

THE ROLE OF PRIOR SALES EXPERIENCE OF BUYERS AND DURATION IN BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIPS

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This paper examines the impact that a buyer's prior sales experience and the duration of the buyer-salesperson relationship has on the satisfaction and commitment linkages established within the literature. First, two key facets of satisfaction (social and economic) are linked to buyer's commitment to the salesperson. Next, buyer-salesperson relationship duration is examined as an influencer between the satisfaction and commitment linkages. Following this, the study shifts its focus to examine if and how buyers with prior sales experience view the buyer-salesperson relationship different than buyers without prior sales experience. Findings of the study highlight the importance of developing our understanding of buyer-salesperson relationships with regards to multi-faceted satisfaction, buyer background, and relationship length.

INTRODUCTION

Firms that are successful in today's competitive environments understand methods of increasing buyer's commitment through comprehending nuances within each buyer relationship (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal & Evans, 2006; Rutherford, Boles, Barksdale & Johnson, 2006; 2008). The presence of commitment in buyer-seller relationships is essential across various contexts and settings including supply chain management exchanges (Kibbeling et al., 2009), services (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007), pharmaceuticals (Lagace, Dahlstrom, & Gassenheimer, 1991), and manufacturing (Cannon & Perrault, 1999) for driving general relationship quality (Dagger & O'Brien, 2010; Ferris et al., 2009). In an effort to better understand the development of buyer's commitment to firms, scholars have focused increased attention on the development and maintenance of the buyer-salesperson relationship. Specifically, the linkage between buyer's satisfaction with the salesperson and its influence on buyer's commitment has been focal to this discussion (e.g. Johnson, Barksdale Jr., & Boles, 2001; Rutherford et al., 2006).

While a linkage between satisfaction and commitment has been established, a limited, but growing body of research has suggested that satisfaction must be studied from both a social

and economic viewpoint (Geyskens & Steenkamp, 2000; Rodriguez, Agudo & Gutiérrez, 2006; Rutherford, 2012). These studies emphasize that a failure to distinguish between both types of satisfaction will undoubtedly lead to conflicting findings, which hinders the advancement of the current knowledge base. For instance, Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000) found that economic and social satisfaction had differing effects vis-à-vis antecedents and outcomes. The authors offer that satisfaction in general has shown mixed findings in the marketing channel literature likely because it has been treated as a unidimensional construct with economic and social dimensions often canceling each other out. From a practitioner viewpoint, sales representatives may be doing particularly well with buyers in one area of satisfaction, while masking potential problems in another, leaving the partnership vulnerable. For instance, sales representatives may pride themselves on providing superior service and on having strong interpersonal relations with their buyers only to be blind-sided when a buyer switches to a competing seller because the competing seller, with no such established social ties, promised the buyer additional cost savings (e.g. economic satisfaction).

Given the importance of distinguishing between these types of satisfaction, this study will first highlight the impact of social and economic satisfaction on commitment using social exchange theory, and demonstrate the relative importance of economic satisfaction. Building

on the direct impact of satisfaction on commitment, the study will then focus on the impact of two potential moderators (relationship duration and prior sales experience of the buyer). Differences in relationship development (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987) and buyer's background may impact the satisfaction to commitment linkages. Specifically, does the relationship length impact the strength of the relationship between satisfaction and commitment? Social exchange theory would indicate that it does as it takes time to have multiple interactions that lead to relationship norms and eventually commitment. Yet, what does this say about buyers and sellers that can establish relatively high levels of social and economic satisfaction early on? Length of the relationship has not been studied as a moderator of satisfaction and commitment and a better understanding of how relationships evolve over time has important managerial implications. Does additional time in the relationship reinforce levels of commitment or potentially lead salespeople into a false sense of relationship security?

As to the second moderator, the previous experience of a buyer as a salesperson, and how this experience impacts the buyer in their present role interacting with salespeople, has not been researched. More specifically, does a buyer's previous sales experience alter the development of the relationship that creates a differing effect on the linkages between satisfaction and commitment? And, does this previous sales experience of the buyer impact the social and economic development of the relationship differently? These are important questions to answer as they can provide insights into how salespeople need to adapt in order to strengthen buyers' levels of commitment. While learning that a buyer was a sales representative in a former life may seem innocuous on first blush, this experience provides the buyer with a basis for comparison in how the present sales representative is assessed. Considering the prevalence of people working in sales, having buyers with previous sales experience is not likely to be an isolated phenomenon. In fact, over one-third of the buyers in this study had previous experience as sales representatives. If researchers can provide firms with a better understanding of how previous social experiences affect buyer-seller

relationships, firms, through sales managers, will be better able to train new sales personnel as well as develop and maintain stronger long-lasting relationships. A more nuanced understanding of the associations can also potentially help salespeople to avoid complacency in their partnerships with buyers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social exchange theory is well established within the literature as a basis for building relationships in a business-to-business context (i.e. Briggs & Grisaffe, 2009; Rutherford et al., 2006; Schetzle & Drollinger, 2014). The theory is based on relational interdependence, which develops over time within the buyer-seller relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987; Kingshott, 2006; Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001). The premises of the theory include: 1) exchange interactions resulting in economic and/or social outcomes such as satisfaction, and 2) positive outcomes over time increases a firms' commitment to the exchange relationship. First, time in the relationship is an important factor per social exchange theory. It takes time for interactions to occur that can foster the necessary levels of trust and commitment. Second, as opposed to economic theory alone, social exchange theory considers both social and economic conditions as key influencers within relationships. Parties engage in exchange interactions depending upon the value of the exchange (Blau, 1968; Lambe et al., 2001). As such, the success of exchange relationships depends on both parties acknowledging the presence of economic and social interdependence (Luo & Donthu, 2007). More specifically, when social and economic rewards are satisfactory, the retention rate of existing relationships and transactions remain and increase.

Social exchange is an appropriate theoretical lens as this study examines levels of commitment parceled out by both social and economic satisfaction. As theorists note, some parties may place more emphasis on economic rewards while others put more emphasis on social outcomes and maintaining trust with trading partners (Lambe et al., 2001). Hence, by determining the importance level of each type of satisfaction on commitment we will have a

better understanding of how social exchange theory operates in a buyer-salesperson context.

DEFINING THE CONSTRUCTS AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Central to this study is the commitment construct. It is an important identifier in the social exchange process (Schetzle & Drollinger, 2014). According to Anderson and Weitz (1992), commitment is the desire to develop a stable relationship by fulfilling the necessary sacrifices to maintain it. Commitment has long served as a key variable in explaining buyer-seller relationships and the willingness of parties to make short-term exchange sacrifices in efforts to maintain these relationships indefinitely (*see* Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The first facet of satisfaction, buyer's social satisfaction, is defined as a "member's evaluation of the psychosocial aspects of its relationship, in that interactions with the exchange partner are fulfilling, gratifying, and facile" (Geyskens & Steenkamp, 2000, p. 13). Research has been able to specifically establish a link between social satisfaction and commitment (e.g. Brown & Peterson, 1993; Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Geyskens & Steenkamp, 2000; Rutherford, 2012; Walsh, Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2008). The second facet of satisfaction, economic satisfaction, is defined as a, "members' positive affective response to the economic rewards that flow from the relationship with its partner" (Geyskens, Steenkamp & Kumar, 1999, p. 224). While not studied nearly as much as social satisfaction within a buyer-salesperson context, a positive linkage between economic satisfaction and commitment has recently been established (Rutherford, 2012).

Relationship Duration as a Moderator

Palmatier et al. (2006) defined relationship duration as the, "length of time that the relationship between exchange partners has existed" (p. 140). They posited that relationship duration supplies partners with behavioral information, which can allow for increased confidence in the partnership. Further, Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp (1995) posited that the age of a relationship had a positive impact on the quality of a relationship because similar goals and interests within the buyer-seller

relationship affect cooperation. This in turn impacts the successfulness of the partnership. Additionally, social exchange theory suggests that more established, long-term buyer-seller relationships tend to have more positive social and economic rewards and increased levels of confidence and commitment (Briggs & Grisaffe, 2009; Stanko, Bonner & Calantone, 2007). Time is a necessary ingredient from which interactions occur and norms that foster commitment are established (Lambe et al., 2001).

Further, an important stability factor for long-term exchange relationships is a commitment-oriented exchange partner who engages in the partnership from both the economic and social aspects (Sharma, 2001). However, relationship duration has rarely been tested in a moderator role. Dagger and O'Brien (2010) found that the effect of social benefits on commitment to a service provider was much stronger for experienced consumers than novice consumers. Experience was needed for the social benefits of friendship to lead to greater commitment.

Conversely, other researchers found that the importance of social bonds linked to utilitarian benefits such as profits and improved store image decreased as relationship duration increased between franchisors and franchisees (Lee, Kim, Ki, Lee, and Lim 2015). As the authors anticipated, social benefits would be more important during early stages of the relationship in which there was still a high degree of uncertainty. Similarly, Sweeney and Webb (2007) hypothesized that within buyer-supplier relationships involving Australian manufacturers, relationship maturation would lessen the importance of social benefits on commitment. According to their reasoning, "time" fosters continuity such that relationship commitment becomes less dependent on social benefits. However, they found evidence to the contrary, suggesting that social benefits are linked to commitment over the duration of the relationship. The authors call for additional investigation of this phenomenon. Meanwhile, a similar proxy to economic satisfaction, termed functional benefits, was found to have a constant positive association with commitment in the same study (Sweeney & Webb, 2007).

Given mixed past findings, and limited scope of inquiry, it is important to examine length of the relationship as a moderator within a broader buyer-salesperson context. Social exchange theory acknowledges that new relationships are likely more fragile because time allows for more interactions and reinforcement of norms. Yet, it has not been established whether time has any additional influence on relationships in which social or economic satisfaction has initially been achieved. The following moderator relationships are formed:

- H₁:** The positive association between social satisfaction with the salesperson and buyer’s level of commitment to the salesperson is stronger as relationship duration increases.
- H₂:** The positive association between economic satisfaction with the salesperson and buyer’s level of commitment to the salesperson is stronger as relationship duration increases.

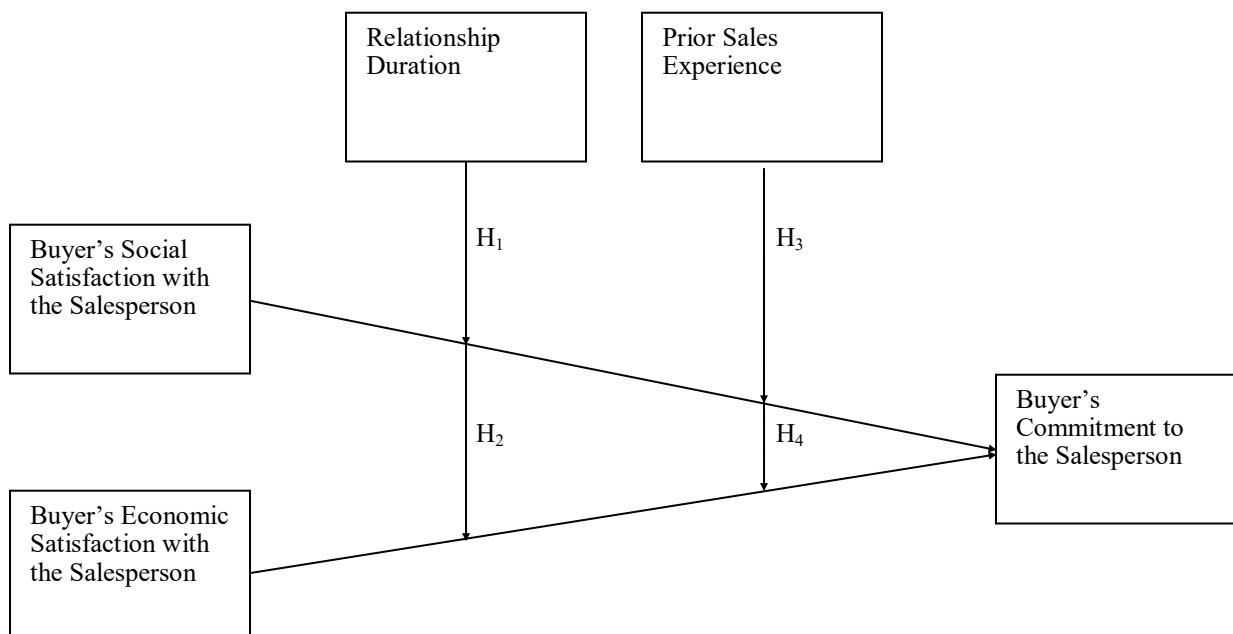
Prior Experience in Sales as a Moderator

In this section, the role of a buyer’s prior sales experience is examined in relation to satisfaction and commitment. Existing literature on buyer’s prior sales experience is sparse. Therefore, this study draws on the impact of

prior sales experience in general to build the case of a moderating effect. Sales personnel with less experience might react differently in business-to-business situations than those with experience (Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1976), like the challenges presented to inexperienced sales personnel when dealing with sales call failures and successes (Dixon, Forbes & Schertzer, 2005; Dixon, Spiro & Forbes, 2003). The ability to deal with a variety of situations and maintain a sense of stability with customers makes for a successful salesperson. In their study on relationship quality, Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) suggested that seller expertise influences the buyer-seller relationship. Expertise comes with experience, which leads to improved relationship quality (Lagace et al., 1991). Expertise refers to the degree to which a salesperson is knowledgeable, experienced, and proficient in the art of cultivating relationships that results in beneficial exchanges (Lagace et al., 1991). Expertise in sales requires an accumulation of competency based on prior experience and application (Newell, Belonax, McCardle, & Plank, 2011).

If a buyer has previous sales experience, the buyer will understand the sales process from both the salesperson and buyer perspectives. With this extra viewpoint of the buyer-seller

**FIGURE 1:
The Research Model**



relationship, buyers that have worked in sales will likely be better at assessing relational aspects over their counterparts without prior sales experience. As social exchange theory suggests, buyers who have had experience on both sides of the buyer-seller exchange have engaged in social interactions on both levels, providing them with the knowledge for expertise, ability to function in either role, and a greater understanding of the interdependence that exists. Buyers with this extra viewpoint will be more confident and better able to assess both behavioral and economic aspects of the relationship with their salesperson. A buyer's sales experience can impact relationship-building strategies used to foster a successful buyer-seller exchange (Dagger & O'Brien, 2010). Moreover, logic suggests that buyers who have been on the sales side will have a greater appreciation for how challenging it is to achieve both economic and social satisfaction from the perception of the salesperson. Hence, it can be expected that growing satisfaction, coupled with a greater level of understanding through previous sales experience for how difficult it is to achieve satisfaction, will result in amplified levels of commitment. Based on the above arguments, the following moderator relationships are formed:

H₃: The positive association between social satisfaction with the salesperson and buyer's level of commitment to the salesperson is stronger for buyers with prior sales experience.

H₄: The positive association between economic satisfaction with the salesperson and buyer's level of commitment to the salesperson is stronger for buyers with prior sales experience.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Participants were part of an online panel in which they were compensated for completing surveys. Employees of firms that worked in purchasing were asked to participate in the study. To qualify for participation in the study, subjects had to have purchasing power in a business-to-business setting and have face-to-face contact with salespeople. A total of 2,068 potential respondents were contacted, of which

635 visited the online site where the questionnaire was posted, and 509 agreed to start the questionnaire. Of the 509 potential respondents, 175 did not meet the set criteria of having direct face-to-face contact with a salesperson and were not allowed to participate. A total of 334 respondents started the questionnaire, of which, 229 completed the questionnaire. A total of 196 respondents remained after complete case deletion (listwise) in which data was missing. Overall, a response rate of just over 30% was obtained with a usable response rate of 9.5%. Complete case deletion is appropriate given the sample size is sufficiently large with the sample after deletion approaching 200, the amount of missing data is relatively small (<15%), and the relationships in the data are strong (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2009).

The sample was composed of 59.5% females. A total of 86.3% were age 35 or older. The majority of the sample was married (59%) and Caucasian (81%). The average length of buying experience for the sample was just under six years. On average, the buyers have maintained a relationship with their respective salespersons for 57 months. Buyers with prior sales experience had on average 25 months of selling experience. Appendix 1 provides additional details of the industries, products purchased, and frequencies within the sample.

Measures

Two questions were used to focus respondent's attention to a specific salesperson which they had face-to-face contact with and procured products from (see appendix 2). The independent and dependent constructs were adapted from previously accepted scales when available. Buyer's social satisfaction with the salesperson was measured using five 7-point Likert-type items developed by Dwyer and Oh (1987) and adapted by Rutherford et al., (2006). Buyer's economic satisfaction with the salesperson was measured using items developed on a 7-point Likert-type scale. To develop the scale, items were partially based on the work of Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000) and Rutherford, Anaza & Phillips. (2012). However, neither of these studies (retailing based and selling firm based) fit the salesperson context and adaptations were made primarily

based on the Rutherford et al. (2012) study to fit the salesperson context. Buyer’s commitment to the salesperson was measured using nine 7-point Likert-type items. The items were adapted from the scale developed by Anderson and Weitz (1992). Adaptations were made by changing words from “we” to “my firm” and “supplier” to “salesperson.” For example, “We have a strong sense of loyalty to this *supplier*” was adapted to “My firm has a strong sense of loyalty to this *salesperson*.” The two moderators were examined at the end of the survey. In measuring relationship duration, respondents were asked, “About how long has this salesperson called on you?” Respondents replied in months. The following question measured prior sales experience, “Have you ever worked in sales?” The respondents answered either “yes” or “no.” A follow-up question to those who answered “yes” allowed the subjects to enter the number of months of prior sales experience.

Analysis

To test the robustness of the model, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using LISREL 8.52. A total of six items were removed from the multi-item constructs. Three of the removed items from the commitment scale were reversed. Reversed items have been shown to exhibit problems (Swain, Weathers & Niedrich, 2008). The remaining three removed items (one from the social satisfaction scale and two from the commitment scale) were removed based on path estimates, standardized residuals, and modification indices (Hair et al., 2009). All multi-item constructs retained at least four items. The model yielded a chi-square of 110.52 with 51 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.00$). According to Hair et al. (2009), goodness-of-fit indices suggest adequate fit (RMSEA=0.078;

CFI=0.99; standardized RMR=0.044). All items had significant loadings on their latent construct, which suggests convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). All construct reliabilities exceeded 0.90, which exceeds the threshold set by Nunnally (1967). All average variance-extracted values (lowest value = .71) were greater than the squared correlation estimates providing evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2009). Table 1 provides a correlation matrix, reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for each construct.

Regression and hierarchical moderated regression analysis were used to test the hypothesized relationships in a series of five steps. In step one, direct paths between both buyer social satisfaction with the salesperson and buyer economic satisfaction with the salesperson were examined in relation to buyer commitment to the salesperson. Next, to test the impact of the two moderators, hierarchical moderated regression analysis was initially used (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Each moderator was tested independently, to keep the integrity of the sample and provide a basis for controlling the effects of each moderator separately (Walsh, Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2008). Relationship duration was reported in months and a single regression equation was used to test the moderating effects of this variable. Buyer’s prior sales experience was captured as both a categorical variable and a linear variable (in months). In the first of three steps, the regression equation for this moderator was run using the linear coded variable. For further analysis, in step four, a regression analysis of the dummy coded version of prior sales experience, split into those with and those without prior sales experience, was examined. Further, step five conducted a Chow

**TABLE 1:
Correlation Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations**

| | Y ₁ | X ₁ | X ₂ | X ₃ | Means | S.D. |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------|-------|
| Y ₁ Buyer’s commitment to salesperson | 0.91 | | | | 5.21 | 1.30 |
| X ₁ Buyer’s social satisfaction with salesperson | 0.67** | 0.98 | | | 6.00 | 1.18 |
| X ₂ Buyer’s economic satisfaction with salesperson | 0.79** | 0.72** | 0.94 | | 5.57 | 1.20 |
| X ₃ Relationship duration | 0.22** | 0.16* | 0.19** | | 56.94 | 63.35 |
| X ₄ Prior sales experience | 0.19** | 0.15* | 0.18* | 0.09 | 25.52 | 68.10 |

Notes: Reliabilities on the diagonal; Correlations under the diagonal; *statistically significant at the .05 level: one-tailed test; ** statistically significant at the .01 level: one-tailed test.

(1960) test to examine the impact of prior sales experience.

RESULTS

Results reinforce support for both a relationship between buyer’s social ($b = .223, p < .05$) and economic ($b = .701, p < .05$) satisfaction with the salesperson and the buyer’s commitment to the salesperson. The overall equation yielded an adjusted R^2 of .645.

To test the effect of relationship duration, H_1 and H_2 , hierarchical moderated regression was used in step two. The results for H_1 failed to find support that relationship duration moderated the relationship between buyer’s social satisfaction and buyer’s commitment to the salesperson ($p > .05$). Results for H_2 found a significant interaction with regards to relationship duration on the relationship between buyer’s economic satisfaction with the salesperson and the buyer’s commitment to the salesperson ($b = .003, p < .05$). This suggests that as time in the relationship increases, the

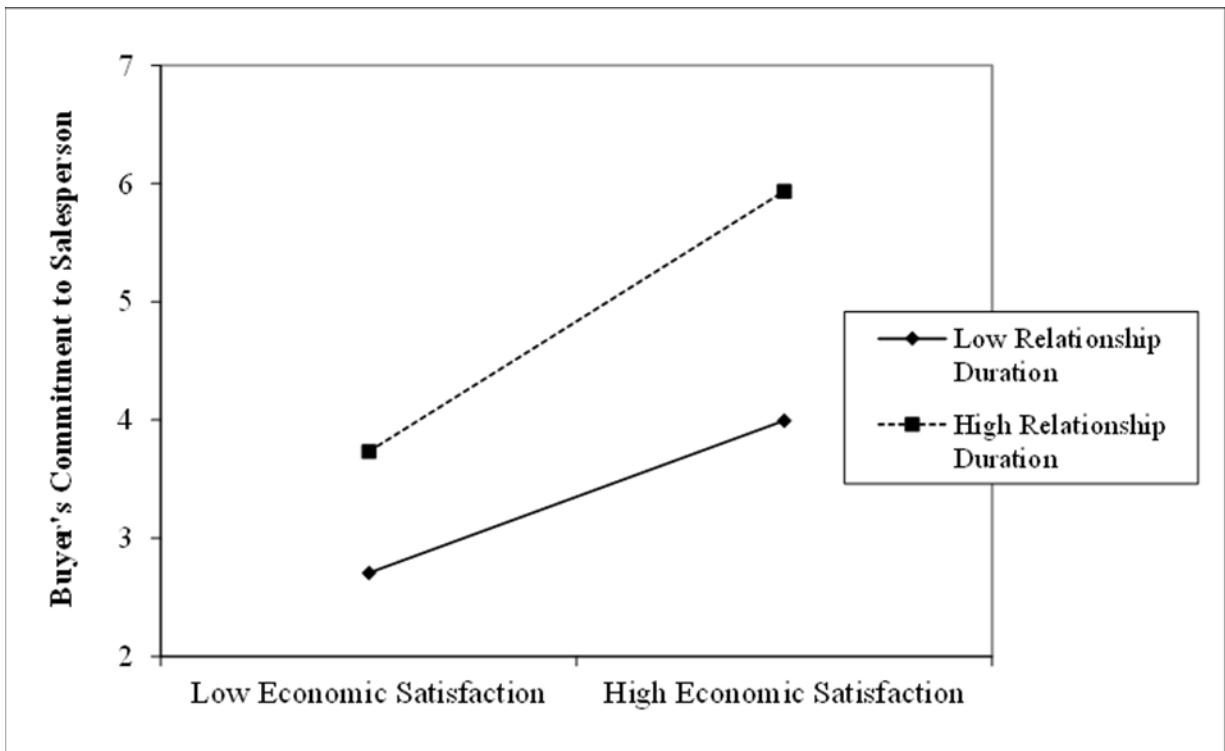
relationship between economic satisfaction and commitment becomes more important. Thus, H_2 is supported. To further assess moderation, Aiken and West (1991) suggest plotting the interaction effects for the analysis. The steeper slope in figure two under conditions of longer-standing relationships indeed signals that gains in economic satisfaction drive higher levels of buyer’s commitment to the salesperson.

In order to test the effect of prior sales experience (H_3 and H_4), two separate steps were completed using hierarchical moderated regression. In step three, prior sales experience was first examined as a linear variable. Hence, buyers without prior sales experience were coded as “0” and buyers with prior sales experience had that experience measured in months. The impact that prior sales experience had on the relationship between buyer’s social satisfaction with a salesperson and buyer’s commitment to the salesperson yielded non-significant results ($p > .05$), failing to support H_3 . For H_4 , prior sales experience impacted the relationship with buyer’s economic satisfaction

TABLE 2:
Regression Models Testing Main and Interaction Effects

| | Step I: Main Effects | | Step II: Interaction Effects of Relationship Duration | | Step III: Interaction Effects of Prior Sales Expe- rience (linear) ^a | | Step IV: Interaction Effects of Prior Sales Expe- rience (yes/no) ^a | |
|--|-------------------------|-----------|--|-----------|--|----------|---|---------|
| | b | t - value | B | t - value | b | t-value | b | t-value |
| Main Effects | | | | | | | | |
| Social Satisfaction | .223 | 3.268** | .281 | 3.153** | .177 | 2.481* | .217 | 2.623** |
| Economic Satisfaction | .701 | 10.522** | .556 | 6.115** | .793 | 11.065** | .805 | 8.941** |
| Relationship Duration | - | - | -.005 | -1.417 | - | - | - | - |
| Prior Sales Experience | - | - | - | - | .018 | 2.571* | 1.720 | 2.698** |
| Interaction Effects | | | | | | | | |
| Social Satisfaction x Relationship Duration | - | - | -.002 | -1.192 | - | - | - | - |
| Economic Satisfaction x Relationship Duration | - | - | .003 | 1.987* | - | - | - | - |
| Social Satisfaction x Prior Sales Experience | - | - | - | - | .002 | 1.228 | -.087 | -.600 |
| Economic Satisfaction x Prior Sales Experience | - | - | - | - | -.005 | -2.880** | -.181 | -1.362 |
| R^2 | .648 | | .665 | | .675 | | .665 | |
| Adjusted R^2 | .645 | | .656 | | .666 | | .656 | |
| Notes: ^a The significance of the interactions were also tested using a change in F test. The results were consistent with the results of the t-tests provided (see Table 3). *Significant at $p < 0.05$ **Significant at $p < 0.01$. | | | | | | | | |

FIGURE 2:
Interaction Effect of Relationship Duration and Economic Satisfaction on Commitment



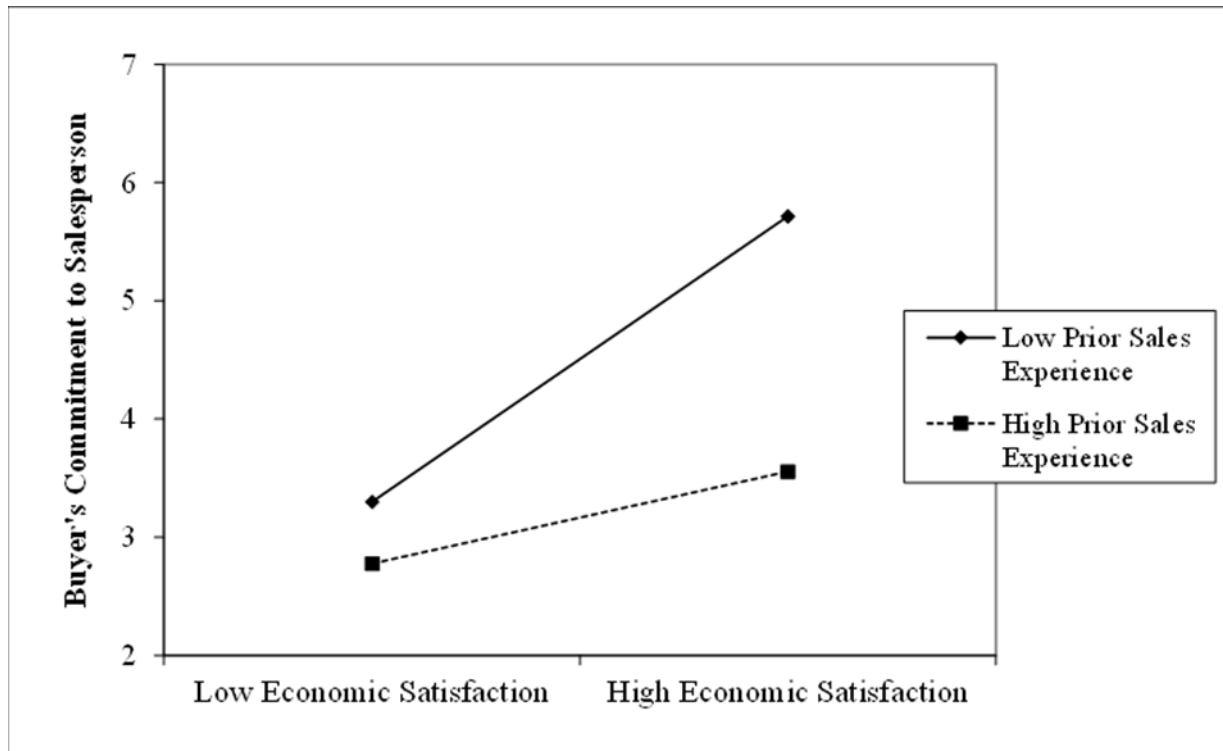
and buyer's commitment to the salesperson ($b = -.005$, $p < .05$). This suggests that as the buyer's prior experience in sales increases, the relationship between economic satisfaction and commitment becomes less important. Figure three confirms this interaction effect. As economic satisfaction shifts from low to high, commitment to the salesperson rises only slightly among buyers with higher levels of prior sales experience. Said another way, when buyer's prior sales experience is low, increases in economic satisfaction have significant increases in commitment to the salesperson as noted by the degree of slope change in figure 3.

Given that the hypothesis was significant in the opposite direction, additional steps provide beneficial information. Therefore, in step four, the sample was split into two groups and recoded. Those that had prior sales experience ($N=72$) were coded as "1" and those that did not have prior sales experience ($N=124$) were recoded as "0". By recoding the variable into two groups, differences could be examined based on prior experience or no prior experience in sales. Moderated regression was run using the dummy coded prior sales

experience and the multiplicative interaction term between social satisfaction ($p > .05$), and economic satisfaction ($p > .05$) on commitment. Results yielded non-significant findings.

To further explore the relationship, a Chow test was conducted between the two groups. The Chow test results produced a significant F-value of 3.10 ($p < .05$). Given the critical F-value of 2.65, the null hypothesis is rejected demonstrating that there is indeed a difference between the group of buyers with prior sales experience and those without. Referring to Table 3, economic satisfaction ($b = .624$, $p < .05$) has a higher impact on commitment than social satisfaction ($p > .05$) in the prior sales experience condition. In the no prior sales experience condition, economic satisfaction ($b = .805$, $p < .05$) also has a higher impact on commitment than social satisfaction ($b = .217$, $p < .05$). When examining the parameter estimates, those without prior sales experience show higher coefficients than those with prior sales experience. This suggests that prior sales experience reduces the importance of buyer's social and economic satisfaction with the salesperson in relation to buyer's commitment

FIGURE 3:
Interaction Effect of Prior Sales Experience and Economic Satisfaction on Commitment



to the salesperson. Further, the amount of variance explained in the dependent variable ($\text{Adj. } R^2 = .729$) is significantly higher within the respondents without prior sales experience. Overall, H3 and H4 are not supported.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Findings from this study highlight the importance of developing our understanding concerning differences in social and economic satisfaction as they relate to commitment in buyer-salesperson relationships. This study suggests that while both social and economic satisfaction impact buyer commitment, economic satisfaction has a stronger impact on buyer's commitment to the relationship. For researchers that focus exclusively on social aspects of satisfaction, this study provides evidence suggesting that they should extend their satisfaction measures to also include economic aspects of satisfaction. Specifically, this study indicates that for buyers in long-term relationships, economic rewards are a strong driver for commitment to their salespeople that

only amplifies over time. Meanwhile, these findings reinforce those of Lee et al. (2015) in a franchisor-franchisee context indicating that social bonds may be more important during early stages when buyer-seller relations tend to be more uncertain. Unlike Lee and colleagues, this study did not find a significant diminishing of social importance over time, yet the nature of the association was similarly in the negative direction. Instead, as the buyer-seller relationship matures economic satisfaction takes on a more prominent role than social satisfaction in fostering higher levels of commitment.

Next, buyer's prior sales experience did have a statistically significant impact on the linkage between economic satisfaction and commitment. However, the direction of the coefficients suggests that with more prior sales experience, the importance of economic satisfaction diminishes. Furthermore, the significance of the Chow test and increased beta values for the group of buyers without sales experience suggest that it is possible that buyers without prior sales experience place a

TABLE 3:
Chow Test Results (Step Four)

| | Social Satisfaction | | Economic Satisfaction | | Adjusted R ² |
|---|---------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|-------------------------|
| | b | t-value | b | t-value | |
| Prior Sales Experience (n = 72) | .130 | .921 | .624 | 5.441* | .516 |
| No Prior Sales Experience (n = 124) | .217 | .2.965* | .805 | 10.106* | .729 |
| Note: * denotes significance at $p < .05$; critical F (3,190) = 2.65 | | | | | |

higher level of importance on both social and economic satisfaction when determining their level of commitment to the relationship.

Given the exploratory nature of this hypothesis, it is possible that we miss-specified the direction of this moderation. It is highly plausible that with previous sales experience, buyer expectations may be more rigorous at the outset, and buyers may be more critical of sales practices that deviate from their own experiences in the sales role. Perhaps there is more of an expectation that satisfaction should be achieved and less of an increase in commitment levels even as satisfaction levels increase. While merely conjecture for now, this makes for an intriguing phenomenon for future study. Along the lines of “familiarity breeds contempt,” psychologists have found that a certain level of ambiguity is needed to foster liking (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). Given that buyers with previous sales experience had lower levels of satisfaction and commitment overall, perhaps this familiarity with the sales process creates higher hurdles for their present sales counterparts. The findings suggest that buyers with prior sales experience are more critical and demanding of the buyer-salesperson relationship because they are accustomed and familiar with what it means to be a salesperson and how to sell.

For salespeople, they should ensure that a buyer’s needs are met on both sides (social and economic) when developing the relationship. Salespeople may need to alter their sales strategy to better adapt to the buyer based on the buyer’s level of prior sales experience. For academic researchers, the results open a new avenue for further inquiry. First, these findings regarding differences among buyers with previous sales experience need replication.

More importantly, if confirmed, researchers need to determine more precisely why the differences exist. Perhaps, qualitative research focusing on buyers with previous sales experience can uncover common themes in how they evaluate satisfaction and commitment with their sales representatives that are unique. These insights can then be translated into adaptive selling measures.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

For salespeople, the findings demonstrate the importance of understanding how buyers view costs versus benefits provided in the relationship. The results show that buyers who experience lower levels of economic satisfaction will be less likely to remain committed to the relationship. From a relationship building perspective, the results illustrate the importance for salespeople to engage in more ways to deliver continued economic satisfaction to the buyer. Said another way, salespeople should not be lulled into a false sense of relationship security with buyers merely based on positive social cues. Such a situation leaves salespeople vulnerable to competitors who can exhibit to buyers that their offerings are more economically attractive. In fact, economic justification provides buyers with a ready-made excuse to exit the relationship with a salesperson when they otherwise may be hesitant because of the social goodwill achieved. Also, this study shows that length of the buyer-salesperson relationship provides no added benefit to the sales representative who has achieved this social goodwill. Hence, salespeople should be counseled to periodically probe buyers to understand if their products or services are helping to reduce buyer’s operating costs. This also raises the importance of salespeople in the

role of intelligence gatherers, constantly monitoring the marketplace to ensure that their products and services are competitively priced.

On the positive side, there is hope for sales managers dealing with salesforce turnover who fear having to assign new sales representatives to buyers with long-standing prior salesperson relationships. If the new sales representative can assure that economic satisfaction is achieved, there may be time to build social satisfaction in the relationship. At the same time, the importance of social satisfaction should not be discounted and salespeople can help create a satisfying environment by customizing buyer-seller relationships and building interpersonal connections. Creating this type of environment is one way to increase the value received from the relationship, leading to improved relationship management and strategic success (Sullivan, Peterson & Krishnan, 2012).

The surprising finding regarding buyers' previous sales experience has managerial implications as well. While it remains to be determined exactly why the differences exist, it is important for salespeople to carefully consider how buyers' previous sales experience may alter their expectations of the buyer-seller relationship. Perhaps salespeople can engage buyers in a conversation early in the relationship about their previous sales experiences to determine what criteria were most important to them from the selling perspective. If the criteria are equally important in the present relationship sales representatives should adapt accordingly. If the previous circumstances are not applicable, it is important that sales representatives explain this and potentially forestall any latent feelings of incongruence that the buyers may have regarding expectations of their sales representatives. For example, buyers in their previous sales role may have operated in a time in which transaction selling, as opposed to partnership selling, was more commonplace. Similarly, buyers may have operated in an industry in which supplier churn was frequent irrespective of current satisfaction levels. As such, sales representatives may need to spend more time articulating to buyers the long-term benefits of commitment itself.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings presented here have some limitations and provide avenues for future research. First, having buyers self-report on their prior sales experiences suffers from recall bias. It is plausible to expect that participants may have forgotten their experiences as salespeople due to the lack of recency, which can bias any results. Researchers must address this limitation in future studies by controlling for the time lapse required for the actual recall. Second, the examination of prior sales experience using years in sales presents some limitations. Although this measurement technique is a sound empirical approach commonly used in the sales literature (e.g., Fu, 2009), it ignores the quality aspects of selling that assesses the features, complexity, and degree to which the buyer was a novice or expert salesperson. Without this information, sales expertise cannot be fully deduced. Thus, further research investigation on this is needed. Third, like most studies utilizing self-reported data, variance explained can be associated with method bias, which is less likely a major concern in this study given that the association between related variables were higher than unrelated variables as seen between the satisfaction measures and prior sales experience. However, we suggest that future studies control for method variance by using dyadic data by assessing predictor variables from buyers and outcome variables (e.g. commitment) from salespeople. This way different individuals measure the predictor and criterion variables, thus limiting the production of artifactual covariance likely to emanate from the same respondent.

Fourth, although the relationships established in this study are grounded in theory, additional independent variables and moderators can shed better insights to understanding buyer commitment to the salesperson. For example, personal variables, prior and current skills, motivation, and training should be considered as likely predictors of commitment in future studies. In addition, it is likely that prior sales experience will impact persuasion knowledge. However, this relationship is not tested in the current study. Thus, future research must investigate persuasion knowledge as an

outcome of prior sales experience. Investigating this relationship will add to the richness of what is currently known from our results. Furthermore, long-term orientation of the buyer as a plausible moderator should be incorporated in future studies. This may further reveal differences in buyer commitment to the salesperson. Moreover, examining a firm's supply strategy as it relates to relationship duration and prior sales experience could shed new insight on the importance of commitment in buyer-seller relationships. Lastly, salesperson prior buying experience could be examined and applied to existing sales research.

CONCLUSION

The present study reiterates the importance of salespeople focusing on maintaining high levels of both social and economic satisfaction within their relationships with buyers. While both social and economic satisfaction have a positive impact on buyer's level of commitment to the salesperson, economic satisfaction has a stronger impact on buyer's commitment. For researchers, this stresses the importance of further developing an understanding of economic satisfaction. The results also support that as a buyer's relationship with the salesperson increases, the strength of the relationship between economic satisfaction and commitment is increased. Furthermore, the buyer's prior sales experience negatively impacted the strength between the satisfaction and commitment linkages. Overall, this study provides additional support for examining satisfaction beyond just a social based dimension and a foundation for examining the impact of both buyers' prior sales experience and relationship duration as potential moderators.

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**APPENDIX 1:
Industry Classification**

| Industry | Frequency | Percent of Respondent |
|--|------------------|------------------------------|
| Manufacturing/Production Equipment | 31 | 15.8 |
| Office supplies/Office Service/Printing | 26 | 13.3 |
| Electronic/IT Services | 25 | 12.8 |
| Retail Products | 14 | 7.1 |
| Construction/Drilling/ Home Components | 13 | 6.6 |
| Food/Restaurant/Hospitality | 12 | 6.1 |
| Medical/healthcare | 12 | 6.1 |
| Shipping/ Shipping Supplies | 11 | 5.6 |
| Auto/Aviation/Marine | 10 | 5.1 |
| Lab/Science | 8 | 4.1 |
| Other (less than 3% of the sample) Financial Services Furniture Gears/lubrications Janitorial Suppliers MRO | 34 | 17.4 |

**APPENDIX 2:
Scale Items**

| |
|---|
| <p><i>Focus Questions</i> Please select and list the name of one firm which meets the following two requirements: 1) Your firm procures products or services from this firm, and 2) A salesperson from this firm makes sales calls to you. What type/types of products or services does this selling firm primary provide to your firm?</p> |
| <p><i>Buyer's social satisfaction with the salesperson</i> In general, I am very satisfied with my firm's relationship with my salesperson. Overall, my salesperson is a good person to do business with. My salesperson provides my firm with a satisfactory level of service. Overall, my salesperson is an asset to my company.¹ All in all, my salesperson deals fairly with my company.</p> |
| <p><i>Buyer's economic satisfaction with the salesperson</i> My firm's relationship with my salesperson has provided good value. My firm's relationship with my salesperson is very attractive with respect to cost savings. My firm's relationship with my salesperson is very attractive with respect to productivity increases. My firm is economically satisfied with my salesperson.</p> |
| <p><i>Buyer's commitment to the salesperson</i> My firm defends this salesperson when others criticize him/her.¹ My firm has a strong sense of loyalty to this salesperson. My firm is continually on the lookout to add to or replace this salesperson.¹ My firm expects to be using this salesperson's products for some time.¹ If another company offered my firm a better product line, my firm would most certainly take them on, even if it meant dropping this salesperson.¹ My firm is not very committed to this salesperson.¹ My firm is quite willing to make long-term investments in the relationship with this salesperson. My firm's relationship with this salesperson is a long-term alliance. My firm is patient with this salesperson when he/she makes mistakes that cause us trouble.</p> |
| <p><i>Prior sales experience</i> Have you ever worked in sales? If yes, how long?</p> |
| <p><i>Relationship duration</i> About how long has this salesperson called on you?</p> |

¹Indicates dropped item