THE INFLUENCE OF MANUFACTURER ATTITUDE, BRAND STRENGTH AND PROFITS ON DISTRIBUTORS' OVERALL SATISFACTION: EVIDENCE FROM BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Distributors are agents of a manufacturer who supply products to other businesses that sell to end users or delivers products straight to end users. They play a significant role as a link between the manufacturer and its final consumers. A company's success or failure predominantly depends on its distributors' performance. Therefore, an important responsibility of a manufacturer is to invest heavily to support its distributors and make them highly satisfied. This research explores key factors that influence satisfaction of distributors in Fast Moving Consumer Goods industry of Bangladesh. Data was collected via structured questionnaire and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 20. We examine relationships among the constructs, which include Distributor's perception of Manufacturer's attitude, Strength of Manufacturer's brand and Distributor's current economic outcomes as independent variables or predictors and Distributor's overall satisfaction as the dependent variable. The results provide evidence to support the hypothesized relationship and provide useful information for firms in formulating strategies to satisfy its distributors thereby developing long-lasting and profitable relationships.

INTRODUCTION

A company needs to market its products to two types of customers, end users and distributors. The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry of Bangladesh is often dominated by big local and international firms such as Partex Group, Square, ACI, Bashundhara Group, Unilever, GlaxoSmithKline, Reckitt Benckiser. These big manufacturers use distributors to make their products accessible to their final consumers. They use their channel of distribution structure to make offerings available in the market. Distributors and agents include wholesaler, Retailer, Reseller, Master distributor, Dealer and Value-added resellers. Undoubtedly these distributors play a vital role in achieving manufacturers' business objectives. Despite political instability and harsh economic conditions in Bangladesh, the FMCG industry grew almost 9% over the past few years. A manufacturer can conduct its business without any assistance from distributors, but may find it is an inconvenient and expensive way to conduct business. For this reason, both small and big companies use distributors to sell their products to the customers. Distributors perform duties to achieve business goals at a low-cost and easily for the manufacturer.

In today's competitive market, distributors can aid a manufacturer in achieving its business goals. The company needs to understand the importance of nurturing and continuing a profitable relationship with its distributors. This paper predicts the reasons that influence distributor's overall satisfaction. The Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry is a very dominant industry for any country and Bangladesh is

no exception. Many local and foreign firms produce several products for consumers. Distributors work as a medium for these firms to make sure that products are available for consumers all corners of the country. A distributor also works as a helping hand for the manufacturer to satisfy the needs of final consumers. In FMCG industry, most frequently inventory of a manufacturer is managed by distributors (Lamming, et al. 2000). As a result, a manufacturer can focus more on production, marketing, and other strategies to reach their goals.

It is nearly impossible to survive in the market without the help of distributors. A manufacturer needs to understand the importance of distributors in reaching its business goals. The manufacturer must identify factors that can influence satisfaction of distributors and study those factors. A group of satisfied distributors is an extremely powerful tool in any company's arsenal (Rolnicki, 1998). If a company keeps its distributors satisfied, in turn, distributors will help a company to achieve its objectives. Nevertheless, few studies focus on distributor's satisfaction or factors that may influence distributor's satisfaction. This study aims to fill this gap.

The objective of the study is to identify the critical factors for distributors' overall satisfaction in FMCG industry of Bangladesh. We also identify the interrelationships between distributors' perception of manufacturer's attitude and distributors' current economic outcomes, and between the strength of manufacturer brands and distributors' current economic outcomes. This paper identifies major factors that can contribute to distributors' overall satisfaction. A theoretical model was developed by conducting a literature review. The structured questionnaire was developed for data collection and respondents from several distribution firms were selected. Analysis and finding are provided in the results section including some statistical analyses. The paper closes with some recommendations for managers of manufacturing companies, concluding comments, and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Satisfaction is 'a positive affective state resulting from the appraisal of all aspects of a firm's working relationship with another firm' (Anderson and Narus, 1984). As noted earlier, distributors are regarded as a customer of the manufacturer and according to Saha (2016), satisfied customers are an asset to an organization. Most companies see their intermediaries as first line customers and partners (Sethuraman, et al. 1988). They practice strong partner relationship management (PRM) to forge a long-term partnership with channel members thereby creating a marketing system that meets the needs of both the company and its marketing partners. Manufacturers need to hold retailers' satisfaction in high regard to fortify their long-term success (Bolton, 1998, Selnes, 1998). The satisfied distributor is more loyal to the manufacturer and willing to make a commitment towards a long-lasting relationship. Distributors having a healthy relationship with a manufacturer consider themselves as partners in the manufacturer's success and are willing to protect prices, promote old and new products, and participate in mutual sales forecasting (Rolnicki, 1998). Distributors' overall satisfaction may be a multidimensional object, but attitude and strength of manufacturer's brands and economic outcomes of distributors are the most important factors (Iglesias and Vazquez 2001).

Distributors closely evaluate the attitude of a manufacturer towards them. The relationship between the supplier's attitude (as perceived by the distributor) and the distributor satisfaction seems clear. The more positive the attitudes are, the greater the distributor's satisfaction (Iglesias and Vazquez 2001). Manufacturer flexibility is an important factor when negotiating in a bargaining process. Many manufacturers are extremely rigid in describing duties and responsibilities for distributors. Others are exceptionally flexible and consider the needs of distributors (Venugopal, 2001). Andaleeb (1996) found climate of the distribution channel (a construct that includes the leader's contemplation towards the other firms) has a positive influence on satisfying the channel members.

A key factor in sustaining a profitable relationship between a manufacturer and distributors is to cooperate with distributors. The manufacturer should consider distributors as partners, rather than a business that works for them (Rolnicki, 1998). A manufacturer that partners with the distributors to understand their business, their customer, and the customer needs can play a critical role in helping the distributor increase their business and market share (Iglesias and Vazquez 2001). A manufacturer needs to convey all information to distributors honestly and accurately even it's painful (Rolnicki 1998). A manufacturer also needs to show interest in distributor's well-being by communicating regularly and solve any conflict that arises. It's difficult for a well-managed firm to perform successfully in the long run without regularly reviewing the performance of its channel members. Success of the firm in meeting objectives is dependent on how well the channel members perform (Li and Dant, 1997). A manufacturer should help its distributors perform well to meet its own objectives. The manufacturer should provide easy payment terms for the distributors. Distributors frequently favor those manufacturers that have above-average payment policies (Rolnicki, 1998).

H1a: Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitudes is positively related to distributor's overall satisfaction.

H1a0: Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitudes is not related to distributor's overall satisfaction.

Prestigious brands of a manufacturer can help its distributors gain more sales because it has demand in the market as well as a loyal consumer base. Manufacturers with weak brands are less able to rely on market demand, and, thus, often use deals to obtain retailer cooperation (Manning, et al. 1998). Distributors also perceive weak brands from the manufacturer as a hindrance to their path of obtaining significant sales. Strong brands can generate loyal customers which give a manufacturer sustainable and distinct advantage over its competition (Srivastava and Shocker, 1991). A sizeable base of loyal customers assists the manufacturer in selling their products quickly and easily. Every distributor loves a manufacturer who has a couple of brands with a powerful brand image because it has high demand in the market which will help it sell quickly and generate good cash flow (Smith, et al. 1997).

The axiom "we are known by the brands we keep" is applicable here. Distributors do not need to keep strong brands in their warehouse for a long time since they are easy to sell. Because of high demand, these products sell easily and generate cash and profits quickly for distributors (Rolnicki, 1998). This increases distributors' satisfaction. Strong and powerful brands are good sources for the manufacturer to exercise more power over its distributors. Distributors prefer strong brands which increase their dependence on a manufacturer. This in turns expands the manufacturer's power in a manufacturer-distributor relationship. This situation suggests lower distributor involvement in the decision-making process, which minimizes distributor satisfaction (Goaill, et al., 2013).

H2a: Strength of manufacturer's brands is positively related to distributor's overall satisfaction.

H2a0: Strength of manufacturer's brands is not related to distributor's overall satisfaction.

Every business wants to make a profit to survive in the marketplace. Distributors are usually small or medium size businesses. They want to make a profit to survive and flourish in the market (Rolnicki, 1998). Research suggests that there is a link between economic outcomes obtained by distributors and the degree of satisfaction (Geyskens, et al. 1999). The first thing a distributor asks a manufacturer is, "How much money am I going to make with your product line?" (Rolnicki, 1998). Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000) defined retailer's economic satisfaction as "the retailer's evaluation of the economic results that stem from its relationship with the supplier". Distributors usually refer economic outcomes as rewards; such as higher sales volume, elevated profit margin, superior discounts/margins etc received as a result of a positive

relationship with the manufacturer (Venugopal, 2001). A good relationship with the manufacturer helps a distributor get the most powerful brands which in turns provides the distributor with greater sales volume.

> *H3a: Distributor's current economic outcome is positively related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

> *H3a0: Distributor's current economic outcome is not related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

Theoretical Framework

Hypotheses are formulated based on the literature review to build a conceptual model for the research. Figure 1 shows that, apart from the causal relationships mentioned, the model includes relationships between the manufacturer's attitudes and distributor's current economic outcomes, and between manufacturer's brand strength and distributor's current economic outcomes. These relationships can arise from the dependence of both variables on certain characteristics of the manufacturers such as their resources, capabilities, and size.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of This Study
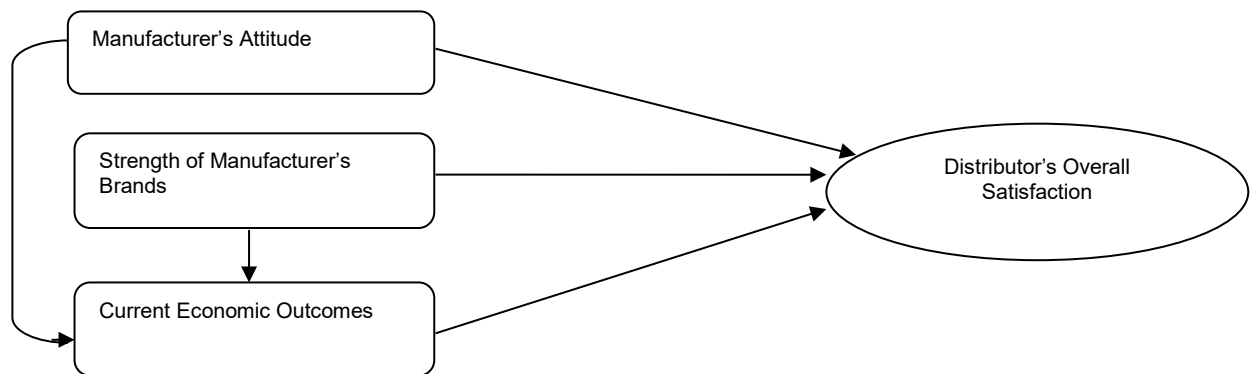
DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this study, a formal research design was followed. The study required a structured and precise way to show the relationship between different variables and to test hypotheses. The data collection method consisted of performing a face-to-face interviews with the managers of a myriad of distribution companies in the FMCG industry in Bangladesh. The survey questionnaire was designed and distributed to target respondents randomly. For the research to produce a realistic outcome, the collation of data was distributed over a large population. The survey was conducted on the entire objective population, i.e. 230 different types of distributors such as wholesalers, dealers, and resellers. If managers were absent, the questionnaire was given to the employee who fulfilled a similar role within the company (usually the general manager or supervisor who have purchasing power). The individual was to answer the questionnaire in its entirety, being the individuals with greatest knowledge and experience in negotiating with manufacturers. Each candidate selected a manufacturer with which the company had maintained a relationship for at least two years.

As shown in Figure 1, there are three independent variables and one dependent variable. So, a change in the independent variables will change the dependent variable. To investigate the research questions and test the hypothesis a Causal study is required. This study focuses on analyzing the factors responsible for a distributor's overall satisfaction. This study also explains the structure of a relationship between

independent and dependent variables. For this reason, this study can be considered causal or explanatory research. Explanatory research indicates a relationship between variables as well as the direction of the relationship. For this research, random sampling method was used. According to Teddlie and Yu (2007), Random sampling occurs when each sampling unit in a clearly defined population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. In this study, Dhaka city (Capitol city) was selected as the population and distributors were selected on a random sampling method. Respondents from several firms were approached in different parts of Dhaka city. The questionnaire and information was collected on the spot. Table 1 shows the designation of all respondents within their respective organizations. The data collection procedure took place during the months of February and March 2016.

Table 1: Respondents Profile

Designation	Frequency	Percentage
General Manager	25	12.14%
Manager	67	32.52%
Supervisor	114	55.34%
Total	206	100%

This table shows the percentage and number of people for each position of the population from whom questionnaires were collected. The highest number of participants is from the supervisor level- 55.34% and lowest from general managers-12.14%. The rest are from the manager level-32.52%.

A closed questionnaire consisting of 14 items was designed to collect feedback from the respondents. Appendix 1 provides an explanation of the items. For a better understanding of the participants, the questionnaire was also translated into native language (Bengali). If any interviewee had difficulties understanding any question, it was resolved promptly and politely. In total, 230 respondents were approached in the survey and 206 responses were collected and used for analysis. The response ratio was almost 90%. Nevertheless, it was necessary to eliminate 24 questionnaires from the sample for not having been correctly filled in or because they were incomplete for statistical analysis. The questionnaires were distributed by personally approaching the respondents in their offices.

RESULTS

A total of 206 respondents were used in the analysis. Some 95.3% (198 participants) were male respondents and 4.7% (8 participants) were female respondents. Of the respondents who participated in the survey, 151 respondents (146 male, 5 female) were in the age range of 21 to 35 years; 43 respondents (40 male, 3 female) were in the age range of 36 to 50 years; 9 respondents (9 male, 0 female) were in the age range of 51 to 65 years; and 2 male respondents were above 65 years.

All accumulated data were analyzed using statistical software SPSS, version 20. Reliability findings (Cronbach's Alpha) of the multiple items were performed to measure the internal consistency. According to George (2003), reliability coefficient of 0.7 is acceptable, more than 0.8 is good and more than 0.9 is considered excellent. Table 2 shows that all constructs met the reliability test. Three of the variables have Alpha value in "good" range and one in "excellent" range.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Dimensions	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitude	3	0.873
Strength of Manufacturer's brands	4	0.902
Distributor's current economic outcomes	4	0.886
Distributor's overall satisfaction	3	0.893

This table shows the values of Cronbach's Alpha (α). All variables have values more than 0.80, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for our scales with this specific sample. Two of the independent variables consisted of four items, one of the independent variables and the dependent variable consisted of three items.

Pearson Correlation

A correlation coefficient is a useful way to summarize the relationship between two variables with a single number that falls between -1 and +1 (Welkowitz et al., 2006). Cohen and Lea (2004) stated that: -1.0 (a perfect negative correlation), 0 (no correlation), and +1.0 (a perfect positive correlation).   The correlation coefficient r measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables on a scatterplot. The value of r is always between +1 and –1. According to Taylor (1990), correlation r is closest to: Exactly –1 A perfect downhill (negative) linear relationship, –0.70 A strong downhill (negative) linear relationship, –0.50 A moderate downhill (negative) relationship, –0.30 A weak downhill (negative) linear relationship, 0 No linear relationship, +0.30 A weak uphill (positive) linear relationship, +0.50 A moderate uphill (positive) relationship, +0.70 A strong uphill (positive) linear relationship, Exactly +1 A perfect uphill (positive) linear relationship. We propose the following hypothesis based on correlation analysis.

> *H1a: Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitudes is positively related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

> *H1a0: Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitudes is not related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

Table 3 shows that the correlation (r) of Manufacturer's attitude is 0.82 and the significant level is 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$). The table shows the p-value is 0.000, is less than 0.01. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. We conclude there is a significant positive (r = 0.822) relationship between Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitudes and distributor's overall satisfaction in FMCG industry in Bangladesh.

> *H2a: Strength of manufacturer's brands is positively related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

> *H2a0: Strength of manufacturer's brands is not related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

From Table 3, we observe that correlation (r) between the strength of manufacturer's brands is 0.863 and the significant level is 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$). The table shows that the p-value is 0.000 so the null hypothesis is rejected. We conclude that there is a significant positive (r =0.863) relationship between strength of manufacturer's brands and distributor's overall satisfaction in FMCG industry in Bangladesh.

> *H3a: Distributor's current economic outcome is positively related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

> *H3a0: Distributor's current economic outcome is not related to distributor's overall satisfaction.*

Table 3 shows the strongest predictor of distributor's satisfaction is distributor's current economic outcomes. The result indicates that correlation (r) of the strength of manufacturer's brands is 0.870 and the significant level is 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$). The results show a p-value is 0.000, so the null hypothesis is rejected. We concluded there exists a significant positive (r = 0.870) relationship between distributor's current economic outcome and distributor's overall satisfaction in FMCG industry in Bangladesh. Results also indicate that a significant positive interrelationship exists between the manufacturer's attitudes and distributor's current economic outcomes (r = 0.798 and significant level = 0.000), and between manufacturer's brand strength and distributor's current economic outcomes (r= 0.837 and significant level = 0.000). Overall, we find for all three correlations, the *r* value is greater than +0.70 which indicates the existence of a strong uphill (positive) relationship.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

	Distributor Satisfaction	Manufacturer's Attitude	Brands' Strength	Economic Outcomes	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Distributor Satisfaction	1	0.822**	0.863**	0.870**	0.000
Manufacturer's Attitude	0.822**	1	0.805**	0.798**	0.000
Brands' Strength	0.863**	0.805**	1	0.837**	0.000
Economic Outcomes	0.870**	0.798**	0.837**	1	0.000

*Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) This table shows the results of Pearson Correlation. All r values are more than 0.70 which indicates a positive and uphill relationship between variables. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the 1, 5 and 10 percent levels respectively. All the P values (significance level) are also ≤ 0.05 which indicates rejection of the null hypotheses. The number of observations in each sample is the same as indicated in Table 1.*

Regression Analysis

Prior to conducting the regression analysis, we check for multicollinearity among explanatory variables. Multicollinearity or collinearity is the situation where two or more independent variables are highly correlated and can have damaging effects on the results of multiple regressions (Haitovsky, 1969). A correlation matrix is a powerful tool for getting a rough idea of the relationship between predictors (Kaur, 2015). The suggested rule of thumb is that, if the pair-wise or zero-order correlation coefficient between two regressors exceeds 0.8, then multicollinearity is a serious problem (Gujarati, 2009). The solution is to drop that variable and thereafter run the regression analysis with the remaining variables. Another way to check for multicollinearity is to compute the average variance inflation factor (VIF). As a rule of thumb, if the average VIF of a variable exceeds 10, which will happen if the correlation coefficient exceeds 0.80, then that variable is said to be highly collinear (Gujarati and Porter, 1999). All the values in the analysis, have VIF values that do not exceed 10. Therefore, we can conclude the data are free from multicollinearity problems. Moreover, the Durbin-Watson statistic was used to test the assumption of independent errors (autocorrelation). The value of this statistic between 2 or close to 2 is considered acceptable. Table 4 indicates the value is 1.867, which is very close to 2 (Gujarati and Porter, 1999). Therefore, the assumption is valid and the model is valid and reliable.

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1(Manufacturer's\ Attitude) + \beta_2(Brand\ Strength) + \beta_3(Economic\ Outcomes)$$

$$Y = -0.176 + 0.214 + 0.276 + 0.316$$

Here Y is the distributor's overall satisfaction, and α, the constant. The results in Table 4 show that the combination of Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitude, strength of manufacturer's brand and distributor's current economic outcomes together contributed 83.2% to the effect on distributor's overall satisfaction. The R^2 for the overall study on the three predictors suggests that there is a powerful effect of all three independent variables on distributor's overall satisfaction. From Table 4, we conclude that all three Independent variables have a significant effect on the dependent variable (p-value = 0.000). By analyzing

the beta values, it can be observed that distributor's current economic outcomes are most influential for distributor's overall satisfaction with 40.1%. Strength of manufacturer's brands and manufacturer's attitude explain 35% and 22% respectively.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Results

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T-Value	Significance	VIF
	B	SE	B			
Manufacturer's Attitude	0.214	0.051	0.220	4.173	0.000**	3.336
Brands' Strength	0.276	0.046	0.350	6.046	0.000**	4.035
Economic Outcomes	0.316	0.045	0.401	7.026	0.000**	3.907
Other Values						
Intercept (Constant)	1.276					
R^2	0.832					
Adjusted R^2	0.829					
Durbin-Watson	1.867					

Note: **. Significant at 5 percent level   *This table shows the values for unstandardized and standardized coefficients which indicate how each independent variable is affecting the dependent variable. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values indicate the multicollinearity among explanatory independent variables. R^2 and Adjusted R^2 indicate how much the dependent variable is explained by all the independent variables together. The Durbin-Watson figure implies the model to be valid and reliable.*

Analysis of variance (ANNOVA) assesses the overall significance of the model (Hoaglin & Welsch, 1978). Table 5 shows the model is significant as the *P* value is <0.05. Table 5 also shows that all the independent variables have a positive impact on distributors' overall satisfaction. The coefficients of these variables are positive and significant at the 5 percent level, hence rejecting H1a0, H2a0, and H3a0.

Table 5: Analysis of Variance (ANNOVA) Results

Sources of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	525.854	3	175.285	332.903	0.000**
Residual	106.360	202	0.527		
Total	632.214	205			

This table shows the overall significance of the model. Here the F value and P value show that distributor satisfaction factors together are significantly related to the overall satisfaction of the distributors. The coefficients of these variables are positive and significant at the 5 percent level of significance.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The research was aimed to predict the factors influencing distributor's overall satisfaction in fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry in Bangladesh. A questionnaire survey was conducted to ascertain relevant distributor satisfaction research and theories. Data was collected from 206 respondents and analyzed using statistical software.

Only three predictors were chosen to construct the research framework. Items included for Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitude were, strength of manufacturer's brands and distributor's current economic outcomes. The study indicates that all the factors predominantly affect Distributor's overall satisfaction in FMCG industry in Bangladesh.

It is pertinent that mangers in the FMCG industry keep their distribution channel strong and productive to make products available to the customer base. One crucial responsibility of a distribution manager is to make channel members satisfied to build a long-lasting and profitable relationship. Many factors can influence distributor's overall satisfaction level. These factors have been previously identified by researchers. But distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitude, strength of manufacturer's brands and distributor's current economic outcomes play the most vital roles. This research provides solid evidence to support it.

It is evident in the research that distributor's current economic outcomes are the most influential predictor. This finding is not a surprise because distributors are also businesses, and every business wants to make a profit. It is also evident that manufacturer's attitude and strength of manufacturer's brands can substantially influence distributor's current economic outcomes. For this reason, the distribution manager should be careful about selecting the best quality distributors. Moreover, they should entice those distributors by offering them inducements to start a fruitful relationship. Managers should also communicate with the distributors to make sure the right information is flowing among them and always involve distributors in the decision-making process. These efforts demonstrate a positive attitude towards distributors. A manager should also consult with other departmental managers to find ways to make the image of brands stronger in the market. Every distributor loves a powerful brand as it is easy to sell, products move through the channel faster, and cash and profits are generated more easily. In this way, a manager can fortify distributors' satisfaction. The result of this study has proven the research model framework is a very effective model to measure distributor's overall satisfaction in the FMCG industry of Bangladesh.

Some limitations of this research must be addressed. First, the size of the current sample is modest. Although appropriate analysis procedures are used and the results are robust, it would be desirable to replicate our findings with a larger sample. Secondly, the study consisted of a single industry. Further research could analyze the effects of predictors by considering different industry or all the industries together. Finally, additional insight could be gained by further expanding the unit of analysis in relationship research. For example, the analysis could be broadened to include the relationship between manufacturer and distributor, and commitment and loyalty of distributors to manufacturers. Doing so, may in turn reveal different types satisfaction predictors. Future studies should continue to expand the unit of analysis in relationship research and consider even more complex factors.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Description of Scales

Distributor's perception of manufacturer's attitudes
Item 1: Manufacturer's positive attitude
Item 2: Manufacturer's interest in satisfying distributors
Item 3: Easy payment terms

Strength of manufacturer's brands
Item 4: Popular brands
Item 5: High market share
Item 6: Loyal customer base
Item 7: Easy to sell

Distributor's current economic outcomes
Item 8: High volume of sales
Item 9: Gain more customers via good relationship
Item 10: Gain more profits via good relationship

Item 11: Adequate profits from manufacturer's products

Distributor's overall satisfaction
Item 12: Highly satisfied
Item 13: Manufacturer tries to keep distributors satisfied
Item 14: Recommendation for manufacturer to other distributors

Note: Questions were rated on the following 5-point Likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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