

The Impact of Trust on Opportunism Across Different Stages of Buyer-Supplier Relationships: A Process Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Opportunism poses a significant challenge in business-to-business exchange relationships, particularly when companies aim for sustainable relationships. While trust is known to influence opportunism, its role across different stages of buyer-supplier relationships remains unclear in the existing literature. This study empirically investigates (1) the occurrence of opportunism *before* and *after* formal contract signing, specifically *ex-ante* and *ex-post* opportunism, and (2) the relational mechanisms for mitigating these types of opportunism. This study draws on transaction cost economics, contingency theory, and a process view of trust to explain the mechanism of *how*, *when*, and *why* trust influences opportunism throughout the different stages of a buyer-supplier relationship. An inductive theory-building approach through exploratory interviews methods was employed to address these theoretical issues. Data were collected through 25 semi-structured interviews conducted from April 2020 to November 2021 in both Japan and Vietnam. Our findings reveal the evolution of trust across different stages of buyer-supplier relationships: (1) in the initial stage, trust is formed by empirical evidence and relational assessment; (2) in the mature stage, trust is sustained by emotional connections and personal experiences. This dynamic interplay between trust and opportunism creates a powerful mechanism for mitigating opportunistic behavior. By understanding this process, managers can foster trust to safeguard against opportunism and build more collaborative and sustainable supplier relationships.

Keywords: *buyer-supplier relationships, ex-ante opportunism, ex-post opportunism, trust*

1. INTRODUCTION

Opportunism, often manifested as *opportunistic behaviors*, is a central concept in transaction cost economics and buyer-supplier relationship literature (Rehman *et al.*, 2024). Opportunism is commonly defined as self-interest seeking with guile, encompassing actions such as misrepresentation, lying, cheating, stealing, distortion, disguise, obfuscation or other forms of deception within

business relationships (Williamson, 1985). While opportunism has been extensively investigated at the inter-firm level (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2015; Han *et al.*, 2022; Handley and Benton, 2012; Huo *et al.*, 2016; Parkhe, 1993; Provan and Skinner, 1989; Yang *et al.*, 2021), our understanding of how trust influences opportunism at the individual level across different stages of buyer-supplier relationships remains limited, particularly within the context of supply chain (Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Pham *et al.*, 2022).

Within the extant literature, a burgeoning stream of research has emerged that addresses opportunism at the individual level, arguing that opportunistic behaviors in business exchanges are primarily *driven* and *controlled* by individual actors rather than organizations (Collier and Sarkis, 2021; Guo *et al.*, 2023; Pham *et al.*, 2022; Tangpong *et al.*, 2010). This study contributes to this emerging research trend by (1) exploring the factors that influence individual opportunism and (2) identifying effective relational mechanisms to mitigate and reduce the risks of opportunistic behavior within buyer-supplier relationships (Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Hawkins *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Pham *et al.*, 2024). Recent conceptual and empirical studies suggest that trust is a critical factors in mitigating opportunistic behavior (Blome *et al.*, 2023; Huo *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2016). Within the supply chain context, *trust* is defined as a party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party's actions based on the expectation that the other will perform an action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

Despite of extensive investigation into the impact of trust on opportunism within supply chain, empirical findings have been *inconsistent* (Eckerd *et al.*, 2022; Villena *et al.*, 2021). While some studies indicate a positive relationship between trust and opportunism (e.g., Crosno *et al.*, 2013; Rokkan *et al.*, 2003; Wu *et al.*, 2016), others demonstrate a negative relationship (e.g., Molina-Morales *et al.*, 2011; O'Malley *et al.*, 1997; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). These conflicting findings led to unequivocal conclusion regarding the effectiveness of trust as a relational mechanism for mitigating opportunistic behaviors in buyer-supplier relationships, consequently not useful to delineate any useful

practical implications for supply chain managers or consultants. Recognizing the dynamic nature of trust, which can evolve throughout the course of a business relationship (Akrou and Diallo, 2017; Dowell *et al.*, 2015), researchers have suggested that future empirical investigation should: (1) examine the impact of trust on opportunism from a process perspective, conceptualizing trust as a dynamic rather than a static construct (Akrou *et al.*, 2016; Akrou and Diallo, 2017); and (2) employ qualitative data to capture the dynamic interplay of these concepts, moving beyond cross-section survey data (Dowell *et al.*, 2015). To address these theoretical and empirical ambiguities, and building on the aforementioned arguments, we propose that the transformation of trust across relationship stages differently influences the quality of buyer-supplier relationships and the behaviors of involved parties, particularly with regard to opportunistic behavior. Therefore, this study examines the following research question: *How do trust and opportunism interact across the different stages of a buyer-supplier relationship?*

To investigate this research question, we interviewed 25 individuals from Japanese and Vietnamese firms between November 2021 and December 2022. Employing an inductive approach and utilizing constant comparative analysis, we iteratively analyzed the interview data in conjunction with relevant literature from transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1985), social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960), and supply chain management, specifically focusing on trust (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Molina-Morales *et al.*, 2011), and opportunism (Huo *et al.*, 2016; Parkhe, 1993; Provan and Skinner, 1989; Wang *et al.*, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2021). This approach enabled us to develop a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between trust and opportunism in buyer-supplier relationships within supply chains, capturing the causal mechanisms linking the evolution of trust with *ex ante* and *ex post* opportunism. Our findings indicate that trust between buyers and suppliers evolves across relationship stages. In the early stage, trust is predicted on perceptions of the supplier's *benevolence*, *honesty*, and *competence*. As the relationship matures, trust is sustained by *emotional attachment* and *interpersonal harmony*. While opportunism can manifest in both the early stage - when the two parties have not yet signed a formal business contract, and the mature stage - when the two parties have officially become business partners, trust consistently plays a significant role in mitigating opportunistic behavior. However, the mitigating effect of trust is substantially diminished if suppliers engage in opportunistic behavior during the early stage.

This study makes two primary contributions to the extant literature. First, by employing an inductive approach and a process perspective, this study reconciles the inconsistencies in prior research by elucidating the dynamic interplay between trust and opportunism across different stages of buyer-supplier relationships (Blome *et al.*, 2023; Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2024). Specifically, we demonstrate how the nature and impact of trust on opportunistic behavior evolve as relationships progress from early to mature stage. Second, this study extends the existing trust literature by conceptualizing trust as a *dynamic* construct rather than a *static* entity (Akrou and Diallo, 2017). This dynamic perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of how trust evolves throughout the

relationship lifecycle and its impact on individual opportunism at each stage. By elucidating these dynamic processes, this study offers a refined understanding of the mitigating role of trust on individual opportunism, detailing how trust is developed, sustained, and ultimately influences behavior as buyer-supplier relationships evolve.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a conceptual background on supply chain opportunism and supply chain trust. Section 3 details the research methodology, followed by the presentation of our findings in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 discusses theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and future research directions, and conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Supply Chain Opportunism

Opportunism in business exchange, a concept originating from transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1985), encompasses behaviors where individuals strategically exploit information asymmetry, incomplete contracts, or other vulnerabilities to pursue self-interest. Williamson (1985) conceptualizes opportunism as the pursuit of personal gain without regard for the welfare of others or broader consequences. Within business exchanges, individuals may engage opportunistic behaviors that prioritize their own interests over the collective goals of the relationship, as such, often employing tactics of misrepresentation, deceit, and manipulation to achieve an unbalanced distribution of benefits (Hill, 1990). These behaviors can manifest both *before* and *after* the formalization of a business contract (Jap and Anderson, 2003). Opportunistic behaviors occurring before the contract signing are termed *ex-ante* opportunism, while those occurring after are termed as *ex-post opportunism* (Jap and Anderson, 2003).

Given that opportunism is a complex phenomenon that can increase transaction costs and degrade the quality of business exchange relationships, supply chain scholars have explored various mechanisms to mitigate it from different theoretical perspectives (Blome *et al.*, 2023). Social exchange theory, which emphasizes relational governance mechanisms between buyers and suppliers, offers a prominent approach to addressing opportunism in the supply chain context (Huo *et al.*, 2015; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). These *relational mechanisms*, encompassing social relations and mutual norms embedded within the buyer-supplier relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), are considered effective in controlling and mitigating opportunism (Cao and Lumineau, 2015). By providing an informal structure that shapes perceptions of value and guides actions in predictable ways, relational mechanisms encourage self-enforcement among exchange partners. Both theoretical and empirical research indicate that trust is a critical element of social relations for enhancing the quality of business exchange relationships (Griffith and Myers, 2005). Trust, defined as the willingness of a party (the trustor) to be vulnerable to the actions of another party (the trustee) (Akrou and Diallo, 2017; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987), reflects a psychological state of confidence and reliance. However, empirical research on the role of trust in mitigating opportunistic behavior has yielded inconsistent findings (Eckerd *et al.*, 2022; Villena *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 Supply Chain Trust

Trust is a fundamental to successful business relationships and collaborations within purchasing and supply chain management (Akrouf and Diallo, 2017; Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Pham *et al.*, 2022). By definition, it involves a willingness to be vulnerable to another party (the trustee), stemming from the belief that the trustee will act in a manner that benefits the trustor (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). This vulnerability arises because the trustor's interests or well-being are potentially impacted by trustee's actions (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Trust is established on the expectations that the trustee will fulfill obligations, commitments, or ethical considerations important to the trustor (Rehman *et al.*, 2023). These may include timely delivery of goods, sharing of sensitive information, or maintaining product quality and safety (Mayer *et al.*, 1995).

While previous studies have examined the influence of trust on opportunism, their findings are inconsistent. Some researchers suggest that trust reduces individual opportunism in business-to-business exchange because trust-based relationships foster greater appreciation for exchange partners, encouraging individuals to avoid actions that might harm the other party (Brass *et al.*, 1998). Trust can also increase cooperative behaviors and reduce non-cooperative behaviors, such as making extreme offers or exploiting power advantages (Kong *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, by fostering social psychological contracts between individuals, trust motivates the development of mutual goals and enduring relationships (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2018; Mangus *et al.*, 2020).

However, recent researchers grounded in paradox theory argue that trust can increase the risk of opportunistic behaviors (Gnyawali *et al.*, 2016; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). This perspective posits that trust and opportunism can co-exist, meaning that high levels of trust do not preclude opportunistic behavior (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Lumineau and Oliveira, 2020). The willingness to be vulnerable in trust may inadvertently jeopardize the relationship (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). For instance, if individual agents trust their counterparts who do not return that trust, they may invest valuable resources in someone unworthy, exposing themselves to unnecessary risks (Molina-Morales *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, excessive trust may diminish vigilance in monitoring and controlling processes, creating opportunities for exploitation (Jap and Anderson, 2003; Yip and Schweitzer, 2015).

Furthermore, a contingency perspective suggests that trust between exchange partners is dynamic and changes over the course of the relationship, evolving from the initial phase to the mature stage (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Dyer and Singh, 1998; Wang *et al.*, 2016). In the initial phase, trust arises from cognitive evaluations and assessments, whereby one party judges the trustworthiness of another based on empirical observation and personal judgement (Akrouf *et al.*, 2016). In the mature phase, trust is cultivated through emotional bond, mutual understanding, and empathy (Gabarro, 1978; Rempel *et al.*, 1985). The evolution of trust creates dynamic relational mechanisms that may differentially influence the behaviors of exchange partners. Given the dynamic nature of both trust and opportunism (Akrouf and Diallo, 2017; Dowell *et al.*, 2015), it is essential to examine whether the influence of trust on opportunistic

behavior remain stable or changes throughout the relationship lifecycle. Therefore, further research is warranted to clarify the elements of trust evolution and to elucidate how the mitigating role of trust on opportunism changes as relationship develops.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Approach

In this study, we adopted the *inductive theory-building approach*, utilizing *exploratory research interviews* to delve into the experiences of practitioners and gain in-depth insights (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). It is crucial to ensure the phenomenon and methodological fit for conducting any qualitative research, meaning the adopted research methods should align with the research topic and its context (Edmondson and Mcmanus, 2007; Gehman *et al.*, 2018). The inductive approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the dynamic role of trust in mitigating opportunistic behavior within buyer-supplier relationships. This approach allows for the generation of new theoretical insights or the reconceptualization of existing phenomena, while also providing valuable practical insights (Voss *et al.*, 2002; Wacker, 1998). An overview of the research method is described in **Figure 1**.

3.2 Informant Recruitment

This study employed a *purposive sampling* strategy (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015; Patton, 2015) to recruit informants responsible for purchasing within manufacturing and retail firms in Japan and Vietnam. Leveraging pre-existing personal and professional networks, we initially contacted purchasing agents from leading Japanese and Vietnamese firms. This approach was necessary because gaining access to professionals in Japan typically requires referrals from trusted contact. In Japan, as well as in Vietnam, the referral system (*shokkai* in Japanese) plays a crucial role in expanding professional networks and accessing opportunities, relying heavily on appropriate connections and introductions by a third party (*shokai-sha*). This strategy facilitated cooperation and openness during the interview process.

Finally, we conducted in-depth interviews with 25 informants, primarily in Japanese and Vietnamese. These informants represented diverse backgrounds within sales and purchasing functions, with many holding managerial positions such as general managers, brand manager, and store manager.

Consistent with purposive sampling best practice (Guest *et al.*, 2006), this sample size is appropriate for inductive research, ensuring sufficient data to provide a rich and heterogeneous perspective on the phenomenon of interest. Detailed informant profiles are provided in Appendix 1.

3.3 Interviews

We conducted several in-depth interviews with 25 informants by following the guidelines proposed by McCracken (1988). These interviews, lasting between one and four hours, were conducted in person at the informant's offices or via video call between November 2021 and December 2022. While the research team resided in Japan, some informants were located in Vietnam, necessitating online interview for convenience.

The initial interviews were open-ended and exploratory-oriented, while subsequent interviews followed a more structured format. The interview protocol, designed in both Vietnamese and Japanese, was grounded in relevant literature and refined through multiple revisions based on feedback from colleagues and practitioners. The English version of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix 2.

The first segment of the interviews focused on gathering general information about the informants, including their company’s industry, major products and services, background and experience in business exchange, and job duties related to supplier interactions. These questions served to understand the informant’s context and establish rapport before delving into more specific inquiries.

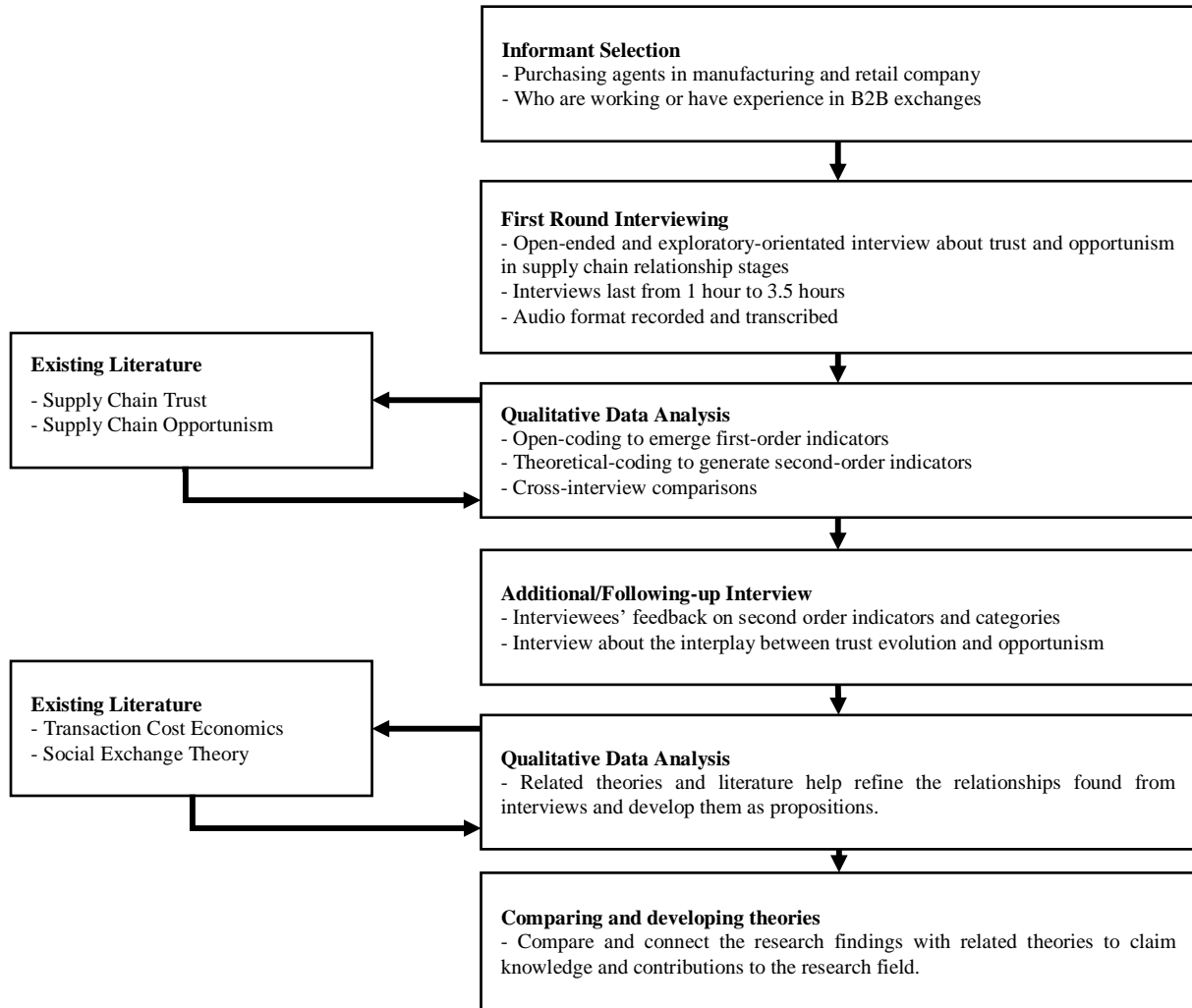


Figure 1 The research method overview

In the second segment, specific questions were directed towards exploring the evolution of trust and opportunistic behaviors in the different stages of relationship. For example: “Please recall the beginning of time when you worked with the supplier agent, how did you feel about he/she? Was he/she trustworthy person?”; “How do you feel about he/she recently? Is he/she still trustworthy person? If not, please explain why?”; “Has the supplier agent shown opportunistic behaviors such as lying, cheating, hiding information, and misleading when working with you?”. These questions were designed to elicit emergent *categories* and *constructs* from the data rather than imposing pre-conceived notions.

3.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by members of the research team. To ensure confidentiality, all data were encrypted. Qualitative data analysis followed the constant comparative method (Glaser

and Strauss, 1967). Influencing factors of opportunism were identified and coded as first-order indicators, derived directly from the informants’ words, expressions, and sentences. To conceptually synthesize these emergent factors, we consulted relevant literature to develop second-order indicators and aggregate categories, following the guidelines outlined by Yin (2009).

In the following phase, we conducted cross-interview comparisons to identify common categories and develop relevant propositions. After three cycles of coding, the analysis yielded key categories and propositions illustrating the relationships between them. This process was repeated for each subsequent interview, ensuring consistent data coding and analysis. The information gathered during each interview enabled a detailed description, comprehension, and explanation of events within the specific context. Cross-interview comparisons ensured that the identified events and factors were not isolated instances, allowing for generalization of the phenomenon (Miles *et al.*, 2020).

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Trust in “The Initial” Relationship Stage

At the outset of any business relationship, buyers and suppliers typically form perceptions of trustworthiness through direct interaction and tangible evidence. This initial trust develops as both parties engage in exchange activities (Akrouf and Diallo, 2017). Consequently, a buyer's trust in a supplier hinges on the supplier's demonstration of *benevolence*, *honesty*, and *competence* (refer to **Figure 2**).

Our findings suggest that buyer-supplier trust, in its early stages, is established through empirical evidence and rational assessment derived from business exchanges

(Dowell *et al.*, 2015). Interviews revealed several key properties of this type of trust essential for establishing a robust initial business relationship. These properties include: (1) perceived supplier benevolence, (2) buyers’ perception about suppliers’ honesty, and (3) buyers’ competence. In essence, these characteristics imply that a buyer's trust in a supplier largely depends on the supplier's ability to demonstrate benevolence, honesty, and competence (refer to **Figure 2**).

Based on the interview data, the following paragraphs elaborate on the characteristics of trust necessary for building a healthy or non-dysfunctional relationship in the early stage.

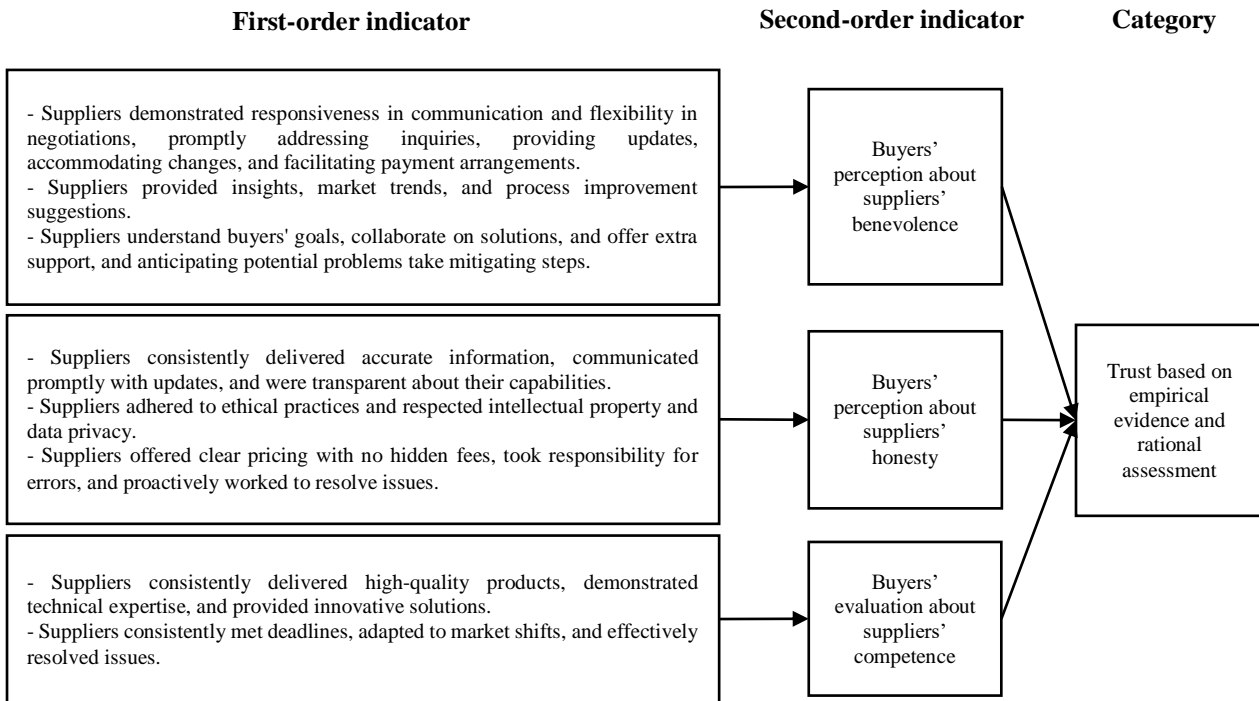


Figure 2 First and second order concepts of trust in ‘initial’ relationship stage

Property 1: Buyers’ perception about suppliers’ benevolence

Buyers perceive suppliers as benevolent when they exhibit several key behaviors. These include promptly responding to inquiries, providing updates, and addressing concerns. Furthermore, suppliers who prioritize collaborative goal achievement – by renegotiating terms, accommodating order changes, or offering favorable payment arrangements – are viewed positively. Consistently delivering high-quality products or services, taking responsibility for any issues, and actively maintaining quality standards also signal benevolence, as these actions demonstrate a commitment to the buyer's success. Moreover, suppliers who engage in problem-solving and offer support beyond contractual obligations are seen as truly benevolent partners. For instance, anticipating and mitigating potential issues signals a proactive approach to ensuring a smooth working relationship. These observations are supported by interview data, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“When I have queries, need order updates, or want to communicate my concerns, the supplier personnel swiftly react. They provide clear and informative information... They maintain open communication channels and work with

me to achieve a seamless supply chain. As a result, I consider them a reliable and trustworthy partner.”. (Interviewee #1)

“When faced with the necessity to increase an order on short notice owing to a spike in customer demand, supplier representatives immediately change the order and delivery schedule without imposing harsh penalties or additional fees. Furthermore, they provide flexible payment options, such as longer payment intervals, to ease financial stress during difficult times.”. (Interviewee #3)

Property 2: Buyers’ perception about suppliers’ honesty

Buyers' perceptions of supplier honesty significantly influence their level of trust. Honesty fosters trust over time, reduces perceived risk, encourages open communication, and contributes to strong, enduring buyer-supplier relationships. For instance, when suppliers provide clear and transparent pricing without hidden fees or unexpected charges, buyers perceive them as honest. This transparency fosters trust by assuring buyers of fair treatment. Furthermore, honest suppliers deliver on promise without exaggeration or misrepresentation, consistently providing accurate information about their products, services, and capabilities. They also offer timely updates on order status,

potential delays, or any changes to agreements, and demonstrating respect for buyers' time and need for information. Ethical business practices – including respecting intellectual property rights, maintaining data privacy, and complying with industry standards – are also important indicators of honesty (Rehman *et al.*, 2023). Finally, honest suppliers are upfront about their limitations, whether in production capacity or technical capabilities. They avoid overpromising, remain realistic about deliverables, and take responsibility for errors, acknowledging mistakes and proactively working to rectify them. The following quotes from interviewees illustrate how buyer evaluate supplier honesty and its connection to trust:

"... with a large order of custom-designed microchips... They communicate openly with me, providing a realistic schedule for the order while taking into account their present workload and production restrictions... They admit the possible difficulty of completing the order's requirements due to their limited production capacity for this particular product." (Interviewee #12)

"I was surprised to see that the final cost was significantly greater than what I expected based on the initial price quotes. These additional charges are unclear, and my attempts to clarify them are greeted with resistance and delays in receiving responses. This experience has led me to view them as dishonest and untrustworthy." (Interviewee #9)

Property 3: Buyers' evaluations of suppliers' competence

Buyers' evaluations of supplier competence are crucial in determining trust. Competent suppliers consistently deliver high-quality products or services that meet or exceed buyer expectations. This reliability fosters collaboration and facilitates long-term relationships. Moreover, buyers seek suppliers with a deep industry understanding who offer valuable insights. Suppliers demonstrating extensive technical knowledge and expertise are highly valued. Competence is also demonstrated by a supplier's ability to propose innovative solutions, suggest process improvements, contribute creative ideas to enhance efficiency, address emerging issues, and adapt to changing circumstances. Furthermore, competent suppliers effectively resolve issues, troubleshoot problems, and offer timely solutions. Buyers trust suppliers who can navigate challenges and provide solutions, rather than simply presenting obstacles. The following interview excerpts illustrate how buyers perceive supplier competence and its link to trust:

"... They impress me with their extensive knowledge of electronic engineering and production complexities. They engage in comprehensive discussions about our specific requirements and the obstacles of incorporating the component into our solution. Their knowledge of design optimization, quality control procedures, and potential cost-saving alternatives is crucial." (Interviewee #12)

"The supplier is a major source of information for my company regarding current fashion trends and styles, and they never fail to meet our expectations. The provider responds quickly to changing consumer preferences that are causing market trends to change quickly... They alert me to new design possibilities and fabric selections when they notice an unexpected spike in demand for a specific style or type of material." (Interviewee #4)

4.2 Trust in "The Matured" Relationship Stage

As buyer-supplier relationships mature, they are typically characterized by high levels of trust and interdependence (Huang and Wilkinson, 2013). In this context, social interactions between purchasing agents and their counterparts become crucial in shaping the relationship trajectory. By fostering trust, mutual understanding, and strong social bonds, these interactions effectively mitigate opportunistic behavior and contribute to a healthy, sustainable partnership and preventing potential deterioration over time (Akrouf and Diallo, 2017). Conversely, the absence of such interactions can lead to misalignment, erosion of trust, and ultimately, relationship dissolution (Dowell *et al.*, 2015).

In mature relationships, trust is cultivated through *buyers' feelings of safety* and *emotional attachment* toward the supplier (refer to **Figure 3**). Based on interview data, the following paragraphs inductively explore the characteristics of trust that contribute to healthy and dysfunctional relationships in this mature stage.

Property 1: Buyers' feeling safe toward supplier

Buyers derive a sense of safety from suppliers who consistently meet expectations. This includes delivering high-quality products or services and upholding agreed-upon standards, leading to perceptions of predictability and reliability. Open communication channels and timely responses to queries also foster a sense of safety, as trust stems from transparency and accessibility. Furthermore, suppliers need to proactively prepare risk management plans and contingency solutions for potential issues and uncertainties to ensure the sustainability of the mutual business relationship in the long term. Suppliers who prioritize data security and confidentiality through robust data protection measures enhance buyers' comfort when sharing sensitive information. The following interview excerpts highlight how buyers experience this sense of safety:

"...They have constantly exceeded our expectations by meeting quality standards and meeting deadlines for timely delivery of high-quality components. They make investments in state-of-the-art quality control techniques, strict testing procedures, and a robust supply chain to guarantee the dependability of their products. Our lengthy history of dependable and consistent performance has greatly increased our sense of safety and trust in one another." (Interviewee #6)

"The supplier agents are well aware of the hazards that could arise in their supply chain, which include natural disasters, geopolitical unrest, and unanticipated production disruptions. In order to effectively reduce these risks, they have taken a proactive stance. They guarantee production continuity even in the event that one facility encounters difficulties by keeping several manufacturing facilities in several geographical regions... This degree of readiness gives our cooperation with the supplier agents a sense of security and assurance." (Interviewee #3)

Property 2: Buyers' feeling emotional attachment toward supplier

Buyers also develop emotional attachment to suppliers who make them feel respected and valued. Jointly acknowledging and celebrating milestones, achievements,

and anniversaries strengthens this attachment and fosters a sense of shared accomplishment. A shared vision for the future – whether focused on growth, innovation, or industry leadership – further enhance this connection by generating excitement and fostering collaboration toward common objectives. Suppliers who exhibit empathy and a deep

understanding of the buyer's challenges and aspirations cultivate a sense of emotional support. This is particularly evident during crises or unexpected disruptions when suppliers offer steadfast support, forging a bond of reliability and dedication. The following interview excerpts illustrate the aforementioned scenario:

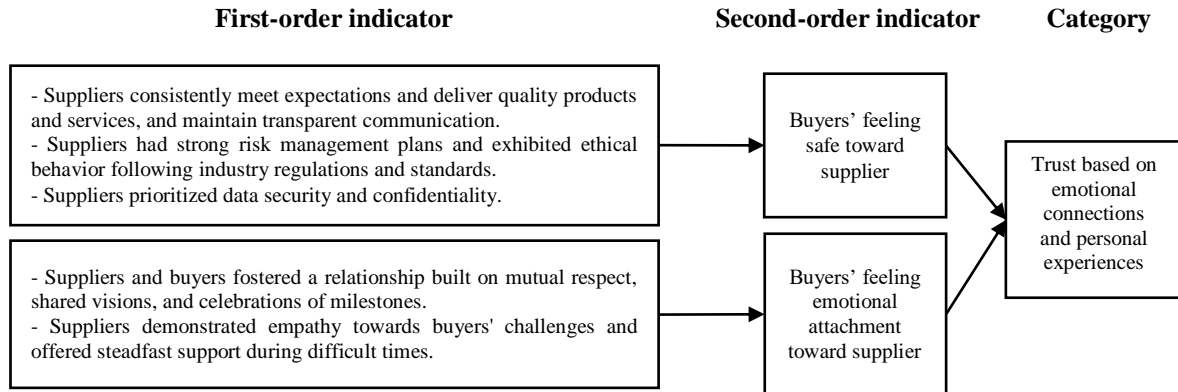


Figure 3 First and second order concepts of trust in the mature relationship stage

"The supply agent is accommodating when I contact them with an urgent job; they prioritize it and adjust their work hours to meet the short notice. They keep me informed on the project's status on a frequent basis and alert me to any possible problems beforehand... As a result, I see them as a vital collaborator who provides emotional support during trying times in addition to high-quality design work... [The relationship is] encouraged by this emotional connection." (Interviewee #22)

"One year, a significant storm that devastated our manufacturing site caused a natural calamity that my organization had never anticipated coming. This flood causes operational disruptions and increases the likelihood that client orders will be fulfilled far later than expected. Recognizing how serious the situation is, the supply agents provide constant support and help... They give our orders priority over other customers and provide flexible payment arrangements to ease the financial burden during this crisis." (Interviewee #19)

In the first two sections explored the dynamic nature of trust as it evolves across different stages of buyer-supplier relationship. Our findings indicate that opportunistic behaviors also emerge and evolve alongside these relationships, particularly during contract negotiation, both *before* or *after* the official agreement is signed. This suggests that opportunistic behaviors are indeed dynamic and emerge overtime through the transaction activities of both parties. The following sections provide empirical evidence demonstrating this dynamic and evolving nature of opportunistic behavior in buyer-supplier relationships.

4.3 Supplier Agents' Ex-Post Opportunism

In mature buyer-supplier relationships, opportunistic behaviors are less likely due to two key factors: (1) high levels of trust and inter-dependence between both parties (Blome *et al.*, 2023) and (2) the binding nature of contractual agreements (Jap and Anderson, 2003). At this stage, opportunistic behaviors can have serious negative consequences for both ongoing business activities and the established relationship. Any such behaviors occurring after

contract signing are labeled as '*ex-post* opportunism' and include actions such as *breaking formal contracts* or *informal agreements* (refer to **Figure 4**). The following sections provide empirical evidence and further discussion of *ex-post* opportunism.

Property 1: Violate formal contracts

Regarding formal contracts, suppliers may engage in *ex-post* opportunism by subcontracting work to third parties without buyer approval, potentially jeopardizing quality control and accountability. They may also fail to provide promised post-sales support, maintenance, or training as stipulated in the contract, or attempt to unilaterally change contractual terms, disrupting agreed-upon expectations and the established relationship. A lack of transparency and confidentiality can also manifest as *ex-post* opportunism. This can include providing inaccurate or incomplete reporting, hindering the buyer's ability to monitor performance and assess compliance, or disclosing confidential information to unauthorized parties, violating confidentiality clauses and potentially harming the buyer's reputation. The following interview excerpts illustrate such situations:

"My organization receives erroneous performance data from the suppliers. To paint a flattering picture of their services, they falsify cybersecurity incident and uptime numbers. We find it challenging to evaluate the true effectiveness and dependability of their data center services due to this misreporting." (Interviewee #7)

"Sensitive client information is exposed in a data breach brought on by vendors' carelessness with data protection. Even worse, it turns out that the vendors broke their end of the bargain by failing to notify my company of the breach right away. Furthermore, an inquiry revealed that they uninvitedly provided private client data to a third party." (Interviewee #12)

Property 2: Violate informal agreements

Regarding informal agreements, suppliers might engage in *ex-post* opportunism by ignoring or downplaying

buyer concerns, requests, or feedback, thereby deviating from the understanding of a collaborative and responsive relationship. Non-compliance with timelines can also constitute ex-post opportunism. This can include missing deadlines or delaying deliveries without prior communication or renegotiation, breaching expectations of timely performance. Suppliers might also become less

willing to accommodate changes or modifications to the agreement, despite a prior understanding of flexibility, or they might prioritize other clients' needs over the buyer's, despite an informal agreement of consistent prioritization. The following interview excerpts highlight such violations of informal agreements:

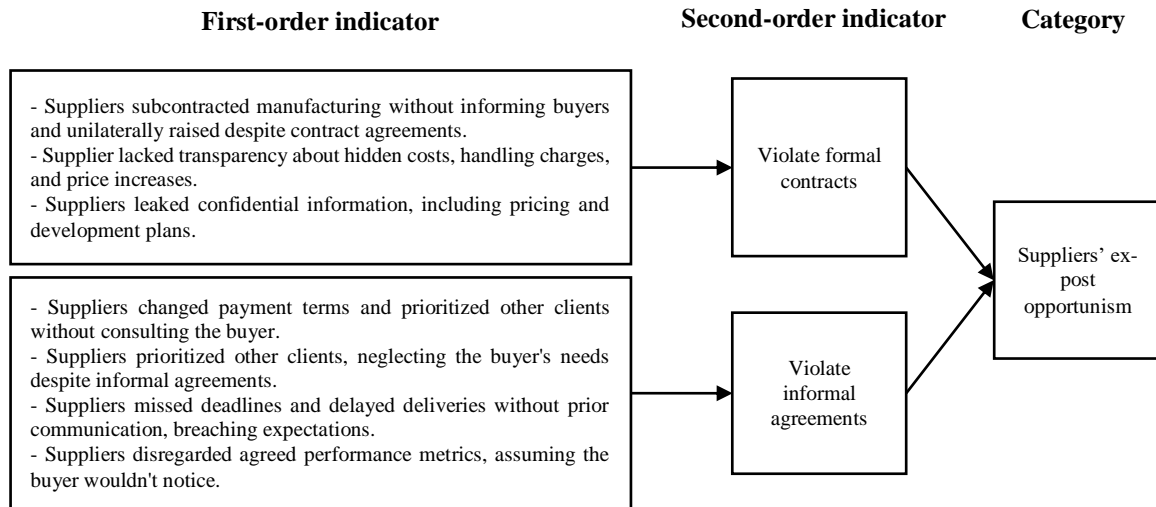


Figure 4 First and second order of suppliers' ex-post

“In the past, our supplier has been courteous and flexible when we have asked for last-minute modifications or revisions to design concepts. However, despite their earlier grasp of adaptability, the supplier becomes less inclined to make these modifications without additional fees or prolonged deadlines as their clientele grows.” (Interviewee #25)

“Many internal issues cause us to miss a number of planned deliveries to our factories. This leads to a scarcity of necessary ingredients, which affects my companies' category offerings and aggravates customers.” (Interviewee #4)

4.4 Supplier Agents' Ex-Ante Opportunism

The initial stage of a buyer-supplier relationship is critical for establishing its tone or trajectory. Opportunistic behaviors occurring before contract formalization, labelled as 'ex-ante opportunism', can significantly undermine trust and collaboration (Jap and Anderson, 2003). For example, during negotiations, a supplier might misrepresent its capabilities or provide overly optimistic delivery timelines to secure a contract. Similarly, a buyer might withhold crucial information about future requirements or market conditions to gain more favorable terms. These behaviors can establish a foundation of mistrust with long-term detrimental effects on the relationship, highlighting the importance of vigilance and integrity during the early stages of a business-to-business exchange (Lee and Ha, 2024; Pham *et al.*, 2024).

In the initial stage of a buyer-supplier relationship, both parties are typically focused on building rapport and exchanging information about products, contractual terms, and other relevant details. However, this information exchange process can also create opportunities for opportunistic behavior (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Before signing an formal contract, suppliers may engage in *ex-ante* opportunism through *misrepresentation*, *unfair bargaining*

tactics, or *incomplete information disclosure* (refer to Figure 5). The following sections provide empirical evidence and further discussion of these opportunistic behaviors.

For example, suppliers might misrepresent their products' features or capabilities, exaggerating their true potential. They might also mislead buyers with manipulated performance data or selectively chosen production metrics that highlight efficiency while concealing quality issues. This allows them to appear more competitive and attractive compared to alternative suppliers. The following interview excerpts illustrate such situations:

“The diesel engines were equipped with software by the manufacturer that could detect when an emissions test was being carried out. In order to meet regulatory requirements, the software would activate full emissions controls during the tests. However, these limitations were loosened during normal driving, which led to much higher real emission levels than stated.” (Interviewee #9)

Suppliers may also engage in ex-ante opportunism by failing to fully disclose all associated costs during the negotiation process. This includes omitting information about shipping, handling, or additional fees, potentially misleading buyers about the true overall cost. When these undisclosed costs arise after contract signing, buyers are obligated to pay them, despite having no initial awareness or control over them. Furthermore, suppliers might present false certifications, awards, or affiliations to inflate their reputation and impress buyers. Exploiting situations where buyers have urgent demands, suppliers might also leverage the situation to demand higher prices or more favorable contract terms. The following interview excerpts illustrate these types of ex-ante opportunistic behaviors:

“The supplier recognizes our situation and takes advantage of it by requesting microchips at rates far higher than the going rate. They contend that charging more is justified because they had to complete such a huge, urgent

request quickly. In order to reach their product launch schedule, my company grudgingly agrees to the higher

pricing out of fear of delays or production stoppages.” (Interviewee #23)

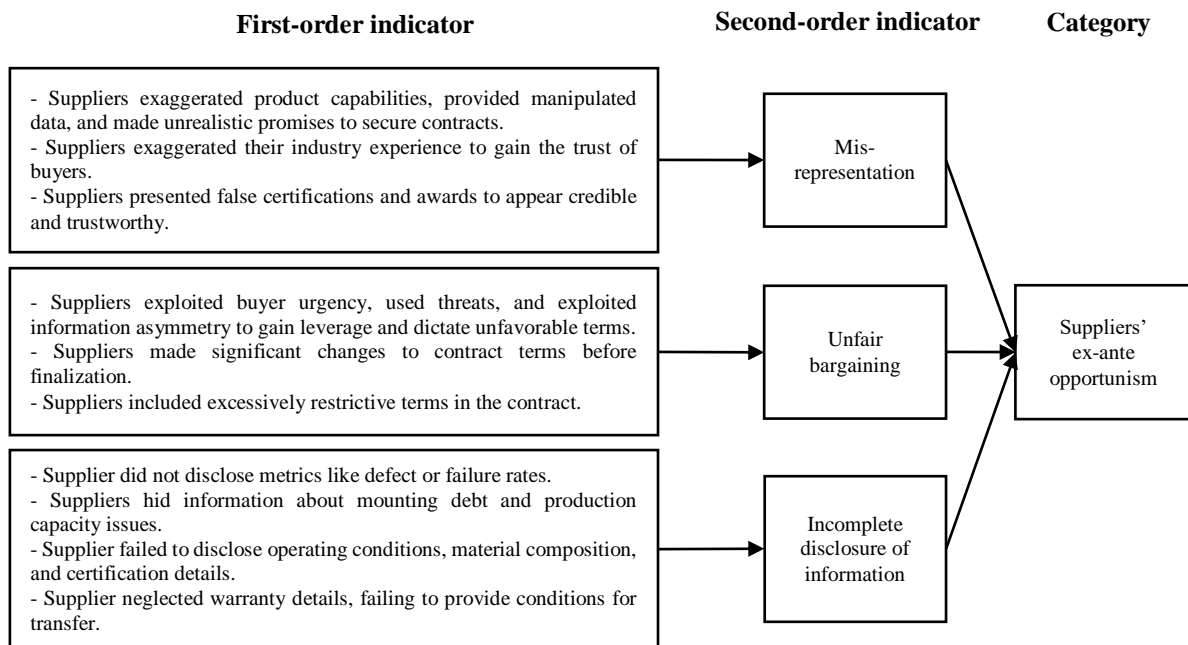


Figure 5 First and second order of suppliers' ex-ante opportunism

“The supplier abuses its position of authority to set terms and place extra requirements on us, such long payment terms and minimum order quantities. In an attempt to achieve their product launch schedule, we feel pressured and unwillingly accept these disadvantageous terms.” (Interviewee #17)

4.5 The Evolution of Trust and Its Impact on Ex-Post Opportunism

While trust in the initial stage of a buyer-supplier relationship is often based on empirical evidence and rational assessment, it evolves in the mature stage to incorporate emotional connections and personal experiences. Positive interactions between buyers and suppliers naturally foster emotional bonds and strengthen the relationship. Trust, therefore, is not solely a product of objective analysis; buyers also rely on their feelings and intuition. This suggests that trust is a multifaceted process, beginning with empirical evidence and rational assessment and then evolving to encompass emotional and interpersonal dimensions. Both rational and emotional trust contribute to mitigating the risk of opportunistic behavior after contract signing. The following interview excerpts illustrate this phenomenon:

“Our vendors acted quickly and efficiently during a crucial situation where my organization was facing a serious cybersecurity threat, averting a possible data leak. Their committed staff put in endless effort to find a solution, and they gave us the advice and assistance we needed to improve their cybersecurity protocols. Our intimate encounter with them during a trying period forged a deep emotional bond between us. In addition to having faith in the supplier's technical proficiency, my organization was also moved by the supplier's commitment to duty during a time of need. (Interviewee # 18)

From a process view, trust is dynamic and evolves throughout a buyer-supplier relationship (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Mayer *et al.*, 1995). While initial trust may be based on

empirical evidence and rational assessment, it can deepen in the mature stage through emotional connections and personal experiences. Positive initial interactions create a foundation for ongoing trust, as individuals tend to place greater confidence in the personal traits, characteristics, and competencies of those they perceive favorably (Dowell *et al.*, 2015). Positive emotions foster openness, cooperation, and a willingness to overlook minor uncertainties (Jones and George, 1998).

As individuals interact and accumulate positive experiences, they gather further evidence of their partner's competence, reliability, and consistency, reinforcing their trust (Akrouf and Diallo, 2017). Emotional bonds can also increase willingness to take calculated risks, leading to greater engagement and deeper interactions (Gundlach and Cannon, 2010). Furthermore, emotional connections often improve communication and information sharing (Kim and Lee, 2024; Lee and Kim, 2023). This enhanced communication provides additional information and reinforce cognitive trust through informed judgments (Jap and Anderson, 2007).

Therefore, the first proposition is formulated as follows:

P1. The degree of trust based on empirical evidence and rational assessment in the initial stage increases the degree of trust based on emotional connections and personal experiences in matured stage.

Social exchange theory suggests that trust built on emotional connections and personal experiences fosters reliability, empathy, shared values, and a commitment to relationship building (Rehman *et al.*, 2024). These factors contribute to reducing opportunistic behaviors in buyer-supplier relationships and promote a healthy, sustainable partnership (Heide and John, 1992). When trust develops through emotional bonds, both buyer and supplier are more likely to consistently fulfill their commitments and demonstrate a deeper understanding of each other's

perspectives, challenges, and constraints. This understanding, coupled with a history of reliable behavior, reduces the likelihood of opportunistic actions that could harm the relationship (Dowell *et al.*, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2009). The established trust acts as a deterrent, as suppliers recognize the importance of maintaining trust for long-term business relationships and reputation (Gligor and Autry, 2012; Lee and Ha, 2024). Engaging in unethical behavior risks damaging this hard-earned trust (Rehman *et al.*, 2023), potentially leading to the loss of future business opportunities (McCarter and Northcraft, 2007).

Furthermore, emotional connections often stem from shared values and goals. When buyer and the supplier are aligned in their vision, mission, and ethical principles, they are less likely to engage in opportunistic behaviors that contradict these shared values (Huo *et al.*, 2015).

Thus, the second proposition is formulated as follows:

P2. Trust based on emotional connections and personal experiences in matured stage decreases ex-post opportunism.

Integrating the previous two propositions suggests that trust in the mature stage mediates the relationship between initial trust and supplier agent ex-post opportunism. Specifically, the empirical trust a buyer places in a supplier can indirectly influence opportunistic behavior through the pathway of emotional trust. Empirical trust shapes the buyer's initial perception of the supplier, influencing how their actions are interpreted. This interpretation, when solidified as emotional trust, decreases the likelihood of opportunistic behavior. Thus, empirical trust establishes the foundation for emotional trust, which in turn fosters ethical and reliable behavior. In essence, the progression from empirical to emotional trust creates a chain reaction that reduces the likelihood of ex-post opportunism, such as misrepresentation, dishonesty, or deception.

Thus, the third proposition is formulated as follows:

P3. Trust based on empirical evidence and rational assessment in initial stage has a negative indirect impact on ex-post opportunism through trust based on emotional connections and personal experiences in matured stage.

4.6 The Moderating Role of Ex-Ante Opportunism

Interviewees revealed situations where they initially perceived supplier agents as trustworthy, but consequently discovered opportunistic behaviors before a formal contract was signed. This discovery significantly diminished the buyers' trust in those suppliers.

"I've known my counterpart for years, and we've bonded deeply emotionally by discussing our personal experiences. Because we cherish their friendship and don't want to damage it, this emotional connection reduces our propensity to participate in opportunistic actions, such as hiding financial information or taking advantage of one another. Mutual respect and consideration are the cornerstones of our trust, discouraging opportunism." (Interviewee #23)

"Prior to starting the relationship, we also perform extensive due diligence. We examine each other's prior performance, company strategies, and financial records. This scientific data and logical analysis offer a reliable foundation for confidence. Our peers are less inclined to act in an opportunistic manner toward us because we have

independently confirmed each other's legitimacy and expertise." (Interviewee #25)

"For years, I have been purchasing electronic components from this company. This supplier seems dependable and trustworthy to me. But what I did not know at first is that some of the supplier's agents acted opportunistically when we first started working together. They purposefully delayed deliveries, exaggerated their pricing, and used inferior parts while passing them off as superior. After a few years of productive working together, the supplier's internal inquiry reveals the previous opportunistic behavior of some of its employees, and they choose to share this knowledge with us. Our emotional fulfillment and bond with the supplier decline as a result of our feeling deceived and disappointed by the supply." (Interviewee #22)

Contingency theory suggests that supplier behavior in business exchanges is influenced by various contingent factors (North, 1990; Scott, 1995). These factors do not operate in isolation, but interact to shape supplier behavior. According to Granovetter (1985), the factors can be categorized as direct and indirect. Among the direct factors, trust has been extensively studied, with research indicating its complex role in both mitigating and exacerbating opportunistic behavior (Brass *et al.*, 1998; Molina-Morales *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, current research has focused on the boundary conditions of trust, exploring when, where, how trust can effectively suppress opportunism (Mangus *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2016). This study contributes to this research trend by examining supplier *ex-ante* opportunism as a boundary condition of trust.

Ex-ante opportunism, as previously defined, involves opportunistic behaviors by supplier agents before contract signing (Jap and Anderson, 2003). High levels of ex-ante opportunism can damage initial trust, as buyer agents become skeptical of the supplier's intentions due to observed deceptive behavior during negotiations. If a buyer initially perceives a supplier as trustworthy but later discovers opportunistic behavior, this discovery can lead to disappointment and a weakening of trust, particularly when the initial trust was high (Skinner *et al.*, 2014). This, in turn, influences how the buyer agent interprets the supplier's subsequent actions, hindering the development of emotional trust.

This negative moderating effect suggests that even if a buyer agent initially had a positive perception of a supplier agent based on personal experiences, the revelation of ex-ante opportunism diminishes the positive impact of those experiences (Schilke, 2014). The buyer agent becomes more skeptical and cautious, potentially leading to negative interpretations of future interactions. This skepticism erodes the emotional connection, thereby decreasing emotional trust. This complex interplay highlights the interconnectedness of opportunistic behavior and trust formation in business relationships, emphasizing on how negative experiences can shape perceptions and trust dynamics (Bachmann *et al.*, 2015).

Thus, the next proposition is formulated as follows:

P4. Supplier agent ex-ante opportunism moderates the positive relationship between buyer agent trust based on empirical evidence and rational assessment and trust based on emotional connections and personal experiences such that

the relationship becomes negative when supplier agent ex-ante opportunism is high.

P5. Supplier agent ex-ante opportunism moderates the negative indirect relationship between buyer agent trust based on empirical evidence and rational assessment and supplier agent ex-post opportunism such that the relationship becomes positive when supplier agent ex-ante opportunism is high.

Based on the data analysis described in the previous section, we demonstrate the relationships among the

emerging factors as described in a conceptual model (see **Figure 6**). In this model, we propose ex-post opportunism as a dependent factor, and ex-ante opportunism as a moderating factor. We capture the trust in the initial relationship stage as ‘trust based on empirical evidence and rational assessment’ – that is an independent factor, meanwhile the trust in the mature relationship stage as ‘trust based on emotional connections and personal experiences’ is a mediating factor.

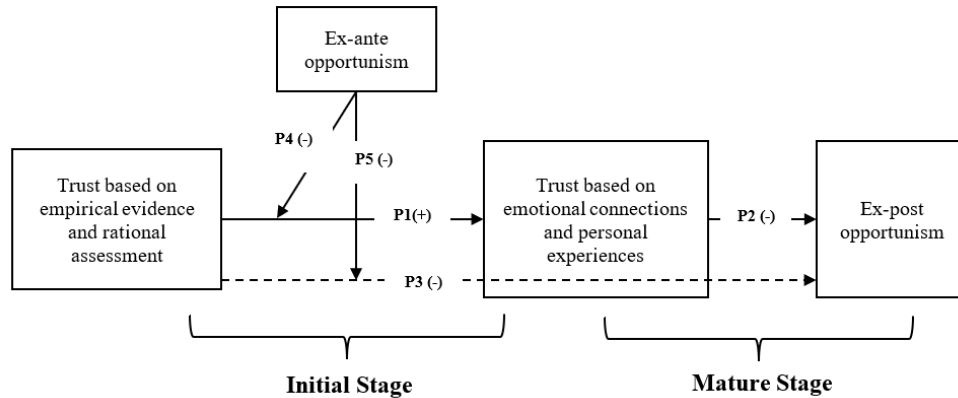


Figure 6 Conceptual model: Inter-relationship of trust and opportunism across the stages of supply chain relationships

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Theoretical Implications

While the impact of trust on opportunism in supply chain relationships is a widely researched, however, several critical gaps remain. These include: (1) a lack of empirical investigation at the individual level (Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Hawkins *et al.*, 2012, 2012; Tangpong *et al.*, 2010); (2) limited understanding of the evolution of trust and its constituent elements (Akrouit and Diallo, 2017; Dowell *et al.*, 2015); (3) an overlooked process view of the relationship between trust and opportunism (Blome *et al.*, 2023; Pham *et al.*, 2022). This study addresses these gaps and makes three main contributions to transaction cost economics and related theories in supply chain relationship management.

First, this study examines individual opportunism in business exchanges, an area largely understudied in previous research (Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Hawkins *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Tangpong *et al.*, 2010). Recent research on individual opportunism has highlighted the role of purchasing agents as representatives of buying firms in transactions with suppliers. The relationship between purchasing agents and suppliers is crucial for sustaining inter-organizational relationships (Hawkins *et al.*, 2013; Pham *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, supplier agents are often the source of opportunistic behaviors, and purchasing agents play a key role in anticipating, detecting, and controlling such behaviors (Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Pham *et al.*, 2022). This study contributes to this literature by investigating how purchasing agents can build and leverage trust to manage supplier opportunism.

Second, this research contributes to the growing literature on process view of trust by examining its development and the factors that contribute to trust building

in different relationship stages. Previous research in operations and supply chain management has often treated trust as a static concept, overlooking its dynamic and evolving nature (Huang and Wilkinson, 2013). Consequently, how trust changes and the elements that constitute trust during different stages of relationship development remain under-researched (Akrouit and Diallo, 2017). This research addresses this gap by demonstrating that, in the initial stage, trust is formed through objective assessments and observations of supplier benevolence, honesty, and competence. In the mature stage, trust is further developed and reinforced through emotional connection, specifically feelings of safety and attachment. Moreover, this study highlights how early-stage trust serves as a foundation for developing and maintaining trust in later stages.

Third, by explaining the casual relationships among evolving trust, ex-ante opportunism, and ex-post opportunism, this study provides a deeper understanding of how trust building can mitigate opportunism throughout a buyer-supplier relationship. Buyer-supplier relationships evolve over time, becoming more or less cooperative, and trust, likewise, is dynamic can be nurtured or destroyed (Dyer and Chu, 2011; Jones and George, 1998). By considering the dynamic unfolding of interaction between trust and opportunism, this study clarifies how, why and when trust reduces or increases opportunistic behaviors, thereby addressing existing controversies regarding the role of trust in controlling opportunism.

5.2 Practical Implications

A process view of trust suggests that trust evolves alongside buyer-supplier relationships. The conceptual model depicted in **Figure 6** offers several implications for managers and consultants involved in supply chain management, particularly those focused on buyer-supplier relationships. These implications include: (1) awareness of

individual agent opportunism; (2) strategies for developing trust over time; and (3) understanding the causal mechanisms between trust and opportunism throughout relationship lifecycle.

First, purchasing and supply chain managers should consider key personnel, such as purchasing agents and supplier agents, who directly engage in managing buyer–supplier exchanges and be able to mitigate the opportunistic behaviors of their counterparts. In many cases, opportunistic behavior is perpetrated by these individuals rather than their organizations. These individual agents are uniquely positioned to identify, mitigate, and control opportunistic behaviors. Therefore, ignoring factors from initial level opportunism prevents managers from fully understanding and addressing the problem, as consequence, leading to the oversight of critical causes.

Opportunistic behavior can manifest both *before* and *after* contract signing. Before signing, during the initial discussions in particular, suppliers may hide relevant information about products and production processes, falsify documents or data to mislead about their production capacity, or exploit buyers' urgent needs in negotiations to secure terms that benefit only the suppliers. After contract signing, suppliers might intentionally violate contract terms to protect their interests without considering the consequences for buyers or refuse and ignore buyers' requests to adjust the contract to meet changing business conditions.

Second, the conceptual model suggests that building trust with business partners requires demonstrating *benevolence*, *honesty*, and *competence* from the outset. Benevolence can be demonstrated through empathy, understanding, and support. This might include a willingness to renegotiate contract terms in the events of unexpected problems, promptly addressing buyer concerns, and actively collaborating to achieve common goals. Honesty is reflected in transparent and straightforward communication. This includes clear communication about production costs and pricing, proactively addressing errors, and providing accurate information about products and services.

Once initial trust is established, managers and agents should focus on fostering a sense of security and emotional connection to further cultivate trust. Buyers feel secure when they perceive suppliers as transparently and consistent, particularly regarding information security and data protection, and adherence to quality standards. In the meantime, emotional connections are fostered when both parties share a vision and long-term goals, especially when suppliers support buyers during crises. Importantly, trust built in the early stages creates a strong foundation for subsequent relationship stages.

Third, trust in both the initial and mature stages have a positive effect on reducing ex-post opportunism. In the early stages of a business relationship, trust is built through interactions and practical experiences between buyers and suppliers. In the later stages, trust is further strengthened by emotional connections, shared values, and mutual goals. Trust at any stage in a business relationship helps both parties strengthen their relationship, promoting comprehensive and long-term sustainable cooperation. Both sides understand the importance of working towards common goals rather than pursuing their own interests at the expense of their partner.

Furthermore, the findings of this study show that suppliers' opportunistic behaviors before the signing of official contracts (*ex-ante* opportunism) play a crucial role in facilitating and sustaining long-term business relationships. If buyers discover that a supplier has committed opportunistic acts such as deception, fraud, hiding information, or providing inaccuracies about products, the more trust the buyers had in the supplier, the greater their disappointment and anger will be. Trust will diminish rapidly, severely damaging the business relationship. Buyers will feel betrayed and perceive their trust has been exploited. Lessons for purchasing managers, purchasing agents, and those involved in B2B transactions with suppliers are as follows: (1) suppliers can exhibit opportunistic behaviors at any time, even before signing an official contract, so buyers must remain vigilant; (2) If a buyer discovers that a supplier engaged in opportunistic behavior from the beginning, the buyer should calmly and objectively evaluate the supplier's honesty and integrity throughout the entire process. This will help the buyer devise suitable solutions to avoid past incidents that could seriously affect current trust and the ability to maintain long-term relationships.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although there are significant theoretical contributions as well as providing lessons for practices, this remains three limitations. First, the conceptual model and propositions are developed from exploratory research interview with 25 informants, so the generalizability of data might be limited, so next research will test the propositions by survey data to confirm the causality relationship in a large population. Second, trust and opportunism might also be influenced by industry characteristics and country culture that could have significant contribution to the evolution of trust and perception about opportunism, but that has not been investigated in this study yet. The future research should further investigate the current research findings by exploring such variables and its impacts. Third, time dimension of trust and the interplay between the evolution of trust and *ex-ante* opportunism, *ex-post* opportunism can be studied more fully by experimental and longitudinal studies, as these methods can allow researchers to observe and track changes in human psychology and behavior, thereby providing more complete knowledge and evidence about the process of forming trust in business relationships, as well as managing coordinate and use trust effectively in controlling opportunistic behavior. Therefore, future studies can further clarify and expand the research results in this study by applying experimental and longitudinal methodology.

5.4 Conclusion

This study responses to the call for further research on the roles of individual agents in managing supply chain relationships (Gelderman *et al.*, 2020; Hawkins *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Pham *et al.*, 2024; Tangpong *et al.*, 2010). Recent empirical studies have documented the mixed findings which pose unequivocal conclusions on the role of trusts in mitigating opportunistic behaviors in supply chain relationships (Crosno *et al.*, 2013; Molina-Morales *et al.*, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2021).

This study makes significant contributions to our understanding of trust and opportunism in buyer-supplier

relationships. Specifically, we find that trust is a dynamic process that evolves throughout the relationship lifecycle. In the initial stage, trust is primarily based on rational assessments of the supplier's benevolence, honesty, and competence. However, as the relationship matures, emotional connections, characterized by feelings of safety and attachment, become increasingly important.

Importantly, we demonstrate that early-stage trust serves as a crucial foundation for the development of mature-stage trust, which in turn mitigates the risk of opportunistic behavior. This finding highlights the importance of nurturing trust from the outset of a buyer-supplier relationship. Furthermore, by examining opportunism at the individual level, this study provides valuable insights into the role of purchasing agents in managing supplier opportunism.

Finally, this paper enhances our understanding of the dynamic interplay between trust and opportunism across different stages of buyer-supplier relationships, thereby contributing to transaction cost economics, social exchange theory, and the broader supply chain relationship literature (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Williamson, 1985).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments, which significantly improved the quality of this manuscript. We also thank the informants for their time and willingness to share their valuable experiences and insights. This research is funded by VNU International School, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL EXTRACT

Part 1 General information

1.1 Company Background

- What is your company name?

- What are the main products/services/markets of your company?
- What are your company’s strategies in selecting and cooperating with a supplier?

1.2 Interviewee’s Background

- What is your job title?
- How long have you been in the current company and in this position?
- How long have you worked in the sales and purchasing section?
- What are your duties when working with a supplier?

Part 2 Buyer-supplier relationship

The following questions are about the biggest supplier you have been working with recently.

2 Relationship with the biggest supplier

2.1 Relationship with biggest supplier

- How long has your company worked with the biggest supplier?
- What type of cooperation exists between your company and the biggest supplier?
- How is the biggest supplier important to your company?
- How does your company manage the relationship and business transactions with supplier the biggest supplier?

2.2 Trust evolution and opportunistic behaviors

- Regarding your relationship with the supplier agent, are there any conflicts or disagreements?
- How would you describe your relationship with the supplier agent?
- Please recall the beginning of time when you worked with the supplier agent, how did you feel about he/she? Was he/she trustworthy person?
- How do you feel about he/she recently? Is he/she still trustworthy person? If not, please explain why?
- Has the supplier agent shown opportunistic behaviors such as lying, cheating, hiding information, and misleading when working with you? If yes,
- Why do you think they have an opportunity or what kind of conditions can enable them to engage in such behaviors?
- How would you deal with it?
- How would your company support you in preventing and dealing with supplier agents’ opportunistic behaviors?
- To prevent supplier agents’ opportunistic behaviors, what are the important factors that you think yourself and your company need to consider?
- How would you maintain and sustain the business relationship with the supplier agent after they behave opportunistically while working with you?
- If supplier agent had such opportunistic behaviors in initial relationship stage (before formal contract signed), how did you continue relationship with them?

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEWEE PROFILES

Interviewee No.	Position	Industry	Nationality	Experience (in yrs.)	Interview duration (hrs. min)
1	Purchasing Manager	Groceries retail	Japanese	15 yrs.	1hr. 15min
2	Purchasing Support Supervisor	Mom and baby products	Vietnamese	14 yrs.	2hr.
3	Sales Account Manager	Electronic appliances	Japanese	12 yrs.	1.5hr.
4	Purchasing Representative and Manager	Textile and apparels	Vietnamese	12 yrs.	1hr. 15min
5	Human Resource Manager	Food processing	Japanese	10 yrs.	3.5hr.
6	Sales Representative	Electronic appliances	Japanese	10 yrs.	1hr.
7	General Sales Manager	Machinery	Vietnamese	8 yrs.	1hr.
8	Purchasing Strategy Manager	Machinery	Japanese	8 yrs.	3hr
9	Assistant Sales Manager	Electronic appliances	Japanese	7.5 yrs.	1hr.
10	Brand Manager	Food processing	Vietnamese	7 yrs.	2.5hr.
11	Product Development Manager	Food processing	Japanese	7 yrs.	1hr.
12	Purchasing Assistant Manager	Rubber products	Vietnamese	7 yrs.	1hr.
13	Purchasing Employee	Groceries retail	Vietnamese	6 yrs.	1.5hr.
14	Assistant General Manager	Groceries retail	Vietnamese	6 yrs.	3.5hr.
15	Sales Planning General Manager	Food processing	Vietnamese	6 yrs.	1hr. 50min
16	Sales Admin Executives	Textile and apparels	Vietnamese	5 yrs.	2hr.
17	Sales Representative	Chemicals	Vietnamese	5 yrs.	1hr 20min

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEWEE PROFILES (CONT'D)

Interviewee No.	Position	Industry	Nationality	Experience (in yrs.)	Interview duration (hrs. min)
18	Purchasing Planning Manager	Pulp and paper	Vietnamese	5 yrs.	1hr. 45min
19	Store Manager	Wholesales	Vietnamese	5 yrs.	1hr.
20	Category Manager	Wholesales	Vietnamese	4.5 yrs.	1.5hr.
21	Purchasing Manager	Food processing	Vietnamese	4 yrs.	2hr. 10min
22	Sales Categories Manager	Electronic appliances	Japanese	4 yrs.	1hr. 15min
23	Store Manager	Groceries retail	Vietnamese	3.5 yrs.	1hr.
24	Sales Floor Manager	Groceries retail	Japanese	3 yrs.	1hr.
25	General Sales Manager	Groceries retail	Vietnamese	3 yrs.	2.5hr.

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