

## **“ We all live in a yellow submarine”**

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### **Abstract**

This work-in progress paper introduces a new model for exploring business relationships with particular focus on relationship atmosphere. This new model uses a submariner analogy to represent the atmosphere in business relationships. In relationships where there is accord, in other words where the parties have shared perceptions of atmosphere it is considered analogous to a submarine, where the parties breathe the same air and coexist in the same space. The situation of relationship discord, where the individuals have differing perceptions of atmosphere, is represented by two scuba divers. Each scuba diver breathes his own air tank which represents his perception of atmosphere. In relationships, where there is accord of perception on some variables but discord of perception on others the situation is likened to divers who at certain times share air from one tank. Parties to a relationship, like divers, can coexist despite not sharing the same perceptions of atmosphere.

This paper attempts to build on this analogy to explore other dimensions of relationships including length of relationship, communication, changing atmosphere and personnel. It hopes to provide a useful framework for continued research into business relationships.

### **Introduction**

This paper is based on research undertaken using the IMP2 standardised questionnaire, It builds on work done previously by Sutton-Brady (2001:1) in the area of relationship atmosphere. To set the scene for the voyage of the yellow submarine, this paper will initially look at the methodology of the study, explain the concept of relationship atmosphere and show some findings from previous research which lead to the development of the analogy. The paper will finally discuss the submariner analogy and its use in understanding business relationships.

### **Methodology**

This section outlines the methodological choices that underpin the study. This study draws on the methods of a previous research program, IMP2 (The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group's second major research program). It uses data collected from the application of three questionnaires (supplier, customer and intermediary) developed for that study, which not only allows for comparability but gives the researcher access to an instrument with measured reliability and validity.

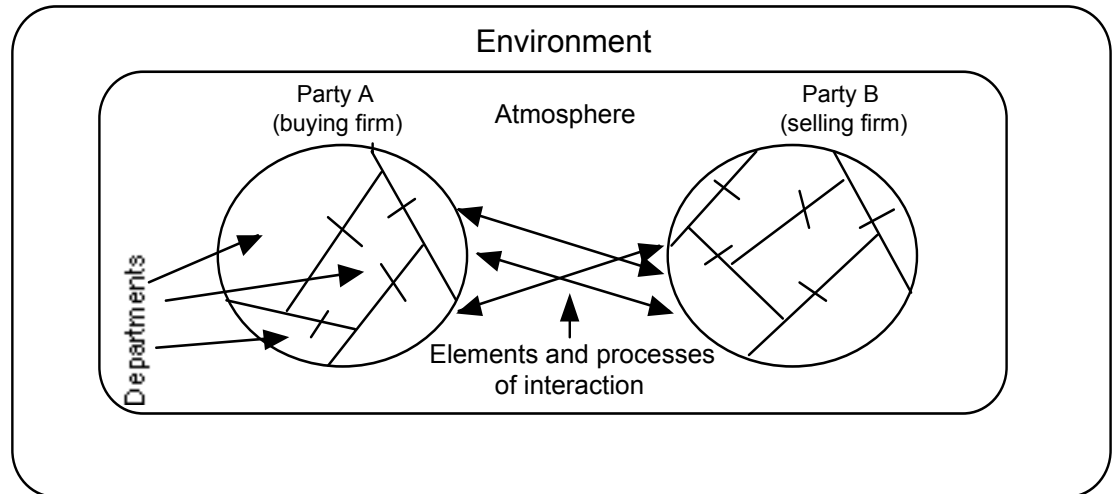
The questionnaire is divided into three sections: the focal relationship, the connected relationship and the interacting parties. These three sections combine to give an overall view of the relationship from the respondents perspective. This study is particularly concerned with the atmosphere section which contains 60 statements which attempt to measure atmosphere.

Respondents were selected within company based on the fact that they were the primary link between parties. Companies were chosen in various industries based on their dealings with supplier countries. For example firms in the Phillipines were only interviewed if they had Australian suppliers. Respondents were asked to nominate a relationship that was important to their firm. Their perception of importance ranged from importance in value to importance based on critical components of the end product. For this particular study the data gathered from Australia and the Phillipines was used to complement the European data previously collected.

The statistical programme SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) was used to analyse the data. Factor analysis was carried out initially to confirm the dimensions of atmosphere. This was followed by some simple matching of the various dimensions. Finally analysis was carried out to determine across relationships if perceptions of atmosphere matched.

### **Relationship Atmosphere**

Interactions in business relationships are assumed not to take place in a social vacuum, they must have some “emotional setting” which sets the scene for relationship development, and it is this scene which is generally referred to as the relationship atmosphere. The interaction approach developed by the original IMP research group, (Ford, 1997), explicitly integrates relationship atmosphere into a model. The “Interaction Model” (IMP 1982) comprises of four main components: the actors in interaction, exchange episodes, relationship atmosphere and the broader environment of the relationship resulting from the exchange as shown in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1: Main elements of The Interaction Model (IMP 1982)**

Relationship atmosphere can be viewed, conceptually as both a product of the relationship and a factor contributing to future relationship development (IMP, 1982). Relationships are developed through interaction between the parties over time. It is therefore more appropriate to view atmosphere as a product of these interactions. It is problematic to measure the atmosphere of the relationship since what is considered to be its creator, is also considered to be indirectly influenced by it, ie. the actions of the parties (Hallen & Sandstrom, 1991). In other words the relationship atmosphere is both derived from and influences the interaction. In spite of the complexity of measurement, a significant amount of research has been carried out by members of the IMP group to measure atmosphere through several dimensions. These dimensions typically include such descriptors of atmosphere as cooperation/conflict, power/dependence, trust/opportunism, closeness/distance and expectations.

It is the intangible nature of atmosphere that poses problems in conceptualisation and measurement. Nonetheless, consensus of opinion would seem to exist on the key dimensions of atmosphere. The IMP project (1982), as stated, put forward five atmosphere dimensions; these were power/dependence, trust/opportunism closeness/distance, cooperation /conflict and expectations. Other researchers over time have added to and refined these dimensions. The dimensions that a consensus in the literature exists on include power/dependence, cooperation/competition, trust /opportunism, understanding and commitment.

Research undertaken by Sutton-Brady (2001:1) can be seen to reinforce the conclusion of Hallen and Sandstrom (1991), that relationship atmosphere is decidedly a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Relationship atmosphere can only be appreciated as a determinant of relationship formation and function from this holistic viewpoint. There is also important support for the notion that relationship atmosphere is inherently a perceptual construct. Jap & Ganesan (2000), in a discussion on the impact of perceptions on the relationship, conclude that a retailers perception of a supplier's commitment can have an impact on

“critical exchange outcomes, such as the retailer’s evaluation of the supplier’s performance, conflict levels and relationship satisfaction”. From a relationship atmosphere perspective this has implications in terms of acknowledging and understanding the importance of perceptions but also realising that these dimension are intertwined and interlinked and can not be looked at in isolation

The understanding of perceptions of atmosphere is vital to gain a clearer understanding of the complex phenomenon that is relationship atmosphere. A definition of perception is “The process by which an individual organises and interprets information to create meaningful pictures of the world” (McCull-Kennedy & Kiel, 2000, p.912). In regard to relationship atmosphere this means that each individual within the relationship interprets and organises the information gathered through interaction and creates a picture of the relationship in their own view (or perception).

Additionally findings from research by Sutton-Brady (2001:2) indicate that another dimension exists. The research was carried out using factor analysis and the most significant difference found was the emergence of culture as an explicit dimension of atmosphere. This is evidenced by the loading of the statements 40 and 36 (from the IMP2 questionnaire –atmosphere section) on factor 6.

- **Factor 6: Culture**

- 40. Language differences create problems in discussions with this customer

- 36. Cultural differences have caused crises in the relationship.

Both these statements refer respectively to language and cultural differences, which cause problems or create difficulties in the relationship. The addition of culture as a dimension of atmosphere contributes to the body of knowledge on business-to-business marketing and may aid the understanding of relationships in an international context and consequently allow practitioners to better manage their international inter-firm relationships.

### **Research Findings**

The following is a brief discussion of the findings from the research study which lead to the development of the submariner analogy.

### **Research question 1**

This research question was concerned with the nature of relationship atmosphere. It sought to identify the dimensions of relationship atmosphere. The hypotheses as previously established were:

**H<sub>1</sub>** : *The dimensions of relationship atmosphere are identical to those previously defined by the original IMP research as cooperation/conflict, power/dependence, trust/opportunism, closeness/distance and expectations.*

**H<sub>10</sub>**: *The dimensions of relationship atmosphere are not identical to those previously defined by original IMP research as cooperation/conflict, power/dependence, trust/opportunism, closeness/distance and expectations*

The analysis of the data and results as presented lead to the null hypothesis being accepted. While the factors representing the dimensions of atmosphere closely followed previous research, there were significant differences. Seven factors were extracted from the analysis which was carried out. These included trust/confidence, distance, dependency, commitment, conflict/cooperation, culture and power. The most significant difference here was the emergence of culture as an explicit dimension of atmosphere. This is evidenced by the loading of the statements 40 and 36 on factor 6. as discussed above.

The attitudinal statements which loaded significantly on the other factors match to a certain extent previous research (Hallen & Sandstrom, 1991,). Overall it was clear that while some factors extracted in this research study closely align with previous studies (IMP, 1982; Hallen, 1989; Hallen & Sandstrom, 1991) there are some interesting differences. Perhaps most significant is the emergence of culture as a dimension in its own right and the division of the power balance dimension into two dimensions of power and dependency. In conclusion in accepting the null hypothesis the importance of culture as a dimension of atmosphere in international interfirm relationships is recognised. This recognition leads to opportunities for future research. The addition of culture as a dimension of atmosphere also contributes to the body of knowledge on business-to-business marketing and may aid the understanding of relationships in an international context and consequently allow practitioners to better manage their international interfirm relationships.

Additionally a factor analysis was carried out on the accord scores based on the relationship atmosphere section of the IMP2 questionnaire. This factor analysis had a much reduced sample size, since it was based on paired or mirrored responses within individual relationships. The number of mirrored relationships used in this study is forty-six. These relationships were analysed to see if there was any difference in the factor outcomes which would suggest that parties perceive relationship atmosphere differently. Again seven factors were extracted and these were labelled based on the operationalisation of the statements as: commitment, power, accommodating, understanding, cooperation and continuity. In looking closely at the variables that load on each factor, it is clear that the factors, which represent commitment and continuity are very closely aligned based on the perceptual statements therein. In other words it is conceivable that these two factors from the context of the literature could be one. The remaining factors bring to light only one new factor which is labelled accommodating. This factor is labelled as such because it is a combination of

statements which were previously operationalised in the literature as representing several other factors. The most interesting aspect of this analysis is that trust and culture, which previous findings in the study identify as significant elements of relationship atmosphere, are not in evidence in these findings. Clearly the small sample size would suggest the need for caution in interpreting these findings, and strongly suggest the need for further confirmatory research.

## **Research question 2**

This question considered whether or not the actors in a given relationship have the same perception of the atmosphere of that relationship. It led to the examination of the perceptions of the actors in a relationship on various dimensions and even across dimensions. The unit of analysis for this research question was the relationship between the parties. The hypotheses were:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *Differences exist in the way parties to a relationship perceive the atmosphere of the relationship.*

**H<sub>20</sub>:** *There is no difference in the way in which parties to a relationship perceive the atmosphere of the relationship.*

The results of the analysis of the mirrored relationships lead to H<sub>2</sub> being accepted. The review of the literature has shown that little has been written on the perceptions of relationship atmosphere (Spencer & Sutton-Brady, 1996; 1997; Sutton-Brady, 1998). As a consequence the findings in respect of this research question make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge. In previous research relationship atmosphere was considered to be a central part of the interaction process (IMP, 1982; Hallen, 1986; Hallen and Sandstrom 1991), but it was discussed purely as if it were a stand-alone entity. Indeed the interaction model (Figure 1) clearly depicts it as existing as a result of the interaction of the firms that are parties to a relationship, however it does not show that there may be several atmospheres as a result of differing perceptions. Yet previous work (Sutton-Brady, 2001:1) has argued that several atmospheres can exist in any given relationship. Additionally the analysis carried out for this study on the differing perceptions of atmosphere clearly supports the notion that atmosphere is a subjective view of the relationship as seen through the eyes of the parties to the relationship.

Analysis, of the perceptions of atmosphere in terms of accord and discord across the various dimensions of atmosphere, lead to the conclusion that parties to the same relationship can have differing perceptions of atmosphere. Three typologies of relationships are put forward following the analysis of accord and discord in the relationship atmosphere. These typologies are: Type 1 - relationships in which there is low accord on perceptions of atmosphere across all dimensions; Type 2 - relationships in which there is medium accord on

perceptions of atmosphere across all dimensions; and Type 3 - relationships in which there is high accord on perceptions of atmosphere across all dimensions. For the purposes of cross-checking and ensuring no bias in division of the relationship type based on percentage of accord, the typologies were divided using an alternative decision rule, whereby relationships were classified according to differing cutting points. The typologies were then labelled A and B to indicate the different cutting points. Interestingly no difference was found in the results from either division.

The results of the analysis, based on the typologies posited, lead to the conclusion that in some cases there is high accord on relationship atmosphere. There is an assumption that high accord would support the idea that relationship atmosphere is viewed similarly by the parties to a relationship and therefore a stand-alone entity. However, in this study, in a significant number of cases there was medium and low accord. This finding clearly supports the thesis that relationship atmosphere is not a stand-alone entity but a product of the perceptions of the parties to the relationship. As can be seen these perceptions do not always match and leads to the question of the possible impact of differing perceptions on the relationship.

The confirmation that perceptions of atmosphere do differ provides a substantial contribution to the literature on relationship atmosphere, inter-firm relationships and business-to-business marketing as a whole. The results of the analysis are used to develop an analogy of relationship atmosphere in the following section, where the differing perceptions are explained using a submariner analogy. Additionally a revised model of interaction is provided in Figure 3, which attempts to depict diagrammatically the notion that relationship atmosphere is no longer a stand alone phenomenon but a product of the individual perceptions of the parties to the relationship. These perceptions of atmosphere are still acknowledged as being generated by and influencing the exchange processes in interaction.

### **Research question 3**

Differences in perceptions of relationship atmosphere having been shown to exist, this research question concerns the impact of that difference on the relationship.

*H<sub>3</sub>: If a difference in perception of atmosphere exists there is an impact on the relationship*

*H<sub>30</sub>: If a difference in perception of atmosphere exists there is no impact on the relationship*

The analysis carried out led to the null hypothesis being accepted. The typology of relationships as set forth previously was utilised to identify the impact of the differing perceptions on various aspects of the relationship. The aspects or variables analysed were length of relationship, profitability and the impact on the firm if this business was lost. In all of these aspects it was found that there was no impact on the relationship across the three typologies. The correlations clearly show that there is no significant correlation between relationship duration/length and the type of relationship. This means that relationships with high accord are not necessarily longer in duration. Again with this research question no previous research or literature exists and therefore it is difficult to discuss these findings in any other context.

The analysis also clearly shows that there is no significant correlation between the differing levels of perception and the profitability of the relationship. One would assume that higher levels of accord would exist in profitable relationships and lower levels of accord in unprofitable relationships, but the research reported in this thesis does not support this supposition.

The final correlation carried out investigated the association between the importance of the relationship to either party and the level of accord/discord. Again the analysis here showed no significant correlation between these variables. An underlying assumption in carrying out this analysis was that there would be a correlation but that assumption was negated by the findings.

The conclusion on this question, in the context of this study, is that differing perceptions of atmosphere do not impact on the relationship, however this does not imply that the differing perceptions do not matter. A critical view might be that these differences do not matter and therefore that this part of the research study has no contribution to make to the field of relationships and business-to-business marketing. Nevertheless the findings are significant in that they show how the parties can have differing perceptions yet seemingly work well together. The assumption always has been that there is a need for a good relationship atmosphere for a relationship to flourish (Spencer & Sutton-Brady, 1997). These findings suggest that researchers should be less concerned with the fact that parties differ in perception of relationship atmosphere and more concerned with understanding how productive relationships can exist despite differing perceptions. This is discussed in more detail using the submariner analogy in the following section and indeed makes an important contribution to the understanding of business markets and relationships.

The identification of culture as an explicit and previously unacknowledged component of relationship atmosphere is a significant contribution of the present research. Whereas this new dimension is significant in the context of question one it also proves to be mirrored by the outcomes of this research question. The discussion of culture becomes complex here as it is now been discussed in two different contexts and measured in different ways. It was found in the analysis of the datasets across the relationship typologies that the only significant association that existed was between relationship typology or level of accord and

the countries in which the data was collected. In other words the data collected from relationships between Australian suppliers and Philippine customers showed the lowest overall levels of accord. In all, 38.5% of relationships in this dataset are classified as Type 1<sub>A</sub> relationships, those with the lowest level of accord - that is those relationships with less than 33.3% accord. Indeed 77% of relationships were classified Type 1<sub>B</sub> that is relationships with less than 50% accord. These levels of discord are much higher than might previously been expected.

This finding has implications for future research into the concept of culture and its importance or significance in the area of relationship atmosphere. It may be purely a consequence of knowledge of culture, which has caused this association between the countries of the relationship and the low levels of accord. It could perhaps be argued that the countries in the European dataset do have cultural differences but their knowledge of these differences negates the impact of the differences. This knowledge of another countries culture has been highlighted in other research studies. In particular Hallen and Wiedersheim-Paul, (1982) refer to the concept of cultural affinity which they have shown exists among many European cultures. Additionally the seminal work on culture by Hofstede (1980) discusses culture in terms of four dimensions. These dimensions comprise individualism, power/distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. On an index of these dimensions Hofstede, (1980) has found that many European countries rate in a similar range, while Australia and the Philippines would be on almost opposite ends of the continuum. These differences may account for the differing perception of relationship atmosphere but obviously this is an area which warrants further research in future studies of relationship atmosphere especially in an international context.

### **Submariner Analogy**

This new model uses a submariner analogy to represent the atmosphere in business relationships. In relationships where there is accord, in other words where the parties have shared perceptions of atmosphere it is considered analogous to a submarine, where the parties breathe the same air and coexist in the same space. The situation of relationship discord, where the individuals have differing perceptions of atmosphere, can be represented by two scuba divers. Each scuba diver breathes his own air tank which represents his perception of atmosphere. Diagrammatically the divers despite their differences appear to be swimming in the same direction.

In scuba diving there is a technique known as the buddy system. This system ensures that divers never dive alone. Under this system if a diver runs out of air he/she can share his partners air supply. As was seen in the results of the analysis on research question two, there are relationships where there is accord of perception on some variables but discord of perception on others. This situation could be likened to divers who at certain times share air from one tank. Parties to a relationship, like divers, can coexist despite not sharing the same perceptions of atmosphere.

An initial assumption of this research study was that a correlation existed between the duration of the relationship and the accord measure. In other words, the longer the relationship, the more likely that both parties were in agreement concerning the nature of the relationship. Findings reported reveal that there is no significant correlation between relationship duration and relationship accord. Nevertheless, given that existing literature discusses the long-term nature of interfirm relationships and the development of those relationships over time (Ford 1980), this submariner analogy could be expanded to include the notion of relationship duration. The relationship duration is analogous to the diving depth. At certain depths, it is impossible to exit a submarine due to excessive pressure, and as a result, the occupants share the same air, and within relationships, this is equated with sharing the same perceptions. Essentially, this model supports the idea that discordant relationships cannot continue to be discordant, but are more likely to move towards accord over long periods, just as divers cannot survive outside the submarine but are forced to stay inside and breathe the same air. While this study, reported in this thesis, does not support this theory of longevity equating with greater accord, this analogy could provide a platform for future research and additionally an interesting approach to the research into business relationships. Table 1 provides some ideas for how this analogy could be used in researching other elements of relationships.

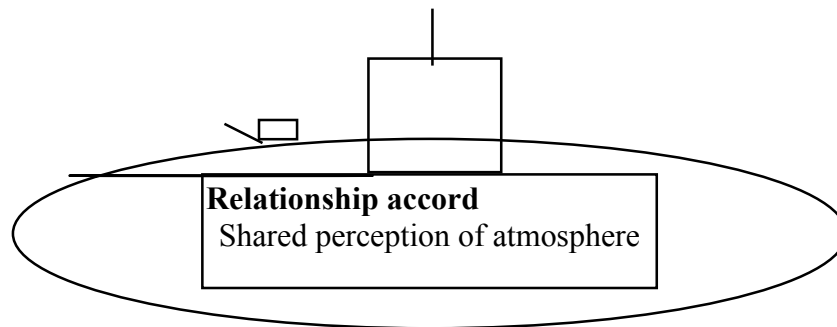
**Table 1: Submariners and business relationships: a comparison.**

	Business Relationships	Submariners
Trust	Business Relationships based on trust/mutual trust.	Buddy system revolves around trust.
Dependency	Many relationships exhibit elements of dependency.	Divers dependent on each other for survival.
Communication	Problems in relationships often caused by communication difficulties.	Divers can have difficulty communicating underwater.
Legal Contracts	Contracts may stipulate length of relationship.	Submariners mission often of a certain length, impossible to leave before completion.
Length of Relationship	Long-term relationships may be harder to dissolve.	Due to diving depth, impossible to exit submarine at certain depths.
Measurement of atmosphere	Academic research into the nature of atmosphere	Mechanisms on submarines measure atmosphere. Divers oxygen tanks have dials measuring their individual atmosphere.
Change in atmosphere	Parties see atmosphere change as relationships evolve over time.	Atmosphere is changed or "cleaned" on submarines by manipulation of atmospheric controls.
Change in personnel	Individuals within companies move on to other positions. Or companies	Crews on submarines can change, as can individuals buddies.
Cooperation	Joint product development, joint production plans. Cooperative alliances	Cooperating towards mission objectives. Buddy system based on cooperation.



The model in Figure 2, part b) shows that instead of atmosphere being a stand-alone entity, different perceptions of atmosphere are viable. One perception of atmosphere relates to atmosphere generated from supplier perceptions of the relationship. The other perception of atmosphere is generated by customer perceptions. This is the situation in relationships where there is discordant perception of atmosphere. The previous view of atmosphere in the interaction model bears a similarity with part a) of Figure 2, which shows the shared perception and therefore one relationship atmosphere. In summary it is akin to the shared submarine oxygen as opposed to the supplier and customer each using their own oxygen tank.

**a) The submarine analogy**



**b) The scuba diver analogy**

**Relationship discord**

Individual supplier perception of atmosphere



**Relationship discord**

Individual buyer perception of atmosphere

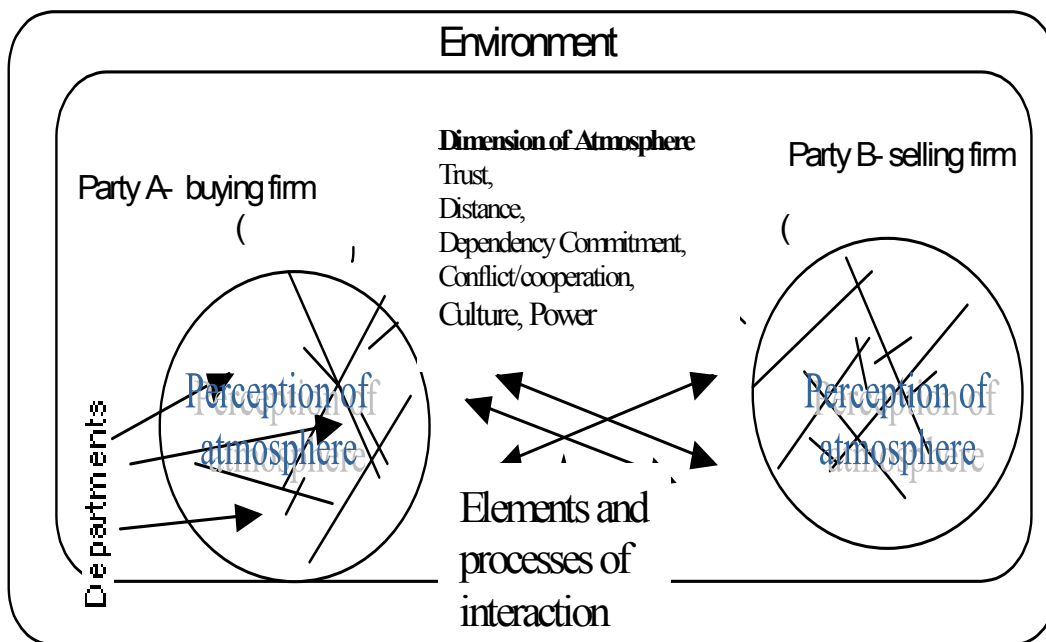


**Figure 2: Submariner Representations of Accordant and Discordant Relationship Atmosphere**

**Revised Interaction Model**

Figure 3 shows the revised interaction model that logically flows from the previous analogy and the conclusions on differing perceptions as discussed above. As previously stated relationship atmosphere was considered a stand-alone entity which was generated by and influenced the exchange processes of interaction. It was considered to include the dimensions of power/dependence, trust/opportunism closeness/distance, cooperation/conflict and expectations. The first contribution of the findings to the interaction model is the revision of the dimensions of atmosphere. These dimensions as shown in Figure 3 are trust, distance, dependency, commitment, conflict/cooperation, culture and power. While these closely equate with previously identified dimensions of atmosphere the notable difference is the inclusion of culture as a dimension of atmosphere. Previous interaction models have not shown culture as a dimension and indeed previous research has not considered it in this setting. As a result the addition of the dimension of culture is seen as a significant contribution to the model and the theory of interaction overall.

The conclusions drawn do not detract from the view of the centrality of atmosphere in interaction but argue that it is a product of perceptions of the parties to the relationship. These perceptions are generated by the interaction, and in turn influence the interaction and thereby confirm the centrality of the perceptions of relationship atmosphere in the interaction model. Nevertheless the interaction model is revised to represent the notion that differing perceptions of atmosphere may exist. The previous interaction model (see Figure 1) represents atmosphere as a stand-alone entity outside the parties, this revised model represents atmosphere or more correctly the perceptions of atmosphere within the circle representing the parties to the relationship. This idea of relationship atmosphere being a question of perception is further reinforced within the submariner analogy and both figures two and three aim to represent the notion that atmosphere is not necessarily a stand-alone entity but clearly a product of the perceptions of the parties to the individual relationships.



### **Figure 3: Revised Interaction Model**

#### **Implications of the research for business-to-business marketing**

This research study has a number of implications for business-to-business marketing. The issue to be addressed here is what does the study mean in terms of its impact in building, managing and maintaining business relationships in an international context.

The first of these implications is that relationship atmosphere is a complex phenomenon. The multiplicity of the factors, which comprise relationship atmosphere, makes the measurement of atmosphere problematic. Future research in the area of relationship atmosphere should be cognisant of the fact that relationship atmosphere has to be measured across the various dimensions to gauge the actual nature of the relationship. From a practitioners' point of view when doing business with other firms the parties must be aware of the multifaceted nature of the concept of atmosphere and look not just at dimensions of trust or commitment, but take a more holistic view. Additionally for those parties involved in international inter-firm relationships they must look closely at culture and how that dimension may impact on the atmosphere of their relationships

The second implication of this research study is the confirmation that relationship atmosphere is inherently a perceptual artefact. The notion here is that the parties to the relationship may have their own perceptions of atmosphere across different dimensions which do not necessarily match those of the other party. From an academic viewpoint this implies that research studies of relationships must be at least dyadic or ideally triadic in nature in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the relationship atmosphere. As was the case in the study reported in this thesis, data should be analysed using the relationship as the unit of analysis since any other combination of the data would be meaningless in terms of perceptions of relationship atmosphere. From a business practitioners viewpoint the implication is that they must strive to understand the other parties more clearly and seek out information on how they feel about the relationship or, in present terms, how they perceive the atmosphere. In essence it calls for closer relationships in which there are greater levels of understanding of how the parties feel about the relationship.

The third implication is that even though one can identify differing perceptions of atmosphere, there is not necessarily an impact on the relationship. From a relationship management perspective this is worthy of note, since business practitioners may not have to worry about how the other party feels about them and can therefore ignore the atmosphere of the relationship. While relationship atmosphere is conceptually central to

interaction, it may in fact play no more than a minor role in the outcomes of the relationship. This is an area which needs considerable future research.

The fourth implication of this study is that researchers in the field of business-to-business marketing should not labour under the misconception that atmosphere is a stand-alone entity, but rather that it is a product of the perceptions of the parties to the relationship. This misconception could as previously discussed lead researchers to overlook the importance of studying mirrored dyadic or triadic relationships as their unit of analysis, and may as a result have lead to findings which were misleading.

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