RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAIRNESS, HAPPINESS AND RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT: A PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Shaikh Rafiqul Islam[1] and Dr. Shaheen Ahmed[2]

Abstract

The objective of the paper is to address at conceptual level the relationship among the fairness, happiness, relationship age and relationship commitment in the Micro Finance Institution's (MFI's) of Bangladesh. Extant literature shows that most of the studies on marketing practices of MFI's in global and Bangladeshi context conducted on customer satisfaction where relational exchange context was overlooked. The postulated conceptual framework is drawn upon the existing literature that has investigated the influence of fairness on both happiness and relationship commitment. Hence, happiness also has a direct influence on relationship commitment. Further, moderating role of relationship age in the relationship between happiness and relationship commitment also proposed. The MFI policy maker and other marketing practitioners can enhance the customer relationship commitment by utilizing this conceptual framework.

Key words: Fairness, Happiness, Relationship age, Relationship commitment and MFI's in Bangladesh

1.0 Introduction

Relationship Commitment (RC) is known as one of the core concept of relationship marketing (RM) to keeps customers loyal regardless of satisfaction or competitive service offerings (Climis, 2016; Shaikh, Karjaluoto, & Chinje, 2015; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It entails exchange partners' interdependency on each other through high level of relationship attachment (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). RM scholars argued that RC is influenced by the perception of service fairness in relational exchange context (Giovanis, Athanasopoulou,& Tsoukatos, 2015; Nikbin Hyun, Iranmanesh, & Foroughi, 2014). Moreover, service providing organization can create emotional impact happiness in consumer mind by maintaining service fairness toward its customer (Namkung & Jung, 2010; Rupp & Spencer, 2006). Further, happy customer is committed to maintain long term relationship with the organization (Belanche, Casaló, & Guinalíu, 2013). However, previous studies have indicated the relationship between fairness and relationship commitment in commercial exchange, restaurant, banking (Namkung & Jang, 2010; Matute-Vallejo, Bravo, & Pina, 2011) context of western world but neglected to consider the effect of fairness on RC in Micro Finance Institution (MFI) in the eastern world and Bangladesh in particular. This is surprising given the important role of MFIs in the development agenda of a developing nation.

Further, scholars have suggested that effectiveness of RM strategies may vary depending on the relationship age (Balaji, 2015). Long endured relationship between customer and service provider increases customer commitment toward the relationship (Balaji, 2015; Dagger & O'Brien, 2010). This suggests a need for

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[1] Associate Professor, Department of Marketing, Jagannath University.

[2] Associate Professor, School of Business, Bangladesh Open University.

additional research that explicitly investigates the role relationship age as a moderator between the happiness and relationship commitment. On the other hand, the previous studies found mixed findings about the effect of happiness on relationship commitment (Prayag, Khoo-Lattimore, & Sitruk., 2015; Belanche et al., 2013; Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2011). Hence, a moderator variable usually introduced between predictor and criterion variables as a result of inconclusive findings (Baron & Kenney, 1986). Meanwhile, few prior studies have investigated the impact of relationship age in the link between happiness and relationship commitment (Balaji, 2015; Palmatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal, 2013; Verhoef, Franses, & Hoekstra, 2002). Further, recent RM studies suggest that future studies should consider the moderating role of relationship age that may influence relationship outcome (Kumar, Dalla Pozza, & Ganesh, 2013; Dagger & O'Brien 2010).

Looking at the Bangladeshi MFI context, the economic and social impact of MFI is evident. Extreme poverty in rural areas has been reduced by 16.8 per cent during the 2000 to 2010 periods where MFI's contribution was over 53 per cent (Khandker & Samad, 2013). Moreover, it contributed 3 percentage to the GDP (Rahman, Rahman & Jalil, 2014) and more than 114,644 employment opportunities has been created over the last couple of decades (Microcredit Regulatory Authority, 2016). Besides that, it is also important to note that MFIs are also facing strong and multi facets competition in Bangladesh. Moreover, due to this strong competition, clients dropout (exit/switching) is taking place (Pearlman, 2014; Rani, Jalbani & Laghari, 2012). In this connection, scholars suggested that MFI management needs to shed light on the relationship commitment to reduce the dropout rate by repeating its loan program to clients until they graduate from the loan program (Islam & Perumal, 2018; Counts, 2008).

Meanwhile, different literatures in Bangladeshi MFI revealed poor fairness conditions are prevalent in offering services (Islam & Natori, 2014; Rahman et al., 2014; Augsburg & Fouillet, 2013). Specifically, maintaining service fairness in building long term MFI- customer relationship is largely overlooked in the context of Bangladeshi MFI. Moreover, less focus has been given to know RC considering the relational exchange context though the financial institutions have considered this relationship as the backbone of their business and marketing activities (Rizan, Warokka, & Listyawati, 2014).

Hence, the main objective of the study is to review the literature of fairness, happiness, relationship age and relationship commitment to draw relationships among them through the development of a conceptual framework. The study also aims to discover the research gap in the context of Bangladeshi MFI so that the management can give emphasize to improve relationship commitment by maintaining fairness and happiness.

2.0 Literature Review

The present study proposes a conceptual framework in Fig. 1 that fairness, happiness as antecedents to relationship commitment. Further, the study proposes that this relationship is moderated by relationship age. In the following sub sections, this study proposes the relationship between the variables and describes their effects.

2.1 Relationship Marketing (RM)

Relational exchange brings the terminology 'relationship' in to the marketing researcher's attention since last two decades (Khandabi, Klidbari, & Fadayi, 2014). It entails that each transaction must be viewed from historical and potential perspective (Macneil 1978, 1980). Gronroos (1994) elaborate the relationship marketing concept by defining as identifying, establishing, maintaining, and improving relationships with exchange partners, at a profit to achieve the objectives. RM approach gives emphasis on relationship commitment to build long term relationship for retaining customer (Palmatier et al., 2013; Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer ,1995). In the same vein, Morgan and Hunt (1994) also argued that relationship commitment is the key success factor for long term relationship. Similarly, the underlying fact of this RM concept is realized and practiced by financial service industry to win and retain customer in a competitive and turbulent environment (Ndubisi & Wah, 2005).

2.2 Relationship Commitment

Empirical evidence in relationship marketing reveals that relationship commitment is deeply rooted in it. RM literature refers RC as the exchange partners desire and motivation to maintain valued relationship (Brun, Rajaobelina, & Ricard, 2016). The RC paradigm draws the conceptualization to explain customer-organization relationship formation by adopting social psychology, marriage (interpersonal relationship) and organizational science stream (Giovanis, 2016; Ou, Shih, & Chen, 2014; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Relationship commitment has been viewed as "a drive which refers to different underlying psychological states that reflect the nature of the individual's relationship with the target of interest and that have implication for the decision to continue that relationship" (Meyer & Allen, 1997). This psychological condition of RC is generally conceptualized as a multi-dimensional of three distinguishable components such as: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. This three dimensional approach of RC is a suitable platform for examining the emotional (affective), functional (calculative) and social (normative) aspect that reflect relationship commitment to MFI.

2.3 Fairness

The concept fairness is an evaluative judgment of consumer about the appropriate treatment they got from others (Adams, 1965; Blau, 1964). It is perceived as a basic criterion to judge the quality of human relationship and business success can be attainable by enhancing fairness perception in consumers mind (Clemmer & Schneider, 1996). The term "fairness" and "justice" have tended to use as interchangeably or synonym by different research scholars (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015; Cugueró-Escofet & Rosanas, 2013). Consumers consider fairness in assessing commitment and overall return intentions to goods or services (Giovanis et al., 2015; Ting, 2011). In the context of service, fairness refers as a consumer's perception of the degree of justice in a service provider's behavior (Seiders & Berry, 1998). However, consumers' evaluation of service fairness come in front when their experience is compared according to their fairness standards and they identify themselves as being either fairly or unfairly treated (Seiders & Berry, 1998). Subsequently, this perception of fairness influences consumer attitude to build long

term relationship (Giovains et al., 2015). Moreover, perception of fairness led to happiness in consumer brain (Tabibnia Satpute, & Lieberman., 2008) which ultimately creates the pledges to continue the relationship with the exchange partner's as meant to develop high commitment to the relationship (Bahri-Ammari & Bilgihan, 2017).

For decades, extensive research on marketing and organization split the fairness in to three dimensions: distributive fairness (fairness of outcomes), procedural fairness (fairness of decision-making procedures), and interactional fairness (fairness of interpersonal treatment) (Martínez-tur, Peiró, Ramos, & Moliner, 2006). Later, Namkung, Jang, Almanza, & Ismail, (2009) introduced a four factor of fairness (price fairness, distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and interactional fairness). Authors' empirical research on fairness issues confirmed the superior projective power of the four-factor model over the three-factor model. Further, they also recommended other researcher to validate the four-factor model in different research contexts. Price fairness refers as a consumer's perception, associated with emotion, about the rationality or justification of variation between seller's price and competitor's price (Xia, Monroe, & Cox, 2004). Distributive fairness refers as an assessment of fairness of the outcome received (Duffy, Fearne & Hornibrook., 2003). Procedural fairness refers to the policies and procedures employed by the service provider in producing the outcome (Giovanis et al., 2015). Finally, interactional fairness refers to the interpersonal treatment consumer receive in a service context (Blodgett Hill, & Tax, 1997). Moreover, previous studies also interpret these fairness dimensions as an individual construct (Narteh, 2016). Based on the above discussion, the present study follows the perspective of four-factor model to examine the projective power of the model in MFI industry to assess whether customers' perception of fairness impacts on their relationship commitment.

Review of different literatures has identified a significant relationship between fairness and relationship commitment in various context (Giovanis et al., 2015; Ting, 2011; Yen & Chu, 2009). Giovanis, et al. (2015) suggested that service fairness (distributive, procedural and interactional) positively affect relationship quality (satisfaction, trust and commitment). Specifically authors argue that customers' commitment increases due to fair treatments and they stay with the same service provider for longer periods. Moreover, Ting (2011) argued that individual dimensions of fairness affect customers' commitment to the relationship (distributive fairness, procedural fairness and interactional fairness) with service provider. Based on the theories related to fairness and relationship commitment the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H1:   Price fairness positively affects the relationship commitment in MFI.

H2:   Distributive fairness positively affects the relationship commitment in MFI.

H3:   Procedural fairness positively affects the relationship commitment in MFI.

H4:   Interactional fairness positively affects the relationship commitment in MFI.

2.4 Happiness

Emotion is one of the psychological states of readiness arises from cognitive evaluation of events or thought which motivate customer to choose a particular product or services (Levy & Hino, 2016). One of the discrete form of emotion is happiness, appears as one of the most used emotion word in consumption emotion (Laros, & Steenkamp, 2005). It is enumerated as particular emotion elicited after fulfillment of consumer's expectation. Happiness conceptualizes as accumulation of many small pleasures or happy moments (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2014). Researcher also argued that comparison between standard and actual conditions elicited happiness in consumer mind (Diener & Fujita, 1995). Further, scholars pointed out that happiness act as a driver of customer commitment during the consumption experience (Belanche et al., 2013).

Past research suggested that happiness positively linked to customer commitment (Belanche et al., 2013; Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2011). Belanche et al. (2013) argued that feeling of happiness reinforced consumer to be more committed in a relationship. The authors more specifically states that happier consumer decide to commit more easily because they are more confident about the evaluative judgment of previous interaction with exchange partner. Hellén and Sääksjärvi, (2011) also suggested that happiness is positively related to customer commitment (affective, normative, and continuance commitment) for hedonic services. Based on the above discussion the following hypotheses can be postulated:

H5: Happiness positively affects the relationship commitment in MFI.

2.5 Mediating effect of Happiness

Happiness is a major outcome of relationship marketing and process culminating in service re-patronage and subsequent commitment to the relationship (Boroujeni & Hematian, 2014; Belanche et al., 2013; Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2011). This explains the reasons that show that happiness can mediate between the antecedents and outcomes in relational exchange context. The study by Su, Swanson and Chen (2016) suggested that positive emotion (such as: Happiness) has significant mediating relationship between fairness and behavioural intention. While, DeWitt, Nguyen, & Marshall (2008) argued that emotion (both positive and negative) partially mediate the relation between fairness perception and attitudinal and behavioural commitment. Authors also give a call to investigate the mediating effect of happiness (as discrete emotion) in different service settings. Moreover, review of previous literature also found positive relationship between fairness and happiness (Namkung & Jang, 2010).

Based on the above discussion the direct relationship between price fairness, distributive fairness, procedural fairness, interactional fairness and happiness is evident (Namkung & Jang, 2010; Xia et al., 2004). Further, customers' sensitivity to fairness issues has been intensified due to the intangible characteristics of financial service which is also intricately intertwined with emotion (Chebat & Susarczyk, 2005). Moreover, based on the diverse surge of study whereby fairness had a significant effect on happiness (Tubillejas Andrés, Cervera-Taulet, & Calderón García, 2016; Abubakar & Mavondo, 2014), which predicted relationship commitment. Therefore, this study is designed to investigate the mediating effect of

happiness in the relationship of fairness and relationship commitment in the MFI sector in Bangladesh is justified. Hence, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H6:   Happiness mediates the relationship between price fairness and relationship commitment in MFI.

H7:   Happiness mediates the relationship between distributive fairness and relationship commitment in MFI

H8:   Happiness mediates the relationship between procedural fairness and relationship commitment in MFI.

H9:   Happiness mediates the relationship between interactional fairness and relationship commitment in MFI.

2.6 Relationship Age

Relationship age defined as the time length of the relationship between the exchange partners (Balaji, 2015; Palmatier et al. 2006). Their relationships gradually and incrementally build over the interaction experience with time (Brass, Butterfield, & Skaggs, 1998). Scholars argued that as relationship age progresses, customers gain more information and become convergent about the service providers' offerings (Balaji, 2015). This makes customers more confident in their evaluation of the service provider's relationship efforts (Palmatier et al. 2006). Moreover, relationship age is corresponds to customer satisfaction, customer retention, organization reputation and profitability (Ranaweera & Menon, 2013; Bartikowski, Walsh, & Beatty, 2011).

2.6.1 Relationship Age: The Important role as a Moderator

Moderator refers to a categorical or continuous variable affecting the direction or strength or both, of the relation between the independent or predictor variable and the dependent or criterion variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). It is included when inconsistent or weak causal relationship evident between predictor and criterion variables (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004; Baron & Kenny 1986). In the context of present study, empirical studies sufficiently demonstrate the inconsistent findings of the relationship between happiness (positive emotion) and relationship commitment (Belanche et al., 2013; Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2011). So, the above mentioned inconclusive findings, suggests the inclusion of a moderator between the exogenous variable happiness and the endogenous outcome variable relationship commitment to investigate whether the hypothesized interaction effect can strengthen the relationship between predictor and criterion variables.

Meanwhile, the moderating effect of relationship age on relationship commitment has been reported by previous empirical studies. For example, Balaji (2015) examines the moderating role of relationship age in the linkage between relationship investment and relationship commitment. The result suggests that positive interaction effect of relationship age in the relationship between relationship investment and relationship commitment. Alongside that, Yen and Barnes (2011), Raimondo, "Nino"Miceli and Costabile (2008) also found positive interaction effect of relationship age in different relationship in different context. Therefore, based on

the above discussion and also the arguments this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H10:   Relationship age moderates the relationship between happiness and relationship commitment in MFI.

3.0 Proposed Research Model

Based on the above mentioned literature and discussion the following research model (Figure 1) is proposed. This model is proposed on the basis of relational exchange theory (RET) with expectation that, if service provider practice fairness in all its activities, it elicit happiness in customers' mind that ultimately inclined them to be committed with relationship (Lui & Ngo, 2012; Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Macneil, 1980).
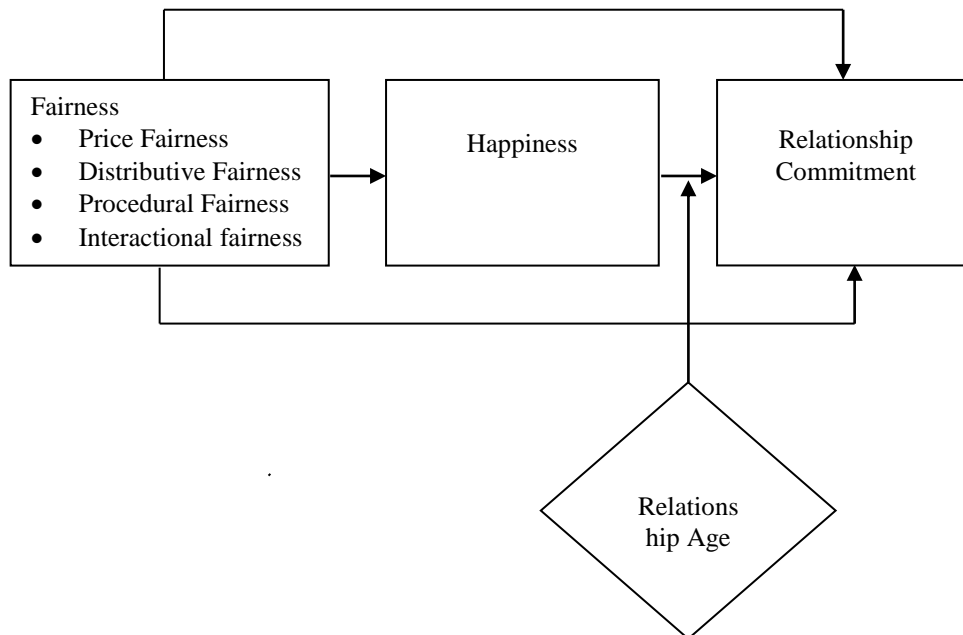

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework

Moreover, according to Baron and Kenny (1986), mediating variable can be incorporated if: independent variables (Fairness) are related to the dependent variable (Relationship Commitment); independent variables (Fairness) are related to the mediating variable (Happiness); and mediating variable (Happiness) is related to the dependent variable (Relationship Commitment). The earlier literature conform that fairness have significant impact on both happiness and relationship commitment. Therefore, considering happiness as mediating variable is logical to conceptualize the relationship between fairness and relationship commitment. Further, inclusion of relationship age as a moderator also support the view of Baron and Kenny (1986) as there are inconclusive relationship between happiness and relationship commitment.

But a thorough empirical analysis is essential to generalize this concept because this relationship has not been generally proved earlier.

4.0 Methodology

The study has been conducted based on the previous literatures of fairness, relationship commitment, happiness and relationship age. The pertinent literature has been evaluated to draw a relationship between fairness and relationship commitment, where happiness plays mediating and relationship age as moderating role on this relationship. The present study examined the relevant variables in six well reputed databases. The databases were Science Direct, JSTOR, Emerald, Taylor and Francis online, Springer Link and Ebscohost. For instance, when the relevant variables were searched in each database, the total number of article displayed was recorded along with the paper/ journals that were considered to be relevant to this paper. Likewise, during the search of relevant variables in the databases, the total numbers of 2,634 papers were documented along with 137 articles that were considered to be particularly relevant with this conceptual paper. Then after, the relevant articles were retrieved and reviewed. Afterwards, the relationship has been assessed in the context of MFIs of Bangladesh on the basis of four factors of fairness such as: price fairness, distributive fairness, procedural fairness, interactional fairness, happiness with relationship commitment. Moreover, secondary data related to the scenario of Bangladeshi MFI were used to discover the insight of the present situations exists in the MFI industry of Bangladesh. Finally, a conceptual model has been proposed based on the extant literatures. The future direction of the research is also incorporated as well in this study.

5.0 Discussion

It can be argued that practices of fairness in the service providing organization are eliciting happiness in the customer mind which as a result inclined them in relationship commitment. Past studies have established that fairness have positive influence on relationship commitment and happiness. Again, happiness has positive influence on relationship commitment. Hence, relationship commitment can be ensured by performing fairness which elicits happiness in consumer mind. In the context of Bangladeshi MFI, this relationship may be important because MFI's are facing many challenges related to fairness and relationship commitment. More specifically, the Bangladeshi MFI's has been suffering from poor fairness condition within the organization. It is happening due to improper practices of relational exchange.

6.0 Conclusion

Building relationship commitment is one of the important approaches to survive in competitive MFI industry. Hence, relational exchange is considered a key method to be stay competitive. Moreover, many researchers argued that performing fairness condition increases relationship commitment though happiness independently influences relationship commitment. Nonetheless, the relationships among fairness, happiness, and RC, are not well established. The concept 'happiness' is relatively new as a disaggregate approach of emotion to generalize and strengthen the

relationship between fairness and relationship commitment through existing literatures that deserves a thorough investigation. Happiness is a significant issue to marketing managers and consultants but the dearth of knowledge in existing literatures on happiness drives the need for more empirical study. Therefore, this study deserve an empirical research in the context of developing economy like MFI industry in Bangladesh using happiness as a mediator to have better understanding of these relations.

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