

FORMATION OF RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT IN B2B SOFTWARE INDUSTRY

**University of Jyväskylä
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JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

ABSTRACT

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>From the beginning of the 1990s customer relationship management (CRM) has gained plenty of attention among marketing researchers and practitioners. The concept of relationship marketing has emerged highlighting the importance of building long-lasting, profitable relationships with the customers. Based on that knowledge, relationship commitment is considered as a goal of companies' relationship marketing approaches. In marketing theory, trust and communication are widely acknowledged as prerequisites for commitment.</p> <p>The goal of this study is to increase understanding of the phenomenon of relationship commitment in topical and growing software industry. The aim is to explore, what kinds of meanings customers point on commitment in software industry after the relationship has begun, and what kind of role trust and communication have as antecedents of commitment. Existing theory from commitment, trust, communication, and the birth of B2B relationship (e.g. Morgan & Hunt 1994; Friman et al. 2002; Mandják et al. 2015; Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017) is used as a foundation for the study and the research framework.</p> <p>The study was conducted as case study as the case company is a global company providing building information modelling software. The empirical data was gathered through six semi-structured theme interviews. Informants are customers who had purchased building information modelling software within the last 18 months. The findings of the study indicate commitment in B2B software industry to be based largely on the strong market position of the company, superiority of the product and the lack of other reasonable alternatives. Earlier experiences from the software strongly affected the decision to purchase the software in question. Support with the usage of the product and timely reacting to contacts were seen the most important forms of communication. In trust building process, product support and company's confidentiality with e.g. trade secrets are deemed the most important.</p> <p>This study supports previous findings in that dependency, high switching-costs and scarcity of alternatives are present in software industry. Moreover, this study suggests that companies need to focus on efficient supporting functions, good-quality customer service and product development to enhance commitment.</p>	
Keywords commitment, trust, communication, B2B marketing	
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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Asiakkuuksien johtaminen (CRM) on kerännyt enenevässä määrin huomiota markkinoinnin ammattilaisten keskuudessa aina 1990-luvun alusta alkaen. Yleinen käsitys alalla on, että keskittyminen pitkäaikaisiin, tuottoisiin asiakkuuksiin on yrityksille kannattavampaa kuin yksittäisten, transaktioperusteisten asiakkuuksien hankinta. Suhdemarkkinoinnin käsite on johdettu asiakkuuksien hallinnasta kuvastamaan yrityksen eri sidosryhmien välillä olevien suhteiden hoitamista. Suhdemarkkinoinnin perimmäisenä tarkoituksena on rakentaa sitoutumista eri osapuolten välille. Markkinoinnin alalla laajalti hyväksytty näkemys on, että sitoutuminen kumppanien välillä rakentuu luottamukselle ja yhteydenpidolle.</p> <p>Tämän työn tarkoitus on selvittää, kuinka sitoutuminen yritykseen muodostuu B2B-ohjelmistoalalla. Lisäksi tarkastellaan sitä, millainen rooli luottamuksella ja yhteydenpidolla on asiakassuhteen aikana. Työn teoreettisen viitekehyksen ja tutkimusmallin perustana on sitoutumiseen, luottamukseen, yhteydenpitoon ja asiakassuhteen syntymiseen liittyvät alan aiemmat tutkimukset (esim. Morgan & Hunt 1994; Friman ym. 2002; Mandják ym. 2015; Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017). Tutkimusmetodina tässä työssä on case-tutkimus. Case-yritys on suomalainen rakentamisen tietomallinnusohjelmistoja kehittävä ja myyvä yritys. Empiirinen osuus on kerätty haastattelemalla yrityksen kuutta yrityksen olemassa olevaa asiakasta viimeisen 18 kuukauden ajalta.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat sitoutumisen yritykseen pohjautuvan B2B-ohjelmistoalalla ennen kaikkea yrityksen vahvaan markkina-asemaan, tuotteen hyvyyteen sekä muiden realististen vaihtoehtojen puuttumiseen. Aiemmat käyttökokemukset ohjelmistosta vaikuttavat vahvasti siihen, että kyseinen ohjelmisto on hankittu. Yhteydenpidon osalta toimivat tukipalvelut ja vastausten saaminen nopeasti ovat keskiössä. Luottamus alalla ilmenee esimerkiksi yrityssalaisuuksien kohdalla, sillä salaista tietoa ei haluta valuvan julkisuuteen. Kaiken kaikkiaan tämä työ tarjoaa uutta tietoa ja ymmärrystä ajankohtaiseen ja kasvavaan alaan liittyen. Tämän työn perusteella keskeistä yrityksille on olla asiakkaan tavoitettavissa ja pystyä tarjoamaan apua ohjelmiston kanssa nopeasti. Sitoutuminen pohjautuu osaltaan muiden vaihtoehtojen vähyyteen ja korkeisiin vaihtamiskustannuksiin, joten myös emotionaalisten tekijöiden ylläpitämiseen tulisi suhteissa keskittyä varmistamalla, että tukipalvelut toimivat ja asiakas on toiminnassa keskiössä.</p>	
Asiasanat sitoutuminen, luottamus, yhteydenpito, B2B-markkinointi	
Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulu	

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the topic and justification of the study

Since early 1990s, customer relationship management (CRM) has received plenty of attention among academics and practitioners (Payne & Frow 2005). Instead of focusing merely on a brand and products, more companies are using customer-centric approach to the business (Reinartz, Krafft & Hoyer 2004). Seeking the ways to move away from single transactions towards long-lasting profitable relationships with customers is focal. Due to the emerging interest in customer relationships, the concept of relationship marketing has become established in marketing literature emphasizing the importance of building relationships with customers and other stakeholders. (Chumpitaz Caceres & Paparoidamis 2007.)

Several studies (Morgan & Hunt 1994; Aurier & N'Goala 2010) have considered relationship commitment as a fundamental goal of relationship marketing, as it is discovered to enhance relationship maintenance. Acknowledged perception in business-to-business (B2B) industry is that nurturing existing business relationships and processing them to profitable long-term relationships is exceedingly more affordable, than approaching new customers (Gee, Coates & Nicholson 2008). This study seeks to broaden understanding of the phenomenon of relationship commitment and its antecedents in the context of B2B software industry.

The most important concepts of this study are communication, trust, and commitment, as they are acknowledged to be strictly bonded together as prerequisites for relationship development in marketing literature. A widely accepted view is that trust and commitment between the partners is a key to success in B2B relationships, since it generates acres of benefits for both parties (Geyskens et al. 1996; Theron, Terblanche & Boshoff 2008). Morgan & Hunt (1994) highlight the role of trust and commitment in relationship marketing success by stating that they forward efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness, and thus enhance cooperation between the partners. It is widely acknowledged that commitment and trust are strongly connected to each other, albeit they should

not be considered as synonyms (MacDonald & Smith 2004). Commitment and trust are especially important in high-technology industry, where integrated networks between suppliers and customers are central due to constantly changing environment and high competition (de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001).

Communication is also acknowledged as a crucial factor in a formation of trust, commitment, and relationship maintenance (Friman et al. 2002). Andersen (2001, 169) stresses the importance of communication in business relationships, as he notes that *"willingness to commit resources depends on the formation of trust, and communicative actions are central to this process."* Furthermore, Friman et al. (2002) support this finding by stating that communicating and sharing information properly enhance commitment and trust. Communicative aspects in relationship development and maintenance will be taken into consideration by examining, what kind of role customers point on communication in B2B software industry and what kind of expectations customers have on communication in the relationship.

In this study, customers who have bought the software lately are under examination, since the aim is to understand how relationships are developed after the purchase and implementation of the software. Mandják et al. (2015) examined how business relationships are born. They present a model that illustrates processes leading to the birth of a B2B relationship. The model of Mandják et al. (2015) is utilized in this study to describe the starting point of the relationship. In addition, the concept of the birth of relationship is used in this study to describe the starting point of the B2B relationship. Exact definitions of the concepts using diverge literature from the field of marketing are presented in Chapters 2 and 3.

Justification of the study

Trust and commitment have been investigated in marketing literature widely. Lacey & Morgan (2008) investigated the influence of commitment and loyalty programs on customer advocacy. Friman et al. (2002) on the other hand tested trust-commitment theory in B2B relationships finding that commitment, trust, and communication are crucial parts in business relationship development. Moreover, Ball, Coelho & Machás (2004) examined the role of communication and trust on customer loyalty in banking sector. They argue that the effect of communication is remarkably significant on customer loyalty. One of the most known studies in the field is the study by Morgan & Hunt (1994), where they present commitment-trust model to understand B2B relationships and examine the effects of different variables on trust and further on relationship commitment.

However, most of the studies is focused on different context such as B2B services or banking sector. Regardless of its extremely strong growth, software industry has not received broad attention among marketing researchers. Software industry is growing rapidly, and today different software are pivotal in companies' marketing activities. Palanisamy et al. (2010) examined the

acquisition process of enterprise software, but the field is still lacking a wider understanding of purchasing different software and how relationship develop and maintain in software industry. In this regard, investigating the context in question will provide actual insights of the relevant topic.

1.2 Objective of the study and research questions

This study aims to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon of relationship commitment in B2B software context tackling especially on the formation of commitment after the relationship between the partners has begun. Trust and communicative aspects are essential foundations of relationship commitment and they will be taken into consideration within this study. The empirical part will be done by examining customers of a global software firm that provides building information modelling software to several industries. The firm has one of its offices in Finland and within the framework of this study the concentration will be on the company's Finnish customers. In this study, customers who have purchased information modelling software will be under investigation. In software industry, products or services are often complex and require implementation and expertise, hence different after-sales services become necessary. As Abratt (1986) stresses, in high technology B2B markets after-sales technical and applications support is indispensable for success. Company's existing customers were chosen as informants, since the purpose is to enrich understanding of the development of relationship in its early stages.

Objectives of the study:

To understand the relationship commitment formation in B2B software industry. Additionally, the objective is to describe the role played by trust and communication in relationship commitment formation.

Research questions of the study:

1. How relationship commitment formation is perceived by the B2B software industry?
2. How trust and communication are formed in B2B software industry?
3. In a B2B relationship, what are the expectations of customers with regard to the trust and communication?

1.3 The structure of the study

This master's thesis consists of six main chapters. In Chapter One, the topic itself is introduced including justification for the study and the research questions. In introduction the most pivotal concepts of this study are covered, and themes that have been studied in the field earlier are reviewed shortly. Theoretical background is presented in Chapters Two and Three. Chapter Two deals with the concepts of industrial business relationships and organizational buying and decision-making. In the end of the Chapter Two, the concept of the birth of B2B relationship is presented. Concepts and theory related to relationship communication, trust and relationship commitment are discussed in Chapter Three. Methodological part of the study is discussed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five reports the results of the study proceeding from the organizational decision-making process to relationship commitment, trust, and communicative aspects. Concluding remarks are made in Chapter Six including also limitations of the study and possible research objectives for the future. The structure of the study is presented in Figure 1.

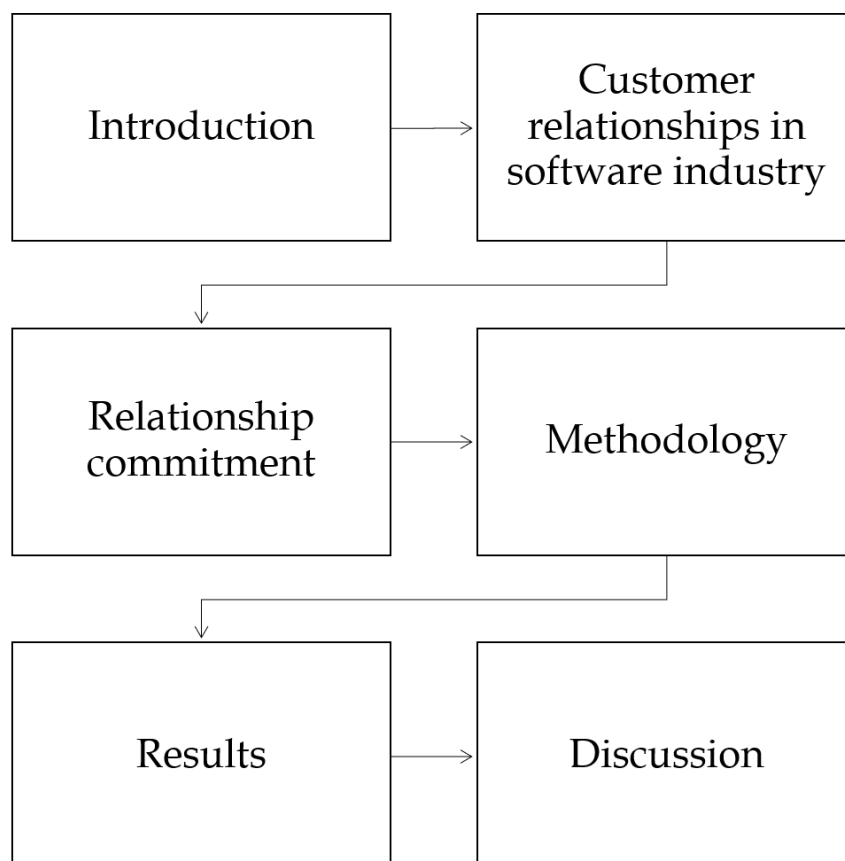


FIGURE 1 The structure of the study

2 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS IN SOFTWARE INDUSTRY

Customer relationships in industrial markets and software industry are discussed in this chapter. Theoretical framework is generated using relevant literature from the field of marketing, particularly industrial marketing. The viewpoint of relationships, adapting the goal of the study, is B2B. First, the nature of industrial business is presented in general covering also characteristics of software industry. Then, organizational buying process and decision-making are discussed before presenting the concept of the birth of B2B relationship.

2.1 Nature of industrial business

In marketing literature B2B is a general abbreviation of the definitions of business to business marketing, business marketing and organizational marketing (Căescu & Dumitru 2011). American Marketing Association (2018) defines B2B as *“a business that markets its products or services to another business.”* Căescu & Dumitru (2011) present a model (Figure 2) to understand the differences between industrial marketing, B2B marketing and B2C marketing. In their division, industrial marketing includes business between industrial manufacturer and wholesaler, whereas B2B marketing contains business from the wholesaler to retailer. Consumer marketing, in turn, includes marketing from the retailer to the final customers. According to the model, industrial marketing can also be considered to belong to B2B marketing. (Căescu & Dumitru 2011.) Industrial markets, according to AMA (2018), include organizations and individuals that purchase goods or services for production of products or services they are renting, selling, or supplying. Industrial markets consist of e.g. agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, construction, transportation and communication and public utilities. (AMA 2018.)

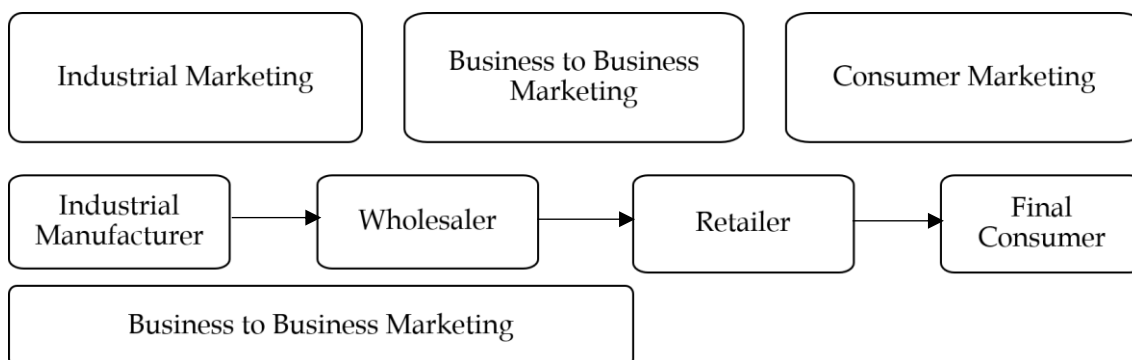


FIGURE 2 Differences between industrial marketing, B2B marketing & B2C marketing (adapted from Căescu & Dumitru 2011)

In B2B markets, customer portfolio typically consists of fewer customers than in B2C markets, since most of sales and turnover comes from the small number of customers. Customers in industrial markets are typically divided into three groups: users, original-equipment manufacturers, and middlemen (Kotler & Pfoersch 2006, 24). Transactions are often long, complex, and expensive processes, as customers tend to need customized products or services. Occasionally, business customers are not the end users of the product (Narayandas 2005). The more risks are associated with the purchase, the bigger group of people is involved in the decision process from the outset. In such cases, buying group usually includes people with higher organizational status (Johnston & Lewin 1996).

Sheth (1973) states that traditional industrial buying process includes people from at least three departments of an organization. Ordinarily in organizational purchase processes, product quality and after-sales services have significant value, when companies are considering different alternatives. Price is considered not as important as quality and services, unless the supplier alternatives in the markets are virtually similar. (Johnston & Lewin 1996.) As Suarez, Casumano & Kahl (2013) note, many prosperous, global technology companies (e.g. SAP, Oracle, IBM, and Hewlett-Packard) receive big share of their sales from different services. Pre-sales customer engagements, financing and after-sales support are typical examples of the services that technology companies provide. (Suarez, Casumano & Kahl 2013.) Additionally, Davies & Brush (1997) emphasize technical support to be the most prominent factor in high-tech business. After a purchase, companies tend to provide implementation service to help customers in installing and deploying the product (Suarez, Casumano & Kahl 2013).

Customers may not understand all the possibilities and features that the new product offers, which makes it important for the supplier to provide support in the use of the product. Importantly, support and other after-sales services influence positively customer satisfaction. (Burger & Cann 1995.) Customers highly appreciate suppliers, who offer proven good quality products and after-sales services and solutions (Johnston & Lewin 1996). Product support has direct influence on the customer's usage of the product in the future, hence it is the most typical form of service in software industry. Distinct maintenance services are also important in software industry relationships, since customers under long-term contracts can receive e.g. bug fixing, repairing, support and product upgrades. Revenues from such services are visible in the long term (Suarez, Casumano & Kahl 2013.)

Burger & Cann (1995) present possible after-sale services a supplier can utilize. Seller can help customers to redesign the physical plant, if such change is needed when implementing new technology. Also assisting in reorganizing customer organisation and choosing the right people to work with the new technology is possible. In case of technical products, providing necessary materials, communication networks and training is required. Sometimes implementation of new software may cause conflicts inside buyer organization,

and to solve the disputes seller can use prior knowledge and experiences from the similar incidents. (Burger & Cann 1995.)

Tellefsen (2002) points that organizational buyers attempt to achieve both organizational and personal goals in purchasing situations and, hereby obtain satisfaction and higher levels of commitment. To increase relationship commitment with the customer, managers must therefore be able to recognize and provide benefits not only for the buyer organization, but also for the purchaser. Companies can enhance relationships with purchasers by e.g. responding quicker to information requests or personalizing the ways information is delivered to the customers. (Tellefsen 2002.) Dick & Basu (1994) stress that strengthening B2B relationships relies abundantly on interpersonal relationships between individuals involved in business. Boles, Barksdale & Johnson (1997) support the perception, as they underline the importance of buyer-seller relationship in customer retention and advocacy. Findings of their study indicate that relationship quality is more pivotal factor in customers repurchase intentions than satisfaction.

Anaza and Rutherford (2014) found that buyer's satisfaction with the selling firm affect substantially buyers' willingness to spread word-of-mouth about the firm. According to Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen (2014), word-of-mouth plays an important role in B2B customers' buying process as customers tend to gather experience-based information about possible suppliers. Seeking information only from supplier's moderating commercial sources would not give a truly suitable snapshot of the firm. Typical sources for such information are e.g. experts, colleagues, customers and even competitors, who provide relevant and truthful evaluation regarding the supplier. Customers with longer relationship with the firm rest their decisions and evaluations highly on prior satisfaction and perceptions. Bolton (1998) found that existing customers behave more stable than newer customers, who tend seek for other alternatives quickly if their experiences of the service are negative.

2.2 Organizational buying process and decision making

According to Webster & Wind (1972), organizational buying behaviour (OBB) typically includes certain special characteristics related to e.g. goals, complexity of the process, time required, and individuals involved in the process. Solving a problem of a sort is usually a part of OBB, and solution to the problem often requires buying action. Furthermore, prevailing buying situation of the company must be identified, and potential suppliers and brands compared. Sheth (1973) describes organizational buying process as a complex, tripartite process. Firstly, buying decision involves different individuals, which forms the psychological state of the process. Then, surrounding conditions affect decision making between the individuals. Finally, decision making among individuals and overcoming plausible conflicts are vital in organizational buying. A group needs

to determine; which alternatives will be the most suitable in a certain situation and what tactic they will use in a process (Sheth 1973).

Webster & Wind (1972) present four factors that have an influence on OBB. Their model consists of environmental, organizational, interpersonal, and individual factors. Environmental factors affecting organizational buying behaviour are physical (e.g. geographical), technological, economic, political, legal, and cultural situations. Goals and tasks related to purchase, buying structure, and buying technology are examples of factors that influence buying behaviour from organizational perspective. Interpersonal and individual factors appear as business between organizations always includes different individuals with their personalities, motivation, and characteristics. (Webster & Wind 1972.)

B2B buying and selling processes have been in turning point since the emerge of the internet and digital age. Due to increased availability of information and the existence of social media, customers have more power and they are better connected to the companies than before (Agnihotri et al. 2016). More customers recognize their need themselves and familiarize with possible suppliers and their assortment even before contacting sales personnel. Therefore, traditional solution selling has altered, and companies need to support customers' buying process and decision making from the beginning of the process (Adamson, Dixon & Toman 2012). According to Ulaga & Kohli (2018) business customers' way to buy different products and services and ultimate expectations over the suppliers and their sales organizations have been altering recently. Furthermore, the shift in buying behaviour extends to what business customers want to buy in the first place. Today's customers are expecting to receive not only products, but also better value from the suppliers. That major shift in buying behaviour requires salespersons to broaden their role from providing flowing purchasing experience to help customers with possible problems and ensuring desired value is provided to them. To achieve these goals, a salesperson must be attending to the process from beginning to end. (Ulaga & Kohli 2018.)

Loebbecke et al. (2010) state that in organizational software purchase process, information and features concerning the product must be canvassed. Sources providing information are customer references, expert network recommendations and demonstration team presentations, as against feature-related factors are price performance, functionality, and sales team service. When customers are considering different alternatives, they add more weight on their trusted information sources than to company's' customer references. They continue that customers highly appreciate different references and especially information from trusted third party is meaningful for potential buyers seeking for different alternatives, as it is considered more important and plausible than company's own customer references. Furthermore, purchase processes in software industry often include software system implementation and integration services. (Loebbecke et al. 2010.) De Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) continue that customers in high-tech markets usually value product-related criteria and provided service support most during their decision-making process.

Even though industrial purchase processes usually proceed deliberately, and decisions require time and recourses, the role of emotions and individual preferences in purchases is often underestimated (Webster 1965). A traditional perception in organizational buying has underlined rational activities in decision-making. However, the role of emotions cannot be ignored (Kemp et al. 2018). Industrial buying process involves personal buyer-seller relationships, which, in addition to rational and objective factors, influence on decision making too (Webster 1965). Different emotions from positive to negative are present from the beginning of the buying cycle affecting on customers' motivation and behaviour. Thus, taking individuals with their emotions into account in selling and marketing efforts is focal. It is vital to recognize which emotions are experienced at the given time, and what is the impact of the emotions on customers' decision-making. (Kemp et al. 2018.) As Reichheld, Markley & Hopton (2000) state customers particularly bond relationships with company's employees.

According to Kemp et al. (2018) organizational buying often includes high risks, which may cause strong negative feelings such as fear or threat. Failure in important decision can inflict several damages for the company and at the worst, job loss for the decision-maker. Contrary to the negative emotions, hope, excitement, and other positive emotions can also be manifested during the buying cycle. Marketers' task is to recognize, manage and regulate these emotions during the process. In case of strong negative emotions, marketers can work to reduce perceived risk and e.g. anxiety and frustration by diverse marketing communication activities. If customer is feeling fear, marketing activities must focus on mitigating such negative feeling. (Kemp et al. 2018.)

Reducing different risks and uncertainties affects also salespersons, which makes their role more demanding. Providing bearing information to the customer is essential. In addition, encouraging customers to act adaptively, co-creating solutions to maintain the products or services, assisting to designate appropriate metrics to measure productivity, and performance of the solution are examples of the operations salesperson may need to provide. Occasionally, supplier organization is required to provide resources to help customers to understand all the benefits new solution offers and how to use it properly. (Ulaga & Kohli 2018.)

2.3 Birth of relationship

Mandják et al. (2015) present a four-stage model (Figure 3) to understand, how B2B relationships are born. The birth of a B2B relationship consists of starting situation, awareness, initiation, and interaction process exchange, which leads to trust building and relationship development. Birth of relationship is a process, in which different activities and stages build conditions for the relationship to begin. Sometimes the process proceeds nonlinear and the order of the steps may vary. (Mandják et al. 2015.) Friman et al. (2002) found that trust between the partners

is a necessary condition for relationship commitment to grow. Moreover, Mandják et al. (2015) stress the importance of trust stating that when trust between the partners exists, the process includes lower uncertainty, partner can predict other's behaviour better and management of interdependence included in the situation becomes simpler. Wilson (1995) highlighted in his five-stage relationship development model that mutual trust building process might start in early stages after the interaction between the parties begins. In the model of Wilson (1995), formation of relationship consists of searching and selecting the partner, defining purpose and goals to the relationship, setting boundaries, creating value, and maintaining stability.

Mandják et al. (2015) define a starting point of birth of relationship to be when two organizations with no common history are not aware of each other, or at least no interaction exists between them. At some point, there will be a trigger issue, which initiates the awareness and interaction processes. Interactive process contains trust building approaches at both interpersonal and organizational level, and it determines, if the relationship can develop further. When trust between the partners exists, it creates the conditions for the relationship to develop and maintain. (Mandják et al. 2015.)

According Wilson (1995), relationship begins from searching and selecting the partner. Partner selection proceeds more fluently if a buyer has familiarized him-/herself with the supplier beforehand. After partner selection, partners involved must define purpose and set mutual goals for the relationship. Instead focusing merely on individual ambitions, partners should define mutual objectives for the relationship, since they are found to hold the relationship together in difficult and stressful situations. (Wilson 1995.)

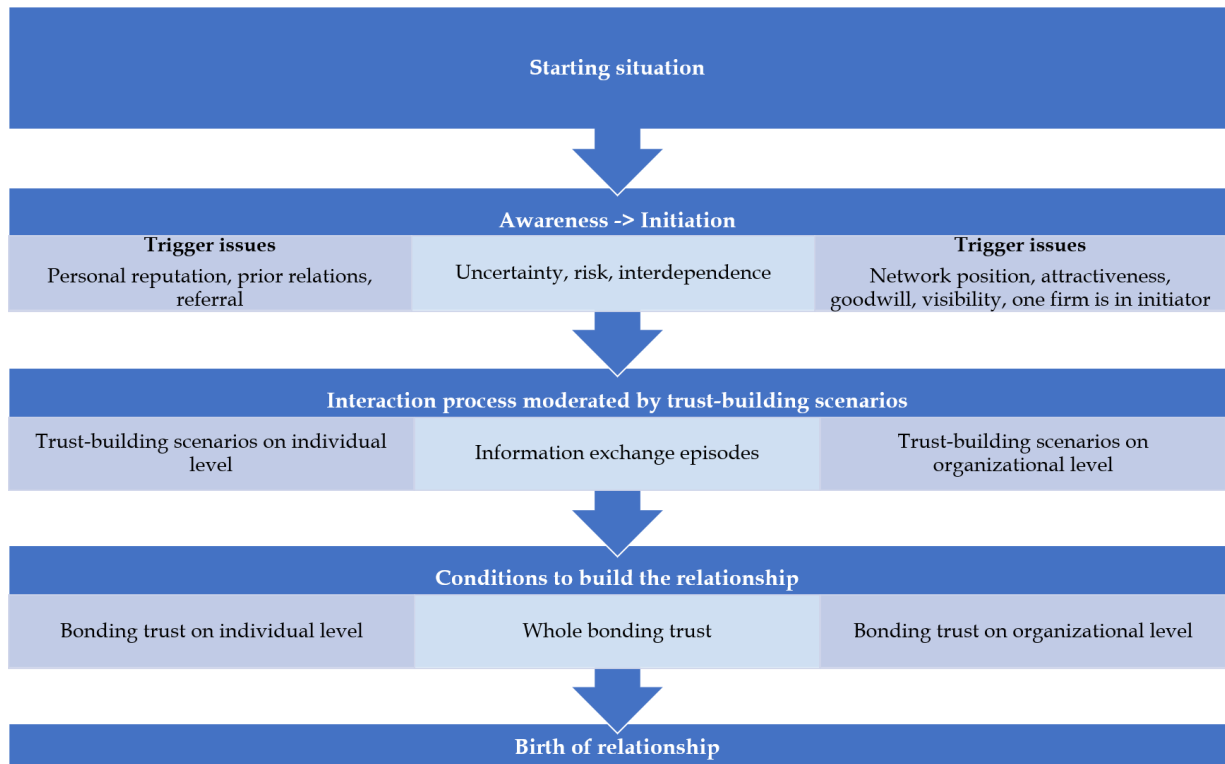


FIGURE 3 Model for the birth of relationship (Adapted from Mandják et al. 2015)

Along with discussing about the mutual objectives, defining boundaries for the buyer-seller relationship and appointing resources provided from both companies is important. By setting clear limits to the relationship, partners can increase value and satisfaction of the relationship, since the partners know their roles and responsibilities related to the partnership. A long-term objective for the relationship is to create value for parties involved. Value can be gained in many ways, e.g. as technology, market access, lower prices and costs and gained knowledge. Occasionally, achieved value is difficult to determine and measure. Hybrid stability to the relationship may be achieved, if the outcomes are positive and they strengthen commitment between the partners. (Wilson 1995.)

3 RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

This chapter focuses on relationship commitment including definitions from marketing literature. First, concepts of communication and trust are covered since they are acknowledged to act as antecedents of relationship commitment. Meanings and perceptions of trust are presented after the literature review of communication. After communication and trust, the definition of relationship commitment is presented before discussing different forms of commitment and a concept of customer retention. Existing theory from the marketing field since 1960s until today is used in this chapter. At the end of the chapter, the research framework of this study is presented by combining and utilizing theory from both relationship commitment and B2B relationships in industrial and software markets.

3.1 Communication

Duncan & Moriarty (1998, 2) define communication as *“a human activity that links people together and creates relationships.”* Communication is a pivotal tool in increasing knowledge and sharing information in countless different areas and situations. Information is the heart of communication since increased information reduces uncertainty and facilitates decision making. In marketing context, communication is considered as a core activity of company’s marketing and relationship building. Instead seeing communication only as a persuasive marketing activity, it should be considered a relationship building approach including informing, answering, and listening. Apart from customers, communicating also with other stakeholders such as employees, media, financial community, investors, government and regulators and local community is essential. (Duncan & Moriarty 1998.)

Communication is an essential factor in business relationships, since it provides customer value and improves customer loyalty. It is crucial for the companies to communicate frequently and to harness communication channels, which their customers use. (Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017.) Moreover, Oly Ndubisi (2007) emphasizes the impact of communication in customer loyalty, as he states that timely and valuable communication and good complaint handling have significant impact on customer loyalty. In addition, Bowman and Narayandas (2001) stress that customers highly appreciate interaction and procedure within business relationships and factors in question directly influence on customers’ intention to maintain the relationship. In line with Bowman & Narayandas (2001), Andersen (2001) highlights the key role of communication in trust building process and argues that communication is an antecedent of commitment.

Chumpitaz Caceres & Paparoidamis (2007) highlight that customers' role is no longer to be only passive receivers of communication, but they appreciate interaction and dialogue with the company instead. Communication, alongside delivery and administrative activities, is a part of the functional quality of the product or service and affects directly customer satisfaction, trust, and relationship commitment by enhancing the conditions for relationship maintenance. (Chumpitaz Caceres & Paparoidamis 2007.) Similarly, Duncan & Moriarty (1998) highlight the role of interactivity in communication. If the objective is to develop and maintain B2B relationships, communication must be two-way, and companies need to personalize their content and messages.

3.1.1 Content of communication

Timely and open information sharing and conversation within a relationship is highly appreciated and effects on the formation of trust between the partners (Friman et al. 2002). Sharing valuable and important information openly to customers will propel customers to spread information as well, and it brings customers closer to the company (de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001). Tanner Jr. (1998) reminds that in B2B relationships customer is rarely the end user of the product. However, communicating not only with buyers and customers, but also with the users is valuable for the companies, since the end users often recognize possible problems in the product first. Agnihotri et al. (2016) stress the role of salespersons in information communication. Especially in the case of complex solutions and products, receiving timely and relevant information within different stages of the buying process is crucial. Properly provided information by salespersons may result in increase in customer satisfaction and better responsiveness.

To succeed, marketing communication messages need to support the establishment, development, and maintenance of customer relationships (Grönroos 2004), thus they must be planned meticulously (Andersen 2001). To improve customer loyalty, companies need to concentrate particularly on channel effectiveness and quality of communication (Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017). In difficult situations, straight communication can avert parties from further damage (Friman et al. 2002). Theron, Terblanche & Boshoff (2008) add that occasionally, if the situation includes risks and uncertainty, effective communication is an advisable manner to reduce negative outcomes. Moreover, when implementing new communication systems, it is advisable not to overrate the role of such systems or overpromise their benefits to the customers. When customers' expectations are extremely high, there might be a risk to pass underneath the expectations, which often results as dissatisfied customers. Satisfaction with the communication technologies in a business relationship correlates strongly with customers' intention to maintain the relationship (MacDonald & Smith 2004).

3.1.2 Communication channels

According to Hänninen & Karjaluoto (2017) today's technology enables numerous possibilities for companies to communicate with their customers and other stakeholders, and the demarcation between mass and personal communication is difficult. Email and company websites, for instance, can be utilized in both mass and more personal marketing communication (Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017). Technology-assisted communication tools enable cost-effective modes to personal interaction with customers (MacDonald & Smith 2004), and especially the emerge of internet has entailed opportunities for the companies to exchange information, develop relationships and learn different strategies globally (Walters 2008).

In recent years, industrial companies have started to capitalize digital channels in their marketing communication increasingly (Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017). In industrial companies, digital marketing communication channels are mainly used in interaction with existing customers as a supportive function for sales process and, in building awareness of the company. Hence, communication in existing customer relationships and sales support are found to be the most important objectives for industrial companies. (Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015).

Järvinen & Taiminen (2015) found that in addition to other digital marketing platforms, marketing automation is a phenomenon that has received plenty of attention among companies and academics recently. Via different marketing automation software (e.g. HubSpot, Marketo, Pardot, Eloqua, Silverpop) companies can optimize their marketing and sales activities, since they allow companies to contact potential and existing customers by more personalized content, thus enhancing lead qualifying, nurturing and follow-up. Instead promoting company's products, the content should be formulated based on customers' needs and focus on solving customers' problems by providing them valuable and interesting information. At best, using marketing automation and combining company's sales and marketing funnels reduces the traditional gap between company's marketing and sales functions and enables more coherent sales and marketing processes. (Järvinen & Taiminen 2015.)

Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen (2014) note that different social media platforms have facilitated fluent communication and information sharing not only among customers, but also between customers and suppliers. Wang, Pauleen & Zhang (2016) found that divergent social media applications and platforms (e.g. LINE, Facebook, and WeChat) diversify and enhance companies' communicative performance. Social media is considered particularly efficient in interplay between business partners, since it offers possibilities to communicate rapidly and e.g. to see, when the receiver has read the message. Furthermore, Siamagka et al. (2015) note that most essential motives to harness social media in marketing communication for industrial companies are its usefulness and innovativeness. According to Huotari et al. (2015) besides external marketing activities, companies should encourage customers to generate content and

participate in marketing communication. Customer references, for instance, are typical examples of customer-generated content that companies utilize in a B2B context (Huotari et al. 2015).

Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi (2015) state that using social media, e.g. in lead generation is somewhat infrequent among industrial companies. A company can use social media not only through a company's official accounts but also by training and encouraging employees to use social media actively. By creating interesting and remarkable content, employees can allure other users to participate in a discussion of a company or a relevant topic related to the company. Huotari et al. (2015) remark vital for the companies to understand the potential benefits social media can provide instead of restricting employees to use it. Social media and other technology-provided tools alone may not give companies competitive advantage, but they allow possibilities to serve their customers better, thus enhancing companies' CRM activities. Overall, integrating new technologies to comport with existing marketing systems is essential (Trainor et al. 2013).

Despite the growing interest in digital communication channels among industrial companies, traditional manners such as face-to-face communication, telephone calls and e-mails are still in industrial companies' favour due to the long-term nature and complexity of business relationships. Some companies might fret that open conversation with customers, e.g. in social media, can be detrimental for confidentiality and thus threaten company's competitive advantage (Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015.). Additionally, Wang, Pauleen & Zhang (2016) point out that issues regarding privacy and security restrain the professional usage of social media among B2B companies. Moreover, Siamagka et al. (2015) argue that costs, lack of knowledge and unconsciousness of potential benefits restricts harnessing social media as a marketing communication tool.

However, digital channels provide a platform for rapid and effective communication with the customers and they should be used to deepen customer relationships to more personal and interactive level. Digital channels enable efficient sales support, while it can streamline the communication between company's sales and marketing functions and different sales support materials can be presented in a digital form. (Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015.) In addition, Theron, Terblanche & Boshoff (2008) note that due to increased mobility of B2B customers, the role of digital channels has incremented, but the human factor must still be included in communication. Due to the complexity of the buying processes in industrial markets, companies have implemented social media as a part of their marketing communication exceedingly timidly (Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015). In all marketing activities, it is essential for the company to examine which communication channels their customers prefer (Theron, Terblanche & Boshoff 2008).

3.2 Trust in business relationships

According to Morgan & Hunt (1994, 23) trust exists, *“when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity.”* Doney & Cannon (1997) add that in marketing literature trust is often divided into two forms, credibility and benevolence. Credibility and benevolence are particularly relevant definitions in industrial business. Credibility arise when a company can rely that the partner is true to its word and follows the rules and contracts formed in a relationship. Benevolence, in turn, depends on the partner’s willingness to achieve mutual goals with the partner and interest in partner’s wellbeing. In risky situations, companies tend to choose the supplier that can perform efficiently and reliably and is interested and willing to help the company in achieving its objectives. (Doney & Cannon, 1997.) Hereby, credibility and benevolence act also as drivers of relationship commitment (Abdul-Muhmin 2005). Mandják et al. (2015) present the concept of *“whole bonding trust”* (Figure 4) to understand the trust building process between the partners. Trust is formed in both organizational and personal level including the aspects of credibility and benevolence. Whole bonding trust is a situation, where *“a perception of partner’s benevolence and credibility simultaneously refers to a person and an organization.”* (Mandják et al. 2015, 36.)

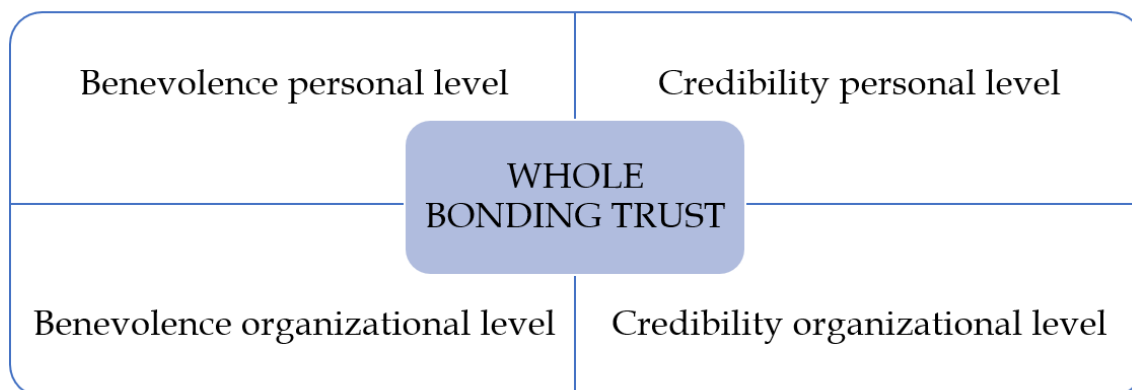


FIGURE 4 Whole bonding trust (Adapted from Mandják et al. 2015)

Additionally, Doney & Cannon (1997) state trust to develop not only between the organizations, but also between individuals, e.g. the buyer and seller in B2B relationships. Buyer’s trust on seller is principally based on behaviours and features of the company. For this reason, failing to achieve customer’s expectations, e.g. not being able to deliver an important product in a promised timeframe, could be detrimental for the company’s current relationship and reputation. Salespeople, in turn, can treat customers in a more personal and customized manner, behaving more predictably and presenting benevolent intentions, thus enhancing the formation of trust between them and the buyers. (Doney & Cannon 1997.)

Gounaris (2005) highlights the role of trust as a crucial factor in customers' inclination to continue the relationship, because trust is an antecedent to relationship commitment. Likewise, Morgan & Hunt (1994) emphasize trust being a premier determinant of relationship commitment. Aurier & N'Goala (2010, 319) state that depending on the degree and quality of trust customers decide "*which and how much business to develop with a given partner*". Moreover, trust influences on the economic aspects of the relationship, since it enhances customers' service usage and possibilities to cross-selling thus, bringing depth and breadth to the relationship (Aurier & N'Goala 2010).

According to Leonidas, Talias & Leonidou (2008) business relationships may include coercive or non-coercive power between the parties. Existence of non-coercive power may result in higher satisfaction, hence enhancing trust and further relationship commitment. International relationships involve commonly geographic and cultural differences and occasionally cross-border cooperation, thus requiring trust and commitment between the parties to develop and maintain successfully. Different forms of power should be used deliberately, since the consequences may vary from fruitful to disastrous. (Leonidas, Talias & Leonidou 2008.)

Trust between the customer and the service provider is resulted by high-class service and bonding strategy and techniques of the provider. Enhancing efforts in question leads to the formation of trust between the parties and further increases customers' affective commitment. Vice versa, improving trust and affective commitment decreases calculative commitment, which is established to have a negative effect on customers' future intentions to invest in and maintain the relationship. (Gounaris 2005.) Further, de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001, 282) found a negative linkage between trust and calculative commitment. They state that "*the less a customer will have confidence in the supplier, the more the motivation will be based on a calculation of costs and benefits*".

According to Friman et al. (2002) trust has a significant influence on commitment and yet on relationship development. Trust is based on personal liking and honesty and, thus it is a prerequisite for relationship commitment. Companies rest their decision with whom to do business with largely on trustworthiness (Friman et al., 2002). In industrial markets, trust strengthens buyer organization's intentions to continue the relationship with the same supplier in the future. In addition to trust, delivery performance and relative cost and price are the most influential criteria for supplier selection in industrial markets. However, trust increases the likelihood for the business relationship to maintain in the future. (Doney & Cannon 1997.)

Trust also increases affective commitment between the partners in relationships grounded highly on dependence, since fondness towards the business partner increases and motivation to maintain the relationship rests more on emotional than calculative dimensions (Geyskens et al. 1996). According to Leonidas, Talias & Leonidou (2008) satisfaction is a prerequisite for trust in a relationship. Through relationship satisfaction, a company can increase feelings of fairness, equitability, and reciprocity. Instead of focusing merely on financial

benefits of the relationships, working on psychological aspects is also pivotal. Due to its temporary nature, satisfaction must be achieved repeatedly to facilitate trust building (Leonidas, Talias & Leonidou 2008).

If relationship is lacking trust, generating both affective and calculative commitment is extremely difficult. In situations in question, partners may have other intentions to maintain the relationship such as using power to proceed towards its strategic goals. Therefore, building relationship based on trust instead of interdependence is essential for the companies (Geyskens et al. 1996). In addition, MacDonald & Smith (2004) state that in certain situations, business relationship can exist without much trust. Supplier can be e.g. from a foreign country or the industry consist only of a few suppliers. Situations in question require plenty of effort and resources from the partners to develop and maintain the relationship. Consequently, given a choice, relationships based on trust are more favourable for the companies in many ways, not least because lower transaction costs (MacDonald & Smith 2004). Occasionally, the absence of trust might result in customers' intention to switch the partner, but in proportion, the existence of trust in a relationship is not always a guarantee of relationship maintenance. In markets, where almost all the vendors are trustworthy, trust may be a self-evident truth, not a way to separate oneself (Ball, Coelho & Machás 2004).

3.3 Defining relationship commitment

Morgan & Hunt (1994, 23) define relationship commitment as *"an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the commitment party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it ensures indefinitely."* The definition of Meyer & Allen (1991) on the other hand describes commitment as a psychological state, which embodies the customer's relationship with the company and intention to maintain or terminate the relationship. Relationship commitment is a top priority in companies' long-term customer relationships, since it is considered as a key antecedent of relationship development and maintenance (Aurier & N'Goala 2010; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Committed partners want the relationship to last and they are willing to give their contribution in maintaining it. Providing better resources, opportunities, and benefits than competitors, sharing similar corporate values, communicating informatively and explicitly, and avoiding taking malignantly advantage of the exchange partner are approaches to build commitment, develop, and maintain relationships, and to gain competitive advantage (Morgan & Hunt 1994).

Friman et al. (2002) found that to strengthen the commitment, relationship partners should aspire mutual benefits instead of striving solely for their own self-interest. Commitment between the parties arise if the perceived cost or reward in a relationship is positive. Apart from that, commitment increases when partners see potential risks and losses resulting from the severance of the

relationship. Negotiating and signing contracts alone will not be enough to enhance commitment, since partners also need psychological triggers to increase the willingness to maintain the relationship. (Friman et al. 2002.) To achieve significant advantage in customer relationships, a firm needs to reorganize its ideology from “market to” to “market with” the customers (Lusch 2007). Additionally, Morgan & Hunt (1994) note that commitment is resulted from partners’ total expectations of costs and benefits possibly achieved or lost through the relationship.

Focusing on strengthening commitment is considered as a primary task of companies, since it is widely highlighted to increase customers repurchase intentions (Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos 2005; Friman et al. 2002; Anaza & Rutherford 2014). In other words, whereas customer satisfaction is traditionally focusing on and evaluating the past occasions, commitment emphasizes upcoming activities and willingness to proceed on the relationship (Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos 2005; Friman et al. 2002). Aurier & N’Goala (2010) support the perception in the sense that it emphasizes the significant role of commitment in customers repurchase intentions. Their findings point that commitment augments customer retention and prevents customers from bonding relationships with other companies. Furthermore, Tsiros, Ross & Mittal (2009) stress that high commitment decreases customers’ willingness to seek for other alternatives. Therefore, highly committed customers still might do the comparison between different alternatives, but the probability for such action is lower than among the less committed customers. Furthermore, customers with low commitment are more likely to approach potential alternative and even terminate the existing relationship. (Tsiros, Ross & Mittal 2009.)

Along with repurchase intentions, customer advocacy is one manifestation of commitment. Committed customers are eager to give feedback to the company and act as volunteer marketers by spreading positive word-of-mouth of the firm, thus driving customer retention, and facilitating acquisition of new customers (Lacey & Morgan 2008). In line with Lacey & Morgan (2008), Olaru, Purchase & Peterson (2008) found that customers who have received value from the relationship are presumable to recommend the company. Conversely, companies with less developed business relationships need to work hard to earn the trust and commitment of their customers and to get them act as volunteer marketers (Lacey & Morgan 2008).

3.3.1 Different forms of commitment

Geyskens et al. (1996) present two different forms of commitment that appear in relationships between companies. Affective commitment is founded on partners’ mutual trust and willingness to maintain the relationship. Achieving affective commitment requires company to build mutual trust with their customers. Company must focus on providing good-quality service and on bonding valuable relationships and, on the other hand, evading to make the relationship to rely excessively on dependence (Gounaris 2005). Calculative commitment, in turn, relies on the partners’ need to maintain the relationship and on a perceived

risks and costs concerning the termination of the relationship (Geyskens et al. 1996).

Morgan & Hunt (1994, 24) define termination costs to include *“all expected losses from termination and result from the perceived lack of comparable potential alternative partners, relationship dissolution expenses, and/or substantial switching costs.”* Thus, if relationship partner expects these losses to result from switching the partner, it strengthens commitment to the relationship (Morgan & Hunt 1994). Calculative commitment is considered as a negative type of motivation, since it refers to company’s intention to continue the relationship, because switching to another partner is too difficult or unprofitable or it is impossible to receive good enough value from other alternatives (de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001). Considering this, interdependence influences more on calculative commitment, whereas affective commitment is formed merely as an outcome of trust between the relationship partners. (Geyskens et al. 1996.) De Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) point that in high-tech markets, different activities and investments in customer relationships are often endeavours to create positive feelings between the partners and hence to enhance affective commitment and trust. Companies’ goal is to strengthen customers’ confidence by sharing information, creating cooperation, and decreasing perceptions of risk (de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001).

Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos (2005) remind that focusing not only on developing affective commitment, but also on calculative commitment is reasonable, since calculative commitment is comprised of economic factors and takes e.g. competitive offerings into account. Consequently, along with enhancing affective commitment and emotional aspects of the relationship, understanding the business environment and competitive position in a market is vital. De Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) found that characteristics of the market has significant impact on calculative commitment, since e.g. high-tech market typically includes large amount of dependence.

A concept continuance commitment is also used in marketing literature to describe dependence-based customer-supplier relationship. Continuance commitment supports customer retention due to the lack of alternatives or high switching costs, but contrary to affective commitment, it affects negatively on customers’ intention to spread positive word-of-mouth. (Fullerton 2003.)

Normative commitment denotes customer’s intention to continue the relationship due to obligation (Meyer & Allen 1991). Even if a company has difficulties to reach customer’s expectations in service quality, it is possible to counteract these weaknesses if normative commitment between the parties is strong. Moreover, in high competitive market, it is important for the companies to enhance also their customers’ normative commitment to improve customer retention. (Fullerton 2014.)

Venetis & Ghauri (2004) reveal that service quality has a significant impact on long-term relationship maintenance and customer retention. Service quality influences on both affective and behavioural commitment, meaning that customers may maintain with the firm even without much affective commitment,

if the perceived service quality is good. In the long term, however, probability to leave the relationship is bigger, if a customer is lacking affective commitment. Considering this, affective commitment is a cornerstone in establishing long-term customer relationships and it truly is worth enhancing in firms' customer relationships. (Venetis & Ghauri 2004.)

According to MacDonald & Smith (2004), the less confident the customer is about the supplier, the more important role costs and benefits of the relationship have in intention to maintain the relationship, which manifests the negative relationship between trust and calculative commitment. Conversely, trust and affective commitment have eminently positive connection to each other making it essential for the companies to accomplish operations that provoke positive emotions between the parties (MacDonald & Smith 2004.)

3.3.2 Customer retention

In customer relationships advisable for the companies is to focus on existing customers since it is more advantageous for the firm than acquiring new customers (Gee, Coates & Nicholson 2008). Reichheld, Markey Jr. & Hopton (2000, 135) found a linkage between firms' customer retention and profits stating that *"5 percentage point shift in customer retention consistently resulted in 25-100 percent profit swings."* Managers need to examine what the customers value in relationships, because their willingness to repurchase and disseminate positive word-of-mouth is highly dependent on the value customers receive for their contributions (Molinari, Abratt & Dion 2008; Boles, Barksdale & Johnson 1997).

Spreng, Shi & Page (2008) state that perceived service quality is a result of several transactions from a certain company and thus it is stronger and more stable form than customer satisfaction. Venetis & Ghauri (2004) find same occurrence as they mention service quality to be the most influential factor in building continuing customer relationships. Therefore, one inadequate customer service outcome may not trigger customer churn, but repetitive negative outcomes can possibly lower customers' threshold to rebuy from the same firm. In negative situations, firm needs to assure that negative outcome in question is a single incident and it will not recur. (Spreng, Shi & Page 2008.)

Gordini & Veglio (2017) agree with Tamaddoni Jahromi, Stakhovych & Ewing (2014) as they found vital for the companies to distinguish churning customers from non-churners to increase profitable customer retention. Furthermore, Gordini & Veglio (2017) note that identifying and targeting the right customers is a prerequisite for a successful customer retention strategy. It is valuable to utilize predictive customer churn techniques and identify potential churners, because using customer retention strategies in customers who will not churn is waste of resources (Tamaddoni Jahromi, Stakhovych & Ewing 2014).

3.4 Research framework

As stated, the focus of this study is on the formation of commitment and trust in the beginning of the relationship. In presenting the research framework of this study, different communicative factors are also taken into consideration as they are found to have an important role in building trust and commitment in B2B relationships (Friman et al., 2002; Andersen, 2001). In this study, the birth of the relationship refers to the moment when a customer of the case company has bought the license to building information modelling software - thus the relationship between the companies has begun. Key reasons behind the purchase decision, expectations over the relationship, formation of trust and commitment and the role of communication during the relationship are primarily under investigation. Figure 5 visualizes the framework of this study. Building on the model of Mandják et al. (2015) this study examines how the process proceeds from the birth of relationship onwards. Existing theory from marketing literature (e.g. Friman et al. 2002; Morgan & Hunt 1994; de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001; Mandják et al. 2015) is used in developing the research framework model, as it is acknowledged that communication enhances trust and further relationship commitment.

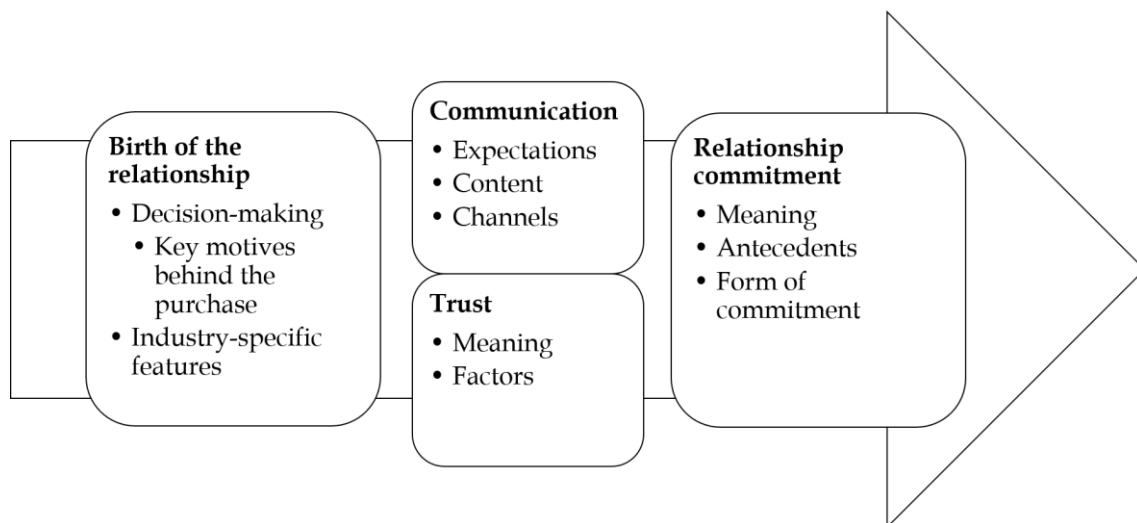


FIGURE 5 Research framework of the study

4 METHODOLOGY

Methodological decisions made during the study are discussed in this chapter. First, the methodological process of the study is presented in Figure 6. Methodological decisions were made keeping in mind the nature and the objective of the study. Since the context still lacks much of an academic interest, this study seeks to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon instead trying to create general rules.

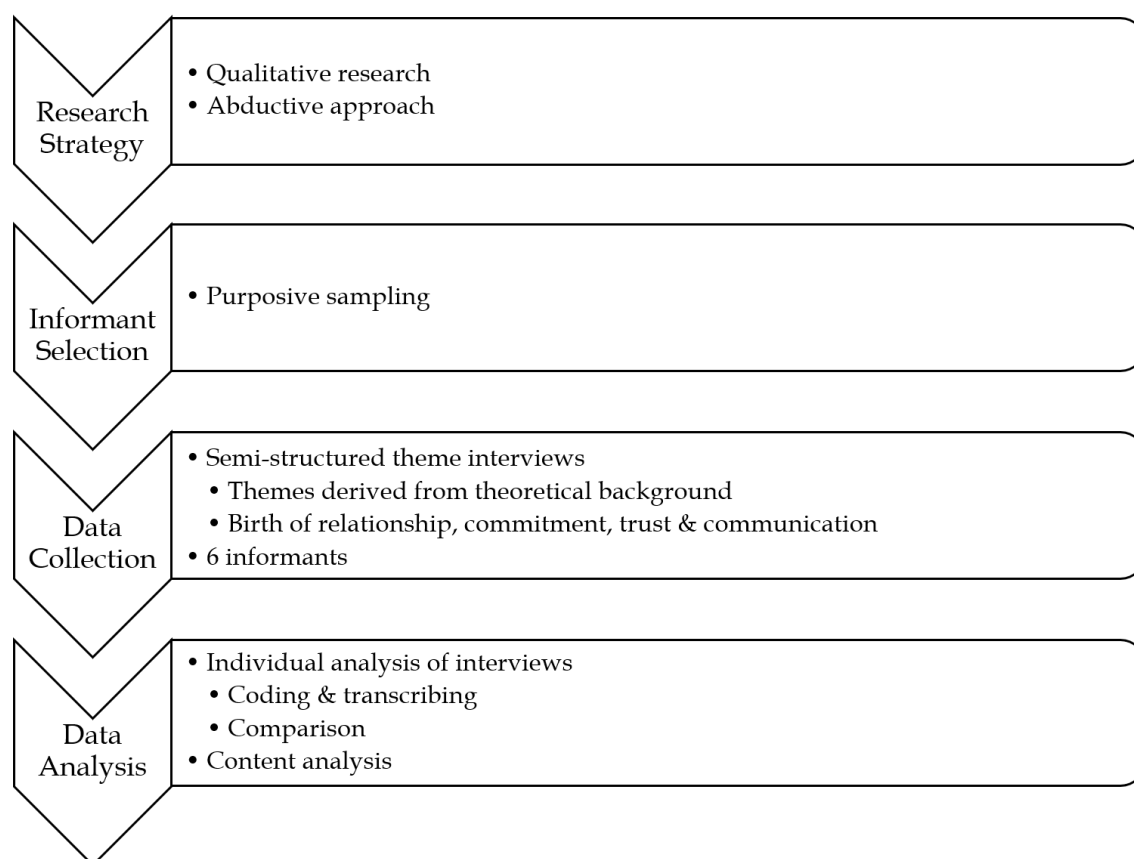


FIGURE 6 Methodological process of the study

4.1 Research philosophy

Understanding the philosophical basis of the study is essential for the researcher (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 1997, 120). Ontology relates to the nature of reality and to what we can know of it. Constructivism denotes that reality is proportional and subjective since it is based on researcher's findings (Metsämuuronen 2011, 216–217). With this consideration in mind, this study follows the philosophy of constructivism because the aim is to broaden understanding of a phenomenon, not to create generalizable rules. Epistemology

examines the relationship between the researcher and the research phenomenon, and it encompasses the question of what we can know in the first place (Metsämuuronen 2011, 216–217). Epistemological approach in this study is subjectivism. Subjectivism emphasizes that findings are created by the researcher and based on researcher's constructions of the reality. (Metsämuuronen 2011, 218–219).

4.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative research has received increasing interest among business researchers lately. The most substantial difference between quantitative and qualitative research approaches is that instead of numbers and statistical generalizations, qualitative research explains and describes different phenomena usually verbally. Moreover, in qualitative research, theory is usually formed based on the empirical data of the research, and the focus is on understanding diverse phenomena and letting the participants to give meanings and assumptions to them (Bryman & Bell 2007, 402–403; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 46).

In qualitative research, examining meanings of different phenomena is in the centre of the process, and the researcher and the participant are in interaction. Qualitative research is dependent on the context and the research process proceeds from single to general, even though the aim of the qualitative research is not to form all-encompassing generalizations. Researcher is a part of a total research process, hence having an impact on the process from choosing and interpreting the concepts to collecting and analysing the empirical data. Even though researcher's subjective interpretations and choices influence the study, the study should reflect most of all participants' view of the world. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 18, 23–25.) Regardless of the roots in the field of social sciences, qualitative research is not strictly confined to the one given philosophy of science, thus enabling researchers to employ qualitative research in several other fields. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 3.)

Methodology applies to how the world is understood from a practical point of view. The objective of methodology is to explicate, how an issue or problem can be studied. Methodology is separated into methods that include concrete tools for collecting (e.g. interviews, observation) and analysing (e.g. thematic or narrative analysis) the empirical data. Philosophical positions may vary in terms of qualitative research, since some studies proceed more systematically and may include e.g. hypotheses. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 8–9.)

In research science, there are two common models in developing theory from the research: deduction and induction. In deductive approach, theory forms the basis for the research since the process proceeds systematically from theory to the hypotheses and empirical analysis. Due to relatively strict form, this approach is usually better suitable for quantitative research. Inductive approach, in turn, forms theory as an outcome of the empirical data of the study. This approach is better suited for qualitative studies, yet absolute induction is

infrequent. Nevertheless, many studies are difficult to determine straight either deductive or inductive, since they present theoretical extremes. Thus, using both models during the research process is often necessary. Abduction combines deduction and induction and enables researcher to use both approaches in different points of the study. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 14–16.)

With this respect, the approach chosen for this study is abductive. Existing theory from B2B relationship commitment, trust, communication, and software industry form the theoretical background for the research. Abductive approach enables researcher to form theory partly before empirical data is gathered, thus fitting best to this study. Additionally, abductive model appears as theme interview questions and theoretical background of the study are both shaped by the empirical data.

4.3 Informant selection and data collection

Where quantitative research often includes random selection of informants, in qualitative studies informants are usually selected by purposive sampling (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 1997, 155) meaning that the informants are selected assuming that they can enrich the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, purposive sampling enables researcher to select interviewees with different characteristics (Bryman & Bell 2007, 499–500).

Interviewees of this study were selected purposively as the goal of the study is to widen the understanding of the studied phenomenon. Since the study seeks to understand customers' impressions and expectations over the relationship and the drivers of commitment when the relationship has born, relatively new customers were under investigation. Customers who had purchased modelling software within eighteen months, were selected as the sample, since they have experience of the relationship to some extent, but they are more likely to provide rich information about future expectations than long-standing, loyal partners.

Interview is a flexible method that is adaptable in several different research. Data collection is real-time since interview is based on straight linguistic interaction. Interview is particularly suitable method in situations where the goal is to put the data into the wider context, to examine complex or sensitive topics, and deepen existing knowledge. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 34–35.) In theme interview, the interaction proceeds on the grounds of chosen themes instead of following tightly structured questions. Thus, the role of the interviewer is less dominant, and the interviewees can describe their perceptions, meanings, and feelings openly (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2015, 48).

In semi-structured interview, questions to every participant remain the same, but there are no ready-made alternatives and participants answer with own words. Theme interview is more open, and it contains specific themes, but the order of the themes and questions may vary between the interviews. Principally, every theme should be discussed within the interview. Themes create a framework, which simplifies analysing the data (Eskola & Suoranta 1998,

63–64). Semi-structured interview or theme interview is an appropriate method for studies where the subject is sensitive or intimate or the objective is to examine assessments, ideals, and justifications of a certain theme (Metsämuuronen 2011, 245–247). The type of the interview should always be based on the research problem and objectives (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 64). Today, widely used type to conduct an interview, especially in market research, is telephone interview. Telephone interviews provide many advantages comparing to traditional face-to-face interviews. Interviews via telephone are relatively inexpensive, and they are effortless to organize regardless of time and place. Moreover, characteristics of the researcher or the surroundings do not influence on the interviewee in telephone interviews. (Bryman & Bell 2007, 214–215.)

Case study research is widely used research method in several fields since it is acknowledged to be an advantageous method to examine complex social phenomena. It enables researcher to focus on a single case, hence receiving holistic and authentic information of the subject under investigation (Yin 2014, 4). “How” and “why” questions often favour researcher to use a case study, experiment, or history. The strength of the case study is its manifold nature, since the empirical data can be collected using different methods (e.g. interview, observation, documents, artefacts). (Yin 2014, 11–12.) One of the most pivotal research strategies of qualitative research is case study since a great number of qualitative research is committed as a case study. Interview is considered as a basic method for data collection due to its suitability to most situations (Metsämuuronen 2011, 222–223). This study was conducted as a case study research since it seemed to fit best to the purpose of the study in that it is to broaden understanding of commitment between B2B customers and the company. Case study is also workable method since the research is conducted qualitative.

Data of this study was collected by interviewing six customers, who had purchased building information modelling software within eighteen months. All the informants were the users of the software, thus providing relevant insights about the software itself and the customer relationship. The roles of the informants in their companies are presented in Table 1. Informants’ companies operate in B2B industry from engineering and concrete to forest machines and consulting. Theme interviews were semi-structured, and themes handled the main conceptualizations of the study, hence concerning decision-making, commitment, trust, and communication in B2B software industry. The structure and the questions of the interviews are presented in Appendixes at the end of the study. Interviews were accomplished via telephone due to financial, geographical, and schedule-related reasons. Telephone interviews enabled researcher to select informants regardless of their geographic location. Informants’ were located all over Finland, thus making accomplishing face-to-face interviews very time and resource consuming. Telephone interview as a method has also received criticism regarding e.g. researcher’s inability to observe informants’ reactions during the interview (Bryman & Bell 2007, 214–216). However, accomplishing interviews via telephone provided undisputed

advantages, and it turned out to be the most suitable form for this study. Interviews were conducted in Finnish due to nationality and mother tongue of the informants. The average length of the interview was 25 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a recording application. Moreover, another application was used when transcribing the interviews hence enabling to transcribe the interviews as accurately as possible.

TABLE I Summary of the interviews

	Industry	Location	Employees	Informant	Gender	Years in a company	Duration of the interview
Company 1	Engineering	Western Finland	> 100	Product Manager	Male	2	24 min
Company 2	Industrial technology	Western Finland	> 5 000	Civil Engineering Specialist	Male	1	25 min
Company 3	Concrete	Southern Finland	> 200	Design Director	Male	1	24 min
Company 4	Forest machines	Eastern Finland	> 1 400	Civil Engineer	Male	1	28 min
Company 5	Machine manufacturing	Western Finland	< 50	Consulting Engineer	Male	6	20 min
Company 6	Structural expert services	Southern Finland	< 20	Senior Graphics Software Architect	Male	1	25 min

4.4 Data analysis

The goal of analysis in qualitative research is to clarify the data, hence yielding new information of the topic under examination. The objective is to condense the data to more readable and simple form, however not to prune the information it provides. Analysing qualitative data requires often the researcher to use multiple different analysing techniques, since there rarely exists only one suitable alternative (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 100, 117). Bryman & Bell (2007, 302) define content analysis as an approach to analyse different qualitative data such as documents and texts. The idea of content analysis is to process the empirical data by quantifying content *“in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner.”* They continue that content analysis is transparent and flexible approach to research analysis, and it is an exploitable method in many situations.

Prerequisite for the successful content analysis is that research questions and rules of the study process are defined properly. Additionally, researcher must act as objectively as possible through the research process. (Bryman & Bell 2007, 302-303.)

Eskola & Suoranta (1998, 109-110) state that is crucial for the researcher to know the empirical data of the study thoroughly. At first, after collecting the data, it must be organized and transcribed to a readable form. Processing the data by transcribing and coding the interviews is a prerequisite for analysis. Bryman & Bell (2007, 311-312) stress coding to be a crucial part of content analysis. According to Eskola & Suoranta (1998, 112-114), coding means dividing the data into the parts that are simpler to interpret. Researcher extracts relevant and repeated parts and words from the data, separate them and name the codes usually as per the first letter of the word. Forming a coding schedule and coding manual is a focal part of coding process, thus they enable exhaustive examination and grouping of the data (Bryman & Bell 2007, 311-312). Coding can be executed either without any theoretical assumptions or with a chosen approach from the theory. For instance, framework of the interview is a useful tool for coding, if empirical data is collected through a theme interview. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 109-110.)

In this study, content analysis was chosen as an approach to analyse the empirical data. Content analysis provides multiple benefits due to its transparency, flexibility, and simplicity (Bryman & Bell 2007, 318-319), thus turning out to fit best in this study. First, all the interviews were transcribed into readable form, which enabled proceeding to dividing answers into groups and further to coding processes. Similar answers and comments were grouped together based on the themes of the interview. After that, answers were divided into smaller parts and e.g. words, which were repeating in the answers. Grouping and coding enabled elaborating the interviews, understanding results, and making conclusions from the data. Results were presented in both quantifying data and analysing it by using merely words.

5 RESULTS

Results of the study are presented in this chapter. Structure of the chapter proceeds similarly as in theoretical background and the research framework of the study. First area under examination is birth of relationship including customers' decision-making and possible comparison to other alternatives. Then, the role and expectations of communication and content and channels of communication are illuminated. After communication, meanings to and formation of trust is expounded. Last, antecedents and factors behind relationship commitment in software industry are presented. At the end of the chapter all results of the study are summarized.

5.1 Birth of relationship

This section focuses on customers' purchase process and decision-making that lead to the purchase of a software, since the first theme of the interview handled the purchase decision and the motives and reasons behind the decision to purchase the software license. First, the main reasons behind the decision are explored and presented and second, purchase itself and possible comparison between different alternatives are discussed. The results show that the reason behind purchasing building information modelling software proceeded relatively fast and the decision to purchase the chosen software was extremely clear. None of six informants had compared different alternatives or asked for a bid from other companies.

5.1.1 Decision-making

Motives and reasons that led to the decision were largely related to familiarity with the software and to the strong market position of the brand. All six informants had prior experience from the software and they had seen it to work well in their work tasks. Five informants had prior experience with the software from their previous companies and one from the studies. In five out of six situations, the purchase decision was strongly related to the employee, who had prior experience from the software. In these five situations, informant is the main user of the software in the company. In one company, on the other hand, the company was established approximately one year ago, and all the founders had prior experience from the software in their previous company. For this reason, they ended up purchasing licenses for their new company as well. In their company, all employees are using the software. Earlier experiences with the software among informants were positive, which supported the decision-making. Moreover, having familiar contacts in supplier company supported decision and made purchase process proficient.

"I used the native model of the software and got used to it and I was like, okay, this kind of planning it is today in the field. Then I noticed that this is the best software in the world for this kind of modelling." Company 1

"Yeah, well we decided to purchase this software for the simple reason that I have used it earlier and I noticed that it works well." Company 5

"In fact, it is very much relative to me that how we ended up choosing this software. I used to work in another company and I used the software there for many years. Then I moved here, and we do not have a big planning organization, but this software was technically the only and the best available alternative at least here in Finland. Actually, it was the first task I did here to ask for the company to purchase the software license." Company 3

"Every founder had an experience with it. And you could say it is almost the only worthy alternative in doing this kind of planning." Company 6

Informants stated that company's needs must be recognized so that they can be sure to make the right decision. Which modelling software to use depends mainly on the products and materials the company is dealing with. Software in question are often purchased for certain work tasks i.e. planning constructions with specific materials. For example, structures with materials such as concrete and steel require specific facilities from the software. In all six situations the informant needed building information modelling software to facilitate their daily work.

One informant stressed that despite the relatively high price of the software, their company decide to purchase it due to the benefits it can provide. Other informant stated that their company needed different information modelling software side of another software of the same type and this software in question turned out to be the most suitable alternative.

"I think we would never had purchased the software, while it is quite expensive. I had used the software in my previous job and in fact, it was me, who brought the idea of purchasing the software. So, in fact, based mostly on my prior experience of the software, we decided to bring it here too. It also fits well to our needs and is a tool to do planning and modelling in our company, so that we do not have to outsource all that work." Company 2

"We already have one software for modelling, but we thought, while we have to do so much planning and modelling from for example steel that we would need another software for that. I graduated as a civil engineer last year and we had two courses regarding to this software in the school and since I had used it, we thought it would be easier to purchase that software here." Company 4

Other key factor that arose from the answers was that the brand and the software have achieved prominently strong position in the market and it is widely used in many other companies all over the world. Using the same software than other stakeholders and partners provides vital benefits both to the company and to the total network. From a company's perspective, using same software with its network can provide benefits in core business operations and scheduling. Vice versa, using different software than partners and stakeholders could cause difficulties and complicate cooperation.

“And there was another point that all the big offices use this software very much, so that was very natural choice from that point of view, too. We don’t want to make their life more difficult by using different software than they do.” Company 1

“And the company has gotten such a foothold here that it affects quite strongly how we settled on to choose this software.” Company 2

5.1.2 Comparing other alternatives

Informants’ buying processes proceeded smoothly and none of the informants stated to had considered other alternatives. In the field of building information modelling in Finland, only a few operators exist, thus restricting companies to conduct a comparison. Hence, none of the six informants stated to consider other alternatives. Results point that only a few considerable software exist, and the chosen software was seen to fit best to every company’s needs. All the informants were unanimous in their answers, as they stated that the decision was clear and no other alternatives and software were considered. Two informants mentioned asking for a bid and discussing about the price the only thing under consideration during the purchase process.

“No, it was a clear choice from the beginning. Well, some of us were like can we consider also other alternatives, but then I was like: no, we will not look for any other alternatives, it is this option we are going to purchase.” Company 1

“Well, it was maybe a bit difficult to find any similar software. So, we did not even try any other, since we already knew this one. The only thing under consideration was to think, how many licenses we will need and what can we do with them and so on.” Company 6

“So, no, at least I am not aware of any other software. Of course, we asked for a bid and so on, which is normal in business world but no, we were not seeking for any complementary product.” Company 2

A strong position in a market also had a significant influence on the decision not to think any other options. When considering the purchase of building information modelling software, the chosen brand’s position as a market leader was a significant factor. In addition, company’s work tasks may include certain special features, which do not exist in every software.

“Well, there was actually not any comparison. This software has achieved quite a strong position in the market and for our work tasks it is an unbeatable software.” Company 2

“It was quite clear actually to purchase this software. This company is a market leader here, so it doesn’t really exist any considerable alternatives.” Company 5

“And I do not even know, how well other companies handle these types of things, and do they only have planning software, or do they have these things we need in carrying out our projects.” Company 1

5.1.3 Buying process and implementation

Purchase and implementation of the software was mentioned to proceed fluently by four informants. Informants had familiar contacts from the supplier, which

facilitated the implementation process. Four out of the six informants told the purchase and implementation to proceed smoothly, and they had gotten to use the software efficiently shortly after the purchase.

"I already had contacts from the company, or some familiar persons, so it all went very easily." Company 3

"Everything worked out perfectly there and I had been working with the software earlier, so thus it was easy to me." Company 1

"Sales worked well, and we have gotten the software to use and everything works as it should, so there were no problems." Company 6

On the other hand, some informants felt that somewhat of training or instructions to the implementation would have been necessary. Supplier provides training with the software after the purchase, but not for free and it must be ordered if it is required. According to one informant, information guide would have been very useful after the purchase of software to get the usage going. Other informant mentioned that their own staff familiarize new employees to the use of the software, since they have experience with it and they have participated in training in their previous company.

"We received this software last December, so it is quite new here and I got to use it a few weeks ago. What I am a little bit dissatisfied with is that now, when we have bought the software, we have not received any kind information package or some kind of "instructions for dummies" to get started. That would have been very nice. Still, of course, there is helpdesk and I have been using it." Company 2

"The thing is that you do not get a proper training to this software itself, even though you would make a bigger order. Of course, they have some webinars where they go through these things and some training videos, but we have been training our employees by ourselves with our own guides and with the help of older colleagues." Company 6

5.2 Communication

Role and expectations concerning communication in customer-supplier relationship was considered relatively similarly among informants. All informants are the main users of the software in their company, thus making their communication with the company to rest mainly in the software itself. Informants stated that the main role of communication is to make information change and interaction easy. They expect supplier to be reachable every time difficulty concerning the use of the software arise, since contacting the supplier always include somewhat of a problem or a question. Communication and messages from supplier to the customer was not considered as important.

"It is similar than when you have a telephone or an internet subscription, and you do not need to contact the service provider as long as everything works. Only when there is reason to overhaul it or you face some failure you need to take contact to the service provider." Company 6

"I see the case so that you will get answers to the questions relatively fast and you can reach the company by telephone when you need to." Company 5

Moreover, timely support is crucial in reducing uncertainty related to software. Helpdesk or support do not always have answers right away, but it would be important to receive solutions relatively quickly to reduce uncertainty towards the use of software.

"If you could get answers quicker, it would eliminate uncertainty towards the software." Company 6

Communication is also a way to bring supplier closer to the customers and "give face" to the software. It is a part of customer service to communicate with existing customers and one way to enhance customer satisfaction.

"Like I said, face to the software comes through communication. And even though average Finnish people may not yearn for it, I see communication as a very important thing. Software is expensive and maintaining it is expensive, so the company has to be visible and introduce things they have done." Company 2

5.2.1 Expectations

Informants' expectations over communication from the supplier were related to sharing information about new releases, updates, or new ways to use the software. In addition, inviting to different events such as user days and webinars was found positive. Overall, receiving help and support is extremely essential.

"Supplier has been quite active, as they are calling at times and asking if we need more training and everything like that. In addition, every time when there appear problems with the software or office or something, the maintenance service contacts you rapidly. In the beginning there were many difficulties due to your own dumbness, as you could not use the software properly, but I received answers to everything very neatly." Company 1

Three out of six informants mentioned that the most important thing to the customer is to receive assistance and support with the software on demand. As one informant stressed, when customer contacts supplier, he or she often has a problem with the software and it should be solved at that moment, since e.g. a phone call to helpdesk is often made in front of the computer. Otherwise, customer's work tasks would be delayed. For this reason, supplier must be easily reachable, and the communication must function smoothly from customer to the supplier.

"Reference is always related to some problem, or new feature that we need in a project and we need assistance with it." Company 5

"Receiving supporting functions rapidly and then finding the support person when some problem appears is important. Assistance with such things like how I can transform this or how do I open this and how can I make this would be important. So that you do not need to turn the problem over by yourself, because it might be very ingenious trick and take only a click of a one button and everything works." Company 4

“One wish would be that when we tell our problems, someone would contact us and solve that particular problem. And of course, we would wish that there were familiar persons who already know our issues, so it would be easier to tell them, because new problems are often related to the previous ones that have already been solved.” Company 6

Two informants said that they wish and expect supporting functions and communication to work efficiently due to relatively high maintenance costs. Customers are willing to receive worth for their investments in the software. One informant pointed that it is important to receive support not only in English, but also in Finnish. Instructions and guides could be in Finnish, since it is easier to the customer to describe his or her prevailing situation or possible problem in native language. Content and meaning of the message could change, if the customer is required to describe the situation in English.

“Of course, technical support, because maintenance costs are quite high here, so you would wish to receive value for money. So that they would always answer and had time to take care of the things we have in our minds and figure out solutions to them.” Company 6

“Annual fees for the licenses are fairly high for us and utilization rate of the software in our company is very low, so we would like to receive some worth for it, other than getting a new version and wondering, how does it work.” Company 2

Answering every question customer has is necessary and important. An informant had a difficult situation with more than one problem, and helpdesk could not solve the issues right away. Supplier contacted informant later with the solutions, but they had not the answer to all questions customer had.

“Quite often when we have asked for a help, they have not had answers at that moment and they have contacted us later. So, they have taken upon to solve it, but quite many times they have not had answers to every question and some of the questions have remained open. I know serving customers can be tough, but you should take all the questions to the finish. So, I feel that it has worked a bit half-baked.” Company 2

On the other hand, companies, of which daily tasks require the use of the software, might have big share of their turnover confined to the reliability of the software, thus highlighting the importance of the functionality and timely support. One informant suggested that supplier’s personnel could visit customers to get the problems solved more fluently, since solving problems via email is more intractable.

“Technical support is weak, or it works somehow. And I know it is challenging, because the nature of the software is what it is, and you do not always get the answer straight. But it would be good if they visited customer sometimes and handled the problems that could not be solved via email. It is very important that the software works, because all the valuable work from the whole year might be there and all the money is confined to its reliability performance.” Company 6

5.2.2 Content

Wished and expected content for communication was largely related to product- and usage-specific information. All the informants were the users of the software,

thus highlighting the role of help and support in their daily work. In the beginning of the relationship, information to implementation and maintenance of the software is crucial. Implementation to the use of software including e.g. training days was seen to be important. Even though communication from the supplier to the customer was not considered as important as vice versa, it is important from the supplier to keep customers updated and take contact in case of different issues. Receiving help and support when customers face problems or difficulties is important, but also supplier must keep them updated every time something new related to the software or to the relationship is coming up.

“When there are these development projects, it works well, and supplier is also asking where we are going with our project. Then there come notifications via email that there is a new webinar coming up. Therefore, that is kind of communication from their side to keep customers updated about what new there is in development and the software itself. Maybe these two things are straight communication from there to us.” Company 3

Informants appreciate personal and customized communication. Different events such as training days enable personal interaction and support, which were considered very efficient. Companies can ask questions concerning e.g. trade secrets, and supplier can customize the program to match perfectly to the customer’s needs. Software contains a huge amount of data and is relatively complicated to use. Hence, providing personal service and communication brings relationship partners closer to each other and may lower the threshold to ask for help.

“We had booked the training only for our company so there were no other companies. It was very good that there were only our representatives there, so the training could be customized to us and we did not have to learn something we will never need to use.” Company 1

“Sometimes you feel, you need to ask stupid questions, but when you have familiar face from the supplier, the threshold is lower to go and ask for help.” Company 2

5.2.3 Channels

Traditional and rapid communication channels were appreciated among informants. Face-to-face, emails and telephone were the most efficient and dexterous channels and tools to communicate. The advantage of face-to-face communication in e.g. different events and training days is that it enables personal and rapid information change and customers receive answers to their questions on the spot. Furthermore, it is easier to become acquainted with supplier’s staff in face-to-face meetings. Threshold of contacting supplier is lower, when customer already has familiar contact persons. Moreover, communicating face-to-face was found to be easier and faster way to exchange of ideas than e.g. email. One informant especially appreciated face-to-face communication and conversation due to its rapidity and easiness.

“I personally appreciate face-to-face communication. If there is some event or such, I appreciate that when the company is presenting demos and you have questions, you can ask right away. So, you do not need to carry on some heavy email conversation.” Company 2

“And the training where we were at their bureau, it was organized superbly in my opinion. There were quite a small group of us and the trainer could watch what we were doing and help behind our backs. So, it was organized very well.” Company 1

“Some kind of customer relationship or relationship with some salesperson would be very nice in these license purchases, as the familiar salesperson could possibly bend the rules in bigger orders or offer some benefits, thus possibly drawing us to order more.” Company 6

Occasionally, mutual development projects and other cooperation require meetings. Meetings can be arranged face-to-face or via video through various software. Different meetings are good way to discuss about ongoing projects and future. Meetings also enable efficient exchange of ideas and timely response to possible questions.

“Then in these development projects are of course either video meetings or personal meetings, but they are arranged always depending on a situation.” Company 3

Inviting to different events and sharing information about new updates and products via email was considered functional and efficient among informants. Email is efficient and relatively rapid tool for interaction if customer’s problem or question is not remarkably acute. Inviting customers to participate in webinars, training days or user days is often managed via email, and it was considered as a workable way to communicate among informants. Another advantage of email founded by one informant was that in less immediate situations, customer can read the messages when time is the most convenient for him.

“I do not know, there are invites to the webinars via email and that is quite good. Moreover, questions and answers on their website is useful so you do not need to call to the helpdesk. There are already solved information, once you bother to search a little bit.” Company 1

“But of course, telling about new things via email and this webinar thing are very good digital ways to deliver information. But I also appreciate face-to-face communication.” Company 2

“What I have received communication, it is mainly about webinars and how you can create components and use them and so on and you can participate in them. I just simply have not had time to participate in them, because we have so much to do here.” Company 4

Webinars were considered very useful and good ways to share information among informants. All six informants stated to know about webinars supplier arrange and five of them had participated in a webinar. Presenting information about new models and updates and showing ways to use the software more efficiently were seen very good additional services. Webinars related to the chosen specific area were considered very useful and they provide customers new ideas and information to future usage of the software.

“And what I like very much about this company is that when they have these webinars, where they are presenting new versions and everything how you can model something simpler. I see that as a very nice additional service.” Company 1

"I have browsed guides from the website quite much and then watched these webinars. I have tried to watch them and if they cannot provide help, then I have taken phone in my hand and called to the company." Company 5

Two informants also appreciated the possibility to watch webinars afterwards, if they are not able to participate in live-webinar. By registering in a given webinar, customer receives a permission to watch it, when the time is right.

"There are sometimes invites to webinars. Yesterday I received an invite to webinar about very central thing to me and I cannot watch it live, but when you register in it, you should be able to watch it later. You receive a link where you can watch it when you have time. So that is very great thing that you can watch it on own time if a given date does not suit." Company 2

"Webinars are absolutely a good way to share new information via internet. Live-webinars are very good, and you can also watch them recorded from the website or YouTube. So, it is an excellent way." Company 3

Besides webinars, supplier's website is overall an important platform to search for information. Providing guides to use the software and contact information of support persons is essential. Customers can try to find necessary information from the website first and contact the support not until they have not found the desired solution from there.

"So, I have not called them constantly just for fun, but I have tried to find the information from the website since it is provided there." Company 5

Searching for information from e.g. company website must be simple. Contact information of the right persons should be found readily, and website could include information about who to contact in each problem or situation. One informant stated that support worked smoothly, once he found the right person to contact from the website.

"They served very well, once I found the right person. There is maybe a little place for development that you can find the right person from the website." Company 4

In addition to webinars and websites overall, helpdesk was considered as an important tool in delivering information and above all, providing help and support in problem situations. Different supporting functions were seen important, since work tasks with software may cause problems and difficulties even to experienced users. Two informants stressed that helpdesk should provide answers and solutions quickly, since different problems delay completing working tasks. Informants wished that supplier keeps developing and maintaining their helpdesk, since it facilitates customer's workload.

"The biggest wish I have is that helpdesk will work also in the future and the company will help us and customize the software with us, because I am not very interested in these coding things." Company 2

"I understand that they cannot get down to the business right away, but some information of the situation and its progress should be provided. So, more contact from the supplier, and telling what the situation is now." Company 6

Helpdesk is especially useful tool in an industry, where support is necessary at regular intervals. Helpdesk must be available and reachable every time, when customer faces complexities with the software and is in a need of immediate support. Support and help through helpdesk must be timely and the solution should be received as soon as possible, since the complexity often delays customer's work tasks. Informants stated that they have used helpdesk and received answers to their problems relatively fast, if not immediately. Customers do not always receive a solution from helpdesk right away, but it is important from the supplier to solve the problem quickly and contact customer when they have an answer. Contacting helpdesk via telephone was considered simple and rapid way to reach supplier and receive answers and solutions to possible problems.

"Then there are these normal helpdesk practices that if you face some problem, you can call or send a message. It works well and has worked all these years." Company 3

"Well, I am a kind of person that likes to make a phone call straight away to get the connection quickly, because it is hard to receive supporting functions via email. Because the problem is that, you have the problem there at that moment. You should work with the project and continuing it depends on that one component. Therefore, support must be there immediately or otherwise you must interrupt your tasks because you cannot proceed. Thus, reacting must be immediate." Company 4

5.3 Trust

Informants' meanings and impressions of trust were largely related to supplier's confidentiality in relationship. Informants work in an industry, where companies have several trade secrets, as they are constantly planning new projects. Training and support with the software might require customers to reveal pieces of information about their plans, and it is crucial from the supplier not to share this sensitive and confidential information to others. In the field where informants operate, being trustworthy and confidential in these situations is considered as an automation or truism.

5.3.1 Meanings

Two informants stated that they have never doubted the relationship partner's confidentiality, and they have never faced issues related to trust. Moreover, other informant stressed that trustworthiness of companies is a matter of course in Finland. Confidentiality and professional secrecy were more commanding themes among the informants than e.g. customer service and communication. However, customer service and particularly supporting functions were also seen as antecedents of trust.

Four out of six informants mentioned confidentiality with trade secrets and other sensitive data as a manifestation and a prerequisite for the trust in relationship. Trust was considered as a feature supplier must earn through its

activities and mutual projects. Business relationships including mutual planning and development projects could not be done without trust between the partners.

"Well, it is kind of a trade secret what we are planning. And when I need to contact the company, because I cannot get the software working the way I would like it to work, I must show them what we are doing so there is a confidentiality point of view that we do not want that information to leak out to competitors or for other public distribution." Company 2

"Trust is a feature you must earn. When we are working with development projects, all information and knowledge are provided from the supplier. In addition, I have not ever doubted it or mentioned it when we are working with some development projects that they include confidential information. I assume it automatically to work confidentially." Company 3

"I would not even imagine that any problems concerning trust could arise, because the supplier cannot see our models and what we are doing. So, I trust in the company that any secret information is not going to leak anywhere." Company 1

"Well, this is a quite difficult issue in Finland, since we tend to trust in companies here when they do something." Company 6

5.3.2 Factors

Smooth customer service and supporting functions raised also from the interviews as important factors in formation of trust, as three out of six informants highlighted their role in the relationship. In the beginning of the relationship, customers often have plenty of questions since they are not experienced users of the software. Customer-centric activities such as providing help with the software quickly are essential when the relationship is on its early stages. Additionally, development of and improvements of the software were seen to encourage trust according to one informant. When customer can trust that company will be operating in the future and it invests in the development of the software, he or she do not need to fear that the software they use will become obsolete. One informant stressed among other things that supplier must be true to its words and keep faith in the relationship concerning e.g. timetable.

"Supporting functions are in important role to develop trust and if they are not reachable right away, it creates an image that customer is not in a centre there. Moreover, of course, the purchase and implementation of the software should go effortlessly. Then I believe that when you face problems, they must be solved fluently. Because the person who is working with the software needs time to learn to use it and there will be real problems when learning it and then there must be help and support." Company 4

"Well, trust is actually formed when you feel that the software and supporting functions work. And also, when you can trust that the supplier develops the software by releasing updates and hence, it will exist in the future, so you do not have to fear that the whole software becomes unusable is essential." Company 5

"Importance of trust is big when you have a problem and need help with it. It also means that company maintains their software and if they promise to deliver us a license, they will deliver it in time." Company 6

5.4 Relationship commitment

The results concerning relationship commitment point that learning to use complex modelling software requires plenty of time and resources. Thus, when company has learned to use one software, a threshold of switching the supplier and software is extremely high. Companies main task is to focus on their primary operations and when they have implemented a software, they have no intentions to switch to another software and start learning new systems. Two informants stressed that they have many other and more important tasks to do than starting to learn new systems when one is acquired and learnt.

"I see it so that when you take one software or use it, the threshold to jump into another software is big. What I have been using these, unlearning from the old software is really difficult. And I believe that when the decision of using some software is made, it will be used to the last." Company 4

"The main thing is that when you have learnt to use some software, it is not important to switch it. And since everything has worked well, we have not even considered other alternatives." Company 5

Only an extremely difficult situation, e.g. restrictions in or inactivity of the software would make companies to switch to the different supplier and the software.

"I think that only some restrictions in the software that you simply cannot do something without purchasing a new software. I believe that would effect on the decision to purchase a new software." Company 4

"Well, of course once when you have bought a software, you won't buy another one just for fun. So, there should be very good reason to change to a new one in midstream." Company 5

5.4.1 Market-related factors

In this case, software's strong position in the market and the lack of competitive alternatives have strong influence on the commitment. Software in question is widely used among other companies and consultants, which is important for industrial companies.

"Lack of alternatives is the only reason we have not tried anything else. Well, we know there exist one other option, but it is also old, and it is not a realistic option in the end." Company 6

Two out of six informants stressed that staying with the same supplier provides multiple benefits to the whole network and the process. It is crucial to use same software with the subcontractors to get the process work as fluently as possible and to gain benefits related to schedule and finance. Switching supplier includes risks and might be costly eventually.

"If our subcontractors use the same software, it is the main reason for us not to switch it to anything and it provides so many benefits throughout the whole process that it is very tough process to start switching these suppliers and systems on the run." Company 1

"It is as I said there is not really any other alternative and it is so widely used software also among consultants. At least this time they have kind of a monopoly on this field, at least a mental monopoly if nothing else. It is the only option right now." Company 2

Furthermore, saving time and costs in company's own operations strengthens commitment to the supplier.

"And every big machine workshop here in Europe, practically every one of them use this software. I have been in Spain in many big workshops, they all use this software, and they can use and process our models there with the software. It also enables us to negotiate lower prices, which is straight profit to us. Staying with same supplier and using same software as our stakeholders also fastens our production times." Company 1

Furthermore, two informants mentioned the lack of other alternatives to be also a weakness in the industry. Lack of realistic alternatives enables supplier e.g. to ask higher prices, and informants stated that they would be glad to see an alternative software with somewhat simpler features to appear.

"It might be a sort of a weakness there that competitors do not exist. This software is sometimes a little bit clumpy, and it causes problems to some extent. So, sometimes I have been waiting for some other company to come and provide another option." Company 3

"I know that we are not the only ones, so let's say all the others than maybe some huge offices would be willing to try some other software. User interface of this software is old, maybe from the end of the 80s. Now there do not exist any competitors, but straight when there appeared one, we would be ready to try it. And one reason tempting us to switch the supplier is that the current supplier has raised their prices so high, because they can as a market leader." Company 6

5.4.2 Product-related factors

Informants agreed that prerequisite for trust and commitment is that the product is good, i.e. the software itself works well. If the software were not functioning, it would not have achieved the position it now has. Since different software require long processes from implementation to learning and maintenance, it is clear, that functionality is a lifeline.

"Of course, a prerequisite is that the software works. Even though the company offers all kinds of special services, they will not help if the software does not work. So, it is certainly the prerequisite." Company 2

Two out of six informants remarked that it is important that the supplier invest in software development. As the software develops and there are yearly updates with improvements, customers can trust that the supplier will do its best to match customers' needs and will continue operating in the future too. Informants felt that the strong position in the market is achieved by hard work and expertise that has made the software to rise above its competitors. In addition, two informants

mentioned that it is important for the software to work with other software, too, as their daily work requires the use of more than one software.

“What I have read and seen this company is at the forefront of development what comes to this kind of building information modelling. So, all these factors affect, brand recognition, functions, and then what software you learn to use and... All these factors have an influence.” Company 4

5.4.3 Relationship-related factors

Customer service, including e.g. providing help and support in implementation and maintenance of the software, were considered important factors in building relationship commitment. One informant highlighted the role of customer service, as the informant claimed that by serving customers well, company ads face to the software, which is extremely important in building commitment. In addition, e.g. helpdesk and other channels for customer service are essential, when dealing with software. Providing help and support is key to successful customer service.

Providing timely help and support to the customers when needed, is remarkably important. Different customer service activities such as different events and training days, was seen to be convenient. Overall, serving customers well and smoothly enhances commitment to the supplier. If everything is working fine, companies do not have a reason to consider other suppliers.

“Well, of course customer service, because even though it is a software it is also service, so these helpdesks and kind of yearly face to the software help a lot. Maybe giving face to the software and then above all providing help and support. So, these are the things, how commitment and satisfaction are certainly created. Because of course we will be committed, if we are satisfied. That is how it goes.” Company 2

In addition to helping and supporting customers, listening to customers and being interactive is an important factor. One informant stated that different user days and mutual meetings have been very productive. Additionally, events per se gathered praise from the informants, since they altogether have been organized well.

“And the company participates also in different team meetings with their customers and listen their customers on that side too, so that is really nice.” Company 3

Results related to interaction and communication are discussed more in Chapter 5.4.

5.5 Summary of the results

Findings of the study are summarized in this section. Findings are presented in Figure 7 through the research framework illustrated in Figure 5. The first theme of the interviews handled customer’s decision making and purchase process, i.e.

the birth of relationship. The key reason that led to the purchase among informants was previous experience with the software either from earlier jobs or from studies. All six informants had found the software to fit well in their work tasks, hence not considering other possible software. Other factors that led to the decision to purchase software in question were largely related to the supplier's strong market position, since it was seen to provide benefits to customer's network. Lack of alternatives and strong market position of the chosen software led for its part to the informants' decision not to consider other software.

The second theme following the research framework of the study handled communication during customer relationship. Viewpoints under examination were the role of the communication, type of content customers would like to receive, and communication channels customers prefer. Informants highlighted the role of communication to be above all helping and supporting customers to use the software. Supporting functions must be available, when customers face difficulties, and support should be timely, since customers would like to receive solutions as soon as possible. Otherwise, their work tasks would be delayed. Communication from customer to company was considered more important than messages from company to customer. Contacting the company often includes questions or problems, in which customer is seeking for answers. From the company informants expected to receive information regarding to the use of the product and about possible updates. Moreover, inviting to different events such as training days or user days was found useful.

In addition to help and support, communication was found to bring company closer to customer, thus giving "face" to the software. When customer is familiar with company's employees, threshold to ask for a help becomes lower. Overall, the role of communication and providing help and support has an important role in customer relationships. As two informants stated, while the maintenance costs are relatively high, customers are expecting to receive worth to their investments in a form of help and supporting functions. Since all the informants are users of the software, they wished content of communication to be mainly product- and usage-specific information. In addition to helpdesk and product support, support with implementation and maintenance of the software were considered essential. In the end, informants' main task is to use the software and to complete their work tasks, which requires communication messages and content from the company to support their work. None of the informants stated to contact the company for fun, since the situation always require somewhat of a problem or a question.

Preferred channels for communication relied largely on the traditional tools such as telephone, email, and face-to-face meetings. However, website and especially webinars were considered efficient and useful in information sharing as well. Email was found to be rapid and workable way to invite to different events and communicate in situations that are more leisurely. Immediate need for a help and support require phone calls. Informants mentioned that they often call for a help in front of the computer and the problem should be solved right away. Functioning helpdesk and support was deemed to have paramount

importance in phone calls. Face-to-face communication was found to enable rapid change of thoughts and to be the best way to discuss about more personal and sensitive issues. For example, training days were considered very efficient, since the help is there present all the time facilitating personal support. Company website was found to be useful platform for information search. Information about the software and e.g. contact information of right persons should be found easily. Webinars received a lot of praise among the informants. Every informant had heard about the webinars and five out of six of them had participated in a webinar. Presenting new ways to use the software or new features of it were seen excellent additional service. Informants also appreciated the possibility to watch webinars later, if the original date is not suitable. ‘

The third theme covered trust in customer relationships. As Figure 7 presents, informants’ experiences of trust concerned abundantly supplier confidentiality, since cooperation with the software often coerces customer to reveal unaccomplished, secret projects to the vendor. Thus, being able to trust in a company is paramount to make the relationship proceed. Most of the informants shared the same opinion as they stated that in Finland and in industrial business overall being trustworthy is a self-evident truth. In addition to confidentiality, receiving help and support when needed was deemed essential in trust building process. In the case of building information modelling software difficulties and problems will be faced unavoidably, which requires supporting functions to be available constantly. Moreover, functionality of the software was considered important, as was suppliers intention to develop and update the software. Hence, customers can trust that the supplier will operate also in the future. Overall, trust was found to be a feature that supplier must earn through its activities.

The final theme concerned relationship commitment. Informants were asked about the meanings and antecedents of commitment to the software supplier. The main reason to stay with the same supplier, which was repeating in the answers, was the lack of other alternatives. In line with decision making process, only few considerable operators exist in the field, hence restricting companies to compare different options. The supplier the informants had chosen is the market leader in Finland and is widely used among different companies from industrial to consulting. Its strong market position provides multiple benefits not only to the customers, but also to the network as e.g. company’s subcontractors use the same software. Two informants mentioned that they have been waiting for competitors or other alternatives to appear and one stated to be willing to try another software. On the other hand, four out of six informants remarked that everything has worked well in the relationship, which strengthens commitment.

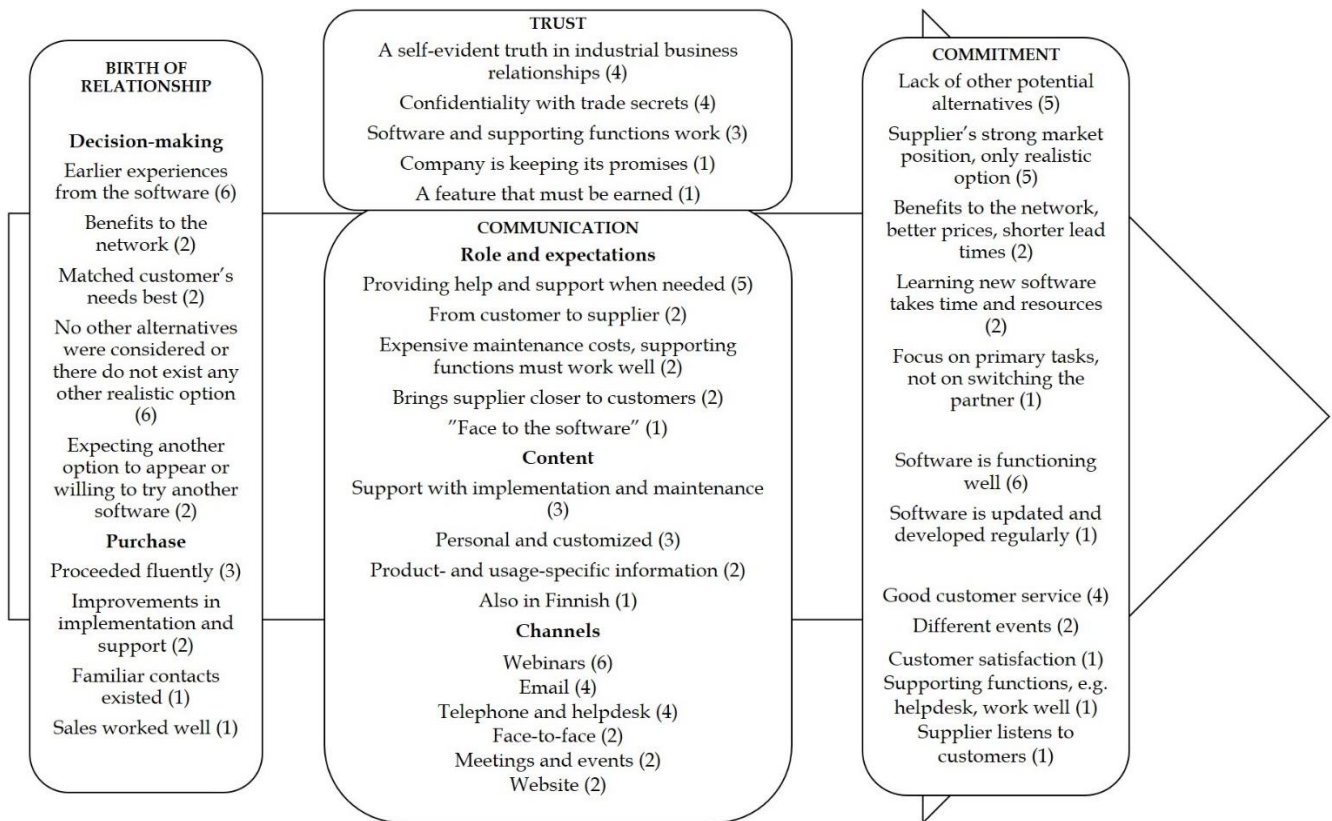


FIGURE 7 Summary of the results

6 DISCUSSION

The final chapter in this study discusses the main empirical findings of the study comparing their relationship to the existing marketing theory. The empirical findings are covered to answer the research questions presented in the introduction. Last, the limitations and restrictions of the study are evaluated before presenting suggestions for future research.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

Results of this study indicate meanings of commitment to include several factors in B2B software industry. Particularly, the results confirm findings of de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) in that especially calculative commitment is present in B2B relationships in software industry. Commitment to the company results largely from the lack of other realistic alternatives. Only a few operators provide software in question making it difficult for companies to consider other alternatives or to switch the supplier, which causes dependency to be present in the relationships. However, supplier has achieved a strong position in the market in Finland and for the most part the customers were satisfied with the company and the software. Partly for this reason, they had not been seeking for other alternatives.

Several studies define commitment to arise when partners see benefits resulting from the relationship or risks and losses coming out from terminating it (Friman et al. 2002; Morgan & Hunt 1994; Geyskens 1996). This study suggests that staying with the same supplier provides benefits not only to the customer company but also to the network it operates making switching the supplier risky and unattractive. Using the same software as other stakeholders was found to be advantageous, since it might e.g. enable company to negotiate better prices and shorten their lead times. Risks and losses appear in that switching the software and learning to use the new one is a complex process and it would require plenty of time and resources.

Even though this study suggests relationship commitment in B2B software industry to be more related to the calculative factors, antecedents of affective commitment exist as well. In addition to e.g. dependence and high switching costs, supporting functions, company's willingness to listen to customers and overall satisfaction with the relationship further strengthening commitment. In other words, there is no intention to switch the partner or seek for other alternatives if everything concerning the relationship has worked well. These findings agree with the studies of Gounaris (2005) and Venetis & Ghauri (2004) in that it is essential for the companies to provide good-quality service and bond valuable relationships to prevent the relationship to rest merely on dependence.

Tsiros, Ross & Mittal (2009) stress that high commitment decreases customers' intention to seek for other alternatives. Similarly, Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos (2005), Anaza & Rutherford (2014) and Aurier & N'Goala (2010) highlight the influence of relationship commitment in customers repurchase intentions and willingness to maintain the relationship in the future. With respect to this study, the informants have not been seeking for other alternatives during the relationship mostly due to the lack of other alternatives. Adding to that, scarcity of the operators in the industry was also considered as a weakness since the supplier as a market-leader is e.g. able to raise their prices high. Two informants were willing to see other suppliers to appear or to be even ready to learn to use new, simpler software. Software in the industry are purchased to enable completing work tasks efficiently and other possible alternatives are not constantly compared and looked for. On the other hand, three informants stressed that everything has worked in their relationship, thus they have no intention to seek for other alternatives, which confirms the findings of Tsiros, Ross & Mittal (2009), Anaza & Rutherford (2014) and Aurier & N'Goala (2010).

The definitions of benevolence and credibility are presented to describe trust in B2B relationships (Doney & Cannon 1997; Mandják et al. 2015). Within the framework of this study, especially credibility was found important in trust building since it is noted to arise when relationship partner can trust that another partner is true to its word and follows the rules and contracts formed in a relationship (Doney & Cannon 1997). Informants stated it essential to be able to trust that their trade secrets and other crucial information will not be leaked from the partner to other parties. The role of trust is important in daily use of the software since trust in the software's functionality and rapid supporting functions were among credibility the major factors in trust building. Overall, trust in business relationships in Finland was considered as a prerequisite and a self-evident truth and informants stated that they have not had any concerns related to trust in their relationship with the company.

Considering communication, findings of this study supported several previous studies (Duncan & Moriarty 1998; Suarez, Casumano & Kahl 2013; Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017; Friman et al. 2002; de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001; Oly Ndubisi 2007) in that timely and open information sharing and support to the usage of the product are essential forms of communication. Company should be reachable every time customer has problems or questions concerning the software. Contacting the seller is usually resulted from arisen problem that needs to be solved rapidly, or customers' work tasks would be delayed. Customers contact the helpdesk often in front of their computer aiming to receive quick solution to their problem. Being reachable and reacting to customers' contacts was appreciated more than communication from the company to the customers. From the company customers are expecting to receive information about new releases and updates and invites to different customer events and webinars. Chumpitaz Caceres & Paparoidamis (2007) have found similar results in that customers do not appreciate one-way communication from the company, but they appreciate interaction and dialogue instead.

Previous studies (Friman et al. 2002; de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001; Agnihotri et al. 2016) have emphasized timely and open information sharing to enhance trust between the partners and to bring customers closer to the company. Correspondingly, in this study communication was found to be a way for the company to bring itself closer to the customers and to give “face” to the software. When customer has familiar contacts from the company, the threshold to take contact and ask for a help becomes lower. Traditional channels such as telephone, email and face-to-face communication were appreciated among informants. Additionally, webinars were extremely popular among informants and they were deemed very workable way for information sharing. Among webinars, company website was considered a useful platform to information sharing. The findings are in line with previous studies (Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017; Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015) since industrial companies are found to favor traditional manners to communicate. Digital marketing channels are used merely in communicating with existing customers and e.g. social media is used very limitedly among industrial companies.

With regard to the characteristics of the industry, this study abundantly supports previous findings from software industry (de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001; Davies & Brush 1997; Burger & Cann 1995). Only a few operators provide building information modelling software in Finland leading to high switching costs and dependency between different actors. In addition, scarcity of comparable alternatives affects customers’ decision-making process restricting them to consider other possible software. De Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) highlighted product-related criteria and technical support to be the most meaningful factors affecting customers’ decision-making in software industry. In line with that, decision to buy a chosen building information modelling software resulted largely from earlier experiences from the software and superiority of the software to other alternatives. The chosen software matched customers’ needs best since their daily work tasks require the use of the software in question. Implementation of the software was a part of informants’ purchase process, which is considered one of the most typical characteristics of the industry (Loebbecke et al. 2010). Additionally, different after-sales services and technical support are central in software industry mainly due to the complex nature of the products (Abratt 1986; Burger & Cann 1995; Davies & Brush 1997). In this respect, supporting functions during the relationship were deemed to have utmost importance. Informants received support in implementation, but some of them wished training of a sort to be included in the price of the license or e.g. instruction guide to be provided to the use of the software.

As a conclusion, this study suggests relationship commitment in B2B software industry to be formed through both affective and calculative factors. Findings of the study confirmed the perception that especially calculative commitment is present in software industry. Functionality of the software, scarcity of competitors and a strong market position of the chosen company had major impact on both decision-making and intention to maintain the relationship. Moreover, earlier experiences with the software affect purchase decision strongly.

Trust and communication as antecedents of commitment have key roles during the relationships both relying largely on supporting functions with the use of the software.

6.2 Managerial implications

From managerial point of view, this study sought to broaden understanding of the relationship commitment formation perceived by customers in a rapidly growing software industry considering also the aspects of trust and communication. Moreover, since the aim was to explore expectations over the relationship and communication relatively new customers of the case company were interviewed. After analyzing the data and observing the findings factors and meanings behind the relationship commitment are recognized.

Even though customers who have bought building information modelling software were merely satisfied with the company and the software, improvements and suggestions were proposed. Calculative factors in formation of commitment were noteworthy as the informants stressed strong market position of the company, lack of other alternatives and high switching costs to be central in decision not to consider other software. Improvements in a relationship concerned more relationship-related factors such as good customer-service and supporting functions. In addition, improvements to the software itself were proposed.

After the purchase, training with the software could be provided to simplify customers' use, and to decrease possible difficulties and problems with the software. Many informants stated not to have any training with the software in the beginning, which by its part has caused difficulties and problems later. Moreover, learning to use the software properly from the beginning could decrease the feeling of uncertainty. Company provides trainings subject to a charge, but somewhat of a free training after the purchase could be offered to enhance affective commitment to the company and to restrict customers to consider other possible alternatives later. Furthermore, making customers aware of the possibilities and features software provides is important. Constantly occurring problems concerning informants' inability to use the software due to its complexity was the biggest reasons slowing informants' work tasks down.

This time only few operators exist in the field and chosen company has an extremely strong position, but in the future, it would be advisable to focus more on increasing customers' affective commitment. Relationship based merely on calculative commitment or dependency may put customers to seek for different partners if they are not fully satisfied with or affectively committed to a current partner. This phenomenon of calculative commitment as a negative type of commitment is recognized in earlier studies too (de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001; Tsiros, Ross & Mittal 2009). Complexity of the software arose from the answers as a one reason for willingness to see other software to appear. Strengthening customers' commitment by training them to use the software

properly would be advisable. To enhance trust, company must develop the product and assure that it is functioning properly. Trust in the development and functionality of the software was deemed important along with trust in company's credibility. To enhance trust, company must be true to its word and follow the rules bond for the relationship so that customer can be sure that their crucial information will not be leaked.

Based on this study, communication has an important role in information sharing and support with the use of the software. Complexity of the product leads to questions and problems to arise constantly, which requires company to be easily reachable. Problems tend to occur suddenly, and customers normally contact helpdesk in front of their computer wishing to receive answers to their questions rapidly. Thus, reacting must be timely, and if a company do not have a solution or answer at that moment, it is important to take contact as soon as possible. Additionally, if customer has more than one question, answering every question is vital. Otherwise, the feeling of uncertainty might continue, and, on the other hand, leaving questions unanswered will not give customer a picture of customer-oriented action. Moreover, customizing the content of communication to match customer's needs is important. In software industry, different training and user days are widely used and they offer companies chance to bring themselves closer to the customer. Customized training days for only one company were appreciated among informants since they give possibility to discuss more sensitive and secret topics and to receive help easily. In summary, companies should bring themselves close to the customers by being reachable and visible and by providing valuable information, help and support with the software. Informants have faced many difficulties when using the software and lowering the threshold for customers to ask for a help or being better reachable would decrease these problems.

Where the role of communication in B2B software industry was typical for industrial business in this study (Friman et al. 2002; de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink 2001; Agnihotri et al. 2016), preferred communication channels were among the most traditional for the industry as well (Hänninen & Karjaluoto 2017; Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015). Informants expected information sharing and supporting functions to work, and telephone and email were deemed the most useful ways for such interaction. Company and helpdesk should be easily reachable via telephone since telephone was deemed very workable especially when customers need immediate answers. Websites could include e.g. frequently asked questions and other helpful information so that customers could also try to find solutions themselves without contacting the helpdesk every time when facing problems. All the information should be easily found from the website. Webinars were considered very useful way to deliver information among the informants. Customers do not always have time to watch webinars live, but possibility to watch them later was deemed excellent. In case of considering including social media in company's marketing communication, webinars are extremely potential alternative. As in all marketing communication, content must be planned carefully to provide valuable information to the

customers. Within the framework of software industry, e.g. information about new products, updates, or ways to use the software more efficiently are workable alternatives as a content.

To conclude, based on this study relationship commitment in the industry of building information modelling software results largely from the strong market position of the supplier, functioning software, and the lack of other alternatives. Customers do not have plenty of alternatives to consider, which causes the purchase decision to be relatively clear. Interestingly, the purchase decision was strongly related to the person who is the main user of the software, and earlier experiences from the software supported the decision. Additionally, software is widely used in Finland and Europe among industrial companies and consultants, which affected the decision to buy the software and not to look for other alternatives later. However, as this study point, all the informants were not completely satisfied with the company and some would like to see other operators to appear, which makes it important to focus also on enhancing affective commitment. Communicative aspects such as workable supporting functions are central in this process. Vital for the company is to listen to their customers, understand what they value and provide them good-quality products and service based on that knowledge.

6.3 Evaluation of the study

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of how relationships are born and developed in B2B software industry and what kind of role trust and communication have during the relationship. The goal was accomplished by conducting a case study research and using semi-structured theme interviews in collecting the empirical data. Consequently, this study provides actual information of the antecedents that enhance commitment in B2B software industry and the role of and expectations for communication in the relationship. However, as in all qualitative research, neither the findings of this study can be generalized into wider context without reserve.

In qualitative research, subjective perceptions and experiences of the researcher unavoidably affect the research process. In this study, the researcher strived to tackle challenges related to subjectivity by working as transparent and honest as possible through the whole process. The researcher does not work in a case company, which enabled examining the case company and its customers outside and as objectively as possible. Accordingly, focusing on customers of only one company in a relatively narrow field made in-depth exploring of the topic possible. Interviewing company's existing customers provided information about the relationship in its early stages since all informants already had experience from the cooperation with the case company.

When evaluating qualitative business research, criteria derived straight from quantitative research often leads to poor-quality results. Concepts of reliability and validity are used in qualitative research too, but alternative

evaluation criteria have been developed to describe the “*trustworthiness*” of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 292–294). Alternative criteria of trustworthiness consist of four areas that are dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300). As mentioned in Chapter 4, this study follows the philosophy of constructivism. Hence using alternative criteria presented by Lincoln & Guba (1985, 300) in evaluating the study is reasonable.

Dependability refers to the reliability of the research in that how logical, traceable, and documented the process has been (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 318–319; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). In this study the researcher conducted theme interviews and the questions were generated using existing theory concerning the birth of relationship, commitment, trust, and communication. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed carefully into readable form so that the meanings would remain the same. After transcribing, the interviews were divided into groups and coded based on main themes of the study. Since the sample of the study was only six interviews the researcher used more time in grouping and comparing the content of the answers than coding the interviews based on e.g. the number of words repeated. Interviews were analysed several times to find relevant similarities and differences between the informants. Findings were presented by using plenty of citations to strengthen the trustworthiness and proving the relationship between the conclusions and the actual answers.

Transferability examines to what extent the study can be indicated to be comparable to other studies in different contexts (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 297). Although every qualitative research is unique and not completely replicable or transferable, connections to the previous research existed in this study. Characteristics of software industry and industrial business matched earlier findings concerning e.g. the big amount of calculative commitment in high-tech markets and the content communication customers value most during the relationship. However, due to the nature of this research as a case study and the amount of the interviews, over-generalizations cannot be made.

Credibility stands for ensuring the empirical data of the research is conducted using canons of good practice and that it is overall truthful (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 296–297; Bryman & Bell 2007, 411). The empirical data was gathered by interviewing six customers of the case company. The interviews were conducted via telephone to make the situation for the interviewee as comfortable as possible. In addition to that, conducting the interviews via telephone enabled informants to be relaxed since in face-to-face interviews surroundings and the presence of the interviewer sometimes affect the interviewee. Moreover, using telephone interview made purposeful sampling possible. The researcher received a list of customers of the case company from the last 18 months, and all the persons who accepted the invitation were chosen as sample. All the interviews and recordings were handled anonymously, and it was mentioned to the informants in the beginning of the interviews. Researcher familiarized with the topic since he had meetings with the case company, thus gathering knowledge

of the industry and the company. Moreover, familiarizing with existing theory from the field provided knowledge to form and conduct the interviews. As with ensuring dependability, a great amount of citations was used in this study to prove trustworthiness of the study.

Confirmability means evaluating the objectivity of the data, i.e. the findings of the study and the interpretations made by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300–301; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). As mentioned earlier, process of this study was conducted carefully and as honest and transparent as possible proceeding from familiarization with the existing theory to gathering the empirical data and analysing the findings.

Within this respect, issues related to confirmability, dependability and credibility of this study were hopefully tackled as well as possible. Since this study is qualitative and focuses only on one case company and its customers, transferring or generalizing the study process and the findings into the different context is difficult. However, by using the same theoretical background and the structure of the interview, in the similar context this study could be repeatable.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

This study provides not only insights into the rapidly growing industry with little interest among marketing academics, but also avenues for further research. However, as in every study, this study must be evaluated considering certain limitations. First, as this study was executed as qualitative research based on constructivism, the results cannot be generalized to cover the whole software industry. Also, only one company and their Finnish customers were under examination, whereupon the findings may not be valid in a global context.

Only a few companies provide building information modelling software in Finland, which strongly affects customers' decision to choose the software in question. Thus, examining more competitive markets in software industry could give different viewpoints to the decision-making process and formation of relationship commitment. Moreover, findings of this study stressed the role of the main users in purchase process since their experience from the software strongly affected the purchase decision. A purchase process would probably be relatively different, if more members were attending to decision-making and e.g. alternative software would be compared.

Reasons to maintain the relationship with the same company would be interesting to see if other similar operators existed in the field. Due to the scarcity of alternatives, this study pointed customers to maintain the relationship, even though they would not be completely satisfied with the company. Exploring the situation in more competitive markets would give valuable information of how low a threshold to switching the partner is and if customers are highlighting the role of affective commitment more when they have more options.

Occupation rate of building information modelling software was low in companies examined in this study since in five out of six companies only one or

two persons used the software. It would be beneficial to figure out how for example communication between the partners would differ in the case of the software with higher occupation rate, such as CRM system. Additionally, since this study explored existing customers of the case company, it would be interesting to see what kinds of factors potential customers value in their purchase processes and what enhances commitment in their relationships.

Theoretical background of this study was based on traditional models of trust-commitment relationship by e.g. Morgan & Hunt (1994), Friman et al. (2002). Their frameworks highlight the role of communication and trust in formation of commitment since they focus on B2B relationships in general. This study, on the other hand, confirmed the findings of de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) in that especially calculative commitment is present in software markets due to e.g. the scarcity of alternatives. However, the software industry has grown explosively since the study of de Ruyter, Moorman & Lemmink (2001) being today one of the fastest growing and most developing industries. Thus, gaining broader and more generalizable information from the industry is still needed. Moreover, regardless of its strong position, software industry has not received much academic interest among marketing researchers. Focusing on e.g. ways for the companies to separate themselves from the competitors in highly competitive markets would be fruitful.

This study aimed to seek answers and broaden the understanding of relationship commitment in B2B software industry focusing on the stages after the relationship has born. Interesting findings concerning especially the form of commitment and communicative aspects during the relationship were found. Furthermore, this study was in line with several previous findings related to communication, trust, and commitment. Nonetheless, due to the nature of this study as a qualitative research and the lack of wider academic interest in the field, several questions remain to be answered regarding relationship commitment in B2B software industry.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1 Interview questions

The interviews were conducted in Finnish thus the questions are translated into English.

Theme 1. Basic information of the interviewee and the company

Name, position, experience in the company, basic information of the company (field, products or services, customers)

Theme 2. Decision-making

Where did you seek for information of this company?

How did you end up buying this software?

Were there any bidding or comparison between different alternatives?

How did different stages (e.g. contact, purchase, implementation, helpdesk, training) of the purchase process work?

Was there something that worked especially well or something that did not work?

Theme 3. Commitment

What kinds of expectations do you have for the overall relationship?

When relationship has begun, how is commitment to the company formed?

What kinds of factors affect commitment?

What makes you to stay with the same company?

Theme 4. Trust

What kind of a meaning/role does trust have in relationships?

How is trust in company formed?

How are things related to trust worked in your current relationship with the company?

Theme 5. Communication

What kind of role does communication have in relationships?

What kind of expectations and wishes do you have over communication?

What are the most suitable channels for communication?

What kind of content do you prefer?

How are these things worked in your current relationship with the company?

Do you have something else to add or comment?