

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Relationship between Adaptation, Trust and Positioning Advantage through Relationship Value

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## Abstract

In the following research paper in progress, the authors investigate the relationship between adaptation and trust as two possible behavioural responses of organizations in B2B relationships, and the positioning advantage through relationship value by the method of ISM validation (Interpretive Structural Modelling framework). It is based on qualitative research and has been used in order to prove the analysed relationships as well as to generate research hypothesis for further quantitative investigation. The results of qualitative research in this paper have indicated that adaptation, trust and relationship value are the antecedents of the positioning advantage of the organizations in B2B relationship.

**Keywords:** *Relationship orientation, Adaptation, trust, Relationship value, Positioning advantage, ISM framework.*

## Introduction

Many researchers and managers support the thesis that one of the key goals of marketing is to build and sustain strong long-term relationships [1-7].

Relationship marketing, as a process-oriented approach to customer management in a meaningful way, is understood as promise management, as follows: "Relationship marketing is to identify and establish, maintain and enhance, and when necessary terminate relationships with customers (and other parties) so that objectives regarding economic and other variables of all parties are met. This is achieved through a mutual making and fulfilment of promises [8]. Relationship marketing investments build strong, more trusting customer relationships [9], improve financial and market performance of the organizations [10], [11-12], and [13], as well as they are recognized as an important source of organization's competitive advantage [14], [11], [1], and [15].

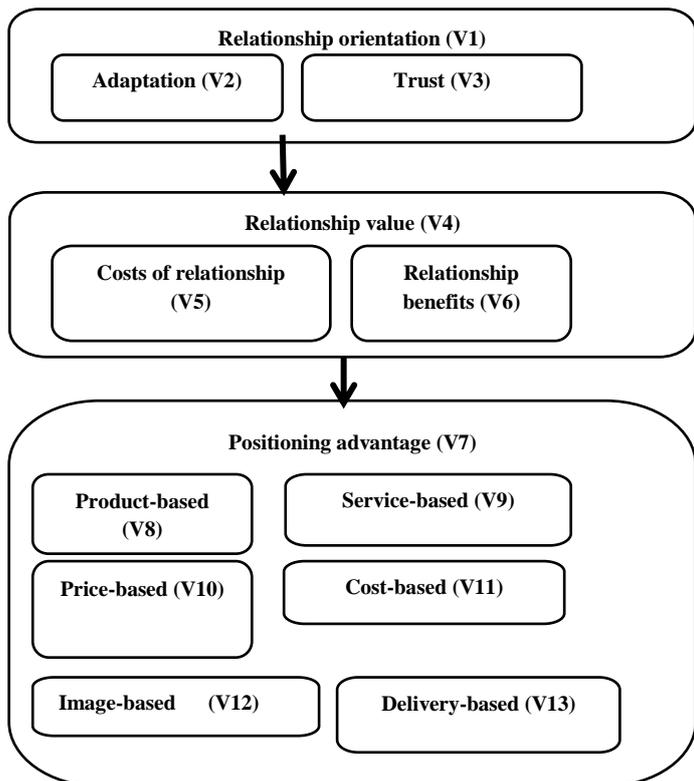
Many researchers have recognized that the intensity of relationship between different relational variables and constructs as well as the outcome of specific relationship depends on moderating and mediating role of some other variables, constructs or characteristics of the organization (for example: the characteristic of governance, creativity, business strategy,

relational capital, type of industry, type of organization, i.e. supplier, consumer, distributor etc., size of organization, type of connections, cultural differences, learning and selling behaviour etc.) [16], [17], [11], [1], [18], [13], [19], and [20].

To advance this overall research stream, we build a research model with two antecedents' constructs: adaptation and trust as prevailing relationship variables, elements and characteristics of relationship orientation of the organization on one side and the positioning advantage of the organization as an outcome (consequence, result) of the relationship on the other side. We posit that adaptation and trust affect the level of positioning advantage of the organization. Since there are many other variables, which determine the intensity of such influence, we put the relationship value into moderating role between above mentioned constructs. Therefore we measure direct and indirect (through relationship value) performance effect of adaptation and trust on positioning advantage of the organization (Fig. 1).

In this paper, we have introduced the first, i.e. qualitative phase of our research, in which we have tested a validation of our theoretical structural research model by Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) [21], [22], and [23].

ISM can be used for identifying and summarizing relationships among specific variables, which define a problem or an issue. It provides us a means by which order and direction can be imposed on the complexity of such variables [23]. Based on the above framework we will propose the research hypotheses which will be empirically tested in the second phase of our research which follows and is not included in this paper in progress.



**Fig. 1: Structural model of adaptation, trust, relationship value, and positioning advantage**

## Theoretical Background

### Relationship Orientation

Relationship orientation is a desire of an organization to engage in a strong relationship with a current or potential partner to conduct a specific exchange [48]. In the literature, there exist many theories about prevailing factors (as antecedents), which may contribute to organization's desire for a relationship: value to customer, relative dependence, industry norms, customers' philosophy of doing business [24], dependence, dynamism, complexity of purchase, importance of product [25], product category involvement [3], dependence, uncertainty, exchange efficiency, social satisfaction [7], dependence, age, flexibility, continuity expectations, relationship quality [26], relational proclivity [27], transaction-specific investments, dependence [28], uncertainty [29], industry relational norms, relational-centric reward

systems, salesperson competence, product dependence [2].

Relationship orientation, accordingly, may generate positive or negative organizations' behavioural responses: trust, enhancing level of adaptation, opportunism etc.). Therefore, we conceptualize and operationalize the constructs of organization's adaptation and trust, i.e. two possible positive behavioural responses of the organization in the relationship orientation process (as antecedents) in order to measure their effect on competitive advantage of the organization directly as well as through relationship value, created by organizations in the relational exchange.

### Adaptation

Adaptation is a specific form of cooperation between the participants in the relational exchange. It is a process, where organizations adjust their actors, resources and activities in the organisational and individual level to those of the organizations they cooperate with, and to the changes in the business environment [30]. Adaptation is the concept that was introduced already in the early IMP studies [31], [32]. The seminal research focusing particularly on adaptation between organizations was conducted by Hallen et al. [33]. They investigated how adaptations are associated with the power balance in the relationship.

Further, there were many other research focuses on adaptation, as follows: investigation of forces driving adaptive behaviour in buyer-supplier relationships [34], a role of trust and adaptation in relational contracting [35], the influence of adaptation on contractual agreements and relational social norms [36], a role of adaptation in the process of retaining business customers [37], exploration of trust and commitment within the environmental adaptation process as well as about the process of adaptation as a series of events, activities and stages, and the influence of managers [38], analyses of connection between adaptation at the supplier-customer relationship level, marketing level, and business strategy level [39], and investigations about supplier's adaptation towards a multinational buyer in a supply network [40].

### Trust

Trust is being discussed as an important moderator in the relationship marketing literature [6], [30], and [9], and an essential ingredient for successful relationships [7]. Every

alliance is based on the thesis that organizations must often “cooperate to compete” [9]. Therefore, alliances characterized by effective communication generate trust between organizations, which promotes cooperation [41].

Although there is not any universally accepted scholarly definition of this concept, we can define trust as “a belief by one party in a relationship that the other party will not act against his or her interests, where this belief is held without undue doubt or suspicion and in the absence of detailed information about the actions of the other party” [43-43].

In our research we have used the elements of trust from the relationship atmosphere dimensions model suggested by Wong, Wilkinson and Young [15].

### Relationship Value

Traditional academic and managerial view on conceptualization of value has been linked with the main goal of marketing which was to create exchange of goods and services for money or equivalent [44].

Competitive advantage of the organization comes from the ability to give target customers an offer with more perceived value than competitors’ offer [45]. This perceived value consists of three elements: perceived benefits of the product minus both the product price and the costs of owning it [46]. The concept of customer-perceived value has become a matter of increasing concern in the marketing literature as it becomes imperative for suppliers to offer buyers in competitive markets what they want if they are to effectively generate profitable business [47].

The relationship value concept based on service-dominant logic (S-DL) focused on the co-creation of value through inter-linked resources, engagements and actors. The main point of this concept is that value is not created by exchange, but in joint co-creation and demonstrated as value-in-use (proposition of value), i.e. it is created between parties [48] or even in the interaction process of both focal dyads and wider network structures [49], [46].

In our research we understand the concept of relationship value as an aggregate measure for relationship outputs [50] and define it as the sum of the benefits and cost reductions generated in the relational exchange with business partner [51].

### Competitive Advantage and Positioning Advantage

The role of relationship marketing in explaining business performance of the organizations has been attracted by many scholars over the past three decades. They have considerably enhanced conceptual understanding of the role of relationship marketing in enabling organizations to create and sustain competitive advantage. It is commonly accepted that competitive advantage of the particular organization is being direct antecedent of business performance of the organization [52-53].

There were a lot of theories and models in strategic management and strategic marketing in the past thirty-five years that have been appearing until now, which explain different views on competitive advantage of the organizations and consequently on their business performance: structure-conduct-performance (SCP) paradigm views [54], [50], resource-based view (RBV) framework [55], dynamic capabilities (DC) theory [56], competence approach [57], market orientation view (MOV) theory [58-59] value chain based view (VBV) theory, and relational approach [59].

Integration of RBV theory, competence approach and relational approach has been made in “resource-advantage” (R-A) theory, which has been introduced by Hunt [60] and Hunt and Morgan [61]. R-A theory views organizations as “combiners of heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile resources-which are the fundamental tenet of resource-based view. Suggesting by Hunt and Morgan [61], an advantage of using R-A theory is that, instead of using “competitive advantage” authors define a positional advantage as a relative value actually delivered to target markets, which is a result of the organization’s marketing strategy decision implementation efforts, and the cost of accomplishing this to the organization.

It has been viewed across a number of different value and cost dimensions as follows: product-based, service-based, price-based, cost-based, image-based, delivery-based positional advantages.

The above mentioned dimensions of positioning advantage represent the set of dependent variables (consequences) in the research model (see Fig. 1) in our study.

## ISM Framework Validation

As we have suggested in our theoretical research model (see Fig. 1) we have defined 13 groups of variables and the possible relations between them based on previous literature review and with support of a group of five experts: three top managers have been selected from the large Slovenian companies, i.e. companies with more than 500 employees, and two university professors of marketing and management from University of Maribor and University of Ljubljana with relevant knowledge, skills, and background on the base of brain storming.

After that, five separate in-depth interviews with the group of experts have been implemented. In the process of interviewing, the pair-wise relationships among the variables have been indicated. The result of the interviews has

answered on two important questions: whether and how the suggested and presented variables are related (see Tab. 1). On the basis of the received answers from the experts (almost all answers, received from the experts, have been very similar), an overall structure is extracted from the complex set of variables.

A Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) has been developed then for groups of variables in which the pair-wise relationships between any two groups of variables (a and b) have been indicated (Tab. 1). Suggested by Srivastava and Singh [23], four symbols are used to denote the direction of relationship between the groups of variables:

- V: a is related to b but b is not related to a.
- A: a is not related to b but b is related to a.
- X: a and b both are related to each other.
- O: a and b both are not related to each other.

**Table 1: Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) Groups of variables b**

Groups of variables a	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
1. Relationship orientation	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	A	A
2. Adaptation	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	X	A	
3. Trust	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	X		
4. Relationship value	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	A	A			
5. Costs of relationship	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	O				
6. Relationship benefits	V	V	V	V	V	V	V					
7. Positional advantage	A	A	A	A	A	A						
8. Product-based PA	O	O	O	O	O							
9. Service-based PA	O	O	O	O								
10. Price-based PA	O	O	O									
11. Cost-based PA	O	O										
12. Image-based PA	O											
13. Delivery-based PA												

\* PA-Positional advantage

Next, the SSIM is transformed into a binary matrix, called the reach ability matrix (Tab. 2) by

substituting V, A, X and O by 1 and 0 as per the case following the below suggested rules:

- (a) If a is related to b but b is not related to a, then a b entry becomes 1, b a entry becomes 0.
- (b) If a is not related to b but b is related to a, then a b entry becomes 0, b a entry becomes 1.
- (c) If a and b both are related to each other, then a b entry becomes 1, b a entry becomes 1.
- (d) If a and b both are not related to each other, then a b entry becomes 0, b a entry becomes 0.

Suggested by Srivastava and Singh [23], a reachability matrix is checked for transitivity. The transitivity of the contextual relation is a basic assumption made in ISM. It states that if a variable A is related to B and B is related to C, then A is necessarily related to C. The driving power of a particular variable is the total number of variables (including itself) which it may help to

achieve. The dependence is the total number of variables which may help in achieving it.

In the next step we decomposed the reachability matrix into different levels in order to create a structural framework, i.e. the reachability set and antecedent set for each variable. The reachability set for a particular group of variable consists of

**Tab. 2: Reachability matrix**

Groups of variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Driver power
V1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
V2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13
V3	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	12
V4	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
V5	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
V6	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
V7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
V8	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
V9	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
V10	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
V11	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
V12	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
V13	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Dependence	3	1	2	6	4	4	13	7	7	7	7	7	7	

the group of variable itself and the other groups of variables, which they may help to achieve.

The antecedent set consists of the group of variable itself and the other groups of variables, which may help in achieving it. After that, the intersection of these sets is derived for all groups of variables. The group of variable for which the reachability and the intersection sets are the

same is given the top-level group of variable in the ISM hierarchy, which would not help achieve any other group of variable above their own level. After the identification of the top-level group of variable, it is discarded from the other remaining groups of variables (Tabs. 3-8). From Tab. 3, we can see that V7 (positional advantage) is found at Level I. Therefore, it would be positioned at the top of the ISM framework. This iteration is continued until the levels of each group of variable are found out.

**Tab. 3: Iteration 1**

Groups of variables	Reachability set	Antecedents set	Intersection set	Levels
V1	1,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3	1	
V2	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	2	2	
V3	1,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	2,3	3	
V4	4,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3,4,5,6	4	
V5	4,5,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3,5	5	
V6	4,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3,6	6	
V7	7	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13	7	I
V8	7,8	1,2,3,4,5,6,8	8	
V9	7,9	1,2,3,4,5,6,9	9	
V10	7,10	1,2,3,4,5,6,10	10	
V11	7,11	1,2,3,4,5,6,11	11	
V12	7,12	1,2,3,4,5,6,12	12	
V13	7,13	1,2,3,4,5,6,13	13	

**Tab. 4: Iteration 2**

Groups of variables	Reachability set	Antecedents set	Intersection set	Levels
V1	1,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3	1	
V2	1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13	2	2	
V3	1,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13	2,3	3	
V4	4,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3,4,5,6	4	
V5	4,5,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3,5	5	
V6	4,6,8,9,10,11,12,13	1,2,3,6	6	
V8	8	1,2,3,4,5,6,8	8	II
V9	9	1,2,3,4,5,6,9	9	II
V10	10	1,2,3,4,5,6,10	10	II
V11	11	1,2,3,4,5,6,11	11	II
V12	12	1,2,3,4,5,6,12	12	II
V13	13	1,2,3,4,5,6,13	13	II

**Tab. 5: Iteration 3**

Groups of variables	Reachability set	Antecedents set	Intersection set	Levels
V1	1,4,5,6	1,2,3	1	
V2	1,2,3,4,5,6	2	2	
V3	1,3,4,5,6	2,3	3	
V4	4	1,2,3,4,5,6	4	III
V5	4,5	1,2,3,5	5	
V6	4,6	1,2,3,6	6	

**Tab. 6: Iteration 3**

Groups of variables	Reachability set	Antecedents set	Intersection set	Levels
V1	1,5,6	1,2,3	1	
V2	1,2,3,5,6	2	2	
V3	1,3,5,6	2,3	3	
V5	5	1,2,3,5	5	IV
V6	6	1,2,3,6	6	IV

**Table 7: Iteration 4**

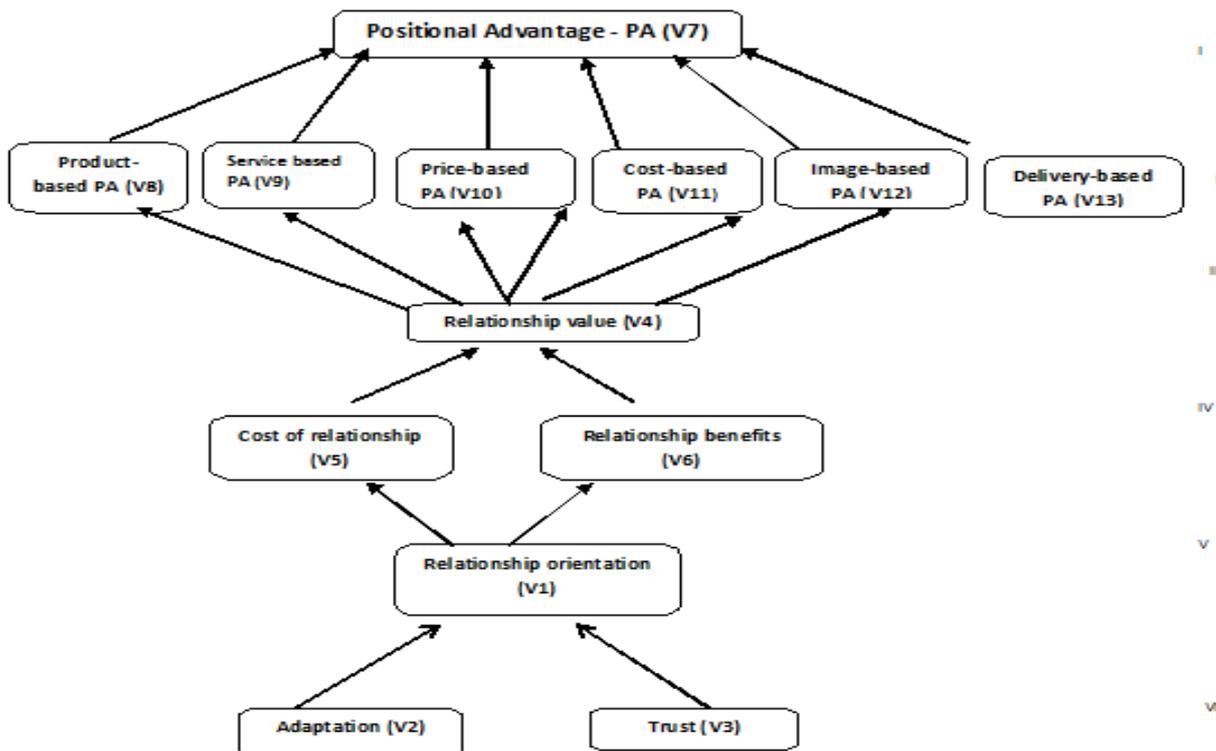
Groups of variables	Reachability set	Antecedents set	Intersection set	Levels
V1	1	1,2,3	1	V
V2	1,2,3	2	2	
V3	1,3	2,3	3	

**Table 8: Iteration 5**

Groups of variables	Reachability set	Antecedents set	Intersection set	Levels
V2	2,3	2	2	VI
V3	3	2,3	3	VI

The result of such iterations is ISM-based framework for relations between adaptation and trust on one side and positional advantage on the

other side through relationship value. It is seen in the Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2: ISM-based framework for relations between the groups of variables**

## Results and Research Implications

The results of ISM framework validation are as follows:

- Adaptation, trust, relationship value (costs of relationship and relationship benefits), and positioning advantage are related research constructs;
- Adaptation, trust, costs of relationship and relationship benefits are identified as antecedents of positional advantage.

However this is a theoretical framework, tested on the base of qualitative study, therefore it exists a need for empirical testing. This further requires development of scale for each variable identified in the framework. To test presented model, we will use a non-parametric approach to structural equation modelling – partial least squares (PLS) modelling. There are a few reasons to choose such

method of analysis. First, the framework incorporates certain latent variables and also comprises of one variable of dual nature, that is, being antecedent as well as consequence at the same time, thus the prepositions will be tested as a standard two step approach of SEM. Second, this study tests an explorative model with potentially alternative hypothesis: whether adaptation, trust and relationship value have positive direct effects on positional advantage of the organizations, and/or whether relationship value moderates the impacts of adaptation and trust on positional advantage. Third, PLS modelling does not require multivariate normal data. Fourth, a PLS model can be estimated using a body of cases that is a minimum of ten times the size of the number of constructs affecting the dependent variable [13].

The above mentioned quantitative method will help us identify direct and indirect effects in a complex system of variables, and allows including the moderating variables in the analysis easily.

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