ANTECEDENTS OF RELATIONSHIP INTENTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTS: A FACTOR ANALYTICAL APPROACH

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–Abstract–

A growing interest in relationship marketing as a practice and research focus has been witnessed over the last two decades and this was spurred primarily by the need to create sustainable competitive advantage in business-to-customer (B2C)

environments. This has prompted marketers to shift their attention from their short-term transactional business approach to more enduring relationship-building strategies. An extant literature review revealed that limited research studies have been conducted in business-to-business (B2B) settings. This study examined the antecedents of relationship intentions in B2B settings in the South African construction industry, in the Gauteng province. The study is imbedded within a post-positivist approach with the use of a quantitative research design. Data were collected from a structured self-administered questionnaire (n=560) from civil and building contractors. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis were employed to determine possible factors and to establish the data's goodness-of fit to the model. In addition, the reliability as well as validity of the study's measuring instrument was established.

The findings offer support for an eight-factor structure (flexibility, information sharing, trust, fear of relationship loss, forgiveness, expectations and feedback) with 36 items that explain the antecedents of relationship intentions. Moreover, the confirmatory factor results show satisfactory goodness-of fit of the proposed factor structure to the data. In B2B environments, relational partners can leverage these eight relationship intention strategies in order to enhance their association for business longevity. A comprehensive framework has been proposed, which can be used as an archetype to measure and understand the antecedents of relationship intentions within B2B environments.

Key Words: Concrete products, civil and building contractors, relationship intentions, antecedents and exploratory factor analysis

JEL Classification: M31

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL SETTING OF THE STUDY

A growing interest in relationship marketing as a practice and research focus has been witnessed over the previous two decades, (Hoppner, Griffith & White, 2015). However, the actual application of relationship marketing as an approach evades most organisations, as the value of the approach is often understated (Wei, Li, Burton & Haynes, 2013). For this reason, Raciti, Ward and Dagger (2013) stress the need for organisations to review their marketing activities to enable only customers who are eager to participate in relationship building to do so.

The prominence of this study is on the South African B2B concrete product environment in the construction industry. The concrete product environment is an important sector that contributes towards the country's infrastructure expansion and economic growth. The public sector accounts for almost 65 percent of the

concrete construction business, while the rest is accounted for by the private sector. The growth and sustenance of the South African concrete product environment is supported by projects in residential and industrial buildings, as well as civil works primarily funded by government (Bbenkele & Madikiza, 2016).

Most concrete product projects are executed by specialist industry role players, which include property developers, architects, project managers, quantity surveyors, materials suppliers, electrical and mechanical engineers, as well as civil and general building engineering contractors (Benton & McHenry, 2010). In South Africa, concrete products are the second-most utilised construction material after water (Bbenkele & Madikiza, 2016). The concrete product environment within the construction industry of South Africa is subjugated by a few large organisations, which partner with smaller organisations in joint venture working arrangements. Hence, the study purpose is to examine the antecedents of relationship intentions in B2B environments within the South African construction industry, in the Gauteng province.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most organisations spend considerable time, energy and resources trying to acquire new customers (Weinstein, 2002). However, it is commonly believed that the cost of attaining new customers is up to five times more compared to keeping existing customers (Lin, 2013). In view of this, Bateson and Hoffman (2011) argue that instead of constantly trying to acquire new customers, organisations should focus on retaining existing customers as it could result in reduced operational and marketing costs, which translates into increased profitability. For this reason, Zeithmal, Bitner and Gremler (2009) opine that the long-term ability of organisations to create sustainable competitive advantage largely depends on how they utilise their resources to satisfy and retain profitable customers. Thus, Malhotra, Uslay and Ndubisi (2008) consider relationships as the bedrock of B2B marketing. Similarly, Roberts-Lombard, Mpinganjira and Svensson (2017) also note that competition has accentuated the importance of relational exchanges in B2B trade relations.

To yield common benefits for the relational partners in the relationship, Segarra-Moliner-Tena and Sánchez-Garcia (2013) underscore the need for trust, commitment, communication, collaboration and joint planning. According to Han and Hyun (2015), once commercial relations are characterised by trust, an atmosphere of open and honest communication is created in which all parties share their relationship expectations. Nabi (2012) adds that, ideal levels of

expectation echo the confidence and desire of customers, so much so, that customers are not prepared to settle for mediocre service standards (Berndt & Tait, 2012). When relationship partners have a sense of shared expectations, Bojei and Abu (2014) note that commitment development and the resultant relationship longevity often translate into sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, Yu, Cadeaux and Song (2017) argue that if organisations can address flexibility, which can be a critical skill that inspires organisations to serve customers with high quality performance, their outcomes in terms of relational norms would ignite functional-specific performances such as product quality and delivery speed. Thus, information sharing amongst the relational partners is also important as it is supposed to stimulate trust and satisfaction (Wickramasinghe & Weliwitigoda, 2011), which are the ingenious fundamentals of relationship quality (Lin, 2013). When organisations share information with their customers, they become well-versed around certain features of the relationship exchange, which translates into customer satisfaction (Tong & Crosno, 2015).

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The successful rollout of government and private sector infrastructure projects largely depends on the proper functioning of the construction materials sector (Bbenkele & Madikiza, 2016). This is hardly the prevailing situation in the South Africa construction industry, which is infiltrated by adversarial relations that are skewed towards a few large organisations (Benton & McHenry, 2010). Although Kumar, Bohling and Ladda (2003) initially proposed that relationship intention should be studied in the B2B setting, to date, most previous relationship marketing studies that took place in South Africa focused mainly on relationship intentions within B2C markets. Comparatively, very little research has explored long-term relationship building intentions in the B2B context, more so within the construction industry. While relational exchanges have been investigated in a range of industries in a B2B context, there is insufficient indication of its use in the South African construction industry.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research design and methodology

The nature of this study is cross-sectional, embedded within a post-positivist approach.

4.2. Sample and data collection method

In drawing the sample size, the Construction Industry Development Board list of registered organisations was used as a sample frame, wherein 2 567 organisations were listed and a sample size of 600 respondents were selected through a systematic random sampling procedure. The target population of this study comprised civil and building construction organisations operating within the Gauteng province, due to its prominence as an economic hub of the country. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire.

4.3. Measuring instrument

The research questionnaire used to gather data covered two sections. Section A contained demographic-related questions. Section B contained the items adapted from the scales of Morgan and Hunt (1994), Kumar *et al.* (2003) and Hsu, Kannan, Tan and Leong (2008) to measure the antecedents of relationship intentions. A five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree was employed to measure the items.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Sample composition

An examination of the respondents' demographic profile confirms that a greater part of responses was derived from procurement managers (n=205; 36.6%), followed by site managers (n=125; 22.3%), quantity surveyors (n=75; 13.4%), construction project managers (n=71; 12.7%), managing directors (n=67; 12%), and others (n=17; 3%). The majority of the respondents (n=196,35%) have been supporting their preferred concrete product manufacturer (CPM) for a period of one year or longer, followed by n=120 (21.4%) who supported their CPM for less than a period of one year.

5.2. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Prior to the factor analysis, the Kaizer-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, as well as the Bartlett's test of sphericity were measured to establish if the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Table 1 confirmed that forms of correlation tests were satisfactory and factor analysis was suitable to apply on the data set (Malhotra, 2010). Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was undertaken to establish the factors that contribute to the antecedents of relationship intentions, as perceived by the relationship managers of the civil and building organisations on the data set. Table 1 presents the rotated factor matrix, that demonstrate factors and their items, including the factor loadings.

Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

No	Subscale items	Factor loadings	Eigenvalue	Total variance explained	Cumulative variance explained
FLEXIBILITY			10.394	14.645	14.645
1	If a situation where we have different assumptions about our agreement arises, our current CPM is prepared to work out a suitable new deal.	.821			
2	When unforeseen circumstances arise, and we disagree on how to continue, our current CPM is ready to work out an acceptable new deal to both of us.	.821			
3	Our current CPM is open to modify our agreement should unforeseen events transpire.	.807			
4	If our views differ concerning events in our relationship, our current CPM is prepared to develop a common understanding.	.788			
5	Our current CPM is open to the idea of making changes, even after we have made an agreement	.757			
6	In this relationship, our current CPM makes it possible for us to make adjustments to cope with change	.751			
7	Flexibility in response to appeals for changes is a characteristic of our current CPM.	.714			
INFORMATION SHARING/EXCHANGE			4.226	12.778	27.422
8	In our relationship, we are expected to share any information that might assist the other party.	.813			
9	In our relationship, we are expected to continuously inform one another about occasions or events which may affect the other party.	.810			
10	We inform our current CPM beforehand of our changing needs.	.793			
11	We share exclusive information with our current CPM.	.764			

No	Subscale items	Factor loadings	Eigenvalue	Total variance explained	Cumulative variance explained
12	Our current CPM share with us exclusive information (such as, products research development phase).	.728			
13	In our relationship, we are expected to only provide each other with information according to the pre-specified agreements.	.681			
14	Our current CPM keeps us well informed regarding issues that affect our business relationship.	.610			
TRUST			2.578	9.296	36.718
15	In our relationship, our current CPM can be trusted to do what is right.	.747			
16	In our relationship, our current CPM is always faithful.	.706			
17	In our relationship, our current CPM has high integrity.	.673			
18	In our relationship, our current CPM is an organisation that we have great confidence in.	.607			
19	In our relationship, our current CPM can be trusted at times.	.574			
20	In our relationship, our current CPM can be trusted completely.	.544			
21	In our relationship, our current CPM can be trusted at times.	.528			

			2.113	7.262-	43.980
FEAR OF RELATIONSHIP LOSS			2.113	7.262-	43.980
22	We are concerned to lose quality products of our current CPM by moving to another CPM.	.838			
23	We are concerned to lose our relationship with our current CPM by switching to another CPM.	.817			
24	We are concerned that we may lose special privileges of our current CPM by switching to another CPM.	.814			
FORGIVENESS			1.934	7.182	51.162
25	We will forgive our current CPM if their product quality is lower than the standard, we expect from them.	.830			
26	We will forgive our current CPM should their product quality be lower than the standard of other CPMs.	.788			
27	We will forgive our current CPM should we experience bad service from them.	.799			
INVOLVEMENT			1.707	7.043	58.206
28	We care about the image of our current CPM.	.866			
29	We are proud when we see our current CPM's name or advertising materials.	.817			
30	We are proud to be a customer of our current CPM.	.816			
EXPECTATIONS			1.505	6.275	64.481
31	We expect our current CPM to offer us more value for our money compared to other CPMs.	.886			
32	We expect our current CPMs products to be better than other CPMs.	.839			
33	We expect our current CPM to offer us value for our money.	.837			
FEEDBACK			1.004	6.244	70.725
34	We will tell our current CPM if their products quality meets our expectations.	.818			
35	We take time to inform our current CPM about their product quality with the intent of improving product quality.	.758			
36	We will tell our current CPM if their products are better than what we expect.	.752			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy=0.899; Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at p<0.000, with chi-square=13077.870 and 630 degrees of freedom. Cumulative explained variance with a seven-dimension structure =70.725 percent.					

5.3. Assessment of the measurement model

Following the factor extraction process using the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by means of AMOS 24.0 was undertaken to authenticate the measurement model. The study employed the acceptable thresholds of model fit indices recommended by Kline (2011) as shown by Table 2.

Table 2: Measurement Model Fit Results

Fit indices	Acceptable fit indices	CFA results *(Measurement model)*	Decision
Chi square/degree of freedom (CMIN/DF)	<3.0	2.422	Acceptable
Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	> 0.90	0.918	Acceptable
Incremental fit index (IFI)	> 0.90	0.904	Acceptable
Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)	> 0.90	0.900	Acceptable
Comparative fit index (CFI)	> 0.90	0.903	Acceptable
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	< 0.08	0.050	Acceptable

The CFA results confirm that satisfactory results were delivered and the overall fit of the measurement models are acceptable.

5.4. Correlation and descriptive analysis

Prior to using correlation analysis, tests for data normality were conducted. The results confirmed that data were not normally distributed, thus, the non-parametric Spearman's correlation coefficients (r) was computed (Malhotra, 2010). Table 3 presents the outcomes of the correlation analysis.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

FACTORS	FLE	INF	TRU	FEA	FOR	INV	EXP	FEE
Flexibility (FLE)	1	.444**	.466**	.430**	.543**	.230**	-.041	.386**
Information sharing/exchange (INF)	.444**	1	.216**	.521**	.377**	.034	-.015	.138**
Trust (TRU)	.466**	.216**	1	.328**	.427**	.438**	.109**	.466**
Fear of relationship loss (FEA)	.430**	.521**	.328**	1	.375**	-.023	-.018	.179**
Forgiveness (FOR)	.543**	.377**	.427**	.375**	1	.072	.029	.255**
Involvement (INV)	.230**	.034	.438**	-.023	.072	1	.131**	.178**
Expectations (EXP)	-.041	-.015	.109**	-.018	.029	.131**	1	.120**
Feedback (FEE)	.286**	.138**	.466*	.179**	.255**	.178**	.120**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 3 unveils results confirming low to moderate yet positive inter-factor correlation associations between the relationship intentions ranging from r= .015 to r=.644 at p< 0.01 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), indicating the convergence between the antecedents.

5.5. Reliability and validity

Table 4 presents the reliability and validity values of the constructs examined in this study.

Table 4: Composite Reliability and Accuracy Analysis Statistics

Research constructs	Cronbach's alpha test		CR	AVE	Factor loading	Highest SV
	Item-total	Alpha value				
Fear of relationship loss	0.668	0.906	0.90	0.75	0.89	0.41
Trust	0.612	0.830	0.83	0.42	0.69	0.22
Flexibility	0.801	0.942	0.94	0.68	0.78	0.30
Forgiveness	0.809	0.892	0.89	0.74	0.76	0.16
Involvement	0.720	0.838	0.84	0.64	0.81	0.05
Expectation	0.700	0.825	0.83	0.62	0.82	0.02
Feedback	0.660	0.793	0.79	0.56	0.76	0.06
Information sharing	0.644	0.892	0.88	0.50	0.68	0.31

For all measurement items, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and the composite reliability (CR) values, both surpassed the permissible threshold of 0.70 (Kline, 2011). To verify the construct validity, the EFA was assumed for each antecedent of relationship intentions and item-total correlations of beyond the acceptable benchmark 0.50 were generated. Each of the factor loadings surpassed 0.5 threshold and the average variance extracted (AVE) also exceeded the 0.4 yardstick. The discriminant validity was established using the AVE values which were higher than the shared variance (SV) values consistent with Fornell and Larcker's (1981) validation.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Factor 1, **flexibility** (eigenvalue=10.394), extracted 14 percent as the highest to the total variance explained and comprised seven items with factor loadings ranging from 0.714 to 0.821. This sub-dimension has been viewed as one of the competitive implications that the relational partners ought to consider when either placing their orders or scheduling their operations (Awwad & Almahamid, 2008).

Factor 2, **information sharing/exchange** (eigenvalue=4.226), extracted 12 percent as the second highest to the total variance explained and contained seven items with factor loadings ranging from 0.610 to 0.813. The seven items which loaded onto this factor concentrated on the civil and building contractors and their CPMs inclination to share information about issues that affect their business relationship and keep informing each other about incidents that may affect their

relationships (Tong & Crosno, 2015). This argument resonates with Devlin and Bleackley's (1988:20-21) study, which revealed that information sharing is a significant predictor of relationship continuity.

Factor 3, **trust** (eigenvalue = 2.578), extracted 9 percent as the third highest to the total variance explained and involved seven items with factor loadings ranging from 0.528 to 0.747, which dealt with the respondents' level of trust on their CPMs service delivery and product performance. Liljander and Roos (2002) also found that customer trust is premised on customer accrued fulfilment and consistent delivery of good quality products and services that meets customer needs, and honest and fair treatment toward the organisation's intentions of satisfying customer.

Factor 4, **fear of relationship loss** (eigenvalue = 2.113), extracted 7 percent as the fourth highest to the total variance explained and loaded three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.814 to 0.838. Items which loaded onto this factor include the civil and building contractors' fear of losing quality products, unique privileges or even their association with the CPM. Jones, Reynolds, Mothersbaugh and Beatty (2007) found that any loss of benefits from the relationship and plausible switching costs increases customer concerns about implications that may occur if their relationship with the organisation ends. Accordingly, those who fear losing their relationship show their relationship intentions (Kumar *et al.,* 2003).

Factor 5, **forgiveness** (eigenvalue = 1.934), also extracted 7 percent to the total variance explained and involved three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.788 to 0.830. Items which loaded onto this factor concentrated on the civil and building contractors' readiness to pardon their CPM for poor quality of products or bad service (La & Choi, 2012). Kim, Ok and Canter (2012) expound that customers who show tolerance of poor product or service delivery are more likely to pardon the transgression and, accordingly, display their inclination to relationship building intentions (Kumar *et al.,* 2003).

Factor 6, **involvement** (eigenvalue = 1.707), similarly extracted 7 percent to the total variance explained and loaded three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.816 to 0.866. This result is in line with findings by Nammir, Marane and Ali (2012:33), that customer involvement in a customer-organisational relationship is largely associated with the supplier organisation's relationship quality. Items which loaded onto this factor focus on the civil and building contractors' level of involvement with their CPM (Ashley, Noble, Donthu & Lemon, 2011). Camra-Fierro, Melero-Polo and Sese (2014) echo that the advantage of customers being

involved with suppliers' operations, is that they are not only providing approvals for improvement, but also endorse their relational partner through confident word-of-mouth to others.

Factor 7, **expectations** (eigenvalue = 1.505), extracted 6 percent as the lowest to the total variance explained and loaded three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.837 to 0.886. Items which loaded onto this factor refer to dealing with the civil and building contractors' expectations of getting value for money from the quality of secondary products offered concomitantly (Pelser & Mostert, 2016). Therefore, customers who expect more from their supplier organisation are keen to improve astute product and service delivery as they display high intent of building their relationship (Kumar *et al.,* 2003).

Factor 8, **feedback** (eigenvalue=1.004), likewise extracted 6 percent to the total variance explained and loaded three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.752 to 0.818. Items which loaded onto this factor determined the civil and building contractors' consistency of feedback towards their CPMs product and service delivery. Wirtz, Tambyah and Mattila (2010) reiterate that positive or negative comments assist organisations to identify strengths and weaknesses, to either be reinforced or avoided in the quest to satisfy customer requirements and improve product and service offerings. Kumar *et al.* (2003:670) note that customers who are more inclined to give positive or negative comments carry high relationship intentions.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study focused on a one product classification (concrete); therefore, the results cannot be generalised to other product classifications. In addition, due to cost restraints, the study was constrained to a B2B setting within the Gauteng province of South Africa, which, accordingly, cannot be generalised to other provinces, suggesting that different outcomes for the antecedents of relationship intention could have emerged if more provinces were included. Future studies might consider extending their examinations across diverse categories of CIDB grades (characterised by different product categories) to provide an enriched understanding of the applicability of customers' relationship intentions in dissimilar B2B environments. Also, future research on some relationship intention factors (information sharing/exchange, flexibility and trust) as they seem to gain high importance on the wake of the fourth industrial technology. It is suggested that these factors should be examined on concrete product user's relationship intentions taking the domain of social media as a tool for relationship building and cultivating loyalists going forward.

8. CONCLUSION

This study's findings provide support for an eight-factor structure (expectations, involvement, trust, forgiveness, feedback, flexibility, information sharing and fear of relationship loss) with 36 items that explain the antecedents of relationship intentions. These findings suggest that the CPM should consider these variables in developing relationships with their civil and building contractors, including other concrete product users.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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