

## Personality Traits and Customer-Oriented Behavior of the Malaysian Nurses

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behavior among nurses in the selected public hospitals in Malaysia. The respondents consisted of female and male nurses with majority of them were staff nurses. A quantitative, cross sectional survey method was used in this study. Factor analysis and multiple regression analysis were employed to analyze the data collected. The findings of this study revealed that personality traits (i.e., extraversion and agreeableness) were positively related to customer-oriented behaviour. Agreeableness made the strongest influence in explaining the variance of customer-oriented behavior. This study provides theoretical and managerial implications by using the concept of customer-oriented behavior in enhancing nurses' job performance in the hospitals.

**Key words:** Customer, oriented behavior, personality traits, nurses, Malaysia

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### INTRODUCTION

Customer-oriented behavior is increasingly being used by researchers and organizations to deliver quality service and satisfying customers from different global perspectives (Narver and Slater, 1990; Brown *et al.*, 2002; Mei-Liang and Kuang-Jung, 2010) particularly in the healthcare sector (Lanjananda and Patterson, 2009). According to Hartline, Maxham and McKee's, customer-oriented behavior is an impression and belief that emphasizes on customers or patients interest in any organizations. Hartline *et al.* (2000) also relates customer orientation concept as achieving patient's needs and expectations especially in the healthcare organizations. Owing to the highly competitive healthcare market and increasing necessity of the patients' needs, quality service and effectiveness of medical treatment have become vital for the healthcare providers (Friedenberg, 1997). Hence, customer-oriented behavior is perceived to be an important factor in enhancing quality service in the hospitals.

In order to generate customer-oriented behavior, personality traits have long been studied by researchers as significant predictors of human behavior (Mei and Jung, 2006). For example, personality traits were identified as predictors to determine workers' customer orientation (Brown *et al.*, 2002); personality traits were treated as determinants to generate work-related behaviors such as citizenship behavior, job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Barrick and Mount, 2005). Majority of the above studies were conducted in the service industry. To the best knowledge of the researcher, study on the influence of personality traits towards nurses' customer-oriented behavior is not extensive and has not

received much attention especially in the developing countries like Malaysia. Therefore, this study intends to examine the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behavior among nurses in the public hospitals in Malaysia.

### Literature review

**Customer-oriented behavior:** Customer orientation concept was introduced in the early 1950s. Saxe and Weitz (1982) were among the initial researchers who measured customer orientation. According to Saxe and Weitz (1982)'s, customer orientation is perceived as customer-oriented behavior exhibited by the frontline employee in servicing customers' interest, discovering the needs of customers, developing appropriate solution, providing services that meet the needs of customers without imposing pressure on customers. In other words, customer orientation approach is about how employees serve their customers.

The outcome of the study by Saxe and Weitz (1982) had resulted the establishment of the Selling Orientation/Customer Orientation (SOCO) scale which consists of 24 item scale with two dimensions: 12 positively phrased customer orientation items and 12 negatively phrased selling orientation items. The SOCO scale intends to measure the degree to which a salesperson engaged with his/her customer for long-term customer satisfaction. The SOCO scale had contributed towards the customer orientation concept and become an important construct which relates to employee customer-oriented performance at the workplace. Hence, the 12 positive phrased customer orientation items were adapted in this study as they were significantly related to customer-oriented behavior.

In the healthcare context, Chien *et al.* (2008) defined customer-oriented behavior as an in-role behavior of nursing staffs where the nursing staffs understand the necessities of the patients. This in return, will lead to better nursing care that satisfies the expectation of various patients. These particular behaviors were perceived as understanding patients' requirements, providing appropriate information to patients and fulfilling their needs. This study is in line with the customer orientation concept constructed by Saxe and Weitz (1982) where the concept focused on resolving customers' problems and providing customer satisfaction.

**Personality traits:** Over the years, personality trait theory was an approach to the study of human personality in psychology. Personality traits refer to the different tendencies of an individual dimension that show consistent patterns of thoughts, feeling and action (Korzaan and Boswell, 2008). Across the literature studies, researchers had classified personality traits into five basic dimensions, namely openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. These five trait dimensions were identified as the Five-Factor Model (FFM) (McCrae and Costa, 1987). These five factors encapsulated the main tenets of human personality into five relatively independent dimensions which provide a meaningful taxonomy for studying individual differences (Barrick, 2005). The first dimension, openness to experience is associated with personality traits that reflects individuals' customary eagerness to try new ideas, being imaginative, cultured, curious, original, board-minded, intelligent and artistically sensitive. The second dimension, conscientiousness describes personality traits as a form of compliance to rules, standards and dependability that being thorough, careful, responsible, organized and planful. The third dimension, extraversion concerns individual personalities such as gregarious, sociable, active and high profile versus reserved, quiet, alone and low profile. The fourth dimension, agreeableness is related to conformity with others and responsiveness in the interpersonal surroundings. Lastly, neuroticism is viewed as negative trait that is related to tension, irritability, lower level of emotional control become upset and anxiety.

**The trait theory:** The main approach of trait theory is to identify the differences among human personalities and attempt to measure the resulting individual behaviors. Gordon Allport's (1961) trait theory is central in assisting people to understand the uniqueness of the individual's style, expressiveness and behavior. Trait is a unique dimension of behavior that is relatively stable over time. This unique dimension of behavior is able to provide constructive information about an individual's personality that reflects the stylistic consistencies of an individual

behavior in an organization. Based on trait theory perspective, the behavior of an individual can be defined as a function of personality traits and the generation of this behavior will be consistent with the individual personality traits. Thus, it is postulated that customer-oriented behavior will be influenced by an individual personality traits.

**Relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behavior:** Trait theory has sought to identify and describe the underlying traits that explain people's behavior (Allport, 1961). John *et al.* (2008) concurred with this statement through their study which indicates that personality traits explained a lot about an individual. Kassin claimed that personality traits represent the innate characteristics of individuals and habitual patterns of their behaviors. Often, personality traits were able to predict human behaviors at work such as job performance, safety behavior, customer-oriented behavior and organizational citizenship behavior. Previous researchers had used personality traits as predictors to determine customer-oriented behavior and discovered that personality traits were significantly related to customer-oriented behavior (Lanjananda and Patterson (2009); Mechinda and Patterson, 2011; Johari and Hee, 2013).

Mei and Jung (2006), in their studies found that there is a positive relationship between four basic personality traits and customer-oriented behavior. They are agreeableness ( $\beta = 0.321$ ), neuroticism ( $\beta = 0.377$ ), activity ( $\beta = 0.134$ ) and conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.170$ ). These results were based on the population sample of 374 frontline employees of five hotels, six restaurants and four travel agencies. On the other hand, Mechinda and Patterson (2011) studied the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behavior among 270 nurses in five public and private hospitals in Thailand. Their research findings show that agreeableness, extraversion and neuroticism were significantly associated with customer-oriented behavior. In the Malaysian context, Johari and Hee (2013) found that conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.110$ ) and openness to experience ( $\beta = 0.443$ ) were predictors of customer-oriented behavior in the health tourism hospitals with 349 nursing respondents. Thus, drawing on the aforesaid empirical evidence, it is hypothesized that:

- $H_1$ : There is a significant relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behavior among nurses in the public hospitals in Malaysia.

**Conceptual framework:** In order to achieve the objectives of this study, a conceptual framework has been established and it is depicted in Fig. 1. The dependent

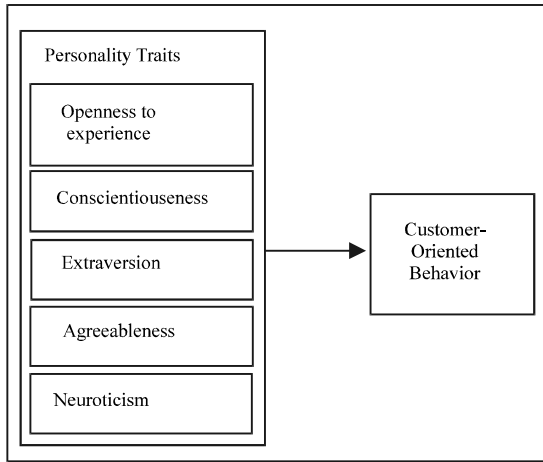


Fig 1: Conceptual framework

variable of this study is customer-oriented behavior where it is the primary interest of this study. The independent variable of this study is personality traits.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research setting and sample:** Public hospitals were chosen as the research setting in the existing study. This is owing to the reasons that public hospital is dominant in Malaysia, heavily subsidized by the government and having very high public demand. Nurses were selected as the respondents in this study because nurses are the key personnel who provide ongoing care and respond to the needs of the patients in the hospitals.

**Method and instrument:** Quantitative survey method was employed in this study. Quantitative method is regard as the most appropriate method owing to its economy of design and a rapid turnaround in data collection (Cresswell, 2003). The findings based on quantitative survey can be generalized more than those of qualitative research (Babbie, 2005). The samples were generated through stratified random sampling technique. The reason for choosing stratified random sampling technique is because this technique increases a sample’s statistical efficiency (Cooper *et al.*, 2006) and able to adequately analyse the data from various sub-groups. The measures of customer-oriented behavior were adapted from the Selling Orientation Customer Orientation Scale (SOCO Scale) developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). On the other hand, measures for personality traits were adapted from the Big Five Inventory (BFI) developed by John, *et al.*, (1991). Likert scale was used to measure the level of

agreement of the respondents. The scale was anchored by 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neither agree nor disagree), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree).

**Data analysis:** Data analysis in the present study was conducted by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). To examine the reliability of the measurement items for the variables, internal consistency check was carried out. In this study, the researcher employed Cronbach’s alpha coefficient analysis to test the reliability of the instruments. Validity test was conducted to ensure all the measurement scales in this study exhibit some degree of construct validity. In this study factor analysis was used to examine the validity of the theorized dimensions tapped by the items in the measurement.

In addition, regression analysis was employed to examine whether there is any significant relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behaviour. Regression analysis provides information such as direction, strength and significance of the relationship between the variables.

## RESULTS

**Profile of the respondents:** A total of 300 respondents participated in the survey of this study. The respondents were 212 female nurses (212, 71%) and 88 male nurses (88, 29%). Majority of the respondents were staff nurse (216 or 72%), followed by assistant/enrolled nurse (45 or 15%). The least number of the respondents were Head nurse/ward sister with 16 respondents or 5.3%. The respondents represent 52.7% of nurses from the medical department and 47.3% from the surgical department. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.

**Factor analysis and reliability test:** The study variables were validated through factor analysis. Table 2 and 3 depict the results of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s Test of sphericity. The values of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) were 0.714 and 0.841 for personality traits and customer-oriented behavior, respectively. The values had exceeded the minimum value of 0.6 for a good factor analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2006; Pallant, 2007). Bartlett’s test of Sphericity was statistically significant at the 0.001 level for both variables. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) extracted five components for personality traits with strong factor loadings ranging from 0.632-0.867

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Items	Description	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	88	29
	Female	212	71
Rank	Assistant/Enrolled Nurse	45	15
	Staff Nurse	216	72
	Senior Staff Nurse	23	7.7
	Head Nurse/Ward Sister	16	5.3
Department	Medical	158	52.7
	Surgical	142	47.3

Table 2: Factor Analysis for Personality Traits

Items	Description	Factor Loading				
		1	2	3	4	5
O1	I am original, I always come up with new ideas.				0.639	
O3	I have an active imagination.				0.803	
O4	I am creative.				0.744	
C1	I persevere until my task is finished.					0.805
C2	I am a reliable worker.					0.776
E1	I am talkative.		0.654			
E2	I am full of energy.		0.632			
E3	I generate interest and enjoyment.		0.748			
E4	I am outgoing, sociable.		0.694			
A1	I like to cooperate with others.	0.837				
A2	I have a forgiving nature.	0.867				
A3	I am generally trusting.	0.849				
A4	I am considerate and kind to almost everyone.	0.811				
N2	I am relaxed, handle stress well.			0.801		
N3	I am emotionally stable, not easily upset.			0.742		
N4	I remain calm in tense situations.			0.777		
Eigenvalues		2.878	1.962	1.829	1.738	1.426
Percentage of Common variance		17.990	12.264	11.432	10.865	8.911
Cumulative %		17.990	30.253	41.685	52.550	61.461
Reliability Coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha)		0.866	0.711	0.703	0.714	0.698

KMO = 0.714, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity:  $\chi^2(120) = 1176.722, p < 0.001$ .

Table 3: Factor Analysis for Customer-Oriented Behavior

Items	Description	Factor loading 1
COB2	I try to achieve my goals by satisfying patients.	0.674
COB3	I try to have patient's best interest in mind	0.778
COB4	I try to get patients to discuss their needs with me	0.756
COB5	I try to influence a patient with information rather than by pressure	0.769
COB7	I try to find out what kind of nursing care would be most helpful to a patient	0.723
COB10	I am willing to agree with a patient in order to help him/ her make a better decision	0.530
COB12	I try to figure out what a patient's needs are	0.760
Eigenvalues		3.605
Percentage of Common variance		51.500
Cumulative %		51.500
Reliability Coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha)		0.840

KMO = 0.841, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity:  $\chi^2(21) = 772.919, p < 0.001$ .

(Table 2). As indicated in Table 2, personality traits contributed 61.461% of the cumulative common variance with Eigenvalues ranging from 1.426 to 2.878. As for customer-oriented behavior, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) extracted 7 items with factor loadings ranging from 0.530-0.778. The percentage of common

Table 4: Model summary of the multiple regression analysis

R value	R <sup>2</sup> value	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
0.420	0.176	0.162	0.392	12.598	0.000*

\*Significant at the 0.001 level

Table 5: Coefficients of the Multiple Regression Analysis

Models	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		Sig.
	B	SE	$\beta$	t-value	
<b>Constant</b>		2.504	0.320	7.832	0.000
O	0.025	0.045	0.032	0.554	0.580
C	-0.064	0.041	-0.088	-1.573	0.117
E	0.193	0.042	0.261	4.559	0.000***
A	0.248	0.044	0.304	5.651	0.000***
N	0.002	0.039	0.003	0.054	0.957

Significant at the 0.001 level Significant at the 0.01 level Significant at the 0.05 level

variance is 51.5% with Eigenvalue of 3.605 (Table 3). All the 7 items were loaded on a single factor and categorized as customer-oriented behavior.

For reliability test, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for each dimension of personality

traits and customer-oriented behavior has reached the minimum value of 0.7 as suggested by Vellis and Dancer (1991). Therefore, all the measures were deemed reliable and consistent throughout the study.

**Regression Analysis:** Multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the relationship between personality traits and customer-oriented behavior. The results of the regression analysis were presented in Table 4. The overall model was significant with F value of 12.598 and  $p < 0.001$ . It reveals that at least one component of the personality traits has significant relationship with customer-oriented behavior. The strength of the regression model between the study variables is moderate ( $R = 0.420$ ). The result also shows that 17.6% ( $R^2 = 0.176$ ) of the variance in customer-oriented behavior can be explained by the variation in personality traits.

Further investigation of the regression analysis reveals that agreeableness ( $\beta = 0.304$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and extraversion ( $\beta = 0.261$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were positively related to customer-oriented behavior (see Table 5). However, openness to experience ( $\beta = 0.032$ ,  $p = 0.580$ ), conscientiousness ( $\beta = -0.088$ ,  $p = 0.117$ ) and neuroticism ( $\beta = -0.003$ ,  $p = 0.957$ ) were not significantly related to customer-oriented behavior. It was found that agreeableness ( $\beta = 0.304$ ) has the strongest influence towards customer-oriented behavior (Table 5).

Table 5: Coefficients of the Multiple Regression Analysis \*\*\* significant at the 0.001 level \*\* significant at the 0.01 level \* significant at the 0.05 level

## DISCUSSION

The regression analysis indicates that extraversion and agreeableness were significantly and positively related to customer-oriented behavior. The significant impact on customer-oriented behavior among the nurses can be explained by the magnitude of the standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ) in which the standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ) were 0.304 and 0.261 for agreeableness and extraversion respectively. However, the results indicate that openness to experience, conscientiousness and neuroticism were not significant to customer-oriented behavior. Among the plausible reasons to explain the positive significant relationships are nurses who possess the trait of extraversion tend to be more outspoken, proactively interact with patients to understand patients' concern and assist the patients to solve their problems. On the other hand, nurses who possess agreeableness tend to be friendlier, supportive and emotionally stable in providing support to the patients during their stay in the hospitals.

In the present study, the positive relationship of extraversion and agreeableness on customer-oriented behavior is consistent with the previous researches done by Williams and Sánchez (1998), Mei and Jung (2006) and Mechinda and Patterson (2011). It is clearly evident that extraversion and agreeableness contribute towards the display of customer-oriented behavior among nurses in the hospitals.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide both theoretical and managerial implications. In terms of theoretical implications, this study attempts to provide a conceptual framework for the public healthcare management to improve their nurses' job performance by using the concept of customer-oriented behavior. Additionally, this study also suggests that personality traits are significant predictors of customer-oriented behavior in the healthcare organizations. In terms of managerial implications, this study provides useful information to the hospital's Management in designing dedicated training programs that aim at enhancing their nurses' job performance. The hospital management could use the information in this study to segregate the nurses into different groups and re-train them with regard to their level of customer-oriented behavior.

## LIMITATIONS

Apart from that it is suggested that personality test could be used to recruit new nurses. By identifying nurses' personality of extraversion and agreeableness, it will certainly assist to produce more customer-oriented nurses in the hospitals. As stated by Lanjananda and Patterson (2009), agreeable nurses have the inclination for good service delivery. There are several limitations inherent in this study. Firstly, the sampling frame only considers particular group of nurses in the selected hospitals. Therefore, the results may not able to generalize towards the entire population of nurses in the public hospitals. Secondly, the samples of this study only consist of nurses but not inclusive of other healthcare individuals such as doctors, pharmacists, medical officers and clinical assistants. Hence, no comparison can be done to observe the differences of customer-oriented behavior among various groups in the hospitals.

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