Relationship intention and service quality as combined competitive strategy

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Abstract
Offering superior service quality or building long-term customer relationships could offer effective strategies to create a competitive advantage. However, since not all customers desire to enter into relationships with service providers, it may be more profitable to focus relationship marketing strategies on customers with relationship intentions. The purpose of this study was to establish whether there is a relationship between relationship intention and service quality, as combining these approaches could result in formulating a greater competitive strategy than using either one of these strategies in isolation. Data were collected from 368 South African respondents. The results indicated positive relationships between respondents' relationship intentions and service quality expectations and perceptions. It was also established that respondents with moderate and low relationship intentions were significantly less satisfied with the service levels they receive compared with their expectations, whereas no difference was found for those with higher relationship intentions.

Key terms
Relationship marketing; relationship intention; involvement; expectations; forgiveness; feedback; fear of relationship loss; *service quality; SERVQUAL; emerging country*

INTRODUCTION

Gaining a competitive advantage becomes increasingly difficult as product and service offerings become more standardised (Duarte, Moreira, Ferraresi & Gerhard, 2016). It has been proposed that offering superior service quality could be an effective competitive strategy to follow (Buell, Campbell & Frei, 2016; Estepon, 2014). Service providers thus often follow this approach, as they believe that offering superior service quality leads to customer satisfaction (Liu, Cui, Zeng, Wu, Wang, Yan & Yan, 2015; Stefano, Casarotto, Barichello & Sohn, 2015), an increase in positive word-of-mouth communication (Liu & Lee, 2016), an increased intention to repurchase, and customer loyalty (Liu *et al*., 2015; Liu & Lee, 2016).

Another possible competitive strategy to follow is to build long-term relationships with customers, referred to as a 'relationship marketing approach' (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012). This approach, with its focus on establishing, developing and maintaining relationships between service providers and their customers, is gaining popularity among academics and practitioners as they begin to understand the importance of long-term relationships when formulating marketing strategies (Pablo Maicas Lopez, Polo Redondo & Sese Olivan, 2006; Yen, Liu, Chen & Lee, 2015). The benefits of following a relationship marketing approach are very similar to those for offering superior service quality: it leads to greater levels of customer satisfaction (Kaura, Datta & Vyas, 2012), an increase in positive word-of-mouth communication (Foscht, Schloffer, Maloles & Chia, 2009) and customer loyalty (Kaura *et al*., 2012; Terpstra & Verbeeten, 2014).

However, the biggest drawback to following a relationship marketing approach is that not all customers desire to enter into relationships with service providers (Gilaninia, Almani, Pournaserani & Javad, 2011; Odekerken-Schröder, De Wulf, & Schumacher, 2003). Service providers thus stand a greater chance of success by focusing their relationship marketing strategies on those customers with relationship intentions, as they will be more likely to build long-term relationships (Conze, Bieger, Laesser & Riklin, 2010; Kumar, Bohling & Ladda, 2003; Leahy, 2011; Raciti, Ward & Dagger, 2013).

As previous research did not consider combining relationship intention and service quality as a competitive strategy, the purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between these two approaches by specifically determining whether customers displaying relationship intention also have higher service quality expectations and – more importantly – higher service quality perceptions.

In this article we contribute to the literature on relationship intention and service quality by establishing the relationship between customers' relationship intention and their service quality expectations and perceptions. A practical contribution it makes is that service providers can use the insights gained from this study to formulate a strategy using relationship intention and service quality in combination. This combined approach would probably result in a greater competitive strategy than using either one of these strategies in isolation.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, the relevant literature is presented. Next, the methodology, results and interpretation of the findings are presented. Finally, the findings and implications are discussed, limitations are presented, and recommendations are made for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service quality

Service quality refers to customers' overall impressions of the relative inferiority or superiority of service providers and their services, based on a comparison of customers' initial service expectations and their perceptions of actual service delivery (Palmer, 2011; Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 2002). Ahmed and Amir (2011) explain that, since customer satisfaction can vary from person to person and from one service encounter to the next, researching the gap between customers' service expectations and their satisfaction with actual service performance can provide service providers with a measure that is both objective and quantitative. It is important to establish this gap since, when customers are satisfied with the service quality they receive, they are inclined to recommend the service provider to others. It is thus essential for service providers to establish customers' satisfaction with the quality of service delivered, and specifically to determine whether there is a gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988).

SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), is probably the most frequently used research instrument to measure service quality and has been adapted over time to consider industry-specific and cultural differences (Bick, Abratt & Möller, 2010). SERVQUAL has been verified by numerous studies across various industries over time (Abukhalifeh & Som, 2015; Arshad & Su, 2015; Bick *et al.*, 2010; Buttle, 1996; Cho, Kim & Kwak, 2015; Paryani, Masoudi & Cudney, 2010; Radder & Han, 2009) and is accordingly regarded as one of the fundamental instruments used to measure service quality. The relevance of SERVQUAL (or an adaption of it) becomes apparent when considering that it is still a widely-used research instrument when measuring service quality (Duarte *et al.*, 2016; Huang, Lin & Fan, 2015; Leong, Hew, Lee & Ooi, 2015; Murali, Pugazhendhi & Muralidharan, 2016).

Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) propose that service quality should be measured with five sub-dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. *Reliability* refers to the ability of the service provider to perform the promised service dependably, accurately and on time, and to do it right the first time (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988:23). Reliability should be at

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the core of quality service, as nothing else will matter if a service is unreliable; if the service provider frequently makes mistakes or fails to keep promises, customers lose confidence in the service provider's ability to provide a dependable and accurate service (Berry, Parasuraman & Zeithaml, 1994).

Responsiveness signifies the service provider's willingness to help customers, to provide prompt service, to reduce waiting time, and to respond to problems, complaints and requests (Grönroos, 2007; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Like reliability, responsiveness is regarded as one of the most important quality dimensions of a service and, according to Zeihtaml, Bitner and Gremler (2009), can only be improved if service delivery is designed from the customer's perspective.

Assurance represents the knowledge and courtesy of a service providers' staff and their ability to inspire trust and confidence in their customers (Grönroos, 2007; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Assurance is particularly important when customers feel uncertain about their ability to evaluate the outcome of the service (Zeihtaml *et al.*, 2009).

Empathy implies that service providers will act in their customers' best interest, that they care for their customers, and that they give them individualised attention (Grönroos, 2007; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). During a service recovery process, it is important for the service provider to show clearly that the problem is understood from the customer's point of view. It is only by looking at situations through the eyes of their customers that service providers can understand what customers think has gone wrong and why they are upset (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011).

Tangibles constitute the tangible aspects related to services, and include the physical facilities, furniture, equipment, communication, marketing material, and general appearance of the service provider's staff (Abukhalifeh & Som, 2015; Palmer, 2011; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988).

Relationship marketing

The belief that customers hold a potential lifetime value for service providers has led to a shift from transactional marketing to relationship marketing (Alexander & Colgate, 2000). This shift was specifically apparent for services. Services and services marketing were accordingly considered as prominent roots of relationship marketing (Eiriz & Wilson, 2006; Grönroos, 1991; Sheth, 2002). In fact, probably the first definition on relationship marketing (by Berry in 1983) emphasised the applicability thereof to services by defining it as "… attracting, maintaining and – in multi-service organisations – enhancing customer relationships" (Berry *in* Harker & Egan, 2006). Organisations increasingly realised that, unlike physical products, the objectives of the marketing of services should be to not only attract, but also retain, customers through the development of long-term relationships (Harker & Egan, 2006). This stems from the fact that much of the costs associated with services comes from setting up of the service (Harker & Egan, 2006).

By implementing a longer-term perspective by focussing more on retaining customers, service providers should see greater financial rewards (Harker & Egan, 2006). It is accordingly not surprising that service providers increasingly focus on relationship marketing tactics to increase customer patronage (Ashley, Noble, Donthu & Lemon, 2011). The link between relationship marketing and service quality lies therein that in order to retain customers, service providers have to provide good quality service (Berry, 2002). This understanding is supported by Eiriz

and Wilson's (2006) view that marketing, customer service and quality are the pillars of the relationship marketing concept.

Successful relationship marketing is dependent on effective cooperation and collaboration between service providers and customers to ensure that both parties in the relationship experience economic value at a reduced cost (Baran, Galka & Strunk, 2008; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2000). The development of enduring relationships is thus the result of service providers and customers alike investing resources such as time, effort and money (Kinard & Capella, 2006). In fact, it is believed that the quality of a relationship and the quality of a service is interweaved and depends on the efforts of the service provider and its customers (Eiriz & Wilson, 2006). Service providers and their customers thus stand to benefit from a relationship marketing approach.

On the one hand, service providers benefit from the successful implementation of relationship marketing in lower costs, as it is less expensive to retain existing customers than continually to attract new customers (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2008). Building relationships is also important, as it increases customer satisfaction; and satisfied customers, in turn, are more likely to invest in long-term relationships, tend to increase their spending, increase repeat purchasing, lower their price sensitivity, and spread positive word-of-mouth testimonies (Foscht *et al*., 2009; Kaura *et al*., 2012).

Customers, on the other hand, stand to gain relational benefits: confidence, social, and special treatment benefits (Chen & Hu, 2013; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002). *Confidence benefits* relate to the customer's psychological feelings of security and trust, which reduce anxiety about purchasing processes (Dagger & Danaher, 2014; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011); *social benefits* refer to emotions, such as a feeling of familiarity or a sense of belonging and the formation of a social bond with the service provider (Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 2002; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011; Yen *et al*., 2015); and *special treatment benefits* refer to economic benefits (e.g., discounts and faster service) and customisation benefits (e.g., personalised or additional services not normally available) (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011).

Although a key principle of relationship marketing is a focus on the retention of profitable customers by maximising the lifetime value of customers' relationships with service providers (Payne, 2006; Yeung, Ramasamy, Chen & Paliwoda, 2013), it should be noted that not all customers have the desire to enter into relationships with service providers. Relationship marketing may therefore not be an appropriate strategy to be applied to all customers (Berry, 1995), as valuable resources will be wasted if relationship marketing strategies are not applied to customers who actually desire a relationship with the service provider (Odekerken-Schröder *et al.,* 2003). The first step in any relationship marketing strategy, therefore, should be to identify and target those customers who are receptive to relationship building – in other words, customers with relationship intentions (Berry, 1995; Liang & Wang, 2006).

Relationship intention

According to the theory of reasoned action, people's behavioural intentions can be used to predict their actual behaviour as the intention to perform the behaviour is the immediate antecedent of any behaviour (Ajzen & Madden, 1985). It is thus implied that the stronger a person's intention, the more that person is expected to act on the intention, and hence the greater the likelihood that the behaviour will actually be performed (Ajzen & Madden, 1985). Considering this theory, it stands to reason that, if it is possible to identify and focus

relationship building efforts on those customers displaying relationship intention, marketers stand a greater chance of building long-term relationships with them. Customers' relationship intentions can thus be used as a market segmentation tool that allows service providers to focus on customers who actually want to build relationships with them, and in so doing to prevent the dissipation of resources (Beetles & Harris, 2010; Hess, Story & Danes, 2011; Kumar *et al.*, 2003).

Kumar *et al.* (2003) define *relationship intention* as customers' intentions to build relationships with service providers while purchasing services from that provider. They posit that five constructs should be considered to measure customers' relationship intention: involvement, expectations, forgiveness, feedback, and fear of relationship loss.

Kumar *et al.* (2003) define *involvement* as customers' willingness to engage in relationship activities without obligation or force, implying that customers will become involved with service providers with whom they really intend to build relationships. Highly involved customers are more likely to have frequent contact with service providers, comment on performance and service delivery, and respond to requests for feedback and suggestions (Scott & Vitartas, 2008; Kinard & Capella, 2006). Customer involvement can lead to higher personal interaction with the service provider and consequently to higher personal and brand identification – which, in turn, leads to stronger personal and brand relationship bonds with the service provider (Burnham, Frels & Mahajan, 2003).

Customer *expectations* are the ideas held by customers about a potential service delivery (Kim, Ok & Canter, 2012). Kumar *et al.* (2003) explain that customers who have higher expectations of a service provider will be more concerned about the service provider and will have higher intentions of building a relationship with it. Also, since customers' expectations are created by their buying experiences, which become the standard against which they measure services, future purchasing decisions will be influenced by how past transactions were experienced (Conze *et al.*, 2010).

When experiencing a service failure, customers can deal with their dissatisfaction in a number of ways, including defecting to a competitor or forgiving the service provider for the transgression (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). It has been suggested that customers who value their relationship with a service provider are more willing to *forgive* a service failure or unmet expectations, and are therefore more willing to give the service provider the benefit of the doubt (Conze *et al.*, 2010). Kumar *et al.* (2003) believe that customers' willingness to forgive service providers for unfulfilled expectations or service failures are indicative of higher relationship intentions.

Customer *feedback* goes beyond mere complaining or complimenting; it is a characteristic of engaged customers who take active steps to improve a relationship by sharing thoughts and feelings, and offering suggestions in addition to providing positive or negative comments (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). Positive feedback helps service providers to identify strengths that can be further reinforced, whereas negative feedback can be used to initiate service recovery, avoid the recurrence of similar dissatisfactory service in the future, and help to improve services and service delivery (Chelminski & Coulter, 2011; Wirtz, Tambyah & Mattila, 2010). It has been postulated that customers with relationship intentions will be more likely to provide positive and negative feedback because they care about the service provider and would like to contribute to the future improvement of the service (Conze *et al.*, 2010; Kumar *et al.*, 2003).

When a relationship is terminated, customers would not only want to reduce potential uncertainty and risk, but would also try to avoid the psychological and emotional stress that might flow from it (Jobber, 2010). Customers – especially those with relationship intentions – might therefore be *fearful of losing their relationship* with service providers (Burnham *et al*., 2003; Kumar *et al*., 2003). In particular, customers will fear losing the relational benefits – the confidence benefits, social benefits, and special treatment benefits – that they derive from their relationship with their service provider (Hennig-Thurau *et al., 2002*).

RESEARCH METHOD

Data were collected by means of an electronic self-administered questionnaire, distributed via email, to personal tax services customers residing in South Africa. The email contained introductory information and a link to the survey, which was accessible through Qualtrics online survey software. One reminder email was sent to encourage participation in the study. In total 368 usable questionnaires were obtained.

The questionnaire had three sections, and used screening questions to ensure that only individuals on the database who use personal tax services would participate in the study. Section A captured demographic and tax services provider patronage behaviour, while Section B measured respondents' expectations and perceptions of the service quality they receive from their personal tax services provider. Section C established respondents' relationship intentions towards their personal tax services provider. Service quality and relationship intention were measured with five-point Likert-type response formats, where 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'.

Respondents' service quality expectations and perceptions of their personal tax services providers were measured by means of an adapted SERVQUAL measuring instrument (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Although the SERVQUAL measuring instrument usually comprises 22 items to measure the five sub-dimensions thereof, the authors decided not to measure 'Tangibles', therefore reducing the SERVQUAL measure to 18 items. The decision to exclude 'Tangibles' was based on the belief that respondents using off-site tax providers would not be in a position to accurately measure most of the items associated with 'Tangibles', including the tax provider's physical facilities, furniture, equipment, marketing material, and general appearance of the service provider's staff. The exclusion of 'Tangibles' was furthermore supported by other similar studies (Devaraj, Fan & Kohli, 2002; Kang & Bradley, 2002; Kettinger & Lee, 1994) where the researchers doubted respondents' ability to accurately evaluate items related to this sub-dimension. Relationship intention towards their personal tax services providers were measured by means of 15 items adapted from Kruger and Mostert (2013).

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 23) was used for statistical processing. The study used a confidence level of 95 per cent. Paired sample t-tests were performed to test for statistically-significant differences between the mean scores of respondents' service quality expectations and their service quality perceptions for the service quality dimensions, while a one-way ANOVA was performed to test for statistically-significant differences between the means of more than two groups (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

To calculate practical significance by means of effect sizes, d-values for one-way ANOVAs were determined (Saunders *et al*., 2012), where d-values were interpreted as small at 0.2; medium at 0.5; and large at 0.8 (Cohen, 1988). The strength of paired sample t-test results were determined by eta-values, where 0.01 was interpreted as representing a small effect, 0.06 as a medium effect, and 0.14 as a large effect (Cohen, 1988). Medium and large effect sizes were interpreted as practically significant, based on Cohen's (1988) argument that large and medium effect sizes have sufficient practical effect, as differences between respondent groups can already be observed with the naked eye.

RESULTS

Sample profile

More than half of the respondents (56.8 per cent) who participated in the study were between the ages of 31 and 50 years, while 20.4 per cent were between 51 and 60 years of age. The majority of the respondents were male (73.1 per cent) and white (88.6 per cent). Most of the respondents' personal gross monthly income was more than R80 000 (approximately \$5 760) (28.5 per cent); 14.7 per cent earned between R60 000 and R70 000 (approximately \$4 320 – \$5 040); and 13 per cent earned between R50 000 and R60 000 per month (approximately \$3 600 – \$4 320).

Most respondents used a professional tax service provider to handle their personal tax affairs (95.1 per cent) and had been dealing with their tax services providers for more than five but less than 10 years (26.9 per cent), 26.4 per cent for between one and three years, while 19.3 per cent had remained with the same provider for more than 10 years.

Validity and reliability

To confirm construct validity, each sub-construct associated with the two constructs tested in this study was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. The exploratory factor analyses were performed by means of Maximum Likelihood extraction with Varimax rotation (Field, 2013). For data to be deemed appropriate for exploratory factor analysis, Bartlett's test of sphericity should be significant (<0.05) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) should be greater than a value of 0.5. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (p<0.0001) for all constructs, and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy revealed results for constructs at values greater than 0.5. For each construct measured, one factor with Eigen values larger than 1 was extracted. Table 1 summarises the results from the exploratory factor analyses by listing the Bartlett's test result, the KMO MSA, and the variance explained for each extracted factor.

Considering the results depicted in Table 1, the uni-dimensionality and the construct validity of each sub-construct could be confirmed. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient values were accordingly calculated for the constructs and their underlying dimensions to determine the reliability of the measurement scales used in the study. Table 2 provides the overall mean score for each factor together with its realised Cronbach's alpha value.

TABLE 1: Construct validity results

Constructs	Bartlett's test	KMO	Variance per factor
SERVQUAL			
Reliability	p <0.0001	0.897	72.26
Responsiveness	p <0.0001	0.837	73.26
Assurance	p <0.0001	0.845	70.21
Empathy	p <0.0001	0.858	69.20
Relationship intention			
Involvement	p <0.0001	0.686	77.17
Expectations	p <0.0001	0.700	77.06
Fear of relationship loss	p <0.0001	0.738	84.97
Forgiveness	p <0.0001	0.694	73.73
Feedback	p <0.0001	0.710	74.09

TABLE 2: Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for constructs of the study

Constructs and underlying dimensions	Number of items	Mean	Cronbach's alpha value
Service Quality: Reliability	5	4.65	0.93
Service Quality: Responsiveness	4	4.55	0.91
Service Quality: Assurance	4	4.58	0.90
Service Quality: Empathy	5	4.47	0.91
Relationship Intention: Involvement	3	3.99	0.85
Relationship Intention: Expectations	3	4.34	0.85
Relationship Intention: Fear of relationship loss	3	2.84	0.91
Relationship Intention: Forgiveness	3	2.63	0.82
Relationship Intention: Feedback	3	4.18	0.82
Overall relationship intention	15	3.61	0.85

From Table 2 it can be observed that all Cronbach's alpha coefficient values are greater than 0.7 (Saunders *et al*., 2012), which indicates that the scales used to measure service quality and relationship intention are reliable.

Respondent classification according to relationship intentions

To determine the relationship between respondents with different relationship intention levels and service quality, respondents were divided into three relationship intention groups: low, moderate, and high relationship intentions, using the 33.3 and 66.6 percentiles as cut-off points. An ANOVA was subsequently performed to determine whether respondents from different relationship intention levels differ statistically from each other in their relationship intentions. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics, Tukey's comparison (statistically significant at the 0.05 level) and *d*-values (effect sizes) for respondents' overall relationship intentions. Due to ties that occurred in the continuous data, the number of respondents per group differed.

Table 3 indicates that 115 respondents were categorised as having low relationship intentions (group 1) (mean = 2.92), while 142 had moderate relationship intentions (group 2) (mean = 3.58) and 111 had high relationship intentions (group 3) (mean = 4.35). Table 3 also shows

that, both statistically and practically, the three groups differed significantly from one another in terms of their overall relationship intentions.

TABLE 3: Relationship intention groups

Construct	Mean	SD	n	p-value*	Relationship intention group	d-values		
						1 (Low)	2 (Moderate)	3 (High)
Overall relationship intention	2.92	0.28	115	1-2	1 (Low)	-	2.4	4.1
	3.58	0.18	142	1-3	2 (Moderate)	2.4	-	2.2
	4.35	0.35	111	2-3	3 (High)	4.1	2.2	-

*Tukey's comparison significant at the 0.05 level between groups (1 = Low; 2 = Moderate; 3 = High)

Relationship intention and service quality

The relationship between respondents' relationship intentions and their service quality expectations and perceptions was determined by using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. Table 4 presents the *r*-value of the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between respondents' relationship intentions and their service quality expectations and perceptions.

TABLE 4: Correlations between relationship intention and service quality

Correlation between relationship intention and:	*r*-value
Overall service quality expectations	0.3*
Overall service quality perceptions	0.5*

*Correlation significant at the 0.01 level

Table 4 indicates that there was a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.3$) between respondents' relationship intentions and their service quality expectations. A larger positive correlation was also found between respondents' relationship intentions and their service quality perceptions ($r = 0.5$). It can therefore be concluded that, as respondents' relationship intentions increase, there is a significant statistical and practical increase in their service quality expectations and service quality perceptions.

Paired sample t-tests

Paired sample t-tests were performed between respondents' service quality expectations and service quality perceptions for each of the three relationship intentions groups, illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5 indicates statistically as well as large practically significant differences between service quality expectations and service quality perceptions for respondents with low relationship intentions, with their expectations being significantly higher than their perceptions for all the service quality factors. This finding implies that respondents with low relationship intentions hold service quality expectations that are statistically and practically significantly higher than their service quality perceptions. Table 5 also shows statistically, as well a large practically significant differences between the service quality expectations and perceptions of respondents with moderate relationship intentions for all the service quality factors. This finding implies that respondents with moderate relationship intentions hold service quality expectations that are statistically and practically significantly higher than their service quality perceptions. However, no significant differences between the service quality expectations and perceptions of respondents with high relationship intentions were found for any of the service quality factors.

TABLE 5: Service quality expectations and perceptions for the three relationship intention groups

Factor	N	RI Group	Expectations		Perceptions		DoM	SDoD	p-value	Eta value
			Mean	Std dev.	Mean	Std dev.				
Reliability	115	Low	4.49	0.77	3.73	0.85	0.76	0.97	0.000*	▲0.38
	142	Mod.	4.68	0.48	4.32	0.65	0.37	0.59	0.000*	▲0.28
	111	High	4.77	0.38	4.69	0.45	0.08	0.49	0.072	◊0.03
Responsive-ness	115	Low	4.28	0.81	3.59	0.91	0.70	1.11	0.000*	▲0.28
	142	Mod.	4.59	0.53	4.16	0.80	0.43	0.75	0.000*	▲0.25
	111	High	4.76	0.41	4.68	0.48	0.07	0.49	0.111	◊0.02
Assurance	115	Low	4.37	0.75	3.65	0.91	0.72	1.05	0.000*	▲0.32
	142	Mod.	4.60	0.52	4.31	0.66	0.28	0.58	0.000*	▲0.19
	111	High	4.78	0.35	4.71	0.45	0.07	0.44	0.076	◊0.03
Empathy	115	Low	4.17	0.83	3.57	0.89	0.59	1.09	0.000*	▲0.23
	142	Mod.	4.54	0.51	4.19	0.71	0.35	0.64	0.000*	▲0.23
	111	High	4.69	0.45	4.63	0.51	0.06	0.53	0.254	◊0.01

RI = Relationship intention; DoM = Difference of Mean; SDoD = Standard Deviation of Difference
* Statistically significant; ◊ Small effect; ᐃ Medium effect; ▲ Large effect

The differences between service quality expectations and service quality perceptions for the three relationship intention groups are illustrated below.
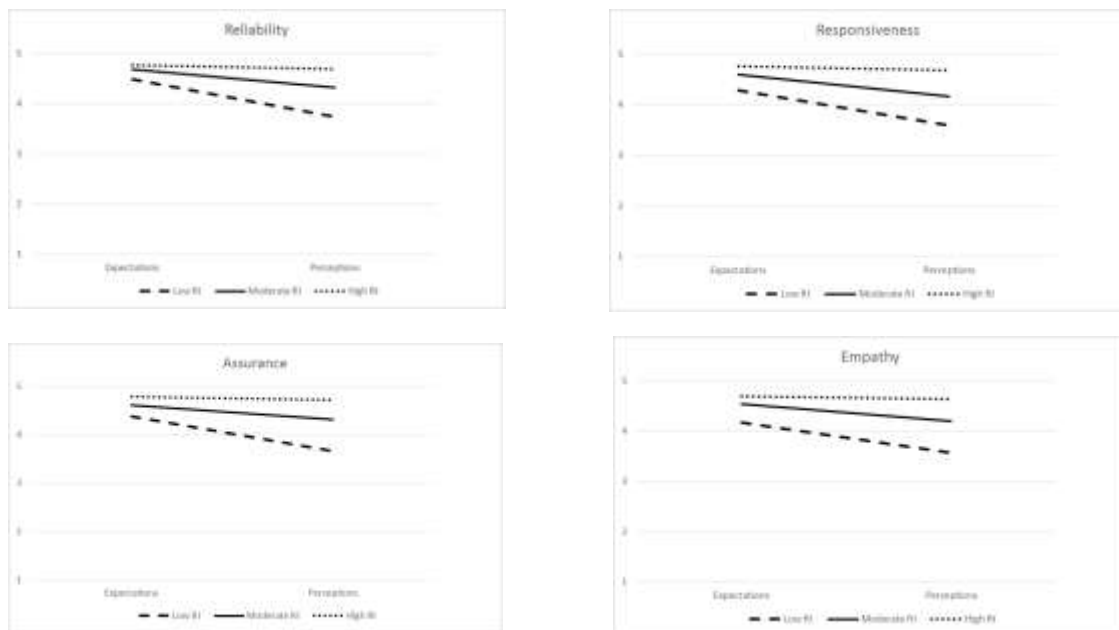

Figure 1. Service quality expectations and perceptions per relationship intention group

From the figures it can be seen that respondents with high relationship intentions held higher expectations and perceptions of the service quality delivered by their tax service providers for all the service quality factors. It can also be seen that the perceptions of the four service quality factors were lower for those with low relationship intentions when compared with respondents with moderate and high relationship intentions (as confirmed in Table 5). Finally, when considering the slopes of each relationship intention group, the difference between the expectations and the perceptions of the service quality factors can clearly be seen from the figures.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Offering superior service quality (Buell *et al*., 2016; Estepon, 2014) or building long-term relationships with customers (Vivek *et al*., 2012) could be effective strategies to follow to create a competitive advantage. The reason for this is that the successful implementation of either of these strategies could result in increased customer satisfaction (Kaura *et al*., 2012; Liu *et al*., 2015; Stefano *et al*., 2015), an increase in positive word-of-mouth communication (Foscht *et al*., 2009; Liu & Lee, 2016), and an increased intention to repurchase and customer loyalty (Kaura *et al*., 2012; Liu *et al*., 2015; Liu & Lee, 2016; Terpstra & Verbeeten, 2014). However, since not all customers want to build long-term relationships with service providers (Gilaninia *et al*., 2011; Odekerken-Schröder *et al*., 2003), it is essential to focus relationship marketing strategies on those customers with relationship intentions, as they will be more likely to build long-term relationships (Conze *et al.,* 2010; Kumar *et al*., 2003; Leahy, 2011; Raciti *et al*., 2013).

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between service quality and relationship intention by specifically determining whether customers displaying relationship intention also have higher service quality expectations and – more importantly – higher service quality perceptions.

A first finding was that respondents could be categorised according to their levels of relationship intentions, and that respondents in each group differed significantly from those in other groups in terms of their overall relationship intentions. This finding is encouraging, as it indicates that personal tax service providers could draft their relationship marketing strategies and service structures to focus on those customers with higher relationship intentions.

It was also found that, as respondents' relationship intentions increased, their service quality expectations and perceptions also increased. Personal tax service providers who are able to determine their customers' levels of relationship intentions are thus in a better position to render services more accurately. Customers with high levels of relationship intentions have higher service quality expectations and perceptions. For this reason, personal tax service providers should focus on customers with higher relationship intentions, as they will hold more positive perceptions of service delivery than those with lower levels of relationship intentions. According to Kumar *et al*. (2003), a possible added advantage of this approach is that customers with higher levels of relationship intentions will provide feedback to personal tax service providers if their expectations are not met or if service failures occur, thereby ensuring improved service delivery and recovery responses that will benefit all customers – even those with lower relationship intentions.

Personal tax providers ought to implement different service strategies for groups with different relationship intentions, since practically significant differences were found between the expectations and perceptions of respondents with low and moderate relationship intentions in all of the service quality sub-dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). This finding implies that, in practice, respondents with low and moderate levels of relationship intentions tend to be less satisfied with the service quality they receive (and its sub-dimensions) because it does not measure up to their expectations. This finding thus justifies focusing efforts on customers with higher relationship intention as it would require greater effort from the service provider to narrow the gap between low and moderate relationship intention customers' expectations and perceptions. It is thus recommended that personal tax service providers focus on customers with higher relationship intentions who wish to build a relationship with the

service provider and who are more likely to be involved with the service delivery process. Their involvement through regular communication and input enables personal tax service providers to understand and manage customer expectations. Implementing this recommendation could possibly result in a smaller gap between all customers' expectations and actual perceptions of the service provided. Kumar *et al.* (2003) maintain that service providers could also benefit from the regular feedback received from customers with higher relationship intentions about their experiences and expectations, and from the fact that they are anxious to preserve their investment in the relationship, and are therefore more willing to forgive instances of service failure and to give the provider another chance to improve the service.

Finally, by focusing on customers with higher relationship intentions, personal tax service providers stand a greater chance of gaining more business through positive word-of-mouth, as it has been suggested that customers with higher service quality perceptions are more inclined to recommend the service providers to others (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). As a final recommendation, personal tax service providers should consider combining offering service quality and focusing on customers with higher relationship intentions, as such a combined strategy could offer a more effective competitive strategy than following these strategies in isolation.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A first limitation of this study was that data were collected from only one developing country, namely South Africa. Greater insights into the relationship between relationship intention and service quality might have been obtained if data were collected from more African (or developing) countries. Secondly, the respondents who participated in this study earned significantly higher incomes than the average in South Africa (approximately R 18 000 or $1 269) (Trading Economics, 2016). Results might have been different if data had been collected from respondents with monthly salaries that were closer to the country's average. A final limitation that should be reported concerns the statistical analyses that were hampered due to low correlations between some of the relationship intention sub-dimensions. It is suggested that future research consider the appropriateness of each of the five relationship intention sub-dimensions when measuring overall relationship intention.

It is recommended that future research consider the relationship between the relationship intentions of customers in different service contexts, and other relationship marketing concepts, such as customers' trust in, commitment to, loyalty towards and willingness to remain with service providers. Future research could also consider replicating this study in a business-to-business (B2B) context by involving emerging small, medium and micro-enterprises in South Africa, as these groups would typically require their personal tax services provider to be a strategic business advisory partner. Future research could also consider the influence of relationship intention on service failure and service recovery. Finally, it is suggested that future studies establish a shorter relationship intention measure by limiting its sub-dimensions to those with the highest correlations, namely involvement, fear of relationship loss and forgiveness.

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