

Exploratory Qualitative Study of Inter-Organizational Commitment in a Specific B to B Context

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Abstract

This research examines the mutual commitment in inter-organizational relationships between distributors and suppliers belonging to a diverse network in which we find integrated distributors and other independents. The substance of the commitment is analyzed according to the three components of the commitment transposed into BtoB relationships: normative, calculative and affective commitment. The findings of an exploratory qualitative study conducted with 10 professionals from the same network show that the intensity of inter-organizational relationships differs according to these three concepts of commitment, and where trust seems to be a fundamental part of the relationship in this context of an mixed network. Likewise, the findings reveal the absence of differences in terms of commitment depending on whether the distributor is integrated or independent.

Keywords: Mixed network, B to B relationships, commitment, trust, qualitative research.

JEL classification: M31.

Introduction

For Nagati, Rebolledo and Cheour (2018), increasing the commitment of distributors is considered by manufacturers as a fundamental element in the distributor-supplier relationship. Distributors have always represented a link between consumers and manufacturers, and their cooperation is essential to achieve the objectives of both parties. Without their cooperation, manufacturers would have major difficulties in selling their products to final consumer (Lin and Chen, 2008). In Business to Business (BtoB), the literature distinguishes independent distributors from integrated distributors. These integrated distributors, unlike independent distributors, are "members" of a network and often have a close collaboration for the optimization of supply management with their network suppliers. There is a link of subordination between the head of the network and the points of sale in an integrated distribution system, which executes the decisions (Chanut and Poirel, 2012), while the independents have complete freedom in their decision-making process. Several studies have shown the superiority of mixed networks over franchised or branch networks in terms of innovation, cost reduction and network survival (Perrigot, 2009). However, the role of commitment in these mixed networks remains unexplored. It therefore seems relevant to question the notion of commitment according to the status of the distributor. The commitment of distributors is effectively essential to stimulate the efforts of manufacturers to increase their market share. The behavior of distributors may vary in particular if they belong to a network or not. Through its dimensions (calculated, normative and affective), the concept of commitment has been explored in the BtoB literature (Kelly, 2004), but to our knowledge, they are not studied in a specific mixed network context. This research, purely exploratory and original because little or not studied, aims to analyze the different dimensions of commitment

and their relationship to trust (Padgett, Hopkins and Williams, 2020; Gounaris, 2005), between an industrial complex and his distributors in a mixed network. Thus, the research question is: Are there differences in the perception of commitment between integrated units and independent units within the same mixed network and what are the consequences in terms of trust? The objective of the research is to determine the weight of the different dimensions of commitment in a mixed network according to the status of the distributor, but also to study their link to trust in this BtoB context. The results should allow us to make some theoretical contributions related to the adoption of a mixed type network, depending on the type of commitment, the status of the distributor and the nature of relationships between suppliers and distributors.

Literature review: definition of commitment in a BtoB context

Few researchs formally distinguish commitment according to the BtoC (Business to Consumer) or BtoB context (Brown, Crosno and Tong, 2019 ; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). For example, Dwyer and al. (1987) study the relationship between buyer and seller in BtoB through 5 phases including commitment. In BtoC marketing, commitment in reference to the theory of commitment (Kiesler, 1971), has been applied in the context of sales (Joule and Beauvois, 1989) for transactional episodes or even products; in relationship marketing (Julienne, 2013) for complaint behaviors (Ladwein and Crié, 2002) and in a relationship context on the Internet for pre-accepted emails (Yildiz, 2007). In BtoB, research focuses on the customer - supplier relationship (Bennett and Gabriel, 2001) or even inter-organizational relationships in distribution chains (Kumar and al., 1995). Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1988) highlight in a service-marketing context that "relationships are built on the basis of mutual commitment". Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992) define commitment as "*relationships are built on the basis of mutual commitment*". According to these authors, a relationship remains interesting, even if a competing supplier outperforms the incumbent supplier's functional value offering. Therefore, the commitment goes beyond simple financial gain, taking more into account the relational value of this commitment. In a business relationship, commitment is then considered as a psychological variable, which forms an attitude in maintaining a relationship with a business partner (Wetzels, Ruyter and Van Birgelen, 1998) and is manifested by the willingness to invest resources in the relationship. The willingness of one partner to continue the relationship with the other is so important that it merits maximum efforts to maintain it indefinitely (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). From these works cited earlier, we adopt the paradigm according to which the commitment is defined according to three components: affective commitment, normative commitment and calculated commitment.

Affective commitment

According to Sharma, Young and Wilkinson (2006), affective commitment includes "the desire to develop and strengthen a relationship with another person or group because of familiarity, friendship, and personal confidence built through interpersonal interaction over time.". In a BtoB relationship, Geyskens and al. (1996) state that emotionally engaged customers continue the relationship because they enjoy working with their suppliers. Affective commitment is also qualified as a desire to improve relationships with partners through the affection, friendship and trust developed through interactions (Čater and Čater, 2010). For Lincoln and Kalleberg (1992), this type of commitment is also the state of attachment to a partner experienced as a feeling of allegiance and loyalty and reflects a strong desire to continue

the relationship. Highly emotionally engaged clients will stay in the relationship as they wish, with allegiance taking precedence over economic rationality.

Normative commitment

Sharma, Young and Wilkinson (2006) consider normative commitment as an attachment due to an obligation informally imposed by the partner. This commitment reflects a strength that links a customer to the supplier because of a perceived obligation. For Geyskens and al. (1996), a normatively engaged company continues the relationship because she has to do it due to moral imperatives. The normative commitment then represents the idea that the relationship between the customer and the partner would endure through felt obligations (Čater and Čater, 2010). In this case, it is a commitment that would only hold the parties by obligation or by standard (Fullerton, 2011).

Calculated commitment

This commitment is based on rational motives by emphasizing the costs of termination or change (Geyskens and al., 1996). It is a kind of binding force that can bind the customer to his supplier out of necessity (Bansal, Irving and Taylor, 2004). Thus, this commitment is based on the perceived structural constraints and the opportunism that bind the company to its partner and not on an examination of the future possibilities offered by the latter (Tse, Wang and Zhang, 2019). This link with the partner is seen as an understanding of the sacrifices associated with termination, disruption and difficulty switching partners, as well as the loss of sunk investments (Padgett, Hopkins and Williams, 2020; Sharma, Young and Wilkinson, 2006). Kim, Kim, and Lee (2018) add that partners calculate whether the benefits of maintaining the relationship outweigh the losses from a potential termination in this type of commitment. Calculated commitment then represents a negative motivation to continue the relationship, as opposed to emotional commitment according to Roghanian and Gheysari (2013). However, the calculated commitment is motivated by the rupture constraints between two partners and can be strategically positive. Finally, the commitment must be mutual and seen from the point of view of both parties.

Interdependence between Commitment and Trust

Beyond commitment, trust is an important element in describing the nature of a relationship and is based on three components: credibility, benevolence and integrity (Gurviez and Korchia, 2002). Credibility promotes a long-term relationship provided the supplier has the necessary expertise to meet its obligations. Likewise, benevolence only acts if the retailer believes that the supplier has intentions that will benefit them in the long term. Finally, integrity represents respect of the company in its promises and commitments. According to Wilson (1995), trust refers to the belief that one partner in the relationship will act in the best way in the interest of the other. It represents the basis of a healthy relationship and rewarding exchanges, while reducing the feeling of insecurity. On the basis of mutual trust, the parties can achieve a higher level of commitment and more "personal resources" are exchanged.

According to Padgett, Hopkins and Williams (2020), trust and commitment can be seen as two interrelated concepts. The authors consider that it is essential to consider trust in order to finely define relational commitment and the dependence that can be established between distributors and suppliers. Hessling, Åsberg and Roxenhall (2018) add that trust is significantly associated with commitment if the different parts show a willingness to continue the relationship. Moreover, in the relational approach to collaboration between companies (Dyer and Singh, 1998), trust and commitment are considered to be the *sine qua non* conditions of collaboration (Brown, Crosno and Tong, 2019 ; Jouny-Rivier and Ngobo, 2016; Morgan and

Hunt, 1994). Commitment and trust then encourage partners to preserve relational investments by cooperating and to resist attractive short-term alternatives in favor of long-term expected benefits with existing partners. Trust tends the different actors to focus more on 'positive' motivation because of their sense of belonging and identification, which may lead to less focus on the calculated reasons for attachment to a supplier (De Ruyter, Moorman and Lemmink, 2001).

Methodological Framework

In order to respond to our research question, the methodological framework is based on a first exploratory qualitative study in order to highlight the importance of the dimensions of the commitment likely to influence the relationship between a supplier of professional paints and distributors specialized within the same mixed network. This study can allow the deepening of knowledge relating to the potential interactions between commitment and trust. The methodological choice therefore naturally fell on semi-structured interviews, which allow us to deepen the research axis.

For that, this study is based on interview guide segmented into three themes (Appendix A): "definition and perception of the network", "influences of the network on BtoB commitment" and "effects of BtoB commitment within a network". The first theme helps to understand the particularities of the network studied and understand each respondent's role within this network as an independent or integrated distributor. The second theme identifies the perception these professionals have of BtoB commitment in this specific context of a mixed network, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of joining. The last theme tends to study the effects of commitment on trust, loyalty, satisfaction or even relationships between members. All the questions are open questions, responding to an ethical approach. And the semi-directive questioning approach is adopted according to the recommendations of Andréani and Conchon (2005). The sample has 10 members of the same mixed network on the paint market: 6 distributors with integrated status and 4 independent distributors (Appendix B). Although this sample is relatively small, we have a semantic saturation threshold, which is mainly explained by the BtoB context of our research.

An inductive thematic content analysis was carried out using the Nvivo 11 software. This method uses a hierarchical classification by theme and subtheme (Bardin, 2003). The interviews are coded separately and sequentially according to an inductive coding technique (Miles et al., 2014) making it possible to classify the data by analogy of meaning in the different categories. The emerging themes of the analysis are thus compared, highlighting the essential points and reinforcing the validity of the analyzes carried out. This inference process thus identifies the three dimensions of engagement and their relationship to commitment. The inductive content analysis commonly used in qualitative and exploratory studies here aims to establish links between the research objectives and the categories resulting from the analysis of the raw data, but can also to bring out new emerging categories, thanks to the speeches of the respondents. This analysis makes it possible to approach the academic literature mobilized in a specific context of a mixed network, but also to propose perspectives for future research following emerging categories (Blais and Martineau, 2006).

Findings

The concept of BtoB commitment in this context of a mixed network is indeed strongly present and several axes should be highlighted. Thus, the three components of commitment are exposed and particularly their links to the concept of trust.

First, within the framework of the mixed network studied, it seems important to emphasize that a **normative commitment** is perceived by the respondents following their

company's membership in the network. However, this normative commitment is not based on any written and signed contract, which commits the member to professional and legal obligations. The member could perceive it as a positive normative commitment: “*we don't retain them contractually, if someone wants to leave, he leaves [...] from the moment they develop, [we] accompany them in their development, there is no reason for them to stop*”(E1). Thus, membership of this network is considered (in)formal without the need for a contract and is accepted by all members “*to form one*”: “*no contract but by definition, we don't no longer ask the question*”(E5). Respondents speak of “*partners*” and not of customers or suppliers. This normative commitment tends towards “*benevolence*” (E5) and therefore towards **mutual trust** between members: “*it's a relationship of trust*” (E10).

This positive normative commitment, linked to trust, will next strongly influence the **calculated commitment**, based on the calculation of costs and benefits (Zhao and al, 2008). In fact, the findings show that with this trust linked to the network, a saving of time is observed and consequently the utility of the network is increased: “*we need to trust them in order to save time so that we don't need to discuss what they are doing but rather move forward towards our customers and develop sales*”(E4); “*We are part of a group, to have confidence, [...] I don't ask myself the question, it's so obvious*” (E3). The benefits of this network are then attributable to both sides, not hesitating to make sacrifices in favor of the well-being of the partner: “*with a lambda supplier, we have a rather selfish notion. On the other hand, with [a partner], we are probably more cool from the moment we say to ourselves: it is also in his interest*”(E3); “*We are an integrated [mixed] network, compared to independents who perhaps have a little less scruples where they think more about satisfying their sales; us, we think more about finding solutions. [...] Let it be win-win*”(E10).

The concept of network promote a calculated positive commitment in the general interest of the network (Sharma, Young and Wilkinson, 2006; Čater and Čater, 2010): “*with another industrial, we are less tolerant, we take care of more details that we don't watch with [our partner]. For him, we trust, if there is a small problem, we don't necessarily report it*” (E4). In addition, an advantage emerges in terms of calculated commitment, it is the possibility of exchanging expertise: “*Synergy that we intend to develop because there is know-how at [our partner] that we want to develop here*”(E5). Thus, the mixed network influences the commitment between partners, towards a positive normative and calculated commitment based on the trust between members to obtain the best of both parties: “*customer commitment is the trust and development of our two companies, which ultimately form only one, so it's to make the other succeed*”(E4). We can thus formulate the following proposition:

Proposition 1: The impact of organizational commitment on trust differs according to the dimensions of the commitment.

In this context of a mixed network, it seems important to question any differences depending on the status of the distributor, whether it is integrated or independent. Respondents 5, 6, 7 and 9 are independent distributors (Appendix B), and no difference can be noted compared to integrated distributors, whether for the normative commitment: “*we are part of the same compagny [...], there is continuity*” (E5); “*They do their best so that we can take business*” (E6); “*We don't have a choice, so it's just like that. We work in symbiosis*” (E7); or the commitment calculated: “*with the same payment at the end*” (E5); “*It's a partnership [...], sometimes we need them... sometimes they can't organize themselves but they do their best so that we can take business*” (E6); “*We commit to buying their products, they commit to quality. It's a mutual commitment. Their result matters to me as much as mine.*” (E7). Likewise for the relationship of commitment to trust, the findings of the data analysis point in the same direction for independent and integrated distributors: “*we have complete trust*” (E5, E6); “*We work in a*

relationship of trust, their success will make our success” (E7); “I try to be the perfect partner for them since they give me their trust” (E9).

The content analysis performed therefore shows no difference in commitment depending on the status of the distributor (integrated or independent) within the mixed network studied. This makes it possible to make the following proposition:

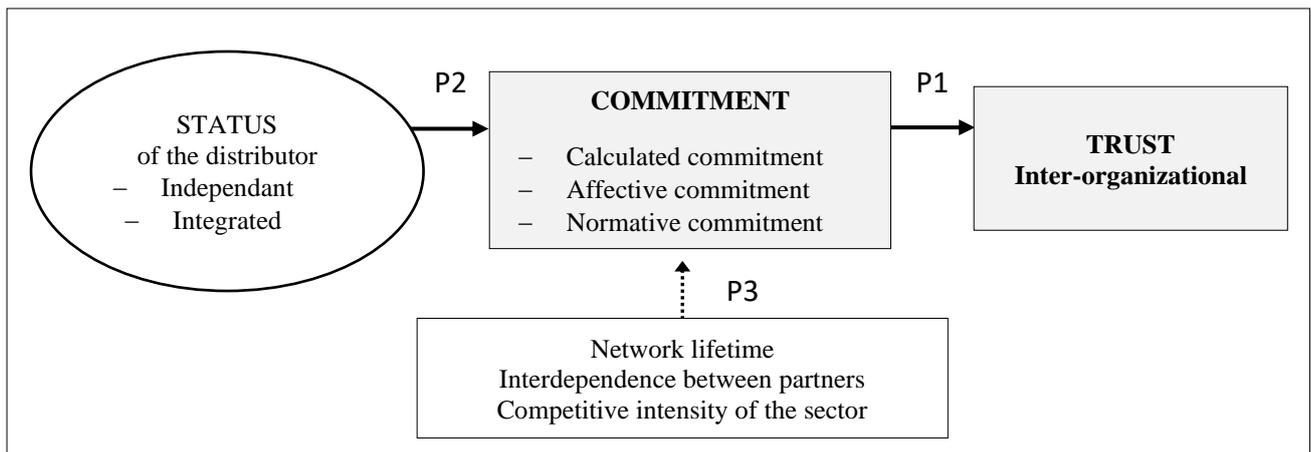
Proposition 2: The status of the distributor in a network influence (or not) the intensity of his commitment to the network.

Regarding the **affective component**, it appears sparingly in the analysis, and more precisely the feeling of loyalty between members, according to the definition of Jaros and *al.* (1993). Indeed, the commitment is mutualized, necessarily inducing loyalty between partners and therefore a certain loyalty: *“our development of business goes hand in hand with the turnover of our supplier so we are also committed to [his] development [...] I don't ask myself whether I should be faithful”*(E3). The same goes for the notion of coherence in the objectives and values of the two companies (Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1992) where promoting the development of the partner company can predominate over economic rationality: *“we can't always stress our provider; it's logical, like us, we don't like to be stressed by our clients”* (E6); *“I try to find solutions internally”* (E10). It appears here that despite the specificities of the mixed network, emotional relationships between customers and suppliers are not very present, in favor of a positive normative and calculated commitment. On this basis, the following proposition can be formulated:

Proposition 3: The intensity of commitment and its impact on trust depends on factors such as the long-term orientation at the head of the network, the interdependence between actors and the competitive intensity in the sector.

Following the presentation of the findings, we can present a summary diagram of the proposals resulting from the research (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Synthetic diagram of the proposals resulting from the findings



The findings allow us to formulate some observations linked to the adoption of a mixed type network, where the alliance is the strength to protect oneself and where no difference is to be noted according to the status of the distributor. Benevolence - a dimension of trust - towards the partner appears as an intrinsic characteristic specific to the mixed network studied. The normative commitment (Čater and Čater, 2010), based on a desire to integrate a network without any legal constraint, turns out to be positive in the sense that the benevolence between partners tends towards a “useful” trust, for integrated distributors or independent. This is consistent with a calculated positive commitment (Kim, Kim and Lee, 2018) where the notion of sacrifices can be present in favor of the well-being of the entire network. However, affective

commitment (Sharma, Young and Wilkinson, 2006) is revealed only in terms of loyalty and well-being between partners. Affect towards the supplier is not in itself "useful", and is therefore not salient in the customer-supplier relationship within the mixed network studied. Integrating a mixed network does not represent any inconvenience for members, favoring positive normative and calculated commitments. Only emotional commitment seems to be minimized and now less important.

Conclusion - Limits and avenues of research

On a theoretical level, this work contributes to the development of the literature on commitment in a context of supplier - distributor relationships, a BtoB context and it allows to deepen the existing interactions between trust and mainly two of the dimensions of commitment (i.e. normative and calculated). Indeed, this exploratory research provides a better understanding of the commitment-trust mechanisms in the case of mixed networks. Likewise, our findings show no difference in perception in terms of commitment depending on whether the distributor is integrated or independent. It also follows that inter-organizational commitment within a mixed network does not depend on the status of the members. As in cooperative and associated networks, we observe a form of solidarity between members, according to Cassous, Cliquet and Perrigot (2016). According to Roche's theory (2016), the performance of one and the performance of the other benefits the overall performance. Therefore, the common good also applies in mixed networks. From managerial recommendations, integrating a diverse network makes it possible to have several advantages: increased trust, time saving, or/and mutualisation of tasks to achieve objectives better. Therefore, this research shows that commitment and trust are at the center of the supplier-distributor relationship. These conclusions can guide manufacturers but also distributors in choosing a BtoB distribution model.

Regarding the limits of the research, emotional commitment is not very present in the interviews of our respondents. Actions could be considered that could increase this commitment within the mixed network, which could be beneficial to the normative and calculated commitment. This constitutes a line of research for the future study. It would also be interesting to compare the weight of affective commitment within a mixed network *versus* partners who do not belong to this type of network. Would the affective side be useless in any mixed network? Another limit is the size of the sample, which can be explained by interviews with BtoB partners within the same network. Then, another research perspective, it would be to study different mixed networks, and potentially in different sectors of activity. This would make it possible to generalize the results and to know whether the conclusions obtained in our qualitative study apply to all mixed networks, whatever the sector of activity. In addition, it would be interesting to compare mixed networks with other types of networks according to their stage of development.

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Appendix A: Interview guide**Theme n°1: Definition and perception of the network**

Sub-themes: Type of distributor; Length of relationship; Nature of relations; Perception of the relationship (perceived value); Membership of the group (date, reasons).

Theme n°2: Influences of the network on BtoB commitment

Sub-themes: Definition of commitment; Perception of its commitment; Type of commitment; Degree of commitment; Expectations; Needs ; Intention to continue the relationship.

Theme n°3: Effects of BtoB commitment within a network

Sub-themes: Evolution of the relationship and the exchanges; Co-creation/Co-design and Co-construction; Improvements and developments envisaged; Changes in trust, loyalty and level of satisfaction; Long-term outlook.

Appendix B: Sample of respondents

(Respondents are classified according to the chronology of the interviews)

Id	Gender	Position at the time of the study	Integrated/independant
E1	M	General manager	Integrated
E2	M	Regional sales manager	Integrated
E3	M	Operational manager	Integrated
E4	F	Regional sales manager	Integrated
E5	M	Sales manager	Independent
E6	M	Distributor manager	Independent
E7	M	Agency manager	Independent
E8	M	Regional sales manager	Integrated
E9	M	Distributor manager	Independent
E10	F	Sales manager	Integrated