
The Converging Link between Supply Chain Management and Marketing in a Business-to-Business Environment -A Descriptive Study-

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Abstract:

Over the past few years, marketing experts have transitioned from engaging in transactional interactions to establishing relational ones, prioritising nurturing long-term connections with important clients. This transition has been seen in several bodies of marketing literature, such as relationship marketing, customer relationship management (CRM), and Key Account Management (KAM). The business-to-business market includes a wide range of industrial and commercial activities throughout the supply chain, emphasising the need for key accounts to effectively handle relationships with strategically significant clients. Many deployments of Key Account Management (KAM) fail or are abandoned, despite its substantial impact on revenue. This research aims to highlight the link between marketing and SCM in managing relationships with key accounts, focusing on SMEs in Algeria.

Keywords: Supply chain management, Business to Business marketing, Key accounts Management, Relationship Marketing, descriptive study.

Jel Classification Codes: M310, M300, M110.

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1. Introduction:

In recent years, whether it concerns the B to B (Business to Business) or B to C (Business to Consumer) environment, marketing specialists and practitioners have embraced two major shifts in the conduct of their activities and exchanges. First, there has been a shift from transactional exchanges to relational exchanges, intended for the long term (Webster 1992). Secondly, marketing specialists have moved away from the assumption that demand is homogeneous, acknowledging the reality of demand heterogeneity and the diverse value customers bring (Niraj et al., 2001). The impact of these two mindset shifts has been evident for years across various marketing literature streams, notably in relationship marketing (Parvatiyar and Sheth 2000), customer relationship management (CRM) (Reinartz et al., 2004), and Key Account Management (KAM) (Workman et al., 2003).

The business-to-business market encompasses a vast array of industrial and commercial transactions along the supply chain, possibly more extensive than practitioners might anticipate. Considering all interactions - from raw material suppliers, agents, distributors, manufacturers, wholesalers to business buyers - it becomes apparent that industrial markets (or B to B) are significantly larger and often more valuable than markets between businesses and consumers and can be just as interesting (Wright, 2004).

In this context, there is a growing and significant importance for key accounts within the business-to-business markets. Indeed, Key Account Management (KAM) represents one of the most significant changes in sales that have emerged over the last two decades. It signifies the birth of a radically different organisational process used by business-to-business suppliers to manage their relationships with strategically important customers, aiming to generate measurable business benefits. However, unfortunately, many implementations of Key Accounts Management (KM) fail or are abandoned.

One avenue through which researchers could examine the management of relationships with key accounts is Supply Chain Management (SCM), a well-established field known for its interdisciplinary research. Although it has gone almost unnoticed in the marketing field, supply chain management has seen significant developments, such as strategic sourcing (Ryals and Rogers 2006) and marketing logistics (Christopher and Gattorna, 2005), which impact relationship management. Supply chain relationships are now characterised by long-term commitments with a select number of suppliers, grounded in mutual trust (Christopher and Gattorna, 2005).

Thus, the purpose of this research is to highlight the link between marketing (particularly in its relational dimension) and Supply Chain Management in the management of relationships with key accounts. A literature review on both SCM and KAM (Key Accounts Management) concepts will be conducted, leading to an exploration of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) through the lens of Supply Chain Management. An

empirical study was conducted involving a sample of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the northwest region of Algeria to understand how the management of key customer relationships unfolds along the supply chain.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Key Account Management (KAM):

Various terms, including 'clients' and 'buyers,' are utilised in B2B literature to refer to key accounts. McDonald et al. (2000) delineate key accounts as "customers in a business-to-business market, identified by selling companies as being of strategic importance." Customers of strategic importance can be identified using several criteria. Campbell and Cunningham (1983) identified criteria such as sales volume, strategic resource usage, the longevity of the relationship, the supplier's share in the client's purchases, and the client's profitability for the supplier. Subsequently, Millman and Wilson (1999) proposed a combination of "hard" (sales, profit, etc.) and "soft" (compatibility, trust, commitment) criteria to define key account criteria.

According to Millman and Wilson (1995), the concept of KAM focuses on examining the enduring collaborative connections between suppliers and buyers/customers, as opposed to transactional customer management strategies that primarily revolve around sales. During the early to mid-1990s, there was a notable shift in research focus from the main types of inter-business relationships to the management of key major accounts. This research area gained prominence as it became a central topic of debate regarding the profitability of large customers (Kalwani and Narayandas 1995). The dispute surrounding the definition of a key account, sometimes referred to as the "size versus value" issue, was expanded upon by Millman and Wilson (1996) and McDonald et al. (2000). These scholars provided a definition of a key account as a customer who holds strategic significance for the supplier, irrespective of the scale of its business.

Key Account Management (KAM) identifies the customer as a long-term investment towards generating future profits. This investment may require "a short-term sacrifice for potential long-term gains" (Cheverton, 1999). KAM is typically associated with business-to-business relations (Ojasalo, 2001), encompassing both tangible elements and service components (Gronroos, 1990). Diller (1992) defines KAM as a management concept, including both organisational and sales strategies to achieve sustainable customer relationships. McDonald et al. (2000) suggest that KAM is "an approach adopted by selling companies aiming to build a portfolio of loyal major accounts by continually offering a set of products/services tailored to their individual needs."

According to the existing literature on relationship marketing, Key Account Management (KAM) is a strategic approach that involves the creation of value by implementing targeted processes aimed at the most significant clients (Wengler et al., 2006). Organizations have adopted KAM approaches because it is not possible

for a single individual to provide special treatment and unique processes to the most important customers. This requires a coordinated effort across product divisions, sales regions, and functional groups at different levels (Workman et al., 2003). One of the most widely recognized methodologies is the concept of industrial networks, which encompasses three key dimensions: (1) connections among actors, (2) connections between activities, and (3) connections between resources (Veludo, 2009). The mentioned elements embody the essence of the commercial association and can be seen as symbolic of the "formal" and "organizational" dimensions of customer relationship management. Further elaboration on these parameters is provided below (ALHussan et al., 2014):

- **Actors:** are individuals who engage in actions and/or have authority over resources. Various stakeholders, such as key account managers, senior executives, and sales teams, play a significant role in fostering and maintaining commercial partnerships.
- **Activities:** Elucidate the various tasks performed within the network. According to Håkansson and Johanson (1992), an activity is defined as the process by which one or more actors engage in the combination, development, exchange, or creation of resources utilizing other resources. These activities encompass the production of goods and services, as well as the management and exchange of administrative, technical, and commercial matters between companies and organizations that have a business relationship.
- **Resources:** The execution of activities requires resources. Links between resources connect the elements of companies to each other. Actors bring the resources, and all resources are controlled by the actors, either by a single actor or by many actors combining their resources to create a shared resource (Håkansson and Johanson, 1992). Resources include technological, human, commercial, and other resources that interacting organisations share and upon which decisions may become dependent on another organisation's resources.

Moreover, the research on significant account management programs reveals four primary elements that closely align with the aspects of the industrial network strategy. Initially, programs that involve unique and targeted inter-organizational operations for important accounts that are not available to regular accounts. According to Montgomery and Yip (2000), these actions pertain to several aspects like price, products, services, distribution, and information sharing. Furthermore, important account programs frequently entail the involvement of dedicated players within the firm. Typically, these important account managers assume responsibility for multiple clients and possess significant organizational responsibilities. According to Millman (1996), these items can be situated at the supplier's main office, within the local commercial organization of the country where the key account operates, or even within the facilities of the key account itself. The need of special arrangements, compensation, and abilities for key account managers is frequently underscored, leading to consequences for their selection, training, and career trajectory (Colletti & Tubridy, 1987).

Also, key account management encompasses other functional units, including marketing, sales, manufacturing, R&D, and finance, in addition to marketing and sales. The establishment of major account programs is impacted by the attributes of the purchasers and the market conditions, including the consolidation of procurement, the intricacy or clustering of demand, and the level of competitiveness.

With the increasing advancements in information technology, it can be observed that companies follow key account management practices because it benefits both parties. The strategic relationships with accounts are very complex. It is crucial to understand the creation and capture of value in KAM relationships. Understanding the value of each key account should allow managers to see where the opportunities lie to develop a mutually beneficial approach to generating and sharing financial value.

2.2. Supply chain management (scm) and the relational factor:

A supply chain can be visualised as a network of companies serving and being served by many other companies. However, it is conceptually easier to imagine a chain as a river, starting from a source, moving downstream, and ending in a well. The concept of Supply Chain Management focuses on managing the flows between actors involved along the same industrial chain. It is defined as the management of coordinated relationships between suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, and retailers to transform raw material into final consumer goods. This vertical coordination is assumed to generate gains superior to those obtained from a purely commercial organisation (Johnston and Lawrence, 1988). It concerns both the planning and control of raw material and information flows and the actual logistical activities within the chain (Chen and Paulraj, 2004).

According to Harrison (2001), a supply chain is considered a logistical channel that provides the means to acquire information, products, and services through manufacturers or suppliers to end customers in the most efficient way possible. It involves operations within the organisation that are directly or indirectly linked to provide products and services to end customers.

In other words, SCM can be described as the parallel management and coordination of a complex network of processes aimed at providing end users with products or services in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible (Storey et al., 2006). The involved processes include sourcing and inventory of raw materials and parts, work-in-progress, manufacturing and assembly of products, order entry and tracking, transportation, and distribution, and finally the delivery of finished products to end users.

According to the literature, four main activities are involved in SCM: procurement, production, distribution, and financial affairs. These main activities are either directly or indirectly related to the key members of the supply chain, which requires establishing a good relationship between these parties to avoid conflicts of interest and to achieve a win-win situation for all chain actors (Britic, 2011).

The literature on Supply Chain Management indicates that its performance is measured across five major categories (Storey et al., 2006):

- Reliability;
- Response speed;
- Agility;
- Costs;
- Assets.

Kelle and Akbulut (2005) declared that these metrics were insufficient and that the quality of relationships must be introduced into the performance measurement of SCM. Two years later, Bhagwat and Sharma (2007) suggested the same, namely that a company should also pay attention to customer service and the relationship with them. However, there is a real lack in SCM when addressing the relational aspect. Indeed, very few studies have focused on this issue, a point that will be discussed below.

2.2.1. The Relational Factor within SCM

The notion that an efficient supply chain would alone guarantee adequate final customer satisfaction by reducing costs is not necessarily an adequate model. The concept that a streamlined supply chain will alone ensure satisfactory end customer satisfaction through cost reduction is not necessarily a sufficient model on its own. According to Walters and Rainbird (2004), customer satisfaction is primarily influenced by a lower price, which leads to a decrease in the efficiency of the supply chain. This reduction in efficiency is characterized by an excessive emphasis on cost reduction, which comes at the expense of broader business objectives and the development of long-term relationships.

Therefore, it can be said that the main competitive advantage of SCM, cost reduction, is a double-edged sword (Green et al., 2006). It is worth mentioning that SCM has evolved from a traditional focus on procurement and logistics to a broader and more integrated focus on value creation. Martin and Grbac (2003) state that SCM is very important for responsiveness to customer needs. Successful initiatives require interfunctional integration, and marketing, particularly in its relational dimension, must play a key role.

The existing body of literature offers comprehensive guidance on how to attain this objective. However, in practical terms, it is commonly defined as the process of integrating supply chains to enhance customer satisfaction (Peck and Juttner, 2000). The current body of empirical research on the modeling and investigation of end-to-end supply chain connections is inadequate and obsolete, despite suppliers acknowledging the importance of integrating with their customers. Macbeth (2002) acknowledges the significance of establishing enduring partnership connections that prioritize the resolution of intricate problems. Furthermore, it is

acknowledged that these partnerships should be founded on transparency, the sharing of risks and rewards, and the utilization of each partner's expertise to attain a level of competitive performance that is beyond the capabilities of an individual. Nevertheless, it is evident that organizations continue to prioritize short-term objectives, which often leads to the formation of conflicting partnerships. Moreover, the establishment of partnership ties is impeded by inadequate communication and a hesitancy to embrace a shift in mindset.

However, these agreements are necessary to address opportunistic temptations. Additionally, it is crucial to develop strong inter-company ties through partnerships as a foundation for attaining the operational advantages of supply chain management (Christopher and Ryals, 2014). In summary, the theory of supply chain management (SCM) is widely recognized within academic and business spheres, although there exists a dearth of research pertaining to its practical application.

2.3. Supply Chain Management (SCM) and Key Account Management (KAM):

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) assert that there has been a significant transformation in the customer's position. Customers have transitioned from a state of isolation, unawareness, and passivity to one of increased awareness and activity. This phenomenon can be attributed, in part, to the extensive array of information accessible to consumers in the contemporary digital era. As a result of this transformation, the market has transitioned from large-scale manufacturing to products that prioritize client satisfaction. Customers' wants and requirements have grown increasingly intricate, and their expectations have escalated.

In 2000, Vehlhaber suggested that Supply Chain Management should move from a "pull" orientation, based on demand, rather than the traditional "push" orientation, based on production. Christopher and Ryals (2014) emphasised this by proposing a model called "Demand Chain Management," to highlight the importance of the customer and managing the relationship with them. However, the research conducted by Humphries and Wilding (2003, 2004) employed an interdisciplinary methodology that combined the principles of supply chain management (SCM), transaction cost economics, and relationship marketing. This approach aimed to comprehensively analyze the dynamics within a diverse range of interconnected dyadic supply chain relationships. The researchers employed a blend of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to construct a model that yielded comprehensive insights into the interconnections within supply chain management (SCM). The Humphries and Wilding model is noteworthy because to its emphasis on the perceived alignment between the relational characteristics of KAM, as outlined in the relationship marketing literature (Ivens and Mayrhofer, 2003), and the main dimensions of SCM that they have identified.

The first dimension to consider is *value*, and more specifically the exchange of value, which forms the very foundation of a win-win relationship. Although value chain analysis, as developed by Michael Porter in 1985, is considered effective for creating a sustainable platform for value generation for companies to gain a competitive

advantage in the industry, the proposition is not without significant limitations, as are all other popular frameworks in the strategic management literature. The main obstacle to enhancing value appears to be motivating supply chain managers by communicating a clear vision of the benefits to be achieved in a highly complex and uncertain environment (Macbeth and Wagner 2000). Galbreath (2002) cites evidence of the positive financial impact of strategic partnerships with KAM over the long term and efficiently managed supply chains. Thus, creating value from the supply chain should be a major goal in managing key account customers (KAM).

The second dimension is *reliability*, which is frequently construed as trust in the relationship marketing literature, constitutes the second dimension. Ensuring reliability in the supply chain necessitates prioritizing the provision of services and products, minimizing shared expenses and risks, and fostering trust. Trust, as defined by Morgan and Hunt, refers to the state in which one party has confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner. Relational commitment, on the other hand, refers to an exchange partner believing that maintaining an ongoing relationship is of utmost importance and requires maximum effort. Similar to their initial roles in the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, trust and relational reliability have a positive impact on the efficiency of the relationship. As trust and relational reliability increase, the efficiency of the relationship also increases. Nevertheless, we contend that dedication in a buyer-seller agreement can stem from necessity rather than trust. Furthermore, the presence of trust does not necessarily imply a commercial necessity for commitment, thereby suggesting that trust alone may not necessarily result in increased engagement within the partnership. We propose that these two primary elements contribute to the efficiency of the relationship, rather than one factor causing the other.

Creativity is a highly valued aspect, and to foster it within the supply chain, it has been widely acknowledged that minimizing the number of suppliers is imperative. This is due to the increased managerial effort required to maintain strong and intense connections (Langley and Holcomb, 1992). The objective is to establish a closer and more efficient collaboration with supply chain partners who possess the greatest influence on the entire functioning of the organization. These partners are identified as key accounts, as recognised by Peck and Jüttner (2000). Undoubtedly, by having a smaller number of strategic partners, it becomes feasible to exchange sensitive information regarding demand, hence diminishing uncertainty, inventories, expenses, and the duration of the order cycle. According to Christopher and Gattorna (2005), there is a consensus that the financial advantages of supply chain management (SCM) can surpass the supplementary expenses in management by a margin exceeding 20%.

The fourth dimension to consider is *stability*. The concept of stability here is not strategic but is closer in spirit to general equilibrium models, where actors perceive the conditions surrounding them as given, and

optimise based on these conditions. In the context of chain stability, actors also perceive the surrounding conditions as given (i.e., which other agents are willing to make contracts with them and what these contracts are), and optimise based on these conditions (Ostrovsky, 2005). Continuous improvement, shared benefits, and the exchange of information between suppliers and key accounts, solving problems by working together, can lead to the protection of partners from systemic forces according to Lamming et al. (2001).

Finally, communication is the last proposed dimension. Communication is defined as the formal and informal exchange and sharing of meaningful and timely information between buyers and sellers. Communication fosters trust by helping to resolve disputes and align perceptions and expectations (Etusman 2001). Relationship marketing research also emphasises the importance of information exchanges in business relationships. For example, Mohr and Nevin (1990) called communication "the glue that holds together a distribution channel." Anderson and Narus (1990) highlighted the crucial role of communication in forming cooperation and trust in partnerships (Sin et al., 2006). Communication to and from KAM differs from non-KAM relationships in that they are characterised by multiple communication links between two organisations.

3. Methodology:

The aim of this research is to describe how the management of the relationship with Key Accounts (KA) is handled throughout the Supply Chain. Our sample consists of both state-owned and private companies from various sectors of activity, primarily concentrated in the following provinces of the northwest region of Algeria: Oran, Mascara, Relizane, Mostaganem, and Sidi Bel-Abbes. We distributed 102 questionnaires over the period from May 1, 2024, to August 7, 2024. This questionnaire targets company managers or heads of the marketing (commercial) department. Out of the 102 questionnaires administered, only 73 were completed. In other words, the number of valid questionnaires is about 71.5%.

To measure the different explanatory dimensions of managing the relationship with key accounts within the supply chain, we adapted a measurement scale centred around five dimensions, based on the combination of two measurement scales developed by Signaw, Simpson, and Baker (1998) and Humphries and Wilding (2004), whose psychometric properties have proven to be very favourable, hence our choice. The dimensions in question are:

- Creativity (8 items): This dimension concerns the promotion of quality, innovation, and a long-term approach by encouraging high performance.
- Stability (6 items): It revolves around synchronising objectives and reinforcing confidence.
- Reliability (10 items): It is expressed by the provision of services and products, reducing common costs and risks, and improving trust.
- Communication (8 items): It includes the willingness to share data, common performance measures, and

frequent interaction.

-Value Exchange (7 items): It is about creating a win-win relationship where each party is delighted to be involved.

All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

4. Results and Discussion:

Our initial results focus on the profile of the companies studied. Our sample of companies consists of 20.5% belonging to the industrial sector, 28.8% from the agricultural and agri-food sector and most of our companies are active in the services sector with 35.6% representation in our sample. 6.8% belong to the energy sector, and 8.2% operate in other sectors. The predominance of the tertiary sector reflects the rise of new needs that have emerged with the expansion of mobile telephony, online banking, training, etc. These services are addressed to both end consumers and companies (private or state-owned).

Regarding our respondents, 64.4% of the company leaders or heads of the marketing (commercial) department were men, while 35.6% were women. This coincides with the fact that entrepreneurship remains a predominantly male activity, despite the promotion of female entrepreneurship in Algeria. The most representative age category was 41-50 years with 47.9%, followed by 51-60 years with 37%, against only 9.6% for the 31-40 years and 5.5% for those over 60 years.

The figure below (Fig 1) highlights the results of the question aimed at the managers' opinion on the supply chain management by their company.

Fig N° 1: Opinion on Supply Chain Management



Source:by the author, adapted from SPSS 23

9.6% believed that the management of their supply chain could be improved, while 32.9% considered it average. However, the majority judged it to be good and excellent, at 46.6% and 11%, respectively.

Finally, our last question regarding the company profile was to know the degree of importance of eight different criteria for exchanges with a supplier and/or significant client. Table N°1 groups our results.

Table N°1: Degree of importance of different criteria for exchanges with the supplier

variables	Totally agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Trust	6.8%	65.8%	13.7%	9.6%	4.1%
Commitment	35.6%	58.9%	0%	5.5%	0%
Cost Reduction	41.4%	45.2%	8.2%	2.7%	2.8%
Quality	39.7%	52.1%	6.8%	0%	1.4%
Time	57.5%	39.7%	1.4%	0%	1.4%
Personal Sympathy	50.9%	40.7%	4.1%	2.6%	1.7%
Skill and Sales Gain	16.4%	67.1%	10.9%	2.9%	2.7%
Value Creation	21.9%	68.5%	6.7%	1.5%	1.4%

Source:by the author, adapted from SPSS 23

The table above informs us that time remains a critical criterion in companies' exchanges with their clients and suppliers within the Supply Chain. This can be interpreted as the importance of respecting production and delivery deadlines in the industrial chain. Commitment comes in second, reflecting the continuity and long-term orientation of exchanges so that both parties can maintain relationships within the supply chain and thus ensure efficiency in exchanges. Quality and personal sympathy follow in order of importance, some studies have demonstrated the importance of kindness and empathy in maintaining long-term customer relationships in the B2B environment, thus, quality represents both the product/service and the attention to needs throughout the supply chain (Jiang et al., 2016). Value creation, cost reduction, skill and sales gain, and trust also have their importance but to a lesser extent compared to other criteria.

We now move on to tests related to our measurement scale aimed at capturing how the management of key client relationships unfolds along the supply chain. We first conducted a Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin sampling adequacy measure, which was approvable (above 0.5), indicating that the correlation between our items is of good quality, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (below 0.05). Regarding the internal consistency of the scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. The results are presented in the table below (Table N°2).

Table N°2. Reliability, KMO, and Bartlett's Test

variables	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO Index	Bartlett's Test
Creativity	0.70	0.620	0.000
Stability	0.67	0.725	0.000
Reliability	0.87	0.836	0.000
Communication	0.77	0.794	0.000
Value Exchange	0.72	0.718	0.000

Source:by the author, adapted from SPSS 23

Factor analysis determines the structure and reliability of the measurement scale. Nunnally (1978) recommended using an Alpha greater than 0.6 to determine the reliability of a measure. Our values are above 0.6, indicating that our scale is quite reliable.

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Table N°3. Descriptive Results by item

Items	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Creativity 1	3.96	4.00	0.949
Creativity 2	4.22	4.00	0.961
Creativity 3	3.25	4.00	0.969
Creativity 4	4.14	4.00	0.990
Creativity 5	4.01	4.00	0.825
Creativity6	3.68	4.00	1.066
Creativity7	3.53	4.00	1.237
Creativity8	3.16	4.00	1.247
Stability 1	3.21	3.00	1.194
Stability 2	3.45	4.00	1.131
Stability 3	3.32	4.00	1.093
Stability 4	3.25	3.00	1.092
Stability 5	2.87	3.00	1.133
Stability 6	3.35	4.00	1.043
Reliability 1	3.04	3.00	1.119
Reliability 2	3.42	4.00	1.084
Reliability 3	2.90	3.00	1.313
Reliability 4	3.14	3.00	1.011
Reliability 5	2.69	3.00	1.109
Reliability 6	3.46	4.00	0.978
Reliability 7	3.22	4.00	1.224
Reliability 8	3.22	3.00	1.189
Reliability 9	3.46	4.00	1.125
Reliability 10	3.38	4.00	1.054
Communication1	3.32	4.00	1.066
Communication2	2.86	3.00	1.122
Communication3	3.33	4.00	1.068
Communication4	3.08	3.00	1.090
Communication5	3.47	4.00	1.042
Communication6	2.97	3.00	1.247
Communication7	3.18	3.00	1.005
Communication8	2.95	3.00	1.092
Value Exchange1	3.56	4.00	0.874
Value Exchange2	3.18	4.00	1.257
Value Exchange3	3.21	3.00	1.194
Value Exchange4	3.45	4.00	1.131
Value Exchange5	3.32	4.00	1.093
Value Exchange6	3.25	3.00	1.092
Value Exchange7	3.06	3.00	1.081

Source:by the author, adapted from SPSS 23

The table above clearly shows that the average scores of the variables studied across our dimensions are around 3.40, which represents an acceptable level of acceptance. The standard deviation is approximately 1.091. We used the standard deviation to measure the degree of representativeness of the average in relation to the observed data. Small deviations represent a scenario in which most data points are close to the average, which is the case for us. Regarding the creativity dimension, the average is 3.74, the median is 4.00, and the standard deviation is 1.030. This means that creativity plays an important role in managing the relationship with key accounts throughout the supply chain. Indeed, the relationship encourages both parties to achieve high performance, i.e., reliable equipment, timely deliveries, and good forecasting. It encourages innovation in the way of working and helps to measure performance and improve standards. Disputes and problems are resolved "quickly" and "fairly". There is reliability and consistency in the relationship, and clients feel that the parties are committed to the success of their business throughout the chain. Finally, when an unexpected problem arises, both parties prefer to find a solution rather than stick to the initial contract conditions. In summary, our results demonstrate that creativity is not just the process of finding original ideas as one might intuitively define it. Although it has a significant impact, creativity is not limited to ideation. Creativity is rather the ability to find appealing, unique, and high-quality solutions to problems (Reiter-Palmon, Murugavel, and Linnell, 2023).

Regarding stability, we record a higher level of acceptance for items 2, 3, and 6. This reflects agreement regarding the clarity of the parties' objectives throughout the chain, their compatibility, as well as confidence in the other party's intentions. Item 5, which achieved less conclusive results, suggests our sample judged that the relationship does not always provide a dynamic business environment in which both parties can gain increasingly significant rewards. We know that the business environment is an important concept that significantly impacts a company's operations and overall strategy. Dynamism is interpreted in the literature as both technological and regulatory evolution, calling for companies to continuously adapt and respond appropriately. However, in our case, this lack of dynamism limiting new opportunities may be explained by the need to include all stakeholders of the organisation and supply chain, which implies a very complex part of execution and planning.

For the reliability dimension, we notice a higher acceptance rate for items 2, 6, 7, 9, and 10. This indicates that the quality-of-service provision, i.e., delivery times, billing, payment, is satisfactory. There is trust in the other party to act in the best interests of key accounts. The responsibility to ensure the relationship works is jointly shared. Honesty in exchanges is present. And there is an alignment between what is said and what is done. However, with an average of 2.69, a median of 3.00, and a standard deviation of 1.109, item 5 shows that while our sample agrees to testify to the goodwill of the different parties in the supply chain, it is not always flexible enough to "bend over backward" to adapt to evolving needs. Similarly, for item 3, the relationship is not always

characterised by an ethic of constantly improving quality. Yet, we know that a company that wants to demonstrate its relational orientation will try to understand the expectations of its clientele regarding tasks to be accomplished. It will strive to fulfil these roles regularly to demonstrate its consistent reliability (Ivens and Mayrhofer, 2003).

In terms of the communication dimension, it is established that effective communication is the cornerstone of any successful collaboration. In the business-to-business environment, "how you say it" matters more than "what you say." Our results indicate that there is accessibility to information when one of the parties has exclusive information that could improve the performance of the joint business (communication item 1). The results are also significant for communication items 3 and 5, which respectively testify to an understanding of the information needs of all participants in the support chain, from subcontractors to the end user, as well as the importance of objective performance measurement in the supplier and key client relationship throughout the supply chain. However, the results are mixed for the rest of the items. Indeed, this reflects the lack of a shared data environment where information related to planning, technique, and pricing would be freely accessible. There is also a lack of regularity in sharing long-term forecasts, to better carry out activities downstream of the chain, i.e., those of the key client. The results also inform us that information exchanges occur frequently but more often within the framework of a specific agreement and not informally. In sum, these mixed results may indicate that while the initial supplier's approach to communication is what initially convinces the key client to trust the other actors in the supply chain, every decision inevitably creates advantages and disadvantages for one or more parties.

Now, let's move on to the last dimension concerning value exchange. The results in Table 3 inform us that the degree of agreement for items 1, 2, 4, and 5 is particularly positive. It indicates that the gains from this relationship are equally shared among the parties operating in the supply chain, that key accounts (KA) do not feel trapped in the current relationship with the initial supplier, that they express satisfaction knowing that their future is linked to the success of partners within the chain, and that their commitment is total.

In summary, our study demonstrates that the management of the relationship with KAs throughout the supply chain is managed as follows:

- The sense of creativity and increased resources should lead to superior, sustainable positive outcomes. Indeed, it is strongly linked to the performance of all parties included in the supply chain, seeking collective solutions and calling on innovation to best meet the needs of KAs, and ensuring follow-up to achieve a common goal.
- Stability is expressed through common objectives and is based on the mutual utility of the parties. Offering reciprocity and thus demonstrating sincerity and interest in the achievements of others throughout the chain.

- Efficiency is crucial for reliability in the supply chain, as stated by Harland (1996). Our findings demonstrate a shift in attitudes and the importance of trust and commitment in establishing an effective relational exchange throughout the entire chain, from upstream to downstream.
- Better communication often implies sharing risks. However, risk management is not among the skills of those who usually manage inter-business relationships (Lamming et al., 2001). This may explain the contradictory results obtained on this dimension.
- Finally, the exchange of value is derived from the experiences and personal relationships involved in the exchange of resources and the benefits provided by the different actors in the chain, linked by economic exchange.

5. Conclusion:

A central notion of marketing is that its activities aim to establish, develop, and maintain fruitful exchange relationships. Within marketing, the rapidly expanding field of Key Account Management (KAM) examines the main supply chain relationships, essentially from the supplier's perspective. A key account is a business customer identified by the supplier as having strategic importance (McDonald et al., 1997). In recent years, while the concept of Supply Chain Management (SCM) has continued to evolve in the direction of value chain management (Womack and Jones, 2005), recognizing the importance not only of efficiently supplying or producing but also of ensuring that this is done in the context of a real understanding of demand. However, there is a glaring lack of research focused on the relational aspect that SCM can and should include.

This modest work has attempted to explore the existing link between marketing, particularly relationship marketing, and SCM, in the context of key customers, named Key Accounts (KA) in the Business-to-Business literature. Although the field remains almost unexplored and future research can enrich this area, the literature review and the empirical study that was conducted allowed us to deduce a converging link between the relational dimensions related to KAM, which are all drawn from the relational marketing literature. And those proposed by one of the only studies done on this issue, namely the model by Humphries and Wilding, which proposes almost the same dimensions to properly include the relational factor in SCM.

The literature, although scant and dated, confirms the growing overlap between KA relationship management and supply chain management in certain key relational dimensions. The exchange of values, creativity and reliability, flexibility, relationship stability, and communication are descriptors of the inter-business supply chain and key account management. Finally, we can suggest that managing the relationship with key clients throughout the chain involves adopting collaborative working methods with clients and other suppliers, rather than traditional transactional and conflictual relationships.

This alignment of interests, behaviours, and intentions is a recurring theme in relationship marketing research, even though it bears different names such as commitment (Ojasalo, 2001), reciprocity or relationship marketing (Sheth, 2020), strategic/operational fit (Richards and Jones, 2009), consistency of relational requirements (Piercy and Lane, 2006), or strategic intention (Anser et al., 2021).

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