

The Quality of Manufacturer: Distributor Relationship- A Case of Plastic Industry in Vietnam

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This research provides the insights of partner-perceived relationship quality between manufactures and distributors in the context of plastic industry in Vietnam. The mixed research approach was used in this study. A qualitative study was conducted through in-depth interview and focus group with persons working for plastic companies. A quantitative research was conducted through the survey with 560 plastic companies located in Ho Chi Minh City. The study explored and measured the components of the relationship quality and factors influencing significantly the quality of manufacturer - distributor relationship. Using SEM analysis, we found three components of the relationship quality (mutual trust, commitment, satisfaction), and six factors (information sharing, communication, product quality, interaction, delivery quality, visiting) influencing significantly on the quality of manufacturer - distributor relationship. The results provide valuable implications for managers of plastic companies for improving the quality of manufacture - distributor relationship in Vietnam plastic industry. This study also provides a significant contribution to the relationship quality literature.

Keywords: Relationship quality, manufacture – distributor relationship, plastic industry, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Relationship Quality (RQ) is considered as a structure with many complementary components (Dwyer et al., 1987; Kumar, 1995). However, previous studies on RQ have no consistency on the components of the RQ concept (Naude & Buttle, 2000; Bove & Johnson, 2001; Naoui & Zaiem, 2010). Similarly, studies of the factors affecting RQ did not find the same results (Athanasopoulou, 2008, 2009; Woo & Ennew, 2004; Naoui & Zaiem, 2010). Most studies looked at the composition, and factors explaining the relationship quality in the context of the relation between buyer and seller. Especially in Vietnam, no study considers a specific relationship between manufacturers and distributors in plastic industry. Therefore, this study used the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to identify the components and determinants of RQ between manufacturers and distributors in Vietnamese plastic industry. This study confirmed the three components of RQ (trust, commitment and satisfaction), as found by Skarmeas et al. (2008). The study found six determinants of RQ (product quality, quality of delivery, market information, communication, personal interaction, and visitation). These findings are similar to the findings of Leuthesser (1997); Chen et al.,

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(2017), Nguyen & Nguyen (2009), Velez et. al (2015), Gupta & Sushil (2014), Shamdasami & Jung (2011).

The following sections are section 2: literature review, section 3: research hypotheses, section 4: methodology, section 5: hypothesis testing results and discussion, and section 6: conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relationship Quality

Relationship Quality (RQ) is the extension of relationship marketing (Bojei & Alwie, 2010), which addresses the customer perception of relationships in term of meeting their goals and desires (Jarvelin & Lehtinen, 1996). Three components of RQ are mutual trust between partners, the commitment of partners, and their satisfaction.

2.2. Trust

Trust is the willingness to rely on a reliable partner (Moorman et al., 1993; Skarmeas et al., 2008); it is also the reputation, credibility and kindness of the partner (Lindsfold, 1978; Doney & Cannon, 1997). To minimize uncertainty of business's outcomes firms usually refer to reliable suppliers (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Manufacturers sell their products through trusted distributors. Mutual trust built from the two parties brings a lot of benefits to them. Without mutual trust, a long-term relationship between manufacturers and distributors cannot exist.

2.3. Commitment

Commitment is a long-term desire to maintain a valuable relationship (Moorman et al., 1993), is the basis of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), as well as the key to achieve valuable results for relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Strong commitment ensures the stability of the relationship (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Commitment is the critical component to sustain the business relationship between manufacturer and distributor.

Manufacturers guarantee their product quality, delivery time and quantity. Similarly, distributors also ensure to distribute products/services; provide the market information as well as carry out strictly contract terms assigned by the manufacturers.

2.4. Satisfaction

Satisfaction refers the social as well as economic aspects of exchange, is a condition necessary for the success of relationships between companies (Frazier et al., 1989; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Skarmeas et al., 2008). In business relation, satisfaction generated as distributors do all their duties and commit to what have been set before by manufacturers. In other words, satisfaction is the feeling of manufacturers about their partners as their expectation met through distribution

activities towards their products or goods. In contrast, the distributors satisfy with their partner in term of product quality, delivery time, discount policy and the manufactures' support as they deal with customer's complaints.

2.5. Product Quality

Product quality is an important attribute that consumers use to evaluate a product (Shetty, 1987), is the extent to which the supplier's product meets the requirements for technical standards of the customer (Ulaga, 2003). Product quality has a positive effect on the quality of the relationship between manufacturers and distributors (Leuthesser, 1997; Chen et al., 2017).

2.6. Delivery Quality

Delivery quality is expressed through time of delivery, delivery reliability (Garg et al., 2003; Rupp & Ristic, 2004; Michael & McCathie, 2005), fast delivery (Bowersox et al., 1999; Liu et al., 2005), frequency of delivery (Katayama & Bennett, 1999), connection in delivery (Katayama & Bennett, 1999; Li & O'Brein, 1999; Garg et al., 2004). The three components that structure the quality of delivery are timeliness, flexibility and accuracy (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Delivery quality is a factor contributing the value of the manufacturer – distributor relationship (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2011).

2.7. Market Information

Market information is external data relating to the current and future business status of an enterprise (Moorman, 1995); Harmancioglu et al., 2010); through market information sharing businesses share values, beliefs, determine behavioral norms, contribute to creating value for their common customers and as a result, will achieve better business performance (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Kirca et al., 2005; Harmancioglu et al., 2010). Three main elements of market information are information collection, information transmission and the use of information (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Moorman, 1995; Li & Calantone, 1998; Harmancioglu et al., 2010).

2.8. Communication

Communication is to provide customers with adequate information and to listen to them when they need to communicate (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Tohidinia & Haghghi, 2011). Thus, communication can bring about greater confidence in the relationship and resolve conflicts between the parties (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Communication through information exchange is positively related to the increase in satisfaction (Rodríguez et al., 2006).

2.9. Personal Interaction

Personal interaction is an important element of the interaction between organizations, which can have a positive or negative impact on business relationships (Halinen Salmi,

2001), as one of the important problems of business and industrial marketing (Mainela & Ulkuniemi, 2013), is the interaction at the individual level between manufacturer and distributor (Ulaga, 2003; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2011). Therefore, improving the personal interaction between the distributors and the manufacturers will benefit both parties; Better communication will result in better performance (Cater & Cater, 2009; Ulaga, 2003); Personal interaction plays an important role in helping providers evaluate the effectiveness of distributors (Jamal & Adelowore, 2008).

2.10. Visit

According to John & Christopher (1999), suppliers visit their customers to review their business capability and financial capability. As visitors can get the information on working habits of their customers, their acumen and belief with the suppliers increase (Carmichael & MacLeod, 1997). Some studies addressed the need to visit clients and make plans and frequency to visit clients (John & Christopher, 1999; Narus & Anderson, 1987; Baldoquin de la Pena et al., 2014).

2.11. Performance

Performance is defined as results achieved in sales, profits, return on investment, productivity or market share (Wall et al., 2004; Campbell & Park, 2017); is an important result of relationships (Cannon & Perreault, 1999). Consequently, the efforts of relationships, the ultimate goal is to increase performance (De Wulf et al., 2001; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002; Alejandro et al., 2011). Chen & Wu (2010) proposed criteria for assessing the effectiveness of a manufacturer – distributor partnership is profit and growth generated by collaboration; a high quality of relationship between buyer and supplier will improve business performance for buyers (Song et al., 2012).

2.12. Collaboration

Collaboration is an agreement between businesses to coordinate activities to maximize efficiency for both parties (Metcalf & Frear, 1993; Wilson & Nielson, 2000; Weaven et al., 2010; McDonnell et al., 2011). Collaboration in business relationships is a

manifestation of trust and commitment, which is considered important in quality relationships (Woo & Ennew, 2004). In the manufacturer - distributor relationship, partnerships help them become strategic partners, sharing benefits and risks, together joining in new product development programs, and as a result, they connect together (Lino et al., 2007; Yuan Li et al., 2011).

By reviewing literature 78 empirical researches on quality relationship published from 2008 to 2017 have been synthesized. Most of them documented B2B relationship quality between buyers and sellers, suppliers and customers. A few studies focused on the relationship quality between manufacturers and distributors, and there is no study in plastic industry in Vietnam.

3. Research Hypotheses

Based on the results of qualitative research and the discussion above, the research model with 24 research hypotheses was proposed and presented in Figure 3.1. The research hypotheses were stated as below:

Ha₁ – Ha₈: Product quality, delivery quality, market information, communication, personal interaction, and visit impact positively significantly on satisfaction.

Ha₇ and Ha₈: Satisfaction impacts positively significantly on collaboration, and performance.

Hb₁ – Hb₆: Product quality, delivery quality, market information, communication, personal interaction, and visitation impact positively significantly on commitment.

Hb₇ and Hb₈: Commitment impacts positively significantly on collaboration, and performance.

Hc₁ – Hc₆: Product quality, delivery quality, market information, communication, personal interaction, and visit impact positively significantly on trust.

Hc₇ and Hc₆: Trust impacts positively significantly on collaboration, and performance.

To test these hypotheses, we developed 3 research models with three dependent variables (⁽¹⁾ satisfaction, ⁽²⁾trust, and ⁽³⁾commitment), and 6 independent variables (⁽¹⁾Product quality, ⁽²⁾delivery quality, ⁽³⁾market information, ⁽⁴⁾communication, ⁽⁵⁾personal interaction, ⁽⁶⁾visit). Then, we test the impact of RQ (Commitment, satisfaction, and trust) on partners' performance and their collaboration.

4. Methodology

This research was conducted with mixed qualitative and quantitative method. The qualitative method was used to explore new research constructs and to revise measurement scales with 23 experts who are managers of enterprises producing and distributing plastic products in Ho Chi Minh City to explore component scales, and factors impacting on the quality of the relationship between manufacture and distributor. The expert research followed the process of Hardesty and Bearden (2004). This was to record the results of expert assessments of the proposed scale regarding generalizability, ambiguity, and validity. Then, five persons were invited to check the draft questionnaire for the explicit content ambiguity and number of items, and the validity of the measurement scales were done a pilot test with a survey of 136 respondents. Finally, data collected by survey questionnaire was developed from 42 observed variables those are the measurement scales of 11 latent variables. 700 questionnaires were distributed to the persons who are directors, business owners, shop owners, head of purchasing, sales, and employees in charge of purchasing and selling of plastic firms located in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. 616 answered questionnaires were collected, however only 560 questionnaires are valid to study, the rest are unsatisfactory questionnaires, because of unanswered fully or answered with the same parameters. The purposive sampling method was used.

This study considered both antecedents and consequences of relationship quality

between manufacturers and distributors while previous studies focused only on antecedent or consequence of the relationship quality.

4.1. Testing Measurement Scales

Measurement scales were developed by previous researchers with revision through focus group and in-depth interview methods. All scales are 5-point Likert-style with 1- *strongly disagree*, and 5 – *strongly agree*.

After testing the measurement model by exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we tested structural model through the SEM technique. The test resulted that all variables in the measurement model satisfy the Cronbach Alpha reliability criteria of .7. The reliability and validity of observed variables are evaluated by exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Observed variables have standardized loading weights (λ) greater than .5 assumed to meet convergence values (Gerbing and Anderson 1988).

Figure 1: Research Model

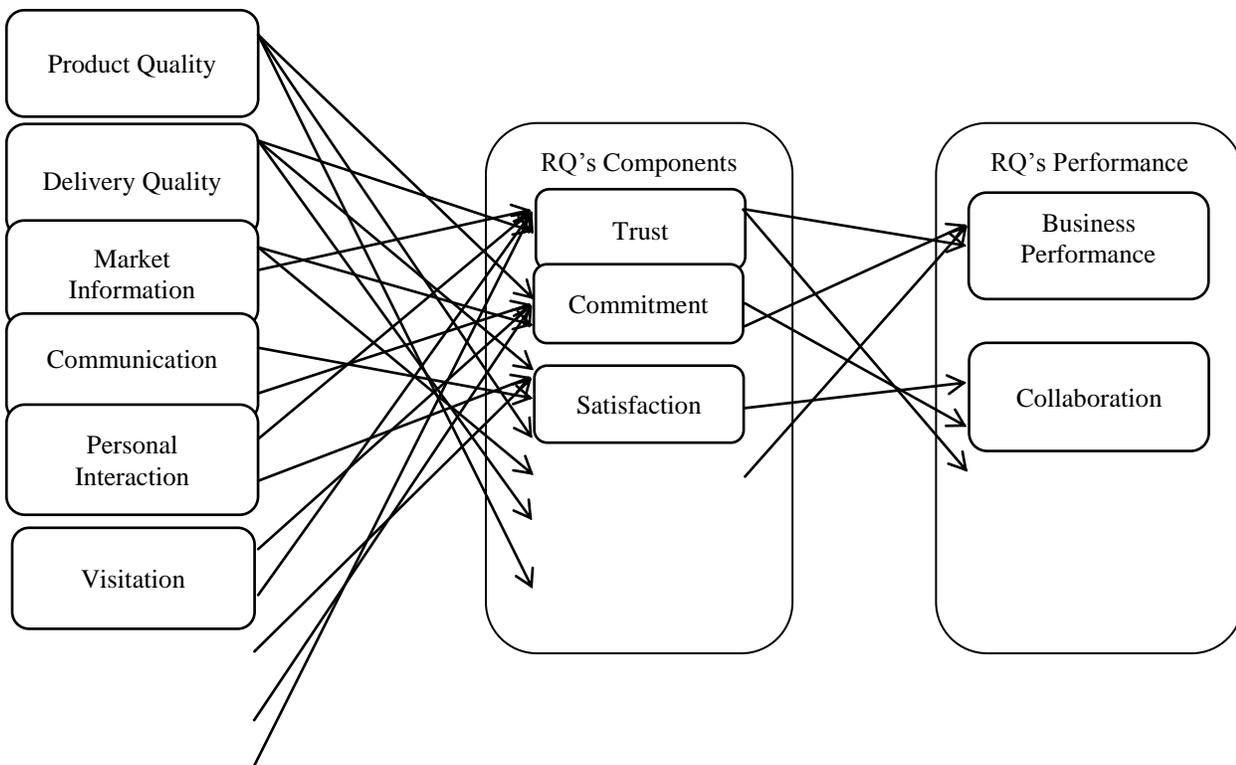


Table 1: Reliability and Validity of Constructs

| Constructs/items, Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) | λ |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Product quality (PQ), CR = .844, AVE= .645 | |
| <i>Manufacturers always supply high quality product to us.</i> | .782 |
| <i>Manufacturers always satisfy our quality standards.</i> | .854 |
| <i>Their products are reliable.</i> | .770 |
| Delivery quality (DQ), CR = 0.879, AVE = 0.708 | |
| <i>Manufacturers always satisfy our delivery progress.</i> | .847 |
| <i>We rarely have delivery errors with the manufacturers.</i> | .849 |
| <i>Delivery is always accurate in terms of time, volume and types of goods</i> | .828 |
| Market information (MI), CR = 0.882, AVE = 0.713 | |
| <i>Manufacturer helps us to introduce our new products/services to our customers.</i> | .823 |
| <i>Manufacturer helps us to track changes in our market share.</i> | .857 |
| <i>Manufacturer allows us to quickly adjust the selling price when market fluctuation happen.</i> | .853 |
| Communication (Co), CR = 0.863, AVE = 0.612 | |
| <i>Manufacturer often contacts us.</i> | .826 |
| <i>Manufacturer provides us useful information.</i> | .903 |
| <i>Manufacturer often warns us about changes, which can affect us.</i> | .796 |
| Personal interaction (PI), CR = 0.878, AVE = 0.644 | |
| <i>We work with manufacturers easily.</i> | .767 |
| <i>We interact well with the representative of the manufacturer.</i> | .768 |
| <i>We solve problems with each other easily.</i> | .858 |
| <i>We discuss openly with each other.</i> | .813 |
| Visit (Vi), CR = 0.834, AVE = 0.560 | |
| <i>Manufacturers ask their employees to visit us once every month.</i> | .767 |
| <i>Manufacturers often ask their employees to visit us.</i> | .838 |
| <i>Sometimes the manufacturer's director visits us.</i> | .643 |
| <i>Visiting helps us more tightly corporate.</i> | .731 |
| Trust (Tr), CR = 0.842, AVE = 0.572 | |
| <i>Manufacturers always keep their promises.</i> | .769 |
| <i>Manufacturer always cares about our business situation.</i> | .800 |
| <i>Manufacturers always consider our benefit as well as their benefit.</i> | .793 |
| <i>We believe that the manufacturers always think of our benefit.</i> | .724 |
| Commitment (Com), CR = 0.863, AVE = 0.612 | |
| <i>We are well – conduced commitments with manufacturer.</i> | .729 |
| <i>The relationship with manufacturers is really important to our business.</i> | .790 |
| <i>The relationship with manufacturers helps us to sustain our business activities in a long term.</i> | .826 |
| <i>The relationship between us and our manufacturers is sustainable.</i> | .780 |
| Satisfaction (Sa), CR = 0.908, AVE = 0.712 | |
| <i>The decision of doing business with our manufacturers is a right decision.</i> | .822 |
| <i>We are very satisfied with our manufacturers.</i> | .866 |
| <i>We are very happy with those things that the manufacturers do for us.</i> | .870 |
| <i>If things begin again, we still choose our manufacturers.</i> | .815 |
| Performance (Per), CR = 0.903, AVE = 0.699 | |
| <i>Our sales from selling products of manufacturers increasing.</i> | .856 |
| <i>Our profits from selling products of manufacturers increasing.</i> | .876 |
| <i>Our market share of manufacturers' products increasing.</i> | .793 |
| <i>Our return on investment increasing</i> | .817 |
| Collaboration (Col), CR = 0.910, AVE = 0.772 | |
| <i>We work closely with manufacture.</i> | .839 |
| <i>Manufacturers quickly resolved our complaints.</i> | .895 |
| <i>As conflict occurs, manufacturers always cooperate with us to find a solution.</i> | .900 |

4.2. Testing Measurement Model

4.2.1. Model 1 - Commitment

The CFA results showed that the fit of the model get generally accepted criteria such as chi-square $\chi^2 = 903.537$ ($p = .000$); TLI = .947; CFI = .954; GFI = .901; RMSEA = .048 (Sharma et al. 2005). The measurement scales meet the criteria such as discriminant value, one - dimensional, convergence value, standardized weights were greater than .5 (Steenkamp and van Trijp 1991). As shown in Table 2, all indicators of composite reliability (CR), the average variance extracted (AVE) were greater than .5 for all constructs.

Table 2: CFA Results – Commitment

| Factors | CR | AVE | MSV | ASV |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Commitment | 0.863 | 0.612 | 0.315 | 0.217 |
| Visit | 0.834 | 0.560 | 0.419 | 0.276 |
| Performance | 0.903 | 0.700 | 0.210 | 0.145 |
| Market information | 0.882 | 0.713 | 0.174 | 0.138 |
| Personal interaction | 0.878 | 0.644 | 0.402 | 0.306 |
| Collaboration | 0.910 | 0.772 | 0.366 | 0.219 |
| Product quality | 0.844 | 0.645 | 0.306 | 0.203 |
| Communication | 0.880 | 0.710 | 0.419 | 0.285 |
| Delivery quality | 0.879 | 0.708 | 0.392 | 0.265 |

4.2.2. Model 2 - Trust

The CFA results showed that the fit of Model 2 get generally accepted criteria such as chi-square $\chi^2 = 927.959$ ($p = .000$); TLI = .944; CFI = .952; GFI = .896; RMSEA = .049. The measurement scales meet the criteria such as discriminant value, one-dimensional, convergence value as shown in Table 3, all indicators of composite reliability (CR), the average variance extracted (AVE) were greater than .5 for all constructs.

Table 3: Model 2 – Trust

| Factors | CR | AVE | MSV | ASV |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| Trust | 0.842 | 0.572 | 0.318 | 0.242 |
| Visit | 0.835 | 0.560 | 0.419 | 0.282 |
| Performance | 0.903 | 0.699 | 0.210 | 0.154 |
| Market information | 0.882 | 0.713 | 0.196 | 0.146 |
| Personal interaction | 0.878 | 0.644 | 0.403 | 0.302 |
| Collaboration | 0.910 | 0.771 | 0.366 | 0.220 |
| Product quality | 0.844 | 0.644 | 0.266 | 0.198 |
| Communication | 0.880 | 0.710 | 0.419 | 0.292 |
| Delivery quality | 0.879 | 0.708 | 0.393 | 0.268 |

4.2.3. Model 3 – Satisfaction

The CFA results showed that the fit of the model get generally accepted criteria such as chi-square $\chi^2 = 847.567$ ($p = .000$); TLI = .955; CFI = .961; RMSEA = .045 (Sharma et al. 2005). The measurement scales meet the criteria such as discriminant value, one-dimensional, convergence value as shown in Table 4, all indicators of composite reliability (CR), the average variance extracted (AVE) were greater than .5 for all constructs.

Table 4: Model 3 – Satisfaction

| Concepts | CR | AVE | MSV | ASV |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| Satisfaction | 0.908 | 0.712 | 0.366 | 0.263 |
| Visit | 0.835 | 0.560 | 0.419 | 0.280 |
| Performance | 0.903 | 0.699 | 0.209 | 0.153 |
| Market information | 0.882 | 0.713 | 0.174 | 0.142 |
| Personal interaction | 0.878 | 0.644 | 0.402 | 0.308 |
| Collaboration | 0.910 | 0.772 | 0.366 | 0.226 |
| Product quality | 0.844 | 0.644 | 0.361 | 0.211 |
| Communication | 0.880 | 0.710 | 0.419 | 0.286 |
| Delivery quality | 0.879 | 0.708 | 0.392 | 0.275 |

5. Hypothesis Test Results and Discussions

This study conducted aims to identify the components and determinants of RQ between manufacturers and distributors in Vietnamese plastic industry. The research found that there are three components of the relationship quality: (1) trust, (2) commitment, and (3) satisfaction. The antecedents of the relationship quality consist of 6 factors: (1) product quality, (2) delivery quality, (3) market information, (4) personal interaction and (6) visits. The consequences of the relationship quality consist of two factors: (1) business performance, and (2) collaboration. The hypothesis test results are shown in Table 5 below.

Hypotheses testing resulted in 20 hypotheses were supported at the significance of 1 % or 5%, and 4 hypotheses were rejected at the significance of 5%. Specifically, market information, product quality, delivery quality, personal interaction, visit have a positive influence on satisfaction at 5% significance level. Satisfaction impacts on business performance and collaboration at 0.001% significance level.

Communication, delivery quality, and personal interaction have a positive impact on commitment at 5% significance level. Product quality influences positively commitment at 0.001% significance level. Commitment impacts on business performance and collaboration at 0.001% significance level.

Market information, product quality, and communication have a positive impact on trust at 0.001% significance level. Delivery quality, personal interaction, and visit influence positively on trust at 5% significance level. Trust impacts on business performance and collaboration at 0.001% significance level.

Table 5: Hypotheses Testing Results

| Hypotheses | Relations | | | λ (*) | P- value | Conclusion |
|------------|-----------|---|-----|---------------|----------|-----------------|
| Ha1(+) | MI | → | Sa | .095 | .025 | Supported |
| Ha2(+) | PQ | → | Sa | .337 | *** | Supported |
| Ha3(+) | Co | → | Sa | .072 | .151 | <i>Rejected</i> |
| Ha4(+) | DQ | → | Sa | .246 | *** | Supported |
| Ha5(+) | PI | → | Sa | .120 | .021 | Supported |
| Ha6(+) | Vi | → | Sa | .105 | .046 | Supported |
| Ha7(+) | Sa | → | Per | .461 | *** | Supported |
| Ha8(+) | Sa | → | Col | .559 | *** | Supported |
| Hb1(+) | MI | → | Com | .056 | .181 | <i>Rejected</i> |
| Hb2(+) | PQ | → | Com | .275 | *** | Supported |
| Hb3(+) | Co | → | Com | .116 | .019 | Supported |
| Hb4(+) | DQ | → | Com | .133 | .007 | Supported |
| Hb5(+) | PI | → | Com | .160 | .002 | Supported |
| Hb6(+) | Vi | → | Com | .088 | .088 | <i>Rejected</i> |
| Hb7(+) | Com | → | Per | .411 | *** | Supported |
| Hb8(+) | Com | → | Col | .573 | *** | Supported |
| Hc1(+) | MI | → | Tr | .184 | *** | Supported |
| Hc2(+) | PQ | → | Tr | .253 | *** | Supported |
| Hc3(+) | Co | → | Tr | .224 | *** | Supported |
| Hc4(+) | DQ | → | Tr | .202 | .001 | Supported |
| Hc5(+) | PI | → | Tr | .075 | .232 | <i>Rejected</i> |
| Hc6(+) | Vi | → | Tr | .180 | .005 | Supported |
| Hc7(+) | Tr | → | Per | .455 | *** | Supported |
| Hc8(+) | Tr | → | Col | .482 | *** | Supported |

Notes: (*) – standardized regression estimate; (***) – p value < 0.001

6. Conclusion, Implications and Limitations

The quality of relationship between manufacturers and distributors in plastic industry is multidimensional concept with three components (satisfaction, commitment, and trust). Its antecedents are market information, product quality, delivery quality, communication, personal interaction, and visit. Its consequences are business performance and collaboration.

The results imply that to improve business performance and the collaboration between partners, they should build up partners' trust and commitment, and satisfy their counterparts. To increase the relationship quality partners should improve product

quality, delivery quality, communication, personal interaction, share market information, and visit partners regularly.

The study was conducted with 560 plastic manufacturers and distributors in Vietnam, thus the generalization of the research results is limited. Other factors such as problem solving, adaptive with changes, and continuous improvement which could influence on RQ would be found if the research conducted in the other industries.

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