

Supplier experience as antecedent to supplier satisfaction - An explorative study of SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Suppliers play a crucial role in maintaining and increasing their customer companies' market competitiveness. Prior research recognizes the importance of supplier satisfaction to a strong and effective supply chain; however, research reflecting the supplier experience is scarce. That is surprising because customer-related research recognizes the interrelatedness and independence of customer experience and satisfaction. This study introduces the concept of supplier experience and explores the factors contributing to it in small and medium-sized enterprises. Further, by building on social exchange theory, the study introduces the process that shapes supplier experience. The findings demonstrate that supplier experience is formed when a supplier compares its expectations to the costs and benefits of a customer relationship and to alternative relationships. The comparison is made based on the reactions and responses to the interaction and stimuli of a supplier regarding communication, relational practices, the use of power, and the use of digital technology in a customer relationship and comparing these elements to the benefits of the relationship. The findings of the study offer directions for further research and discussions on the supplier experience.

1. Introduction

The competition in markets has shifted from a company level toward a supply-chain level. Accordingly, companies should strive to develop supplier relationships (Hudnurkar & Ambekar, 2019). Supply chains are a crucial part of a firm's operations and the relationships within them are critical to firm performance (Prajogo et al., 2024), central to strategic decision-making (Gu, 2024), and a source of vital external expertise (Ma & Ozer, 2024). Prior research established that companies that collaborate with suppliers can improve their performance (Gu, 2024; Pulles et al., 2016). Further, supplier satisfaction is found to be an important factor in a strong and effective supply chain (Benton & Maloni, 2005). Hudnurkar and Ambekar (2019) recommend that buyer firms view suppliers as collaborators and strive to enhance their satisfaction. Accordingly, suppliers should be viewed as central elements of building and maintaining competitive advantage (Vos et al., 2016), and strategically important suppliers should be treated as partners rather than as outsiders (Ganguly & Roy, 2021).

Prior research has investigated supplier satisfaction, which depends on a supplier feeling that a buyer's incentives and supplier's

contributions within the buyer–supplier relationship are essentially fair (Benton & Maloni, 2005; Essig & Amann, 2009; Hudnurkar & Ambekar, 2019). Hence, supplier satisfaction relates to feelings of fairness and equity, which might be affected by how suppliers experience the buyer–supplier relationship. Marketing research indicates that satisfaction and experience are two distinct but connected concepts (Klaus & Phil Maklan, 2013; Srivastava & Kaul, 2014). Researchers often employ the customer satisfaction concept to investigate the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm within consumer choice models (Thakur, 2019). While customer experience encompasses numerous touchpoints throughout the exchange journey (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014), including cognitive, affective, social, and physical responses (Klaus & Phil Maklan, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009).

There is no universally recognized definition of supplier experience. We propose that while supplier satisfaction is triggered by supplier needs and expectations being met (usually associated with suppliers feeling they have been fairly treated), supplier experience encompasses the entirety of interactions and perceptions throughout the supplier–buyer relationship, thus extending beyond satisfaction alone. Accordingly, while supplier satisfaction and supplier experience are

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related, they are distinct facets that contribute uniquely to the overall dynamic of the supplier–buyer interaction. Hence, we define supplier experience as reactions and responses emerging from interaction and collaboration occurring within the supply chain that significantly influence supplier satisfaction. In addition, we draw on social exchange theory (SET) and view supplier experience as a reciprocal process involving interactions that generate obligations and expectations, including comparisons with alternatives. This, in turn, affects the feelings of fairness and equity constituting supplier satisfaction. Using SET suits investigating an evolving topic as exploratory research requires qualitative, open-ended data to reveal insights and support theory building (Makri & Neely, 2021). There is a lack of research on supplier experience that could enhance our understanding of it as a concept. Therefore, this study explores supplier experience and its development from the perspective of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) suppliers. Our research question is: “What factors contribute to the formation of supplier experience in the buyer–supplier relationship?”

It is important to understand the factors shaping supplier experience, particularly because recent events that disrupted supply chains highlighted the benefits of maintaining good supplier relationships (Basu et al., 2023; Jääskeläinen et al., 2023). Prior research has shown that collaborating with suppliers does not directly produce competitive advantage. Competitors might collaborate with the same suppliers (Hunt & Davis, 2008) and suppliers allocate resources differently among customers based on their satisfaction and experience of the relationship (Vos et al., 2016). A recent study by Prajogo et al. (2024) focusing on SMEs showed that a buyer’s unfair and socially irresponsible practices adversely affect a supplier’s willingness to continue the relationship with a buyer. However, why suppliers treat customers differently remains understudied (Jääskeläinen et al., 2023). Our research clarifies this phenomenon and offers several contributions. First, our exploratory research illuminates the formation of supplier experience and identifies the factors associated with its development. Second, we propose a theoretical model encapsulating supplier experience based on the premises of SET and findings derived from empirical data. Third, we outline means to foster supplier experience to enhance competitive value chains. Fourth, we focus on SME suppliers, an under-researched perspective despite numerous SMEs being integral to supply chains.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social exchange, supplier satisfaction, and preferred customer theory

The paper draws on social exchange theory (SET), which views social exchange as a reciprocal process involving interactions that generate obligations (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Das & Teng, 2002). This article treats buyer–supplier relationships as social exchange processes, recognizing that interorganizational relationships are embedded within broader social networks (e.g., Andersson et al., 2002; Dyer & Singh, 1998). According to SET, the balance of costs and benefits determines the continuation of a relationship, meaning, for example, that when the cost of a relationship outweighs its benefits, the relationship is likely to be terminated (e.g., Blau, 1964). Furthermore, SET posits that the net outcome of an exchange relationship is compared with that from alternative relationships to guide decisions on continuing it (Wallenburg & Handfield, 2022). Prior research also views buyer–supplier relationships as social exchange processes and demonstrates that suppliers’ expectations of buyers affect their willingness to assign preferred customer status (Schiele et al., 2012). Buyer firms often seek preferred customer status to obtain critical resources and capabilities that confer a competitive advantage (Schiele et al., 2012).

Preferred customer status can bring price, availability, and services concessions, and boost resource allocation to a buyer firm (Piechota et al., 2021; Schiele et al., 2012). It should be a goal of a well-developed buyer–supplier relationship (Q. Yang et al., 2023). In line with SET, suppliers analyze their relationships with buyers by comparing their

outcomes to expectations and alternative relationships. This assessment drives decisions about whether to assign preferred or regular customer status, and about the continuance of a relationship (Schiele et al., 2012). The comparison of outcomes, expectations, and alternatives are central elements of preferred customer theory (e.g., Schiele, 2022). Supplier satisfaction reflects a buyer firm’s ability to meet a supplier’s expectations (Schiele et al., 2012; Vos et al., 2016), can help predict supplier performance (Janssens et al., 2023; Weller et al., 2021), and is thus an important influence on a firm attaining preferred customer status (Nollet et al., 2012; Piechota et al., 2021; Schiele et al., 2012; Vos et al., 2016).

Although, supplier satisfaction is an important antecedent of achieving preferred customer status, it is not a necessary condition (Piechota et al., 2021; Schiele, 2022). Customer companies benefit if they are awarded a preferred customer status, as prior research has demonstrated that preferred customers receive privileges (Schiele, 2022). For example, Bemelmans et al. (2015) found that preferred customers are the first to be offered innovative goods or services and expedited delivery terms, even if not exclusively preferred. Patrucco et al. (2019) found that preferred customers’ are prioritized when innovations are launched and cost reductions are feasible. Consequently, achieving preferred customer status may produce a competitive advantage, as it enables better access to supplier resources than competing companies can achieve (Pulles et al., 2016). While prior studies have examined the antecedents of preferred customer status, a supplier experience perspective is rare.

2.2. The customer and supplier experience

Marketing scholars have examined the customer experience and its effects on business-to-business (B2B) relationships (e.g., Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). However, despite the importance of suppliers to creating competitive advantage (Vos et al., 2016), the concept of supplier experience remains unexplored. Customer experience has been described as “holistic in nature involving the customer’s cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to any direct or indirect contact with a service provider, brand or product across multiple touchpoints during the entire customer journey” (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015, p. 431). Customer experience is particularly complex in B2B contexts because multiple actors interact in different phases (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023). Customer experience is shaped by responses and reactions to stimuli during interactions with the seller (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), and is built through touchpoints creating memorable experiences that can prompt repurchase decisions or recommendations (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023; Puccinelli et al., 2009). Further, customer experience encompasses both cognitive, rational elements and subjective, affective elements (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023). Becker and Jaakkola (2020) asserted that satisfaction or perceived quality should not be viewed as components of customer experience, but as outcomes, suggesting customer experience is an antecedent of satisfaction (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023).

Similarly, we propose that the supplier experience should be viewed as an antecedent of supplier satisfaction and attaining preferred customer status. Research on customer experience indicates that key components include the nature of a relationship, touchpoint control, function, hierarchy level, and stage of the customer journey (Witell et al., 2020). Additionally, Keiningham et al. (2020) emphasized that customer experience is multidimensional and encompasses cognitive, physical, sensory, emotional, and social elements. These elements are crucial in planning and managing the customer experience, as they can also be sources of competitive differentiation (Keiningham et al., 2020).

However, customer relationships differ markedly from supplier relationships, such as power dynamics (Lacoste & Johnsen, 2015), thus the formation of supplier experience may not mirror the process resulting in customer experience. But it can be assumed that supplier experience is as multidimensional as customer experience in terms of what people think, how they interact, what they experience, how they feel and how

they share those feelings (Keiningham et al., 2020). Therefore, the supplier experience would be formed mainly through touchpoints with customers. Similarly, Roy and Bhatia (2019) argued that in B2B settings, the service experience of a customer is shaped through interactions between a service provider and the customer. Additionally, Cepeda-Carrión et al. (2023) emphasize the role of the moments of truth or touchpoints in shaping customer experience; they argue that suppliers must offer flexible and skilled staff and quality service to generate the moments of truth through which customer experience is formed. Accordingly, we propose that supplier experience mirrors customer experience in being formed through touchpoints with buyers, and encompassing both cognitive and affective elements; however, we seek to specify its constituent factors in the context of SME suppliers involved in B2B relationships.

3. Methodology

The current study is exploratory, and therefore adopts a qualitative case study approach. The case study approach provides an in-depth understanding of the elements that form the supplier experience (see e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Further, the case study approach is a suitable method because the supplier experience concept remains understudied and it allows for exploring a “phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1989, p. 23). In addition, the case study approach is recommended in situations where little is known about the phenomenon in question and when existing theory seems inadequate (Eisenhardt, 1989) and for exploratory purposes (Rashid et al., 2019).

The current study focuses on SMEs operating in the manufacturing industry. The SMEs were required to have a turnover of less than EUR 50 million. We chose SMEs because they are most likely operating as suppliers to industrial companies. In addition, SMEs provide an interesting perspective through which to explore the supplier experience, given that their customers include companies ranging from SMEs to large multinational enterprises. That improves the likelihood of capturing issues related to the power dynamics of interorganizational relationships. In many buyer–supplier relationships, the supplier will often be in a vulnerable exchange position owing to the buyer firm being far larger (Glavee-Geo et al., 2022). Further, Owalla et al. (2022) argue that it is important to focus research on SMEs for several reasons: 1) SMEs are vital to national economies, 2) there is a productivity gap between SMEs and larger firms, and 3) SMEs, for example, a lag in terms of the digital transition and face more structural barriers. Therefore, in this study, SMEs are treated as cases.

In total, 22 companies were contacted, of which nine declined to participate. Further, one of the companies contacted proved unsuitable for the study based on their manufacturing profile, which focused more on B2C products than B2B ones. All the selected companies produced B2B products, and their turnovers were below EUR 50 million. The study is thus informed by data from 12 manufacturing SMEs from Finland. The data were collected through interviews; the first part of the interview was open, and the second part was themed, with interviewees asked to consider relationships under different themes. The interviews were guided by the SET principles, meaning that in the first part, the interviewees were asked to consider and reflect on both good and bad customer relationships or experiences, which created an arrangement of comparisons with alternatives. This type of open interview frame also enables an exploratory approach as interviewees can raise issues that they feel are meaningful. In the second part, the interviewees were also asked to reflect on their experiences with customers in light of themes around business transactions and pricing, the social aspects of a relationship, relationship structures, and future prospects.

The interviewees were selected based on their position in the company, meaning the interviewees mostly held managerial positions such as CEO and Operations Manager. We anticipated these senior managers

would have a broad knowledge of their firms’ interorganizational activities with customers. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the case companies’ premises. Two interviewers were present for the first interview, while in the remainder of the cases, one person conducted the interview. There were either one or two interviewees present. The length of the interviews varied from 29 to 54 min, and the average length was 39 min. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition to background information, it is important to mention that suppliers had several different interaction points with customers, of which the three most common were top management, purchasers, and people from the manufacturing unit, depending on the customer’s organizational structure and size. The summary of the interviews is presented in Table 1.

The transcribed interviews were reviewed several times before data processing to ensure that the data were fully understood. The data were analyzed by employing the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2012; Magnani & Gioia, 2023) in which the data analysis moves from informant-centered codes (1st order codes) toward theory-centered themes (2nd order themes) and, finally, to aggregate dimensions. First, two researchers independently coded the data, then discussed their analysis before agreeing the final data structure. The process increased the trustworthiness of the data analysis and ensured that the interpretations were similar based on the data and not biased by an individual researcher’s perspective. Coding was done using NVivo 14 software. The coding process involved coding the supplier experience-related issues from the interview transcripts after excerpts were analyzed to identify a common nominator between excerpts representing first-order codes. Next, the first-order codes were coded into second-order themes based on the common nominators found between the first-order codes. Finally, the second-order themes were coded into aggregated dimensions based on the relationship structure they represented. The final data structure is presented in Fig. 1.

4. Findings

The data analysis revealed four influential components of the supplier experience: communication, relational practices, the use of power, and the use of digital technology.

4.1. Communication

The empirical data revealed that communication-related factors affecting the supplier experience can be grouped under three themes: openness, continuation, and wording and tone. The suppliers considered that open communication is a positive element in customer relationships. A customer’s willingness to openly communicate and give feedback on a supplier’s quotations to the supplier can enhance the supplier experience. Openness in communication was considered to foster understanding among the parties to the relationship. Further, openness related to future forecasts was seen as an influential factor regarding the supplier experience.

Openness is extremely important in a customer relationship. It also generates those other operational activities, their functionality or non-functionality. Openness makes a big difference if we start from the top level. Through openness, both parties are able to listen and understood each other’s principles. (S2).

They don’t hold back information at all. They tell you exactly as it is. That’s great. You get the feeling that you want to be there with them, that we can do well in the markets. Then there are others that don’t tell you. (S7).

Our data revealed that suppliers perceived the communication was more detached with some of the larger companies. Suppliers did not necessarily have direct contact with the representative of a customer

Table 1
Summary of the interviews.

ID	Industry	Position(s)	Turnover	Employees	Interview length (minutes)	Transcribed pages
S1	Machinery and equipment manufacturing	CEO + Operations Manager	11–19ME	50–100	54	26
S2	Mechanical engineering workshop	Operations Manager	5–10 ME	20–49	30	9
S3	Machinery and equipment manufacturing	CEO	> 5 ME	10–19	44	17
S4	Plastic industry	CEO + COO	5–10 ME	20–49	31	12
S5	Mechanical engineering workshop	CEO	5–10 ME	20–49	30	13
S6	Machinery and equipment manufacturing	CEO	5–10 ME	20–49	47	16
S7	Mechanical engineering workshop	CEO	5–10 ME	20–49	43	19
S8	Mechanical engineering workshop	CEO	5–10 ME	20–49	37	17
S9	Machinery and equipment manufacturing	CEO	20–50	50–100	49	20
S10	Mechanical engineering workshop	CEO	> 5 ME	20–49	37	13
S11	Mechanical engineering workshop	CEO	> 5 ME	>10	33	17
S12	Plastic industry	CEO	> 5 ME	>10	29	12

organization and were not even necessarily sure who their contact person was. Such a situation would complicate interactions with the customer. In this kind of case, customer companies were usually larger units, whereas, with smaller firms, the connection was more straightforward and, therefore, efficient. Further, detached communication was perceived as avoidance by the suppliers.

Usually, the bigger one has a bigger organization, and it is a bit more distant compared to a smaller firm, where the interaction is very direct with the so-called ordering entity and the performing entity, meaning that there are no intermediate organizations. That's how it works. (S5).

You have to find a consensus and establish direct communication and direct answers. No beating around the bush and then bringing up the matter two weeks later, saying this is how it should be. Instead, things should be discussed directly. (S4).

Continuity of communication was highlighted in the empirical data. Continuous communication was appreciated as it supported interorganizational operations, as regular communication and timely information help suppliers, for example, in planning the production in a way that the customer gets critical parts or components in time if there are some delays regarding the whole supply. Further, continuous communication was perceived as a building block for a trusting and long-lasting relationship.

Daily, or at least weekly, interaction with such a customer is usually part of a good relationship, because then both parties always know where things stand. (S11).

Our best customer relationships are such that the information flow is continuous, and there is ongoing dialogue all the time (S6).

However, the fragmentation of interaction creates various challenges for suppliers as they may not receive all the information needed from the customer. For example, when an interaction is fragmented, suppliers may not get information about why customers have chosen some other supplier instead of them. Further, changes in customer relations and staffing, which also relate to suppliers, may remain unclear.

And then, when I mention, for example, that there was a change in personnel, it caused this kind of challenge in the old customer relationship. (S3).

In a faceless situation, then you don't always know why you're not a supplier; you don't get that feedback directly. Could it be something like, for example, in our case, that the designer prefers a particular brand, or is it a price, or is there something else behind it? (S5).

Moreover, the data analysis shows that the wording and tone that customer representatives adopt in communications with suppliers is important to the supplier experience. Naturally, a negative tone

adversely affects the supplier experience, while a relational tone helps create a positive supplier experience. Further, suppliers consciously select the style and wording they use when interacting with customers in order to maintain the relationship. Straightforward communication involving feeling free to make suggestions would be appropriate with some customers but for others, a more cautious approach would be appropriate.

When it comes to big global companies, the reception is not necessarily what it should be. It is taken more as, to put it bluntly, sarcasm. 'Don't come here to advise us.' (S2).

Yes, yes, because, as I said, if we go to the wrong person to say something like this, they'll take offense, like a football-sized pea up their nose, and it affects the customer relationship. You can't just go and say anything. (S9).

The analysis revealed that interorganizational communication is an important factor in the supplier experience. Suppliers interpret and react to interactions and communication occurring in an interorganizational relationship. The reactions and interpretations are then compared to the benefits of the relationships for the supplier company and from alternative relationships. If the outcome is negative, the relationship may be terminated.

After every call, you always must consider with the more difficult ones, whether this will continue or not (S7).

Communication in buyer–supplier relationships influences the supplier experience in several ways. Table 2 combines the results of the communication dimension, divides the results into positive and negative experiences, and offers some recommendations. In summary, we can conclude that timely, dialogical, and appropriately toned communication fosters positive supplier experiences, whereas detached communication, lack of dialogue, fragmented communication, and an authoritarian communication style create negative experiences.

4.2. Relational practices

Analysis revealed that relational practices, such as cooperation, commitment, and trust, are important aspects of the supplier experience. Cooperation-related practices can have either a positive or negative effect on the supplier experience. The cooperation reflects shared goals and a common understanding of the business relationship and its objectives. Suppliers are the experts on their products, and the data analysis shows that some customers use this expertise more than others.

Still, there's a bit of a situation where a suggestion for improvement is thrown out, and a year goes by, and nothing has happened. (S2).

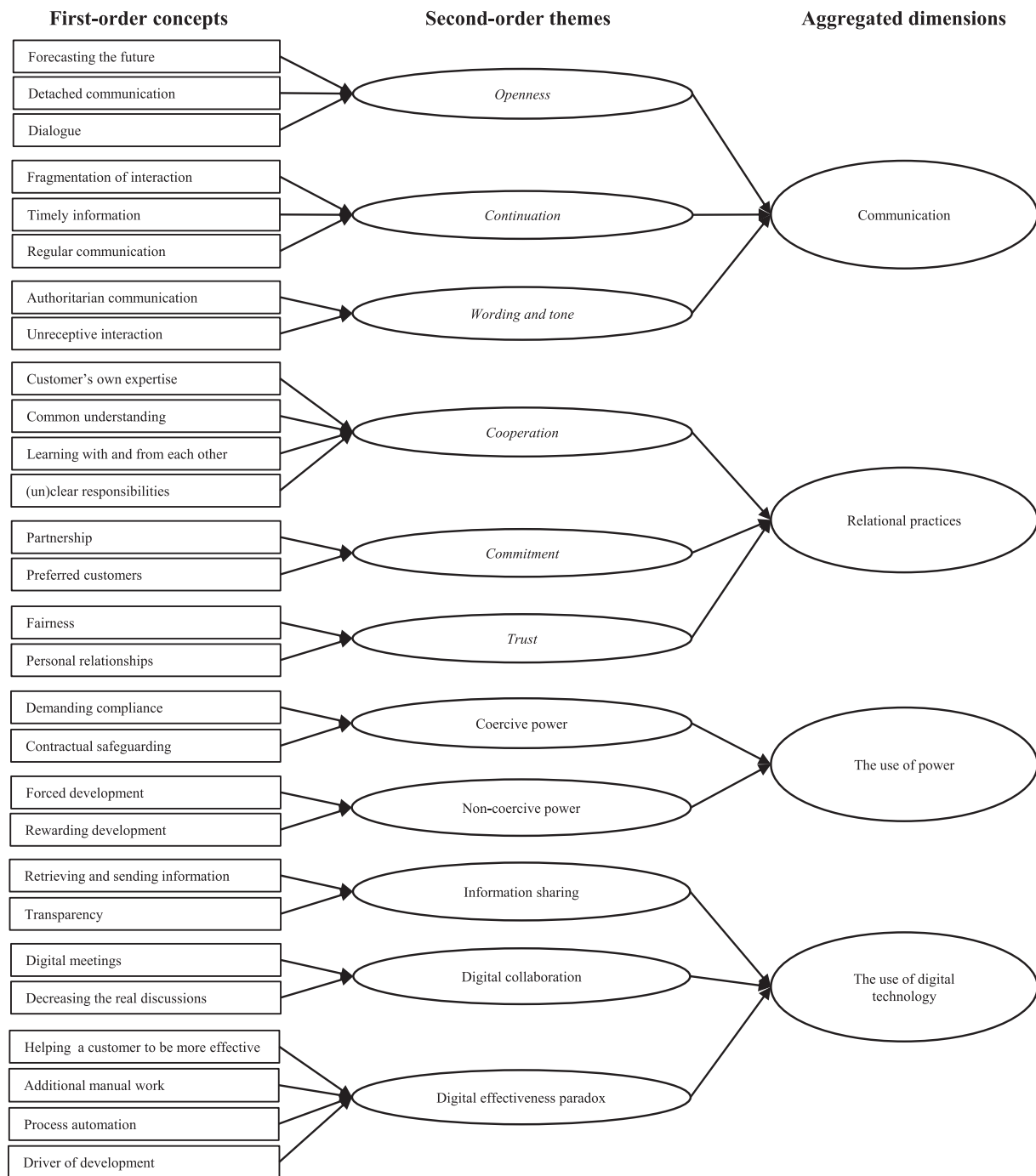


Fig. 1. Data structure.

But then, when we work on such a project for the customer, and there's a good end result, it often happens that we brainstorm solutions together. Often, the solution can be really challenging, and we brainstorm it together, throwing ideas back and forth, and then we come to a conclusion (S3).

The suppliers also emphasize that the customer's own expertise on operations, products, and procurement affects the relationship and, further, the supplier experience. Additionally, clear responsibilities are an important factor affecting the supplier experience. The analysis revealed that the supplier's experience is affected by unclear responsibilities and a reluctance to take responsibility, which occur within big companies.

We also have some customers who are a bit confused themselves, not knowing what they're ordering and when they're ordering. (S6).

In my opinion, it's a good example of when you question everything, you don't take responsibility for anything in any way, but then if you say, 'This is good, let's go this way,' then you take responsibility for that matter. A challenging customer is someone who lacks expertise and knowledge and questions everything about the matter. They don't really trust the supplier but instead, keep asking why things are done a certain way despite assurances that certain steps have been taken. (S3).

Commitment reflects a supplier's commitment to always serve preferred customers first. In addition, a customer's commitment to cooperate with suppliers was considered an essential element in forming

Table 2
Summary of the findings of communication.

Communication	Positive experience	Negative experience	Recommendation
Forecasting the future	Information sharing and openness in regard to future forecasts	Uncertainty about the future	
	Supports an ability to react when needed	Buyer not sharing information	
Openness	Direct communication	No direct contact between buyer and supplier	Establishing practices that support constant dialogue between buyer and supplier in core relationships.
	Clear roles in regard to contact persons	Uncertainty about contact persons	Information sharing and openness create the foundation for effective operations and well-functioning relationship
Dialogue	Creates understanding among parties and of each other's businesses principles	Not receiving answers to questions	Clear roles in regard to contact persons in organizational boundaries
	Creates trust	Lack of dialogue in regard to core customers	
Fragmentation of interaction	Enables reacting to problems as they arise	Information shortfall	
	Supports situational awareness during the project, and the ability to anticipate customer needs	Lack of knowledge about the customer's situation	Developing a routine for regular information sharing between buyers and suppliers in collaborative relationships
Continuation	Timely information		Analyzing the need for information sharing depending on product complexity
	Regular communication		Creating clear rules and policies about appropriate communication practices with suppliers
Wording and tone	Authoritarian communication	Negative tone and perceived unfair bossing	
	Unreceptive interaction	Buyer's negative attitudes toward development suggestions	Arranging meetings focusing on development and offering an opportunity to share insights

the supplier experience, as it shows mutual commitment and considering the relationship to be a partnership. Moreover, a lack of commitment also manifests in the supplier experience.

We did prioritize taking care of those old, good customer relationships. There were many new inquiries, but primarily, we took care of the old ones. (S5).

If the customer has provided us with material that is not accurate, then it's not our problem. (S2).

Suppliers emphasized that trust is an important factor in creating the supplier experience. Trust is present in many different situations. For example, cooperation and communication in customer–supplier relationships may be ad-hoc and cemented verbally. Actions might be agreed upon face-to-face but not always systematically written down and officially sanctioned. That can affect how a supplier is treated by the customer company, for example, in regard to delivery progress and partial deliveries of a shipment. The suppliers highlighted that it is important to be able to trust the customer; if something is agreed upon, for example, flexibility around delivery dates, it should not negatively influence the supplier performance figures monitored by the customer company.

It's kind of a company-specific thing, but I would see that the similarity is always in the trust aspect. That's always the first thing to earn when working together. So, if there are any problems, we call at the point when we know them rather than waiting to see if it affects the supply. Instead, we immediately communicate that there's such and such a situation; for example, our machine broke down, and we won't be able to get it done now. So, we try to inform each other in a timely manner if there are any delays or anything like that, which we can't influence ourselves. (S10).

When dealing with challenging projects, I think the most important thing is to always be honest about how things are going. For example, if you have a project that's three weeks behind schedule, it's not worth telling the customer that we're completely on schedule. (S3).

Further, trust is seen as a central element of relational practices related to the long-term relationships between suppliers and customers with a win-win orientation. In a long-term supplier–customer relationship, trust may be built through personal relationships with certain people.

Everything starts with trust, from the immediate feeling of whether both parties are equally invested. One is the customer, the other is the supplier, and both understood that they need each other...Trust is the be-all and end-all of everything. (S7).

And then we talk about personal chemistry and how things have been made to work. Then, at the worst end, the chemistry doesn't work at all, but usually, these relationships aren't terribly long-lasting...The importance of personal relationships is significant, and we aim to have a reasonable amount of face-to-face contact. (S2).

Table 3 summarizes the findings on relational practices. The existence of relational practices such as cooperation, commitment, and trust make the supplier experience positive. However, factors such as a customer's limited operational experience, or of procurement and the products create challenges for suppliers and, therefore, also trigger negative experiences. Similarly, if customers do not deliver on promises or act unfairly, the experience becomes soured.

4.3. The use of power

The analysis revealed that the use of coercive and non-coercive

Table 3
Summary of the findings of relational practices.

Relational practices	Positive experience	Negative experience	Recommendation
Cooperation	Customer's own experience (operational, buying, products)	Possibilities and willingness to develop better solutions together	The buyer's insufficient expertise affects the entire supply chain's performance. Clear roles, responsibilities, and the expertise of a buyer supports better operations and creates better supplier experience
	Common understanding	Seamless collaboration	
	Learning with and from each other	Sharing knowledge and developing operations and products together	
Commitment	(Un)clear responsibilities	Clear responsibilities and willingness to take responsibility	Interaction and communication between buyer and supplier supports understanding between parties.
	Partnership	Willingness to be flexible	
	Preferred customers	The suppliers' willingness to go the extra mile for the customer	
Trust	Fairness	Serving old, good customers first and allocating the best resources to them	Instead of competing on price, building a long-term partnership with core customers supports commitment and enhances the opportunity to achieve preferred customer status and treatment
	Personal relationships	An atmosphere enabling honest communication and open discussion of challenges that emerge	
		Win-win orientation	
	Long-term relationships with well-known persons	Being unable to trust verbal agreements	Trust arises from long-term collaboration, personal relationships and a sense of fairness. A confidential atmosphere and fair treatment of suppliers increases the feeling of trust, which enhances the supplier experience
	Trusting a certain person	The facelessness of a relationships	

power shapes the supplier experience. Typically, in buyer–supplier relationships, buyers have the power as they are the paying customer. This setting was also evident in the data. Although the presence of power dynamics was recognized, the use of coercive power affected the supplier experience. Suppliers felt it unfair and negative if customer representatives leveraged their position as buyers to demand obedience from the suppliers. The use of coercive power was interpreted as an indication of distrust in the supplier's competence.

'We haven't ordered these, but they need to be here by tomorrow. And we just have to get those.' It sends shivers down your spine from irritation. It's part of life, and we live with it, but especially from the procurement side, that's where directions can be given (S2).

Further, suppliers recognized that the distribution of power within a large customer firm affected the supplier experience. If customer representatives are not authorized to make decisions, it reveals someone on the customer side is avoiding responsibility.

Yeah, that responsibility should be given, and rights should be given to sort of a lower level, to the level that actually makes those decisions, give them the rights there, and maybe not control them so much. (S5).

Suppliers protect themselves against the coercive power of customers through contracts, meaning that suppliers want to make sure that everything agreed in a customer relationship is written in a contract. Further, suppliers felt safe following the contract in unclear situations.

We have everything specified very well, but then it's very important that when the challenging customer arrives, you can show them in black and white, 'this is how we've agreed, and this is what we do.' (S3).

The use of coercive power seems to affect the supplier experience negatively. Exploiting a stronger position and demanding compliance was interpreted as treating suppliers badly, which could lead to the termination of a relationship. Simultaneously, applying non-coercive power was interpreted as a positive development and as positively

affecting the supplier experience, such that doing so supported the continuation of the buyer–supplier relationship.

We don't have to work for every customer. If we really don't like something or if we're treated poorly, we don't have to do it. Absolutely not. (S7).

So, we often operate with much larger companies than we are ourselves. So sometimes it feels like the big company somehow uses its position toward us. There are good experiences there, of course, and then there are some not-so-good experiences. (S8).

Further, the use of power may also produce positive outcomes from the suppliers' perspective, as non-coercive power seems to guide and support suppliers in developing their own operations so that, eventually, the supplier is satisfied. These changes can be somewhat forced; however, suppliers also agree that certain changes for the operations might have remained unmade if the customer had not demanded them.

If you say that the customer develops you, well, ... the customer has indeed developed us considerably and taken us forward in many aspects. (S3).

Table 4. summarizes the findings on the use of power. From the suppliers' perspective, the use of power can drive positive and negative experiences. Contracts create security in a relationship, and positive pressure from customers drives suppliers to develop and progress. However, coercive power is perceived as distrust and an abuse of power, which eventually may lead to the ending of the relationship.

4.4. The use of digital technology

Digital technology plays a significant role in shaping the supplier experience. The usage of digital technologies is illustrated through three dimensions in the empirical data: information sharing, digital collaboration, and digital effectiveness paradox. The influence of digital

Table 4
Summary of the findings of the use of power.

The use of power	Positive experience	Negative experience	Recommendation
Coercive power	Demanding compliance	Customers using their positions and demanding a supplier to obey Interpreting the use of coercive power as distrust for supplier's competency	The use of coercive power may lead to ending the relationship. Act fairly and justify the requirements.
	Contractual safeguarding	Written contracts are followed, and minimal flexibility is offered without a contract Pressure from the customer to develop	
Non-coercive power	Forced development	Necessary changes	The use of non-coercive power may benefit the relationship and further development of the relationship, collaboration and a supplier's operations
	Rewarding development	Developing and progressing together with a customer toward larger projects	

technology on the supplier experience varied from positive to negative.

Information sharing through digital systems is part of the everyday operations of buyer–supplier relationships. Information on orders was shared through different digital platforms and portals, and suppliers reported having to use multiple portals and platforms to send and retrieve data depending on customer preference. However, the use of digital technologies has enabled access to the customer's digital systems, which is seen mostly as positive, as suppliers then have access to the data in real time, and the information needed is available. However, the lack or shortage of relevant information gained through digital platforms was reported to cause more manual work, as suppliers then need to ask for the missing information from the customer. If the situation becomes embedded, the use of digital technologies can become a negative experience for the supplier. The data analysis shows that the use of digital technology is mostly seen to increase both the transparency and the accuracy of data. In addition, the invitation to customers' digital systems may also signal trust and importance for a supplier, which appears to improve the supplier experience.

If you're a significant player, then you're involved in it. They don't necessarily include all suppliers in that system. (S6).

It goes there [digital platform], and it leaves a trace there when the order is done; it is one of the rare good sides of digital platforms in that it leaves a trace. (S5).

The respondents reported that digital collaboration made working more efficient, as virtual meetings are not as time-consuming as visiting the customer facilities in person. However, the suppliers reported that the adoption of virtual meetings has reduced the number of real discussions and personal communication, which may drive errors arising from sub-optimal communication.

Nowadays, all meetings are on Teams. It's terribly easy, and we can quickly gather people together, and they can be in different places, and the work can be done...But then again, on the other hand, maybe there's still a bit of getting used to it, so sometimes it feels like it's a bit too easy to practically steal each other's time and arrange those Teams meetings. (S8).

The data analysis revealed the existence of a digital effectiveness paradox, which means that using digital technologies may not always lead to more efficient working. Some suppliers reported struggling with the customers' demands to utilize various digital systems, such as digital portals and platforms. From the suppliers' perspective, these types of digital systems may increase the amount of manual work, as the digital systems are planned from the customer's perspective and not always integrated with the suppliers'. The outcome can be manually adding and

moving information between multiple systems. However, some suppliers reported that digital technology has helped automate processes and decreased the amount of manual work. Further, some of the relationship-specific information reporting seems to have been moved to the customers' digital systems and become the responsibility of the supplier rather than the customer. Some suppliers concluded that the customer companies are making the suppliers do their job as they have to input information directly to the customer's systems.

It's [using digital tools] as useless as work as can be. digitalization has been sought, meaning this kind of automation, but in reality, we've gone backward. There's an enormous workload; people here are just typing away at something. (S9).

But now that we have a varying number of clients and each of the big ones has its own portal, it just adds to our workload. We have to manage this portal, that portal, another portal, and yet another portal. It becomes a jungle of different applications and digitalization. No one can perfectly manage all of them. (S4).

In addition, digital technology within customer relationships has been a driver of development in supplier companies. The data analysis revealed that some suppliers' digital technology will make them more competitive in the future. It is possible that their technological development would not have occurred without pressure from customers, which may prove to be a positive supplier experience.

Table 5 summarizes the findings on the use of digital technology in buyer–supplier relationships. Suppliers acknowledged the increased availability of information, data, and transparency was a positive. However, in many cases, the use of digital technology in buyer–supplier relationships was considered more negative than positive due to the increased level of manual work, system incompatibility, missing information, lack of discussion, and unnecessary meetings. The presence of digital technology highlighted the benefits for the customers from whose perspective the solutions were implemented and the drawbacks for the suppliers who were forced to adopt their customers' choices.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

Building on prior research and the exploratory study, we argue that the supplier experience is based on responses and reactions to communication with customers, relational practices, the use of power, and the use of digital technology in a relationship (Fig. 2).

Forming successful relationships necessitates considerable interaction between parties (Gadde & Snehota, 2019). Communication is an essential element in relationships, and procurement staff represent a

Table 5
Summary of the findings of the use of digital technology.

The use of digital technology	Positive experience	Negative experience	Recommendation	
Information sharing	Information is available in the customers' system	Information must be retrieved manually	Make sure that all needed information is shared and accurate.	
	Retrieving and sending information	Granted access to customers' systems		Exclusion from digital platforms
	Transparency	Decreases the volume of e-mail A record is kept of the issues that are agreed upon - traceability		Missing information must be requested
Digital collaboration	Transparency	Access to real-time data	Shortage of information	
		Accuracy of data		
	Digital meetings	Easy and location-independent way to collaborate	Increased number of meetings Unnecessary meetings and poor time management Lack of personal interaction may lead to a lack of information	Organize digital meetings when needed, but plan the agenda carefully and to deliver efficiency. Secure the information interaction with the supplier in core relationships to enable information sharing and discussions that could lead to innovations, more effective ways of operation, or even increased competitiveness
	Decreasing the real discussions Helping the customer to be more effective	Serving customers well	Lack of information discussions and exchange of information Manually updating information on systems that was previously a customer task Incompatibility of digital systems leads to manual transfer of information to suppliers' own systems	
Additional manual work		An increasing number of digital systems and platforms as each customer has its own		
Digital effectiveness paradox	Decrease the amount of manual work			
	Process automation	Automated processes and automatic reminders and notifications about needed activities	Lack of process automation creates frustration	
	Driver of development	Integrations of systems helps reporting and monitoring Adoption of digital tools enhances the competitiveness of a supplier		
		Possibilities to be more efficient		

customer company and, thus, use the tone of their company when they interact with suppliers (Vesalainen et al., 2020). In addition, communication is seen as a facilitator of buyer–supplier relationships (Han et al., 2022), and it has been acknowledged as one of the most effective strategies in relationship building (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). Prior studies on communication in B2B relationships have found that communication includes frequency, content, and feedback elements (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). Our empirical findings show that concerning the supplier experience, the communication elements can be distinguished in terms of openness, continuation, wording, and tone. These may be compared to Murphy and Sashi's (2018) frequency and continuation, which refer to the number of contacts and participants and the sources of communication. Frequent information sharing supports fulfilling functions, eases planning, and improves process flow (Bodendorf et al., 2023). According to Murphy and Sashi (2018, p. 3), the content of the communication refers to “the content of a message what is said or communicated.” That is a broader definition than our finding of openness, as the content may include the attempts to use power directly or indirectly. In contrast, openness refers to the amount of information shared among relationship parties. In addition, Murphy and Sashi (2018) emphasize that feedback refers to two-way communication and can take different forms, ranging

from responding to a previous message to changes in attitudes and behaviors. The findings of the current study emphasize the tone used in communication, which relates to ideas of symmetrical communication—characterized by collaboration, understanding, responsiveness, and the creation of long-term and mutually beneficial relationships (Grünig et al., 2002; Lee, 2022). Compared to prior research on communication in B2B relationships, our findings reveal the more nuanced elements of symmetrical communication that contribute to the supplier experience. The findings also indicate that elements related to communication can be distinguished from other elements, such as those associated with the use of power.

The use of power was identified as one of the influential components in the supplier experience, which is natural as power is frequently a feature of buyer–supplier relationships (Han et al., 2022) when it is applied to influence the behavior and attitudes of other relationship parties (Zhang et al., 2020). The use of power in buyer–supplier relationships is often dependent on the size of the companies. Therefore, if the supplier is notably smaller than the customer, the customer may have greater power over the suppliers. The situation may be reversed when the supplier is larger than the customer. Typically, power in buyer–supplier relationships has been categorized as either coercive or

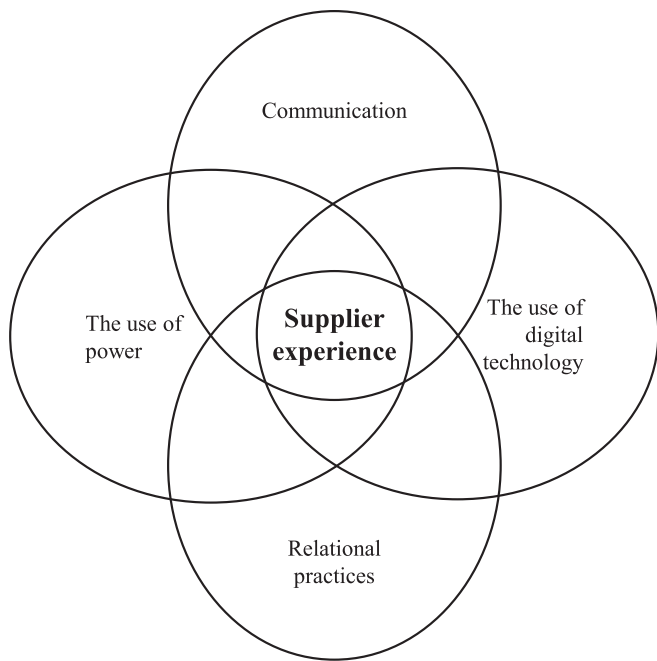


Fig. 2. Proposed model of the components of the supplier experience.

non-coercive (see e.g., Benton & Maloni, 2005). Coercive power refers to citing contract terms and conditions and using the customer position to make demands; actions that may well be accompanied by a threat to activate penalty clauses. In contrast, non-coercive power aims to affect behaviors by emphasizing the potential positive outcomes of compliance (Hausman & Johnston, 2010). Prior research has found that using coercive power may negatively affect the relationship (Han et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Our findings align with that research, as the empirical data demonstrates that applying coercive power negatively affects the supplier experience. Firms’ operating rules and procedures differ (Wang et al., 2024). Our study shows that some suppliers rely on contractual safeguarding to manage coercive power. Further, the findings show that non-coercive power could be a positive driver of development that would not have been achieved without pressure from customers. Customer demands and suggestions helped suppliers develop their operations and were thus considered beneficial.

Further, our findings demonstrate that relational practices are an influential factor in forming the supplier experience. This study defines relational practices as “being the function of trust, cooperation, and commitment to enhance relational ties among supply chain members to achieve overall supply chain goals and performance” (Chowdhury et al., 2019, p. 661). The existence of relational practices in the buyer–supplier relationship has been found to reduce the problems related to demand and supply disruptions (Chowdhury & Quaddus, 2015). Trust is seen as a key element in cooperative business relationships: It is defined as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013, p. 455). Trust changes and develops in a business relationship through interaction and operations over time (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Our findings emphasize the importance of trust in buyer–supplier relationships and also in forming the supplier experience. Commitment is closely related to trust, as prior research has shown that trust promotes the creation of commitment in buyer–supplier relationships (Kwon & Suh, 2005). Commitment refers to “an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is worth the effort required to ensure the continuation of the relationship” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Our findings show that commitment is related to long-term relationships that are considered partnerships. Cooperation is defined as a process in which companies and individuals come together, interact, and form psychological connections to achieve

mutual benefits (Wieland & Wallenburg, 2013). The empirical data demonstrate that cooperation happens in buyer–supplier relationships but may be related to both positive and negative supplier experiences in regard to how well the cooperation is perceived to work.

Further, increasing digitalization has changed the practices of managing supplier relationships, and digital technology has become an important component of supplier relationships (Yu et al., 2018). This development is also evident in our findings, as applying digital technology was identified as a constituent of the supplier experience. Our findings show that digital tools are decreasing face-to-face communication as meetings shift to digital platforms. That shift has changed how buyer–supplier relationships are managed, which aligns with prior research (Obal & Lancioni, 2013). Further, our findings demonstrate that this shift is instrumental to the formation of the supplier experience. Digitalization also plays a role in making relationships more effective, as meetings can be handled with digital tools. In addition, the use of many different digital tools and platforms can also produce additional manual work for supplier companies, demonstrating the effectiveness paradox of digitalization in buyer–supplier relationships.

In summary, our findings show that the supplier experience is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes four components: communication, the use of power, relational practices, and the use of digital technology. These four components sit within a customer–supplier relationship, and the process driving the actual supplier experience is an ongoing one. Building on SET, we propose that the formation of the supplier experience can be represented by a circular process where a supplier compares its expectations to the costs and benefits of a customer relationship and to the alternative relationships; the model is presented in Fig. 3. The comparison is made based on the reactions and responses to the interaction and stimuli of a supplier regarding communication, relational practices, the use of power, and the use of digital technology in a customer relationship and comparing those elements to the benefits derived from the relationship. Accordingly, the supplier experience can be both positive and negative and contribute to maintaining or terminating the relationship. If the customer is important to the supplier’s business, the relationship may continue even if the supplier feels poorly treated. In that case, the monetary benefits outweigh the costs and the poor treatment. Given that the supplier experience process is ongoing, the expectations, costs, and benefits can vary over time. In conclusion, the supplier experience is formed through the combination and interrelatedness of expectations, costs, and benefits and also the interactions within a relationship.

The current study makes several contributions to business-to-

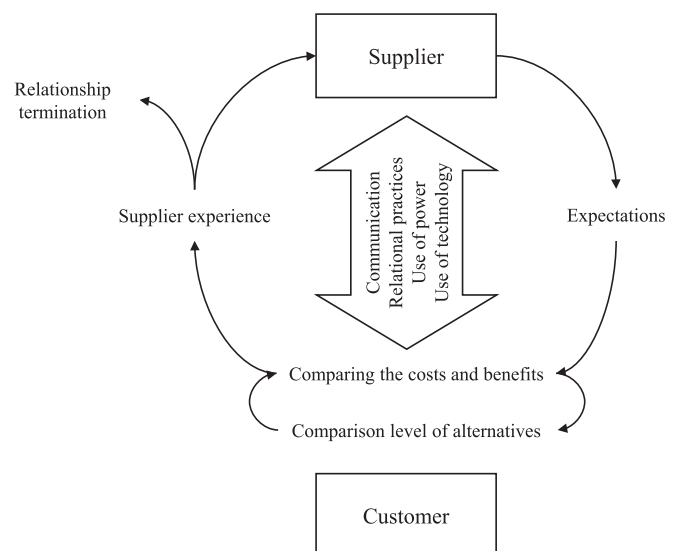


Fig. 3. The proposed model of the supplier experience.

business research. First, we introduce the concept of the supplier experience and explore the mechanism and components through which supplier experience is formed. Prior research has acknowledged the importance of suppliers and customer companies needing to pay attention to supplier relationship management to secure access to supplier resources and maintain the relationship (Piechota et al., 2021). In addition, supplier satisfaction may be affected by trust and commitment (Piechota et al., 2021). Our study shows that these are influential components of the supplier experience. Prior marketing research has shown that customer experience is an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023); therefore, it may be that the trust and commitment components of the supplier experience are antecedents of supplier satisfaction. Supplier satisfaction is related to the supplier experience, as it relates to how the expectations of a relationship are met or exceeded (Schiele et al., 2012). The supplier experience is influenced by numerous points of contact and interactions with a customer that fuel the comparison of expectations and alternative relationships. Second, the study contributes to the research field by introducing the supplier experience model, which demonstrates the mechanism through which the supplier experience is formed based on social exchange theory and the empirical results.

Relationships are central to firms' operations and competitiveness (Cristofaro et al., 2024). Therefore, suppliers have an important role as links in supply chains creating competitive advantages for customer companies (Z. Yang et al., 2017). However, the relationship between supplier and buyer must benefit both parties. Prior research shows that buyers should recognize and react to suppliers' intentions to build strong relationships (Schmelzle & Mukandwal, 2023). That recognition manifests in constant interaction and communication between firms that build the foundations for understanding both parties' goals. Further, the relationship's quality drives both buyer and supplier performance (Maleki et al., 2023), meaning it is important to understand how the supplier experience is formed from the supplier perspective. Therefore, this study offers important insights for buyer firms to improve their relationship with suppliers.

5.2. Managerial implications

Suppliers play a crucial role in creating a competitive advantage. Therefore, firms should pay close attention to the supplier experience and the factors contributing to its formation. The more positive the experience, the more willing suppliers will be to cooperate to secure mutual benefits and to award preferred customer status. Our research shows that the supplier experience is reflected through four dimensions: communication, relational practices, the use of power, and the use of digital technology. The supplier experience is formed along different customer touchpoints, including cognitive and affectual elements. Hence, to develop an excellent supplier experience, a firm should focus on all four dimensions identified in this research and consider the moments of truth in the relationship.

First, communication should be open, transparent, timely, and use the correct tone. Developing the communication skills of each customer-facing employee is important and can be achieved through training and encouraging frequent reflection. Regular updates and meetings are important to discuss ongoing projects, expectations, and any potential issues. Clear roles and contact persons should be agreed on. Using digital technology to aid communication (e.g., collaboration platforms) can enhance openness and transparency, facilitating prompt information sharing. However, face-to-face meetings are important in building trust and closer relationships. Clear rules and policies about polite communication practices could be provided.

Second, cooperation should be enhanced through mutual learning in diverse situations, with clear responsibilities and communicated commitment and trust. Personal relationships should also be fostered through regular meetings and informal communication. Joint training programs could be organized to help both parties understand each

other's processes and challenges. Developing skills supports operational efficiency and nurtures the supplier experience. It would be beneficial to establish common goals and performance metrics and jointly review them regularly to ensure alignment and mutual understanding.

Third, the use of power should be acknowledged; non-coercive methods are more effective than demanding compliance. These methods rely on trust and mutual respect rather than duress. Establishing trust by being transparent, reliable, and consistent is important. It is important to demonstrate respect for suppliers' expertise and contributions by listening to their concerns and ideas. Sharing success stories relating to partnerships and best practices could motivate suppliers. Support and resources could be offered to improve suppliers' performance (e.g., training and technical assistance).

Fourth, digital technology can foster transparency, effectiveness, and automation. However, customers must understand the challenges its use can create for suppliers, even if supporting digitalization among its suppliers is not an objective. Further, it is important to ensure that digital meetings do not replace real discussions, which are essential for building personal relationships. The effective use of digital technology requires skilled employees, resources for investment in new technology, and a digital strategy. When implementing new digital technologies in buyer–supplier relationships, assessing and maintaining system compatibility is crucial. Additionally, the transfer of tasks from buyer to supplier, facilitated by digitalization, should be approached with caution.

Finally, since the supplier experience is shaped by touchpoints and moments of truth with the customer, it is wise to analyze these aspects in every relationship. Such analysis can reveal weaknesses in the four elements described above and spur remedial action that improves the supplier experience.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This research has some limitations. The study is exploratory and proposes a new model of the supplier experience. The data were collected from a single country, which may have influenced the results. For instance, cultural contexts vary significantly, potentially affecting communication patterns and relationship expectations. Future research could investigate the supplier experience in different countries and contexts. Furthermore, our data were collected from SME suppliers that differ from large companies in terms of their resources, expertise, business operations, and perspectives. Hence, more research focusing on large suppliers' experience and comparing differences related to experience would be welcome. Additionally, the model presented here should be tested with quantitative data.

Our research did not focus on the relationship between the supplier experience and supplier satisfaction. Based on prior research on customer experience and customer satisfaction (Klaus & Phil Maklan, 2013; Srivastava & Kaul, 2014), we suggest that the supplier experience is a precursor of supplier satisfaction. Future research could delve deeper into that relationship.

Moreover, it would be interesting to determine whether relationship termination is a direct outcome of the supplier experience or if it is mediated through supplier satisfaction. A large-scale quantitative study across multiple countries would be necessary to explore that concept.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Anni Rajala: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Tuire Hautala-Kankaanpää:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Sanna Joensuu-Salo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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