

Examining the link between the antecedents of relationship commitment and loyalty within the road transport industry of South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – The study investigates the extent to which the relationship commitment by customers of road transport service providers is influenced by trust, communication, shared values and the attractiveness of alternatives. In turn, the influence of the extent of their commitment towards future loyalty is determined.

Design/methodology/approach – An explanatory research design was followed and data was collected from road transport service provider customers using self-administered questionnaires. A total of 120 responses were suitable for analysis. Multiple regression analysis as well as the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique was used to analyse the results and to uncover the interrelationships between constructs.

Findings – Trust, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives can be regarded as predictors of both customer commitment and customer loyalty and must become the key elements in a business relationship building strategy in the bulk road transport industry in South Africa

Research implications – The model tested confirms the hypothesised relationships between trust, communication, shared values, the attractiveness of alternatives commitment and loyalty of road transport customers. Customer commitment is linked to three of its four antecedents (trust, shared values and the attractiveness of alternatives) and their outcome, loyalty.

Managerial implications – The findings assist bulk road transport service providers in South Africa that if they become more trustworthy, communicates effectively, shares in the same values as their customers and offers a superior service at exceptional prices, customer commitment will be the result, which directly and positively influences customer loyalty.

Originality/value – An understanding of the factors that could assist bulk road transport providers in fostering customer loyalty within a business environment might assist them in maintaining their client base, and develop strategies to strengthen business service need requirements. Few research studies, however, have examined how customer commitment and customer loyalty relate to the antecedents and outcome in the South African transport industry.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction, trust, communication, shared values, attractiveness of alternatives, relationship commitment, road transport industry

INTRODUCTION

The success and progression of the South African road transport industry are dependent on how well businesses compete for a share of the customer's wallet, while simultaneously balancing all the negative aspects that affect business performance (Axer, 2014; Viljoen, 2014:16). In order for businesses to progress and achieve greater success, a focus on optimisation needs to be realised. This optimisation focuses mainly on performing business-related tasks by being customer focused in order to achieve a more competitive business (Ross, 2009:450; Roberts-Lombard, 2011:3488; Trasorras, Weinstein & Abratt, 2009:616; Viljoen, 2014:15).

Customer focus is concerned with how well an organisation places its customers at the centre of its business. Understanding what customers' needs and wants are, is the essence of marketing and requires a strong relationship to be built and maintained between the business and its customers (Brink & Berndt, 2008:3; Gummesson, 2008:316; Ross, 2009:450). Relationship marketing is a tool to develop a customer focus and is defined as, "all those market activities directed towards establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:22). However, the success of relationship marketing rests on a balancing act between a business's ability to attract new customers, while simultaneously building existing relationships in an attempt to retain that customer (Payne, 1994:29; Palmer et al., 2005:319). Customers who are retained will continuously purchase goods and services and in the long run they will impact positively on profits (Ang & Buttle, 2006:85; Roberts-Lombard & Nyadzayo, 2013:2). Edward and Sahadev (2011:331) and Payne (1994:30) also explain that retaining customers allows a business to build stronger and deeper relationships with customers, thus enhancing customer commitment. Research by Theron, Terblanche and

Boshoff (2008:998), Fullerton (2005:1374) and Morgan and Hunt (1994:20) indicates that relationship commitment is central to the development of marketing relationships, and that the establishment of strong business relationships must reflect benefits for both the business and its customers (Dagger, David & NG, 2011:273, 274, 281). Customer commitment in relationship marketing is a key variable in determining whether or not a customer will remain loyal towards their service provider (Hess & Story, 2005:317; Awan & Bukhari, 2011:18).

To date, however, no formal research study has been conducted in the South African bulk road transport industry on the factors that are important in the development of relationship commitment from a customer's point of view. Evaluating the relationship between key factors, relationship commitment and customer loyalty, could provide the road transport industry with valued information to retain a loyal customer base and survive and grow their business over the long term.

Consequently, the study conducted for this article aims to address the above-mentioned research gap that exists in the South African bulk road transport industry.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The road transport industry in South Africa is competitive, as road transporters fight for a larger share of the customer's wallet (Reinhardt, 2014). In South Africa alone, there are hundreds of different bulk road transport service providers to choose from, ranging from large to small-to-medium organisations (Axer, 2014; Road Freight Association (RFA), 2014). Competition within this industry is heightened by the presence of foreign transporters from neighbouring countries operating in South Africa and by the rail inefficiencies (Maputo Corridor Logistics Initiative [MCLI], 2014; Transnet, 2014). In such a competitive environment where switching to alternative service providers is easy, success is achieved only by retaining existing customers by satisfying their needs and wants (Viljoen, 2014:15).

Relationship marketing is a strategy that can be used to determine customers' needs and wants. Therefore, research is required to explore the key factors that have a positive relationship with commitment and intentional customer loyalty. An understanding of the different factors contributing to the fostering of relationship commitment and intentional customer loyalty can assist the bulk road transport industry with a greater understanding of servicing customer needs, thereby ensuring that customers remain loyal.

OBJECTIVES

Against the background of the research problem provided, the aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between key variables, commitment and intentional loyalty in the South African bulk road transport industry. The secondary objectives below were developed to support the primary research objective:

- To determine whether trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives influence relationship commitment at a bulk road transport service provider.
- To establish whether relationship commitment influences intentional customer loyalty at a bulk road transport service provider.
- To make recommendations regarding the relationship between the key variables and intentional customer loyalty at a bulk road transport service provider.

Theoretical framework

Relationship Marketing Theory grounding the study

Since the dawn of the new millennium, there has been a transition in marketing theory towards relationship marketing, perceiving business practice as an inclusive approach of different stakeholders. Relationship marketing theory is built around the collaboration of all parties in a business relationship which extends beyond market transactions (Knox & Gruar, 2007). Morgan and Hunt (1994) in their seminal work on the Trust-Commitment Theory, argued that a relational approach based on mutual trust and relational

commitment between stakeholders will become increasingly important to secure a competitive advantage in the supply chain. Hunt, Arnett and Madhavaram (2006) concur that stakeholders will only be interested in a collaborative working relationship if all parties can contribute to the value-add of the final product or service. Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek (2011:107-108) states that in the last decade, the power of balance in the relationship-building process between supplier and buyer, has shifted away from the supplier in favour of the buyer. The buyers are increasingly positioning their dominance in the relationship building process, and expect trust and relationship commitment in this process. Gummesson (2017:1) concurs that the buyer or customer increasingly demands the building of long-term relationships, even taking the lead in the relationship-building process. This stakeholder group requires the principles of trust, shared values, communication, commitment and integrity to be the foundation blocks for any future supplier and buyer relationship.

Trust

Trust, as described by Morgan and Hunt (1994:23), is achieved when either an individual, group of individuals or a business has faith and confidence in the ability of the other party to provide a reliable service and to match their unique requirements (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007:842; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010:841). Anderson and Narus (1990:45) define trust as a “firm’s belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm, as well as not take unexpected actions that would result in negative outcomes for the firm.” Both Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Anderson and Narus’ (1990) definitions of trust indicate a high level of confidence that customers or businesses have in service providers.

Communication

Theron, Terblanche and Boshoff (2012:35) state that communication only occurs when information is transferred from an input source to an output secondary process. Roberts-Lombard (2011:3488) stresses the importance of communication during the initial stages of building a relationship with a customer. Ndubisi (2007:100) and Anderson and Narus (1984:64) define communication as the ability to share meaningful, trustworthy and timely

information. Sharma and Patterson (1999:158) explain the importance of communication in maintaining relationship commitment in a service environment due to the continuous interaction between a service provider and its customers. Effective, relevant and timely communication also increases customers' confidence in a service provider and reduces the perception of risks that may arise, as these are communicated to the customer and solutions can be easily formulated (Sharma & Patterson, 1999:158; Ndubisi & Wah, 2005:545; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2006:507; Ndubisi, 2007:98).

Shared Values

Shared values are the common beliefs that service providers and customers have concerning behaviour, goals, policies, morals and ethics (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:25). Such values can be directed towards the triple bottom-line goals (profit, planet and people) quality services, integrity and innovation. These common shared values strengthen the relationship between a service provider and its customers (Theron et al., 2008:999). When an organisation and its customers have a common way of conducting business, it streamlines operations and results in an effective mutually beneficial relationship. By understanding each party's values, one can easily align strategically to achieve the desired outcome of a relationship (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012). Considering this, Fullerton (2003:334) and Kassim and Abdulla (2006:437) state that shared values do indeed lead to relationship commitment.

Attractiveness of Alternatives

Within the road transport industry, customers are exposed to alternative service providers and are attracted to their service or product offerings through advertisements, differentiated service offerings and cheaper transport prices (Mynhardt, 2015). Road transport service providers therefore need to ensure that they remain competitive by always differentiating from other service providers by being innovative, offering greater value, ensuring that their costing structure is market related, and focusing on superior customer service in order to ensure that customers will not be attracted by other road transport service providers in the market (Wu, 2011:594; Marais, 2015; Mynhardt, 2015). Mynhardt (2015) and Marais (2015) indicate that the less attractive alternative road

service providers are, the more committed customers will be to their current road transport service provider and that such commitment will lead to customer repeat purchases and ultimately, to loyalty (Hur, Park & Kim, 2010:2296; Wu, 2011:594).

Loyalty

Hur et al. (2010:2296) describe customer loyalty as a customer's willingness to continue purchasing services and products from their suppliers, regardless of other options available in the market. These loyal customers will not be tempted by marketing campaigns to switch to other suppliers. Research by Dagger *et al.* (2011:275), Sauers, (2008:35) and Kuusik (2007:11) indicates the positive influence that relationship commitment has on customer loyalty, and that customers who are committed to a relationship are more loyal and ultimately more profitable.

Theoretical model development

The interrelationship between trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives and commitment

Relationship marketing emphasise that trust is an important antecedent of relationship commitment (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010:306; Tolmay, 2012:177). Chen et al. (2011:262) concur that trust and commitment are directly linked to one another and trust is one of the many factors that result in the development and strengthening of relationships between businesses and their customers (Cater & Zakbar, 2009:786). According to Zeffane (2011:77), trust and commitment are closely related, confirming that customers will be more committed to that relationship when trust is present. When customers have trust in a business to deliver on promises made, customers' commitment is strengthened, which positively influences customer retention and loyalty (Cater & Zakbar, 2009:786; Bostrom, 2015:243).

Zeffane (2011:80) provides a strong argument for the direct relationship between communication and commitment. Roberts-Lombard (2011:3488) states that if businesses effectively communicate with customers, loyalty will be developed and through loyalty,

customer commitment will be formed. Therefore, open, clear, timely and accurate information sharing is important to ensure that customers' confidence in a business is maintained, influencing customers' future purchasing decisions and ultimately their commitment to the business (Marchet, Perego & Perotti, 2009:791).

According to Fullerton (2003:334) and Kassim and Abdulla (2006:437), relationship commitment is positively influenced by shared values and when customers and businesses share the same values, perceived fairness will be developed and through this, relationship commitment will be positively influenced (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012:586). Abdullah and Musa (2013:297) state that shared values positively influence trust, resulting in the strengthening of relationship commitment. Earlier studies by Morgan and Hunt (1994:24) revealed that shared values positively influence not only trust, but also relationship commitment.

A business should perceive shared values in terms of ethics, business practices, cultural acceptance, ethnicity, morals and policies, as a key element in the improvement of relationship commitment. (Tatham, 2013:155; Axer, 2015). A business also needs to continuously communicate with customers, to identify values that are important to the customer-business relationship, thus ensuring customers' commitment to the business so that customer loyalty may be earned (Chao, Chen & Yeh, 2015:21). Theron et al. (2008:1006), on the other hand, state that attractiveness of alternatives does have a direct relationship and influence on customer commitment to a business. When there are less favourable alternatives in a market, customers will be more committed to their relationship with an existing business (Axer, 2015). However, in a competitive market it is important to identify all competitors, and to understand their product and service offering. This will enable better servicing of existing customers' needs and wants, decreasing customers' intention of switching to an alternative business (Wu, 2011:594). Customer commitment entails the provision of value for money products and services that meet and exceed customers' needs and wants (Wu, 2011:594; Marais, 2015). Achieving such customer commitment results in customers' repeat purchase intention, which positively influences customer loyalty (Hur et al., 2010:2296; Wu, 2011:594).

Based upon these findings, the following hypotheses were formulated for the study:

- H₁: There is a positive relationship between trust and relationship commitment.
- H₂: There is a positive relationship between communication and relationship commitment.
- H₃: There is a positive relationship between shared values and relationship commitment.
- H₄: There is a positive relationship between attractiveness of alternatives and relationship commitment.

The interrelationship between relationship commitment and loyalty

Du Plessis (2010:94) defines commitment as the “desire to maintain a relationship and is represented by the ongoing investments made into activities, which is required to maintain the relationship into the future.” Sauers (2008:35) and Roberts-Lombard (2011:3488) define commitment as the willingness of parties to work and remain in the relationship. Commitment is therefore an important factor that ensures relationship continuation (Ibrahim & Najjar, 2008:14). Loyalty is defined “as the biased behavioural response expressed over time by the customer with respect to one business out of a set of businesses, which is a function of psychological processes resulting in brand commitment” (Du Plessis, 2010:83). Hur et al. (2010:2296) also describe customer loyalty as a customer’s willingness to continue purchasing products and services from their suppliers, regardless of other options available. From a theoretical underpinning, customer commitment and loyalty are important variables that ensure business survival, profitability and continuation (Sauers, 2008:35; Dagger et al., 2011:275; Chang et al., 2012:948; Hawkins & Vel, 2013:126).

Chang et al. (2012:948) and Cater and Zakbar (2009:785) are of the opinion that commitment has been widely researched in B2B relationship building, indicating that commitment is the most important antecedent for loyalty. Customer loyalty is reinforced at various stages of a relationship, with customer commitment being the leading variable that results in loyalty (Henrique & de Matos, 2015:572). Finally, the factors of trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives, as discussed, influence relationship commitment and ultimately loyalty. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between customer commitment and loyalty and both are needed to ensure future business success, customer retention, increased customer profitability and business continuation (Van Vuuren, Roberts-Lombard & Van Tonder, 2012:89; Magalhães, 2009:3).

Based upon these findings, the following hypothesis can be formulated for the study:

H₅: There is a positive relationship between relationship commitment and intentional customer loyalty.

Figure 1 depicts the proposed theoretical model for this study, illustrating the six constructs of the study as well as the hypothesised relationships between these constructs.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

METHODOLOGY

Research context and sample

The study was quantitative and descriptive in nature (Zikmand, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2013:52) and aimed at developing results that could be generalised and flows from the masters degree dissertation of Warren Luke Jackson, published at the University of Johannesburg under the title 'Factors influencing Business to Business relationship commitment within the road transport industry of South Africa'. (The co-authors on this

article were the supervisors of the dissertation). Data was collected from South African road transport business customers who have made use of the services of a bulk road transport service provider. Self-administered questionnaires and personal interviews were used to collect the data. These two methods of data collection were utilised to ensure enough respondents participated in the survey to have a large enough sample for representation. The sample frame was drawn from a list provided by the selected bulk road transport services provider and respondents were as a result of geographical distribution targeted in Gauteng, North-West, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and the Free State provinces. The sample unit was the selected bulk road transport service provider in South Africa and the sample elements were the users, or customers of the bulk road transport service. Non-probability convenience sampling with judgement technique was employed to realise a sample of 120 respondents. The questionnaire commenced with a preamble and three screening questions to ensure the representation of the target population of the study.

The questionnaire covered demographic questions as well as questions about the commitment and loyalty behaviour of respondents. To measure the constructs, a seven-point unlabelled Likert-scale was utilised to measure the level of agreement with respect to measuring trust, communications, shared values, availability of alternatives, relationship commitment and intentional loyalty. The scale measuring the different constructs in the study was adapted from Theron et al. (2008). Table 1 provides insight into the items used to measure each of the constructs.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 23.0. The measurement model and structural model were assessed using AMOS 23.0. Validity was addressed by securing that the items used in the research instrument was aligned to the research objectives developed for the study and that the questionnaire measurement supported the aim of the study. The questionnaire was pilot tested amongst a sample of 10 respondents who were representative representative of the population of the study. Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire to secure greater clarity of statements to the respondents. In

total, 250 respondents completed questionnaires that was used for data analysis. The SPSS version 23.0 was used for statistical analysis after data was captured and edited. The data analysis included Cronbach alpha values to determine the reliability of the scales, and standard multiple regression analysis, independent sample t-tests and the one-way analysis of variance technique (ANOVA) were used to measure the formulated hypotheses for the study.

RESULTS

Profile of respondents

The majority of respondents were male (65.3%) and white (66.9%). The second largest race group was coloured (10.2%) with the black race group holding the lowest percentage (9.3%). The biggest age group of respondents was between 36-51 years old (45.38%), holding a tertiary qualification (64.4%). Logistics and operations was the most common job description among respondents (50.8%,) with marketing and sales being the lowest (13.6%). A total of 15% of respondents marked 'other' for the job description question.

A total of 42.4% of respondents indicated that they make use of the services of a bulk road transport service provider daily, while 3.4% of respondents make use of the services of a bulk road transport service provider annually. The product transported the most by bulk road transport service providers is coal, followed by chrome and the least transported product, is slag. Furthermore, a total of 22% of respondents transport more than 200 000 tons of product in a year. The least of these is the 12.7% of respondents who transport between 1 – 10 000 tons of product a year. Finally, only 2.5% of respondents indicated that they have made use of the services of a bulk road transport service provider for longer than 20 years, while the majority of respondents at 34.7% indicated that they have made use of the services of their bulk road transport service provider for between 3 – 5 years, followed by 31.4% of respondents at 1 – 2 years.

Reliability

The Cronbach alpha technique was applied to assess the reliability of the six constructs that were used in the study Pallant (2010:100) states that the Cronbach's alpha value shows the reliability of the scale items, where a Cronbach alpha value of 0.7 is regarded as acceptable, although a value of 0.8 is preferred. Table 2 illustrates the reliability statistics for this study and illustrates that the different can be noted as reliable, since the values are higher than 0.7.

(Insert Table 2 here)

The influence of trust, communication, shared values and availability of alternatives on relationship commitment

Concerning the first research objective, standard multiple regression analysis was used to explain the relationship between the independent variables trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives, and the intervening variable, relationship commitment.

A number of preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violations of the underlying assumptions for performing the standard multiple regression analysis technique. In the first instance, a sample of 250 respondents was regarded as acceptable considering that it is higher than the minimum required sample size of 54 (number of independent variables), as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007:403). Secondly, no evidence of multicollinearity was found. The Tolerance Value that was considered per variable was not lower than 0.1 and the calculated Variance Inflation Factor were almost 10. Therefore, the values calculated were within the within the limits as recommended by Pallant (2010:158). Thirdly, the residual scatterplots indicated normally distributed data. In addition, the distribution of the findings can be perceived as normal if they illustrate a skewness that is lower than an absolute value of 2.00, and a kurtosis of the distribution of less than 7.00 (West, Finch & Curran, 1995). Considering this, the different scale items that were applied to the study was within these limits. Therefore, considering this analysis and the relatively large (n = 250) sample, the standard multiple regression analysis technique was applied to test the first hypothesis formulated for this study.

The results of the standard multiple regression analysis (to assess the relationship between trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives and relationship commitment) are reflected in Table 3.

(Insert Table 3 here)

Table 3 indicates that the R Square value of 0.486 under the Model Summary is interpreted, as 48.6% of the variance in commitment is explained by trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives, indicating that commitment is influenced by trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives. The p-value (Sig.) under the ANOVA section is 0.00, indicating a correlation between the variables. Thus, trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives are jointly significant in predicting commitment. The coefficients section was evaluated and it can be deduced that the constant was significant as the p-value (Sig.) is less than 0.05. The p-values (Sig.) for the variables trust, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives are all less than 0.05, and therefore are all significant in influencing commitment. The unstandardised B values were analysed only for the variables that were significant (trust, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives). The results indicate that for every 1 unit that trust increases, commitment increases by 0.183 (18.3%), for every 1 unit that shared values increases, commitment increases by 0.372 (37.2%) and for every 1 unit that attractive of alternatives increases, commitment increases by 0.136 (13.60%). Finally, the standardised coefficients revealed that shared values (0.397) were the highest influencing variable on commitment, followed by trust (0.223) and lastly, attractiveness of alternatives (0.188). Therefore, shared values is the most important variable in earning the customers' commitment.

Considering the information provided above, the H₁, H₃, and H₄ hypotheses are accepted, H₁ states there is a positive relationship between trust and relationship commitment; H₃, states there is a positive relationship between shared values and relationship commitment, and H₄ states there is a positive relationship between attractiveness of

alternatives and relationship commitment. Hypothesis H₂, which states that there is a positive relationship between communication and relationship commitment was rejected. The positive relationships between (i) trust, (iii) shared values and (iv) availability of alternatives on commitment, imply that bulk road transport service providers can build customers' commitment through focusing on these factors (i, iii and iv).

Therefore, if bulk road transport service providers are trustworthy, share in the same values as customers and are more attractive in terms of service offerings than competitors, the customers' commitment towards their bulk road transport service provider will be achieved.

(Insert Table 4 here)

The influence of relationship commitment on intentional loyalty

Concerning the second research objective, standard multiple regression analysis was used to explain the relationship between the intervening variable, relationship commitment and the dependent variable, intentional loyalty.

The collinearity between the intervening and dependent variable has to be discussed to give effect to research objective 2. The Pearson Correlation is an indication of the strength of the relationship that exists between variables. Only if there is a significance (Sig. less than 0.05) between the variables, Pearson Correlations is inspected (Statstutor, 2016:1). The Pearson Correlation is measured on a scale of 0 to 1, the closer to 1, the stronger the relationship, where 1 indicates perfect correlation. Any value above 0.5 can be interpreted as a strong correlation. However, any value above 0.85 can indicate problems of multicollinearity (Dormann et al., 2012:33 & Aimran, Ahmad & Afthanorhan, 2016:45). The p-value achieved for the Pearson Correlation for the intervening and dependent variable was 0.000. Commitment also correlated strongly with, loyalty with a value of 0.733.

The results of the standard multiple regression analysis (to assess the relationship between relationship commitment and intentional loyalty) are reflected in Table 5.

(Insert Table 5 here)

From Table 5 the R Square value is 0.537, indicating that 53.7% of variance in the dependent variable loyalty is explained by the intervening variable, commitment. The p-value (Sig.) under the ANOVA section is 0.00, and indicates that there is a correlation between relationship commitment and intentional loyalty. It can be further stated that relationship commitment is significant (p-value= 0.000) in predicting intentional loyalty. The unstandardised B values were analysed and indicated that for every 1 unit that relationship commitment increases, intentional loyalty increases by 0.70 (70.0%). The Standardised Coefficient was also analysed and revealed that relationship commitment is very strong in influencing intentional loyalty, with a Beta value of 0.733.

Considering the given information, H₅, which states there is a positive relationship between relationship commitment and intentional customer loyalty, is therefore accepted (refer to Table 6).

This positive relationship between relationship commitment and intentional loyalty implies that if customer commitment is present in a relationship, intentional loyalty will be achieved. Therefore, if customers are committed to their bulk road transport service provider, their loyalty can be positively influenced.

(Insert Table 6 here)

Therefore, against the background of the results provided, the final model proposed is illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here)

DISCUSSION

The study makes both a theoretical and a practical contribution. From a theoretical perspective, the results endorse that the measurement scales used to measure trust, communication, shared values, availability of alternatives, relational commitment and intentional loyalty are reliable and valid. The model as proposed has been verified, confirming the relationships between commitment, its antecedents and intentional loyalty within the bulk road transport industry in South Africa.

From a managerial perspective, the study contributes in possibly guiding the bulk road transport industry in South Africa to understand how trust, shared values and availability of alternatives can strengthen relationship commitment, which can eventually lead to support intentional loyalty. This outcome will depend on the customers' perception of the value add of trust, shared values and availability of alternatives towards the strengthening of commitment. Dagger et al. (2011:273 and Theron et al. (2008:998) state that customer relationship commitment is central to relationship marketing. The professional management of customer relationships is critical to ensure that customer relationships are further developed, customers' needs and wants are satisfied, enabling customers' continued commitment and loyalty. Within the bulk road transport industry, customer relationship commitment is important to ensure continued business success and profitability (Espejel, Fandos & Flavia, 2011:206; Axer, 2015). It therefore becomes critical for road bulk transport service providers to become more inward focused on their service delivery strategies to customers. This implies that service providers should empower employees with the required knowledge and skills to ensure that each customer-employee contact should result in the customers' complete satisfaction. All employee efforts should be directed at developing and strengthening their customers' commitment and loyalty.

Training employees will ensure that customers are placed at the centre of all marketing activities, highlighting for example on the importance of building trust and identifying the meaning of value. These employees are responsible for the customers' retention, satisfaction, commitment and loyalty. Loyal customers can be enticed to remain loyal and

earn further benefits such as reduced transportation rates, longer payment terms, favourable discounts for early payments, or overnight deliveries for urgent orders. Achieving the customers' commitment and loyalty will ensure that customers return in the future, increasing the bulk road transportation service provider's share in the customers' wallet and maximising profits.

From a theoretical perspective, the study makes two contributions. Firstly, it establishes that the relationship commitment of customers in relation to their bulk road transport service providers in South Africa, leads to the intentional loyalty of these customers. Thus, the different constructs claimed in theory to drive commitment, namely trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ganesan & Hess, 1997; Van Vuuren, 2011), shared values (Fullerton, 2003; Theron et al., 2008; Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012) and attractiveness of alternatives (Sharma & Patterson, 2000; Fullerton, 2005) do have an influence on the intentional loyalty of customers in South Africa. However, it is important to note that although theory argues (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Coote, Forrest & Tam 2003; Ndubisi & Wah, 2005; Du Plessis, 2010; Tsai, Tsai & Chang, 2010) that communication does have an influence on the commitment of customers to a relationship and their eventual loyalty to the supplier, this was not the case in this study.

Secondly, the study contributes to the knowledge base of relationship commitment constructs and its influence on intentional loyalty in an emerging economy such as South Africa. The research study proposes a model that explains how trust, shared values and availability of alternatives have a direct influence on relationship commitment, which ultimately influences intentional loyalty. Therefore, the positive influence of relationship commitment on the intentional loyalty of customers can assist road bulk transport service providers in South Africa to achieve a competitive advantage.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The seminal work of Morgan and Hunt (1994) on the factors of trust and commitment was the groundwork for numerous studies to investigate the factors that influence customer

loyalty. However, no research study in South Africa has formally recommended guidelines for bulk road transport service providers to consider to enhance customer loyalty in the industry. Therefore, the researchers are proposing the following guidelines for the South African bulk road transport industry to consider in enhancing customer commitment, and eventual loyalty. The guidelines below also address the final research objective developed for the study.

Guideline for winning the trust of customers

Customers want a bulk road transport service provider that is trustworthy. Employees of a bulk road transport service provider therefore play a huge role in fostering and developing trust in the minds of customers, through each and every customer-business interaction. These employees need to be strategically hired and well trained to manage all types of interactions with customers, be it good or bad, to ensure that the only result of each interaction is the customers' satisfaction. Training is one aspect in which trust, and the elements of trust, can be taught to all employees who are engaged with customers. Bulk road transport service providers can go the extra mile in conducting quarterly questionnaires with customers, to determine their customers' level of trust, or areas in which services can be improved, in a bid to improve their customers' trust.

Guideline for adopting business values aligned with customer values

Bulk road transport service providers can adopt business values that are both general and directed towards customer concerns such as, safety, health, the environment and quality concerns. These general business values are values in terms of morals, ethics, policies, profits, social responsibility, integrity and innovation (Porter & Kramer, 2011:66; Tatham, 2013:149). Such customer-focused values could entail certifications such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO) certifications. Such certifications are ways in which bulk road transport service providers can prove to customers that their business values are internationally focused to improve customer service. Bulk road transport service providers can adopt the following certifications to prove that their values are world recognised, namely ISO 9001 (a quality recognised international certification that proves

to customers that a business is focused on customer service and satisfaction through the adoption of systems and procedures that guarantees such satisfaction), ISO 14 001(an environmental certification that focuses on the preservation of the environment in line with both international and local legislation) and ISO 18 0001 (the Occupational, Health and Safety Systems certification (OHSAS 18 001). This certification indicates that a company has health and safety procedures and systems in place. These procedures and systems ensure the health and safety of all staff, customers and all members of the public who come into contact with the company that holds such certification.

It is also important for employees of a bulk road transport service provider to be encultured in sharing the same values as their business to ensure that they too are an extension of their company's brand during each and every customer-service provider interaction.

Guidelines for strengthening service delivery to customers

Guideline 1: Customers are willing to seek new service providers should an existing one not satisfy their needs and wants. It is therefore important for bulk road transport service providers to enable mechanisms within their business that will allow customers to easily complain if service requirements are not met. Such mechanisms can be the welcoming of complaints through a website complaint page in which customers can freely and easily complain about services or instances that resulted in a non-desired outcome. These complaints will allow the bulk road transport service provider an opportunity to rectify these problems and ensure that the desired customer outcome is achieved.

Guideline 2: The provision of monthly catch-up meetings to ensure that customers are happy with the services provided. Key contact employees of a bulk road transport service provider can administer these meetings at the customers' offices. Such visits will identify areas of service improvement as well as identify customers' level of service satisfaction. These employees have to be effectively trained and skilled as they are the key contact point for customers. Therefore, hiring the most capable employees and providing these employees with company and customer-specific and focused training, will ensure that

customers experience quality services at all times. It is important to note that a customer's willingness to seek a new service provider is minimised when his current bulk road transport service provider's price and services are in line with the customer's requirements and expectations.

Guidelines for obtaining customer loyalty

Guideline 1: Bulk road transport service providers can earn their customers' loyalty through developing and maintaining their customers' trust. This trust is built through each customer-business interaction, which is important for relationship survival. Trust can be earned by bulk road transport service providers continuously meeting their customers' unique wants and needs, thus ensuring that customers can expect the same level of service or outcome for each interaction. Customer loyalty will also be earned when employees conduct business in an honest, truthful and trustworthy manner.

Guideline 2: Bulk road transport service providers can also earn the loyalty of their customers through sharing in the same values as their customers. These shared values, in terms of respect for one another's business values, sharing of same business practices, common business values and beliefs, and mutual understanding of each other's business values are important variables for customers in determining their loyalty towards a bulk road transport service provider. Customers therefore require a bulk road transport service provider that is an extension of their brand, one that will act in good faith in servicing their needs and requirements, positively influencing their loyalty.

Guidelines 3: Bulk road transport service providers can earn the loyalty of their customers through minimising the attractiveness of alternative service providers in the market. Bulk road transport service providers can achieve this by providing services at prices either similar or less than market-related prices, or by offering a quality and high level of pre-and post-sale services that ensure that customers are not attracted by alternative bulk road transport service providers.

Guideline 4: Bulk road transport service providers can earn their customers' loyalty through developing, maintaining and enhancing their customers' commitment. Therefore, if a bulk road transport service provider is trustworthy, communicates effectively, shares in the same values as their customers, and offers a superior service at exceptional prices, customer commitment will be the result, which directly and positively influences customer loyalty. It is therefore important for bulk road transport service providers to effectively train and equip all employees who come into contact with customers, especially front-line marketing employees, with the skills required to maintain and build relationships with customers.

Such employee training can entail an understanding of what existing customer needs and wants are, in order to enable a bulk road transport service provider to effectively plan and strategise to achieve these needs and wants. Secondly, it can focus on an understanding of customers' unique business requirements and how their business is influenced by external factors that a bulk road transport service provider can monitor, manage and improve. Thirdly, building onto an existing market by focusing on attracting new customers. This training will ensure that front-line marketing employees are equipped to sell the business of their bulk road transport service provider to their potential customers. Fourthly, the maintenance of a customer base by understanding the importance of customer retention strategies. Such strategies should be aimed at maintaining profitable customers with the aim of making them committed and loyal long-term customers. Fifthly, to use an existing customer base to sell extended services with the aim of increasing profitability. Employees of a bulk road transport service provider need to be trained to cross-sell services. Such cross-selling could be the selling of warehousing space, product handling and loading, stock pile management and road maintenance on mines or loading sites. Finally, to explain the importance of relationship marketing and the steps to follow in order to build onto and further develop customer relationships. Such training is of vital importance to ensure that employees understand that each customer-employee contact should result in the customer's complete satisfaction. All employee efforts should be

directed at developing and strengthening their customers' commitment and loyalty, thus achieving the customers' long-term profitability.

This focused approach on training will ensure that customers are placed at the centre of all marketing activities directed towards satisfying their needs and wants. These training sessions can be administered by the management of bulk road transport service providers, who will provide realistic and industry-specific references and examples. Such training and skill transfer will ensure that all employees who are in contact with customers will ensure that the customer is placed at the centre of all business-related activities. These employees are responsible for the customers' retention, satisfaction, commitment and loyalty. Loyal customers can be enticed to remain loyal and earn further benefits such as reduced transportation rates, longer payment terms, favourable discounts for early payments, or overnight deliveries for urgent orders. Such benefits will reward loyal customers for their continuous commitment and support, ensuring that these customers return for future business. Achieving the customers' commitment and loyalty will ensure that customers return in the future, thus increasing the bulk road transportation service provider's share in the customers' wallet, maximising their business revenue and profits.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence that trust, communication, shared values and attractiveness of alternatives have on intentional customer loyalty through relationship commitment within the South African bulk road transport industry. The study concluded that if customers are committed to their bulk road transport service provider, their loyalty can be positively influenced. The study further provides direction on the importance of trust, shared values and the availability of alternatives to strengthen relationship commitment. Therefore, to increase the commitment of customers, bulk road transport services providers should develop a greater understanding of the importance of trust in the relationship-building process, improve their knowledge of the need for shared values when engaging with customers, and have a clear understanding of the influence of available alternatives in their relationship-building strategies.

The study is limited by the fact that only four antecedents, namely trust, communication, shared values and the availability of alternatives are considered in a single industry service setting. However, the study does provide concise insights into these four antecedents of relational commitment within the South African road bulk transport industry context, and into the degree to which relationship commitment is influenced by its antecedents (trust, communications, shared values and availability of alternatives) and determine their outcome (intentional loyalty). An understanding of this should assist the bulk road transport industry in South Africa to prioritise the fostering of relationship commitment and intentional loyalty, which should benefit both themselves and their customers.

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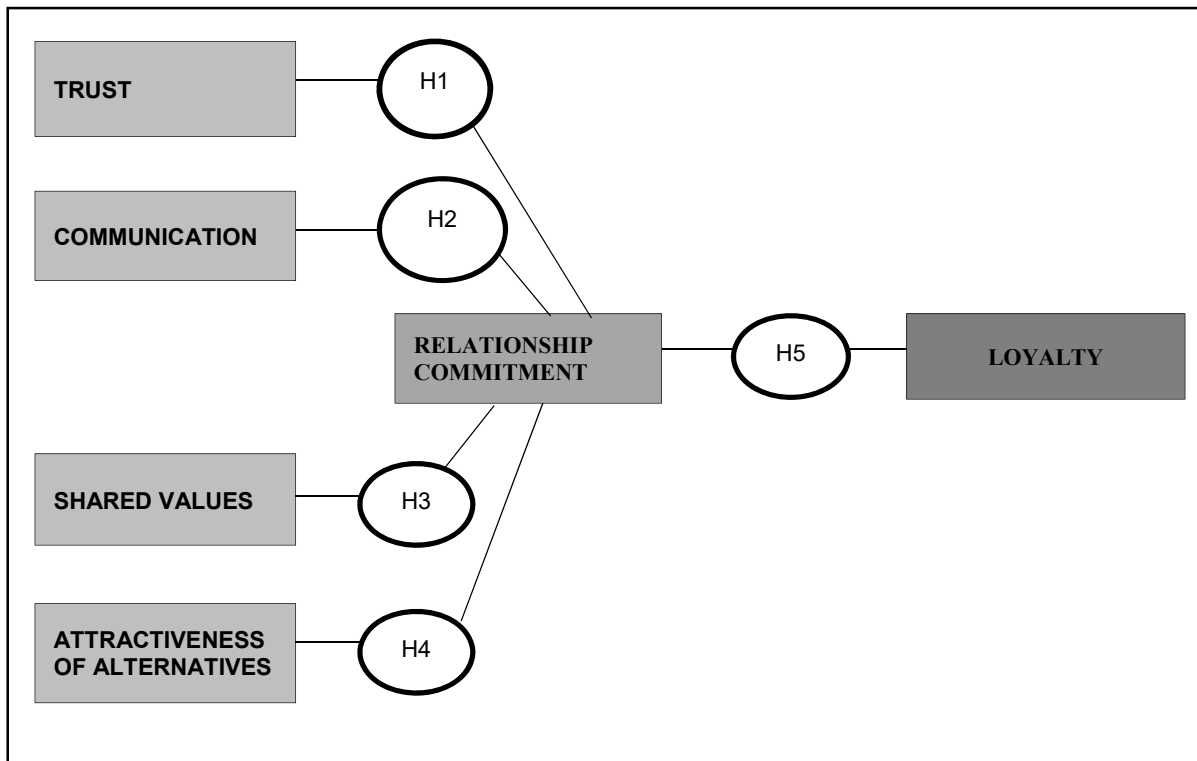
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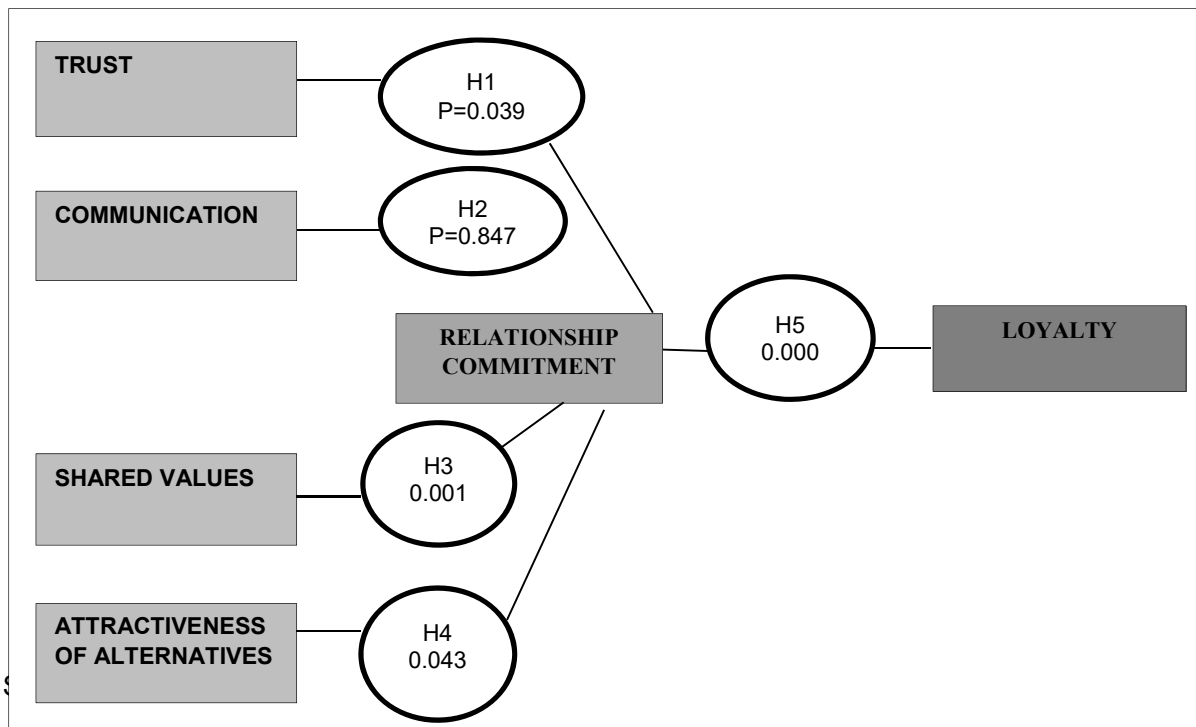
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Figure 1: Proposed theoretical model



Source: Researchers' own construct

Figure 2: Final empirical model



Source: Researcher's own construct

Table 1: Constructs and items

Trust
X1 I trust my bulk road transport service provider
X2 I have confidence in my bulk road transport service provider
X3 My bulk road transport service provider can be regarded as credible
X4 My bulk road transport service provider demonstrates a high level of integrity
Communication
X5 My bulk road transport service provider keeps me well informed
X6 My bulk road transport service provider provides frequent communication about issues that are important to my business
X7 My bulk road transport service provider provides timely information
X8 My bulk road transport service provider provides accurate information
Shared values
X9 My bulk road transport service provider respects my business values
X10 My bulk road transport service provider and my company share the same views about most business practices
X11 My bulk road transport service provider has business values and beliefs similar to those of my company
X12 My bulk road transport service provider and my company have a mutual understanding of each other's business values
Attractiveness of alternatives
X13 The fees charged by my bulk road transport service provider are less than those of other bulk road transport service providers
X14 My bulk road transport service provider offers a greater level of service than other bulk road transport service providers
X15 There are not really worthwhile alternatives to my bulk road transport service provider
X16 It is questionable whether other bulk road transport service providers can offer me a better service than my current bulk road transport service provider
X17 I have no intention of switching bulk road transport service providers
X18 I am not attracted by short-term specials attracting my attention to use another bulk road transport service provider
Relationship commitment
X19 I am committed to my bulk road transport service provider
X20 It is important that I maintain my relationship with my bulk road transport service provider
X21 I am willing to invest time to maintain my relationship with my bulk road transport service provider
X22 I am willing to extend extra effort to maintain my relationship with my bulk road transport service provider
Intentional loyalty
X23 I consider my bulk road transport service provider as my first choice among other bulk road transport service providers in South Africa
X24 My bulk road transport service provider is the first company that comes to mind when I require the services of a bulk road transport service provider
X25 I intend to stay in a loyal relationship with my bulk road transport service provider
X26 The relationship between my bulk road transport service provider and my company is mutually beneficial
X27 I will definitely make use of the services offered by my bulk road transport service provider in the future
X28 I will recommend my bulk road transport service provider to colleagues and business acquaintances
I have encouraged other people to do business with my bulk road transport service provider

Source: Theron et al. (2008)

Table 2: Results of the Cronbach's alpha test

Construct		Cronbach's alpha
Independent Variables	Trust	0.960
	Shared values	0.932
	Communication	0.949
	Attractiveness of alternatives	0.864
Intervening variable	Commitment	0.888
Dependent variable	Loyalty	0.941

Table 3: The influence of trust, communication, shared values and availability of alternatives on relationship commitment

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	0.697	0.486	0.468	0.581		
ANOVA						
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
Regression	36.073	4	9.018	26.728	0.000	
Residual	38.127	113	0.337			
Total	74.200	117				
Coefficients						
Model		Constant	Trust	Communication	Shared values	Attractiveness of alternatives
Unstandardised coefficients	B	2.111	0.183	-0.015	0.372	0.136
Standardised coefficients	Beta		0.223	-0.021	0.397	0.188
Sig.		0.000	0.039	0.847	0.001	0.043

Table 4: Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	SIGNIFICANCE				Finding
	Trust	Communication	Shared values	Availability of alternatives	
H1	0.039				Supported
H2		0.847			Rejected
H3			0.001		Supported
H4				0.043	Supported

Table 5: Influence of the intervening variable on the dependent variable

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	0.733	0.537	0.533	0.520	
ANOVA					
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	36.385	1	36.385	134.455	0.000
Residual	31.391	116	0.271		
Total	67.777	117			
Coefficients					
Model		Constant/ Intentional loyalty	Relationship commitment		
Unstandardised coefficients	B	1.955	0.700		
Standardised coefficients	Beta		0.733		
Sig.		0.000	0.000		

Table 6: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	SIGNIFICANCE		Finding
	Relationship Commitment	Intentional loyalty	
H ₅	0.000	0.000	Supported