More communication is not always better? The interplay between effective communication and interpersonal conflict in influencing satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication on a personal level plays an important role in developing a long-term buyer–seller relationship, but the process of interpersonal communication may be conflictual. Drawing on the interaction approach, the present study investigates the interplay between effective communication and interpersonal conflict in influencing satisfaction and argues that a high level of effective communication not only diminishes the negative impact of relationship conflict on satisfaction, but also suppresses the positive impact of task conflict on satisfaction. Surveying data from 298 procurement professionals revealed that as the level of effective communication increases, the negative impacts of relationship conflict on satisfaction decrease, but the positive impacts of task conflict on satisfaction also decrease. Therefore, effective communication is found to be beneficial for improving purchasers' perceived satisfaction, but the timing of the task conflict, along with the low levels of relationship conflict, is a critical factor to affect the efficiency of effective communication.

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1. Introduction

In a long-term relationship between buyer and seller, the nature of exchange is relational, characterized by reliance on norms and shared values (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Communication plays a vital role in the relationship development (Dwyer et al., 1987; Haytko, 2004; Olkkonen, Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000) as it is important to develop shared values and understanding and to coordinate activities (Stanko, Bonner, & Calantone, 2007). Moreover, communicating such information has been shown to lead to increased buyer satisfaction (Mohr & Spekman, 1994) and increased confidence in the seller's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This, as a result, lowers transaction costs (time and effort) required of parties to negotiate and reach agreements (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Of particular importance in a long-term buyer–seller relationship is effective communication on personal level (Haytko, 2004; Olkkonen et al., 2000), which implies a degree of quality in the information exchanges between boundary spanners, performed regularly and whenever necessary (Sanzo, Santos, Vasquez, & Alvarez, 2003; Sharma & Patterson, 1999; Yen, Wang, & Horng, 2011). Effective communication can develop a common understanding of the message from both boundary spanners' perspectives and is essential in order to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty, shape expectations, resolve any misunderstandings, explain the

options, and build both boundary spanners' knowledge bases (Sharma & Patterson, 1999; Yen et al., 2011). In buyer–seller relationship literature, some research on both organizational and personal levels has reported that effective communication significantly affects the buyer's perceived relationship quality with the seller, on factors such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction (e.g. Sanzo, Santos, Alvarez, & Vasquez, 2007; Sanzo et al., 2003; Sharma & Patterson, 1999; Yen et al., 2011).

However, the process involving the exchanges of feedback, clarification, and explanation between the individuals of the exchange parties may be conflictual (Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998). Specifically, there are always differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions about the content of tasks being performed, which is a type of interpersonal conflict: task conflict (Reid, Pullins, Plank, & Buehrer, 2004). Although extant research has reported that effective communication helps resolve disputes, which negatively affect the buyer's perceived conflict (e.g. Sanzo et al., 2003; Sanzo et al., 2007; Sharma & Patterson, 1999), it does not mean that high level of effective communication is always accompanied by low level of task conflict. For example, Zaheer et al. (1998) argue that "boundary spanners are more likely to confront trusted counterparts with 'harsh truths' than those they do not trust". Although task conflict enhances the assessment of shared information and deliberates careful assessment of alternatives, it can still hurt consensus building (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Therefore, a buyer's perceived efficiency may drop with an excessive amount of continuous discussion but when there is lack of consensus for undertaking a transaction, this in turn lowers the level of the buyer's satisfaction with the seller.

In addition, Ring and Van de Ven (1994) propose that communications among parties gradually and incrementally produce a shared

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congruent understanding of an inflexible world, which is a critical experience in the social–psychological processes of sense making and establishing psychological contracts. Moreover, these processes will take much longer to develop than commonly acknowledged by economic theories of transactions or legal work on relationship (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). However, the lack of consensus may hinder the development of a shared congruent understanding when a purchaser and a salesperson have engaged in intense communication. Therefore, critical gaps are evident in our understanding of how the interplay between effective communication and task conflict influence a buyer–seller relationship.

This study aims to bridge that gap in the buyer–seller relationship literature by conducting an empirical study drawing on interaction approach (e.g. Anderson & Narus, 1990; Haytko, 2004) that examines the interplay between effective communication and interpersonal conflict in influencing satisfaction. In addition, given the nature of the sales process and drawing on existing conflict literature, interpersonal conflict can be seen as consisting of task conflict and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995; Reid et al., 2004). Relationship conflict refers to the existence of interpersonal incompatibilities between a purchaser and a salesperson (Reid et al., 2004); thus, it may be related with generalized value incongruence. Sitkin and Roth (1993) argue that a person being seen as value incongruent is likely to give rise to the threat of future violations of expectations. Moreover, they argue that decreasing perceived interpersonal distance is the critical factor to ameliorate the harmfulness of value incongruence. Effective communication is thought to increase the opportunities for understanding the other (Haytko, 2004; Sharma & Patterson, 1999), which in turn reduces the tension from interpersonal value incongruence (De Clercq, Thongpapanl, & Dimov, 2009). Therefore, this study also examines the interplay between effective communication and relationship conflict in influencing satisfaction (Fig. 1).

We aim to make three main contributions to business and communication literature and thereby enrich understanding of the contingencies that underlie the conflict–satisfaction relationship. First, the nature of interaction between effective communication and task conflict would provide an insight into the question of when effective communication is more efficient for improving satisfaction at various levels of task conflict. Second, clarifying the effects of relationship conflict and task conflict in their interaction with effective communication could provide an insight into the question whether changes in efficiency of effective communication applies differently on increasing satisfaction between relationship conflict and task conflict. Third, such research adds to the growing body of literature on conflict–outcome moderated model and communication effectiveness in buyer–seller relationship. Managerially, a better understanding of the interplay between communication and interpersonal conflict between purchasers and salespersons in influencing satisfaction can help enhance the efficiency of communication for developing long-term buyer–seller relationships.

The next section highlights previous research to support the hypotheses tested in this paper. Following the literature review, the research methodology and survey results are presented. Finally, discussion and conclusions along with managerial implications and areas for future research are provided.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Satisfaction

In academia, customer satisfaction is commonly accepted as a convincing predictor for behavioral variables such as repurchase intentions, word-of-mouth, or customer loyalty (e.g. Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Sambandam & Lord, 1995). Satisfaction research is mainly influenced by the disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980). This paradigm asserts three points: First, customer satisfaction is accomplished when expectations of exchanges are met. Second, positive disconfirmation will lead to improved satisfaction when perceived

performance of exchanges exceeds expectations. Third, negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction when perceived performance of exchanges does not meet expectations.

However, the feeling of satisfaction is not only a cognitive process of comparing perceived performance of exchange with certain comparison standards; rather it is also an emotional state of mind (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). It, therefore, includes an evaluation of the economical and noneconomic aspects of satisfaction (Gassenheimer & Calantone, 1994). Economic satisfaction is defined as a buyer's positive affective response to the economic rewards that flow from the relationship with a seller, such as sales margins and volume (Gassenheimer & Calantone, 1994). Noneconomic satisfaction is defined as a buyer's positive affective response to the noneconomic, psychosocial aspects of a buyer–seller relationship, where interactions with the seller are easy, gratifying, and fulfilling (Gassenheimer & Calantone, 1994).

However, the ratio of economic and noneconomic items shown on the satisfaction scale is significantly different in different studies (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). The extent to which a satisfaction scale captures the economic versus noneconomic dimension is related to the antecedents that affect satisfaction (Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1999). Because this research examines the impacts of the affects associated with interpersonal conflict and effective communication on satisfaction, we opt for affective satisfaction and define purchaser-perceived satisfaction with supplier as an affective state of mind resulting from the appraisal of all relevant aspects of the buyer–supplier relationship.

2.2. Interpersonal conflict

Interpersonal conflict, broadly defined as a perception occurring where different parties hold different views or conflict due to interpersonal incompatibilities (Jehn, 1995), is endemic to all buyer–seller relationships (Emiliani, 2003). Moreover, interpersonal conflict is a common distinction which marks relationship conflict, versus task conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). According to Reid et al.'s (2004) perspective, in the buyer–seller context, task conflict refers to disagreements in viewpoints, ideas and opinions between a salesperson and a purchaser. Relationship conflict, on the other hand, refers to the existence of interpersonal incompatibilities between a salesperson and a purchaser, such as tension, animosity or annoyance. Relationship conflict has been also been termed affective conflict or emotional conflict, while task conflict is otherwise termed cognitive conflict (Bradford & Weitz, 2009).

To date, studies of both types of conflict primarily discuss the impacts of the conflicts in terms of the team outcomes such as team member satisfaction, team performance and team innovation (e.g., De Clercq et al., 2009; Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). Although relationship conflict very often negatively relates to team outcomes, the impacts of task conflict are relatively unclear (DeChurch & Marks, 2001). For example, De Clercq et al. (2009) report that relationship conflict has a negative effect on innovation, whereas task conflict has a positive effect. Plank and Newell (2007) report that relationship conflict between a purchaser and a salesperson has a negative effect on relationship loyalty, but the effect of task conflict is nonsignificant.

Because the nature and strength of the conflict–performance relationship may vary across different contexts (De Clercq et al., 2009), a clear need exists for more context-bound approaches (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Recently, the marketing works on interpersonal conflict argue that trust is the key factor affecting the impact of task and relationship conflict on performance such as innovation and decision quality (De Clercq et al., 2009; Parayitam & Dooley, 2009). Conflict and trust have been found to be related in a number of studies (e.g. Porter & Lilly, 1996; Reid et al., 2004; Zaheer et al., 1998). The dominant logic concerning the link between trust and interpersonal conflict is based on the premise that trust is an antecedent for task and relationship conflict (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Because trust allows for the development of strong interpersonal

ties among the group members, it reduces the need for monitoring (Curseu, 2006; Curseu, Schalk, & Wessel, 2008), which in turn reduces the likelihood of task and relationship conflict in later stages.

In addition, some studies address relationships in which the negative impacts of task and relationship conflict on performance may be mediated by reducing trust (Langfred, 2007). In organization literature, Sitkin and Roth (1993) outline a theory that trust is violated to the extent that expectations about context-specific task reliability are not met and distrust is engendered when a value-related violation is perceived. Moreover, while legalistic mechanisms (i.e., mechanisms that are institutionalized, mimic legal forms, or exceed legal regulatory requirements) are often effective in ameliorating context-specific reliability problems, they are less effective in dealing with generalized value incongruence due to their effect on perceived interpersonal distance.

Relationship conflict often includes personality differences as well as differences of opinion and preferences regarding non-task issues such as religion, politics, and fashion, which would be related to general value diversity (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Therefore, the more relationship conflict, the more likely it is that differences rather than similarities will be salient and that those differences may indicate the generalized value incongruence (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). In business literature, Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois (2004) have found positive associations between perceived individual value dissimilarity and relationship conflict. When an individual is seen as value dissimilar, they are less socially attractive, and are more likely to be categorized as out-group members (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This categorization process increases the likelihood of relationship conflict (Pelled, 1996). In addition, social categorization is associated with in-group favoritism which can lead to the derogation of out-group members, such as perceiving that out-group members are less trustworthy, honest and co-operative than members within the in-group (Brewer, 1979). Therefore, when a person is perceived as incongruent with generalized values, that person's underlying world view becomes suspect and the threat of future violations of expectations arises (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). As a result, when perceived relationship conflict is high, the expectation that a seller will not act in one's best interests should lead to lowering the buyer's perceived satisfaction (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998).

H1. The higher the purchaser-perceived relationship conflict, the lower the purchaser-perceived satisfaction with the supplier.

Although task conflict can cause anxiety and uncomfortable feelings among group members, which can potentially damage both their satisfaction with the work experience, it is potentially beneficial to quality decisions (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Especially, in the buyer–seller context, task conflict can be the catalyst for understanding, because it provides the means for buyers and sellers to identify and discuss alternative perspectives (Bradford & Weitz, 2009). Moreover, the increased constructive discussion between a purchaser and a salesperson enhances the assessment of shared information and deliberate careful assessment of alternatives, which in turn should yield higher purchasing decision quality (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Parayitam & Dooley, 2009). As a result, the purchaser's perceived satisfaction would rise. In line with literature in similar contexts (e.g. Bradford & Weitz, 2009; Plank & Newell, 2007), we posit that more task conflict between a purchaser and a salesperson will lead to greater satisfaction.

H2. The higher the purchaser-perceived task conflict, the higher the purchaser-perceived satisfaction with the supplier.

2.3. Moderating effects of effective communication

Communication is the formal as well as informal exchange of information between buyer and seller, which can be at an inter-organizational level or at a personal level (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Olkkonen et al., 2000). The literature has recognized the importance

of communication, especially when it is timely, accurate, and useful as an effective approach to remove mutual suspicion, unify expectations, and to subsequently facilitate trust (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; Yousafzai, Pallister, & Foxall, 2005). Moreover, communication is one of the most effective relationship-building strategies across all elements of a relationship (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Furthermore, relationships are a substantial part of structuring, evaluating and understanding messages in interpersonal settings; thus, relationships are essentially formed by interpersonal communication processes (Olkkonen et al., 2000).

Mohr and Nevin (1990) identify communication strategy consisting of frequency, bidirectionality, modality, and content. Frequency refers to the amount of contact between exchange parties. Bidirectionality refers to the two-way give and take of information between exchange parties. Modality of communication refers to the extent to which contacts between exchange parties are regular, planned, or structured. Content refers to the perceptions of the nature of the content in transmitted message. Extant marketing literature of interpersonal communication has mostly covered the impacts of communication frequency on outcome (e.g. Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, & Barksdale, 2000; Cannon & Homburg, 2001). Although explorations of frequency of communication have contributed insights to understanding individual-level relationships, a separated construct is insufficient for completely assessing communication (Kasouf, Celuch, & Bantham, 2006).

Recently, a few studies highlight that effective communication has a significant impact on the perception of relationship quality, comprising factors such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction (e.g. Sanzo et al., 2003, 2007; Yen et al., 2011), because effective communication could help resolve disputes, clarify misunderstandings, and increase the opportunity for healthy constructive discussion (Massey & Dawes, 2007). Effective communication includes both formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between exchange parties in an empathetic manner (Sharma & Patterson, 1999). Moreover, Sanzo et al. (2003) argue that effective bidirectional communication between the exchange parties implies quality information exchanges at multiple levels and domains, performed regularly and whenever necessary. Accordingly, the characteristics of effective communication should include bidirectionality, modality (i.e. formal and informal, regular), and content (i.e. meaningful, timely information). As such, a purchaser's perceived effective communication toward a salesperson would refer to the degree to which he/she solicits and gives feedback, routinizes communication flows, and provides helpful information. Therefore, effective communication is suitable as the proxy of communication between boundary spanners in buyer–seller context. This study adopted effective communication as a means to examine its interaction with interpersonal conflict in influencing buyer's perceived satisfaction. Referring to Sanzo et al.'s (2003) work, we define effective communication as the degree of quality information exchanges between a purchaser and a salesperson, performed regularly and timely.

The purchaser's perceived effective communication with the salesperson may ameliorate the negative impact of relationship conflict on satisfaction. Effective communication helps develop a common understanding of the message from both the sender's and receiver's perspectives (Fisher, 1978; Yen et al., 2011). Therefore, effective communication is thought to reduce misunderstandings due to differences between exchange parties' world views by providing an opportunity for both parties to increase the clarity of communication exchanges (Fisher, Maltz, & Jaworski, 1997). Moreover, the ability to engage in dialogues and to explain and clarify communications enhances the understanding of the work patterns and preferences of the other member of the dyad (Fisher et al., 1997), which could prompt the purchaser to build a knowledge base about the salesperson (Haytko, 2004). This, in turn, decreases the purchaser's perceived interpersonal distance, which is the critical factor for ameliorating the harmfulness of value incongruence (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). In sum, these studies suggest that effective communication may reduce the perceived negative expectation of

relationship conflict, which in turn increases satisfaction (Massey & Dawes, 2007).

H3. The negative correlation between relationship conflict and satisfaction is positively moderated by the level of effective communication, such that this negative correlation is weaker at higher levels of effective communication.

While the levels of effective communication are low between a purchaser and a salesperson, avoiding or smoothing over a problem may lead to suboptimal decision making due to the lack of presenting dissenting viewpoints, and superior alternatives possibly being overlooked (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). In contrast, evaluating and critiquing the status quo may enhance the assessment of shared information and deliberate careful assessment of alternatives, thus yielding higher quality decisions (Parayitam & Dooley, 2009; Schwenk & Valacich, 1994). Therefore, in spite of the lack of effective communication, task conflict facilitates the useful give and take of information between the purchaser and the salesperson. As a result, this type of consultative interaction and problem-solving enhances quality decisions and thus, increases satisfaction (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003).

However, at high levels of effective communication, the purchaser expects low levels of perceived task conflict. Effective communication is associated with higher perceived relationship effectiveness, a low conflict state, because it reduces ambiguity, facilitates dialogue, and provides the opportunity for healthy constructive discussion (Fisher et al., 1997; Massey & Dawes, 2007). Moreover, effective communication provides opportunities for the salesperson and the purchaser to learn about each other — what is expected of the buyer and what the seller can afford, which is necessary to induce consensus (Yen et al., 2011). However, Jehn and Bendersky (2003) argue that task conflict may cause tension, antagonism, and unhappiness among group members that can damage their ability to reach consensus on decision making tasks. Therefore, despite the purchaser's time and effort toward effective communication, a high level of task conflict can erode the efficiency of reaching consensus (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Moreover, Jehn and Mannix (2001) propose that task conflict often decreases satisfaction and productivity when it interferes with consensus. As such, if there is an extreme amount of continuing discussion, lack of consensus is unlikely to be expected by the purchaser. Therefore, at high levels of effective communication, a low level of task conflict would meet the purchaser's expectations, which leads to enhanced satisfaction. On the other hand, high levels of task conflict fail to meet the purchaser's expectations, resulting in lowered satisfaction.

H4. The positive correlation between task conflict and satisfaction is moderated by the level of effective communication, such that this positive correlation is weaker at higher levels of effective communication.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and data collection

To ensure wide applicability of our findings, we tested our hypotheses with a sample of purchasers working in a variety of industries and sectors. According to Athanasopoulou's (2009) review, selling firms are usually very reluctant to provide information on their customer relationships; secondly, it is difficult for executives to find spare time in order to take part in a research effort; so most studies are on the buyer side. We referred to the list of top 5000 companies in Taiwan from China Credit Information Service as a sampling frame. Because the revenue of each company was at least 100 million NT dollars in 2009, these companies should employ purchasing specialists. Subsequently, we randomly selected 500 companies and employed 10 graduate students to assist to call the procurement manager in each company for approving for data collection from them or their colleagues. Consequently, 1050 procurement professionals within 312 companies participated in the survey. We mailed a questionnaire and personal letter explaining the purpose of the study to the procurement professionals, whom we chose because they should have suitable experience of interacting with salespersons and perceived satisfaction with a seller. We asked the respondents to self-select an ongoing business relationship that they were engaged in and rate the primary person with whom they had the most contact.

We developed a questionnaire to measure purchasers' perception of satisfaction with supplier, as well as levels of communication and conflicts in a specific purchaser-to-salesperson relationship. Moreover, the respondents answered a number of demographic questions relating to themselves, their company, the salesperson and the supplier (e.g., gender, size of firm, industry). To pretest the survey instrument for readability and relevance and ensure that our questions were clear and understandable, we conducted the survey with a sample of 33 purchasers.

Our data collection adopted Dillman's (1978) total design method. We prepared a mailing packet containing (1) a cover letter addressed personally to the purchaser, (2) a questionnaire, and (3) a postage-paid return envelope. After six weeks, 298 responses were received, providing a 28.4% response rate. To assess non-respondent bias we used the technique suggested by Armstrong and Overton (1977) and analyzed the
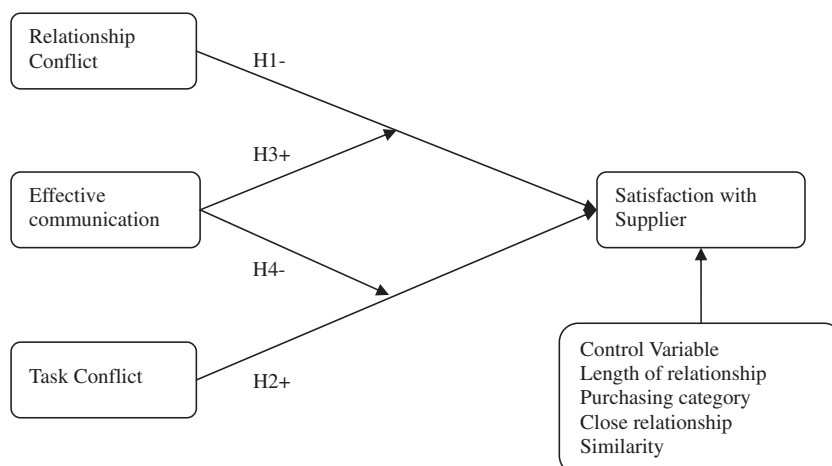

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

first quartile of the responses against the last quartile of the responses. We compared the demographic of responses and examined the means of the conflict variables used in this study, and we have found no statistically significant differences. This suggests an acceptable level of non-respondent bias.

The responding purchasers, 158 (53%) male and 140 (47%) female, work in a wide variety of sectors: electronics (22%); finance (18%); non-financial services (e.g., transportation, wholesale, retail) (22%); conventional industries (e.g., food, textile, construction) (18%) and other (20%). This broad variety of industries fits our purpose to be able to generalize beyond particular industries (Hsieh, Chiu, & Hsu, 2008). The categories of their purchased goods from specific salespersons were 77.5% products and 22.5% services. Following the work of Menon, Bharadwaj, Adidam, and Edison (1999), we pooled the data because the analysis of variance test showed that the constructs did not differ significantly (p > .10) among the industry groupings or the categories of purchased goods. The responses show a mean purchasing experience of 5.48 years and a mean duration with the salesperson of 3.50 years. Therefore, the respondents have sufficient experience in terms of purchasing settings and duration in interacting with a salesperson.

3.2. Measures

The survey included measures of satisfaction with supplier, perceived levels of effective communication with a salesperson, perceived task conflict, and perceived relationship conflict. We adapted the measures (Table 1) from previous research, with minor wording modifications to fit our study context, and then had them professionally back translated (Chinese and English) to ensure conceptual equivalence. On satisfaction with supplier, we adapted three items with minor wording modifications from Ulaga and Eggert (2006). These items regard satisfaction in more noneconomic, psychosocial terms, defining it as an

emotional response to the overall working relationship with the supplier (Geyskens et al., 1999). Three items used to capture task conflict and four items used to capture relationship conflict were based on the measure used by Reid et al. (2004). On the levels of effective communication between the purchaser and a salesperson, we adapted four items from the work of Sanzo et al. (2003).

For avoiding model misspecification, we included four control variables to take into account possible alternative explanations for variations in satisfaction. First, because prior history in the relationship could affect relationship quality (Dwyer et al., 1987), we measured how long the purchaser and the salesperson had been doing business with each other. Second, we controlled the purchasing category to account for the possible variation between purchasing product and service, because purchasing service could warrant more interactions than purchasing product, which in turn amplifies the impact of effective communication on conflict–outcome relationship. Third, the close interpersonal relationship between boundary individuals is characterized as positive affective ties existing in business relationships (Haytko, 2004). Because the levels of closeness for interpersonal relationships can be divided by the depth and the breadth of self-disclosure (Haytko, 2004), we measured purchaser's self-disclosure with the salesperson using four items that reflect the closeness of interpersonal relationships between the purchaser and the salesperson (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). Fourth, because the interpersonal similarity promotes mutual understanding and reduces uncertainty concerning how others will behave, which in turn enhances satisfaction (Edwards & Cable, 2009), we measured the purchaser's perceived similarity with the salesperson with two items from Doney and Cannon's (1997) work.

In addition, since there may be common method bias variance for all the constructs from the same questionnaire, we tested for common methods bias using the procedures recommended by Podsakoff and Organ (1986). If that were a serious problem, we would expect a single

Table 1
Measurement items and validity assessment.

	Standardized loadings	t-Value
Length of relationship		
1. About how long have you had contact with the salesperson?		
Purchasing category		
1. Do you purchase products or services from the salesperson?		
Close relationship: (α = 0.94; CR = 0.94; AVE = 0.78)		
1. I have confided in this salesperson a lot of information about my goals and objectives, even my hopes and dreams for the future.	.91	20.33
2. I have confided in this salesperson a lot of information about my background, personal life, and family situation.	.92	20.69
3. I have told this salesperson a lot about my job (e.g., accomplishments, likes and dislikes of my occupation).	.87	18.59
4. I have confided in this salesperson a lot of information about my values, religious beliefs, and political beliefs.	.84	17.67
Similarity: (α = 0.87; CR = 0.88; AVE = 0.78)		
1. This salesperson shares similar interests with me.	.88	16.24
2. This salesperson has values similar to me.	.89	16.47
Relationship conflict: (α = 0.95; CR = 0.95; AVE = 0.82)		
1. How much anger was there between you and the salesperson during the course of the negotiation?	.92	20.52
2. How much personal friction was there between you and the salesperson during the course of the negotiation?	.95	21.74
3. How much of a personality clash was there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?	.90	19.71
4. How much tension was there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?	.86	18.57
Task conflict: (α = 0.94; CR = 0.94; AVE = 0.85)		
1. How many disagreements over different ideas were there between you and the salesperson during the negotiation?	.89	19.58
2. How many differences about the content of the decision were there between you and the salesperson during the negotiation?	.94	21.35
3. How many general differences of opinion were there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?	.93	21.06
Satisfaction with supplier: (α = 0.96; CR = 0.97; AVE = 0.90)		
1. I am very satisfied with the supplier.	.97	22.69
2. I am very pleased with what the supplier does for me.	.94	21.71
3. I am completely happy with the supplier.	.94	21.42
Moderating variable: effective communication: (α = 0.86; CR = 0.87; AVE = 0.62)		
1. There are regular exchanges of business information between me and the salesperson.	.71	13.55
2. The salesperson keeps me well informed about any change or questions that could be of interest to me.	.85	17.38
3. The salesperson never hesitates to explain to me the pros and cons of the recommendations he/she make to me.	.83	16.69
4. If I ask for some type of information, whether it is strategic, technical or operating, the salesperson supplies it rapidly without any difficulty.	.75	14.51
Overall model fit:χ^2(155) = 300.44; χ^2/d.f. = 1.938; GFI = 0.91; AGFI = 0.88; RMSEA = 0.056; SRMR = 0.043; NNFI = 0.97 IFI = 0.97; CFI = 0.97		

CR construct reliability, AVE average variance extracted.
All scales are from 1 = "absolutely disagree" to 7 = "absolutely agree".

factor to emerge from a factor analysis or one general factor to account for most of the covariance in the independent and criterion variables (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). We performed factor analysis on items related to the predictor variables and criterion measures. No general factor was apparent in the unrotated factor structure.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model evaluation

We provide the correlations and descriptive statistics for the study variables in Table 2. We examined the validity of the measures in a two-step approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). In the beginning, we conducted exploratory factor analysis to measure the underlying factor structure of the items. Then we measured the convergent and discriminant validity of the focal constructs by estimating the confirmatory factor model using LISREL 8.5. We found that the confirmatory factor models fit the data satisfactorily ($\chi^2(155) = 300.44$; GFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.97; IFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.056), which indicated the unidimensionality of the measures. The results reflected in Table 1 indicate that all factor loadings are highly significant ($p < 0.001$), composite reliabilities of all constructs are greater than 0.75, and all average variance extracted (AVE) estimates are greater than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981); therefore, the measures demonstrate adequate convergent validity and reliability.

Finally, we used the approach recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to test the discriminant validity of all constructs. We examined whether the shared variance between all possible pairs of constructs were lower than the square root of AVE for the individual constructs, which suggested that there is strong discriminant validity. In conclusion, the measurement models fit the data well and demonstrated adequate reliability, good convergence, and good discriminant validity.

4.2. Hypothesis testing

We use moderated hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypotheses, and mean-centering variables to minimize multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). All variance inflation factor values are less than three, suggesting that multicollinearity is not an issue.

In Table 3, we provide the regression results. Model 1 contains only the control variables; Models 2 and 3 add the direct effects of task conflict, relationship conflict, and effective communication; and Model 4 add the two-way interaction terms. The Models 2, 3, and 4 reveal a significant improvement in model fit ($\Delta R^2 = 0.084, 0.166,$ and 0.028, respectively, $p < 0.05$), attesting to the importance of the variables representing our hypotheses. In Model 2, partially consistent with the basic premise of our theoretical discussion, relationship conflict has negative effects on satisfaction; thus, we find support for Hypothesis 1. However, no significant relationship is found between task conflict and satisfaction; thus, we find no support for Hypothesis 2. In addition, we find a positive, direct effect of effective communication on satisfaction. The results in Model 4 suggest a

positive interaction effect between effective communication and relationship conflict ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.01$) and a negative interaction effect between effective communication and task conflict ($\beta = -0.235$, $p < 0.01$).

To shed further light on the presence and significance of a relationship between the different conflict types and satisfaction at varying levels of effective communication, we conducted simple slope analyses for each plot (Aiken & West, 1991). We find that (1) there is a negative relationship ($\beta = -0.501$, t = -3.81; $p < 0.001$) between relationship conflict and satisfaction at low levels of effective communication but no such relationship ($\beta = -0.108$, t = -1.065; ns) at high levels of effective communication; and (2) there is a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.240$, t = 1.85; $p < 0.1$) between task conflict and satisfaction at low levels of effective communication but no such relationship ($\beta = -0.159$, t = -1.565; ns) at high levels of effective communication. Overall, these results corroborate our Hypotheses 3 and 4.

4.3. Supplementary analysis

To validate our results, we estimated a structural equation model by LISREL 8.5 (Table 4). This model offers an appropriate fit ($\chi^2(32) = 81.83$; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; GFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.072), and the sign and magnitude are consistent with those from the regression analysis, as illustrated in Model 2 in Table 3. To test the moderating effect, we divided the samples into high and low group by the mean of effective communication (4.98) and then estimated the model with both groups. The results appear to be consistent with those from the regression analysis, as illustrated in Model 4 in Table 3.

5. Discussion and implications

This study captures the interplay between task and relationship conflict and effective communication on satisfaction in the relationship between a purchaser and a salesperson. Our analysis revealed that the impact of relationship conflict on satisfaction is negative, but no significant relationship was found between task conflict and satisfaction. Moreover, effective communication can ameliorate the harmful effect of relationship conflict on satisfaction. However, the directions of impact of task conflict on satisfaction at high levels of effective communication are opposite to those at low levels.

The negative relationship between task conflict and satisfaction occurs only with high levels of effective communication; with low levels of effective communication, a positive relationship is present (Fig. 3). This finding implicitly supports Lovelace, Shapiro, and Weingart's (2001) research, in which they found that the impact of task disagreements on team performance was moderated by how collaboratively those doubts were communicated. Amason and Schweiger (1994) identified this paradox and suggested that teams need not only to engage in task conflicts to produce high-quality decisions, but also somehow to reach consensus without interfering with the quality of the decision. In addition, based on Haytko's (2004) proposition, interpersonal communication is the key to building

Table 2
Correlation matrix (n = 298).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Length of relationship								
2. Purchasing category	.017							
3. Close relationship	.034	.199[**]						
4. Similarity	−.012	.174[**]	.463[**]					
5. Relationship conflict	.013	−.019	.128[*]	−.099				
6. Task conflict	−.014	−.060	.071	−.113	.721[**]			
7. Communication	−.001	−.026	.334[**]	.359[**]	−.205[**]	−.165[**]		
8. Satisfaction	.000	.042	.198[**]	.261[**]	−.291[**]	−.222[**]	.533[**]	
Mean	3.510	0.450	3.269	3.904	2.900	3.617	4.980	5.041
Standard deviation	1.953	0.836	1.376	1.060	1.082	1.037	0.810	0.942

[**] $p < .01$.
[*] $p < .05$.

Table 3
Regressing satisfaction on conflicts.

Dependent variable	Satisfaction with supplier			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variables				
Length of relationship	−0.041	−0.012	−0.015	−0.038
Purchasing category	−0.018	−0.028	0.038	0.040
Close relationship	0.069	0.115**	0.025	0.015
Similarity	0.193**	0.141*	0.047	0.051
Independent variables				
H1: Relationship conflict		−0.255***	−0.170**	−0.192**
H2: Task conflict		−0.006	0.001	0.023
Moderators				
Communication			0.538***	0.549***
Interactions				
H3: relationship conflict × communication				0.249**
H4: task conflict × communication				−0.235**
R^2	0.076	0.160	0.326	0.354
$\triangle R^2$	0.076***	0.084***	0.166***	0.028**
F	6.044	14.523	71.551	6.175

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Fig. 2. Probing two-way interactions between relationship conflict and effective communication in influencing satisfaction.

a knowledge base about the other person. Moreover, as this knowledge base grows, the relationship matures. Furthermore, Dwyer et al. (1987) propose that a buyer–seller relationship seems unlikely to form without collaborative communication of wants, issues, inputs, and priorities. That is, the interpersonal relationship at high levels of effective communication should be more mature than at a low level. Therefore, our results imply that a high level of task conflict combined with a more mature interpersonal relationship can be destructive, but, in contrast, can be constructive in an immature interpersonal relationship (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003).

Consistent with previous buyer–seller research about conflict-relationship quality (e.g. Plank & Newell, 2007), relationship conflict at low levels presents less harmful impact on satisfaction than that at high levels. Moreover, our arguments and results point to effective communication improving the relationship between a purchaser and a salesperson, especially when there are interpersonal incompatibilities between them (Fisher et al., 1997). As Fig. 2 depicts, none of the effects of relationship conflict on satisfaction exist when the level of effective communication is high. The uncertainty and uneasiness
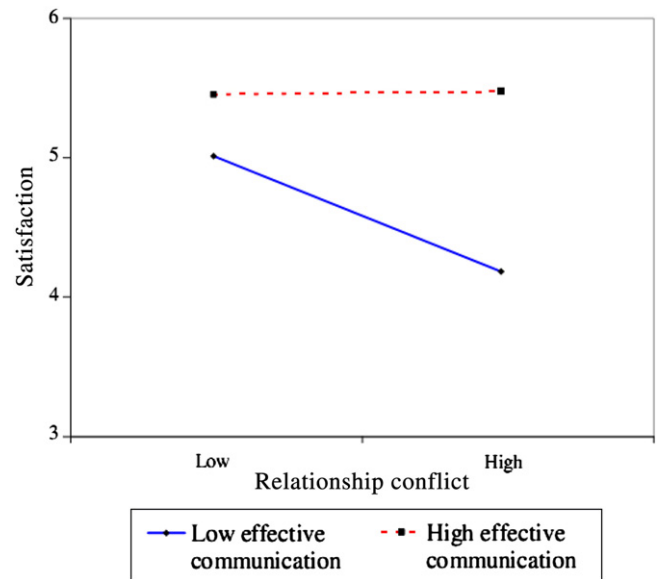
resulting from negative emotions in relationship conflicts may be minimized by the ability of effective communication to clarify misunderstandings, which can increase the purchaser's knowledge about the salesperson (De Clercq et al., 2009; Haytko, 2004; Massey & Dawes, 2007). Conversely, where there are barriers to communication, this may create confusion and misunderstanding, which may reduce the opportunity for developing a knowledge base about the salesperson, resulting in lower satisfaction (Haytko, 2004; Massey & Dawes, 2007; Menon, Bharadwaj, & Howell, 1996).

In summary, these findings extend current marketing, communication and conflict literature in several ways. First, our arguments and results make a contribution to existing buyer–seller and communication research by specifying when effective communication is more efficient for developing the buyer–seller relationship. The results indicate that high levels, rather than low levels, of effective communication relate with higher satisfaction. As far as satisfaction is concerned, the effect of task conflict in a mature relationship is destructive, whereas it is constructive within an immature relationship. The results implicitly support Jehn and Bendersky's (2003) proposition that the timing of the

Table 4
Standardized structural equation parameter estimates.

Hypothesized path	Hypothesized model (n = 298)			Moderating testing[a]	
				High group (n = 172)	Low group (n = 126)
	Path coefficients	t-Value	Hypotheses	Path coefficients	Path coefficients
Relationship conflict → satisfaction with supplier	−0.30**	−3.18	H1	−0.11[b]	−0.58**[b]
Task conflict → satisfaction with supplier	0.00	−0.03	H2	−0.17[c]	0.32*[c]
$\chi^2(32)$	81.83			66.41	55.11
GFI	0.95			0.93	0.92
NNFI	0.98			0.97	0.97
CFI	0.99			0.98	0.98
IFI	0.99			0.98	0.98
RMSEA	0.072			0.079	0.076
SRMR	0.027			0.031	0.034

[a] Two groups in model (high levels of effective communication group and low levels of effective communication group), where $\chi^2(64) = 121.52$ since all paths are free estimated.
[b] Set the path on high group equals to the path on low group, where $\chi^2(65) = 129.46$; $\triangle\chi^2(1) = 7.94$, $p < 0.01$, support H3.
[c] Set the path on high group equals to the path on low group, where $\chi^2(65) = 128.39$; $\triangle\chi^2(1) = 6.87$, $p < 0.01$, support H4.
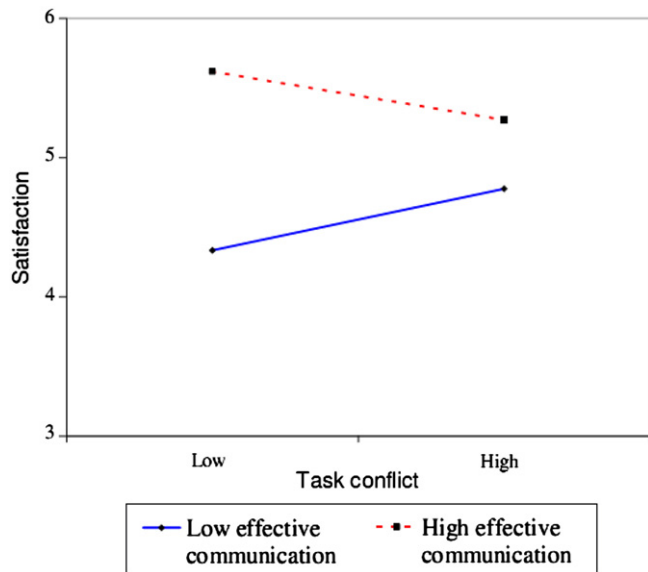** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.

Fig. 3. Probing two-way interactions between task conflict and effective communication in influencing satisfaction.

task conflict, along with the low levels of relationship conflict, allows groups to capitalize on the constructive aspects of task conflict such as enhanced information sharing, critical evaluation of divergent opinions, and increased task focus. Therefore, the study adds important nuances to clarify that a high level of effective communication on a personal level is beneficial for developing a long-term relationship between buyer and seller, but its efficiency is dependent on the level of task conflict.

Second, our study is drawn from Sitkin and Roth (1993)'s earlier work to examine whether effective communication is efficient to ameliorate the harmfulness of interpersonal value incongruence on satisfaction in a buyer–seller context. We find that effective communication is especially efficient to suppress the negative effects of a high level of relationship conflict on satisfaction. Effective communication is helpful to build the other's knowledge base (Haytko, 2004), and in turn, may decrease perceived interpersonal distance which is critical for decreasing the harmfulness of the value incongruence on developing relationship (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). This is important because relationship conflict can have serious flow-on negative effects on outcomes such as commitment and the likelihood of getting the sale (Plank & Newell, 2007; Reid et al., 2004). Conversely, as mention above, effective communication has a negative effect on the relationship between task conflict and satisfaction. Therefore, by highlighting the opposing effects of relationship conflict and task conflict in their interaction with effective communication, we add important nuances to clarify that the efficiency of effective communication for developing a buyer–seller relationship is also dependent on the types of conflict.

Third, our arguments and results make a contribution to group conflict research by adding effective communication as a suppressor moderator, which weakens both the positive effects of task conflict and the negative effects of relationship conflict on satisfaction in a buyer–seller context. More specifically, the impact of task conflict on satisfaction is positive at low levels of effective communication, but negative at high levels. Jehn and Bendersky (2003) have reviewed organizational studies and reported that routine tasks and rights-based conflict resolution are suppressor moderators. Therefore, our finding expands the understanding of the effective communication underlying the conflict–satisfaction relationship (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003), and the scope of the conflict–outcome moderated model to include the buyer–seller context.

6. Managerial implications

Our results have implications for salespersons and sales managers who wish to maintain or develop long-term relationships with purchasers or buyers. When the interpersonal incompatibilities between a purchaser and a salesperson are high, it is better to encourage the salesperson to take the initiative to communicate with the purchaser. Past research based on an information processing perspective reported that relationship conflict limits the processing of new information and disturbs effective communication (e.g., Amason, 1996; Bradford & Weitz, 2009; Jehn, 1995). Therefore, relationship conflict may cause the purchaser to close the lines of communication. According to our results, at low levels of effective communication, high levels of task conflict serve to enhance the buyer–seller relationship; it is actually constructive rather than destructive. Because task conflict can provide the means for the purchaser and the salesperson to identify alternative perspectives for further discussions (Bradford & Weitz, 2009), the salesperson should take the initiative to provide opinions and alternatives in order to build the lines of communication with the purchaser. Gradually, as the purchaser opens up to communication, the tension from relationship conflict should be lowered, which in turn leads to an escalating spiral of effective communication and enhances satisfaction. It is worth noting that as the level of effective communication increases, the salesperson should gradually restrict critical stances against the purchaser's different viewpoints to increase the efficiency of effective communication for developing a buyer–seller relationship.

When relationship conflict is low, the salesperson can handily build the lines of communication with the purchaser. As mentioned above, the inclusion of conflicting opinions may negatively impact the buyer–seller relationship, too. Therefore, sales managers should provide training in communication skills with the objective of lowering the purchasers' perceived task conflict, crucial for efficiently moving the buyer–seller relationship forward. For example, Kasouf et al. (2006) have reported that communication skills relating to active and nondefensive listening and disclosure are critical for dealing with the continuous conflict encountered in various stages of buyer–seller relationships. Otherwise, improper tactics for dealing with conflicting opinions may not only slow down the development of a long-term relationship with a buyer, but is also likely to waste resources in advancing to effective communication. Palmatier et al. (2006) suggest that business executives focused on building and maintaining strong customer relationships should note that the training of boundary spanners is critical; communication is one of the most effective relationship-building strategies.

7. Limitations and future research directions

It ought to be noted that this study contains some limitations and it provides an opportunity for further research in that the communication construct had not previously been examined in similar contexts to the extent of this study. Additionally, some of the scales used in this study have been specially modified. Therefore, the results and implications presented here must be viewed with a certain amount of reservation. While the results of the tests used to assess reliability and validity provide some level of confidence, they must be tested using different samples and multiple methods for further verification.

For parsimony, we focus on one set of potential moderators between interpersonal conflict and satisfaction. Although our focus on effective communication is guided by the observation that both communication and conflict shape the purchasers' perception of unmet expectations (Ayoko & Pekerti, 2008; Haytko, 2004; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Sitkin & Roth, 1993), additional research should consider a broader set of variables to explore; for example, how the relationship between interpersonal conflict and satisfaction can be affected by the various types of conflict management (Bradford & Weitz, 2009) or other communication variables such as quality and content (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). In addition, we focus only on satisfaction as a standard for

evaluating relationships. Although the purchaser's expression of negative emotions is suitable to assess communication effectiveness, the purchaser's willingness to engage in future interaction is also useful (Ren & Gray, 2009). Therefore, future research should consider how effective communication affects the relationship between interpersonal conflict and other outcomes such as collaboration (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Although explorations of aspects of communication (i.e. frequency, bidirectionality, formality, and noncoercive content) have contributed insights to understanding individual-level relationships, specific communication skills help to operationalize communication quality/efficacy beyond those aspects (Kasouf et al., 2006). Because effective communication may be affected by various communication skills, such as listening, self-disclosure, and editing (Kasouf et al., 2006), we recommend that future research examine the effects that various communication techniques have on the linkage conflict–outcome.

In addition, in cross-functional relationship research, extant studies have reported that communication frequency, bidirectionality, and communication quality are related with interpersonal conflict (e.g. Massey & Dawes, 2007). Nevertheless, trust may affect the relationship between communication and interpersonal conflict. For example, extant research emphasizes credibility as an important aspect of trust that reflects partners have the required skill and knowledge to fulfill the job effectively and reliably (Ganesan, 1994). The purchaser's perceived credibility of the salesperson may reduce his/her doubts about the contents of communication from the salesperson, which in turn helps suppress his/her critical stances (Langfred, 2004; Zaheer et al., 1998). In principle, effective communication negatively relates with task conflict; but in the absence of credibility, effective communication may positively relate with task conflict. Therefore, we posit that future research is needed to examine what the effects of various types of trust are on the linkage between communication and interpersonal conflict.

The study follows Plank and Newell's (2007) propositions to gather data from the purchasers' side. However, the perception may vary from the salespersons' side. Therefore, we suggest that future researchers widen the scope by incorporating viewpoints from both sides. In addition, in spite of our general findings and predictions, researchers are advised to pay attention to cultural-specific issues; our data collection was conducted in Taiwan, where confrontational versus avoidant approaches when managing conflicts should be different from those of American managers (Doucet, Jehn, Weldon, Chen, & Wang, 2009). Therefore, we encourage future researchers to conduct cross-cultural comparisons to explore whether these findings are common across cultures or whether they reflect a cultural difference in terms of both types of conflict. Nevertheless, the present research results are solidly valid in regard to the purchasers' perceptions of effective communication, conflicts, and satisfaction in Taiwan.

Acknowledgments

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