

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AS INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS FEATURE

Introduction

Over the last few decades, inter-organizational relationships (IOR) have emerged as a significant area of managerial practice and academic inquiry [Ford, 1980; Dwyer et al., 1987; Kumar et al., 1993; Ring, Van de Ven, 1994]. Also, the role of inter-organizational relationships in strategic management is increasing rapidly [Holm et al., 1999; Zaefarian et al., 2017, Klimas et al., 2020]. As the development of long-term, successful relationships have been in the interest of researchers for the past few decades, the issue of relationship features has become increasingly important [Athanasopoulou, 2009].

The literature suggests that inter-organizational relationships are affected by many factors [Eggert et al., 2006; Jap, Anderson, 2007; Ming-Huei, Wen-Chiung 2011; Klimas et al., 2022]. Indeed, a wide variety of relationships' features have been investigated by scholars so far [Wilson, 1995; Cannon, Perreault, 1999; Jap, Ganesan, 2000; Hewett et al., 2002; Holmlund, 2004]. Within the discussion on relationships' features, the relationship quality as leading directly and indirectly to successful inter-organization relationships [Heffernan, Poole, 2004], has gained a significant interest [Athanasopoulou, 2009].

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Despite the growing popularity of inter-organizational relationships [Czakon, 2009; Glinska-Newes et al., 2018; Klimas et al., 2022] including their features, still, there is a need for further studies concentrated on the attributes [Holmund, 2004; Athanasopoulou, 2009; Lee, Johnsen, 2012; Lussier, Hall, 2018] and relationship quality in particular [Palmatier et al., 2006; Athanasopoulou, 2009]. Regarding IOR quality, research needs can be seen as relevant as this relational feature is claimed to be strengthening B2B interlinks and triggering social relationships [Palmer, 2007], and thus impacting long-term benefits gained from IOR [Yaqub, 2017]. In the literature, there is a cognitive gap concerning the significance of IOR quality for firms exploiting them. Indeed, most literature concentrates on relationship quality in the marketing area, mainly on B2C relationships [see Crosby et al., 1990; Han et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau, 2000], the strategic management literature concentrating on B2B relationships is rare [e.g., Mitreğa et al., 2012; Zaefarian et al., 2017; Klimas et al., 2020]. Therefore, this paper applies to inter-organizational relationships context. What is even more, there is no consensus among scholars on a definition of relationship quality [Sheth, Parvatiyar, 2002; Palmatier et al., 2006]. Regarding conceptual inconsistencies, it would be reasonable to empirically settle, whether IOR quality is a first-order [a suggested e.g. by Dwyer et al., 1987; Crosby et al., 1990; Dorsch et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Kumar et al., 1995; Palmatier, 2008] or second-order (as suggested, e.g., by Bell et al., 2005; Duanmu, Fai, 2007] relational feature. Given the above, this paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ₁ *Is a relationship quality an important inter-organizational relationships' feature?*

RQ₂ *Is an inter-organizational relationship quality a first or second-order feature?*

Answering the above questions was based on qualitative studies. The research process was organized into two steps – the systematic literature review and qualitative field research. The target group consisted of 18 companies from the software development industry – 3 software developers and their 15 business partners (5 business partners for each developer). In total, 18 semi-structured, in-depth, direct interviews were conducted with managers responsible for inter-organizational relationships in the surveyed company.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the theoretical section, the basic terminology of relationship quality is presented, where we propose the definition of relationship quality in an inter-organizational relationship context. Next, our research methodology is described. Then, in the fourth section, we discuss the findings of our field research. After that, the results of the data analysis are presented. Finally, the paper concludes by answering the research questions posed earlier. We conclude by providing directions for future research.

1. Theoretical background

In the literature, the relationship quality is characterized by two different approaches. The first concerns the business-to-customer relationships, however considering them from an organizational perspective only [Crosby et al., 1990; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Lagace et al., 1991]. The second concentrates on relationship quality in a broader perspective, focusing on business-to-business relationships and capturing the relationships' importance perceived by all partners involved [Kumar et al., 1995; Wilson, 1995; Henning-Thurau, Klee, 1997; Dorsch et al., 1998; Jap, Ganesan, 2000]. Here the second approach is adopted.

Literature lacks a commonly accepted conceptualization [Sheth, Parvatiyar, 2002; Palmatier et al., 2006] which is surprising since, IOR quality leads to the higher quality of relationships' outcomes [Heffernan, Poole, 2004]. Instead, many studies provide a context-specific definition of IOR quality [see Moorman et al., 1992; Holmlund, 2001].

In an inter-organizational context, relationship quality refers to the business partners' perception of fulfilling their needs and goals, which directly determine participating in the relationship [Yaqub, 2017]. Relationship quality can be understood as the compatibility of expectations regarding the effects actually achieved, thus the quality level is seen as reflecting to what extent a given relationship meets the expectations of individual partners and whether they are satisfied with being in it or not [Ali, Ndubisi, 2010; Lussier, Hall, 2018; Ndubisi, Natarajan, 2018]. We adopt this conceptualization of relationship quality in our research.

In the mainstream academic research, it is acknowledged to treat relationship quality as a higher-order (i.e., first-order) relational feature that reflects a combination of multiple lower-order (i.e., second-order) features [Dwyer et al., 1987; Crosby et al., 1990; Dorsch et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Kumar et al., 1995; Palmatier, 2008]. In the above categorization [Holm et al., 1999; Jap, Ganesan, 2000], the first-order features do not depend directly on the partner's behavior but from the general nature of inter-organizational relationships (e.g., dynamics, complexity). Moreover, they are considered as outcomes from specific second-order relational features, which are directly dependent on partners' behaviors and actions undertaken within IOR [Abosag, Lee, 2013; Fynes et al., 2005; Lee, Johnsen, 2012; Palmatier et al., 2013].

In the literature quality is frequently concerned as the first-order feature, especially affected by trust and commitment [Kumar et al., 1995; Henning-Thurau, 2000; Lang, Colgate, 2003]. Next to these two features, relationship quality is also influenced by social bonds [Lang, Colgate, 2003], conflict [Kumar et al., 1995; Lang, Colgate, 2003], mutual investments [Kumar et al., 1995] or satisfaction [Dorsch et al., 1998; Henning-Thurau, 2000; Lang, Colgate, 2003]. Contrastingly, there are studies concerning relationship quality as a second-order feature, where it impacts relationship dynamics

[Duanmu, Fai, 2007] or next to loyalty, relationship longevity [Bell et al., 2005]. All in all, there is an inconsistency in the relationship quality perception of whether it is a first or second-order feature. Also important is the fact, that the literature on relationship quality [see Kumar et al., 1995; Henning-Thurau, 2000; Bell et al., 2005] mostly contains theoretical considerations where relationship quality was not a subject of empirical research. Indeed, there is a deficit of studies focusing on the relationship features, including relationship quality in particular [Palmatier et al., 2006; Athanasopoulou, 2009]. Moreover, the dimensions used to measure relationship quality in the inter-organizational area [Athanasopoulou, 2009] and strategic management context [Mitreğa et al., 2012; Klimas et al., 2022] are scant as well. In our paper, we try to fill the above research gaps.

2. Methodological design

The objective of this paper is to recognize the specificity of IOR quality through answering the following questions:

RQ₁ *Is a relationship quality an important inter-organizational relationships' feature?*

RQ₂ *Is an inter-organizational relationships' quality a first or second-order feature?*

Resolving the above questions was based on qualitative studies, which allowed us to capture the research experience and interpretation of respondents [Schutz, 1962] and then enhance our knowledge with natural business complexities [Altinay, Brookes, 2012] of inter-organizational features. Within the qualitative study framework, we aimed to recognize and clarify the understanding of inter-organizational features and then evaluate the importance of each relationships' feature viewed from managers' perspective.

The research process was organized into two steps. First we conducted systematic literature review (SLR) (see more details in Klimas et al. [2020]) and then – qualitative field research¹ [Klimas et al., 2022]. The group of 25 inter-organizational features including their possible conceptualizations and measurement approaches was isolated from our SLR [Klimas et al., 2020] with relationship quality [Heffernan, Poole, 2004; Palmer, 2007; Chu, Wang, 2012; Akrou, 2014; Varotto, Parente, 2016; Yaqub, 2017; Ndubisi, Natarajan, 2018; Lussier, Hall, 2018] among them. Our SLR found the features of IOR as two-level constructs while in the literature there is no consistency when it

¹ This study is a part of a wider project involving SLR, explorative and verification-focused qualitative and testing-focused quantitative investigations. In general, in the project 25 different IOR attributes were analyzed [Klimas et al., 2022], including asymmetry, complexity, dynamics, intensity, longevity, quality, strength, velocity commitment, communication, (lack of) conflict, cooperation, formality, information exchange, investments, multidimensionality of bonds, mutuality, particularity, power (dependency), similarity (proximity, homogeneity), stability, structure, transparency, and trust.

comes to categorizing features in first- and second-order ones [Abosag, Lee, 2013; Jap, Ganesan, 2000; Kusari et al., 2013]. Next, the findings from SLR were used as input to qualitative, explorative and verification-focused research. This part was run using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Importantly, the relational features presented in the interviews were not prioritized in any way by the researcher to capture the real understanding, importance and hierarchization of them in managers' opinion.

Data collection was limited to one industry – software developers. We've chosen this sector, as our purpose was to capture inter-organizational relationships as changeable [Mitręga, Pfajfar, 2015], dynamic phenomena [Eggert et al., 2006; Polonsky et al., 2010; Palmatier et al., 2013]. The data was collected in Poland. In total, 18 semi-structured, in-depth, direct interviews were conducted with managers responsible for inter-organizational relationships in the surveyed company, no matter which management level they represented. The interview lasted on average 96 minutes. All of them were conducted in firms' headquarters.

To capture the dyadic nature of inter-organizational relationships, the interviews were conducted with 3 software developers (D1, D2, D3) and their 15 business partners (D1_C1, D1_C2, D1_C3, D1_C4, D1_C5 and D2_C1, D2_C2, D2_C3, D2_C4, D1_C5 and D3_C1, D3_C2, D3_C3, D3_C4, D3_C5).

The general characteristics of the surveyed developers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. List of software developers

| Developer | Number of employees (full time) | Years in the market | Geographic scope of activity | Functional area |
|-----------|---------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| D1 | 7 | 3 | international | B2B |
| D2 | 100 | 8 | international | B2B |
| D3 | 16 | 10 | national | B2B |

Source: own study.

The geographic scope of activity was international (D1, D2) as well as national (D3), which is not very relevant to this sector of activity – software development. The period of operation of companies on the market did not exceed 10 years (D1, D2) and in one case was exactly 10 years (Table 1). That means, developers are relatively young companies on the market, which, considering the sector of software developers, may be specific. On the other hand, the situation differs significantly in the case of their business partners (cooperators or cocompetitors), where in most cases, they have been operating on the market for longer than 10, even 20 years, and only in 3 cases business partner was present in the market for less than 10 years.

All 3 developers function in the B2B model. The dominant sector/product segment of the first developer was software development (no specific sector), the second

developer focuses on the defence and industry (manufacturing) sector and the last one operates in the sector of Web platforms, especially dedicated to education (e-learning) and also provides solutions for internet marketing.

We were interviewing two groups of respondents: developers and their business partners (cooperators or cooptitors). First, we asked introductory questions, then questions about forming relationships with business partners, and in the last part, we asked about relationships' features. First, we targeted 3 software developers. Then, 15 strategic partners were chosen according to the developer's indications – in the first part of the questionnaire they identified 7–10 cooperators or cooptitors with the most valuable, long-term relationships. Given the above, our field study was organized around 3 groups of dependent business partners (D1 and D1_C1, D1_C2, D1_C3, D1_C4, D1_C5; D2 and D2_C1, D2_C2, D2_C3, D2_C4, D1_C5; and finally D3 and D3_C1, D3_C2, D3_C3, D3_C4, D3_C5) to observe the interpretation of the same questions in the context of the particular strategic partnership. As the dyadic nature of inter-organizational relationships was important to capture the detailed context of quality perception, we surveyed pairs of partners who have real, active relationships and for whom the relationships with partners are key activity in the core business. Therefore, we ensured that for developers, the choice of a business partner is not incidental (Table 2). In all of three surveyed cases, developers see the importance of maintaining the relationships with their business partner.

Table 2. Relationships of developers

| Developer | Criteria of selecting the cooperation partner | The importance of relationships with the business partners in company's core business |
|-----------|---|--|
| D1 | "experience, commitment, personal aspects – the way of behavior of the partner (...) so if the partner is adaptable, spontaneous, it fits into our company's framework" | "essential, as these are lasting relationships" |
| D2 | "partner's employment of >100 people – potential users of our technology" | "critical importance" |
| D3 | "competency gaps, that are diagnosed in our company and the second is the area related to team complementing with key competencies in the realization of the software" | "Huge (...) that is cooperation with these entities, and here it is worth saying that with some companies we have been successfully cooperating for several years" |

Source: own study.

All of the interviews were conducted in February 2020 by a research company that recorded and then transcribed all of the interviews. Then, the transcriptions were analyzed by the research team using content-centric, thematic analyses.

3. Findings

In our study, the relationship quality was conceptualized based on definitions developed by Ali & Ndubisie [2010], Lussier & Hall [2018] and Ndubisi & Nataraajan [2018] assuming that quality should be understood as the compatibility of expectations of partners regarding the effects of the relationship with the effects actually achieved. Further, the quality level is understood as reflecting to what extent a given relationship meets the expectations of individual partners and whether they are satisfied with being in it or not. This understanding of inter-organizational relationship quality was confirmed by the interviews, as “*quality determines the extent to which a relationship fulfils the individual partners and the formation of being in it*” (D2). All in all, for all of the interviewees the above conceptualization was clear. As the conceptual approach was fully understandable it was possible to concentrate on IOR quality significance (RQ₁) and its level of categorization among relational features (RQ₂).

First, in the light of our interviews, the answer to the first research question should be positive as quality in the context of inter-organizational relationships has been found as really significant. On the one hand, the developers, when discussing the most relevant IOR attributes for long-term cooperation, emphasized that “*quality is essential to the relationships*” (D1) or that it is a “*key feature*” (D2) which must be at a “*significant level*” (D2) in relationships with strategic partners. Relational quality reflected in everyday actions and behaviors is important as it grounds for smooth cooperation in a long-term perspective – “*quality of works, engagement into everyday work and the trouble-free nature of these people*” (D1). Furthermore, another developer stated, “*quality determines the extent to which we engage and to which relationship meets our expectations (...) I would say it's like development with high importance*” (D3). Also, strategic partners interviewed in our study confirmed the importance of quality, as “*quality (...) it's high. We would not work for so many years and the importance is also very high*” (D1_C1) and “*we try, we care a lot about quality*” (D2_C1).

Second, we concentrate on the second research question, namely is an inter-organizational relationship quality a first or second-order feature. The analysis of the interviews showed that the relationship quality is not a first-order but a second-order feature. One of our interviewees stated that relationship quality “*it's also interconnected, some formal aspects are automatically connected with quality (...) and influence other aspects like stability, longevity*” (D3). The interlocutor emphasized that relationship quality influences other relationship features, especially dynamics, asymmetry, complexity and strength. In this manner, developers point out that “*thanks to quality there is transparency*” (D3) and “*quality influences asymmetry, which determines the disproportion between partners in a given relationship*” (D1) and “*influences strength and dynamics*” (D3). “*Given participants' connections, there*

is a strong emphasis on contact, on the subject of quality as it shapes the complexity of relationship” (D3). Given the above, IOR quality can be seen as a second-order feature, which considered with other second-order attributes can shape the level of higher-order relational features (e.g., dynamics, asymmetry, complexity). Indeed, when we asked about the possible invert direction of determining the role of other relational features for IOR quality one of the interlocutors stated unambiguously “quality does not necessarily relate” (D3).

Respondents confirmed also that quality is a second-order feature in terms of their understanding of quality. Second-order features defined as directly dependent on relationship partners’ behaviors and their perceptions [Jap & Ganesan 2000]. This perspective can be found in the respondents’ statements indicating that relationship quality can be shaped by partners’ behaviors and activities: “everybody wants to get and convey relationship quality as much as possible (...) so if you’re providing a solution and you’re trying to do the best of your ability, with the knowledge you have today, in time you have to do it in the best way” (D3). Respondents also mentioned quality perceived in partners’ perception as they pointed out that “above all, what matters to us, to our company, is relationship quality as it is the level of satisfaction with our relationship with partner” (D3_C1), “yes, we are very satisfied with our relationship” (D2_C1) and also “people’s perception of quality” as “everyone wants to get and pass on that quality as possible, the highest in their opinion” (D3).

Conclusion

Our theoretical discussions, as well as findings from the empirical study contribute to evolving discussions on the quality of inter-organizational relationships in the strategic management context [Holm et al., 1999; Oliver, Ebers, 1998; Park, Russo, 1996]. Basically, we see our contribution as threefold.

First, our study allowed us to propose and verify the conceptualization of IOR quality. As our proposition was based on existing definitions [Ali, Ndubisie, 2010; Lussier, Hall, 2018; Ndubisi, Natarajan, 2018]. Its verification should be seen as supporting theory with empirical evidence. Moreover, given the meaning of adopted conceptualization (see section 4) and considering that we are missing from comprehensive measurement framework [Athanasopoulou, 2009] we propose a measurement of inter-organizational relationship quality. We claim it can be operationalized with five items, namely three adopted from Ndubisi & Natarajan [2018]: my relationship with the business partner fulfills my more or less manifested expectations (item_1); my relationship with the business partner is as I would wish (item_2); we recommend this business partner as good for cooperation (item_3) and two adopted from Lussier & Hall [2018]: my relationship with the business partner

is satisfactory (item_4); overall, I have a good relationship with the business partner. This measurement approach could be adopted in future quantitative studies.

Second, as we presented above, it is empirically confirmed that relationship quality is the feature with high importance for our respondents, as well as for developers and their partners. Our empirical evidence confirms the importance of this feature in inter-organizational relationships discussed in the literature [Palmer, 2007; Yaqub, 2017].

Third, features of inter-organizational relationships are considered at two levels and thus first- and second-order features are considered [Jap, Ganesan, 2000; Kusari et al., 2013; Klimas et al., 2022]. Although relationship quality is often considered in the literature as a first-order feature [Palmatier et al., 2013; Lussier, Hall, 2018] and this was initially confirmed by our SLR², this has not been confirmed in our field study. Instead, our qualitative research shows that respondents perceive relationship quality as a second-order feature. Thus, it is consistent with the approach that second-order features result indirectly from inter-organizational relationships and their nature and directly depend on relationship partners' behaviors and their perceptions [Jap, Ganesan, 2000].

Given the inconsistent state of knowledge, our findings support those works showing IOR quality as lower-order construct [Bell et al., 2005; Duanmu, Fai, 2007], whereas are opposed to those considering it as a higher-order construct [Dwyer et al., 1987; Crosby et al., 1990; Dorsch et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Kumar et al., 1995; Palmatier, 2008].

To conclude, given our research was preceded with SLR, it can be seen as widening the knowledge cumulatively, although at the same time it has some limitations, including mainly industry and national contextuality. Therefore, we recommend replication of our investigation in different contexts. Even if the theoretical generalizability of empirical findings is limited, we believe that our study adds a qualitative understanding of the studied issue. Following methodological recommendations [Athanasopoulou, 2009; Gelei, Dobos, 2014; Gnyawali, Song, 2016], without this explorative and verification-focused qualitative understanding of inter-organizational relationship quality.

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² As a result of systematic literature review the following first-order features have been identified asymmetry, complexity, dynamics, intensity, longevity, strength, quality, and velocity [Klimas et al., 2022].

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RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AS INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS FEATURE

Abstract

This study aims to recognize the specificity of relationship quality in an inter-organizational context, especially concerning its importance and feature type (first-order or second-order).

Methodologically, this paper follows the qualitative approach, specifically 18 in-depth interviews were used to acquire the data from two groups of software development firms – 3 software developers and their 15 strategic partners (i.e., cooperators or competitors).

Obtained results suggest that relationship quality plays a key role in inter-organizational relationships, including both their establishment and long-term exploitation. Moreover, it seems to be the second-order feature as directly resulting from partners' behaviors and actions undertaken under the relationship.

As an original value, this paper introduces empirical findings of inter-organizational relationship quality in the software industry. In turn, using marketing and strategic management underpinnings, our study presents inter-organizational relationship quality in a different perspective than in quality management literature, where quality is usually presented as a first-order relational feature.

KEYWORDS: RELATIONAL QUALITY, RELATIONSHIPS ATTRIBUTES, INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS, COOPERATION

JEL CLASSIFICATION CODES: L14, L2, C7

JAKOŚĆ RELACJI JAKO CECHA RELACJI MIĘDZYORGANIZACYJNYCH

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest rozpoznanie specyfiki jakości relacji w kontekście międzyorganizacyjnym, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do jej znaczenia oraz oznaczenia rodzajowego cechy (pierwszego lub drugiego rzędu). Pod względem metodycznym praca ma charakter jakościowy i eksploracyjny. W toku badań wykorzystano 18 wywiadów pogłębionych w celu uzyskania danych od dwóch grup firm tworzących oprogramowanie komputerowe w Polsce

– 3 producentów oprogramowania i ich 15 partnerów strategicznych (tj. kooperantów lub kooperatorów).

Wyniki badań sugerują, że jakość relacji odgrywa kluczową rolę w relacjach międzyorganizacyjnych, zarówno w ich nawiązywaniu, jak i długotrwałym wykorzystywaniu. Co więcej, wydaje się ona cechą drugiego rzędu (*second-order feature*), jako bezpośrednio wynikająca z podejmowanych w ramach relacji zachowań i działań partnerów.

Oryginalną wartość empiryczną artykuł stanowią wyniki badań dotyczących jakości relacji międzyorganizacyjnych w branży oprogramowania. Z kolei, w ujęciu dotychczasowego dorobku marketingu relacyjnego oraz zarządzania strategicznego, opracowanie przedstawia jakość relacji międzyorganizacyjnych jako cechę drugiego rzędu.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: JAKOŚĆ RELACJI, ATRYBUTY RELACJI
MIĘDZYORGANIZACYJNYCH, CECHY RELACYJNE,
RELACJE MIĘDZYORGANIZACYJNE, WSPÓŁPRACA**

KODY KLASYFIKACJI JEL: L14, L2, C7