

# The Antecedents of Communication in Buyer-Seller Relationships

\* *Bohyeon Kang*

## Abstract

Communication in buyer-seller relationships has an important role in boosting relationship performance. As a conceptual paper, this study proposes the antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships based on relationship marketing and transaction cost paradigms. From a literature review on relationship marketing and transaction cost literature, this study proposes the eight possible antecedents of communication - conflict, opportunism, unfairness, goal incongruity, cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms. Consequently, this study extends knowledge on how to boost communication in buyer-seller relationships. This study provides bright avenues and theoretical backgrounds for future empirical studies related to communication in buyer-seller relationships. This study provides helpful insights to academics and practitioners who are interested in understanding and utilizing communication as a tool for boosting relationship performance as well.

**Keywords:** communication, antecedents, conflict, opportunism, unfairness, goal incongruity, cooperation, trust, satisfaction, relational norms.

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To survive and make profits, firms have to ensure their competitive advantages. Over the last decades, academics and practitioners have paid attention to communication as a tool for increasing firms' outcomes (Joshi, 2009; Kang, Oh, & Sivadas, 2013; Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Communication plays an important role in business-to-consumer as well as business-to-business transactions (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Communication in buyer-seller relationships can be defined as the informal or formal sharing of information between buyers and sellers (Anderson & Narus, 1990 ; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Also, communication can be defined as a control mechanism in collaborative conditions reflecting substantial amounts of shared information, ordinary and routine interactions, extensive feedback, and the use of rationality for influencing others (Kang et al., 2013; Mohr & Nevin, 1990). If two parties can give and take sufficient and frequent communication, then they can solve any existing conflicts and align their expectations with each other. Communication can also boost trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and encourage two parties to evaluate each other in positive ways. By the way of communication, two parties can understand their partner's position and concerns, and this favorable environment allows them to solve their existing problems. Consequently, communication can boost relationship performance (Kang & Oh, 2005, 2009; Kang et al., 2013; Oh, Kang, & Kim, 2004). In particular, communication has received considerable attention from marketing channel researchers as well as practitioners (Joshi, 2009 ; Mohr & Nevin, 1990).

Joshi (2009) argued and demonstrated that manufacturers' communication with their suppliers increases suppliers' performance. It is because manufacturers' communication increased suppliers' knowledge and emotional commitment. Mohr and Nevin (1990) argued that two-way directionality plays an important role in communication particularly, and Joshi (2009) highlighted mutual feedback as a critical factor in communication. Mohr and Nevin (1990) suggested that non-coercive information sharing plays an important role in communication as well, and Joshi (2009) argued that rationality accepted by partners and means to gain partners' compliance are more important factors in communication. According to Joshi (2009), cooperative communication enables partners to better understand each other's needs and expectations. Consequently, communication can boost knowledge and emotional commitment and lead to increased performance. Emotional commitment can be defined as a high level of

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\* Assistant Professor of Marketing, School of Business, Kyungpook National University, 1370 SanKyuk-Dong Buk-Gu Daegu 702-701, Republic of Korea. E-mail: bohyeonkang@knu.ac.kr

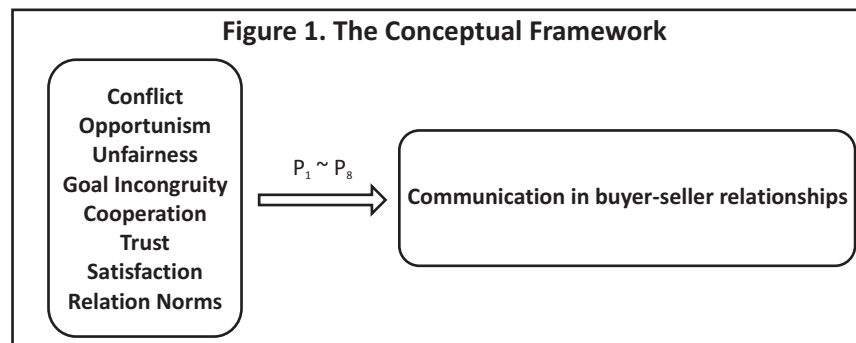
unity (Kim & Frazier, 1997) or positive emotional attachment (Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000). To enhance relationship performance, it is necessary to capture the changes in partners' values and provide what they need and want. Communication means providing feedback to align two parties' expectations. Consequently, firms can bridge their expectancy and performance by the way of communication (Krause, Scannell, & Calantone, 2000).

Previous research on communication in marketing or business have focused on the cognitive (Flint, Woodruff, & Gardial, 2002) or emotional (Prahinski & Benton, 2004) basis of communication. Moreover, previous research has focused on the consequences of communication. Thus, despite the importance of communication, only few studies have investigated how to boost communication in buyer-seller relationships. According to Joshi (2009), so far, most of the research on communication has regarded communication not as a focal variable, but as a peripheral one. Previous studies have regarded communication as a peripheral variable to explain some focal variables such as trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The extant knowledge lacks on the antecedents of communication, that is to say, how firms can boost their communication with their partners. Consequently, to boost relationship performance in buyer-seller relationships, from the consensus of a strong link between communication and performance, we have a strong necessity for understanding how to boost communication in buyer-seller relationships.

Theoretically and empirically, there is a strong need for investigating the antecedents of communication. Consequently, this is the first step to provide a theoretical background for investigating the antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships. So far, no study has examined the antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships. From a literature review on relationship marketing and transaction cost literature, this study proposes the eight possible antecedents of communication - conflict, opportunism, unfairness, goal incongruity, cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms. Some variables such as conflict, opportunism, unfairness, and goal incongruity can hinder communication in buyer-seller relationships. In addition, some variables such as cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms can facilitate communication in buyer-seller relationships.

## Theoretical Background and Propositions

To search the possible antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships, this study has a comprehensive literature review on communication and relationship marketing paradigm (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Dyer & Song, 1997; Etgar, 1979; Flint, Woodruff, & Gardial, 2002; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000; Heide & John, 1992; Joshi, 2009; Kang & Oh, 2005, 2009; Kang, Oh, & Sivadas, 2013; Kim & Frazier, 1997; Kim, Natter, & Spann, 2009; Krause, Scannell, & Calantone, 2000; Mohr & Nevin, 1990; Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oh, Kang, & Kim, 2004; Prahinski & Benton, 2004; Song, Xie, & Dyer, 2000; Tjosvold, 1991; Williamson, 1975). Extant literature provides us with main research ideas and inspirations about this issue. The below mentioned eight propositions are based on a comprehensive literature review in the marketing area, but the antecedents of communication proposed in this study have a high generalizability and possibility of undergoing empirical testing in and application to the overall business context. The Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the present study.



**(1) Conflict :** Dwyer et al. (1987) argued that conflict exists in all dyadic relationships. Conflict is a kind of tension caused by changing prices, changing environments, due to the violation of an agreement, and so on. Sometimes, conflict can be perceived by one party as functional when communication with its partner is frequent and sufficient, when its partner gives a sign to cooperate with (Kang et al., 2013; Anderson & Narus, 1990), and when trust is already established. However, conflict can dissolve relationships when two parties fail to timely resolve or control conflict in their relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In a changing environment, a party wants to amend the extant agreement with its partner to be favorable to the party. In this situation, conflict can be deteriorating because two parties are likely to be in fighting mode, not conceding one. If they fail to timely resolve this conflict, then their relationships begin to dissolve. Furthermore, if one party violates an agreement with its partner and there is no adequate compensation or apology for the violation, then the partner is likely to be angry and search for a new partner (Kang & Oh, 2005).

In terms of the relationship between conflict and communication in buyer-seller relationships, conflict will decrease communication. The more one party perceives a conflict with its partner, the less the party wants to communicate with its partner. Intrinsically, firms like to communicate with their partners when they perceive their partners to be favorable and friendly (Kim & Frazier, 1997). The goal of communication is what firms expect - that they can make situations better, or they can obtain what they want, by way of communication. In a conflict situation, firms have low possibility of obtaining what they want by way of communication with their partners (Kim & Frazier, 1997). In a conflict situation, firms think that a continuous exchange of their opinions, values, requirements, and feedbacks with their partners will lead to a low effect of capturing problems, reach a consensus on the sources of conflict, provide concessions, and lower discrepancies. Thus, firms will be reluctant to communicate with their partners.

➔ **Proposition 1: Conflict will decrease communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(2) Opportunism :** In transaction cost theory, opportunism can be defined as self-interest seeking with guile (Williamson, 1975). Firms intrinsically have strong needs to behave opportunistically in order to maximize their profits. John (1984) argued that the essence of opportunistic behaviors is the internal and external violation of required obligations. Opportunism makes two parties doubtful about each other (Kang et al., 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Intrinsically, one party cannot trust its opportunistic partner as there will be a low possibility of communication with each other. Basically, communication stems from a mutual belief between two parties. Opportunism reduces the need for communication and the desire of maintaining permanent relationships with partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, opportunistic parties always tend to seek better alternatives ; that if any alternatives better than the current partner appear, then the current relationships will likely be dissolved. Any better opportunities offered by competitors of current partners can encourage firms to be opportunistic and to terminate the current relationships (Kang et al., 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In general, opportunism is a major factor that causes relationships to deteriorate (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Heide & John, 1992; Kang & Oh, 2005).

In terms of the relationship between opportunism and communication, opportunism will reduce communication in buyer-seller relationships. It is because firms will think that sufficient and frequent exchange of opinions with their opportunistic partners is of no use. Buyers and sellers want to exchange their opinions, values, requirements, and feedback through continuous interactions and capture what their partners think, want, and expect. However, if their partners are opportunistic, then all these efforts are useless. In this regard, in terms of the relationship between opportunism and communication in buyer-seller relationships, opportunism will decrease communication. The more one party perceives opportunism in its partner, the less the party wants to communicate with its partner. Intrinsically, firms are likely to communicate with their partners when they perceive their partners to be reliable and consistent. The goal of communication is that firms expect that they can make situations better, or they can obtain what they want by way of communication. In opportunistic situations, firms have low possibility of obtaining what they want by way of communication with their partners. In such negative situations, firms think that the continuous exchange of their opinions, values, requirements, and feedbacks with their partners will lead to a low effect of

reliable and consistent implementation by their partners. Thus, firms will be reluctant to communicate with their opportunistic partners.

→ **Proposition 2: Opportunism will decrease communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(3) Unfairness :** Some studies in experimental economics have verified that consumers are motivated by concerns over fairness. Rabin (1993) conceptualized that a fair equilibrium is sharing equal fairness between two parties. This conceptualization is based on the assumption that individuals help only those who are fair to them. Microeconomics shows that consumers are selfish and are motivated not by rationality, but by fairness. One party perceives its partner to be fair when the ratio of input and output is identical. If not, the party perceives unfairness, that is to say, being treated unfairly (Kang et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2009). Unfairness is a critical factor in relationship dissolution (Kang & Oh, 2005, 2009; Kang et al., 2013). Any perception of unfairness can motivate one party to dissolve the existing relationship and search for better alternatives which can provide better conditions for deals. Moreover, unfairness can make one party angry, and this anger can motivate the party to dissolve the existing relationship. In this regard, in terms of the relationship between unfairness and communication in buyer-seller relationships, unfairness will decrease communication. The more one party perceives unfairness from its partner, the less the party wants to communicate with the partner.

Intrinsically, firms like to communicate with their partners when they perceive their partners to be fair. The goal of communication is what firms expect - that they can make situations better, or they can obtain what they want by way of communication. With unfair partners, firms have low possibility of obtaining what they want by way of communication with their partners. Firms think that through continuous exchange of their opinions, values, requirements, and feedbacks with their partners will lead to a low effect of fair improvement by their partners. Perception of being treated unfairly will lower firms' expectation for communication. Thus, firms will be reluctant to communicate with their unfair partners.

→ **Proposition 3: Unfairness will decrease communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(4) Goal Incongruity :** Goal incongruity can be defined as fundamental discrepancy between the goals of two parties (Song, Xie, & Dyer, 2000). If goal incongruity between two parties increases, firms' incentive to cooperate decreases (Dyer & Song, 1997; Kang et al., 2013; Tjosvold, 1991). The cost of resolving their incongruity and aligning their goals increases as well (Kang et al., 2013; Song et al., 2000). When goal incongruity exists, frequent collisions of opinions will happen and communication between two parties will be difficult. Consequently, the possibility and effect of communication will be lowered. Furthermore, any small change of policy or in the management can deepen and increase goal incongruity in buyer-seller relationships. In this situation, frequent and repeated collisions of opinions are inevitable. In this regard, parties with different goals cannot reach a consensus or an agreement. If they look at different directions, they will confirm their differences and experience frequent frictions through repeated exchanges (Kang & Oh, 2009; Kang et al., 2013). Owing to the fundamental difference between two parties, the post-result of communication can be different from the ante-expectancy of communication, and therefore, disappointment can emerge. Eventually, one party regards communication with partners, who have different goals, as useless.

Looking at the same direction means sharing values, making compromises and concessions, and fulfilling obligations (Kang & Oh, 2005; Kang et al., 2013). Accordingly, goal incongruity reduces communication in buyer-seller relationships. In this regard, in terms of the relationship between goal incongruity and communication in buyer-seller relationships, goal incongruity will decrease communication. The more one party perceives goal incongruity with its partner, the less the party wants to communicate with its partner. Intrinsically, firms like to communicate with their partners when they perceive that their partners have the same goal (Song et al., 2000). The goal of communication is what firms expect - that they can make situations better, or they can obtain what they want by way of communication. With partners having different goals, firms have low possibility of obtaining what they want by way of communication with their partners (Dyer & Song, 1997). Hence, firms will think that the continuous exchange of their opinions, values, requirements, and feedbacks with their partners will be useless (Tjosvold,



1991). Perception of goal incongruity will lower firms' expectation for communication. Thus, firms will be reluctant to communicate with their partners having different goals.

➔ **Proposition 4: Goal Incongruity will decrease communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(5) Cooperation :** Previous macroeconomic studies have demonstrated that consumers want to cooperate with firms (Kang et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2009). Cooperation can be defined as working together for mutual benefits or obtaining common goals (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Coordinated efforts are more likely to produce better outcomes than isolated efforts (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Sometimes, cooperation can naturally encounter conflict in repeated interactions of buyer-seller relationships (Frazier, 1983; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). To cooperate with each other, buyers and sellers meet frequently, and this frequent meeting will increase the possibility of conflict as well. However, this cooperation mode between buyers and sellers will enable two parties to cope with conflict in wise ways. Thus, in cooperative relationships, conflict is not a big problem. In terms of the relationship between cooperation and communication in buyer-seller relationships, cooperation will encourage communication in buyer-seller relationships.

Cooperation increases one party's need to capture what its partners want and help the party to become more aware of its partners' opinions, values, requirements, and feedback. To cooperate with their partners and to obtain their common goals, firms should communicate with them (Kang et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2009). Firms regard cooperative partners to be reliable and consistent. By the way of communication, firms attempt to provide their partners with what they want and need. Consequently, the more cooperation firms want, the more communication firms need. This is because to obtain common goals, cooperation motivates firms' by knowing what their partners want.

➔ **Proposition 5: Cooperation will increase communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(6) Trust :** Trust is an important indicator of relationship quality (Kang et al., 2013). Trust is one party's confidence in its partner's trustworthiness and sincerity. Thus, trust can encourage one party to perceive that its partner is consistent, capable, honest, fair, reliable, helpful, and benevolent (Kang et al., ; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). One party that trusts its partner tries to maintain and develop the existing relationship. Firms want to communicate with reliable partners. It is because communication with reliable partners will lead to positive results. Firms can expect better conditions from communication with reliable partners. In terms of the relationship between trust and communication in buyer-seller relationships, trust fosters communication by making firms confirm the effect of communication such as solving arguments and aligning expectations (Etgar, 1979; Moorman et al., 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In particular, more frequent, reliable, and timely communication with reliable partners will lead to a higher level of communication effect (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). If one party cannot trust its partners, the party will be reluctant to communicate with its partners. Consequently, communication can be boosted by trust in buyer-seller relationships. By sharing opinions and aligning expectations, parties want to communicate with their partners who can be trusted.

➔ **Proposition 6 : Trust will increase communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(7) Satisfaction :** Satisfaction is an emotional evaluation formed after experiences with partners and consists of transactional and cumulative satisfaction. Transactional satisfaction is an overall evaluation focusing on a specific transaction, whereas cumulative satisfaction is an overall evaluation based on all transactions (Kang et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2009). Satisfaction is a key concept in relationship marketing and is an important indicator of relationship quality (Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In addition, satisfaction is an overall evaluation of the components and processes of transactions (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Satisfied parties try to maintain and develop their relationships with their partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Satisfaction will make firms regard their partners as good, sustainable, respectable, and working-together. In this regard, satisfaction has the potential to enhance communication. Firms will want to communicate with satisfactory partners (Dwyer et al., 1987). Satisfied

parties are in positive and favorable mode to communicate with its partners. Satisfied firms will highly evaluate the effect of communication with their partners. By continuous interactions with satisfactory partners, buyers and sellers can exchange their opinions, values, requirements, and feedback in favorable ways. From this mechanism, parties want to understand what their partners need, try to achieve what their partners want, gradually correct what is not desirable to their partners, and finally, try and increase communication with their partners as often as possible.

➔ **Proposition 7: Satisfaction will increase communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

**(8) Relational Norms :** Relational norms are shared values or common beliefs about what is important, adequate, and right (Heide & John, 1992; Kang et al., 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and consists of mutuality, flexibility, and solidarity. Relational norms can suppress negative behaviors in fear of bad reputation in networks (Kang et al., 2013). According to Dwyer et al. (1987), relational norms can facilitate the development of positive factors of buyer-seller relationships. Relational norms make parties more trustworthy and reliable. In this regard, relational norms represent a positive attribute of relationship factors. Accordingly, in terms of the relationship between relational norms and communication in buyer-seller relationships, relational norms will increase communication with partners, because buyers and sellers can exchange their opinions, values, requirements, and feedback through continuous interactions with ethically right partners (Heide & John, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

In buyer-seller relationships, relational norms can be expected; parties will want to communicate with their partners as often as possible. Firms can highly evaluate the effect of communication with their partners. Consequently, relational norms will increase communication in buyer-seller relationships. In high relational norms situation, any negative behavior such as violation of agreement will be prevented (Heide & John, 1992; Kang et al., 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Thus, relational norms will make parties regard communication with their partners safe and effective.

➔ **Proposition 8 : Relational norms will increase communication in buyer-seller relationships.**

The Table 1 shows the directionality of propositions in this study. Conflict, opportunism, unfairness, and goal incongruity are expected to decrease communication in buyer-seller relationships. Cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms are expected to increase communication in buyer-seller relationships. Thus, to boost communication in buyer-seller relationships, firms should try to minimize negative factors (conflict, opportunism, unfairness, and goal incongruity), and maximize positive factors (cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms).

**Table 1. The Directionality of Propositions**

Proposition	From	Directionality	To
1	Conflict	-	
2	Opportunism	-	
3	Unfairness	-	
4	Goal Incongruity	-	Communication in buyer-seller relationships
5	Cooperation	+	
6	Trust	+	
7	Satisfaction	+	
8	Relational Norms	+	

## Discussion

📌 **Theoretical Contributions :** As a conceptual and theoretical research, this study proposes the eight antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships - conflict, opportunism, unfairness, goal incongruity,

cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms. Conflict, opportunism, unfairness, and goal incongruity are expected to decrease communication in buyer-seller relationships. Cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms are expected to increase communication in buyer-seller relationships. In conclusion, to boost communication in buyer-seller relationships, firms should try to minimize negative factors (conflict, opportunism, unfairness, and goal incongruity) and maximize positive factors (cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms).

This study provides marketing academics and practitioners with deeper insights on relationship factors and communication strategies to boost their efficient and effective management performance. The main objective of this study was to propose the eight antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships. As a result, this study provides theoretical background for future empirical research. This study regards communication as a focal variable that can lead to better relationship performance and proposes the eight antecedents of communication in buyer-seller relationships. Based on a comprehensive literature review on relationship marketing and transaction cost theory, this study proposes the directionality of antecedents of communication respectively. Furthermore, this study repositions communication as a focal variable. So far, communication has been regarded as a peripheral variable in relationship marketing. In this way, this study provides a new perspective for capturing the relationship between relationship factors and communication. This study would be useful for academicians as it provides a theoretical background for future empirical research on communication and would be useful for practitioners as it provides useful insights for boosting their communication strategy. The antecedents of communication proposed in this study have a high generalizability and possibility of undergoing empirical tests and for application in the overall business context.

## **Managerial Implications**

This study is a conceptual and theoretical research. Accordingly, marketing managers should be careful in understanding and implementing the mechanisms proposed in this study. Researchers need to conduct empirical research to confirm the mechanisms proposed in this study. In spite of the necessity of caution, to obtain a better performance, this study provides marketing managers with useful insights for boosting their firms' communication with their partners. According to the mechanisms proposed in this study, marketing managers can boost their firms' communication with their partners by minimizing conflict, opportunism, unfairness, and goal incongruity, and maximizing cooperation, trust, satisfaction, and relational norms. By minimizing four negative factors and by maximizing four positive factors, marketing managers will succeed in boosting their firms' communication with their partners. Increased communication will lead to better performance to ensure a firm's effective management and business success.

## **Scope for Further Research**

This study has some limitations. In terms of relationship factors, such as the antecedents of communication, there may be additional factors that have not been considered in the present study. In this regard, future studies can identify and employ additional variables not considered in the present study. There can be an approach to investigate any mediators or moderators between relationship factors and communication, which is very important for academics and practitioners so as to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of the communication mechanism. Also, this study provides some directions for further research, which are as follows :

- (1)** An empirical study needs to be conducted to confirm the propositions proposed in this study. Some paths may be significant, and some paths may be non-significant. Hence, it needs to be empirically verified which paths are significant and which are not.
- (2)** The present research has suggested that multi-dimensional communication is different from one-dimensional communication.

- (3) Influence strategies (e.g., request, legal plea, recommendation, promise, etc.) affecting communication between firms and their partners may be considered in future studies.
- (4) Further studies may use different antecedents such as economic and financial factors - for example - return on investment or return on asset and ascertain their influence on communication between firms and their partners.
- (5) Researchers may investigate the relationship between corporate social responsibility and communication.
- (6) Researchers can design a better integrated model to explain the relationship between relationship factors and communication with empirical results.
- (7) Researchers can analyze the effect of employees' emotions or attitudes on communication.

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