

**Understanding the Role of Interpersonal Liking in Buyer-Supplier Relationships
in Saudi Arabia**

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Relationship marketing in Easting cultures has rarely been researched. Patterson and Smith (2001) found that the Eastern cultural context, mainly the collectivist cultural norms impact the nature of relationships. Furthermore, studies on relationship marketing in different cultures have found differences between cultures, especially in the perceptions of the nature and the development of key relational constructs including relationship commitment and trust (e.g. Rodriguez and Wilson, 2002; Zabkar and Brencic, 2004). The literature on relationship marketing has given examples of relationships in the Middle East (Gronroos, 1994; 1996) and asks for empirical support from an eastern culture (Ambler and Styles, 2000) and yet this gap has not been filled. Despite the fact that trade in the Saudi Arabia has been conducted on the basis of personal relationships for many centuries, research has paid little attention to the nature of relationships in Saudi Arabia.

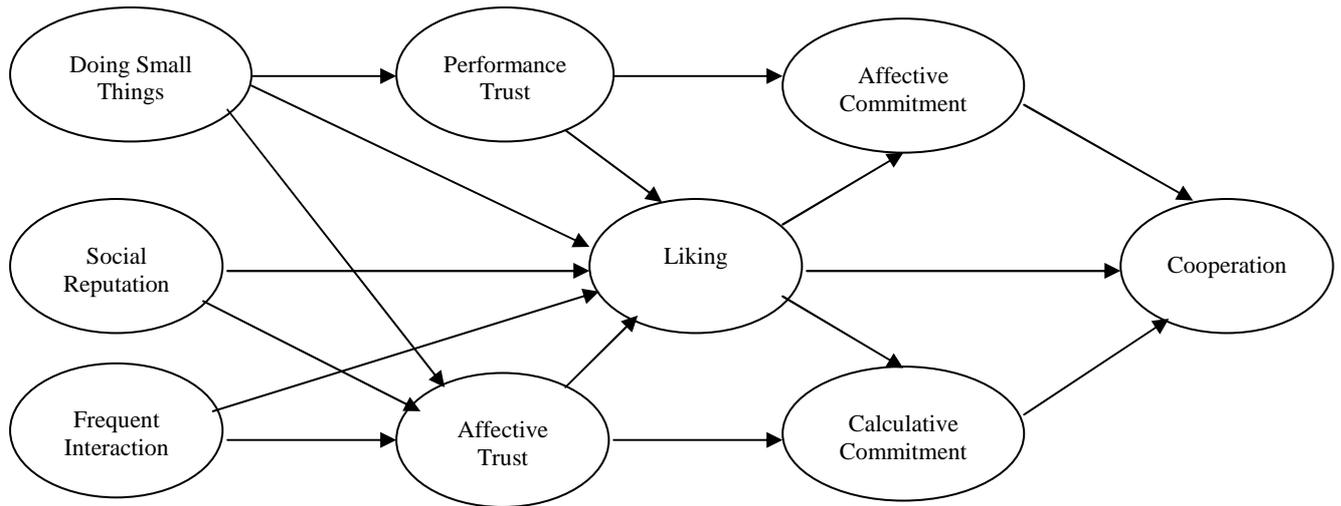
Interpersonal liking has rarely been explored in business-to-business relationships. Interpersonal liking is an important component of relationship development. It influences the motivation to develop and maintain relationships (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Liking helps to create personal attachment between managers and reinforce economic bonds (Nicholson *et al.*, 2001) and act as driving force for the relationship (Nicholson *et al.*, 2001; Hawke and Heffernan, 2006). The limited number of studies on interpersonal liking have been conducted in Western context, thus examining the role of interpersonal liking in Saudi Arabia would contribute to our understanding on how interpersonal liking influences business relationships in the Saudi cultural setting. The following is a brief review of all variables influencing interpersonal liking as well as variables influenced by interpersonal liking.

Key Variables and Model Development

Trust and relationship commitment are the cornerstones of relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust and commitment are found to be multidimensional constructs. Trust is made up of two dimensions. The first is the dimension of trust focused on the *performance-related trust*. This dimension is characterised by competence, customisation, reliability/dependability, and promptness. The second dimension focuses on the *personality/affective-related trust* characterised by caring, concern, empathy, similarity, and politeness. Similarly, commitment has two main dimensions, the first being *instrumental/calculative commitment*, which is viewed as a function of pledges, idiosyncratic investments, sharing of information, and allocation of relationship-specific resources (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Gundlach *et al.*, 1995). Inputs or investments in a relationship are evidence and manifestation of implementing early promises, which enhance parties' credibility at the beginning of the relationship and reduce uncertainty and the risk of opportunism (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wuyts and Geyskens, 2005). The second dimension of commitment is *affective commitment* (Gundlach *et al.*, 1995; Geyskens *et al.*, 1996), which is based on a set of perceptions, knowledge, beliefs and emotions that link two individuals/managers to their business relationship and motivate them towards maintaining their relationship. Thus a social structure is generated through individuals' desire to be psychologically and emotionally consistent throughout the interaction (Meyer and Allen, 1991). *Frequent interaction* helps managers to develop a more positive attitude interaction (Doney and Cannon, 1997), thus enhancing the level of liking in the relationship. The term '*doing*

small things' was found by Abosag (2006) to be an important element in creating liking in relationships in Saudi Arabia. *Social reputation* was found by Abosag (2006) to influence partners' assessment of each other at the early stages of the relationship development. It is particularly influential on development of affective trust in the relationship (also see Hakansson, 1982 and Einwiller, 2003). The conceptualisation of these variables can be found in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The Conceptualisation of the Mediating Role of Interpersonal Liking in B-to-B relationships in Saudi Arabia.



The Objective and Methodology

The objective of this study is to measure the above model in Saudi Arabia. The data collection method for this research is the structured questionnaire which will contain items measuring all variables in the model. The sample will consist of 200 managing directors of Saudi manufacturing companies. Data will be analysed using structural equation modelling using LISREL 8.5.

The findings of the study and discussion will be included in the full paper.

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