

Abstract preview

# **THE IMPACT OF INTERNET USE ON BUYER-SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIP ATMOSPHERE**

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**ABSTRACT**

To strengthen their position in today's highly competitive and fast paced business environment more and more organizations engage in long-term relationships with their suppliers. These inter-organizational relationships have proven to create value for both parties involved. However, the management of such relationships requires resources and is a complex task. Recent advances in information technology particularly the Internet offers new ways of managing inter-organizational relationships.

This paper explores the structure of key dimension of long-term relationship atmosphere scale in a French context. Beside this, we introduce and test the impact of Internet use, such as information, communication and transaction, on the key dimension of relationship atmosphere (trust, commitment and loyalty). We hypothesize that use of the Internet for communication purpose would increase relationship closeness, whereas the use for information purposes would decrease.

Using a sample of 176 industrial buyers, we found that the use of Internet for information and communication purpose has a tendentious positive effect on trust. On the contrary, the use it has a significant, negative, direct effects on commitment and loyalty. Furthermore, there effects are found to be mediated by Internet use for transaction.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Internet use - Long-term atmosphere relationship- trust- commitment- loyalty

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Internet, this worldwide and open network with millions of computers connected has been an impressive success story in recent years. The rapid advancement of the Internet in business marks the

starting point of our reflection. In France, as in most European countries, almost all firms are now equipped with computers connected to the Internet<sup>1</sup>.

Authors have acknowledged that the current transformation in business is not only caused by increased investments in information technology, the way we use the Internet has also changed organizations and business relationships (Avlonitis and Karayanni, 2000). Many buyers believe that these relationships can be managed easily. However, the interaction between buyer-supplier relationships and the Internet are complex and require considerable care in their analysis and management. This research explores the role of the Internet in business-to-business marketing and identifies the impact of Internet use on the key dimension of relationship atmosphere.

## **1- CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

The interaction approach proposed by the IMP Group presents a model comprising the actors in interaction (buyer and supplier), processes of interaction, an element environment and relationship atmosphere element. The atmosphere is the context in which this relationship is formed and evolves. It is described as the emotional setting within which business takes place (Hallen and Sandstrom 1991; Hakansson *and al.* 1982). The IMP group found that the atmosphere could be one of mutual trust or it could be one of conflict and antagonism. The atmosphere was seen to have an influence over the way exchanges were carried out. So, where the relationship had developed over time, the atmosphere tended towards being trusting and co-operative, with an emphasis on the continuity of a business relationship between the two companies.

Relationship marketing attempts to move the relationship between supplying firms and buying firms from discrete transactional exchange to relational exchange. The interaction approach considers the relationship between buyer and supplier as central to the exchange process. Research has also shown that the relationships formed by these interactions are often lasting and committed. These long-term relationships are based on mutual trust, commitment and loyalty. These key dimensions of atmosphere are adequate to explain and even to predict the likelihood that a long-term relationship will be formed between buyer-supplier (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

### **Trust**

Trust is considered to be one of the basic concepts in the social exchange framework. It is viewed as an essential ingredient for successful relationships. Several definitions of trust in marketing context have recently been offered. In line with some authors (Moorman, Zaltman and Desphandé, 1993;

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<sup>1</sup> 95 % french firms have access to the Internet and 99% for industrial firms (“INSEE première” n°1126- March 2007)

Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ganesan, 1994, Doney and Cannon, 1997), we define trust as “a confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity”. An important aspect of this definition is the notion of a belief, a sentiment, or an expectation about an exchange partner that results from the partner’s expertise, reliability, and intentionality. The definition of trust proposed here is based on two distinct components (1) credibility, which is based on the extent to which the buyer believes that supplier has the required expertise to perform the job effectively and reliably and (2) benevolence, which is based on the extent to which the buyer believes that the partner is interested in the other partner’s welfare, is willing to accept short-term mistakes, and will not undertake unexpected actions that can negatively affect the other partner (Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 1995a/1995b).

### **Commitment**

Commitment is very much a long-term dimension of atmosphere. It is recognized as an essential ingredient for successful long-term relationships. Commitment is generally referred to as an enduring desire to maintain a relationship. The concept of relationship commitment is similar to the concept of long-term orientation that comprises the desire and utility of a buyer to have a long-term relationship with a supplier (Geyskens et al. 1996; Fisher, and Nevin 1996; Gilliland and Bello, 2002).

In line with Morgan and Hunt (1994), Kumar et al (1995b); Moorman, Zaltman and Desphandé (1992) we define relationship commitment as “a buyer’s enduring desire to continue a relationship with a supplier accompanied by his willingness to make efforts at maintaining it through investments of capital and effort”.

In this paper, as Gundlach, Achrol and Mentzer (1995), commitment has three components: a calculative component of some form of investment, an attitudinal component that may be described as affective commitment or psychological attachment, and temporal dimension indicating that the relationship exists over time.

We suppose that trust leads to the desirable attitude of commitment. Thus, Relationships characterized by trust are so highly valued that parties will desire to commit themselves to such relationships, so some marketers indicate that trust should positively affect commitment (e.g., Doney and Cannon 1997, Siguaw, Simpson, and Baker 1998).

*H1a- A higher level of trust leads to a higher level of affective and temporal commitment*

*H1b- A higher level of trust leads to a lower level of calculative commitment*

### **Loyalty**

Loyalty to the selling firm is the customer's "intention to perform a diverse set of behaviors that signal a motivation to maintain a relationship with the focal firm" (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002). The buyer's intention of continuing to conduct business with the selling firm may be based on their interactions with the supplier, the comparative advantage of the firm's product offered, and/or other loyalty generating activities associated with the selling firm. We consider that loyalty has based on two distinct components: attitudinal and cooperative.

Attitudinal loyalty reflects the customer's psychological disposition toward the same product. Building attitudinal loyalty involves more than simple transactional marketing incentive; positive attitudes towards one's firm must be cultivated over a longer term relationship horizon (Kumar and Shah 2004).

Rosson and Ford (1982) believe that a highly committed relationship should imply a high level of investment in the relationship by both parties. Commitment emerges from developed, cooperative sentiments (Evanschitzky and al. 2006). Thus the second component of loyalty: cooperative loyalty

*H2- A higher level of commitment leads to a higher level of relationship loyalty*

### **Assessing the role of the Internet**

The analysis of literature<sup>2</sup> and our qualitative study (interviews with industrial buyers) have revealed that industrial buyers do not use the Internet for the same reasons. We distinguished three main functions of the Internet for information on the supplier and the to market, communicating with partners and make transactions. Its application in each of these functions gives rise to a different impact on key relationship atmosphere.

In developing our hypotheses on how the use of the Internet will influence the dimensions of relationship closeness such as trust, commitment and loyalty. We will distinguish between the use of Internet for information purposes, communication purposes and transaction purposes.

#### **Internet use for communication purposes**

Internet use by buyer, offers new ways of communication that enrich and complicate the interaction between buyer and supplier. The Internet has become a medium of interpersonal communication in its own right both internally and externally of the firms.

Several studies have shown the positive impact of communication on trust (Anderson and Narus 1990, Morgan and Hunt 1994, Selnes, 1998, Wong et al., 2003). Indeed, when a customer is asked to

evaluate his level of trust, he assesses this perception at that time. While if we ask him to evaluate communication, he refers to past experiences (Geyskens and al., 1998). Communication appears as a factor in the formation of two dimensions of trust: credibility and benevolence.

Using the Internet to communicate with a partner could contribute to strengthening the relationship and consequently improve the level of commitment of the buyer. In his study Oser (2000) found that the use of new information technologies can increase the cooperation of partner exchange and collaboration as in the design of new product

*H3- Using Internet for communication purposes has a positive effect Key dimensions relationship atmosphere.*

### **Internet use for information purposes**

The new information technologies have different properties to traditional technologies: they accelerate the flow of information and increase processing capabilities. Indeed, the use of new technology makes information more available and more susceptible to a quick search.

The information collected by the buyer may give a clearer picture on the market and serve to put pressure on the supplier during the negotiation of prices and contracts. So we supposed a negative impact of this use of the Internet information on variable relationships.

*H4- Using Internet for information purposes has a negative effect Key dimensions relationship atmosphere.*

### **Internet use for transaction purposes**

The Internet provides an opportunity to order products and services directly. Its use for transaction purposes, however, can be regarded as cooperation in itself. Advantages in the form of lower transaction costs can be realized if both supplier and buyer are connected to the same electronic marketplace. In our model, we suppose that Internet use for transactions has a mediating role.

The resulting integration of information systems is also a prerequisite for many cooperative arrangements in the supply chain. Additionally, the automation of order processes leaves time in the purchasing department to initiate more strategic cooperation.

*H5- Using Internet for transaction has a role of mediating between Internet use for communication and information and loyalty*

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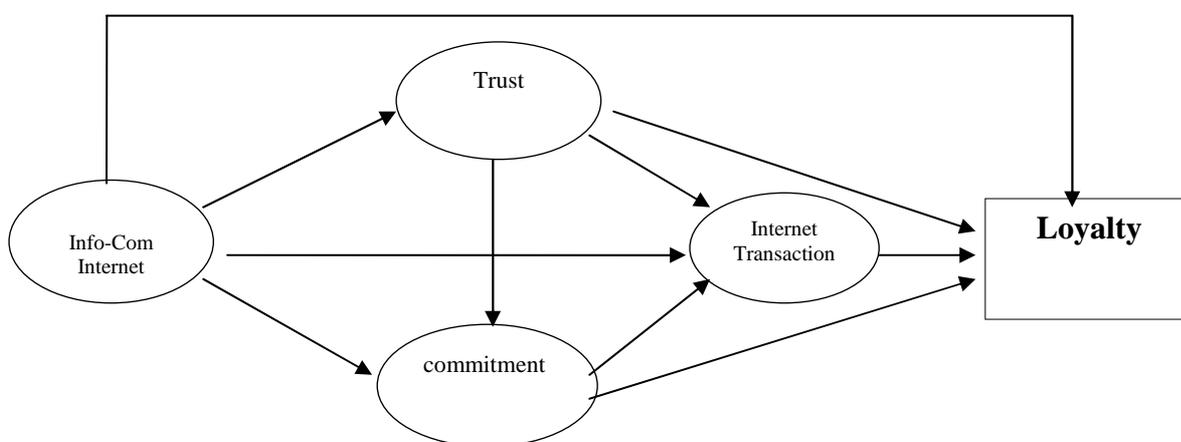
<sup>2</sup> French firms use Internet for (1) communication, (2) information (3) for transaction (INSEE première n° 1126- March 2007).

*H6- Using Internet for transaction purposes has a positive effect on loyalty*

## 2- THE DESIGN OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

This paragraph attempts to provide a preliminary conceptual framework of the business relationship digitization process. Based on extensive literature review and interviews with purchasing professionals on the affects of the Internet on structures and processes of business relationships. The following Figure 1 was produced to depict the preliminary conceptual framework.

**Figure 1 – Conceptual model**



## 3- VALIDITY ASSESSEMENTS

We looked at a specific industrial buyer-supplier relationship as level of analysis of this study. In this research, questions we chose to seek data from the buyer’s vantage point.

A retrospective mail survey was employed for data collection. Survey and measurement issues reviewed below

### Data collection

The sample is taken principally from the buyer’s guide listing of companies in France<sup>3</sup> and yahoo-group “purchasing”<sup>4</sup>. At each selected company, a key informant was contacted via telephone to

<sup>3</sup> « Le guide 2008 des Décideurs Achats des Grandes Entreprises », Point d’entrée, 6<sup>ème</sup> édition, ISBN : 978-2-9519844-5-6.

<sup>4</sup> [http://fr.groups.yahoo.com/group/emploi\\_achat/](http://fr.groups.yahoo.com/group/emploi_achat/)

solicit participation. Using data collected via a self-administered questionnaire sent from the Internet-site “<http://etudeacheteurs.noosblog.fr/>”.

A total of 870 survey questionnaires were mailed to a sample of industrial buyers. In order to increase the response rate, they were sent a reminder two weeks later, asking them to complete the survey if they had not done so already. Of the 204 questionnaires returned, 176 were useable.

### Measures

Measures were developed on a review of literature as well as on a set of 18 interviews with industrial buyers. Existing multi-item reflective measures for the variables of interest were sourced from a combination and synthesis of past studies and adapted to the industrial context. A seven point Likert response format was used where 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree for all multi-item scales. An important goal of the pre-test study was constructs of interest; hence a maximal rather than optimal number of items were initially sourced with the intention to purify.

Hence buyer trust was measured in terms of two dimensions, credibility and benevolence.

Commitment was measured in term of three dimensions, affective, calculate and temporal. Loyalty to the supplier was made up of attitudinal, behavioral and cooperative dimension.

To measure Internet use in buying center, we had to develop new measures.

**Tableau 1- Construct measuement**

Variables	Dimensions	No. of items	Source of items
<b>Trust</b>	Credibility	3	Ganesan 1994, Kumar et al 1995, Doney et Cannon 1997
	benevolence	3	
<b>Commitment</b>	Affective	2	Kumar et al 1994, Kumar et al 1995, Gundlach et al 1995. Kim et Frazier 1997
	Calculate	2	
	temporal	4	
<b>Loyalty</b>	Behavior	1	Anderson et Narus (1990), Dwyer et al. (1987); Mohr et Spekman (1994); Morgan et Hunt (1994), Anderson et Weitz 1992, Zeithma et al 1996, Pritchard et al., 1999
	Attitudinal	2	
	cooperative	5	
<b>Internet use</b>	Informational	4	Interviews with industrial buyers
	Communication	3	
	Transaction	3	

The construct validity assessment procedures recommended by Churchill (1979) and updated by Gerbing et Anderson (1988) et Gerbing et Hamilton (1996).

The modern positivist paradigm for conducting scientific research rests on developing sound theoretical frameworks followed by rigorous testing of these theories. One often adopted technique is Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). SEM is a powerful statistical technique that combines measurement model or confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural model into a simultaneous statistical test.

A SEM using software and maximum likelihood estimation was next used to assess the adequacy of our measures and test our substantive hypotheses. All measures demonstrated acceptable levels of fit, convergent validity, discriminant validity and reliability. The factor loading and associated construct reliabilities are reported in table2

**Tableau 2- Construct evaluation**

Construct	Dimensions	Crombach alpha	ρ Jöreskog	ρ vc
Trust	Credibility	,912	0,836	0,732
	Benevolence			
Commitment	Affective	,786	0,78	0,66
	Calculative		0,71	0,63
	Temporal		0,82	0,71
Loyalty	Attitudinal	,782	0,765	0,603
	Cooperative		0,689	0,562
Internet use	Informational	,83	0,77	0,690
	Communication		0,872	0,749
Internet transactional use	Global mesure	,682		

**4- TESTS OF PROPOSITIONS AND RESULTS**

Typically, a hypothesized model is tested with a linear equation system through SEM. This method of study investigates the extent to which variations in one variable corresponded to variations in one or more variables based on correlation co-efficient. SEM is usually used because it permits the measurement of several variables and their inter-relationships simultaneously. It is more versatile than other multivariate techniques because it allows for simultaneous, multiple dependent relationships between variables. Structural Equation Modeling was applied to the sample data using a software package called Amos 7.0.

**Estimation of the structural model**

First, the proposed model was tested with the entire sample for model fit and parameter estimates. The output of Amos 7.0 produces multiple fit indices from various families. Ideally, every fit should be used in contemplating how well the models fits data set. Nevertheless, many of these indices are either sample size dependent, or influenced by the complexity of the model. For example, Hair et al. (1995) note that the use of chi-square is appropriate for sample sizes between 100 and 200, with the

significance test becoming less reliable with sample sizes outside this range. Moreover, GFI (Goodness of Fit Index) and AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of fit index) were found to favor complex models while AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) favors simple models (Anandarajan, 2001).

As a result, this study relied on three fit indices that are less susceptible to biases; relative chi-square (chi-square/ddl), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA).

**Tableau 3- Test of model fit**

Indices absolus						Indices incrémentaux		Indices de parcimonie
$\chi^2$	Ddl	P	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA (pclose)	TLI	CFI	$\chi^2$ /ddl
628,274	239	,000	0,852	0,798	,062 (,000)	,903	,918	2,629

**Results and discussion**

Our study found two levels of interaction effect on loyalty: a primary effect which confirms the positive impact of dyadic interaction (a) and a secondary effect of internet use on trust, commitment and loyalty.

- (a) The primary effect: Interaction between key dimension of relationship atmosphere (trust, commitment and loyalty)

The first group of hypothesis wanted to test the links between the key variables of the buyer supplier relationship. Previous research has already validated these links, however the majority of the studies do not make the distinction between the dimensions of these variables.

Trust has a negative effect on calculative commitment. In an industrial context trust is an important element in the buyer-supplier relationship. It is based on the interpersonal relations developed between the buyer and the supplier which would reduce the calculated commitment. If a buyer trusts his partner, he feels engaged in the relationship and he becomes less calculator. These results confirm those of Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer and Kumar., (1996); Wetzels; Ruyter and Van Birgelen (1998); Ruyter , Moorman and Lemmink (2001) and Carter (2007). However contrary to these researchers we were not able to validate the hypotheses concerning the positive effects of trust on the affective commitment.

The result shows that calculative commitment has an impact on loyalty in a very different way. The affective commitment increases attitudinal loyalty. If the buyer appreciates his supplier, this feeling discourages him from breaking the relationship in case of minor dissatisfaction.

Concerning the calculated commitment, we showed its positive impact on attitudinal loyalty. Indeed, as showed by Amine (1998), the emotional commitment of the consumer leads to longer-lasting and more stable loyalty than a calculated commitment. This calculated commitment leads to a susceptible opportunist loyalty disappearing as soon as the received profit becomes lower than the cost of change. In an industrial context, even if the buyer makes a commitment with his supplier mainly for financial reasons, he will remain loyal by tolerating some temporary dissatisfaction (Ruyter Moorman and Lemmink 2001).

As for the temporal commitment, it increases the cooperative as well as the attitudinal loyalty but in lesser measure. The buyer who makes his supplier participate more in his activities and decisions, would be more inclined to cooperate durably with him.

- (b) The second effect: the influence of Internet-use on key dimension of relationship atmosphere : trust, commitment and loyalty

#### Internet use for communication

Internet use to communicate with suppliers has a positive effect on the trust that customers have in a business relationship. This impact confirms our hypothesis which stipulates that communicating with the supplier through the Internet allows the buyer to have a clearer and more precise idea of his skills and his seriousness. Consequently, as the buyer is capable of foreseeing the future behavior of his supplier, he trusts him more.

Concerning the commitment, the link is significant only on its calculated dimension. The communication reduces the calculated commitment. If a buyer is engaged in the relationship for reasons of finance, energy or resource, a satisfactory communication with the supplier could reduce this feeling of constraint.

Contrary to our research hypotheses, the results show a negative direct impact between Internet use as means of communication and both dimensions of loyalty (attitudinal and cooperative).

#### Internet use for information

The results show a significant and positive effect of the use of the Internet for information on trust. This result contradicts our initial hypothesis.

The use of Internet for information reduces the commitment of the buyer to his supplier. Indeed, the buyer can feel less committed to his supplier from the moment he has a more precise idea on the market thanks to the information collected on the Internet.

The results also show the direct and significant impact of the use of the Internet for information on both dimensions of loyalty. This effect is negative, that is, the more the buyer uses Internet to inquire, the be less faithful to his supplier.

#### *The role of Internet use for transaction*

The results show that the trust and temporal commitment of the buyer to he supplier have a positive and direct impact on his choice to buy on the Internet. Indeed, as noted in the qualitative study, most of the current volume of Internet transactions are between two players who know and trust each other that is to say, the private market places or online catalogs. However, contrary to our assumptions, the results indicate that affective and calculative commitment have a negative impact on the Internet purchases.

#### **Limit**

Before drawing conclusions, we shall look at the limitations of its study.

The data comes from a diverse set of firms. Our attempt was to gain an overview of the situation and not to analyze industry-specific issues. However, the use of Internet may be quite different across industries. The second limit is the measure, we had to develop new measures for use of IT in relationship. The fit criteria indicate that we have put together a valid set of items, but further studies need to validate these measures in other settings. Finally, we were particularly interested in the buyer's point of view, and have gathered information about the buyer's firm and its view on the relationship. Obviously, the use of the Internet in a relationship is determined by both the supplier and the buyer. More data about the supplier's use of Internet should therefore be included in further studies.

#### **Conclusion**

This paper adds empirical and conceptual evidence of the impacts of Internet use on communication, information and transaction on key relationship atmosphere.

The results showed the positive effect of Internet use as a means of information and communication on the Trust. Also negative effect on the calculative commitment of the buyer to his supplier. This adverse effect also concerns the Internet purchase (transaction. We can say that Internet use in the relationship does not directly affect the loyalty of the buyer.

Abstract preview

This paper provided a preliminary framework that illustrated the role of Internet use on purchasing center. Moreover, based on the theoretical elaboration managers may gain new insights on how the development and exploitation of technology contribute in development of supplier and buyer relationships. In future studies, more research is needed in how different business relationships with their stage and context are to be changed by using Internet?

## Appendix A

**Tableau - Impact of the trust on the commitment**

Impacts		Path coefficient B	t student
Trust	→ affective commitment	0,010	n.s ( ,146)
Trust	→ calculative commitment	<b>-0,250**</b>	<b>-2,874</b>
Trust	→ temporel commitment	<b>0,146*</b>	<b>0,186</b>

\*\*\*  $p < 0,01$     \*\*  $p < 0,05$     \*  $p < 0,1$     n.s = non significative

**Tableau - Impact of the commitment on loyalty**

Impacts		Path coefficient B	T student
Affective commitment	→ cooperative loyalty	-,440	n.s(,134)
Affective commitment	→ attitudinal loyalty	<b>,887**</b>	<b>6,167</b>
Calculate commitment	→ cooperative loyalty	,153*	1,153
Calculate commitment	→ attitudinal loyalty	<b>,661***</b>	<b>3,693</b>
Temporel commitment	→ cooperative loyalty	<b>,567***</b>	<b>3,790</b>
Temporel commitment	→ attitudinal loyalty	<b>,161**</b>	<b>1,976</b>

## Appendix B

**Tableau – Impact of Internet-use on the relational constructs**

Impacts		Path coefficient B	t student
Communication with Internet	→ Trust	<b>,463***</b>	<b>3,550</b>
Communication with Internet	→ affective commitment	-,021	n.s(-,089)
Communication with Internet	→ calculate commitment	<b>-,419**</b>	<b>-3,169</b>
Communication with Internet	→ temporel commitment	-,184*	-1,797
Communication with Internet	→ attitudinal loyalty	<b>-,214*</b>	<b>-1,964</b>
Communication with Internet	→ cooperative loyalty	<b>-,363**</b>	<b>-2,609</b>

Information Internet	→ trust	<b>,284***</b>	<b>2,125</b>
Se renseigner par Internet	→ affective commitment	<b>-,863**</b>	<b>-3,655</b>
Se renseigner par Internet	→ temporel commitment	<b>-,241**</b>	<b>-1,991</b>
Se renseigner par Internet	→ calculate commitment	<b>-,427**</b>	<b>-2,858</b>
Se renseigner par Internet	→ attitudinal loyalty	<b>-,973***</b>	<b>-3,952</b>
Se renseigner par Internet	→ cooperative loyalty	<b>-,947**</b>	<b>-3,087</b>

Impacts		Path coefficient B	T student
Communication Internet	→ Internet transaction	<b>,926***</b>	<b>3,618</b>
Information Internet	→ Internet transaction	<b>,355***</b>	<b>3,438</b>
Trust	→ Internet transaction	<b>,367***</b>	<b>3,156</b>
Affective commitment	→ Internet transaction	<b>-,383***</b>	<b>-3,143</b>
Temporal commitment	→ Internet transaction	<b>,377*</b>	<b>-2,632</b>
Calculative commitment	→ Internet transaction	<b>-,520**</b>	<b>-3,004</b>
Internet transaction	→ attitudinal loyalty	<b>-,937***</b>	<b>-4,114</b>
Internet transaction	→ cooperative loyalty	<b>-,569*</b>	<b>-1,780</b>

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Abstract preview

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