

A business-to-business love story?

**Relational Attractiveness (RA) and its impact on the firms` ability
to build up and maintain new business relationships**

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ABSTRACT

Although much has been written about business-to-business relationship phases as well as about the ending of particular business relationships, the beginning of business relationships is a relatively under-researched area. Furthermore the partner selection process is a crucial issue for companies both in the short and long term.

Much of the existing business-to-business knowledge concerning attractiveness focuses on interpersonal relationships between sales people and a few articles on the patterns of supplier attractiveness. There is also a linkage to relationship management studies, and to psychological studies on the role of attractiveness in interpersonal relationships and studies on decision heuristics. The answer to the question 'What is attractive for companies when they decide about entering into a new business relationship or maintaining a previous one?' needs to be elaborated further.

The aim of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework on attractiveness to explore the potential dimensions of the construct. We intend to investigate the phenomenon on different levels of potential business-to-business partnerships.

Keywords: relational attractiveness, interaction process, business relationships

1. Rationale for this research and for the construct development

This paper aims to contribute to a conceptual understanding of inter-organisational attractiveness in a business-to-business context. We aim to identify important elements of attractiveness based on the existing literature in business-to-business marketing, psychology and sociology.

Although the importance of attractiveness has long been recognized (Christiansen and Maltz 2002, Wynstra et al. 2003, Koppelman 2000, Ellegaard et al. 2003, Mortensen et al. 2008), and some prior work has been conducted related to the attraction between companies, the issue remains relatively under-researched. The highlighted literature is important in facilitating initial construct development of `relational attractiveness`.

Without a certain level of attraction there is a considerably lower probability that a new business interaction will come into existence. Besides, attractiveness plays a role in not only building, but also maintaining long-term relationships (on the relationship between trust and attractiveness: Wilson and Eckel 2006). Also, presumably relational attractiveness has an impact on the intention to make relationship-specific investments (RSI).

Most of the phases of business relationship development are articulated in models (for example Wilson 1995, Ford 1980), yet the pre- and early-relationship phases are not explored in detail. This invites further research to strengthen our understanding of the dynamics of the beginning of business relationships.

It is important to note that when considering attractiveness we are primarily using the term applied to an inter-organisational level. Although the research on attraction derives from psychology (Levinger 1979, Anderson et al. 2008), similar to trust research, a number of inter-personal phenomena could be examined on an inter-organisational and network level too.

In practice, relational attractiveness (RA) might include several dimensions: reputation, brand, history of the company, membership in professional organizations, a beneficial offer, and relationship portfolio, former working experience with the company or some colleagues has worked before for that company and so on. These latter regards to the importance of interpersonal relationships in the beginning of business relationships, as among others, Dwyer et al. (1987) emphasize it.

It is not obligatory that all of these RA dimensions will be present in a certain interaction and the importance and role of the present RA dimensions could be different and might change with time. The attractiveness of a particular company might play a significant role in the inter-organisational partner selection process, as well as in decisions about allocating the limited resources of a company.

2. The potential positioning of RA in the literature

Despite their relative importance, the beginning of business relationships and related issues, like relational attractiveness (RA) are not fairly elaborated yet in the management literature. We would like to highlight the following fields of research related to relational attractiveness: considerations about development phases of business relationships, relationship management, business network studies and psychological as well as socio-psychological aspects of RA.

2.1. Development process of B2B relationships

There is a discourse about the particular phases of business relationships and their potential sequence in time – probably we cannot think about business relationships in terms of linear relationship development. However, evidently each business relationship has a starting point, which is a milestone between the pre-relationship and early relationship stages.

According to Ford (1980) there may be several different reasons why a company decides to evaluate a potential new supplier. (His starting point is the case of a company which has grown to rely on a main supplier for a particular product purchased on a regular basis.)

- a particular episode in an existing relationship
- a regular vendor analysis in which the performance and potential of the existing suppliers is assessed (e.g. changes in performance)
- efforts of non-suppliers (e.g. a special offer)
- general policy (e.g. 40% of product components are required to be purchased from overseas)
- other information sources (from the market)

In his model of the development of buyer-seller relationships, Ford (1980) defines five stages: the pre-relationship stage; early stage; development stage; long-term stage and final stage. The evaluation of the business relationship is conditioned by the experience with previous suppliers, the uncertainty about potential relationships and the social/geographical/cultural/technological or time distance between buyer and seller. Brennan et al. (2007) point out that the relationship stages neither have to follow each other in a sequential order, nor are they irreversible by necessity (a relationship might turn back to a former stage).

Ford's model (1980) points to the consideration that the role of relational attractiveness (RA) might change in its qualities and in its importance subject to the relationship stage. The description of the reasons of why to look for a new supplier might direct specific attention on the complex contextual nature of relational attractiveness.

Wilson (1995) identifies five main stages of relationship development: (1) partner selection, (2) defining purpose, (3) setting of relationship boundaries, (4) creating relationship value and (5) relationship maintenance. The observed variables according to the development stages are reputation, satisfaction with performance, trust, and social bonds, the comparison level of alternatives, mutual goals, power/dependence, technology, non-retrievable investments, adaptations, structural bonds, cooperation and commitment.

Interestingly, Anderson and Narus (1984) developed the initial idea of Thibaut and Kelley (1959) paying special attention to the comparison level and comparison level of alternatives. The authors define comparison level as a standard representation of the quality of outcomes expected from a given kind of relationship, based upon the present and past experience with similar relationships and knowledge of other partners' similar relationships. Also, the authors argue that the outcomes obtained from a relationship, compared against a certain standard, determine the attractiveness of the business relationship as well as the degree of satisfaction the participant experiences from the relationship.

The importance of attractiveness was raised up by Mortensen et al. (2008) when they emphasized that when suppliers and buyers work closely together, for example on innovation projects or joint product developments, interaction, mutual understanding and a high level of attractiveness play a significant role. Cox (1999) defined attraction as an approach to manage business relationships in a relational mode, which is established by the creation of voluntary motivation and commitment between the partners. According to the author this is different from the traditional view on relationship management which is focused on power-control mechanisms.

Schiele et al. (2010) state “Customer attractiveness for a supplier describes a situation in which the supplier is (a) aware of the existence of the customer and knows his relevant attributes and (b) has a positive expectation towards this organisation”. They raise the question that if we assume that the buyer`s attractiveness is given, how could we understand and achieve supplier satisfaction.

Ellegaard et al. (2003) define attractiveness as the ability of the industrial customer to be and stay attractive to its suppliers. Their research has shown that when attractiveness fell drastically, it reduced the firm`s ability to influence the decision making process of the supplier.

Ellegaard and Ritter (2006) describe the nature of attractiveness as a capability to mobilize supplier resources, which supports value creation. According to the authors the concepts of attraction is linked to trust and commitment, since attraction is essential and required in advance to build trust and commitment.

For the current research on relational attractiveness, the pre- and early relationship phases, as well as the comparison levels of potential alternatives are especially interesting. As a matter of course the boundaries of early phase of a relationship could vary as well as might possess with sector-specific features. In this study we define the upper boundary of the early stage of a business relationship when a significant relationship-specific investment is made, for example when the partners sign a long-term contract of their collaboration.

2.2.Relationship marketing and management

The main purpose of relationship marketing is to find, attract and win new clients and maintain/develop already existing relationships. Attraction has a significant potential in explaining the dynamic nature of marketing relationships and although it is fundamentally important in interpersonal relationship development (Harris et al. 2003), has not been elaborated yet on an inter-organisational level.

Customer profitability analysis (for example, Murphy, 2006) and relationship portfolio analysis could be a next step forward understanding the features of attractiveness. This type of analysis supports to decide about whether a company should attract new customers and if so, attract profitable new customers in the industry sectors that the company has identified in its strategic plan.

A further analytical business tool, relationship portfolio analysis examines business relationships from a seller's perspective (Turnbull et al 1996, Zolkiewski and Turnbull 2002). Ford et al (2011) suggest six categories of buyers for conducting relationship portfolio analysis: today's profits, cash cows, yesterday's profits, old men, new technical or commercial requirements.

Zolkiewski and Turnbull (2002) emphasize the importance of the buyer's profitability during the construction of the relationship portfolio. However the authors notice the complexity of defining profitability and they influence of such subjective factors like the buyer's strategic importance or its attractiveness. They argue that 'business attractiveness' (from a supplier's perspective) could be determined by considering a number of factors that are related to the customer's market (for example, growth rate, competition, maturity, changes in the environment) and the status/position of the customer's business within the market.

The Olsen and Ellram (1997) portfolio approach is a tool which helps companies to improve the allocation of scarce resources. Interestingly, one of the aspects the authors suggest to apply in the analysis of supplier relationships is the so called "relative supplier attractiveness". This phenomenon describes the factors which make a company choose a specific supplier. They define five group of factors influencing the relative supplier attractiveness: (a) financial and economic factors; (b) performance factors; (c) technological factors; (d) organizational, cultural and strategic factors and (e) other factors. However the authors speak about the characteristics of attractiveness of the partner, which does not include the attractiveness of the particular partnership and the contextual (network) factor – we intend to re-think and extend their framework in this respect.

2.3. Network perspectives of RA

Since "no business is an island" (Hakansson and Snehota 1995) business relationships cannot be examined in an isolated space, only as embedded constituents of the business network (Hakansson and Snehota 1995). One example of this is the network management model (Ford et al 2002, Hakansson et al. 2009).

According to Axelsson and Easton (1992) business relationships are represented by such elements as: mutual orientation; dependence on each other; investments in the relationship and bonds of different kinds and strengths. In this context a bond implies a measure of tying, though unspecified, between partner firms. Johanson and Mattson (1987) distinguish technical planning, knowledge, social, economic and legal bonds.

The examination of the existing and emerging bonds are important when studying relational attractiveness, since they indicate a certain level of commitment, thus a kind of maturity of the relationship. However the types and strengths of bonds might vary even in the beginning of the relationship and possess with sector-, or company-specific and socio-political features. Building new business relationships probably has an impact on the company's other relationships. Hakansson (1992) emphasises that the total resources of the company are limited, which means that the development of relationships requires the reduction of involvement (disinvestment) in other relationships.

If we consider RA as an impulsive force to enter into a new business relationship, we have to be aware of its network perspective, that the intention to invest in a particular relationship on

the one hand, might cause the weakening of the intention to invest in other (actual and also potential) relationships on the other hand. Axelsson and Johanson (1992) argues that the network position of the company strongly influences the basis for its development of exchange relationships in the future.

Van der Bulte and Wuyts (2007) refer to the relationship between closure and reputation in the analysis of the structure of inter-organisational networks. The authors argue that “*buyers can communicate the supplier’s opportunistic exploitation to other potential buyers, and thus, damage the supplier’s reputation as a trustworthy exchange partner and eventually even cause the supplier to lose future contracts. This reputation mechanism is most effective when information is easily communicated throughout the network, i.e. when network density and network centrality are high.*” (pp. 68)

Also Buskens (1998) argued that buyers who communicate more with others, or have a higher out-degree, can spread information more easily and, therefore, will have a larger reputation effect.

Since reputation is an important variable of relational attractiveness, the reputation effect is expected to have an impact on attractiveness in a network context. However the role of attractiveness in a network context needs further clarification and research investigation. Focusing on a focal company for its attractiveness towards other companies in its network we use the term network related attractiveness (NA), which is considered a part of the company’s attractiveness.

2.4. Psychological aspects of RA

Similar to trust and other constructs in social sciences, attractiveness could be examined on different levels and also according to various approaches (Chen et al, 1997). Firstly, the inter-personal level of attraction is the micro-level – this type of research is focusing on the nature of attraction among friends, family members, couples, strangers (psychological and psycho-sociological literature) (Eagly et al, 1991; Saffer et al, 2000) as well as among professionals in a business context (managerial and psychological literature) (Johnson et al, 2010). Secondly, the inter-organisational level of attraction is the mezzo level, where groups of people are interacting (Clifford and Walster, 1973; Jackson et al, 1995; Patzer, 2006) – this research aims to provide a potential theoretical framework for this level of examination. Thirdly, attraction could be examined on a social level (macro level), where the drivers and effects of attraction are examined in the society (Wheeler and Kim, 1997).

No matter which level of the three above is studied, the smallest among the potential units of analysis is the individual itself. The patterns of perception of the individual, including attraction in this regard, might be represented in a managerial context, both in case of an intra-organisational and in an inter-organisational context (Watkins and Johnston, 2000). Therefore to gain a better understanding on the nature of inter-organisational attraction, we have to start with the analysis of individual perception on attraction and investigate how these individual patterns are convertible into an inter-organisational context.

Harris et al. (2003) demonstrates that inter-personal relationships are not likely to be initiated unless at least one party finds the other attractive. In this section we intend to provide an

overview about those psychological aspects of relational attractiveness, which possess relevance at an inter-organizational level. These are as follows: cost and rewards; the impacts of physical attractiveness; similarities (including inter-organisational similarities); the effects of exposure and some psychological characteristics of the information flow.

Cost and rewards

In his highly cited work, Levinger (1979) introduced a conceptual model of the influencing factors on relational stability and dissolution. There are several factors protecting to maintain a relationship: various barriers (like for example religious views), dissatisfaction with potential alternatives and also relational attractiveness, which is in Levinger’s interpretation, the difference between perceived costs and rewards. In this inter-personal case the ‘rewards’ could be, for example; family income, social similarity, sex and companionship. ‘Costs’ incorporate the time and energy invested in the union. Attractiveness tends to be positive when rewards are higher than the costs. (In some respects, like for example the chance for alternative choices, Levinger’s theory is similar to the social exchange theory.)

Physical attractiveness and its inter-organisational analogies

Eagly et al. (1991) provided a meta-analytic review of articles on the physical attractiveness stereotype. They argue that the strength of the often-used summary phrase “what is beautiful is good” is context dependent and varying. However the authors declare, by reviewing the differences of individual impressions between attractive and unattractive people, that attractiveness implies a set of personality-like traits and people judged to be physically attractive, also attributed with a set of positive personal attributes.

Models with attractive physical appearance produced higher advertisement ratings compared to comparatively unattractive models (Baker and Churchill 1977). Jackson at al. (1995) report that attractive people were perceived as being more competent than less attractive people.

We suppose that the features of physical attractiveness (height, weight, gender, age) might be most comparable with basic and descriptive statistical features (size, production rate, growth ratio) of a particular company. Obviously these are important constituents of the first impression on an inter-personal and on an inter-organisational level as well.

The table below shows a potential equivalence between some inter-personal and inter-organisational features. The first part of the list is related to inter-personal features perceived during the first impression, followed by features revealing with time in a relationship.

Personal features	Organisational features
Age / year of birth	Year of establishment
Height, weight	Size (e.g. no. of employees, departments)
Material circumstances (judged by clothing, accessory, car)	Financial stability
Profession and social group memberships	Market(s) where the focal company exists
Inter-personal networks (friends, colleagues)	Inter-organisational network
Duration of labour relation at a particular workplace	Duration of presence on a particular market
Degrees, awards	Performance statistics
Reputation of the person	Reputation of the company

Table 1 Potential equivalence between personal and organisational features

Similarities

Based on their study conducted on a sample of 160 friends (80 pairs) Batool and Malik (2010) report that friends with more similar attitudes showed higher interpersonal attraction as compared to friends with less similar attitudes. Axelsson and Easton (1992) states that familiarity breeds affection. In their work on inter-organisational attraction Homburg et al. (2003) argue that attraction and relationship effectiveness is positively affected by similarity in business orientation.

Exposure

Zajonc (1968) pointed out that "mere familiarity" with a person or object of apparently any kind increases its level of attractiveness. Even when the initial attractiveness of a stimulus is negative, preference for the stimulus increases with exposure. This means that the level of attractiveness of a particular company might increase with the number of interactions or even with increased perception in the media.

Information flow

Impressions could be different when adjectives describing a person or object are introduced in a different sequence. The order of the words presented plays a significant role, even when the same adjectives are used. Asch's (1946) experiments have shown that when a more positive meaning comes earlier, people tend to rate the described person more positively and vice versa. Consequently, the description "intelligent – lazy - benevolent" might create a different personality impression than "intelligent – benevolent - lazy". The attractiveness of a person or company might be influenced by the sequence of information about its particular features.

2.5. Sociological aspects of RA

One important theory among the potential sociological theories relevant to relational attractiveness is the Social Identity Theory. Tajfel's early work on the theory of stereotype systems (Tajfel, 1982) was extended to the framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), which had various applications in sociology and management (for example consumer-company identification, social action in virtual communities, corporate social responsibility).

The theory argues that a particular group membership leads to a state of social identity and behaviour. The authors suggest three types of mental processes involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them", like for example the categories of "in-group" and "out-group":

Firstly, the process of categorization, with the aim of understanding objects (people, groups, and institutions) as well as to identify them. Various social categories like `black`, `white`, `Christian`, `Muslim`, or `student` could be outputs of the this mental process.

Secondly, social identification, which results in the conformation to the norms of the group the person has categorised themselves as belonging to. If, for example, a person has categorised themselves as a salesperson of a particular company, the chances are high that he/she will adopt the identity of this position and begin to act in the ways he/she believes these people act.

Thirdly, the process of social comparison: people tend to compare the group with which they identified themselves with other groups. Also, to compare favourably the own group's with the other groups ('outsiders') strengthens self-esteem.

Homburg et al. (2003) highlights the importance of the Social Identity Theory by putting it in an inter-organizational context. Since this theory suggests higher attraction between objects with similar features, the authors presume the higher the similarity between manufacturer and distributor, the more likely will be the formation of cross-company social groups.

3. The construct of relational attractiveness (RA)

Although the idea of relational attractiveness might not be completely new, it is relatively uncommon in a business-to-business context. Relational attractiveness (RA) brings together three dimensions: the attractiveness of the partner (PA), the attractiveness of the relationship (RsA) and a contextual factor: network-related attractiveness (NA):

$$RA = PA + RsA + NA.$$

According to the literature (explained later on in the paper) we came up with the construct as follows: Relational attractiveness (RA) is a context-dependent perception, based on an overall impression and (implicit) judgement about (1a) the desirability of a (potential or actual) organizational business partner as well as about (1b) the desirability of the (potential or actual) business relationship with them. Relational attractiveness (2) implies a presumption that the (potential or actual) partner possesses (or lacks) certain features and (3) an estimation about the future utility of a certain (potential or actual) partnership with a certain (potential or actual) partner.

The term "relational" attractiveness doesn't refer to an indication of the business relation (according to Ellegaard and Ritter (2007) attractiveness is by definition relational) – it regards to the not absolute nature of attractiveness and emphasizes that it is estimated by comparison.

There might be cases when they are not distinguishable, but we have interpreted the partner's attractiveness and the relationship's attractiveness as constituents of relational attractiveness based on some practical concerns. A potential partner could remain very attractive (for example, as a reference), although the offered conditions of the potential business relationship are detrimental and not attractive – in this case the relational attractiveness of the potential partner might be still positive. One could argue that in this case the relationship is still attractive in the long run, however, when deciding whether to enter into this relationship, partner-specific attractiveness plays a more significant role than relationship-specific attractiveness (the attractiveness of the particular relationship between the two companies).

4. Research design and methodology

Firstly, we are planning to conduct expert interviews. There are three types of expert interviews (Bogner et al. 2002): explorative (which provides technical knowledge), systematising (which provides process knowledge) and explanatory expert interviews (to gain exploratory knowledge for theory building). For the RA research both explanatory and explorative expert interviews could be interesting. However in the preliminary stage of empirical research, explorative expert interview method seems to be the most appropriate.

We are primarily interested in senior managers who are involved in the partner selection and resource allocation process. Also, the type and size of the company should be considered insofar as it has an impact on how many people are involved in the decision making process. A manager who is involved in a less extended decision process about the potential partners (the decision making unit is smaller) might provide a more reliable picture of the process itself because of a presumably higher level of transparency.

A critical point of expert interviews is to find the "right" interviewees (both professional and psychological aspects matter). Other characteristics of expert interviews include frequent time restrictions and the requirement of professional knowledge for the interviewer as well. The selection process of interviewees could be "purposive sampling" (Miles and Huberman 1984) by selecting as far as possible talkative respondents. Because of probable limits (time and accessibility) a well-focused interview guideline will be needed. We will endeavour to reach experts with a decision making role in supply and distributor centres of companies. We are planning to conduct at least 30 expert interviews, each would last between ca. 60-90 minutes.

Secondly, a survey research with a sample of 270 senior managers is also planned. However prior to this we need to gain a better understanding of the decision making process related to new business relationships and how inter-organisational attractiveness works in this context. Based on the literature we built up a preliminary model, which needs to change according to the results of the interviews, as well as according to further literature.

Based on some major differences between the aspects of suppliers and buyers, we will have to decide which side to examine. For this purpose, we have organised two focus groups among MBS students who have experience either on the buyers' or on the suppliers' side.

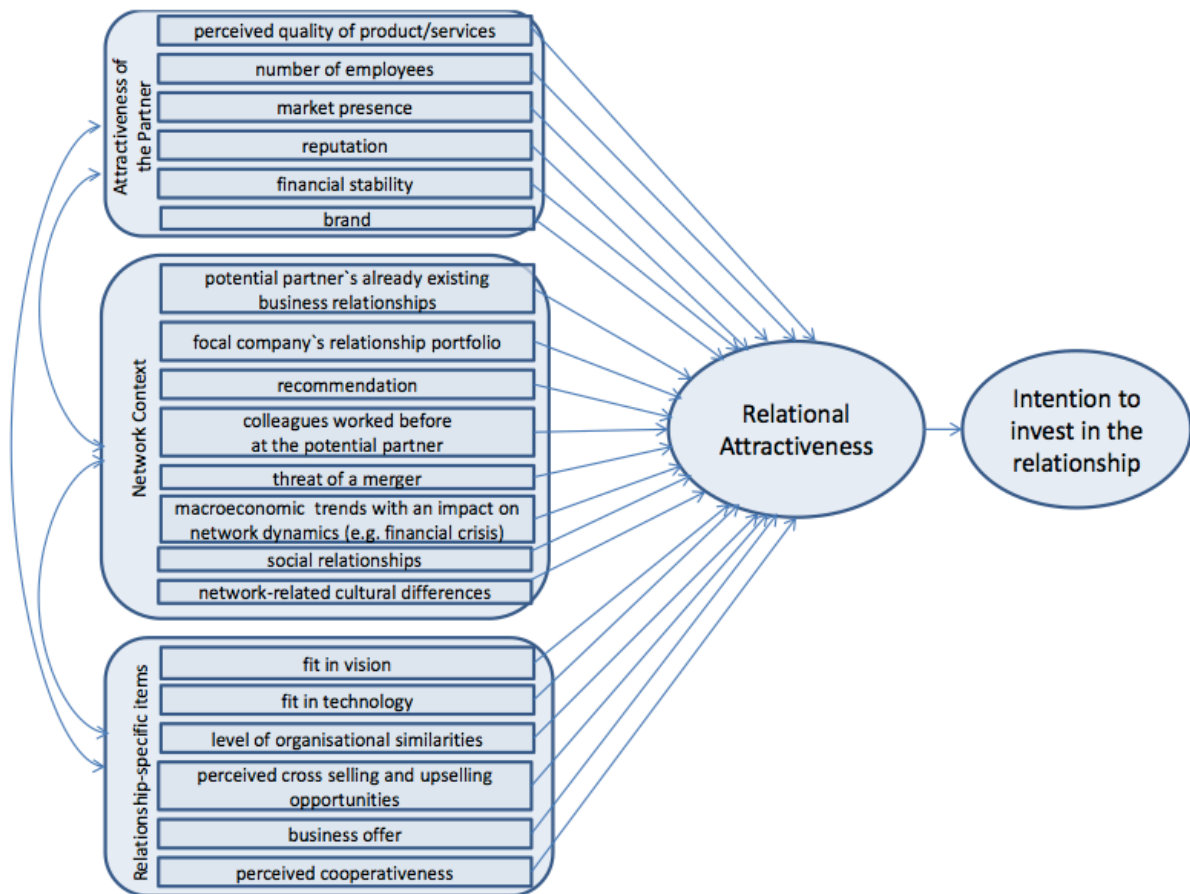


Figure 1 Preliminary model of Relational Attractiveness

This presumed path diagram shows specified hypothesized structural relationships between relational attractiveness (RA) and its` already-identified potential variables. These presumed variables could be grouped in the categories as follows: attractiveness of the partner; network context; relationship-specific items

5. Conclusions

Attractiveness plays an important role in the partner selection decision process in inter personal as well as inter-organisational levels, where it might have an impact on the allocation of the companies` limited resources. Relational attractiveness describes attractiveness in an inter-organisational context (attractiveness of the organisational partner, attractiveness of the particular business relationship and the network context). We highlighted a potential position of this construct in the existing literature and draw attention to its business-to-business marketing, psychological and sociological aspects. We also suggested a preliminary model of Relational Attractiveness for further research and testing.

6. Proposed Contribution

This research attempts to explore the nature of attractiveness in a business-to-business context. Attractiveness plays a more significant role in the beginning of business relationships. The beginning of business relationships is a relatively under-researched area.

With this research we would like to contribute to the IMP literature on business-to-business relationships, with a focus on the beginning of the relationships, more specifically on the pre-relationship phase. Also the early stages of existing relationship-phase models (like for example Ford 2002, Wilson 1995) are mainly unelaborated, inviting further development.

With the model development our aim is to develop a higher order construct on attractiveness that synergises and builds upon particular existing constructs and concepts, applying them to a B2B context. For this purpose we have to achieve a synthesis between B2B marketing, sociology and psychology in terms of attractiveness.

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