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It was brought to the attention of the Editors and the Publisher that the article has some text and data issues. Upon further review, such errors were deemed to be significant enough to affect the reliability of the published research and the overall quality of the paper. Keeping such an article in public domain with high similarity index is not ethical and it was therefore decided to retract the article.

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RETRACTED: Antecedents to Customer Dependency in Buyer–Seller Relationship: A BOP Retailer Investigation

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Abstract

Relationship marketing research extensively covers such variables as customer dependence, satisfaction, trust and loyalty, which play an important role in building and maintaining long-term relationships. Countries like India have a huge base of unorganized markets and the relationship between the customer and the seller is healthy. In such an environment, the dependency of customer and retailer is an important issue. We attempt to identify the determinants of customer dependence through the literature and conceptual model development. We conducted a survey to study the customer dependence in the relationship between a grocery retailer in a rural area and the local residents. Variables such as product familiarity, customer dependence, switching cost, attractiveness of alternatives, supply uncertainty and product importance are studied in the article.

Keywords

BOP retailing, buyer seller relationship, customer dependence

Introduction

In the current highly competitive marketing environment, there are few situations in which customers attempt to build and maintain relationships with marketers. Subtle changes in the concept and practice of business have fundamentally reshaped the marketing discipline (Kaur & Gupta, 2012). In large-format retail situations, customers maintain a non-personal association with the store and personal relationships with salespersons. By contrast, many customers in developing countries like India build and maintain long-term relationships directly with the small-scale retailers, who happen to be the owners as well as the

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salespersons of the store. According to Aagja et al. (2011), when consumers feel the need for a product or a service, they have to decide the service provider from whom they will buy the service. It depends upon the information provided by the service providers in making the decision. The relationship marketing research extensively covers such variables as customer dependence, satisfaction, trust and loyalty, which play an important role in building and maintaining long-term relationships (Andaleeb, 1995; Anderson & Narus, 1990; Kassim & Abdullah, 2010; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Rajaobelina & Bergeron, 2009). But the research is predominantly focused on business-to-business (B2B). There have been many studies discussing the impact of dependence within the firm as well as with the clients outside the firm (Dundas & Roper, 1999). Customer dependence has been studied in marketing channels and industrial buying literature (e.g., Andaleeb, 1995, 1996; Gassenheimer, Davis & Dahlstrom, 1998; Gassenheimer, Sterling & Robicheaux, 1996; Joshi & Arnold, 1998; Lusch & Brown, 1996) and not much in retailing. With regard to research in the retail domain, there is a focus on customer satisfaction, trust, loyalty and emotional attachment (Reynolds & Beaty, 1999; Vlachos, Theotokis, Pramatari & Vrechopoulos, 2010).

Review of Literature

The extant literature suggests that dependence of one party on another provides power to the less dependent party (Dwyer et al., 1987; Ganesan, 1994). There is a broader research on the negative aspects of dependence for long-term relationships (Johnson, 1999). The negative aspects of dependence are evident when the powerful party tends to enforce a control mechanism and then the dependent party tends to behave opportunistically. This phenomenon ultimately discourages the parties from maintaining long-term relationships (Andaleeb, 1995, 1996; Monczka et al., 1995). It is, therefore, useful to understand the coordinative behaviour between the buyer and seller subject to asymmetric dependence. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) describe dependency as a measure of the potency of the external organizations or groups in a given organizational environment, and of the extent to which organizations must be taken into account, perceived as important and considered in organizational decision making.

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) also mention three critical factors which determine the dependence of one organization on another:

1. The extent to which the interest group has discretion over resource allocation and use;
2. The extent to which they are limited by the availability of alternatives, or the extent of control over the resource by the interest group; and
3. The essentiality of the resource, the extent to which the organizations require it for continued operation and survival.

Determinants of Customer Dependence

Product Familiarity

This concept refers to the degree of knowledge of a particular product or service (Alonso, 2000; Tuu & Ottar, 2009). Increased product knowledge increases the expertise of the customer (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Hayashi (2001) determined the familiarity as a composite measure of cognitive and behavioural experience, and found that the level of familiarity with a product or product category has a major impact on purchasing behaviour. Similarly, other studies defined familiarity as the number of product-related experiences, which led to the development of attitudes towards a product and hence subsequent behavioural and purchasing intention (Pollard, Kirk & Cade, 2002; van Kleef, van Trijp & Luning, 2005). Past experiences are thus to be considered as substantive predictors of later behaviour.

There are numerous studies in distribution channel relationships area which suggest that the supplier's expert power enables the supplier to infuse control mechanism in a non-coercive way and involve the customer to be non-coercively committed to the relationship and exhibit cooperative behaviour (Lindblom et al., 2009; Sahadev, 2005; Zhao, Huo, Flynn &Yeung, 2008). As argued by Chakrabarty et al. (2010), highly dependent customers need the products/services of the selling organization and the knowledge and expertise of salespeople. Hence, the supplier's expert power necessitates the customer to depend on the supplier. When the customers gain such an expert power which the supplier possesses, they need not follow the control mechanism of the supplier and need not be dependent on the supplier. Furthermore, expert power enables the customers to switch easily between suppliers as their perceived switching costs are reduced, especially their procedural costs of switching (Burnham et al., 2003).

There are a few of empirical findings that support our above argument. Soderlund (2002) studied that high level of familiarity exhibits different post-purchase behaviour than the customers with a low level of familiarity. Selnes and Hansen (2001) argued that the frequent use of self-service (which is commonly used by informed customers) by the customers reduces the perceived utilitarian value of serviceperson and found that it reduces the social bonding between the customer and the serviceperson. Hence we can say, the greater the level of customer product familiarity, the lower the level of customer dependence on the retailer.

Product familiarity refers to the degree of knowledge of a particular product or service (Alonso, 2000; Tuu & Ottar, 2009). Expert power reduces the conflict and enhances the satisfaction between the exchange partners (Lee, 2001). In retailing context, Busch and Wilson (1976) conducted an experimental analysis of salesman expert and referent social power on customer trust in the salesman and found that the customers perceive both sources of power to be trustworthy. Also, they found that the expert power was more important than referent power in affecting customer trust. When the customer acquires that expertise which the salesman possesses, then the situation becomes different. When the customer is familiar with the task that the trader is performing for him, it is logical to conclude that the former need not trust the latter. There are divergent empirical findings on this issue. Coulter and Coulter (2003) found that customer knowledge/familiarity acted as a negative moderator on the impact of perceived service person 'personality related' characteristics (e.g., empathy) on customer trust. A negative impact of product familiarity on trust was tested empirically in the context of a developing country

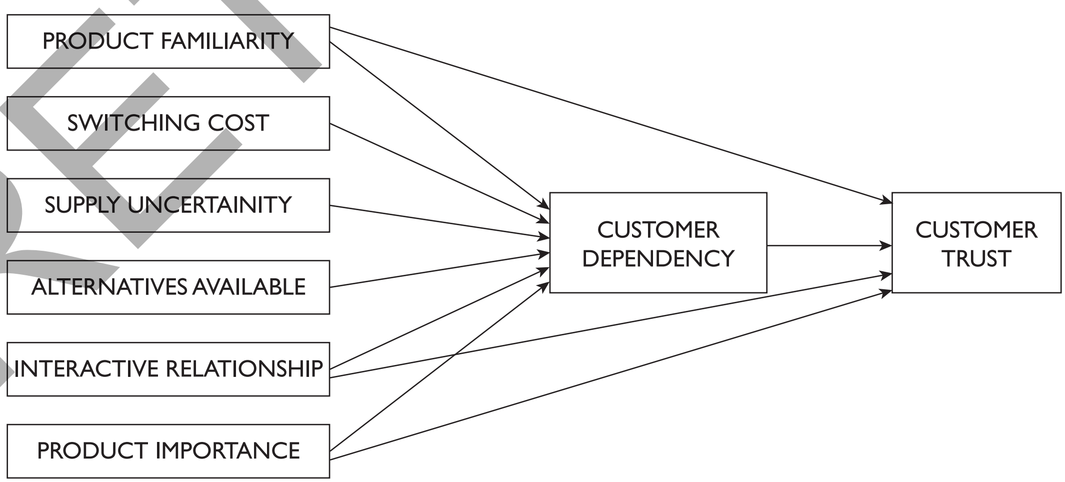

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Source: Author's own.

by Andaleeb and Anwar (1996), who found a non-significant relationship. However, a research from a developed country by Kennedy, Ferrell and LeClair (2001) yielded a significant negative relationship between the product familiarity and trust in the salesperson, which suggests the need for further investigation. Hence, increased customer product familiarity is associated with lower levels of customer trust in retailers.

Product Importance

Bloch and Richins (1983) define the perceived product importance as, 'the extent to which a consumer links a product to salient, enduring or situation-specific goals'. Product importance is derived from the product characteristics, consumer characteristics and purchase situation (Bloch & Richins, 1983). If the product is perceived to be important to customer goals, risk perceived by the customer will be high (McQuiston, 1989). In such situations, customers always try to reduce the perceived risk, tending to acquire more information about the availability of alternatives. If there are alternatives available, they would be in a more powerful and comfortable position than the suppliers. Otherwise, customers have to depend on the supplier. A product may be perceived as having enduring importance even when a specific purchase or usage goal is not operative; explaining its importance, perceptions here are based on the product's ability to satisfy the consumers' enduring needs intrinsically. Enduring importance also includes the case where certain products attain extreme importance and become a continuing focus of one's life (Bloch & Richens, 1983). Customer dependence on the supplier is one way by which the customer attempts to reduce the perceived risk (Pires & Stanton, 2005). Customers need to depend on the supplier when they perceive their product purchase decisions to be important. Hence, the greater the perceived importance of the product, the greater the customer dependence on the retailer.

Product importance is the perceived significance of the decision on buying in terms of the size of the purchase and/or the potential impact of the purchase on the buyer (Kool, Meulenberg & Broens, 1997). Shepherd and Zacharakis (2003, p. 155) argued that 'if the purchase price represents a significant amount of the buyer's income and/or represents an emotional decision, then the importance placed on the product is high'. Further, it was evaluated that the trust between partners becomes an essential element for a successful cooperation in a new product development, much more so than in other buyer–supplier contexts that are less uncertain and less risky. Cannon and Homburg (2001) found that the perceived product importance increases their intention to expand purchases from the current supplier. Empirically, Batt (2000) found a positive relationship between the importance of purchasing and farmer trust in their suppliers. There are some empirical findings from another related concept to product importance, namely, product involvement. Liang and Wang (2008) found that a higher level of product involvement leads to a higher level of trust and commitment. When customers perceive certain products or services to be important, they place high purchase involvement on those products or services (Beatty, Kahle & Homer, 1988; Mittal, 1989). Kinard and Capella (2006, p. 361) found that the highly involved consumers perceive relational benefits from a service provider. In their research, the relational benefits are categorized as confidence, social and special treatment. They also argued that 'the confidence benefits reduce anxiety levels associated with a service offering, increase perceived trust in the provider, diminish the perception of risk, and enhance knowledge of service expectations'. Hence, customer trust in retailers is positively associated with the perceived importance of the product.

Supply Uncertainty

Uncertainty is defined as an unanticipated change in the circumstances surrounding an exchange (Jean, Sinkovics & Kim, 2010; Noordewier, John & Nevin, 1990) and is a basic requirement for the successful relationship performance between the buyer and seller (Ambrose et al., 2010). Uncertainty in the input market is concerned with the availability of adequate and stable input supplies and is a perception that the customer holds before making the purchase decision. Supply uncertainty can act as an exit barrier in relationships with suppliers, if there is perceived uncertainty about the availability of alternative supplies and suppliers. If alternative suppliers are uncertain or unavailable, customers are normally motivated to continue established supplier relationships owing to difficulties in replacing the existing suppliers in input markets. This exit barrier in the customer relationship with the supplier increases customer dependence on the supplier.

According to Williamson's (1975) seminal work on transaction costs analysis (TCA) principle, if the input market is really uncertain, it increases transaction costs of the customers. These transaction costs normally exist in two ways, namely, deterrence and compliance-based transaction costs. The customer incurs deterrence-based transaction cost due to non-maintenance of relationship with the supplier when the customer perceives the availability of input supplies and suppliers as uncertain. It means that the customers may not be able to continue their production in a smooth way, and to avoid such a situation, the customers develop alternative transaction mechanism (increased opportunism) which also involves search cost. Also, the customer might have developed idiosyncratic investments (asset specificity) with the focal supplier's input and its processes (Joshi & Stump, 1999). If the customer moves out of the relationship, it leads to the loss of earlier investments specific to the relationship. In order to reduce such cost, customers need to build and maintain long-term relationship with the supplier (Williamson, 1975). Building and maintaining long-term relationships (vertical relation and reduced opportunism) also involves transaction cost, which is nothing but compliance-based transaction cost. Customers usually evaluate deterrence- and compliance-based transaction costs. If customers opt for deterrence-based transaction cost, they do not depend on the focal suppliers as they do not mind the expenses in finding alternative supplier and loss of idiosyncratic investments when the input market is uncertain. However, if they opt for compliance-based transaction cost, it leads to dependence on suppliers as this dependence is directly proportional to the level of difficulty faced in gaining access to alternative sources of valued outcomes (Anderson & Narus, 1984, 1990). Hence, the greater the level of supply uncertainty perceived by the customer, the greater the customer dependence on the retailer.

Switching Cost

Much of the literature on 'dependence' focuses on marketing-channel relationships—such as that between a vendor and a retailer, or that between a manufacturer and a distributor (Ganesan, 1994; Heide & John, 1988; Kumar et al., 1995). In this context, a company's 'dependence' is defined as the extent to which that company needs a particular supplier to achieve its goals (Frazier, 1983; Kumar et al., 1995). Dependence is higher if the required resources cannot be found elsewhere and if the goals can be realized only from a given relationship (Andaleeb, 1996). In these circumstances, a firm has little choice but to maintain its relationship with the supplier (Frazier, 1983). 'Dependence' of a customer on a provider is increased if the outcomes obtained by the customer are highly valued and the magnitude of the exchange is high. There is empirical evidence that 'switching costs' are associated with dependence on a service provider (Heide & John, 1988; Lam et al., 2004; Nielson, 1996). Moreover, a positive relationship has been demonstrated between asset specificity and dependence (Ganesan, 1994), and it is, therefore, likely that a business customer who has invested specific assets in a service provider will have some degree of dependence on that service provider. On the basis of the above discussion, the following propositions with respect to ‘switching costs’ and ‘dependence’ are advanced: switching cost has a negative relation with the customer dependency.

Attractiveness of Alternatives

Attractiveness of alternatives means the reputation, image and service quality of the replacing carrier, which are expected to be superior or more suitable than those of the existing carrier. Attractiveness of alternative carriers is intimately linked to service differentiation and industrial organization. If a company offers differentiated services that are difficult for a competitor to match or to provide with equivalents, or if few alternative competitors exist in the market, customers tend to remain with the existing company (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). According to Stanley and Markman (1992), the customers stay in loyal relation with the retailer because they are forced to do so in the absence of attractive alternatives. Same is the case when no substitutes are available. But this relation tends to last as long as there are no attractive alternatives available for the customer (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Depending on the quality of competing alternatives, the customer perceives a benefit in changing the provider (Oliver, 1997). The more attractive the alternatives are, the higher the perceived benefits when switching (Jones, Mothersbaugh & Betty, 2000). Therefore, consumers are likely to switch once they perceive alternative offerings as being superior with respect to the cost–benefit ratio (Kalyanaram & Little, 1994; Sivakumar & Raj, 1997). There is also empirical evidence from Rusbult, Zembrodt and Gunn (1982), who report that the quality of alternatives is associated positively with exiting and negatively with loyalty. Research suggests that customers in such a constrained situation attempt to restore their freedom of choosing (Brehm, 1966). So, we can say, attractive alternatives are negatively associated to the customer dependency.

Interpersonal Relationship

Interpersonal relationship means a psychological and social relationship that manifests itself as care, trust, intimacy and communication (Gremler, 1995). The interpersonal relationship built through recurrent interactions between a carrier and a customer can strengthen the bond between them and finally lead to a long-term relationship. Companies are not alone in desiring a sustained relationship. Many customers wish to establish, develop and continue with a company an interpersonal relationship that provides value and convenience (Gwiner, Gremler & Bitner, 1998). Therefore, relationship-specific investment helps increase the customers’ dependence, and thus magnifies the switching barrier (Jones, Mothersbaugh & Betty, 2000). Social bonding tactics are personal ties or linkages forged during interaction at work (Turner, 1970). Researcher includes the degree of personal friendship and liking shared by a buyer and seller (Wilson, 1995), as well as linking of personal selves or identities through self-disclosure; closeness; providing support or advice; being empathetic and responsive; feelings of affiliation, attachment or connectedness; and shared experiences (Turner, 1970). Although the effects of ‘social bonding’ cannot replace ‘price attraction’ yet, it provides customized service, developing independent relationship, making the consumers trust and be satisfied with the retailers’ service and understanding, learning with consumer’s needs and wants. Retailers expressing friendship or gratitude with gifts to consumers really had social meaning. Personnel can use these kinds of socializing tactics to build a stable relationship and promote the relationship quality further.

The outcome of the discussion provides the base for the following hypothesis: (i) Interpersonal relationship is positively related to the customer dependency; (ii) Interpersonal relationship is positively associated to the trust.

Impact of Customer Dependence on Trust

The development of trust is believed to be an important result of investing in dyadic buyer–seller relationships (Gundlach, Achrol & Mentzer, 1995). According to Ramendra Singh (2008), trust and distrust have central roles to play in determining the supervisee sales performance in an organization. As relationship efforts are defined as efforts that are actively provided by a retailer, the extent to which a retailer makes relationship efforts can provide evidence to the consumer that the retailer can be believed, cares for the relationship and is willing to make sacrifices (Doney & Cannon, 1997). In the literature, several types of relationship efforts have been related to the concept of trust. Several authors indicate that more intense levels of buyer–seller communication enhance the feelings of trust (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Doney & Cannon, 1997). Hence, we could infer that trust is the main element to develop high-level relationships, especially during the initial period of relationship development. Researchers such as Andaleeb (1995) on marketing channel relations, and Handfield and Bechtel (2002) on industrial buyer–seller relations attempt to separate the effects of dependence from those of trust. Customer (economic) dependence (measured by supplier assistance and revenue loss) is found to exert a significant positive effect on customer compliance (Gassenheimer & Calantone, 1994).

A widely prevailing argument suggests that when the customer is dependent on the supplier, the supplier can exploit its market power, and customers will be less able to obtain competitive price quotes to negotiate (Monczka et al., 1995). In addition, Handfield and Bechtel (2002) argue that the customers may trust a supplier when they have more than one (multiple sourcing), but trust another supplier less, simply because they feel vulnerable, due to the fact that the supplier is the only source in the market for a unique product or service. This argument led Handfield and Bechtel (2002) to test the hypothesis that increased levels of perceived customer dependence on the supplier have a negative impact on customer trust, which was however, not empirically supported in their study. A recent study found that the interdependency in inter-firm relationships have a significant positive influence on the formation of both arm's length and cooperative relationships. In these relationships, trust increases the merits of continuing them (Bradach & Eccles, 1989). We contend that even when the buyers are in dependent position, the extent and quality of experience gained during the interactions could lead to positive effects on trust. Hence we can say, the greater the customer dependence on the retailer, more the customer trusts the retailer.

Rationale of Study

We have focused on customer dependence on the retailer, a phenomenon which is evident in rural areas of India even today. Dependence is an important initiating variable for buyer–seller relationship. (Andaleeb, 1995; Gassenheimer et al., 1996, 1998; Joshi & Arnold, 1998; Lusch & Brown, 1996). Retailing in India is still dominated by an interpersonal-based buyer–seller relationship. Very few studies in this context have researched the customer dependence from an interpersonal buyer–seller relationship perspective. We attempt to identify the determinants of customer dependence through the literature and conceptual model development. We conducted a survey to study the customer dependence in the relationship between a grocery retailer in a rural area and the local residents.

Methodology

Sample: In India, interpersonal buyer–seller relationships could be found in consumer–retailer relationships, where the retailer is the owner as well as the salesperson of the shop. In this study, we considered the grocery retailer (seller) and the rural bottom of the pyramid (BOP) customer (buyer). The study was conducted with respect to the rural retailer and customers on three districts (Jammu, Kathua and Udhampur) of Jammu region. The retailers were selected randomly in the rural areas of these districts. So, a total sample of 150 retailers was collected with a distribution of 65 retailers from Jammu, 40 retailers from Udhampur and 45 from Kathua district. A questionnaire was prepared taking into account all the relevant measures and demographics.

All the retailers included in this survey had purchased their goods either from wholesalers located in their villages or in nearby villages or towns. The demographic characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 1. Approximately, 96 per cent of the respondents were male. This is primarily due to the fact that the shopkeeping is still considered to be a male activity in the rural areas of India.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

	Frequency	Per cent
Gender		
Male	144	96
Female	6	4
Age		
Under 25	18	12
25–35	32	21
36–45	46	30.33
46–55	39	26
Above 55	15	10
Education		
No formal education	18	12
Up to elementary school	42	28
Up to high school	48	32
Up to higher education	31	20.66
Up to college	11	7.33
Marital status		
Male	62	41.33
Female	88	58.66
Annual income		
Under ₹30,000	42	28
₹30,000–39,999	49	32.6
₹40,000–49,999	22	14.6
₹ 50,000–59,999	20	13.33
Above ₹60,000	17	11.33

Source: Author's own.

Measurement Scales

Product Familiarity

Most of the researchers conceptualized the construct expertise as one party's perception of the other party's expertise. For example, Chinomona and Pretorius (2011) measured the manufacturer's perception of dealer's expert power; Sahadev (2005) measured the distributor's perception of supplier expertise; and Zhao et al. (2008) measured the supplier's perception of customer expert power. However, we conceptualized the product familiarity as customer's perception about his/her own knowledge about the product which he/she intends to purchase from the retailer. Kennedy et al. (2001) measured the buyers' perception of their own knowledge about the product. Hence, buyer familiarity with the product was measured on a three-item, seven-point semantic differential scale from Kennedy et al. (2001). The scale was perfect fit and did not require any changes.

Importance of the Product

Cannon and Perreault (1999) measured the perceived product importance in the context of manufacturing industry. Patterson, Johnson and Spreng (1997) measured the perceived product importance in the context of B2B professional services. Batt (2000) measured the farmer's perceived product importance in seed potato purchases. We adapted Batt's (2000) scale as it suited the context of our study. This scale has two factors, namely, supplier evaluation and economic consequences. The first factor (supplier evaluation) suggested that the customers spend a considerable amount of time making the purchase decision and that, despite the long-standing relationships which often existed between retailer and customer; the customers carefully evaluated the alternatives each time they purchased a new product. The second factor (economic consequences) dealt with the cost of purchasing the product and the number of times the customer chose to buy the new product from the retailer. The scale was revised to suit the study context.

Supply Uncertainty

Ambrose et al. (2010) measured uncertainty by a four-item scale which was adapted from Gao, Sirgy and Bird's (2005) scale in the context of supply chain relationships. Batt (2000) measured uncertainty on a two-factor, five-item; strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) scale. The two factors were seed specifications and input market uncertainty. The first factor of seed specifications was related to personal indecisiveness about the seed requirements. The second factor of input market uncertainty had two items: price stability and supply stability. It is a two-item scale. We used Batt's (2000) scale as it suited the context of our study. We conceptualize the supply uncertainty as unanticipated changes in the availability of an adequate and stable supply of inputs and hence used a single item related to the stability of supply. No modifications were required.

Customer Dependence

Dependence construct has been conceptualized in two ways: first, as a party's perception of its own dependence on other party and second, the perception of other party's dependence on them. Heide and John (1988) conceptualized the distributors' perception of their own dependence as potential replacement ability of principal. Similarly, Andaleeb (1995, 1996) measured the buyer's perception of their own dependence on the seller. We needed a scale to measure the customers' perception of their own dependence on the retailer. Very close to the context of our study, Batt (2000) measured the customer dependence on their retailer which was developed from the following studies: Anderson and Narus (1990), Frazier, Gill and Kale (1989), Heide and John (1988) and Ganesan (1994). Originally, the scale had three factors, namely, independence, availability of alternatives and comparison of alternatives with six items, three items and one item, respectively. The present study used Batt's (2000) first factor, namely, independence, which described how and despite the financial obligations between customer and retailer, most were not unduly influenced by the demands imposed upon them by the retailer. The scale was revised to conform to the specific context of our study.

Customer Trust

Morgan and Hunt (1994) measured the retailers' trust on their supplier. In an industrial purchasing context, Gao et al. (2005) assessed the buyer's trust and buyer-perceived supplier's trust adapted from previous studies (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Ganesan, 1994). In this study, Holden's (1990) 'sales trust' scale was used to assess the customer's trust in the retailer. Holden's (1990) original scale, developed to assess trust in an industrial buyer–seller relationship has eight items. The scale was again revised to conform to the present study.

Switching Cost

Blut et al. (2007) also evaluated the switching barrier with the four-staged model. They used a two-item Likert scale to evaluate the switching barrier among the customers. The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.86. Chatura and Jaideep (2003) examined a combined effect of satisfaction, trust and switching barrier on the customer retention. They examined the switching barriers by a five-item scale which had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95. The same scale was adopted for this study also with slight modifications.

Interpersonal Relationship

This study used the social relationship scale of Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler (2002), which was used to evaluate the relationship of the store salesperson and the customers. The scale is a five-item Likert scale. It yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.848. Another empirical evidence of this scale can be seen in the study of Blut et al. (2007). Our study used the scale of Kim et al. (2004); with slight modification, it is well suited to the scenario that is to be studied, that is, buyer–seller relationship.

Attractiveness of Alternatives

Kim et al. (2004), in their study of assessing the effect of customer satisfaction and switching barrier on customer loyalty, examined the effect of attractiveness of alternative mobile companies available for a customer. They used a three-item scale to evaluate the attractiveness of substitutes. In our study, we used the similar scale to evaluate the customer behaviour towards the switching behaviour when attractive alternatives are available.

Analysis and Results

Measurement Models

We used AMOS16.0 for the analysis. We first assessed the measurement model, followed by the structural model for the hypothesis testing, using the guidelines suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). In this section, we first report the results of our confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for all the measures, in order to test their convergent validity. The supply uncertainty and product familiarity (three items) did not require any modification, as their measurement model suggested a good fit with the data and reported significant factor loadings (product familiarity—$\chi^2(1) = 0.358$, $p = 0.552$, Tucker-Lewis-index (TLI) = 1.003, comparative-fit-index (CFI) = 1, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.000; composite reliability = 0.905).

Other measures, such as product importance, dependence and trust required some refinement, due to weak factor loadings and poor fit indexes. We used a minimum cut-off loading of 0.6 for all the measures. Following this procedure, we removed some of the items from product importance, dependence, trust, switching cost, attractiveness of alternatives and interpersonal relation measures. The remaining items provided a better fit and strong factor loadings as well. Table 2 summarizes the results of the CFA for all the individual measurement models.

Table 2. CFA Results for All Measures Used

Construct	Std. Reg. Coeff.	χ^2	p	df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	Composite Reliability
Product familiarity		0.358	0.552	3	1.003	1	0	0.905
Pf1	0.916							
Pf2	0.827							
Pf3	0.884							
Supply uncertainty		0.197	0.423	1	1.005	1	0	0.893
SU1	0.884							
Product importance		0.208	0.649	1	1.007	1	0	0.729
Pi1	0.761							
Pi2	0.754							
Dependence		0.56	0.454	3	1.004	1	0	
D1	0.826							
D2	0.742							
D3	0.763							
Trust		3.362	0.063	3	0.964	0.932	0	0.818
Tr1	0.764							
Tr2	0.851							
Tr3	0.810							
Switching cost		0.216	0.415	4	1.001	1	0	0.88
Sc1	0.742							
Sc2	0.761							
Sc3	0.880							
Sc4	0.863							
Sc5	0.801							
Attractiveness of alternative		0.108	0.515	1	1.004	1	0	0.714
Aa1	0.769							
Aa2	0.819							
Aa3	0.766							
Interactive relationship		0.316	0.635	3	1.005	1	0	0.773
Ip1	0.725							
Ip2	0.779							
Ip3	0.819							
Ip4	0.832							
Ip5	0.883							

Source: Author's own.

Table 3. Assessment of Discriminant Validity among Selected Pairs of Constructs

Correlation between	Estimate	Standard Error	95% CL Lower	95% CL Upper	χ^2	p	df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
CD ⟷ PF	–0.125	0.195	–0.515	0.265	3.928	0.864	8	1.01	1	0
CD ⟷ PI	–0.014	0.144	–0.302	0.274	17.353	0.004	5	0.94	0.96	0.091
CD ⟷ SC	0.012	0.131	–0.286	0.252	16.831	0.000	5	0.91	0.94	0.048
CD ⟷ SU	0.019	0.158	–0.336	0.293	18.258	0.001	8	0.96	0.97	0.093
CD ⟷ AA	–0.128	0.216	–0.524	0.271	4.196	0.998	8	1.05	1	0
CD ⟷ IR	0.0116	0.198	–0.280	0.518	16.022	0.226	5	0.99	1	0
CD ⟷ TR	0.112	0.189	–0.266	0.490	15.302	0.000	8	0.97	0.99	0.055
TR ⟷ PI	0.556	0.155	0.246	0.866	1.794	0.874	5	1	1	0
TR ⟷ IR	–0.008	0.139	–0.286	0.270	1.862	0.861	5	1.01	1	0
TR ⟷ PF	–0.032	0.18	–0.392	0.328	1.953	0.023	8	1	1	0.033

Source: Author's own.

All the measurement scales related to the study are mentioned in Appendix. Once the convergent validity for all the measures had been established, we proceeded to the next step of testing the discriminant validity with CFA among the related measures. The results are shown in Table 3. The measurement models for all the pairs had a good fit with the data. Furthermore, we used a confidence interval test to check the correlation among the measures.

Structural Model

The full structural and measurement model analysis was performed to test the fit of our proposed theoretical model with the data. The results are provided in Table 4. Fit indexes such as the χ^2 fit index, TFI, CLI and RMSEA suggested a good fit with the data $\chi^2(50) = 68.148$, $p = 0.005$, TLI = 0.984, CFI = 0.988, RMSEA = 0.035. Overall, the theoretical model was found to have a satisfactory fit with the data. We now turn our attention to the hypothesis testing, the results of which are presented in Table 4. The results indicate that the customer dependence is influenced positively by supply uncertainty (standardized coefficient = 0.277; critical ratio = 4.459) with a p-value as 0.000 and negatively influenced by product familiarity (standardized coefficient = 0.133; critical ratio = 2.066) with a p-value less than 0.05. Furthermore, product importance was found to have a significant positive association with customer trust (standardized coefficient = 0.559; critical ratio = 7.447) with a p-value of 0.000. Product importance was not influenced by customer dependence with the standardized coefficient = 0.052, critical ratio = –0.731 and $p = 0.465$. But product importance had a positive relation with customer trust. Switching cost showed a negative relation with customer dependence with the standardized coefficient = –0.145, critical ratio = –2.108 and $p = 0.004$. But, alternative attractiveness and interactive interaction did not influence customer dependency as the p-values came out to be 0.583 and 0.661, respectively. But, interactive interaction showed a positive influence on customer trust (standardize coefficient = 0.281, critical ratio = 4.487, $p = 0.000$). The main contention of our study, that of customer dependence (standardized coefficient = 0.120; critical ratio = 1.898) was found to have significant positive association with trust, with a p-value of 0.058.

Table 4. Summary of Results for the Structural Model

Paths	Hypothesis	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	p-value
Product familiarity ⟶ Customer dependency	H1a	–0.133	–2.066	0.039
Product familiarity ⟶ Customer trust	H1b	–0.014	–0.244	0.807
Product importance ⟶ Customer dependency	H2a	–0.052	–0.731	0.465
Product importance ⟶ Customer trust	H2b	0.559	7.447	0.000
Supply uncertainty ⟶ Customer dependency	H3	0.277	4.459	0.000
Switching cost ⟶ Customer dependency	H4	–0.145	–2.108	0.004
Alternative available ⟶ Customer dependency	H5	0.089	0.981	0.583
Interactive Relationship ⟶ Customer dependency	H6a	0.064	0.818	0.661
Interactive relationship ⟶ Customer trust	H6b	0.281	4.487	0.000
Customer dependency ⟶ Customer trust	H7	0.120	1.898	0.058
χ^2	68.148			
df	50			
p	0.045			
TLI	0.984			
CFI	0.988			
RMSEA	0.035			

Source: Author's own.

Conclusion

There is a well-documented research suggesting the importance of customer dependence for long-term buyer–seller relationships. However, the limited research in the marketing domain has considered the phenomenon of customer dependence in the marketplace. Our study conceptualized and empirically tested the determinants of customer dependence and its effects on customer trust.

Customer perceptions of supply uncertainty were empirically established as an important determinant of customer dependence in buyer–seller relationships, specifically in the interpersonal relationship context. When customers perceive high supply uncertainty, they attempt to adapt within an ongoing relationship (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1996) which leads to their dependence on the retailers. Primarily, this finding conforms to the implications of Williamson's TCA framework. Some researchers have shown contradicting results of the impact of uncertainty on vertical integration of relations (Leonidou, Barnes & Talias, 2006). However, our result of the positive impact of supply uncertainty on customer dependence could be one of the reasons for the previous research finding on buyer and seller cooperation during uncertainty (Eriksson & Sharma, 2003).

Perceived product familiarity was found to have no impact on customer trust. We expected a negative impact of product familiarity on customer trust. Previous research on this issue also showed contradicting results. Kennedy et al. (2001) found a significant negative relationship while Andaleeb and Anwar (1996) found the relationship to be non-significant. However, we found that the perceived product familiarity to significantly reduce customer dependence on the seller. Retailers have been provided with information and training related to the products and their functionality by the manufacturers which improves their product knowledge and gives expert power over their customers. Customers also look for such expertise from sellers to make an informed purchase decision which consequently led them to cooperate and be committed to the relationship with the sellers (Sahadev, 2005; Zhao et al., 2008). In contrast, when customers improve their familiarity with the product and possess such expert power (expertise), they do not depend on the sellers. This finding is important to the marketers and helps them to understand customer familiarity status. Soderlund (2002, p. 861) found that 'when service performance was high, high-familiarity customers expressed a higher level of satisfaction and behavioral intentions than did less familiar customers'. Furthermore, theoretically, our finding conforms with previous researches which were conducted on the similar lines by Selnes and Hansen (2001) and Capraro, Broniarczyk and Srivastava (2003) and possibly provides the missing link in their research as to why self-service reduces social bonding (Selnes & Hansen, 2001) and why knowledge about alternatives increases defection (Capraro et al., 2003).

Keaveney's (1995) evaluated the impact of switching cost on customer switching behaviour. He found that higher the switching cost, lesser a person will switch the retailer and thus will be more dependent on the retailer. Similarly, our study evaluated a positive impact of switching cost on customer dependence of customer on the retailer. The more the person has to pay for switching a retailer, the more he will be dependent on him. The same results were obtained by Lee, Lee and Feick (2001), where they proved a positive impact of switching cost on customer dependency. In our study, we studied the relationship between interactive relationship and customer dependency. We emphatically evaluated that there is a positive relationship between interactive relation of customer and retailer and customer trust on retailer. This showed that the retailers should maintain a healthy interactive relationship with the customers in order to increase the trust on them. Earlier studies have also reported the importance of social interactions for trust development. So, the marketers should focus on one-to-one social interactions with the people, as in Indian scenario the customer still relies on retailer and trusts him.

Perceived product importance was found to have no impact on customer dependence, but it does exert a significant impact on customer trust. This finding implies that the customers are comfortable in being positive about the retailers and they expect higher perceptions of performance when they perceive the product to be important, and consequently manifest trust on the retailers rather than feel dependent on them (Cannon & Perreault, 1999; Patterson et al., 1997). Theoretically, these finding compliments similar researches conducted earlier (Batt, 2000; Liang & Wang, 2008).

Our main contention on the effect of customer dependence on customer trust was well studied. Basically, this result emphasizes the relevance of interpersonal trust development perspective (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996) in interpersonal-based buyer–seller relationships. The possible subsequent interactions between the buyer and seller add to mutual knowledge and positive experiences, which may lead to information symmetry. Such trust between buyer and seller leads to joint goals, cooperative behaviour and collective decision-making and collective efforts. Hence, this process negates the negative consequences of customer dependence in buyer–seller relationship. Also, Morgan and Hunt (1994) in their original model found that the manufacturer's less opportunistic behaviour enhances the retailer's trust and in their extended model hypothesized that the manufacturer's power reduces retailer trust. Basically, they conceptualized customer trust from the perspective of the perceived behaviour about partners (manufacturer/supplier/seller). However, we conceptualized customer's trust from customer perspective, that is, how customer trust develops when customers feel they are dependent. Future research could also focus on how customer trust develops when customers perceive lack of power from their side and when they have less opportunistic behavioural tendencies.

Implication

We derive several implications from this finding. Apart from providing high-quality products and services and satisfying the customers (Kennedy et al., 2001), improving communication and inculcating shared values (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) to develop customer trust, the marketers should also look at building the dependence negating its negative consequences as it eventually enhances trust. Marketers can nurture dependence mechanisms towards the goals of trust-based, long-lasting relationships by providing ongoing streams of suitable products, facilitating upgrades from one product to another or investing in capital, people, lasting assets and basic business procedures (Jackson, 1985). Further, this result could be applied to the case of inter-firm alliances. Both the alliance partners should invest in men, machine and money which would increase mutual dependence and that would finally lead the alliance to a mutual trust-based long-term success.

Appendix

Measurement scales after back translation (statements followed by (–) indicate reverse scoring).

Product Familiarity—seven-point semantic differential scale.

1. How familiar or unfamiliar were you with the product you purchased, before first visiting the current retailer's shop? (Completely familiar to completely unfamiliar) (–).
2. How informed or uninformed were you about the product, prior to first visiting the current retailer? (Fully informed to not at all informed) (–).
3. How knowledgeable or unknowledgeable were you about the product before first visiting the current retailer? (Knew all to knew nothing at all) (–).

Supply Uncertainty—seven-point scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree.
The supply of products is highly unstable.

Product Importance—seven-point scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. I buy the products from my retailer frequently.
2. This product is the most significant component of my total production costs.

Customer Dependence—seven-point scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. My retailer decides what brand of product I should use.
2. My retailer controls all the information pertaining to decision making in our relationship.
3. My retailer has all decision making power in our relationship.

Customer Trust—seven-point scale: strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. My retailer would not lie even if he could gain by doing so.
2. My retailer always maintains his principle of honesty and integrity even though his business is not doing particularly well.
3. My retailer can be trusted.

Switching Cost—seven points: strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. There are difficulties with changing my retailer.
2. Changing the retailer is a costly affair.

3. Lot of effort in terms of distance is required if I change my retailer.
4. I might have changed my retailer if doing was a simple task.

Attractiveness of Alternative—seven points: strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1 Alternative retailer carries a good reputation.
2. Alternative retailer carries a good image.
3. Alternative retailer carries overall good service quality.

Interpersonal Relationship—seven point: strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. Carrier's care for customer.
2. Trust towards carrier.
3. Intimacy felt towards carrier.
4. Level of communication with carrier.

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