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THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
IN SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRATION

A THESIS BY PUBLICATIONS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
LOGISTICS AND SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT
MASSEY UNIVERSITY, ALBANY, NEW ZEALAND

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May 2018
Abstract

Purpose – This research aims to explore the role of inter-personal relationships within a supply chain integration context. Firstly, it proposes a conceptual model addressing the inter-relationships between interpersonal relationships, inter-organizational relationships, and supply chain integration. Secondly, it investigates the influence of interpersonal relationships on supply chain integration. Lastly, it examines how interpersonal relationships influence inter-organizational relationships to enable supply chain integration.

Methodology/approach – Based on a comprehensive literature review, the study first proposes a series of propositions and establishes a conceptual framework to illustrate the relationship between interpersonal relationships, inter-organizational relationships, and supply chain integration. Then, the study applies an exploratory/investigational approach of multiple case studies and empirically examines how interpersonal relationships affect inter-organizational relationships and supply chain integration.

Findings – The study proposes that interpersonal relationships can indirectly and positively influence supply chain integration, mediated by inter-organizational relationships. Personal affection acts as a relationship initiator, and personal credibility serves as a gatekeeper while personal communication works as a facilitator and plays more important roles than personal affection and credibility. Also, interpersonal relationships can initiate and enhance inter-organizational relationships to enable supply chain integration. In the formative stage of supply chain integration, personal affection and credibility play key roles, whereas personal communication becomes more significant during the operational stage.

Originality/value – The study advances supply chain integration literature by extending the focus from that of firm level to the level of individuals, and introduces interpersonal
relationship dimensions to explore inner mechanisms of supply chain integration. It demonstrates that interpersonal relationships are able to initiate and motivate firm level integration, which modifies the presumption that firm level relationships are predominantly established first in Western cultural contexts. It also sheds light on applying theoretical lenses in supply chain integration. It extends social exchange theory from relationships between parties that are on the same level to different levels of interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships. Meanwhile, it applies resource dependency theory by addressing how interpersonal relationships influence dependence levels on supply chain partners to form firm level relationships. Furthermore, it extends resource orchestration theory by suggesting that inter-organizational relationships and interpersonal relationships can be orchestrated to achieve supply chain integration capabilities.

Implications – The study provides insights for practitioners who have limited “hard” firm level resources. Managers should be aware of the significance and characteristics of interpersonal relationships, and decide when and how to deploy both interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships as resources during the integration process. In the formative stage, managers should utilise boundary spanners with good personal credibility. More physical contact with counter-partners should be encouraged to foster personal affection, thus initiating the formation of inter-organizational relationships. In the operational stage, personal communication should be strengthened to facilitate the supply chain integration process. On the other hand, managers should mitigate the conflict between primary business interests and subordinate interpersonal friendships.
Author’s Declaration

This thesis was produced according to Massey University’s “PhD thesis by publication” requirements: it is based on research that has either been published, in revision following reviewers’ comments, in review, or in preparation to be submitted. Each individual chapter is set out according to the stylistic requirements of the journal to which it has been submitted. Consequently, some of the submitted chapters are relatively succinct, there is some repetition (particularly in the literature review and methods sections) and there are small stylistic differences between chapters.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my principal supervisor, Professor Paul Childerhouse. It has been an honour to be his PhD student as well as his colleague. He has shared with me the philosophy of life-learning, both consciously and unconsciously. I appreciate the time, ideas, and support he has contributed to make my PhD experience productive and stimulating. I also want to thank my co-supervisor, Dr. Yuanfei Kang. Because of our similar cultural backgrounds and convenient geographic proximity, I have kept a seamless discussion with Dr. Kang on all kinds of issues including the research topic, interview questions, data collection, analysis and manuscript writing and revisions. The joy and enthusiasm both supervisors have for their research was contagious and motivational for me, even during tough times in the PhD pursuit. I am also thankful for the excellent example both supervisors have provided as successful researchers. Because I am pursuing my PhD by publication (rather than PhD by monography), I have experienced dark moments in which my manuscript submissions were rejected or which required numerous major revisions. I am grateful to both supervisors for their guidance, encouragement, and support in the whole process.

Also, I want to express my appreciation to my team, IMI cluster members, especially the Director, Professor Nigel Grigg, for his strong support on my PhD confirmation and completion, Dr. Sanjay Mathrani for his advice in the very beginning of the project, Mr. Alan Win and Mr. Jersey Seipel for their support on the interview issues.

My thanks also go to Professor Baofeng Huo from Zhejiang University, Professor Dong Yang from Donghua University, and Dr. Jack Gong from the University of Southampton for giving me valuable suggestions and spiritual support.
My time undertaking a PhD was made enjoyable as a result of the philosophy that one is “never too old to learn”. I had previously started my PhD studies during 2000-2003 but I suspended because I immigrated to Auckland. After five years physical, nightshift labouring work in the new country, I returned to academic area. Again, I restarted my PhD in my late 40s and felt a little embarrassed from the viewpoint of my culture. But recently a popular short verse (author unknown) in social media has comforted me (with minor adaptions by me):

“Harvard is three hours ahead of Stanford, but that doesn’t make Stanford slow.
Someone became a leader at 25 while another being 50 became a CEO.
Obama retired at 55, but Trump became President when he was 70-year-old.
Yes, everyone in this world works based on his own time zone.”

So, I am happy to accept my late coming “time zone”.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for all their love and encouragement. For my illiterate (even in Chinese) parents, Fuying Xia (mum), and Jianhua Wang (dad) in China who always urged me to pursue further study (sadly my mum passed away in 2008). I am also grateful for the support from my parents-in-law, Jinju Lin and Quanyun Fang. And for the understanding of my elder son, George (in Harvard College), and younger son, Albert (in Takapuna Normal Intermediate School), during their formative years. And most of all for my loving, supportive, encouraging, and patient wife Maggie whose faithful support during the all stages of this PhD is so appreciated and valued. Yes, love from family is always the most in our life.

Bill Wang
Massey University
October 2018
Funding and Support

I gratefully acknowledge

- School of Engineering and Advanced Technology, Massey University to exempt me from all charges for my PhD study as a Massey University staff.
- Graduate Research School for its Massey University Conference Presentation Grant’s for 2017.
- National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 71372058; No. 71525005)
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... I  
Author’s Declaration ................................................................................................. III  
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................... IV  
Funding and Support ................................................................................................. VI  
List of Tables ............................................................................................................... X  
List of Figures .............................................................................................................. XI  
Abbreviations and Terms ........................................................................................... XII  

## Chapter 1. Introduction ......................................................................................... 1  
1.1 Research gaps and research topics ................................................................. 1  
1.2 Key concepts and research questions ............................................................. 3  
1.2.1 Supply chain integration (SCI) ................................................................. 3  
1.2.2 Inter-organizational relationships (IORs) .................................................. 6  
1.2.3 Interpersonal relationships (IPRs) ........................................................... 7  
1.2.4 Research objectives and goals ............................................................... 9  
1.3 Research methodology overview ................................................................... 12  
1.3.1 Justification of qualitative multiple case study approach ......................... 12  
1.3.2 Case and data selection, validity, and analysis ......................................... 17  
1.4 Structure of the thesis .................................................................................... 19  
1.5 Additional associated journal publications .................................................. 29  
1.6 Appendix .......................................................................................................... 31  

## Chapter 2. Enablers of supply chain integration: interpersonal and inter-organizational perspectives 32  
Abstract .................................................................................................................... 32  
2.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................... 33  
2.2 Theoretical foundation and construct development ........................................ 36  
2.2.1 SCI .......................................................................................................... 36  
2.2.2 Theoretical approaches to SCI ................................................................. 38  
2.2.3 IPRs ......................................................................................................... 40  
2.3 Research propositions ..................................................................................... 42  
2.3.1 IPRs and SCI ........................................................................................... 42  
2.3.2 The mediating role of trust ...................................................................... 44  
2.3.3 The mediating role of commitment .......................................................... 46  
2.3.4 The mediating role of power .................................................................... 48
Chapter 3. Service Supply Chain Integration: The Role of Interpersonal Relationships ................................. 54

Abstract .............................................................................................................. 54

3.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 56
3.2 Theoretical background ............................................................................... 59
  3.2.1 Service supply chain integration (SSCI) .................................................. 59
  3.2.2 Interpersonal relationships (IPRs) .......................................................... 61
  3.2.3 Resource orchestration theory (ROT) ....................................................... 63
3.3 Research method .......................................................................................... 65
  3.3.1 Case selection ......................................................................................... 65
  3.3.2 Data collection ......................................................................................... 68
  3.3.4 Data analysis ........................................................................................... 70
3.4 Analysis and discussion ............................................................................... 72
  3.4.1 Case findings .......................................................................................... 72
3.5 Conclusions and implications .................................................................. 86
  3.5.1 Theoretical and practical implications ..................................................... 86
  3.5.2 Limitations and future research ............................................................... 88

Chapter 4. Inter-personal and inter-organizational relationship drivers of supply chain integration ... 90

Abstract .............................................................................................................. 90

4.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 91
4.2 Literature review ......................................................................................... 94
  4.2.1 Theoretical foundation ......................................................................... 94
  4.2.2 Supply chain integration and inter-organizational relationships ............ 95
  4.2.3 Inter-personal relationships .................................................................. 98
4.3 Methodology ............................................................................................... 99
  4.3.1 Case study approach and sampling ......................................................... 99
  4.3.2 Data collection ....................................................................................... 102
  4.3.3 Data coding and data analysis ............................................................... 104
4.4 Findings ...................................................................................................... 105
  4.4.1 Overall influence of IPRs on IORs at different stages ............................ 105
  4.4.2 Influence of three IPR dimensions on IORs and SCI at different stages .... 110
  4.4.3 The role of the three IPR dimensions on three IOR factors .................... 113
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Discussion</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.1 Role of IPRs in initiating IORs</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.2 Role of the three IPR dimensions on IORs across different SCI stages</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Conclusions</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1 Managerial implications</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2 Limitations and future research</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. Conclusion</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Research findings</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Theoretical implications</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Managerial implications</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Limitations and future research</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Protocol</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements of contribution to doctoral thesis containing publications</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

**TABLE 1** COMPARISON OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ............................................ 16

**TABLE 2** CASE COMPANY PROFILES ........................................................................................................... 67

**TABLE 3** INTERVIEW DATA SOURCES ............................................................................................................. 69

**TABLE 4** VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY TESTS ................................................................................................. 70

**TABLE 5** THREE DIMENSIONS OF IPRs ........................................................................................................ 72

**TABLE 6** SERVICE SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRATION BETWEEN SUPPLY CHAIN PARTNERS ............... 76

**TABLE 7** LEVELS OF IPR INFLUENCE ON SCI ............................................................................................ 77

**TABLE 8** SUMMARY OF THE INFLUENCE OF IPRs ON SCI ................................................................. 78

**TABLE 9** NUMERAL SUMMARY OF THE INFLUENCE OF IPRs ON SCI .................................................... 78

**TABLE 10** ROLE OF TRUST, COMMITMENT, AND POWER ON SCI .......................................................... 97

**TABLE 11** LITERATURE REVIEW ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS (IPRs) .................................... 99

**TABLE 12** PROFILES OF CASE COMPANIES ............................................................................................... 104

**TABLE 13** SALIENT RESPONDENT QUOTATIONS RELATING TO THE IMPORTANCE OF IPRs ON IORS 108

**TABLE 14** SALIENT RESPONDENT QUOTATIONS RELATING TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IPRs ON DFERENT STAGE OF IORS ........................................................................................................... 111

**TABLE 15** SALIENT RESPONDENT QUOTATIONS RELATING TO THE INFLUENCE OF IPRs ON IORS... 114

**TABLE 16** RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION SUMMARY ......................................................................................... 133
List of Figures

FIGURE 1 SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRATION (INTERNAL INTEGRATION AND EXTERNAL (SUPPLIER/CUSTOMER) INTEGRATION ................................................................. 4
FIGURE 2 IPRs-IO Rs-SCI SYSTEM ........................................................................... 10
FIGURE 3 IPRs-IO Rs-SCI RESEARCH FRAMEWORK ............................................. 11
FIGURE 4 SOCIOLOGICAL PARADIGM .................................................................... 14
FIGURE 5 LINK S BETWEEN CHAPTER 2 AND IPRs-IO Rs-SCI RELATIONSHIPS .......... 21
FIGURE 6 LINK S BETWEEN CHAPTER 3, RQ1, RESEARCH METHOD, AND DATA ........ 24
FIGURE 7 LINK S BETWEEN CHAPTER 4, RQ2, RESEARCH METHOD, AND DATA ........ 27
FIGURE 8 SCREENSHOT OF INDUSTRIAL MANAGEMENT AND DATA SYSTEMS .......... 29
FIGURE 9 LINK S BETWEEN IPRs, IO Rs, AND SCI .................................................. 36
FIGURE 10 THE ROLE OF IPRs AND IO Rs ON SCI ................................................. 50
FIGURE 11 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF IPRs AND SSCI ............................................ 64
FIGURE 12 INFLUENCE OF IPRs ON SSCI .............................................................. 85
FIGURE 13 PERSONAL AFFECTION, CREDIBILITY, AND COMMUNICATION IN SCI PROCESS .......... 120
FIGURE 14 RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS ON IPRs-IO Rs-SCI RELATIONSHIP ............. 124
FIGURE 15 RESEARCH FINDINGS ON IPRs-SCI RELATIONSHIP ................................ 126
FIGURE 16 RESEARCH FINDINGS ON IPRs-IO Rs RELATIONSHIP ............................. 128
## Abbreviations and Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABDC</td>
<td>Australian Business Dean Council</td>
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<td>ABS</td>
<td>Association of Business Schools</td>
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<td>C+F</td>
<td>Contract farmers</td>
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<td>EI</td>
<td>External integration</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
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<td>INGOs</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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