

LOYALTY AND WORD-OF-MOUTH AS OUTCOMES OF SOUTH AFRICAN AIRBNB CUSTOMERS' RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Airbnb, a worldwide giant in the sharing community, has shown tremendous growth in the past few years, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. The next big challenge for Airbnb is probably to understand how to develop long-lasting relationships with its customers. It is well-known that relationship quality not only aids in forming long-term relationships with customers, but it also helps to strengthen the relationship between firms and customers. This paper fills a gap in literature by considering both composite and disaggregate approaches to study customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth as outcomes of relationship quality. Snowball sampling was used to collect data from 250 South African Airbnb users. The findings show that although both approaches to relationship quality predict loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, a disaggregated approach better predict these relationship quality outcomes.

Keywords: relationship quality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, Airbnb, composite approach, disaggregated approach

INTRODUCTION

Airbnb, one of the global giants in the sharing community (Guttentag, 2015), is a world-wide platform that uses technology to allow its users to stay in more than 7 million listed accommodations in 100 000 cities from 220 countries (Airbnb, 2020). Airbnb South Africa has seen significant growth in the past few years with over two million guests in South

Africa in 2018 (BusinessTech, 2018). As Airbnb is a relatively new platform with a large potential for growth, it is important to understand how to develop long-lasting relationships with its customers, as loyal customers lead to consistent income (Rafiq, Fulford & Lu, 2013). This is important, as online platforms are associated with greater perceived risk; however, developing strong relationship bonds can reduce this risk, resulting in loyal customers (Abbad, Alkhatib, Al Qeisi & Jaber, 2019; Ali & Ndubisi, 2011; Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Harris & Goode, 2004). Concerning relationship formation in an online environment, it should be noted that there appears to be a gap in literature as to how firms should build online relationships in this environment that has “revolutionized the process of relationship building between firms and their customers” (Boateng, 2019: 226).

The goal of relationship quality is to strengthen the relationship between customer and firm, reduce customers’ perceived risk, and overall, to create loyal customers (Ali & Ndubisi, 2011; Bhuian, Al Balushi & Butt, 2018; Ndubisi, 2007). Relationship quality is thus a key factor in relationship marketing, and is based on the belief that customer loyalty is developed from relationship-related aspects or dimensions that indicate the strength of the relationship (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Samudro, Samarwan, Yusuf & Simanjuntak, 2018). However, our understanding of relationship quality specifically in an online environment is limited. In their recent study, Lam and Wong (2020) concur by stating that the “Internet has other characteristics that may pose additional challenges to online relationship quality between buyer and seller”.

There is furthermore limited research available as to how relationship quality should be measured (Alves, Campón-Cerro & Hernández-Mogollón, 2019; Izogo, 2016) due to the inconsistencies between whether it should be measured as a composite construct (i.e.

comprising only a single construct) (e.g., Al-Alak, 2014; Ali & Ndubisi, 2011; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019; Izogo, 2016; Li, 2020; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013) or as a disaggregate construct (i.e. comprising multiple dimensions) (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Cater & Cater, 2010; Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Izogo, 2016; Lai, 2014; Sayil, Akyol & Simsek, 2019; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). The approach followed is important, especially from a practitioner perspective, because it is relatively easy to establish customers' relationship quality in a business environment using a composite measure since the measure used usually comprises only a few items. However, the disaggregate measure comprises significantly more items since each dimension included in the overall relationship quality measure comprises a number of items each. The advantage of using the (shorter) composite measure lies therein that it provides practitioners with a quick overview of customers' relationship quality, but does not identify where potential relationship quality problems are (which the disaggregate approach offers). This paper addresses this gap by comparing a composite approach with a disaggregate approach to study relationship quality and its outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is accordingly to compare a disaggregate and composite approach to relationship quality in terms of two relationship quality outcomes, namely loyalty and word-of-mouth. The paper contributes in a number of ways. Firstly, it considers a dual approach (composite and disaggregate) to studying relationship quality *in the same study*. Secondly, it offers insights into a unique service setting (i.e. Airbnb) where customers' intentions to build long-term relationships based on their relationship quality, as well as the outcomes thereof (i.e. loyalty and word-of-mouth), are influenced by both the Airbnb platform as well as its listings. Thirdly, the paper offers a much needed developing economy perspective (Jouzdani, Shirouyehzad, Maaroufi & Javaheri, 2020) by being conducted in an African context. Finally, the study answers the call in recent research studies (Alves *et al.*, 2019; Fernandes & Pinto,

2019; Lam & Wong, 2020) to further explore relationship quality to advance our understanding of the antecedents, sub-dimensions and outcomes thereof.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, the relevant literature about relationship quality and its dimensions is discussed. This is followed by the research methodology and reporting of the study's results. Lastly, the findings are discussed and the paper concludes with the limitations and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical background

Relationship marketing aims to create long-lasting relationships with customers that will, as a result, benefit the firm (Boateng, 2019; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002; Kim & Cha, 2002; Putra & Putri, 2019). This ideology is imbedded in the reciprocal action theory (also known as the social exchange theory), which underscores the exchange relationship between customer and firm (Bagozzi, 1995; Huppertz, Arenson & Evans, 1978; Lee, Kim & Pan, 2014). Reciprocity has been defined as a “good for good exchange, in proportion to what is received” (Bagozzi, 1995:275). This view is in line with Gouldner's (1960:168) assessment that reciprocity “evokes obligation toward others on the basis of past behaviour”. While there are several aspects that impact the way customers perceive a firm and the service they receive during exchange relationships, reciprocity in particular can be viewed as the ‘social glue’ that impact customers' perceptions of service delivery and overall satisfaction with a service provider (Bagozzi 1995; Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff & Kardes, 2009). However, the behaviour associated with reciprocity is very subtle – and, at times, automatic – and so may be hard to measure and understand (Bagozzi, 1995). Accurately measuring the effects of reciprocity may require a firm to have a personal interaction with every customer, which is unfeasible.

However, it is believed that by establishing relationship marketing on the theory of reciprocity, customers will have a reduced perceived risk when entering a relationship and may thus be more willing to remain loyal to a firm (Bagozzi, 1995; Smith & Barclay, 1997). Thus, similar to previous studies on relationship marketing (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder & Iacobucci, 2001; Ndubisi, Malhotra, Ulas & Ndubisi, 2012; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013) this paper will be grounded in the theory of reciprocity.

Relationship quality

Relationship quality has been identified as a central factor in determining whether a customer-firm relationship will be long-term, or not (Athanasopoulou, 2009) because it is relationship quality that indicates the strength of the relationship (Smith, 1998; Vieira, Winklhofer & Ennew, 2008). Furthermore, relationship quality is considered the measure that determines whether the relationship fulfils the customer's expectations and desires, thereby indicating the customer's overall impression of the relationship (Ndubisi *et al.*, 2012; Wong & Sohal, 2002).

There has been debate about whether relationship quality should be measured as a composite (i.e. a single construct) or disaggregate (i.e. comprising multiple dimensions) construct. Several researchers advocate using a disaggregate approach as opposed to composite, as it offers greater depth of insight into customer perceptions of relationship quality (Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Lai, 2014; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). However, other researchers view relationship quality as a composite construct based on the belief that customers cannot distinguish between the dimensions (Al-Alak, 2014; De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Ndubisi, 2007; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013). This paper examines both approaches: a disaggregate approach (i.e., relationship quality has multiple dimensions) and a composite approach (i.e., relationship quality is viewed and measured as a single construct) to identify which approach provides the best insights into the outcomes of

relationship quality. However, in considering a disaggregate approach, it is important to note that researchers disagree as to which dimensions to include to measure relationship quality (Alves *et al.*, 2019; Athanasopoulou, 2009; Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Ivens & Pardo, 2007). Previous research considered a wide range of dimensions as identified in the thorough literature reviews on relationship quality by Athanasopoulou (2009) and Vieira *et al.* (2008), including social bonds, service quality, cooperation, customer orientation, opportunism and continuity. Considering the disagreement in the literature, this paper will, as in previous studies (Balla *et al.*, 2015; Elbeltagi & Agag, 2016; Roberts, Varki & Brodie, 2003; Wong & Sohal, 2002), include trust, commitment and satisfaction when exploring the disaggregate relationship quality approach. The reason for including these three dimensions is rooted in the belief that the combination thereof provides the most commonly used approach to measure relationship quality (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Vieira *et al.*, 2008) and because these dimensions would probably explain the highest variance in overall relationship quality. It should also be noted that the strong relationship between trust and commitment, the foundation of the early work on relationship quality, has been verified extensively (Dowell, Morrison & Heffernan, 2015; Ferro, Padin, Svensson & Payan, 2016; Lam & Wong, 2020; Mungra & Yadov, 2019) since the seminal work by Morgan and Hunt (1994) hypothesised the link between these constructs.

Trust

Trust, defined as the belief that an exchange partner will act with integrity to ensure the best interests of the other partner (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), is regarded as an essential dimension of relationship quality because, without trust, the relationship between customer and firm cannot develop (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; De Wulf *et al.*, 2010; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). In fact, as customers' trust in a firm increases, so does the likelihood that a short-term relationship will turn into a long-term relationship (Luo, 2002).

It has been established that within an online environment (the context of this paper), trust is especially important due to the large amounts of perceived risk due to the lack of physical contact between customer and firm (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Boateng, 2019; Harris & Goode, 2004; Kim & Peterson, 2017). This issue is further alleviated by customers' privacy concerns when using online platforms (Kim & Peterson; 2017; Luo, 2002). Indeed, research identified that a lack of trust, and not technological issues, will limit business on the internet in the future (Kim & Peterson, 2017). However, if firms successfully foster customers' trust, they stand a greater chance of being rewarded by increased customer commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Commitment

Commitment refers to the want to sustain a relationship between customer and firm (Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpande, 1992). Committed customers are important to firms since they make an effort and use resources to sustain the relationship with the firm (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment is thus an important dimension of relationship quality because it helps firms to estimate the strength of relationships and to identify loyal customers (Chung & Shin, 2010; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013). In fact, commitment is considered to be one of the highest stages of relationship bonding (Lee, Huang & Hsu, 2007).

Research identified three sub-dimensions of commitment: affective, normative, and calculative (Cater & Zabkar, 2009; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). 'Affective commitment' refers to an emotional connection with a firm, such that the customer has a desire to continue the relationship (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Vesel & Zabkar, 2010), 'normative commitment' arise when a customer feels obliged to continue a relationship based on previous experience (Cater & Zabkar, 2009; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002), while 'calculative commitment' considers the cost of switching and ending a relationship with a firm (Meyer & Herscovitch,

2001). Despite these traits, this paper will, similar to previous studies, consider overall commitment since it is the most commonly used approach in relationship quality research that includes commitment as sub-dimension (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Crosby *et al.*, 1990; De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

Satisfaction

The link between trust, commitment and satisfaction as sub-dimensions of relationship quality becomes abundantly clear when considering that satisfaction, as an outcome of customer-firm relationships, is highly improbable “in the absence of trust and commitment” (Skarmeas, Katisikeas, Spyropoulou & Salehi-Sangari, 2008:25). Satisfaction, rooted in the disconfirmations-of-expectations paradigm, ensues when customers’ perceptions of firms’ performance meet or exceed their expectations (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Since satisfaction may be harder to quantify on online platforms as customers rely on websites or applications for accurate information as opposed to a personal interaction (McKinney, Yoon & Zahedi, 2002; Sanchez-Franco, Ramos & Velicia, 2009), firms should endeavour to improve customers’ perceived satisfaction by engaging in reciprocal actions (Settoon, Bennett & Liden, 1996). Such firm-driven actions could be perceived as deliberate efforts to improve and sustain customer relationships, thereby resulting in positive exchange experiences and, ultimately, improve satisfaction (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Ndubisi *et al.*, 2012).

Relationship quality outcomes

Previous research identified several outcomes from relationship quality, including purchase intentions (Papassapa & Miller, 2007) and service quality (Woo & Ennew, 2004). This study, similar to previous studies, considered word-of-mouth and loyalty as relationship quality outcomes (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Kim & Cha, 2002; Macintosh, 2007; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012).

Loyalty

Loyalty, considered one of the most important outcomes of relationship marketing, refers to the frequency of repeat purchasing from the same firm (De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Tamwatin, Trimetsoontron & Fongsuwan, 2015). The significance of loyalty lies therein that it is more valuable to invest in existing customers than to continuously seeking new ones (Klankaew & Panjakajornsak, 2017; Rafik *et al.*, 2013; Yang & Peterson, 2004). While loyalty can be viewed from a long- or short-term perspective, relationship quality aims to create long-term loyalty since customers displaying this type of loyalty are not as likely to switch firms, and are more profitable (Liu, Guo & Lee, 2011; Putra & Putri, 2019; Suwanamas, Trimetsoontorn & Fongsuwan, 2015; Yang & Peterson, 2004). Despite previous studies grouping loyalty and word-of-mouth to measure repeat purchasing, Söderlund (2006) argue that these constructs should be studied separately due to their unique contribution in predicting behaviour. This approach will accordingly be followed similar to previous studies (Macintosh, 2007; Roy & Eshghi, 2013; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012).

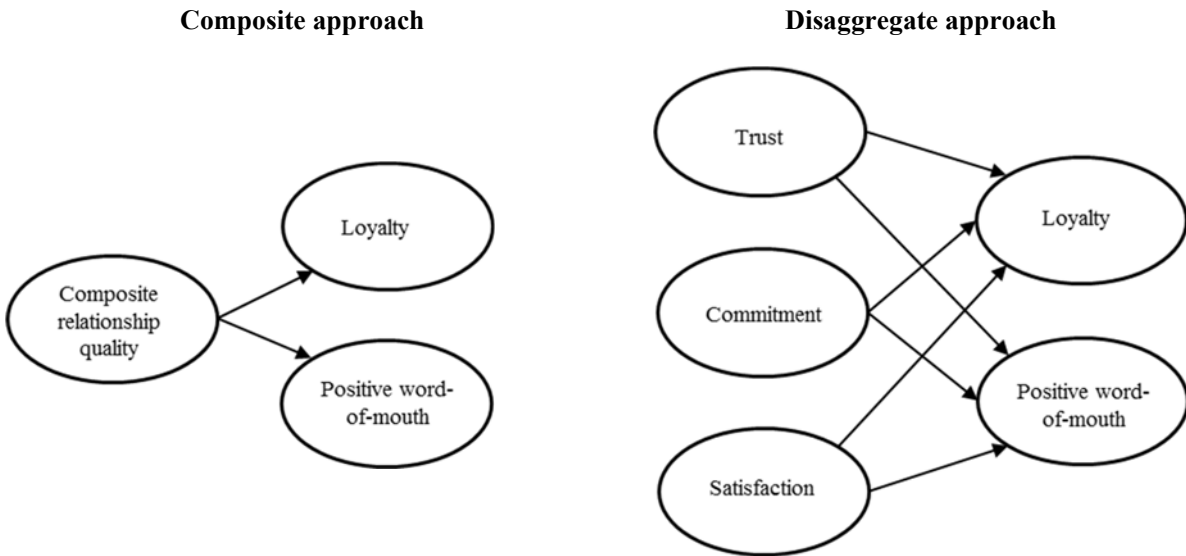
Word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth has been defined as the act of independently sharing oral information with others about a product, service or firm (Lam & Wong, 2020; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2007). Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) explain word-of-mouth can range between positive and negative, and could be promulgated by potential, actual or former customers. The significance of word-of-mouth lies therein that it is powerful in influencing future customers' buying decisions because personal communication is seen to be more accurate and reliable than commercial marketing (Gremler & Brown, 1999). Although loyalty has been seen to help customer retention, word-of-mouth helps to acquire new customers – a fundamental element in relationship quality (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Kim & Cha, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and therefore an important outcome of relationship quality.

HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

Figure 1 depicts the research models guiding this paper by showing the composite and disaggregate approaches to relationship quality.

Figure 1: Research models



Composite approach

The main goal of firms investing in improving relationship quality is to establish and strengthen long-lasting relationships with customers in an effort to cultivate customer loyalty (Rafiq *et al.*, 2013). This view is based on the proposition that customers who believe that they have a high relationship quality with the firm will be more likely to reward the firm with their loyalty (Ndubisi *et al.*, 2012). It is thus not surprising that researchers established a positive relationship between relationship quality and loyalty (Alves *et al.*, 2019; De Wulf *et al.*, 2001; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Izogo, 2016; Lai, 2014; Ndubisi *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H₁: There is a positive relationship between relationship quality and loyalty.

Relationship quality measures the strength of the relationship between customer and firm (Smith, 1998; Vieira *et al.*, 2008) and this strength is represented through repurchase behaviour as well as communication behaviour such as word-of-mouth (Naudé & Buttle, 2000). If customers perceive that they have a strong relationship quality with a firm, they are more inclined to promulgate positive word-of-mouth (Kim & Cha, 2002; Roberts *et al.*, 2003). It is thus not surprising that previous research established a positive relationship between relationship quality and positive word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Kim & Cha, 2002; Lam & Wong, 2020; Macintosh, 2007; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). It is accordingly hypothesised that:

H₂: There is a positive relationship between relationship quality and positive word-of-mouth.

Disaggregate approach

Trust is considered a critical factor in the success of relationships between customers and firms in service settings (Reichheld & Scheffer, 2000). It has been established that trust reduces perceived risk in complex and technical environments and can thus be one of the main reasons for repeat purchases (Berry, 1995). Consequently, if customers trust firms, they tend to be more prone to be loyal in the future (Aldaihani & Ali, 2019; Alves *et al.*, 2019; Boateng, 2019; Deng, Lu, Wei & Zhang, 2009; Menidjel, Bilgihan & Benhabib, 2020; Putra & Putri, 2019; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013). It is thus hypothesised that:

H₃: There is a positive relationship between trust and loyalty.

Commitment helps researchers understand customer-firm relationships, which in turn, provides insights into customer loyalty in terms of repeat purchasing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). Furthermore, it is very likely that customers will commit to (by purchasing repeatedly from the same firm) and stay loyal to those firms that meet their needs

(Aldaihani & Ali, 2019; Cater & Zabkar, 2009; Menidjel *et al.*, 2020; Ngoma & Ntale, 2019; Putra & Putri, 2019). It is therefore hypothesised that:

H4: There is a positive relationship between commitment and loyalty.

Research established that continuously ensuring high levels of customer satisfaction leads to customers forming emotional bonds with firms (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002), thereby making them less susceptible to competitor enticements (Ndubisi *et al.*, 2012). It therefore makes sense that customers who have been satisfied with the services they received in the past are very unlikely to switch to a competitor and may even be more forgiving of services falling short of their expectations (Athanasopoulos, Gounaris, & Stathakopoulos, 2001). It is thus not surprising that previous research linked satisfaction to customer loyalty (Alves *et al.*, 2019; Hennig-Thurau, *et al.*, 2002; Li, 2020; Menidjel *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H5: There is a positive relationship between satisfaction and loyalty.

Trust has been established as an important influencer of positive word-of-mouth in the service industry (Gremler, Gwinner & Brown, 2001) since if customers trust service providers they are more likely to purchase repeatedly from them and to make referrals (Kim & Cha, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2007). Customers are more likely to provide referrals to people in their reference groups, such as friends and family, and are thus more likely to give positive word-of-mouth about firms with which they have had good experiences with and whom they trust (Gremler *et al.*, 2001; Lam & Wong, 2020). It is accordingly hypothesised that:

H6: There is a positive relationship between trust and positive word-of-mouth.

Committed customers are more prone to endorse positive word-of-mouth because customer commitment is considered to be critical to relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2002) support this view by arguing that, when customer commitment is high, the likelihood of customers making positive referrals is substantially higher. This, De Matos and Rossi (2008) explain, may be because they feel the need to support their decision to use a firm, and so reinforce it with positive word-of-mouth. Several empirical studies support this notion that customers who are committed to firm relationships will be more prone to endorse positive word-of-mouth (Lam & Wong, 2020; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H7: There is a positive relationship between commitment and positive word-of-mouth.

The positive association between satisfaction and word-of-mouth has been widely researched in the past (e.g. Hennig- Thurau *et al.* 2002; De Matos & Rossi, 2008), where it has been established that customers' tendency to endorse positive word-of-mouth increases as their expectations are exceeded (Athanasopoulos *et al.*, 2001). It is thus not surprising that researchers found a direct positive relationship between customers' satisfaction and their intentions to spread positive word-of-mouth (Eisingerich & Bell, 2006; Lam & Wong, 2020; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003), thereby leading to the following hypothesis:

H8: There is a positive relationship between satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study population, sampling and data collection

The target population consisted of adult South Africans who have used Airbnb. In the absence of a sampling frame, snowball sampling (Wolf, Joye, Smith & Fu, 2016) was used to identify potential respondents who used Airbnb. The data were collected through self-administered

online questionnaires by posting the link to the questionnaire (hosted on Qualtrics) on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. A description of the study's purpose was provided and respondents were encouraged to share the link with other potential respondents who may have used Airbnb.

Questionnaire design and pretesting

The questionnaire began with dichotomous screening questions to ensure that only respondents who lived in South Africa and who have used Airbnb participated in the study. The items used in the questionnaires, all measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly agree' and 7 = 'strongly disagree'), together with the references from where the items were obtained (and adopted for the study context), are detailed in Table 1.

The questionnaire was pretested with a smaller subset of the study population. This was done to ensure that there were no major problems with the questionnaire before it was distributed (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). The pre-test indicated that the context of Airbnb could be misleading because respondents' relationship quality with Airbnb could be based on the listing (i.e., the accommodation hosted on the platform) or on the platform itself. To ensure that the questionnaire accurately measured relationship quality with Airbnb (i.e., the Airbnb platform), qualitative research in the form of a focus group was conducted. Findings from the focus group showed that respondents clearly distinguished between relationship quality with the Airbnb platform and relationship quality with the independent Airbnb listings. Furthermore, respondents indicated that even if they had had a bad experience with a listing, they would use the Airbnb platform again. Based on these insights, the questionnaire was adjusted, and the wording changed to ensure that respondents would clearly understand that their responses should be in relation to the Airbnb platform, not the independent accommodation listings. A

second pretesting of the questionnaire following the adaptations based on the focus group insights showed no problems with the wording of the questionnaire, and that respondents were clear about the study's focus (i.e., the Airbnb platform, not the independent accommodation listings).

Table 1: Study constructs and questionnaire items

Constructs and items	Source
Composite relationship quality approach	
Composite relationship quality	Ali & Ndubisi (2011)
My relationship with Airbnb is what I really want	
I have a very close relationship with Airbnb	
My relationship with Airbnb meets my goals	
My relationship with Airbnb fulfils my expectations	
Overall, I have a good relationship with Airbnb	
Disaggregate relationship quality approach	
Trust	Ndubisi <i>et al.</i> (2012)
Airbnb fulfils obligations to customers	
Airbnb consistently provides quality services	
Airbnb shows respect to their customers	
Commitment	Ndubisi <i>et al.</i> (2012); Hennig-Thurau, <i>et al.</i> (2002)
My relationship to Airbnb is something that I am very committed to	
My relationship to Airbnb is very important to me	
My relationship to Airbnb is something I really care about	
Satisfaction	Ndubisi <i>et al.</i> (2012)
I am completely happy with Airbnb	
I am pleased with what Airbnb does for me	
My experience with Airbnb is good	
Overall, I am satisfied with Airbnb	
Relationship quality outcomes	
Customer loyalty	Roy & Eshghi (2013)
If I had a choice, I would choose Airbnb again in future	
I expect to stay with Airbnb for a long time	
I would do more business with Airbnb in the future	
Positive word-of-mouth	Roy & Eshghi (2013)
I say positive things about Airbnb	
I have spoken favourably of Airbnb to others	

RESULTS

Sample profile and Airbnb patronage information

Most of the 250 respondents who fully completed the questionnaire were female (81.5%). Respondents were grouped according to their ages, resulting in more than half (62.7%) categorised from 18 to 28 years old; 14.3% between 29 and 38 years old and 11.2% between 39 and 48 years old. Considering their Airbnb patronage, an equal percentage of respondents used either only locally listed Airbnb accommodation (45.7%) or both locally and international listed Airbnb accommodation (45.7%), whereas the remainder of respondents (8.6%) used only international listed accommodation. Most respondents stayed in Airbnb listed accommodation once (16.3%), twice (27.8%), three times (14.7%), four times (11.4%) or five times and more (29.8%) in the 24 months preceding the study.

Validity and reliability

Due to the study design two exploratory factor analyses were conducted to establish the underlying structure in the data used in the composite relationship quality approach and the disaggregate approach. The appropriateness of the data (for both exploratory factor analyses) was assessed using Bartlett's test of sphericity, which was significant ($p < 0.001$), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (MSA), meeting the required value of 0.5 (MSA = 0.930 for the disaggregate approach; and 0.934 for the composite approach). This indicated that the data were appropriate for factor analysis (Pallant, 2016). Using principal axis factoring with orthogonal (Equamax) rotation (Pallant, 2016), only factors adhering to the eigenvalue criterion (> 1) were extracted (Field, 2016; Pallant, 2016). Table 2 details the descriptive statistics for the extracted factors together with the Cronbach's Alpha, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) values for each factor.

Table 2: Factor analyses, validity and reliability results

Factor	Mean	Std. Dev.	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE*	CR*
Composite relationship quality	1.88	0.64	0.88	0.6	0.9
Trust	1.63	0.60	0.84	0.5	0.7
Commitment	2.71	1.00	0.92	0.7	0.9
Satisfaction	1.59	0.59	0.92	0.5	0.8
Loyalty	1.41	0.56	0.91	0.6	0.8
Positive word-of-mouth	1.45	0.62	0.94	0.7	0.8

*AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability

Table 2 indicates that both measures used in the study were reliable and valid. The factor loadings on the respective items were all above 0.5 and statistically significant for both exploratory factor analyses, which indicates convergent validity (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2019; Field, 2016). With no items cross loading we could conclude that the measures showed adequate discriminate validity (Hair *et al.*, 2019). As an additional validity check we calculated the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor. From the results, where all factors had AVE values above 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), we could conclude the measures had adequate validity. Furthermore, the scales used in the study were reliable since the Cronbach's alphas were all above 0.7 (Pallant, 2016; Hair *et al.*, 2019). As an additional reliability measure we calculated the composite reliability (CR) for each factor. With all CR values above 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2019) we could conclude that the measure was reliable.

Hypotheses testing

Multiple and simple regressions were used to test the hypotheses formulated for the study. Before running the regressions for the various models tested in the study we first ensured that all the required assumptions were met. When running the analyses it became clear from the Mahalanobis and Cook's distance values that outliers were present in the data (Field, 2016; Hair *et al.*, 2019; Pallant, 2016). These outliers were deleted and the analyses run again (Field, 2016; Pallant, 2016). From the output it could be concluded that all the assumptions (Field,

2016; Hair *et al.*, 2019; Pallant, 2016; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) were satisfactory met: the sample size exceeded the minimum required number of respondents; no issues related to multicollinearity were noticed because no correlations were above 0.9 and since none of the independent variables had variable inflation factor index values (VIF) above 10 nor tolerance values below 0.1; Mahalanobis distances and Cook’s distance indicated that there were no more outliers; and the normal probability plots depicted a straight diagonal line from left to right, and the scatterplot depicted a relatively rectangular shape with majority of the scores situated in the centre. The assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were therefore met.

Table 3: Model summary

Model	Dependent variable	Independent variable(s)	R	Adjusted R-Square
Composite approach				
1	Loyalty	Composite relationship quality	0.657	0.429
2	Positive word-of-mouth	Composite relationship quality	0.718	0.514
Disaggregate approach				
3	Loyalty	Trust, commitment and satisfaction	0.754	0.563
4	Positive word-of-mouth	Trust, commitment and satisfaction	0.788	0.616

With the assumptions met, multiple regressions were performed for the disaggregate approach and simple regressions for the composite approach. The results from the different regressions (models 1 – 4) are reported in Table 3 where regression models 1 and 2 depict the results from the composite approach and models 3 and 4 the disaggregate approach. Since we compared the disaggregate (using three independent variables) to the composite (using only one independent variable) approaches to relationship quality, we report on the adjusted R square since “this

statistic is quite useful for comparison between equations with different numbers of independent variables” (Hair *et al.*, 2019:260).

From Table 3 it can be seen that the adjusted R square values for the disaggregate approach were higher for explaining the variance in loyalty ($R^2 = 0.563$) as well as positive word-of-mouth ($R^2 = 0.616$) than the composite approach ($R^2 = 0.429$ for loyalty and $R^2 = 0.514$ for positive word-of-mouth). It can thus be concluded that the disaggregate approach explains more variance in the dependent variables (loyalty and positive word-of-mouth) than the composite approach. Table 4 shows the ANOVA results, indicating that all the regression models were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) (Field, 2016).

Table 4: ANOVA

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F-value	p-value
Composite approach						
1	Regression	33.450	1	33.450	184.244	0.000*
	Residual	44.117	243	0.182		
	Total	77.566	244			
2	Regression	61.545	1	61.545	264.507	0.000*
	Residual	57.704	248	0.233		
	Total	119.249	249			
Disaggregate approach						
3	Regression	44.120	3	14.707	105.968	0.000*
	Residual	33.447	241	0.139		
	Total	77.566	244			
4	Regression	57.591	3	19.197	131.736	0.000*
	Residual	35.119	241	0.146		
	Total	92.710	244			

*p-value < 0.05 is statistically significant; Models 1 and 3: Dependent variable: Loyalty; Models 2 and 4: Dependent variable: Positive word-of-mouth

Table 5 provides the standardised coefficient values and the resultant hypotheses results for the four regression models.

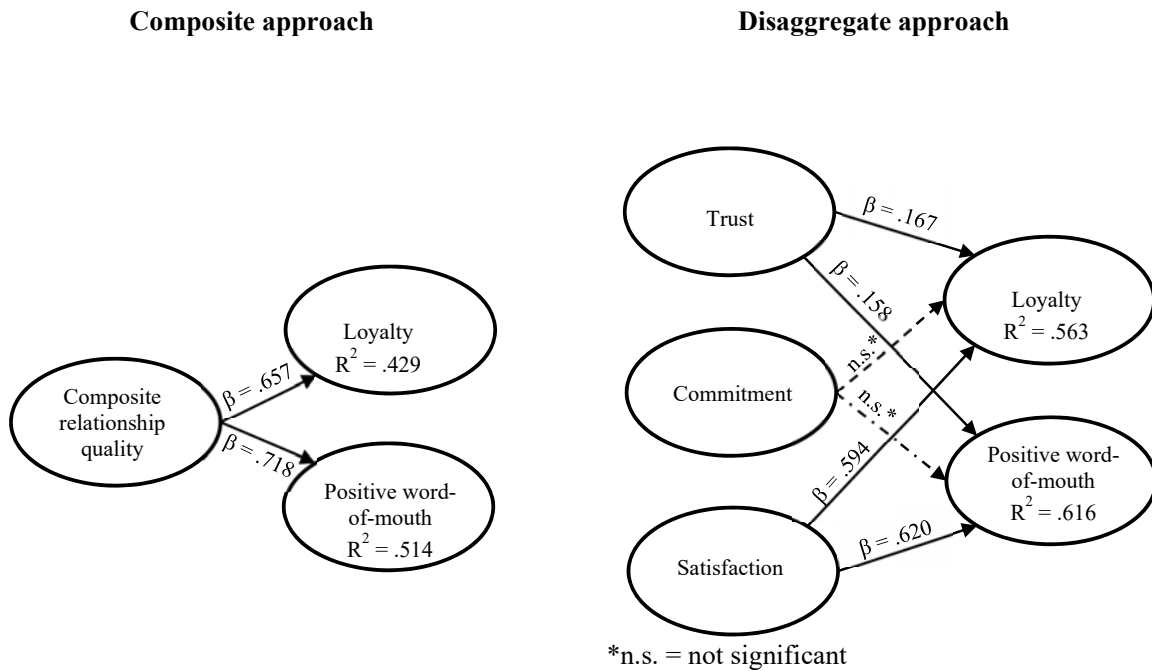
Table 5: Coefficients and hypotheses results

Model	Standardised coefficients Beta-value (β -value)	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Finding	
Composite approach					
1	Constant		3.856	0.000	
	Composite relationship quality	.657	13.574	0.000*	H ₁ : Supported
2	Constant		1.863	0.064	
	Composite relationship quality	.718	16.264	0.000*	H ₂ : Supported
Disaggregate approach					
3	Constant		2.080	0.00	
	Trust	.167	2.632	0.009*	H ₃ : Supported
	Commitment	.052	1.056	0.292	H ₄ : Not supported
	Satisfaction	.594	9.030	0.00*	H ₅ : Supported
4	Constant		.310	0.757	
	Trust	.158	2.654	0.008*	H ₆ : Supported
	Commitment	.079	1.702	0.090	H ₇ : Not supported
	Satisfaction	.620	10.064	0.000*	H ₈ : Supported

**p*-value < 0.05 is statistically significant; Models 1 and 3: Dependent variable: Loyalty; Models 2 and 4: Dependent variable: Positive word-of-mouth

It is evident from Table 5 that composite relationship quality is a statistical significant predictor of both loyalty ($p < 0.005$; beta-value = 0.657) and positive word-of-mouth ($p < 0.005$; beta-value = 0.718). Hypotheses H₁ and H₂ is thus supported. It can furthermore be seen that, for the disaggregate relationship quality approach, trust and satisfaction were statistical significant predictors of both loyalty and positive word-of-mouth ($p < 0.005$). Hypotheses H₃, H₅, H₆ and H₈ are thus supported. Commitment, in contrast, was not a significant predictor of either loyalty ($p = 0.292$) nor positive word-of-mouth ($p = 0.090$). Hypotheses H₄ and H₇ are thus not supported. It can furthermore be seen that satisfaction was a stronger predictor of both loyalty (beta-value = 0.594) and positive word-of-mouth (beta-value = 0.620) than trust (beta-values = 0.167 for loyalty and 0.158 for positive word-of-mouth). Figure 2 offers a summary of the results for the various regression models.

Figure 2: Result summary



DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this paper was to compare disaggregate and composite approaches to relationship quality as predictors of South African Airbnb customers' loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. The key finding for this study was that although both approaches had a significant influence on both loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, the disaggregate approach declared more variance in these relationship quality outcomes than the composite approach. Despite this finding, both approaches offer a number of managerial implications.

The first finding from this study is that regardless how it is measured (i.e. composite or disaggregate approach), relationship quality is (similar to previous studies) a significant predictor of customer loyalty (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Lai, 2014; Ndubisi *et al.*, 2012; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012) as well as positive word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Macintosh, 2007; Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). This finding implies, as suggested by Ndubisi *et al.* (2012), that customers who felt that they had a high relationship quality with

Airbnb rewarded the relationship with their loyalty as well as by spreading positive word-of-mouth communication.

When considering the results from the disaggregate approach this study found similar to previous studies that satisfaction and trust were significant predictors of both loyalty (Deng *et al.*, 2009; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013) and positive word-of-mouth (Eisingerich & Bell, 2006; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). Satisfaction was a stronger predictor of both loyalty and positive word-of-mouth than trust. A surprising finding was that unlike previous studies, commitment was not a predictor of either loyalty (Cater & Zabkar, 2009; Lee, *et al.*, 2007) nor positive word-of-mouth (Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). A possible reason why trust (and not commitment) was a significant predictor of both loyalty and positive word-of-mouth may be because Airbnb operates on an online platform and is associated with large amounts of perceived risk, implying that only when trust is established will the customer reciprocate with loyalty (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Harris & Goode, 2004; Kim & Peterson, 2017). This is in line with studies indicating that customers are more likely to purchase repeatedly and make referrals when they trust a firm (Deng *et al.*, 2010; Kim & Cha, 2002; Rafiq *et al.*, 2013; Yoon & Kim, 2009).

Findings from this study make several theoretical and practical contributions. First, the study supports the theory of reciprocity (Bagozzi, 1995:276). This study corroborates this theory because, when customers believe they have high relationship quality, they reciprocate with loyalty and by spreading positive word-of-mouth communication. Furthermore, theoretically, this study fills a gap in knowledge by considering a dual approach to relationship quality by comparing the value (and usefulness) of using a composite versus a disaggregate approach to relationship quality and the outcomes thereof. This study found that as could be expected due

to previous research (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Lai, 2014), the disaggregate approach explains loyalty and positive word-of-mouth better than a composite approach. Thus, by following a disaggregate approach Airbnb (as well as other similar service providers, such as Uber) stand a better chance of building customer loyalty and benefiting from customers spreading positive word-of-mouth communication by focusing their strategies and relationship marketing efforts on ensuring customer satisfaction and by building customer trust in their service offering (and operating platforms). Customer satisfaction can be improved by conducting research into the needs, wants and expectations of customers (for both Airbnb platform as well as its listings) and designing service delivery processes to exceed customer expectations. To further improve customer satisfaction Airbnb can also contract independent consultants to audit its service delivery processes and publishing such (positive) findings in travel-related media (e.g. in-flight magazines and tourism-related magazines and publications). Airbnb can also conduct research relating to their platforms and processes by means of eye tracking studies in an effort to identify potential problems and identifying areas where customers' satisfaction with their experience using the Airbnb platform can be increased. Airbnb can furthermore develop relational bonds with customers by offering additional post-purchase services such as providing details of, for example, restaurants, entertainment options and emergency services close to the listing or providing additional positive references for the selected listing to help customers who experience cognitive dissonance. Marketers could even use the positive word-of-mouth from clients as a marketing tactic. Thus, to foster trust and create exceptional satisfaction, customers must feel that Airbnb goes beyond to communicate with them and to deliver services with which they are satisfied.

Furthermore, the study indicated that trust was an important factor for customers. According to prior research the relationship between the customer and firm cannot progress without

trust (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; De Wulf *et al.*, 2010; Kim & Cha, 2002). Therefore, marketers need to ensure that there is transparency between the customer and firm. The firm can take several steps to ensure trust, such as using banking platforms for payments that request a one-time pin to prevent fraud; providing confirmation emails to ensure bookings; or providing a 24-hour customer service for any problems or complaints. These tactics will also improve commitment and thus loyalty to the platform as they provide a way to sustain the relationship between customer and firm (Moorman *et al.*, 1992). Customer trust in the Airbnb platforms can furthermore be improved by conducting and publishing audits on the safety of using their services and platforms, offering customers “no-nonsense” refunds, and offering (and telling customers they do) use the latest and most secure encryption technology to ensure customer privacy and security.

Finally, the results from the study showed that Airbnb and other similar service providers can use the composite or disaggregate approach to measure customers’ relationship quality perceptions. Although the disaggregate approach offer more in-depth insights into which areas to focus on (and improve if necessary) in an effort to improve perceived relationship quality, the composite approach offer a quick measure of the overall customer impressions of the relationship quality. It is therefore recommended that the composite measure be used with confidence to establish customers “overall relationship quality impressions” and that, if this measure identifies poor or lower levels of relationship quality, the disaggregate measure be used to pinpoint where exactly the problem lies (i.e. trust, commitment or satisfaction).

LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study had a number of limitations that could be considered in future research. First, this study was conducted in one context only, namely Airbnb. Future studies could consider

replicating the study in other collaborative consumption platforms, such as Uber, to substantiate its findings. Furthermore, this study only considered trust, commitment and satisfaction as dimensions in the disaggregate approach; this could be expanded to include other constructs such as value, benevolence, cooperation and communication (Athanasopoulou, 2009). The outcomes of relationship quality could also be expanded to measure constructs such as purchase intentions, relationship strength, relationship continuity and customer retention (Athanasopoulou, 2009).

The generalisability of the study is also limited because non-probability snowball sampling was used, and can thus not be generalised to a larger population. Using snowball sampling could also have resulted in results being skewed since respondents could have asked others that were similar to them (in terms of demographics and behaviour) to complete the questionnaire. Finally, future studies could also include a more in-depth qualitative aspect to understand *why* relationship quality influences loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Babin & Zikmund, 2016).

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