

TWO COMPETITIVE STRUCTURES OF RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

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ABSTRACT

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In the Relationship Marketing paradigm the concepts of trust and commitment are frequently under investigation. Even a special Commitment-Trust-theory was proposed by Morgan & Hunt (referred to as M&H) to address the mediating influence of these two concepts. The present study investigates the concept of commitment. The study was initiated by a pilot study testing the Morgan-Hunt construct on industrial marketing data from South-East-Asia. The result of the pilot study emphasised the importance of the two concepts, however the original Key Mediating Variables model (referred to as KMV-model) seems to have some problems of definition. In this study a competitive model of commitment is drawn from recent socialpsychological theory Rusbult (1980 & 1983) investment model. The two commitment constructs are subjected to a test of 329 manufacturer-retailer dyads of a Finish Clothing manufacturer and its retail outlets.

THE CORE DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS OF THE MORGAN & HUNT (1994) MODEL

Morgan & Hunt (1994) propose a “Key Mediating Variables-model” for the description and explanation of relational interaction. According to the authors the model should have its applicability in all marketing relationships, i.e. supplier-, buyer, internal- and lateral partnerships. What the authors further propose is that the presence of relationship commitment and trust are “central to successful relationship marketing...”. Being highly perceptual in orientation the model should tap relational exchanges in cross cultural marketing channels.

The key mediating variables of the model are commitment and trust. The concept of commitment is defined as “...an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant

maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely". Respectively trust is defined as "one party having confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity". Further, the definition of trust is said to resemble the Morman, Deshpande and Zaltmann (1993) definition of trust as "...a willingness to rely on...". Also Rotters (1967) classic definition of "a generalised expectancy ... that can the others word...be relied on" is presented as a reminiscent conceptualisation. Any psychologist would argue, that the definitions of the key mediating variables are a jungle of concepts; Beliefs, willignesses, importance of relationship, maximum efforts, indefinite time span, confidence, reliability, integrity and a generalised expectancy. The very end result of this multitude of psychological concepts is at the very least a confusion. This is especially problematic when trying to apply the model to a cross-cultural dyad in which the symbolic structures of social exchange are different between actors. The perceptual images of the exchange or dyadic partners are different. In such a situation the M&H definitions present the KMV-model vaguely. The cognitive or affective dimensions are present in both the concepts and further seem to be pointing towards a non orthogonal relationship between the two key concepts. If such is the case then we are left with a non-explanation. However as the concepts are seen as key to successful relational exchanges, the problems must be of definitional nature. Further as the original model is based on a bulk of Relationship Marketing literature the definitional problems must also be present in the many of the present day Relationship Marketing discourses.

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

The concept of commitment holds two distinct features;

- a) "an exchange partner believing...", i.e. a belief component.

b) "...that it (relationship) endures indefinitely", i.e. a perceptual time dimension.

Both the belief- and the time-component of the commitment definition seem to point towards a cognitive component of relational interaction. Verbal statements of belief, and verbal statements of time are typical cognitive reactions (Hovland and Rosenberg, 1960).

The concept of trust is seen as composed of three dimensions;

- a) confidence
- b) willingness to rely
- c) an expectancy

The trust concept seems to be composed of affective components of social behaviour even though the signalling of confidence, willingness to rely and expectation are more related to cognitive processes. Our discussion in this sense is reminiscent of that of Smith and Barclay (1997), who "find it meaningful to separate ... trusting behaviours and perceived trustworthiness".

The Key Mediating Variables-model could thus be seen as a cognitive-affective model of relational interaction, although the Morgan & Hunt definitions seem to be confusing. Next a model is proposed, that discusses the cognitive-affective approach to the key mediating variables. The model contains the concepts of the original KMV-model, but is based on modern socialpsychological research. However as the model deals with perceptions it is not a psychological theory, but more a model of industrial marketing exchange.

THE PROPOSED MODEL

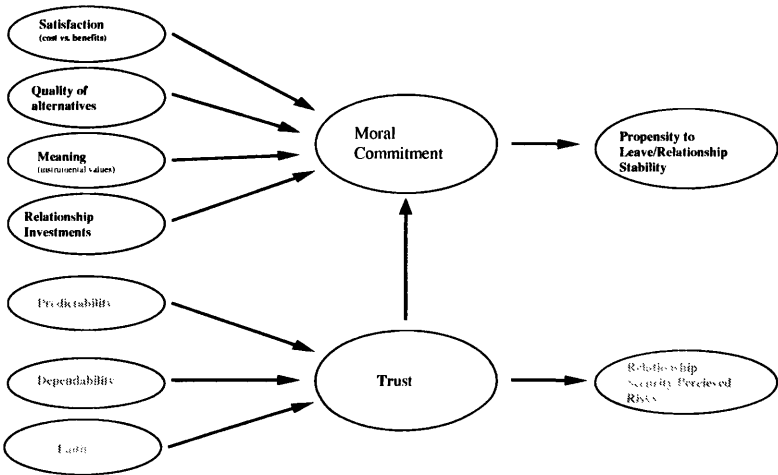


FIGURE 1: The proposed model

The figure presents the whole competitive structure even though in this study only the structure of Commitment is under investigation. The broader presentation is to give an overview of the idea behind the model; To divide the perceptual images an actor has about a relational interaction into Cognitive level evaluations and Affective level evaluations of the relationship. The core idea is thus very simple. The perceptual images, whether unconscious, semi-conscious or conscious are classified into two groups. Those which can be cognitively handled in ones minds and those which are present only vague affections. The model is thus more an inductive classificatory instrument than a full scientific explanation.

Further the cognitive descriptions and evaluations are organised in the manner of the Rusbult, Bui & Peplau investment model. Simultaneously the more vague affective material contain evaluations on three levels past (predictability), present (dependability) and future (faith). The core behind this ideal is the Rempel, holmes & Zanna (1985) definition of interpersonal trust.

RESEARCH EXECUTION

The core idea in the execution of the study is to present the respondent with both the Morgan & Hunt measurement device and the measurement devices related to the competitive model. As the measures are sometimes overlapping, the measurement device was designed in an atomistic manner. The measures can be utilised in both models and further they provide possible double check-up information on whether the questions were understood correctly. The original instruments were first translated to Finnish. The questionnaire form was then discussed with a panel of experts at the company. After minor changes were made, the form was tested with the sales representatives of the company. The questionnaire was then mailed to 329 respondents (companies) in Finland. The results will be ready by June 1998. As they are reported to the clothing manufacturer in their annual marketing meeting.

What the present discussion is aiming at is providing a classificatory initiative. If we were to classify the concepts of commitment and trust as cognitive and affective by their nature they would provide a number of benefits for both the conceptual models and the everyday practitioners. Thus by bridging some gaps between the two separate theoretical disciplines - Relationship Marketing paradigm and Social Psychology we might acquire some clarification into the theories of industrial marketing.

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