Engaging customers with employees in service encounters
Linking employee and customer service engagement behaviors through relational energy and interaction cohesion
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Abstract
Purpose – Keeping both employees and customers highly engaged has become a critical issue for service firms, especially for high-contact and highly customized services. Therefore, it is essential to engage employees and customers during service interactions for better service outcomes. However, past research on employee and customer engagement has primarily focused on brands and organizations. Little research has concentrated on service interactions as the objects of engagement. To fill this research gap, this study aims to clarify and define service engagement behaviors (SEBs), identify various employee and customer SEBs and develop a model to investigate the relationships between these behaviors.

Design/methodology/approach – A theoretical framework was developed based on social contagion theory and service-dominant (S-D) logic to explore the effects of employee SEBs on customer SEBs through customer perceptions of relational energy and interaction cohesion. Dyadic survey data collected from 293 customer-employee pairs in various high-contact and highly customized service industries were examined through structural equation modeling.

Findings – Results show that employee SEBs (service role involvement, customer orientation behavior and customer empowerment behavior) positively influence relational energy and interaction cohesion, which in turn affect customer SEBs (service exploration behavior and service coordination behavior).

Originality/value – This study represents pioneering research to conceptualize SEBs. Different from the extant literature on engagement, SEBs capture the proactive and collaborative engagement behaviors of employees and customers in service interactions. Various employee and customer SEBs were identified and an empirical model was proposed and tested to investigate the effect of employee SEBs on customer SEBs through relational energy and interaction cohesion.

Keywords Customer service engagement behavior, Employee service engagement behavior, Interaction cohesion, Relational energy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
In the current service era where many customers no longer settle for impersonalized service experiences (Bock et al., 2016; Wilder et al., 2014), the success of services requires all interactants to engagingly take initiatives during service encounters (Chan et al., 2010; Guo et al., 2017). As service encounters involve both employees and customers as interactants (Bitner, 1990; Gallan et al., 2013; Lloyd and Luk, 2011), not only are the acts of employees critical in service delivery but also how customers act during the processes is significant for service outcomes (Dellande et al., 2004; Dong and Sivakumar, 2015; Sim et al., 2018). The phenomenon is especially crucial in high-contact and highly customized services, where identifying an individual customer’s explicit and implicit requirements and preferences and, subsequently, integrating the information into service delivery has become central for fulfilling customer needs (Homburg et al., 2009; Lim et al., 2019; Wilder et al., 2014). That is to say, the proactive and collaborative engagement of both employees and customers is crucial for the creation of such individualized service experiences, in which service provision and customers’ unique needs are matched (Auh et al., 2007; Bendapudi and Leone, 2003;
Coelho and Henseler, 2012; Dong and Sivakumar, 2017; Gwinner et al., 2005; Johnston and Kong, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Wilder et al., 2014). Such customized services bring about abundant positive service outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, delight, trust, relationship longevity and high perceived service quality (Coelho and Henseler, 2012; Dong and Sivakumar, 2017; Gwinner et al., 2005; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Wilder et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important for service firms to keep both service employees and customers highly engaged during service interactions.

Engagement behavior represents one's pattern of action with respect to a target object (Pham and Avnet, 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2002; van Doorn et al., 2010). It is an important element in an interpersonal interaction (Smith and Gallicano, 2015). During an interaction, when focal participants proactively contribute to the relational activities and engage in the interaction, more positive perceptions and interaction outcomes may result (Jang et al., 2004; Runhaar et al., 2013). Similarly, as service interactants take initiatives to shape service offerings and coordinate the delivery processes, they may jointly create services to better fit customer needs and establish more effective communication in achieving customization (Bernardes, 2010; Field et al., 2018; Jääskeläinen and Heikkilä, 2019; Patel et al., 2019). In the meantime, service employees play an integral role in customer interactions, and their acts consequently shape customer perceptions, which, in turn, lead to various behavioral reactions of customers (Bitner, 1990; Keh et al., 2013; Mills and Morris, 1986; Zhao et al., 2018). Moreover, Kumar and Pansari (2016) have clearly proposed that firms should engage customers through employee engagement. Therefore, it is essential for both researchers and service practitioners to understand and explore the service engagement behaviors (SEBs) of both employees and customers, and how they are connected during service encounters. However, this issue is yet to be clearly identified and investigated in past studies.

Despite the increasing interest in the literature on engagement, existing service research primarily focuses on brands and/or organizations as the engagement objects in enhancing firm performance (e.g., Brodie et al., 2011; Gong, 2017; Kumar et al., 2010; Leckie et al., 2018; Vivek et al., 2012). Even though the interactive and experiential nature of service delivery processes plays an integral role in creating customer value, and such processes could be jointly shaped through employee and customer behaviors (Neghina et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2019; Subramony et al., 2017; Vargo and Lusch, 2008), extant research has overlooked service interactions as focal objects of engagement (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). While past research on service management also attempts to address the issue of enhancing value through employee and/or customer behaviors (e.g., Chan et al., 2010; Fisk et al., 2018; Yim et al., 2012), it has yet to capture the proactive and collaborative engagement of both interactants in service interactions, least yet the linking mechanism between employee and customer SEBs.

To fill these research gaps, this study examines SEBs based on both service interactants' proactive investment of effort in and collaborative contributions to the service interactions, which the extant literature has ignored. This research first defines SEB as the behavioral manifestations of a service participant's (i.e. employee and customer) proactive involvement dedicated to the service interaction (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010). Furthermore, this study explores how employee and customer SEBs are linked through customers' positive perceptions resulting from the interactions with service employees. Drawing on theoretical lenses of social contagion and service-dominant (S-D) logic, this paper proposes that employee SEBs influence customer SEBs through customer-perceived relational energy and interaction cohesion.

In the following sections, this study first reviews the theoretical background and concepts that are central to employee and customer SEBs. Next, a conceptual framework and hypotheses are presented, along with the research methodology and data collection. Finally, the empirical results, implications and future research directions are discussed.
**Conceptual background**

As a service interaction encompasses both the service offering and the service process (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Helkkula et al., 2018), the participants not only have to devote themselves to crafting superior core service but also need to develop close collaboration to enhance the service delivery procedure (Hülshéger et al., 2015; Oertzen et al., 2018). During service encounters, engagement behaviors are essentially important because more positive perceptions and interaction outcomes may follow as the focal participants (i.e. employees and customers) jointly take charge of the service tasks and collaboratively engage in the service processes as a team (Huetten et al., 2019; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; Mullins et al., 2015). In other words, once the service employees and customers engage in contributing to the service interactions, more effective service dialog is likely to be achieved (Mustak et al., 2016; Sharma and Conduit, 2016), while services could be more personalized, better fit customer needs and generate greater service value (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2018).

However, the extant literature on engagement of employees and customers has primarily focused on brands and organizations as objects rather than service interactions (e.g. Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Kumar et al., 2019; Macey et al., 2009; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Research pertaining to how service interactants proactively contribute to and collaboratively engage in service interactions also remains scarce. Specifically, past research on employee engagement has primarily emphasized employees’ work-related psychological states (e.g. Barrick et al., 2015; Byrne et al., 2016; Salanova et al., 2005), neglecting the actual engagement behaviors they display in service encounters. Moreover, studies on customer engagement behaviors have also centered only on customer acts after transactions with the firms or brands, such as spreading positive word-of-mouth and exhibiting brand loyalty (Beckers et al., 2018; Gong, 2017; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Leckie et al., 2018; Pansari and Kumar, 2017; van Doorn et al., 2010; Verleye et al., 2014). Little research has been done to simultaneously examine the engagement behaviors of both employees and customers for enhancing the service interaction processes and offerings.

Despite the importance of engagement behaviors in the service processes, few studies have examined and clarified the engagement behaviors displayed by both employees and customers in service encounters. The link between employee and customer SEBs is also underexplored. To bridge the research gap, the current research aims to define SEBs, develop and empirically test a model that identifies various employee and customer SEBs and examine the relationships between these behaviors.

**Service engagement behavior (SEB)**

Engagement behavior refers to an individual’s pattern of action associated with a target object (Pham and Avnet, 2009). This study then defines SEB as the behavioral manifestations of a service participant’s (i.e. employee and customer) proactive involvement dedicated to the service interaction (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010). The SEBs of employees and customers are discussed as follows.

**Employee SEB**

As indicated by Fleck and Inceoglu (2010), engaged employees are likely to display three types of behavior that benefit their organizations: (1) investing effort, (2) making extra contributions and (3) stretching beyond typical activities. Investing effort implies that engaged employees tend to exert a great deal of effort on their core tasks. As service employees, they may devote themselves and infuse energy into the service roles (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010; Young et al., 2018). Making extra contributions refers to the willingness of employees to go the extra mile when accomplishing their jobs. In service interactions, such employees likely care more about customers’ needs and try to better serve customers (Anaza and Rutherford, 2012; Gazzoli et al., 2013). Stretching beyond typical activities means
employees’ tendency to act as trustworthy partners toward customers. During service delivery, when an employee assumes the mantle of service partner rather than being limited to the label of service provider, they are more inclined to involve customer collaboration in the service content (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017; Sharma and Conduit, 2016). Thus, on the basis of the theoretical background provided by Fleck and Inceoglu (2010), this study proposes three distinctive types of employee SEBs.

First, engaged service personnel may exert considerable effort on the core service tasks as they tend to recognize their responsibility to serve customers (Crawford et al., 2010; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013) and regard involvement in their work roles as an essential act toward enhancing service content (Bakker et al., 2012; Raub and Liao, 2012; Rich et al., 2010). Engaged employees are also more energetic, enthusiastic and deeply engrossed in the service processes (Salanova et al., 2005; Sonnentag et al., 2019). They would naturally and genuinely interpret their roles with passion because they enthusiastically engage themselves in the service tasks (Wilk and Moynihan, 2005). In other words, they are prone to investing their energy and fully inhabiting their roles instead of simply performing their jobs (Kahn, 2010). Accordingly, the engaged service personnel are more likely to demonstrate service role involvement, which represents their dedication to their service roles and their effort exerted on the core service tasks (Kahn, 2010; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Schneider et al., 2018).

Second, engaged service personnel may be more willing to contribute extra effort for their customers (Chan and Lam, 2011). The mindset of “going the extra mile to serve customers” is reflected in their customer-oriented acts (Rafaeli et al., 2008). In particular, engaged service employees are likely to be more alert to various customer needs (Homburg et al., 2009; Menguc et al., 2013; Young et al., 2009) and be more motivated to offer personalized services (Jung et al., 2017). To make customers feel that they are unique, the engaged employees tend to exert extra effort on acts such as accommodating customer requests and providing customized service suggestions (Eldor and Harpaz, 2016; Payne and Webber, 2006; Wieseke et al., 2009). In other words, the dedicated employees are likely to display customer orientation behavior, which refers to employee’s behavior of making extra effort toward satisfying customer needs in the service encounters (Rafaeli et al., 2008; Stock and Hoyer, 2005).

Third, engaged service personnel are more likely to broaden their behavioral contributions beyond ordinary service activities by acting as customers’ supportive service partners to involve customers in the service processes (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017; Sharma and Conduit, 2016) since they realize that superior service performance would not be achieved without the aid of customers (Xie et al., 2008; Yi et al., 2011). That is to say, in pursuit of excellent service delivery, these engaged personnel may perceive customers as proactive co-creators rather than passive receivers of services (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017; Payne et al., 2008). Therefore, they tend to provide avenues for customers to connect and collaborate with them (Auh et al., 2007; Ramani and Kumar, 2008), encourage suggestions and ideas (Bakker, 2010; Dean, 2007) and seek customer feedback and opinions (Auh et al., 2019). That is, engaged service employees are more likely to exhibit customer empowerment behavior, which represents an employee’s endeavors to actively stretch beyond regular service activities by encouraging customer collaboration in the service processes (Ouschan et al., 2006; Ramani and Kumar, 2008).

With the notion that engaged frontline employees are prone to take on their roles, pay particular attention to customer needs and proactively engage customers during service encounters, this study proposes that employee SEBs consist of three vital behaviors: service role involvement, customer orientation behavior and customer empowerment behavior.

Customer SEB
As suggested by Sonnentag (2003), to achieve higher team performance, engaged individuals are more likely to search for learning opportunities, taking personal initiatives to coordinate
interaction processes with the interacting counterparts. In high-contact and highly customized service interactions, where individualized services are jointly crafted (Auh et al., 2007; Moeller et al., 2013), customers tend to acknowledge their influence on service delivery and regard themselves as indispensable collaborators with service personnel (Dong et al., 2015; Kelleher et al., 2019; Moeller et al., 2013; Oertzen et al., 2018). That is to say, customers consider themselves to be service collaborators with employees. Therefore, to achieve better service outcomes, engaged customers tend to explore and coordinate more in service interactions. Following such a theoretical rationale, this study proposes two types of customer SEBs.

First, with stronger tendency toward learning, engaged customers tend to be more explorative; they are more inclined to seek service-related information in service encounters, since they are more willing to learn through interpersonal interactions (Gong et al., 2012; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2014). Moreover, engaged individuals also tend to search for better solutions (Heidenreich and Handrich, 2015; van Doorn et al., 2010). In service encounters, engaged customers would learn more about various service options (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Lakshmanan and Krishnan, 2011), exploring various service possibilities and combinations (Cui and Wu, 2016). Consequently, engaged customers are more likely to demonstrate service exploration behavior, indicating their devotion toward exploring service-related knowledge and delving into better service experiences (Hibbert et al., 2012; Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Second, engaged customers tend to be good coordinators. They may demonstrate proactivity by affirming their personal preferences and offering service-related information (Fisher et al., 2012; Raub and Liao, 2012), participating in integrative decision-making (Sweeney et al., 2015), investing great effort to achieve service mastery through mutual communication (Hollebeek et al., 2019) and dynamically adjusting their behaviors to accommodate the personnel’s ongoing service activities to achieve better interactions (Fisher, 2014). If required, engaged customers will voluntarily propose, discuss and negotiate service improvement opportunities with employees to receive more personalized and satisfactory services (Bradley and Sparks, 2002; Gong et al., 2012). That is, the dedicated customers will exhibit service coordination behavior, which demonstrates their initiation of proactive communication as well as adjustments better orchestrating the service interactions (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Parker and Collins, 2010).

Overall, as engaged customers tend to further explore the service offerings and collaboratively arrange service processes with service employees to generate more personalized service experiences; this research proposes that customer SEBs encompass two critical behaviors: service exploration behavior and service coordination behavior.

Linkage between employee and customer SEBs
A rich body of the service literature has emphasized the influence of frontline employee behaviors on customers via interactions (Bittner, 1990; Bove et al., 2009; Chebat and Kollias, 2000; Groth et al., 2009; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Lechner and Paul, 2019; Tsai and Huang, 2002; Wieseke et al., 2012). Social contagion implies behavioral changes after interacting with other individuals because of aroused feelings through the process of relating (Hirshleifer and Teoh, 2009; Latane, 2000; Owens et al., 2016; Paxton et al., 1999; Radel et al., 2010; Rapp et al., 2013; Van den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007). In particular, behaviors could be spread among interacting individuals and cause similar behaviors by affecting the counterparts’ perceptions (Crandall, 1988; Hatfield et al., 1994; Hirshleifer and Teoh, 2009; Owens et al., 2016; Paxton et al., 1999; Radel et al., 2010). The more vigorous the behaviors and more empathic the communication that people are exposed to, more likely the social contagion will occur (Burt, 1987; Contractor and Eisenberg, 1990; Rapp et al., 2013). In service encounters, employee SEBs effectively create enthusiastic, caring and
individualized service interactions with customers; in such an atmosphere, customers are more likely to be affected and influenced to demonstrate similar behaviors. Therefore, this study adopts the theoretical view of social contagion to explain the influence of employee SEBs on customer SEBs.

Based on S-D logic, customer engagement behaviors are suggested to be highly related to their psychological states, which are activated by interactive experiences in service processes (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008). Moreover, the extant literature has emphasized that the antecedents of customers’ proactive involvement in service encounters include intrapersonal- and interpersonal-level promoting factors (Auh et al., 2007; Bettencourt, 1997; Bitner et al., 1990; Liao and Chuang, 2004; Owens et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2018). Thus, combining social contagion theory and S-D logic, customer SEBs which require an individual’s “proactive” input of effort, are proposed to be triggered by infectious and inspiring perceptual factors at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels as a result of interactions with engaged service employees (Harmeling et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Moliner et al., 2018; Pansari and Kumar, 2017; van Doorn et al., 2010).

At the intrapersonal level, past research has indicated that the perception of psychological resourcefulness generated from interactions is highly associated with individual engagement (Baker, 2019; Hobfoll and Shirom, 2001; Owens et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2012; Saks, 2006). According to Owens et al. (2016), relational energy—depicted as the perception of vitality, vigor and enthusiasm resulting from interpersonal interactions—represents a positive psychological state that is aroused by interpersonal contact. Such energy, spreading contagiously from a vigorous and dedicated interacting counterpart (Baker, 2019; Hatfield et al., 1994; Owens et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018), enriches one’s capacity to engage in the interaction (McDaniel, 2011; Quinn et al., 2012). Thus, relational energy serves as a critical concept that links employee and customer SEBs.

At the interpersonal level, the extant literature has suggested that the perception of cohesion derived from interactive experiences contributes to collaborative and contributive behaviors within a social group (Den Hartog et al., 2007; Farmer et al., 2015; Mathieu et al., 2015; Zaccaro et al., 2001). Interaction cohesion—defined as the sense of being connected with, supported by, and mutually attentive to the one with the same goal (Coleman, 1988; Jonczyk et al., 2016; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Post, 2015)—is likely to be perceived through the interactant’s effort to work on the shared tasks (Salanova et al., 2005). Such a sense of cohesion would enhance an individual’s desire to be associated and engaged (Miller, 2015; Rosenbaum, 2008). In the service context, customer engagement behaviors refer to customers’ proactive actions to improve their service experiences and outcomes with service employees, denoting the roles of customers as active service partners (Auh et al., 2007; Dong and Sivakumar, 2017; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2000; Lovelock and Wright, 2002; McKee et al., 2006; Mills and Morris, 1986). Given that engaged service employees build up enthusiastic interactions and devote extra effort toward fulfilling customer needs, customers are more likely to feel connected and share goals with them (Barrick et al., 1998; Mathieu et al., 2015; Rosenbaum, 2008). Consequently, customer SEBs are more likely to be triggered. That is to say, interaction cohesion also acts as a crucial mechanism of the contagious flow from employee SEBs to customer SEBs. With these theoretical notions, this study proposes that employee SEBs influence customer SEBs through customer-perceived relational energy and interaction cohesion.

**Hypotheses**

**Employee SEBs and relational energy**

Relational energy is highly related to personal behaviors and could be amplified and manifested through social interaction processes (Baker, 2019; Cole et al., 2012; Morgeson and
Hofmann, 1999; Owens et al., 2016). In other words, the perception of relational energy should be a social experience rather than an individual occurrence (Quinn, 2007; Yang et al., 2019). Moreover, Owens et al. (2016) mentioned that people can be energized by interacting with others. The positive interactions or exchanges with an energetic party have been proposed as the sill upon which such energy is created (Cole et al., 2012; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). The social contagion literature has also indicated that the sense of energy can be transmitted through interpersonal interactions with energetic, enthusiastic and exciting counterparts (Hatfield et al., 1994; Owens et al., 2016). Therefore, employee SEBs, which display proactive involvement dedicated to the service jobs and customers, should be treated as a critical source of relational energy to customers.

During service encounters, when employees immerse themselves in their service roles, they will be perceived as energetic people because they perform their jobs vigorously and enthusiastically, greet customers with smiles, maintain eye contact and even make routine processes fun and enjoyable (McDaniel, 2011; Menguc et al., 2013; Vallerand et al., 2007). Such behaviors bring a positive atmosphere to service interactions, and customers may feel energized because of the ripple effect of arousal-based perceptions (Langford, 2010; Otterbring, 2017; Söderlund and Sagfossen, 2017). In other words, as customers perceive the employees’ dedication to their service roles, they will have a heightened level of relational energy. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1.** Employee’s service role involvement is positively related to customer-perceived relational energy.

Customer orientation behavior is characterized by an employee’s devotion to a customer’s interests and endeavors geared toward meeting the customer’s needs and solving his/her problems by going beyond formal service requirements (Lin and Hsieh, 2011; Rafaeli et al., 2008; Stock and Hoyer, 2005). Such behavior instills a customer perception that the service employee is caring and supportive (Beck et al., 2002; Labig et al., 2005), which makes the service encounter meaningful. As past studies have indicated that relational energy can be strengthened, recharged or created through meaningful and vigorous interactions, it is likely that customers feel a higher level of relational energy during service encounters with customer-oriented employees (Holland et al., 2017; Hoppe et al., 2017). Moreover, Bock et al. (2016) reported that frontline employees’ provision of customized service offerings can cheer up customers and generate a sense of energy during the service interactions. Therefore, this study proposes that customer orientation behavior enhances relational energy:

**H2.** Employee’s customer orientation behavior is positively related to customer-perceived relational energy.

Customer empowerment behavior represents service personnel’s effort to solicit customers’ opinions and encourage their collaboration in service delivery processes (Ouschan et al., 2006; Ramani and Kumar, 2008). As customers are exposed to open communication, in which they are invited or encouraged to voice their opinions and make service decisions together, the bonding with employees and their vigor toward the interactions are strengthened (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Carmeli et al., 2009a; Menguc et al., 2017). This may then cause customers to feel more energetic during service encounters (Salanova et al., 2005; Ugwu et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2019). Therefore, it is expected that service employees’ customer empowerment behavior leads to customer-perceived relational energy:

**H3.** Employee’s customer empowerment behavior is positively related to customer-perceived relational energy.
Employee SEBs and interaction cohesion

In service delivery, when engaged employees express enthusiasm, make additional effort to provide customized services and display eagerness for the participation of customers (Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Salanova et al., 2005), it is contributive to developing effective interactions, making customers feel supported and having someone to work together on problem solving (Barrick et al., 1998; Mathieu et al., 2015; Rosenbaum, 2008). Under such circumstances, customers would psychologically connect the fulfillment of their needs with service employees, considering both sides as a collective team to achieve mutual goals. Hence, employee SEBs should be deemed as important factors bringing about customer perceptions of interaction cohesion.

When employees are deeply involved in their roles, they are more likely to link their personal success to task performance and consider their goal accomplishments more seriously (Courtright et al., 2017; Morgeson et al., 2005). During service encounters, such employees are more likely to perform their service tasks with greater effort, efficiency, conscientiousness and empathy, thus reflecting a desire to keep organizational service promises and fulfill customer needs. As customers perceive the support from service employees, they tend to treat them as partners working toward the mutual goals in the service interactions (Lakey et al., 2016; Rhoades et al., 2001). Therefore, it is proposed that employee’s service role involvement will increase interaction cohesion:

$$H_4.$$ Employee’s service role involvement is positively related to customer-perceived interaction cohesion.

Past research has indicated that employees with higher customer orientation are more accustomed to the effect their personalized behaviors might have on customers; they are more flexible in service delivery and are more engaged in showing positive attitudes, behaviors and expertise to serve customers (Gazzoli et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2014). Therefore, customer-oriented frontline employees may create more enjoyable service interactions by anticipating customer needs, providing customized suggestions and offering adapted services rather than performing and following a scripted routine (Rafaeli et al., 2008; Schau et al., 2007). In the service encounters, when customers feel that they are understood, treated personally and pampered with care, they are likely to form positive perceptions of interactions, consider the association with this employee to be satisfying and have a sense of belonging (Gazzoli et al., 2013; Post, 2015). Therefore, this research proposes that employee’s displayed customer orientation behavior will enhance relational cohesion.

$$H_5.$$ Employee’s customer orientation behavior is positively related to customer-perceived interaction cohesion.

Past research has suggested that positive customer perceptions about service encounters are likely to be achieved when frontline employees seek to empower customers by expressing openness and encouraging them to participate in the service processes (Sharma and Patterson, 1999; Webster and Sundaram, 2009). Furthermore, previous studies have reported that once customers perceive that they are valued and influential to the service delivery processes and are encouraged to join, a sense of inclusion and togetherness within the group occurs (Farmer et al., 2015; Martin and Bush, 2006). In other words, a positive perception of cohesion results as service employees invite customers to collaborate with them. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

$$H_6.$$ Employee’s customer empowerment behavior is positively related to customer-perceived interaction cohesion.
Relational energy and customer SEBs

According to the extant literature, aroused relational energy in human interactions attracts a sense of capability as well as motivation to improve individuals’ psychological states and drive people to perform dedication behaviors in social interactions (Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2016; Qin et al., 2018). The more energized interactions one experiences, the more willing and volitional they are to invest their own effort and time to perform proactive behaviors (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). As customers perceive the positive psychological state of relational energy resulting from service interactions, their exploratory mindsets are thereby enhanced (Fredrickson, 1998; Zaman et al., 2010). Thus, such customers are more inclined to seek service information and pursue opportunities for better service solutions (Liu et al., 2011; Shalley et al., 2004). That is, energized customers are motivated to allocate more resources, such as time and effort, to explore various service possibilities and search for better service solutions (Ashby et al., 2002; Cui and Wu, 2016; Heidenreich and Handrich, 2015; Zaman et al., 2010). Therefore, this paper proposes that relational energy will lead to customers’ service exploration behavior:

H7. Customer-perceived relational energy is positively related to service exploration behavior.

Besides exploring the possibility of better service solutions, energized customers are also more eager to play proactive roles as service coordinators (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Rich et al., 2010). The extant literature indicated that when people are positively aroused and perceive relational energy, they are more likely to actively engage in thought-provoking communication, service mastery and behavioral adjustments according to the pace of service progress (Kark and Carmeli, 2009; Owens et al., 2016). Therefore, in service encounters, relational energy will activate customers to demonstrate coordination behaviors, such as initiating discussions about personal preferences (Baker, 2019; Brown and Leigh, 1996; Rich et al., 2010), attentively monitor and collaborate in the service processes (Grodal et al., 2015) and thoughtfully integrate mutual interests and adapt one’s acts to the ongoing service activities (Fan and Zietsma, 2017; Rico et al., 2008). Thus, this research proposes that perceived relational energy will influence customers’ service coordination behavior:

H8. Customer-perceived relational energy is positively related to service coordination behavior.

Interaction cohesion and customer SEBs

People who experience cohesion with others are believed to be more likely to work collaboratively and proactively in the team (Farmer et al., 2015; Jonczyk et al., 2016; Malhotra and Lumineau, 2011; Martin and Good, 2015). In other words, individuals working in a cohesive team will engage more deeply with the aim to obtain better outcomes (Fisher et al., 2012).

When people feel connected with each other, they are more motivated to pursue better information exchange and knowledge creation (Gully et al., 2002; Lester et al., 2002; Stajkovic et al., 2009). For customers in service encounters, the sense of togetherness in achieving superior service outcomes with service employees enables them to enact explorative practices (Spreitzer et al., 2005). They may make inquiries and seek opportunities to acquire specific service-related knowledge for developing better service programs with the service provider (Carmeli et al., 2009b; Carmeli and Gittell, 2009; Edmondson, 2004). Since such cohesive perception motivates customers to discover more out of the service content and to explore innovative service experiences, this research proposes that interaction cohesion is positively
related to customers’ service exploration behaviors. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\( H9. \) Customer-perceived interaction cohesion is positively related to service exploration behavior.

Coordination refers to individuals within a group communicating intensively with the aim of understanding each other and finding activities conducive to reach their desired goals (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Lester et al., 2002). In the service interaction context, perceived cohesiveness may propel customers to exhibit coordinative acts (Keyton, 1999; Martin and Good, 2015). Initially, the cohesive perception will motivate customers to better communicate their own preferences and work cooperatively with service employees to master the service processes (Farmer et al., 2015; Mathieu et al., 2015). Furthermore, being on the same page with the service personnel enables customers to heedfully cope with them (Farmer et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2012). As these customers consider themselves and the service employees as a team, they will effectively adjust their own behaviors to jointly perform better service tasks (Ahn and Rho, 2016; Kim and Choi, 2016). Since interaction cohesion drives customers to initiate proactive communication and behavioral adjustments that enhance service effectiveness, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

\( H10. \) Customer-perceived interaction cohesion is positively related to service coordination behavior.

**Control variables**

To further strengthen the robustness of the conceptual model and reduce possible spurious relationships resulting from unmeasured variables, this research incorporates relationship duration (the length of time that the relationship between the interactants has existed) and contact frequency (the number of interactions per unit of time between the interacting participants) as control variables, since these two relational factors have been suggested to affect how customers behave in and contribute to service encounters (Bolton et al., 2004; Huang et al., 2018; Lin and Hsieh, 2011; Palmatier et al., 2006). Moreover, this study controls for customer knowledge (customers’ general understanding of the service), since different knowledge levels may affect customers’ contributions to service delivery processes (Auh et al., 2007; Chang and Taylor, 2016; Dong et al., 2008; Santos and Spring, 2015). Additionally, customer-perceived employee deep acting (customer perceptions of employee’s modification of actual feelings to match the required emotional display) is also controlled, on account of its potential influences on customers’ sense of energy and belonging in service interactions (Groth et al., 2009; Lechner and Paul, 2019; Yoo and Arnold, 2016).

Figure 1 presents the hypotheses in the conceptual framework. The relationships among the constructs were empirically tested in the following sections.

**Method**

**Research frame and procedures**

An empirical study was conducted to test the conceptual model and hypothesized relationships. Dyadic data were collected from service employees and customers in high-contact and highly customized service industries, which involve more intensive interactions and discussions to achieve customers’ service consumption goals (Bowen, 1990; Guo et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2007; Yee et al., 2008). Data gathered from service employees include service role involvement and customer empowerment behavior, while customer data includes
perceived customer orientation behavior, relational energy, interaction cohesion, service exploration behavior, service coordination behavior, as well as customer knowledge, perceived employee deep acting, relationship duration, and contact frequency.

A total of 20 research assistants were recruited and grouped into ten teams, each consisting of two field observers. These teams observed service interactions and collected data from both service employees and customers (Pugh, 2001; Tsai and Huang, 2002). The research assistants first chose a target customer and observed his/her service interaction with a service employee. Only service interactions that lasted for at least 10 min were used in the analysis to ensure that customer-employee interactions were not affected by time pressure (Lin and Lin, 2017). Employees and customers were not aware of the presence of the research assistants during the interactions, and each store was visited only once to ensure that employees were not aware of the observations in advance (Lin and Lin, 2011). Upon exiting the store, the customer was approached by one of the assistants and was requested to fill out a questionnaire regarding various perceptions and behaviors. Simultaneously, the other assistant requested the employee’s cooperation after the service interaction in rating his/her displayed behaviors toward the specific customer. If the employee was busy with subsequent customers and unable to finish the survey immediately after the service interaction, the research assistant waited until he/she had time to finish the survey. Respondents (either the customers or employees) who declined or could not complete the survey in a reasonable time were excluded from this study’s sample (Lin and Lin, 2011).

A random sample of service firms from multiple high-contact and highly customized service industries (e.g., beauty care services, hair styling, fashion retailing, optical services and fitness training) [1] were selected for this research. First, five cities were chosen for data collection [2]. Using commercial directories, 90 stores were randomly selected per city (a total of 450 stores) (Stock and Bednarek, 2014). Each team, comprising two research assistants, visited each store during regular business hours (Finn and Kayanda, 1999), randomly selecting customers and time frames based on a sampling schedule, where various time frames (peak/off-peak; morning/afternoon/evening and weekdays/weekends) were employed to increase randomness (Lin and Lin, 2017; Lin and Liang, 2011; Lin and Lin, 2011; Tsai, 2001; Tsai and Huang, 2002).
This study yielded a response rate of 77.3 percent and 80.4 percent from employees and customers, respectively. The final sample consisted of 293 pairs of employees and customers. Of the 293 service employees, 71.7 percent were female and 68.9 percent were full-time employees. Of the 293 customers, 38.2 percent were male, the overall customer age range was 18–65 years, and customer education level ranged from high school to graduate school.

This research also tested for non-response bias. The demographic information (gender and age) of the non-respondents (including those who did not completely finish the questionnaires) was collected and compared with that of the final sample (Pugh, 2001). A series of chi-square and t-tests indicated no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents, suggesting that non-response bias was minimal.

**Measures**

Multi-item scales from previous research were adopted for this study. A questionnaire was constructed and pretested four times to ensure that the questions were understood as intended and to assess the feasibility of the survey approach. The four pretests were conducted before the formal data collection, with 93 participants in total. The participants responded to the items, shared their understanding, explained their responses, and reported any problems they encountered. The feedback from the pretest was then utilized to confirm whether the meaning of the questions was fairly understood. Minor adjustments in wording were then made according to the feedback, and the items were finalized to be used in the research (Lin and Hsieh, 2011). The finalized items were displayed in seven-point Likert scales anchored from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

This study measured service role involvement with three items derived from Langford (2010). While customer orientation behavior was operationalized through five items based on Lin and Hsieh (2011), customer empowerment behavior measured with three items was adapted from O’Cass and Ngo (2011) and Ramani and Kumar (2008). To measure customer-perceived relational energy, this paper used five items adapted from Owens et al. (2016). Three items of interaction cohesion were adapted from Mathieu et al. (2015). Moreover, service exploration behavior measured with three items was adapted from Kashdan et al. (2004), Niessen et al. (2012), and Stumpf et al. (1983). Regarding service coordination behavior, four items were adapted from Fisher et al. (2012).

For the control variables, relationship duration was measured with a single item following Dagger et al. (2009): “Approximately how long have you been coming to this service employee?” Answers were coded into years for analysis. Following Dagger et al. (2009), the single-item measure of contact frequency asked respondents, “Approximately how frequently have you been coming to this service employee?” Response options included the number of contacts per week, month or year, allowing respondents to reply based on a general estimate over a period of time (Dagger et al., 2009). These were then standardized as the number of contacts per year. As regards customer knowledge, two items were adopted from Eisingerich and Bell (2008); while for customer-perceived employee deep acting, it was measured with three items adopted from Groth et al. (2009). For the list of all items, please see the Appendix.

**Results**

*Total measurement model estimation*

The theoretical model was tested using LISREL 9.2. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (including the items listed above) was employed. Results suggest a good fit overall ($\chi^2 = 509.92$, df = 442, RMSEA = 0.024, SRMR = 0.04, NFI = 0.97, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99 and IFI = 0.99). Regarding reliability, Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability (CR) and maximum reliability were evaluated (Chin, 1998; Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). As shown in Table I, all the Cronbach’s alpha, CR and maximum reliability were well above
the cut-off value of 0.70, exhibiting satisfactory reliability. In addition, all factor loadings in
the CFA for the total measurement model were significant (with all t values at \( p < 0.01 \) level)
(Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Kumar et al., 1998), demonstrating convergent validity.
Moreover, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor was all above 0.50, further
supporting convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Discriminant validity was then examined. As shown in Table II, the maximum shared
variance (MSV) for each construct was smaller than its AVE, while the square root of the AVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Cronbach’s ( \alpha )</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>Maximum reliability</th>
<th>Standardized loading</th>
</tr>
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<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer orientation behavior</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COB1</td>
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<td>COB3</td>
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<td>COB5</td>
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<td>0.78</td>
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<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>CEM2</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEM3</td>
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<td>0.80</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>RE1</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE2</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE3</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE4</td>
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<td>RE5</td>
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<tr>
<td>IC2</td>
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<tr>
<td>IC3</td>
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<td>0.93</td>
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<td>COOR4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship duration</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
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<td>Contact frequency</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNOW1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer-perceived employee deep acting</td>
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<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
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<td>DAB3</td>
<td></td>
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<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table I.** Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model

Note(s): CR = composite reliability; \( \chi^2 = 509.92 \), d.f. = 442, RMSEA = 0.024, SRMR = 0.04, NFI = 0.97, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>MSV</th>
<th>AVE</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<th>8</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Relational energy</td>
<td>5.13</td>
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<td>2. Interaction cohesion</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.84</td>
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<td>3. Service exploration behavior</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Service coordination behavior</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.88</td>
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<td>5. Service role involvement</td>
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<td>6. Customer orientation behavior</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Customer empowerment behavior</td>
<td>5.93</td>
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<td>0.31</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Relationship duration</td>
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<td>0.34</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Contact frequency</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Customer knowledge</td>
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<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.56</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Customer-perceived employee deep acting</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** AVE, average variances extracted; MSV, maximum shared variance. Square roots of AVE are indicated on diagonal in italic. No average variances extracted and maximum shared variance were applicable to the constructs measured with single-item scales. *Items were rated on seven-point scales; brelationship duration was coded as number of years; ccontact frequency was coded as number of contacts per year.
for each construct was higher than its correlations with all other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010), which supports discriminant validity. A $\chi^2$ test (with one degree of freedom while constraining each path to 1.00 versus the same path unrestrained) provides evidence of discriminant validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Moreover, all cross-construct correlations were significantly less than 1.00 (Bagozzi and Heatherton, 1994), tested via the confidence interval for each pairwise correlation estimate ($\pm$ 2 standard errors) not including the value of one, providing additional evidence of discriminant validity. Furthermore, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was examined (Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015; Voorhees et al., 2016). All inter-construct correlation ratios were lower than 0.75, well below the threshold value of 0.85. In addition, none of the confidence intervals of the HTMT statistics included the value 1.00, thus further supporting discriminant validity. Overall, these results demonstrate that the measures possessed adequate reliability and construct validity.

Tests for common method bias
To avoid common method bias, this research collected data from dyadic sources (Frey et al., 2013; Homburg and Stock, 2004; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, Harman’s single factor test was employed to reconfirm the absence of common method bias. The first factor extracted explained only 35.06 percent of the variance, which was smaller than the 50 percent threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, a CFA model where all items load on one common factor had poor fit ($\chi^2 = 3226.07$, df = 495, RMSEA = 0.158, CFI = 0.83 and NNFI = 0.82), and 18 items had loadings below 0.6. These results show that common method variance did not appear to be a problem (Drengner et al., 2018; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2015).

Structural model results
After confirming the total measurement model, the structural model was estimated. The overall fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 661.89$, df = 458, RMSEA = 0.039, PCLOSE = 1.00, SRMR = 0.06, NFI = 0.96, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99 and IFI = 0.99) indicated satisfactory fit between the hypothesized model and the data. Estimated structural coefficients were then examined to evaluate individual hypotheses (see Table III).

As predicted, service role involvement ($\gamma_{11} = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$), customer orientation behavior ($\gamma_{12} = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) and customer empowerment behavior ($\gamma_{13} = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) were positively related to relational energy, providing support for H1, H2 and H3. Moreover, service role involvement ($\gamma_{21} = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), customer orientation behavior ($\gamma_{22} = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$) and customer empowerment behavior ($\gamma_{23} = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$) were positively associated with interaction cohesion, supporting H4, H5 and H6. Consistent with H7 and H8, relational energy had positive relationships with service exploration behavior ($\beta_{31} = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) and service coordination behavior ($\beta_{41} = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, interaction cohesion had positive influences on service exploration behavior ($\beta_{32} = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$) and service coordination behavior ($\beta_{42} = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), thereby confirming H9 and H10.

Testing rival models
This research followed Ramaswami and Singh’s (2003) procedure to test for mediation effects by comparing the proposed model with rival models. The first rival model (Model 1: full-antecedent model) proposed that the three employee SEBs, relational energy and interaction cohesion all have direct effects on the two customer SEBs, while the second rival model (Model 2: non-mediation model) suggested that the employee SEBs directly influence the customer SEBs, completely eliminating the mediating effects of relational energy and
interaction cohesion. The proposed model (Model 0) was compared with the rival models on the following criteria based on the previous literature (Arnett et al., 2003; Browne and Cudeck, 1989; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1996; Morgan and Hunt, 1994): (1) overall fit of the model, as measured by the RMSEA and the CFI; (2) Akaike information criterion (AIC) and expected cross-validation index (ECVI) and (3) percentage of the model’s significant structural paths (see Table IV).

First, the RMSEA of each rival model was larger than that of the proposed model (0.046, 0.048 vs. 0.039), while the two rival models (1 and 2) also held smaller CFI values than Model 0 (0.98, 0.98 vs. 0.99). These results indicated that the proposed model fit the data better than the rival models. Second, models 1 and 2 had greater AIC and ECVI values than the proposed models.

### Table III.
Path estimates for the proposed model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1 Service role involvement → Relational energy</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 Customer orientation behavior → Relational energy</td>
<td>0.46***</td>
<td>5.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3 Customer empowerment behavior → Relational energy</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4 Service role involvement → Interaction cohesion</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5 Customer orientation behavior → Interaction cohesion</td>
<td>0.57***</td>
<td>7.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6 Customer empowerment behavior → Interaction cohesion</td>
<td>0.19***</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7 Relational energy → Service exploration behavior</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8 Relational energy → Service coordination behavior</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H9 Interaction cohesion → Service exploration behavior</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
<td>6.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H10 Interaction cohesion → Service coordination behavior</td>
<td>0.25***</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Control variables**

| Relationship duration → Service exploration behavior | 0.12** | 2.15 |
| Relationship duration → Service coordination behavior | 0.07 | 1.32 |
| Contact frequency → Service exploration behavior | 0.02 | 0.43 |
| Contact frequency → Service coordination behavior | 0.03 | 0.58 |
| Customer knowledge → Service exploration behavior | 0.14*** | 2.18 |
| Customer knowledge → Service coordination behavior | 0.33*** | 5.58 |
| Customer-perceived employee deep acting → Relational energy | 0.04 | 0.52 |
| Customer-perceived employee deep acting → Interaction cohesion | 0.05 | 0.81 |

**Model fit**

- $\chi^2 = 661.89$
- $df = 458$
- RMSEA = 0.039
- PCLOSE = 1.00
- SRMR = 0.06
- CFI = 0.99
- NFI = 0.99
- NNFI = 0.99
- IFI = 0.99

**Note(s):** *p-value < 0.05; ***p-value < 0.01 (two-tailed)

### Table IV.
Comparisons of rival models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model specifications</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>AIC</th>
<th>ECVI</th>
<th>% of sig. path</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 0 (PM)</td>
<td>651.25</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>867.89</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1 (FA)</td>
<td>758.76</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>947.96</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2 (NM)</td>
<td>802.25</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>964.30</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** PM = Proposed model; FA = Full-antecedent model; NM = Non-mediation model
model (947.96, 964.30 vs. 867.89; 3.25, 3.30 vs. 2.97, respectively). Since lower AIC and ECVI values indicate a better fit (Browne and Cudeck, 1989; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1996), the results were in favor of the proposed model. Lastly, in the proposed model (Model 0), all the ten structural paths (100%) were significantly supported, while only six structural paths remained significant (60%) in the full-antecedent model (Model 1), and two out of the six structural paths remained significant (33%) in the non-mediation model (Model 2). Overall, these results supported the proposed model over the rival models, showing that relational energy and interaction cohesion played significant mediating roles in the model.

Discussion
SEBs are critical in the high-contact and highly customized services as such behaviors capture the proactive investment of effort and collaborative contributions of service interactants (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010). As both employees and customers display SEBs in service interactions, intensive discussions and information exchanges occur (Fliess et al., 2014; Mustak et al., 2016; Sharma and Conduit, 2016). Under such circumstances, more personalized service experiences and individually fitted service outcomes are more likely to be achieved (Field et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2019), which, in turn, leads to customer delight, perceived quality, satisfaction and relationship longevity (Dong and Sivakumar, 2017; Gwinner et al., 2005; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Wilder et al., 2014). However, the issue of SEB is yet to be explored. Thus, this study aims to define SEB, identify various employee and customer SEBs and investigate how employee SEBs affect customer SEBs through relational energy and interaction cohesion. The research findings also provide several contributions and implications to the engagement behavior and services marketing literature.

First, this study represents pioneering research to conceptualize SEB. Different from the extant literature on engagement, which has mainly focused on brands and organizations as objects (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Kumar et al., 2019; Macey et al., 2009; Pantsari and Kumar, 2017), this study extends to the realm of service interaction as the target object of engagement behaviors.

Second, this research is also among the earliest to identify and validate various engagement behaviors that service employees display during service encounters. Unlike previous studies, which focused on employee engagement as a psychological state of immersion and involvement toward the firms (Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Macey et al., 2009; Rich et al., 2010; Salanova et al., 2005), the current study sheds light on employees’ actual engagement behaviors toward service delivery and customers, as specified in service role involvement, customer orientation behavior and customer empowerment behavior.

Third, this paper contributes to the extant literature by investigating different forms of customer SEBs. Contrary to prior research on customer engagement behaviors associated with firms or brands after transactions (Gong, 2017; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Leckie et al., 2018; van Doorn et al., 2010; Verleye et al., 2014), the customer SEBs in this research focused on and highlighted the on-site proactive acts that engaged customers display to acquire more service information and explore more service possibilities for achieving better service experiences (i.e. service exploration behavior), as well as to articulate personal preferences, join integrative decision-making and adjust personal behaviors to better orchestrate the service interactions (i.e. service coordination behavior).

Finally, this research provides empirical evidence regarding the manner in which employee SEBs influence customer SEBs. In keeping with social contagion theory and S-D logic, the results obtained in this study demonstrate engaged employees’ acts boosting customers’ similar engagement behaviors through the mediation of relational energy and interaction cohesion. Such research findings not only fulfill the research gap of the unidentified linking mechanism between employee and customer engagement (Kumar and...
Pansari, 2016) but also reveal and highlight the activated customer psychological states during the spread of SEBs as opposed to the traditional ripple effects of emotional contagion (e.g. Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Howard and Gengler, 2001; Pugh, 2001). Overall, this research clarifies SEB, identifies various employee and customer SEBs and verifies the linking mechanism between them, thus making valuable contributions to the engagement behavior and services marketing literature.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study illustrate that employee SEBs are a vital trigger of customer SEBs. Such employee behaviors enhance customers’ perceptions of relational energy and interaction cohesion, which are critical factors in activating customer SEBs. Therefore, to benefit from customers’ engagement behaviors in service encounters, it is imperative to manage and encourage frontline employees’ engagement behaviors, including service role involvement, customer orientation behavior and customer empowerment behavior. This research provides strategic implications for service practitioners to better manage employee SEBs for eliciting customer SEBs through relational energy and interaction cohesion.

First, service managers must ensure that employees are capable of genuinely engaging in their service roles. They should recruit employees who are competent and passionate about human interactions and serving customers. Service employees should also be provided with role instructions and be trained to master detailed service tasks (Chi and Grandey, 2016; Grandey et al., 2005; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Besides managerial emphasis on basic display rules, service firms should further offer incentives and establish a supportive working climate to cheer employees up and motivate them to perform their service tasks better. As customers perceive the wholehearted service from employees, the feelings of enthusiasm and caring will be aroused (Stanworth et al., 2015). Such positive feelings will provide customers with more relational energy and a sense of interaction cohesion.

Second, service firms should seek ways to enhance the exhibition of service employees’ customer orientation behaviors. Service companies could develop a system that records an archive of customer needs, such as marketing intelligence system, and constantly update frontline personnel with such customer knowledge. Moreover, employees can be trained to explore individual customer needs with the assistance of instruction sessions on conversational and observational skills that help them better understand the customers. Additionally, in highly customized service industries, it is important to listen to customers and display genuineness to provide tailored services. Most importantly, frontline employees should be authorized and provided with resources to adapt service offerings according to individualized customer needs. As employees are encouraged and eager to satisfy each customer’s need, the customer will feel that he/she is unique, valued and supported, which in turn can enhance his/her energetic feelings and perceptions of interaction cohesion.

Third, service managers should ensure that contact personnel are willing and able to empower customers in service interactions. The personnel should be trained in social skills that encourage customers to express themselves and guide them to concretize their needs, such as initiating small talks, establishing rapport and naturally guiding conversation to service-related topics (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008; Macintosh, 2009; Ouschan et al., 2006). Moreover, to motivate service employees to work collaboratively with their customers, service managers should seriously consider customers’ opinions collected and reflected by frontline employees and revise the service design accordingly. As employees empower customers to actively join the service processes, it strengthens customers’ bonding with them and makes customers feel more energetic. Meanwhile, customers will feel more connected with service employees and have the same goal to fulfill their needs.
The research findings also confirm that relational energy and interaction cohesion enhance customer SEBs. Under this notion, service organizations should create more opportunities for the contagion of energy from employees to customers and the sense of collaboration between employees and customers through service interactions. For example, service processes should allow for more intimate and individualized employee-customer interactions, which are conducive to the delivery of service enthusiasm from employees to customers. Furthermore, service firms should try to enhance the degree of customer involvement in the decision-making processes. In service interactions, employees should invite customers to express their thoughts, and enthusiastically discuss with them to figure out the best service solutions for customers’ personal needs. While being invited to the service decision-making, customers will strongly feel the sense of cohesion with the service employees. With such effort, service organizations can further promote customer perceptions of relational energy and interaction cohesion, leading to positive customer SEBs.

As customers engage in service exploration and coordination behaviors, there will be a higher possibility to achieve more tailor-made services. Particularly in the highly customized service conditions, the proactivity of customers is critical in shaping the service provision, which could truly be effective. Therefore, the importance of customer SEBs should be especially highlighted to service employees. Moreover, when customers demonstrate SEBs, employees should be able to respond properly and be capable of maintaining the momentum of customers’ proactivity. Training sessions regarding interaction and communication techniques in response to proactive customer behaviors are thus recommended to be added, so that service employees can be better equipped with the knowledge and skills to achieve superior service outcomes with their engaged customers.

Limitations and future research
This research contains a number of limitations, which provide avenues for further research. First, this study adopts a cross-sectional approach to explore the SEBs displayed by both employees and customers in service interactions. Further research with longitudinal designs would be valuable for understanding whether employee SEBs, relational energy, interaction cohesion and customer SEBs persist on a long-term basis.

Second, this study focuses solely on the influence of employee SEBs on customer SEBs. Future research can further examine the antecedents of employee SEBs, such as leadership, service climate, socialization approaches and/or other organizational factors, as well as the consequences of customer SEBs, such as perceived service quality, satisfaction and service innovation.

Third, this research mainly focuses on high-contact and highly customized services. However, as the context of services can possibly influence how employees and customers interact, future studies should further consider service context, such as search-based, experience-based and credence-based services. Fourth, this research investigates the effects of employee SEBs on customers’ perceptions and SEBs; on the other hand, customer SEBs may possibly further influence employee behaviors. Therefore, investigating the impact of customer SEBs on employees may result in interesting and fruitful findings.

Fifth, although customer SEBs can bring positive effects in high-contact and highly customized services, in rare cases, customer SEBs may result in unexpected outcomes for employees. Future research can examine such unique scenarios through exploratory studies to enrich further understanding of the SEB issue.

Finally, human attitudes and behaviors may vary widely across cultures (Chan et al., 2010; Mattila, 1999; Patterson et al., 2006). For example, high power distance might obstruct the relationships or social bonds built among service employees and customers, since their roles might be perceived to have unequal status (Chan et al., 2010; Patterson and Smith, 2001). Therefore, the degree of engagement might vary between these two parties due to cultural
factors. Future studies can examine the impact of cultural norms on employee and customer SEBs within the context of service encounters.

Notes
1. Professional services (e.g. legal, financial, medical and healthcare services) were excluded, since most of these services require higher level of customer privacy, where employee-customer interactions could not be observed in public.
2. The five cities were Taipei, Taoyuan, Taichung, Tainan and Kaohsiung, the major metropolitan cities in Taiwan. These cities were chosen because the studied service context is more salient in such highly populated urban cities (e.g. Brady and Cronin, 2001; Daniels, 2004; Lin and Lin, 2011).

References


**Appendix**

**Measurement items**

**Service role involvement**

SRI1: When I serve the customer, I really exert myself as much as I can

SRI2: I put in extra efforts whenever necessary

SRI3: I work harder than is required during the service delivery
Customer orientation behavior

COB1: The service employee makes recommendations that match my needs
COB2: The service employee offers tailor-made services for me
COB3: The service employee offers promotions that are tailored to my situation
COB4: The service employee makes me feel that I am a unique customer
COB5: I believe that the service employee offers services customized to my needs

Customer empowerment behavior

CEM1: I interact with the customer to design service offerings that meet his/her unique needs
CEM2: I co-opt customer involvement in providing services for the customer
CEM3: I provide the customer with support to help him/her get more value from the service interaction.

Relational energy

RE1: I feel invigorated when I interact with the service employee
RE2: When interacting with the service employee, I feel more energy to engage in the service process
RE3: I feel increased vitality when I interact with the service employee
RE4: An interpersonal exchange with the service employee makes me feel more stamina to engage in the service process
RE5: I feel “pepped up” when I interact with the service employee

Interaction cohesion

IC1: There is a feeling of unity and cohesion in the service interaction
IC2: There is a strong feeling of belongingness between the service employee and me
IC3: The service employee and I feel close to each other

Service exploration behaviour

SEPB1: During service interaction, I actively investigate service possibilities
SEPB2: During the service encounter, I actively explore information on services and products
SEPB3: During the service encounter, I actively seek information on specific areas of my interest

Service coordination behavior

COOR1: I provide service-related information to the service employee without being asked
COOR2: I proactively help the service employee when he/she needs assistance
COOR3: I monitor the progress of service delivery
COOR4: I effectively adapt my behaviors to the actions of the service employee

Relationship duration
Approximately how long have you been coming to this service employee?

Contact frequency
Approximately how frequently have you been coming to this service employee?
Customer knowledge

KNOW1: I can understand almost all the aspects of the services
KNOW2: I possess good knowledge of the services and products

Customer-perceived employee deep acting

DAB1: The employee works hard to feel the emotions that he/she needs to show to me
DAB2: The employee tries to actually experience the emotions he/she has to show to me
DAB3: The employee makes a strong effort to actually feel the emotions that he/she needs to display toward me

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