A taxonomy of customer-seller relationships in consumer financial markets*

The financial crisis has pointed to the need for an improved understanding of consumer financial markets. The present study represents the first attempt to develop a taxonomy of ongoing customer-seller financial services relationships while considering the full-range of financial subsectors. A total of 3,638 consumers with representativeness of the studied country population participated in the survey. Based on their current status as active financial customers they were grouped as bank customers (n=1155), mortgage customers (n=802), pension customers (n=770) and insurance customers (n=817), respectively. Our results reveal several new insights, including (a) identifying six unique types of financial customer-seller relations enabling financial services managers to efficiently identify and target customers; (b) mapping the role of financial services relationship type for customer satisfaction, loyalty and commitment; (c) identifying associations between relationship type and several customer constructs ultimately related to society welfare and (d) revealing how financial sub-sector types are related to relationship types and outcomes.

Keywords: customer-seller relationships, financial services, consumer financial behaviour, financial sub-sectors

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Introduction and Objectives

As one of its many serious outcomes, the global financial crisis has elevated the need for an improved understanding of customer-seller relationships in consumer financial services markets. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the content of customer-seller relationships in the consumer financial marketplace, as seen from the customers' perspective, in order to develop an empirical grounded taxonomy of these and to explore how these relations are related to customer relationship response (i.e., satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment). Towards this aim, this study considers the full-range of financial subsectors (banks, mortgage companies, pension companies, and insurance companies), which interact with customers in the consumer financial marketplace and evaluates the content of 3,638 financial services customer-seller relationships distributed across financial subsectors. Our study contributes to existing literature and managerial insights in several ways.

First, this study represents the first attempt to develop a taxonomy of financial customer-seller relationships across all main financial subsectors with representativeness of the studied consumer population within each subsector. Second, we do not limit our analyses to relationship outcome variables that ultimately are believed to be associated with seller performance (i.e., consumer satisfaction, commitment and loyalty) but also consider variables (i.e., customers' financial behaviour, expectations to future financial situation, and general financial trust) that are related to the financial well-being of the customer and, ultimately, the financial well-being of the society. The obtained results reveal several new insights, including (a) identifying six unique types of financial customer-seller relations enabling financial managers to more efficiently identify and target customers; (b) mapping the role of financial relationship type for customer satisfaction, loyalty and commitment; (c) identifying associations between relationship type and customer constructs ultimately related to the welfare of a society and (d) revealing how financial sub-sector types are related to relative shares of relationship types and to relationship outcomes.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Although a large number of conceptualizations of 'relationship marketing' have been proposed, marketing researchers seem to agree that (a) relationship marketing focuses on the individual customer-seller relationship; (b) both parties in a relationship must benefit for the relation to continue; (c) the relationship is often longitudinal in nature; (d) the focus of relationship marketing is to retain customers (Peterson 1995; Hunt, Arnett and Madhavaram 2006). Even though there is broadly consensus in prior research regarding the content of relationship marketing, the full range of potential important variables for developing and maintaining well-functioning relationships is not yet fully understood (Palmatier 2008). Particular lacking are studies that seek to understand relationships in consumer markets, especially studies focusing on developing empirically based taxonomies aiming at classifying customer-seller relations.

Although relationship marketing is not appropriate for all consumer markets, the relationship marketing approach is suitable for financial services because of the lifetime financial requirements of customers and the continuous nature of transactions (O'Loughlin Szmigin and Turnbull, 2004; Colgate and Stewart 1998). It has even been proposed that the relationship marketing approach is particularly applicable to the financial services sector, as financial services can be characterised as highly intangible, complex, high-risk and often long-term service-based offerings, wherein relationship participation is central to service delivery (e.g., O'Loughlin, Szmigin and Turnbull 2004). Moreover, consistent with the relationship marketing approach, recent empirical results suggest that consumers are often loyal to their financial service provider (Krohn 2009); confirming the presence of ongoing relations.

While factors such as trust and communication may be important for developing and maintaining well-functioning financial customer-seller relationships, the financial customer-seller relation may, however, also include more specific service-factors such as service customization, waiting time and the like, which customers may perceive, evaluate and value. The investigated relationship characteristics and outcomes are reviewed in the following.

Relationship characteristics

Trust. Trust is being regarded as one of the most critical variables for developing and maintaining well-functioning relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994) and is likely to be especially important in financial customer-seller relationships because financial companies have an implicit responsibility for the management of their customers' funds and the nature of financial advice supplied (Harrison 2003). We adapt the often-cited definition proposed by Sirdeshmukh, Singh and Sabol (2002) and conceptualize trust as "the expectation held by the consumer that the service provider is dependable and can be relied on to deliver on its promises" (p. 17)

Information. Information is a focal characteristic in customer-seller communication, where communication can be defined as "the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between [parties]"

(Anderson and Narus, 1990, p. 44). This study focuses on the customer's perceived quality of the information that is being provided by the financial company. While information quality is a multidimensional construct we concentrate on information relevancy and information understandability.

Information involvement. While customers may be involved in the purchase decision, the service category, the service brand, and/or the information (Gordon, McKeage and Fox, 1998), this study focuses on customer information involvement. Information involvement we conceptualize as the degree of personal importance and relevance a customer attach to the financial services information perceived in the particular relationship.

Switching costs. Switching costs can be financial or psychological in nature (Bell, Auh and Smalley, 2005) and are the "one time costs facing the buyer of switching from one supplier's product to another" (Porter 1980, p. 10). Switching costs may include time, monetary and psychological costs.

Service quality. Service quality can be divided into functional and technical service quality, respectively. Functional service quality relates to the nature of the interaction between the service provider and customer and the process by which the core service is delivered. Technical service quality relates to the quality of the service output (Bell, Auh and Smalley 2005) such as the recommendation of 'best investment options' and the achievement of 'financial goals'. In the present context, we focus on functional service quality since this form relates more directly to the customer-seller relationship approach, which emphasises the caring and individualized attention a firm provides its customers.

Waiting time. While waiting time may actually be beneficial in relation to anticipated stressful events since customers could use waiting time to help them cope with the impending event, past research has shown that in neutral or pleasant events waiting time may induce unpleasant responses such as boredom, irritation and helplessness (Miller, Kahn and Luce 2008). Thus, waiting time may be harmful to the financial customer-seller relationship.

Relationship antecedents

Financial customer-seller relationships may evolve in all the financial sub-sectors that are present in the consumer marketplace, including banks, mortgage companies, pension companies and insurance companies. Therefore, in the interest of the generalizability of the results, we decided not to constrain our sample to specific sub-sectors. Moreover, financial sub-sectors differ according to type and perceived complexity of services (Towers Perrin 2008), among other factors, emphasizing the need for investigating the extension of relationship types across sub-sectors.

Relationship outcomes

Satisfaction, loyalty and commitment. Satisfaction, loyalty and commitment constitute the three outcome variables included in our conceptual framework. This is consistent with prior research (Johnson and Selnes, 2004) suggesting that these variables constitute the main competitive advantages that may be gained from developing relationships with customers. On a similar note, satisfaction, loyalty and commitment can be seen as dimensions indicating 'relationship quality', i.e., the strength of the relationship between customer and seller (Huang, 2008).

Relationship descriptor variables

As well as several demographics and socioeconomics (i.e., age, gender, educational level, personal income, and household size), the descriptors included in this study also comprise three financial customer constructs: current financial behaviour, financial expectations and general financial trust.

Methodology

Data collection

We used a two-step procedure to sample respondents from Capacent Epinion's online panel of approximately 30,000 Danish consumers. In the first step, we drew a stratified random sample of 11,682 respondents aged 18+ from the online panel, reflecting the distribution of gender, age, and educational level in the population (aged 18+) as a whole. In the second step, respondents were contacted by email, and asked to respond to the screening question: "Have you recently been in contact with your current [type of financial company]?" (Yes/No/Not engaged with this type of company) to ensure that only ongoing relationships were included in the sample.

3,638 respondents constituted our final sample of respondents, distributed in the following way across financial sub-sectors: banks (n=1155; 31.7%), mortgage companies (n=896; 24.6%), pension companies (n=770; 21.2%) and insurance companies (n=817; 22.5%). In the final pooled sample, 55.6% were women and average age was 47.0 years with a range between

18-86 years. We investigated whether the profile of our pooled sample deviated from the Danish population aged 18-86 on gender and educational level. X^2-tests of difference between sample and population frequencies on each of these criteria produced p-values >.07, indicating that the pooled sample reflected the demographic profile of the studied population.

Measurements

Our measurement items were based on prior research, modified to fit the financial service context of our study where relevant.

Relationship characteristics measures. The three-item scale provided by Ping (1993) measured switching costs. Waiting time was measured by the three-item scale proposed by Brady and Cronin (2001). Four items adapted from Cho, Lee and Tharp (2001) and modified to fit the present context measured information involvement. Trust was measured by the four-item trust in the organization scale developed by Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran (1998). The four-item service quality (empathy) scale developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1994) measured customers' evaluations of service in the relationship. The service quality empathy scale was chosen because, consistent with the relationship theory approach, this scale is specifically directed at measuring the caring and individualized attention a firm provides its customers. Information understandability and relevance, respectively, were measured using the two four-item scales developed by Lee, Strong, Kahn and Wang (2002).

Outcome construct measures. Satisfaction was measured with a three-item scale adapted from De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder and Iacobucci (2001). The two loyalty intentions items developed by Sirohi, McLaughlin and Wittink (1998) along with one additional item measured loyalty, whereas commitment was measured by the Ganesh, Arnold and Reynolds (2000) three-item commitment to service provider scale.

Decriptor variable measures. Current financial behaviour was measured using six items adapted from the financial behaviour scale provided by Joo and Grable (2004). Two items derived from the SD Consumer Confidence Indicator (2008) measured financial expectations. Four items based on Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran (1998) measured general financial trust.

Results

Validation of measurements

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the thirteen latent factors, with each indicator specified to load on its hypothesized latent factor. The measurement model yields a chi-square of 7040.59 (d.f.=911, $p<.01$). However, since the chi-square test is highly sensitive to sample size other fit measures are given greater prominence in evaluating model fit. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=.043), the comparative fit index (CFI=.91) and the normed fit index (NFI=.90) show an acceptable degree of fit of the measurement model. All composite reliabilities exceeded, or were nearly equal to, .70 in our data, indicating acceptable reliability of measured constructs. Finally, extracted variance was equal to or greater than .5 for all latent constructs, which satisfies the threshold value recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Moreover, the extracted variance for each of the individual constructs exceeds the squared correlation between constructs indicating that sufficient discriminant validity is obtained.

Taxonomic development procedure

Cluster analysis was employed for the purpose of exploring whether a viable taxonomy of financial customer-seller relationships could be detected. An index was formed for each of the relationship constructs by adding and averaging the items for each construct. A two-step process was then utilized to take advantage of both hierarchical and non-hierarchical clustering procedures. First, hierarchical clustering was used to identify the numbers of clusters implied by the data. Then, k-means clustering was used to fine-tune and to further validate the results from the hierarchical procedure. These analyses indicated a six-cluster solution as the most reasonable option.

Taxonomic results

The means and standard deviations of relationship-characteristics by type of relationship (cluster) are shown in Table 1

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of relationship-characteristics by type of relationship (cluster)

Type of relationship (Cluster)	N	Trust	Information relevancy	Information understandability	Information involvement	Low switching costs	Service	Low waiting time
				Relationship-characteristic				
Poor relationship	476 (13.1%)	3.97^f 1.04	3.25^e .95	3.92^f 1.07	3.73^f 1.02	3.65^d 1.25	3.05^f .96	3.67^e 1.15
Semi-poor relationship	517 (14.2%)	5.34^e .73	3.26^e 1.07	4.90^e .84	3.87^e 1.07	2.22^f .93	4.51^e .76	5.02^d .67
Average relationship	1206 (33.2%)	5.55^d .57	4.20^d .65	5.21^d .60	4.36^d .78	3.94^c .44	4.69^d .58	5.09^d .54
Emerging semi-close relationship	459 (12.6%)	5.83^c .67	4.57^c .89	5.54^c .64	4.72^c .97	6.04^a .65	4.91^c .77	5.60^b .78
Semi-close relationship	609 (16.7%)	6.21^b .63	5.22^b .84	5.82^b .69	5.70^b .78	3.25^e 1.00	5.47^b .82	5.40^c .76
Close relationship	371 (10.2%)	6.67^a .51	6.06^a .77	6.61^a .48	6.24^a .74	5.00^b 1.23	6.40^a .64	6.38^a .70
Total sample	3638	5.57 1.01	4.34 1.21	5.28 1.02	4.67 1.20	3.92 1.39	4.78 1.14	5.12 1.01
F-value		829.93**	802.07**	701.48**	620.96**	1121,00**	1014.66**	609.89**

For a given relationship-characteristic (column), means for different relationship-types with the same superscript letter are not significantly different ($p<.05$) based on Duncan's multiple-range test. The means in the highest range are designated with a superscript a, the next highest with b, and so on. Solid-lined boxes emphasize the relationship-types with a mean in the highest range for a relationship-characteristic, dashed boxes represent the next highest level, whereas circles emphasize the lowest range. Cluster means were developed using seed points taken from the hierarchical cluster analysis.
All scales range from 1 (=customers' highly disagree that the characteristic is present in relationship) to 7 (=customers' highly agree that the characteristic is present in relationship).
**: F-value significant at the .01 level.

Additional insights into the nature of each cluster is provided in Table 2, which uses a range of variables (descriptors), including mean income (year), educational level, age, gender, household size, current financial behaviour, financial expectations and general financial trust, to display descriptive information about each relationship type. The combination of Tables 1 and 2 provides information about the relationship types. Interestingly, while the results suggest that only modest differences in income, educational level, age and household size are found across relationship types, more substantial differences are found when regarding consumers' current financial behaviour, financial expectations, and general financial trust. Because of the relatively larger variation of these last mentioned variables across relationship clusters we will concentrate on these as the main descriptor variables in the following review of the results.

Table 2: Descriptor variables by type of relationship (cluster)

Type of Relationship (Cluster)	N	Mean income (year)	Educational level (mean)	Age (years)	Household size (number of persons)	Gender (% females)^	Current financial behaviour	Financial expectation	General financial trust
					Descriptor variables				
Poor relationship	476 (13.1%)	3.99^a	4.99^{a,b}	47.3^{b,c}	2.68^a	51.5	5.26^{d,e}	4.42^d	4.01^f
Semi-poor relationship	517 (14.2%)	4.06^a	5.20^a	46.0^c	2.63^a	54.9	5.16^e	4.45^{c,d}	4.73^e
Average relationship	1206 (33.2%)	3.85^a	5.07^{a,b}	46.1^c	2.65^a	56.9	5.39^{c,d}	4.49^{c,d}	5.00^d
Emerging semi-close relationship	459 (12.6%)	4.08^a	5.19^a	46.4^{b,c}	2.70^a	51.9	5.52^{b,c}	4.63^{a,b}	5.25^c
Semi-close relationship	609 (16.7%)	4.02^a	4.96^{a,b}	49.1^a	2.46^b	55.1	5.57^b	4.56^{b,c}	5.42^b
Close relationship	371 (10.2%)	3.90^a	4.85^b	48.1^{a,b}	2.42^b	56.2	5.82^a	4.72^a	5.90^a
Total sample	3638	3.96	5.05	47.0	2.60	55.6	5.43	4.53	5.03

For a given relationship-characteristic (column), means for different relationship-types with the same superscript letter are not significantly different ($p<.05$) based on Duncan's multiple-range test. The means in the highest range are designated with a superscript a, the next highest with b, and so on.
^Chi-square test not significant ($p=.305$).

Poor relationship. Poor relationship comprised 13.1 percent of the sample population. These customers had the lowest level of information involvement across relationship types. Moreover, they exhibited the lowest level of trust and also perceived the lowest levels of information relevancy, information understandability, service, and low waiting time. However, they moderately agreed that the relationship is associated with low switching costs. Notably, in addition to assigning poor evaluations to most of the relationship characteristics these customers reported the lowest level of general financial trust and low levels of current financial behaviour and financial expectations.

Semi-poor relationship. Semi-poor relationship comprised 14.2 percent of the sample population and was the third largest cluster. Customers assigned to this relationship type have the lowest mean score on low switching costs and information relevancy is in the lowest mean range. Especially these two characteristics are the distinguishing features of this relationship type. Customers in the semi-poor relationship cluster also rate relatively low on information involvement, trust, service, and information understandability, whereas the mean score on waiting time is in the midrange. Their mean scores on current financial behavior and general financial trust are relatively low, whereas the mean score on financial expectations is in the midrange.

Average relationship. Comprising 33.2 percent of the sample population, average relationship was the largest cluster. For all relationship characteristics, customers in the average relationship cluster show mean scores near the sample mean and can thus be thought of as a 'baseline' cluster. Also, customers in this relationship type exhibit midrange levels of current financial behaviour, financial expectations and general financial trust.

Emerging semi-close relationship. Emerging semi-close relationship comprised 12.6 percent of the sample population and was the second smallest cluster. Customers in this cluster agree that the relationship is characterized by low switching costs, as suggested by the highest mean score of any of the relationship types on low switching costs. Also, the mean score on low waiting time is relatively high, whereas mean scores on all remaining relation characteristics are in the midrange. The relatively high mean score on low switching costs suggest that these customers are 'voluntarily' tied to their financial supplier. Thus, their actual presence in the relationship suggests that it may be beneficially for companies to invest additional amounts of resources in

order to improve customers' evaluations of relationship characteristics. While financial expectations is in the high mean range, current financial behaviour and general financial trust are in the midrange.

Semi-close relationship. Comprising 16.7 percent of the sample population, semi-close relationship was the second largest cluster. Semi-close relationship customers exhibit the second largest levels of information involvement, trust, service, information understandability, and information relevancy. They are not likely to agree that low switching costs are present in the relationship, as indicated by the relatively low mean score on this characteristic. Financial expectations, current financial behaviour and general financial trust are all in the high mean range.

Close relationship. Close relationship comprised 10.2 percent of the sample population and was the smallest cluster. With the highest mean scores on any relationship characteristics, except for low switching costs (assigned with the second largest mean score), customers in this cluster are likely to being close to their financial services provider. The high mean values indicate that sellers meet customers' needs and it is therefore unlikely that customers should terminate the relationship for the benefit of a competing provider, even though switching costs are deemed relatively low. A relationship portfolio with high shares of close relationships is therefore a goal that any financial service provider might wish to pursue. Financial expectations, current financial behaviour and general financial trust are all in the highest mean range.

Relationship antecedents and outcomes

Table 3 displays means and standard deviations of financial sub-sector (relation antecedents) and customer evaluations (relationship outcomes) by type of relationship.

Table 3: means and standard deviations of financial sub-sector and customer outcome evaluations by type of relationship (cluster)

Type of Relationship (Cluster)	N		Financial subsector				Customer outcome evaluations		
		Banks	Mortgage companies	Pension companies	Insurance companies		Satisfaction with rel.ship	Loyalty toward rel.ship	Relationship commitment
Poor relationship	476 (13.1%)	152 (13.2%)	102 (11.4%)	96 (12.5%)	102 (11.4%)		3.66^f	4.33^e	2.49^d
Semi-poor relationship	517 (14.2%)	129 (11.2%)	133 (14.8%)	170 (22.1%)	85 (10.4%)		4.95^e	5.36^d	2.20^e
Average relationship	1206 (33.2%)	295 (25.5%)	322 (35.9%)	331 (43.0%)	258 (31.6%)		5.31^d	5.93^c	2.47^d
Emerging semi-close relationship	459 (12.6%)	167 (14.5%)	120 (13.4%)	34 (4.4%)	136 (16.9%)		5.82^c	6.04^c	2.77^c
Semi-close relationship	609 (16.7%)	229 (19.8%)	140 (15.6%)	111 (14.4%)	129 (15.8%)		6.29^b	6.51^b	3.54^b
Close relationship	371 (10.2%)	183 (15.8%)	79 (8.8%)	28 (3.6%)	81 (9.9%)		6.75^a	6.71^a	4.40^a
Total sample	3638	1155	896	770	827		5.42	5.83	2.85

For a given relationship outcome evaluation (column), means for different relationship-types with the same superscript letter are not significantly different (*p*<.05) based on Duncan's multiple-range test. The means in the highest range are designated with a superscript a, the next highest with b, and so on.
Customer outcome evaluation scales range from 1(=low commitment, satisfaction, and loyalty) to 7(=high commitment, satisfaction, and loyalty).

A chi-square test (237.55, d.f.=15, *p*<.01) indicates that relationship type is related to type of financial sub-sector. While the results suggest that the four financial sub-sectors have nearly equal shares of poor relationships, pension companies are overrepresented with semi-poor and average relationships, having larger shares of both these relationship types than any of the other three sub-sectors. Consistent with these results, pension companies also comprise the lowest share of emerging semi-close, semi-close and close relationships, respectively. Relatively more close relationships, and fewer average relationships, are found within the bank sub-sector than within the three other sub-sectors. No substantial differences in shares of relationship-types appear between mortgage and insurance companies.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated that customer outcome evaluations are dependent upon the type of financial relationship (Wilks' lambda=0.49; F=200.08 (15, 10021.23), p<.01). Therefore, to determine which customer outcome evaluations are different across relationship type, separate univariate ANOVAs were performed for each of the individual dependent variables: satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment. Relationship type had significant effects on both satisfaction (F=522.08, p<.01), loyalty (F=218.05; p<.01), and commitment (F=139.91, p<.01). The cell means provided in Table 3 suggest that the levels of relationship commitment, satisfaction and loyalty were higher the closer the relationship. An examination of the partial eta squared values indicates that noticeable proportions of variance in each of the three outcome evaluations (commitment: 16.1%; satisfaction: 41.8%;

loyalty: 23.1%, respectively) can be attributed to relationship type.

Relationship outcomes by financial sub-sector

To investigate whether type of financial sub-sector would influence customer outcome evaluations a MANOVA, along with subsequent ANOVAs, was carried out. The MANOVA results suggest that customer outcome evaluations are significantly influenced by type of financial sub-sector (Wilks' lambda=0.92; F=32.84 (9, 8839.48), p<.01). ANOVAs were performed for each of the individual dependent variables: satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment. Type of financial sub-sector significantly affected both satisfaction (F=38.32, p<.01), loyalty (F=4.89; p<.01), and commitment (F=36.25, p<.01). However, an examination of the partial eta squared values indicate that only limited proportions of variance in each of the three outcome evaluations (satisfaction: 3.1%; loyalty: .04%; and commitment: 2.9%, respectively) are attributed to type of financial sub-sector. Consequently, no further results are discussed in relation to this issue.

Discussion

Six types of financial customer-seller relations were identified in this study. Similar to prior relationship taxonomic research (e.g., Cannon and Perrault 1999), the general picture was that relationship characteristic levels vary collectively such that, for example, a relatively low level of one characteristic in a relationship type most likely

was accompanied by relatively low levels of other relationship characteristics within that relationship type. However, an examination of the specific levels of relationship characteristics provides additional insights since characteristic levels, in particular switching costs levels, and to a lesser degree waiting time levels, vary in different ways across relationship types. Recognizing that even highly satisfied and loyal customers might still switch to another company it is essential that financial managers gain knowledge of customers' perceived switching costs. Customers who perceive relatively high switching costs are more likely to remain loyal to a service provider, even under conditions of dissatisfaction with the relationship (Ganesh, Arnould and Reynolds 2000). With average perceived switching costs close to the total sample mean, this may be an important reason behind the existence of the poor relationship type. For this relationship type competitors may, however, see an interest in trying to reduce the perceived costs of switching to another financial company for the purpose of taking advantage of customers' perceived poorness of their current relation-ship. In order to prevent this, financial managers should seek to improve customers' perception of relationship characteristics to levels corresponding to the levels of the semi-poor relationship cluster. This latter relationship type is characterized by customers who on average highly disagree that switching costs are low.

The emerging semi-close relationship type comprises customers with the highest mean score on low switching costs, which makes them vulnerable to competitors' actions. Thus, consistent with relationship portfolio theory and management (Johnson and Selnes 2004) it is essential that these customers are tied even closer to the company by transferring them into semi-close or even close relationship types.

Our research results suggest that relationship characteristics are major factors in influencing financial customers' satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment responses. Consistent with the marketing relationship approach this heightens the importance of long-term and well-functioning customer-seller interactions in the financial marketplace. As such, the understanding of customers' perception of their interaction with financial companies is vital in order to tie customers closer to their company. We identified several differences among customer clusters, enabling financial companies to more efficiently identify and target customers as part of a broader value assessment and retention strategy (Johnson and Selnes 2004; Ganesh, Arnould and Reynolds 2000). This presupposes, however, that financial managers urge employees to realize that financial customers should be regarded as an asset to the company and also that financial employees must learn, among other aspects, how to communicate with individual customers in a relevant and understandable manner and how to build customer trust. The results

suggest that demographic information is less useful for determining customer-seller relationship type since only modest differences in income, educational level, age, and household size, and no gender-differences, were detected across relationship types. Thus, we also point to the critical role of continuously monitoring financial customer relationship perceptions and outcome evaluations. Dependent upon their perceived attractiveness, each relationship type requires a different approach and degree of investment according to whether the intent is to maintain or improve the relationship (Johnson and Selnes 2004).

To our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate possible associations between customer-seller relationship types and constructs associated with the financial welfare of the customer and, ultimately, of the society. Notably, the clearest association was found between relationship type and general financial trust with mean scores on general financial trust systematically increasing with closeness of relationship. Close to this picture, but in a little less systematic manner, customers' mean scores on current financial behaviour and financial expectations both tend to increase with closeness of relationship type. These results provide important input to the debate currently taking place in many societies concerning the implications for society and welfare of consumers' decreased confidence in financial companies and whether special governmental initiatives should be carried out to deal with these developments. It should be noted, however, that while our results suggest the existence of an associative tendency between these relationship descriptors and relationship type, they do not take into account the possible causality of these associations. Future research may wish to investigate to what degree part of the associative tendency may be attributed to financial companies' interest in attracting and developing close relationships with customers with already established positive financial behaviours and expectations and/or to the possible reason that close and well-functioning customer-seller relationships might positively affect customers' financial behaviour, expecta-tions and general financial trust.

Our results suggest that only limited, however signifi-cant, proportions of variance in the three relationship outcome constructs, i.e., satisfaction, loyalty and commitment, are attributed to type of financial sub-sector. These results fit well into the findings that, when disregarding pension companies, only modest differences in shares of relationship types were found across financial sub-sectors, suggesting the generalizability of the relative sizes of relationship types. Moreover, our results are consistent with recent research suggesting that it is often difficult to engage consumers in pension-related topics because of their long-term nature and perceived complexity (Towers Perrin 2008).

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