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Measuring the effects of supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents on communication quality and willingness of information sharing, a case study at SES Creative

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Abstract: In a market where the supplier base is decreasing it is very important for buyers to get the most out of their existing suppliers. Preferred customer status is the concept that shows how buyers can get preferential treatment by their suppliers. This status is achieved by being an attractive customer as a buyer, and satisfying your suppliers as a buyer. This is a continuing process working within the theory of social exchange theory. Here expectations are constantly compared to actual outcomes as well as the competition. This research focusses on supplier satisfaction, and the relational antecedents that cause a supplier to be satisfied. This paper explores whether supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents lead to better communication quality and willingness of information sharing by suppliers. This should be seen as benefits that could be gained from preferential treatment. This is researched by a case study at SES Creative. Results show that of the relational antecedents relational behaviour and reliability are the two best indicators as their relation to supplier satisfaction is positive and statistically significant. Communication quality appears to be a reward gained by supplier satisfaction and relational behaviour. Suppliers only seem to be more willing to share information when a buyer behaves in a relational pleasant way, or when a buyer is underperforming the expectations of the supplier. Conclusions from this research show that buyers need to invest in their relational behaviour and reliability in order to create more satisfaction with suppliers. Additionally communication quality and suppliers that are willing to share information are rewards gained by relational behaviour, which is most likely due to buyers being genuine pleasant business partners to work with.

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Preface

Hereby I present my master thesis in order to complete my Master Business Administration, specialised in Purchasing and Supply Management, at the University of Twente.

I researched the topic of preferred customer status, supplier satisfaction, its relational antecedents, and whether communication quality and information sharing are outcomes of supplier satisfaction. For this thesis I worked together with SES Creative as my case company.

Here I would like to thank some people that helped me succeed with my thesis. First of all I would like to thank Dennis Nordsiek for allowing me to write my thesis about SES Creative and its suppliers. He allowed me to use contact information from the suppliers of SES Creative, so I was able to contact these suppliers and asked for their cooperation in my research. This helped me to gather enough data in order to write a meaningful thesis. Furthermore I would like to thank him for his the information and experiences he shared, this helped me to better understand the suppliers SES Creative is working with, as well as how and why these suppliers differ from each other.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisors at the University of Twente. They were always willing to provide me with helpful and meaningful remarks, as well as general feedback. This allowed me to continually improve my thesis, and thus allowed me to submit a thesis contributing to this field of science.

I would also like to thank all the suppliers of SES Creative who were willing to sit down and take the time to fill in my questionnaire. Time is money, yet these people still found the time to fill in the questionnaire and thus helping me with providing meaningful data, allowing me to draw meaningful conclusions and give options for SES Creative to pursue.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family who were always willing to support me. Without their support and believe in me, I would not have been able to complete this research.

Daan Voortman

1. Introduction: Getting ahead of the competition by getting the most out of suppliers

This research aims to understand the buyer-supplier relationship better. In the current market it is important to stay competitive, and staying ahead of the competition. Staying ahead of the competition usually entails that companies make their firms more efficient, cut costs, or higher its profits. In order to accomplish this firms tend to work on these improvements internally, yet there is also a lot to be done externally with the suppliers a firm does business with. This is where the concept of preferred customer status comes in to play. Here buying organisations are competing for the best supplier, the best deal, shared collaborations, and better treatment compared to other buyers to name a few. Schiele, Calvi, and Gibbert (2012, p. 1178) describe this process as researching the “other side” in their study. A result that can be achieved is gaining greater benefits from the suppliers’ resources and capabilities compared to other buyers. This concept is known as preferred customer status, where buyers are seen as preferred customers compared to other buyers. This should lead to preferential treatment by suppliers. Schiele et al. (2012, p. 1181) add that in order to achieve preferred customer status, customer attractiveness and supplier satisfaction are necessary. Customer attractiveness refers to how attractive the buying firm is perceived by suppliers. Supplier satisfaction refers to how satisfied suppliers are with the relation they have with the buying firm. This research focusses on how supplier satisfaction can be achieved, and if supplier satisfaction will lead to better communication quality and willingness of information sharing by suppliers. Most firms are limited in increasing their attractiveness as a buyer, since attractiveness is a concept that is continuously compared to other buyers in the market. Some buyers may lack resources, expertise or time to drastically increase their attractiveness. However supplier satisfaction should be something that can be worked on more effectively, as making suppliers satisfied is not solely dependent on other buyers in the market. In order to know how supplier satisfaction is achieved this paper will dive deeper into the antecedents of supplier satisfaction as discussed by Vos, Schiele, and Hüttinger (2016). Antecedents of supplier satisfaction that were discussed were operative excellence, reliability, support, involvement, availability and relational behaviour. Essig and Amann (2009, p. 106) divided the antecedents of supplier satisfaction into three dimensions. This research focusses on the accompanying level, which includes communication, conflict management, and the general view. All these antecedents are on the relational side, the reason for this is that these antecedents should not be limited to certain industries or markets, but could serve as tool any buyer can use to increase satisfaction among suppliers they want to invest more into.

Knowing what causes supplier satisfaction is only one part of the framework. The whole preferred customer status cycle, with customer attractiveness and supplier satisfaction as its antecedents works within the social exchange theory (SET). This theory is being used by Schiele et al. (2012) and Pulles, Schiele, Veldman, and Hüttinger (2016). Here it becomes clear that social exchange theory is a framework where expectations and outcomes are continuously being compared with each other. In short a relation is being initiated due to the initial attraction a buyer has, then the supplier assesses their satisfaction which leads to three outcomes. A relationship discontinuation, a regular customer, or being a preferred customer. Being a regular customer is the most common outcome, yet being a preferred customer is the most desired outcome as it leads to preferential treatment and thus possibly to better communication quality and suppliers that are willing to share information with buyers. That is why this thesis uses the relational antecedents of Vos et al. (2016) that cause supplier satisfaction. Communication quality and the willingness of information sharing are based on one of five rewards of preferential treatment based on Nollet, Rebolledo, and Popel (2012). One of these rewards is support, and communication quality and willingness of information sharing can be seen as support. The reason this paper focusses on the possible outcomes of better communication quality and suppliers willing to share information as a result of suppliers comes from various reasons. The importance of communication is already being mentioned by Essig and Amann (2009) in their supplier satisfaction index . Furthermore Paulraj, Lado, and Chen (2008, p. 45) describe communication as the essence of organisational life. Wagner and Krause (2009, p. 3163) mention that communication is critical for creating and maintaining value enhancing relationships. It is clear that communication is essential, and the better the communication is, the more likely it is both the buyer and supplier perform better. A desirable outcome one could strive for. Next is the willingness to share information by suppliers. Cheng (2011, p. 375) found that information sharing is key in order for a supply chain to be more responsive to changes and disruptions. It can be argued that supply chains that are more agile and thus better prepared for uncertainties, perform better. Buyers operating in these supply chain should operate better than buyers outside of these supply chains. That is why willingness of information sharing can be seen as a desirable outcome of preferential treatment. Whether communication quality and willingness of information sharing by suppliers is an actual outcome of supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents is what will be discussed in the literature review, tested with a questionnaire with the suppliers of SES Creative, and then analysed in SmartPLS. This leads to the research question:

- *Will supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents lead to better communication quality and suppliers willing to share information?*

This paper has multiple contributions that are going to be analysed, discussed and tested. First the concept of supplier satisfaction will be analysed, and it will be tested if the relational antecedents that are supposed to create supplier satisfaction also holds true in this case with SES Creative. After that the reasoning as to why communication quality and willingness of information sharing by the supplier are very beneficial to a buying firm will be discussed and why these two concepts could be results of preferential treatment, and thus from supplier satisfaction. Whether these two concepts are actually results of supplier satisfaction will be tested using a questionnaire that will be send to the suppliers of SES Creative.

1.2 Outline of the paper

In order to explore the buyer-supplier relationship, the framework of preferred customer status needs to be explored. As mentioned before this is working within social exchange theory (SET) where expectations are continuously compared to outcomes. Exploring this framework in literature allows a better understanding of these expectations and how they come to be. What the outcomes are and how they will be compared. And how understanding this framework leads to a better understanding of supplier satisfaction. Once the preferred customer status dynamic is explained. It will be clear what it is and how it works. It will be clear what social exchange theory (SET) is and how it works. Next is a literature review on supplier satisfaction, as a part of the preferred customer cycle within social exchange theory (SET). This will show what the antecedents of supplier satisfaction are. As well as the reason why it is that supplier satisfaction should lead to preferential treatment. It will then be argued why preferential treatment should lead to better communication quality and suppliers willing to share their information. In addition communication will be excessively defined to get the true meaning, as well as seeing how exactly supplier satisfaction impacts communication. Next in the discussion will be the effect of supplier satisfaction on information sharing. Information sharing will be defined with subcategories to understand what information sharing really means as well as seeing the true effect of supplier satisfaction on information sharing.

2. literature review

The following literature review dives into understanding marketing as it used to be, and how it came to be. Then other topics as social exchange theory, supplier satisfaction and its antecedents are discussed. This literature review serves as the means the answer the previously stated research question, allowing for a better understanding of the buyer-supplier relationship. But before trying to understand the current market firms operate in, it is important to look back at how firms used to operate, what the norm was and why. This is why first the topic of traditional marketing will be discussed. As well as the current focus on the importance of suppliers.

2.1 Traditional marketing: From suppliers selling to buyers to buyers competing for suppliers

In order to look at new and innovative ways of engaging in the buyer-supplier relationship it is important to look back to see how the market used to operate. First the traditional marketing sphere needs to be explored and understood. It needs to be clear why and how companies in the past collaborated with each other. After exploring this, it should be clear what limitations there were and what new problems came up. This in turn would explain the rise of new and innovative ways to gain resources and services from suppliers, as will be discussed in this paper.

The norm used to be that suppliers were seeking buyers to sell their goods to, similar to how companies are targeting consumer to sell their products to. Nollet et al. (2012, p. 1186) say that it is usually the potential vendor that is the initiator of the relationship between buyers and sellers. However suppliers have gotten a more important role as owners of important resources, innovations or services. This gives the suppliers more power to choose who they sell their products and services to. Meaning buyers are now competing for suppliers, instead of suppliers competing for buyers. It is important to know that these are examples and that the market still contains suppliers competing for buyers. Markets do not always work in a singular way, but are complex with multiple forces that needs to be understood. Yet the trend is clear, an increased focus on getting the most out of suppliers, as well as getting the best suppliers. Buyers are now increasingly competing for suppliers, and preferential treatment from buyers. Additionally Steinle and Schiele (2008, p. 3) mention that buyers are looking globally for cheaper suppliers instead of locally, this increases the competition among buyers for global suppliers.

Hüttinger, Schiele, and Veldman (2012) talk about the decrease of available suppliers stating that the increasing importance of suppliers and the decreasing number of available partners in current supply markets make it necessary for customers to rethink the way they manage their supplier relationships and to secure their prime suppliers' resources. It is clear that obtaining the ability to do business from certain supplier is a main component of doing business in the current market and cannot be overlooked. In some industries there can be supplier scarcity, which would result in buying firms losing their ways to do business. Supplier scarcity is another trend that forces buyers to compete for suppliers, or to do more business with current suppliers. This could be at the cost of other buyers already doing business with a supplier. A supplier thus has to choose where to allocate their resources. Again it can be stated that there is competition among buyers for resources and preferential treatment from suppliers. Sarkar and Mohapatra (2006, p. 149) talk about a corporate strategy to reduce the amount of suppliers as a buyer, in order to invest more in current and critical suppliers. This will also contribute to the increased competition for better suppliers. Seeing as buyers are likely to invest their time and money in the better performing suppliers. The point for buyers is thus clear, getting preferential treatment by suppliers. Schiele et al. (2012, p. 1194) mention that preferential treatment is achieved by having a preferred customer status as a buyer. This status is achieved by being an attractive customer and satisfying your suppliers as a buyer. In order to better understand this, the following topic that will be discussed is social exchange theory (SET) the framework preferred customer status, customer attractiveness and supplier satisfaction operate in.

2.2 Social exchange theory, a continues cycle of expectation, outcomes and competition working in the preferred customer status dynamic

2.2.1 Definition of social exchange theory

The social exchange theory allows for a better understanding of the framework preferred customer status operates in. This makes it easier to understand the relational sphere of the buyer supplier relationship. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005, p. 874) see social exchange theory as the most influential concepts in organisational behaviour. Lambe, Wittmann, and Spekman (2001, p. 1) talk about how social exchange theory has been extensively used to explain business-to-business relational exchange.

Understanding social exchange theory (SET) allows for a better understanding of the buyer-supplier relationships. It is important for companies to maintain their relationship and continuously evaluate it in order to see whether they need to invest more into the relationship,

do nothing extra, or discontinue the relationship in search for a new and better one. It is also important to know whether firms need to invest more in the relationship to ensure long term financial gain is secured. This is why it is necessary to discuss what factors have an effect on the buyer supplier relationship. This helps companies understand what they need to invest in to maintain a strong relationship with suppliers.

Social exchange theory is an old theory describing social behaviour first introduced by Blau (1964). The idea here is that business partners go into a relationship, expecting rewards from doing so. "The basic assumption of SET is that parties enter into and maintain relationships with the expectation that doing so will be rewarding" (Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001, p. 4) Here it is clear that social exchange theory fits into the preferred customer status dynamic. As expecting a rewarding outcome from a relationship can be seen similar to doing business with a buying firm that exceeds or meets expectations a supplier might hold. And from the buyer's perspective, they try to satisfy their supplier with the assumption of gaining preferential treatment. It can be stated that preferred customer status is built upon social exchange theory. The researchers make it clear that the premise of social exchange theory is a continuous concept. "Over time, each party in the exchange relationship compares the social and economic outcomes from these interactions to those that are available from exchange alternatives which determines their dependence on the exchange relationship." (Lambe et al., 2001, p. 6) Assuming the relationship continues and a supplier or buyer does not choose an alternative, the level trust and commitment between the two parties will increase. The researchers summarize the theory with four premises: "The four premises are: (1) exchange interactions result in economic and/or social outcomes, (2) these outcomes are compared over time to other exchange alternatives to determine dependence on the exchange relationship, (3) positive outcomes over times increase firms' trust of their trading partner(s) and their commitment to the exchange relationship, and (4) positive exchange interactions over time produce relational exchange norms that govern the exchange relationship." (Lambe et al., 2001, p. 6) It can be seen that the social exchange becomes more active and stronger, the longer parties exchange with each other. Linking this to preferred customer status, the fourth premise could determine whether a buyer would receive preferential treatment from a supplier. Something that is missing here are the other buying firms that are also in this process. The focus is on the internal factors, but external factors are also of importance. Seeing as preferential treatment is something that is preferential, thus not for every buyer. It should be noted that simply positive interactions over time is not enough, as

these positive interactions by the buyer should be better than the competition if a buyer wants to be preferred over other buyers.

Schiele et al. (2012, p. 1180) provide a figure that explains the continuation of constantly meeting or exceeding expectations. In figure 1 it can be seen that the preferred customer status dynamic is a continuous cycle, where at any point the relationship can be ended, or privileges could be scrapped. As can be seen supplier satisfaction is the comparison level. Here it is where the decision is being made by suppliers whether to discontinue the relationship, treat the buyer as a regular customer, or the third option treat the buyer as a preferred customer. The most common outcome is treating the buyer as a regular customer, as supplier usually just want to do business, and reward only those buyers that offer something special. Here it shows why supplier satisfaction is so important. Buyers that create more satisfaction than buyers of the competition have a chance to gain this preferred customer status. This is why the next section dives deeper into supplier satisfaction.

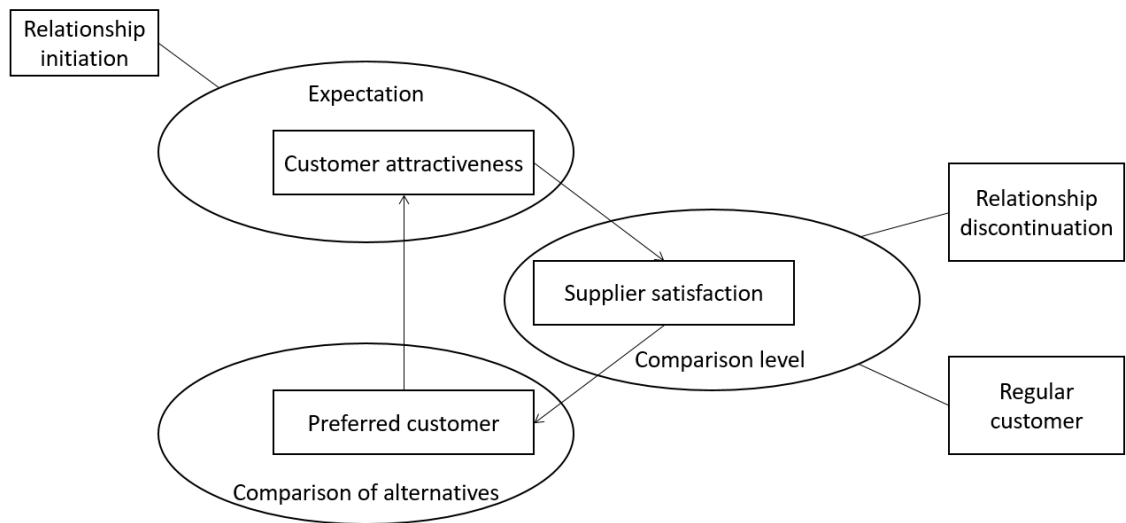


Figure 1 - The cycle of preferred customer status

2.3 Supplier satisfaction, the way to gain preferred customer status

2.3.1 Definition of supplier satisfaction

Supplier satisfaction is the degree to which a supplier is satisfied with the actions, investments, and stability of the buyer. The theory aims to further explore what factors have impact on supplier satisfaction. This will help to get a better view as to what matters to most to suppliers, and how to maintain a strong buyer-supplier relationship. The theory suggests

that the more satisfied the supplier is, the likelihood of preferential treatment is larger. It is thus very important for buyers to understand how to satisfy their suppliers, in order to gain benefits.

With the understanding of how preferred customer works, and why it is beneficial to strive for as a buying firm, it is now important to know how to achieve this status. Supplier satisfaction is one of the two main antecedents on how to achieve this status.

As supplier satisfaction is being mentioned as an antecedent of preferred customer status, it is important to know its definition. Jonsson and Zineldin (2003, p. 224) Define it as: "Satisfaction is an emotional response to the difference what customer expect and what they ultimately receive" This means that expectations also play a role to what degree a supplier will be satisfied. Supplier satisfaction is: "a feeling of equity with the supply chain relationship no matter what power imbalances exists between the buyer-seller dyad" (Benton & Maloni, 2005, p. 2) "Supplier satisfaction is defined as a supplier's feeling of fairness with regard to buyer's incentives and supplier's contributions within an industrial buyer-seller relationship." (Essig & Amann, 2009, p. 103) Furthermore the researchers describe that this feeling of fairness is important for future interactions. "For instance, an unsatisfied supplier may produce poor quality output that lowers the quality of a buyer's products and thus influences the buyer's sale volumes and profitability. Thus, the importance not only of linking supplier satisfaction to value creation but also of the reciprocity between supplier satisfaction and supplier management is evident." (Essig & Amann, 2009, p. 107) This means that supplier satisfaction is not only for positive outcomes, but for the reduction of negatives outcomes in a business relationship as well, and thus improving the reciprocity. The worst case scenario of negative outcomes would be the discontinuation of the buyer-supplier relationship, which can be detrimental if the buyer cannot cope with this quick. It is important to keep in mind that satisfaction is subjective, and different factors can make a supplier satisfied. There is no one way to make a supplier satisfied, but still exceeding expectations, being fair, and doing acts of kindness are likely to be appreciated by most suppliers. And actions like being available, involved, sharing information, communicating, and more are likely to be reciprocated by the supplier.

Supplier satisfaction can be easily defined by the degree of satisfaction a supplier has. However this is tied to the buyer-supplier relationship, meaning different relationships, have different meanings for being satisfied. It is important for a buying firm to know what satisfies his suppliers in order to enhance the relationship. But it is clear that the stronger the

relationships the more likely the supplier will reward the buyer either intentionally or unintentionally with benefits. Here the length of the relationship will provide the necessary experience for keeping suppliers satisfied.

Schiele et al. (2012, p. 1180) Describe supplier satisfaction as the end result of the expectation the supplier has of the buyer compared it to other buyers. This comparison then leads to the buyer being a regular customer or a discontinuation of the relationship. The researchers further describe supplier satisfaction as followed: “supplier satisfaction is a condition that is achieved if the quality of outcomes from a buyer-supplier relationship meets or exceeds the supplier's expectations.” (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1181) This seems logical, but the researchers emphasize the importance this has on a business relationship. As a satisfied supplier leads to a preferred customer according to the social exchange theory. Here supplier satisfaction can be seen as exceeding the expectations that were in play, mostly created by past experiences and other buyers. The emphasis here lies on exceeding the expectations, not just simply meeting them.

2.3.2 Empirical findings of supplier satisfaction: The supplier satisfaction index and the relational antecedents

Knowing what supplier satisfaction is, it is important to know what actual empirical findings about supplier satisfaction have been found. Supplier satisfaction is still described as a degree to which a supplier is satisfied, and although this is a true statement a few researchers have analysed supplier satisfaction further. In their papers they divided supplier satisfaction into antecedents. This makes it easier for firms to see what truly makes a supplier satisfied, as well as researchers exploring what makes up supplier satisfaction when dismantling the concept.

The following explanation is based upon the research done by Essig and Amann (2009), which can be seen in table 1. The researchers divided supplier satisfaction into three dimensions, each dimension is then further divided into indicators making up that dimension of supplier satisfaction. Furthermore the researcher add that using said model is not a tool to create supplier satisfaction but serves as a way to ensure there will be no supplier dissatisfaction. Or diminishes the likelihood of supplier dissatisfaction. As it is important to note that there is no one way to satisfy suppliers. Suppliers should still be seen as individual companies.

Table 1 - Supplier satisfaction index

Dimension 1: Strategic level	Dimension 2: Operative level	Dimension 3: Accompanying level
Intensity of cooperation	Order	Communication
	Billing delivery	Conflict management
		General view

The supplier satisfaction index is divided into three dimensions. The strategic level, the operative level, and the accompanying level. The strategic level consists of the intensity of the cooperation, assuming that with more cooperation more satisfaction is likely to be present. The second dimension is the operative level. This level consists of order and billing delivery. All things that have to do with everyday tasks to ensure firms operate well. Here the premise is that a good streamlined operative dimension will cause supplier satisfaction. The third and final dimension is the accompanying level. The accompanying level consists of communication, conflict management, and the general view. The way supplier satisfaction is created here is by good and clear communication, conflicts that are managed well, and the overall view that is derived from this. It is the way the buyer behaves that allows the supplier to form an opinion on the degree to which they are satisfied.

To further understand supplier satisfaction, its antecedents need to be analysed. Hüttinger et al. (2012, p. 1203) provided figure 2 where they dive deeper into preferential treatment and what it consists of. The main takeaway that customer attractiveness needs to be present for an initial relationship to begin stays, alongside the fact that supplier satisfaction is the way in which preferred customer status is reached, which will eventually lead to preferential treatment. Here it can be seen that supplier satisfaction consists of technical excellence, supply value, mode of interaction, and operational excellence. This research focusses on the relationship quality, and will thus look at the mode of interaction to get to supplier satisfaction. This asks the question as to what makes up this relationship quality.

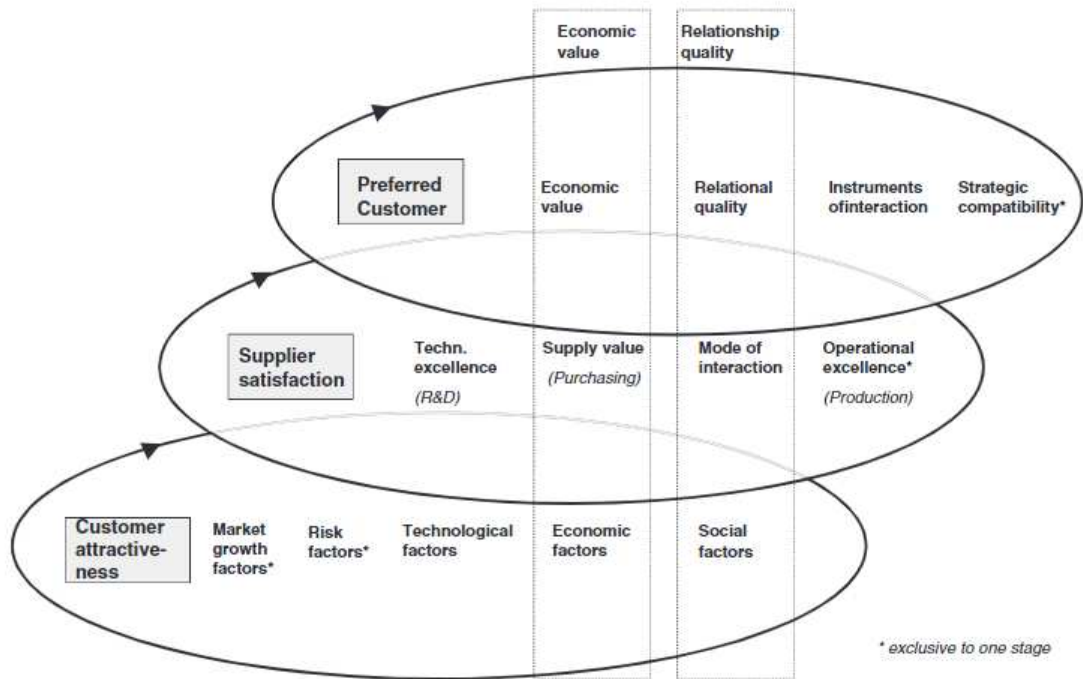


Figure 2 - Drivers of preferred customer status

Knowing that supplier satisfaction is one of the antecedents of preferred customer status and thus preferential treatment, it is important to know how to make supplier satisfied. Or what causes supplier satisfaction. Vos et al. (2016, p. 4615) provided a figure that shows the antecedents of supplier satisfaction. As can be seen from figure 3 nine antecedents of supplier satisfaction were tested for their effect on supplier satisfaction. As well as the eventual way to preferential treatment. These relational aspects form the relationship quality mentioned in figure 2 based on the research done by Hüttinger et al. (2012)

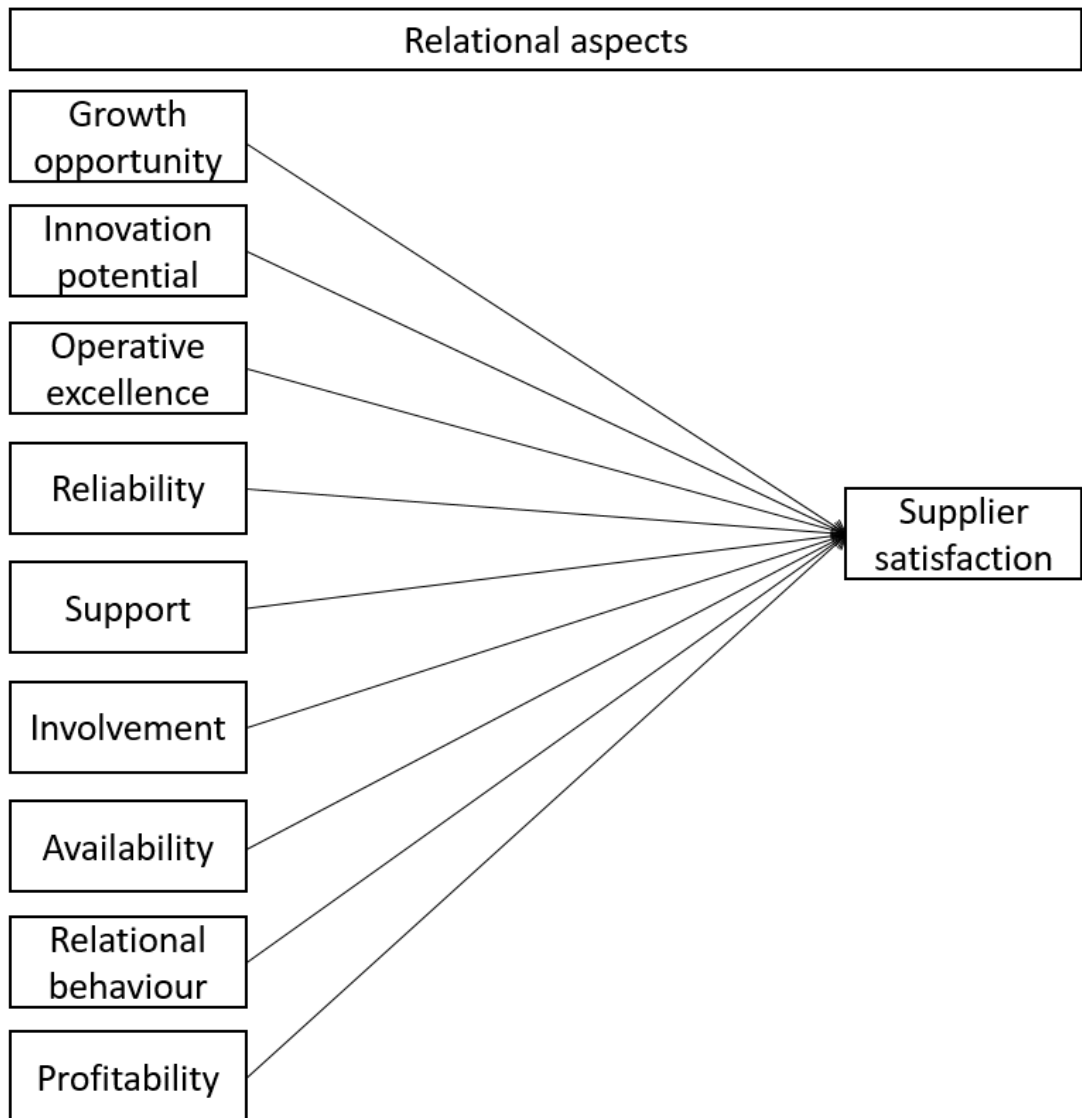


Figure 3 - Relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction

The focus will be on operative excellence, availability, reliability, support, involvement and relational behaviour. The reasoning for this is that in these six areas buyers are more likely to improve their firm on a short notice. Growth opportunity, innovation potential and profitability are antecedents of supplier satisfaction, but it is very hard for buyers to exceed their innovation potential as an example compared to other buyers who are focussed on innovation. This thesis thus focusses on the other six antecedents as they serve as relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction. Buyers should be able to improve on these areas on short notice. Operative excellence refers to the how well the buyer performs on an operative level. This refers to forecasts, deliveries, orders, communication, and more. It can be summarized as to how well the buyer handles day to day tasks. Reliability means how well the buyer keeps promises made, delivers on expectations and honesty on negotiations and discussions.

Reliability can be seen as how trustworthy the buyer has proven themselves to be. Support can be seen as how helpful, or willing to help the buyer is on technical issues and/or improvements. A supportive buyer is proactive in helping their supplier improve, assuming effective results coming from this help, supplier should be satisfied with this help and could be seen as satisfied suppliers. Involvement is seen as the degree to which the buyer involves their suppliers in new projects, product developments or other types of collaboration. It is again a proactive concept initiated by the buyer that should result in satisfied suppliers, as only a handful are likely to be involved, and this would be appreciated by suppliers, making them satisfied. The last concept is relational behaviour and refers to how fair the buyer is in their relationship with their supplier. A buyer that is behaving fair will treat problems of the supplier as “we” problems, commits to the relationship for mutual benefit and not only selfish gains, is willing to grant the supplier cut costs due to savings made by the buyer, and flexibility to help the supplier when needed. In summary relational pleasant behaviour can be seen as the degree to how selflessness the buyer is, and unpleasant behaviour would thus be how selfish the buyer is. The premise here is that selflessness would result in satisfied suppliers that are likely to return the favour.

2.4 Preferred customer status, the way to gain preferential treatment

2.4.1 Definition of preferred customer status

The concept of preferred customer status is relatively new. Schiele et al. (2012, p. 1178) describe preferred customer status as a new phenomenon, different from traditional marketing. Preferred customer status is a status a buying company can have. It is present when a supplying firm gives preferential treatment to that buying firm. Seeing as “preferential treatment” is not very descriptive, many researchers try to describe it in order to capture as many elements into it. This will help better understand the concept of preferred customer status. Which allows companies to analyse the theory and determine whether a pursuit of this status is of benefit for the company. It is also described as “selling” your company to a supplier, as the supplier would see value in the buyer. With a decreasing amount of suppliers, or decreased high quality suppliers, or limited amount of resources and or services, preferred customer status becomes clear as a desirable status to obtain as a buying firm.

In traditional marketing suppliers try to sell their goods and services to buyers as previously mentioned. This can be seen as suppliers seeking out the best buyers for their products or services. Using preferred customer status, something different emerges. “the phenomenon

of buyers that attempt to obtain the best resources from sellers by striving to become more attractive to suppliers. This scenario represents a counterintuitive inversion of the classical marketing approach (that is, in this scenario, buyers are competing for suppliers, rather than the converse interactions).” (Schiele et al., 2012, p. 1178)

Preferred customer status is being described as: “A preferred customer is a purchaser (buying organization) who receives better treatment than other customers from a supplier, in terms of product quality and availability, support in the sourcing process, delivery or/and prices.” (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1187). The researchers explain further that being a preferred customer comes with a strong relationship. Here it can be seen that market interactions are not exclusively coming from suppliers, but are also initiated by buyers in order to get a competitive advantage. They continue to add that preferred customer status has to be re-earned and maintained. It is not a one and done deal. Study also shows that buyers focus on the best suppliers in which companies should invest to become a preferred customer. “Suppliers, particularly those recognized as excellent or exceptional, are wooed by potential clients, and even by existing ones who want to increase their business with them” (Nollet et al., 2012, p. 1186) It can be seen that buyers are putting more importance to their suppliers, as the market experiences more competition for the best supplier. This means that buyers have to come up with strategies, invest time and money, and ideas in order to get the best suppliers for the buying company. This is a challenging task for buyers, shifting the focus on achieving the preferred customer status with key suppliers.

Research has made it clear what preferred customer status is, with mentions of preferential treatment. Next it is important to know what classifies as this “preferential treatment” in order to see the importance of being a preferred customer.

2.4.2 Becoming a preferred customer, a step by step process

To gain more insight into preferred customer status it helps to look at a study that describes how to gain a preferred customer status. Nollet et al. (2012) describe preferred customer status as a result of social exchange theory where outcomes and expectations are being compared. This results in evaluation of the buyer supplier relationship, resulting in either continuation, improvement or an alternative to do business with. The steps of becoming a preferred customer are divided into four steps by Nollet et al. (2012, p. 1188). Step one is the initial attraction, step two the performance, step three the engagement, and finally step four the sustainability. It is already clear that there is a large emphasis on sustainability on both the relationship and the preferred status itself, thus highlighting that preferred customer

status is not simply achieved, but must also be sustained. Meaning that becoming a preferred customer is a continuing process. Figure 4 below shows the process of becoming a preferred customer.

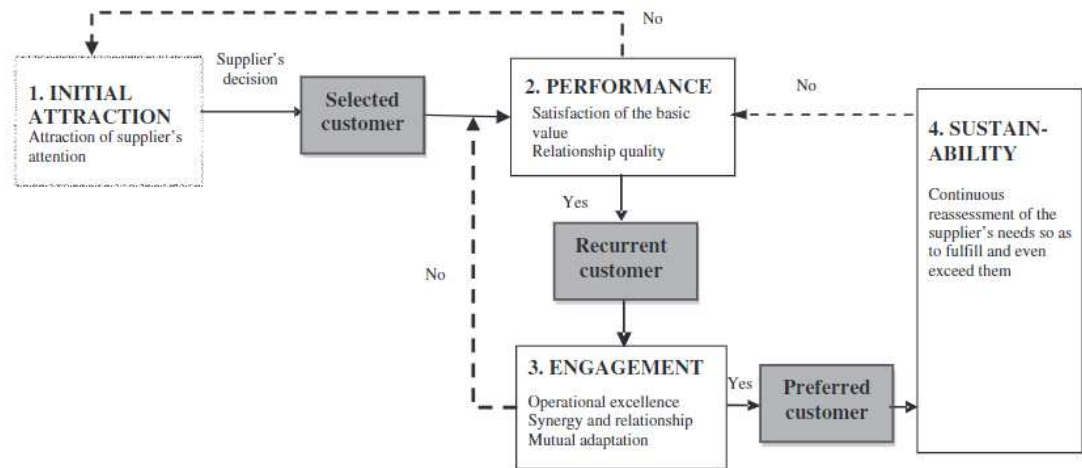


Figure 4 - Becoming a preferred customer

Step one the initial attraction. Nollet et al. (2012, p. 1188) mention that the first things to take into account are the attractiveness factors. Concepts included in this attractiveness factors are growth, market share, influence on the market, and financial technologies to name a few. Although these concepts are outlined, every supplier values different things more or less, and other concepts might play a role. The main point is that the supplier sees value in the buying firm and wants to do (more) business with the buying firm. It is therefore important that the buying firms is aware of what the supplier values, as well as creating awareness of the buyer's firm capabilities. Nollet et al. (2012, p. 1189) refers here to corporate advertising. Here the buying firm promotes there capabilities to the outside world, and shares successful projects, experiences, and accomplishments. Known advertising concepts such as word of mouth are also likely to be a successful way of creating a good name for the buying firm. Nollet et al. (2012, p. 1189) does mention that corporate advertising is likely more useful when suppliers are still choosing which clients to supply to, and that for suppliers who are already into a business relationship with the buyer factors such as trust, past experiences, and the length of the relationship appear to be much more beneficial into making the supplier see value in the buying firm. Once the supplier is aware of the potential that can be achieved, it is time to interact with the supplier, and fulfil the expectations continuously, which will lead into step two.

Once the expectations for the supplier are set it is now time that these expectations are met. This is the second step called performance by Nolle et al. (2012, p. 1189). Basically step two is just delivering on the expectations and wishes that are valuable to the supplier outlined in step one. It should be made clear to the supplier that doing business with the buying firm is more beneficial than doing business with other buying firms. "So, in this second step, the purchaser will strive to fulfil the supplier's priorities, so that the latter really perceives clearly the advantages of continuing to deal with the purchaser." (Nolle et al., 2012, p. 1190) Step two is about meeting those expectations and keeping ahead of competing buying firms to satisfy the supplier. A note here is that the buying organization needs to exceed the expectation that are expected for its firm, while simultaneously outperforming rival buying organizations. The bar is continuously raised in the market firms operate in, as other buyers raise expectations, a supplier needs change, as well as other outside forces at play.

Step three is engagement. In this step it is made clear that just being an attractive customer in the eyes of the supplier is not enough. The buyer should be proactively ensuring that the supplier can work well with the buyer, which should result in more value creation for the supplier. This should then in turn reward the buyer with a preferred customer status. Engagement efforts thus ensure the supplier that the buyer is serious in building a strong business relationship that is beneficial for the sustainability of the supplier. Nolle et al. (2012, p. 1191) argues that the buyer consistently needs to meet or exceed to the expectations of the supplier, while at the same time being ahead of potential buyers. In order to develop the relationship, it matters which state it is in. The more it can develop, the more engagement can be put into the relationship.

The final step is sustainability. Step four makes it clear that nothing is given, but everything is earned and has to be continuously re-earned. The market is constantly changing, with new suppliers, new buyers, new innovations, new customer demands, and more. All these impact if the buyer should receive a preferred customer status by the supplier, or if the buying firm even values a preferred customer status with a certain supplier. But for the sake of being explanatory, it is assumed that the buying firm is wanting to have and maintain a preferred customer status with a certain supplier. This still has to be maintained. In theory since the buyer is already invested in the relationship it should be clear to the buyer what satisfies the supplier in order to maintain a preferred customer status. This makes it so the buyer has an advantage over his competitors. All of this confirms that preferred customer status is not just an achievement, but a continuous process that can be re-earned, maintained, or lost. Hence

why figure 1 is not a path, but more of a cycle. With all of these external factors like competitors, new innovations, changes, and more that impact the preferred customer status cycle.

2.4.3 Benefits of preferred customer status, five major benefits, but with a focus on support

Knowing what preferred customer status is, it is important to know what the benefits are. As the preferred customer status can be very beneficial for buying companies. Nollet et al. (2012, p. 1186) found that preferred customers gained three benefits. 75% of suppliers give rare products and services to their preferred customers, 82% of suppliers make it clear that a preferred customer is the first customer to benefit from new innovations and technologies, and 87% of suppliers offer better prices to their preferred customers. Furthermore the researchers found five benefits that suppliers grant when they see their buyer as the preferred customer. These five benefits are product quality and innovation, support, delivery reliability, price, and costs.

In terms of product quality and innovation, suppliers are willing to customize products to the needs of the customer, deliver consistent quality, suggest and/or initiate quality improvements and innovations for the products by the customer, as well as increase technological capabilities for products sold to the customer. In terms of support, suppliers tend to give appropriate information on a timely basis, such as information about products and markets, as well as new solutions to solve problems. Support also comes with being available and responsive, this entails physical appearance, speed of responses, and the speed at which the supplier adapts to the needs of the customer. Support also let suppliers accept to perform steps that are not part of the supplier's core business. Delivery reliability means that the supplier is willing to give the preferred customer priority when demand exceeds supply, adjust to changes in delivery schedules due to peaks in demand or changes in delivery requested, take extra for orders delivered to the customer, have safety stocks, and warehouses close to the customer's location. In terms of prices, suppliers tend to offer lower prices than the market average, as well as being more receptive to price negotiations. Finally there are the costs, suppliers are willing to contribute to the reduction of costs incurred by the customer. These consist of acquisition costs and operational costs. It is clear that there are a lot of advantages to get from the preferred customer status, however as the preferred customer status is not a set rule on how suppliers have to behave towards their customer,

results can vary. As is explained the preferred customer status is part of the relationship, where every relationship is different. With these differences come different results. Referring back to the model describing different levels of preferred customer status. Where the exclusivity of the benefits and where potential extra costs must be taken into account to see what level of preferred customer status a customer is receiving. This paper will focus on the support benefit that can be obtained from preferential treatment, as there is there is a lot of value in timely and appropriate communication, as well as information that is being shared by suppliers. That is why the next sections will dive deeper into communication and information sharing.

2.5 Communication the glue that holds two partners together and a value enhancing tool for precise expectations and outcomes.

2.5.1 Definition of communication

Now that it is clear how the preferred customer status works, what its antecedents are, and in what framework it operates in, it is now possible to explore new concepts that should be benefits gained by preferential treatment. The first concept that will be analysed is communication. The goal is to understand what communication actually is, and how it can be perceived as a benefit of preferential treatment, and why it is so beneficial for buying firms.

Prahinski and Benton (2004, p. 40) Argue that in today's business environment there has been a shift, the amount of suppliers has been reduced to a few in which buyers need to have a long-term cooperative relationships. A buyer would like to achieve a preferred customer status with these suppliers. In order to achieve a preferred customer status it has been stated that supplier satisfaction has a large impact on this. Meaning that satisfied suppliers are more likely to treat their buyers as preferred customers. Communication plays a large role in the relationships between buyer and supplier. It is important that both parties understand each other and what is to be expected, good or bad communication is the deciding factor to whether this understanding is present. It is clear that the communication needs to be good. It can furthermore be argued that good communication between the two parties leads to better collaboration, which can be seen as a form of preferential treatment. This means that it can be argued that better communication might be a result of supplier satisfaction. Yet communication is not clearly defined, this leads to the question of what communication really means. Paulraj et al. (2008, p. 45) describe communication as the essence of

organisational life. It is a giant pillar in business that every relationship needs to invest into it. The researchers add that communication is so important that it is critical to creating and maintaining a value-enhancing inter-organisational relationship. Wagner and Krause (2009, p. 3163) See communication as factor in supplier development. Seeing supplier development as efforts by the buying firm to improve the performance or capabilities of its supplier. The researchers add that communication and information sharing are investments by the buying firm used as tools to better the buyer-supplier relationship. J. Mohr and Nevin (1990) Describe communication as the glue that holds together a channel of distribution, and divide communication into four different categories. These categories are communication frequency, communication content, communication medium and communication feedback. The frequency of communication refers to the amount of times communication is being exchanged between the two parties. Assuming that the more frequent the moments of communication the more informed both parties will be, a desirable outcome of supplier satisfaction. The content refers to what information is actually being exchanged within the communication, arguing that communication is only important when it holds the right content. The medium is the way in which the information is being exchanged. It being verbal, non-verbal or some sort of automatic system. At last the feedback refers to how the two parties perceive each other and how it is used to clarify the perception using an evaluation process. Prahinski and Fan (2007) focus on communication quality. The researchers define communication quality as followed: “communication quality can be defined either as the difference between states, such as the gap between the supplier’s perceived performance and the buying organization’s communication of the actual performance, or as the elements of the communication transaction, such as its effectiveness, efficiency, appropriateness and conformity.” J. J. Mohr and Sohi (1995, p. 413) define communication quality as the degree to which communication is timely, honest, adequate, complete, and credible. Claycomb and Frankwick (2004) use the term relationship communication elements, which consists of communication quality, participation, information sharing, and conflict resolution. Arguing that all these elements together form the communication in business relationships.

Looking at these definitions it can be seen that there are multiple forms of communication. It is a pillar in buyer-supplier relationships and no one company can operate without communication. Communication needs to be at least good in order for the buyer and supplier to understand each other, which in turn allows for the existence of business between the two parties. This speaks for itself and that is why other researchers laid the foundation to

distinguish different types of communication. All these types of communications are important for buying firms to take into account in order to bring the right message, using the right tools, timely and regularly to their supplier for it to be a useful tool to serve as a way to develop the buyer-supplier relationship. Seeing as communication is so essential, it also opens the door that higher communication quality is a great way to stay ahead of the competition and thus a desirable outcome of supplier satisfaction. It is important that the information that the two parties exchange with each other can help improve the business between the two parties. The right information in this case can be forecasts the buyer expects for a certain period of time, this leads to the frequency of the communication. If there are hiccups in the previously mentioned forecasts or orders it is important that the supplier communicates this as fast as possible so the buyer can act fast on these changes. A way to cope with this is using automated systems that buyers and suppliers can choose to use to improve their effectiveness in the supply chain. Systems like these can communicate new orders directly, and thus instantly, to the supplier. Allowing the supplier to act immediately on changes happening. It is clear from these definitions that communication is not only something natural and necessary but also a tool to enhance the buyer-supplier relationship. In table 2 it shows all the discussed forms and definitions of communication. This research focusses on whether communication quality is a reward that can be gained from supplier satisfaction. Communication quality is defined to the degree to which the communication is timely, accurate, adequate, complete, and credible based on a study by J. J. Mohr and Sohi (1995, p. 413). The reason for this is that communication quality largely captures what all other forms of communication are about.

Table 2 - Concepts of communication

Communication concept	Explanation	Study
Communication frequency	The amount of times communication takes place	(J. Mohr & Nevin, 1990)
Communication content	The information that is being exchanged within the communication	(J. Mohr & Nevin, 1990)
Communication medium	The way the communication is taking place	(J. Mohr & Nevin, 1990)
Communication feedback	How the communication is received by all parties involved	(J. Mohr & Nevin, 1990)

Communication quality	The difference between the supplier's expectations, and the buyer's actual performance of communication	(Prahinski & Fan, 2007) and (J. J. Mohr & Sohi, 1995)
Relationship communication elements	Communication quality, participation, information sharing, and conflict resolution. / Forms of communication enhancing the relationship	(Claycomb & Frankwick, 2004)

2.5.2 Empirical findings

Paulraj et al. (2008, p. 57) found support for their hypothesis that suggested that having a long-term relationship orientation can increase collaborative communication between supply chain partners which is necessary for disseminating and sharing strategically important information and knowledge for mutual gains. Furthermore the researchers add that a long-term relationship is not purely time based, as buyers could not gain or invest into the potential of their suppliers. Additionally the researchers state: "The empirical findings in support of the hypothesized relationships corroborate our main theoretical assertion that interorganizational communication can be viewed as a relational competency that yields strategic advantage for the collaborating firms. From a practical viewpoint, this study shows that building collaborative communication skills or competencies can have direct, positive effects on the bottom lines of the supply chain partners." (Paulraj et al., 2008, p. 59). So it is clear that there is a positive effect between interorganizational communication and collaboration, which in turn positively effects the supply chain.

Yan and Dooley (2013) conducted their research on the relation between communication intensity, goal congruence, and uncertainty in buyer-supplier new product development. Showing how communication, a relational tool, has performance based results. The conducted research focussed on the effect of communication intensity on design quality and design efficiency in buyer-supplier new product development. The results are categorized into three parts. Firstly communication intensity has a positive effect on both design quality and design efficiency in new product development, but is not significant. Secondly communication intensity has a positive effect that is greater on both design quality and design efficiency in new product development when a project involves a complex product,

adopts novel technologies, and projects that have an interdependent buyer-supplier task structure. All of these cases are significant with the exception of the effect of communication intensity on the design quality in new product development when projects have an interdependent buyer-supplier task structure. Here the effect is positive yet not significant. Thirdly the effects of communication intensity is tested when prior investments were low. The researchers found that communication intensity has a positive effect that is larger on both design quality and design efficiency in new product development when prior inter-firm coordination efforts were low, as well as the same effect when prior inter-firm relation-specific investments between the buyer and supplier were low. The effect is both positive and significant when prior inter-firm coordination efforts were low. Whereas the effect is not significant on design quality when prior inter-firm relation-specific investments were low, and marginally significant on design efficiency when prior inter-firm relation-specific investments were low (Yan & Dooley, 2013, p. 537). Implications of this research are that communication intensity indeed has a positive effect when designing new products, but is only significant in certain situations, and especially when prior relationship investments were low. Arguing that intensifying communication efforts is a good strategy for firms that previously have not invested into their relationships. Here it becomes clear that communication clearly enhances the performance of the buyer, showing it to be a desirable outcome of supplier satisfaction.

Carr and Kaynak (2007) Found that traditional communication methods, information sharing within a firm, and information sharing between firms have a significant effect for improving a buyer's performance. The researchers added that traditional forms of communications are more effective than advanced communication methods. "Although buying firms' use of traditional communication methods with key suppliers is positively related to the extent to which the information is shared between buyers and key suppliers, the relationship between their use of advanced communication methods and the extent to which information is shared between buyers and key suppliers is not significant." (Carr & Kaynak, 2007, p. 362) Additionally the researchers state that advanced communication methods are not critical but should not be ruled out. "While advanced communications methods may be helpful, the results of this study suggest that they are not critical with respect to influencing information sharing within and between firms." (Carr & Kaynak, 2007, p. 364) The reason to not rule out advanced communication methods are based on the lack of successful implementations as currently known within the academic world. The researchers state: "In the future, we may

see these relationships change depending on the successful implementation of various advanced communications among firms.” (Carr & Kaynak, 2007, p. 364)

The findings of communication quality are next. Prahinski and Fan (2007, p. 22) found that when the supplier believes that the evaluation content is important, the level of the communication quality, in terms of usefulness, timeliness, clarity and thoroughness, is considered to be high. Evaluation content is also positively related to the supplier’s commitment to the buying organization. Moreover the researchers found that operational frequency was positively related to communication quality. An interesting find is that there is no direct relation between communication quality and supplier performance, but there is a mediating factor. Supplier’s commitment was found to mediate the linkage between communication quality and supplier performance (Prahinski & Fan, 2007, p. 22). The researchers concluded their research as followed: “The buying organization’s expectations reflected by the content and frequency of the supplier evaluation program can help the supplier gain a clear and thorough understanding about its areas of strength and weakness. The resultant communication quality strengthens the supplier’s commitment, which, in turn, helps the supplier improve its performance.” (Prahinski & Fan, 2007, p. 26). It can be seen that high commitment between the buyer and the supplier with the use of good communication quality allows both parties to strenghten each other. The supplier will become more aware of its achievements and wrongdoings. Communication of high quality allows these strenghts and weaknesses to be properly discussed. This allows a supplier to act on this information and in turn better it’s firm, and thus supplier performance. It is clear that all forms of communication can be used to increase the effectivness of the buyer-supplier relationship, and it is thus important to know whether communication is an actual result of supplier satisfaction.

2.6 Information sharing, a supply chain that is informed is agile, responds better to changes, and performs better leading to supplier satisfaction.

2.6.1 Definition of information sharing

Seeing the concept of communication being explored as a benefit of supplier satisfaction, another concept will be discussed. The following is information sharing. As good information sharing should make buyers better informed, and thus perform better than less informed buyers. This allows information sharing to give a competitive advantage. Whether or not information sharing is a direct benefit from supplier satisfaction remains to be seen, but first a deeper dive into information sharing is needed.

In a supply chain it is a good thing to exchange information in order to better the efficiency between business partners. Yet information sharing is still broad. Hsu, Kannan, Tan, and Leong (2008, p. 298) describe information sharing as: "Information sharing in a supply chain context refers to the extent to which crucial and/or proprietary information are available to members of the supply chain." It is thus important that the information that is being shared has a purpose within the supply chain. The researchers then classify two categories, namely tactical and strategic information sharing. Tactical information sharing refers to purchasing, operations scheduling, and logistics. Strategic information sharing refers to long-term corporate objectives, marketing, and customer information. It is clear that tactical information sharing focusses more on frequent day to day information in order to have an efficient supply chain. Whereas strategic information sharing is primarily focussed on overarching goals over longer periods of time. Another way to classify information sharing is by their components. There are three forms of integration. Information system integration, decision system integration, and business system integration (Hsu et al., 2008, p. 298). Information system integration refers to changes in demand, customer preferences, and other transaction related activities. Decision system integration aims to remove misunderstanding between buyers and suppliers, as suppliers need to understand a buyer decision making process. This will help provide more visibility, reduce uncertainty, and raise understanding to changes in the supply chain. Business process integration refers to all technological forms of integrations. Think of data transfer, automated systems, and more. Seeing as information sharing is only useful when the right information is being shared, it is important to know what information belongs in this category. Lee and Whang (2000) categorized six types of information that is commonly shared between companies, and within a supply chain. These categories are inventory levels, sales data, order status for track and trace, sales forecast, production and delivery schedule, and the last category is other types of information sharing, grouping all smaller things together into one category. Each of these categories has its reason for its information to be shared throughout the supply chain. The reason to exchange information about stock levels is to increase efficiency throughout the supply chain. Sales data is exchanged to combat the bullwhip effect. Track and trace is used to track deliveries and make sure they arrive timely. Sales forecast allow companies to anticipate and prepare ahead of time, allowing production to be more streamlined instead of relying on information based on short term. Schedules also allow for a more streamlined supply chain, knowing when materials arrive, allowing buyers to shift their focus on more pressing issues. The more

streamlined the business is, the more attention can be shifted to other issues allowing companies to excel.

As information technology evolves, firms tend to become more integrated with another. Therefore, integrating effective supply chain practice with effective information sharing becomes critical for improving supply chain performance (Zhou & Benton Jr, 2007, p. 1348). The importance of information becomes clearer as a tool to enhance firm performance. Zhou and Benton Jr (2007) categorize information sharing into three categories. Information sharing support technology, information content, and information quality. Information sharing support technology refers to hardware, software and personnel able to streamline the information sharing process. Information content refers to the type of information that is being exchanged, while information quality refers to the quality of the information, and thus how clear the information is.

Cheng (2011, p. 375) summarizes that the sharing of information is needed to enhance the supply chain's effectiveness in terms of the coordination and product quality. Furthermore the betterment of sharing of information leads to a supply chain that is more responsive to changes happening either within the supply chain or the market outside. Making it clear that information sharing by suppliers is a desirable outcome of supplier satisfaction, assuming it will be.

Wang, Ye, and Tan (2014, p. 7046) argue that supply chain information sharing is key in order to combat deterioration of supply chain performance. The researchers describe information sharing by the sharing of material flow, order entry, shipping and billing, as well as forecasts and plans with supply chain partners. Wang et al. (2014, p. 7047) describe two information sharing characteristics. The first being the extent of information sharing, and the second being the quality of information being shared. The extent of information sharing refers to the scope and frequency of information sharing. The quality refers to whether the information being shared is timely, adequate, accurate, and being credible.

Kim and Chai (2017, p. 43) describes two kinds of information sharing. These two are connectivity and willingness. Connectivity focusses on the technological aspect of information sharing, whereas willingness refers to the openness of sharing information with other supply chain partners. These two kinds show the requirements of applying good quality information sharing within a supply chain as technological infrastructure is required to streamline information sharing processes. The willingness is needed as a mutual agreement

between business partners is needed to start information sharing processes. Next is table 2 which shows all the discussed concepts and definitions of information sharing.

Table 3 - Concepts of information sharing

Information sharing concept	Definition	Study
Information system integration	Information related to changes in demand, customer preferences, and transactions	(Hsu et al., 2008)
Decision system integration	Allows the understanding of the decision for both parties in a buyer-supplier relationship	(Hsu et al., 2008)
Business system integration	Technological forms of integration	(Hsu et al., 2008)
Support technology	Hardware, software, and personnel able to streamline the information sharing process	(Zhou & Benton Jr, 2007)
Information content	Type of information that is exchanged	(Zhou & Benton Jr, 2007)
Information quality	The quality of the information/ the clarity of the information	(Zhou & Benton Jr, 2007) and (Wang et al., 2014)
Extent of information sharing	The scope and frequency of information being shared	(Wang et al., 2014)
Connectivity	The technical aspects of information sharing	(Kim & Chai, 2017)
Willingness	The openness of information sharing	(Kim & Chai, 2017)

2.6.2 Empirical findings

Hsu et al. (2008, p. 305) found that buyer-supplier relationships mediate the impact of information sharing capability on firm performance. Additionally the researchers found that alignment on the dimensions of information sharing improves the responsiveness of firms, allows them to reduce and more effectively manage uncertainty, and thereby focus more closely on sources of value. This means that when a buyer-supplier relationship focusses on information sharing that it will not necessarily improve firm performance, but creates a supply chain that is more capable with dealing with uncertainties, changes, and new innovations. Still this means that these buyers do perform better than other firms when these events happen.

Cheng (2011, p. 382) found that connectedness was insignificant, yet it was positively related with dysfunctional conflict. The effects of this are that dysfunctional conflicts are unavoidable between organizations engaging in information sharing. Information sharing is also positively linked to dysfunctional conflict. A possible reason is explained by the researchers. "One possible reason is that the relational benefits of the parties involved are so great that dysfunctional conflict among them is tolerated and conceived of as acceptable for achieving better information sharing." (Cheng, 2011, p. 382) The researchers also state that firms should carefully build up relations with its partners. Additionally the researchers state that: "Our findings on the effects of relational benefits, relational proclivity, connectedness, power symmetry and dysfunctional conflict not only are consistent with prior studies, but also examine how information sharing is significantly affected by inter-organizational relational benefits through other mediating variables such as relational proclivity, and connectedness, power symmetry, and dysfunctional conflict." (Cheng, 2011, p. 382) Concluding that: "The important managerial implication is that a good practice in enhancing information sharing in supply chains is to develop a positive and strong connectedness" (Cheng, 2011, p. 382)

Wang et al. (2014, p. 7054) found that managerial ties do not have a direct impact on information sharing quality. However managerial ties has an indirect effect on the extent to which information is being shared with the mediating factor being trust. Additionally it turns out managerial ties have a greater impact on the extent to which information is being shared rather than the quality. This means that there can be pressure as to what information is being shared, but not the quality based on managerial ties. The final find is that an increase in the quality of information being shared results in less opportunistic behaviour by the supplier. This effect is not in place for the extent to which information is being shared, in which case the supplier will behave as opportunistic as before. The researchers concluded with: "The empirical results have indicated that managerial ties can influence both types of information sharing indirectly through trust, while managerial ties may have a direct impact on the extent of information sharing. Furthermore, the results have revealed that the quality of information shared has significant negative impact on supplier opportunism whereas there is no effect on the extent of information sharing." (Wang et al., 2014, p. 7055)

Kim and Chai (2017, p. 49) found that supplier innovativeness encourages information sharing within the supply chain. Additionally the researchers found that information sharing is an antecedent of increased supply chain agility, with supply chain agility being the

responsiveness of a supply chain to changes. This means that information sharing makes a supply chain better prepared to changes inside the supply chain compared to supply chains that practice little to no information sharing. Here the information sharing by suppliers is something buyers should be striving for as it helps the whole supply chain, and thus their performance.

It can be seen that information sharing allows a supply chain to be more capable with dealing with uncertainties in the supply chain. It is not a direct improvement of firm performance, but one can argue that supply chains managing uncertainties in difficult times well are the better performing firms. Assuming that other supply chains might not be able to manage these uncertainties, it would give the supply chain with better information sharing as the one with lesser information sharing a competitive advantage. Information sharing does not eliminate conflicts, but rather conflicts are accepted to receive better results from information sharing. As a conflict needs to be present in order for information to be discussed, allowing a solution to be discussed between two parties. It is noted that strong relationships are needed in order to get productive results rather than destructive. It was also found that trust is an important factor for information sharing. Trust is needed for information sharing. Additionally managerial ties have an impact on the extent of information being shared, but not the quality of the information being shared. Finally supplier innovativeness encourages information sharing. Logically when working on innovations, supply chain partners will share information with each other to get the latest information from industry experts and new studies. This thesis will focus on the willingness of information sharing, this helps to see whether information sharing by the supplier is an actual outcome of supplier satisfaction, or something that is simply present. Additionally information sharing itself should capture all the sub elements it consist of.

[2.7 Communication and information sharing could be the rewards of the relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction and supplier satisfaction itself.](#)

Combining all the topics of chapter two, a new framework of supplier satisfaction and its antecedents can be created. This will allow a new perspective of gaining preferential treatment from suppliers, as communication and information sharing could serve as benefits that serve as great ways to stay ahead of the competition. As can be seen from figure 5, Growth opportunity, innovation potential, and profitability have been excluded from this model. The first reason is that this research focusses on the relational aspects of supplier satisfaction as these factors are not market and/or industry specific. Not all buying firms can

increase their level of growth opportunity, innovation potential or profitability, but are able to increase their level of the other indicators like support, and reliability. Additionally following the logic of social exchange theory, growth opportunity, innovation potential and profitability are hard to be rewarded by suppliers with similar benefits. Whereas a buyer being supportive, expects a supplier to respond supportive. Communication quality and willingness of information sharing are relational rewards, are thus likely a result of relational antecedents, and not economic factors.

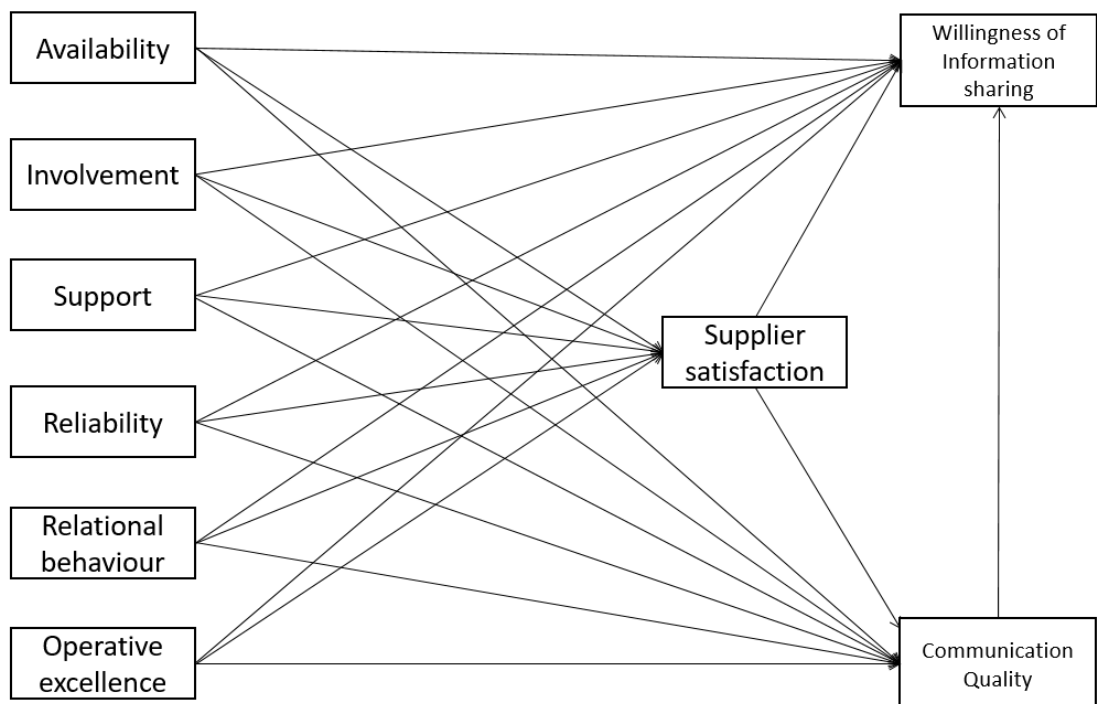


Figure 5 - The new supplier satisfaction framework

With the current understanding of the framework of supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents based on the study done by Pulles et al. (2016), it can be further expanded using existing theory. The whole relational aspect of this dynamic can be further explained with the concepts of communication quality and willingness of information sharing by the supplier. This framework still uses the relational antecedents presented by Pulles et al. (2016) which should cause supplier satisfaction. However this paper adds that supplier satisfaction should also result in better communication quality and a higher willingness of suppliers wanting to share information. In order to truly understand the effect, the relational antecedents will also be tested on their effect on communication quality and willingness to

share information, as supplier satisfaction could not be the factor causes these benefits, but only serve as a mediating factor.

3. Hypothesis

3.1 Why supplier satisfaction is of importance for literature

The following section allows the research question to be answered that needed scientific data by the use of hypothesis. The hypothesized expected outcomes will be compared to measured data, allowing for a comparison to be drawn. Using the answers of the questionnaire that will be filled in by the suppliers of SES Creative. This allows for accurate data on the relation between concepts as supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents, communication quality, and willingness of information sharing by suppliers.

3.2 The hypothesis are divided into three parts

According to the literature review it has become clear that supplier satisfaction is a very strong indicator of preferred customer status, which is highly likely to lead to preferential treatment. This is why it is very important for a company to make their supplier satisfied. Another reason is that dissatisfied suppliers create a destructive business environment for the buying firm. As stated before this thesis focusses on supplier satisfaction and its relational antecedents, seeing if this will lead to better communication quality and willingness of information sharing by suppliers. To gain a clearer picture the effect of the antecedents on supplier satisfaction will be tested as first, next is communication quality, and finally the willingness of information sharing by suppliers.

3.3 The effects of the relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction on supplier satisfaction

Starting with the antecedents of supplier satisfaction. These are the six relational antecedents that should cause supplier satisfaction. These antecedents are availability, involvement, support, reliability, relational behaviour, and operative excellence. It can be argued that a buyer being available, involved and supportive should make the supplier more satisfied. As the buyer is spending more time and energy in the supplier. This will most likely be appreciated by the supplier, which should lead to supplier satisfaction. The supplier satisfaction index by Essig and Amann (2009) suggest that supplier satisfaction is achieved on the accompanying level as well as the operative level. These could account for the antecedents within the buyer's engagement and behaviour, as well as the buyer's performance. This led to hypothesis H1a, H1b, and H1c. Next is the buyer's behaviour. It can be argued that positive behaviour that supplier perceive as pleasant will be appreciated. This appreciation should result in supplier satisfaction. This led to the creation of hypothesis H1d, and H1e. At last there is the buyer's performance. It can be argued that suppliers value

a buyer that is performing well, as this would mean that the buyer is likely to do more business with the supplier. This can be seen as a win-win situation. It is therefore expected that positive buyer's performance results in supplier satisfaction, creating hypothesis H1f. Hüttinger et al. (2012, p. 1201) provide a summary of multiple factors that cause supplier satisfaction. Operative excellence, and support are directly mentioned and thus account for H1c and H1f. Additionally Benton and Maloni (2005, p. 16) findings offer grounds for the performance of buyers positively affecting supplier satisfaction. Availability, involvement, reliability and relational behaviour are all present in the summary via cooperative relationships, politeness and openness of the buyers employees, and recommendations. Accounting for the remaining hypothesis H1a, H1b, H1d, H1e. Additionally Forker and Stannack (2000, p. 37) found that cooperative relationships led to more supplier satisfaction. Combined it led to the following hypothesis:

H1a: Availability has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction

H1b: Involvement has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction

H1c: Support has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction

H1d: Reliability has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction

H1e: Relational behaviour has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction

H1f: Operative excellence has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction

3.4 Why is communication important in the buyer-supplier relationship dynamic?

Communication allows partners in a business relationship to interact with each other. It is always present within a relationship as one cannot start without the initial communication that comes from either the buyer asking for a supplier to supply their firm, or a supplier offering a buyer their goods or services. The degree to which communication is necessary is still up for debate. Research also shows that there different concepts of communication, each in theory differently affects the preferred customer status dynamic. Prahinski and Benton (2004, p. 40) already argue the importance of communication, as there are fewer suppliers available, which stresses buyers into investing more into their suppliers. In this case in the form of communication and long term relationship investments. Paulraj et al. (2008, p. 45) described communication as a pillar of buyer-supplier relationship. It is critical to maintain and enhance relationships in the buyer-supplier relationship according to the researchers. It

allows buying companies to invest in their suppliers, allowing them to develop, with the expected and wanted result that the more developed supplier is a great addition for the buying organization. J. Mohr and Nevin (1990) described communication as glue in buyer-supplier relationships. Meaning that communication is what holds these two partners together and is necessary. Seeing as communication is always present and necessary, it can be seen that the better the communication is the better the buyer will be able to stay ahead of its competition, seeing the crucial value of communication. It is therefore explored whether communication quality is a result of supplier satisfaction.

It thus clear that previous research showed the importance of communication, and its expected outcomes. Communication quality consists of communication that is accurate, complete, credible, adequate, timely, and honest. Previous research made it clear that suppliers are willing to do more for a buyer when they are satisfied with them, but if this results in better communication quality remains the question. Suppliers might always have good communication quality as a core business practice within their firms, and do not discriminate against buyers whether they are satisfied with them or not. This is what the following hypothesis will explore. Nollet et al. (2012) say that support is one of the five major benefits of preferential treatment. One can argue that a supplier being supportive is a supplier that puts more effort in their communication quality than other suppliers. It can therefore be argued that supplier satisfaction will lead to better communication quality, leading to hypothesis H2. Wong (2000, p. 431) argues that satisfied suppliers invest more into the relationship. The train of thought here is that if supplier satisfaction would cause better communication quality, the relational antecedents are likely to have the same effect. Still their individual effects will be explored. A buyer that is available, involved, and supportive, would likely receive the same behaviour from their supplier. The benefit described by Nollet et al. (2012) that a supplier will be supportive as a result of preferential treatment, here is supported with the theory of reciprocity explained by social exchange theory. Nyaga, Lynch, Marshall, and Ambrose (2013, p. 2) research also follows the logic of reciprocity seeing as the researchers found that satisfied suppliers feel the need to return the favour. This idea of reciprocity is repeated by Pulles et al. (2016): "If a supplier perceives a relationship to be satisfactory, the notion of reciprocity implies that the supplier may feel socially indebted to make relational investments" (Pulles et al., 2016, p. 131) The buyer's ways of being available, involved, and supportive are thus likely to be rewarded with communication that is accurate, complete, credible, adequate, timely and honest. This

resulted in the creation of hypothesis H2a, H2b, and H2c. A buyer that is reliable and behaves in a relationally pleasing way is also likely to receive reciprocity by the supplier. Honest and timely communication can be seen as the supplier being reliable, a reward gained by the buyer being reliable. Therefore reliability and relational behaviour are likely to positively influence communication quality, leading to hypothesis H2d and H2e. Operative excellence can be seen as a way to get preferential treatment, and thus to get better communication quality. This will follow the same logic as H2, leading to hypothesis H2f. Combining all these points, the following hypothesis were made:

H2: Supplier satisfaction has a positive effect on communication quality

H2a: Availability has a positive effect on communication quality

H2b: Involvement has a positive effect on communication quality

H2c: Support has a positive effect on communication quality

H2d: Reliability has a positive effect on communication quality

H2e: Relational behaviour has a positive effect on communication quality

H2f: Operative excellence has a positive effect on communication quality

3.5 Why is information sharing important in the buyer-supplier relationship dynamic?

In order for supply chain partners to do businesses with each other information needs to be shared. Information sharing as a basis is needed, but the to what extent is still theorized. Suppliers use information to create forecasts, react to changes, and base their investments on. The more frequent, the higher quality, and better technological ways of sharing information should all make it easier for a buyer and supplier to perform well in the market and the supply chain. Hsu et al. (2008, p. 305) has found that firms that share their information manage uncertainties better. Kim and Chai (2017, p. 49) found that supplier innovativeness increases the information sharing within the entire supply chain and allows for supply chain agility. With supply chain agility being the effectiveness of responding to changes in the market. Additionally being in a supply chain that has good agility to respond to changes will most likely perform better. It is clear that as buyer being part of a supply

chain in which suppliers share their information has major benefits compared to those supply chains that lack in this area. Information sharing by suppliers can be seen as a good benefit, and it thus important to know whether it is a result of supplier satisfaction. Are suppliers more likely to share their information when they are satisfied, that is what the hypothesis will explore.

Starting with supplier satisfaction itself. Information sharing by the supplier can be seen as a reward from supplier satisfaction. Using the five benefits by Nollet et al. (2012) again, seeing as one of them is support, information sharing can be seen as a reward by satisfied suppliers. Additionally Wong (2000, p. 431) argues that satisfied suppliers invest more into relationships, potentially leading to more information sharing. This creates hypothesis H3 that supplier satisfaction positively affects the willingness of information sharing. Based on the study by Kim and Chai (2017, p. 49) innovativeness enhances information sharing. It can be argued that being available, supportive, and involved follow this same logic. Assuming these three concepts would enhance information sharing. Nyaga et al. (2013, p. 2) found that suppliers feel the need to return the favour, when they feel the relationship is satisfactory. This idea is supported by Pulles et al. (2016) “If a supplier perceives a relationship to be satisfactory, the notion of reciprocity implies that the supplier may feel socially indebted to make relational investments” (Pulles et al., 2016, p. 131). Relational investments can easily be translated into suppliers being more willing to share information. Using the theory of social exchange, a buyer being available, involved and supportive would likely see similar results from the supplier as a form of reciprocity. This led to the creation of hypothesis H3a, H3b, and H3c. Reliability and relational behaviour can also be argued from the perspective of social exchange theory. As reliable buyers are likely to be rewarded with reliable suppliers, which in this case would be suppliers that share their information. Wang et al. (2014, p. 7054) also showed how trust is the mediating factor in the increase of information sharing. One could argue that relational behaviour and reliability are forms of trust and thus enhance information sharing. This led to the creation of H3d, and H3e. It is likely that suppliers do not simply share their information with everyone, but rather with well operating firms that actually use their information well and put it good use. It is therefore expected that information sharing is positively linked to operative excellence. This creates hypothesis H3f. Concluding the following hypothesis were created:

H3: Supplier satisfaction has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

H3a: Availability has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

H3b: Involvement has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

H3c: Support has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

H3d: Reliability has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

H3e: Relational behaviour has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

H3f: Operative excellence has a positive effect on the willingness of information sharing

4. Methods

4.1 SES Creative a toy manufacturer with global suppliers

SES Creative is a toy manufacturing company, located in Enschede, The Netherlands. SES Creative produces all kind of toys from painting products, folding products (like origami), as well as clay products. Basically everything a child would use to create something, either out of his or her imagination or following an instruction manual. All these products focus on the creativity of the child, hence the name SES Creative. Most products are shipped to Dutch toy stores, and it is a well-known brand. In order to create these products SES Creative buys its raw materials from many suppliers from all around the world, making SES Creative an interesting case company. Most of the suppliers are located in the Netherlands and Germany, with additional suppliers from China, as well as other locations. SES Creative has over one hundred suppliers they are currently working with.

4.2 Questionnaire exploring the effects of communication quality and willingness of information sharing as a part of a larger data collection

The questionnaire that can be found in the appendix comes from an existing survey that tries to understand the complete picture of the buyer-supplier relationship. This means that there are a lot of factors that will be measured that are not being discussed in this paper. The reason for this is that researchers will continuously use this survey (and add more concepts) to keep increasing the data base. This helps create more accurate data for different studies. For this paper the concepts of communication quality and willingness of information sharing are taken into account and added to the questionnaire. The entire survey that will be distributed to suppliers has been divided into six sub categories. The categories are as followed: classification, dimensions of supplier satisfaction, customer attractiveness of SES Creative, relational sphere, dependence, and closing remarks. Within the classification category, respondents are asked what their position is within the firm, how long the company they work for has been supplying SES Creative, what industry the company is in, and if they agree to personalisation of data. This will give a general overview of the type of company, length of the relationship, and more. Next is the section of the dimensions of supplier satisfaction. In this section the degree to which the supplier is satisfied with SES Creative will be researching the concepts that make up supplier satisfaction. This will help map one side of the preferred customer status theory. Next is customer attractiveness, the other side of the preferred customer status theory. Here suppliers will answer questions that will give an indicator as to how attractive SES Creative is as a customer of their business. Next is the relational sphere, seeking to understand the dynamic that is taking place between the buyer

and the supplier, this is being analysed by various concepts. The idea here is that having good relations should encourage preferential treatment. Dependence is the next concept that will be asked for suppliers to fill in, as it will map the strategic positions of both firms compared to each other. In the closing remarks suppliers are able to fill in remarks, as well as giving an indicator as to how well they know SES Creative to successfully complete the survey.

4.3 How will the important concepts be analysed?

The important concepts in this study are the six relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction, supplier satisfaction itself, communication quality and willingness of information sharing. Wanting to know the effect of all these concepts is important, but it is also important to see how these concepts are being measured. The entire questionnaire can be found in the appendix, but these important concepts will be discussed here. It is important to know that every concept is analysed by how much suppliers agree with statements on a five point Likert scale, going from totally disagree to totally agree. The three most important concepts that will be mentioned here will be supplier satisfaction, communication quality, and willingness of information sharing. Supplier satisfaction was analysed using four statements. 1: "Our firm is very satisfied with the overall relationship with SES Creative" 2: "Generally, our firm is very pleased to have SES Creative as our business partner" 3: "If we had to do it all over again, we would still choose to use SES Creative" 4: "Our firm does not regret the decision to do business with SES Creative". All these statements try to capture the degree to which suppliers are satisfied with SES Creative. Next is communication quality. Communication quality is analysed by asking to which degree the communication between the two parties is accurate, complete, credible, adequate, timely, and honest. These six qualities try to assess the quality of the communication that is taking place. The final concept is willingness of information sharing. The willingness of information sharing is tested by using three statements 1: "We keep SES Creative informed about what is happening in our company" 2: "The transfer of information about customer needs we know takes place frequently" 3: "We share information with SES Creative, if we feel that the information can improve their company". These three statements assess if a supplier is willing to share information with SES Creative with the idea that is a possible outcome of supplier satisfaction.

4.4 Data was being collected from the international and national suppliers of SES Creative using an online survey

Data will be collected with an online questionnaire, filled in by suppliers of SES Creative. The suppliers are sent a link via email in which they could fill in questionnaire. The questionnaire had three versions, one in Dutch, one in German, and one in English. A total of 44 responses were gathered from this, seeing as this is on the lower side an additional 83 cases from a different paper has been added to increase the validity of the research. This has two main purposes, to expand the knowledge of buyer-supplier relationships as a whole, as well as giving an indicator as to how SES Creative is operating on the buyer supplier market, and whether improvements can be made in certain areas. The suppliers are asked to fill in the complete questionnaire as this will be used for the greater database used in other research papers. This includes all the factors that will be used in this paper to analyse the hypothesis. After there will be an indicator of the effect of these factors on preferred customer status, and the data can be used to show how SES Creative scores on these factors, based on their suppliers. This can give SES Creative some options as to how to operate in the future and to in what areas they should put more attention to. Should certain factors be improved upon to ensure a preferred customer status? Should certain suppliers have better preferential treatment for SES Creative, opening up possibilities at the negotiation table, or the data could show in which suppliers SES Creative should invest more time and resources, as these suppliers are more likely to give preferential treatment.

Most of the questions asked in the questionnaire are statements, the supplier then have to say how much they agree with a certain statement on a Likert scale of five. (completely disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and completely agree) This makes it easy to import the data into SPSS. After the data is imported into SPSS and checked it will then be imported into SmartPLS. Here the model can be recreated and tested so the hypothesis can be tested. This will make it clear what the effect of the relational antecedents on supplier satisfaction is, as well as the effects of communication and information sharing on supplier satisfaction and the relational antecedents.

4.5 Data quality assessment shows the data to be very reliable and valid

In order to assess the data quality several analysis were done in SmartPLS3. In table 4, 5, and 6 can the validity and reliability assessment, correlations table, and model fit analysis be found respectively.

Table 4 - Validity and reliability assessment

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Availability	0.922	0.928	0.950	0.865
Communication quality		1.000		
Involvement	0.883	0.935	0.926	0.807
Operative excellence	0.858	0.895	0.900	0.693
Relational behaviour	0.912	0.938	0.933	0.701
Reliability	0.948	0.949	0.963	0.867
Supplier satisfaction	0.971	0.971	0.981	0.946
Support	0.757	1.289	0.826	0.618
Willingness of information sharing	0.868	0.877	0.919	0.790

Starting with the validity and reliability assessment. Table 4 shows the cronbach's alpha, the rho_A, composite reliability, and the average variance extracted. All constructs are above the threshold of 0.7, indicating reliable and valid data. The average variance extracted (AVE) is above the threshold value of 0.5 for all concepts, showing that variance due to measurement error is smaller than the variance captured by the constructs themselves. This all shows the data to be valid and reliable.

Table 5 - Correlations table

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Communication quality (1)	1								
Willingness of information sharing (2)	0.675	1							
Availability (3)	0.646	0.523	1						
Reliability (4)	0.837	0.636	0.631	1					
Involvement (5)	0.301	0.226	0.186	0.271	1				
Operative excellence (6)	0.572	0.387	0.687	0.587	0.404	1			

Relational behaviour (7)	0.848	0.724	0.639	0.821	0.363	0.616	1		
Supplier satisfaction (8)	0.889	0.645	0.629	0.884	0.290	0.539	0.839	1	
Support (9)	0.468	0.437	0.483	0.465	0.337	0.598	0.553	0.491	1
Mean	3.49	3.53	3.33	3.52	2.98	2.89	3.36	3.74	3.10
Standard deviation	1.21	1.04	1.24	1.29	1.15	1.08	1.09	1.45	1.08

Looking at table 5, the correlation table it can be seen that generally the constructs have high correlation among them. This comes to no surprise as many constructs are relational, and have a certain degree of overlap. However none of these constructs show too high of a correlation to show a significant problem with the data. Looking at the means and standard deviation it can be seen that overall the scores are reasonably high (above or around three), meaning that the suppliers are generally neutral or agreeing with these concepts affecting their relationship with SES Creative. However the standard deviations are quite high with an entire point, meaning that there is most likely high variation between suppliers. For example a lot of suppliers will be very satisfied, while others perceive little to no satisfaction.

Table 6 - Model fit

Saturated Model	
SRMR	0.080
d_ULS	4.059
D_G	2.169
Chi-Square	1113.263
NFI	0.772

Looking at table 6 the model fit can be assessed. The SRMR is exactly at the threshold of 0.080. This shows a good fit. However the NFI value is below 0.9, showing a poor model fit. The saturated and the estimated model are exactly the same, so only the saturated model is being shown in table 6.

5. Results

In table 7 and figure 6 the results can be found. It can be seen that there are only six significant results out of the twenty-one analysed relationships. In terms of the relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction it shows that only reliability and relational behaviour have a positive and significant effect on supplier satisfaction. Communication quality seems to be the result of supplier satisfaction and relational behaviour, meaning that better communication quality is a result of supplier satisfaction, yet that is mostly due to pleasant behaviour by the buyer that is being rewarded. The final two significant results are the negative effect of operative excellence on the willingness of information sharing, and the positive effect of relational behaviour on the willingness of information sharing.

Table 7 - The results of the analysis in SmartPLS

	Original Sample (O)	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values
Availability -> Communication quality	0.072	0.70	1.037	0.300
Availability -> Supplier satisfaction	0.099	0.063	1.565	0.118
Availability -> Willingness of information sharing	0.159	0.086	1.835	0.067
Communication quality -> Willingness of information sharing	0.225	0.183	1.228	0.220
Involvement -> Communication quality	0.008	0.056	0.146	0.884
Involvement -> Supplier satisfaction	0.023	0.047	0.492	0.623
Involvement -> Willingness of information sharing	0.001	0.081	0.017	0.986
Operative excellence -> Communication quality	0.034	0.070	0.491	0.624
Operative excellence -> Supplier satisfaction	-0.116	0.069	1.665	0.097
Operative excellence -> Willingness of information sharing	-0.247	0.109	2.269	0.024
Relational behaviour -> Communication quality	0.293	0.079	3.713	0.000
Relational behaviour -> Supplier satisfaction	0.324	0.092	3.530	0.000

Relational behaviour -> Willingness of information sharing	0.532	0.174	3.068	0.002
Reliability -> Communication quality	0.092	0.101	0.914	0.361
Reliability -> Supplier satisfaction	0.594	0.086	6.875	0.000
Reliability -> Willingness of information sharing	0.109	0.157	0.693	0.489
Supplier satisfaction -> Communication quality	0.521	0.111	4.679	0.000
Supplier satisfaction -> Willingness of information sharing	-0.123	0.159	0.774	0.439
Support -> Communication quality	-0.060	0.060	0.829	0.407
Support -> Supplier satisfaction	0.050	0.061	0.816	0.415
Support -> Willingness of information sharing	0.118	0.095	1.251	0.212

5.1 The effects of the antecedents of supplier satisfaction on supplier satisfaction

Looking at table 7 and figure 6 we can see the following effects. Availability has a very small positive effect on supplier satisfaction ($b = .099$; $p = .118$). H1a has been rejected. Involvement has a very small positive effect on supplier satisfaction. ($b = .023$; $p = .623$). This means the hypothesis H1b has been rejected. Support has a very small positive effect of on supplier satisfaction. ($b = .050$; $p = .415$). This means the hypothesis H1c has been rejected. Reliability has a positive effect of on supplier satisfaction. ($b = .594$; $p = .000$). This means that hypothesis H1d has been accepted. Relational behaviour has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction. ($b = .324$; $p = .000$). This means hypothesis H1e has been accepted. Operative excellence has a negative effect on supplier satisfaction. ($b = -.116$; $p = .097$). This means that the hypothesis H1f has been rejected. Concluding all these results it can be seen that several hypothesis have been rejected and only two are accepted. Availability, involvement and support had an effect too small and not statistically significant, which led to the rejection of hypothesis H1a, H1b, and H1c. Operative excellence did not have a statistically significant effect, and the effect was negative on supplier satisfaction. This led to the rejection of hypothesis H1f. Finally there were reliability and relational behaviour who both had a positive and statistically significant effect on supplier satisfaction as expected, which led to the acceptance of hypothesis H1d, and H1e.

5.2 The effects of the antecedents of supplier satisfaction and supplier satisfaction on communication quality

Looking at table 7 and figure 6 it can be seen that supplier satisfaction has a moderate positive effect on communication quality. ($b = .512$; $p = .000$). This means H2 is accepted. Availability has a weak positive effect on communication quality. ($b = .072$; $p = .300$). This means H2a is rejected. Involvement has a very weak positive effect on communication quality. ($b = .008$; $p = .884$). This means H2b is rejected. Support has a very weak negative effect on communication quality. ($b = -.050$; $p = .407$). This means that H2c is rejected. Reliability has a very weak positive effect on communication quality. ($b = .092$; $p = .361$). This means that H2d is rejected. Relational behaviour has a moderate positive effect on communication quality. ($b = .293$; $p = .000$). This means that H2e is accepted. Operative excellence has a very weak positive effect on communication quality. ($b = 0.034$; $p = .624$). This means that H2f is rejected. Concluding all these findings it can be seen that only two hypothesis were accepted. The only ways to achieve better communication quality as a reward is via supplier satisfaction itself, and by behaving in a relational pleasant way. This means H2, and H2e are accepted. H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d, and H2f are rejected.

5.3 The effects of the antecedents of supplier satisfaction and supplier satisfaction on the willingness of information sharing

Supplier satisfaction has a negative effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = -.123$; $p = .439$). This means that the hypothesis H3 is rejected. Availability has a weak positive effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = .159$; $p = .067$). This means that the hypothesis H3a is rejected. Involvement has a very weak positive effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = .001$; $p = .986$). This means that the hypothesis H3b has been rejected. Support has a weak positive effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = .118$; $p = .212$). This means that the hypothesis H3c has been rejected. Reliability has a weak positive effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = .109$; $p = .489$). This means that the hypothesis H3d has been rejected. Relational behaviour has a strong positive effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = .532$; $p = .002$). This means that the hypothesis H3e has been accepted. Operative excellence has a moderate positive effect on the willingness of information sharing. ($b = -.247$; $p = .024$). This means that the hypothesis H3f has been rejected. Concluding it can be seen that only one hypothesis has been accepted. In this study making sure supplier share their information is achieved by behaving in a relational pleasant way as a buyer. This led to the acceptance of H3e.

Operative excellence has a remarkable effect were the less expertise is being shown by the buyer, the more likely it is suppliers will share their information. Leading to the rejection of H3f. All other effects were not statistically significant leading to the rejection of hypothesis H3, H3a, H3b, H3c, and H3d.

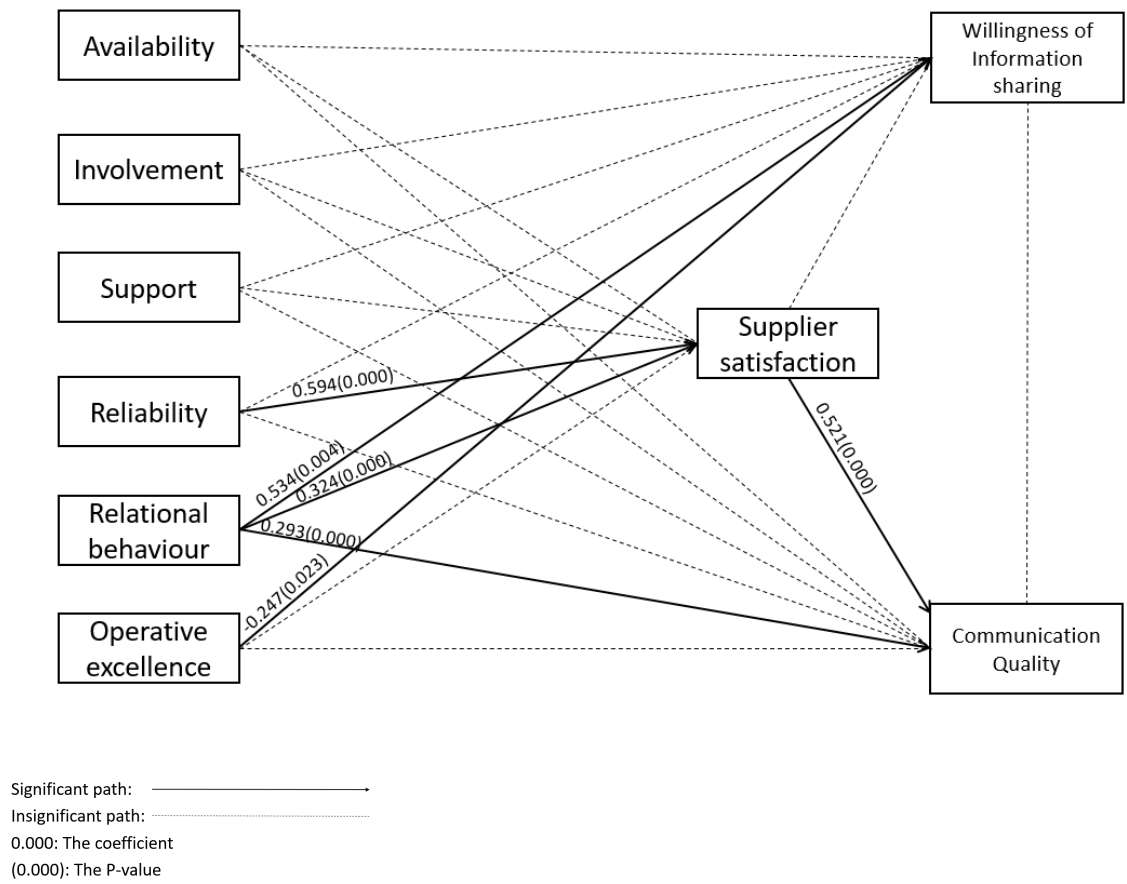


Figure 6 - Results of the analysis

6. Discussion: Only reliability and relational behaviour appear to be antecedents of supplier satisfaction, better communication quality is a result of supplier satisfaction and relational behaviour, and suppliers are only willing to share information due to relational behaviour.

A general conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that in this case only two out of the six relational antecedents actually predict supplier satisfaction. Only reliability and relational behaviour show to have a positive and significant effect on supplier satisfaction. The other four antecedents are not statistically significant, this does not mean these antecedents are not good predictors of supplier satisfaction, but their effect does not hold true in this case scenario. The research shows that better communication quality is an actual result of supplier satisfaction. However this effect is mainly caused by pleasant relational behaviour done by the buyer that is being rewarded. Finally the research shows that suppliers are more willing to share their information only when their buyers act in a relational pleasant way. It is not a direct result of supplier satisfaction or the other antecedents, but only due to the buyer acting in a relational pleasant way. Here it can be seen that relational behaviour holds a lot of power as an indicator of supplier satisfaction, communication quality, and willingness of information sharing.

6.1 Antecedents of supplier satisfaction, reliability and relational behaviour are key, while operational excellence poses an interesting view

Looking at the results it shows that every antecedent has a positive effect on supplier satisfaction, except for operational excellence. Availability, involvement, and support all have a very small positive effect that is not significant on supplier satisfaction. The only positive and significant effects are from reliability and relational behaviour. This does not make the studies by Hüttinger et al. (2012), Schiele et al. (2012) and Vos et al. (2016) obsolete, rather it shows how different indicators of supplier satisfaction have different weights in certain markets. Involvement and support all have to do with technological support and capabilities. SES Creative mainly purchases raw materials. It could be the case that most suppliers are simply not being involved or supported technologically, simply because it plays a minor role in the market SES Creative is operating in. Therefore something that is not valued by suppliers does not create supplier satisfaction, as supplier satisfaction needs to be understood as an individual process next to a scientific topic. Not everything is of the same value to suppliers, and something that has little to no value is bound to not create supplier satisfaction. Seeing that availability has a very small positive and insignificant effect

might mean that SES Creative has not invested enough in employees that create a special connection that leads to supplier satisfaction. It could also be that investing in extra employees or training employees to be more involvement with the employees of the supplier is simply not economically viable. Yet if supplier satisfaction is something of value to SES Creative, it is a clear point where improvements can be made. Operative excellence is a curious find. The results show that operative excellence has a negative effect on supplier satisfaction. If buyers still want to achieve supplier satisfaction buying firms should focus on the other antecedents that truly enhance supplier satisfaction, which in this case is reliability and relational behaviour. These two antecedents both have a positive and significant effect, with relational behaviour having a moderate effect of 0.324 and reliability a strong effect of 0.594. Meaning that within this research reliability and relational behaviour are the two tools in order to create more supplier satisfaction. Seeing as these two indicator are so strong, it could be that these will generate supplier satisfaction in general, regardless of the market buyers and suppliers operate in. Making reliability and relational behaviour much more valuable than they previously were. Putting all these antecedents together it can be seen that when operating with SES Creative they are very reliable and pleasant to do business with, which is very appreciated and should serve as an indicator as to see reliability and relational behaviour as major indicators of supplier satisfaction. It seems SES Creative does not go the extra mile to involve and support suppliers with new projects, innovations, and developments. This is most likely caused by the absence of high tech in the market SES Creative and its suppliers are operating in.

6.2 Communication quality is a reward gained from supplier satisfaction and relational behaviour

Looking at the result it shows that communication is a result of supplier satisfaction and relational behaviour. Seeing as availability, involvement, support and operative excellence had no significant effect on supplier satisfaction itself it is no surprise these indicators have no significant effect on communication quality. What is interesting is that reliability, even though it had a positive and significant effect on supplier satisfaction, it has no significant effect on communication quality. Meaning that communication quality seems to be only improved when suppliers in general are more satisfied, and when the buyer behaves in a relational pleasant way. This can be seen as a form of reciprocity. As communication quality could be seen as relational pleasant behaviour by the supplier. These findings confirm the

benefits mentioned by Nollet et al. (2012), as better communication quality can be seen as a form of support by the supplier. However in this scenario it is only relational behaviour that causes this, and not all the other relational antecedents of supplier satisfaction. As mentioned before it could be that these other factors are not important for these specific suppliers or it could be that in order to gain a certain benefit from supplier satisfaction it has to be aligned with the appropriate buyer's action that corresponds with a reward. In short only certain actions by buyers could drive certain benefits, rather than supplier satisfaction in general causes benefits. Each benefit could be linked to a specific action by the buyer. Another reasoning could be that the suppliers in this scenario simply have other buyers they are more satisfied with, as satisfaction itself is not a guarantee for benefits, but often buyers have to stand out in their satisfaction compared to other buyers. "Hence, the supplier is expected to show more commitment to relationships in which it experiences more relational benefits." (Pulles et al., 2016, p. 132) In order to answer this question more research should be done on the supplier's perspective.

6.3 Suppliers are more willing to share information to buyers behaving in a relationally pleasant way, but might want to share more information with lesser performing firms

Looking at the results on the willingness of information sharing it appears that only two relations are significant. A positive relation between relational behaviour and the willingness of information sharing, and a negative behaviour between operative excellence and the willingness of information sharing. There is a similarity with communication quality, seeing as only relational behaviour of the relational antecedents positively affects a possible reward from supplier satisfaction. Interestingly is that the willingness of information is not a direct outcome of supplier satisfaction, but only from relational behaviour. This shows that in this case the only way to make sure suppliers are more willing to share information with a buyer is by behaving in relational pleasant way as a buyer. Seeing as sharing information to buyers is a commitment that costs time and money, it is not something suppliers are willing to do to every buyer, or as the researchers put it: "Hence, the supplier is expected to show more commitment to relationships in which it experiences more relational benefits." (Pulles et al., 2016, p. 132). It could be that information is already being shared to buyers the suppliers perceive more satisfaction with, or the satisfaction achieved from SES Creative is not enough. Again this requires the perspective of the supplier to better understand the situation. The other interesting find is that there is a negative and significant relation between operative excellence and the willingness of information sharing. It was thought that excelling as a

buyer would be rewarded by suppliers sharing more information, however in this case it seems like suppliers are actually more willing to share information with buyers when they are not performing as well. This is the exact opposite of what is expected. A possible explanation for this is that supplier actually do not want to see their buyers fail, so when they notice buyers performing worse than expected, they are more likely to share information in order to help the buyers. This makes sense looking at it from a supply chain perspective, as the supply chain performs as the weakest link. It could be that the buyer is the weakest link, at that suppliers want to elevate the buyer in order to elevate the entire supply chain, which in turn helps the supplier themselves to sell more to a buyer. In this scenario information sharing by suppliers is not a reward, but a tool in order to help buyers perform better.

6.4 Additional insights from suppliers

Looking at the comments that suppliers could leave in the questionnaire as well as comparing them to conversations I had with supplier directly. It became clear that multiple firms answered questions with neutral as they were of no to little importance in their day to day activity with SES Creative. Others said they were too small of a supplier to qualify for joint projects, new innovations, and more. Meaning a lot of antecedents of supplier satisfaction could not be truly tested with these suppliers. Another conversation I had was with a supplier of SES Creative that purposefully not filled in the questionnaire as the employee found the questions to be too ambitious and not all applicable to the relation his company had with SES Creative. Yet in the conversation I had with him, he clearly pointed out that if SES Creative were to call on short notice about materials, problems, or any other thing, his company would help quickly. Faster than they would help other buyers I might add. This is preferential treatment. One can argue that this is better communication quality SES Creative receives, namely timely communication. Furthermore the employee added that the length of the relationship also had to do with the preferential treatment, as they were suppliers of SES Creative for over twenty years. Furthermore comments and remarks added that the suppliers are generally happy to do business with SES Creative and are glad to have them as their customer. The conclusion that can be made from this is that is harder to gain true supplier satisfaction in markets that lack high tech capabilities, yet is not impossible. Relational factors like reliability and relational behaviour still allow for supplier satisfaction in these markets, and in some cases actual preferential treatment.

7. Implications: Reliability and relational behaviour are great relational enhancing tools, and better communication quality is a reward gained from supplier satisfaction

7.1 Implications for theory

This research shows a few implications for theory. It confirms that reliability and relational behaviour serve as great relational indicators of supplier satisfaction. This is in alignment with previous research from Hüttinger et al. (2012), Schiele et al. (2012), and Vos et al. (2016). The other four antecedents did not seem to have a significant effect on supplier satisfaction, yet this might have to do with the industry this research was conducted in, as not many technological innovations are taking place for a buyer to be very involved, supportive or show their excellence. This begs the question as to how supplier satisfaction differs per industry and market, and whether there is a general overlap that allows buyers from any industry to use to make their suppliers satisfied. According to this research it seems likely reliability and relational behaviour should create supplier satisfaction regardless of the industry the buyer and supplier are operating in. Another implication for theory is that communication quality is a reward coming from supplier satisfaction and relational behaviour. Information sharing is increased if suppliers are dealing with buyers who they deem are acting in a relational pleasant way. Buyers that are performing worse than expected can expect suppliers to share more information with them in order to improve the buying firm, and in turn the supply chain. This is an interesting find for theory.

7.2 Implications for practice and SES Creative

Implications for practice that can be drawn from this research are that relational behaviour and reliability are great indicators of supplier satisfaction, regardless of industry. In this case not every antecedent was an actual indicator of supplier satisfaction, yet following previous research showing the importance of these antecedents, and with the knowledge that every supplier is different and values different antecedents, one thing is certain reliability and relational behaviour are always appreciated. When buyers want to satisfy their suppliers they should improve their reliability and relational behaviour. If a buyer is only interested in the rewards of better communication quality and suppliers that are willing to share information, the buyer needs to make sure they are behaving in a relational pleasant way. Yet here it becomes clear that a buyer cannot simply be just interested in the rewards, as suppliers might notice how the buyer is only interested in the rewards and can be seen as unpleasant

behaviour. It seems only genuine pleasantly behaving buyers are rewarded with these benefits. Looking at table 5, the means show the average scores of the various concepts tested in this thesis. The two concepts that on average scored below three were operative excellence, and involvement. If SES Creative wants to improve their expertise, these areas allow for the biggest improvement, as they are currently on the lower end.

8. Limitations and future research

8.1 A more in depth look into information sharing is needed

This thesis was made with limited time. The questionnaire that was sent to the suppliers was one of the first things that needed to be completed. The idea of information sharing being a reward of supplier satisfaction and its antecedents was taken into account, yet was later more developed when the questionnaire was already sent out. This means that the topic of information sharing was analysed in a very basic form, when the literature review dives deeper into what information sharing really is, as well as the different sub concepts that can be drawn from information sharing. As a reminder information sharing was analysed using three different questions: “We keep SES Creative informed about what is happening in our company”, “The transfer of information about customer needs we know takes place frequently”, and “We share information with SES Creative, if we feel that the information can improve the company”. These statements are rather limited compared to the different forms of information sharing that were discussed in the literature review. First is integration. No form of integration of information sharing was analysed in this research. One can argue that integrated system that allow for information to be easily accessed and shared by both partners comes with new challenges and opportunities. On the one hand it can be argued that before such a form of integration is in place a high level of trust, commitment, and satisfaction is needed for such a system to be even in place. This suggest a high level of supplier satisfaction to information sharing integration. On the other hand integration means that almost nothing is hidden for both partners, meaning that the two partners are continuously working with each other which could lead to more conflicts, which potentially make it harder for satisfaction to be achieved. But this is something that needs to be discussed. Next is the extent and quality of information sharing. It can be that abundant and overwhelming information sharing leads to supplier dissatisfaction, as it is simply too much information, or not relevant information for a supplier. Too much of this kind of information could lead to dissatisfaction. This study found that underperforming buyers receive more information sharing as a way to be helped by suppliers. It would be better to split up information sharing in different categories to see what information is a result of what action, rather than just an increase in the sharing of information. Again this healthy balance should be explored in future research. Finally there is openness and willingness of information sharing. It could be that only those suppliers and buyers open and willing to the idea of information sharing would actually benefit from it in terms of supplier satisfaction, while those not open and willing to information sharing would react differently to the idea leading

to supplier dissatisfaction. Again every supplier is different and those differences need to be taken into account. Future research should explore if openness and willingness of suppliers is needed for the success of information sharing, or that information sharing in general is a reward of relational behaviour.

8.2 A focus on what antecedents of supplier satisfaction are the best indicator in different markets and industries

It is already known that every supplier is different and values things differently, which suggest different approaches to make suppliers satisfied. And although this premise is true, it might make it hard for buyers to be actively understanding what makes their suppliers satisfied, which could lead to buyers stopping to pursue understanding what makes their supplier satisfied. This is not a good sign. It is therefore needed that suppliers can be classified into categories to know what generally makes them satisfied. This can differ based on size, industry, and corporate strategy among other things. This allows for a tool that can be used by buyers to classify their suppliers. This can then be used to quickly see what is needed to be done to create supplier satisfaction with a particular supplier, or group of suppliers. Still this shouldn't be the determining factor, but it should serve as a tool that allows for quick, easy, and accurate classification of suppliers. This would make it easier for buyers to pursue supplier satisfaction, which should eventually lead to preferential treatment, which is one way to create competitive advantage.

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Questionnaire

Supplier satisfaction research (EN)

What is your position in the company?

How long does your company supply to SES Creative?

For how long do you personally work for your company?

How many employees does your company have?

In what industry would you place your company?

What type of ownership does your firm have?

How much influence does SES Creative have on your product/service design specifications?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Influence of SES Creative ()



Complexity

	Totally agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Totally disagree (5)
The supplied product/service is very complex in relation to others that we produce (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How streamlined are the procedures between you and the customer?

	Excellent (1)	Good (2)	Average (3)	Poor (4)	Terrible (5)
Streamlining of procedures (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Would you agree to personalize your individual answers and reveal your answers to the customer? If yes, the customer will be able to see your individual responses. If not, the customer will not be able to see your answers.

- No, I want to stay anonymous (1)
- Yes, I do not object personalization (2)
-

Name of your firm (optional)

Contact accessibility

There is a contact person at SES Creative who...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
...coordinates the relevant relationship activities within and outside of SES Creative. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...is, for the employees of our company, the one to contact in regard to partner-specific questions. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...informs employees within SES Creative firm about the needs of our company. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Growth potential for your company

The relationship with SES Creative...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... provides us with a dominant market position in our sales area. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... is very important for us with respect to growth rates. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... enables us to exploit new market opportunities. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Innovation potential

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
In collaborating with SES Creative, our firm developed a very high number of new products/services. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In collaborating with SES Creative, our firm was able to bring to market a very high number of new products/services. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The speed with which new products/services are developed and brought to market with SES Creative is very high. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Customer's operative excellence

SES Creative...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... has always exact and in time forecasts about future demand. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... provides us with forecasts our firm can rely and plan on. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... has for our firm simple and transparent internal processes. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... supports short decision-making processes. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Customer's reliability

In working with our company, SES Creative...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... provided a completely truthful picture when negotiating. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... always negotiated from a good faith bargaining perspective. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... never breached formal or informal agreements to benefit themselves. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... never altered facts in order to meet its own goals and objectives. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Support

SES Creative...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... collaborates with us to improve our manufacturing processes or services. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... gives us (technological) advice (e.g. on materials, software, way of working). (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... gives us quality related advice (e.g. on the use of inspection equipment, quality assurance procedures, service evaluation). (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Involvement

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
We are early involved in the new product/service development process of SES Creative (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We are very active in the new product development process of SES Creative. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communication with our firm about quality considerations and design changes is very close. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Customer's relational behaviour

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
Problems that arise in the course of the relationship are treated by SES Creative as joint rather than individual responsibilities. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SES Creative is committed to improvements that may benefit our relationship as a whole and not only themselves. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We each benefit and earn in proportion to the efforts we put in. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our firm usually gets at least a fair share of the rewards and cost savings from our relationship with SES Creative. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SES Creative would willingly make adjustments to help us out if special problems/needs arise. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SES Creative is flexible when dealing with our firm. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Economic performance

The relationship with SES Creative...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... provides us with large sales volumes. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... helps us to achieve good profits. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... allows us to gain high margins. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... has a positive influence on the profitability of our firm. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... enables us to raise our profitability together. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Customer satisfaction

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
Our firm is very satisfied with the overall relationship to SES Creative. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Generally, our firm is very pleased to have SES Creative as our business partner. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If we had to do it all over again, we would still choose to use SES Creative. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our firm does not regret the decision to do business with SES Creative. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Preferred customer status

Compared to other customers in our firm's customer base...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... SES Creative is our preferred customer. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... we care more for SES Creative. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... SES Creative receives preferential treatment. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... we go out on a limb for SES Creative. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... our firm's employees prefer collaborating with SES Creative. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Preferential treatment

Our company...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... allocates our best employees (e.g. most experienced, trained, intelligent) to the relationship with SES Creative. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... allocates more financial resources (e.g. capital, cash) to the relationship with SES Creative. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... grants SES Creative the best utilization of our physical resources (e.g. equipment capacity, scarce materials). (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... shares more of our capabilities (e.g. skills, know-how, expertise) with SES Creative. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Customer attractiveness

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
We consider SES Creative to be an attractive partner for future collaborations. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We expect positive outcomes from the relationship with SES Creative. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our firm has positive expectations about the value of the relationship with SES Creative. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We wish to collaborate more with SES Creative than we are currently doing. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We have the feeling that we have to join a strong competition to keep SES Creative as a customer. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Trust

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
SES Creative keeps promises it makes to our firm. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We trust SES Creative to keep our best interests in mind. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We consider SES Creative as trustworthy. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Atmosphere

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
Our relationship with SES Creative can be best described as tense. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We have often disagreements in our working relationship with SES Creative. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We frequently clash with SES Creative on issues relating to how we should conduct our business. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discussions within areas of disagreement are productive (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discussions intend to create more problems (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discussions increase effectiveness/strength of relationship (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When disputes occur, we sort them out among ourselves easily. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Status

According to us...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
... SES Creative has a high status (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... SES Creative is admired by others (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... SES Creative has a high prestige (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... SES Creative is highly regarded by others (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Communication

Our communication with the other party is always...

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
...Accurate (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...Complete (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...Credible (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...Adequate (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...Timely (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...Honest (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Dependence

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
In this relationship, our company is very dependent on SES Creative. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To achieve our business goals, our company has to maintain this relationship with SES Creative. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If the relationship were to end earlier than contracted, our business goals would be negatively affected. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our company would face great challenges if SES Creative did not continue the contractual relationship. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We have good alternatives for SES Creative. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Relation

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
SES Creative has the right to tell us what to do. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Since SES Creative is our customer, we should accept their requests and recommendations. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Customers have a right to expect suppliers to follow their instructions. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SES Creative offers rewards so that we will go along with their wishes. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We feel that by going along with SES Creative, we will be favored on other occasions. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If we do not do as asked, we will not receive the rewards offered by SES Creative (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SES Creative offers us rewards if we agree with their requests. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
SES Creative makes it clear that failing to comply with their requests will result in penalties against us. (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If we do not agree with SES Creative's suggestions, they could make things difficult for us. (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If we do not do as asked, we will not receive very good treatment from SES Creative. (10)

If we do not go along with SES Creative, they might withdraw certain services/resources we need. (11)

SES Creative is an expert in the industry. (12)

We respect the judgment of SES Creative's representatives. (13)

SES Creative has business expertise that makes them likely to suggest the proper thing to do. (14)

Supplier power

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
If SES Creative stopped buying from us, we could easily switch our volume with sales to other buyers (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It would be relatively easy for us to find another buyer for our product(s) (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Information sharing

	Strongly agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
We keep SES Creative informed about what is happening in our company (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The transfer of information about customer needs we know take place frequently (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We share information with SES Creative, if we feel that the information can improve their company (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Annual turnover in Euro's

Please indicate the annual turnover with SES Creative as percentage of your total annual turnover

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



I know SES Creative good enough to answer all questions

- Strongly agree (1)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Remarks (optional)
