The Concept of Relationship Quality in Government Linked Companies (GLCs): Evidence from Malaysian Automotive Industry

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Abstract

Government Linked Companies (GLCs) represent 36% of total market capitalization in Bursa Malaysia. This percentage contributes a significant role in Malaysian economic backbone. Some GLCs are not performing well and their poor performance has tainted the public perceptions on GLC specifically Proton Holdings Berhad as one of the non-performing GLC in automotive industry. Alarming weak performance and declining market share has diverged from the main purpose of its existence and consequently impact public confidence on its ability to preserve the country's asset. Product quality and customer service are the means to capture the further weakening in Proton's market share. Although previous literatures have established the importance of quality towards business profitability, this study has further explored another aspect of quality which is the role of relationship as an important ingredient to strengthen the long term bonding between customer and firms. This study examines relationship quality (RQ) and proposed a conceptual model linking quality performance dimension, customer value especially the price as mediating variable between product quality dimension and RQ. The model was developed based on observed practical gap, industry reports and review of empirical literatures on RQ in multi-dimensional disciplines using RELQUAL measurement technique. Findings from this research revealed a significant relationship between quality performance measurements, customer value and RQ. It finally recommends that in order to increase level of customer retention and business profitability, firms specifically automotive industry should strengthen their customer relationship, quality performance and simultaneously increase customer value to remain competitive in the industry.

Keywords: Relationship Quality, Quality Performance, RELQUAL, Automotive Industry, GLC.

1.0   Introduction

The significant growth in performance of GLCs has been noticed in the last few years where they contribute 36% of Bursa Malaysia total market capitalization (Mokhtar, 2005). GLC, specifically in automotive market in Malaysia is dominated by two companies which are also national car maker namely Proton Holdings Berhad and Perodua and both controlled 31% and 28% market share respectively. Public perception on GLCs in Malaysia has been contaminated by the deprived performance of the first national carmaker namely Proton Holdings Berhad. In 2006 when Volkswagen released ideas to participate in the company, Proton's share price fell sharply and in the third quarter of the same year they also recorded a pre-tax loss of RM240.5 million. Another loss of RM51.535 million recorded in the third quarter ended Dec 31, 2010 and the trend widened to RM84.054 million in 2011. In the early establishment of Proton in 1980's, they controlled almost 50% of automotive market share and the share shrunk to 28% as of September 2013. In an announcement, the company said the slower performance was due to deterioration in sales and consequently impact revenue performance. This alarming weak performance and declining market share has brought a very bad insight into GLCs survival and contribution to economy. In a statement related to Proton's declining market share, Chief Executive Officer of Proton Edar Sdn. Bhd.,

Proton's subsidiary in charge of sales, Hisham Othman said that product quality and customer service are the means to capture the further weakening in Proton's market share. He added that Proton Holdings will concentrate on assurance of product quality, value for money and customer service (Bernama, 15 July 2013).

2.0   Literature Review

2.1   *The Importance of Quality, Relationship Quality and The gaps*

From academic perspective on quality performance, Giffi, Rith and Seal (1990) suggest that superior quality not only differentiate from competitors but it also authenticate a company's worthiness to compete. Another literature supporting the importance of quality found from Hanfield and Ghosh (1994) who recognize order-winner of high product quality as order-qualifier. Despite the significant importance of quality in the era of globalization (Lawrence, 1980; Schonberger, 1982: cited in Curkovic, Vickery & Droge, 2000), there is no consensus in the dimension of quality performance and it is more research context. Results of prior studies suggest that quality is multi-dimensional in nature and but there are very limited empirical evidence supporting this claim (Curkovic et al., 2000) specifically in automotive industry. In addition to that literature, results of prior researches examining the firm performance have proven that relationship is one of the major contributors to business success. It is believed that relationship is able to make up for gaps in performance of product or service; unfortunately the prominence of consumer-firm affiliation has been ignored in the literature (Priluck, R., 2003) specifically in automotive industry. To ensure long-term profit increase, companies should heavily focus on customer value and management of customer relationship/retention (Trasorras, Weinstein and Abratt, 2009). An absolute indispensable condition of high relationship quality is achieved when a product or service meets the customer's needs (Henning-Turau & Klee, 1997).

Due to the multifaceted nature of business performance and the absence of simple indicator as measurement, customer satisfaction and trust which is associated to marketing performance is considered to measure organization's performance (Sin, Tze and Yim, 2005). Other than those two factors, the result of a study by Moliner, Tena and Garcia (2013) has shown a positive impact amongst the measurements of relationship quality that is trust, satisfaction, and commitment. According to Athanasopoulou (2009), these measurements are also supported by the extensive literature on relationship marketing. Aurier and N'Goala (2010) suggest that in maintaining and developing the relationship, these three dimensions have their own different roles; it needs earlier development of trust followed by commitment for relationship maintenance and both trust and commitment are nurtured by universal satisfaction. From the aforementioned practical issues and theoretical gaps, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships between quality performance dimensions and its consequences on customer perceived value and relationship quality and equally scrutinize the mediating impact of customer perceived value on relationship quality in GLC specifically automotive industry in Malaysia.

"Satisfaction . . . is thought to be an immediate antecedent to quality judgments and then to loyalty" (Oliva et al., 1992: cited in Henning-Turau & Klee, 1997). Other than satisfaction and quality of product and service determines the loyalty and customer retention, customer's evaluation on the quality of the relationship will impact customer loyalty (Henning-Turau & Klee, 1997). The relationship between product and/or service quality and RQ is explained by Henning-Turau et al., (1997) who suggests that a product or service that meets the customer's needs can be regarded as an absolute indispensable condition of high RQ. The useful of relationship between customer and firm is described by Schneider and Bowen (1999) as a phenomenon stronger than satisfaction that may keep

the customer from defect and it leads to customer delights. Another literature on the importance of relationship is brought by Bove and Johnson (2001) who proposed that relationship building efforts will lead to strong internal relationships and supported by Mohr and Nevin (1990) who viewed RQ as a critical factor for business operation, performance and survival. Another literature found by Keaveney (1995) who claimed that service failure, service encounter failures and bad employee response to service failures are the reasons for customers switch to competitor. In this situation, Schneider and Bowen (1999) suggest that the existence of customer-firm relationship will act as a make up for the defect and with relationship customers might overlook and ignore the instances of poor product performance. Consequently, the relationship will benefit seller in terms of customer retention rate and service recovery opportunities.

2.2   *Non-consensus on Definition and Dimension of RQ*

Relationship quality (RQ) is one of the concepts applied in relationship marketing to indicate the depth or magnitude of a relationship (Shemwell and Cronin, 1995) and also its capability to endure (Barnes and Howlett, 1998; Paulin et al. 2000: as cited in Dant, Weaven and Baker, 2013). In this study, quality is observed in the context of interaction and relationship between buyer and seller. Levitt refer RQ as a package of intangible value that enhances products or services and lead to an anticipated exchange between buyer and seller. (Levitt, 1983: as cited in Moliner et al., 2013). Another definition is given by Ismail (2009) who observed RQ as a meta-construct consist of several key components, and reflecting the relationship as a whole. Gummesson (1987) interprets quality of interaction between a firm and its customers in terms of accumulated value. Gro¨nroos (2000) defined RQ from customer's point of view as a dynamics and consistent long-term quality formation whereas Henning-Thurau and Klee (1997) suggest RQ as "the degree of appropriateness of the relationship to fulfill the needs of the customer associated with the relationship".

Despite the observed evidence on the important role of relationship on business profitability (Henning-Turau & Klee, 1997; Schneider and Bowen, 1999; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal and Evans, 2006; Wong, Hung and Chow, 2007; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Athanasopoulou, Kalogeropoulou and Douvis, 2013), there is still no agreement among researchers on the established and formal definition of relationship quality (Henning-Thurau, 2000; Henning-Thurau et al., 2001; Walter et al., 2003; Woo and Ennew, 2004; Huntley, 2006; Holmlund, 2008: cited in Athanasopoulou et al., 2013). RQ has been studied across various contexts covering service firms and retail customers (Crosby et al., 1990; Wray et al., 1994; Bejou et al., 1996; Gwinner et al., 1998; Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998;Woo and Cha, 2002; Lang and Colgate, 2003: cited in Athanasopoulou et al., 2013), corporate customers (Lagace et al., 1991; Boles et al., 2000;Woo and Ennew, 2004; Venetis and Ghauri, 2004; Athanasopoulou, 2006; Vieira, 2009: cited in Athanasopoulou et al., 2013) also buyer – supplier relationship in B2B (Song, Su, Liu and Wang, 2012; Moliner et al., 2013), it is still observed that there is no agreed model for the study and the results are highly context specific. In addition to that, only a few studies address both sides of the relationship dyad (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Until recently, Athanasopoulou et al. (2013) observed that RQ is still underexplored, no agreement on the quality dimensions and features influence it and therefore it requires more authentications prior to quantitative testing.
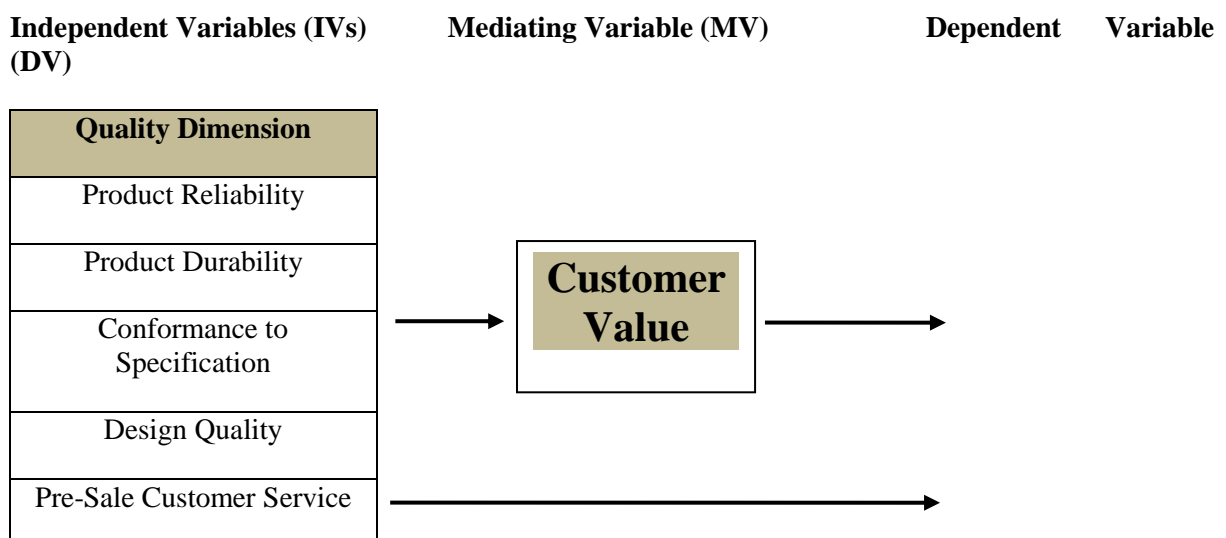
As a result of the non-consensuses, these researchers such as Crosby, Evans & Cowles (1990); Roberts, Varki & Brodie (2003) and Huntley (2006) have continually tried to determine the dimensions of RQ as well as its antecedents and consequences in various contexts. To support this argument, Hausman (2001) suggest that it is essential to understand the factors influence the relationships because of its importance to business success. Another dimension for RQ found in a study of RQ between franchisee-franchisor contexts. Dant et al., (2013) have examined the

personality impact on the RQ perceptions of franchisee-franchisor relationship by using Big Five personality dimensions. From relationship marketing perspective, Palmatier et al. (2006) wrote that RQ has constantly been hypothesized as a multi-faceted, as second order concept comprising of trust and at least another one different interactive construct for example Crosby et al. (1990) taken both trust and satisfaction as the primary indicator of RQ together whereas De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder, and Iacobucci (2001) adding commitment as a suitable third surface of RQ. From various dimensions of RQ found in the studies of past researchers in different context of study; combination of trust, customer satisfaction and commitment are the most popular constructs as measurement of RQ. This is consistent with marketing relationship research stream where the combination of the three dimensions appeared to be the most regularly studied as consensual relational intermediaries (Palmatier et al. 2006). The recent study by Athanasopoulou et al. (2013) also suggest that majority of the researchers also identified the three dimensions as RQ measurement in their related studies.

Since majority of researchers have identified the combination of trust, commitment and customer satisfaction as dimension across various studies, the definition of the three dimensions will be defined accordingly. From the literature, trust is defined by Morgan and Hunt as "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" and serves as principal basis of cooperation. (Morgan and Hunt, 1994: as cited in Dant et al., 2013). Moorman et al. described commitment as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship". (Moorman et al., 1992: as cited in Dant et al., 2013). Anderson and Weitz further described commitment as a dynamic component for cooperation and relationship endurance. (Anderson and Weitz, 1992: as cited in Dant et al., 2013). Whereas for satisfaction, Davies; Grace and Weaven refer to situation when an individual respond positively to cumulative valuations of previous interaction experiences with their partner; and it is important to preserve the relationship. (Davies et al. 2009; Grace and Weaven, 2011: as cited in Dant et al., 2013). Hence, customer satisfaction acts as principle driver by combining the elements of relationship quality, commitment and trust.

3.0   Research Framework

Based on the well-accepted three-dimensional of RQ namely trust, commitment and satisfaction; we develop a conceptual framework and come up with the hypothesis to investigate the extent to which the quality performance variables positively affects RQ and also to examine the impact of customer value as mediating variable (MV) in the relationship among product quality performance and RQ in automotive industry. The research model is visualized in Figure 1.
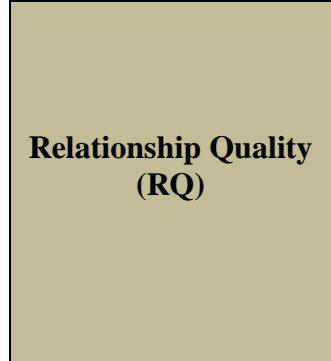
Independent Variables (IVs)   **Mediating Variable (MV)**   **Dependent   Variable (DV)**

Quality Dimension
Product Reliability
Product Durability
Conformance to Specification
Design Quality
Pre-Sale Customer Service

Customer Value

Product Support
Responsiveness to Customer

| | Relationship Quality (RQ) |
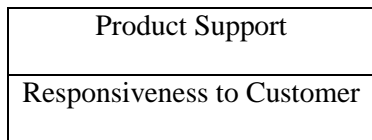
Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

Quality dimension	Description
Product reliability	The ability to maximize the time to product failure or malfunction
Product durability	The ability to maximize the time to product replacement
Conformance to specifications	The ability to manufacture a product whose operating characteristics meet established performance standards
Design quality	The ability to provide a product with capabilities, features, styling, and/or operating characteristics that are either superior to those of competing products or unavailable with competing products
Pre-sale customer service	The ability to service the customer during the purchase decision process (that is, before the customer buys the product)
Product support	The ability to service the customer in providing product support after the sale of the product to ensure continuing satisfaction
Responsiveness to customers	The ability to respond in a timely manner to the needs and wants of the company's customers including potential customers

Table I.
Competitive quality items

Table 1: Competitive Quality Dimension: Adopted from Curkovic, Vickery & Droge (2000)

3.1   The Competitive Quality Dimensions

The quality performance dimension consists of seven competitive quality items proposed in this study is adopted from a study in automotive supply industry by Curkovic, Vickery & Droge (2000). There are two aims to justify the selection of these variables in the framework of this study:

1.   The group of variables known as quality performance dimension selected by Curkovic, Vickery & Droge (2000) used in this study is established in prior research (Garvin, 1987 and Forker et al., 1996: cited in Curkovic, Vickery & Droge, 2000). It considers discussion with executives as panel of experts in automotive industry from the Automotive Industry Action Group (AIAG) in Southfield, Michigan. The input from these panel experts is believed will contribute to a comprehensive and meaningful set of quality dimension in auto industry (Curkovic, Vickery & Droge, 2000). The dimension of quality items selected for this study is shown and properly described in Table 1.

2.   According to Curkovic, Vickery & Droge (2000), the core dimension of quality consist of two perspectives. Product quality concern on physical manufactured product whereas service quality contains of both pre- sale and post-sale service. The author stress that both product and service quality will contribute to firm's performance in total. This is supported by Henkoff (1994), who stress that every company is building better quality products, but the only thing to differentiate them from competitors is service. Therefore, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1991) has developed a scale or tool known as SERVQUAL to measure service quality by final customers. SERVQUAL evaluates service quality based on five dimensions which are reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness. By comparing the items in the table of quality performance and SERVQUAL dimension, there are similarities on the dimension and it is detail out in Table 1.

3.2 Quality Performance, Customer Value and Relationship Quality

Product quality is often considered as contributor to competitive advantage development; hence to improve quality performance, products must be designed and manufactured based on customer requirements (Benson et al., 1991; Flynn et al., 1994: as cited in Dunk, 2002). According to Dunk (2002) despite contribute to competitive advantage; product quality is also an essential pre-requisite for competitiveness. Quality serves as a basis for strategic advantage, so any product quality developments must contribute to quality performance enhancement (Daniel and Reitsperger, 1991); Belohlav, 1993; Terziovski et al., 1999: as cited in Dunk, 2002). Nowadays, product quality is interpreted through both product design as well as extra concern on customer needs and requirement (Flynn et al., 1994; Reeves and Bednar, 1994; Lynch, 1999: as cited in Dunk, 2002).

According to Zineldin (1999), the concept of quality will involve substantial focus on enhancing customer value and that force organizations to take a much more proactive stance towards their customers. Customers regularly evaluate a company's offer against competitors' and it is assumed that the firm's success is achieved once the firms offer "extra" value to customer compared to competitors (Walter et al., 2001). Some scholars refer value to quality or price of product/service as perceived by consumers. In consequent to this, Zeithaml (1988) describes perceived value as ". . . the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given". While Anderson and Narus (1999) identify value as ". . . the worth in monetary term of the economic, technical, service and social benefits a buyer receives in exchange for the price it pays for a product offering". Bolton and Lemon (1999) relates customer value in terms of equity concepts which refers to customer's comparison between perceived cost of the offering versus fairness, right, or deserved. The competitive price and the importance of value is described by Zineldin (1999) who wrote that many companies is doing their very best to offer the best quality product and service at the lowest cost but competitors are following to compete. The most important component in our framework is relationship quality (RQ) which has been chosen as dependent variable in this study. RQ has been discussed in detail in the earlier part of this study.

The preceding review from literature on quality dimension, customer value and RQ has leads us to posit the research hypotheses in the next table:

H1a	Product reliability has significant influence on customer value in automotive industry
H1b	Product reliability has significant influence on RQ in automotive industry
H2a	Product durability positively influence customer value in automotive industry
H2b	Product durability positively influence RQ in automotive industry
H3a	Conformance to specification positively influence customer value in automotive industry
H3b	Conformance to specification positively influence RQ in automotive industry
H4a	Design quality has strong positive influence on customer value in automotive industry
H4b	Design quality has strong positive influence on RQ in automotive industry

H5a	Pre-sale customer service positively influence customer value in automotive industry
H5b	Pre-sale customer service positively influence RQ in automotive industry
H6a	Product support has significant influence on customer value in automotive industry
H6b	Product support has significant influence on RQ in automotive industry
H7a	Responsiveness to customers positively influence customer value in automotive industry
H7b	Responsiveness to customers positively influence RQ in automotive industry
H8a	Customer value has strong positive influence on RQ in automotive industry
H8b	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between product reliability and relationship quality in automotive industry
H8c	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between product durability and relationship quality in automotive industry
H8d	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between conformance to specification and relationship quality in automotive industry
H8e	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between design quality and relationship quality in automotive industry
H8f	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between pre-sale customer service and relationship quality in automotive industry
H8g	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between product support and relationship quality in automotive industry
H8h	Customer value positively mediates the relationship between responsiveness to customers and relationship quality in automotive industry

4.0   Conclusion

Even though there is no consensus among scholars on the definition and dimension of RQ; and the available definition is slightly differ according to background of study, RQ is normally measured using the combination of commitment, trust and satisfaction (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). In constructing RQ, the three dimensions are interrelated rather than independent (Ismail, 2009). Based on this study, the competitive quality dimension is positively influence the degree of RQ. Strong relationship determines high level of RQ between customer and firm and contributes to customer delights and consequently will result in high customer retention. High degree of RQ will make up the possible defect, opens for service recovery, contribute to long-term relationship and subsequently improves business performance. On another note, this study is conducted purely based on literature review and it lacks of empirical test on the hypotheses. Therefore, for future research, we recommend an empirical test for validation.

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