

Business Relationship Dissolution: Empirical Insights from UK Supermarket Supply Chains

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand why and how relationships end within UK supermarket supply chains. While the bias towards the study of the positive side of business relationships has been addressed in some respect by those few researchers who study the dissolution of business relationships there is still need for further research, especially in business-to-business relationships beyond the services context.

In this paper we therefore present the dissolution of various business relationships between UK food retailers and their suppliers distinguishing the triggers of the dissolution, the way the trigger influenced the relationship, why certain relationships were more prone to end, the role of personal and organisational factors in the dissolution of business relationships and finally the factors that tried to prevent dissolution from happening but without success.

The study developed a framework to depict the dissolution process in UK supermarket supply chains using insights from past studies. Based on qualitative evidence from eleven business relationships it modifies and improves the initially developed framework. The findings of the study complement existing dissolution research on the way theoretical constructs (e.g. trigger, predisposing factors, personal and organisational factors) promote or inhibit relationship dissolution. More importantly, the findings of the study provide empirical evidence from a new context to extend the understanding of predisposing factors, the effect of people and personal relationships on dissolution, the interplay of people and business in dissolution and the influence of the network on dissolution. It is suggested that this paper makes a useful contribution to business relationship dissolution research.

Keywords: Business relationship dissolution, Food industry

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INTRODUCTION

Current reviews of the relationship marketing literature suggest that despite the growth of the field there is a bias towards the study of the positive aspects of relationships leaving aside their negative side (Kasabov, 2007). This imbalance has been addressed in some respect by those few researchers who study the dissolution of business relationships focusing on triggers – reasons that lead the relationship to the end, predisposing factors that add vulnerability to the relationship, factors and events that try to attenuate the dissolution, and the process view of relationship dissolution (Strandvik & Holmlund, 2000; Tahtinen & Halinen, 2002)

There is however still a need for further research (Good & Evans, 2001; Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002; Pressey & Mathews, 2003; Sheth & Sharma, 2006; Tikkanen et al., 2000) and a need for a better understanding of interaction episode dynamics, those that change, weaken and even dissolve the relationship (Andersen & Kumar, 2006; Ford & Havila, 2003; Holmlund-Ryttonen & Strandvik, 2003; Schurr, 2007).

This research was undertaken in order to understand why and how relationships end within UK supermarket supply chains. It wanted to understand those factors that move the relationship towards the end as well as those that try to stop dissolution from happening.

The importance of the research lies first on the fact that it explores relationship dissolution in a new context. It also lies on the fact that it explores the role of various factors in the dissolution of business relationships such as the role of the personal relationship in business relationship dissolution, a role that is believed to be ignored (Andersen & Kumar, 2006; Good & Evans, 2001; Halinen & Salmi, 2001).

The purpose of the paper is to present the triggers of the dissolution, the way the trigger influenced the relationship, why certain relationships were more prone to end, the role of

personal, organisational and other factors in the dissolution of business relationships and finally the factors that tried to prevent dissolution from happening but without success.

The subject of relationship dissolution is particularly relevant in supermarket supply chains due to the continuous rationalisation of the supply base in non-branded categories and the poor reputation of supermarkets, often accused of abusing their market power and creating a negative climate and tension within the supply chain (Competition Commission, 2000; Fearne et al., 2005).

The paper is in five parts. The literature on supply chain relationships and the dissolution thereof is discussed in the next section. This is followed by a description of the conceptual framework and research methodology. The key findings are presented in section four and in the final section we present the revised framework, draw some conclusions, discuss management implications and make recommendations for further research in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most research on inter-organizational relationships to date has focussed on:

- the analysis of close, collaborative relationships (Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Dwyer et al., 1987; Fontenot & Wilson, 1997; Iacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Wilson, 1995)
- the identification of pre-requisites for successful long-term relationships (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Ganesan, 1994; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Naude & Buttle, 2000; Walter & Ritter, 2003) and
- the impact of relationships on performance (Cannon & Homburg, 2001; Duffy & Fearne, 2004; Kalwani & Narayandas, 1995; Lusch & Brown, 1996; Noordewier et al., 1990)

Few studies have focused on relationship dissolution and failed relationships (Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Giller & Matear, 2001; Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002; Hocutt, 1998; Olkkonen & Tuominen, 2005; Ping, 1993; Pressey & Mathews, 2003; Roos, 1999, 2002; Stewart, 1998a, 1998b; Tahtinen et al., 2007; Tidstrom & Ahman, 2006).

The literature review undertaken for the purpose of this research comprised literature on both the maintenance and the dissolution of relationships. This is because the literature that explores why a relationship is sustained provides the understanding on how dissolution is avoided. The section that follows seeks to demonstrate the key ideas from both streams of the reviewed literature.

Explaining Relationship Maintenance

Customers maintain relationships with their suppliers for different reasons but always because of some kind of “benefit” they expect compared to alternatives (Ford et al., 1998). Many studies have identified quality, satisfaction, value, trust, dependence and certain kinds of bonds such as social bonds as drivers of relationship maintenance (Abdul-Muhmin, 2005; Ganesan, 1994; Geyskens et al., 1996; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Simpson et al., 2001; Smith, 1998; Tellefsen, 2002).

What wants to be emphasised is that there might be different motives and reasons behind the customer’s intention to maintain the relationship. So, for some it is more important to understand the psychology behind the customer’s intention to stay in the relationship (Geyskens et al., 1996; Gilliland & Bello, 2002; Oliver, 1999; Sharma et al., 2001; Venetis & Ghauri, 2004). This is because relationship maintenance may come simply from the evaluation of the supplier’s performance or from a deeper commitment of the customer to the supplier.

Even though commitment represents the highest level of relationship bonding (Dwyer et al., 1987) what wants to be demonstrated here is the underlying motive that drives the continuity of relationships. So, here comes affective and calculative or cognitive commitment to shed light on the psychology of the customer’s intention to stay in the relationship.

Table 1: Attitudinal Commitment Dimensions

Attitudinal Commitment Dimensions	Affective Commitment	Positive Calculative-Cognitive Commitment	Negative Calculative-Cognitive Commitment
Underlying Motives driving each Commitment Dimension	Emotional attachment, affection, sense of belongingness	Value realisation	Switching costs, Lack of alternatives

Adapted from Sharma et al. (2001)

Affective commitment is concerned with ties that go beyond economic motives where the customer has a sense of loyalty, belonging and identification with the partner (Gilliland & Bello, 2002). As such, the bond that develops between two people from the customer and the supplier side is an important driver of affective commitment (Geiger & Turley, 2005). Yet, calculative commitment is concerned with the instrumental worth of the relationship and its economic importance (Venetis & Ghauri, 2004). There are therefore times where the customer has no other option but to stay with the supplier if it cannot obtain the same resources and outcomes outside the relationship or if it will experience a switching cost in the effort to replace the resources and outcomes (Geyskens et al., 1996).

There is also the view that there exists the positive value-based commitment which is similar to the negative locked-in commitment in that it is cognitive and involves economic calculation. This positive commitment however refers to the extent to which there is willingness to stay in the relationship because of the value the customer obtains from it (Sharma et al., 2001).

While the literature contains words like ‘bonds’ and ‘commitment’ which denote strength, the term ‘relationship strength’ rarely appears as a separate construct and when it does there is no agreement about what it means. Some authors view relationship strength as similar to commitment (Patterson & Smith, 2001) whereas for Bove & Johnson (2001) trust and commitment seem to be the most appropriate way to measure relationship strength which in industrial settings also involves the interdependence between firms. It is therefore here believed that relationship strength should be seen as being formed by a rational and an affective dimension, like Hennig-Thurau & Klee (1997) view commitment and like affective is distinguished from calculative-cognitive commitment.

To conclude, the emotional and rational elements supporting the continuity of the relationship are important and this is what the theory and practice is trying to “manipulate” in the effort to increase the strength of the relationship. The relationship may never reach the “commitment” level where the customer feels a psychological desire or need to stay but still at a lower level of attachment the driver of continuity will be supported by rational and/or emotional elements.

Explaining Relationship Dissolution

The relatively few studies on relationship dissolution try to identify what led the relationship to the end or what increases/decreases the likelihood of dissolution. Among the factors that may lead a relationship to end can be factors that relate to the relationship like poor product/service quality, factors that relate to each of the companies involved in the relationship like change of the firm’s strategy and factors that relate to the network within which the companies operate like a more competitive offer or environmental changes like the intensification of the industry environment (Halinen et al., 1999; Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002; Pillai & Sharma, 2003; Wendelin, 2002). There are also research findings that indicate the role of people and their emotions in the dissolution of business relationships (e.g. Halinen & Salmi, 2001).

Some researchers use the notion of the trigger event when they try to understand why the relationship dissolved (Stewart, 1998a). The trigger is seen as the catalyst that starts the dissolution path and may be for example a competitive offer that the customer receives (Roos, 2002). The trigger is not therefore different from the factors responsible for the ending, what is identified though with the use of this notion is that the trigger may differ from the reason of the dissolution (Michalski, 2004). For instance, when the competition attacks the relationship (trigger) the outcome of the comparison between the old and the new offer leads to relationship dissolution. It seems therefore that the trigger is a useful notion for explaining why dissolution takes place.

Some authors also explain that a predisposition might lie behind relationship dissolution making the relationship more vulnerable to experience dissolution. For instance, when the task related to producing the product/service is complex it is easier for mistakes to take place (Tahtinen, 2001). Others also suggest that negative critical incidents taking place during the life of the relationship may cause immediate tension but may also be stored in the buyer's memory and have serious effects if used in decisions concerning upgrading or downgrading the relationship in the future. These negative experiences that are memorised by individuals may complement the understanding of predisposing factors (Holmlund-Ryttonen & Strandvik, 2003).

When all the previous factors seem to lead the relationship towards the end there is still the possibility for recovery. The lack of alternative suppliers is proposed as an explanation for the maintenance of unsatisfactory relationships (Hocutt, 1998; Stewart, 1998a; Vaaland & Tahtinen, 2003), particularly in supermarket supply chains for own-label products, where exclusive supply and customer-specific contractual agreements make it more difficult and costly to switch suppliers (Fearne & Hughes, 1999).

Moreover, when an actor is satisfied with the overall relationship then short-term performance failures of their suppliers/customers may not lead to dissolution (Ping, 1993). Customers may also remain because of a good personal relationship with individuals from the opposite side under conditions of low satisfaction with the core offering (e.g. Coulter & Ligas, 2000).

Moreover, some customers may feel locked in the existing relationship and therefore prefer to stay because of the negative consequences they will face if they leave. For instance, Ping (1997) shows that relationship-specific investments increase switching costs, reduce the attractiveness of alternative suppliers and increase the probability of voice - defined as active, constructive and relationship preserving behaviour including but not limited to alerting the partner to relationship problems (Ping, 2003) - as a means of maintaining relationships and Wathne et al. (2001) show that structural bonds have a negative effect on customer switching behaviour.

There are also researchers who try to conceptualise the process of dissolution. They show the "steps" that the customer/supplier went through until the relationship ended. So, once more we observe what began the dissolution process, what other factors influenced the movement of the process forwards or backwards, when and if the customer started to evaluate alternative suppliers, what the customer/supplier was thinking and feeling during the process and after the relationship dissolved (e.g. Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Stewart, 1998a, b; Tahtinen, 2001). It seems therefore that the study of the dissolution process does not provide different results from the studies that focus on a specific aspect of the dissolution. However, the study of the dissolution process offers a dynamic perspective and the dissolution experience becomes more comprehensive.

Relationship dissolution research complements existing relationship research that focuses on how the relationship is maintained and grows stronger. As such, the essence of various studies on relationship maintenance is that the relationship is maintained due to rational and/or emotional motives (e.g. Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Ganesan, 1994). This is the reason that there is reference to dedication and constraint-based relationship maintenance (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997), affective and calculative commitment (Geyskens et al., 1996), "rational" and

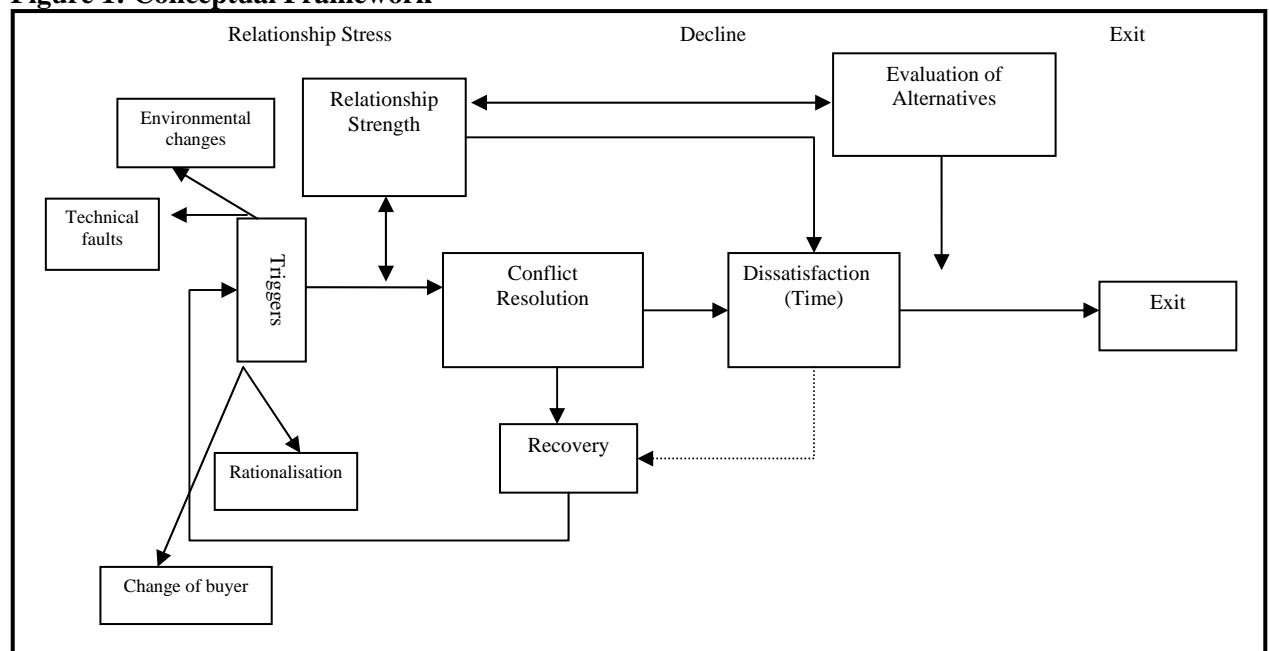
social bonds (Smith, 1998). In this respect it was previously shown that the relationship may dissolve due to rational or emotional reasons and that the relationship may sustain despite the occurrence of critical incidents due to rational and/or emotional motives. For this reason, Stewart (1998b) argues that the study of relationship dissolution improves the understanding of relationships.

To our knowledge, there is no published research on unsuccessful or ended relationships in supermarket supply chains, yet this is a sector in which structural change (on the supply side) and hyper-competition (on the demand side) is resulting in significant casualties from the suppliers' perspective. This may be, to a large extent, inevitable, as supermarkets adjust their purchasing and supply chain strategies to gain competitive advantage. However, the decision over who survives and who does not and the process of reaching that decision, in the context of supermarket supply chains, has not been addressed at all in the academic literature. It is this gap in the literature which this study aims to fill, at least in part, by exploring the process of ended relationships in UK supermarket supply chains and the role of the relationship (economic and social-emotional dimension) in precipitating or inhibiting the dissolution process.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Given the exploratory nature of this research, the objective is to build a framework rather than apply or test an existing one. However, rather than start with a blank sheet and ground a framework in our empirical findings, we formulated a conceptual model informed by the theoretical literature on relationship dissolution but reflecting the empirical evidence of buyer-supplier relationships in UK supermarket relationships (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



From a theoretical perspective the model focuses on what we perceive as the four key dimensions – a) the existence and impact of triggers in the dissolution process (Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Stewart, 1998a), b) the role of the state (strength) of the relationship as a barrier to/precipitator of relationship dissolution (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Ganesan, 1994), c) the availability and consideration of alternatives (Hocutt, 1998; Stewart, 1998b) and d) the dynamics of relationships over time (Holmlund-Rytkonen & Strandvik, 2003) as well as the process view of relationship dissolution (Coulter & Ligas, 2000; Tahtinen, 2001) which acknowledges changes within the relationship and steps between the trigger and exit.

The definition of triggers, in the context of UK supermarket supply chains, is informed by the empirical evidence from Fearné & Hughes (1999), Zanqueto-Filho et al. (2003) and Duffy

(2002), resulting in the specification of four triggers that signify the start of the dissolution process – a) the change of supermarket buyers (which breaks any social bonds that may have been developed between the previous buyer and suppliers); b) the strategy of supply base rationalisation (which has as its objective the reduction of the number of suppliers); c) technical faults on the part of the suppliers (which increase transaction costs and reduce the level of competence-based trust that the buyer may have in suppliers); and d) a change in the market environment (e.g. the takeover of the retailer Safeway by the retailer Morrison's in 2003, which resulted in the replacement of Safeway suppliers with Morrison's suppliers and created a trading environment of heightened price competition). This last trigger addresses the impact of the external environment on relationship dissolution adding exogenous constructs to the model.

The model recognises that conflict is inevitable in buyer-supplier relationships. Thus, over time there is likely to be a cyclical process of relationship decline and then recovery, as a result of functional conflict resolution due to the good state/strength of the relationship and/or a lack of alternative suppliers. However, in the study of ultimate dissolution, we hypothesise that there is a combination of factors, preceding and following the specific trigger identified by the supplier as the critical event, that result in terminal decline and that the process of decline will be accelerated or attenuated by the strength of the relationship, in terms of the social bonds between buyer and seller and/or the economic bonds that result from the nature of the product and the volume of business conducted between the respective parties, which are critical components of dependence.

The dyadic relationship is visible in the model given the “action-reaction” sequence. Specifically, the trigger triggers “something” which has an impact on the relationship moving the process towards dissolution. The strength of the relationship might try to move the process backwards towards recovery.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of this research and the sensitivity of the subject – it is much easier to research the antecedents and benefits of collaborative, successful relationships than the causes of failed ones (Giller & Matear, 2001) – a case study methodology was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques.

In the first instance a postal survey was administered for the purpose of identifying and selecting case study companies. The questionnaire was sent to the managing directors of 440 companies operating in the UK fresh produce, meat and dairy sectors, in July 2004. These sectors were chosen because they represent the three major commodity sectors in which UK suppliers are predominantly own-label and in which there has been significant structural adjustment over the last decade. The company databases used for the survey were developed from previous studies (Duffy & Fearne, 2004; Fearne et al., 2005; Hornibrook & Fearne, 2002; Zanquetto-Filho et al., 2003) and comprised the members of the respective trade organisations (Fresh Produce Consortium, Dairy UK, British Meat Manufacturers Association) who were known to be suppliers to the major UK supermarkets. Two mailings were administered, each comprising a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, the questionnaire and a postage paid return envelope. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject respondents were guaranteed anonymity but invited to include their contact details if they were willing to discuss their experiences further.

The questionnaire sought information about the respondent's business, the number of customers they had in 2000, the number of customers they had at the time of completing the questionnaire and how many of those customers were regarded as key to their business. Those companies who had lost at least one customer since 2000 were asked to state the reason by selecting from a list corresponding to the triggers in the model. They were then asked to answer a series of questions about the supermarket customer they had lost more recently as this is the relationship with which they would be most familiar. These questions were based on the work by Zanquetto-Filho et al. (2003) and Duffy (2002) and were used to establish the

state of the relationship before it dissolved (a process over time as distinct from the end itself), in order to establish the extent to which it was predisposed to dissolution due to a lack of trust, information-sharing, functional conflict, innovation, inter-personal relationships and dependency.

Eighty one companies responded, of which twenty three showed a willingness to discuss their experiences in further detail. Of these, nine failed to respond to telephone and email requests for an interview, resulting in fourteen case companies who participated in the next stage. Twelve of the companies were operating in the fresh produce sector and two were suppliers of branded dairy products. Most of the companies operating within the fresh produce sector were small businesses with the exception of one multinational company. For reasons of confidentiality no further information will be shared about the companies involved in the research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the winter of 2005. The average duration of the interviews was about two hours. One person was interviewed from each supplier company with the exception of two interviews where two people were involved. The interviewees were senior managers (chief executives or marketing directors) who had a detailed knowledge of events. A lack of time and resources from the authors' part and the fact that in several cases the companies had ceased trading so only the original owners had interest in participating, meant it was not possible to conduct multiple interviews with different people involved in the relationship from the supply side.

From the original set of fourteen companies that participated in the study, nine were included in the final analysis. In two of them more than one relationship was discussed which meant that we had information relating to eleven business relationships. The decision not to use all the information was based on the fact that certain data were considered inadequate or not fitting with the purpose of the study.

An interview guide was used covering information about the company, the respondent, the history of the relationship and the dissolution process. However, in most cases respondents were requested to 'tell their story' in their own words, with minimal interventions from the interviewer, which is consistent with previous dissolution studies (Tahtinen, 2001) that suggest that free reporting increases the validity of retrospective reports. The process was iterative, moving backward and forward in time, describing how the relationship was before the dissolution, when and why it started to change, how the ending finally came about and what they could have done differently, with the benefit of hindsight, to change the course of events. All but one of the interviews were tape recorded and all were transcribed. All of the interviews were sent back to the interviewees for comments and some of them were returned reviewed prior to the analysis.

At the outset the decision was taken not to elicit information from the buyer's side of the relationship. This was for three reasons: a) in the majority (if not all) of the cases the buyer responsible for the decision to end the relationship would have moved on such is the turnover of supermarket buyers; b) the subject of the study is an extremely sensitive one and at the time of our investigation the UK Competition Commission were conducting their second review of supermarket power and their behaviour with respect to suppliers and c) it is also highly likely that the supplier companies that participated would not have agreed to take part in the study or they would not have revealed the stories they did if they knew that the customer's point of view was being sought to compare with theirs. This was evident from the fact that the respondents wanted to preserve their anonymity.

The analysis undertaken followed the principles of content analysis (Patton, 2002) and was guided by the theoretical propositions and rival explanations general analytical strategies (Yin, 2003). It therefore started with within-case analysis looking carefully at each individual case and organized the data around five main themes: the business environment, the relationship itself, the trigger event, the process including the causes of the dissolution, and the aftermath (focusing on what the suppliers could have done differently).

The cross-case analysis was also performed using the principles of content analysis. The study identified themes for looking across the cases in the effort to improve the understanding of relationship dissolution as well as identify similarities and differences between the cases. Given the diversity of the case evidence it was not possible to identify exactly the same findings replicated across many cases. Still, it was possible to identify “similar” patterns, sometimes almost identical patterns and sometimes contradictory evidence. In addition, it was possible to identify patterns that followed the same logic in the way they influenced the evolution of the relationship. This was another way of looking at the data because even though the data were organized around a theme the analysis was also directed towards explaining the way the theme influenced the dissolution (e.g. trigger). This seems to correspond with the explanation building analytic technique which is a special type of pattern matching (Yin, 2003).

Effort was also spent in relating the findings to the existing literature, either supporting or contradicting the focal findings. This process increased the understanding of the phenomenon within the specific setting and enhanced the credibility of the focal findings. Moreover, it was deemed as a necessary part of the explanation building technique given the need to offer the most accurate explanation of a phenomenon that has not been explored before in the specific setting.

The original study included eleven cases because it was considered that each one of them contributed to the research. Each case offered a different dissolution experience and offered something to the findings. This paper is an effort to compile certain findings from all cases. It is understood that this decreases the ability of the reader to understand fully the dissolution process of each case. However, it increases the number of findings which are believed are also needed for both theory and practice.

KEY FINDINGS

Trigger

The study identified the importance of the trigger event in initiating the dissolution process. Triggers became the decision of the retailer to rationalise their supply base (*“they reduced the number of suppliers down and we were unlucky”* – Case 1); the change of buyer (*“we thought we were moving forward but then all you need is a new buyer to come in and say I don’t like that idea...and the whole thing just finishes”* – Case 2b); technical faults on the part of the supplier or the supplier’s refusal to invest in the relationship thereby not fulfilling the retailer’s requirements (*“they have said again...we want you to do this and this and we have said it’s not really worth it”* – Case 6b); a more competitive offer (Case 3); the action taken by the retailer’s competitor to decrease the price of the supplier’s product in their stores (*“because of that we became number 1 on Retailer A’s hit list because they were not happy, because...Retailer B...reduced the retail price”* – Case 1); the supplier’s accusations against the retailer’s staff for unethical behaviour (*“and I described exactly what had happened...and how the retailer had I thought changed dramatically from the company which I had grown up with”* – Case 3).

Table 2: Triggers

TRIGGER	SOURCE OF TRIGGER
Rationalisation	Customer
Change of buyer	Customer
Technical faults	Relationship
Supplier’s accusations	Relationship
Competitive offer Retailer’s competitor action	Environment

The a priori categorisation of triggers was supported. However, the action taken by the retailer’s competitor to decrease the price of the supplier’s product complemented the category of environmental changes. The refusal of the supplier to invest for the retailer complemented the technical fault category given that this action relates to the technical

dimension of the relationship. Moreover, the supplier's accusations against the retailer's staff added another category and the interpersonal element.

Trigger-Relationship Strength-Evaluation of Alternatives Sequence

The trigger is a key element of the process since it initiates re-evaluation of the relationship against alternative options (rationalisation, change of buyer, competition, refusal to continue investment, technical faults); it triggers the retailer's reaction which then influences their economic performance (retailer's competitor price reduction) or it creates intense negative feelings to the retailer (supplier's accusations). The trigger therefore leads to a change in the retailer's perception of the relationship.

Sometimes the trigger revealed weak elements of the relationship relative to alternatives. These weaknesses related either to economic/technical elements or social/emotional elements. For example, in most of the cases where rationalisation triggered the process the supplier was not able to compete with other suppliers on price terms (*"I think it was just purely cost"* – Case 2a). However, in one case the personal relationship between two managers from the two sides was stressed. The poor personal relationship made the retailer's manager inclined to end the relationship once rationalisation took place (*"we didn't understand the depth of feeling...against us until we lost the business"* – Case 1)¹.

Other times the trigger led to the weakening of economic or emotional elements of the relationship. For example, when the retailer's competitor reduced the supplier's product price in their stores the focal retailer matched their competitor's price which had, as a consequence, important financial losses. The focal retailer perceived that their problem was the supplier's responsibility and either rationalised the supplier or delisted most of the supplier's branded product when the supplier refused to compensate the retailer for their losses (*"...and then the retailer woke up and said we are going to match this price and...they wanted some ridiculous reduction..."* – Case 4). In addition, when the retailer's staff found out about the supplier's accusations of unethical business behaviour the personal relationship was significantly stressed. The retailer's reaction revealed the supplier's non-compliance with the product specifications and destroyed the relationship and the supplier (Case 3).

The change of buyer trigger also requires attention because the results show that something influenced the buyer's decision making. So, someone could say that the trigger is not obvious. Bearing in mind that the new buyer started these dissolution paths then the change of buyer is influential because every person has a different way of interpreting situations and deciding the future of the relationship. So, the most appropriate explanation could be that the change of buyer is the trigger because it is the person that interprets the situation whereas the factors that may influence the buyer's decision making are part of the episode that has as an outcome the ending of the relationship (*"...the buyer came and said I don't see the benefit of...I can buy them cheaper from abroad... at that time the retailer was going through a fairly hefty cost reduction strategy..."* – Case 2b).

The previous observations show that the trigger is distinct from the underlying reason behind the dissolution. Even in those cases where the trigger was directly related to the reason (e.g. a competitive offer) first the trigger changed the retailer's perception of the relationship and then the relationship dissolved based on the benefits the alternative supplier offered to the retailer.

This general comment also shows the dissatisfaction element within the model otherwise the relationship would not have ended. Moreover, in certain occasions conflict was evident within the relationship (e.g. when the retailer's competitor action took place). The relationship did not however recover because the supplier did not want to compensate the retailer for the losses they incurred as a result of matching their competitor's price.

¹ See also next section.

This section wanted mainly to explain the way three elements of the framework –trigger, relationship strength, evaluation of alternatives – interact and move the process towards dissolution. The trigger opens a path for reevaluating the relationship or it leads to the weakening of the economic and/or emotional side of the relationship.

The promoting or inhibiting role of the relationship

The cases also showed the role of people and personal relationships in the evolution of the business relationship². This was an important contribution of the study given that the role of the personal relationship in the critical phases of the business relationship is believed to be ignored (Halinen & Salmi, 2001) and because most studies ignore the role of people as change agents in the ending process (Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002).

In this respect, the refusal of one supplier to comply with one retailer's requests (behaviour) worsened the relationship between the two respective technical managers. Moreover, it seems that the attitude of the supplier's technical manager aggravated even more the feelings of the retailer's technologist as the supplier indicated that "*there are more ways of saying no*" (Case 1). It was therefore the interplay of the behaviour and the attitude of the supplier's manager towards the other party that had created negative feelings in the retailer's manager.

The consequence of the poor personal relationship became evident when the supplier blamed the retailer's technical manager for not warning them that their non-compliance would affect them in the rationalisation and they suggested that this happened because the retailer's technical manager did not have a good relationship with their technical manager. The outcome was therefore de-listing from the product area when the customer decided to rationalise.

Similarly, the accusations of one supplier against another retailer's staff destroyed the personal relationship between the two sides and had a severe consequence on the business relationship. Once the retailer found out about the accusations, the supplier's non-compliance with the product specifications was also revealed. This case showed that if people from the customer side feel particularly negative about a supplier their reaction may be to engineer or support the ending of the relationship ("*...and I remember him saying...we like you, you have been supplying us for many years, but what happened here is unacceptable...*" – Case 3).

There were also occasions where the relationship was severed because the new buyer was receiving preferential treatment by the supplier's competitors in the form of personal benefits unrelated to business benefits ("*...you just don't know what goes on behind the scenes, you don't know who has holidays paid for, you don't know how people buy business...*" – Case 8).

There were however occasions where the new buyer perceived that the supplier was not offering enough economic benefits to the retailer compared to other options ("*...the buyer came and said...I can buy them cheaper from abroad*" – Case 2b). Moreover, for those suppliers who were rationalised or replaced, price was one of the reasons that determined the dissolution.

² The trigger section also reveals the role of the economic/social dimension of the relationship in promoting dissolution.

Table 3: Promoting role of the relationship

Economic side	<i>"I can buy them cheaper from abroad"</i> – Case 2b
Economic side	<i>"in the end we were saying we can't do it any more and they were saying actually we would prefer it if it went somewhere else"</i> – Case 6b
Economic side	<i>"they (retailer) came along and said we are going to drop our prices to match the other retailer and therefore you (supplier) are going to pay or if you don't we will shoot you, which is in fact what they did"</i> – Case 4
Economic side	<i>"They started trading with his company based on the technical and commercial benefits his company offered to them"</i> – Case 3
Buyer's personal economic benefits	<i>"you don't know how people buy business"</i> – Case 8
Social side	<i>"we didn't understand the depth of feeling...against us until we lost the business"</i> – Case 1
Social side	<i>"we like you, you have been supplying us for many years, but what happened here is unacceptable"</i> – Case 3

Still, there were occasions when people were driven by rational or emotional motives to try and prevent the dissolution. The personal loyalty of people on the retailer's side succeeded in counteracting the influence of a competitive offer even though it managed to break the focal relationship (*"...always very loyal to me personally* – Case 3). Another supplier acknowledged that if they had developed a good personal relationship with the retailer's senior management then they could have used that relationship to their advantage when the new buyer decided to de-list them as part of the rationalisation strategy (*"...perhaps the weakness was that there was no social relationship* – Case 7).

Also, a retailer's senior manager tried to prevent the dissolution since he perceived that the rationalisation could have long-term economic consequences for the retailer even though another manager wanted to end the relationship (*"...the senior manager had actually sent them away and said are you sure you want to make this call...because this is a huge step..."* – Case 1). Elsewhere, the buyer tried to prevent the dissolution because he perceived that the supplier was offering good product quality unlike the opinion of the new buyer who wanted to end the relationship (*"...although the buyer said it would put our name forward because we had done a really good job, it didn't make any difference to the new buyer..."* – Case 2a). Still, in certain occasions not even the supplier's brand was able to prevent the dissolution.

Also there were occasions when people from the retailer side could not prevent the negative evolution of the relationship. The views of the interviewees showed that the personal relationship cannot get in the way of the customer who is trying to look after their business first (*"we can have great relationships with people and they absolutely screw us in the ground, because that's what their job is..."* – Case 4 and *"I don't believe there is such a thing as an honest relationship between a supplier and a supermarket buyer in a commodity product"* – Case 2a).

Table 4: Inhibiting role of the relationship – Can it help?

Economic side	<i>"although the buyer said it would put our name forward because we had done a really good job, it didn't make any difference to the new buyer"</i> – Case 2a
Economic side	<i>"we believe and some people, oh, you are a brand, you can do anything, you get a buyer who doesn't know you and you realise that he will delist you and may not realise that what is doing is wrong but how do you get that over to him unless he is willing to understand"</i> – Case 9
Economic side	<i>"the brand gives you some strength...but the brand was never a particularly strong market (for the specific retailer)"</i> – Case 4
Social side	<i>"always very loyal to me personally"</i> – Case 3
Social side	<i>"perhaps the weakness was that there was no social relationship"</i> – Case 7
Social side	<i>"I don't believe there is such a thing as an honest relationship between a supplier and a supermarket buyer in a commodity product"</i> – Case 2a

Risk towards failure

The model apriori had also identified the role of the relationship in predisposing the dissolution. The cyclical process was indicating that a trigger may create a conflict situation where the relationship is recovered until something else happens and brings back memories that may lead the relationship to dissolution.

The observations show that sometimes the relationship was vulnerable towards failure. The poor personal relationship between the two technical managers resulted in the supplier's rationalisation and this factor was predisposing the dissolution in line with Holmlund-Rytkonen & Strandvik (2003).

Moreover, the position of certain suppliers within the supply base was making them more prone to experience dissolution if rationalisation was going to take place ("*...we knew it was coming, we were obviously too late, we couldn't get big enough quick enough...*" – Case 6a). The supplier was less important or less able to meet the retailer's economic expectations than the rest of the supply base.

In addition, a retailer was making every effort to improve their product offering and satisfy their consumers while the supplier was a small company without the resources to adapt continuously to the retailer's needs. As such, the mismatch between the two companies predisposed the future, made the supplier to refuse investing in the retailer that eventually made the retailer end the relationship.

Similarly, the non-compliance of a supplier with the product specifications of the retailer was adding risk to the future of the relationship. The seeds for a critical event to take place were sown a long time before the critical event occurred. In addition, the supermarket policy of continuous rotation of employees was pushing every relationship towards change without this meaning that it directly had an effect on every relationship. The views of the suppliers were that they "*want to make a mark*", "*new people come in with new ideas*" when the buyer changes. These comments indicate that a new person may decide to introduce changes even though the business relationship until this point in time was satisfactory for the previous buyer. It could therefore be seen as a factor that predisposes a critical change or dissolution.

Moreover, most relationships were operating in a network with the inherent trend of rationalisation ("*...there is still a lot of rationalisation going on at the moment which is causing all sorts of problems for suppliers...*" – Case 5). Even though rationalisation did not affect every relationship it was adding vulnerability to the specific relationships rather than if they were operating in a different network. Finally, most relationships were operating in a network with availability of alternatives. It can be argued that in the specific context where the competition among supermarket customers is so intense there is always the chance for the existing relationship to be re-evaluated on price terms. This also means that the relationship is more prone to ending in a competitive environment with many alternatives that compete for the retailer's business.

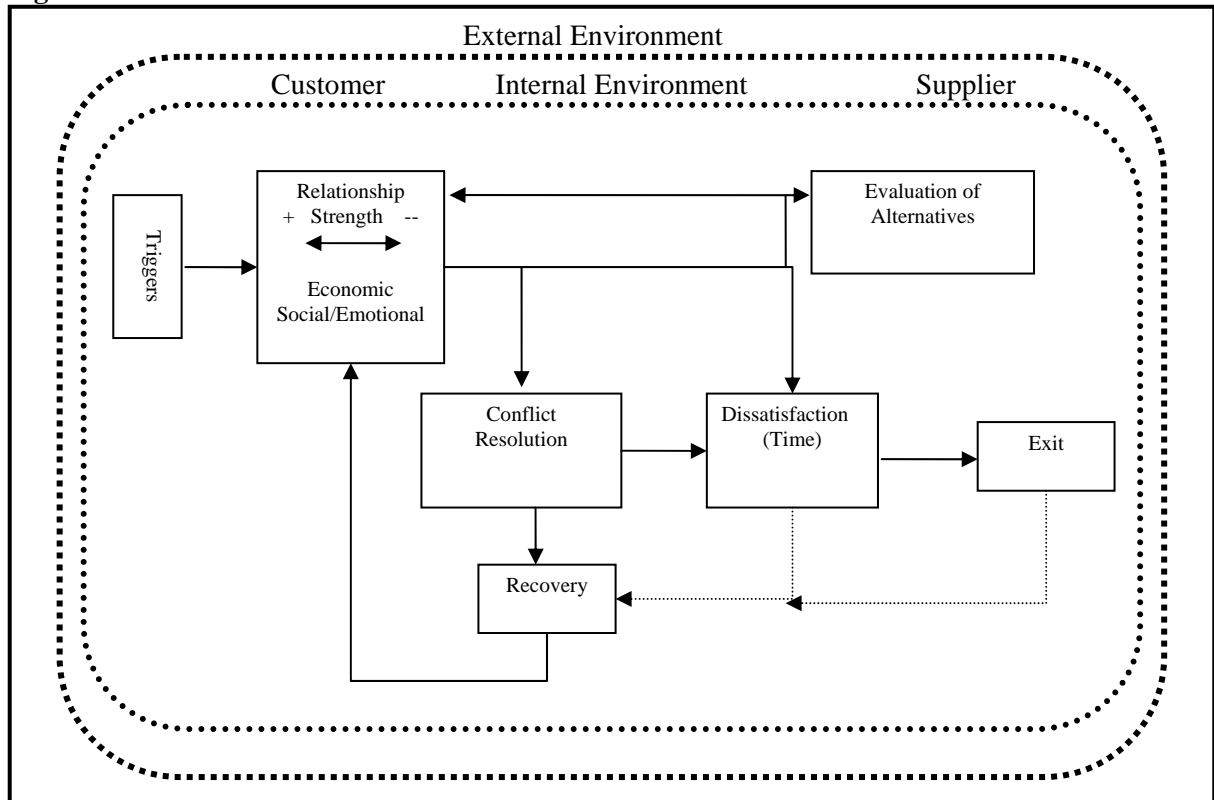
Table 5: Risk/Predisposing Factors

Risk/Predisposing Factors	Source
Employee rotation	Retailer
Negative personal relationship	Relationship
Mismatch between retailer and supplier	Relationship
Non-compliance with product specifications	Supplier
Position of suppliers	Network/environment
Rationalisation trend	Network/environment
Many alternatives	Network/environment

REVISED FRAMEWORK

The original framework managed to capture elements of the process but it did not manage to address some of the complexity that may appear when a relationship ends. For instance, it did not address the fact that the relationship exists at different hierarchical levels and as such different people may perceive things differently. Neither did it address explicitly the risk factors even though the study could see from the outset that a predisposition might exist. Based on what was observed a modified framework has been developed for analysing relationship dynamics with a focus on the dissolution or the weakening of the relationship.

Figure 2: Revised Framework



The new framework proposes that the relationship is surrounded by the external environment which includes elements such as the competitive intensity between customers or suppliers and other network actors that may become influential during the process. The previous framework was depicting the environment within the environmental change trigger but it was considered appropriate to distinguish the environment from the triggers because it may or it may not generate a trigger event. For instance, the environment may generate a trigger (e.g. a competitive offer) or it may be a predisposing factor (e.g. many network alternatives).

The nature of the environment that surrounded all cases was a competitive one. The study identified in general that all suppliers were operating in an environment where retailers were very focused on price/costs or differentiation strategies in the effort to increase their profitability and compete with other retailers. There was not any difference between the fresh-produce and the dairy sector on what was identified. Both sectors had to deal with the power of retailers and their competitive strategies. The objective of the study was though on which environmental factor influenced the evolution of the relationship and how

The internal environment refers to the customer and the supplier as companies and acknowledges that internal to the company factors may become influential such as the customer's employee rotation policy. As far as the supplier company is concerned, the supplier's way of doing business or the resources they have available may influence the evolution of the relationship. The inter-company factors try to capture the extent to which there is a predisposition or a risk towards change and also other factors such as the personality

or the personal goals of the buyer that may influence its behaviour. It is also understood that there is a fine line between the environment, the companies and their relationship.

As far as the central elements of the framework are concerned the new process keeps the elements of the previous framework but rearranges the way they interact. The interaction between the trigger and relationship strength suggests as before that it influences the relationship because it initiates change. The trigger creates a situation where the customer changes the way they perceive the supplier.

The change in the customer's perception can be the result of the trigger or the result of the re-evaluation of the existing relationship against alternatives (or both). Moreover, the change of the customer's perception means that the relationship weakens in the customer's mind compared to what it was before the trigger took place. As such, either the economic or the social/emotional side of the relationship changes or sometimes both.

The response afterwards depends on the specific situation. When the buyer perceives something differently than before on the economic side then the social side may try to prevent the process. Depending on the outcome of the trade-off, the result can be dissatisfaction and exit or recovery. Moreover, other individuals within the customer organisation may try to prevent the buyer's decision depending on economic or emotional criteria but it may not always be satisfactory. In addition, the supplier may take action and try to change the customer's mind which again may or may not change the buyer's decision. It may also be that the outcome is not exit but dissatisfaction and recovery in a weakened state.

Another response by the customer to the effect of the trigger may be conflict with the supplier and depending on the resolution the sequence may be dissatisfaction or recovery. In the case of dissatisfaction the customer may consider what he will lose from leaving and again the outcome may be exit or recovery.

The arrow within the relationship strength box indicates those times where the trigger does not necessarily initiate the reevaluation of the relationship against alternatives. In those cases there is a trade-off between the economic contribution or the emotional attachment of the customer relative to the new situation after the trigger.

If recovery is achieved then the relationship strengthens since the customer changes their negative perception of the supplier company. However, it may also be that things are never the same as before because the customer keeps a mental account of the problem and is more alert if something else goes wrong. The relationship may also not only weaken in the mind of the customer but there is also action and the supplier loses part of his business. Exit on the other hand means that the relationship ends.

The framework also acknowledges the reactivation possibility of the relationship after exit. This framework is not able to show all the complexity that the dissolution process may exhibit but it is believed that it captures the main elements that may influence the dynamics of the process. This section tried to explain the way each element of the framework influences the process forward or backwards. There might be cases where all the steps of the framework are identified or there might be simpler cases where only a part of the framework is identified. This paper gave emphasis on certain parts of the framework in the effort to offer an initial overview of dissolution in UK supermarket supply chains.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the cases revealed the importance of the trigger event in bringing about a change in the relationship and the existence of other factors that influence the movement of the dissolution process (promoting or preventing it). The study also revealed additional examples of predisposing factors. In general, the dynamics of the cases extend our knowledge beyond the business-to-business and business-to-consumer services context.

There were also important examples which support those authors who have previously highlighted the importance of the interpersonal relationship in the process of business

relationship dissolution (Halinen & Salmi, 2001) and those who argue that most studies ignore the role of people as change agents in the ending process (Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002). Moreover, the study showed the complex interplay of business and personal elements in the dissolution process (Halinen & Salmi, 2001).

For instance, in the case where the poor personal relationship between the two technical managers accounted for the rationalisation of the supplier it was also mentioned that the supplier was not complying with the retailer's requests. Still, different emotions arise from making a mistake and from non-compliance. The combination of the behaviour (non-compliance) and the attitude of the supplier had created an intense situation which can explain why conflict about business issues can become personalised (Reid et al., 2004).

There were also examples of the connected network of supply chain relationships, which supports those who argue that there is a need for a more holistic and contextual view of customer (dis)satisfaction in industrial business settings (Tikkanen et al., 2000).

The contribution of the study rests on the fact that it explores relationship dissolution in a new context. Taking into consideration studies in different contexts it offers additional empirical examples to support existing theoretical perspectives and extend current empirical knowledge.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Relationship dissolution research offers a window on understanding relationships. Practitioners can avoid dissolution knowing how important the management of the personal relationship is, understanding that they have to take actions in order to be able to adapt to the customer's changing requirements, to environmental changes and competitive actions. Still, there are times that the supplier cannot say yes to the customer and hurt their own viability.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should explore the analysis of relationship dynamics from a general view and not only from a negative perspective (Schurr, 2007). In this way it would also be possible to bring in the longitudinal perspective that is missing from current research and has been identified as important for investigating how buyer-seller relationships are initiated, built, and nurtured in industrial markets and why and how they succeed or fail (Narayandas & Rangan, 2004).

One more issue that represents an opportunity for further research is the extension of the study to another country. It would be interesting to look across different cultures and compare how relationships change, weaken and die. The context around the relationships will differ and this might affect what will be observed. Moreover, cultural differences may have an effect on what would be observed, given that it has been proposed that culture is one of the factors that may affect the behaviour of firms under different trigger events (Shankarmahesh et al., 2003) as well as the way business-to-business phenomena manifest within each country (Johnston et al., 1999).

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