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The development of trust over time in an emerging market context: the case of the Tunisian automotive sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to empirically investigate how context influences the quality of business relationships. This theoretical question is studied from the point of view of trust, one of the important components of business relationship quality. The authors study how trust is related to the dynamics and management of the business relationship in the context of an emerging market.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on qualitative interviews with 15 spare-parts resellers in the Tunisian automotive industry. The authors take a monadic view, interviewing resellers about their relationships with their wholesalers-importers. The decision to undertake the research in Tunisia is based on three factors. First, Tunisia is an emerging country and there is very little published research based in the Maghreb countries. Second, the Tunisian automotive parts market structure is relatively simple and, hence, easily understood, with most spare-parts being imported because of the low level of local production. Third, the actors in the study are all Tunisian companies, so research allows us to explore relationships between local companies in an emerging country.

Findings – The authors find that different kinds of trust play different roles over the dynamics of the relationship. Perceived trust is more important at the emergent stage of a relationship, and as the two parties learn from each other, experienced trust becomes more important in the established relationships. The initial perceived trust creates the possibility of building trust, and when mutual trust exists between the parties, it motivates them to maintain the relationship, but there is always the threat of the degradation of the quality of the relationship because of the violation or destruction of the trust.

Research limitations/implications – This paper shows that more care should be taken when using trust as the variable under scrutiny. Different aspects of trust manifest themselves at various stages of the relationship building cycle.

Practical implications – The results emphasize that when initiating a business relationship, managers first need to create perceived trust. Thereafter, once trust is built up, it is the trust that may "manage" or act to control the on-going relationship as long as the partners' behavior or network changes do not violate the trust.

Originality/value – The results of this paper show that there is a mutual but not necessarily symmetrical or balanced influence of trust on the behavior of the partners involved. The influence of the different parties is dependent on the power architecture, the history of the relationship and the network position of the actors.

Keywords Tunisia, Trust, Emerging markets, Business relationship management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The characteristics of business in the increasingly important and rapidly growing emerging economies is one of the business-to-business (B2B) marketing knowledge gaps identified by Lilien (2016). Our knowledge of marketing derives almost exclusively from research conducted in high income, industrialized countries (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). However, emerging markets (Kearney, 2012) are dramatically different from traditional industrialized economies in terms of their market heterogeneity, sociopolitical governance, chronic shortage of resources, unbranded competition and inadequate infrastructure (Sheth, 2011). These differences require us to rethink the core assumptions of marketing (Sheth, 2011) and also create a research context in which theories and assumptions and their underlying mechanisms can be studied

(Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). Answering the call for research from Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) and Kearney (2012) about emerging countries, we investigate the emerging economy of Tunisia and its automotive spare-parts market, to study how trust evolves during the relationship development process (Ford, 1980; Mandják et al., 2015).

Applying the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group's (IMP) thinking, a business relationship is considered as an interactive buyer–seller exchange built up over numerous interactions (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Ford et al., 2010). It always has both economic and social dimensions. Short-term exchange episodes (involving the exchange of information, product, financial and social aspects) create the long-term consequences of the relationship. Until the exchange episodes start to produce economic benefits, the social dimension of the relationship consists of a combination of power, trust, cooperation and conflict (Bonoma and Johnston, 1978). These social dimensions of business relationships are the mutual outcomes of the involved partners' capabilities and relational investments on the one hand and of the environmental conditions on the other (Håkansson et al., 2009).

The two parties may also share some values and have mutual interests (Bonoma and Johnston, 1978). The interaction between inter-dependent companies involves elements of cooperation, conflict, integration and separation, often simultaneously (Ford et al., 2002). This interactive element influences and defines the management of business relationships.

Relationship management requires managers to make decisions about and act in the best interests of the relationship (Donaldson and O'Toole, 2000). Managers are, therefore, both decision-makers and actors at the same time (Mainela and Ulkuniemi, 2013). Their decisions are influenced by their perception of the relationship (Mandják and Szántó, 2010). Negotiation between partners, as part of the interactive problem-solving process (Brett, 2017), is an important aspect of relationship management. The social dimensions of the relationships are integral in influencing the managers' perceptions of the quality of the relationship. Thus, relationship quality is fundamental to relationship management. In planning the operationalization of their supply or client relationships, managers need to know the determinants of what influences this quality.

Relationship quality is a multidimensional construct, with Naudé and Buttle (2000) identifying four different types. Of the different attributes determining the quality of a relationship, two were identified as being of particular importance: trust and mutual integration of needs. They suggest that different perceptions exist about what determines quality, and that the role of trust is contingent upon varying situational factors. The authors urged researchers to better understand how different independent variables might influence relationship quality. They hypothesize that the duration of the relationship or the relationship itself may determine quality (Naudé and Buttle, 2000).

Our theoretical starting point is that business relationships always exist in time and space (Håkansson et al., 2009; Ford et al., 2010). Consequently, we operationalize the time dimension by studying the evolution of relationships (Gibbert et al., 2008). This evolution is described by several stage models of business relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987; Wilson, 1995; Ford, 1980). The different stages represent the actual situation of the relationship at one point in time. It is where the managers have to manage the relationship, that is, to make decisions and take actions. The space is operationalized in this research by an emerging market, Tunisia. The complex relationship management task (Ford et al., 2011) is operationalized by one of its specific processes, the negotiation with business partners (Herbst et al., 2011).

The Tunisian automotive spare-parts business network has been chosen as the context of the research for three reasons. First, as an emerging market (Bass, 2016), it may serve as a research context for theory development (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). Second, automotive spare-parts as products are diverse but readily definable and fairly simple. Consequently, the business relationships between the actors involved are relatively similar and the mutual integration of needs is quite clear. Third, the actors in the study are all Tunisian companies, so research allows us to explore relationships between local companies, as suggested by Lilien (2016). In addition, there is very little business research emanating from developing countries in general and more precisely from the Maghreb area. Given that nearly all products are imported, the market structure is relatively simple. The local actors are either intermediaries or customers, typical actors in business marketing.

The paper is structured as follows. A review of the trust and trust building literature gives the theoretical background. The second part details our research process and presents our research into the industry. After presenting and discussing our empirical results, we conclude by identifying the theoretical and managerial implications, the limitations of our study and also identifying some further research questions.

Theoretical background: trust and trust building

Trust is a highly complex phenomenon and several different dimensions can be found in the literature (Lane, 2002). A thorough literature review emphasizes that trust has many definitions, none of which is unanimously accepted (Castaldo et al., 2010). Our starting point is the multidisciplinary definition of Rousseau et al. (1998, p. 395) that "trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another". In a business context, trust is an integral part of buyer-seller relationships (Schoorman et al., 2007). It is a necessary condition for smooth and efficient business transactions to take place between partners, but it is also a highly intangible and volatile asset, being difficult to create and also easy to destroy (Usunier, 2002). Trust itself is not a behavior or choice "but an underlying psychological condition that can cause or result from such actions" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). The predictability of another person's behavior and the fact that behavior produces outcomes that are favorable to the person creating trust objectives are two typical outcomes of trust (Castaldo et al., 2010).

For the partners involved, the benefit of trust is that it facilitates the creation of information and social exchange episodes and helps to make decisions about whether to invest the time and effort to continue doing so (Håkansson et al., 2009; Ford et al., 2010). In this indirect way, trust can help when approaching potential partners. Trust levels influence the interaction process and the relationship that exists between partners (Rousseau et al., 1998). Furthermore, from a network

perspective, trust itself is a resource, in the form of a psychological condition, which in various ways may impact the activities performed (Huemer, 2004).

Aurifeille and Medlin (2009) argue that the partner's credibility and benevolence are the main dimensions of trust, conceptualizing credibility as being the combination of honesty, reliability and expectancy. Benevolence is a psychological state, occurring when managers perceive that the other firm is willing to look after their firm's interests in future. They argue that both credibility and benevolence are time dimensions of trust, with credibility being oriented in the past, and benevolence being forward-looking (Aurifeille and Medlin, 2009).

Within the automotive industry, Sako (1992) studied inter-organizational trust in two different cultures. Analyzing British and Japanese companies, she defined trust as an expectation by an economic actor that its trading partner will behave in a mutually acceptable manner. She distinguished between three types of trust: contractual, competence and goodwill. Contractual trust involves the expectation that the other party will carry out its contractual obligations. Competence trust is about the capability of the partner, that they are able to do what they say, and goodwill trust is the expectation of the clear and mutually beneficial commitment of the partner. Furthermore, she places these types in a hierarchy, arguing that contractual trust is the most basic, and goodwill trust represents the highest level of inter-organizational trust. Goodwill trust tops the hierarchy because it creates the best possibility to predict the other party's behavior. Moreover, it provides the broadest basis for cooperation and supports a lasting relationship. More recent studies in the automotive industry have empirically measured and proved the existence of these types of inter-organizational trust (Sako and Helper, 1998; Miyamoto and Rexha, 2004).

The process of building trust in business relationships
From the point of view of the survival of business relationships, it is essential that we identify the factors that lead to the formation of trust (Sahay, 2003). The basis of trust building is how much the partner is able to predict the behavior of the other party. In this process, the sharing of market information and advance knowledge about the other party play a vital role. Therefore, both social interaction and open communication have an important role in the trust building process (Doney et al., 2007). The building of trust could be hypothesized to be an evolutionary process, involving mutual learning by both parties (Usunier, 2002). Smirnova et al. (2012) argue that expectations and relational norms are important pre-conditions for trust building to occur, implying that expectations, relational norms and trust are all the results of the interaction dynamics.

To perceive and evaluate the partner's credibility and benevolence, it is necessary for one party to possess information about the other's behavior and promises (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Such information is composed of the different signals sent out by the partner. Signals are identified as reputation, brands and adoption of quality standards – and these signals may help relationships to emerge (Castaldo et al., 2010). In addition, the network position of the organization also serves as an important signal, which is typically generated by potential partners or third parties in form of word of mouth, rumors or recommendations. In the case of recommendations, there are three parties involved, the recipient, the recommended party and the recommender who has a positive attitude towards the recommended party. The first relevant interaction is communication, during which the recommendation takes place. This information exchange is not directly connected to any economic event, and is simply a social interaction, where actors in possession of certain characteristics tend to attract other actors with similar characteristics (Wiedmann et al., 2007; Buttle, 1998; Schmitt et al., 2011).

Trust in business relationships is rarely offered spontaneously but requires an extended period of interaction (Lane, 2002). Over time, initial perceived trust must be supported by experienced trust, with the latter related to the interaction process, and generated by the different exchange episodes (Håkansson, 1982). We draw a distinction between perceived and experienced trust because of their different origins. Initial perceived trust is based on the various direct and indirect pieces of information related to the potential partner before any economic interaction takes place, whereas an actor's past actions in a focal business relationship are the origin of experienced trust. Perceived trust is typically important before the established stage of a business relationship. A business relationship can be considered as established when all the four types of exchange episodes, that is, information, product, financial and social exchange episodes have occurred (Håkansson, 1982). Before this stage is reached there is no direct experience of the other actor's behavior in the relationship. However, in an established business relationship, both perceived and experienced trust may play important roles.

The transition from perceived trust to experienced trust (Mayer et al., 1995) could typically happen as the relationship evolves (Ford, 1980). The evolution process distinguishes between different but not necessarily sequential stages where interactions, communication and negotiations between the partners are always happening over time (Ford, 1980). Mandják et al. (2015) emphasize the decisive role of a mutual trust building process during the emergence of a new business relationship.

Trust and negotiation in business relationships
Trust plays a significant role in business negotiations (Brett, 2017). Business negotiation is a process in which two or more parties try to influence each other to achieve their own and common goals. Such goals include the exchange of products, services, skills, information and other resources (Agndal et al., 2017). In a negotiation process, there are negotiating parties, who interact to realize a negotiation outcome. Trust influences both the behavior and the negotiation tactics of the negotiators. Trust may be present at the beginning of negotiation process, when the people with no prior relationship trust each other, unless and until one party's behavior betrays that trust. This is the case of so-called swift trust (Brett, 2017). Trust may be developed or destroyed during the bargaining process, depending on the different negotiation tactics of and the power distribution among the parties (Agndal et al., 2017). Trust also may be the outcome of the negotiation process if both parties are satisfied with the results achieved and are ready to continue their relationship (Preuss and van der Wijst, 2017).

However, from the business relationship point of view, business negotiation is an episode of the interactive exchange process, in which the exchange conditions (e.g. price or delivery

date) are determined (Herbst *et al.*, 2011). As any business negotiation is always an episode within the broader experience of the entire business relationship, it could be misleading to study it alone, and therefore out of context (Håkansson, 1982). The elements of the social dimension of the business relationship, that is, power, trust, cooperation and conflict make up the social dimension which creates the atmosphere of the business negotiation (Bonoma and Johnston, 1978; Håkansson, 1982; Herbst *et al.*, 2011).

Trust, culture and business relationships in emerging economies

Over the past two decades emerging economies have been studied extensively (Kearney, 2012). They encompass the majority of the world's population and land and are growing faster than the developed world (Sheth, 2011). Emerging countries are increasingly recognized as a diverse set of business, cultural, economic, financial, institutional, legal, political and social environments within which to test, reassess and renew perceived wisdoms about how the business world works (Kearney, 2012). In the business context, Grewal *et al.* (2015) cite several key differences between emerging and developed markets. The former are characterized by informal business relationships compared with the relatively more formal and contractual relationships in Western business. A strong influence of political ties and large, often government-owned, local buyer enterprises are more characteristic of emerging markets. In addition, business is typically dominated by informal relationships (Grewal *et al.*, 2015). Lilien (2016) emphasizes that little work has focused on how firms in emerging markets buy from other firms in emerging markets.

Multidisciplinary studies on emerging economies show the important role of culture in business (Kearney, 2012). Darley and Blankson (2008) offer a synopsis of African culture, investigating its implication for organizational behavior, business relationships and negotiations. They found that despite the huge variety and diversity of African cultures, there are some common cultural dimensions such as a hierarchical social structure, the importance of kinship, the primacy of the group and also the value attached to the extended family. In business relationships, reciprocity and respect for the elderly are important guiding principles. Oumlil and Balloun (2017) also clarified the influence of culture on business decisions, comparing North African and the Western business decision-makers.

Limited research deals with the cultural differences and adaptations for the development of trust in business relationships (Weck and Ivanova, 2013). Jukka *et al.* (2017) investigated Finish and Russian business relationships, revealing the important role of relational norms and the business partners' ability to develop trust in relationships where the connected partners came from different, "high or low context" cultures (Hall, 1977). The research of Dadzie *et al.* (2018) explores the relationship between trust and the duration of business relationships in Ghana. They studied the sellers' interpersonal trust perception of the buyer–seller relationship by interviewing cocoa producers and sellers, with their results underlining the important role of trust (Dadzie *et al.*, 2018).

Trust plays a significant role in business negotiations (Elahee and Brooks, 2004), which involve problem-solving social interactions. However, people in different cultures approach social interactions, for example, negotiation, somewhat differently. Culture is one clue to the trust environment. Trust in people and in institutions varies systematically with culture. In Western cultures, people with no prior relationship tend to engage in swift trust (Brett, 2017). In most emerging countries, this swift trust does not exist, perhaps because of the hierarchical social culture, the importance of kinship or the role of extended family (Darley and Blankson, 2008). In a more general way, the lack of immediate/early trust in emerging markets may be caused by their different business contexts (Grewal *et al.*, 2015).

In emerging countries, a typical situation is that presented by Elahee and Brooks (2004, p. 403), who found that in Mexico, to "successfully conduct business-to-business negotiations, efforts should be made to build trust and relationships not just between the business firms, but also between the people representing the firms". They argue that established personal relationships are an absolute requirement for successful business negotiations, with negotiation behavior varying as a function of the trust that is placed on an exchange partner during negotiation. In addition, the nationality of the counterpart plays an important role in determining the extent of trust and the various negotiation tactics of Mexican business people (Elahee and Brooks, 2004).

Following the call for research on emerging economies (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Nakata and Sivakumar, 2001), we focus on the knowledge gap about how business relationships develop in emerging countries (Lilien, 2016).

Method

We studied how trust, as an important component of relationship quality, it is related to the dynamics and the management of the relationship in the Tunisian automotive spare parts market. The relatively simple structure of the industry meant that the mutual integration of needs between wholesalers-importers and the resellers is fairly easily understood. We take a monadic view, having interviewed the resellers about their relationships with their wholesalers-importers. Our paper is based on a qualitative study of the relationships of 15 spare-parts resellers.

In this section, after presenting our qualitative research design, we present the context of our Tunisian field research, that is, the automotive industry. Data collection and data analysis then follow.

Research design

Interviews with professionals was selected as the most appropriate data collection method (Evrard *et al.*, 1997), and given the exploratory nature of our work, theoretical sampling was used (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Respondents were selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic between constructs (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). This sampling technique focuses on identifying data that is sufficiently and significantly relevant to the core category and its related properties. When the core category is saturated – considered sufficiently dense and data collection no longer generates new leads – theoretical sampling ceases (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This qualitative approach was deemed applicable given the scarcity of research

in Southern Mediterranean countries. In addition, we took advantage of privileged access as one of the authors has Tunisian links. However, as Tunisia is not an English-speaking country, the language of the interviews, and consequently, the problem of translation for subsequent data analysis had to be overcome (Evrard *et al.*, 1997).

In conducting the research, we needed to be aware that the respondents were likely to use both Arabic dialects and French. Several studies have addressed the occurrence of code-switching between the Arabic dialects and French in the Maghreb region (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) (for instance Bentahila and Davies, 1983; Davies and Bentahila, 2008). There is general agreement that the relatively recent colonial history of North Africa and the spread of education, as Independence have resulted in the continuing presence of the French language in Tunisia. This competence in French has allowed colloquial Arabic and French to coexist and, inevitably, often end up being used in the same conversation. The origin of this mixture is the need to fill the gaps in the dialect through French and the tendency to "tunisify" French by interspersing it with words and expressions from the dialect. Added to this, the bilingual speaker tends to use the first word that comes to mind, regardless of the reference system when the receiver is also bilingual, which does make subsequent transcription and analysis more difficult.

Research context: Tunisia and its automotive industry

In this section, we first present the environment in which the Tunisian automotive spare-parts' actors are embedded. After showing the general structure of the network, the typical role and relationships of the resellers are described. As shown in Figure 1, the structure of the market is relatively simple, in that the local resellers have a central role in the network. Given the limited number of local manufacturers, the distribution network essentially depends on foreign suppliers, who historically are mainly European spare-parts producers. A local reseller typically has multiple suppliers and so has relationships with both local producers and wholesalers-importers. From the end of the 1990s, Asian and Turkish producers have entered as new suppliers to the market, typically supplying cheaper, unbranded products. Foreign suppliers have business relationships only with the wholesalers-importers, and in those relationships, local agents may have a trustworthy and supporting role, especially in the case of European suppliers because of their traditionally close relationships, based on both historical links and geographical closeness. Wholesalers-

Figure 1 The Tunisian spare-parts network

importers interact with both local producers and with local resellers. The local resellers buy from these two types of suppliers and sell the spare-parts to their clients. Local clients consist of two different types, namely small repair shops and small local enterprises that have their own limited fleet of vehicles. These two can be seen as one segment in that the nature of their buying behavior is very similar given that they are technical people. Taxi drivers are different because while they generally have good knowledge about what to buy, decisions are often based on urgency. In some cases, collective purchasing between a number of taxi drivers is undertaken. Importantly, the taxi drivers know each other well and form an important group of opinion leaders concerning the spare-part brands and the service level of the resellers. Individual end-users are the car drivers who generally do not have clear knowledge about what to buy, but just have a technical problem to be solved, and so they typically look to the reseller for advice and are frequently influenced by the local reseller's technical experts.

Key industry participants

The *wholesalers-importers* have wide-ranging experience and comprehensive knowledge of the international market of the European suppliers and also of Turkish and Asian suppliers. They are in constant contact with their network of resellers and understand the market and how it is developing. Based on their previous relational investments, they have a strong network position in the local resellers' system and well-established relationships with local agents. They have business relationships with foreign suppliers, typically via an agent. The relationships with local resellers are usually managed by the sales manager and a specialized sales force. Generally, these sales managers have a great ability to influence purchases by resellers, and the sales managers and sales force act as the boundary spanners between the importers and resellers (Stock, 2006).

The *local resellers'* network plays the role of supplier of spare-parts to the different end customers. They specialize by type of vehicles (cars and vans versus trucks and buses) and by brand (French, German, Italian, Asian and Swedish). They supply a range of products from the wholesalers-importers and/or local producers (car batteries, shock-absorbers, filters, brake pads, etc.). Given the strong competition between wholesalers-importers in the market, they can negotiate distribution discounts of between 15 and 18 per cent and payment terms of up to 180 days. They generally have good capabilities to collect local market information (e.g. prices, competitors, promotions, newcomers) and have very good knowledge of products and all associated spare-parts' reference numbers, which are necessary when re-ordering. They are also strong when it comes to giving advice to their customers on the merits of different products.

Local resellers make relational investments in two directions. They are strongly connected to the sales management function of the wholesaler-importer. In this case, the relationship revolves around the ordering, trading margins, payment deadlines and profit margins based on the volume of sales. In the other direction, their selling staff have very close contact with the local companies and also with taxi drivers. They have business relationships with the wholesalers-importers and with repair professionals. In the former case, they are the buyers, and in the latter, the sellers. Local resellers are the focus of our
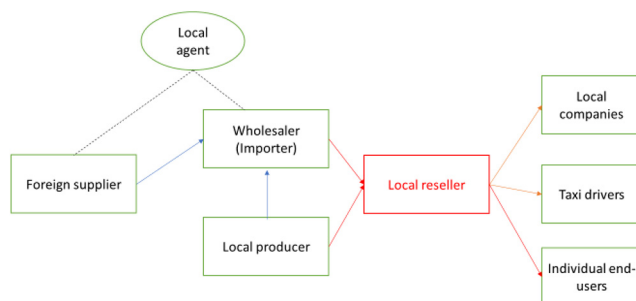
analysis because their contacts with the wholesalers-importers make it possible to study the role of trust in different situations.

Sample and data collection

Our research participants were recruited from the database of a local consulting company. They were selected because they are, on the one hand, key actors in the reseller network, and on the other hand, according to their local reputation, they were qualified to speak about the purpose of the study. To ensure a degree of heterogeneity in the data, we varied the profile of the resellers, selecting respondents with different specialties. Ten were resellers supplying parts for European cars as Peugeot, Citroen, Renault, (R5, R9, R11 and R13) Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes, Audi, (R2, R3 and R15) Fiat and Alfa Romeo (R1, R10 and R12), and three were supplying parts for Asian cars like Toyota, Nissan, Kia and Hyundai (R6, R8 and R14). There were two resellers (R4 and R7) supplying automotive parts for trucks such as IVECO, Scania and OM. The face-to-face interviews all lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were recorded with permission of the interviewees and then transcribed.

Before starting the main data collection, we developed our interview guide by carrying out informal interviews with three resellers who have industry profiles very similar to their colleagues whom we ultimately interviewed. Data collection was undertaken in two steps in 2015 and 2016 in Tunisia, and after 15 interviews, we have found our data sufficiently dense and rich to cease the theoretical sampling. The data collection was done in two phases. First, we informed potential respondents by email of the overall context of the study, with emphasis on its academic character. Then we contacted them by phone to confirm the interview. Finally, we conducted 10 initial interviews which we analyzed. In a second step, to confirm the results obtained, we completed five additional interviews which we analyzed. Table I shows the main characteristics of the interviewees.

The first half of the interview focused on how the reseller's relationships with their suppliers were created and developed over time. All respondents were asked questions such as "How were business relationships created?" "How do business relationships work?" or "Has the business relationship experienced changes?" The second half of the interview focused on trust, the bases of the relationship establishment and decision-making in the particular market. The interview guide covered questions about the different types of trust and the characteristics of each type. In this article, we focus only the role of trust from the perspective of the respondents. Some typical questions from the second part of the interview guide were: "On what basis do you select your suppliers?" "What could influence the nature of business relationships?" or "What is the role of trust in establishing business relations or in the choice of brands?"

Data analysis

After transcribing the full dataset of interviews and making summary sheets of the interviews (Miles and Huberman, 2003), we analyzed them (Spiggle, 1994). To conduct the process of translation of the transcripts, we followed the approach of McDermott and Palchanes (1994). First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim in the Tunisian dialect and then analyzed to facilitate the emergence of concepts and categories. Given that one of the researchers is fluent in the Tunisian dialect, French and English, he translated the transcripts into French and asked another researcher (bilingual in French and English), to translate them from French to English. This version was reached by agreement between the translators. The next step was to ask a third colleague, fluent in French and English, to take the English version and back translate the concepts and categories from English to French. These initial two steps were repeated as necessary to reduce any discrepancies that existed between the original version and the back-translation.

The data analysis was done by identifying and coding different themes in the interview data. Coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis. Our data were gathered from a relatively small sample, and experienced researchers were involved in applying a manual coding process (Saldanõa, 2013). The choice of the codes applied was based on our specific research question into

Table I the Tunisian resellers interviewed

Reseller	Activity	Brands	Year started	Background
R1	Automotive parts for tourism vehicles and utilitarian	IVECO – Fiat-Alfa-Romeo, Lancia	1985	Owner and general manager
R2	Automotive parts for tourism vehicles	V-W, Audi, BMW, Audi, Mercedes	1970	Store manager, an employee of the company
R3	Automotive parts for tourism vehicles	VW, Audi, BMW, Audi, Mercedes	1982	Owner and general manager. Started by his father
R4	Automotive for trucks	Scania and Renault Trucks	1990	Store manager
R5	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Peugeot, Renault, Citroën	1975	Store manager
R6	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Toyota, Nissan, Isuzu, Kia, Mazda	2000	Owner and general manager
R7	Automotive parts for trucks	Iveco, OM, Berliet, Renault-Trucks	2002	Owner and general manager
R8	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Toyota, Nissan, Isuzu, Kia, Mazda	2000	Owner and general manager
R9	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Peugeot, Renault, Citroën	2010	Store manager
R10	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Fiat-Alfa-Romeo, Lancia	1978	Owner and general manager
R11	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Peugeot-Citroën	1970	Owner and general manager
R12	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Fiat-Alfa-Romeo, Lancia	1980	Owner and general manager
R13	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Peugeot-Citroën-Renault	1990	Owner and general manager
R14	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	Toyota, Nissan, Isuzu-Kia	2000	Owner and general manager
R15	Automotive parts for tourism Vehicles	VW-Audi	2002	Owner and general manager

how trust is related to the dynamics and management of business relationships and was the result of a two-phased coding process. The coding scheme, consisting of codes, categories and concepts links the gathered data to the more abstract concepts (Saldanõa, 2013). In our research, trust, negotiation, evolution of business relationships and the business context were the main concepts. Trust was composed by two categories of codes, that is, perceived and experienced trust; negotiation had two categories, the content and the frequency of negotiation; evolution of business relationship collected three categories, that is, emerging relationship, early stage and established relationship and the Tunisian business context had three categories, that is, spare-part network structure, environmental changes and cultural specificities of Tunisian business relationships. Specific codes were developed consensually by the involved researchers (Sandelowski *et al.*, 2007). Some codes, such as commercialized brands or the age of the reselling company, were defined before the coding process, and others, such as the types of the negotiations, emerged during the coding process itself (Roussel and Wacheux, 2005). To meet the requirements of reliability, two researchers conducted the analysis separately. They then compared their analyses, which after thorough discussion produced convergent results. The analysis of the interviews allowed us to collect a rich set of verbatim comments, presented below.

Triangulation has been considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning. Creative use of "member checking" submitting drafts for review by participants in the research is one of the requisite forms of validation of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). To enhance the construct validity (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989) and to ensure the trustworthiness of our results, we applied data triangulation (Cortez and Johnston, 2018). This was achieved by combining local secondary sources and the verbatim comments of the resellers interviewed, which yielded the description and presentation of the industry context. This process contributes to enhance the external validity of our qualitative research (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989).

Findings

To obtain an in-depth understanding of the role of trust as a component of relationship quality, the study focuses on two main aspects, namely relationship dynamics and the negotiation process. We study relationship dynamics by considering the development phases through which the relationship goes, and business relationship management is conceptualized by studying the negotiation process. In this section, we present our findings about the characteristics of the distribution network and Tunisian business relationships.

Research context: the Tunisian spare-parts distribution network
The Tunisian network is dominated by European manufacturers, albeit with an increasing presence of Asian and Turkish producers. The European manufacturers are the primary suppliers, given the composition of the Tunisian vehicle fleet. With the existence of national-level agreements between Tunisia

and the European Union, they have enjoyed preferential treatment in terms of duties on imports. Despite this privileged access, in the past few years, the presence of other foreign suppliers has become increasingly visible, even if their products are subject to tariffs. However, their prices tend to be lower than those of the European suppliers, and these tariffs are declining. This creates a competitive environment based almost exclusively on price and market conditions (i.e. the payment level and payment period), in addition to an annual rebate paid by the importer to the reseller, which is based on the previous year's turnover. Despite this emerging competition, there are close historic personal relationships among the local agents and the traditional Western producers.

Historically, the Tunisian intermediaries and customers have had great confidence in some strong and well-known European brands, mostly German but also French and Italian ones. However, given the increasing availability of counterfeit versions of these European brands, which are generally made by Turkish and some Asiatic suppliers, this trust has been weakened. For this reason, Tunisian buyers have generally become more suspicious of low-priced European branded spare-parts.

Research context: Tunisian business relationships
Based on our literature review, some characteristics of business relationships in emerging countries may be summarized. This short picture is not exhaustive, and it is also very general, but it does enable us to identify some characteristics of the Tunisian business relationships. We can see in which way the relationships that we studied are similar or different to this general picture. Typically, a business relationship in an African emerging country is more informal (Grewal *et al.*, 2015), in which reciprocity and respect for the elderly are important guiding principles (Darley and Blankson, 2008), and the emotional dimension of trust plays an important role of (Dadzie *et al.*, 2018). In these relationships, the nationality of an opponent plays an important role (Elahee and Brooks, 2004). The idea of swift trust does not exist (Brett, 2017), and efforts need to be made to build trust and relationships between the two parties (Elahee and Brooks, 2004).

Based on the narratives of the Tunisian resellers interviewed, we found that some of these general characteristics do occur. The reciprocity and the respect for the elderly are important guiding principles in the business relationships we studied, as is the lack of swift trust. The Tunisian resellers are accepting of informal relationships, but they also consider contractual conditions as important facets, especially at the beginning of a relationship and concerning the financial issues. The emotional dimension of trust was not identified by any of the respondents.

Trust and relationship dynamics in the Tunisian spare-parts network
When a reseller is looking for a new supplier, a process is triggered in which he starts to seek for information about the wholesaler to compensate for his own lack of data and experience. Data are collected from different commercial testimonies, and legal and financial guarantees are required to smooth the first transactions. Formal information is provided mainly by banks. The informal information flows predominantly through word of mouth, following discussions from peers, commercials teams, resellers and/or repair professionals. As

stated by R5, "Trust develops even before the relationship is created: everything depends on the market reputation of the supplier, word of mouth is important, nothing is hidden".

If the reseller perceives there to be a level of trust based on the information gleaned, then contact is made.

> At first it's us [the reseller] who are going to suppliers because we are not known. We bring the trade register and license and we open accounts with them, we leave a guarantee cheque and agree to the terms of payment (R5).

Commercial terms are very strict in terms of payments and payment deadlines. Generally, resellers must present pledges, guarantees and must demonstrate their credibility to be able to stock up. "We must initially pay in cash" (R11). At this early stage, no experienced trust exists between the two parties. The reseller contacts the wholesaler based on direct and indirect information, which creates the perceived trust.

However, if a reseller is known in the field and perceived to be a relatively powerful actor and/or the reseller has had members of his family who are in the marketplace, then this can affect the nature of relationships with suppliers.

> When I go to a supplier, I just tell him that I am the son of so and so and I immediately enjoy great advantages, particularly in terms of payment and payment deadlines. I can buy all a product range with a value of 150,000 dinars [45,000 euros], for which I will pay only a third with the order and the rest over a long period. There is no problem. All suppliers agree with pleasure because my last name is well known throughout the area. Five of my uncles have also worked in this field for years and have a good reputation. I can impose my presence based on this good reputation (R15).

In the Tunisian spare parts network, good reputation is considered a valuable intangible resource (Rindova *et al.*, 2010). For the entrepreneurs, the appeal of establishing their business was influenced by social factors; they had family in the area, their children had made good friends, they liked the way of life and the social side (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Besides these general network functions, we can identify further mechanisms by which a special network type – the family network – increases success (Brüderl and Preisendörfer, 1998).

If the first transactions go smoothly, with payments being on time, and there is an increase in turnover, then personal relationships start to form. The experience between the supplier and the reseller is seen as positive. Trust begins to settle, and trade conditions become more flexible.

> According to turnover and volume of sales, the wholesaler will gradually trust its resellers, it tests them for two or three iterations. When they demonstrate that they are competent and professional, and the sales volume is increased, they grant longer payment deadlines, first 30 days, then 60 days and up to 150 days. From that moment resellers get the desired quantities with more flexible commercial conditions (R3).

It is fundamental to set up an environment in which uncertainty or distrust are eliminated, to be replacing by increasing trust. "You have to respect payment deadlines, and buy regularly, because trust comes with time and with experience" (R7).

Based on good experiences, a sustainable relationship evolves between the reseller and the wholesaler. It is characterized by a balanced distribution of power between the actors. A good quality relationship was described by one of our resellers as follows:

> The supplier that I am comfortable with is the cheapest and the one who lets me choose the products I want. I stock up with all suppliers who respect their commitments (on time delivery) and reliability of the product. Regular exchanges, particularly regarding information to help develop trade relationships based on cooperation (R6).

In this case, the expectations of the resellers are focused on the price level, the quality (original equipment products, quality products equivalent to the original equipment and reputed brands), reputation (what is said in the network) and information exchange, which together constitute the determinants of creating and maintaining a balanced business relationship based on trust between both parties. "It is characterized by their ability to honor their involvement" (*R2*).

However, power in the relationship is not always balanced, particularly when the wholesaler sells exclusive brands that are sought after by the market. In such cases, it is the supplier that has the advantage, and his conditions are accepted by resellers.

> If he's the only one to provide these brands I do not have choice. I can do nothing in negotiation and I am forced to buy his goods if he is the only one to provide them. I can do nothing but give in (R4).

This situation shows that trust is context dependent, because here the reseller is obliged to purchase from a monopolistic wholesaler who has power over the reseller.

Trust and negotiation in the Tunisian spare-parts network

In the Tunisian market, the most frequent negotiations between wholesalers-importers and their resellers occur at the start of the business relationship and after that is typically negotiated once a year. For some resellers, it could be twice a year. These purposes of these negotiations is twofold. First, the partners discuss the current state of their cooperation and future prospects. In addition, they re-negotiate the terms of the conditions of sale. In the first case, they have exhibited cooperative behavior, while in the second, it is more competitive.

> Normally we negotiate a lot at the beginning of the business relationship, then we re-negotiate the terms of sale once a year. Usually at the beginning of the new year, after I have done my accounts, I see what level of sales I realized. If I made a large turnover with him, I can negotiate better terms. If this is not the case, I have no reason to negotiate. The exchange of information is a part of negotiations. If you provide useful information to your supplier you are no longer a simple client for him, but a partner in that the information you give him can be very beneficial for both parties (R8).

The frequency of the negotiations seems to vary depending on the specificities of each reseller and the business relationship he has with his supplier. In some cases, it is an annual occurrence, while in others it contingent on the levels of stock being held. In the latter case, resellers facing imminent shortages choose their provider based on geographical proximity. This is typified by the comment that:

> Whenever I have too few goods in stock, I negotiate with suppliers. I always choose the geographically closest provider, there is one in Charguia and the other one is in Ben Arous [local cities close to the seller] (R13).

Other remarks made concern the consequences of the bargaining episode. An important consequence of the level of trust found early in the relationship is its effect on the next round of negotiations with the same partner. A high level of initial trust facilitates the next trading round and will result in easier, more convenient commercial conditions. If the level of trust is low, then business conditions will certainly become more difficult and less advantageous.

> With suppliers, you must meet deadlines and pay your bills on time, you must be a man of your word. If he finds that you are serious and correct, the supplier will have confidence in you and will not require further guarantees. Certainly, you will pay, even if there is a slight delay. A supplier who trusts you can even take your advice before selling to other dealers. [...] We can gain a lot of knowledge and have strong relationships in the industry (R10).

But:

> [...] whenever there is the slightest rumor in the market among your competitors, if you have financial difficulties or credit problems, or if you do not manage to meet your obligations to the bank, or if you do not pay the bills when they are due - even if there is a delay of just 3 or 4 days, the supplier comes to ask you what is happening (R13).

Discussion

Investigating the actors in the Tunisian automotive spare-parts network, we were interested in the way in which trust developed in the relationships between the resellers and the wholesalers-importers that supplied them. Table II shows the main empirical results of our investigation.

According to the resellers interviewed, trust also affects the preparation of the negotiations and the content. At the same time, trust has different effects at various stages in the evolution of a business relationship. However, the role of these two types of trust seems to be different. Perceived trust is important in the pre-relationship stage (Ford, 1980) and during the emergence of a new relationship (Mandják *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, experienced trust became more important in established business relationships. Applying Ford's business relationship evolution model, experienced trust is important in the long-term stage (Ford, 1980).

An interesting finding was that it appears that trust can be transferred to make a new relationship easier, as one of our resellers stated, "I just tell him that I am the son of so and so and I immediately enjoy great advantages, particularly in terms of payment and payment deadlines" (R15). In addition, the satisfaction with the negotiation outcome influences the level of trust positively in the next negotiation episode with the same partner. Figure 2 shows how trust is related to relationship dynamics and negotiation in the Tunisian case.

In Figure 2, on the x-axis, we show the different stages in the evolution of a business relationship. The early, developing and long-term stages are based on Ford's (1980) relationship evolution model, while the emerging phase is based on the work of Mandják *et al.* (2015). We see the emerging phase as being placed between the pre-relationship (not shown) and early stages of the business evolution model. In different stages, relationship management has different tasks and challenges concerning the management of trust. In the emergence of a new relationship (Mandják *et al.*, 2015), the partners do not yet know each other, having only a preconceived perception about each other, but no actual experiences. In this situation, the perceived trust, based only on external and internal information, is important. Ford (1980) describes the early and the development stages of a business relationship as a process where the partners' exchange interactions become more and more frequent, implying that they already have direct experiences about each other's behavior. This is the trust building process that needs to be nurtured. In the long-term stage, the partners know each other well, have developed many exchange routines and they have strong experienced trust. However, perceived trust also still exists, because it is based on external information about the partner. The source of this external information is typically the wider business network, and it could be positive or negative. In the case of positive external information, the perceived trust may support or increase the level of experienced trust. In case of negative external information, perceived trust may decrease, and it may weaken or negatively influence the experienced trust.

With the transition from perceived to experienced trust, we can hypothesize that the required managerial tasks also change. Managerial actions begin with the collection of information about the possible future partner, information that is sourced from across the wider network (Mandják *et al.*, 2015; Gulati and Gargiulo, 1999; Gulati, 1999). As the transition starts to take place, managerial action has to focus on building experienced trust, based on trying to incrementally build on successive successful interactions. However, it is important to emphasize that this "automatic maintenance" is only a temporal situation that can change rapidly because of the volatile nature and the context dependence of the trust (Usunier, 2002; Schoorman *et al.*, 2007), which may ultimately result in the dissolution of the relationship, or at least a temporary drop in trust levels.

In summary, we find that different kinds of trust play different roles over the dynamics of the relationship development process. Perceived trust is more important at the emergent stage of a relationship and, as the two parties learn from each other, experienced trust becomes more important in the established relationships. Perceived trust creates the possibility of building experienced trust, and when mutual trust exists between the parties, it motivates them to maintain the relationship, although there is always the danger of the degradation of the quality of relationship by the violation or destruction of the trust.

Following our research question, we have to investigate what the characteristics are of this process in the Tunisian context. High dependence on imports of the Tunisian spare-parts

Table II The main results

Management of business relationship (Negotiations)	Emergence of new relationship	Relationship dynamics Early and development stage	Stable stage
Preparation, data collection	Formal (banks) and informal (network) sources	Annual turnover	Annual turnover, previous experiences
Content	Present pledges, guarantees, and demonstrate credibility	Commercial terms are very strict in terms of payments and payment deadlines	Easier and tailor-made conditions
Role of trust	Creation of perceived trust, no experience trust	First experienced trust and important perceived trust	Strong experienced trust and less important perceived trust
Source: Authors			

Figure 2 Trust, negotiation and relationship dynamics over time in Tunisia
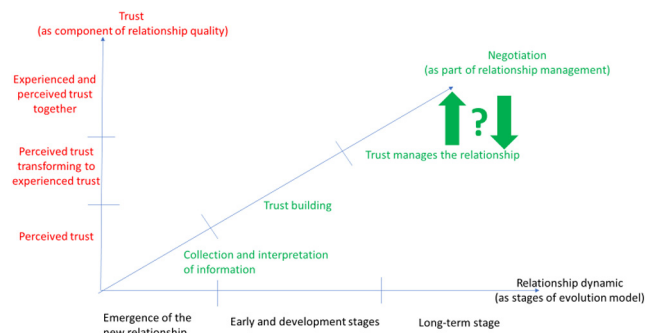
Source: Authors

market affects the relationship and trust between resellers and wholesalers-importers. In addition to the European suppliers with preferential tariffs, Asian (Chinese, Turkish) suppliers are becoming more and more active, who, despite the higher import duties payable on their products, offer lower prices. In the fierce competition so formed, commercial conditions are increasingly important, undermining the earlier relationships that were primarily based on trust. Thus, the market becomes increasingly monetarized, which also means that market players, namely wholesalers-importers and resellers, act and behave more and more like Western market economies' actors.

An interesting finding is that although the informal relationships are important for the Tunisian partners, there is also a strong emphasis on formal, contractual relationships and in particular on the financial conditions of relationships. We also found that the level of trust affects the prevailing business conditions, in that the higher the level of trust between the two parties, the more favorable would be the retailers' environment because of their extended payment terms.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have looked for answers to our research question regarding how trust is related to the dynamics and the management of business relationships in an emerging market context. Applying the IMP interaction approach as our theoretical basis, we have studied the business relationship management practices of the local resellers of the Tunisian automotive spare-parts market.

Our empirical findings identify the different roles of trust in business relationships. First, trust has a moderating role in business relationships (Rousseau et al., 1998), where the level of trust aspired to influences the behavior of the parties involved, most notably during the negotiation of the commercial parameters of the exchange.

A possible relationship between the levels of trust and the nature of the task of managing the buyer–seller interactions has been found. The perceived trust creates the possibility of building trust, and when mutual trust exists, it motivates the parties to maintain the relationship. In established business relationships, both perceived and experienced trust exist together and influence each other. The process of building trust seems to be an evolutionary process (Usunier, 2002) in which

the trust had dual origins. That is, perceived trust originates from information, while experienced trust comes from the interaction process. Together, these two processes create the ongoing trust in the relationship.

Our findings show that the relationships between the Tunisian spare part resellers and wholesalers-importers are quite similar to Western European business relationships. One reason for this is the powerful monetization of the Tunisian spare parts network. Another reason is the strong European, and in particularly French influence in Tunisian history and commerce. This effect appears on the one hand in the Tunisian language, and on the other hand on the professional knowledge of the actors, as wholesalers-importers regularly visit European trade shows. The geographical proximity of Tunisia to Europe is also very important in the evolution of this similarity. In addition, in many cases, dealers have family links to European business (Edelbloude et al., 2017). At the same time, however, the positive role of the extended family in establishing and maintaining trust in Tunisia can be perceived (Darley and Blankson, 2008).

Our empirical research findings also contribute to value innovation research (Matthyssens et al., 2006; Berghman et al., 2006). Namely, the exploration of the different moderating effects of perceived and experienced trust draws attention to the stage-specific nature of business relationship management. This underlines that management decisions must strive not only to build trust but also to take into account the different nature of the two kinds of trust. However, if a business relationship has reached the long-term stage, it is basically the task to preserve the trust level achieved. This typically requires fewer resources to be used and, at the same time, makes the business relationship more secure. Thus, trust management contributes to the creation of a sustainable business relationship. This management knowledge becomes part of the company's dynamic relational capabilities. Then, as Zahra and George (2002) have argued, these types of abilities are needed to maintain competitive advantages in markets.

Our study sought to identify how contingent contexts influence the quality of business relationships. Naudé and Buttle (2000) identified the contingent nature of relationship quality and urged researchers to better understand how different independent variables might influence relationship quality. Our empirical results show that two hypothesized independent variables, that is, the relationship itself and its age, may influence the quality of the relationship. This influence may happen via the moderating role of trust. We argue that perceived trust influences relationship quality more in the emerging and early stage of the development. In turn, experienced trust will influence the quality of stable, long-term business relationships. However, our research has also identified the role of other independent variables that may influence the quality of business relationships, which in our case is the local business context of Tunisia.

Managerial implications

As shown in Figure 2, our results argue that proactive managerial actions can facilitate the evolution of trust levels in business relationships over time. As the relationship develops, the characteristics of the trust changes, evolving from perceived into experienced trust. We argue that this early stage is the

phase of highest risk and also the one that takes most managerial time and effort. Then, as the mutually experienced level of experienced trust increases, the trust starts to "automatically maintain" the relationship, demanding less work from the managers, on condition that the operations inside the relationship do not disrupt the level of trust. It should be noted, however, that besides the experienced trust, there is also a level of perceived trust based on external information at this stage. Its role here, however, is to refine the experienced trust and to foreshadow possible signals. For example, such an indication may be the external information that the partner has a payment difficulty in another relationship, or that the wholesaler is treating another customer poorly. In these close-knit environments, such information spreads rapidly within the business network.

The implication is that managers first need to create perceived trust. Thereafter, once trust is built up, it is the trust that may "manage" or act so as to control the on-going relationship as long as the partners' behavior or network changes do not violate the trust.

Limitations and directions for further research

The generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations, caused by the exploratory nature and the limited scope of our study. For broader generalizations to be made (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008), a deeper study of the specifics of Tunisian business relationships and the behavior of decision-makers would be necessary. The analysis of the Tunisian resellers' activities with their clients may broaden the scope of the study.

In spite of its limitations, the study adds to our understanding of the relationship between the dynamics of business relationships and the different types of trust. It would also be interesting to study the transition phase as perceived trust transform to experienced trust. Further research may deepen these insights in other emerging markets. It would be interesting to study the behavior of similar industries in other African countries. As originally proposed by Lilien (2016), this type of research may open the way to comparative research in the field of business relationships in emerging markets, thereby broadening our B2B knowledge

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