



Balancing the sequential logic of quality constructs in manufacturing-supplier relationships – Causes and outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Manufacturers in business markets are experiencing a strong trend towards close versus distant relationships with suppliers. Three key relationship constructs in academic research are trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Although the relevant literature holds some evidence that trust and commitment are antecedent to satisfaction, the possibility that satisfaction plays a key mediation role between trust/commitment and other important outcomes (i.e., coordination, cooperation, and continuity) receives scant examination. This study tests this conceptual model by examining the relationships between manufacturers and suppliers. A random sample of small-to-medium-sized Norwegian manufacturers was contacted by phone in order to identify potential key informants. Shortly thereafter, a total of 581 surveys were mailed to the key informants. Two hundred and twelve surveys were returned, representing a response rate of 36.5%. Results support the conceptual model presented; trust and commitment relate positively to satisfaction; and satisfaction, in turn, relates positively to all three outcomes of coordination, cooperation, and continuity.

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1. Introduction and literature review

Close working relationships between buyers and suppliers in business markets are becoming more and more essential to achieving business success (e.g., Anderson and Narus, 1990; Ganesan, 1994; Geyskens et al., 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In support, Skarmeas, Katisikeas, Spyropoulou, and Salehi-Sangari (2008) state that strong relationships with suppliers can insure supply continuity, minimize risks of new exchanges, result in special accommodations and aid in inventory reduction.

Three of the most studied key relationship-oriented constructs include trust, commitment and satisfaction (Barry et al., 2008; Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007; Palmatier et al., 2006). Most research supports the view that trust and commitment are unique constructs (e.g., Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Barry et al. (2008), state that trust is an antecedent to commitment. In support, several recent studies (see Table 1) show that trust is a precursor to commitment (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007; Bansal et al., 2004; Moliner et al., 2007a,b; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). Presumably, buyers and sellers value high trust so much that they want to commit themselves to such relationships.

Geyskens et al. (1999) show in a meta-analysis that satisfaction is a distinct construct from trust and commitment. Unfortunately, how satisfaction fits in a nomological network with trust and commitment

remains an issue in need of resolution. This lack of resolution may be due, in part, to Geyskens et al. (1999, p. 231) contention that the emphasis in previous satisfaction research “has been on developing and testing new theory rather than on establishing empirical generalizations.”

In support of the lack of consensus about the positioning of satisfaction, a recent review of the literature that includes satisfaction, trust, and commitment (see Table 1) shows that some studies position all three constructs simply as dimensions of a higher order construct labelled relationship quality (e.g., Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Skarmeas and Robson, 2008; Skarmeas et al., 2008). Other studies position satisfaction as an antecedent to trust and commitment (Geyskens et al., 1999; Moliner et al., 2007a,b), as an outcome of trust and commitment (e.g., Farrelly, 2005), as an equal mediator along with the mediating role of both trust and commitment (Barry et al., 2008; Palmatier et al., 2006; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006), or as a mediator between trust and commitment and other outcomes (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999).

The present study supports the position of satisfaction as mediator between trust and commitment and important outcomes for three reasons. First, some studies show that trust and/or commitment appear to be antecedents or precursors to satisfaction (e.g., Farrelly, 2005; Johnson et al., 2008; Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Payan and Svensson, 2007; Smith and Barclay, 1997; Roath and Sinkovics, 2006; Wong and Zhou, 2006). In support of these findings, Skarmeas et al. (2008, p. 25) state that “...satisfaction is a focal outcome of buyer–seller relationships that is generally unlikely to develop in the absence of trust and commitment.” Second, satisfaction may have a stronger

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Table 1
Representative recent research – satisfaction, trust, and commitment (in chronological order).

| Citation | Findings |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Garbarino and Johnson (1999) | For low relational customers (e.g., infrequent transactions), satisfaction mediates the influence of commitment and trust on future intentions. For high relational customers, satisfaction is an antecedent of commitment and trust. |
| Geyskens et al. (1999) | Satisfaction (noneconomic) leads to trust and trust leads to commitment. |
| Lang and Colgate (2003) | Different facets of relationship quality differ in their sensitivity to Information Technology gaps. The most sensitive facets are conflict, satisfaction, and trust, while social bonding and commitment appear to be less sensitive. |
| Roberts et al. (2003) | Relationship quality, consisting of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and affective conflict, is a better predictor of behavioral intentions than is service quality. |
| Walter et al. (2003) | The extent to which a supplier fulfills direct and indirect functions in a relationship has a direct positive impact on relationship quality. The dimensions of relationship quality include commitment, trust, and satisfaction. |
| Bansal et al. (2004) | Commitment does not mediate the relationship between either satisfaction or trust and switching intentions. However, trust does lead to commitment. |
| Farrelly (2005) | Commitment and trust lead to satisfaction. |
| Bruggen et al. (2005) | Channel performance is positively associated with relationship quality, consisting of satisfaction, trust, commitment, and conflict. This relationship is moderated by interdependence of the relationship. |
| Carr (2006) | Relationship quality (satisfaction, trust, and commitment) mediates the effect of service quality on user identification with Information Systems (IS) department and voluntary participation with the IS department. Trust and satisfaction lead to commitment. |
| Leonidou et al. (2006) | The article examines the impact of uncertainty, distance, and conflict on relationship quality. The dimensions of relationship quality include adaptation, commitment, communication, cooperation, satisfaction, trust, and understanding. Specifically, an inverse association was found between uncertainty, distance, and conflict, on one hand, and commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction, on the other. In high conflict situations, trust and understanding were low. |
| Palmatier et al. (2006) | Commitment, trust, satisfaction are individually and collectively mediators between various antecedents and several outcomes (including the positive expectation of continuity and positive cooperation). |
| Uлага and Eggert (2006) | Satisfaction and commitment have a negative association with propensity to leave a relationship (the opposite of continuity expectancy). Trust was found to be a mediator between satisfaction and commitment. Relationship value has a direct impact on the intention to expand business as well as an indirect impact that is mediated by the relationship quality construct (satisfaction + trust + commitment). |
| Barry et al. (2008) | Relationship quality, consisting of satisfaction, trust and affective commitment, mediates the influence that perceived value has on relationship strength. |
| Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007) | Satisfaction is the mediating variable between service/product quality and business loyalty. There is a significant positive effect of the components of relationship quality – satisfaction, trust, and commitment – on business loyalty. Satisfaction also leads to trust and commitment. Finally trust leads to commitment. |
| Moliner et al. (2007a,b) | Post-purchase perceived value is an antecedent of satisfaction. Satisfaction, in turn, is an antecedent of trust and affective commitment. Trust (benevolence) also positively impacts affective commitment. Results show that all four dimensions of relationship quality (i.e., trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality) influence attitudinal loyalty; however, only satisfaction and perceived service quality influence behavioral loyalty (purchase intentions). |
| Payan and Svensson (2007) | Commitment and trust precede coordination, cooperation and specific assets. Cooperation and coordination, in turn, are positively related to the outcome of satisfaction. Specific assets are negatively related to the outcome of satisfaction. |
| Rauyruen and Miller (2007) | Trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality constitute relationship quality. All four dimensions of relationship quality influence attitudinal loyalty. However, only satisfaction and perceived service quality influence behavioral loyalty (purchase intentions). |
| Sanchez-Garcia et al. (2007) | Post-purchase perceived value is an antecedent of satisfaction. Satisfaction, in turn, is a precursor of trust and affective commitment. Trust (both honesty and benevolence) also positively impacts affective commitment. |
| Skarmeas and Robson 2008 | Trust, commitment, satisfaction and conflict, constituting relationship quality, are outcomes of exporter's role performance, asset specificity and cultural sensitivity. |
| Skarmeas et al. (2008) | Trust, commitment and satisfaction constitute relationship quality as a second order construct. Psychic distance is negatively associated with relationship quality, while transaction-specific investments and role performance are associated positively with relationship quality. No link is found between environmental uncertainty and relationship quality. |

association with certain outcomes in comparison to trust (e.g., Leonidou et al., 2006; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Uлага and Eggert, 2006) and compared to commitment (e.g., Bansal et al., 2004; Lang and Colgate, 2003; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). Third, satisfaction may be the strongest component of relationship quality (Moliner et al., 2007a). In combination these three reasons suggest that satisfaction may serve as a more proximal cause of important outcomes than trust or commitment. Consequently, this study positions satisfaction as a mediator between trust and commitment with important outcomes.

The quality of relationships is viewable as essential to business success. Another basic premise of interorganizational research is that joint activities between organizations (or actual relationship-oriented intentions/behaviors) are essential to business success (Payan and Svensson, 2007). Consequently, this paper includes three different outcome variables that are related to joint activities (both intentions and behaviors). In specific, this study includes the rarely studied combined outcomes of cooperation, coordination and continuity expectancy.

In partial support of the inclusion of these outcomes, in a review of the relationship marketing literature Palmatier et al. (2006) identify both continuity expectancy and cooperation as two important outcomes of key relational mediators of satisfaction, trust, and commitment. They report that these relational mediators had the largest combined influence on the dyadic outcome of cooperation ($r = .70$) and had a substantial impact of continuity expectancy ($r = .52$). In addition Uлага

and Eggert (2006) find that satisfaction and commitment have a negative association with propensity to leave a relationship (the opposite of continuity expectancy). They report trust has an indirect impact of propensity to leave a relationship via its mediator role between satisfaction and commitment. In sum, the literature supports the inclusion of cooperation and continuity expectation as important outcomes of relationship quality. This study also includes the outcome of coordination because this construct (general joint activities) is very close in meaning to cooperation (the willingness of one organization to work with another) yet both are distinct constructs because coordination reflects actual behaviors and cooperation reflects the intention to work with another (Payan and Svensson, 2007).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, the paper presents a theoretical framework and associated hypotheses. Second it outlines the methodology, data analysis, and empirical findings. Finally, it discusses conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

Based on the previous discussion and literature review, the conceptual model here (see Fig. 1) positions satisfaction as a positive mediator between trust, commitment, and the outcomes of continuity expectancy, cooperation and coordination. All of the paths are

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