RELATIONSHIP LEARNING AS A DIMENSION OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY: TENTATIVE EVIDENCE FROM TRANSNATIONAL BUYER-SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIPS

UČENJE KAO DIMENZIJA KVALITETE ODNOSA I SURADNJE: OKVIRNI DOKAZI IZ TRANSNACIONALNOG ODNOSA KUPAC-DOBAVLJAČ

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Key words:

relationship quality, relationship learning, trust, commitment, buyer-supplier relationships, transnational company, variance-based structural equation modeling

SAŽETAK

Učenje kao dio odnosa i suradnje poznato je u marketinškoj teoriji, ali nije istraženo kao moguća dimenzija konstrukta drugog reda kvalitete odnosa i suradnje. Do sada je ovaj konstrukt uglav-

ABSTRACT

While relationship learning has been addressed in marketing theory, it has not yet been explored as a possible dimension of the second-order construct of relationship quality (RQ). This construct

nom bio konceptualiziran tako da se sastoji od povjerenja i predanosti, ponekad i zadovoljstva, iako neki autori potonje vide više kao posljedicu dvaju prethodnih. Dodatno, dok se kvaliteta odnosa i suradnje te njezina multidimenzionalnost istraživala u marketinškoj literaturi, ovo područje je ostalo gotovo neistraženo u literaturi iz distribucijskog i operacijskog menadžmenta. Svrha je rada analizirati multidimenzinalnu prirodu konstrukta drugog reda kvalitete odnosa i suradnje u specifičnom okruženju transnacionalnih poduzeća u odnosima kupac-dobavljač. Naš rad nastoji odrediti može li se učenje u odnosu i suradnji smatrati važnom dimenzijom kvalitete odnosa, uz povjerenje i predanost. U istraživanju pratimo pristup Jeana, Sinkovicsa i Kima (2010) te Jeana i Sinkovicsa (2010) koji su se usredotočili na aspekte upravljanja učenjem u upravljanju performansama i ishodima distribucije. Primijenili smo indirektnu metodu testiranja kvalitete odnosa kao reflektivni konstrukt drugog reda koji se sastoji od povjerenja, predanosti i odnosa, na temelju modela strukturnih jednadžbi temeljenog na jednostavnoj varijanci. Rezultati potvrđuju kako je učenje tijekom odnosa i suradnje važna dimenzija konstrukta drugog reda kvalitete odnosa. Istraživanje je provedeno, uz određena ograničenja, na probnom uzorku od 11 prodajnih menadžera transnacionalnih poduzeća i 55 ocijenjenih dobavljača. Ono zahtijeva dodatnu potvrdu rezultata dobivenih na probnom uzorku.

has so far been mostly conceptualized to consist of trust and commitment, sometimes also satisfaction; however, some see the latter more as a consequence of the former two. Additionally, while RQ and its multidimensionality have been researched in the marketing literature, this area has remained virtually unexplored in the supply and operations management literature. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the multidimensional nature of the second-order construct of RQ in a particular setting of transnational corporation (TNC) buyer-supplier relationships. Our paper aims to determine if relationship learning can be considered an important dimension of RQ, alongside trust and commitment. In our study of relationship learning, we follow Jean, Sinkovics and Kim (2010) and Jean and Sinkovics (2010), who have focused on the governance aspect of relationship learning in managing supply performance outcomes. We employ an indirect testing approach by testing RQ as a second-order reflective construct comprised of trust, commitment and relationship within a simple variance-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Our results confirm that relationship learning is an important dimension of the second-order construct of RQ. This was done on a tentative sample of 11 TNC purchasing managers and 55 evaluated suppliers, albeit with some research limitations which we acknowledge. Our research calls for additional cross-validation of our tentative results.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Transnational corporations (TNCs) are often described as interorganizational differentiated networks (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1990). In such networks, buyer-supplier relationships play a particularly pivotal role, as drivers of organizational competitiveness (Veludo, Macbeth & Purchase, 2006). This is due to TNCs' wide employment of outsourcing strategies, reliance on collaborative supply partnerships and inherent focus on internalizing only those activities which are connected to their core competitive advantage (Tang & Musa, 2011; Blome & Schoenherr, 2011). Handfield and Nichols (1999), for example, emphasize the importance of organizational relationships as conduits for the integration and management of supply chain actors and activities in their widely-used definition of supply chain management (SCM). Otto and Kotzab (2003) and Chen and Paulraj (2004) go even further by placing relationship management ability at the very core of SCM.

If relationships and the ability to appropriately manage them lie at the core of SCM, then managers need to pay particular attention to the quality of such relationships in order to effectively and efficiently manage them. In this regard, relationship quality (RQ) is believed to offer "the best assessment of relationship strength and provides the most insight into exchange performance" (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 136; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder & Iacobucci, 2001; Kumar, Scheer & Steenkamp, 1995). In a recent review of the literature on collaborative planning in supply chains, Günter et al. (2011) systematically address the issue of RQ as a key concept in the supply chain and operations management literature. They point out that RQ has so far been mainly analyzed in the relationship and industrial marketing literature, where it has been explored as a higher-order construct (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990, p. 70) – usually consisting of trust, commitment and satisfaction (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 136; Athanasopoulou, 2009, p. 603). On the other hand, Günter et al. (2011) pointed to RQ

being neglected in the supply and operations management literature. Günter et al. (2011, p. 84) no longer viewed RQ as a set of fuzzy relational characteristics, or as a black box antecedent construct of collaborative planning and supply chain performance, but as a set of "mechanisms of action" which should be employed as managerial tools to achieve better collaborative planning and overall supply chain performance. This governance perspective is very close to that of Jean and Sinkovics (2010) and Jean, Sinkovics and Kim (2010) in the international marketing literature. Additionally, for example, Su et al. (2008) see a strong and positive relationship between supply chain RQ and cooperative behavior of the parties involved in the chain. From this collaborative relational perspective, learning also plays an important part, particularly in buyer-supplier relationships (Selnes & Sallis, 2003).

Despite RQ research taking off in the supply chain and operations management literature over the last couple of years (see e.g. Fynes et al., 2008; Huntley, 2006; Chu & Wang, 2012) – and being researched extensively in the last three decades in the marketing literature (e.g. Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Anderson & Narus, 1990; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Liu, Li & Zhang, 2010), as well as in the last decade in the organization studies and applied psychology literature (e.g. Arino, De la Torre & Ring, 2001; Garcia-Canal, Valdes-Llaneza & Arino, 2003) – Günter et al. (2011, p. 90) pointed to both a "dearth of empirical evidence" related to RQ in the supply chain and operations management literature and a "lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the concept of RQ" (cf. Huntley, 2006). This has also been acknowledged by Chu and Wang (2012, p. 80). Also, this gap is similarly present in analyzing more specifically the impact of relationship learning on buyer-supplier relationship performance outcomes, as pointed out by Jean and Sinkovics (2010) and Liu (2012).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the multidimensional nature of the second-order construct of RQ in a particular setting of TNC buyer-supplier relationships. In doing so, the paper aims to determine if relationship learning can

be considered an important dimension of RQ, alongside trust and commitment. In this regard, we build on the work on the governance role of relationship learning by Jean and Sinkovics (2010) and Jean, Sinkovics and Kim (2010), as well as on the work by Selnes and Sallis (2003) and the importance of promoting relationship learning in buyer-supplier relationships, as forms of collaborative inter-organizational relationships. By exploring a new dimension of RQ which, to the best our knowledge and review of the relevant literature, has not yet been explored specifically in transnational buyer-supplier relationships as a dimension of RQ, we make a twofold contribution. First, we contribute to the existing marketing research on the multi-dimensional nature of the RQ construct itself – particularly, the work by Naudé and Buttle (2000) and Palmatier et al. (2006), for example. Second, we show how relationship learning is not just an important governance mechanism, but actually a fundamental part of the quality of TNC buyer-supplier relationships (adding to the works by Jean & Sinkovics, 2010; Jean, Sinkovics & Kim, 2010).

Further, we also provide an important theoretical contribution to the supply and operations management literatures by addressing Günter et al. (2011) recent call for more structured research on RQ in buyer-supplier relationships. This is because our respondents were TNC purchasing managers, rather than marketing managers, as is usually the case. In total, we surveyed 11 TNC purchasing managers – in fact, a complete population of one large Slovenian TNC in the steel construction industry – who, in turn, evaluated 55 suppliers (5 suppliers each) on selected dimensions of trust, commitment and relationship learning.

2. RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

The definition of RQ as "the best assessment of relationship strength" offered by Palmatier et al. (2006, p. 136) represents the so-called "relationship magnitude" understanding of RQ, according to Chu and Wang (2012, p. 80; cf. Golicic & Mentzer, 2006). This perspective has been widely adopted by the marketing literature (see e.g. De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder & Iacobucci, 2001; Kumar, Scheer & Steenkamp, 1995; Naudé & Buttle, 2000). On the other hand, there is also the understanding of RQ adopted by the supply chain management literature, where RQ is seen as "the degree to which both parties in a relationship are engaged in an active, long-term working relationship" (Chu & Wang, 2012, p. 80; cf. Fynes, de Burca & Voss, 2005).

With regard to RQ, Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987, p. 14) were probably the first to refer to the concept of RQ in a study of buyer-supplier relationship development by saying that "among other factors, we suggest the buyer's anticipation of high switching costs gives rise to the buyer's interest in maintaining a quality relationship". The concept of RQ was more explicitly outlined and conceptualized by Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990). They emphasized how "salespeople involved in the marketing of complex services often perform the role of 'relationship manager'. It is, in part, the quality of the relationship between the salesperson and the customer that determines the probability of a continued interchange between those parties in the future" (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990, p. 68). By the mid-1990s, RQ had become an important focal point within the relationship marketing literature, particularly in the literature related to services where Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990), Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp (1995), and Dorsch, Swanson and Kelly (1998) all emphasized a higher-order nature of the RQ construct.

However, while Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990, p. 70) saw RQ as a higher-order latent construct "composed of at least two dimensions" – namely, trust and satisfaction – Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp (1995, p. 55) were more explicit in emphasizing that "there is no consensus on which constructs comprise relationship quality". Acknowledging this issue, De Wulf, Odekerken-

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Schröder and Iacobucci (2001, p. 36), as well as Palmatier et al. (2006, p. 136) conceptualized RQ "as reflected by a combination of commitment, trust, and relationship satisfaction". In addition to trust and satisfaction, the dimension of commitment was emphasized as an integral part of RQ, particularly by Dorsch, Swanson and Kelly (1998, p. 130; cf. Gundlach, Achrol & Mentzer, 1995), and further adopted by Palmatier et al. (2006). So far, Naudé and Buttle (2000, p. 352) have perhaps defined RQ most extensively as a second-order construct, which includes: trust, fulfillment of needs, supply chain integration, power and profit. However, their understanding of RQ seems to be more of a metaphoric panacea for buyer-supplier performance.

Relating to the dimension of relationship learning itself, De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder and Iacobucci (2001, p. 34) as well as Palmatier et al. (2006, p. 140) pointed to the context-specific nature of the RQ concept in its impact on relational performance. With regard to RQ in supply network contexts, Su et al. (2008) emphasized that RQ differed significantly from RQ in traditional marketing relations. Therefore, trust and commitment are in our analysis accompanied not by satisfaction but by relationship learning, as learning and information sharing take on a particularly important role in TNC buyer-supplier contexts (Jean, Sinkovics & Kim, 2010). This is so for three specific reasons:

1. Within Morgan and Hunt's (1994) trust-commitment theory, trust and commitment are believed to determine satisfaction (Mohr & Speckman, 1994). This could, in turn, be seen more as an outcome of RQ, rather than as its dimension. Furthermore, the issue of satisfaction has not been that strongly emphasized in the traditional domains of supply and operations management, particularly with regard to RQ (Su et al., 2008).
2. The reviews of RQ construct definitions and operationalizations in industrial supply contexts by Huntley (2006), Su et al. (2008) and Alejandro et al. (2011) all include the concept of information sharing and/or communica-

tion, which is believed to be an integral part of the supply context RQ.
3. Selnes and Sallis (2003, pp. 80 and 85) themselves directly emphasized the importance of relationship learning in terms of RQ by saying: "Through relationship learning, both parties in customer-supplier relationships identify ways to reduce or remove redundant costs, to improve [relationship] quality and reliability, and to increase speed and flexibility", where they refer to quality as "the way the parties change the way they work together".

Hence, we formed the following research proposition:

Research proposition: *Relationship learning is a dimension of the second-order construct of relationship quality (RQ) in transnational buyer-supplier-relationships.*

The most direct theoretical support for studying relationship learning as a potential new dimension of relationship quality may be drawn from the works by Jean and Sinkovics (2010) and by Jean, Sinkovics and Kim (2010). These works address the governance nature of relationship learning. Jean, Sinkovics and Kim's (2010) focus on relationship learning as an important performance-driving governance mechanism in TNC buyer-supplier relationships. They have linked Transaction cost economics theory with the Resource-based theory of the firm, integrating it with an interorganizational learning theory perspective. Their empirical results have shown that "relationship learning is an effective interaction capability that can serve as a governance mechanism for suppliers to reduce transaction cost and enhance transaction value" (p. 78). At the same time, they further point that "dynamic learning capabilities developed through effective cross-border relationship learning can create competitive advantages […] in the face of intensifying global competition" (p. 78). From both perspectives, trust has been established to be an important element of the relationship learning, since close personal interaction and communication are essential prerequisites for any

type of learning to take place. This can, however, be much more difficult to achieve in culturally diverse TNC buyer-supplier relationships (Jean, Sinkovics & Kim, 2010).

In addition to the marketing literature, a specific link between relationship learning and trust has also been explored in the international business literature by Liu (2012) in studying TNC buyer-supplier relationships. Seeing relationship learning "as an effective relational governance mechanism which allows small suppliers to influence MNC partners' decisions to safeguard their own interests in inter-firm relationships", Liu (2012, p. 311) has shown that trust moderates the impact of two important relationship learning antecedents – learning intent and absorptive capacity – on relationship learning; which, in turn, leads to enhanced capabilities and increased relationship performance outcomes in transnational buyer-supplier relationships.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data and construct operationalizations

The data was collected in October of 2011 through a web-based survey. The questionnaire was administered in Slovenian, Russian and Serbian language. Data collection took place in two stages, both employed for the purpose of collecting network-type data. In the first stage, each of the 11 respondent TNC purchasing managers (full population) was contacted by e-mail and asked to recall five suppliers, of which three had to be "the most important" suppliers and two could be "less [not least!] important" suppliers. Thus, 55 suppliers in total were evaluated by the 11 respondent TNC purchasing managers. This distinction between the most and less important suppliers was made on the basis on Kraljic's (1983) purchasing portfolio matrix, where he in-

dicated that RQ (trust and commitment) is positively and linearly related to the degree of supply relationship importance.

In the second stage of the survey administration process, each of the 11 purchasing managers received a link to a personalized web survey, where they had to evaluate each of the five specified suppliers according to selected dimensions of trust, commitment and relationship learning. Table 1 presents a summary of the employed scales for the three proposed dimensions of the RQ second-order construct.

With regard to trust and commitment, the two constructs were operationalized as single-item constructs, similarly to the work by Selnes (1998) and Michell, Reast and Lynch (1998) who also operationalized trust as a single-item construct. We are fully aware that this can be a serious limitation to our research. However, Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2009) have provided some support for the employment of single-item constructs in the cases where constructs can be considered concrete (in our case the overall assessment of the trustworthiness of a supplier), within limited sample sizes (as is ours) and in the cases of diverse sampled populations (in our case two supplier sub-groups in terms of their importance).

From a theoretical perspective, Selnes (1998) has actually argued strongly in support of not discarding single-item operationalizations of trust *a priori* by emphasizing that multi-item operationalizations of trust often actually include sources of trust as well. He provides the example of Morgan and Hunt's (1994) operationalization of trust which also incorporates three antecedents of trust, namely: integrity, reliability and confidence. In our case, single-item operationalization of trust and commitment was used because it referred to the respondents' overall assessment of the supply relationship with the actor. Thus, it was not specifically focused on addressing the multidimensionality of the constructs themselves, as is often the case in marketing research. From a data collection perspective, single-item operationalization of trust and commitment was

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Table 1: Operationalizations of trust, commitment and relationship learning

No.	Construct	Scale	Operationalization	Reference
1.	**Trust**	7-point ordinal*	1 item: experience-based level of trust and reliance on arrangements and promises made by the specific supplier	Adapted from Morgan & Hunt, 1994
2.	**Commitment**	7-point ordinal*	1 item: experience-based level of supplier commitment towards long-term collaboration and mutual performance in the specific supply relationship	Adapted from Morgan & Hunt, 1994
3.	**Relationship learning**	7-point ordinal*	4 items related to: (1) exchange of information on successful and unsuccessful experiences related to products and services supplied in the relationship; (2) exchange of information related to mutually-relevant business plans, strategies and other activities; (3) establishment of joint teams for problem-solving and/or improvements related to the supply relationship; (4) frequent and explicit adjustment of common understanding of mutual needs, expectations, processes and behavior related to the supply relationship	Adapted from Selnes & Sallis, 2003

Source: Authors' own review of the relevant literature. Notes: * 7-point Likert-type scale: 1-Completely disagree (lowest possible value), and 7-Completely agree (highest possible value).

employed to minimize burden on the respondents and actually increase measurement reliability, since each TNC purchasing manager had to evaluate five different suppliers at the same time. Thus, each additional questionnaire item carried a five-fold burden of responses to be provided.

3.2. A variance-based SEM approach

The second-order nature of the RQ construct was tested by means of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) due to the latent nature of the RQ construct. In this regard, however, we employed variance-based SEM – based on a Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach, and not a traditional covariance-based SEM – based on an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) approach. The variance-based SEM approach was chosen not only due to the tentative size of our sample but also due to the non-normal distribution of our data, our focus on estimating the predictive power of a very specific model and a higher degree of multicollinearity between the items belonging to each of the three dimensions of RQ (see Tables 2 and 3). In such cases variance-based SEM was shown to be a more appropriate methodology, since it produces more precise and less biased estimations (Hensler, Ringle & Sinkovics, 2009). In testing the second-order nature of the RQ latent reflective construct, we employed an indirect analytical approach, as suggested by Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder and van Oppen (2009, p. 181) and Wilson, 2010 (pp. 621-652). This is presented next in Figure 1.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents a summary of the descriptive statistics for the individual items of all three RQ dimensions for the "most important" suppliers group (m_1=33). Mean and standard deviation data is complemented by data on skewness and kurtosis, from which we can confirm the non-normal distribution of our data. Furthermore, we can observe quite a strong pair-wise correlation between relationship learning and commitment (β=0.70) as well as between trust and commitment (β=0.62). Because of this, the employment of variance-based SEM was much more appro-

priate, compared to traditional covariance-based SEM.

From the descriptive statistics for less important suppliers in Table 3 we can observe lower average scores across all three RQ dimensions, particularly relationship learning and commitment. The average level of trust is, on the other hand, quite comparable between the most and less important suppliers' groups. Data is again non-normally distributed, as shown by the corresponding skewness and kurtosis values.

Lastly, strong pair-wise correlation coefficients can be observed in all three pair-wise cases, with the strongest pair-wise correlation between relationship learning and trust (β=0.75) and the weakest between relationship learning and commitment (β=0.69).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics, distribution information and correlation matrix for the most important suppliers' group

Dimension	AVE	CR	Mean (Std. dev.)	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
(1) **Trust** (1 item)	N/A	N/A	5.79 (0.99)	-0.77	0.63	1.00		
(2) **Commitment** (1 item)	N/A	N/A	5.70 (1.21)	-1.17	1.67	0.62	1.00	
(3) **Relationship learning** (4 items)	0.70	0.90	4.93 (1.74)	-1.13	1.77	0.47	0.70	1.00

Source: TNC purchasing managers' survey, 2011 (n=11, m_1=33). Notes: *All items measured on 7-point Likert-type scales. ** Optimal values for normally distributed variables: skewness 0 and kurtosis 3. *** AVE=average variance extracted (convergent validity), CR=composite reliability (internal reliability).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics, distribution information and correlation matrix for the less important suppliers' group

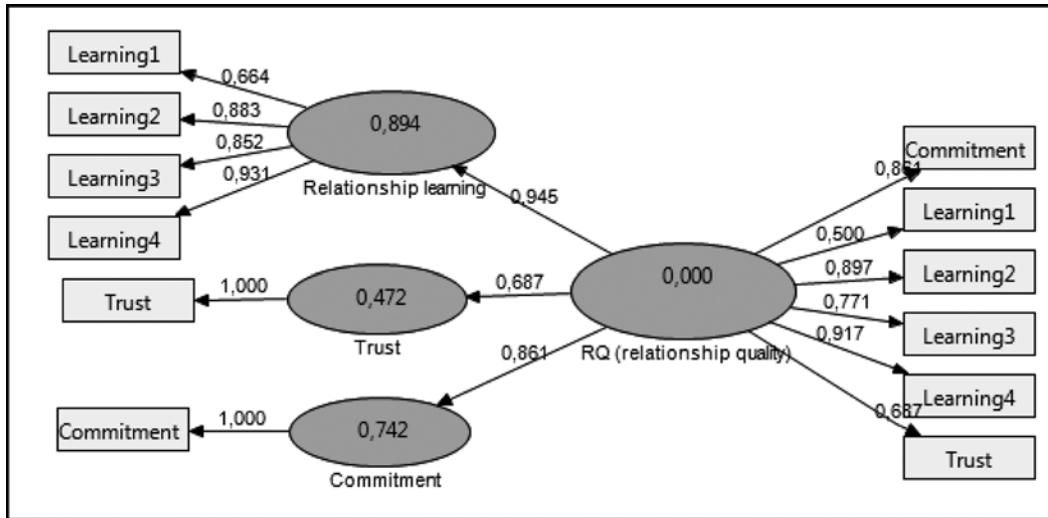| Dimension	AVE	CR	Mean (Std. dev.)	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
(1) **Trust** (1 item)	N/A	N/A	5.50 (1.01)	-0.30	-0.20	1.00		
(2) **Commitment** (1 item)	N/A	N/A	4.45 (1.47)	0.47	-0.52	0.70	1.00	
(3) **Relationship learning** (4 items)	0.71	0.90	3.80 (1.71)	-0.17	0.16	0.75	0.69	1.00

Source: TNC purchasing managers' survey, 2011 (n=11, m_2=22). Notes: *All items measured on 7-point Likert-type scales. ** Optimal values for normally distributed variables: skewness 0 and kurtosis 3. *** AVE=average variance extracted (convergent validity), CR=composite reliability (internal reliability).

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4.2. Key results

Figures 1 and 2 present the results stemming from our indirect testing approach of the second-order nature of the reflective RQ construct.
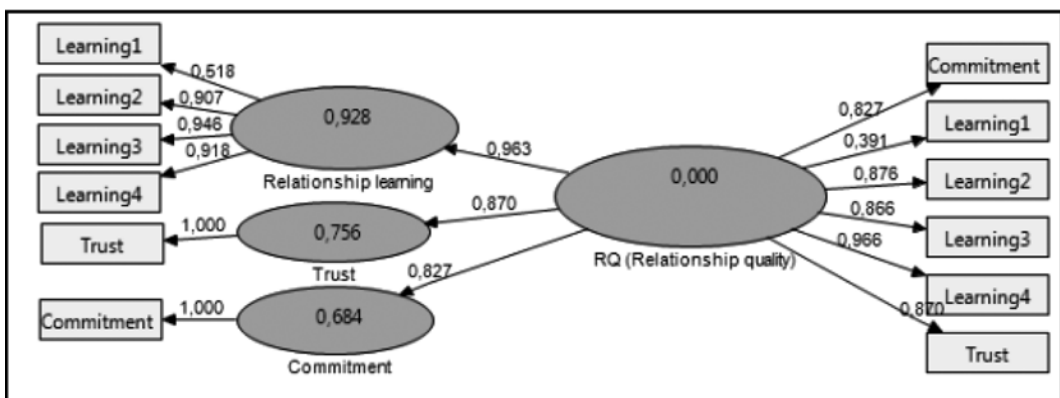
This is shown separately for the most and less important suppliers' groups. As we can see, the indirect variance-based SEM approach outlined by Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder and van Oppen (2009) and Wilson (2010) produced very similar results for both these groups.

Figure 1: Results of testing RQ as a second-order reflective latent construct within PLS SEM among the most important suppliers' group

Source: The most important suppliers' sub-sample, 2011 (m_1=33); calculations conducted in smartPLS based on a Path Weighting Scheme, data metric with a mean at 0, variance 1, a maximum of 500 iterations and initial weights at 1.

Figure 2: Results of testing RQ as a second-order reflective latent construct within PLS SEM among the less important suppliers' group

Source: The most important suppliers' sub-sample, 2011 (m_2=22); calculations conducted in smartPLS based on a Path Weighting Scheme, data metric with a mean at 0, variance 1, a maximum of 500 iterations and initial weights at 1.

Based on the presented results in Figures 1 and 2, it appears that RQ is not only a second-order reflective construct, as previously described by Palmatier et al. (2006). It is a second-order reflective construct as well which, in addition to trust and commitment, also includes relationship learning. In the next section, these results are discussed both in terms of the limitations of our research, as well as possible theoretical implications for marketing theory.

4.3. Research limitations and discussion of its results

Of course, the testing of RQ as a second-order construct within our variance-based SEM is not without its limitations. The first limitation is definitely in a small number of observations (hence our reference to tentative results). However, we would on the other hand also like to point out that our single TNC setting excluded a lot of cross-industry and cross-organizational influences. Furthermore, the data collection could imply a higher degree of observation interdependence, since each TNC purchasing manager evaluated five suppliers of his/hers choice. However, a variance-based SEM is better equipped to handle this than is a covariance-based SEM.

Additionally, the use of single respondents could have led to a possible common method bias. Because our model was tested as a variance-based SEM, and not as a covariance-based SEM, we could not test a common method bias by using the approach outlined by Cote and Buckley (1987) for testing hierarchically-nested covariance structural models. This is because the variance-based SEM does not offer any global optimization criterion. Instead, we could only employ Harman's single-factor test (see Podsakoff et al., 2003). Within this approach, two factors with Eigen values above 1 emerged and the first factor did not overwhelmingly explain the variance of all the six original items in our questionnaire. This led us to the conclusion that common method

variance was not a significant issue with regard to our data.

Lastly, an important limitation of our research definitely also lies in the operationalization of trust and commitment as single-indicator reflective constructs. While this may be a serious limitation to our research, here we have followed Selnes' (1998) single-item operationalization of trust and have also taken into consideration Fuchs and Diamantopoulos' (2009) position on this matter.

5. CONCLUSION

Relationship learning, as part of the companies' overall knowledge orientation, has an important impact not only on short-term organizational performance (Mazur & Strzyżewska, 2010) but on long-term competitive advantage as well (Michailova & Mustaffa, 2011; also see Selnes & Sallis, 2003). It has also been shown to be a key relational dimension connected to collaborative and high trust buyer-supplier relationships (Selnes & Sallis, 2003), as well as an important dimension of buyer-supplier relationship management (see e.g. Miočević, 2011 for the Croatian context). Selnes and Sallis (2003) further position relationship learning as part of the companies' overall market orientation (cf. Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). This was also pointed out explicitly by Snoj, Gabrijan and Milfelner (2010) in the context of Slovenian companies.

While "the marketing literature has addressed elements of relationship learning, such as information sharing (e.g. Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Cannon & Perreault, 1999) and coordination (e.g. Buvik & John, 2000; Jap, 1999)" (Selnes & Sallis, 2003, pp. 80-81), it has to the best of our knowledge, stemming also from literature review, not been analyzed as part of the second-order nature of RQ. Despite several research limitations which we fully acknowledge, our research will hopefully stimulate future research in this area. In this regard, further empirical cross-validation

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of the role of relationship learning within the second-order construct of RQ in TNC buyer-supplier relationships is needed first. This, in turn, should contribute to a better understanding of the multidimensional and context-specific nature of RQ in buyer-supplier relationships while also complementing the existing work in the marketing literature by Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990), Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp (1995), Naudé and Buttle (2000), De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder and Iacobucci (2001) and Palmatier et al. (2006), as well as that by Günter et al. (2011) in the supply literature and operations management literature. Only once a theoretical understanding of relationship learning as part of RQ has been established, can we derive the necessary implications for managers, as called for by Selnes and Sallis (2003). Thus, more marketing research is needed in this particular area of marketing. Here, we believe that research on the role of relationship learning in Central and Eastern Europe, as part of the second-order construct of RQ, can help advance the level of international marketing theory (Schuh, 2010) and contribute to the improvement of managerial practices through the study of emerging market contexts (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). This is so due to the fact that such emerging market contexts have been described as "real world learning laboratories", where relationship learning becomes increasingly important (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2012, p. 1).

Pending a more extensive empirical cross-validation, which would address the research limitations of our existing research, relationship learning appears to be a suitable RQ dimension, at least within our specific TNC supplier-buyer relationship setting. The TNC context may in fact be crucial to this type of understanding of RQ, given the importance of knowledge management and transfer in TNCs, as emphasized by numerous TNC scholars, including Bartlett, Ghoshal and Beamish (2008, pp. 203 and 465), Kogut and Zander (1993, pp. 630-632), and Kogut and Zander (2003, p. 510) to name but a few. If this is the case, it would represent an important theoretical contribution to the current understanding of RQ more generally in B2B relationships.

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FROM TRANSNATIONAL BUYER-SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIPS

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