



Role of Professional Service Quality and Communication Effectiveness in Predicting Relationship Commitment among Professional-Client in Lawyer Services

Muhammad Abrar¹, Rizwan Shabbir^{1*}, Mohsin Bashir¹, Shahnawaz Saqib², Ahmed Raza³

¹Lyallpur Business School, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan, ²PhD Scholar, Lyallpur Business School, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan, ³MS Scholar, Lyallpur Business School, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan. *Email: rizwanshabbir@gcuf.edu.pk

Received: 09 March 2020

Accepted: 01 July 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.9387>

ABSTRACT

Globally, judicial sector regarding its relationship commitment has been discussed in few studies. In South-Asian context, service sector has been explored mostly with commercial industries like banks, restaurants and academic. However, professional industries like lawyers, doctors and brokers have rarely investigated by marketers to understand its relationship commitment with their clients considering their core antecedents. In such service industries, technical and functional service quality attributes along with communication effectiveness enhance client's satisfaction. Moreover, it examined trust and relationship quality of service provider that impact client-lawyer relationship commitment. Structured questionnaire was designed for collecting a sample of 220 clients who had/have encountered civil cases at district bar Faisalabad, Pakistan. Results of structured equation model shows that professional service quality and communication effectiveness promote relationship commitment among clients and professional lawyers. Also relationship quality mediates the relationship of service quality, communication effectiveness and relationship commitment. Limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

Keywords: Relationship Commitment, Professional Service Quality, Relationship Quality, Communication Effectiveness, Professional Services

JEL Classifications: M310, M130

1. INTRODUCTION

The successful delivery of services is associated with higher degree of interpersonal skills, communication and contact between client and professional service providers such as: lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers, physiotherapist, psychotherapist, accountant, chartered accountant and others (Lovelock, 1983). In the area of relationship marketing, target and focus of previous studies was on background of relationship commitment and loyalty in business and industrial markets, consumer goods and distribution channels. It is quite clear that implementation of relationship marketing provides service organizations with trusting relationship the enhance commitment and relationship quality among service provider and client (Denning, 1983; Oly

et al., 2011). Globally, lawyers misuse their powers and don't express supportive behavior in delivering legal service based on relationship marketing principles which is quieting alarming specially in developing economics (Ngo and Nguyen, 2016). The role of relationship practices in professional services cannot be considered as effective unless an effective interpersonal skills and service quality is delivered to clients. However, less information exchange among client and service provider create dis-satisfaction that led to drop relationship commitment. Similarly, service providers who don't explain rights and liabilities to clients might experience a switching behavior due to client satisfaction level (Alshurideh et al., 2016; Takala and Uusitalo 1996). For building high relationship of ethical norms are essential or even mandatory (Satkunasingam and Ndubisi, 2006).

In professional services, trust and commitment are quite associated because higher their credibility of services provider led to stronger relationship commitment (Bricci et al., 2016). The problems faced by professional clients need special individual attention in services like financial advisor planning, medical consultants and lawyers. Such attention is assessed by service quality attributes, consumption habits, and communication effectiveness. In South Asian context, lawyer's interaction with clients are not clearly explored regarding interpersonal communication (Ponder et al., 2016) and level of service quality (Overall and McNulty, 2017). It has been observed that lawyers manipulate situational factors and don't reveal value of legal system and procedure to clients. On the contrary, professional services like banks, insurance companies disclose all legal rules and policies to clients before proceeding to purchase/consumption. There are very few studies particularly globally and especially in Pakistan in judicial sector on the topic of ethical norms and its results and due to this reality, the under-discussion phenomenon is very rarely understanding by the public. In judicial or legal service sector globally and especially in Pakistan the awareness of effect of ethical norms on relationship commitment and its results or outcomes are very few and previously researchers were also unaware of the reality and situation. There is also very limited info on ethical norms and its strategies that can describe that how we can bring improvement in legal services sector, consumer-producer relationship and in marketing and its results. Globally its very vivid reality that in legal services sector lawyers are the persons who are responsible to provide professional legal services to their clients besides that they are associates of courts of law to help them in legal matters. A very strict code of conduct and rules is for Lawyers and they are bent before it.

In emerging economies, in judicial system insights of pricing is subjective (Ndubisi et al., 2014), and thus there are limited studies on features of ethics. It's the thinking, perception and expectation of the public from professional service providers especially from lawyers that they provide them quality services (Grimshaw, 2001; Vanclay et al., 2013; Jamal and Bowie, 1995) but in case of gaps in ethical behavior from lawyers risk the trustworthiness of whole profession (Kim and Ki, 2014; Kerr and Smith, 1995) in lawyer-client relationship. In case of advancement in ethical promotion, ethical behavior and relationship commitment there must be more research in Deming's view (Alshurideh et al., 2016) and if lawyers are sincerer with their clients then it's their success in terms of confidence by their clients (Ndubisi et al., 2014). This study explored relative influence of technical service quality, functional service quality and communication effectiveness in shaping client's relationship commitment and analyzing role of lawyer-client relationship quality in enhancing long-term commitment. In professional services ethical norms and service quality play a pivotal role in promoting relationship commitment (Oly et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2010).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The client's cooperation with their professional service provider depends on level of acceptance among these parties. The theoretical foundation of this study considered firstly, fairness/

equity theory which described that a human associate itself with other for providing input or acquiring output and must treat everyone with fair treatment (Swan and Oliver, 1989). Moreover, Adam (1963) lighted ethical norms and human behavior to explore fairness. Secondly, social exchange theory suggested by Huseman and Hatfield (1990) that logic of responsibilities contribute towards better cost-benefit analysis for find perceived risk/benefits associated with client-lawyer relationship. Lastly, the study of Gouldner (1960) and Regan (1971) stated that reciprocity theory defined good action have good rewards which explained that in professional services as a contributor towards enhancing relationship between client-lawyers. If lawyers are fair, loyal and responsible to their clients then clients respond like with faithfulness, ethical behavior, positive word of mouth and fulfilling of promises and vice versa. As, lawyers serve under judicial system their appropriate duty is in term of care and capability that represent a good sample of relationship quality and commitment (Ndubisi, 2011; Zhao et al., 2010).

2.1. Professional Service Quality

In professional service, service quality is a judgment that tells about client satisfaction about service delivered by lawyers with analyzing service expectation of client (Grönroos, 1983). The service quality identified parameters for exploring service gaps, service improvement tools, performance and knowledge about customers (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Prior studies that focused professional service (Bricci et al., 2016) summarized that service quality is constituted on two quality aspects named as technical and functional. Real results or essential services that clients seen is called technical quality (Lovelock, 1996; Halinen, 2012). To attain best return on assets/investment on satisfactory risk level, technical quality states advisor's competency is to help the clients for achieving of fiscal goals (Yalabik et al., 2015). Numerous clients that be incapable to assess technical results such situations create assurance for service providers to satisfy their customers that returns are invested in safe investments and they will have higher level of technical quality. Secondly, Functional service quality is a transferring procedure of product or service basic aspect which is associated not only with what is transferred? But also, how basic or technical service is transferred (Ryu et al., 2012). It's very hard for professional service providers to distinguish themselves on generic product level and customer's knowledge. When service providers reach level of maturity their competition increase, and service quality turned into merchandising which is presumed as functional quality that lead to service differentiation. Functional quality is visualized as polite, thoughtful and openness in individual services of professional planning and adviser's (lawyer) behavior during sequence of creation and delivery in the basic service (Sharma and Patterson, 1999; Siu et al., 2013). The pursuit to understand client's problem is associated with openness and politeness by presenting better services in a timely manner.

H₁: Service quality positively predicts relationship commitment.

2.2. Communication Effectiveness

Sharing of effective understanding and message among sender and receiver is termed as effective communication. Productive relationship depends on personnel level of engagement in a communication. It's a mandatory component of any organization

specially in service-orientated firm, “*People*” is a part of their marketing mix. Prior studies on employee communication concluded that failure of numerous service firm is all due to poor communication. The work of Mohr et al. (1996) summarized that relationship communication is explored under industrial markets but few researchers investigate communication effect on consumer services. For attaining higher anticipated service quality communication is very vital element (Clark, 1992; Lai, 2014). The communication between adviser and client involves many uncertainties due to nature of problem, thus many perceived risks are eliminated by effective communication.

In case professional services, such as financial planning technical knowledge and communicative ability are main drivers of personal goals (Benson, 1994; Olivet and Eberhardt, 2012). To understand customer dilemma, services provider like lawyers must create powerful communication skills that assure them about risk, legal documentation and to avoid unavoidable highs and lows about lawsuits. A customer gets firsthand knowledge and state of the art information about their petitions by consulting and timely communication with their lawyers and become aware about risks and opportunities to understand that either they will be able to achieve their expected returns. The study of Bland (1997) described a profile of successful adviser with qualities to attract clients, provide ease and generate a comfort-level with client. Persuasive communication with clients comprised on regular meeting with clients and asking quires about his/her petition, collecting appropriate information and developing a sense of proximity. The work of Smits (2018) concluded that communication develop a social bonding among parties which design their emotional attachment by building strong relationship and demonstrating a psychological barrier. Therefore, professional services that require technical as well as functional service quality need to understand the importance of communication for resolving client’s problems.

H₂: Communication effectiveness positively predicts relationship commitment.

2.3. Relationship Quality

Johnson (1999) and Ndubisi (2007) explained that relationship depth and feeling of that relationship is known as relationship quality. The study of Levitt (1986) concluded that it is an intangible attribute that enhance value for exchange parties. Partanen and Möller, (2012) referred relationship quality as client’s awareness towards needs, wants and objectives by comparing them with the expectation and goals. The conceptualization of relationship quality with communication and service quality has been examined but difference in results due to professional service (Jarvelin and Lehtinen, 1996).

Relationship commitment (Professional service providers (lawyers) with their clients) as of their professional attributes and the service they provided (Gronroos 1985; Lacity et al., 2017). Individual modules of relationship commitment also comprised the need for technical quality. Few clients familiar this as a relationship commitment of demonstration on the end of the Professional service providers (lawyers) and also pointed out some possible risks, as for some counsel’s relationship

commitment is about technical quality, but that was very risky and according to customers’ needs, and the customers has to pay for counsel’s tolerance. Sources of services difference are interpersonal skills; technical capabilities and result is client satisfaction and client retention ultimately. Rigorous preparation in communication and interpersonal skills must be obligatory as there is essential part of communication and functional quality that effect relationship commitment. Effective and timely interpersonal communication has the future and potential resolve problems. Thus on the basis of above argument it is assumed that:

H₃: Service quality predicts relationship quality among clients of professional services.

H₄: Relationship quality mediates the relationship of service quality and relationship commitment.

H₅: Communication effectiveness predicts relationship quality among clients of professional services.

H₆: Relationship quality mediates the relationship of communication effectiveness and relationship commitment.

3. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research is used to meet research objective with the help of numerical data or such data which can be transformed into statistical form. Target population was common people of Pakistan who are clients of lawyers practicing in Faisalabad (Pakistan) and frequently approaches lawyers for getting justice in judicial system. Already established scales were followed for data collection. Data collection was started in March 2018 and completed in July 2018. Total time was four months. Convenience sampling technique was used. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed among the clients, out of which 240 were received back. From the received back questionnaires partially filled responses were discarded and at the end 220 useable responses were left. Response remained at 63%. Respondents were assured regarding data confidentiality (Baron and Kenney, 1986). Seven items regarding functional and technical service quality was adopted from the work of Sharma and Patterson (1999). The relationship quality items were adopted from Ndubisi (2007). The measure regarding relationship commitment were adopted from the work of Anderson and Patterson (1992) and Morgan and Hunt (1994) which consisted on five items. Lastly, four items were adopted from the work of Sharma and Patterson (1999) and Anderson and Patterson (1992) to measure communication effectiveness in professional services.

Demographic description showed that majority clients are 31-50 years male adults with average education as college graduates. 51.8% clients are referred to a specific lawyer by friends, 19.5% are referred by their family members and 15.5% are referred by relatives. This showed that lawyers selection is based mostly on recommendations (Table 1).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to test hypotheses this study used a variance based approach and for this purpose Smart PLS 3.2.8 (Ringle et al., 2015)

was used. Smart PLS 3.2.8 was best available option in this regard due to less theory development in the field of professional services (Lawyers client relationship). In addition to this Smart PLS 3.2.8 deals best in case of small sample size. At first, measurement model was assessed in SEM for which reliability (Cronbach's Alpha, rho-A & composite reliability) and discriminant (Fornell and Larker Criteria) and convergent validity (Average variance extracted) (Bacon et al., 1995) was measured. All the indicators of reliability and validity shoed a reliable statistics regarding alpha, composite reliability, rho-A and AVE with values greater than the required limit (Table 2).

In order to assess discriminant validity Fornelr and Larker Criteria was used. Here in the above table values of square root of AVE of each construct is higher than the correlation values in respective column (Table 3). Thus discriminant validity has been established. Similarly HTMT criteria (Table 4) was also used for assessment of discriminant validity which also confirmed the models discriminant validity.

Predictive relevance of the model was assessed on the basis of Q² and it has been found that all the values of Q² were higher than zero confirming the predictive relevance of model. Coefficient of determination (R²) was used to assess percentage of variation in dependent variable on the basis of predictors i.e. professional service quality and communication effectiveness. High R² value (0.63%) was observed in case of relationship commitment due to professional service quality, communication effectiveness and relationship quality. Similarly large value of R² was observed in case of relationship quality due to professional service quality and communication effectiveness (Figure 1).

First hypothesis of this study was regarding relationship of professional service quality and relationship commitment in lawyer's client relationship. This hypotheses was supported by the results as ($\beta = 0.188$, $t = 3.370$ and $P < 0.000$). Similarly 2nd hypothesis was supported by the results and it has been found that communication effectiveness in professional services boost relationship commitment in client-professional relationship.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents (n=220)

Description	Frequency	Percent	Description	Frequency	Percent
Gender			Relationship duration		
Male	199	90.50	<1 year	106	48.20
Female	21	9.50	1-5 years	89	40.50
Age			>5 years	25	11.40
<30	64	29.10	Visit local district bar		
31-50	108	49.10	Frequently	85	38.60
48-62	3	1.00	Not Frequently	113	51.40
>50	48	21.80	Often	22	10
Education			Referred to specific lawyer		
Under matric	39	17.70	Relatives	34	15.50
Matric	55	25	Friends	114	51.80
Intermediate	61	27.70	Family Member	43	19.50
Bachelor	40	18.20	Others	29	13.20
Master	25	11.40			

Source: Authors own calculations

Table 2: Indicators of reliability and validity

Constructs	Indicator	Indicator reliability	Cross loadings	VIF	Alpha	rho-A	Composite reliability	AVE
Communication effectiveness	CE1	0.829	0.829	1.446	0.704	0.719	0.835	0.628
	CE2	0.827	0.827	1.470				
	CE3	0.717	0.717	1.275				
Relationship commitment	RC1	0.784	0.784	2.050	0.84	0.842	0.887	0.61
	RC2	0.800	0.8	1.892				
	RC3	0.796	0.796	1.863				
	RC4	0.782	0.782	1.935				
	RC5	0.741	0.741	1.661				
Relationship quality	RQ1	0.788	0.788	2.104	0.864	0.865	0.902	0.648
	RQ2	0.833	0.833	2.591				
	RQ3	0.775	0.775	1.858				
	RQ4	0.793	0.793	2.148				
	RQ5	0.833	0.833	2.416				
Service quality	FQ1	0.753	0.753	2.400	0.883	0.898	0.909	0.592
	FQ2	0.671	0.671	2.917				
	FQ3	0.737	0.737	1.993				
	TQ1	0.911	0.911	5.639				
	TQ2	0.857	0.857	2.733				
	TQ3	0.669	0.669	2.959				
	TQ4	0.757	0.757	2.081				

Figure 1: Path diagram

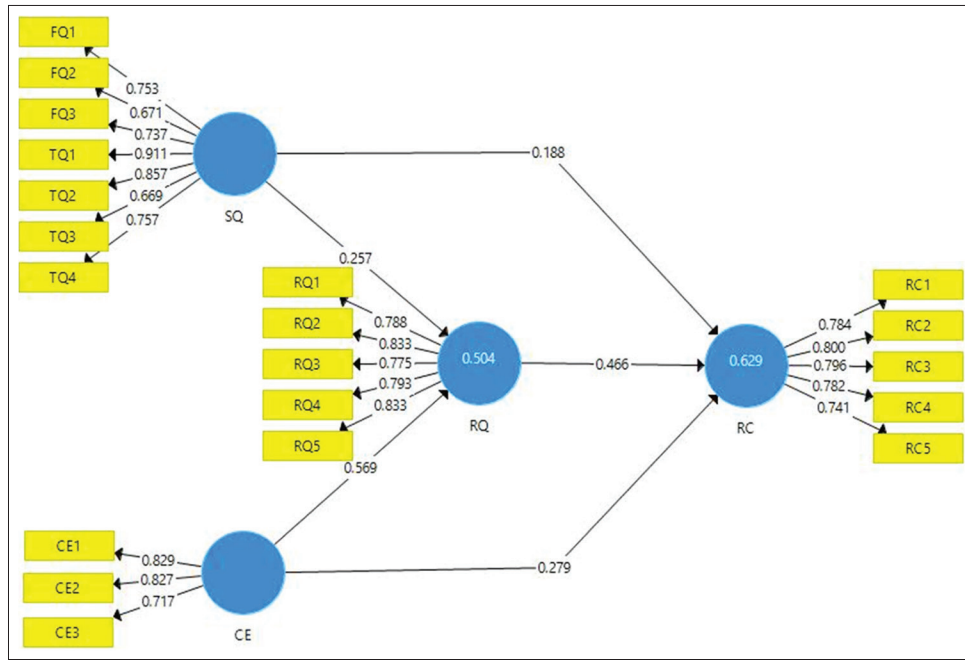


Table 3: Discriminant validity (Fornel and Larker Criteria)

Construct	CE	RC	RQ	SQ
CE	<u>0.793</u>			
RC	0.664	<u>0.781</u>		
RQ	0.669	0.742	<u>0.805</u>	
SQ	0.39	0.52	0.479	<u>0.769</u>

Table 4: Discriminant validity (HTMT Criteria)

Construct	CE	RC	RQ	SQ
CE	-			
RC	0.855	-		
RQ	0.848	0.863	-	
SQ	0.48	0.599	0.541	-

Table 5: Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	β	t	P	Status
H1 SQ→RC	0.188	3.370	0.00	Supported
H2 CE→RC	0.279	5.192	0.00	Supported
H3 SQ→RQ	0.257	4.556	0.00	Supported
H5 CE→RQ	0.569	13.867	0.00	Supported

Table 6: Mediation hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Indirect	Total	VAF	Status
H4 Professional service quality→Relationship quality→Relationship commitment	0.12	0.308	39%	Supported
H6 Communication effectiveness→Relationship quality→Relationship commitment	0.265	0.544	49%	Supported

In addition to this it has also been found that service quality promotes relationship quality (H3) which further strengthens its relationship with relationship commitment (Table 5). On the other hand relationship of communication effectiveness and relationship

quality has also been found significant (H5). Mediating relationship of professional service quality and relationship commitment was tested through VAF approach (Table 6). Value of VAF in this regard is found as 39% which indicates a partial mediation (H4). Similarly relationship of communication effectiveness and relationship commitment was also mediated by relationship quality (H6). However this relationship was partially mediated.

5. CONCLUSION

On the basis of empirical results of this study it can be concluded that service quality and communication effectiveness delivered by professional lawyers promotes relationship commitment and strengthen the bond between professional service providers and their client. Further relationship quality was also found a predictor of relationship commitment. Both professional service quality and communication effectiveness also boost relationship quality which further strengthen relationship commitment. This study provide insight into lawyers and their clients interaction in legal system in the context of Pakistani culture. It provides deeper insights to understand the behaviors of lawyers and their clients about judicial system in Pakistan. This study contributes to develop better understanding between lawyers and their clients. This study provides meaningful insights for the service providers to understand the importance of social interactions that occur during service encounters. It shows how beneficial it's for long term success to create a friendly and informative environment during communication between professional service providers and their clients. Relationship commitment is very important factor as in the context of professional service providers companies & individuals like lawyers, when clients approach and pay them for resolving their problems but the lawyers don't fulfill their duties and often their clients seem to be complaining about their services. Relationship commitment is very wide phenomenon as its depends on trust and service quality between professional service providers

and their clients. Relationship commitment is just like a contract of fulfilling promise between professional services providers like lawyers and their clients and lawyers provide functional and technical services to their clients. Most previous studies are based on loyalty and commitment on industrial markets (Halinen, 2012; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Relationship commitment is essential for successful long-term relationships (Anderson and Patterson, 1992; Kumar et al., 1995). While research in business-to-client services associates commitment with trust, perceived value, involvement of service provider and quality of interaction between clients and service providers (Hakanen and Jaakkola, 2012; Lapiere, 1997; Patterson and Spreng, 1997). From theoretical perspective this study has also tested scale of relationship (Ndubisi, 2007) and scale of relationship commitment (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Ndubisi, 2011) which is also contribution of this study.

Despite contribution from theoretical and practical perspective this study has few limitations too, first this is a cross sectional study which does not allow to draw inference. Secondly on lawyers under professional services were considered in this study and generalizability of results cannot be made. Sample size was not large enough in this study and in future large sample size might produce different results. Only two aspect of professional service quality were considered in this study, incorporating other aspects of service quality would be another area for future research. High ethical norms and behaviors have the potency to shape perceived relationship quality by exchange parties positively. It predicts the client behavior during judicial service encounters between lawyers and their clients. For building high relationship of trust ethical norms are essential or even mandatory (Ameer and Othman, 2012; Satkunasingam and Ndubisi, 2006). Thus including high ethical norms and behaviors can engender favorable perception of relationship quality. Thus in future, considering ethical norms of legal service providers can provide important insights into literature. Due to lack of knowledge clients who come in contact with lawyers don't know that what are their rights and duties of the service providers like lawyers that satisfy the clients (Alshurideh et al., 2016; Takala and Uusitalo 1996). So in future considering consumer's knowledge can also be an avenue for future research.

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