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Exploration of congruence in perceptions of buyer–supplier attraction: A dyadic multiple case study

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ABSTRACT

In long-term complex buyer–supplier relationships, many exchanges are non-contractual, a factor that emphasizes the social dimension of the relationship. Previous studies have shown that attraction is a fundamental aspect of the social dimension and a main driver in non-contractual exchanges. Although attraction is a determinant of a relationship, many studies have examined the relationship only from the buyer's or supplier's perspective. Our study extends this research stream by considering the dyadic aspect of attraction and poses the following questions: Does the success of a relationship require that both parties perceive it to be attractive? How important is it to understand how the company looks in the eyes of the other party? In this paper, we explore the dyadic aspect of buyer–supplier attraction by analyzing six cases, two buyer firms and six supplier firms and by conducting a total of 43 interviews. By using cross-case analyses, we develop a set of proposals for explaining how congruence in perceptions of attraction affects relationship success.

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1. Introduction

Progressive firms have become increasingly aware of understanding their relationships as generators of value rather than simply focusing on the best prices to obtain or sell products (Gadde and Håkansson, 2001). According to Ellegaard and Ritter (2006), contributions have focused on understanding how suppliers generate value, with the purpose of optimizing supplier performance through, for instance, supplier development. The problem seems to be that suppliers tend to refrain from major developments unless they are willing to engage in such developments. Value creation requires developing not only the activities of two particular companies but also the relationship itself. In buyer–supplier relationships, partners must find ways of encouraging other parties to voluntarily make the desired choices. In recent years, there have been a number of references to efforts made by companies to obtain improved performance from suppliers by increasing their attractiveness as buyers and becoming customers of choice (Ramsay and Wagner, 2009). Previous studies have argued that buyer–supplier attraction is a force that encourages the buyer and the supplier to jointly develop a buyer–supplier relationship and that the purpose of being attractive is to create the ability to manage and optimize value creation in the relationship (Mortensen et al., 2008). Hald et al. (2009) defined attraction in buyer–supplier relationships as 'as a force of fostering voluntarism in purchasing and marketing exchanges, and further pushing a buyer and supplier closer together in a mutual advantageous relationship'.

Although the social dimension of exchange and attraction has received increasing attention in business relationship research in recent years, we argue that previous studies' findings do not yet provide a full understanding of attraction in the buyer–supplier relationship. Dyadic studies on value creation in buyer–supplier relationships remain scarce (Terpend, 2008). Our study aims to fill this gap by providing a dyadic approach to buyer–supplier attraction by analyzing the congruence of customers' and suppliers' perceptions of attraction. This approach makes an important contribution to the existing literature, as, according to social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), not of an actor.

In this study, our objective is to explore the underlying expectations and perceptions of attraction in buyer–supplier relationships, as they are central to understanding how the relationship and attraction develop. In this article, we propose a systematic approach for exploring these underlying expectations and perceptions about attraction and introduce the notion of congruence to describe the nature and extent of differences in these perceptions. We see congruence in attraction as referring to alignment of the key elements of attraction. Following the definition of Orlikowski and Gash (1994), congruent does not mean identical but rather related in structure and content. Congruence in perceived attraction would imply, for example, similar expectations around different elements of attraction, such as cost reduction and support of the other party. Accordingly, incongruence implies important differences in expectations about some key elements in behavioral constraints of attraction. We analyze congruence from two different perspectives (see Fig. 1). First, we analyze whether the buyer's

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perception of the supplier's attractiveness is congruent with the supplier's perception of the buyer's attractiveness. We call this phenomenon 'mutuality of attraction'. Second, we explore how the buyer evaluates its own attractiveness in the eyes of the supplier and whether this evaluation is congruent with the supplier's actual perceptions of attractiveness of the buyer. Conversely, we analyze how the supplier evaluates its attractiveness in the eyes of the buyer and whether this is congruent with the buyer's actual perception of the supplier's attractiveness. We call this evaluation 'self-assessment of attractiveness'.

Authors of service quality have also been interested in congruencies, or gaps, as they call it, between perceptions and expectations, and they have created a service quality model (ServQual) (see for example Parasuraman et al., 1985). The researches of ServQual emphasize the need to understand and manage the gap between expectations and perceptions of service, gaps between expected service and perceived service as well as gaps between management perceptions of consumer expectations and consumer expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Parasuraman et al. (1985) argue that the gap between consumer expectations and management perceptions of those expectations will have an impact on the consumer's evaluation of service quality. Their interest lies close to our 'self-assessment' congruence from supplier's point of view, as they are interested in discrepancies between marketers' and consumers' perceptions in quality of service. The model doesn't cover the phenomenon 'mutuality of attraction'.

We base our empirical analysis of attraction on the conceptual model presented by Hald et al. (2009), which is currently the most comprehensive model of attraction. In the conceptual model, attraction is constructed as the combined output of a complex interaction between three behavioral constraints: expected perceived value, perceived trust and perceived dependence. We analyze our data collected from 43 interviews in six buyer–supplier relationships these six units to answer the following research questions: Does a successful long-term customer-supplier relationship require mutual attraction? How does perception about the other party's attraction affect the success of a long-term customer–supplier relationship? By mutual attraction, we mean high and congruent attraction in the relationship as perceived by buyer and supplier.

The paper is organized as follows. We begin by briefly discussing social exchange theory (SET), which is an underlying theory of attraction. Next, we review previous studies of buyer–supplier attraction. The research methodology section discusses how we collected our data and performed our analyses. We then briefly describe our case dyads, present our findings and develop a set of propositions. Finally, we discuss our results.

2. Theoretical foundation of buyer–supplier attraction

2.1. Attraction in SET

Because the attraction in exchanges has its roots in SET, we will briefly discuss SET's basic assumptions, scope and concepts. The foundational premises of SET may be summarized as follows. Exchange may involve both social and economic outcomes. These outcomes are compared to other exchange alternatives. Positive outcomes increase trust and commitment, and over time, norms develop that govern the relationship (Lambe et al., 2001). Therefore, parties to relational exchange tend to rely more on trust, commitment, cooperation, satisfaction and relational norms than strictly on written contracts (Heide and John, 1992). The unit of analysis in SET is the relationship between actors. The actors who engage in the exchange can be either individuals or corporate groups acting as single units. SET adopts the norm of reciprocity, which proposes that people who give a great deal to others try to receive a great deal from them and that people who receive a great deal from others are pressured to give a great deal to them (Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1961).

Blau and Homans, the early developers of SET, considered attraction to be a driving force in social exchanges. Blau (1986): 20 stated that 'an individual is attracted to another if he expects associating with him to be in some way rewarding for himself, and his interest in the expected social rewards draws him to the other'. Bryne and Rhammey (1965) presented a more precise definition that has been used in studies on interpersonal attraction: attraction toward X is a positive linear function of the number of positive reinforcements received from X. One party's attraction is visible to the other and is, thus, in the eye of the beholder. Moreover, a person who is attracted to others is interested in proving himself attractive to them (Blau, 1986). This principle also applies to the buyer–supplier relationship. A buyer must appear to be an attractive customer to the suppliers whom the buyer views as attractive.

Blau (1986) further argues that a person who is attractive in the eyes of another has power within the dyad. Homans's (1961) experimental research showed that attraction is linked to the ability to influence another person, and Emerson (1962) argued that an actor's power to control or influence another person resides in the actor's control over what he or she values. According to Blau's theory, these desired objects initiate attraction in the relationship. Thus, mutual attraction creates a situation in which both parties make voluntary efforts to reciprocate and remain attractive in each other's eyes.

As regarding to power, our basic assumptions are derived from Emerson's (1972a, 1972b) approach, commonly called as power

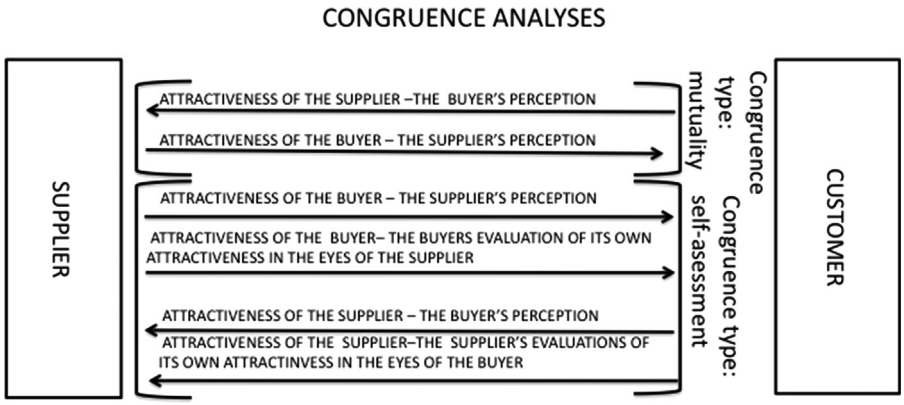

Fig. 1. Two different perspectives for analyzing congruence in buyer–supplier attraction.

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