A Conceptual Framework for Eliciting Dealer's Selling-Efforts Through Dealer-Supplier Identification

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Abstract

Informal ties between a supplier and its dealers can induce the dealers to allocate additional resources and selling-efforts towards the supplier's products, beyond those contractually specified (Murry & Heide, 1998). We develop a conceptual framework for one such tie between a supplier and its independent dealers, i.e. dealers' identification with the supplier (a psychological bond that satisfies dealers' self-definitional needs). Drawing from social identity theory, we develop propositions related to three key antecedents of dealer-supplier identification, i.e. (1) supplier's characteristics, (2) supplier's construed external image, and (3) boundary personnel characteristics. Further we propose the consequences of dealer's identification on their selling-efforts and the relationship quality dimensions between the dealer and the supplier.

Keywords: dealer-supplier identification, independent dealers, dealer's selling efforts.

1. Introduction

Several firms or suppliers[1] distribute their offerings through a network of independent distributors, such as, agents, brokers, resellers, independent retailers, dealers, etc. The independent distributers often sell products from multiple competing suppliers (Gale, 2005). In such a context, a critical factor that influences a supplier's sales is the share of dealer's resources and selling-efforts[2] that are dedicated towards selling its products (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). Therefore, a major challenge for the suppliers that distribute through independent dealers is to garner a favourable allocation of dealers' resources for selling its products relative to the competitors.

Grounded in agency theory, distribution literature suggests two broad strategies to influence a dealer's behaviour, i.e. (1) ex ante formal contracts, and (2) ex post monitoring and contractual enforcement (Kashyap, Antia & Frazier, 2012), such as, administering reward and punishment (Scheer & Stern, 1992), and output and behaviour based coordination efforts (Celly & Frazier, 1996). However, due to the absence of any formal authority over the independent dealers, suppliers may find it difficult to influence dealers' behaviour and channel activities, via these formal strategies (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). The strength of informal ties that a supplier develops with its dealer often plays a key role in influencing their actions and behaviour (Ouchi, 1979).

The strength of informal ties between supplier and the dealers are known to result into higher selling-efforts by the dealers (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). Suppliers can initiate several channel activities to develop favourable relationships with dealers (Anderson, Lodish, & Weitz, 1987) and influence their selling efforts through extra-contractual incentives (Klein & Leffler, 1981). For example, a supplier can offer higher margins to some dealers (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010), offer better sales training, attractive resellers programs, effective communications (Weitz & Jap, 1995), and regular feedback (Anderson et al., 1987) to enrich their relationship with dealers beyond the formal contract. Additionally, suppliers' direct involvement in the day-to-day activities of the dealers can also have favourable influence on their resources allocation towards its products (Anderson et al., 1987).

In this research, we draw upon social identity theory to develop a conceptual framework for eliciting independent dealers' favourable selling-efforts towards a supplier's products relative to the competitors. We study the role of dealer's identification with the supplier and its influence on their selling efforts and resource allocation. We have identified the key determinants of

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1   Supplier refers to an organization that sells its products through independent dealers to retailers or consumers.

2   Literature defines 'effort' as the force, energy, or activity by which a work is accomplished (Brown & Peterson, 1994). We conceptualize 'dealer's selling efforts' as the force, energy, or activity devoted toward selling a supplier's products.

dealer-supplier identification and its consequences on the selling efforts of the dealers.

Supplier identification is defined as the extent to which independent dealers perceive themselves and the focal supplier as sharing the same defining attributes (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Identification has been viewed as a sense-of-association that dealers perceive with the supplier (Dutton et al., 1994), which act as a primary psychological bond and ties their activities together (Scott &Lane, 2000). Identification can serve as a powerful motivating influence because it aligns the dealer's self-goals with the supplier's goals and make the achievement of the supplier's goals intrinsically satisfying for the dealer (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010).

Although the application of identification in inter-firm relationships such as, distribution channels is limited, the construct of identification finds wide application in organizational behaviour research (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005). For example, firm-employee identification is positively related to employees', trust (Hameed, Arain, Roques, & Peretti, 2011), commitment (Meyer, Becker, & Van Dick, 2006), satisfaction (Riketta, 2005), loyalty (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and job performance (Ahearne et al., 2005). Satisfying the employee's need for social identity and self-definition (Dutton et al., 1994), firm identification is recognized as one of the important drivers for building employee relationships and enhancing their efforts on the job (Pratt, 1998).

Extending the concept of identification to consumer markets, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) developed a conceptual framework for customer-company (C-C) identification. They argued that customers have self-definitional needs that can be addressed by the companies they patronize and thus customers may develop strong identification with the company (Pratt, 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000). Additionally, the construct of identification is also found to be important for developing relationships in business markets (Schuh, Egold, & Van Dick, 2012). For example, sales person identification with organization is found to be positively associated with sales person's customers' orientation (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009), customer identification with sales person (Aherane et al, 2005;

Homburg et al., 2009), customers' in-role[3] and extra-role[4] behaviour (Aherane et al., 2005; Schuh et al., 2012), customers' spending (Netemeyer, Heilman, & Maxham, 2012), overall firm performance (Homburg et al., 2009), and the operational performance of the supplier (Corsten, Gruen, & Peyinghaus, 2011).

These findings collectively indicate the critical role that identification can play in building strong inter-firm relationships, such as, distribution channel relationships. Despite this potentially useful route to building stronger dealer relationships (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), the research on the role of identification in dealer supplier relationship building is missing. Contributing to the stream of research on dealer relationships, we extend the supplier identification in the dealer context and develop a conceptual framework to study its impact on securing dealer's favourable selling-efforts. Building on prior research, we argue that dealer-supplier identification will play a crucial role in building distribution channel relationships.

In the next section, we conceptualize the dealer-supplier identification. Subsequently, we develop the conceptual framework that identifies the key antecedents of dealer-supplier identification, and its consequences on the dealer's selling-efforts. Next, we present the propositions regarding the antecedents and consequences of the identification on dealer-supplier relationship. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the potential expansion and application of the framework and the directions for future research.

2.   Dealer-Supplier Identification

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), suggested that while articulating the self-identity, individuals usually go beyond their personal identity to develop a broader social-identity by identifying themselves as a member of various social groups (e.g., ethnicity, occupation, sports teams supporter, etc.).To perceive themselves as a member of a social group, individuals

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3   In role refers to expected behaviour from the customer to finish the task, e.g. Product Purchase.

4   Extra role refers to the behavior that is not the part of the consumer's task, but benefit the organization without any self-interest, e.g. Positive Word of Mouth.

do not necessarily need to interact with the group or have strong interpersonal tie with it (Brewer, 1991). Evidence suggest that individuals can develop strong identification with a social group even if they have no direct contact with the group or with any member of the group (Turner, 1982). For example, individuals are found to derive identification with abstract social categories or symbolic groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Building on preceding discussion, we posit that the independent dealers can develop strong identification with the supplier if they find it to be attractive and capable of enriching their social identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Sindhav & Lusch, 2008). This is consistent with research in supplier-manufacturer identification (Pratt, 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000), which suggests that stakeholders associate themselves with manufacturer for identification purposes even when they are not formal members of the organization.

Prior research on identification is centred on the employee-employer relationships (Dutton et al., 1994), and the relationships of non-profit organizations with its members (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). However, drawing from this stream of research, we define dealer-supplier identification as

an active, selective, and volunteer act motivated by the satisfaction of one or more self-definitional needs of the dealer (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Pratt, 1998). In other words, dealer identification is 'the perception of oneness with or belongingness to supplier' (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Additionally, we argue that the strength of dealer-supplier relationships would be positively related to the level of dealer-supplier identification. Higher identification will induce the dealers to engage in favourable supplier-related behaviours (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010).

3. Conceptual Framework for Dealer-Supplier Identification

In this research, we discuss the influence of three critical antecedents for dealer-supplier identification, i.e. (1) the perceived characteristics of supplier, (2) construed external image of the supplier, and (3) the dealer's perception of supplier's boundary personnel. The consequences of dealer-supplier identification have been discussed in terms of its impact on dealer's selling efforts toward the supplier's products relative to the competitors' products.
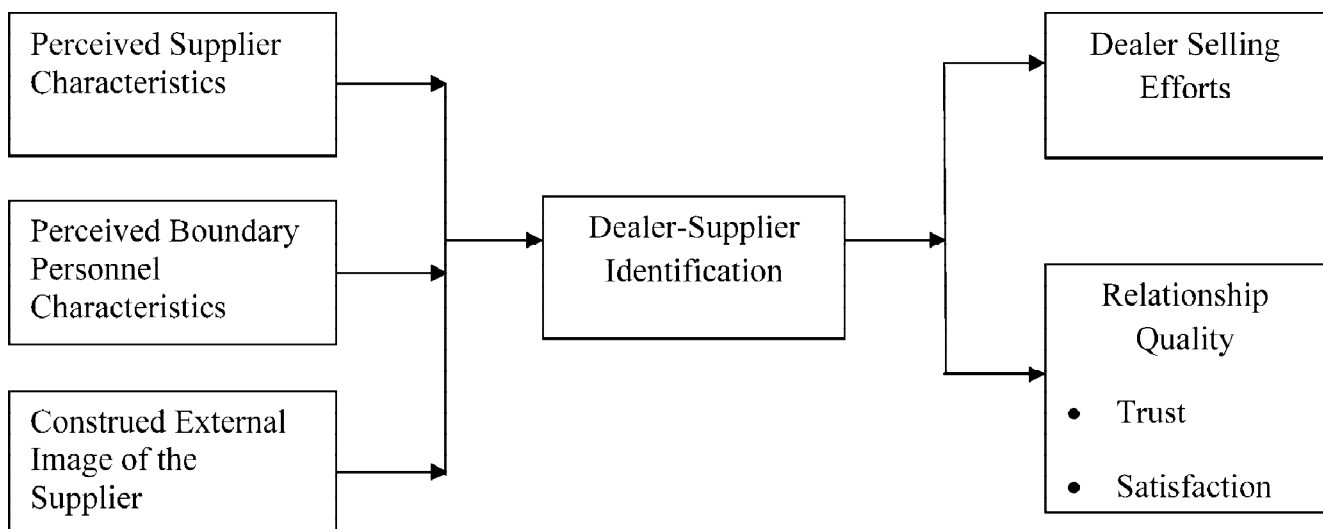

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for dealer-supplier identification

4.   Antecedents of Dealer-Supplier Identification

As an active, selective, and volunteer act to define self, dealer-supplier identification would hugely depend on the dealer's perception of supplier characteristics (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Specifically, three distinct dimensions of supplier's characteristics, i.e. (1) dealer's perception about the supplier's core characteristics, (2) construal external image of the supplier, and (3) characteristics of the boundary personnel, will influence the dealer's psychological bond with supplier and impact the degree of dealer-supplier identification.

Dealers' perception about supplier image, reputation, and culture based on personal experience or through other indirect modes would influence their identification with the supplier (Dutton et al., 1994). If a dealer finds the supplier to be attractive on these core characteristics, the dealer-supplier identification is likely to be stronger. Besides its own perception of supplier characteristics, dealers' identification with a supplier is also influenced by what other stakeholders, such as, customers, other dealers of the same supplier or different supplier or related social entities think about the supplier (Aherane et al., 2005; Dutton et al., 1994). The identification is likely to be high, if other stakeholders hold favourable construal image (i.e. dealer's perception of what other stakeholders think about the supplier) of the supplier. Lastly, the role of supplier's boundary personnel in developing identification is also crucial (Ahearne et al., 2005). Boundary personnel, who have frequent interactions with dealers, represent the supplier and reveal critical information about the supplier's policies, character, and values (Ahearne et al., 2005). Dealers' favourable perception about the boundary personnel is subconsciously attributed to the supplier itself, which enhances the degree of dealer identification (Aherane et.al, 2005, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Dealer-Supplier identification is also found to flourish when the dealer perceives high level of overlap between its own characteristics and that of the supplier (Dutton et al., 1994). These shared attributes help the dealer to promote its self-definition and enhance its self-identity through external validation. In addition to the three factors discussed above, two supplier characteristics

may also promote dealer-supplier identification. First, when the dealer perceives the supplier as highly distinctive. As social comparisons are important means to evaluate self- identities, individuals emphasize their distinctiveness in social comparison by identifying themselves with distinctive organization (Bartel, 2001). Second, frequent interaction between the dealer and the supplier, which will give the dealer a feeling of oneness or belongingness with the supplier (Granovetter, 1985).Therefore, dealer supplier identification is likely to advance if there are frequent interactions between the dealer and the boundary personnel of the supplier.

4.1 Perceived Supplier Characteristics

Dealers' perception about the attractiveness of the supplier characteristics is one of the key determinants for developing dealer-supplier identification. The distinctive, enduring, and core characteristics of supplier (Albert & Whetten, 1985) are found to be critical for dealer identification. Three basic characteristics of self-definition i.e. (1) need for self-continuity, (2) need for self-distinctiveness, and (3) need for self-enhancement contributes towards the perceived attractiveness of a supplier which strengthens dealer-supplier identification (Dutton et al., 1994).

The need for self continuity suggests that individuals tend to maintain their self-continuity across contexts and over time periods (Steele, 1988). When individuals find that organization characteristics are similar to their self-concept, they find it attractive and are likely to use this similarity for self-expression (Shamir, 1991). Social identity theory asserted that individuals seek to distinguish themselves from others in the social context (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). As a result, people find an organization attractive for identification when it provides a sense of distinctiveness on the attributes they value. Thus, when dealers find a supplier's characteristics (e.g. culture, strategy) as distinctive and valuable they would be attracted towards the supplier and are likely to develop stronger identification with these suppliers. When people associate with attractive organization identities, they enhance their self-esteem and acquire a more positive evaluation of themselves (Dutton et al., 1994), and these favourable perceptions of organizational

characteristics are likely to lead them towards stronger identification with the organization. Based on preceding discussion, we propose that,

Proposition 1: The more favourable a dealer's perception of the supplier's characteristics, the higher will be the dealer-supplier identification.

4.2 Perceived Boundary Personnel Characteristics

One of the tenets of identification literature is that the stakeholder identification with an organization is based on its perception of the core organizational characteristics (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, Dutton et al., 1994). However, in dealer-supplier identification, dealers interact only with supplier's boundary personnel (such as, sales person, customer service employee, channel managers, etc.) who coordinate supplier's activities with its external stakeholders (Bartel, 2001). Therefore, these boundary personnel come to represent the core characteristics of supplier to the external stakeholders, such as, independent dealers.

Dealers' quality of interaction and the frequency of interaction with supplier's boundary personnel will play a significant role in shaping their belief about the supplier's characteristics (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Boundary personnel have frequent interactions with dealers in order to coordinate various activities, such as, promotional activities, taking orders, sharing product and market information, discussing company sales targets, etc. In these interactions, boundary personnel reveal deep insights about the core characteristics of the supplier. Additionally, the personality, knowledge, empathy, responsiveness, reliability and assurance of the boundary personnel are also critical inputs in dealer's perceived supplier characteristics (Aherane et al., 2005). Therefore, the dealer's perception of boundary personnel characteristics can also impact their degree of identification with the supplier. In other words, dealers' favourable perception of the interactions with the boundary personnel of a supplier is likely to enhance the dealer-supplier identification (Aherane et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Scott & Lane, 2000). Thus, we propose that,

Proposition 2: The more favourable the dealer's perception of the boundary personnel characteristics,

the higher will be the dealer-supplier identification.

4.3 Construed External Image of the Supplier

Construed external image of the supplier refers to its prestige (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), which is the dealer's belief about the perception of other stakeholders (e.g. other dealers, customers, etc.) about the supplier in contrast to its own perception of supplier's characteristics. When a dealer finds that the defining attributes of the supplier are valued by other stakeholders, its identification with the supplier is likely to be strengthened because of higher perceived attractiveness of the supplier's construed image.

Dealers strive to maintain a positive social identity through their association with prestigious suppliers, because these associations provide several benefits, such as, social opportunities (Brown, 1969), enhanced social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), increased social interaction (Foote, 1951), etc. Earlier research on image have demonstrated strong positive relationship between the construed image of the supplier and stakeholder's identification. For example, Smidts, Pruyn, and Van Riel (2001) reported positive relationship between construed external image and employee identification. Similarly, positive association has been established between institute and alumni (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), sports club and fans (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), and customer and company (Aherane et al; 2005). Therefore, building on extant literature, we propose that,

Proposition 3: The more attractive the dealer's 'construed external image' for a supplier is, the higher will be the dealer-supplier identification.

5.   Outcomes of Dealer-Supplier Identification

Research on identification has demonstrated various important consequences of identification on the firm-stakeholder relationship. For example, employees' identification is positively related to their extra efforts (Dutton et al., 1994), and customers' identification is directly related to their in-role and extra-role behaviour (Aherane et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Building on this literature, we argue that dealer-supplier identification must directly influence dealer's selling efforts (i.e. promotion, display, shelf space). Additionally,

dealer-supplier identification is expected to improve the relationship quality between the dealer and the supplier, as it is found to be related to some of the dimensions of relationship quality (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Sindhav & Lusch, 2008). For example, identification can enhance the trust between the parties (Sindhav & Lusch, 2008), and their commitment towards each other (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt, 1998).

5.1 Identification and Dealer's Selling Efforts

Most independent dealers sell products or services from multiple suppliers (Gale, 2005). Due to several product options and limited resource availability (e.g. finite hours in a day, limited store space, number of sales persons), dealers must make a choice regarding how much effort they should allocate to the products of each supplier's. Higher resource allocation to one supplier's products means availability of lesser resources for other suppliers' products. In such situation, dealers would tend to optimize their resources and selling efforts based on several external factors (e.g. profit margins, supplier's sales support, organizational climate, etc.) and internal factors (e.g. goal alignment, relationship strength, etc.) However, an important internal motivator for dealers to allocate favourable selling efforts to a supplier's product could be the degree of dealer-supplier identification (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010).

Extant literature on identification suggests that a stakeholder's higher identification with an organization leads to its favourable resource and efforts allocation towards that organization. For example, in employer-employee context, it is found that high identification of the employee leads to their better performance on in-role and extra-role behaviour, and higher support to the employer for achievement of their collective goals (Griepentrog, Harold, Holtz, Klimoski, & Marsh, 2012; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). In the customer-company context, high identification of customers has been found to result in greater product purchase, positive word of mouth (Aherane et al., 2005), and increased customer franchise[5] (Bettencourt, 1997). Similarly, in company-salesperson context, high identification

increases the salesperson efforts to promote the company's products (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010).

Dealer-supplier identification represents the cognitive link between the supplier and the dealer's self-defining attribute, which can lead the dealer to perceive higher overlap between its self-goals and the supplier's goals (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). Therefore, a dealer's motivation to achieve its self-goals will in turn motivate them to exert higher efforts towards achieving the goals of the suppliers they identify with (Brown, Jones, & Leigh, 2005). Alternatively, when dealer-supplier identification is high, dealers become vested in the success or the failure of the supplier, which should lead to higher selling efforts by the dealer towards the products of the supplier. Thus, we propose that,

Proposition 4: There will be a positive relationship between the dealer-supplier identification and the dealers' selling efforts towards the supplier's products.

5.2 Dealer Identification and Relationship Quality

Relationship quality is proposed as a multidimensional construct that reflects the overall strength of relationship and the extent to which it meets the needs and expectations of the exchanged parties (Smith, 1998). Although, there is no clear consensus on the dimensions that represents relationship quality, the constructs of trust and satisfaction are found to be central to relationship quality (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Bhattacharya, Korschun, and Sen (2009) argued that identification is one of the dimensions of relationship quality itself. On the contrary, several other scholars have indicated that relationship quality and identification are two distinct constructs which may be related (e.g. Ashforth & Mael 1989; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Sindhav & Lusch, 2008). While, the relationship between identification and relationship quality has not been directly assessed, literature provided evidence for the relationship of identification with some of the dimensions of relationship quality (Pratt, 1998; Sindhav & Lusch, 2008). To further examine the relationship of identification and relationship quality, we have developed prepositions on the influence of identification on the construct of trust and satisfaction.

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5   Customer franchise refers to recruitment of new customer for the organization.

5.2.1 Identification and Trust

When dealers identify with a supplier they develop higher confidence in the supplier's positive intentions (Sindhav & Lusch, 2008). This confidence leads to dealer's trust which is derived from its psychological bond with the supplier (Shapiro, Sheppard, & Cheraskin, 1992). It is suggested that high dealer-suppler trust can result into both parties effectively understanding and appreciating each other's implicit wants such that, they start acting on behalf of each other (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). According to group cooperation theory, psychological and social processes associated with organizational identification can increase an individual's propensity to confer trust on others and also their willingness to engage in trusting behaviour (Kramer, Brewer, & Hanna, 1996).

Earlier research reported strong empirical evidences for positive relationship between the stakeholder's identification with an organization and their trust on the organization. For example, evidences suggest that strong identification with an organization increases the trust of its employees (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998; Hameed et al., 2011), its suppliers (Corsten et al., 2011), its retailers (Sindhav & Lusch, 2008), and customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) in the organization. Building on this stream of research, we propose that,

Proposition 5: Dealer-supplier identification is positively related to dealer's trust toward the supplier.

5.2.2 Identification and Satisfaction

Satisfaction with a relationship is defined as an affective state that results from overall appraisals of the working relationship between a dealer and the supplier (Gaski & Nevin, 1985). Satisfaction is a crucial dimension of successful channel relationships which enhances the coordination between adealer and the supplier (Dwyer & Oh, 1987). Although, literature provides evidence on the relationship between identification and satisfaction, the results are less clear on the direction of this relationship. For example, Mael and Ashforth (1992) suggested that satisfaction of a dealer leads to higher dealer-supplier identification. Contrarily, several other

studies suggested that organization identification enhance a members' job satisfaction (Van Dick et al., 2004; van Knippenberg, 2000). Bhattacharya et al. (1995) also indicated that identification over time influences satisfaction, and argued that greater identification with a supplier leads to higher satisfaction with the supplier's products. Therefore, we argue that identification with supplier may also positively affect dealer's satisfaction and propose that,

Proposition 6: Dealer-supplier identification is positively related to dealer's satisfaction with the supplier.

6. Discussion

The paper extends the construct of identification in distribution channels to develop further insights in dealer-supplier relationship. The proposed conceptual framework integrates research from organizational identification, relationship marketing and distribution literature to develop propositions that examine the impact of relevant antecedents and consequences of dealer-supplier identification.

We draw from social identity theory, and conceptualize dealer-supplier identification as a psychological bond that dealers develop with the supplier which satisfies their key self-definitional needs. We identify three key antecedents of dealer-supplier identification, i.e. perceived characteristics of the supplier, construed external image of the supplier, and perceived boundary personnel characteristics. Further we identified the influence of dealer-supplier identification on dealers' selling efforts, and the relationship quality between them.

The extant literature on distribution channel relationships suggests several ways to develop dealer relationships and influence their selling efforts, such as, coercive strategies (e.g. by administering reward and punishment) (Scheer & Stern, 1992), contractual enforcement (Weitz & Jap, 1995), and non-coercive strategies (e.g. effective communications, regular feedback) (Weitz & Jap, 1995, Anderson et al., 1987). However, suppliers may find it extremely difficult to influence dealers' activities through these strategies because they have limited formal authority over the independent dealers (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010).

The proposed framework provides an alternative approach for building relationship with independent dealers and to influence their selling efforts on the basis of a psychological bond with the supplier. We develop theoretical arguments for the proposed dealer-supplier identification framework and indicate that dealer identification can be useful to supplier for developing strong dealer relationships.

In terms of theoretical contribution, we extend the construct of identification into the context of dealer-supplier relationship. We have developed specific propositions to understand the relationship between dealer-supplier identification and the dealer's selling efforts. Organization identification research shows the strong relationship between employees' identification and their effort, but literature about the same relationship is scare in inter-organizational research (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). Thus, we contribute in the inter-organizational research by providing a direct path for suppliers to influence the selling efforts of the dealers by developing strong psychological associations via identification.

The link between dealer-supplier identification and relationship quality has not yet been addressed in the literature. The findings from the various domains regarding the relationship between identification and relationship quality are rather scattered. We explore this relationship, and argue that dealer-suppler identification is a distinct construct which influence the strength of relationship between the supplier and the dealer. Additionally, the dealer-supplier identification provides the psychology based theoretical explanation for strong relationship between the supplier and the dealer.

The dealer-supplier identification provides new insight for managerial practice, which can emerge as an important tool for building strong relationships with dealers. One of the implications is that managers should integrate the dealer-supplier identification dimension in their relationship marketing strategy to strengthen their relationships with dealers. In addition, empirical findings may also provide insights into the relative contribution of each driver of the dealer -supplier identification. This understanding would be useful for managers to decide their investment priorities towards

developing and managing the dealer-supplier relationships.

Channel managers use one or combination of the coercive strategies, contractual enforcement and non-coercive strategies to coordinates various activities and develop relationship with dealers (Weitz & Jap, 1995). The identification based approach provides an alternative approach to channel managers for developing strong and successful relationship with independent dealers. Particularly, the combination of non-coercive and identification based strategies are more complementary in nature as non-coercive strategies create more favourable image of the suppliers. An inquiry in the relative effectiveness of using these strategies (in isolation and in combination with each other) presents an interesting area for future research.

Besides the conceptual contribution, this study opens several directions for future research. Future research should develop or adopt the dealer-supplier identification measurement scale and validate the concept of dealer-supplier identification. In addition, the proposed dealer-supplier identification framework should be empirically tested to conform or reject the proposed propositions. We have not explored the direct link between antecedents of dealer-supplier identification and selling efforts, and relationship quality. Future research should expand the framework to explore the direct and mediating effect of identification and provide insightson the role of dealer-supplier identification as a mediating factor.

Further research, within the context of a distribution channel, should also integrate appropriate moderators to shed light on the conditions in which dealers are more likely to have strong identification with the supplier. For example, dealer's functional and structural roles influence the level of identification with the supplier. Particularly, structural role refers to the relative position of the dealer and how they perceive it-self, including its social status and self-identity. Additionally, scholars can extend the dealer-supplier identification framework to investigate its effects on dealers' performance.

Finally, it is indicated that the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives of the suppliers may

influence the level of dealer identification as it offers psychological benefits and value satisfactions to the stakeholders (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). Although we captured the impact of CSR on dealer-supplier identification indirectly through perceived characteristics of the suppliers and construed external image, the direct impact of CSR initiatives on dealer identification presents a promising avenue for future research.

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