 2019). Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: CRQ positively influences the share of purchases.

H5: CRQ positively influences relationship continuity.

H6: CRQ positively influences WOM.

2.6 Moral identity

An individual with a strong MI considers that moral traits (such as generosity, compassion, fairness, and honesty) are essential parts of their self-concept (Wang et al., 2017). MI is defined as the individual's organised intellectual schema related to moral characteristics, ethical principles, objectives, and behaviour scripts (Teng et al., 2017). MI improves the accessibility of a person's moral self-schema that directs self-regulation and promotes moral action (Wu and Yang, 2018).

2.6.1 Moral identity dimensions

MI consists of two dimensions: internalisation and symbolisation (Teng et al., 2017; Wu and Yang, 2018). Internalisation is considered the private dimension of MI. It means the degree to which moral traits are essential to one's self-concept (Bavik et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2020).

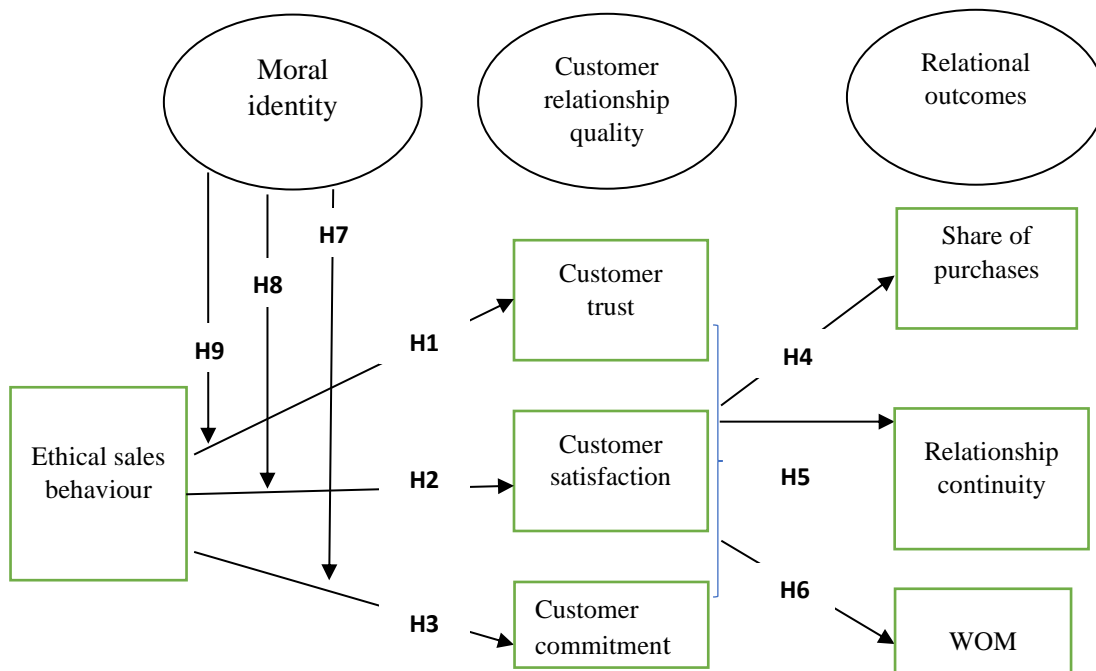
As regards symbolisation, it denotes the importance an individual attaches to displaying a public moral self as a means of confirming one's morality. Therefore, it is considered the public dimension of MI (Van Gils and Horton, 2019). Symbolisers search for strengthening their MIs in the social world since this affirmative feedback assists in verifying moral identities (Woodside et al., 2020).

2.6.2 The moderating role of moral identity

The MI model (Aquino and Reed, 2002) proposes that the two dimensions of MI predict ethical outcomes. MI internalisation was found to affect pro-social behaviours significantly, regardless of the existence of external recognition for these behaviours. Also, MI symbolisation was found to directly affect moral behaviours when external recognition for these behaviours was received (Winterich et al., 2013; Van Gils and Horton, 2019; Bhatti et al., 2020).

Figure 1

Hypothesized model



Ethical behaviour positively affects customer relationships with the organisation for those customers with more vital MI. They are more likely to see keeping a relationship with ethical people or organisations as suitable. This relationship could also result in further help or fairness (Greenbaum et al., 2013).

Therefore, it was expected that the positive relationship between employees' ESB and CRQ is likely to be strengthened for persons with more vital MI, as the thought of maintaining a solid relationship with ethical people or organisations is consistent with their self-concept (Urbonavicius and Adomavičiūtė, 2015; Harris and He, 2019). Depending upon the existing literature, therefore, theorised that MI moderates the relationship between ESB and the three dimensions of CRQ. Thus, the following propositions are made:

H7: MI significantly moderates the effect of ESB on customer commitment.

H8: MI significantly moderates the effect of ESB on customer trust.

H9: MI significantly moderates the effect of ESB on customer satisfaction.

Based on the literature review and hypotheses proposed, this research proposes the hypothesized model as shown in figure 1.

3. Methodology

Based on the literature review, there are four variables in the study (i.e., ESB, CRQ, MI, and CRQ outcomes), which can be examined from the perspective of tourism managers working in travel agencies. The research also examines the effect of ESB on CRQ and the influence of CRQ on relational outcomes, which are share of purchases, relationship continuity, and WOM. Moreover, the study inspects the role of MI as a moderating variable between ESB and CRQ.

3.1 Measurement and instrument

The questionnaire was composed of five main sections: demographic characteristics, ESB, MI, CRQ, and relational outcomes. Firstly, the demographic section consisted of 3 items (i.e., gender, age; educational level). Secondly, the ESB section comprised 6 items (Ferdous and Polonsky, 2013).

Thirdly, the MI section comprised two parts: internalization (5 items) and symbolization (5 items). A list of nine moral traits (i.e. caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind) and the ten items assessing the respondents' self-importance were used to measure moral identity (Aquino and Reed, 2002) (see table 4).

Fourthly, the CRQ section consisted of three parts: satisfaction (7 items), trust (5 items) (Kim and Cha, 2002), and commitment (3 items) (Olavarria-Jaraba et al., 2018). Lastly, CRQ outcomes were composed of three parts: share of purchases (2 items), relationship continuity (3 items), and WOM (2 items) (Kim and Cha, 2002). The respondents were asked to respond to a five-point Likert scale in the last four sections of the survey (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

3.2 Population and sample

The study's target population was tourism managers in the travel agencies category (A) in Greater Cairo, whose whole number is 1109 (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). One questionnaire form will be distributed to the tourism manager in each of the selected companies. Therefore, the sample size of managers is computed according to the following formula (Freund and Wilson, 1997):

$$n^0 = \frac{N}{1+n/N}$$

Where n is the required sample size; N is the population size.

Through the previous equation, it was possible to select a simple random sample of 387 managers. A total of 285 valid questionnaires was received, representing a response rate of 71.6 %. The questionnaire forms were distributed and collected by hand to the investigated sample of managers during the period from 9-2019 to 11-2019.

This category of travel agencies was selected because it always does business with five-star hotels where the ESB concept is applied and can be measured. Additionally, tourism managers working in the travel agencies category (A) are likely to be familiar with the concepts of ESB, CRQ, and MI, and they always contact salespeople of five-star hotels.

3.3. Validity and reliability of the study instrument

The questionnaire was pre-tested to verify its suitability with ten tourism managers working in

travel agencies. Moreover, after handing the questionnaire out to five specialists in the hotel marketing field and five professors majoring in hotel studies to investigate its validity, the questionnaire was modified based on comments and suggestions obtained from the pre-test. Additionally, all the scales in this research were used and tested by previous researchers. For instance, the MI scale was used by several previous scholars (e.g., Aquino and Reed, 2002). To determine the internal consistency of the scales used in the research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. The values of Cronbach's coefficient alpha which surpass 0.7 indicate high credibility (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). In this study, Cronbach's alpha values for all dimensions were above .7, which indicated that the instrument was reliable.

3.4. Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows v.25.0 was applied to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were employed to gain information about sales employees' ESB, customers' MI, CRQ, and relational outcomes. Besides, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used at a significance level of 5% to find the relationship between ESB and CRQ dimensions. Moreover, the same analysis was used to identify the relationship between the dimensions of CRQ and relational outcomes. Furthermore, the hierarchal multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the effect of ESB on CRQ items. The same analysis was utilised to examine the impact of CRQ on relational outcomes and the effect of MI as a moderating variable on the relationship between ESB and CRQ.

4. Results and discussion

This part of the study includes explaining the respondents' demographic characteristics, estimating descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations), measuring correlations among variables of the study, and testing

Table 2

A descriptive analysis of ethical sales behaviour items

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Ethical sales behaviour	4.2		
ESB ₁ . The hotel employee doesn't lie about the competition to make the sale	4.5	0.901	0.84
ESB ₂ . The hotel employee doesn't paint rosy pictures of the products or services to make them sound as good as possible	4.5	0.914	0.84

hypotheses of the study using hierarchical regression analysis. It also tackles the discussion of these obtained results.

4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

The questionnaire used for this research encompassed three items regarding the respondents' demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and educational level). As table 1 shows, 155 out of the 285 respondents (54.4%) were male, and 130 (45.6%) were female. In terms of age, half of the respondents (49.8) were over 55 years old; approximately 35% of them belong to the 35-55 years group, while about 15% of them were aged 18 to less than 35 years. Regarding educational level, 55.1% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree, 44.6% graduated from high school, and 0.3% were postgraduates.

Table 1:

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographics elements		Freq.	%
Gender	Male	155	54.4%
	Female	130	45.6%
Age	18- less than 35 years	43	15.1%
	35-55 years	100	35.1%
	More than 55 years	142	49.8%
Educational level	High school	127	44.6%
	University	157	55.1%
	Postgraduate	1	0.3%

4.2. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Descriptive statistics (including means and standard deviations) of all four study variables (ESB; CRQ; CRQ outcomes; MI) are reported in tables 2, 3, and 4.

4.2.1 A descriptive analysis of employees' ESB items

To identify ESB, the six items of this construct were descriptively analysed. They were examined by their means and standard deviations (Table 2).

ESB ₃ . The hotel employee doesn't provide misleading information about the products or services to make the sale	4.3	0.911	0.87
ESB ₄ . The hotel employee doesn't lie about availability to make a sale	4.1	0.785	0.84
ESB ₅ . The hotel employee doesn't apply sales pressure even though he/she knows the product is not right for me	4	0.875	0.74
ESB ₆ . The hotel employee doesn't give answers when he/she does not really know the answers	4	0.901	0.82

The results in table 2 showed that the mean score of the overall ESB was 4.2. Besides, it could be noticed that ESB elements had means of 4.5, 4.5, 4.3, 4.1, 4, and 4, respectively. All six items had average scores of four and above four, indicating that employees' ESB was acceptable by customers. These results showed that hotel sales employees have high ESB levels, indicating that they behave according to social norms, e.g., fairness, honesty, and full disclosure.

4.2.2 A descriptive analysis of the items of CRQ and relational outcomes

As shown in table 3, the mean score of the overall CRQ was 4.6. Separately, CRQ dimensions (i.e., commitment, trust, and satisfaction) had general means of 4.7, 4.6, and 4.6, respectively. These

Table 3

A descriptive analysis of the items of CRQ and relational outcomes.

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Customer relationship quality dimensions	4.6		
Commitment	4.7		
C ₁ .I feel this hotel is close to me	4.7	0.914	0.64
C ₂ .I like feeling a link to this hotel	4.7	0.911	0.82
C ₃ .I feel a sense of belonging to the hotel	4.7	0.875	0.84
Trust	4.6		
T ₁ . A hotel salesperson keeps promises	4.7	0.914	0.84
T ₂ . A hotel salesperson is honest	4.7	0.901	0.84
T ₃ . A hotel salesperson puts customers' interests first	4.7	0.785	0.74
T ₄ . A hotel salesperson is sincere	4.5	0.911	0.77
T ₅ . A hotel salesperson is reliable	4.5	0.875	0.84
Satisfaction	4.6		
S ₁ .I am satisfied with the hotel's overall products	4.7	0.901	0.74
S ₂ .I am satisfied with this company	4.7	0.785	0.84
S ₃ .I am happy with the service received by the hotel	4.7	0.901	0.82
S ₄ . This hotel meets my needs and covers my expectations	4.6	0.914	0.84
S ₅ .I think a service provider is favourable	4.5	0.914	0.84
S ₆ .I am satisfied with hotel salespersons	4.5	0.875	0.74
S ₇ .I am pleased with a hotel salesperson	4.4	0.911	0.87
Customer relationship quality outcomes	4.6		
1. Share of purchases	4.6		
SP ₁ .Hotel usage frequency has increased	4.7	0.914	0.74
SP ₂ .I think that many hotel services will be used, e.g., F&B outlets	4.5	0.911	0.77
2. Word of mouth	4.6		
W ₁ .I want to recommend this hotel to other companies	4.7	0.914	0.77

results highlighted that all mean scores of the three dimensions of CRQ were above 4.5, indicating that the relationship between customers and the hotels was solid.

Besides, hotel employees were able to reduce customers' doubts. Similarly, this finding was confirmed by many previous scholars (e.g. Japutra et al., 2018). Furthermore, the tabulated data indicated that customers were very satisfied. This result concurs with previous literature (such as Kattara et al., 2015). Moreover, customer commitment (mean = 4.7) also was very acceptable, indicating that customers want to maintain a strong relationship with the hotels. This finding coincided with previous research (e.g. Tuan, 2015).

W ₂ .I want to tell other companies about the good things about this hotel	4.5	0.911	0.84
Relationship continuity	4.6		
R ₁ . I will contact this hotel again in the future	4.7	0.875	0.82
R ₂ . I believe that the hotel will provide better service in the future	4.5	0.914	0.84
R ₃ . I will continue the relationship with this hotel	4.5	0.911	0.84

In addition, the results in table 3 clarified that the mean score of the overall CRQ outcomes was 4.6. Individually, CRQ outcomes (i.e., the share of purchases, WOM, and relationship continuity) had a general mean of 4.6, 4.6, and 4.6, respectively. It is clear from the previous results that all mean scores of the three outcomes of CRQ were above 4.5, indicating that customers actively participated in positive behaviours towards the hotels due to the strong relationship with the hotels. These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Fernandes and Pinto, 2019).

The results in table 4 showed that the mean score of the overall MI was 4.5. Thus, the overall customers' MI was very high, indicating that customers saw themselves as moral persons and are more likely to understand situations and interact with salespeople ethically (Black and Reynolds, 2016). Also, the results showed that the two dimensions of MI (internalization and symbolization) had a general mean of 4.7 and 4.3, respectively. It is clear from these results that customers' internalization is higher than their symbolization.

4.2.3 A descriptive analysis of customers' MI items

Table 4

A descriptive analysis of moral identity items

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Moral Identity	4.5		
Internalization	4.7	0.914	
I ₁ . Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am	4.8	0.875	0.84
I ₂ . I strongly desire to have these characteristics	4.8	0.901	0.82
I ₃ . Having these characteristics is really important to me	4.7	0.785	0.84
I ₄ . It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics	4.6	0.911	0.87
I ₅ . I would not be ashamed to be a person who has these characteristics	4.6	0.901	0.84
Symbolization	4.3	0.914	
S ₁ . The types of things I do in my spare time (e.g. hobbies) clearly identify me as having these characteristics	4.5	0.814	0.85
S ₂ . I am actively involved in activities that communicate to others that I have these characteristics	4.4	0.904	0.82
S ₃ . I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics	4.3	0.804	0.80
S ₄ . The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as having these characteristics	4.2	0.814	0.85
S ₅ . The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations	4.1	0.904	0.85

Table 4 also indicates that the internalization items had means of 4.8, 4.8, 4.7, 4.6, and 4.6, respectively. Therefore, customers' internalization was found to be very high, which means that moral characteristics, such as fairness, honesty, and compassion, are significant to their self-concept. Moreover, the results clearly stated that the symbolization items had means of 4.5, 4.4, 4.3, 4.2,

and 4.1, respectively. It is clear from Table 4 that all items of symbolization had average scores above four, indicating that customers had high levels of symbolization. Thus, customers primarily support ethical behaviours for reasons of social approval (Van Gils and Horton, 2019). Besides, customers express their moral traits (such as

fairness) in the form of behaviours displayed to the hotel.

4.3 Relationship between ESB and CRQ dimensions

To indicate the relationship between ESB as an independent variable and CRQ dimensions as dependent variables, a correlation was measured. The results obviously exposed that, there are

significant relationships among all these variables. These results are presented in Table 5.

It is clear from table 5 that there are positive relationships between ESB and all the three dimensions of CRQ: customer commitment (r= 0.45, Sig. <0.000); customer trust (r= 0.46, Sig. <0.000); and customer satisfaction (r= 0.42, Sig. <0.000), respectively. This means that if ESB increases, CRQ dimensions will increase.

Table 5

Correlation between ESB and CRQ dimension

		ESB	Customer commitment
ESB	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 285	0.45 0.000 285
Customer commitment	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.45 0.000 285	1 285
		ESB	Customer trust
ESB	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 285	0.46 0.000 285
Customer trust	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.46 0.000 285	1 285
		ESB	Customer satisfaction
ESB	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 285	0.42 0.000 285
Customer satisfaction	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.42 0.000 285	1 285

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

To indicate the relationship between CRQ as an independent variable and CRQ outcomes as dependent variables, a correlation was measured. The findings in table (6) showed that CRQ is positively related to relational outcomes: share of

Table 6

Correlation between CRQ and relational outcomes

		CRQ	Share of purchases
CRQ	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 285	0.43 .000 285
Share of purchases	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.43 .000 285	1 285
		CRQ	WOM
CRQ	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 285	0.44 .000 285
WOM	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.44 .000	1

purchases (r= 0.43, Sig. <0.000); WOM (r= 0.44, Sig. <0.000); and relationship continuity (r= 0.41, Sig. <0.000), respectively. This means that if CRQ increases, relational outcomes will increase.

	<i>N</i>	285	285
		CRQ	Relationship continuity
CRQ	Pearson correlation	1	0.41
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	<i>N</i>	285	285
Relationship continuity	Pearson correlation	0.41	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	<i>N</i>	285	285

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

4.4 A regression result of ESB with CRQ dimensions

The first regression analysis was conducted to assess the degree of influence of ESB on the three CRQ dimensions based on the previously

mentioned correlation (see table 7). Concerning customer commitment, it was found to be positively influenced by ESB (R-square= .47, P-value= .000). This finding concurs with other studies (e.g., Román and Ruiz, 2005; Tuan, 2015).

Table 7

ESB influencing customer relationship quality

Variables	Un-standardized Coefficients			Sig.	Model Statistics
	B	Std. Error	R-square		
Constant	0.002	0.0001		.000	F: 10.0141
Customer commitment	0.001	0.0001	0.47	.000	
Customer trust	0.005	0.0000	0.52	.000	
Customer satisfaction	0.004	0.0004	0.51	.000	

*Regression equation can be formed as $ESB = .002 + .001 \text{ customer commitment} + .005 \text{ customer trust} + .004 \text{ customer satisfaction}$

In terms of customer trust, it was also positively affected by ESB (R-square=.52, P-value=.000). In this regard, several studies (e.g., Alrubaiee 2012; Pezhman et al., 2013; Demirgunes, 2015; Ou et al., 2015; Wedatama et al., 2019) found a positive relationship between ESB and customer trust.

Regarding the dimension of customer satisfaction, it was also found to be positively affected by ESB (R-square= .51, P-value=.000). This finding is consistent with previous research results (e.g. Lin, 2012; Pezhman et al., 2013; Kattara et al., 2015; Ou et al., 2015; Wedatama et al., 2019).

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 predicted that ESB would have a positive effect on customer commitment, customer trust, as well as customer satisfaction. These three hypotheses are supported. The findings showed that customers, who perceive that hotel

sales employees behave ethically during the sales process, have higher levels of commitment to the relationship with the hotel, trust in the salespersons, and satisfaction with the service.

4.5 A regression results of CRQ with a share of purchases, WOM, and relationship continuity

As shown in table 8, the regression analysis was used to assess the degree of influence of the overall CRQ on the three outcomes of CRQ based on the previously mentioned correlation results. CRQ was found to significantly affect share of purchase (R-square = .94, P-value=.000); WOM (R-square =.86, P-value=.000); as well as relationship continuity (R-square =.85, P-value=.000), respectively.

Table 8

CRQ influencing share of purchases, WOM, and relationship continuity

Variables	Un-standardized Coefficients			Sig.	Model Statistics
	B	Std. Error	R-square		
Constant	0.011	0.003		0.000	F: 10.0001
Share of purchases	0.014	0.0001	0.94	0.000	
WOM	0.013	0.0011	0.86	0.000	
Relationship continuity	0.010	0.0003	0.85	0.000	

*Regression equation can be formed as $CRQ = .011 + .014 \text{ share of purchase} + .013 \text{ WOM} + .010 \text{ relationship continuity}$

The findings in table 8 agree with those of previous researchers (e.g., Kim et al., 2001; Kim and Cha, 2002; Fernandes and Pinto, 2019). Besides, it was expected that the overall CRQ would have a positive effect on the three outcomes of CRQ (i.e., the share of purchases, WOM, and relationship continuity). Therefore, hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 were supported.

4.6 Regression results of ESB and MI as a moderator with CRQ dimensions

Table 9 shows the results of testing hypotheses 7, 8, and 9. Three moderated hierarchical regression analyses are conducted for the three dimensions of CRQ (commitment, trust, and satisfaction) to achieve the sixth objective of this study, which is to investigate the effect of MI as a moderating variable on the relationship between sales employees' ESB and CRQ. In each analysis, the dependent variable (one of the CRQ dimensions) was specified, and predictor variables were entered in steps, as follows: step1: the predictor variable ESB; step 2: the moderating variable (MI); step 3: the interaction term (ESB*MI) (Baron and Kenny 1986).

Table 9

The impact of MI as a moderating variable on the relationship between ESB and CRQ dimensions

Models	Standardized beta								
	Customer commitment			Customer trust			Customer satisfaction		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Independent variable									
ESB	0.45	0.41	0.87	0.46	0.38	0.90	0.42	0.45	0.85
Moderating variable									
MI		0.10	0.57		0.03	0.52		0.09	0.55
Interaction term									
ESB*MI			0.42			0.39			0.36
R ²	0.47	0.25	0.86	0.52	0.18	0.91	0.51	0.17	0.89
(f) Sig.	0.000	0.1	0.000	0.000	0.1	0.000	0.000	0.1	0.000

4.7 ESB influencing customer trust with MI as a moderating variable

The second regression analysis, including trust as the dependent variable, generated similar results. The inclusion of the interaction term ESB*MI caused a significant increase in the R² value of the model (P-value=.000). The model R² increases

4.6 ESB influencing customer commitment with MI as a moderating variable

As shown in table 9, in the first step of the regression analysis, the independent variable (ESB) was introduced into the model, resulting in a notable change in R² (P-value=.000), with the variable (ESB) being positively correlated to commitment (P-value=.000). In the second step of the analysis, the moderating variable (MI) was entered. This did not cause any critical change in the standardized regression coefficients, nor did it result in a noticeable change in R² in the model. In the third step of the analysis, when the interaction term ESB*MI was entered into the model, there was a significant increase in variance explained (P-value=.000). The model R² increases from 0.25 to 0.86. Besides, the interaction term (ESB*MI) was also significant (P-value=.000). Moreover, the regression coefficient of ESB remained positive, and the MI regression coefficient became significant but experienced a considerable increase in size, with both being highly significant (P-value=.000).

from 0.18 to 0.91. Besides, the interaction term (ESB*MI) was significant (P-value=.000). Moreover, there were considerable changes in the size of the standardized regression coefficients for ESB and MI, with ESB remaining highly significant (P-value=.000) and MI becoming significant (P-value=.000).

4.8. *ESB influencing customer satisfaction with MI as a moderating variable*

When the interaction term ESB*MI was entered in the third model, a significant increase in R² occurred (P-value=.000). The model R² increases from 0.17 to 0.89. The interaction term (ESB*MI) was also significant (P-value=.000). Also, the MI variable became significant and the regression coefficient for ESB remained significant and increased in size.

For the purposes of this research, the results achieved in step 3 of each of the three regression analyses are the most critical since a statistically significant change in R² from steps 2 to 3 supports the study's moderation hypothesis. In addition, it is also essential to take into account any change in the regression coefficients, especially between steps 2 and 3. Moreover, in each regression model, MI did not directly influence CRQ dimensions after controlling for the impact of ESB. However, when interaction term between ESB and MI was introduced into each of the models to account for moderation, these factors were statistically significant. In this regard, several researchers (e.g., Urbonavicius and Adomavičiūtė, 2015; Harris and He, 2019) found that the relationship between ESB and CRQ is likely to be strengthened for persons with more vital MI. Therefore, the study's hypotheses (7, 8, and 9), specifying that MI moderates the positive relationship between ESB and the three dimensions of CRQ were consistently supported.

5. **Conclusions and implications**

The study highlighted three main findings: (1) ESB positively affected CRQ dimensions (CT, CC, and CS); and (2) CRQ positively affected relational outcomes (WOM, share of purchases, and relationship continuity); (3) customer MI moderates the positive relationship between ESB and the three dimensions of CRQ.

The findings of the study assist hospitality practitioners and academicians in better comprehending the concepts of ESB, MI, and CRQ in hotels. In addition, the study has both theoretical and managerial implications; based on the increased importance of ESB and CRQ in all types of business.

Theoretically, the study contributes to theory by helping to understand the theoretical relationship that exists between ESB and CRQ. Additionally,

the findings of the present study support the conclusions of prior studies regarding the significant effect of ESB on CRQ. Furthermore, the study tests a conceptual framework developed based on the literature to understand the importance of ESB in hotels and customer MI.

Practically, this research could be beneficial for hotels in the following:

(1) To maintain and enhance the ethical behaviours of salespeople, there has to be a commitment from senior managers. They should continuously monitor the ethical attitudes and behaviours of management team members in sales and marketing departments, which may influence salespersons' ethical behaviours. Besides, top management should strictly examine any applicants for managerial positions and employ ethical professional persons.

Moreover, senior managers must set some examples from their level in front of the sales employees. Also, they should take an ethical initiation, so it would be easy to spread it downside. Furthermore, they should fully support sales employees' ethical behaviour.

(2) Based on the study results, hotel management should take into account the existing relationship between salespersons' ESB and CRQ dimensions. They can sustain the level of CRQ by maintaining the excellent practice of salespersons' ESB. In order for this to take place, several steps should be implemented: Firstly, a code of ethics must be developed and implemented. Secondly, this code of ethics and core values can be supplemented by salespersons in two ways (i.e., in a written form with some questions in the form of feedback; by holding a meeting with supervisors to discuss ethical issues). Thirdly, salespersons should participate in an ethical training program that helps them to have correct moral behaviours on an ongoing basis, put the hotel company's values into practice, understand the ethical values and increase their moral awareness, and identify standards for ethical decision making within the hotel. Finally, if the hotel mission statement includes the critical role of the code of ethics and ethical behaviour, it would be possible to encourage all hotel staff to implement the ethical principles.

(3) Furthermore, hotels should strengthen supervision and develop efficient ways (e.g., employing an ethics officer who will act as a guide

for ethical conduct and ethical decision making) to monitor sales employees' behaviour.

(4) Hotels can also maintain employees' ethical sales behaviours by recruiting, hiring, retaining, and promoting ethical salespersons who will always be capable of doing the right thing regardless of supervision, successfully handling ethical dilemmas, exhibiting ethical decision-making, and showing ethical behaviours that appropriately correspond with the hotel company's ethical climate, policies, beliefs, and values. Additionally, it is imperative for hotels to get rid of unethical sales employees.

(5) Hotel management should pay attention to the ethical work climate (moral atmosphere of the work environment) in all hotel departments, which encourages ethical beliefs and behaviours among hotel sales employees.

(6) The findings highlighted the critical role of customer MI in hotels as it has a significant effect on the relationship between hotel salesperson's ESB and CRQ. Hence, hospitality practitioners must consider this. They should maintain and satisfy their current customers and attract more of such types of customers whose moral identities are vital which are likely to increase CRQ.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

The study has several limitations, which also pave the way for further research. A significant limitation of this research is that it did not explore the factors that may influence salespersons' ESB, such as the ethical behaviour of managers and co-workers. Therefore, the positive and negative factors affecting salespersons' ESB in hotels need to be examined by further research. Another limitation of this study is that it assessed the variable of salespersons' ESB from the perspective of tourism managers in travel agencies. Further research could also identify this variable from marketing managers' point of view. Moreover, the findings were based on data gathered within a limited period (from September 2019 to November 2019). Thus, other longitudinal studies are required to provide more beneficial implications. Finally, future research could also be directed to different types of frontline employees (e.g. foodservice staff) for exploring the relationship between their ethical sales behaviour and CRQ.

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