

SUSTAINABLE SUPPLIER-DISTRIBUTOR RELATIONSHIPS: INSIGHTS FROM AUSTRALIAN AGRIBUSINESSES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors that impact on the success of supplier-distributor relationships in the Australian agribusiness industry. The importance of this research lies in the fact that while B2B relationships have been researched extensively and across a range of industries, there is little evidence of its application to the agribusiness sector. From the extant literature, a preliminary framework of success factors was developed and investigated through 20 in-depth interviews conducted with 10 agribusinesses from a dyadic perspective. The findings of this research confirmed the initial 11 factors presented in the preliminary framework as being important to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. The research findings also revealed insights into six new factors that were considered to be crucial to the relationship success, which were included in the revised framework for future investigation.

Keywords. Supplier-Distributor Relationships, Business-to-Business Relationships, Success Factors, Agribusiness, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Agribusiness has traditionally been a challenging and competitive industry. Some of the recent events including natural disasters (eg earthquakes, flooding) have led to significant changes in the market conditions across the industry where cost pressures are building up on agribusinesses. While the current situation may not be favourable to many agribusinesses, yet they need to seek out for and remain competitive. For this reason, many agribusinesses nowadays rely on fewer but more efficient and reliable business partners that are willing to establish long-term sustainable relationships where they can seek complementary resources, create synergy and value add to their respective business.

While business-to-business (B2B) relationships has been investigated [1], [2], [3], [4] extensively in the last decade, however there is an apparent lack of research into the effects of these changes in the industry where limited studies [5], [6], [7] have been conducted to evaluate the success factors for developing B2B relationships and in particular from a dyadic perspective between supplier and distributor within the agribusiness industry. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the current long-term relationships from both sides of the dyad by exploring the factors that contribute to their successful development of supplier-distributor relationships. This

study draws from both the theory and the preliminary empirical knowledge acquired from interviewing stakeholders who are directly involved in the development of supplier-distributor relationships in the Australian agribusiness industry. Hence, this exploratory research will seek to address the question ‘*What are the success factors in supplier-distributor relationships? Why?*’ The research findings seek to contribute towards the B2B relationships theory, specifically in the supplier-distributor context by exploring new insights and also with the confirmation or disconfirmation of the factors identified in the literature. In addition, the findings can also provide practical contributions that are beneficial to agribusiness managers where their competitiveness in the industry can be enhanced through the development of sustainable supplier-distributor relationships.

This paper begins by reviewing the literature relevant to the research issue and then discusses the methodology adopted in researching this issue. Next the research findings will be presented. These are followed by the conclusions drawn from the research, the implications from these and finally suggestions for further research are drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of B2B relationships are often based on variables such as experience, uncertainty, co-operation, commitment and mutual adaptation, and this itself is complex in its own nature [8]. B2B relationships refer to the relation established between two or more businesses which are characterised by three dimensions; activity links, actor bonds and resources ties [9], [10], [11]. The dimension on activity links relate to the technical, administrative, commercial and other activities that can be connected in different ways between businesses [10]. The second dimension of actor bonds seeks to connect actors and influence how they perceive and evaluate each other and form their opinions in relation to one another [10], [12]. The third dimension, resources ties relate to the connection of different resource elements (technological, material, knowledge resources and other intangibles) of businesses [10], [12].

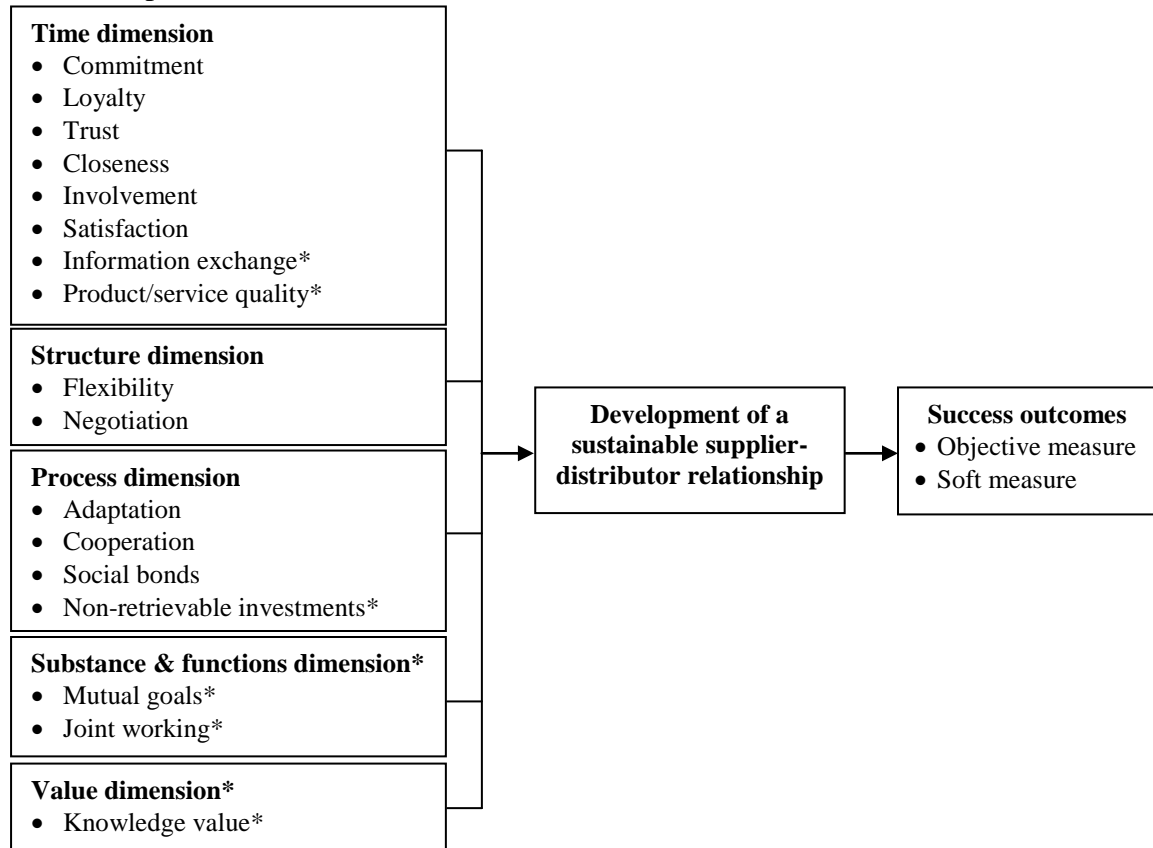
The success of B2B relationships can be determined by two distinctive approaches; objective measure (eg sales volume), and soft measure (eg service quality). The objective measure approach seeks quantifiable measurements of the mutual benefits that businesses can attain from the relationships [13], [14]. In contrast, the soft measure approach is associated to the business partners’ overall level of positive satisfaction and meeting performance expectations [6], [7], [14]. Regardless of the approach undertaken, B2B relationships can be considered as successful when the business goals have been achieved and satisfied, thus creating or adding values to the stakeholders (e.g. customers, employees).

The literature posits that there are different types of B2B relationships (sellers-buyers, manufacturers-dealers, providers-consumers, and suppliers-distributors) and are often developed over a period of time that is challenging and complex in nature. Such a relationship requires more than just monetary transactions and should include other activities (including commitments and resources) that contribute to a sustainable long-term relationship [15], [16], [17]. While the literature has revealed extensive empirical investigation into the success factors of developing sustainable B2B

relationships in several industries (such as the manufacturing, softwares) [18], [4], [19], [20], but there is limited evidence of such studies conducted specifically on supplier-distributor in the agribusiness industry (which is the focus of this study).

Based on the literature reviewed, a preliminary framework (Figure 1) was developed and derived from these previous studies on B2B relationships which had investigated different success factors. Each of these factors will be addressed in turn.

Figure 1. Preliminary framework for developing sustainable supplier-distributor relationships



Adapted from: [6], [8], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25]

Note: Based on the case study findings, factors and dimensions with a (*) were added to the framework as important to the success of supplier-distributors relationships.

Time dimension. B2B relationships are dynamic and are seen as an evolution process to: increase experience of businesses involved, minimise uncertainty in the relationship, the development of both actual and perceived commitment, and the formal and informal adaptations, and investment and savings involved in such a relationship [8]. The time dimension provides a timeframe boundary for which B2B relationships are developed through the interaction and learning from one another and also involvement in a range of activities at different stages of the process [26]. While studies have shown diversity of the B2B relationships development stages, there are common factors being identified as contributing to the successful development of supplier-distributor relationships.

The literature suggested that *commitment* plays a critical role in determining between ‘stayers and leavers’ where such commitments to the learning processes and

investments are evident to the continuity of the valued relationship [8], [23], [27], [28]. Furthermore, commitments can ensure future value and benefits to businesses that are involved in the relationship [4], [29]. *Loyalty* shown by the business partners plays an essential role to the success of B2B relationships and this is particularly more so towards the later stages (long-term and final stages) of the relationship development process [3], [6]. The likelihood of continuing the B2B relationships is greatly affected by the loyalty displayed by the business partners where increasing commitments, adaptations and interactions can be achieved [4].

Trust is another factor that deemed to be important to the success of a B2B relationship and this is particularly significant in the relationship development stage. Trust encourages open communication, exchange of ideas/knowledge and sharing of resources between business partners that improve the relationship [30]. The level of trust between business partners serves as a key indicator to not only the continuity of the relationship but also their success [31], [32], [33].

Findings from previous studies [8], [23], [34] revealed that *closeness* and *involvement* can enhance the stability and sustainability of relationships. The confidence about the relationships can be enhanced when a closer working relationship between business partners is established and extensive involvement also occurred [8], [35]. The strengthening of the relationships is often evidenced by way of increasing cooperation and involvement, mutual problem solving and adaptations.

Satisfaction with the B2B relationships is important as it advances the development of trust and commitment, which contribute towards achieving relationships success through better retention of business customers and increasing sales and meeting expectations [3], [25]. Thus, a high level of mutual satisfaction is crucial to the maintenance of sustainable relationships.

Structure dimension. Business relationships structure is seen as the characteristics that can be easily observed by outsiders. There are four key features; continuity, complexity, symmetry, and informality that are relevant to the relationship structure [21]. Previous studies [6], [36] suggested that the level of *flexibility* that business partners bring into the relationships can have an impact on its success. Flexibility provided by business partners has a positive effect on the relationship development and this can encourage coordination and interaction between businesses where mutual goals can be achieved [37], [38]. On the other hand, the continuity of business relationships can also be affected by *negotiation* as businesses attempt to reach decisions and agreements on disputable issues [39].

Process dimension. The process associated with the development of B2B relationships is often complicated and to be successful, businesses need to consider: adaptation, cooperation and social bonds. The literature [6], [40] revealed that *adaptations* tend to bond business partners into a closer relationship and are signs of willingness to seek improvements on the existing business relationships. Furthermore, adaptations may also imply considerable investments by the business partners where such investments are often specific to the relationship and are not transferable [24], [41].

Effective *cooperation* between business partners has the potential to achieve success in B2B relationships. Business partners that are prepared to make cooperative changes demonstrate their commitments and willingness to develop and maintain on-going relationships [41]. In addition, successful business relationships also require cooperative behaviours from business partners to undertake joint tasks and activities in order to pursue common goals [42], [43]. Business partners with strong *social bonds* are more committed to maintaining the relationship and thus more sustainable [44], [45]. Moreover, social bonds bring business partners closely together in a personal level through interactivity and the exchange of knowledge and skills that contribute to the success of B2B relationships [46], [47], [48].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was exploratory in nature and had adopted the case study methodology, which was used to assist in confirming or disconfirming the success factors in the preliminary framework, as identified in the literature reviewed [49], [50]. The adoption of the case study approach is justified on the following bases. Firstly, case study research focuses on an organisation or industry with the aim to rigorously explore and analyse thoroughly the contemporary real-life experiences and events while retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of these experiences and events. This captures the richness and depth of contextual meaning (such as the reasoning of the success factors for supplier-distributor relationships) that can give raise to possible new insight [50]. Next, the approach undertaken by this research focuses on exploring the complexity and dynamism of the context within the organisational settings and events such as the success factors for B2B relationships in the Australian agribusiness industry [50], [51], [52]. Thirdly, case study research provides a more informed basis for theory building than surveys and is deemed suitable to new research areas or research areas where existing theory seems inadequate [50], [53], [54]. As evident in this research, there are limited research studies in this area, particularly in the Australian agribusiness industry context. Through case studies, this research will attempt to investigate the complex business environment in the agribusiness industry that provides a real-life account of the research issue raised in this research and builds on theory for further conclusive research.

Ten cases within the agribusiness industry were selected judgmentally based on the criteria that they have operated in the industry for a minimum of five years and have on-going business relationships with the partner (supplier or distributor) for at least three years. These 10 cases were equally represented by five supplying and distributing organisations respectively. For each case, two interviews were conducted with the executive director or equivalent (who is involved in managerial activities) and a middle level manager or operational staff (who is involved in the daily operational activities), to determine if significant differences existed between (1) management versus operations perspectives and (2) supplier versus distributor viewpoints.

In this research, replication logic in multiple case studies was used to achieve external validity. Whereas, the construct validity of this study was achieved with the use of multiple sources of evidence through secondary sources (such as the company's business plans, marketing plans and other relevant documentations) which

were used to further triangulate the results. These interviews were semi-structured in nature and conducted in a flexible and informal manner, which provided a greater sensitivity to misunderstanding by interviewees and also to reveal in-depth understanding and information about feelings and emotions toward the specific factors that were considered to be important to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. In addition, a case study protocol was developed and used throughout the interviewing process, in order to enhance the reliability of the study and also to ensure all relevant issues were consistently addressed and conveyed to the interviewees. The duration for each of the in-depth interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Data analysis

This research adopted content analysis procedures that began with the coding of themes in the interview questions, which assisted in organising the data for easier retrieval [55], [56], [57]. In this analysis, data in each interview was coded in terms of the actual questions on the interview protocol, which could assist in revealing relationships and new ideas or areas for coding [55], [57]. The coded interviewing questions within each interview were then compared and contrasted to identify the major issues and derive some form of generalisation [55], [57]. In addition, narrative text and quotations from case studies were used to enhance the credibility of data analysis and also to add qualitative insights to the research issues [54]. The findings of this research will be discussed in the next section.

RESULTS

A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 agribusiness cases (i.e. five supplying organisations and five distributing organisations) where majority of the interviewees (15 out of 20) were male and the remaining five being females. Eighteen of the 20 interviewees had more than five years of experiences in the agribusiness industry, while other interviewees had at least two years of relevant experiences. All interviewees had direct involvement in activities related to the development of business relationships. A summary of the interviewees' profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of the interviewees

Case / Interviewee	Position / Gender	Years of agribusiness experiences	Organisation type
A1	General manager (Male)	12	Supplying
A2	Sales manager (Male)	7	Supplying
B1	Managing director (Male)	15	Supplying
B2	Marketing manager (Male)	6	Supplying
C1	Director (Male)	8	Supplying
C2	Accounts executive (Female)	3	Supplying
D1	Partner (Female)	15	Supplying
D2	Client service manager (Male)	10	Supplying
E1	Owner (Female)	11	Supplying
E2	Business manager (Male)	7	Supplying
F1	Operation director (Male)	22	Distributing
F2	Customer service executive (Female)	2	Distributing
G1	Executive director (Male)	19	Distributing
G2	Operations manager (Male)	20	Distributing
H1	Managing director (Male)	14	Distributing
H2	Senior purchaser (Male)	6	Distributing
I1	General manager (Male)	17	Distributing
I2	Purchasing manager (Female)	13	Distributing
J1	Owner (Male)	9	Distributing
J2	Marketing manager (Male)	6	Distributing

Source: field data collected for this research

The findings were consistent with interviewees agreed that all the initial 11 factors identified in the literature as being important to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. The results also revealed insights to six new factors that could have a significant impact on the development of sustainable supplier-distributor relationships. These factors include: (1) information exchange, (2) product/service quality, (3) non-retrievable investments, (4) mutual goals, (5) joint working, and (6) knowledge value. A summary of the results from the case studies is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary results from the case studies

Success factors	No. of interviewees mentioned the factor
Time dimension	
Commitment	20
Trust	20
Satisfaction	19
Loyalty	19
Closeness	15
Involvement	15
Information exchange*	15
Product/service quality*	12
Structure dimension	
Flexibility	18
Negotiation	16
Process dimension	
Adaptation	19
Social bonds	18
Cooperation	16
Non-retrievable investments*	13
Substance and functions dimension	
Mutual goals*	16
Joint working*	15
Value dimension	
Knowledge value*	16

Source: field data collected for this research

Note: where factors have similar score in the column total, they will be discussed in order from time dimension to value dimension as they appear in this table.

All interviewees agreed that *commitment* and *trust* were critical to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. A high level of commitment gave confidence and assurance to suppliers and distributors that they were capable of fulfilling their obligations. This was supported by an interviewee stating that “*To us, their (distributors) long time commitment is the assurance for our success (business relationships)*”. Commitment towards the relationships was also seen as a sign of trust to the business partners which was often evident only in the later stages of the relationship development process. In supporting this, one interviewee commented that “*A genuine relationship requires commitment and trust. However, this takes time to come into effect. For us, this has taken 12 years of working with our suppliers, and now we have utmost trust in one another*”.

Satisfaction and *loyalty* were regarded as key factors for the development of sustainable business relationships. Interviewees indicated that the level of satisfaction could impact on the continuity of a supplier-distributor relationship and also served as a basis for a long-term loyal business partnership to be established. For example, a high level of relationship satisfaction can reduce the intensity of negative emotions (e.g. accusation, anger) which could have damaged the relationships significantly. One interviewee supported this by commenting that “*Over the years, we have satisfactory relationships with our distributors and in my opinion there isn’t any issue or problem that we cannot resolve together. We are committed to help one another and often put our differences aside for the benefits of our long established relationship*”. Further to this, interviewees also agreed that *adaptation* could play a

major role in the success of their supplier-distributor relationships. They believed that being able to accommodate the needs of the business partners were a sign of their willingness to help and that their relationships could be stronger. This was supported by an interviewee stating that “*We make adaptations to our ordering and delivery system so that it fits with the supplier’s procedures. We showed goodwill in this and they do appreciate what we have done*”.

Interviewees also acknowledged that *flexibility* was essential to the success of developing supplier-distributor relationships. It was evident that suppliers and distributors gave preference to business partners that were flexible in meeting their needs and this would have increased their interaction that led to a further development in their relationships. An interviewee supported this by commenting “*Being flexible in ways that we conduct our business has allowed us to develop a stronger relationship with our suppliers*”. *Social bonds* had been regarded by the interviewees as crucial to their supplier-distributor relationships since much benefit (e.g. tacit knowledge and skills) could be gained from the social exchanges. This was supported by an interviewee commenting “*The invaluable knowledge that I have acquired over the years from my suppliers made me realised how important this relationship is not just to me but also to our business*”.

Negotiation, cooperation, mutual goals and knowledge value were highlighted as important success factors for supplier-distributor relationships. Effective *negotiation* was considered by the interviewees as a mean to develop a longer-term relationship with their business partners, and they also acknowledged that if poorly managed would destroy the business relationships. They believed that business negotiation should aim to have a compromise agreement where on-going business relationships could be attained. This was supported by an interviewee stating that “*We go into any business negotiation with the view that all parties should be treated fairly and come to an agreement that is generally satisfactory for all. This ensures that the business relationships can be continued. Repeat business is good business to us*”.

Interviewees argued that *cooperative* behaviour (such as through joint problem solving) could contribute to sustainable business relationships. Through cooperation, business partners were able to work more closely and gain a better understanding of one another whereby mutual benefits (e.g. increase profit) could be achieved. It was also noted that cooperation was regarded as an indication of the level of commitment towards the relationships. For example, a high level of cooperation in product innovation between the supplier and distributor would be considered as a strong relationship that had been successful over the years.

Interviewees revealed that *mutual goals* were often accomplished through joint efforts between the business partners and provided a strong reason for the continuity of the relationships. It was also agreed that mutual goals brought and held the relationships together where a common understanding of expectations existed. In contrast, the lack of understanding towards mutual goals could give rise to potential conflicts and caused damage to the relationships. One interviewee commented “*Knowing that we shared in common will definitely help in improving the relationships*”.

Many agribusinesses in Australia emphasized the importance of *knowledge value* since it could improve their competitiveness in the intense industry. Interviewees agreed that the sharing of knowledge (e.g. market intelligence, new product idea) between the suppliers and distributors had enhanced the strategic value of their business relationships. In supporting this, an interviewee commented “*Our distributors regularly share with us the market information on what our end user customers think about our products and how we can further improve them to better meet their (end user customers) needs. I must say this has been a key to our successful relationships*”.

Closeness, involvement, information exchange, and joint working were supported by the interviewees as important factors to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. For example, business relationships that were characterised by *close and highly involved* working relationships were often seen as evidence of stability and confidence in the relationships. An interviewee supported by stating that “*We work very closely with our suppliers and get involved in different activities such as promotion and annual planning events. This helps to build a strong relationship*”.

On the other hand, interviewees believed that the *sharing of information* could give them a better understanding of their partners and also achieving mutual benefits from the exchange of relevant information. For example, synergy could be achieved with suppliers and distributors sharing information about their key strengths so that values could be further added to the end customers.

Joint working and planning of activities were indications on a closer bond and understanding between suppliers and distributors. While the interviewees agreed that joint working (e.g. through mutual decision-making and problem identification and solving) could at times be difficult to coordinate because of the differing levels of commitments that each partner had, but through communication and accommodation such joint involvements could be achieved and developed into sustainable relationships. An interviewee who supported this commented “*Initially joint planning of activities is difficult, but when we see the benefits from such joint efforts, we realised how important this is to our relationships with the distributors*”.

Non- retrievable investments were highlighted by the interviewees as a factor that could impact on the success of supplier-distributor relationships. For example, business partners that had invested specific resources (such as capital improvements, training, equipment and software) into a relationship would be highly valued and be seen as a significant contribution to the building of stronger social and structural bonds between the suppliers and distributors.

Interviewees also suggested *product/service quality* as an important factor that could affect the success of the relationships. Product and service quality have had great impact on the level of satisfaction by the business partners which could result in the continuity or termination of the relationships. For example, distributors in the agribusiness industry tend to rely on their suppliers to provide the technical support for their products. Suppliers that failed to provide adequate service in this aspect could easily damaged the business relationships with the distributors and thus encouraging them to discontinue with the relationships.

The results highlighted six new factors (i.e. information exchange, product/service quality, non-retrievable investments, mutual goals, joint working, and knowledge value) that were considered as important to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. These new insights could be attributed to the nature of the case study's business and also the differing cultures in the Australian agribusiness industry.

Differences in response

The findings suggested that there were differences in responses for two (non-retrievable investments and product/service quality) of the 17 success factors based on perspectives from management versus operational. From the management perspective, interviewees believed that business partners would make *non-retrievable investments* into the relationships only if they have considered it to be strong, successful to date and that the relationships had been stably established over a period of time. It was also noted that such a type of managerial decision often requires substantial time and considerations to the many different aspects of the business as a whole, to determine if such investments were worthwhile. This was supported by an interviewee stating "*This (non-retrievable investments) is no easy decision to make since it can involve significant investments. But it will be the right decision to make when we see that the relationship has progressed very positively over the years. Making such commitments will only further enhance our relationships and advanced it to the next level*". In contrast, interviewees who were in operational roles might not appreciate the importance of non-retrievable investments to the success of supplier-distributor relationships because they had limited understanding and involvement in the decision making of such investments. An interviewee supported this with the comment "*I have no involvement in this (non-retrievable investments) and don't see how this can really affect the success of the relationships*".

On the other hand, interviewees from operational roles indicated that *product/service quality* could essentially affect their views about the continuity of the relationships. For example, frequent complaints received by the operational staff from the customers about poor product quality could cause significant inconvenience to them (such as having to respond to customers complaints, organise faulty products to be replaced and delivered). As a result, negative impressions about the suppliers could be developed and therefore damaging the relationships.

In addition, the study found no major differing opinions between interviewees from supplying and distributing organisations with regards to the factors impacting on the success of supplier-distributor relationships.

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 agribusinesses in Australia. The interviewees highlighted a list of 17 factors that were considered to be important to the success of supplier-distributor relationships. The findings confirmed the support of the initial 11 factors identified in the preliminary framework and had also revealed six new factors; information exchange, product/service quality, non-retrievable investments, mutual goals, joint working, and knowledge value, that could be crucial to the development of sustainable supplier-distributor relationships. As a

result of new insights acquired, the preliminary framework had been revised to include the new factors identified and was also incorporated into categories based on the five dimensions (i.e. time, structure, process, substance and functions, and value) of B2B relationships in the literature. From this study, agribusiness managers were provided with a list of success factors to which they could take into consideration (according to their differing situations) when developing sustainable supplier-distributor relationships. This would enable mutual benefits to be gained and improved competitiveness in the agribusiness industry.

This study investigated the supplier-distributor relationships in Queensland, Australia and therefore the findings could not be generalised to other geographical areas and/or population at large. Future studies could look at a more representative sampling population and be tested to allow generalisation of the findings. Further studies could also be investigated into other industries and countries, to provide comparisons and determine their similarities and differences.

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