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Spirituality as an antecedent of trust and network commitment: The case of Anatolian Tigers

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of spirituality in network commitment and trust building through a focus on the specific network context of Anatolian Tigers from Turkey. Despite the previous research employing utilitarian perspectives to explain the antecedents of commitment, the aim here is to understand the role played by spirituality, a higher-order dimension of human life, in commitment at a network level. The study adopts a survey approach. A hundred and twenty questionnaires were conducted through face-to-face meetings with owners/managers of the sample firms. A partial least squares (PLS) path modelling approach is employed to examine relationships through a 'soft-modelling' analysis, using SmartPLS 3. The results empirically confirm that spirituality operates as a significant antecedent of network commitment and trust in the context of networks among Anatolian Tigers. Furthermore, it is found that neither the length of membership nor the firm size has any significant effect on network commitment. The paper contributes to the understanding of antecedents of network commitment by going beyond traditional economic perspectives whose argument, historically, has been that commitment is driven by utilitarian, profit- and utility-maximizing motivations and economic self-interests.

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1. Introduction

Turkey, as the first Muslim country to bid for European Union (EU) membership, was officially recognized as an EU candidate in December 1999 (Demirbag, Glaister, & Tatoglu, 2007; Hughes, 2004). Within the Islamic world, Turkey is a unique democratic and secular country whose population is predominantly Muslim (Karakas, Sarigollu, & Kavas, 2015). It acts as a bridge between West and East, combining cultural elements from each, and has historically been an important economic and political ally of the EU. It is also one of the biggest trading partners of the EU, with a liberalizing market characterized by high economic growth and a rapidly growing population (Demirbag et al., 2007; Kirca, 2011). In addition, its strategic position within close proximity to the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe creates exclusive economic and business opportunities (Demirbag et al., 2007). The Turkish context provides

an interesting research setting given its idiosyncratic characteristics as an EU candidate and a Muslim country following a Western-style market economy.

Recently, in Turkey, a rapidly growing number of firms referred to as Anatolian Tigers have exhibited significant success in both their home and foreign market operations. The Anatolian Tigers are a moderate Islamic group of outward-oriented young entrepreneurial Turkish firms. Their name originates from their geographical location in the new industrial cities of inner Anatolia. They are operating in the booming sectors of the post-1980s, such as textiles, furniture, machinery and consumer products (Hosgör, 2011). The vibrant activity of this new and fairly widespread entrepreneurial breed has spurred economic development and modernization in second- and third-tier cities across Turkey. The success of the Anatolian Tigers has primarily been associated with their effective network mechanisms (Baki Adaş, 2009; Buğra, 2002; Hosgör, 2011). The networks among these firms are especially visible in the relatively economically underdeveloped periphery of Turkey, outside major urban areas such as Istanbul. The networks among the Anatolian Tigers are mainly formed through their membership of specific business associations (MUSIAD⁴ and TUSKON⁵), which are

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characterized, through a common Islamic identity, as representing a binding force fostering cooperation, solidarity and trust among members (Buğra, 1998; Hosgör, 2011) and enabling them to form 'a "powerful network based upon trust-relations" among Islamic economic actors' (Keyman & Koyuncu, 2005, p.117). The case of the Anatolian Tigers offers an interesting study context for investigating the underlying elements that have contributed to this success story. Although previous research has emphasized the role of effective network mechanisms as a significant antecedent of their remarkable progress, there is still a need for deeper and more comprehensive research exploring the idiosyncratic characteristics of these networks.

Social, economic and organizational actors are embedded in various dynamic systems of network relations. Whereas some types of networks are naturally created, such as family ties, most are formed under certain intentions and motivations from the actors, and particular antecedent conditions of networks are associated with specific outcomes (Oliver & Ebers, 1998). Commitment, among other factors, has been considered the key determinant of effective network outcomes (Clarke, 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The significant role it plays opens up the question of 'what motivates individuals to commit themselves into networks', as different underlying elements of commitment lead to distinct network outcomes. Most of the previous approaches to networks have treated individuals as the perfectly rationale 'homo-economics' (economic man), whose involvement in networks is driven by utilitarian, profit- and utility-maximizing motivations and the achievement of their economic self-interests, as networks are accepted as being efficient tools for accessing information, knowledge, resources and other benefits. For instance, Blau (1964, p.91), in his social exchange theory, argued that individuals' actions are motivated 'by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others'. It is also argued in the resource-dependence literature that economic actors seek their self-interest and act in opportunist ways, through which they can gain resources and maximize their utility, even if this comes at the expense of other parties (Provan & Milward, 1995; Ring, 1997). As an illustration of the utilitarian perspective on network commitment, Park and Luo (2001, p. 457), in their research focusing on the guanxi networks of China, demonstrated that 'guanxi is utilitarian...based entirely on the exchange of favours, not an emotional attachment'. Similarly, in their liability-of-outsidership perspective on firm internationalization, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) argued that actors aim to commit to targeted networks in order to build insiderhip positions through which they can acquire necessary information and resources for internationalization.

However, as indicated by Rego and Cunha (2008), humans, who are the core element of any network relationship, are not only rational but also spiritual and emotional beings and deeply motivated by higher-order spiritual dimensions of life. Spirituality is likely to motivate humans to a greater extent than material returns, as spiritually motivated individuals tend to devote more effort, time and energy to contribute to, preserve and protect whatever they perceive to be sacred based on their spiritual value systems. Despite the recent, widespread interest in the role of spirituality in commitment, previous empirical research on the relationship has stayed entirely at a unidimensional, organizational level, investigating the commitment of employees to their organizations and revealing that spiritually motivated individuals have greater organizational commitment, loyalty and job satisfaction (Bandsuch & Cavanagh, 2005; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003). In today's networked marketplaces, in which social and economic actors are embedded within various types of networks, it is also important, even necessary, to reveal how and to what extent spirituality

affects commitment at the network level. Also, as stated by Clarke (2006, p. 1185), 'we still know very little regarding the particular antecedent conditions that give rise to commitment in networks', and he called for further studies identifying 'different antecedent conditions that may foster commitment at the inter-organizational level' (p. 1199). Following Clarke's research call and by focusing on the networks among Anatolian Tigers, this research extends the boundaries of the existing research, by importing spirituality into the network commitment research context, and contributes to the literature in two ways: Firstly, it proposes spirituality as a significant antecedent condition of network commitment, and secondly, it extends spirituality-commitment research from the organizational to the network level. It also demonstrates to what extent the relationship between spirituality and network commitment is mediated by trust.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The second section reviews the conceptual background on network commitment, spirituality and trust. The conceptual model and hypotheses are developed in the subsequent section. After that, the proposed model is tested through partial least squares (PLS) path modelling. We then present the results of the analysis, followed by a discussion, conclusions, and implications for further research.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Understanding the spirituality–commitment relationship at the network level

Networks are shaping the global business environment nowadays (Parkhe, Wasserman, & Ralston, 2006). Previous approaches considering firms as autonomous atomistic actors are becoming increasingly inadequate in today's world of firms that are embedded in various relationships with other actors, while traditional markets are being replaced by networks of interrelated firms (Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000; Möller & Halinen, 1999). The focus of organizational and management studies has recently shifted 'away from individualist, essentialist and atomistic explanations toward more relational, contextual and systemic understandings' (Borgatti & Foster, 2003, p. 991). Besides this, firms are now being considered networks of internal and external relationships, which go beyond the traditional understanding of organizational boundaries (Larson, 1992; Rowley, 1997). In parallel with the shift from an atomistic firm-centric focus to network perspectives, within the management field, we believe that the commitment phenomenon should be studied by means of a similar path – a shift to the network level – in order for firms' conduct and performance to be fully understood. Previous commitment research primarily focused on organizational commitment as a unidimensional construct dealing with the identification and involvement of an individual within an organization (Clarke, 2006). Commitment was considered an underlying bond or attachment between employee and organization (Clarke, 2006). Most of the studies employing the notion of commitment have mostly investigated the relationship between it and its performance outcomes at both firm and employee levels (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Focusing entirely on the unidimensional commitment of employees at the organizational level within traditional organizational boundaries lacks the potential of commitment research, particularly at the network level. Building on the fact that firms' performance and behaviours are highly affected by the networks in which they are embedded (Dyer & Singh, 1998), and that commitment significantly affects network outcomes (Clarke, 2006; Holm, Eriksson, & Johanson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), it is important, even necessary, to shift the focus of commitment research to the broader network level. The shift in the

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