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Papers / Humboldt-Universität Berlin, Center for Applied Statistics and Economics (CASE), No. 2004,06

Provided in cooperation with:

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Suggested citation: Paulssen, Marcel (2004) : Satisfaction and Interpersonal Closeness as Determinants of Relationship Commitment in Business-to-Business Relationships, Papers / Humboldt-Universität Berlin, Center for Applied Statistics and Economics (CASE), No. 2004,06, <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/22180>

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Satisfaction and Interpersonal Closeness as Determinants of Relationship Commitment in Business-to-Business Relationships

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Satisfaction and Interpersonal Closeness as Determinants of Relationship Commitment in Business-to-Business Relationships

The theory of embedded markets states that economic transactions are embedded in social relationships, and economic actors are influenced by both marketing variables and relationship properties. That is, within an exchange relationship actors derive utility from the attributes of a focal product and from interpersonal relationships. We investigate the different roles of satisfaction with a focal product and closeness between boundary personnel in a business-to-business relationship. We demonstrate that these constructs are distinct and differ with respect to antecedents and consequences in a larger nomological network with relationship commitment as the focal dependent variable.

Key words: Satisfaction, Closeness, Embeddedness

Background

Economists have traditionally conceptualized markets as interpersonal vacuums. Marketing scholars however have acknowledged the relevance of interpersonal relationships: e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar (1995) discuss the emotional bonding that transcends economic activity. In a broad attack on what he refers to as an “undersocialized concept of man,” Granovetter (1985) criticizes the economists’ analysis of economic activity. In his theory of embedded markets he states that economic transactions are embedded in social relationships and thus cannot solely be explained through economic motives. Economic action is embedded in ongoing networks of personal relationships, rather than being carried out by atomized actors. Thus within an exchange relationship actors derive utility not only from the attributes of a focal product but also from interpersonal relationships. This is consistent with what intuition as well as anecdotal evidence would suggest. In a recent paper Wathne et al. (2001) studied the impact of interpersonal relationships as one factor with two levels (level 1: unknown account manager, level 2: close and personal relationship with account manager) along with other factors such as price on the likelihood of switching suppliers with conjoint scenarios. We extend that work by actually measuring satisfaction with a focal product and the degree of closeness between boundary personnel of interacting companies in a business-to-business context. One of the main research goals is to test the implicit assumption about the importance of close customer relationships for relationship commitment and to contrast its impact from satisfaction with a focal product. After defining both constructs we propose how they differ with respect to antecedents and consequences in a larger nomological net explaining relationship commitment as the key dependent variable. Close relationships between customers and employees have received considerable attention in a service context (e.g., Price & Arnould, 1999; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999 and others). This is due to the fact that services unlike goods are mainly based on person-to-person interaction. To our knowledge closeness between boundary personnel has not been studied alongside satisfaction with a focal product in an industrial marketing context. This paper is organized as follows: In the next section, we present our conceptual framework, including construct definition and research hypotheses. Afterward we describe research design, the empirical results and discuss the implications of our findings.

Conceptual Framework and Model Development:

Most studies in the area of business-to-business relationships are cross-sectional. We follow Geysken’s et al. (1999) call and investigate business-to-business relationships between a commercial vehicles (abbreviated as cvs) manufacturer and its customers in a longitudinal study. For part of the initial sample at time-point 1 we were able to measure actual repurchase behaviour at time point 2. This will not only allow us to test the proposed hypotheses but also

to assess predictive validity of our model. Given the research goal we distinguish commitment, and trust as consequences of satisfaction with a focal product and closeness between boundary personnel. As antecedents we include perceived value and satisfaction with personal interaction at the two major interaction points: sales and after sales. Attractiveness of the best alternative is included as an additional predictor. Commitment, our key dependent variable, has been defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpande, 1993). According to Rusbult (1983) commitment can be defined as a long-term orientation toward a relationship, including intent to persist and feelings of psychological attachment. This definition proposes two components of commitment: behavioural intent and psychological attachment. In this study we focus on the intentional aspect of commitment. We measure four types of intentions that are relevant in the context of relationship marketing: intent to repurchase, to recommend, to buy other products and services (cross-selling) and to tolerate price increases (e.g., Zeithaml, Berry, Parasuraman, 1996). Commitment itself is operationalized as a second order factor with the four above mentioned intentions as first order factors. This is in line with other studies in the relationship marketing area (e.g., Price & Arnold, 1999) that focus on the intentional aspect of commitment and label it as commitment/loyalty.

Since Morgan & Hunt's (1994) seminal paper trust is considered as a major determinant of relationship commitment (Doney & Canon, 1997) and regarded as an essential ingredient for successful relationship marketing. They define trust as "perception of confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity." In our study the exchange partner is the vehicle manufacturer. We measure trust in the manufacturer and not in an individual (e.g., Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990). Rather than measuring different dimensions of trust (e.g., Ganesan & Hess, 1997; Singh & Sirdeshmurkh, 2000) we measure it on an overall or global level as future expectations of honesty, integrity, reliability and quality placed on the manufacturer. Consistent with the above cited findings we propose: *H₁: Trust in the manufacturer of cvs increases commitment to the manufacturer.* Building on Wathne et al. (2001) and analogous to Geyskens & Steenkamp (2000), we distinguish between satisfaction with a focal product and closeness between boundary personnel. In the empirical example the focal product is the commercial vehicle. Thus we measure satisfaction with the commercial vehicle/vehicles of the manufacturer. Given that the satisfaction loyalty link has been studied and strongly supported in a variety of product and service industries (Fornell et al., 1996; Szymanski & Henard, 2001) we propose. *H₂: Satisfaction with the focal product increases commitment to the manufacturer.* The relationship between satisfaction and trust has received limited attention in the literature. Based on Morgan & Hunt's (1994) key mediating hypothesis, Garbarino et al. (1999) proposed that for customers with a high relational orientation trust is determined by satisfaction judgements. Satisfactory experiences with a product can reinforce trust in the manufacturer. Given that the customer is highly satisfied it is likely that trust in manufacturer is even enhanced (Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Thus we hypothesize: *H₃: Satisfaction with the focal product increases trust to the manufacturer.* As an additional determinant of commitment we included the perceived attraction of the best alternative. According to the investment model relationship commitment is not only determined by the satisfaction with the current relationship, but also by the quality of the best alternative to the current relationship (Rusbult 1983). The investment model has been successfully applied to many different kind of relationships e.g., employment relationship, friendships, romantic associations. To measure attraction of the best alternative items were adapted from Rusbult & Farrell (1983) and we propose: *H₄: Attractiveness of the competition decreases commitment to the manufacturer.*

Social psychologists have dedicated considerable attention to the study of close personal relationships. Different conceptualization and measures of closeness have been employed in the context of personal relationships (see Berscheid et al., 1989a). In the classic definition of

Kelley et al. (1983) a close relationship is being characterized by strong, frequent, diverse interdependence that lasts over a long period of time. Based on this definition Berscheid et al. (1989b) developed the relationship closeness inventory (RCI) focusing on the first three properties of interaction highlighted in the definition of Kelley et al. The RCI is deliberately free of any items measuring the affective feelings of an individual for its relationship partner. However Berscheid et al. (1989a, 1989b) observe that close relationships are characterized by positive affective ties. As Barnes (1997) points out, the measures of the RCI may be indicators, but the defining characteristic of a close relationship is its emotional content. Therefore we focus on the emotional content and measure the affective ties between boundary personnel. Selecting from the different approaches to measure closeness as the affective tone of a relationship discussed by Berscheid (1989a), we use the respondents' self-assessment of the closeness of the relationship. Blau (1964) suggests that as a result of their previous interactions individuals can accumulate social capital in a friendship tie by achieving higher levels of trust and greater willingness to lend assistance. Marsden & Laumann (1977) found that personal trust was used to facilitate exchanges. They concluded that social relationships can act as guarantors of trust and be integral to the operation of markets. Bendapudi & Berry (1997) propose that social bonding that may occur in the context of a customer relationship can serve to reduce or eliminate the fear of opportunistic behaviour and thereby increase the customer's trust. Thus *H₅: Emotional closeness between boundary personnel increases trust in the company.*

Perceived value has been defined "as the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml 1988, p. 14). It can be conceptualized as a cognitive trade-off between perceived quality and sacrifice, based on the notion of monetary exchange (Zeithaml, 1988; Dodds et al., 1991). There has been a convergence of opinion that positive value directly influences satisfaction. Theoretical justification for these links can be attributed to Bagozzi's (1992) appraisal -> emotional response -> coping framework. Bagozzi's model suggests that initial evaluations lead to an emotional reaction that, in turn drives behaviour. In the context of our study this suggests that the more cognitively-oriented perceived value appraisals precede satisfaction. These propositions have been confirmed among others by Cronin et al. (2000) and Patterson & Spreng (1997). Thus we propose *H₆: Perceived value increases satisfaction with the focal product.* Based on the above stated definition perceived value is a primarily cognitive evaluation of the fairness of past exchanges. Perceived cognitive evaluation of fairness of exchange in the past can reassure or even enforce expectation about fairness of exchange in the future. Future expectations in fairness, reliability and integrity are basically what trust is all about (see e.g. Singh & Sirdeshmukh; 2000 for a similar line of argumentation). Thus we propose that *H₇: Perceived value increases trust in the manufacturer.* However based on the notion that value is a superordinate consumer goal the same authors propose that value is a mediator of trust in a later paper (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). We question the notion of value as "the superordinate goal" of relational exchanges (see e.g. Schwartz 1992) and therefore test several rival models. Researchers that have conceptualized satisfaction more towards the satisfaction with personal interaction have defined it as an evaluation of personal interaction experiences (Crosby et al., 1990; Geyskens et al. 1999) or the extent to which personal interactions are gratifying (Gassenheimer & Ramsey 1994). We measure satisfaction with personal interaction at two major interaction points between a customer and a commercial vehicle manufacturer: the sales process and the after-sales process. *H_{8/9}: Both satisfaction with the personal interaction during sales and satisfaction with the personal interaction after-sales increase emotional closeness between boundary personnel.*

Research Method and Results

We conducted two telephone surveys of business customers of a cv manufacturer. In the first wave we obtained a total of 350 useable responses. Eight months later we conducted the second wave, where 301 participants of the initial sample responded. 95 of these respondents had purchased a new vehicle in the meantime. The manufacturer provided a database including each company's telephone number most importantly the contact person responsible for fleet-management. The average age of the respondent was 44 years and respondents were predominantly male (89%). The companies came from a broad range of industries: wholesaler, construction industry, craftsmen, transport business, car rental etc. reflecting the broad customer basis of the cv-manufacturer. Two focus groups were conducted prior to the development of the questionnaire. Item formulations were refined based on the results of a pre-test with 20 respondents. Further items were eliminated due to low item-to total correlations (e.g. two in the case of closeness) before we arrived at the scale items for each construct reported in the appendix. In order to measure satisfaction with personal interaction at the two contact-points sales and after sales respondents were primed with the statements: Now please think about a cv purchase of from X, now please think about the service after the cv purchase from X.

Before testing the complete model we tested the second order factor model of commitment/loyalty. As stated before we focused on intentional commitment. The fit of the model is very good with $\chi^2(23) = 29$ ($p=0.18$), RMSEA = 0.027 and CFI = 1. Indicator and construct reliability for both first and second order construct are in the desired range (see appendix). Our main goal is to distinguish between satisfaction with a focal product and closeness between boundary personnel in a business-to-business relationship. Thus we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis with both constructs to assess convergent and discriminant validity. The fit of the model is good with $\chi^2(8) = 11.9$ ($p=0.155$), RMSEA = 0.037 and CFI = 1. Furthermore the lambda coefficients are substantial and significant for both constructs. The correlation between satisfaction and closeness is a moderate 0.37. Fixing it to one yields a $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 285.3$ ($p<0.001$) thus we can conclude that both constructs possess convergent and discriminant validity. Next we test whether both constructs occupy the different hypothesized positions in a larger nomological net. The complete model provides an acceptable fit with $\chi^2(331) = 610.19$ ($p<0.001$), RMSEA = 0.049 and CFI = 0.98. The proposed hypotheses were confirmed (see table).

	Hypothesized Relationship	Expected Effect	Reg. Coefficient
H ₁	Trust -> Commitment	+	0.48 ^{***}
H ₂	Satisfaction focal product -> Commitment	+	0.39 ^{***}
H ₃	Satisfaction focal product -> Trust	+	0.35 ^{***}
H ₄	Attractiveness Competition -> Commitment	-	-0.20 ^{***}
H ₅	Closeness -> Trust	+	0.26 ^{***}
H ₆	Value -> Satisfaction focal product	+	0.78 ^{***}
H ₇	Value -> Trust	+	0.33 ^{***}
H ₈	Satisfaction personal interaction sales -> Closeness	+	0.50 ^{***}
H ₉	Satisfaction pers. interaction after-sales -> Closeness	+	0.30 ^{***}

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

Explained variance in our key dependent variable relationship commitment is at 90% considerably high. Explained variance for trust is 61%, for closeness 50%, and for satisfaction with the product also 61%. We tested three rival models in order to assess the stability of our findings. In the so-called non-mediating model we freed and estimated the paths from closeness and value on relationship commitment. We thereby also tested the contention of Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) that value, being the superordinate consumer goal in relational

exchanges, mediates the impact of trust on commitment. If trust is not a mediator of value, value should have an additional direct effect on commitment. The addition of the two paths did not improve model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = .21, p > .80$); both paths are not significant. In order to shed additional light on the role of value in our model, we estimated a non-recursive model with a path from value on trust and trust on value to establish the direction of causality in our model (e.g., Bagozzi, 1980). We had to free a path from attractiveness competition on value to make the model identifiable. It was found that the effect of trust on value is non-significant ($\beta = 0.06, p > .10$), whereas the effect of value on trust remains significant ($\beta = .34, p < .01$). We received similar results for a non-recursive relationship between satisfaction cv and value. Although these results are based on cross-sectional data they support Bagozzi's (1992) appraisal \rightarrow emotional response \rightarrow coping framework. Furthermore we tested whether closeness and satisfaction with a focal product really differ with respect to antecedents. We freed the paths of satisfaction with interaction after-sales and with interaction sales on satisfaction cvs(focal product). We also freed the path from value to closeness. The equivalent antecedents model ($\Delta\chi^2(3) = 11.38, p < .05$) led to a significant model improvement. Value has a significant impact on closeness ($\gamma = .20, p < .01$), whereas the other two paths remain insignificant. Although the path from value on satisfaction cvs is significantly stronger ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 26.01, p < .01$) than that on closeness, our key constructs differ only partially with respect to antecedents. Given that closeness between boundary personnel is also an emotional response, the relationship between value and closeness is consistent with the appraisal \rightarrow emotional response framework. Last but not least we test the predictive validity of our model. 95 Respondents repurchased a cv between wave 1 and wave 2. For these respondents we are able to test whether relationship commitment actually predicted behavioural loyalty. Given this small sample size and the categorical nature of behavioural loyalty we were not able to estimate a complete model with e.g., a weighted least square estimator. This would have required a substantially larger sample (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2001). Instead we computed latent variable scores for commitment, trust, satisfaction and attractiveness competition and ran a logistic regression with repurchase of cvs being the dependent variable. Relational commitment has the only significant effect on behavioural loyalty ($\beta = 1.679, p < 0.01$) and mediates the influence of trust, satisfaction focal product and attractiveness competition on behavioural loyalty. A Nagelkerkes R-square of .311 points to a reasonable explanatory power of the model. In order to assess whether the 95 respondents who purchased a cv between wave1 and wave2 differed significantly from other customers in the initial sample, we ran univariate ANOVAs with latent variable scores of all model variables. No significant difference between the groups exists on the model variables.

These results support the embeddedness hypothesis in business-to-business relationships. Satisfaction with a focal product directly impacts on commitment while closeness has, as hypothesized, an indirect effect on relational commitment via the generation of trust. Closeness is primarily determined through pleasant interaction experiences between customer and personnel, while satisfaction with the focal product is determined through value perceptions. Both constructs represent different levers for marketing management to increase relationship commitment and thereby also, as has been shown, relationship stability. Marketing management should be aware of this distinction especially in a business-to-business context, where the relevance of emotional closeness tends to be overlooked not only by marketing researchers.

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Appendix: Constructs and Measures

Construct/Item	Lambda/Gamma (t-Value)	Item/Construct Reliability
Loyalty/Commitment		0.89
Repurchase Intent^e	0.83	0.93
In your opinion, what are the chances that your next purchase will be a commercial vehicle from X?	0.93 (25.78)	0.86
In the event that you would have to replace your vehicle, would you again choose a commercial vehicle from X?	0.93	0.86
Word-of-mouth Intent^e	0.94(16.45)	0.88
Would you recommend commercial vehicles from X to a friend?	0.88	0.78
Would you recommend X if someone asked you for advice?	0.90 (23.21)	0.81
Price-Tolerance Intent^b	0.68(12.26)	0.81
I would repurchase a commercial vehicle from X even if its price were slightly raised by 2%	0.94	0.88
I am willing to pay a price that is 2% higher than the competition for the commercial vehicles from X	0.70 (11.23)	0.49
Cross-Buying Intent^b	0.80(8.08)	0.67
I will buy other products/services/components from X.	0.51	0.26
I plan to use other vehicles e.g. cars; trucks from X in a business or private context.	0.64 (7.79)	0.41
I intend to buy other vehicles (cars, trucks) from X.	0.75 (8.27)	0.56
Attractiveness Competition^c		0.76
If you were to compare commercial vehicles from X with the commercial vehicles of its best competitor, would you then say that commercial vehicles from X are compared to those of its best competitor? ...	0.77	0.59
If you were to compare the performances from X (vehicles, garage service, additional services) with the performances of its best competitor, would you then say that performances from X are compared to those of its best competitors?	0.79 (13.25)	0.62
Closeness^b		0.79
Is the personal contact with your service personnel good?	0.81	0.66
Is it a pleasant experience to contact your service personnel?	0.76 (13.16)	0.58
Do you enjoy talking to your service personnel about your commercial vehicle and related topics?	0.66 (11.55)	0.43
Satisfaction focal Product^{a, b} (here commercial vehicle)		0.87
Overall, how satisfied are you with your commercial vehicle? ^a	0.78	0.61
Were your expectations regarding your commercial vehicle completely fulfilled? ^b	0.85 (17.25)	0.73
Do you think that, you made the absolutely right choice with a commercial vehicle from X? ^b	0.88 (17.88)	0.78
Perceived Value^d		0.74
Considering all factors concerning your cv ownership how would you rate the value for money at X?	0.72	0.56
If you were to compare the overall quality of products and services with the price paid, would you rate that relationship as ...	0.81 (13.63)	0.65
Trust^b		0.83
Do you believe that you will be treated fairly by X in the future?	0.75 (13.93)	0.57
Do you trust X to be a reliable business partner in the future?	0.86 (15.93)	0.74
Do you believe that X will develop an effective and efficient business relationship with you?	0.76	0.57
Satisfaction Personal Interaction Sales^a		0.81
How satisfied were you with the advice and assistance from the service personnel?	0.78	0.60
How satisfied were you with the competency of the service personnel?	0.80 (13.50)	0.63
How satisfied were you with the friendliness and helpfulness of the service personnel?	0.71 (12.36)	0.50
Satisfaction Personal Interaction After Sales^a		0.86
How satisfied are you with the personal assistance of the service personnel?	0.85	0.72
How satisfied are you with the explanation of defects and necessary repairs through the service personnel?	0.84 (17.44)	0.71
How satisfied are you with the competency of the service personnel?	0.78 (16.02)	0.61

^aItems measured with five-point scales anchored with “very unsatisfied” to “very satisfied.”

^bItems measured with five point scales anchored with “definitively not” to “yes definitely.”

^cItems measured with five point scales anchored with “much better” to “much worse.”

^dItems measured with five point scales anchored with “very bad” to “very good.”

^eItems measured with five point scales anchored with “very unlikely” to “very likely.”

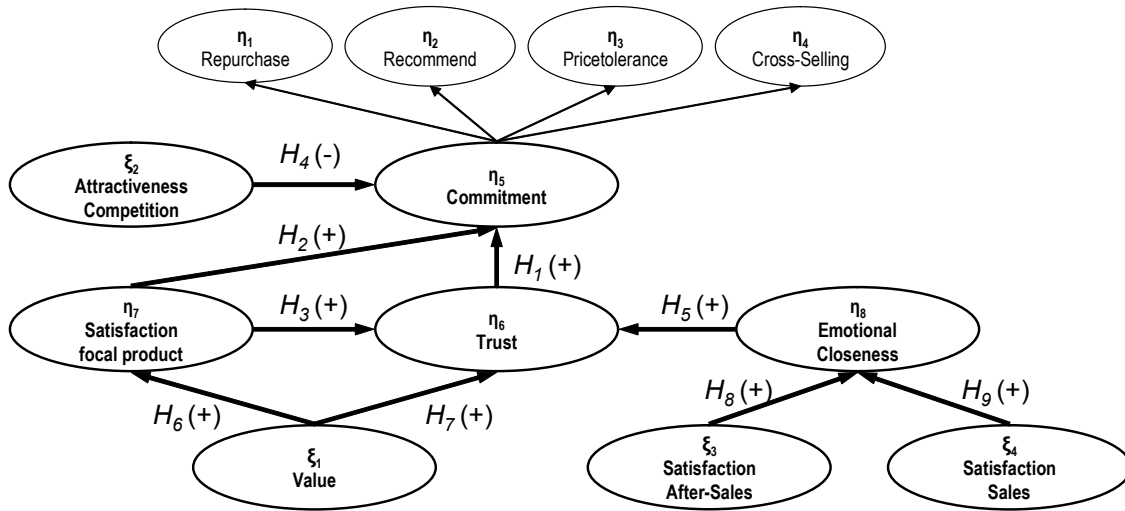


Figure 1: Conceptual Model