

Modelling Business-to-Business Relationship Quality in the Hotel Industry: A Competing Models Approach

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Abstract | Relationship quality (RQ) is nowadays seen as a main source of competitive advantage, rather than service quality and/or customer satisfaction. As firms move towards more collaborative relationships, the role of relationship managers is increasingly vital to organizational success. Despite their crucial role in building business-to-business (B2B) RQ, very little research has looked at the key constructs of inter-organizational RQ from an interpersonal approach. This study aims at contributing to a better understanding of the nature, determinants, and dimensions of RQ. The focus is on testing a B2B RQ model from an interpersonal perspective using LISREL. A mail survey was employed and 948 client representatives provided their perceptions of their relationships with their counterparts in hotels, yielding a 40.7 percent response rate. Goodness-of-fit estimates provided strong support for the model. An alternative model was analysed and rejected in favour of the proposed model. By focusing on relational drivers this study responds to the lack of research on the interpersonal component of RQ, and suggests theoretical and managerial guidelines regarding the social level in the governance of business relationships.

Keywords | Business-to-Business Markets, Hotel Industry, Relationship Marketing, Relationship Quality, Structural Equations Modelling.

Resumo | A qualidade da relação (QR) é hoje considerada um factor crucial de vantagem competitiva, sobrepondo-se à qualidade de serviço e/ou à satisfação do cliente. À medida que as empresas apostam cada vez mais em parcerias de negócio, o papel dos gestores de relações no desenvolvimento da QR em mercados *business-to-business* (B2B) é crescentemente decisivo. Todavia, as variáveis relacionais da QR têm merecido pouca atenção por parte dos investigadores. Este trabalho visa contribuir para compreender melhor a natureza, determinantes e dimensões da QR e centra-se no teste, com recurso ao LISREL, de um modelo da QR em mercados B2B numa perspectiva interpessoal. 948 representantes de clientes de hotéis forneceram as suas percepções das interações com os seus homólogos nos hotéis, através de um inquérito postal com uma taxa de resposta de 40,7%. O modelo proposto foi fortemente corroborado pelas estatísticas de qualidade de ajustamento e demonstrou um desempenho superior relativamente a um modelo rival. Ao focalizar-se nos determinantes relacionais da QR, este estudo contribui para amenizar a falta de investigação sobre a componente interpessoal da QR e identifica implicações teóricas e práticas no âmbito da gestão das relações de negócio.

Palavras-chave | Indústria Hoteleira, Marketing Relacional, Mercados *Business-to-Business*, Modelação em Equações Estruturais, Qualidade da Relação.

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1. Introduction

Why is service quality not enough to retain clients, and customer satisfaction not a guarantee of repeat business? This is one of the most frequently asked questions amongst researchers and practitioners. A possible answer is that closer, more collaborative relationships between buyers and sellers are viewed as increasingly crucial organizational success. Several scholars and managers suggest that in contexts where good quality relationships matter, relationship quality (RQ) is replacing service quality and/or customer satisfaction as a key source of superior performance (Vieira *et al.* 2008a). Since the product/service offered by companies in a given business and segment can be the same, differentiation is exerted through the capacity of developing long-term relationships with clients that resist changes in the competitive environment (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Zineldin, 1999). Indeed, since the early 80s, sellers operating in different businesses (e.g. banking, insurance, and telecommunications) have been increasingly introducing the function of relationship manager, performed by a special kind of contact personnel, responsible for managing the relationships with the firm's business partners. This trend is paralleled by the marketing literature, both research- and practice-oriented. Since the very beginnings of the relationship marketing (RM) 'era', researchers have been calling the attention to the need to establish, maintain, and develop good quality relationships with business partners (e.g. Berry, 2001; Jackson, 1985).

In 1985 Evert Gummesson (1987; 2002) introduced the concept of RQ, in the context of an Ericsson Quality program. Since then, RQ has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners by highlighting the importance of relationships as part of customer perceived quality (Grönroos, 2001). The success of inter-organizational relationships is viewed as crucial to financial performance given that "most firms must leverage other organizations' capabilities and

resources to compete effectively" (Palmatier *et al.* 2007: 172). Moreover, it has been suggested that future research needs to look beyond satisfaction, which is not enough to retain clients, not least because satisfied customers often defect (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990), and replace measures on service quality by measures on RQ, which is the key factor in repurchase (Boles *et al.* 1997). Notwithstanding a growing body of literature on RQ, there continues to be a high degree of ambiguity about its nature, determinants, and dimensions. It has been argued that this vagueness may have in part to do with RQ's context dependence (e.g. Palmatier *et al.*, 2006), and the different levels at which business relationships seem to develop, e.g. structural, economical, and social (Holmlund and Tornroos, 1997). The importance of the social aspect, referred to as actor/social bonds in the IMP literature (e.g. Ford *et al.*, 1998), is highlighted in a significant number of studies on RQ (e.g. Holmlund, 2001; Walter *et al.* 2003). Social bonds between relationship managers and clients can be a powerful tool to augment the core product/service (Price and Arnould, 1999), and its influence on customer satisfaction with company representatives and perceived value is stronger than that of economic resources (Haytko, 2004). Indeed, frequently, relationship managers are the primary contact point for the buyer and have a significant influence on the level of service quality delivered, especially in those situations where the customer perceives that "the salesperson is the company" (Crosby *et al.* 1990: 68). It has further been argued that the success or failure of relationships depends strongly on the way relationship managers act (Bejou, *et al.* 1998). However, very little research has looked at the antecedents of RQ from an interpersonal perspective. In addition, RQ has been modelled from several, different perspectives but very rarely tested against rival models. This study focuses on the nature and determinants of RQ in a context where B2B relationships, despite occurring formally between organizations, contain a significant interpersonal component. Particular attention is paid

3. Method

The model was tested in the context of the relationships between hotels operating in Portugal and their corporate clients, an industry context where (i) marketing is seen as managing relationships (ii) relationship managers engage in person-to-person interactions with their counterparts in firms (iii) in a long-term perspective, i.e. a research setting that is perceived to provide a suitable habitat for RQ (Gümnesson, 1987). A cross-sectional field survey, employing a self-administered, pen-and-paper questionnaire operationalized latent constructs adopted from extant studies in the area of services marketing, and, more specifically, in the area of RM. The survey was based on 2,329 corporate hotel clients, as they constitute the segment that presents more potentialities for repeat business (Yelkur and DaCosta, 2001). The unit of analysis is the long-term relationship of the dyad, as perceived by the client, and 948 client representatives provided their perceptions of their relationship with their counterparts in hotels, yielding a 40.7 percent response rate. The overall strategy concerning data analysis was divided in two main parts: model calibration and model validation (the final sample was split in two random halves). Within model calibration, the two-step approach suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was followed. The evaluation of the measurement model was carried

out using factor analysis, both exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory (CFA). In a first instance, EFA was used as a procedure of measure purification, from a traditional (i.e., non-confirmatory) perspective, which was subsequently complemented with a confirmatory assessment of unidimensionality, convergent validity, reliability, and discriminant validity, under the principles of structural equations modelling (SEM) through LISREL. The testing of the structural model, within model validation, also with LISREL, then served, not only as a confirmatory assessment of nomological validity, but also as a basis for comparing the proposed model with a rival model.

4. Results

The analysis of the measurement model resulted in the model structure depicted in Figure 2, which is consistent with the partial aggregation approach (Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996) adopted in the present analysis. Indeed, this process revealed two higher-order structures, customer orientation (with three dimensions, named problem solving behaviour, selling orientation, and selling ethics) and relational value (comprising two dimensions, relative relational rewards, and relational investment and dependence), in addition to RQ, which had already been included as a higher-order construct in the

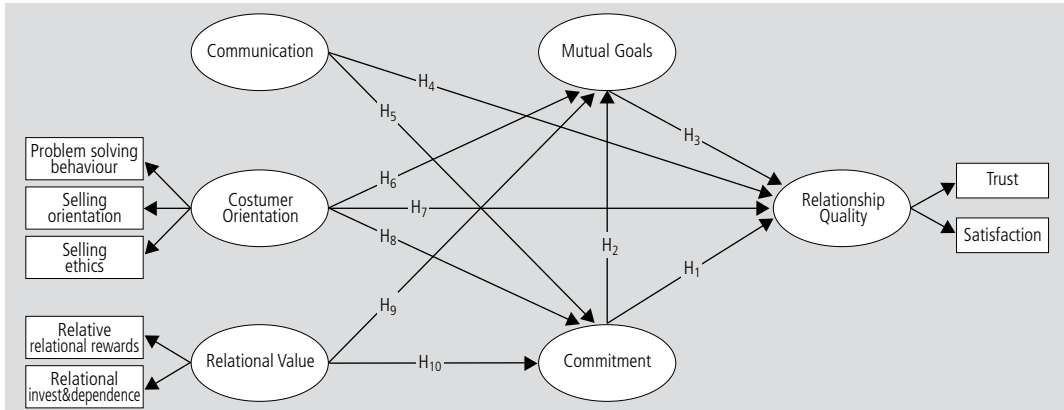


Figure 2 | Proposed RQ model structure.

model development phase and was confirmed within the measurement model assessment (see Vieira 2008 for measurement details).

In terms of overall fit based on the calibration sample, the model's goodness of fit indices are within thresholds indicating good fit: $\chi^2 = 40.16$ ($p=.028$), $df=25$, $\chi^2/df=1.61$, $RMSEA=.036$, $GFI=.98$, $AGFI=.96$, $NNFI=.99$, $CFI=.99$. All signs of the associations between constructs in the model under analysis were in accordance with hypothesised relationships, all but one of the parameter estimates – the one correspondent to the link between relational value and mutual goals (H_9) - were significant at $p<.05$ or better, and the square multiple correlations for the structural equations ranged from .30 to .45.

The test of the final structural model on the validation sample seems to generally corroborate that based on the calibration sample, given the good overall fit: $\chi^2 = 49.80$ ($p=.0023$), $df=25$, $\chi^2/df=1.99$, $RMSEA=.046$, $GFI=.98$, $AGFI=.95$, $NNFI=.98$, $CFI=.99$. Table 1 presents the results concerning the signs and significance of parameter estimates, along with the square multiple correlations, while Table 2 presents the aggregate of both direct and indirect effects.

¹ The final model that serves as the basis for the rival model analysis does not include the non-significant link (H_9), as recommended in the literature (e.g. Diamantopoulos and Siguaw 2000)

Overall, these results seem to constitute sufficient evidence that the proposed conceptual framework is supported by the data, while reinforcing support for the nomological validity of the constructs that integrate the final model. However, even if a given model exhibits an acceptable fit and cross-validates well, there may be alternative models, containing different associations among the variables, which could show the same level of goodness-of-fit. An alternative model, consistent with previous propositions in literature, was formulated and compared to the model proposed in the present study¹, on the following criteria: AIC (Akaike's

Table 2 | Decomposition of structural effects – validation sample

	Direct	Indirect	Total
Effect on R. Quality			
Commitment	.320	.044	.366
Mutual goals	.210		.210
Communication	.120	.100	.220
Customer orientation	.430	.270	.700
Relational value		.086	.086
Effect on mutual goals			
Commitment	.210		.210
Communication		.055	.055
Customer orientation	.530	.090	.620
Relational value	.070	.040	.110
Effect on commitment			
Communication	.260		.260
Customer orientation	.430		.430
Relational value	.200		.200

Table 1 | Results for structural model assessment – validation sample

Parameter	Path	Estimate	SE	t-value	R ²	Hyp.	Result
Commitment → R. quality	β_{13}	.32	.052	6.26	.36	H ₁	Supported
M. goals → R. quality	β_{12}	.21	.054	3.87		H ₃	Supported
Communication → R. quality	γ_{11}	.12	.046	2.62		H ₄	Supported
C. orientation → R. quality	γ_{12}	.43	.100	4.18		H ₇	Supported
Commitment → M. goals	β_{23}	.21	.055	3.73	.23	H ₂	Supported
C. orientation → M. goals	γ_{22}	.53	.110	4.96		H ₆	Supported
Rel. value → M. goals	γ_{23}	.07	.060	1.18		H ₉	Not Supp.
Communication → Commitment	γ_{31}	.26	.050	5.55	.31	H ₅	Supported
C. orientation → Commitment	γ_{32}	.43	.100	4.28		H ₈	Supported
Rel. value → Commitment	γ_{33}	.20	.060	3.46		H ₁₀	Supported

Information Criterion), ECVI (Expected Cross Validation Index), as an indicator of a model's overall fit, and PNFI (Parsimonious Normed Fit Index), given that the comparison involves nonnested models (Hair *et al.* 1998). Complementarily, overall fit as measured also by CFI (Comparative Fit Index) was used for comparison purposes, as well as two other comparison indicators that have been used previously for comparing competing models (e.g. Morgan and Hunt 1994): comparative percentage of hypothesised statistically significant parameters; and average squared multiple correlations for the endogenous constructs (ASMC). Other goodness-of-fit indices, namely the ones used previously in

this study, are also included to complement the comparative analysis between the final structural model cross-validated on the validation sample – model 1 (M1) - presented in Figure 3.

Let M2 be the proposed alternative model that was compared to the results of M1. In M2 (see Figure 4), commitment was moved from antecedent to dimension of RQ. The rest of the structure of M1 was maintained, only relational value in M2 is now directly linked to RQ – an association that has been proposed previously (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2002). This simulates one of the most common conceptualizations in the literature, where commitment, satisfaction and trust were

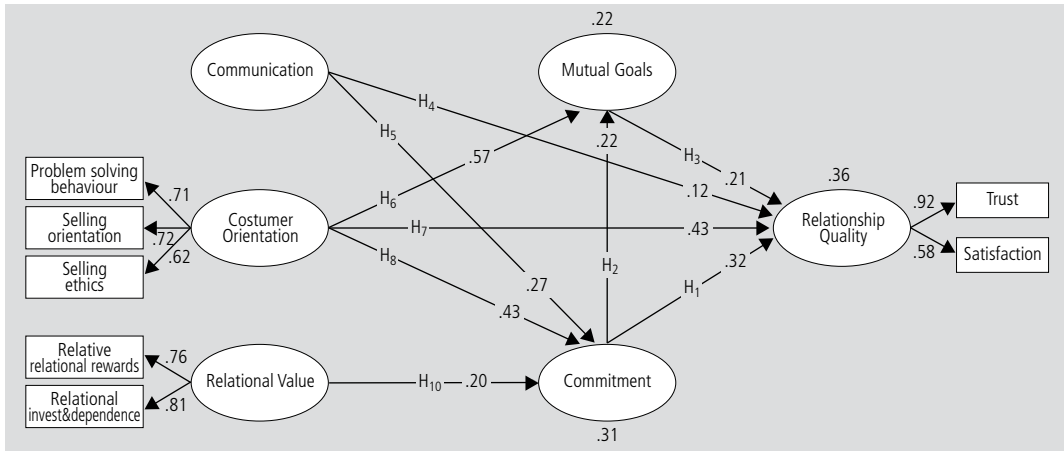


Figure 3 | Final structural model cross-validated on the validation sample (M1).

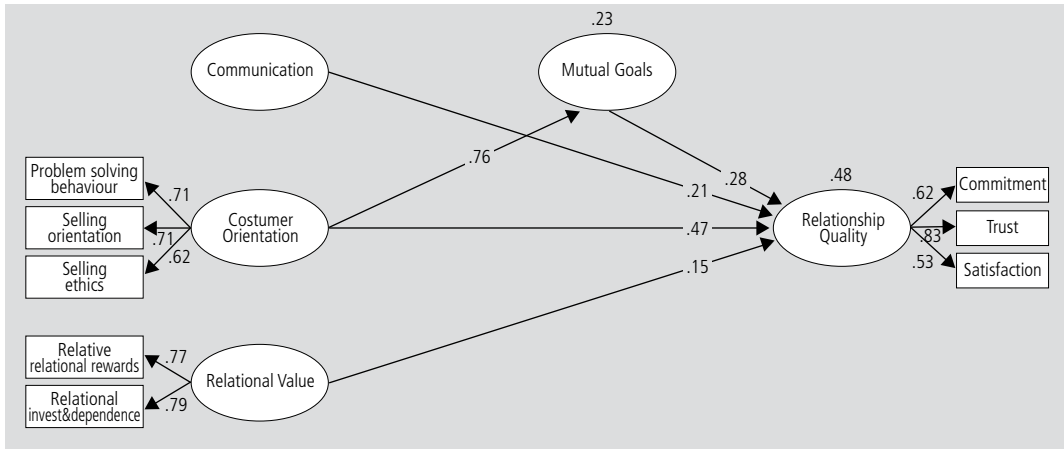


Figure 4 | M2 (Model 2 - proposed alternative model based on the validation sample).

simultaneously included as dimensions of RQ (Dorsch *et al.* 1998; Rauyruen and Miller 2007; Roberts *et al.* 2003; Ulaga and Eggert 2006). Regarding the overall fit of the models under comparison, M2's CFI is lower than that of M1 (.97 vs. .99). The results relating to the AIC and the ECVI criteria suggest that the described alternative/rival model performs worse than M1, given that the latter shows the lowest values for both AIC and ECVI (see Table 3, for a summary of the results of the comparative analysis). The fact that M1 exhibits the smallest value for the AIC corresponds to a better fit of M1, while the smallest value for ECVI indicates M1 as the model with the greatest potential for replication (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw 2000). However, the analysis on alternative models proceeds, using the rest of the above mentioned criteria, in order to provide a more detailed idea on this subject.

All the hypothesized parameters are statistically significant in both models. In the M2 model, a little explanatory power is gained, with a mean increment in the average squared multiple correlations for the endogenous variables of only .058, and PNFI is also slightly higher (.62 vs. .56). The models were also compared on the goodness-of-fit indices used during previous analyses. These additional criteria also showed a better performance of M1 vs. M2, reinforcing the earlier indication of AIC and ECVI (see also Table 3).

Customer orientation remained as the most influential determinant of RQ, continuing to exhibit a strong impact, both directly and indirectly via mutual goals. This seems to suggest customer orientation as an additional building block of RQ. As stated, commitment was included in M2 as a dimension of RQ. The information displayed in Figure 4 suggests that commitment assumed the role of the second dominant dimension of RQ, right after trust, which maintained the status of the most dominant dimension of RQ. This seems to suggest that, in certain contexts, commitment might perform an important function as a dimension/outcome of RQ, which would be consistent with some literature

(e.g. Dorsch *et al.* 1998; Kumar *et al.* 1995). This possibility notwithstanding, the role of commitment as antecedent seems to be an essential one. For example, as far as the construct of relational value is concerned, it looks as though its influence is to a good degree dependent on the mediation of commitment, since the absence of the latter led to a decrease of the effects of relational value on RQ. Mutual goals reiterated its important role as both direct determinant of RQ and mediator of the effects of customer orientation, while communication maintained a non negligible influence on RQ, in this case only a direct one (as happened also in relation to relational value) due to the absence of commitment as a mediator in M2.

Overall, the results of analysing the alternative models provide further support to the robustness of the model proposed in this investigation. In effect, M1, the proposed model cross-validated on the validation sample, performs better than its rival in virtually all comparison criteria. Exceptions refer to ASMC and PNFI in model M2. In terms of goodness-of-fit indices, although differences might be viewed as not substantial as far as GFI, AGFI, and NNFI are concerned, there are significant differences with respect to RMSEA and the ratio χ^2/df , which are within thresholds indicating good fit, contrary to what was observed for the alternative model (see Table 3).

Table 3 | Summary of alternative models evaluation – validation sample

Comparison criteria / rival models	M1	M2
ECVI (Expected cross validation index)	.23	.27
AIC (Akaike's information criterion)	110.2	129.2
PNFI (Parsimonious normed fit index)	.56	.62
CFI (Comparative fit index)	.99	.97
Percentage of significant parameters	100	100
ASMC (Average squared multiple correlations)	.297	.355
χ^2 (Chi-square goodness-of-fit test)	52.17	77.24
P - Value	.002	.000
Df (Degrees of freedom)	26	29
Ratio χ^2/Df	2.00	2.66
RMSEA (Root mean squared error of approximation)	.046	.059
GFI (Goodness-of-fit index)	.98	.97
AGFI (Adjusted goodness-of-fit index)	.95	.94
NNFI (Non-normed fit index)	.98	.96

5. Conclusion

The results of the assessment of the structural model indicated that the proposed RQ model (M1) had a good fit and that the amount of variance in the endogenous variables explained by the respective proposed determinants was acceptable. All but one of the associations hypothesised were supported, resulting in a scenario where the variables customer orientation, communication, and commitment exerted both direct and indirect effects on RQ, mutual goals exerted direct effects only, and relational value indirect effects only. Customer orientation, modelled as an exogenous construct, emerged as the most important determinant, with relatively strong direct and indirect effects, not only on RQ, the central endogenous construct in the model, but also on the other endogenous latent variables, commitment and mutual goals. Commitment exhibited the second best performance, namely regarding its direct association with RQ. Findings also highlighted the importance of both dimensions of RQ, trust and satisfaction. Trust was the dominant dimension of RQ, which contributed to strengthen the pivotal role of trust in the model. Problem solving behaviour and selling orientation were the most important dimensions of customer orientation, leaving a slightly less important but still essential role to selling ethics, whereas the importance of both dimensions of relational value revealed to be quite equitable between them.

Overall, taking into account the foregoing results, it is perceived that there is a high probability that the model is correct for the population of interest. In addition, an alternative model was analysed and rejected in favour of the model proposed in this study. Moreover, considering that the analysis was carried out in a B2B services market in which the relationship between the partners in the dyad is mainly based on person-to-person interactions between key individuals representing firms, a research setting that provides a suitable environment for RM and RQ - the result of RM efforts

(Palmatier *et al.* 2006) - it is perceived that there are strong reasons to believe that the constructs tend to work as depicted in the model proposed and tested in this study.

This research suggests important insights for both practitioners and researchers. Researchers have been focusing on key factors such as commitment, satisfaction and trust. This study suggests an additional building block, customer orientation, with both direct and mediated effects on RQ. The emphasis on customer orientation calls the attention of managers for a managerial aspect that is as much obvious and critical as often neglected: the need to work alongside clients, towards mutual beneficial relationships. If the relational perspective of marketing implies that relationship managers evolve from a selling approach to a counselling approach as the literature suggests (Crosby, 1989), then several additional implications arise. First and foremost, a relationship manager has to be someone who is perceived by buyers as being trustworthy, as evidenced by the fact that trust is the dominant dimension of RQ in this study. In effect, it has been shown that employees that are the 'face' of the organisation and establish the link between client and firm can be dangerously harmful to both parties if not managed appropriately (e.g. Crosby, 1989). In this context, firms should be extremely careful in terms of whom to designate as client managers, as well as how to train, motivate and compensate this special kind of contact personnel or 'part-time' marketers. In addition, knowing that customer orientation comprises three dimensions - problem solving behaviour, selling orientation, and selling ethics - managers can use these factors (and the items in the respective scales) as criteria precisely for the selection, training, empowerment, motivation, and performance evaluation and compensation of relationship/client managers. The same would apply to the rest of the RQ relational drivers included in the model devised in this study. In sum, by looking at the connections in the model, in addition to the constructs themselves, it is possible to apprehend

how the above mentioned components may help client managers to enhance their customer orientation, to inspire commitment in their clients and to promote goal congruity, thereby concurring to enhance the quality of the relationships with their partners, which is reflected by the levels of trust and satisfaction. In terms of theoretical contributions, is believed that this study extended the knowledge on RQ and its key constructs by testing a RQ model in a research setting that corresponds to an appropriate habitat for RM and RQ. It is perceived that the combination of both calibration and validation procedures, complemented with a rival models analysis, contributed decisively, not only to differentiate this study from previous approaches to modelling RQ, but, more importantly, to enhance understanding of the nature, determinants and dimensions of RQ. Therefore, it is expected that these results will spark researchers interested in increasing the body of knowledge on RQ and that this model can be replicated in different B2B service settings.

These findings must be viewed with some limitations such as the context specific and cross-sectional nature of this investigation. Indeed, dynamic realities, as marketing relationships are, call for dynamic approaches, as RQ models should be. This suggests that an assessment of the model in different contexts and, ideally, from a longitudinal perspective, represents a crucial avenue for future research. Moreover, while a single organization study, at a single point in time, may provide a richer knowledge of the phenomena under analysis, and the chosen research setting matches the characteristics of an appropriate habitat for RM and RQ, further validations in different settings are suggested for future investigations. This could be helpful, for example to assess the context dependence of the RQ construct. Another interesting opportunity for research would be to investigate RQ in the broader network of relationships in which buyer-seller interactions are embedded in, bearing in mind, in addition, that contributions to enhance RQ may come, not only from the external interaction

environment, but also from the internal interaction environment (e.g. co-workers support, supervisors support, etc.). Furthermore, the model devised in this research, which is confined to antecedents and dimensions of RQ and to those variables relevant to confirm the suggested hypotheses, explained a considerable, but not all, variance of RQ. The portions of the variance that remain unexplained also constitute an opportunity for future research. In addition, previous research did not assess empirically RQ at different levels, and this is a theme that should be addressed in future investigations. In this respect, the present study is a starting point, by addressing the social level, due to its prevalence, adopting an approach in line with previous suggestions that research in the area of RM should begin with a small number of fundamental issues and then move on to integrate these into broader conceptions (Bagozzi, 1995; Price and Arnould, 1999). To offer more or less intricate relational programs or schemes without an understanding of what RQ is and is not might be counterproductive.

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