



Imprinting, honeymooning, or maturing: Testing three theories of how interfirm social bonding impacts suppliers' allocations of resources to business customers

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ABSTRACT

In business markets, does strength of social bonds that a supplier perceives with a specific customer influence the supplier's allocations of resources relative to other customers? If social bonding does uniquely impact supplier allocation of resources to customers, does the impact vary by relationship duration? Relationship marketing and Homans' framework for social behavior are the theoretical bases for the study, which uses survey data to examine three alternative models that indicate how suppliers' perceptions of social bonds with customers influence the suppliers' allocations of resources over time. Analysis of data from sales and marketing managers confirms that two of these models, the imprinting theory and the maturity theory, are relevant. The findings indicate that relationship managers need to take into account the clear effect that creation of strong social bonds in buyer–seller relationships, as distinct from financial bonds, has on the way in which suppliers allocate resources to those relationships and how relationship duration affects the way in which they do so. The study strengthens the argument, on a strong theoretical base, to adopt a collaborative, as opposed to a transactional, approach to buyer–seller relationships.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

在商业市场中，一个供应商所感知到的与特定客户的社会联系的优势是否会影响该供应商对其他客户的资源分配？如果社会联系确实会对供应商向客户分配资源产生独特的影响，那么该影响是否会因这种关系持续时间的不同而有所变化呢？关系营销和霍曼斯的社会行为框架是本研究的理论基础，本研究使用调查数据来探究三种可供选择的模式，表明供应商对于与客户社会关系的看法是如何随着时间的推移而影响到供应商的资源分配。对来自销售和营销经理的数据进行分析证实，其中的两个模型，即印记理论和成熟度理论，是相关的。研究结果表明，客户经理需要考虑创建强有力的买方与卖方的社会联系将会带来的与财务联系截然不同的确凿的效果，这种效果会影响到供应商，使其在分配资源时考虑到社会关系，同时客户经理还需要考虑这种关系的持续时间是如何影响其工作方式的。本研究以强有力的理论为基础来加强论证，采取一种合作（而非事务性）的方式来探讨买卖双方的关系。

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1. Introduction

This article empirically investigates social behavior influences in interfirm buyer–seller relationships. In order to explain the interplay between social bonds and interfirm resource allocations, the article uses sociological concepts and propositions in combination with other relationship marketing concepts (cf. [Blau, 1964](#); [Håkansson, 1982](#); [Kelley and Thibaut, 1978](#); [Macneil, 1980](#); [Vargo and Lusch, 2004](#)). The study specifically investigates two research

questions. In business markets, does strength of social bonds that a supplier perceives with a specific customer, independently of financial bonds, influence the supplier's allocations of financial, physical, time, and intangible resources to this customer relative to other customers? If social bonding does uniquely and independently impact supplier allocation of resources to customers, how does the impact vary over the duration of the supplier–customer social relationship? Theory indicates that empirical research would affirm a positive answer to the first question and substantial variance in resource allocation due to the duration executives in interfirm social relationships. Questions such as these become important because they relate to the growing interest in mobilization of resources by actors in buyer–seller relationships ([Cantù et al., 2012](#))

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and interest in customer attractiveness (Baxter, 2012; Schiele et al., 2012).

This introduction identifies the key variables of the study, which are social bonds, resources allocated to relationships, and time. Section two of the article presents a review of theory and literature relevant to the link between relationship bonds and resource allocation. Section two also includes formal statements of alternative models of the impact of social bonds on supplier (or customer) allocations of resources and relevant hypotheses. Section three describes the method for examining the models empirically. Section four presents the findings from the study. Section five discusses implications for theory and managing relationships among suppliers and business customers. Section six discusses limitations. Section seven offers conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Theory development

2.1. Theory and research on social bonds among suppliers and business customers

The concept of reciprocity of resource exchange in sociological exchanges (e.g. Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960), in adaptations made by business partners generally (e.g. Williamson, 1975, 1984), and in marketing relationships specifically (Bagozzi, 1995), has led to studies showing high reciprocity frequency in business-to-consumer marketing contexts. The studies show customer loyalty resulting reciprocally from supplier resource inputs (e.g. De Wulf et al., 2001). Theory in business relationship marketing similarly includes the proposition that some pairs of buyers and sellers have strong personal relationships and these pairs are more committed to maintaining the relationship than less socially bonded partners (Wilson, 1995). Survey research studies by Wilson and Mummalaneni (1986) and Mummalaneni and Wilson (1991) support this proposition, although Han and Wilson (1993) find that social bonding did not contribute to buyer–seller commitment in a relatively complex buying context. Rodríguez and Wilson (2002) propose that perceived strength of social bonds affects trust in the business partner positively and that both social bonds and trust influence commitment to the relationship, where two of their measures of commitment ask about their level of inputs into a relationship, which infers greater input of resources of the type this study investigates. Rodríguez and Wilson support these two propositions in analyses of survey data on U.S. and Mexican interfirm strategic alliances.

Relevant theory includes the perspective that psychological antecedents include “personal bonding” or “social bonding” (Han, 1991; Wilson and Mummalaneni, 1986) and social bonds “encompass resources that are emotional or affective in nature. As such, social bonding entails familiarity, friendship, and personal confidence built through interpersonal exchange. Social bonding measures the strength of a personal relationship and may range from business to close, personal ties” (Rodríguez and Wilson, 2002, p. 55). Thus, the concept of social bonding as a resource antecedent in business marketing–customer relationships provides theoretical ground for the proposal that social bonding as a resource associates with the investment of other resources in the relationships. While not referring to social bonding specifically, Anderson (1995) and Anderson and Narus (1991, p. 346, italics in the original) express the view that the prosperity of firms depends on having “close, collaborative, relationships with selected suppliers, customers, and value-added retailers. Thus, management thinking has advanced to gaining a better understanding of *which* firms they ought to engage in these collaborative relationships and *how* to make these relationships work in practice.”

While research on the impact of social bonding on trust and commitment supports the occurrence of interfirm social relationships,

the propositions relating to the association of social bonding with the allocation of other resources and social bonding’s unique influence on the prosperity of the firm are topics for empirical investigation. The empirical literature deals with these issues only to a limited extent. For example, “Industrial Marketing and Purchasing” (IMP) researchers investigate the link between “relationship atmosphere” and resource ties in business-to-business relationships in case analyses (Håkansson, 1982), but not in more generalizable quantitative studies. Researchers do not appear to have studied independence of the effects of financial and social bonds on relationship outcomes in depth.

This study’s H₁ and H₂ derive from the discussion relating to the study’s first research question concerning strength of social bonds and their relationship to supplier allocation of resources. H₁: Social bonding in interfirm relationships has a positive influence on suppliers’ allocation of resources to customers. H₂: The positive social-bonding influence in interfirm relationships on suppliers’ relative allocation of resources has an effect that is independent of the impact of financial bonds between customers and suppliers. These hypotheses are precursors to H₃ to H₅, which relate to the second research question about the effect of time on the relationship between bonds and resource allocation. Both social and financial bonds in the study are at the level of the relationship, rather than at the individual level, as the data collection section explains.

H₁ derives from the literature-based indication that social bonding is a resource antecedent to relationship outcomes. In S-DL terms (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), social bonds are very much toward the operant (“acting on”) end of the spectrum of resource types, whereas the resources whose allocation the study assesses as an outcome are more toward the operand (“acted on”) end of the spectrum. The relationship actors, through their social bonds, act on these resources and thereby affect their supply and their exchange. In a longitudinal study comparing relationship marketing theories, Palmatier et al. (2007) find that the RBV provides a unifying view of relationship constructs. On the basis of the RBV, they note that relational norms and consequent relationship bonds lead to sellers’ relationship specific investments (as well as buyers’ relationship specific investments). Specific to the business relationship context of this study, Wilson (1995, figure 2, p. 340), based on Dwyer et al. (1987) and Ford (1990), states that social bonds antecede nonretrievable investments. Specific to this study, the actors’ social bonds will affect the extent to which the supplier will allocate financial, physical, time, and intangible resources to the relationship.

Ford (1980, p. 349) notes that one of the developments over time in a successful relationship is that social distance decreases and also notes that the management of relationships must link to the company’s “allocation of its resources between different relationships according to the likely return.” A range of relationship marketing literature infers that social bonds positively affect the allocation of resources by a seller to a relationship with a buyer, but prior studies do not test this relationship. H₁ is therefore worthy of testing.

Supporting H₂, the limited research into the independence of financial and social bond effects on relationship outcomes in the business-to-business context indicates that though they may be related, they do have distinct effects in the business-to-consumer context, for example in Ahmad and Buttle’s (2001) research. Similarly, Berry and Parasuraman (1991) describe a hierarchy of increasing effectiveness from financial bonding alone through to the highest level where financial, social, and structural bonding are employed. Turnbull and Wilson (1989), in an industrial context, discuss the greater strength of structural bonds than social bonds, and allude to the lower effectiveness of financial bonds. However, apart from assessment of discriminant validity of the bond types from the buyer’s perspective in consumer contexts (Chiu et al., 2005) and their distinct effects on business-to-business relationship outcomes (Palmatier et al., 2006), there is not a great deal of testing of their

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