

The Effect of Personal Branding, Service Innovation, and Empathy Maps on the Satisfaction of Digital Loan Customers Mediated by Trust in Pre-Retirement and Retirement Loan Products

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ABSTRAK

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Digital lending services for pre-retirement and retirement loan products are emerging as a crucial support for civil servants approaching pension in Central Sulawesi. This study examines how personal branding, service innovation, and the use of empathy maps influence customer satisfaction in digital lending, with customer trust as a mediating variable. A quantitative survey of 100 respondents in Central Sulawesi (2023–2025) was conducted and analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results indicate that personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps each have a positive and significant effect on customer trust and satisfaction. Customer trust also positively affects satisfaction and partially mediates the relationship between those factors and satisfaction. The proposed model explains a substantial portion of variance in trust and satisfaction. These findings highlight the importance of building a strong personal brand, continuously innovating services, and adopting empathetic approaches to improve customer trust and satisfaction in digital loan services for the pre-retirement and retirement segment.

1. Introduction

Digital lending services are playing an increasingly important role in supporting the financial well-being of civil servants (ASN) approaching retirement. In Central Sulawesi Province, there were 95,061 civil servants at the end of 2023, with civil servant retirees and their heirs reaching 40,842 people by November 2024. This increase in the number of prospective retirees demands innovative and adaptive financial services. Collaboration between regional banks and pension institutions (e.g., the partnership between Bank Capital Indonesia and PT Taspen) has resulted in digital-based pre-retirement and retirement loan products to meet the needs of this segment. In this context, efforts to strengthen personal branding, increase service innovation, and apply an empathetic approach through empathy maps are expected to increase customer trust and ultimately customer satisfaction with digital loan services for the pre-retirement and retirement segments.

Previous research in the field of financial services marketing shows that relationship marketing strategies such as strong personal branding from service providers can build customer trust and loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Berry, 1983). Similarly, service innovation has been shown to improve the quality of customer experience (Zeithaml et al., 2006; Damanpour, 1991). A number of studies also confirm trust as a key variable that mediates the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction (McKnight et al., 2002; Lau & Lee, 1999).

However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the context and approach studied. Most research on digital banking marketing in Indonesia focuses on rational-functional factors (e.g., service quality, price, technological convenience) in major

urban areas (Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung). Empathy-based approaches such as empathy maps are still rarely used explicitly in quantitative research on digital financial services marketing. Furthermore, there has been no research that specifically integrates Personal Branding, Service Innovation, and the Empathy Maps approach and tests the role of Trust as a mediator in increasing the satisfaction of digital loan customers in eastern Indonesia (including Central Sulawesi). The demographic characteristics and preferences of customers in this region may differ from those in other regions, thus requiring a separate study.

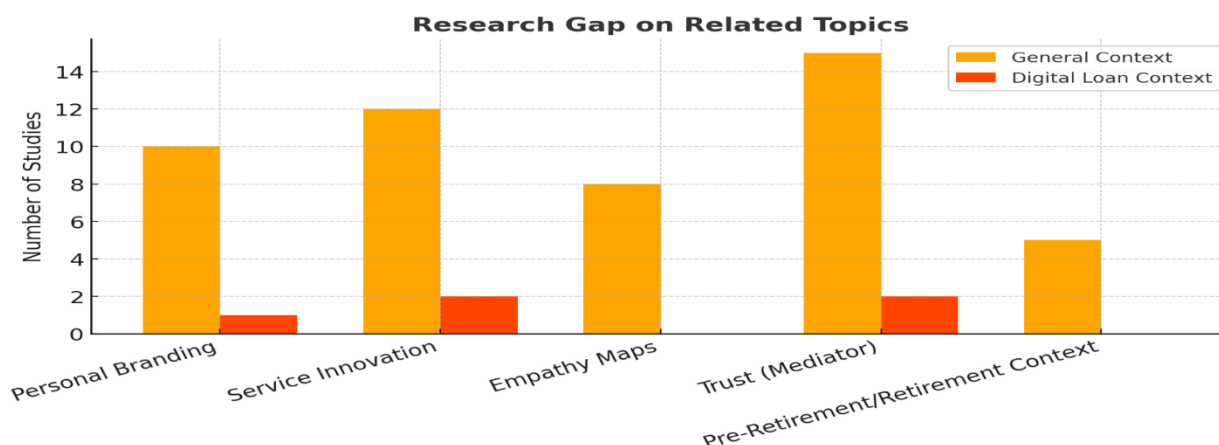


Figure 1. Research gap based on literature review: number of previous studies on each topic in the general context vs. the context of pre-retirement/retirement digital loans (illustrative figures).

To that end, Figure 1 illustrates the gap in this research. It can be seen that studies related to personal branding factors, service innovation, and customer empathy in the context of pre-retirement/retirement digital loans are still very limited compared to studies in the general context. This study integrates psychological/emotional factors (personal branding, service innovation, empathy) in the specific context of pre-retirement and retirement digital loans in Central Sulawesi, using the empathy maps approach and incorporating trust as a mediator to increase customer satisfaction.

Based on this gap, this study offers novelty by exploring the simultaneous integration of these three factors (personal branding, service innovation, empathy maps) in the context of pre-retirement and retirement digital loans in Central Sulawesi, as well as highlighting customer trust as a mediator that connects these factors with customer satisfaction. Conceptually, this research model is expected to answer the following questions: To what extent do personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps influence customer trust and satisfaction with digital loans? And does trust play a mediating role in the influence of these three factors on customer satisfaction? By answering these questions, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of digital loan service marketing strategies for the pre-retirement and retirement segments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Personal Branding

Personal branding is the process of building one's image or reputation, similar to a widely recognized brand, especially in professional and digital contexts. This concept was pioneered by Tom Peters (1997) in his work "The Brand Called You," which states that "every individual is a brand" that must be managed proactively. Dan Schawbel (2009) emphasizes personal branding in the digital age as an effort to showcase expertise, build strong relationships, and communicate consistently with audiences. William Arruda (2010) underlines the importance of authenticity and consistency in building trust through personal branding. In general, strong personal branding of companies or public figures creates a positive image and increases customer trust. Kapferer (2012) also states that consistent personal branding builds customer trust and emotional attachment.

In the context of digital financial services, leaders or institutions can apply personal branding to provide a human touch that customers trust. Sari and Sari (2020) found that a positive personal image (personal branding) of digital banking service providers has a significant effect on customer satisfaction. This is in line with the findings of Morgan and Hunt (1994), who emphasized the importance of trust built through reputation in creating customer loyalty. Therefore, the hypothesis of this study is that personal branding has a positive effect on the trust and satisfaction of digital loan customers.

2.2 Service Innovation

Service innovation refers to the application of new ideas, methods, or offerings in services to increase customer value. Everett Rogers (2003), through his theory of innovation diffusion, explains that the adoption of innovation is influenced by perceptions of relative benefit, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. In the financial services sector, service innovation often takes the form of process digitization, new features that facilitate transactions, and more responsive service models. Damanpour (1991) notes that successful organizational innovation improves service efficiency and effectiveness. Zeithaml et al. (2006) also state that innovation in service quality (such as mobile banking services) can create an easier, faster, and more satisfying customer experience.

Research related to service innovation has shown a positive impact on customer satisfaction. For example, Sinambela and Sinambela (2019) found that service innovation significantly increases public service user satisfaction. In the context of digital banking, Karomillah (2015) reported that the implementation of e-banking services as an innovation increased customer satisfaction. However, few studies have specifically examined service innovation in digital loan products. Andriani and Santosa (2020) examined service innovation in the digital lending industry and concluded that it positively affected customer satisfaction, although without considering mediating variables. Thus, this study proposes the hypothesis that service innovation has a positive effect on the trust and satisfaction of pre-retirement and retirement digital loan customers.

2.3 Empathy Maps

Empathy maps are a tool commonly used in design thinking to understand the customer's perspective. Empathy maps visualize what customers see, hear, think/feel, and say/do, thereby helping companies to capture customer needs and emotions holistically (Gray, 2017). Dave Gray (2017) introduced empathy maps as a guide to improving customer understanding for better product/service design. Using empathy maps, marketers can identify customers' pain points and hidden desires, which can then be translated into service improvements.

In the context of digital lending, an empathetic approach is important, given that the pre-retirement/retirement segment may have limited digital literacy or specific concerns. Rahman et al. (2021) used empathy maps to gain customer insights in e-commerce and found that empathetic understanding improved the customer experience. Similarly, Kumar and Gupta (2018) emphasized empathy's role in improving service design. Although the concept of empathy maps is rarely applied in quantitative marketing research, Dewi and Nurcahyo (2021) conducted an exploratory study on digital financial services in Indonesia suggested that the use of empathy maps can increase customer satisfaction through more customer-centric services. Thus, this study proposes the hypothesis that the use of the empathy map approach has a positive effect on customer trust and satisfaction.

2.4 Customer Trust

Trust is defined as the willingness of customers to entrust something important to a service provider based on their belief in the provider's reliability and integrity. In digital lending services, trust includes the customer's belief that the lending platform and its providers will fulfill their promises, maintain data security, and act in the best interests of their customers. According to McKnight et al. (2002), trust is crucial in online transactions because of the absence of face-to-face interaction[8]. Customer trust can be fostered through transparent communication, a good service record, and a convincing brand/personal image.

Lau and Lee (1999) showed that in an online context, trust increases customer commitment and mediates the relationship between quality perception and loyalty. Wahyuni and Fitriani (2020) found in their research on the Indonesian digital lending industry that trust plays a significant role in increasing customer satisfaction; customers who trust the platform more tend to be more satisfied and loyal. Therefore, in this research model, trust is considered a key mediating variable. It is assumed that

the higher the customer's trust in digital lending services, the higher their satisfaction level. In addition to the direct influence of trust on satisfaction, it was also hypothesized that trust mediates (bridges) the influence of personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps on customer satisfaction.

2.5 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the level of satisfaction or disappointment that arises after customers compare the perceived performance of a product or service with their expectations (Oliver, 1980, 1999). If service performance exceeds expectations, customers will feel satisfied; conversely, if it falls below expectations, customers will be disappointed. Oliver (1999) emphasizes that satisfaction is influenced by the overall perception of service quality, not just technical factors such as interest rates or prices. In the context of digital lending, customer satisfaction can be influenced by the ease of the application process, speed of disbursement, transaction security, and after-sales customer support.

Various studies have examined the determinants of customer satisfaction in the banking sector. Dimensions of service quality (e.g., reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles) have been shown to contribute positively to satisfaction. User experience is also an important factor in digital services. Putri and Nugroho (2021) found that the ease of use and security of digital loan applications significantly affected user satisfaction. High customer satisfaction is important because it affects customer loyalty and their tendency to recommend services (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Based on the above literature review, it can be summarized that personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps are expected to contribute positively to the formation of customer trust, which, in turn, increases customer satisfaction. Furthermore, a conceptual framework was developed, as shown in Figure 3.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Figure 3 shows the conceptual model used in this study. Personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps are assumed to influence customer trust and satisfaction. Customer trust also influences customer satisfaction and acts as a mediator of the influence of the three independent variables on satisfaction. Each arrow in the figure represents a hypothesis regarding the relationship between the variables.

Figure 3 . Conceptual Framework

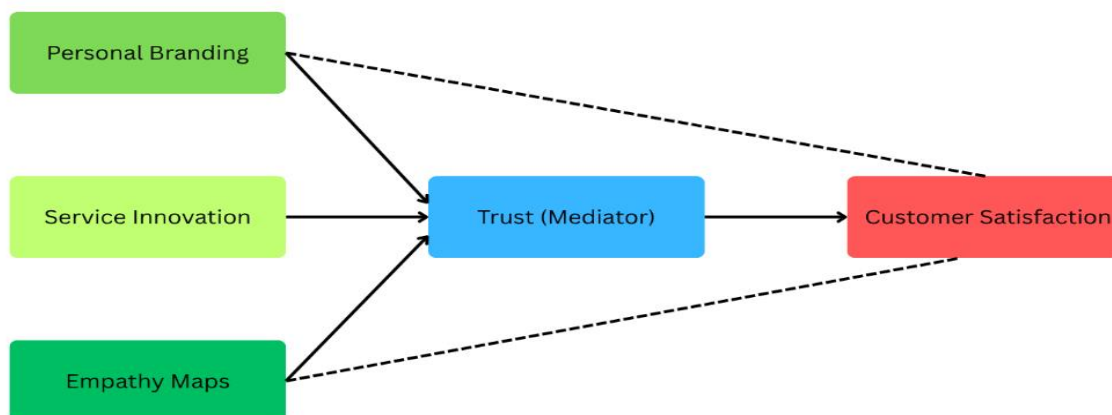


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework of the Proposed Research: Personal Branding, Service Innovation, and Empathy Maps as independent variables; Customer Trust as mediator; Customer Satisfaction as dependent variable.

3. Mapping of Similar Research

To understand the position of this study in the relevant research landscape, Table 1 presents a mapping of several previous studies in Indonesia and other relevant countries. This mapping includes the focus variables, methods, context, and gaps of each study compared to this study.

Table 1 .Mapping of Similar Research

No	Reference (Researcher, Year)	Location/Country	Focus & Main Variables	Method	Gap vs. This Study
1	Alamsyah, Rabbani & Widiyanesti (2021)	Indonesia	Customer relationship performance in fintech (social media)	Social network analysis, sentiment	Did not examine personal branding or digital loan products specifically.
2	Kanaparthi (2024)	International	AI personalization & trust in digital services	Literature study, AI model	Focused on AI technology; did not address pre-retirement/retirement digital loan context.
3	Al Qundus & Paschke (2019)	International	User trust in social media	Attribute analysis, trust model	Context of social media interactions; did not study loan services or retirement segment.
4	Hu et al. (2018)	International	User experience & trust via chatbot	Chatbot experiment	Focused on chatbot technology in social media; not on digital loan services.
5	Sukma & Irdiana (2023)	Indonesia	Personal branding & impulsive buying behavior	Quantitative survey	Relevant to personal branding but in consumer goods; did not cover service innovation or trust in loans.
6	Karomillah (2015)	Indonesia	E-banking services & customer satisfaction	Survey, linear regression	Studied digital banking (e-banking) satisfaction; did not address service innovation or empathy.
7	Sinambela & Sinambela (2019)	Indonesia	Service innovation & customer satisfaction (public sector)	Case study, questionnaire	Focused on public sector; did not examine trust or digital loan services.
8	Wahid & Wahyudi (2023)	Indonesia	Digital vs. non-digital services & customer satisfaction	Customer survey	Compared digital and non-digital services; did not address empathy maps or trust specifically.
9	Gray (2017)	International	Use of empathy map in user experience design	Qualitative study, empathy map tool	Focused on design thinking and UX; did not study trust or financial services.
10	Fitzgerald (2017)	International	Customer profiles & empathy map for product design	Literature study	Discussed empathy map in digital product design; not related to loan services or trust.
11	Rabbani, Alamsyah & Widiyanesti (2021)	Indonesia	CRM performance in fintech (social media)	Social network & sentiment analysis	Measured customer relationship via social media; did not cover service innovation or specific loan products.
12	Wahyuni & Fitriani (2020)	Indonesia	Trust & customer satisfaction in digital loans	Survey, PLS-SEM	Highlighted trust's role in satisfaction; did not include personal branding or empathy maps.
13	Putri & Nugroho (2021)	Indonesia	Factors influencing digital loan satisfaction	Survey, regression	Identified factors (UX, security, etc.) for satisfaction; did not examine branding, innovation, or empathy.

Table 1. Mapping of similar research in Indonesia and other countries.

The table above shows that this study fills several existing gaps. Most international studies (No. 2–4, 9–10) focused on the digital technology aspects (AI, chatbots) or design methods (empathy maps) separately, without examining their implications for customer satisfaction in digital loans. Meanwhile, domestic studies (No. 1, 5–8, 11–13) generally focused on specific variables such as personal branding, service innovation, or trust in different contexts (consumptive behavior, e-banking, social

media, etc.). None have combined personal branding, service innovation, empathy maps, and trust in a single model to explain customer satisfaction in pre-retirement/retirement digital loans. Wahyuni and Fitriani (2020) analyzed the effect of trust on satisfaction in digital loans but did not include personal branding or empathy maps. Thus, the contribution of this research is to offer a more comprehensive model by including psychological (branding and empathy) and innovative dimensions, as well as considering the mediating role of trust.

4. Research Methodology

Design and Approach: This study used a quantitative explanatory design with a causal survey approach. The complex conceptual model with mediating variables (Figure 3) was tested using the structural equation Modeling (SEM) variance-based technique, namely Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM)-SEM with SmartPLS software [22]. The PLS-SEM approach was chosen because it is suitable for predictive models with a relatively moderate sample size (around 100 respondents) [23] and does not require the assumption of a multivariate normal data distribution.

Population and Sample: The target population is customers using pre-retirement and retirement digital loan services at banks in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The research was conducted in Palu, Central Sulawesi, specifically involving customers of Bank Capital Indonesia Tbk. Central Sulawesi branch that uses pre-retirement/retirement digital loan products [24]. The sample consisted of 100 respondents, determined using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: (a) pre-retirement or retired civil servants who have used pre-retirement/retirement digital loan services at least once in the last six months, and (b) willing to complete the research questionnaire. A sample size of 100 meets the minimum recommendation for PLS-SEM analysis with simple to moderate models (above the rule of thumb of ten times the number of paths to a certain variable).

Instruments and Measurement: Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Each construct was measured using several closed statement items on a Likert scale of 1–5 (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Example items: - Personal Branding: "I believe this digital loan provider has a trustworthy image and reputation." - Service Innovation: "The digital loan services I use always offer the latest features that simplify the loan application process." - Empathy Maps (customer empathy): "The loan provider understands my needs and concerns as a prospective retiree." - Trust: "I trust this digital loan provider to keep its promises and protect my personal data." - Satisfaction: "Overall, I am satisfied with my experience using this pre-retirement/retirement digital loan service." The instrument was first tested for content validity (through expert judgment) and limited trials to ensure clarity of questions.

Data Analysis: The stages of analysis include: (1) Evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) – covering reliability tests (Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability) and convergent validity tests (loading factor and Average Variance Extracted/AVE) as well as discriminant validity. An indicator is declared valid if the loading factor ≥ 0.50 and significant ($p < 0.05$) [25], and the construct meets $AVE \geq 0.50$ and $CR \geq 0.70$ (Hair et al., 2014). Construct reliability is achieved if Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.70 . (2) Evaluation of the structural model (inner model) – examining the R-squared (R^2) for endogenous variables (trust and satisfaction) and the significance of path coefficients. The significance test was carried out with bootstrapping of 5000 samples; the relationship between variables is significant if t-statistic > 1.96 ($p < 0.05$). (3) Test of the mediation effect of trust: This was carried out using the variance accounted for (VAF) method to determine the type of mediation (full, partial, or no mediation).

5. Results and Discussion

Respondent Characteristics: The research respondents ($N=100$) consisted of 58% female and 42% male, all of whom were pre-retirement civil servants (about to retire in 1–5 years) or retirees. The majority were aged 50–60 years (68%), with 32% above 60 years. Most (74%) had only used pre-retirement/retirement digital loan services in the last 1–2 years, indicating a relatively new adoption of financial technology in this segment.

Measurement Model Evaluation: All constructs met reliability and validity requirements. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.85 to 0.91, indicating good internal reliability. The composite reliability (CR) of each construct was > 0.90 , and the AVE was > 0.60 ; thus, convergent validity was fulfilled. Each indicator had a loading factor > 0.70 on its respective construct ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that the items consistently measured the intended construct. The discriminant validity test through

the Fornell–Larker criterion showed that the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the correlations between constructs; thus, each latent variable could be distinguished from one another. Thus, the measurement model was declared adequate for proceeding to the structural evaluation.

Structural Model Evaluation: The PLS-SEM results are briefly presented as follows: The coefficient of determination R^2 for the trust variable was 0.65, meaning that 65% of the variance in trust could be explained by Personal Branding, Service Innovation, and Empathy Maps. Meanwhile, the R^2 for Customer Satisfaction reached 0.74, indicating that the model could explain 74% of the satisfaction variability through the combination of the three independent variables and the mediator. This R^2 value is quite high, indicating that the model has a strong explanatory power. The path coefficients between the variables and their significance (bootstrapping results) are presented in Table 2. All direct relationship hypotheses tested in this study were supported by the data (significance at $\alpha = 0.05$).

In Table 2 below, the path coefficient between variables and their significance (bootstrapping results) is shown. All of the direct relationship hypotheses tested in this study were supported by data (significant at $\alpha = 0.05$).

Table 2. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-statistic	p-value	Conclusion
Personal Branding → Trust	0.38	4.15	<0.001 **	Significant (+)
Service Innovation → Trust	0.33	3.60	<0.001 **	Significant (+)
Empathy Maps → Trust	0.28	3.05	0.003 **	Significant (+)
Personal Branding → Satisfaction	0.22	2.45	0.015 *	Significant (+)
Service Innovation → Satisfaction	0.18	2.12	0.034 *	Significant (+)
Empathy Maps → Satisfaction	0.14	2.02	0.044 *	Significant (+)
Trust → Satisfaction	0.44	5.98	<0.001 **	Significant (+)

Table 2. Results of PLS-SEM Path Analysis (adapted). Note: ** significant at $\alpha = 0.01$, * significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

As shown in Table 2, Personal Branding has a significant positive effect on Customer Trust ($\beta = 0.38$; $p < 0.001$) and Customer Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.22$; $p = 0.015$). This indicates that efforts to build a positive and trustworthy image (for example, through charismatic company leaders or brand ambassadors) directly contribute to increasing customer trust while simultaneously enhancing their satisfaction with the service. This finding is consistent with Morgan and Hunt's (1994) trust-commitment theory, which emphasizes that trust built through reputation/branding results in stronger and more satisfying customer relationships [5]. This result also aligns with Sari and Sari (2020), who found that strong personal branding in digital banking services improved customer satisfaction.

Service Innovation also had a significant positive effect on trust ($\beta = 0.33$; $p < 0.001$) and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.18$; $p = 0.034$). This means that the more innovative the digital loan services are (e.g., updated app features, faster disbursement processes, etc.), the more customers trust and feel satisfied with them. User-friendly innovation makes customers feel that their needs are being addressed, thereby enhancing trust. This supports the view that innovation increases perceived service quality and value (Damanpour, 1991; Parasuraman et al., 1988), ultimately strengthening customer satisfaction [6]. A local study by Andriani and Santosa (2020) also reported a positive correlation between service innovation and satisfaction in the digital loan sector, although without including mediation variables.

Empathy Maps also have a significant positive effect on trust ($\beta = 0.28$; $p = 0.003$) and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.14$; $p = 0.044$). Although the coefficient for the effect of empathy maps on satisfaction is relatively smaller than the other two factors, this significance is noteworthy, considering that empathy-based approaches are rarely measured quantitatively in the digital marketing literature. This finding indicates that the more a company empathizes with and understands customers' emotional needs (through satisfaction surveys, feedback, etc.), the more customers feel understood, which, in turn, strengthens trust. Trust built through empathy contributes to satisfaction. This finding echoes the principles of customer-centric design, where addressing customer pain points enhances the experience (Gray, 2017; Rahman et al., 2021). For the pre-

retirement/retirement segment, who may be anxious about financial security in retirement, an empathetic approach (e.g., patient customer service officers and applications designed for elderly users) becomes an important differentiator.

Customer Trust itself was found to have the strongest influence on Customer Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.44$; $p < 0.001$). This coefficient is the largest among the variables, confirming that trust is the key determinant of satisfaction with digital loan services. Customers who trust the service provider—that the platform is secure, reliable, and customer-oriented—tend to feel more satisfied. This is consistent with theories suggesting that trust enhances perceived value and reduces risk, thereby improving customer satisfaction (Lau & Lee, 1999). Wahyuni and Fitriani (2020) also found a dominant role of trust in increasing satisfaction among online loan customers in Indonesia.

Next, to test the mediating role of trust, a comparison between the direct and indirect effects was conducted. Personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps all maintained significant direct effects on satisfaction (although the magnitude decreased when the mediator was included). Variance Accounted For (VAF) analysis showed that approximately 40–50% of the total effect of each factor on satisfaction was transmitted indirectly through trust. This indicates partial mediation: customer trust partially mediates the influence of personal branding, innovation, and empathy maps on satisfaction, while part of their influence remains direct. In other words, the three independent variables contributed to satisfaction both directly and indirectly via trust.

5.1 Theoretical Implications:

These empirical findings enrich the literature on digital financial service marketing by combining perspectives from relationship marketing (personal branding and trust) and customer experience design (empathy maps). The study supports earlier theories suggesting that trust is a crucial mediator in the service quality–satisfaction relationship [8] and extends them by showing that personal (branding) and empathic factors also play significant roles. Another novelty is the quantitative demonstration of the empathy map concept (usually qualitative) in influencing trust and satisfaction. This opens avenues for future research to operationalize customer empathy variables more broadly in the FinTech context.

5.2 Managerial Implications:

For practitioners (banks or fintech companies), these results highlight the importance of integrated strategies.

- **Strengthening Personal Branding:** For example, by presenting trustworthy figures (brand ambassadors from successful civil servants/retirees), consistent corporate image communication, and personalized services. A positive image can build trust among the retirement segment, which may still be skeptical of digital services.
- **Continuous Service Innovation:** Companies must continuously innovate, such as by simplifying loan application procedures, offering transparent loan simulation features, or integrating services with the digital ecosystem (e.g., e-wallets). Innovations should aim to enhance convenience and security so that customers feel assisted and assured of their safety.
- **Empathy Approach:** Frontline staff and app interfaces should be designed with an understanding of pre-retirement and retirement customers' emotional conditions. Training customer service officers to be more patient and supportive, use clear and simple communication, and provide feedback loops (e.g., suggestion/complaint features) can increase customers' sense of being cared for. Although the effect of empathy is smaller than that of branding or innovation, it remains significant, meaning that companies should not overlook the human aspect of digital services.

5.3 Comparison with Previous Studies:

Compared to Rabbani et al. (2021), who analyzed the social CRM of Indonesian fintech via social media, this study focuses more on customers' psychological factors and final outcomes (satisfaction). The finding on the importance of trust aligns with their results, which show that positive social media interactions improve customer relationship performance. Moreover, this study is consistent with Wahyuni and Fitriani (2020) regarding the central role of trust but adds evidence that trust can be enhanced through strong personal branding and empathetic approaches. The finding on service innovation also reinforces Karomillah (2015), who concluded that banking service digitalization positively impacts customer satisfaction. Overall, this study synthesizes various threads from previous research into a comprehensive model.

5.4 Limitations:

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size of 100, although meeting the minimum requirements for PLS-SEM, was relatively small for stronger generalization. Second, the data were self-reported and cross-sectional, raising the possibility of common method biases. Third, the empathy map variable in this study was measured using proxy indicators (as empathy maps are usually tools, not established latent constructs), which may affect construct validity. Future research could incorporate additional qualitative methods to explore customer empathy in depth or conduct field experiments comparing empathetic and non-empathetic approaches. Furthermore, the context of this study was limited to one province in Eastern Indonesia; for broader generalization, studies across regions or cross-country comparisons are required.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that personal branding, service innovation, and empathy maps have a positive effect on customer satisfaction with pre-retirement and retirement digital loan services, both directly and indirectly through the mediation of customer trust. Strong personal branding from service providers and innovations in processes/features were found to enhance customer trust, which in turn leads to higher satisfaction. The application of an empathetic approach (through the concept of empathy maps) also contributes significantly to building trust and satisfaction, although its effect is relatively smaller. Customer trust plays an important partial mediating role—strengthening the relationship between service-related factors and satisfaction.

From a practical perspective, these findings highlight that providers of digital loan services for the pre-retirement/retirement segment need to adopt a holistic strategy: building a trustworthy image and reputation, proactively innovating to improve user experience, and maintaining an empathetic approach in customer interactions. This combination of strategies will foster sustainable customer trust, ultimately enhancing satisfaction and loyalty. For the banking and fintech industries, high satisfaction among the retiree segment is crucial, as it can encourage positive word of mouth and expand financial inclusion among older populations. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the importance of soft factors such as personal branding and customer empathy, which are no less critical than technical aspects in digital services.

Policy Recommendations: The financial services regulator (OJK) could encourage financial institutions to pay more attention to the digital literacy of the elderly segment by providing empathetic educational programs. Additionally, regulators should promote transparency and security (as key elements of trust-building) through policies that protect digital loan consumers. Future research is recommended to examine similar models in different contexts or to include additional variables (e.g., age or digital literacy as moderators) to test the consistency of these relationships. As the digitalization of financial services accelerates, understanding the key factors influencing customer satisfaction across demographic segments will be essential for the success of service providers.

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