



A Qualitative Study of the Effects of Cultural Differences on Buyer-Supplier Relationships in Global Supply Chains

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the effects of country-specific or national cultural differences on buyer-supplier relationships in global supply chains. The investigation was carried out by means of a cross-sectional qualitative study involving a series of semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected international sample set of supply chain professionals. These interviews sought the perspectives of the sample on a myriad of factors found to either effect relationship quality or define the nature of buyer-supplier relationships. These perspectives were then analysed through the lenses of popular national cultural frameworks to determine whether country-specific cultural values correlate with varying perspectives on the quality and nature of business relationships. The national cultural aspect was intentionally kept blind from the sample set so as not to influence their responses and to ensure unbiased personal insights which could then be interpreted through the cultural frameworks.

The findings of the research indicated that national cultural differences do not have much effect on the nature of buyer-supplier relationships in global supply chains. The types of relationships pursued by professionals, the levels of investment in relationships by organisations and the expectations and priorities within these relationships are defined by contextual factors such as strategic direction of the firms, the shape of the industry and power-dynamics between the buyer and seller. However, there were some correlations identified between national cultural values and perceptions of relationship quality. Mainly that the more traditional survivalist nations - as defined by the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World - valued the importance of personal bonds moreso than secular self-expressive nations that placed greater emphasis on the role of structural governance and controls in defining relationship quality. This supports previous research findings which highlight varying levels of formality encountered in international business from region to region.

Declaration

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Research Students Declaration Form

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Introduction

Business-to-Business relationships are increasingly exposed to the effects of cross-cultural interactions. As a result of globalisation, a considerable number of buyer-supplier relationships now take place across national and cultural borders (Murphy, Golgeci and Johnston, 2020). As supply chains become more globalised, the challenges incumbent with cultural differences become more pronounced and can create challenges for relationship management. The most extreme example of this would be “Culture Shock” whereby a person uses their own cultural model to evaluate the customs and norms of people belonging to a different culture (Gong and Zhang, 2011). Generally, cultural differences present themselves through miscommunication and misinterpretation leading to misunderstandings which can stoke conflicts within business relationships and result in poor organisational performance (Vlad and Stan, 2018).

Concurrent with the increasing rate of internationalisation of supply chains in recent decades, business relationship management has become more prominent within organisations and is now considered a key element of global supply management. For businesses to succeed, their supply chain management must identify the key relationships or links within their supply chains – those with unique capabilities or strategic importance – and manage such relationships closely and effectively (Lambert and Cooper, 2000). While such relationships are normally established and maintained at senior management level, it is also critical that multiple one-to-one relationships are given due care and attention at lower levels. The quality of the relationship that exists at these levels within both supplier and customer organisations will often determine, to a large extent, the success of that business relationship (Lambert, 2010). And in an increasingly international business setting, the cultural intelligence (CQ) of individuals in these positions is often the difference as it guides them in unfamiliar cultural environments and when interacting in culturally diverse situations (Ishakova and Ott, 2019).

This paper will investigate whether cultural differences can be observed to influence the perceived quality and nature of buyer-supplier relationships within global supply chains. Firstly, a literature review of the topics of business-to-business relationships and the concept of relationship quality will be completed to document the contemporary universal definitions and dimensions of these subject areas. Secondly, a literature review on the business impact of cultural differences, and to a lesser extent the mitigating impact of cultural intelligence, will be

completed to highlight the effect both can have on business-to-business interactions. Finally, two popular country-specific cultural frameworks will be outlined. These models or frameworks will be the lenses through which the research data will be analysed to determine the effects of country-specific cultural differences on buyer-supplier relationships.

The investigation will take the form of thematic analysis of interviews conducted with supply chain professionals of various national backgrounds concerning buyer-supplier relationships. Firstly, the study will try to ascertain if perceptual differences exist within the supply chain between different nationalities when considering the nature and quality of business relationships – including types of relationships pursued, expectations and priorities. Secondly, the study will attempt to determine if there are correlations between the observed perceptual differences and country-specific cultural values put forward by preeminent writers in the field such as Geert Hofstede, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel. The answers to these research questions will add to the existing international business literature and hopefully foster an improved understanding of the effect of cultural differences on cross-border business relationships within the field of global supply chain management.

RQ1.

Is there evidence of varying perceptions of the nature and quality of buyer-supplier relationships between supply chain members of different nationalities?

RQ.2

If such variances are evidenced in the research, is there a correlation between them and the country-specific cultural differences espoused by popular frameworks such as Hofstede's "Dimensions of National Culture" and the Inglehart-Welzel "Cultural Map of the World"?

Literature Review

The Importance of Relationships in Supply Chain Management

The Ohio State University's Global Supply Chain Forum defines supply chain management (SCM) as "the integration of key business processes from end user through original suppliers that provides products, services and information that add value for customers and other stakeholders" (Lambert, 2004, p. 19). The process of SCM is linked across intra and inter-company boundaries requiring both cross-functional and cross-organisational capabilities within participating firms. The failure to integrate and effectively manage supply chains and the associated processes can create friction between customer and suppliers resulting in waste and lost value for all parties (Lambert and Cooper, 2000). The effective management of relationships between participating firms within the supply chain becomes paramount as a result of this integration. Douglas Lambert (2010, p.1) in his paper on customer relationship management (CRM) describes it as a "strategic, process oriented, cross-functional" tool that creates value for both supplier and buyer. In supply chain management, both CRM and supplier relationship management (SRM) fall under the umbrella term business relationship management (BRM). The importance of BRM is widely recognised. Lambert and Cooper (2000, p. 65) were so convinced of its criticality they proclaimed that the ultimate success of an organisation depends on "management's ability to integrate the company's intricate network of business relationships". While other researchers have noted a developing shift from transactional to relational marketing recently with increased resources dedicated to relationship management and data analytics (Jain, 2015). With this shift continuing at pace and more and more businesses recognising how vital BRM can be to their success, it is no wonder there has been an increased academic interest in both the nature and quality of business-to-business relationships.

The Nature of Business Relationships

In 1978, the Pan-European Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group published their business integration model which would go on to become one of the foundational pieces of

literature concerning business relationships. The model described three key features of business-to-business relations as institutionalisation, adaptation and atmosphere (Woo and Ennew, 2004). Institutionalisation is defined as “the process through which patterns of behaviour and expectations of behaviour of others become established” and concerns the formation of rules, customs and norms within a relationship. Adaptation meanwhile is seen as “behavioural or structural modifications designed to meet the needs of another organisation” and typically involves considerable investment by one or more parties in the relationship. Such adaptations can be in areas such as product design, information sharing practices or financial transactional processing and management. The presence of adaptations has even been described by some as an indicator of a business relationship compared with a mere transactional relationship that exists in their absence (Woo and Ennew, 2004). The last feature of business relationships defined by the IMP business integration model is atmosphere which deals with the current state of the relationship in terms of whether it is conflicting or collaborative and whether the value created is mutually shared or heavily weighted towards one party over the other. Atmosphere is transient as it is continuously shaped by the ongoing pattern of interactions or “building blocks” of the relationship and is therefore more short-term than the features of institutionalisation and adaptation.

The Context of Business Relationships

The nature of any business relationship is also dependent on the characteristics of the firms involved in the relationship - such as negotiating power, strategic direction and organisational culture - and the situational context of the industry or markets they participate in. Martin Hingley (2001, p. 60) draws attention to this point in his paper analysing relationship management in the UK fresh produce market. He states that “relationships are seldom fair in the division of power or reward nor are all parties equally active in commitment to the relationship”. Hingley (2001) cites that the imbalance of power can be threatening to the dependent party of the relationship and that the onus to share value equitably normally resides with the more powerful participant. These relationship dynamics recall the bargaining power factors of Porter’s five forces model which determines the influence of buyers, suppliers and switching costs on a firm’s profitability (Porter, 1979).

Andrew Cox developed a conceptual model on the appropriateness of buyer-supplier relationship management styles based on these power dynamics within supply chains. Cox (2004a) states that long-term collaborative relationships such as ‘supplier development’ can only realistically be achieved in situations of buyer dominance as significant investment and adaptation is required from the supplier to meet buyer cost and functionality requirements. According to Cox, such relationships are not always possible, even if desired, as they are resource intensive and cannot be committed to in industries or markets that experience irregular or unreliable demand patterns (Cox, 2004a). In a separate paper, Cox (2004b) highlights how value capture is rarely if ever equal between transactional exchange partners. He claims that the ideal normative “Win-Win” scenario (Cell C in Fig.1) is theoretically impossible as the ideal outcome for buyers and sellers are diametrically opposed, and therefore the most common outcomes are partial “Win-Win” scenarios (Cells B, E and F in Fig.1) in which the share of value capture and level of collaboration is determined by the balance of power in the relationship (Cox, 2004b). From these studies, it is clear that the nature of business-to-business relationships is very much dependent on market circumstances and the orientation of the exchange partners.

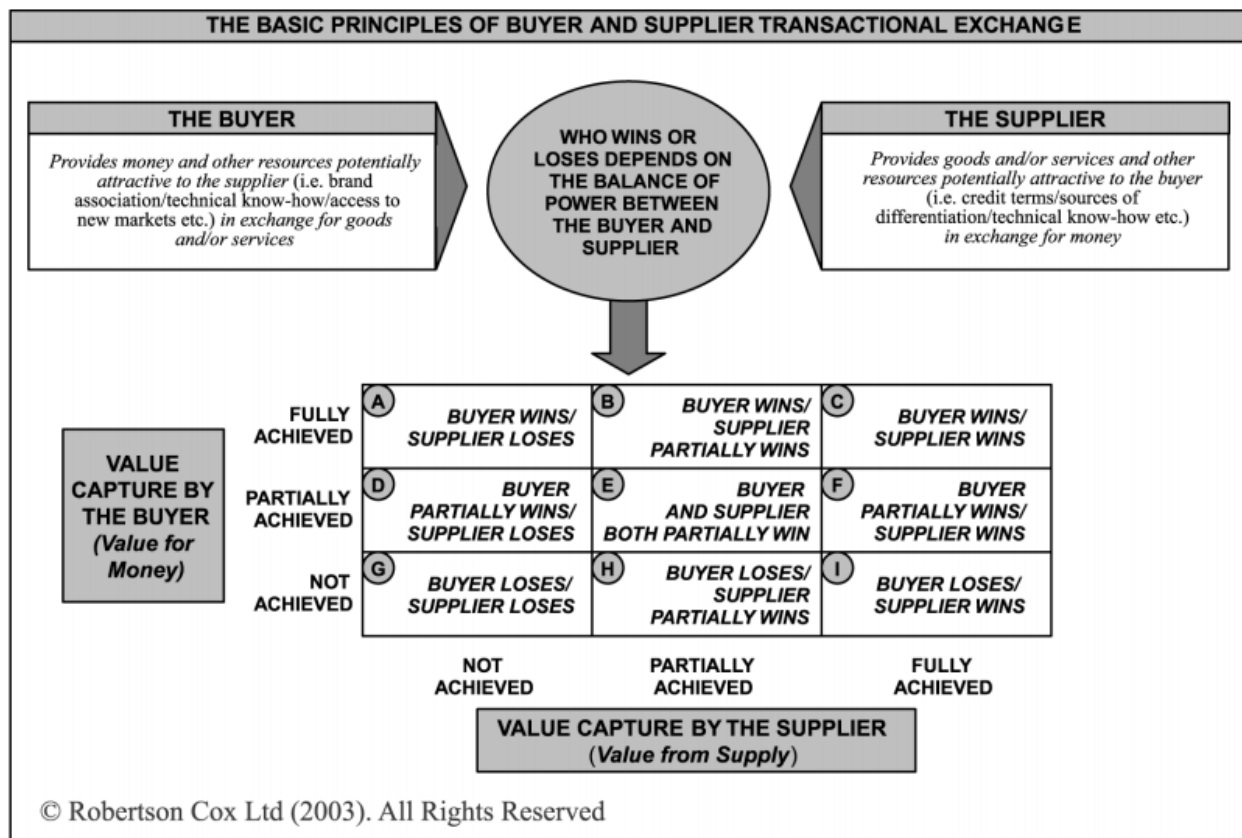


Fig 1. Buyer-Supplier Outcomes in Transactional Exchange Source: Cox (2004b)

For this study, the sample set have been selected from a single supply chain in the healthcare packaging sector – An industry defined by relatively stable and steady supply patterns that would allow for long term collaborative relationships where desired. However, the power dynamics and organisational cultures experienced by participants may vary and could inform responses more than the country-specific cultural values that are the focus of the investigation. This will have to be considered a limitation of the research.

The Emergence of Business Relationship Management

Early studies of business relationships were typically approached from the salesperson's perspective and had a high focus on reducing customer uncertainty through relationship management (Holmlund, 2008). The responsibility for maintaining the relationship resided with the marketing and sales force of supplying companies and it was from these origins that the area of customer relationship management (CRM) first emerged. This eventually resulted in a multitude of available CRM technologies such as Hubspot, Inbound and Salesforce that monitor and report on customer buying patterns and preferences. However, studies by the Gartner Group looking into the effectiveness of such technologies showed that when used in isolation, they would fail more often than succeed with 55% not producing results (Lambert, 2010). More recently, businesses are beginning to view their key strategic relationships as dyadic in nature. That is to say that there is a mutually shared responsibility between both the buying and supplying firms to create value for each other (Woo and Ennew, 2004). More complex relationships have also been studied including business relationship triads in supply chains that also feature intermediaries between buyers and suppliers (Havila, Johanson and Thilenius, 2004). This research paper will solely deal with dyadic buyer-supplier relations to limit the number of variable factors at play in the relationship dynamic and so hopefully provide more conclusive results.

The Quality of Business Relationships

Research into relationship quality (RQ) in business has been ongoing since at least 1987 when Gummesson (1987) listed it among the types of qualities encountered by customers and said it reflects participating individuals' abilities to develop and nurture relationships at an interpersonal level. Since that first identification, there has been much literature that has built on the concept of RQ. Crosby, Evans and Cowles (1990, p.70) wrote one of the seminal papers on the topic and they considered relationship quality to be high generally when "the customer is able to rely on the salesperson's integrity and has confidence in future performance based on the level of past performance". This qualification of RQ neatly encapsulates the three core elements of the concept that would go on to be identified repeatedly in subsequent research – Trust, Satisfaction and Commitment. Holmlund (2008) wrote that RQ is a higher order construct and these three subdimensions were the more concrete first-order constructs that supported it. Whereas other researchers have alternatively described trust, satisfaction and commitment as either antecedents or consequences of RQ. So, while there are differing opinions with respect to the direction of influence, there is near universal acceptance of their significance to relationship quality. Other studies such as Naudé and Buttle (2000) identified different constructs of RQ such as communication, coordination, joint problem solving and goal congruence.

The Study of Cultural Differences

Country-specific cultural differences have been an area of interest for scholars as far back as the 1940s when national character studies were carried out following the second world war (Kanter and Corn, 1994). However, the modern field of studies around cultural differences has been defined primarily by the works of the renowned social psychologist Geert Hofstede. Hofstede completed his seminal work in a study of IBM affiliates across 72 different countries between 1968 and 1973 with the aim of quantifying cultural differences (Beugelsdijk and Welzel, 2018). He initially identified four so-called cultural dimensions, but these have since been extended to six dimensions – Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism, Masculinity, Long Term Orientation and Indulgence (Aggarwal and Zhan, 2017). The Hofstede cultural dimensions framework is one of the most widely applied and studied models on cultural

differences in academic literature with over 40,000 citations placing it among the top 25 most cited works in the social sciences (Beugelsdijk, Kostova and Roth, 2017). Another significant work on country-specific cultural differences was completed by political scientist Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel. In 1997, they used data gathered by the World Values Survey to generate a scatter-plot cultural map of the world (Fig. 1) along two axes inspired by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) – “Survival vs Self-Expression” values and “Traditional vs Secular” Values (Cheng, Yau and Ho, 2016). This work has also been applied extensively in literature attempting to understand varying cultural values between nations.

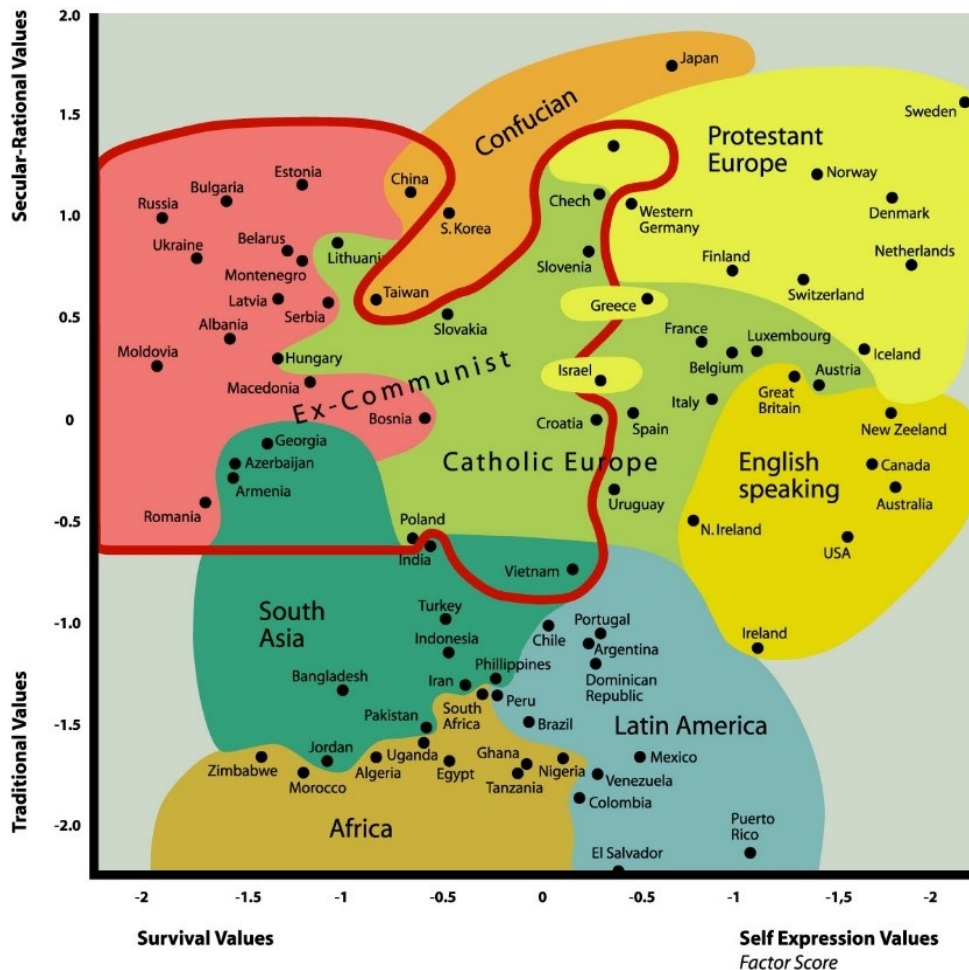


Fig 2. Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World (1996) Source: WVS Database (2021)

The Business Impact of Cultural Differences

The predominant school of thought with regards to the business impact of cultural differences is that while they can present challenges, they also provide advantages to an organisation. For example, previous research has concluded that such cultural diversity adds richness to an organisation by bringing innovative ideas and fresh insights while challenging old assumptions (Vlad and Stan, 2018). Other authors have found that internal comprehension of cultural differences can bring improved understanding of specific local requirements that can lead to success in international markets (Lillis and Tian, 2010). Conversely, there is also much literature on the challenges presented by cultural differences including the relational tensions that can emerge from perceived threats to culture-based identities (Smallwood, 2020) and the disruption of effective business interactions due to cultural barriers (Lim et al, 2019). Erin Meyer (2015) provided excellent examples of this disruption when she highlighted the impact of national cultures on cross-border negotiations. She outlined how culture effects how business partners of different nationalities build trust and even how the importance and prominence of written contracts varies from nation to nation. And as Meyer (2015) says in these countries where written contracts are less frequent, “relationships carry more weight in business”.

Whereas each of these works acknowledges the effects of cultural difference, there is also research that has questioned their actual business impact. Kanter and Corn (1994) used foreign acquisitions of American businesses as case studies to assess the impact of cultural difference and found that in many cases, the tension that at first appeared to arise from cultural factors turned out to have more significant structural causes. They warned of the dangers of generalisation as well as the conflation of nationality-based cultural values with organisational, generational or personal values. This risk must be considered for the research study herein.

The Concept of Cultural Intelligence

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) was first conceived by Earley and Soon Ang in 2003 with their book of the same name that examined the interactions between individuals across cultures. They described the CQ characteristic as “a person’s capability to adapt as they interact with others

from different cultural regions” (Lim et al, 2019). The application and effectivity of CQ has been further studied in the intervening years. For example, Ishakova and Ott (2019) found that heightened levels of CQ positively impacted multicultural teams through improved intragroup trust, team cohesion and ultimately, team performance. And Erin Meyer’s article “Getting to Si, Ja, Oui, Hai and Da” (2015) is essentially an essay on the importance of CQ in intercultural business exchanges, with behavioural modifications and other recommendations on how to adapt manners and business etiquette from region to region.

In another study of “Boundary Spanners” – i.e., Individuals that link their organisation to the external environment – Murphy, Golgeci and Johnston (2020) found that the CQ of such individuals played a vital role in them making power-based decisions that resulted in more rewarding cross-cultural buyer-supplier relationships. So, while that study demonstrated the business impact of CQ in decision making and indirectly the effect of cultural differences, this study will seek to understand this effect on varying perceptions of the buyer-supplier relationship through the lens of popular cultural difference frameworks. If strong correlations are identified, the frameworks could even serve as the groundwork for cultural intelligence training and development purposes.

Country-Specific Cultural Difference Frameworks:

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

As mentioned previously, Hofstede completed his analysis of differences in cultural values between international IBM affiliates almost 50 years ago. The resulting “Cultural Dimensions” have since gone on to be one of the most widely cited cultural value frameworks in academic literature. Although originally only four dimensions were identified, the framework now encompasses the following six dimensions. Hofstede, Bond and Minkov together defined these dimensions and ranked countries according to them on a scale of 0-100 (Mindtools, 2021).

1. **Power Distance Index (PDI)** - This dimension measures the degree to which the people of a nation are willing to accept unequal divisions of power (Hofstede Insights, 2021).

Those nations that rank highly in the power distance index (eg. Malaysia scores 100 in PDI) typically are more deferential to traditional hierarchies and do not seek to take part in decision making. Nations that score low in this index (eg. Denmark scores 18 in PDI) typically prefer to work in flatter organisations and seek to be involved in any decisions that could directly impact them (Mindtools, 2021). In buyer-supplier relationships, this cultural dimension could potentially be implicated in the power-dynamics of the relationship. For example, high PDI participants may be more accepting of unequal value exchanges with buyers/suppliers deemed to be negotiating from a position of power.

2. **Individualism vs Collectivism (IDV)** – This dimension measures the degree to which peoples of a nation view themselves either as independent individuals or part of an interdependent collective (Geerthofstede, 2021). Nations that score high in this index (eg. United States scores 91 in IDV) place high value on the individual’s privacy and freedom and take less responsibility for the actions and outcomes of others. Conversely, in nations that score low in this dimension (eg. China scores 20 in IDV), great emphasis is placed on loyalty to groups to which the person belongs including defending the group’s interests and looking out for the well-being of others within the collective (Mindtools, 2021). In buyer-supplier relationships, this dimension could potentially play a role in the levels of transparency exhibited by participants, with organisations from high scoring individual nations perhaps less concerned with the equitable sharing of value and information in their dyadic relationships.
3. **Masculinity vs Femininity (MAS)** - This dimension measures the degree to which gender roles are explicitly maintained and traditional male archetype characteristics such as assertiveness and ambition are valued in a nation compared with traditional female archetype characteristics such as compassion and modesty (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Nations that score high in this dimension (eg. Japan scores 95 in MAS) place a great emphasis on personal status and success through competition. The opposite is true for nations that score low on masculinity (eg. Sweden scores 5 in MAS) where people value compromise, negotiation and achieving a consensus (Mindtools, 2021). In buyer-supplier relationships, one would expect this dimension to heavily influence the levels of

collaboration sought and received by participants with organisations from low-scoring nations expected to have greater levels of collaboration with suppliers and customers.

4. **Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)** - This dimension measures the degree to which peoples of a nation are willing to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity (Geerthofstede, 2021). Nations that score high in uncertainty avoidance (eg. Poland scores 93 in UAI) typically will try to make life as predictable and controllable as possible and employ rigid codes of belief and behaviour. In contrast, nations that score low in uncertainty avoidance (eg. Singapore scores 8 in UAI) have a more relaxed approach to the unknown and are generally more open to change and new ideas (Mindtools, 2021). In buyer-supplier relationships, this dimension may be visible in participants' preferences for stable and reliable business partners and perhaps a more cautious approach to changes in the terms and nature of the relationship.

5. **Long-Term Orientation vs Short-Term Orientation (LTO)** - This dimension is concerned with the time horizon the people within a nation display, and it has also been termed as “Pragmatic (LTO) vs Normative (STO)” (Mindtools, 2021). Nations that score high in this dimension (eg. Germany scores 83 in LTO) have a pragmatic approach, believe truth is contextual and display thriftiness in preparing for the future. Nations that score low in this ranking (eg. Ireland scores 24 in LTO) are more concerned with present circumstances, believe truth is absolute and adhere to time-honoured traditions (Hofstede Insights, 2021). In buyer-supplier relationships, this dimension is possibly evident in approaches to conflict resolution with participants that score highly in LTO perhaps more willing to compromise on solutions and less concerned with the immediate impacts and underlying reasons for the conflict than participants who score low and have a more short-term outlook.

6. **Indulgence vs Restraint (IVR)** - This dimension measures the degree to which the peoples of a nation indulge the impulses to do what makes them feel good (Geerthofstede, 2021). Nations that score highly in this dimension (eg. Australia scores

71 in IVR) place a greater importance on personal happiness and generally take life less seriously. On the other hand, nations that score low in this dimension (eg. Russia scores 20 in IVR) place a greater emphasis on duty and responsibility than personal liberties and gratification (Mindtools, 2021). In buyer-supplier relationships, this dimension could perhaps be reflected in the importance participants place on the personal relationships they develop with their counterparts in the relationship, with low scoring nations presumably placing less emphasis on this aspect and adopting strictly professional business-to-business relationships.

This study will consider all six dimensions when assessing the responses of international participants to determine if correlations exist between the country-specific cultural values defined by Hofstede and the values and opinions the participants hold with regards to buyer-supplier relationships.

Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World

Since 1997, the World Value Survey (WVS) has been publishing this scatter-plot map of the world's cultural values based on the data sets produced from each wave of the survey. The map was first devised by political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel based on Wave 4 of the survey which completed in 1996 (World Values Survey, 2021). The relative position of nations on the map is heavily influenced by religion, prevailing philosophy and other historical antecedents with nations of the protestant reformations and former soviet bloc nations for example forming cultural blocs within the map. In a broader sense though, Inglehart noted that the map could be interpreted as a reflection of political and economic "Modernisation". As the workforce of a nation moves from agrarian to industrial sectors, a shift is typically observed vertically upwards along the "Traditional vs Secular-Rational" y-axis while a shift from left to right along the "Survival vs Self-expression" x-axis follows as a nation moves to post-industrial or service-based economies (Yeganeh, 2017).

Inglehart initially used twenty-two variables to plot cultural values, but this was later reduced to just the ten variables shown in Table 1 (Dobewall and Rudnev, 2014). The variables are tied into areas such as national identity, religion, family values, individual autonomy and self-expression. Inglehart first plotted the variables against axes termed “Traditional vs Secular-Rational Authority” and “Survival vs Well-Being” (Inglehart, 1997) which later evolved to simply “Traditional vs Secular” and “Survival vs Self-Expression” axes.

<i>Traditional vs. Secular-Rational Values</i>	<i>Survival vs. Self-Expression Values</i>
“ <i>God is important</i> ” How important is God in your life? [“not at all” 1 - “very important” 10]	“ <i>Not happy</i> ” Taking all things together, would you say you are [“very happy” 1 - “not happy at all” 4]
“ <i>Abortion justified</i> ” Abortion is never justifiable [“never justifiable” 1 - “always justifiable” 10]	“ <i>Abstaining from petitions</i> ” Signing a petition [“have done” 1 “Might do” 2, “would never do” 3]
“ <i>Low national pride</i> ” How proud are you to be (nationality)? [“very proud” 1 - “not proud at all” 4]	“ <i>Homosexuality justified</i> ” Homosexuality is never justifiable [“never justifiable” 1 - “always justifiable” 10]
“ <i>Less authority</i> ” Showing greater respect for authority is [“good thing” 1 - “bad thing” 3]	“ <i>Distrust</i> ” General trust in people. [“Most people can be trusted” 1, “Can’t be too careful” 2]
“ <i>Autonomy index</i> ” It is more important for a child to learn independence and determination than obedience and religious faith [-2 to +2].	“ <i>Materialism—Postmaterialism index</i> ” Respondent gives priority to self-expression and quality of life over economic and physical security [“materialist” 1, “mixed” 2, “postmaterialist” 3].

Table 1. The 10 variables of the Inglehart-Welzel Map. **Source: Inglehart and Baker (2000)**

Nations that are shown to hold traditional values place a greater emphasis on religion and family values, tend to be more deferential to authority figures and hold a greater degree of national pride. Whereas the nations that fall closer to the secular-rational end of this axis hold more humanistic values, believe in greater autonomy of individuals and have a more global outlook (Cheng, Yau and Ho, 2016). With regards to survival values, individuals from these nations typically value economic and physical security and show lower levels of tolerance and trust. Whereas individuals from nations with a higher degree of self-expression values focus more on quality of life, well-being and environmental issues while seeking a greater say in decision-making in politics and economics (World Values Survey, 2021).

As we can see, a nation's relative position on these axes has been demonstrated to be strongly correlated to other national orientations including deference to authority in power structures, interpersonal trust and nationalistic outlook. Each of which can play a key role in the development and success of cross-cultural buyer-supplier relationships.

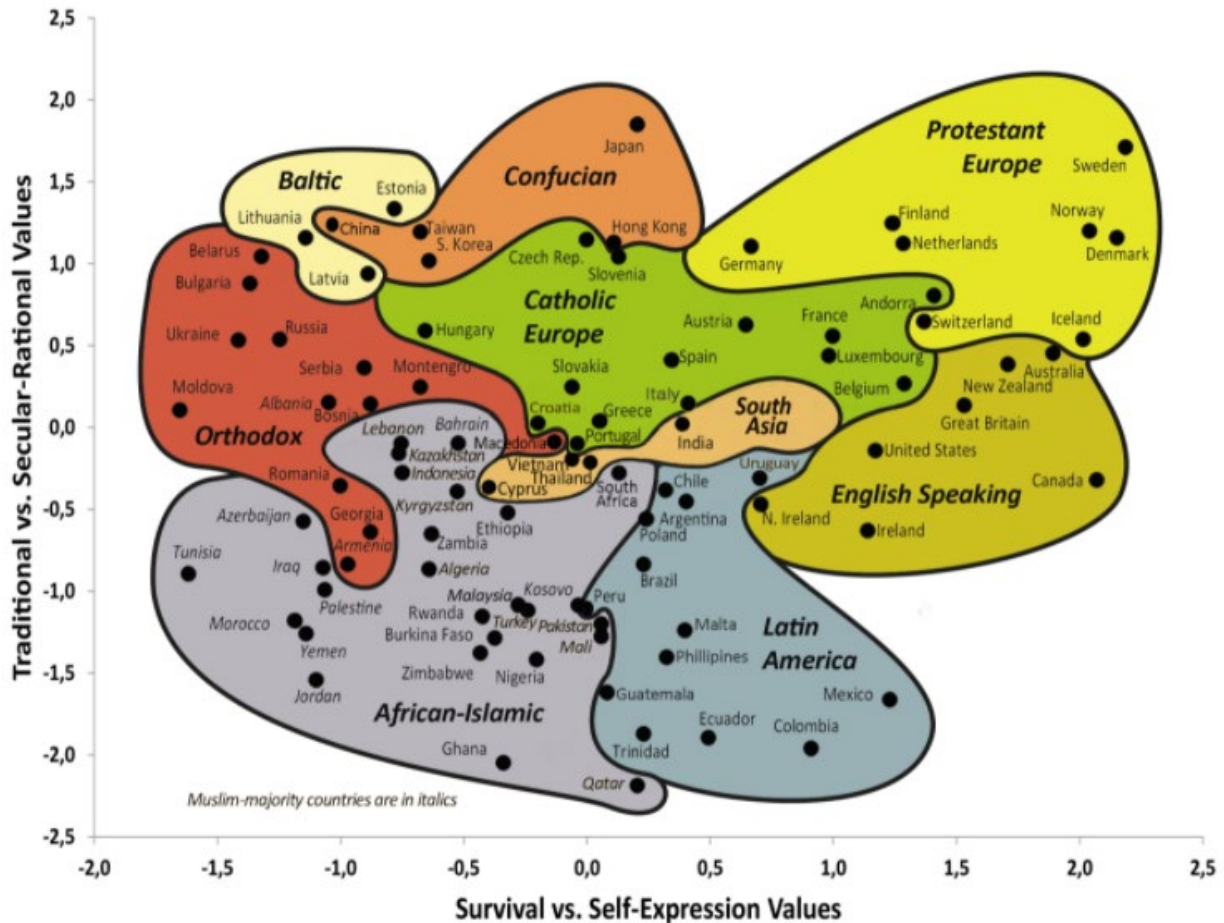


Fig 3. Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World (2014) **Source:** WVS Database (2021)

Criticisms of National Cultural Frameworks

Both Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World have been subject to enduring criticism since their conceptions. Even the broader subject area of cultural dimension studies has been criticised as being "too limited in scope and incapable of providing a thorough and in-depth understanding of national culture" (Yeganeh, 2017, p. 130). Many authors have found flaws in the cultural framework models employed in this study. This is

particularly true of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions as one of the oldest and most widely cited models of national cultural differences.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions model is most commonly criticised for overestimating the number of dimensions, misinterpreting their meaning and even for the quality of the supporting data (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). For example, Minkov and Kaasa (2021) demonstrated that Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) and Masculinity-Femininity (MAS) dimensions lacked internal consistency and that some items that targeted these dimensions followed very different logic. Similarly, the Long-Term Orientation (LTO) dimension has been acknowledged by Hofstede himself as lacking a convincing explanation of what holds together the diverse values that constitute this dimension (Minkov et al, 2018). Some have even described the Hofstede model as "an empirical vacuum" (Minkov et al., 2018, p.310).

Other criticisms of Hofstede's cultural dimensions are that the IBM employee dataset did not reflect the broad cultural values of participant nations (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). While there have also been criticisms of the temporal stability of the national values. With most of the supporting data collected between 1968 and 1973, many authors have mentioned the problematic issue of Hofstede's data being outdated (Beugelsdijk, Kostova and Roth, 2016). Hofstede himself rejects this criticism claiming that the data is enduring and persistent since "national cultures are extremely stable over time" (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). This claim is at odds with the central premise of the Inglehart-Welzel map which is a dynamic model of cultural values based on the concept of modernisation as a nation moves from agrarian through industrial and post-industrial stages.

The Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World is not without its critics though. The model has been criticised for overestimating the generational replacement effect on national cultural values and for having a flawed dimensional understanding of national culture (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). Li and Bond (2010) said that there is dubious justification for both axes of the cultural map since traditional and survival values have been found to be highly convergent. This is supported by the findings of Dobewall and Rudnev (2014) who showed that "Embeddedness vs Autonomy" dimension of Schwarz's cultural value theory lies at the diagonal of the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map of the world thus highlighting the intersection of both axes in certain cultural values.

Research Question

According to Murphy, Golgeci and Johnston (2020), there is a considerable dearth of research into the effects of national culture on buyer-supplier relationships in global supply chains. This paper will hopefully add to the field of study in answering the following questions:

RQ1.

Is there evidence of varying perceptions of the nature and quality of buyer-supplier relationships between supply chain members of different nationalities?

RQ.2

If such variances are evidenced in the research, is there a correlation between them and the country-specific cultural differences espoused by popular frameworks such as Hofstede's "Dimensions of National Culture" and the Inglehart-Welzel "Cultural Map of the World"?

The hypothesis of the study is that varying perceptions of buyer-supplier relationships will be observed between participants of different nationalities in a global supply chain. The proportionate weighting of their country-specific cultural values into forming these perceptions will be determined but it is hypothesised that they will have at least a partial influence. If these hypotheses are proved out, the research will add to existing literature and reinforce the importance of cultural intelligence in fostering mutually beneficial cross-border business relationships for global supply chains.

Methodology

As per the title, this dissertation attempted to answer these research questions by means of a qualitative study. Due to the contextual nature of business relationships and the complexity of cultural effects, a qualitative approach was deemed to be necessary as it allows for a more dynamic and flexible approach when exploring the subject and attempting to answer the research questions than would be offered by a quantitative study. This methodological approach is supported by the suggested methods of previous papers in the subject area. Lillis and Tian (2010, p 100) for example, contend that “qualitative research is flexible and iterative, allowing for the discovery of unexpectedly important topics which may not have been visible had the researcher been limited to a set of questions or data collection”. This point of view is shared by many other researchers in their approach to value and relationship analysis with Potter and Cooper (2020) asserting that values are abstract beliefs or principles that drive behaviours, while Mandják and Szántó (2010) claim that social relationships are not directly observable.

Research Philosophy

The research adopted an interpretivist philosophy with the transcripts resulting from the interview process being interpreted by means of thematic analysis. An interpretivist philosophy is typically required for studies of cross-cultural effects since the effects are not easily measured or conclusively validated as would be required by a positivist philosophy. As Denscombe (2010, p.97) notes “positivistic approaches to social research are premised on the assumption of one reality” whereas interpretivist philosophies accept the subjective and changing nature of a subject such as culture. This view is endorsed by previous researchers in the area such as Lillis and Tian (2010, p 100) who declared that “cultural analysis is not an experimental science but an interpretive one in search of meaning”.

Research Approach

The study took an inductive approach to the research questions by first establishing the foundational literature and cultural frameworks, then forming hypotheses based on observations from these works before finally testing the hypotheses against the novel data gathered over the

course of the study. This approach is recommended by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) for the collection of qualitative data as it allows a more flexible structure that permits changes of emphasis as the research progresses and can better understand the meanings that humans attach to phenomena. In contrast, deductive reasoning requires greater controls in ensuring the validity of the data as it seeks to reach generalised conclusions. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.83) further define the role of inductive reasoning in thematic analysis saying it “is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions”. In keeping with this open-minded approach, the research study was designed in such a way to allow for emergent themes in answering the research questions.

Research Design

The research was mono-method and cross-sectional in nature with data collected from a series of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with purposefully sampled professionals from across the global supply chain of one focal organisation. Multi-method and longitudinal studies were not feasible for the study given the time constraints involved. The data collection method of semi-structured interviews was decided to be the most appropriate with other methods such as questionnaires, surveys and checklists considered unsuitable for the purposes of inductive research due to their impersonal nature and rigid design. As Denscombe (2010) notes, pre-coded questions can lead to bias in the research design and do not allow the researcher to probe deeper into responses as required. One-to-one interviews were essential for research purposes given the requirement to analyse each individual’s responses based on personal criteria such as nationality. Interviews with teams or focus groups would have lost the personal feedback of participants and could potentially have led to biased answers and occasions of groupthink. Finally, the research was blind with respect to the effect of national cultural differences to avoid national representation influencing the responses of participants in any way. This single-blind study design is recommended “when participants’ knowledge of their group membership might bias the results” (Salkind, 2010). This ensured views were non-partisan and open to unbiased analysis by the national cultural frameworks.

Research Sample

The final sample set for this research study consisted of five different nationalities among eight procurement, sales or supply chain professionals. The sample was purposefully selected to give equal representation of buyer and supplier perspectives as well as a variety of national backgrounds that could open the data to analysis of cultural effects. The characteristics noted during the establishing and concluding questions of the research interviews allowed for thematic analysis of responses through three distinctive lenses.

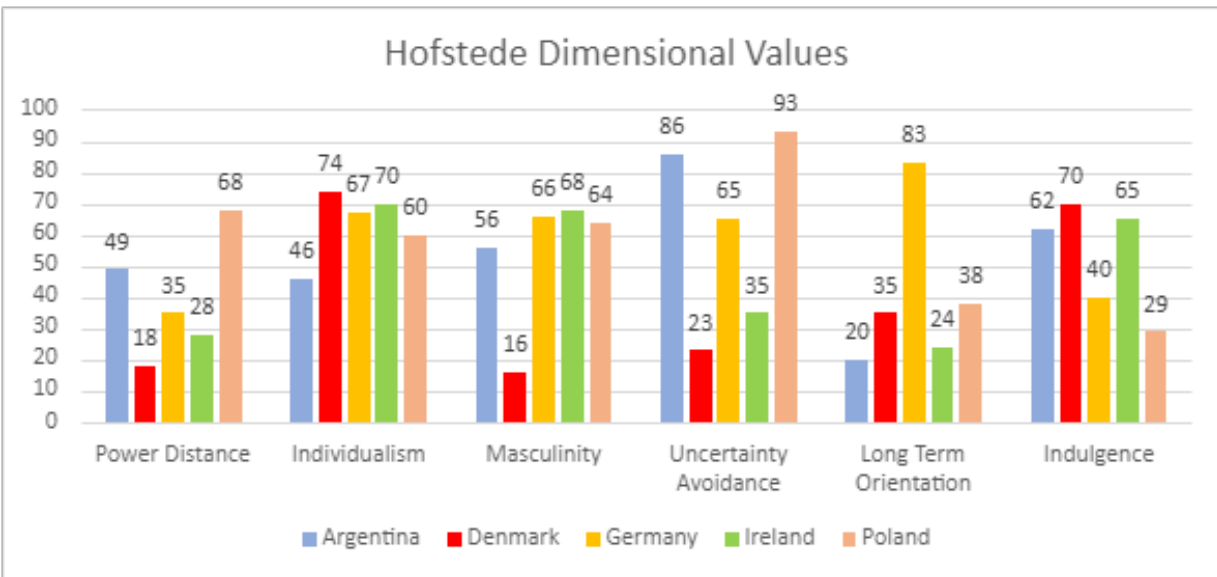


Fig 4. Cultural Dimensional Values of Participant Nationalities (Hofstede Insights, 2021)

Firstly, the primary goal of the research is to interpret responses by nationality to identify the influence of country-specific cultural differences between participants. This will be done with reference to the cultural difference frameworks outlined in the literature review. The values for Hofstede’s “Cultural Dimensions” for each participant nationality are shown in Figure 4 above. These values were retrieved from the database of Hofstede Insights (2021). The second framework is the Inglehart-Welzel “Cultural Map of the World” shown below in Figure 5 which was retrieved from the World Values Survey (2021). For ease of analysis the participant nations have been highlighted (Note: Ireland was not included in 2020, so its position has been mapped from the 2014 edition). As illustrated the nations can be broadly grouped into “traditional survivalist” nations of Ireland, Poland and Argentina and the “secular self-expressive” nations of Denmark and Germany due to their relative positions on each axis,

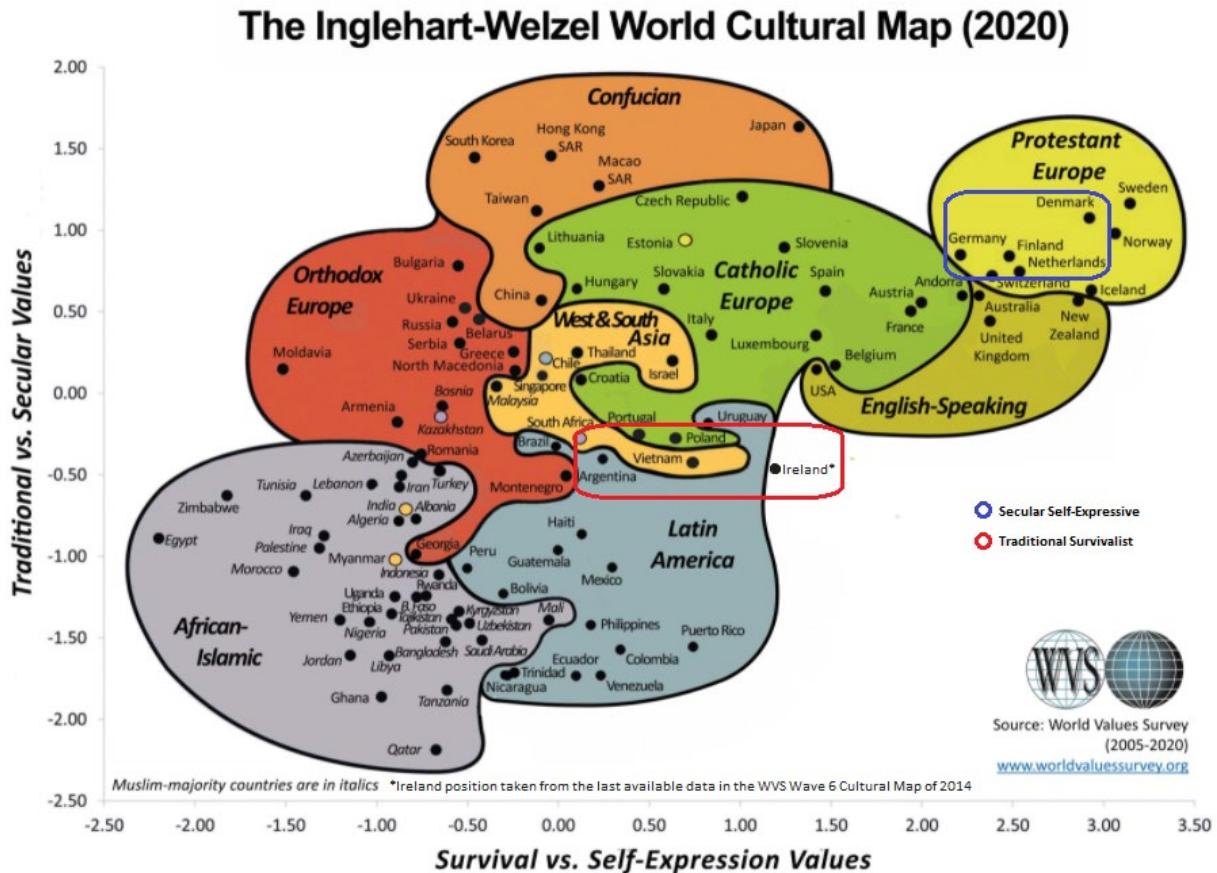


Fig 5. Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World (2020) Source: WVS Database (2021)

Secondly, responses can also be considered reflective of the participants role as either a buyer or supplier in the relationship. And finally, there are some limited inferences that can be drawn from the job titles which indicate the role - operational or strategic - that the participant occupies within their buyer-supplier relationships. For the purpose of this study, job titles which indicated seniority such as manager, director etc. are considered more likely to be a strategic position in the relationship whereas executive positions are more likely to be operational in nature.

Table 2 below shows the characteristics of participants that were used when analysing participant responses as well the shorthand keys that will be used to refer to each participant.

Interview	Nationality	Buyer/Supplier	Job Title	Operational/Strategic	Shorthand Key
1	Irish	Buyer	Material Planner	Operational	IB1
2	German	Supplier	Account Executive	Operational	GS1
3	Danish	Buyer	Category Manager	Strategic	DB1
4	Polish	Supplier	Key Account Manager	Strategic	PS1
5	Irish	Supplier	Technical Sales Manager	Strategic	IS2
6	German	Supplier	Sales Director	Strategic	GS2
7	Danish	Buyer	Head of Procurement	Strategic	DB2
8	Argentine	Buyer & Supplier	Supply Chain Manager	Strategic	ABS1

Table 2. Characteristics of Research Interview Participants and Shorthand Keys

Interview Style

The study comprised of informal semi-structured interviews with a mix of open-ended, closed-ended and deliberately pointed questions that allowed for further prompting and probing as required. There were fourteen interview questions in total (See Appendix ii) with the first seven questions focused on the varying perceptions among the sample set of relationship quality and its influencing factors. The next four questions pertained to the nature of buyer-supplier relationships – specifically the expectations, priorities and structural preferences among the sample set. The questions were neutrally posed where possible to avoid any chance of leading responses from the participants. Dobewall and Rudnev (2014, p.57) highlighted this risk when they said “acquiescence - the general tendency to agree (or disagree) with all items presented – has been shown to vary cross-culturally being stronger in traditional cultures”. The interviews were executed virtually using videoconferencing software to record the sessions which were then converted to written transcripts for analysis.

Data Analysis

Collected data from the interviews was interpreted by means of thematic analysis using the six-step method as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the data set was extensively reviewed and analytical observations recorded. Next, these observations were codified according to notable features and relevance to the research question. For example, the analysis considered the factors of trust, satisfaction and commitment which were shown to be at the core of business relationship quality and can also be linked to cultural dimensions noted by Hofstede, Inglehart and Welzel. These codes were then used to aid in the identification of emergent themes. The

emergent themes from the dataset were next reviewed and interpreted through the lenses of our country-specific cultural difference frameworks as well as other distinguishing features such as the participants position as either buyer, supplier, strategic or operational. The most robust emergent themes from this review were neatly defined before finally being included in the findings and analysis section.

Ethical Considerations

There were few ethical hazards to be considered with this research methodology. The practice of interviewing participants is well established. As Allmark et al. (2009) explained, the main concerns are typically confidentiality, informed consent and avoidance of harm. In this research, the consent of all participants was received in advance via a consent form (See Appendix i) with the purpose and mode of research made clear both in the form and immediately prior to the interview itself. The prospect of harm was considered extremely unlikely since interview questions were solely based on the interviewee's professional area of expertise and sought only their opinions on the buyer-supplier relationship dynamic. Finally, the protection of any personal or organisational data was given due consideration at all times during the recording of the study. The personal information of all participants has been anonymised and any information arising from the interview that could be used to identify the individual or their organisation was omitted from the transcripts. The raw data resulting from the interviews will be stored as password encrypted files only for as long as required by the data retention policy of National College of Ireland. Finally, the study incorporated a very low level of deceit by keeping the aspect of the study concerned with the impact of national cultural differences hidden from the participants in the initial invitations and consent forms. This aspect was made clear to the participants at the conclusion of each interview prior to confirming their nationality and participants were again made aware that they were free to withdraw their participation in the study if they wished.

Limitations

Studies of national cultural effects are by their nature reductive and can never fully reflect the broad spectra of values and beliefs held by individual representatives of each country. At best, such studies can only provide a broad approximation of what is important to the population of a

nation while at worst they can lead to lazy and misguided stereotypes that refract or even obfuscate underlying truths about national cultures. The same observation was noted by Ribbink and Grimm (2014) who cited culture as a limitation since there can clearly be individual differences within members of a society. Therefore, it is important for this study to outline that individual preference must be considered a confounding variable. Any conclusions drawn from the collected data were subject to this limitation. Interpretation of the data was based on established country-specific cultural frameworks to ground the analysis in previous research findings and avoid novel generalisations which may be baseless. Besides individual preference, contextual factors such as organisational culture, strategy and negotiation position within their industry and supply chain may also play a part in determining the responses of interviewees. As Holmlund (2008, p.58) recognised “There is perhaps no such thing as a typical business relationship. They are variable and all tend to be unique in some respect.” This must be considered another confounding variable and therefore a limitation of this study. Another limitation to be noted is that within the international sample set of the study, there were non-native English speakers. It is reasonable to assume that there may have been misunderstandings or misinterpretations at times in the interview process. The final limitation of note within the study is that the sample set was Euro centric with only one non-European participant. This limited the scope of cultural differences that could be readily observed.

Findings & Analysis

Perceptions of Buyer-Supplier Relationship Quality

The first three interview questions were open-ended and sought both objective definitions from participants of good-quality and poor-quality buyer-supplier relationships as well as subjective opinions on what elements of such relationships mattered personally to each participant based on their experience.

- 1. Generally, how would you define a good-quality buyer-supplier relationship?*
- 2. Generally, how would you define a poor-quality buyer-supplier relationship?*
- 3. What aspects of a Buyer-Supplier relationship are most important to you personally from your own professional experience?*

Findings:

Perhaps unsurprisingly the most common characteristic of good-quality buyer-supplier relationships mentioned by participants was collaboration. All of the participants either explicitly mentioned or alluded to collaboration or compromise as being important elements in good-quality buyer-supplier relations or being absent in the case of poor-quality buyer-supplier relationships. Collaboration was found to be universally regarded as critical regardless of nationality or position. For example, GS1 in their response to what defines a good-quality relationship said “I think a good give and take basis is very important for the co-operation” while ABS1 in their response to what defines a poor-quality relationship described it as “looking after your own self-interest” and emphasised that the relationship is “a two-way street”.

The next most common characteristic cited by participants as a core element of good-quality buyer-supplier relationships was communication. Seven of the eight interviewees cited communication, information sharing or clear communication channels as vital to sustaining good-quality business relationships. Once again with such universal acknowledgement there was no distinctions that could be made with regards to nation-specific cultural differences nor to the

role of the participant in the supply chain or their organisation. IB1 for example, noted the importance of communication and information sharing in response to all three of the above questions stating “You have to have good communication with the supplier (...) and try to give as accurate information as you possibly can” while GS2 in response to question three noted the importance of “Intensive information exchanges” in building understanding within the relationship.

And this understanding was the final universally acknowledged characteristic of good-quality buyer-supplier relationships. Seven of the eight participants interviewed addressed the understanding of requirements, goals and/or capabilities of both parties in the relationship with some describing this understanding as a key foundational element for shared success and value creation. As the last universally accepted attribute of good-quality buyer-supplier relationships there was once again no interpretation that could be made with regards to nation-specific cultural values or positions held within the organisation and relationship. For example, in response to the first question IS1 claimed that a good-quality buyer-supplier relationship “is an open and transparent relationship where both understand what the end goal is” and in response to question three described the importance of “understanding how the relationship needs to develop at a multi-tier level”. This sentiment was echoed by DB2 in response to question three when they espoused the benefits of having “a good counterpart that understood the customer requirements but were always able to transform that requirement into a constructive proposal that could be of value add for both parties”.

Besides these universally accepted characteristics, there were some other features noted by our participants which would appear to represent a divergence of opinions between the internal groupings of our sample set. The most pronounced difference observed was the requirement for a degree of formality that our participants believed contributed to good-quality buyer-supplier relationships.

The clearest examples of this came from the Danish participants DB1 and DB2 who both made reference to the importance of formal agreements, specifications, governance and structured KPIs. DB1 cited the importance of products and services complying “with agreed specifications” in both questions one and two while highlighting the failure to “agree supply terms and have a balanced contract” as impediments to a great relationship. DB2 meanwhile emphasised the

importance of “clear governance between the parties for structured follow-up on KPIs” and claimed that formal agreements “frame the kind of relationship you have between the parties” in terms of deliverables as well as commercial and legal aspects.

This endorsement of the more formal aspects of the buyer-supplier relationship contrasted most starkly with the responses of the Irish and Argentine respondents who emphasised more informal and intangible characteristics of honesty and trust when defining relationship quality. IB1 said that a key element of a good-quality relationship was “to have respect for one another (...) and be open and honest”. These informal elements were supported by ABS1 who described trust as “the first (thing) that comes to mind” when defining good-quality relationships and emphasised its role in building partnerships saying both sides “are trying to do the best for their own company. But when trust is in place it doesn’t have to go one against the other”.

Analysis:

The findings above point to a mostly shared and universal definition of buyer-supplier relationship quality with collaboration and communication both critical elements in building a strong relationship based on a mutual understanding of the requirements and capabilities of each party. These same elements were recognised by previous researchers encountered in the literature review. Woo and Ennew (2004) recognised co-operation as a key pillar in the higher order construct of relationship quality and Holmlund (2008) in her empirical study of business-to-business relationship quality described smooth communication and responsiveness as social dimensions of the same construct. Naudé and Buttle (2000) meanwhile listed the mutual understanding of needs as one of five attributes of relationship quality. So, while the research did not yield any new insights into the topic of relationship quality, it does support these previous findings as these features were widely recognised among our sample set.

However, it is the points of divergence among our sample set that are of most interest to this study for the purposes of interpretive analysis of nation-specific cultural differences. And in this regard, we have the apparent divergence of our traditional survivalist nations of Ireland and Argentina from the secular self-expressive nation of Denmark when interpreting the levels of formality required for good-quality relationships. From the aforementioned cultural difference

frameworks, the two most relevant measures which could potentially be implicated here are masculinity index of Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the "Survival vs Self-Expression" axis of Inglehart-Welzel's cultural map.

From Hofstede Insights (2021), we see masculinity as the one dimension of significant discrepancy between Denmark (16) and Ireland (68) or Argentina (56). This dimension has previously been shown to be linked to the levels of competition or collaboration exhibited within a national culture – Low scores indicating more collaborative societies and vice versa. It could therefore be implicated in the level of competition expected by a party in a business relationship. And correspondingly the survivalist nations typically exhibit lower levels of trust than Denmark as a self-expressive nation according to the Inglehart-Welzel axis values. The result of this untrusting and highly competitive cultural mindset is an apparent need for intangible personal attributes such as honesty, respect and transparency as part of the trust-building process for traditional survivalist nations when entering business relationships. Denmark and similar secular self-expressive nations may perhaps consider respect and honesty as given in any relationship and so are more comfortable in entering formal agreements and define the quality of business relationships based on adherence to specified standards.

The Importance of Personal Relationships

The fourth interview question was a closed-ended question concerning the importance of personal relationships to the overall quality of the buyer-supplier relationship.

4. *Is the personal relationship with your key point of contact important to the quality of a business-to-business relationship? Why or why not?*

Findings:

This question also yielded an interesting point of divergence among the study's nation-specific cultural groupings of traditional survivalists – Argentina, Ireland and Poland – and secular self-expressives – Denmark and Germany. While both groups acknowledged there can be inherent

advantages to the business relationship in having strong personal relationships, the secular self-expressive group believed that ultimately the personal relationship should not be of importance in a professional setting. This contrasted considerably with the views of the traditional survivalist nations' participants.

The views of the traditional survivalist nations placed the personal relationship at the heart of overall buyer-supplier relationship quality. The group remarked how personal bonds play a central role in trust-building and lead to improved communication and understanding between parties. IB1 said that “when you build up personal relationships it makes the whole situation a lot better (...) and there is a better understanding of each other and the business”. IS1 described the personal relationship as “Integral” and claimed that it helps to “engage in an open and trustworthy manner”. Similarly, ABS1 considers the personal relationship as “one of the key parts” of business relationship quality, particularly its role in trust-building as they believe that trust “is person based. It is not company A trusts company B. It is buyer A trusts supplier B”. ABS1 also made the point that the quality of a business relationship can be inherited from predecessor buyers or suppliers but the replacement “can improve it or kill it” due to the personal relationship's impact. Finally, PS1 also acknowledged it is “good if you like the person because it's easy-going communication (...) you have easy access and can be very quick in supporting”. They did however note the increasing difficulty of maintaining such personal relationships due to the “fast-changing of people” in modern supply chains. This point was echoed by IS1 in response to interview question five and they even suggested that it is “done very much on purpose because they don't want personnel to build up relationships with suppliers”.

These views contrasted profoundly with the majority of views expressed by participants from nations classified as secular self-expressive. While these participants did recognise that healthy personal relationships can benefit business relationships in some ways, they also were keen to emphasise that professional duty should ideally outweigh personal bonds in a business context. For example, in response to this question DB1 said “I would like to say no but we are working with people (...) and sometime chemistry is important”. This participant even acknowledged the cultural aspect when speaking of an example of dealing with an Asian supplier they said “trust is everything for them (...) and is something that is built over time” and so “It is a culture thing (...) about me as a person. And so, in that way I have to say yes it matters”. This hesitancy to fully

endorse the positive aspects of personal relationships owing to professional duty was also expressed by GS1 who argued that “It should not be important, but I think we are all human and if a buyer is kind the quality of my work is also better. It is an involuntary process”. The professional obligation which outweighs personal relationships was most clearly described by DB2 who stated that personal relationships “would not be a first thing that rules a relationship (...) You might not be able to have a super relationship on a personal level with that person but on a professional level you need to make it work”.

Analysis:

Once again, this research question unearthed a separation of views between our nation-specific cultural groups of traditional survivalists and secular self-expressives. While all respondents acknowledged the impact personal relationships can have - even if involuntary - on elements such as responsiveness and trust, three of the four German or Danish respondents qualified this impact by saying it should not be of such importance when considering professional duty. Only GS2 of the secular self-expressive grouping proclaimed the benefits of personal relationships without such qualification by saying “It definitely helps (...) as most human beings make decisions based on emotions to a big extent” and “if you have a personal good understanding (...) it makes conversations easier”. This outlier response from the group could even be partially explained by the fact GS2 is based in Poland which is a traditional survivalist nation according to the Ingelhart-Welzel cultural map.

This response was more in line with the participants from this traditional survivalist cultural grouping who described personal relationships as key and integral. These respondents appeared to be more embracing of personal bonds and it could even be the case that these cultures are dependent on such bonds for trust-building and developing optimal buyer-supplier relationships. Interestingly, the opinions of PS1 in response to this question and IS2 in response to question five indicates that such personal bonds are becoming more difficult to maintain to the fast-changing business environments and even deliberate impediment by organisations. This supports the views presented by Butt, Sohal and Prajogo (2019) who concluded that some organisations worry that personal relationships can lead to “mutual loyalty” which could eventually lead to negative outcomes such as higher opportunity costs and reduced sales volumes. It is a valid

point, but it is also important to make the distinction between operational and strategic positions if organisations wish to inhibit personal bonds in this way. Operationally it would appear that the positives gained from personal understanding would outweigh the risk of such negative outcomes when compared with the more strategic roles that make decisions on business spend and volumes.

With regards to the analytical lenses employed by this study, there is clearly a distinction that can be made between national attitudes towards personal relationships in a business setting based on the values attributed to national cultures by the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the world. There once again appears to be a correlation between the varying levels of trust inherent in some national cultures as mapped along the "Survival vs Self-Expression" x-axis of the map and the importance of personal relationships to these cultures in trust-building. With regards to the Hofstede cultural dimensions, it was proposed in the literature review that preceded the study that the "Indulgence" score of a nation could play a part in determining the likelihood of its people engaging in personal relationships in business rather than adopting strict duty-bound attitudes in buyer-supplier relationships. This was resoundingly proven untrue as Denmark with the highest indulgence score (70) from our sample set in fact had the least positive assessment of the importance of personal relationships to the buyer-supplier business relationship. So, there appears to be no causal link in this respect. There was also no distinction that could be made between responses based on participants position or role as buyers or supplier in the relationship.

The Effects of Time and Commitment

The fifth and sixth interview questions were again closed-ended questions related to the effects of longevity and the importance of commitment to the overall quality of the buyer-supplier relationship.

5. *Do you find the quality of your buyer-supplier relationships improve over time? Is this always the case?*
6. *Do you value commitment in a buyer-supplier relationship? Is there value in staying with a long-term supplier or customer when a new relationship appears to be more profitable?*

Findings:

These two questions yielded no clear disparity in the valuation of commitment and the effects of time on buyer-supplier relationships between participants of different national cultures. The only observable differences were in the opinions expressed by those occupying more strategic rather than operational positions within organisations and an apparent division in the value of commitment between buying and selling organisations.

To the first point, the results of the research showed a clear difference between the views of operational and strategic positions of the sample set. That is that while five out of six of the strategic respondents acknowledged the contextual nature of business relationships with regards to the effects of time and importance of commitment, neither of the two operational participants mentioned contextual factors. For example, IS1 commented that the quality of buyer-supplier relationships does not always improve over time “if the emphasis of the organisation changes”. This point was echoed by DB2 who noted the importance of “the two companies’ strategies continuing to be a good fit”. In addition to the strategic fit, DB1 highlighted the impact of segmentation saying “you do your segmentation to find out (...) your most critical suppliers because either they can help you meet your strategy goals, or they can bring innovation or the products and services they supply are critical to your business”. And ABS1 remarked that when the relationship “is strategic both ways, I think you have to think long-term”. Each of these views reflect the contextual nature of business relationships described by writers such as Lambert (2000), Hingley (2001) and Cox (2004b) outlined in the literature review with factors such as strategic fit, segmentation and power-dynamics playing a role in the development of any business relationship.

While both operational participants failed to mention these conditional elements of buyer-supplier relationships they did share other sentiments with the strategic participants. They both referred to the process of “Institutionalisation” as described within the IMP business integration model (Woo and Ennew, 2004). For instance, IB1 in response to the effect of time on relationships, touched upon institutionalisation by saying “when you get to know your supplier and your contact, you do build up personal relationships as well as business relationships and you tend to work together to get the outcome you both need”. GS1 reinforced these sentiments by claiming “you will better understand the customer over the years (...) and the experiences with

other customers will make your work better”. Institutionalisation was also acknowledged by half of the strategic participants with PS1 stating that the relationship “is usually improving with time. If it is a long relationship, the communication and relation improve”. The same experience was reported by GS2 who said “generally, it is a relatively cold start and then it is certainly improving over time if you are getting to know each other”.

Finally, the last noteworthy observation was an apparent divide in valuation of commitment between buyer and supplier organisations as well as between the operational and strategic positions. The responses of the sample set appear to suggest that commitment in the buyer-supplier relationship is more greatly valued by supplier organisations and those who occupy operational positions within both organisations. Both operational participants cited the importance of commitment with IB1 saying “you tend to go with who you know rather than take a risk on somebody that you don’t know” and GS1 prefers business with long-term suppliers as they are “reliable for many years and a stable part of the business”. Three out of four of the supplier participants endorsed such long-term commitment as well with GS2 describing commitment as “very important” and IS1 believing that “once you lose volume you never gain it back in the same way”. This contrasts with the participants who occupy strategic buying positions. DB1 exemplifies this by saying even with long-term partners “You still need to benchmark. (...) You still need to know if you have the right prices”. This view was shared by DB2 who outlined the obligation for procurement professionals to “translate a requirement over to a market perspective and to get the best possible (...) commercial deals for the company”.

Analysis:

While the relatively small size of the sample set may be a limiting factor, if one is to read into the responses of participants to these two interview questions it would suggest that national cultural values do not play a large role in individual perceptions on long-term commitment in buyer-supplier relationships. Participants from both of our traditional survivalist and secular self-expressive national culture groupings cited the positive impacts of institutionalisation such as improved understanding leading to improved performance. And similarly, participants from both of these groups were equally represented in acknowledging the contextual variables that affect commitment such as strategic fit, segmentation and the power dynamics of the relationship. The

findings suggest that opinions on the value of long-term commitment are more heavily influenced by factors such as the professional experience and position of the individual within both their organisation and the buyer-supplier relationship.

The responses of all of the strategic buyer participants was notable for the more cautious and conditional endorsement of long-term commitment when compared with the responses of operational and supplier participants. This reflects the different priorities of these positions. The view of the strategic procurement professionals is best summarised by DB2 who said, “I do think it is our obligation to show the potentials that are out there”. Even though these respondents acknowledged the inherent improvements that can accompany supplier development and partnership, commitment in and of itself can never be fully endorsed without considering a wider context. Whereas the stronger endorsement found in the responses of operational and supplier participants perhaps reflects the larger impact and switching costs observed by these participants in the dissolution of existing links and the establishment of new buyer-supplier relationships. Both operational buyers and suppliers who work at the coalface of the business may lose the benefits of institutionalisation and the trust they had built up over the years and are then forced to begin the process over again with a new partner. While strategic suppliers may see years of adaptation through investment in customer specific solutions made redundant as the business is lost to a competitor. In this way the switching costs are perceived to be higher among these groups and so commitment is more highly valued than by strategic procurement professionals.

A Pointed Question – Responsiveness or Reliability?

The seventh interview question was a deliberately pointed choice question that asked the participant to rank two characteristics of supply chain relationships to see if any clear distinctions could be made between subgroups of our sample set on the basis of nationality or position within their organisation or the supply chain.

- 7. Of the following two characteristics, which do you believe to be more important in a buyer-supplier relationship – Responsiveness (i.e. Quick to react to changes and communications) or Reliability (i.e. Routine and predictable behaviour)?*

Findings:

This question did yield a pattern of responses that is open to interpretation through the country-specific cultural difference frameworks. Although it must be said that the critical importance of both traits in a buyer-supplier relationship was widely recognised, with most struggling to select one trait over the other. And it should also be noted that once again the context was called into question by several participants with factors such as the lifecycle stage of the product or service and the industry or business area that the relationship exists in playing a part in determining which of the two characteristics is more important to the buyer-supplier relationship. Ultimately though a divide emerged with three out of four traditional survivalist participants choosing responsiveness as the more desirable trait and three out of four secular self-expressive participants opting for reliability. While not a clear and comprehensive divide it does signal a trend that is open to further analysis.

Of the traditional survivalist cultural grouping most chose responsiveness citing the merits of flexibility, adaptiveness and fast reactions in a quickly changing environment. IB1 said “we need a supplier to respond to something especially if the business requires it urgently”. PS1 agreed by citing the importance of information and arguing that “with the changes and the environment worldwide it is more important to be responsive I believe”. Lastly, ABS1 concurred with these sentiments saying “when you are dealing with a number of variables and complex environments, I think it is better to be able to be able to react quickly more than being steady and reliable” but qualified the response by saying “it depends on the business you are in and so on”. The one member of the secular self-expressives to select responsiveness over reliability was GS2 who claimed it is “critically important to adapt to changes which then hopefully will lead to an increased reliability moving forward”. Although opting for responsiveness, the response acknowledged the importance of reliability as well and it should be noted that GS2 works in Poland so a case could be made for national or organisational cultural assimilation.

From the secular self-expressive participants, the majority opted for reliability but also qualified this choice on the basis of their particular business area. For example, DB1 said “My answer is based on me working with direct procurement. That is why I would take reliability. Because we need to ensure that the quality does not vary. We’re talking about GMP direct procurement (...)

but if I was in R&D I would probably pick responsiveness”. Similarly, DB2 stated that “if we say this is related to the pharma business and more specifically to the areas I represent (...) then I would say reliability” but also acknowledged “If I talk to my stakeholders in the development area, they would say agility and speed”. And finally, GS1 also chose reliability over responsiveness when pressed saying “It’s hard to decide. I think the second is more important. Yes, but for small urgent orders it is important to be reactive”. The one exception from the traditional survivalist cultural group was IS1 who reluctantly chose reliability stating “It tends to be a combination of both. Responsiveness depending on the situation can be imperative. But reliability is key in the long term”.

Analysis:

While the outcome of this question did begin to show a cultural divergence in the importance of responsiveness versus reliability, it must be noted that the critical importance of both was made clear by the sample with most reluctant to declare a preference and some also highlighting the importance of context in favouring one over the other. Therefore, the outcome is not comprehensive evidence of a national cultural divide. But for the purpose of this study, we will try to interpret the emergent divide through the lenses of our cultural frameworks.

Interview	Key	Inglehart-Welzel Group	Responsiveness / Reliability	Hofstede UAI	Hofstede LTO
1	IB1	Traditional Survivalist	Responsiveness	35	24
4	PS1	Traditional Survivalist	Responsiveness	93	38
5	IS2	Traditional Survivalist	Reliability	35	24
8	ABS1	Traditional Survivalist	Responsiveness	86	20
2	GS1	Secular Self-Expressive	Reliability	65	83
3	DB1	Secular Self-Expressive	Reliability	23	35
6	GS2	Secular Self-Expressive	Responsiveness	65	83
7	DB2	Secular Self-Expressive	Reliability	23	35

Table 3. Responsiveness vs Reliability preferences by participants’ national cultural values.

Of the six country-specific cultural dimensions conceived by Geert Hofstede, the two that would be most implicated in ranking responsiveness against reliability would be uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation.

Hofstede described uncertainty avoidance as “the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by unknown situations and have created institutions that try to avoid these” (Hofstede Insights, 2021). The high scores of Germany (65), Poland (93) and Argentina (86) in this dimension would suggest that these cultures would value reliability over responsiveness to reduce the risk of ambiguity however that was not reflected in the findings with just one of the four interviewees from these nations preferring reliability. The low scores of Ireland (23) and Denmark (35) in this dimension would suggest that these cultures would place a lower importance on reliability but once again the opposite was the case with just one out of four participants from these two nations preferring responsiveness as a trait.

Long-term orientation could also be linked to this choice of preference as those cultures which score low in this dimension are said to have a short-term outlook and “a focus on achieving quick results” (Hofstede Insights, 2021). This would suggest a preference for responsiveness in such nations as Ireland (24), Poland (38), Argentina (20) and Denmark (23). However, half of the interviewees from these nations opted for reliability. And Germany as the sole LTO nation with a score of 83 was also split down the middle with both participants choosing different traits. This suggests that neither of these cultural dimensions of Hofstede’s are good predictors of this preference in typical buyer-supplier relationships, with LTO slightly more effective in this regard than UAI which almost gave the exact inverse of the expected result.

For this choice question, the cultural framework displaying the highest correlation with the preference for responsiveness over reliability was the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map of the world and specifically the “Survival vs Self-Expression” x-axis. On this axis, nations are measured according to the perceived levels of security – Economic and Physical – enjoyed by their citizens (Cheng, Yau and Ho, 2016). Those ranking towards the survival end of the axis are characterised as less secure and could be assumed to be more concerned with immediate requirements. The findings of the study are best correlated with this measure with three out of four of the survivalist participants favouring responsiveness compared to just one out of four self-expressive participants. While this is the most effective cultural determinant of preference for reliability or responsiveness investigated by the study, the results are far from conclusive and show national culture as a very weak determining factor when compared to other variables such as situational context, market demand volatility or product lifecycle stage.

Responsibility and Priorities in Buyer-Supplier Relationships

The eighth and ninth interview questions shifted the topic from relationship quality to the nature of buyer-supplier relationships. Specifically, the expectations of participant parties when it comes to the share of responsibility for relationship maintenance and the prioritisation of business requirements within the relationship.

8. *In a typical Buyer-Supplier relationship, which side do you believe bears responsibility for maintaining the quality of the relationship and why?*
9. *In a typical Buyer-Supplier relationship, do you believe the business needs of one side should be considered more important than the other? Which side and why?*

Findings:

Questions eight and nine yielded no significant results for analysis of country-specific cultural effects. Mixed responses were returned for all cultural groupings according to both Hofstede and Inglehart-Welzel frameworks. Similarly, no clear division of opinion could be discerned between operational or strategic positions. The only significant emergent trend from this question was that while most participants saw the ideal business relationship as one of mutual responsibility and equal prioritisation, those participants that represented suppliers in the relationship were split down the middle with half holding the belief that the supplier should take responsibility for the quality of the relationship and meet the needs of the customer.

The prevailing sentiment in response to question eight was that both sides are responsible for maintaining the relationship and this was observed in responses from all nationalities and positions. IB1 highlighted the interdependency for value creation saying, “We’re depending on them to supply us with something and they’re depending on us for their business, so I think we’re equally responsible”. DB1 explained how conflict emerges if the onus for maintaining the relationship is too one-sided claiming that “It can’t be only the buyer who is active in the relationship as it will clash at some point”. Finally, GS2 speaks of their ideal as a “business partnership” stating that “if only one side is delivering and the other side is only taking all the time, this is probably not working in the long term.”

Question nine yielded similar results with a preference for equity in the relationship when it came to prioritising requirements between the parties. IS1 spoke of how both companies should look to maximise the shared value exchange with the view that “it is the total cost element that’s important. So, from cradle to grave (...) I don’t believe any one part of it should override anything else”. And likewise, DB2 brought up mutual dependency when it comes to costs saying, “if you are not able to establish some sort of framework where the supplier would be able to keep their production running, you would impact the cost base of that supplier which would eventually impact prices to you”.

The noteworthy divergence from these responses came from half of the supplier participants. GS1 claimed that customer service is still the overarching driver in any business relationship by arguing that “the supplier is responsible for the quality of the relationship because as the supplier they have to satisfy the customer because (...) the customer is king”. The sentiment was shared by PS1 who noted the oft unequal dedication of resources to relationship management stating that “both sides should work” but that typically “suppliers have functions in the company dedicated to this (...) so the responsibility I believe belongs to the supplier to build the good relationship”.

Analysis:

With no clear division of opinion based on national cultural groupings, cultural factors would appear to have no bearing on the expectations of partners within a business relationship when it comes to relationship maintenance and prioritisation of needs. The responses showed an overwhelming preference for mutual ownership and equal value share in the ideal buyer-supplier relationship. This was true of all four procurement professionals interviewed. It shows the increasing popularity, within sourcing functions, of supplier development programs as noted by Ulaga and Eggert (2006) and of supply chain management practices as defined by Cox (2004a). That is “a sourcing technique that involves the buyer undertaking proactive supplier development work, not only at the first tier of the supply chain but also at all stages (...) through to raw material supply” (Cox, 2004a, p.350). Cox (2004a) attributes the earliest development of this approach to large Japanese automotive companies such as Toyota and Honda but it’s principles now appear to be firmly embedded in European supply chains also.

The fact that this preference for equitable division of responsibility and attention to business needs was not as strongly endorsed by supplier participants is noteworthy. The preference of half of these respondents for customer-centric relationships shows the persisting importance, within sales teams, of customer service and customer-oriented approaches to relational quality as noted by Holmlund (2008). However, half of the supplier respondents did favour mutual relationships citing that such a relationship is necessary for reliable long-term partnerships. This aligns with the findings of Cox (2004b, p. 412) who claimed that “relationships cannot be sustained unless both sides gain from the relationship”.

The varying responses among the supplier participants could also reflect the power-dynamics at play within their organisation and its business relations. Those suppliers who prefer mutuality may enjoy the luxury of strategic importance to their customers whereas the customer-centric respondents may be based in an industry where their organisation has low negotiating power and so must compete more aggressively on service levels. This contextuality was noted by DB1 who said “If you have a supplier that you have segmented as critical (...) then you need to ensure that the supplier’s needs are met (...). But then you can also have segmented a supplier as leverage (...). In that case you probably prioritise your needs as a customer because you know the supplier does not have the same power”. This is consistent with the effects of power-dynamics as detailed by Cox (2004a).

Structure and Support in Buyer-Supplier Relationships

The tenth and eleventh interview questions further examined the nature of buyer-supplier relationships with questions about the optimal structure and the levels of involvement and investment required at all levels to best support the relationship.

- 10. In your opinion, is the buyer-supplier relationship best served by a single point of contact or by multifunctional collaboration between participant organisations?*
- 11. In your opinion, is it important that buyer-supplier relationships are endorsed and supported at all levels from operational to senior management on both sides to be successful?*

Findings:

Once again, these questions showed no clear disparity in structural preferences for buyer-supplier relationships between participants of different nationalities. In fact, question eleven yielded the most unanimous response of any of the interview questions while question ten showed only a difference in opinion between the operational and strategic participants of the sample set.

For question ten, every strategic participant held the opinion that buyer-supplier relationships are best served by multifunctional collaboration. Some argued that it is not possible to fully support a relationship through a single point of contact. IS1 contended that “it is unfair to be reliant on any one individual on either side because we’re not all experts in all areas”. DB2 shared this view saying “it is important to enable people to perform on their levels and to deliver on their primary tasks. And that is probably difficult to think that could be merged completely into one role”. However most also acknowledged the potential for crossed wires and miscommunication that can emerge in such a setup. ABS1 stated “I don’t think everything should go through this bottleneck. Each side should enable the bigger team (...) and eventually create those connections – quality with quality, finance with finance, technical with technical but with the oversight of a single person. Not just leaving it completely loose”. DB1 affirmed these communication issues that can occur saying “As a category manager, I will be looking at commercial activities and agreements. It will not be beneficial if somebody else for example in the technical team is talking about volumes to purchase next year or the strategy”. This highlights the importance of clear communication channels in multi-functional collaboration between buyers and suppliers.

The exceptional responses for question ten came from the operational positions on both the buyer and supplier sides. IB1 commented on the importance of the single point of contact as a means of building a personal relationship and so creating trust in the business relationship when saying “I could depend on that person knowing my needs and the urgency of them at times (...) so I prefer a single point of contact where you’re dealing with them on a regular basis”. This point of view was shared by GS1 who said “you can better manage with only one contact. You can understand the person better and their wishes”.

In response to question eleven, every single participant felt it was important that business relationships are supported at all levels. The most common reasons given were to ensure strategic alignment of the businesses, to provide appropriate resources for operational support and to enable supplier development or partnerships to grow. PS1 said that “it’s very important that the supplier is visible not only to the operational buyer but by all levels of senior management because the aim of the two companies is to grow”. GS2 acknowledged that context is required when considering each relationship saying “When we are talking about global key account management that is the case (...) to ensure that the right service and performance levels are in place”. And DB1 emphasised the importance of support for relationship growth asserting that “once you have those partners, you have to make it clear as a procurement professional that you have an alignment within the company of why they are strategic, (...) why you even consider joint investments. You cannot do that if you don’t have support from leadership”.

Analysis:

Yet again, when discussing the optimum structure and support for buyer-supplier relationships, there was no discernible difference of opinions that could be drawn along national cultural boundaries. This means that, unlike the characteristics of relationship quality, the four questions concerned with the preferred nature of buyer-supplier relationships including responsibilities, expectations, structure and dynamics showed no correlation with country-specific cultural values.

Question ten yielded a resounding endorsement from the strategic participants for multi-functional collaboration across buyer-supplier relationships. This conforms with the views of Lambert and Cooper (2000, p. 76) who speak of “penetrating functional silos” and describe successful supply chain management as requiring “a change from managing individual functions to integrating activities into key supply chain processes”. The respondents also highlighted the communication challenges incumbent with this approach and spoke of the critical importance of establishing clear channels and governance around the multi-functional collaboration. This recalls and endorses the work of Zhao and Zhao (2018, p. 601) on multi-agent supply chain information sharing in which they concluded that “information sharing can effectively improve the profit of the supply chain and its various members”. The lone dissenting voices against multi-

functional collaboration came from those participants in operational positions. This could be because these positions are the most acutely affected by instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding, hence a preference for simpler two-way communication channels.

Question eleven unearthed an undisputed predilection for support and endorsement from all levels of an organisation on both sides of the buyer-supplier relationship. This agrees with the findings of Lambert (2010, p. 14) who claimed that “a top-to-top relationship is necessary to achieve buy-in and the resources to support the relationship but there must be multiple one-to-one relationships “where the rubber meets the road”. But once again the issue of context was raised by some participants with levels of support and investment required varying with different levels of segmentation of supply partners. Once more, this confirms the findings of Cox (2004a) regarding the appropriateness of buyer-supplier exchanges.

The Effects of International Relationships

The final three interview questions asked participants directly for their insights into the differences between domestic and international business relationships and the challenges and benefits of working across borders.

- 12. Of the business relationships you are in or have been a part of, is it your experience that the quality of the relationship was affected by whether it was domestic or international?*
- 13. Do you think there are any challenges in working as part of an international buyer-supplier relationship?*
- 14. Do you think there are any benefits from working as part of an international buyer-supplier relationship?*

Findings:

Whereas the preceding eleven questions sought to indirectly observe differences in beliefs and predispositions around the quality and nature of business relationships based on national culture, the final three questions directly asked about the participants experiences of dealing across national and cultural boundaries. The results reinforced the importance of this study, with seven of eight participants noting the impact of cultural differences when dealing with international

partners. Some respondents did seek to qualify the national cultural effects somewhat by also citing the role of organisational cultures and by highlighting that even in domestic relationships there can be multicultural teams, so the effects of culture are not limited to international business.

Of the respondents, ABS1 perhaps gave the most glaring examples of the effects of cultural differences citing from experience examples of “different ways of doing things. More informal, more formal. More flexible, more agile, more open to being creative and some cultures are different to others”. ABS1 also noted that culture affects trust claiming “it is easier sometimes to trust people that have the same set of values that you have” while also proclaiming the importance of cultural intelligence by saying “I think it is very important when you are part of a global organisation to get formal training and understanding on social differences”. Other respondents acknowledged this cultural impact with PS1 describing the challenge of “different culture and different mindsets” and DB2 also acknowledged the importance of cultural intelligence stating “I see it as an obligation on both sides to have an understanding of the cultural difference in that relationship”.

As mentioned, there were respondents who tempered the significance of country-specific cultures by also referring to the effect of organisational culture. PS1 for example also said “relationships and the building of respect is also dependent on company culture” and DB1 reiterated this in saying “It is not about whether it is domestic or international (...) you can also have different cultures with domestic suppliers”. This point was further expanded by GS2 who showed that even nationality-based cultures can exist in domestic supply chains since “in many cases you have on both sides multinational teams (...) they are probably involving English people, Irish people, Polish people so it becomes very international anyway”.

Besides culture, the other challenges mentioned by respondents included the language barrier, logistical hurdles and the limitations of teleconferencing tools in business dealings. IB1 responded that they understand that “language can be a barrier or communication breakdowns”. This was supported by non-native English speaker GS1 who said “it is my own challenge that I could be misunderstood or mistaken”. GS1 also mentioned logistical challenges of “import regulations, transport times and other bank holidays”. Finally, GS2 highlighted the difficulties of trying to negotiate and influence people over large geographic distances saying “You have to

convince a lot of stakeholders within the individual organisations (...) and so you have to talk to them via video call because they are located in a different country. I think that could be a challenge yes”.

The last interview question actually returned a surprising difference in the perceived benefits of international buyer-supplier relationships between the two cultural groupings traditional survivalists and secular self-expressives. Three out of four of the secular self-expressive participants referred to the experiential learnings of working internationally and learning from other cultures and ways of working. GS1 said “I think it’s very good to have wide spectra of different views and I think you can improve your work if you have different influences”.

Similarly, GS2 believes working internationally “you have much more possibilities to learn. And because people have different cultures, different ways of tackling the same challenge (...) I think it is much more interesting simply”. However, the same appreciation of the learning opportunities was not observed in the responses of any of the traditional survivalist interviewees. This group primarily recognised the benefits of exposure to global markets – something also acknowledged by the secular self-expressives. For example, PS1 claimed dealing internationally offers increased stability as “if you are focussing only on the domestic there could be economical issues within one country so you have increased stabilisation (dealing internationally)”. While ABS1 acknowledged the advantage of increased competition saying “The obvious one is price I suppose. Or availability. You go international to look for a better position for you”.

Analysis:

The most significant outcome from this set of questions was the overwhelming appreciation of the effects of cultural differences among our sample set of professionals actively involved in global supply chains. The references to different mindsets and ways of working corroborates Murphy, Golgeci and Johnston (2020, p.207) who defined culture as “a set of values that distinguish a given social group from others” and highlighted how it “denotes a distinct, enduring pattern of behaviour (...) influences perceptions and sense-making, thereby effecting managerial decision making and activities”. Also, the examples of ABS1 in particular, highlighted the differences in common business practices between regions with the prevalence of bartering evident in some cultures and “the risk of facilitation payments” being commonplace in

others. This calls to mind the varying modes of behaviour and accepted practices detailed by Meyer (2015). Even the role of organisational cultural differences as a confounding variable, as mentioned by some participants, conforms with the literature, such as Kanter and Corn's (1994, p.11) opinion that observed behavioural variances "may also reflect differences in organisational culture (...) or in country-specific industry practices". Overall, the participants' views on cultural effects resoundingly endorsed the findings of most of the literature in this area.

As demonstrated, the last question surprisingly evidenced one final cultural divide within the sample set. That being the apparent further appreciation of the benefits, beyond market benefits, of experiential learnings afforded by working internationally in global supply chains. Of course, the finding may be coincidental and not of great significance but there is scope to analyse it through the lenses of our cultural difference frameworks. From Hofstede's cultural dimensions, there are no differences in dimensional values that can be applied to rationalise this appreciation. The divide once again is more evident in the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map. However, whereas previous findings appeared to be most strongly correlated to the "Survival vs Self-Expression" x-axis. This proclivity for cross cultural learning would appear to be influenced more by the values expressed in the "Traditional vs Secular" y-axis. As Cheng, Yao and Ho (2016) detailed, nations that fall towards the secular-rational end of this axis tend to be more acceptable of differences when compared to traditional nations who maintain close ties to their beliefs and values and take a more cautious approach to change. This overarching difference in national cultural values would explain the readiness and eagerness of secular self-expressive nationalities to learn from other cultures moreso than traditional survivalist nationalities.

Discussion

The hypothesis of this study was that cultural differences would be observed to have at least a partial effect on participants' perceptions of buyer-supplier relationships. The results have proven the hypothesis to be correct to this limited degree with most of the observed effects of nation-specific culture found only in constituent elements and precursors to relationship quality such as different modes of trust-building and the acceptance of personal relationships within supply chains. However, it was undoubtedly observed that there are more universally shared values when it comes to the nature of business relationships between national cultures of the sample set. The majority of the interview questions yielded no clear national cultural disparities and, in some cases, showed consensus on certain aspects of buyer-supplier relationships between nationalities. This supports the findings of previous studies that contextual and situational factors are more significant in impacting cross-cultural relationship effectiveness (Kanter and Corn, 1994) and that cultural differences are often overrated (Pressey and Selassie, 2003). That is not to say that further study of the impact of cultural differences in international business has no merit, but it is important that further studies understand precisely how national culture effects business relationships as well as how it does not.

Research Question 1 (RQ1)

Is there evidence of varying perceptions of the nature and quality of buyer-supplier relationships between supply chain members of different nationalities?

The most obvious differences in the views expressed by our sample set on the quality and nature of buyer-supplier relationships centred around the areas of trust-building, the levels of formality expected and the appreciation of personal relationships within global supply chains.

When it comes to trust, the research found that most participants from the traditional survivalist cultural grouping valued intangible and person-based qualities in their buyer-seller relationships. Three out of four of representatives of this group mentioned the importance of honesty, trust and/or transparency when defining relationship quality. This contrasted with just a single

mention of transparency in the secular self-expressive grouping. Half the participants from those nations defined relationship quality in more tangible elements of structured KPIs, balanced contracts and clear governance within the relationship. None of the traditional survivalist cultural grouping defined relationship quality in these terms. This finding corroborates the point made by Erin Meyer (2015) that different nations build trust differently. Meyer (2015) described the different types of trust as cognitive and affective. Cognitive trust is said to be built through business interaction and is based on skills and reliability. Conversely affective trust is more personal and arises from feelings of empathy or friendship. The research appears to suggest that there could be a correlation between the x-axis of the Inglehart-Welzel map and the importance of affective trust in building strong business relationships internationally.

The other differences observed in the data along the boundaries of national culture were an apparent preference for short-term responsiveness over long-term reliability among the more traditional survivalist nations of the sample set as well as an increased appreciation of the learning experiences available from working internationally expressed by the secular self-expressive nations. These findings were not quite as conclusive nor are they supported as strongly in the existing literature. However, hypothetical links were made with the cultural values of the Inglehart-Welzel cultural framework in the analysis. These hypotheses may merit further research to determine if they have any empirical grounding.

Besides these differences, the responses that showed no variance in perceptions along country-specific cultural boundaries – particularly the interview questions on commitment and the nature of the business relationship – highlighted just how insignificant national cultural factors are when considered in a business context. Organisational factors such as strategy and company culture along with situational factors such as industry makeup, market dynamics and the power dynamics of the buyer-supplier relationship have a far greater bearing on the type of relationships pursued by organisations and the expectations they set of their partners. This finding demonstrates the importance of contextual factors as conceptualised by Cox (2004a) in his paper “The art of the possible” which showed the appropriateness of relationship management strategies in terms of power-dynamics and the focus of participant organisations. It also reaffirms the dangers of overestimating the business impact of national cultural differences as cautioned by Kanter and Corn (1994) and Pressey and Selassie (2003).

Finally, there were also occasions of consensus among the entire sample set. Perhaps most resoundingly in response to the first three interview questions on characteristics that define good-quality relationship. It was clear from the responses that collaboration, communication and a mutual understanding of needs are valued across cultural and organisational boundaries. When considered in terms of the “first-order constructs” of relationship quality - defined by Holmlund (2008) as trust, satisfaction and commitment - this research determines collaboration, communication and mutual understanding to be antecedents of these constructs or ‘second-order constructs’ of relationship quality.

Research Question 2 (RQ2)

If such variances are evidenced in the research, is there a correlation between them and the country-specific cultural differences espoused by popular frameworks such as Hofstede’s “Dimensions of National Culture” and the Inglehart-Welzel “Cultural Map of the World”?

Of the variances that were observed, there was considerable correlation with the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World. However, the cultural values attributed to nations by Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions were not highly correlated with the views expressed by participants belonging to those nations.

From analysing responses through the lense of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the only dimension that yielded any correlation was Masculinity-Femininity (MAS) with the importance of personal relationships and that was after some extrapolation of the effect of this dimension on trust as a result of the increased levels of competition found in more “Masculine” nations. The other dimensional values employed in analysis of participant responses such as Long-Term Orientation (LTO) and Indulgence-Restraint (IVR) showed no correlation at all. Indeed, the findings of question seven regarding the preference for either responsiveness or reliability turned out to be inversely correlated to Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). This finding demonstrates the poor applicability of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to business relationships, calls into question the broad application of Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions to studies of International Business and

supports the criticisms levelled at the model that it is outdated (Beugelsdijk, Kostova and Roth, 2016) and empirically unsound (Minkov et al., 2018).

Contrastingly, the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map of the world correlated with most of the views expressed by national cultural groups of the sample set. There were findings that correlated to both the 'Traditional vs Secular' y-axis and 'Survival vs Self-Expression' x-axis, especially as they pertained to the varying levels of trust, security and openness to new ideas and different belief systems. On the y-axis for example, the more traditional nations of the sample set did not show the same enthusiasm as secular nations when it came to the learning opportunities of dealing internationally, presumably as these nations are more tied to their own beliefs and methods (World Values Survey, 2021). While on the x-axis, survival nations that are said to have lower levels of security (Cheng, Yau and Ho, 2016) were found to value responsiveness in meeting short-term requirements more so than self-expression nations that valued long-term benefits of reliability. This finding demonstrates the value of this model and its potential applicability in further understanding the effects of national culture in a business context.

The highly contrasting applicability of both cultural frameworks employed in this study demonstrates at least a lack of mutually reinforcing principles of national culture and possibly even a complete misalignment of values between the two. Previous research papers have critically assessed both frameworks while Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) even synthesised the two models into a new three-dimensional framework. Some of these papers highlighted the key differences between the models.

Firstly, there is the issue of temporal stability of national culture with Hofstede's dimensional values now fifty years old and preceding the third and fourth industrial revolutions (Schwab, 2016). Hofstede's declaration that national culture is "extremely stable over time" is increasingly dubious when the world is changing faster than ever in an age of increased digitalisation that is accelerating the rates of globalisation. In comparison, the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map is iterative. It accepts national cultural values as dynamic in nature and re-evaluates for shifts on a regular basis. Indeed, the model is forthright in showing that national cultural values are shaped over time by historical antecedents, prevailing philosophies and religious beliefs (World Values Survey, 2021). Which highlights the second considerable difference between the two cultural frameworks and how they were conceived. The Inglehart-Welzel model was derived from the

World Values Surveys which measures a random and representative sample of each nation according to universal values such as trust, importance of religion and the distribution of power (Dobewall and Rudnev, 2014). While the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions study was comprehensive, the sample was not widely representative as it was limited to IBM employees of each nation and many of the questions asked were workplace specific and not readily applicable to wider society (Minkov and Kaasa, 2021). The cultural blocs of the Inglehart-Welzel cultural map of the world also broadly reflect the concept of cultural or psychic distance – famously applied in the Uppsala model of internationalisation (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). They are based on historical antecedents and show the importance of shared language, religion, experiences and philosophies in shaping cultural values. Conversely, the Hofstede cultural dimensions do not reflect cultural distance as well and often show nations with low cultural distance to be disparate in several of the cultural dimensions. Minkov and Kaasa (2021, p.402) surmise that Hofstede’s continuing influence in cultural studies is because of its popular theoretical appeal that lead many to consider it “Fairest of them all”.

Potential Areas for Further Research

There are a few areas of interest for further research. Firstly, given the limited sample size of this research study, it is recommended that the primary conclusions regarding the correlation between the Inglehart-Welzel cultural values and the informal versus formal inclinations of participants in buyer-supplier relationships be examined on a larger scale study by quantitative measures. Expanded and more controlled testing by means of a coded questionnaire would validate the preliminary conclusions of this study. Secondly, it is recommended that similar qualitative studies be carried out with a more diverse national cultural sample set. As noted in the methodology, the Eurocentric sample set was a limitation and did not allow for more divergent perspectives on Buyer-Supplier relationships that may be found in more culturally distant regions such as Asia, Africa or North America. Lastly, further studies of the correlation between national cultural differences and the nature and quality of buyer-supplier relationships should look to employ other cultural value models such as the Lewis model or Schwartz’s theory of basic human values. This would be advisable especially considering the finding of this study that not

all cultural values frameworks are equally applicable to the research topic of business relationships.

Conclusion

The findings of this research have provided answers to the research questions posed that further enhance the understanding of cultural differences and their effects on buyer-supplier relationships in global supply chains. The research has found that country-specific cultural differences mostly play a part in how supply chain professionals from different countries perceive relationship quality, but the same differences have little to no bearing on the nature of business relationships in terms of the type of relationships pursued, expectations or priorities within the relationship. These elements are affected to a far greater degree by contextual business factors such as power-dynamics and strategic fit between the participant organisations. In terms of relationship quality, the study found that there was a clear divide among traditional survivalist groups which placed greater emphasis on personal bonds and preferred an informal approach compared with the secular self-expressive group which believed structured governance and formal agreements facilitate good-quality business relationships. These preferences appear to be linked to the tendency of different national cultures towards either affective trust or cognitive trust when establishing business relationships. These findings were correlated with the x-axis of the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World which suggests that there is potential for this and similar cultural frameworks to be applied for Cultural Intelligence (CQ) training and the interpretation of varying perceptions of relationship quality.

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Appendices:

Appendix i – Research Study Consent Form



Dear Participant,

You have been invited to participate in a study that will examine the nature of buyer-supplier relationships across global supply chains. The study will involve interviews with supply chain professionals who have participated in buyer-supplier relationships.

The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes and will follow a general interview style with a series of questions that will seek the participant's opinions and insights on the topic of buyer-supplier relationships. The session will be recorded for academic review. The transcript of the interview will be analysed by Kevin Fagan as research investigator. Access will be limited only to Kevin Fagan.

Any summary content, or direct quotations in the final dissertation will be anonymised so that participants and/or their organisation cannot be identified. Due care will be taken to ensure that all information will be kept confidential with interviews and the resulting transcripts stored securely under encryption. Original recordings and a signed copy of this consent form will be stored securely until the exam board of National College of Ireland has confirmed the result of the dissertation. The transcribed interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a period of two years thereafter.

As a participant you have the right to withdraw from the study, refuse to answer any question and/or to withdraw permission to use your data at any time. You also have the right under freedom of information legislation to access any of the data you have provided while it is in storage as specified above. In signing this form, you hereby consent to participate in this research study in accordance with the terms outlined above.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at 085 xxx xxxx, or x19105096@ncirl.student.ie. Thank you in advance for your time and effort. I greatly appreciate your help in this research.

Yours faithfully,

Kevin Fagan

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

DATE: _____

RESEARCHER SIGNATURE

DATE: _____

Appendix ii – Research Interview Questions

Establishing Questions:

1. What is your current or most recent job title or position held?
2. Is your role best defined as a buyer (eg. Purchasing), supplier (eg. Sales) or both?

Relationship Quality:

1. Generally, how would you define a good-quality buyer-supplier relationship?
2. Generally, how would you define a poor-quality buyer-supplier relationship?
3. What aspects of a Buyer-Supplier relationship are most important to you personally from your own professional experience?
4. Is the personal relationship with your key point of contact important to the quality of a business-to-business relationship? Why or why not?
5. Do you find the quality of your buyer-supplier relationships improve over time? Is this always the case?
6. Do you value commitment in a buyer-supplier relationship? Is there value in staying with a long-term supplier or customer when a new relationship appears to be more profitable?
7. Of the following two characteristics, which do you believe to be more important in a buyer-supplier relationship – Responsiveness (i.e. Quick to react to changes and communications) or Reliability (i.e. Routine and predictable behaviour)?

Nature of Relationship:

8. In a typical Buyer-Supplier relationship, which side do you believe bears responsibility for maintaining the quality of the relationship and why?
9. In a typical Buyer-Supplier relationship, do you believe the business needs of one side should be considered more important than the other? Which side and why?
10. In your opinion, is the buyer-supplier relationship best served by a single point of contact or by multifunctional collaboration between participant organisations?
11. In your opinion, is it important that buyer-supplier relationships are endorsed and supported at all levels from operational to senior management on both sides to be successful?

The Effects of Cultural Differences:

12. Of the business relationships you are in or have been a part of, is it your experience that the quality of the relationship was affected by whether it was domestic or international?
13. Do you think there are any challenges in working as part of an international buyer-supplier relationship?

14. Do you think there are any benefits from working as part of an international buyer-supplier relationship?

Concluding Questions:

1. What is your nationality?
2. What is your nation of employment or most recent employment?