

Investigating the role of apparel supplier satisfaction in developing a collaborative buyer–supplier relationship: a power-dependency perspective

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Abstract:

Purpose The purpose of this study was to investigate the affective and cognitive dimensions of satisfaction that impact the buyer-supplier relationship (BSR) from the supplier's perspective and to consider satisfaction within the context of power-dependency theory.

Design/methodology/approach Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 Chinese apparel supply professionals who regularly interact with apparel buyers. Audio or video interviews were conducted via WeChat (the most popular social media platform in China).

Findings A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that both affective and cognitive dimensions of satisfaction impact the BSR. A model of supplier affective and cognitive satisfaction in a collaborative BSR was developed to illustrate the connections between the two dimensions.

Originality/values Due to intense competition in the market, supplier satisfaction is essential for building relationships in the apparel industry. Existing studies have focused on satisfaction from the perspective of the buyer rather than the supplier because in a BSR, the buyer tends to hold more power. Moreover, research has primarily considered cognitive evaluations of satisfaction with the BSR. This study offers new insight on both cognitive and affective satisfaction from the perspective of suppliers within the context of power-dependency theory.

Keywords: Apparel supply chain | Buyer-supplier relationship | Cognitive and affective satisfaction | Power-dependency theory

Article:

Introduction

Globalization of the apparel supply chain (ASC) has shifted most apparel manufacturing activities to developing countries, where apparel buyers tend to seek out suppliers (Singh and Hodges, 2011). At the same time, the rapid globalization of the ASC has prompted a rise in opportunism and

transactional-based buyer–supplier relationships (BSRs). Such relationships have been found to be detrimental to market competitiveness for both buyers and suppliers (Adams et al., 2012; Terpend et al., 2008). The BSR in the ASC is unique when compared to other industries, primarily due to it being “dynamic, considering continual changes in product availability, prices and competition” (Su and Gargeya, 2012, p. 146). Dealing with the challenges arising from globalization within the ASC requires a well-managed, long-term and collaborative apparel BSR (Ashby et al., 2017). Thus, developing a collaborative BSR is essential for apparel firms to remain competitive. Understanding the dynamics of the BSR can also help to strengthen relationship quality and outcomes and therefore is vital to achieving competitive advantage for both parties. Cook et al. (2006) argued that within a relationship (e.g. a BSR), the two parties' satisfaction with the relationship is one of the most critical factors in determining the quality and potential outcomes of that relationship. Likewise, Caniels et al. (2018) argued that supplier satisfaction is key to the collective success of the supply chain because BSR qualities are highly dependent on supplier initiatives. Supplier satisfaction refers to “a supplier's feeling of fairness about a buyer's incentives and the supplier's contributions within an industrial buyer–seller relationship” (Ganguly and Roy, 2021, p. 248). According to Molm (1991), satisfaction comprises two dimensions: affective response to and cognitive evaluation of the relationship. These two dimensions of satisfaction are influenced by the power-dependency structure of the relationship.

Although the literature indicates that satisfaction is essential to the functioning of the BSR, the majority of past studies have paid attention to buyers' satisfaction rather than suppliers' (Whipple et al., 2010). Few studies have explored how supplier satisfaction may affect the degree of collaboration that occurs in a BSR and, particularly, within the ASC context. Depending on the power dynamics, supplier satisfaction could result in both parties' increased performance within the BSR and increased performance of the buyer relative to their competitors sourcing from comparable suppliers (Caniels et al., 2018). Therefore, investigating supplier satisfaction and collaboration offers ASC professionals insights to better manage the relational exchange of the BSR to achieve competitive advantage.

Emerson (1962) proposed the power-dependency theory (PDT) to explain and study social relational exchanges like the BSR. The PDT helps to articulate how the use of buyer power impacts supplier satisfaction within the relationship (Huo et al., 2019) and, therefore, can provide valuable insights into ASC dynamics. However, from the power-dependency perspective, studies on how a supplier acts or reacts to the power-based behaviors of its buyers, and how these interactions shape a more collaborative BSR, are lacking (Golgeci et al., 2018). Furthermore, past BSR studies have viewed satisfaction as a single entity instead of considering the multidimensional aspects of satisfaction (Benton and Maloni, 2005; Ganguly and Roy, 2021; Meena and Sarmah, 2012). For example, Ganguly and Roy (2021) investigated the major factors that affect supplier satisfaction in a BSR (i.e. purchasing policy, cooperation, coordination, payment policy and technology/digitalization) and tested the relationship between those factors and supplier satisfaction using partial least-squares analysis. Supplier satisfaction in their study was viewed as a single factor rather than reflecting the dyadic aspects of satisfaction (i.e. affective and cognitive). Moreover, the dynamics of power manifested in a BSR were not considered in the study. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore the affective and cognitive dimensions of supplier satisfaction and their impact on collaboration in the BSR, given the power-dependency structure inherent to the relationship. Along with a lack of attention to supplier satisfaction, previous research has rarely explored the dimensions of relationship satisfaction in shaping collaboration in

the BSR. Employing the theoretical lens of PDT, findings of this study offer insight into the role of supplier satisfaction in the development of a collaborative BSR.

Literature Review

The buyer-supplier relationship

Satisfaction and collaboration in the apparel supply chain. According to the literature, firm growth is best achieved through long-term, as opposed to transactional, relationships (Adams et al., 2012; Gereffi and Lee, 2016; Huo et al., 2019). Given the intense competition in the apparel industry, this calls for a proactively managed BSR and an in-depth understanding of BSR dynamics. Moreover, although collaboration in a BSR is influenced by a variety of relationship factors, research has shown that relationship satisfaction is particularly important because the perception of being satisfied in a BSR is the key motivating factor for remaining in the relationship (Benton & Maloni, 2005; Brito and Miguel, 2017; Caniëls et al., 2018; Essig and Amann, 2009; Leonidou et al., 2008). Caniëls et al. (2018), and Whipple et al. (2010) argued that satisfaction with a BSR results in the relationship parties seeking to maintain the BSR and to make it long-term oriented and collaborative. Both are crucial characteristics of a competitive BSR.

Previous ASC studies have posited that BSRs in the apparel industry are more complicated and challenging compared to BSRs in other industrial contexts (Bair and Gereffi, 2003; Cho et al., 2015; Singh and Hodges, 2011). These complications present significant challenges to building a competitive BSR in at least three ways. First, the apparel industry is extremely fragmented, with thousands of buyers and suppliers in almost every market, prompting firms to focus on their own interests and taking little interest in forging long-term collaborative relationships (Handley and Benton, 2012; Huo et al., 2019). Second, globalization of the ASC has greatly impacted interactions and transactions between buyers and suppliers, such that a significant proportion of BSRs involve parties representing different nations and cultures (Handfield and Bechtel, 2002). Opportunistic behaviors that only consider short-term benefits in a BSR are common (Handley and Benton, 2012; Huo et al., 2019). Such behaviors make it extremely difficult for parties in the BSR to collaborate on building competitiveness and improving performance, not only as stand-alone entities but also as part of the supply chain that they participate in (Adams et al., 2012). Third, buyer power is dominant in apparel BSRs (Ashby et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2015). Several studies have pointed out that a power imbalance in relationship interactions ultimately contributes to relationship vulnerability, thereby detracting from its collaborative potential (Huo et al., 2017, 2019).

Role of supplier satisfaction in a collaborative buyer-supplier relationship. ASC complications and challenges suggest that it is important to understand the impact of satisfaction on relationship quality (Benton and Maloni, 2005; Meena and Sarmah, 2012). That is, understanding the role of relationship satisfaction in building a long-term orientation and collaboration is important in the BSR. Caniëls et al. (2018) argued that supplier satisfaction is a crucial factor that leads to buyer trust of and commitment to the supplier and therefore results in a long-term BSR. Yet, most relationship satisfaction studies have focused on buyer satisfaction (Whipple et al., 2010) rather than supplier satisfaction. The justification for an emphasis on the buyer perspective is that buyers hold most of the power in pursuing a long-term relationship.

However, studies by Essig and Amann (2009) and Meena and Sarmah (2012) posited that supplier satisfaction is just as important to relationship collaboration as buyer satisfaction.

A deeper understanding of supplier satisfaction can shed light on how the BSR can be more collaborative. Thus, the findings of the present study contribute to an understanding of the BSR in at least three ways. First, few studies consider the supplier's perspective. The BSR is a two-actor (dyadic) relationship, and insufficient knowledge about one part of the dyad can hinder BSR interactions and negatively impact relationship dynamics. Second, considering that the satisfaction construct comprises multiple factors, one-dimensional treatment of it cannot adequately explain its complex role within BSR dynamics. Third, the extant literature does not offer an examination of the influence of buyer power on supplier satisfaction, which ultimately impacts the success and competitiveness of both relationship parties.

The dynamics of the power structure, the use of power and satisfaction are all crucial to building a collaborative BSR and therefore have a significant impact on supply chain competitiveness (Benton & Maloni, 2005; Essig and Amann, 2009; Huo et al., 2019). However, the inter-relationships between the two satisfaction dimensions and how they impact collaboration have not been examined in the literature. Moreover, little is known about them from the supplier's perspective. Findings of the present study will help to address these gaps.

Supplier Satisfaction

Affective satisfaction. According to the literature, satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional construct when viewed in the context of the BSR as a relational exchange (Caro and Garcia, 2007; Molm, 1991). Stauss and Neuhaus's (1997) study sheds light on the dimensions of satisfaction, in that they argued that the measurement of customer satisfaction has not been accurately capturing actual levels of satisfaction. In order to address this problem, Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) employed the qualitative satisfaction model to measure customer satisfaction across multiple dimensions, including emotional (affective) and cognitive components.

Supplier satisfaction with the BSR can come from two sources of factors. The first source includes those factors related to the overall affective response to the relationship and the other relationship actor, including being cooperative, aggressive, pleasant, mean, etc. (Huo et al., 2019). Second, supplier satisfaction can come from the cognitive evaluation of the outcomes of the relationship with the buyer (Benton & Maloni, 2005; Essig and Amann, 2009; Meena and Sarmah, 2012). Specifically, past studies delineate that satisfaction in a social exchange relationship comprises both cognitive and affective dimensions (Im and Ha, 2011; Molm, 1991; Oliver, 1997). The satisfaction of the relationship actors with the overall relationship is based more on affective response than the cognitive process, which weighs costs and benefits (Molm, 1991). Based on Molm's (1991) theory of affect and satisfaction in social exchange, in the present study, affective satisfaction refers to the overall satisfaction of the relationship actor with the BSR. Evaluation of satisfaction with different aspects of the BSR is referred to as cognitive satisfaction.

Cognitive satisfaction. The majority of BSR studies on satisfaction posit that it is a cognitive process. Yet, cognitive evaluation of satisfaction is usually studied as a unidimensional construct, which does not comprehensively address satisfaction in a BSR. Recognizing the importance of cognitive satisfaction among suppliers, Essig and Amann (2009) asserted that the cognitive process of supplier satisfaction has to be actively managed in a successful BSR. They suggested that

supplier satisfaction is a highly complex construct and the cognitive factors that comprise satisfaction warrant further exploration to determine their relevance in the ASC context.

Studies by Meena and Sarmah (2012) and Pulles et al. (2016) indicated that suppliers can be satisfied with the overall BSR but dissatisfied with the buyer, especially in terms of the buyer's daily operations, such as coordination policies and payment terms. Moreover, evidence of the multidimensionality of satisfaction is strong in multiple studies (Caniëls et al., 2018; Cho et al., 2015; Leonidou et al., 2008). Findings of these studies, alongside Huo et al. (2019), suggest that the treatment of satisfaction as a cognitive evaluation, as is the case in the majority of studies, is inadequate, indicating that cognitive and affective satisfaction should be treated separately.

Empirical findings also indicate that BSR satisfaction is impacted differently depending on actions or behavior from the opposite relationship party and under different relational exchange conditions (Benton & Maloni, 2005; Huo et al., 2017; Pulles et al., 2016). In the ASC context, Molm's (1991) view of satisfaction as a culmination of the affective result of the cognitive evaluation of the relationship and Essig and Amann's (2009) view of satisfaction as a culmination of a positive evaluation of relationship outcomes are both tenable. Many studies have investigated cognitive satisfaction with the BSR (Benton & Maloni, 2005; Brito and Miguel, 2017; Essig and Amann, 2009; Meena and Sarmah, 2012). Although there are existing measurements used to examine the supplier satisfaction construct in the supply chain management (SCM) literature (Benton and Maloni, 2005; Essig and Amann, 2009; Meena and Sarmah, 2012), they were developed to address the construct either in a highly specific context (e.g. automobile, Benton and Maloni, 2005) or to apply in the broadest context (e.g. all industries, Essig and Amann, 2009). Thus, the present study was conducted specifically to understand and explore both affective and cognitive satisfaction simultaneously within the ASC context.

Power-dependency theory

As power and dependence are considered core factors influencing behaviors in inter-organizational relationships, they have been extensively applied to investigate performance outcomes and relational satisfaction within SCM research (Altinay et al., 2014; Cadden et al., 2015; Caniëls et al., 2018; Gölgeci et al., 2018; Susanty et al., 2016). Power is a medium of social exchange (Emerson, 1962, 1976). In social exchanges, how power is determined and used is crucial to relationship formation and outcomes (Cook et al., 2006). In inter-personal and inter-organizational exchanges, power is the ability of one actor (either a person or an organization) to influence and subordinate another (Emerson, 1962; Hunt and Nevin, 1974). As power is a fixture in social relations (exchanges), Emerson (1976) asserted that there is a clear association between power and exchange. PDT argues that the power of a relationship actor is a function of the dependency of the other actor in the social exchange they both engage in (Emerson, 1962; Molm, 1991).

Emerson (1962) posited that in all social relations, social power is an inherent property of the relationship and not an attribute of the actor. Broadly speaking, "actor" or "actors" in Emerson's (1962) statement refers to social relationship participants, "either a person or a group," and therefore, actors in a BSR can be "person-person, group-person or group-group relation" (p. 32). According to Emerson (1962), a relationship's power-dependency structure serves as its medium of relational exchange. PDT posits that the power the buyer holds over the supplier equals the supplier's dependency on the buyer and vice versa (Emerson, 1962). Past PDT studies suggest that BSRs with symmetric power and dependence are more effective and collaborative than those with asymmetric relationships, as symmetric BSRs highlight equitability, with the two parties actively

engaging in shared compromise and problem solving (Gölgeci et al., 2018). Conversely, an asymmetric relationship in which one party dominates the exchange may allow circumstances in which the dominant party exploits its power, which can lead to instability and conflict within the relationship (Caniëls et al., 2018). As Cook et al. (2006) argued, all behavior in a relationship is power-driven; therefore, PDT is applicable to understanding how BSR exchanges impact relationship outcomes (e.g. satisfaction).

The apparel industry is characterized by low entry barriers, and the apparel market is extremely fragmented. Thus, a supplier is highly dependent on a buyer's orders to keep production plants running (Su and Gargeya, 2012). A halt in the supplier's production can cause serious damage to its business, both financially and operationally. This is because much of the costs are fixed costs that suppliers must bear even when there is no production. Furthermore, a halt in production often means workers must take unpaid leave, thereby undermining morale. The supplier's dependency on the buyer puts the supplier in the less powerful position within the power-dependency structure. The power-dependency structure indicates that the level of power that one actor has is framed by the level of dependency of the other actor. That is, buyer power is determined by supplier dependency. As Emerson (1962) stated, the social power of relationship actors is the product of their social relationship. Molm (1991) pointed out that relationship actors' degree of satisfaction is influenced by the power-dependency continuum they share. Therefore, it is important to consider the power-dependency structure when studying supplier satisfaction and interactions that could lead to collaboration between buyers and suppliers.

Method

There is limited extant research on supplier satisfaction and its impact on BSR collaboration and specifically studies that identify factors influencing supplier satisfaction that consider the power dynamics of the BSR. To address this gap, a qualitative approach to research design was used in this study (Bryman, 1999), as it allows researchers to uncover meanings within the data that emerge and to interpret them inductively (Watson and Yan, 2013). Among qualitative methods, Mason (1996) argued that interviews with participants are most effective to explore their feelings and how they interpret a phenomenon, particularly when researchers cannot directly observe their behaviors. To this end, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed. The interview was designed to allow participants to share their BSR experiences and to describe power dynamics in their relationships. The first part consisted of eight questions adapted from Molm (1991) and Caniëls et al. (2018) regarding participants' overall affective satisfaction with the BSR and were intended to garner in-depth answers from participants. The second part consisted of 36 short-answer questions grouped into five factors (cooperation intensity, order procedure, delivery process, communication and conflict management) adapted from Essig and Amman (2009). Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they think their BSRs are collaborative in nature and whether they think they have greater power (i.e. less dependency) or less power (i.e. higher dependency) in their BSRs.

Data collection procedures

With institutional review board approval, a total of 20 industry professionals were recruited using the snowball method (Mason, 1996) through the lead authors' professional network in Guangzhou, China. As a nonrandom sampling method, snowball sampling may provide results that are difficult

to generalize. However, given the exploratory nature of this study and the difficulty in obtaining samples comprising mid- to high-level industry professionals, the snowball sampling technique was deemed appropriate (Bianchi and Birtwistle, 2012; Vivek et al., 2012). Mason's (1996) suggestions for sample selection rules were followed, specifically the participants' representativeness, relevance, availability for participation and practicality. The final sample consisted of apparel supply professionals who regularly interact with apparel buyers as part of a BSR. The number of participants was determined to be enough when data saturation was reached, i.e. the point where no new common experiences and key issues emerge from interviews with additional participants (Hodges, 2011). According to Slevitch (2011), samples in qualitative studies are designed to help achieve an understanding of “a small number of participants' own frames of reference and worldviews, rather than to test hypotheses on a large sample” (p. 78). To this end, participants holding operational and managerial roles with SCM job titles ranging from sales manager, marketing manager, supply chain manager, general manager and owner were recruited (see Table I).

Individuals selected for interviews were contacted by phone, email or social media and provided with the details of the study. Audio or video interviews were scheduled and conducted via WeChat (the most popular social media platform in China). The semi-structured interviews lasted from 40 min to a little over an hour. Participants were given enough time to answer the questions with the “guided conversation” approach (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). With participants' consent, the interviews were digitally recorded. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese by the first author, who is a native speaker.

Questions asked during the interviews focused on the affective and cognitive dimensions of satisfaction. For example, how would you characterize most of your interactions with buyer X? Are you satisfied with the quality of buyer X's reaction to problems? Does your satisfaction with the BSR affect your intention to continue working with Buyer X? and what relationship qualities are important to your satisfaction with Buyer X? Interview questions were translated from English to Chinese by the first author and then back translated from Chinese to English by an apparel industry professional with expertise in both languages to ensure accuracy and relevance to the participants (Huo et al., 2019). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated to English by the first author. Transcripts were then reviewed by a second bilingual member of the research team against the interview recordings.

As seen in Table I, a total of 20 participants (8 males and 12 females) were interviewed. Participants have rich experiences in the apparel industry, with an average of 6.5 years of experience. To protect participants' confidentiality, whether the participant is male (M) or female (F) is used along with an assigned number as identifier. The majority (16 out of 20) of the participants work at small- to medium-sized companies. The overwhelming majority of participants indicated a major market orientation ratio of international to domestic (14:4), which reflects the extent to which the ASC and Chinese apparel suppliers' experiences in BSRs are globalized (World Trade Organization, 2020). The power structures overwhelmingly favor buyers, as 15 of the 20 participants reported that they are highly dependent on their main buyers and almost all of the 15 represent small- to medium-sized companies. The majority of the participants (4 out of 5) that reported they are more powerful represent large companies.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Coded name	Age	Job title	Experiences (years)	Company size	Market(s)	Power structure
M01	32	Sales Manager	8	Small	D	DE
M02	28	Account Manager	4	Small	I	DE
M03	32	Sales	10	Small	I	DE
M04	26	Merchandiser	2	Large	I	P
M05	35	Sales Manager	13	Medium	I	DE
M06	40	Director	15	Small	I	DE
M07	42	General Mangers	15	Medium	I	DE
M08	38	Vice General Manager	11	Medium	D/I	DE
F09	27	Customer Service	3	Large	D/I	P
F10	29	Merchandising	5	Medium	I	P
F11	24	Customer Service	1	Small	I	DE
F12	30	Sales Representative	7	Small	I	DE
F13	25	Merchandiser	2	Large	D/I	P
F14	25	Merchandiser	1	Large	D/I	P
F15	26	Merchandiser	3	Medium	I	DE
F16	41	Director	20	Small	I	DE
F17	22	Assistant Sales Manager	1	Medium	I	DE
F18	25	Merchandiser	3	Medium	D	DE
F19	26	Merchandiser	3	Small	I	DE
F20	26	Merchandiser	3	Small	I	DE

Notes: Coded Name M = male and F = female; Company size – number of employees less than 300 = small, greater than 300 but less than 2000 = medium and greater than 2000 = large; Market D = domestic, I = international; DE = dependent, and *p* = power

Source: Table created by Author

Data analysis

After completing the interview transcriptions and translations, the texts were read jointly across the interviews by all members of the research team. A hermeneutic analysis of the data was employed to identify commonalities and differences within and across the data set (Mason, 1996). Following Keegan's (2009) suggestions, both open and axial codings were employed to allow the patterns or themes to emerge directly from the dataset and identify the key themes relative to supplier satisfaction within power-dependency structure of the BSR. That is, patterns that emerged in multiple locations across the dataset in the initial coding process were identified (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Words or phrases that repeatedly surfaced in a single interview and/or across the interviews were grouped together into categories and then the categories were organized based on emergent themes (Mason, 1996), which were then used to structure the interpretation of the data considering the dynamics of BSR power-dependency relations. Gioia et al's (2013) aggregation procedures were followed in the process of analysis and interpretation, which helped to develop the resulting grounded model.

First, the themes that emerged relative to the affective dimension of satisfaction were compared to those of cognitive satisfaction. Second, themes that distinctively belonged to either affective or cognitive dimensions were refined, while similar themes were merged. Connections between the themes both within and across the satisfaction dimensions reflective of power-

dependency structures were identified (Gioia et al., 2013). The themes were then assessed by the researchers, differences between them were resolved and the resulting themes were further interpreted through the lens of PDT and then mapped into visual form (Gioia et al., 2013; Keegan, 2009). As a final step, a summary of the interpretation was provided to the participants for the purposes of providing a member check (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). After integrating participants' feedback, the resulting interpretation consisted of a total of seven themes illustrating the affective and cognitive satisfaction dimensions important to building and maintaining a collaborative BSR. The themes were examined through the lens of PDT to interpret the broader significance of the role of suppliers' affective and cognitive satisfaction in the BSR.

Results and discussion

The results of the interpretation indicate that, as suppliers, participants consider both dimensions of satisfaction to be important in fostering a collaborative BSR and particularly when evaluating the BSR within the context of the power-dependency structures they experience. Thus, the two dimensions are first addressed separately in the following discussion of emergent themes and then interpreted for broader meanings and interconnections via the PDT.

Affective satisfaction

The results of the analysis indicate that, as suppliers, participants' affective satisfaction is related to four qualities of their interactions with buyers: partnership, mutual respect, personal friendship and effective communication. Data indicate that these four factors are linked to each other and, collectively, can help to achieve affective satisfaction, which, in turn, enhances collaboration. Likewise, if these qualities exist in a given BSR, then there is likely to be a high degree of affective satisfaction with the BSR and a collaborative orientation on the part of the supplier.

Partnership

Participants believed that a buyer's willingness to engage with them in a partnership-driven relationship, rather than a transaction-driven relationship, is the foundation of a strongly collaborative BSR. The participants pointed out that a focus on collaboration, in turn, is reflected in the buyer's attitude toward them. For example, participant M03 stated, “[A] partnership is when buyers treat our benefits as their own, always considering we need to grow together. For me, that makes us ‘partners’.” The “partner” status, as pointed out by various participants, is usually conferred by the buyer. This is likely because buyers tend to initiate the BSR more often than suppliers, as found in prior studies on BSR satisfaction (cf., Brito and Miguel, 2017).

It appears that for many of the participants, a partnership approach indicates a high level of emotional satisfaction with the BSR, which, in turn, can compensate for issues that arise between the two parties. As participant M07 explained, “I have a higher tolerance level for the buyer's mistreatment of us if we are in a partnership. Bad things happen and I can still be, overall, happy about the buyer.” This example implies that even when there are instances of negative treatment, a supplier can be satisfied with the buyer if there is a strong partnership between the two parties. That is, qualities that influence affective satisfaction appear to be complimentary rather than incompatible in those BSRs in which the dynamics of power-dependency support rather than detract from the partnership. Likewise, as participant F09 described, “Businesses have ups

and downs. A partnership better prepares us for the market challenges. [A] partnership makes me satisfied even when results don't really go our way." The idea that the supplier can develop a partnership with the buyer fosters a sense of equity in terms of BSR power distribution (Benton and Maloni, 2005). This sense of being an "equal partner" points to the role of respect within the BSR, which, for participants, is a two-way street that can lead to higher levels of overall relationship satisfaction and fosters collaboration. Per PDT, an equal partnership can be achieved by striking a balance between power and dependency, and as Susanty et al. (2016) suggested, a balanced power dependency can have a positive effect on levels of trust and loyalty of both partners.

Mutual respect

Participants stated that they are respectful to their buyers, regardless of the number of purchase orders they get from them. For participants, the challenge appears to be gaining respect from buyers. That is, multiple participants expressed that it is common for buyers to act somewhat condescending toward them as suppliers, resulting in a feeling of being treated with disrespect, causing them to avoid collaborating with buyers. As M01 said, "Maybe most buyers are used to being chased by loads of suppliers to get their purchase orders, they tend to think our roles as suppliers [is] not as important as them in the industry. [Yet] without our collaboration, there is little they can do." Moreover, as F11 explained, "Some buyers think we can be easily replaced, and they feel they can deal with us in whatever way they want. Let them find whoever are better than us." Most participants said this lack of respect for them and their work can cause serious damage to the relationship, ultimately leading to dissatisfaction and a short-lived BSR.

Indeed, from the PDT perspective, when the supplier is heavily dependent on the buyer, buyer power is dominant and the tendency to use the power to manipulate the supplier increases (Cadden et al., 2015). However, participants also stated that their regular buyers are typically very respectful of them and that such respect is developed from the collaborative relationship they have formed.

As participant F12 said, "I only want to work with buyers who treat me like a partner, respect the work that I do for [them]. Such respect I think is not too much to ask. My regular buyers all respect me." It is apparent that participants think buyers should treat their suppliers out of respect for the relationship because this not only fosters mutual satisfaction, but it sets the groundwork for continued interaction and collaboration. This interaction and collaboration can even lead to friendship, as participant F10 explained, "two mutually respectful partners are highly likely to grow a personal friendship outside of work." From a social exchange perspective, mutual respect not only fosters satisfaction but plays a significant role in strengthening supply chain relationships (Cadden et al., 2015).

Personal friendship

According to participants, a professional relationship can foster a personal friendship between the buyer and supplier. As participant M08 stated, "With my top buyer, we talk [about] things outside of our businesses. We are like friends, talk a lot of hobbies and family matters." Other participants agree that friendly interactions are signs of being emotionally supportive of the relationship and explained that they will keep the talk to a minimum when they have negative feelings about a buyer. For example, participant M04 said that "I am highly satisfied with my relationship with

buyer X. We hang out together in [our] free time and organize activities between our company staff. I won't do that with somebody I don't like or not considered as my friend.” Interestingly, the blending of professional relationship and personal friendship can actually help the purchase order process become more efficient. This is because, according to the participants, one of the biggest advantages that comes from being satisfied with the BSR is that communication with the buyer is consistently effective, which is indicative of a collaborative relationship (Essig and Amman, 2009; Huo et al., 2017). The degree of power dependency in the BSR affects the closeness between the two parties as well as their willingness to invest in collaborative work (Hingley, 2005). Given the dynamics of power dependency, the social interactions between a buyer and supplier are important, as these interactions can enhance relationship outcomes, including relationship satisfaction (Cadden et al., 2015).

Effective communication

For participants, a buyer and supplier can communicate more effectively when the BSR possesses characteristics of a personal friendship. As participant M02 put it, “Good communications are so important to achieve the best possible results. If what buyers want [is] not effectively communicated, how we can deliver the right goods at the right time?” Indeed, previous studies have shown that a BSR with effective communication helps both buyers and suppliers achieve their operational goals (Huo et al., 2017; Meena & Sharmah, 2012). Further, as participant F09 pointed out, “Effective communication not only helps us achieve our goals but also saves a lot of human and financial resources [that] otherwise would be wasted on bad communication.” However, as participant M05 noted, “Effective communication with a buyer is something that does not just happen but requires a close partnership.” The efficiency achieved from effective communication helps participants to feel more like a collaborative partner with buyers, which, along with respect and friendship, forms the emotional basis of their satisfaction with a given BSR. According to Caniels et al. (2018), in asymmetric relationships, communication is likely to flow from the more powerful party to the dependent party, which makes it difficult for the dependent party to feel as though they can communicate freely in the relationship. Thus, quality communication is more likely to occur when there is a more balanced power-dependency structure in the BSR.

Cognitive satisfaction

Participant responses highlighted four of the five factors in suppliers' cognitive satisfaction dimension proposed by Essig and Amann (2009). That is, participants indicated that order procedure, communication, cooperation intensity and conflict management are the crucial factors for evaluating satisfaction with a BSR. Interestingly, communication emerged strongly as a factor in the affective satisfaction dimension, suggesting that good communication has a great deal of influence on both dimensions of satisfaction. Notably, the fifth factor, delivery process, was not considered important by the participants in this study, as they said they were willing to commit to whatever arrangement that the buyer wants. As F15 explained, “Our delivery process for buyer X is not important to our satisfaction because it is our job to accommodate the process that buyer X prefers.” Moreover, the delivery process represents a small percentage of the total order value. To put it another way, participant F09 said: “Why would we make the buyer unhappy for the small inconvenience of the buyer's required delivery process? We won't be dissatisfied about it, and

every buyer has some part of their business that is not so satisfactory. We just deal with it.” The following paragraphs discuss participants' comments on the four factors that emerged as impacting their satisfaction with a BSR.

Order procedure

In terms of order procedures, participants expect buyers to maintain operational efficiency and to engage in advanced purchase planning. This allows for higher levels of certainty for the participants, particularly in terms of order intervals. As participant M05 said, “Buyer X's standardized ordering procedure is crucial to efficiently place his many different orders with us.” It seems that for participants, if the buyer has a well-planned and organized order procedure, then the supplier will be more inclined to put effort into building a long-term BSR, instead of one that is more transactional in nature. A long-term BSR can help the supplier grow. As participant F11 described, “We are satisfied with buyer X's adherence to arrangements. We can rely on them to grow our business. We want to work with them for the foreseeable future.” Supplier satisfaction with the buyer's order procedure appears to be instrumental in establishing a stable and long-term oriented BSR because it means that the supplier can count on future orders. When there is a power-dependency balance, buyers are more willing to improve purchase planning and order processes, such as developing procedures specifically to suit suppliers. This level of collaboration in the BSR is more likely to lead to supplier satisfaction (Benton and Maloni, 2005).

Cooperation Intensity

Participants agreed that a high degree of cooperation is a sign of affirmation of their products and performance outcomes on the part of their buyers. An exemplifier of high cooperation intensity, as pointed out by participant F09, is when the supplier is invited to participate in the product development and marketing parts of the process: “Our major buyer will involve and share their product development with us, as well as taking our opinion on product marketing.” As Huo et al. (2017) stated, sharing product knowledge in such detail is a sign of high intensity cooperation. One cannot have a collaborative BSR without this high intensity cooperation between the two parties. This cooperation is also key to the supplier evaluating the BSR as satisfactory, as participant M03 reflected, “We are satisfied with the value buyer X brings into our strategic partnership which helps us to grow in the market.” According to participants, when suppliers are asked to cooperate in multiple aspects of the business, their interest in maintaining the relationship increases because they can clearly see the value of continuing to be a part of the BSR. Per Gölgeci et al. (2018), as a type of power-based behavior, such egalitarian approaches to the BSR (i.e. fostering an equitable relationship between partners) is a precondition for effective cooperation.

Communication

As with affective satisfaction, communication is important to evaluating relationship satisfaction from a cognitive perspective. As participant F14 explained, “Precise and effective communication is the basis for our efficient daily interaction with X.” Clear, detailed and easily understood communication with the buyer also helps to maintain the BSR. Apparel product attributes are numerous and most of them are highly specific; therefore, effective communication is vital to ensuring that the supplier understands what the buyer is expecting. As participant F14 put it, “They

[the buyers] get exactly what they expected, and we perform our job much easier.” According to participants, it is important to engage in efficient and productive operations with their buyers, which entails being able to get in touch with the right person in the buyer's organization when necessary and in a timely fashion. Participant F11 explained why this is important to relationship satisfaction: “X's direct contact person is the most important person for end results because she coordinates our operations, so our goals are always aligned.” From the PDT perspective, interdependency creates a positive relational attachment between parties, enhancing two-way, open communication and ultimately leading to relationship satisfaction (Cadden et al., 2015).

Conflict resolution

Participants talked about how conflicts arising between two parties need to be solved fairly, quickly and amicably. Because many participants indicated that they are the less powerful party in the BSR; if buyers use their power advantage in the power-dependency structure to force suppliers to accept unfair solutions to conflicts, then the suppliers feel as though they are powerless to disagree, as when participant F09 said: “Sometimes buyer X forces their solutions on us. That's the action that makes us feel angry because they know we have no choice.” In contrast, a buyer that approaches resolving conflict in a collaborative way reflects an interest in putting forth the degree of effort required to maintain satisfaction in the BSR. As stated by participant M08: “X's good quality of reaction to problems [will] provide excellent advice and correctly solve the problem.” For participants, equitable approaches to conflict resolution also reflect positively on the buyer's honor and suggest that they will uphold their end of the contractual, delivery, and payment arrangements.

The role of power dependency

According to the PDT, the power of an actor in a dyadic BSR is a function of the dependency of the other actor (Emerson, 1962; Molm, 1991). In the present study, most of the participants acknowledged themselves as being in a less powerful position in the power-dependency structure because they are highly dependent on their major buyers for orders. In such cases, the supplier's weaker position is usually caused by a dependency on the most critical resource that the buyer controls, which is the purchase orders that keep their factories running: “Buyers are always more powerful in our relationships because they have the most important resources we depend on – purchase orders” (M01). Interviews revealed the important role of partnership within power-dependency structure of the BSR, generating supplier satisfaction. Partnerships that can also be associated with friendships, reflecting mutual respect and effective communication, are qualities that participants think contribute to a BSR that is collaborative and therefore beneficial to both parties, even when one partner has more power than the other. For example, participant (M07) said that a close BSR he built with a major buyer helped take him from being a small workshop owner to becoming a prominent local apparel supplier and means he is always willing to meet this buyer's expectations. Yet, M07 indicated that he does not think that he has equal power in the BSR because it is always the buyer who is the more powerful party in their negotiations. As the supplier's satisfaction is a result of buyer's power behavior in BSR interactions (Molm, 1991), for the supplier, the buyer's use of power (i.e. being more equitable) is crucial to a satisfactory and collaborative BSR.

Based on the data, it appears that both participants' affective and cognitive satisfaction with the BSR is dependent on the supplier's position in the power-dependency structure, primarily because balanced power dependency allows both parties to build partnership, mutual respect, communication and even personal friendship, which ultimately leads to affective satisfaction. Such equitable approaches also help to generate cognitive satisfaction by improving order procedures, intensifying cooperation, enhancing effective communication, as well as solving conflicts collaboratively.

The interview data revealed that imbalanced power-dependency dynamics can be characteristic of apparel industry BSRs. Participants expressed that buyers are sometimes inclined to abuse their powerful position in the power-dependency structure when they know that the supplier is highly dependent on the BSR. This action hinders the supplier's cognitive satisfaction within the BSR. However, at the same time, when the supplier's dependency on the buyer is greater but they are emotionally satisfied with the BSR, the supplier tends to be more tolerant of the imbalance of power in the relationship.

A model of affective and cognitive supplier satisfaction with the BSR

Based on the data, a model of supplier affective and cognitive satisfaction in a collaborative BSR (see Figure 1) was created to illustrate how the two different dimensions of supplier satisfaction relate to collaborative BSRs within the power-dependency structure. Both the affective and cognitive dimensions of satisfaction influence the nature of the BSR. Likewise, a collaborative BSR contributes to both affective and cognitive satisfaction. Together, the four themes that comprise affective satisfaction are inter-related as they help to build the BSR. Based on the participants' responses, the factors that are influential to the formation of supplier cognitive satisfaction are order procedure, conflict resolution, communication and cooperation intensity.

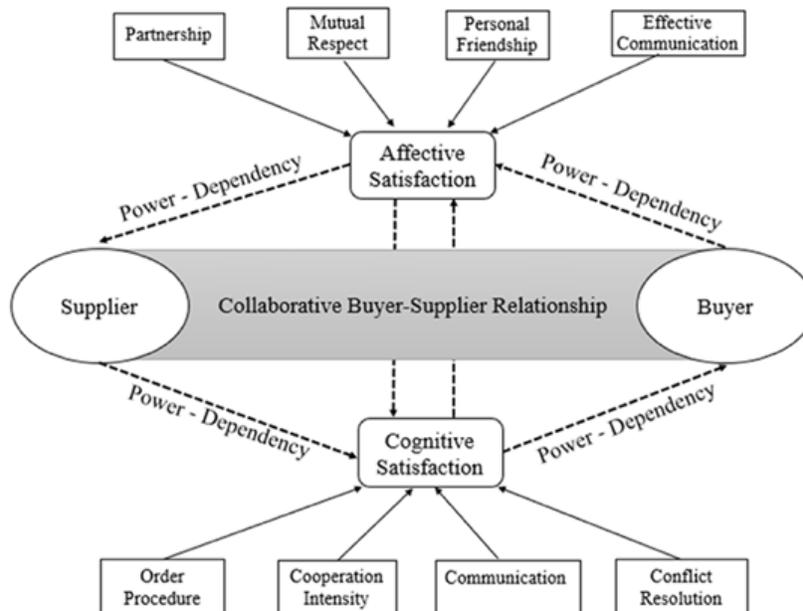


Figure 1. A model of supplier affective and cognitive satisfaction in a collaborative BSR.

Source: Figure created by author.

Unlike the four themes identified as important to affective satisfaction, the four factors that comprise cognitive satisfaction do not appear to relate to each other. Instead, each factor is evaluated independently by the supplier as regards the buyer. Furthermore, changes in individual factors do not appear to directly influence collaborative interaction in the BSR.

Collaboration in BSRs is connected to the power-dependency structure that shapes the satisfaction dimensions between buyers and suppliers. According to the data, suppliers are generally tolerant of BSRs that are not satisfactory, provided that, at the same time, they are not highly dependent on the buyer in that BSR. As the buyer enforces his or her power on the supplier, supplier satisfaction tends to be negatively affected and the BSR becomes less collaborative.

Conclusions and implications

Suppliers are considered a major determinant for BSR business success, as they have been shown to be a value-adding partner (Essig and Amann, 2009), and therefore, supplier satisfaction is important to maintaining a successful BSR. Findings of this study provide deeper understanding of how supplier satisfaction can be achieved in the context of the BSR, and particularly in relation to the power-dependency dynamics that exist between suppliers and buyers within a given BSR.

Findings of this study support the idea that, within the framework of PDT, affective satisfaction is dependent on the extent to which the buyer treats the supplier as an equal partner, even when the buyer is in the more powerful position in the power-dependency structure (Molm, 1991). Findings suggest that in BSRs that are not collaborative, buyers are inclined to take advantage of the favorable power-dependency structure, and particularly when they know that the supplier is highly dependent on the BSR. This situation ultimately leads to supplier dissatisfaction, both according to Caniels et al. (2018) and as seen in the data collected for the present study. An asymmetrical power-dependency structure can impede affective and cognitive satisfaction levels on the part of suppliers, which also negates a collaborative BSR orientation.

Findings of this study offer several contributions to the academic literature. First, factors important to affective satisfaction were identified from the supplier's perspective. This study focused on supplier satisfaction, which has been overlooked in BSR research and especially compared to buyer satisfaction (Whipple et al., 2010). Furthermore, unlike previous studies that have viewed satisfaction as a single entity in the BSR, this study explored two dimensions of satisfaction and identified the factors relevant to both. That is, prior studies have not separated causes for affective or emotional-based satisfaction from satisfaction that arises from the cognitive evaluation of relationship outcomes. Second, the implications of affective and cognitive satisfaction dimensions for building a collaborative BSR were explored and identified, including four factors that impact affective satisfaction (i.e. partnership, mutual respect, personal friendship and effective communication) and four factors that impact cognitive satisfaction (i.e. order procedure, cooperation intensity, communication and conflict resolution). Third, this study provides an understanding of affective and cognitive satisfaction from a PDT perspective.

From a practical perspective, findings of the study illustrate the extent to which PDT helps to elaborate supplier affective and cognitive satisfaction in a collaborative BSR. The relationship between power dependency and satisfaction in a BSR as proposed by Molm (1991) is reflected in the findings of the present study, in that the higher the supplier's dependency on the buyer, the more likely it is that the supplier will be tolerant of negative aspects of the BSR. The decision to continue with a BSR can occur even when there are negative aspects, provided the supplier is

satisfied with the relationship overall. Importantly, the conceptual framework created from the data collected for this study provides a comprehensive understanding of supplier satisfaction by revealing the primary factors important to enhancing supplier satisfaction within the power-dependency structure of the BSR.

In terms of managerial implications of the study, the importance of satisfaction in a relationship, especially one that is collaborative, has long been established (Benton and Maloni, 2005). However, by examining satisfaction from the supplier's point of view and including both cognitive and affective dimensions of satisfaction, the results of this study provide insight for supply chain managers, specifically in terms of the role of supplier satisfaction in building a collaborative BSR and then leveraging it for competitive advantage. Supplier satisfaction is as important as buyer satisfaction for maintaining collaboration (Benton and Maloni, 2005; Huo et al., 2017) and has strategic value to the buying firm (Caniëls et al., 2018). Knowledge of what is important to suppliers within the BSR and what leads to a satisfying relationship for both parties can help to significantly improve supply chain competitiveness, in that a collaborative BSR increases competitive advantage for both the buyer and the supplier (Benton and Maloni, 2005). Furthermore, findings offer direction for buyers seeking to avoid the negative consequences that can result from supplier dissatisfaction (e.g. poor quality products that can have negative implications for the buyer's sales performance as well as profitability). From the supplier's perspective, awareness of the extent to which their satisfaction is impacted by the power-dependency structure operating within the BSR can help them to avoid becoming too dependent on buyers who are seeking transaction-driven exchanges rather than collaboration for a long term.

Limitations and future research

Although this study makes important contributions to the supply chain literature, it is limited in its focus on suppliers operating in one area of China. Likewise, the study focuses specifically on the ASC. Both limitations mean that generalizations based on the data, including to other countries and industry contexts, should be made with caution. Due to the limited research on supplier satisfaction in the extant SCM literature, further empirical examination of the distinctions between affective and cognitive satisfaction dimensions as related to collaboration in the BSR is needed. The globalized nature of apparel and other industries points to the need for using different methods of data collection and broader samples that span different geographical areas to understand satisfaction and collaboration within different cultural or situational contexts. As a collaborative BSR is heavily influenced by the power of one relationship actor and the relative dependency of the other, further empirical study of the dynamics of structural power dependency in relationship satisfaction and collaboration is needed to better understand how a collaborative BSR benefits both parties.

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