



# Toward a typological view of buyer–supplier relationships: Challenging the unidimensional relationship continuum



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## ABSTRACT

Building on the configurational approach to buyer–supplier relationships (BSRs), we attempt to define a parsimonious framework for relationship integration to create a holistic understanding of relational configurations. Following the principles of typological theory building, this study aims to understand the mechanisms underlying relationship integration and type-specific performance. To that end, we use the relational governance theory to build a three-dimensional (economic, structural, and social) framework that distinguishes BSRs. Using the dimensions from previous BSR-typologies, we propose eight relational configurations, which we test against empirical data from 246 dyadic industrial BSRs. Our results show eight distinct BSR-configurations with varying levels of operational performance. Our work contributes to the BSR literature by providing a unified framework of relational configurations and by demonstrating the link between relational configurations and performance.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on buyer–supplier relationships (BSRs) is predominantly based on ideal-typical premises. Much of the existing research considers relationships to exist along a continuum that ranges from discrete relationships to exist along a continuum that ranges from discrete to relational exchanges (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Macneil, 1980), from transactional to relational relationships (Rinehart, Eckert, Handfield, Page, & Atkin, 2004), or from arm's length associations to complete functional coordination (Lambert, Emmelhainz, & Gardner, 1996). The premise of the typological approach can be traced back to Max Weber's methodological definition of ideal types. Organizational sociology has treated ideal types as configurations of fit, i.e., as combinations of the structural and strategic characteristics of an organization that commonly occur together and that form high-performing strategy/structure constellations (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993). A typological approach to BSRs is based on similar logic and highlights the following questions: 1) What are the most important attributes for relational integration? 2) What types of relational configurations exist in empirical reality? and 3) How do relational attributes interact to produce higher relational performance?

The typological theory on BSRs to date is underdeveloped. The dominant unidimensional thinking emerging from the transactional versus relational continuum has strongly shaped our understanding of BSRs. This weakness has been highlighted by scholars who question

the adequacy of a unidimensional understanding and who instead call for a more thorough investigation of the mechanisms that explain the differences between partnerships and other forms of coordinated relationships (Adler, 2001; Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Duffy, 2008; Golicic & Mentzer, 2005; Hausman, 2001; Laing & Lian, 2005). Moreover, studies note a lack of understanding regarding how the main dimensions of relationship integration interplay to form high-performing relationships (Tangpong, Michalisin, & Melcher, 2008; Van der Vaart & Van Donk, 2008). The relatively narrow stream of typological studies on BSRs (e.g., Bensaou, 1999; Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995; Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Donaldson & O'Toole, 2000; Laing & Lian, 2005; Sacconi & Perona, 2007; Tangpong et al., 2008) urges the development of a unified theoretical framework.

The present study intends to extend the prevailing knowledge by reviewing the existing typological literature and by unifying the attributes of relational integration for a consistent theoretical framework. Second, by analyzing data from 246 dyadic industrial business relationships, we attempt to explain the link between relational configurations and relational performance. The analyzed data consist of exploitative (not explorative) relationships with respect to their basic purpose (Möller & Svahn, 2006; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011).

## 2. Typological view of buyer–supplier relationships

Despite the broad range of theoretical perspectives available for approaching business relationships, existing research typically adheres to the perspective of a unidimensional relationship continuum, which forces this variety into frameworks that are unable to account for the

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wide diversity of potential combinations of interactions. Nevertheless, the existing theoretical base provides a valuable foundation for understanding the mechanisms behind relational or organizational performance.

The relational research that builds on transaction cost economics highlights the need for effective coordination of economic activity. Certain studies even suggest hybrid forms of relational governance for reasons related to characteristics of the relational exchanges (Kohtamäki, Partanen, & Möller, 2013; Kohtamäki, Partanen, Parida, & Wincent, 2013; Wathne & Heide, 2004). From a resource-based perspective, interorganizational relationships are required to gain access to complementary resources. An organization theory perspective underlines the importance of relationships in terms of effective task accomplishment and emphasizes the embeddedness of organizational behavior in the broader social structure, where social capital plays an important role in the pursuit of organizational goals (Granovetter, 1985; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011). Although these “grand theories” are primarily used to differentiate between the basic forms of governance (i.e., market, hybrid, and hierarchy), they are also useful in a more fine-grained analysis of interorganizational relationships. For example, Bensaou and Venkatraman (1995) use concepts from transaction cost economics, organization theory, and political economics in their contingency-oriented research on BSRs to develop a theory of fit between the relationship context and type.

### 2.1. Typological research on buyer–supplier relationships

Typological research can be separated into theoretically and empirically driven approaches. In theoretically driven research, a priori generated conceptual types are subject to empirical verification, whereas in empirically driven research, the aim is to uncover sets of configurations from a given empirical dataset based on several attributes. Empirically discovered configurations represent common natural clusters that are produced by the studied attributes (Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995; Kaufman, Wood, & Theyel, 2000; Miller, 1987; Oerlemans & Knoblen,

2010). Both of these approaches are used in typological research on BSRs (Table 1). Studies by Bensaou and Venkatraman (1995), Cannon and Perreault (1999), and Laing and Lian (2005) adopt the configurational approach to apply a multidimensional definition of BSRs. Zinn and Parasuraman (1997) and Stuart and McCutcheon (2000) adopt a conceptual approach, whereas Bensaou (1999), Donaldson and O’Toole (2000), Saccani and Perona (2007), Tangpong et al. (2008), and Duffy (2008) use an empirical approach. Thus, the typological research demonstrates variety. Whereas certain studies build on theory, others emphasize empirical data and search for naturally occurring clusters. Five of the empirical studies are quantitative (Bensaou, 1999; Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995; Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Donaldson & O’Toole, 2000; Duffy, 2008), whereas three use a qualitative approach (Laing & Lian, 2005; Saccani & Perona, 2007; Tangpong et al., 2008). Based on our review, it seems that the literature lacks a unified typological theory of buyer–supplier relationships.

### 2.2. Framework for integration of buyer–supplier relationships

The roots of relational thinking can be traced back to Macneil’s (1980) distinction between relational and discrete exchanges (Blois, 2002; Dwyer et al., 1987) and the work of the IMP school of marketing beginning in the late 1970s (Ford & Håkansson, 2006; Håkansson, 1982). The dichotomous thinking, particularly of Macneil’s (1980) work, however, has been challenged by Adler (2001). Proposing a typology (not a dichotomy or a continuum) of organizational forms, Adler (2001); see also Ritter, (2007); Kohtamäki (2010) underlines the importance of the three basic mechanisms in the formation of organizational forms (market, hierarchy, and social). In this study, we use the three-dimensional framework presented by Adler (2001), with the exception that our study focuses on BSRs. We replace the term “market” with “economic” integration. The concept of economic integration was previously used by Zaheer and Venkatraman (1995) and complemented by social and structural dimensions in their framework for relational governance. The economic perspective has been represented by relationship-

**Table 1**  
Studies using the typological approach: dimensions, identified types, and research methodology.

Author(s)	Classification dimensions	Resulting identified types	Type of data and empirical analysis
<i>Empirically driven studies (types defined by empirical data)</i>			
Bensaou and Venkatraman (1995)	Information-processing needs and information-processing capabilities; contingency fit sought	Remote relationships, Structural relationships, Electronic control, Electronic interdependence, and Mutual adjustment	N = 447 relationships; two-phase cluster analysis; hierarchical clustering; performance analyzed
Cannon and Perreault (1999)	Operational linkages, information exchange, legal bonds, cooperative norms, adaptations by seller, and adaptations by buyer	Bare bones, Contractual transactions, Custom supply, Cooperative systems, Collaborative, Mutually adaptive, and Customer is king	N = 426 relationships; cluster analysis with Duncan’s multiple range test of statistical significance among the clusters
Laing and Lian (2005)	Relationship closeness (incl. time orientation, socialization, communication, coordination, customization, nature of boundaries, and nature of secondary relationships)	Elementary relationships, Interactive relationships, Embedded relationships, and Partnering relationships	N = 7; Differentiation between the types on the basis of qualitative data
<i>Theoretically driven studies (types defined theoretically)</i>			
Bensaou (1999)	Specific investments of buyer and supplier	Market exchange, Captive buyer, Captive supplier, and Strategic partnerships	N = 447; Segmentation of the sample into four generic cells with high/low criterion
Donaldson and O’Toole (2000)	Action component Belief component	Discrete, Hierarchical, Recurrent, and Bilateral relationships	N = 235; cluster analysis with a priori assumption of 4 clusters
Saccani and Perona (2007)	Level of interaction (exchange criticality); level of cooperation (operational impact)	Traditional relationships, Operational relationships, Project-based partnerships, and Evolved partnerships	N = 45; Qualitative assessment of suggested and actual relationships; a contingency model tested by analyzing the performance of match/nonmatch cases; performance analyzed
Duffy (2008)	Concepts derived from internal political economy: degree of coordination, nature of interdependence, and level of cooperative attitudes and sentiments	Partnerships, Highly coordinated relationships, and Limited coordination relationships	N = 155; the respondents first identified a long-term relationship as a partnership, a highly coordinated relationship or a relationship with limited coordination; discriminant analysis
Tangpong et al. (2008)	Degree of relationalism Degree of supplier dependence	Market, Power, Autonomous-link, and Constrained-link	N = 8; an exploratory longitudinal study of eight firms’ business relationships and performance; data obtained from public sources

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