

Building an energizing customer bond model in the consumer goods industry: the evidence of sales force-retailer relations in Indonesia

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Abstract. *This study aims to develop a conceptual framework that describes efforts to improve sales force performance using a relevant theoretical approach. The novelty of this study was developed and synthesized from relevant marketing theories. It is a conceptual model construction that proposes Energizing Customer Bond (ECB) as an intervening variable to address the research gap in explaining the influence of relational capital on the performance of salespeople at consumer goods companies. This study involved salespeople at large-scale fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies in Indonesia. The acceptance of all of the hypotheses proposed in this study shows the importance of relational capital, ECB, and value-based selling in driving the performance of the sales force. ECB, as a proposed novelty, is also proven as a mediating variable, thus clarifying the relationship between relational capitals in improving sales force performance.*

Keywords: relational capital, energizing customer bond, value-based selling, salesperson performance, business to business.

Please cite the article as follows: Saputra, M. H. and Ferdinand, A. T., (2023), "Building an energizing customer bond model in the consumer goods industry: the evidence of sales force-retailer relations in Indonesia", *Management & Marketing*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 192-213. DOI: 10.2478/mmcks-2023-0011.

Introduction

Strategic efforts to optimize business performance through the exploitation of relational capital are a current central issue in business management (Liao, Hu, & Ding, 2017). Relational capital is a concept in marketing management that has been continuously developed by academics and practitioners over the last decade to push companies to achieve customer value advantages (Landroquez, 2013), and simultaneously increases their competitive advantage (Wang, 2014). Relational capital is defined as a capital or resources of internal and external relations owned by a company that are handy for the company's

business development (Abiola & Emmanuel, 2013). This study focuses on the role of a company's relational capital in establishing business relationships with customers. Studies show that the advantages of relational capital are identified as a vital driver for income and viability of the company (Martini, Corvino, Doni, & Rigolini, 2016; Sussan, 2012).

This study is motivated by the inconsistencies in the results of empirical studies about the relationship between relational capital and the improvement of sales force performance. Several findings on relational capital show that it has a positive effect on sales force performance (Ambrose, et al., 2010; Blonska et al., 2013; Cabrilo and Dahms, 2018; Keillor, et al., 1999; Retnawati and Nuryakin, 2016), while other results do not support the notion (Behyan et al., 2011; Gonzales et al., 2014). Such gaps display unclarity and drives the need of a further study to explain the relationship between the variables of relational capital and sales force performance.

In addition to the result gaps, it is also found that the majority research on the effect of relational capital on sales force performance only focuses on passive relational capital, which is capital that arises as a result of a condition. Whereas, developing and strengthening relational capital cannot be done only by developing a brand or corporate image, but also by proactively developing a strategy to optimize the creation of shared value and build strong bonds with customers (Silvio, Antonio, Federica, & Alessandra, 2016). We believe that effective relational capital can potentially increase customer bond and sales force performance.

This study aims to develop a relatively new conceptual framework to address the research gaps. It clarifies the relationship of relational capital to sales force performance by approaching the Network Theory and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL). The two theories are viewed as relevant in explaining the basic reasons why various parties are willing to cooperate and collaborate with each other. Social network theory has several basic assumptions (Katz, Lazer, Arrow, & Contractor, 2004) as follow, the rational self-interest paradigm, the social exchange paradigm, and the the paradigm of mutual interests and collective action.

This study formulated a novelty and framework in the context of Business to Business (B2B). It is designed and developed to be applicable in the B2B context, namely between the sales force and customers (owners of non-network retail stores). B2B approach is used due to the understanding that the target of B2B itself is another company or entity, therefore, it will obtain greater benefits due to a greater quantity of product purchases and faster product turnover.

Our research develops and investigates a relatively new conceptual framework model to explain the effect of relational capital on sales force performance in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry. Such concept is called Energizing Customer Bond (ECB) that is also proposed as a solution to the research gap. ECB is derived from the strength of the customer bonds and the collaborative relationships. The ECB concept is interpreted as a strong partnership bond between the sales force and customers which will provide feasible supports and solutions to various business constraints, facilitate business transactions between partners, provide extra profits, and will enhance the customer value of each party in order to generate mutual empowerment for those involved in the consumer goods business. ECB is a concept at the individual level that describes the ability of sales force in FMCG companies to establish strong and sustainable relationships with their customers, namely retailers of FMCG products. The results of our study provide new

insights by deepening the values and basic assumptions of Network Theory and SDL, specifically on how to build an unwritten or informal (non-structural bonding) customer bond between business partner relationships.

FMCG companies are companies that produce goods for daily consumer needs with fast turnover, therefore, the interactions and transactions between the sales force and the customers (retailers) are frequent and intensive. The owners of non-network retail stores are generally unbound and are free to connect to any FMCG company, and thus the ECB concept is relevant and important for FMCG companies that strive for a competitive advantage. The intensity and typology of the relationship between the sales force of FMCG products and the retailers are distinctive and closely intertwined, which makes the sales force at FMCG companies relevant and representative as research subjects to prove the construction of the empirical model built in this study.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Importance of relational capital

Relational capital is built on the social capital literature at the corporate level (Krause, Handfield, and Tyler, 2007; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). Currently, the concept of social capital has been expanded and modified for use in terms of business relationships and has been defined as relational capital (Chang and Gotcher, 2007). Relational capital is a form of social capital that is embedded in business relationships (Kohtamäki, Partanen, and Möller, 2013).

Relational capital is a capital in the form of relationships between the company and its internal and external parties that enable the business to develop effectively (Abiola and Emmanuel, 2013). Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter (2000) explain that relational capital is formed through trust, respect, and friendship, by developing close interactions among partners. Furthermore, the company's relational capital is an important factor in building differentiation advantage through the existence of a close emotional bond between consumers and the company (Meyer, 1999). Relational capital is vital in ensuring a company's existence in the midst of increasingly fierce business competition.

This study focuses on the discussion of how relational capital construction improves sales force performance. Relational capital is identified by practitioners and academics as the main driver of company earnings (Martini et al., 2016; Sussan, 2012). Relational capital is an intangible asset formed by developing and maintaining high-quality relationships with organizations, individuals, and groups that affect business performance, including customers, suppliers, employees, governments, partners, and other stakeholders (Falcone & Castelfranchi, 2011).

Relational capital is beneficial to increase the sensitivity and reliability of a company to market dynamics. High knowledge and responsiveness to consumers and stakeholders are beneficial in fulfilling customers' desires (Fiona, 2012). Furthermore, in order to build a strong network, the company must have relational capital as a basic element in order to collaborate with other parties (Agostini, Anna, & Benedetta, 2017; Stovel & Bontis, 2002). Relational capital greatly affects the performance of individuals in carrying out their work.

Synthesis and conceptual mapping of novelty variables (ECB)

Networking and collaborating with various parties in a partnership is a central issue in business nowadays (Liao et al., 2017). Therefore, building sustainable relationships within a strong network is a fundamental requirement to optimize a company's performance (Ford

and Mouzas, 2013; Husain, Dayan, and Benedetto, 2016). In this regard, values from the Network Theory (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Katz et al., 2004) and Service Dominant Logic (SDL) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) are viewed as relevant in explaining business issues in this study. We propose that the value and synthesis of Network Theory and SDL can explain the basic reasons why various parties are willing to cooperate with each other in a business network. Such understanding is important due to the shift in the current relationship between companies and their customers from a transactional type of relationship to a collaborative one (Schoenherr, Power, Narasimhan, & Samson, 2012).

In building the new conceptual model, we conducted a logical and coherent study and synthesis of network theory and SDL. The substance and assumptions of the two theories were then derived from the middle-range theory, namely Network Society (Castells, 2011) and Value Co-creation (Restuccia, 2009). It is then further derived to an operational concept as Collaborative Partnership Network (Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2014), Customer Bonding (Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005; Yi, Yeo, Amenuvor, & Boateng, 2021), Customer Empowerment (O'Cass and Ngo, 2011), and Energizing Customer ((Zhang, (2018); Hu & Krishen (2019)). The following is a summary of the process of developing the novelty of the ECB variable.

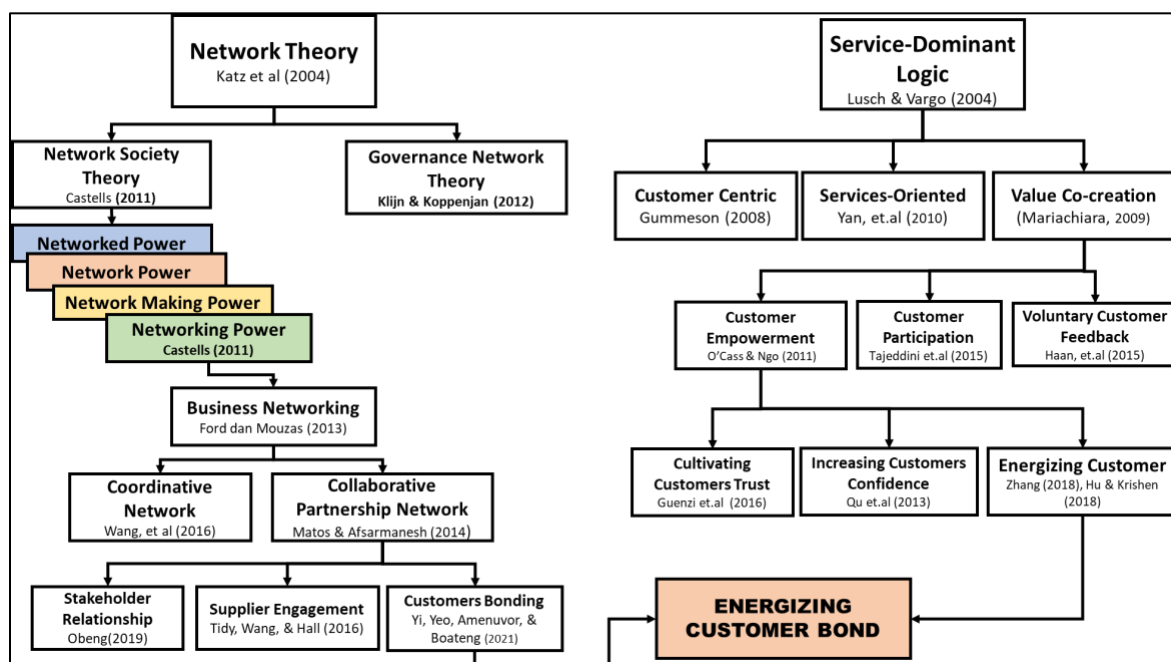


Figure 1. Novelty Concept Synthesis Process of Energizing Customer Bond

Source: Dissertation (Saputra, 2021).

As seen in figure 1, the ECB concept is developed from Network Theory and SDL theory. Network theory explains that a network is a group of actors and knots with a binding agreement that is in accordance with the mutually agreed-upon network model (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Such ties are connected to each other through a node, and form a path that indirectly connects to other nodes. The bonding pattern in the network will produce a certain structure (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Naturally, a person will interact more frequently with other people who share similar values and norms compared to those with

different views. Furthermore, Borgatti and Halgin saw that the interactions between individuals are influenced by the strength of the social relationship and the bonds between individuals and groups. Bonds in a network will create cohesion among group members who share the same values, norms, and goals. Furthermore, the article "A Network Theory of Power," Manuel Castells (2011) distinguishes four different dimensions of power in the network society: 1) Networking Power, defined as the power of actors and organizations involved in the networks that constitute the core of the global network society over human collectives and individuals who are not included in these global networks. 2) Network Power, defined as the power of the network structure itself, where power lies in the relative position of actors within the network. 3) Networked Power defined as the power that arises from interconnections between actors and organizations through networks, where power lies in the relationships between actors and organizations. 4) Network-making Power, defined as the power to create or change the network structure itself, where power lies in the ability to influence the formation or change of network structures.

SDL theory holds that every company that strives for a sustainable competitive advantage must have meta-competencies, such as adaptive competence, collaborative competence, and absorptive competence, to deal with a complex and dynamic business environment (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). SDL changes the paradigm that originally focused on tangible resources, into a dynamic implementation of intangible resources. The role of competence in the form of human resources with knowledge and expertise is considered to be more dominant than that of tangible assets (Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien, 2007).

Several approaches from a business network perspective can be used to explain why people create, maintain, disconnect, and even re-establish broken relationships. Such approaches are explained by various experts (Katz et al., 2004) using the assumptions in the network. First, scientists assume that people form a group and dyadic bonds to maximize their personal preferences and desires, known as the rational self-interest paradigm (James, 1990; Kotha, Rajgopal, & Rindova, 2001; Lin, 2017). The second assumption is a paradigm of an approach through social exchange theory and social dependence. Under this paradigm, various parties will establish relationships with other parties who can exchange valuable resources. The sustainability of the relationship will depend on the rewards or benefits obtained by each party (Homans, 2017). A third assumption is an approach based on the theory of mutual interest and collective action. Those three basic assumptions explain the reasons for collaborations. Furthermore, the synthesis and derivation of these theories form a new concept called the ECB. It is defined as a tight bond between the sales force and customers (retail store owners) that empowers and strengthen each party. This concept has the potential to be a powerful and effective driver to improve sales force performance.

For companies in the FMCG industry, the sales force play a vital role. Sales force directly interacts with customers, both at an individual and business level. The better the sales force does at building mutually beneficial relationships with retail store owners, the easier it is for the sales force to increase sales growth, market share, and the number of customers. A tight competition at the sales force level requires them to excel at establishing tight bonds with customers in order to achieve customer loyalty and reach as well as increase sales targets.

The effect of relational capital on ECB and sales force performance

Relational capital is a form of social capital embedded in business relationships (Kohtamäki, Partanen, & Möller, 2013). The elements of relational capital will influence customers' perceptions of the value of the partnership. Relational capital is defined as assets or resources owned by the company, which can be seen from several dimensions, such as trust in the form of customer trust; commitment, in the form of consistency in serving customers; transparency, in the form of information disclosure to customers; mutual respect between the company and its customers; and partner interaction, which is the ability to interact intensively as a partner for the customer. These factors are important assets for companies to collaborate with customers (Liu et al., 2010; Miocevic, 2016).

A sustainable partnership with customers is an important factor for the success of the company. A company will be able to achieve business goals and increase its long-term value if it has superior customer bonds compared to its competitors. Companies with effective customer partnerships will benefit in a sustainable manner (De Clercq & Sapienza, 2006).

The ECB is a new concept proposed to bridge the research gap on the relationship between relational capital and salesperson performance. The ECB is a strong partnership between the sales force and customers which will provide solutions to various business constraints, support and benefit each other, ease business transactions between partners, and optimize customer value in order to empower and strengthen the network in the partnership. We predict that there is a positive relationship between relational capital and the ECB concept.

FMCG Companies with good relational capital that are highly committed to customer satisfaction will be able to increase and strengthen the partnership bond between the customer and the company. The relational capital will convince customers that the company can provide the best possible solution to the problems that occur, thus strengthening the existing partnership bond. The causality relationship is in line with the analogy proposed by Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter (2000). A strong relational capital will help partners trust the company, create mutual respect, tighten the partnership, and strengthen the commitment to sustain the partnership (Kale et al., 2000).

Customer enthusiasm to partner with the company will increase if the company has a high ownership of relational capital (Gregorio Martín de, Pedro López, & José Emilio Navas, 2004). A strong relational capital will strengthen the partnership between sales force and customers, and as a result it will be able to provide solutions to various business constraints, ease business transactions between partners, support and benefit each other, and optimize customer value.

Relational capital has positive impacts on the performance improvement of salespeople. Therefore, managers need to increase understanding of the relationship between knowledge and expertise in a management perspective. In the context of decision making, managers must consider the important aspects related to the concept in order to produce more effective and efficient actions in creating value for customers through products and services (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2023). A company that gains trust, is highly committed, and respects its customers will find it easier to improve the achievement and performance of its salespeople (De Clercq & Sapienza, 2006). Similarly, Retnawati and Nuryakin (2016) also found that relational capital has a positive impact on increasing the performance of the sales force. Thus, relational capital of FMCG companies will push

customers to collaborate, which eventually increases the performance of the sales force (Ambrose, Marshall, & Lynch, 2010; Gogan, Artene, Sarca, & Draghici, 2016). Based on the explanations, the first and second hypotheses of this study are stated as follows:

H1: Relational capital positively affects energizing customer bond

H2: Relational capital positively affects sales force Performance

The effect of relational capital on value-based selling

Relational capital is an important factor in driving the ability of the sales force to offer value-based products to customers. Strong relational capital will increase the ability of the sales force to offer a product to consumers and to convince buyers that the products or services offered are superior and profitable compared to those offered by other parties (Terho et. al., 2012; Töytäri and Rajala, 2015). Strong relational capital in team members will generate a portfolio of new ideas and has the potential to increase value-based selling and sales innovation by the sales force (Škerlavaj, Song, and Lee, 2010; Spraggon and Bodolica, 2017).

The quality of relational capital is an effective driver in the coordination of the sales and purchasing functions (Dubois and Wynstra, 2005; Moon and Armstrong, 1994). Other studies also show that relational capital has a positive impact on increasing value-based sales capabilities. A company that has trust capital, high commitment, and respect for customers will find it easier to improve the ability of its sales force (De Clercq & Sapienza, 2006). According to Panigyrakis and Theodoridis (2009), a good relationship capital will increase the ability of the sales force to offer products to retail business owners. Relational capital will greatly facilitate the sales force in achieving sales targets. Based on these descriptions, the third hypothesis of this study is stated as follows:

H3: Relational capital positively affects value-based selling

Mediation effect of ECB on the relationship between relational capital and sales force performance

The relational capital of the sales force will have an effective and significant impact on improving the performance of the sales force as long as the sales force can optimize the relational capital to empower customers in a close and mutually beneficial partnership.

Sales force with high commitment to customers will be able to encourage customers participate actively in the established relationships, therefore facilitating the increase of product sales and the expansion of market coverage (Ferdinand & Wahyuningsih, 2018). If the sales force of an FMCG company is skilled in establishing relationships and is able to build bonds with their customers by providing solutions to various business problems, providing concrete support, facilitating the process of business transactions between partners, providing extra benefits, and optimizing customer value from each party, then it will empower and strengthen the retail business network (Jang & Nemeh, 2017). This empowering customer bond has the potential to be a powerful driver for improving sales force performance. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis of this study is stated as:

H4: Energizing customer bond mediates the relationship of relational capital and sales force performance.

The effect of ECB on sales force performance

Building formal and informal partnerships with other parties in a network has become a very important requirement for optimizing business performance (Ford and Mouzas, 2013; Husain, Dayan, and Benedetto, 2016). Although the ECB variable is new, we use the results of previous studies that have the similar analogies of the relationship between variables to strengthen the explanation and logical argument of this study. A partnership between companies and customers that has trust, commitment, and support among its partners will ease the company's ability to achieve its marketing targets. The trust of customers that a mutual benefit exists in a partnership will also ease companies to retain their customers and improve their marketing performance (Deborah, 2015). Furthermore, customers who are loyal to existing relationships, and feel bound to the company, will ease the sales force's task of maintaining and increasing customer growth (Soliman, 2011).

The sales force is a division that leads the company in interacting with customers. A salesperson for an FMCG company who is able to provide the best service for customers is a crucial element in creating a sustainable relationship between the company and the customer, which eventually will improve the company's overall performance. A tight bond between the sales force and customers, and the ability to empower customers or partners, will ease the sales force to increase the growth in the number of customers (Niininen, Buhalis, & March, 2007).

Customer will be more likely to continue to working with a salesperson who is oriented towards a partnership with them and can make them feel benefited (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011). Thus, resulting in a sustainable benefit for the sales force's performance. A tighter bond that can provide solutions and mutual benefits between the company and the customer will increase sales volume and the number of customers. Likewise, the existence of a mutually supportive partnership and the ability to optimize customer value will have an impact on the performance improvement of the sales force. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis of this study is stated as follows:

H5: Energizing customer bond positively affects sales force performance.

The effect of ECB on value-based selling

Experts have explained and provided a general understanding of the importance of customer value in business relationships (Salem Khalifa, 2004; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2006; Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). The competence of service providers in delivering value is an important factor in building bonds with customers. In this regard, sales force competence is the ability or capability of a sales force that is built based on knowledge regarding the domain of their activities (Terho, Eggert, Haas, & Ulaga, 2015). Customers will feel happy when dealing with companies that have capabilities and competencies in their fields (Drucker, 2001). In this case, the salesperson's ability to understand the increasingly complex needs and wants of customers will greatly affect his or her ability to offer value-based products to customers (Terho et al., 2015). According to Töytäri and Rajala (2015), the sales force plays a key role in value creation when interacting with potential customers. Value-based selling is reciprocal, focuses on offering potential value from product usage, and is able to describe the effect of the product or service on the customer's business profit. Teichmann, Scholl-Grissemann, and Stokburger-Sauer (2016) explained that the company's ability to build bonds with fashion customers through co-design will ease companies' efforts to offer value-based products to customers.

The better and tighter the partnership bond between FMCG companies and retailers, the easier it will be for the sales force to offer interesting suggestions to increase the retailer's business. Similarly, as the bond between the sales force and the customer strengthens and becomes capable of providing solutions to business constraints, it has the potential to ease salespeople in making offers that make customers feel benefited (Salem Khalifa, 2004). The higher the confidence that the business partnership between suppliers and retailers is mutually beneficial, the easier it will be for the sales force to provide advice, suggestions, and long-term solutions that benefit the retailer. Therefore, the sixth hypothesis of this study is stated as:

H6: Energizing customer bond positively affects value-based selling.

The effect of value-based selling on salesperson performance

The superior customer value offered to consumers has been recognized as an important and fundamental part of business success (Salem Khalifa, 2004; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2006). Researchers agree that the creation of superior customer value will drive customer satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term company survival (Eggert, Ulaga, & Schultz, 2006; Salem Khalifa, 2004; Slater, 1997; Woodruff, 1997). Value-based product offerings enable sellers to provide reliable information that the product is capable of providing benefits to buyers (Jaakkola, Frösén, & Tikkanen, 2015). The sales force's ability to understand the value of the product will influence the customer's desire to use the product or service offered by the company. Other opinions also state that communication skills in offering product value to customers have a considerable influence on improving the performance of the sales force (Ball, Simões Coelho, & Machás, 2004). The company's ability to fulfill the consumer's complex desires will have an impact on increasing customer satisfaction and the performance of the sales force.

Sales force competence is vital to improving performance. It is understood as the ability or capability of a sales force that is based on knowledge regarding the domain of their activities (Terho et al., 2015). Consumers will feel happy when dealing with companies that have capabilities and competencies in their fields (Drucker, 2001). The sales force plays a key role in value creation when interacting with potential customers. Value-based selling requires a reciprocal orientation and focuses on the potential user value with offers that reflect the effect the product or service has on the customer's business profits (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015).

According to various literatures, understanding value and the ability to provide value to customers is an important source of a competitive advantage (Töytäri & Rajala, 2015). This is because providing customers with explicit value in the form of rational arguments will make their purchasing decisions easier. Sales forces who are able to offer attractive propositions for customers will find it easier to improve their performance (Salem Khalifa, 2004). Therefore, the seventh hypothesis of this study is stated as follows:

H7: Value-based selling positively affects sales force performance.

The following is the empirical model designed in this study:

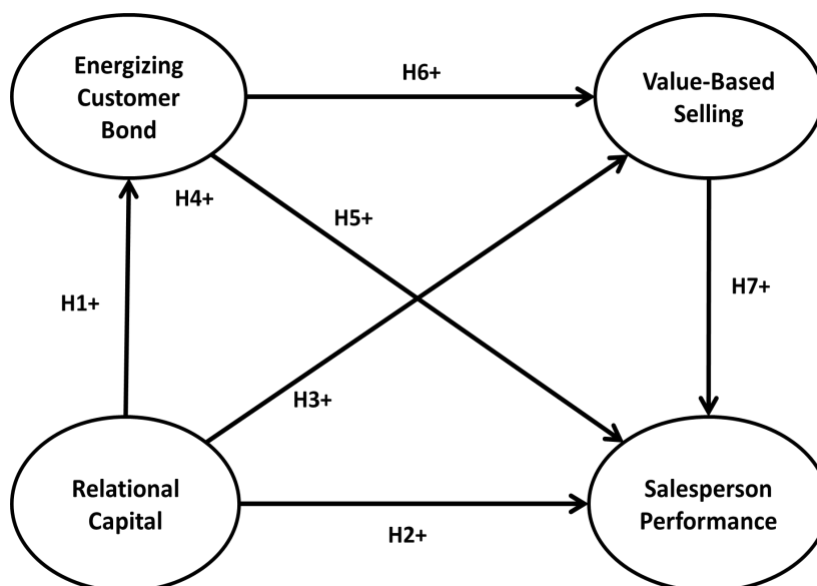


Figure 2. Empirical Research Model

Source: Authors' own research.

Research method

Sample and data collection

Data were gathered through the distribution of questionnaires to respondents during the four month period of September until December 2022. The respondents in this study are salespeople at large-scale FMCG companies in branch offices or sales units in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The designation of Yogyakarta as a research area is due to the rapid growth of the retail industry in this province, which is among the fastest in Indonesia (Bisnis.com). Currently, the FMCG industry in Indonesia is experiencing very tight competition, both at the company and salesperson level (marketing.co.id, sindonews.com). Salespeople at FMCG companies have unique characteristics because they are given leeway by the company to be creative and improvise in selling products and build relationships with customers (retailers) so that sales targets can be achieved. Based on these conditions and characteristics, the salesperson of the FMCG company is very relevant as an object for the construction of the empirical model built in this study.

The sampling technique used in this study is judgmental sampling technique. The criteria for participants are sales force members who have worked for a minimum of one year. A minimum of one year assumes that the sales force already has customers at various retail stores in their working area. Moreover, after working for one year, they have generally received some kind of training or professional skills debriefing in accordance with their duties and responsibilities. Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling-AMOS, which was estimated using the maximum likelihood technique. This technique requires the distribution of data that is normally distributed, to be processed further (Ferdinand, 2014). The screening and trimming process resulted in 248 data points that can be processed and that meet the normality requirement.

The description of the profile of the respondent includes gender, education, income, length of service, and participation in job training. Respondents in this research are salespeople at 16 consumer goods companies, namely PT. Unilever, PT. Coca-Cola, PT. Indofood, PT. Yakult, PT. Wings Food, PT. Cleo, PT. Mayora, PT. Sera Food, PT. Garuda Food, PT. SGM, PT. Tea Poci, PT. Ultra Jaya Milk, PT. Sosro, PT. Dua Kelinci, and PT. Sari Roti. Based on the gender, there are as many as 190 (76.7%) male respondents and 58 (23.3%) female respondents. As per the education level of the respondents, there are 125 (50.2%) high school graduates, 68 (27.3%) Bachelor degree graduates, 49 (20.1%) diploma graduates, 4 (1.6%) Postgraduates, and 2 (0.8%) of other educational backgrounds. Based on the working tenure, there are as many as 146 (58.6%) respondents who have worked between 4 and 6 years, as many as 80 (32.1%) respondents with more than 6 years of tenure and as many as 23 (9.2%) respondents in the tenure group of 1 to 3 years. As per the training that has been done, there are 88,8% respondents who have attended training.

Measurement

There are four constructs in this study: relational capital, value-based selling, energizing customer bond, and salesperson performance. The instruments in this study were adopted and developed from instruments that have been used in previous research. A scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) was used to measure each indicator and statement item in the questionnaire for this study.

The conceptual framework construction in this study is analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling-AMOS (SEM-AMOS), because of its ability to compare the suitability of the model with the empirical data being analyzed (Nachigall, Kroehne, Funke, & Steyer, 2003). SEM analysis is carried out in two stages, namely the measurement model and structural measurement analysis. The measurement model is used to determine the ability of the instrument to measure the variables under study by testing the validity and reliability of the instrument. The results of instrument testing can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Validity and Reliability Test Result

Variables & Indicators	Loading Factor	Convergent Validity (AVE)	Cronbach Alpha	Construct Reliability (CR)
Relational capital (RC)				
Ownership of customer trust (RC1)	0.754	0,564	0,866	0,866
Commitment in relation (RC2)	0.749			
Transparency (RC3)	0.753			
Mutual respect in relationship (RC4)	0.738			
Partner interaction capability (RC5)	0.760			
Value-based selling (VBS)				
Understand of customer desires (VBS1)	0.733 0.787 0.710 0.730 0.748	0,551	0,860	0,860
Ability to offer value (VBS2)				
Ability to minimize business risk of customer's (VBS3)				
Ability to offer interesting proposition (VBS4)				
Able to offer long-term solution of customer's business (VBS5)				

Variables & Indicators	Loading Factor	Convergent Validity (AVE)	Cronbach Alpha	Construct Reliability (CR)
Energizing customer bond (ECB) A bond that is able to provide solutions to business constraints (ECB1) A bond that can provide concrete support to retailers (ECB2) A bond that simplifies the retail business transaction process (ECB3) A bond that provides extra benefits for retailers (ECB4) A bond that can add value / benefits to each customer (ECB5)	0.733 0.731 0.763 0.724 0.725	0,541	0,855	0,855
Salesperson performance (SP) Increased sales volume (SP1) Growth in the number of customers (SP2) Expansion of sales area coverage (SP3) Increased sales of product variants (SP4)	0.781 0.734 0.704 0.785	0,565	0,838	0,838

Source: Author's primary data processing (2022).

Table I demonstrates that all indicators have a factor loading value of more than 0,5 and that all constructs studied also show an average variance extracted (AVE) value greater than 0,5. These results indicate that the instrument has good convergent validity. Likewise, the values of construct reliability and Cronbach's alpha show a value above 0,7. It means that the instrument has good reliability. Based on the results above, it can be concluded that the instrument used in this study is valid and reliable.

Table 2. Mean, Correlation Across Construct and Square root of AVE

Konstruk	Mean	Dev Std.	RC	VBS	ECB	SP
1. Relational Capital (RC)	7,421	1.030	0.751*			
2. Value-Based Selling (VBS)	7,835	0.854	0.448**	0.742*		
3. Energizing customer bond (ECB)	7,938	0,944	0.687**	0.568**	0.735*	
4. Salesperson Performance (SP)	8.359	0,856	0.595**	0.567**	0.698**	0.752*

**) Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*) Square root of AVE are on the diagonal (bold).

Source: Author's primary data processing (2022).

The next step is to ensure the validity of the discriminants to measure the extent to which a construct is completely different from other constructs (Malhotra, 2012). Discriminant validity was tested by comparing the square root of AVE with the correlation between variables. The instrument is called valid if the square root value of AVE is higher than the correlation value between variables. Based on Table 2, it can be concluded that all constructs have good discriminant validity.

Findings

Data analysis and results

The data analysis to test the hypothesis in this study is carried out by using Structural Equation Modeling with the AMOS program. In the empirical model of this study, relational capital (RC) is considered an exogenous variable, while value-based selling (VBS), energizing customer bond (ECB), and salesperson performance (SP) are endogenous variables. Figure 3 depicts the full structural model test results in this study.

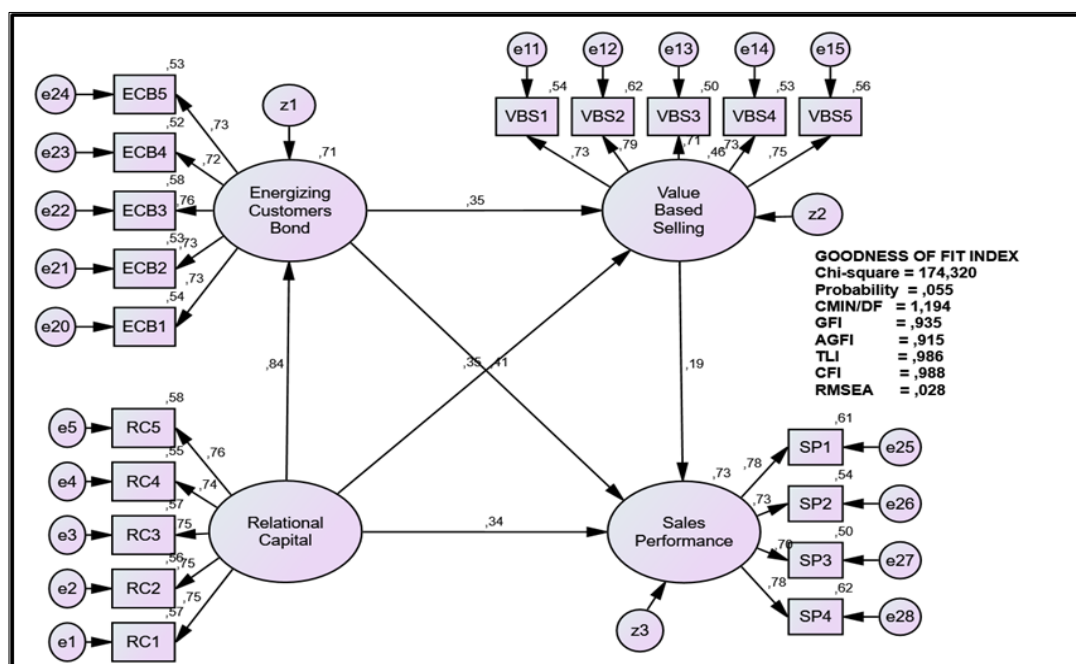


Figure 3. Full Structural Model Analysis

Goodness of fit index: Chi-square:176,320, Sig. Probability: 0,055, CMIN/DF: 1.194, GFI: 0,935, AGFI: 0,915, TLI: 0,986, CFI: 0,988, RMSEA: 0,028

Source: Authors' own data processing (2022).

The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Hypothesis Test Result

Hypothesis	Construct	Unstandardize Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1	RC → ECB	0,848	0,841	0,085	9,981	***	Supported
H2	RC → SP	0,285	0,335	0,105	2,727	0,006**	Supported
H3	RC → VBS	0,307	0,351	0,126	2,430	0,015**	Supported
H4	RC → ECB → SP	Z-value= 3.10232018				***	Supported
H5	ECB → SP	0,346	0,411	0,106	3,272	0,001*	Supported
H6	ECB → VBS	0,306	0,353	0,126	2,431	0,015**	Supported
H7	VBS → SP	0,180	0,185	0,072	2,509	0,012**	Supported

***) Significant $\leq 1\%$; **) Significant $\leq 5\%$

Source: Authors' own data processing (2022).

The results shown in Table 3 explain that the critical ratio values for H1, H2, H3, H5, H6 and H7 are greater than the cut-off value of 1,96, with a significance probability value lower than 5%. This means that the hypotheses are accepted or supported. Furthermore, the results of the goodness of fit index also show that all parameters of the goodness of fit of this research model have met feasibility and show good conformity results. The value of the goodness of fit index parameter is; Chi-square:176,320, Sig. Probability: 0,055, CMIN/DF: 1.194, GFI: 0,935, AGFI: 0,915, TLI: 0,986, CFI: 0,988, RMSEA: 0,028. As a result, the structural model developed in this study meets the goodness of fit criteria.

Mediation test

Mediation variable testing is intended to determine the role of the novelty variable in overcoming the research gap, which is the main objective of this research. Testing the role of the mediating variable aims to prove the fourth hypothesis (H4) in this study. To test the ECB construct, as a mediating variable for the relationship between the relational capital construct and salesperson performance, it is critical to see how big the contribution of the new constructs proposed by the author is in bridging the research gap that was stated at the beginning of this paper. At the same time, it is also to confirm the main purpose of this research.

This construct is tested by analyzing the direct and indirect effects of relational capital on salesperson performance. Based on Table 3, the relationship between the RC variable and the ECB is significant with a regression coefficient value of 0,841 and a p-value of 0,000. Likewise, the effect of the ECB on SP shows a significant result with a regression coefficient of 0,411 and a p-value of 0,001. The direct relationship between RC and SP shows a p-value of 0,006 with a regression coefficient value of 0,335; thus, it indicates the occurrence of partial mediation. The coefficient value of the mediation effect is 0,346. It is obtained by multiplying the coefficient of direct effect RC to ECB and ECB to SP. The next stage is to do a Sobel test. It is carried out to determine the level of significance of the indirect or mediating effect in the structural equation model. The Sobel value based on the Sobel test is $z = 3.10232018$ ($> 1,98$) with a significance of $<0,001$. These results prove that the construct of ECB has been proven to have a significant role as a mediating variable for the relationship between relational capital and sales force performance.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that all the hypotheses built are supported. Relational capital has an indirect positive impact on empowering customers who bond with the sales force. The results indicate that relational capital is effective to increase an empowering and mutually reinforcing partnership with customers, which in turn impacts the increase in the performance of the sales force. These results are in line with the findings (Ambrose et al., 2010) and (Silvio et al., 2016).

The results of this study show that the better the relational capital of the sales force, the tighter the bond with customers, which will empower and strengthen the existing business network. The predictive ability of the relational capital variable on energizing customer bond reaches 80%, and thus the effect is the greatest. The strength of the sales force's relational capital is proven to be able to encourage partnerships with their customers (retail stores), further strengthening the retail business network. This finding confirms that sales force with traits such as being trusted by retailers, having a high

commitment to retailers, and being consistent in providing the best service will have an increased strength in their partnership with the customer (Liu et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2016). In addition, openness in conveying information to retail stores, mutual respect and appreciation, as well as the ability of the sales force to position themselves as reliable partners for retailers, have also been confirmed to have a significant impact on the strength of the bond between the sales force and retail stores, thus falling in line with the opinion of Liu et al. (2010) and Miocevic (2016).

Intense competition, both at the company level and at the level of the sales force level, in the FMCG industry causes fluctuations in the growth of consumer goods product sales in Indonesia (bisnis.com). This certainly causes the company to have a competitive advantage over competitors, including advantages in the form of loyalty or loyalty of business partners, in order for the company to exist and sustain its business. Therefore, the company is eager to have a sales force that is effective in creating value with customers, owns reliable capabilities, and is able to establish mutual relationships with retailers to ensure the company gains long-term profits (Singh and Koshy, 2011; Valenzuela dkk., 2014).

The elements of relational capital shape the customer's perception of the value of the collaboration (Saputra & Pratomo, 2023). Trust as a reflection of relational capital has an important function for increasing the bond between the various partnering parties. The partnership of various actors in the organization, both internal and external, will not be established and endure without mutual trust between the parties involved (Lavie, Haunschild and Khanna, 2012). The results of this study prove that sales people who are trusted by retail store owners are able to encourage partnerships that provide mutual benefits and provide solution to the obstacles in the businesses they run.

Another element that plays an important role in relational capital is the commitment and consistency of the sales force to provide the best service to retail store owners. Companies with a high commitment to customer satisfaction will be able to increase and strengthen the partnership bond between customers and the company (Hennig-Thurau dkk., 2002). The service commitment of the sales force will act as a solution to various constraints in their retail business, thereby strengthening the bonds of cooperation that have been established (Kale et al., 2000a).

Another factor that plays an important role in reflecting the construct of relational capital is the transparency and willingness to share information with partners (Lages, Silva and Styles, 2009). Good information disclosure will increase mutual trust between stakeholders, and strengthen partnership cohesiveness (Kohtamäki, Partanen and Möller, 2013). The findings show that salespeople who openly share product information with customers and retailers strengthen partnership bonds, which can optimize customer (buyer) value from each party and mutually benefit both parties.

The existence of reciprocal relationships of mutual respect and the ability of salespeople to interact actively and intensively as partners with customers is another element of relational capital that has an effect on increasing mutually reinforcing customer bonds (Gregorio Martín de et al., 2004). Sales people who are able to interact with customers with mutual respect, will have a tighter partnership bond that makes the business transaction process between partners more effective and easier. Likewise, salespeople who are able to interact intensively as partners with customers will

further enhance partnership bonds that can provide solutions to various obstacles in their business.

The results of the mediation test of the novelty variable indicate the occurrence of partial mediation. Therefore, the findings of this study prove that the ECB variable, as a novelty concept, proves to be the key to the success of the effect of relational capital in improving sales force performance. The results also indicate that the effect of relational capital on sales force performance will be effective if the bond that exists between salespeople and retailers can; (1) provide solutions to various business constraints (solutive bonding), (2) provide concrete support to partners (mutual support bonding), (3) facilitate the business transactions between partners (easy process bonding), (4) provide extra benefits (extra benefit bonding), and (5) optimize customer value from each party (customer value bonding). Thus, the bond between the sales force and the retailer will be mutually strengthened and beneficial. These conditions are fundamental factors for the creation of sustainable cooperation and match the basic principles in network theory (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Katz et al., 2004) and SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2007).

On the other hand, the ECB also has an impact on increasing VBS. The more intensive the mutually reinforcing partnership between the sales force and the retailer, the easier it will be for the sales force to offer value-based products to retail stores, which in turn will contribute to the improvement of FMCG sales force performance. The findings are consistent with those of (Kohtamäki, Partanen, Parida, & Wincent, 2013). This is due to the fact that customers feel benefited and receive solutions from suppliers for business problems that may occur. The results of this study also indicate that to improve sales force performance, it is necessary to increase the value-based selling of the seller. This is in line with the notion of Panigyrakis and Theodoridis (2009), that the bond that provides mutual energy between sellers and customers will increase the ability of salespeople to make offers to retailers. This study provides empirical evidence that salespeople at FMCG companies must be able to optimize their relational capital in order to encourage partnerships with customers. A partnership that is able to energize and reinforce each other, which in turn will improve their performance. The model construction used in this study fills the research gaps and complements previous research models in explaining strategies to improve sales force performance by using a network theory and SDL approach.

The findings can also become scientific guidance for practitioners to improve the performance of their sales force. Increases in sales volume, number of customers, marketing area, and product sales can be done by optimizing the relational capital and creating a partnership that energizes and strengthens each other. Customer involvement in the value co-creation process will reduce the boundaries and barriers between the company and the customer (Jaakkola & Hakanen, 2013). A partnership that is able to provide energy and strengthen each party will greatly benefit both parties and facilitate business operations. Managers need to design training and development programs to enhance employees' innovative work behavior in establishing customer relationships, and improve their customer knowledge management (Bratianu, Stănescu, & Mocanu, 2022). Indonesia is a country with a social culture with high cohesiveness values, therefore, it is important for salespeople to seize these opportunities by maintaining good relationships with customers, so that informal partnerships can be maintained and enhanced.

It is also important to consider the accuracy and relevance of the research object. Businesses with a supply chain, both the supplying and buying companies, recognize the

benefits and importance of collaborative partnerships (Hales, Perrilliat, and Bhardwaj, 2011). This study examines the relationship between salespeople in FMCG companies who interact directly with retail store owners. In consumer goods companies, the rapid turnover of products causes a high intensity and frequency of interactions between salespeople and retailers. Furthermore, the sales force at FMCG companies also has unique characteristics, including the leeway to create and improvise in selling products and establishing relationships with customers in order to achieve sales targets. The intensity and typology of the relationships that exist between FMCG product salespeople and retailers are very distinctive and closely intertwined, thus the objects and subjects of this study are very representative and relevant to prove the construction of the empirical model built in this study.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several implications, both at the theoretical and managerial levels. Our study develops a framework for the relationship model between variables. It aims to overcome the research gap and clarify the causal relationship between variables. The originality of this research lies in the development of new concepts by deriving and synthesizing relevant marketing management theories. The results of this study provide additional insights by completing the values and basic assumptions in Network Theory and SDL. The ECB concept, which is the novelty in this study, fills in gaps that have not been discussed clearly enough previously. The ECB concept coherently explains how to build customer bonding, on the understanding of an unwritten or non-institutionalized business relationship (informal or non-structural bonding) between salespeople and retail stores. There are 5 characterizing concepts that need to be implemented in order to create an effective ECB and to establish it as a common ground between salespeople and retailers. These are solutive bonding, mutual support bonding, easy process bonding, mutual benefit bonding, and customer value bonding.

The process of constructing the research model is carried out carefully, logically, and coherently so that it can contribute and add value to the development of the body of knowledge in the field of marketing management science, especially as it relates to selling knowledge. The predictor variables examined in this study, namely relational capital, value-based selling, and energizing customer bond, are able to explain and describe the relationship pattern that improves sales force performance. The novelty and conceptual model construction in this study are specifically projected in the context of the business-to-business (B2B) relationship; hence, the meanings and instruments developed in this new construct are highly relevant to the context of B2B relationships. The occurrence of mediation shows the importance of such a variable. It means that the relational capital variable will not be able to effectively improve sales force performance without going through a significant increase in the ECB variable.

In addition to the conceptual contribution, the results of this study can be used as a basis to assist companies in formulating policies and making strategic and operational decisions in an effort to improve the performance of consumer goods companies in Indonesia by maximizing and optimizing their business networks.

Conclusion

This study confirms the role of the ECB variable in addressing research gaps on explaining the effect of relational capital on sales force performance. The contribution of this research lies in the exploration of the construction of a relatively new research model with the relevant research objects to confirm the research model proposed in this study. The construction of a research model built to resolve the research gaps in this study has proven to provide convincing results. This indicates that the ECB has been proven to be a mediating variable that plays an important role in mediating the effect of relational capital on sales force performance.

The development of network theory and SDL as the main reference in this study has proven relevant to explaining the fundamental reasons for collaboration between FMCG salespeople and retail shop owners. The partnership bond occurs naturally and then creates cohesion between the parties because of the shared values and goals. Optimization of relational capital will increase the mutually reinforcing partnership between the sales force and the retail store. Furthermore, the bond has been shown to be effective in improving sales force performance in FMCG companies.

The results of this study provide a perspective on the importance of adopting Network Theory and SDL, especially in understanding informal or non-structural business relationships. In practical terms, the results of this study can also serve as scientific guidance for consumer goods companies in formulating strategic policies to improve sales performance by increasing the capacity and capability of sales personnel in building ECB with retailers.

Limitations and direction for future research

There are limitations in this study that can be further studied in future research. First, the proposed model framework may apply differently to industrial conditions with different characteristics. This study only uses a sample of salespeople in FMCG companies; therefore, to broaden the generalization, the construction of this research model still needs to be tested empirically in different field contexts, for example, in industries other than FMCG or even across industries.

Furthermore, this conceptual model framework is tested and developed using only the perceptions of the sales force, while in order to capture a broader and more objective perspective on sales force performance, it would be better for future research to use additional units of analysis related to sales divisions or departments, such as supervisors, salespeople, and marketing office staff. Future research can also combine the opinions or perceptions of customers and companies (dyadic) to develop a more comprehensive sales force performance improvement model.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo & Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP) Republic of Indonesia. Thank you very much for providing support and funding for this research.

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