Christoph BURMANN - Philip MALONEY

INTERNAL IDENTITY-BASED BRAND MANAGEMENT - HOW TO CONSISTENTLY DELIVER THE BRAND PROMISE AT THE POINT OF SALE?

In many well developed economies the number of brands as well as their perceived homogeneity is increasing for more than two decades. As a result, more and more brands appear interchangeable to their customers. To cope with this challenge it is necessary to develop a unique brand identity and to assure that this is being consistently delivered at all brand touch points. The latter requires that everyone who acts as a brand representative behaves according to the brand identity. Common understanding of and commitment to the brand are necessary prerequisites. A first model for internal identity-based brand management intended to fulfil these prerequisites was recently developed at the chair for innovative brand management. The model is explicitly targeted at employees.
This paper draws attention to yet another group of stakeholders which influences the brand image substantially: the brands distributors. Empirical research has shown that particularly those internal reference groups[1] that have intensive interaction with the customers are able to influence the brand image. The purpose of this article is to assess whether the internal brand management model developed for employees applies to distributors and to extend the existing model for the distributor context if necessary.

Many brands are perceived interchangeable by more and more customers. Constructs like consumer confusion or brand image confusion prove this impressively (see Wiedmann –Walsh – Klee, 2001; Burmann – Weers, 2006: p. 29 ff.). On the one hand, this can be attributed to a high degree of functional substitutability (see Esch, 2005a: p. 32 f.). On the other hand, many brands are unable to communicate existing points of difference in a convincing manner (see Clancy – Trout, 2002: p. 3). As a result of this lack of differentiation, an increasing number of customers make use of alternative buying criteria, predominantly the price. A relationship between these customers and "their brands" does not exist.

The prerequisite for a trustful and stable relationship between a brand and its customers is a consistent and continuous implementation of a differentiating brand identity (see Burmann, 2005: p. 856). The brand identity can be defined as the sum of all attributes that determine the essence and character of a brand from the point of view of the internal target groups (see Burmann – Meffert, 2005a: p. 53).[ ]. Trust can only be generated if the brand identity is implemented consistently at all customer-brand touch points (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2005a: p. 116; Ind, 2003: p. 394).

For a consistent implementation of the brand identity it has to be assured that all employees understand, live and communicate the brand in the same way (see Wittke-Kothe, 2001: p. 2; Joachimsthaler, 2002: p. 29). This is the objective of a very new stream of research within the area of brand management, dealing with the topic of internal brand management (see Zeplin, 2006; Burmann – Zeplin, 2005a; Burmann – Zeplin, 2005b; Esch – Vallaster, 2005; Wittke-Kothe, 2001). Generally speaking, the aim of internal brand management activities is to turn every employee into a committed "brand ambassador" (see Ind, 2001; Esch – Vallaster, 2004: p. 8).

[1] Distributors are understood as internal target groups throughout this elaboration.

Special relevance for the communication of the brand identity and the brand-customer-relationship is assigned to personal contact between customers and brand representatives (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2004: p. 3; Bruhn, 2005: p. 1039; Nguyen – Leblanc, 2002). Hatch – Schultz (2001) point out that *„nothing is more powerful than stakeholders' direct, personal encounters with the organization."* (Hatch – Schultz, 2001: p. 132). In this context it is often referred to the influence of the distributors [ ] (see Burmann – Meffert, 2005b: p. 109 f.; Diller – Goerdt, 2005: p. 1212 ff.; Zentes – Swoboda – Morschett, 2005: p. 176 f.; Bloemer – Lemmink, 1992: p. 359). The contact between a customer and a distributor is in many cases the closest or even the only interaction between a brand and its customers (see Burmann – Meffert, 2005b: p. 95).

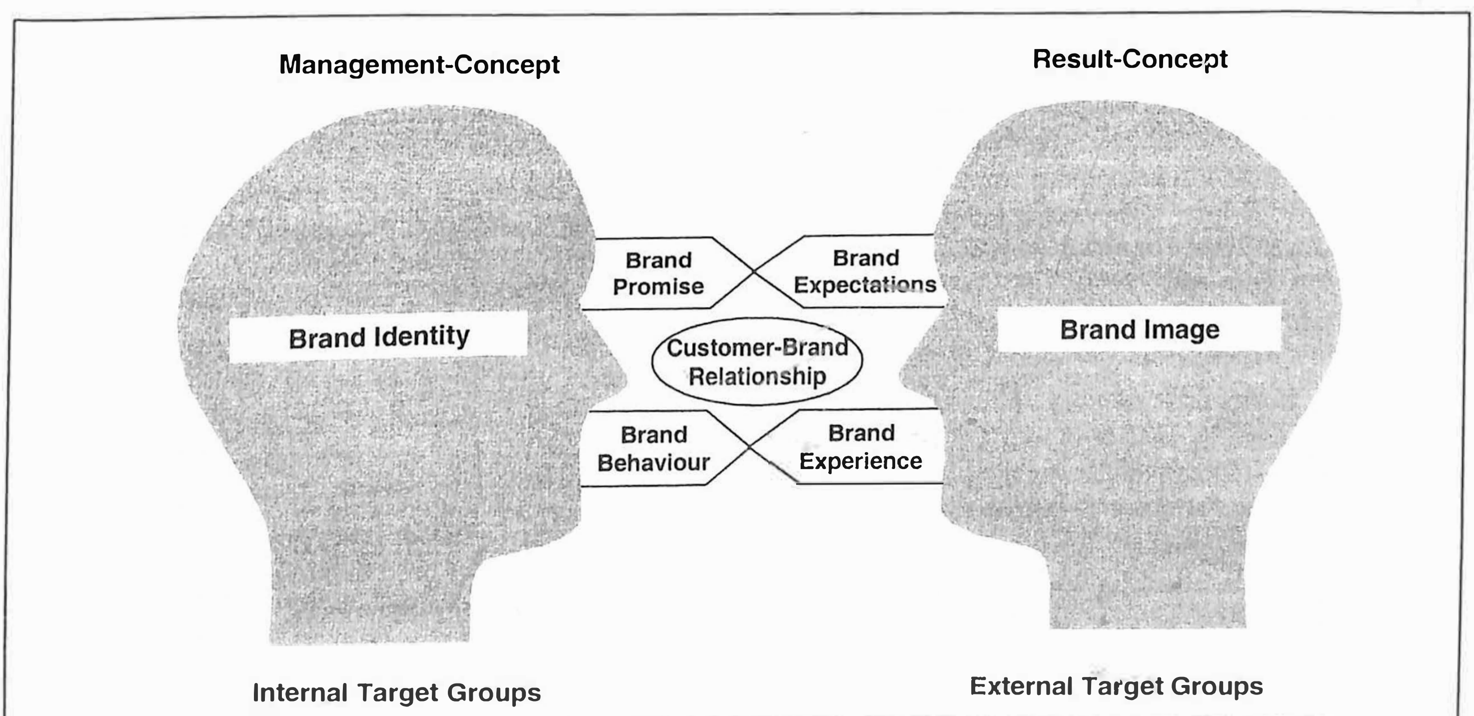
In this regard, distributors are both recipients and senders of external brand communication (see Gregory – Wiechmann, 1997: p. 55). From a customer's point of view, the distributors are often the most direct brand representatives and thus sender of external brand communication. Taking on this perspective implies that distributors, just like employees, belong to the recipients of internal brand management activities. However, in contrast to brand management activities towards employees, the possibilities to influence and direct distributors are limited because of their legal and economic independence. A behaviour which is consistent to the brand identity can therefore not be enforced with the same instruments and perhaps not with the same efficiency against distributors as against employees.

The challenge of integrating the distributors in the brand management activities is explicitly formulated as a goal in the context of identity-based brand management. This is described as a *management process which covers all planning, coordination and control activities to build strong brands for relevant target groups. The aim is companywide integration (including distributors) of all decisions and activities in order to create stable and profitable brand-customer-relationships and to maximise the brand equity* (see Meffert – Burmann, 2005: p. 32.).

Against this background, the goal of the paper at hand is to augment the existing body of literature dealing with internal identity-based brand management with an explicit allowance for the target group "distributors". For that purpose, the state of the art of internal brand management as well as its conceptual background, the identity-based brand management, will be briefly described. Thereafter, the applicability of the existing model of internal brand management for the target group "distributors" will be evaluated. The literature on distribution channel management and particularly research related to distributor commitment will then serve to adapt the existing model of internal brand management to the distributor context. Finally, both streams of research will be combined and a first model of internal brand management for the target group

Figure 1.

Basic Concept of Identity-based Brand Management



Source: Following Meffert – Burmann (1996), p. 35.

"distributors" will be presented. Throughout this article, the authors will argue from the perspective of the brand carrying company (manufacturer).

Internal Brand Management in the Context of Identity-based Brand Management

Basic Concept of Identity based Brand Management

The object of all brand management activities in the concept of identity-based brand management is the brand identity. The brand identity represents the essential and characteristic attributes of a brand and determines what the brand is supposed to stand for (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2005b: p. 1023; Esch et al., 2005: p. 989). The essence of the brand identity is the brand promise (see Burmann – Meffert, 2005a:, p. 52). This is being actively communicated to the external target groups. In a reciprocal process the brand promise is confronted with the brand expectations which are the result of the previous perception of the brand identity. This external view on the brand identity is termed brand image. It is a multidimensional, attitudinal construct [3] which reflects deeply rooted, concentrated and valuing associations of a brand in the mind of relevant external target groups (see Burmann – Meffert, 2005a: p. 53) (see Figure 1).

The identity-based brand management attempts the creation and consistent implementation of a trusted brand identity that offers meaningful benefits to the customers. In this respect, the degree of trust in a brand is mainly determined by the consistency between the brand promise and the actual brand behaviour. To generate a (brand) behaviour which is consistent to the brand promise (respectively the brand identity), Burmann – Zeplin developed a first model for internal identity-based brand management.

Internal Identity-based Brand Management Model by Burmann and Zeplin

With reference to Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) research (see Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2000), Burmann – Zeplin (2004, 2005) identified the Brand Citizenship Behaviour as primary prerequisite for a consistent implementation of the brand identity. It is defined as all positive brand–relevant generic (brand- or industry-independent) behaviours that in sum strengthen the brand identity and are performed voluntarily (Zeplin, 2006: p. 77). Brand Citizenship Behaviour consists of the dimensions helping behaviour, brand enthusiasm and willingness to develop (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2006: p. 27 f.):

- **Helping Behaviour** describes a positive attitude, friendliness, empathy and supporting behaviour towards fellow employees and customers as well as the willingness to take on responsibilities beyond the personal field of activity.
- **Brand Enthusiasm** refers to compliance to brand related behavioural guidelines even in situations in which the behaviour can not be controlled by the company as well as efforts to strengthen the brand which go well beyond the usual job description. Alongside, this dimension also implies the active recommendation of the brand and the exemplification of brand supporting behaviour to new employees.
- **Willingness to develop** can either refer to the individual employee or the brand. The first type means the intention to further develop ones own personality and abilities according to the brand identity. The latter refers to the willingness to continuously develop the brand through ideas or feedback.

The decisive determinant of Brand Citizenship Behaviour is the attitude towards a brand. In dependence on the construct of Organisational Commitment (see O'Reilly III – Chatman, 1986; Allen – Meyer, 1996), Burmann – Zeplin develop the construct of *„Brand Commitment"*. This is defined as the employee's degree of psychological attachment to a brand which leads to the intention to show Brand Citizenship Behaviour (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2005a: p. 120). For the conceptualisation of this construct Burmann – Zeplin make use of three dimensions which have been developed by O'Reilly III – Chatman (1986) who in turn followed Kelman (1958). Hence, Brand Commitment consists of the dimensions compliance, identification and internalisation (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2004: p. 60 f.).

- **Compliance** describes the adoption of behaviours that are consistent with the brand on the basis of a willingness to achieve or avoid rewards or penalties. Accordingly, it is extrinsically motivated.
- **Identification** describes the acceptance of social influence due to a sense of unity between an employee and the group of employees and the acknowledgement that the personal fate is closely linked to the group. It is intrinsically motivated.
- **Internalisation** is the strongest form of commitment. It describes the voluntary inclusion of brand values into the employee's self-concept. It is intrinsically motivated.

On the basis of research on organisational commitment and explorative expert interviews, Burmann –

Zeplin further identified three key levers for generating Brand Commitment (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2005a: p. 124 f.; Zeplin, 2006: p. 104 ff.). These are the (1) implementation of person-brand-fit through HR-measures, (2) the development of a common understanding of what the brand stands for through internal brand communication and (3) brand oriented leadership on all hierarchical levels.

Drawing on basic ideas of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (see Ajzen, 2005) Burmann – Zeplin also identified two context factors, namely the culture-fit and the structure-fit. The culture-fit refers to the degree of congruence between the brand identity and the corporate culture. It is assumed that a high level of brand commitment is only possible when the corporate culture and the brand identity fit to each other (see Zeplin, 2006: p. 131 ff.). The structure-fit relates to the incentives applied and the organisational structures. They should be designed in a way that supports the brand identity and fits to the brand goals (see Deckop – Mangel – Cirka, 1999; Decì – Koestner – Ryan, 1999)). Burmann – Zeplin expect these factors to have both a moderating effect on the three levers to generate Brand Commitment as well as a direct effect on Brand Commitment (see Zeplin, 2006: p. 131).

With regard to the relationship between Brand Commitment and Brand Citizenship Behaviour Burmann – Zeplin identify the context factors "existence of relevant competencies" and "sufficient resources" which are expected to have a mediating effect (see Zeplin, 2006: p. 144 ff.). Finally, Burmann – Zeplin identify the Brand Relationship Quality as the main success criterion for internal brand management (see Burmann – Zeplin, 2006: p. 28; Fournier, 1998). The resulting model is illustrated in *Figure 2.*

This model has been empirically tested on the basis of a survey including brand managers, employees and customers of 14 brands from different branches of industry. It generally proved to be valid (see Zeplin, 2006: p. 151 ff.).

Transferability of the Internal Identity-based Brand Management Model to the Target Group „Distributors"

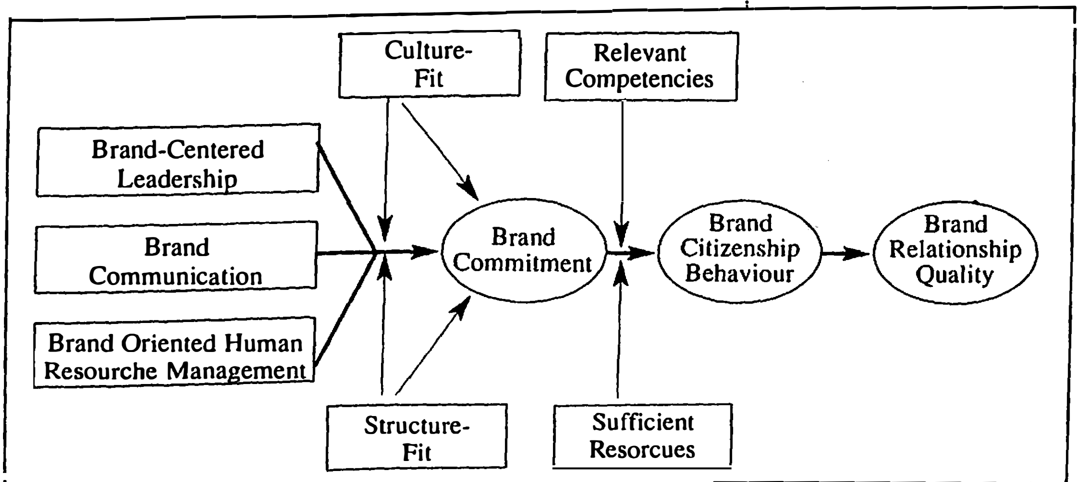
The existing internal brand management model is solely focused on employees. However, an application of the model for the target group "distributors" seems to be possible with regard to the pivotal constructs Brand Commitment and Brand Citizenship Behaviour. Notwithstanding, regarding the definitions of these constructs such a transfer would require that the exclusive focus on employees is somewhat enlarged through the use of the more general term "internal target groups". To which, according to Burmann – Meffert and the understanding of the authors, also the distributors belong (see Burmann – Meffert, 2005b: p. 85). The Open System View by Sanchez – Heene can serve as a theoretical explanation for this broader interpretation of the term "internal target groups". According to this, stakeholders such as the distributors can be viewed as "firma addressable resources" and thus be regarded as internal target groups (see Sanchez, 1996; Heene – Sanchez, 1997; Sanchez – Heene, 2002). However, the dimensions of the two constructs may have to be adapted for the distributor context.

A transfer of the levers to generate Brand Commitment is comparatively more complex. Ensuring a high degree of person-brand-fit through HR-measures is for instance only possible in the distributor selection phase. Also the generation of a common understanding of the brand identity through internal brand communication is restricted. One reason is for this restriction is the geographical distance between the manufacturer and the distributors. Finally, also brand centred leadership on all hierarchical levels can only be implemented if it is supported by the management of the respective distributors (see Barth, 1996: p. 65).

The context factors culture- and structure-fit can as well not be directly transferred to

Figure 2.

Internal Brand Management Model



Source: Burmann – Zeplin (2005a), p. 123.

distributors. Regarding the culture-fit this is intuitively evident, because a corporate culture that fits to the brand identity can not be assumed or implemented for the distributors in the same way as for the brand carrying organisation. A high structure-fit is also unlikely because it seems reasonable to assume that the distributors have incentives and an organisational structure which are not explicitly designed to support the brand identity.

On the contrary, the context factors mediating the relationship between Brand Commitment and Brand Citizenship Behaviour can be directly transferred to the distributor context. Also the success criterion, Brand Relationship Quality, can be used for the distributors in the same way.

The main difference between employees and distributors is the fact that the distributors – even though they belong to the internal target groups according to the authors understanding – are legally and economically independent (see Meffert, 2000: p. 600). In many cases their interest in the brand is purely based on economic considerations (see Barth, 1996: p. 32). Accordingly, the exchange relationship between a manufacturer and a distributor is quite similar to procurement of investment goods (see Franke, 1997: p. 72; Meffert, 2000: p. 142 f.; Backhaus, 2003: p. 66 ff.). Decisions are often made collectively, rather rational, within a formal decision making process and under economic pressure (see Barth, 1996: p. 284 ff.; Tomczak – Schögel – Feige, 2005: p. 1090). Employees on the other hand often make individual and less rational decisions under a less direct economic pressure (see Staehle, 1999: p. 162 ff.).

It therefore seems reasonable to assume that economic aspects play an even more dominant role for distributors than for employees. In this context, Gilliland – Bello (2002) state that *„in a channel relationship, each partner realistically considers the economic rewards that can be attained through the arrangement."* (Gilliland – Bello, 2002: p. 28). To allow for their importance, economic aspects have to be reflected in the factors determining the distributor's Brand Commitment. In the current model of internal brand management only the structure-fit and particularly the incentive system refers to economic factors. The model is generally based on behavioural considerations and theories. In order to respond to the importance of economic factors it seems to be necessary to further develop the existing model by making use of economic theories.

It can be summarised that the state-of the art of internal brand management does not have sufficient explanatory power for the target group "distributors". Therefore, literature dealing with distribution channel relationships and especially research on distributor commitment will be subsequently analysed and used to adapt the existing internal brand management model to a distributor context.

Contribution of Research on Distributor Commitment

Construct of Distributor Commitment

The last two decades have shown a fundamental shift from a transactional towards a more relational understanding of exchange relationships in research on distribution channels (see Dwyer – Schurr – Oh, 1987; Anderson – Narus, 1990; Morgan – Hunt, 1994). In this context, the construct of "distributor commitment" has received a great deal of attention, particularly through leading American scholars (see Anderson – Weitz, 1992; Morgan – Hunt, 1994; Andaleeb, 1996; Kim – Frazier, 1997a; Kim – Oh, 2002). The rational behind generating commitment in exchange relationships is that it is supposed to lead to a self-enforcing coordination between the exchange partners (see Anderson – Weitz, 1992: p. 18; Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 22). In contrast, without a high degree of commitment intensive governance mechanisms would have to be applied which would increase the costs of exchange substantially (see O'Reilly III – Chatman, 1986: p. 493). These assumptions are predominantly based on the Theory of Relational Exchange. Core idea of this theory is that partners in long-term exchange relationships develop common norms and values which prevent them from behaving opportunistically and lead to a unification of interests (see Dwyer – Schurr – Oh, 1987: p. 12 ff; Heide, 1994: p. 74). According to Anderson – Weitz (1992), distributors can be quasi-integrated through commitment and thus be efficiently controlled without having to bear the costs of integration (see Anderson – Weitz, 1992: p. 18).

Definition of the Construct "Distributor Commitment"

Even though research on commitment in distribution channels can look back on a long tradition, it is still lacking a clear definition of the term "commitment" (see Skarmeas – Katsikeas – Schlegelmilch, 2002: p. 759). One has to agree with Kim – Frazier who point out that *„we still do not have a clear understanding of what commitment in a channel relationship entails."* (Kim – Frazier, 1997b: 139).

Within the context of Organisational Commitment, O'Reilly – Chatman conclude that the "psychological attachment" is the least common denominator of all attempts to define the construct: *„it is the psychological attachment that seems to be the construct of common interest.“* (O'Reilly III – Chatman, 1986: p. 492). This focus on psychological attachment can also be found in the definition of Brand Commitment developed by Burmann – Zeplin (degree of psychological attachment to a brand; Burmann – Zeplin, 2006: p. 30). Against this background and prior to further research, the distributor commitment may also be generally defined as the *psychological attachment to an exchange partner.*

Dimensionality of the Construct „Distributor Commitment“

Not only with regard to the definition but also concerning the dimensionality of the construct, a commonly accepted approach is yet lacking. One-, two- and three-dimensional conceptualisations are competing. [4]

For the purpose of this elaboration a two-dimensional structure of the commitment construct will be applied, since this comes very close to the realities in distribution channels (see Stern – Reve, 1980: p. 53; Dwyer – Schurr – Oh, 1987: p. 12; Heide, 1994: p. 72 ff.). Referring to the two-dimensional conceptualisations by Geyskens et al. (1996), De Ruyter – Moorman – Lemmink (2001), and Gilliland – Bello (2002), one dimension based on rational considerations and one based on emotional or social considerations will be utilised. Concretely, the conceptualisation by Brown – Lusch – Nicholson (1995) which is based on the works of O'Reilly – Chatman (1986) as well as Caldwell – Chatman – O'Reilly (1990) and which differentiates between an instrumental and a normative dimension of commitment will be drawn on.

- **Normative Commitment** is based on identification with the exchange partner and internalisation of common norms and values. It is intrinsically motivated and leads to the desire to continue a relationship.
- **Instrumental Commitment** is based on compliance as a result of rational cost-benefit considerations. It is extrinsically motivated and leads to the perceived necessity to continue a relationship.

Determinants of Distributor Commitment

The distinction between a normative and an instrumental dimension of commitment is also reflected in the determinants of commitment. Many scholars classify the determinants of commitment (explicitly or implicitly) into economic determinants on the one side and behavioural determinants on the other side (see Anderson – Weitz, 1992; Kim – Frazier, 1997a; Brown – Dev – Lee, 2000; Zineldin – Jonsson, 2000).

Such a classification will also be applied in this elaboration. Determinants which assume a purely rational decision-making-behaviour will be classified as economic determinants. In turn, determinants which go beyond rational considerations and include subjective perceptions and non-economic benefits will be classified as behavioural determinants (see Geyskens et al., 1996: p. 304 f.; De Ruyter – Moorman – Lemmink, 2001: p. 273; Gilliland – Bello, 2002: p. 25 ff.).

Following, both groups of determinants will be discussed. Due to the great number of determinants that have been analysed in previous research, only those determinants will be taken into consideration that fulfil three criteria: (1) *Usage:* every determinant has to be used in at least two studies which were independent from each other. (2) *Relevance:* a significant influence on the distributor commitment has to be empirically proven for every determinant. (3) *Influence:* all determinants have to be influenceable through brand management measures.

Economic Determinants

Economic determinants influence the behaviour of those distributors, for which a purely rational decision-making behaviour can be assumed. One of the most cited economic determinants is the degree of vertical integration.

Vertical integration covers all investments on the part of a manufacturer into the ownership of a distributor as well as into direct distribution channels. This can be any contractual agreements, a minority stake or even a complete take over of a distributor through a manufacturer (see Zentes – Swoboda, 2005: p. 1082 ff.). The effectiveness of vertical integration for the reduction of opportunistic behaviour has been empirically investigated by Brown – Dev – Lee (2000). Their results show a positive correlation between the degree of vertical integration and opportunistic behaviour. Accordingly, vertical integration fosters opportunistic behaviour (see Brown – Dev – Lee, 2000: p. 62 f.; as well as Moschandreas, 1997: p. 47). Since opportunistic behaviour can be interpreted as a result of a lack of commitment, it can be generally assumed, that the degree of vertical integration has a (positive or negative) effect on commitment. Because of the close link between vertical integration and economic aspects, an influence in particular on the instrumental dimension of commitment can be expected.

Depending on its degree, vertical integration is based on the governance principle "hierarchy" or a combination of the governance principles "market" and "hierarchy". It is generally based on assumptions of Transaction Cost Theory, according to which an increasing complexity of the exchanged goods and services leads to an efficiency advantage of the coordination principle "hierarchy" over a coordination based on market principles (see Rindfleisch – Heide, 1997: p. 31). Among other aspects, the optimal coordination principle is determined by whether idiosyncratic investments (transaction specific investments) are necessary for a given transaction (see Williamson, 1975).

Transaction specific investments are investments which have little or no value outside of the respective exchange relationship (see Lohtia – Brooks – Krapfel, 1994: p. 265; Williamson, 1990). Accordingly, these investments loose great parts or even their total value in case of a termination of the relationship. Therefore, a relationship threatening behaviour becomes unattractive and the incentive structures of the involved parties are somewhat aligned (see Williamson, 1981; Anderson – Weitz, 1992: p. 21).

Research by Kim – Frazier (1997a) has shown that investments in transaction specific investments on the part of the distributors are able to increase their commitment. Anderson – Weitz (1992) can also empirically prove a positive correlation between transaction specific investments and distributor commitment. With regard to the specific influence on the two dimensions of commitment, it seems reasonable to assume that primarily the instrumental dimension of commitment will be positively affected.

In general, transaction specific investments increase the (economic) dependence of a distributor. This is true even for investments made by the manufacturer. Since transaction specific investements by the manufacturer allow a better adjustment to the exchange relationship, the performance of the manufacturer in the relationship will be improved and thus the value of the manufacturer from the point of view of the distributor increased.

Dependence can be broadly interpreted as a difficult replacement of a certain manufacturer (see Heide – John, 1988: p. 23; Kumar – Scheer – Steenkamp, 1995: p. 349). Goodman – Dion (2001) describe this as "degree of difficulty" a distributor would face if the relationship with a manufacturer would be terminated (see Goodman – Dion, 2001: p. 291).

A significant positive effect of dependence on commitment was proven by Andaleeb (1996). Payan – McFarland (2005) showed a positive correlation between dependence and compliance; a behaviour which can be generally understood as an outcome of instrumental commitment. Accordingly, a dominant effect of dependence on the instrumental dimension of commitment can be expected.

The counterpart to dependence is the power in channel relationships (see Kim – Frazier, 1997a: p. 869). *Power* in the context of distribution channel research refers to the potential of one player in the channel dyad to actively influence the decisions made by the partner (see El-Ansary – Stern, 1972: p. 47; Specht – Fritz, 2005: p. 453). It has to be admitted that the classification of power as an economic determinant of commitment is not clear-cut. On the contrary, many scholars classify power as a behavioural determinant of commitment (see Heide, 1994: p. 72; Goodman – Dion, 2001: p. 289). Nonetheless, many forms of power such as the reward or coercive power (see the following discussion) presume a clearly rational decision making behaviour by the less powerful party.

The potential to exercise power can have very different sources. Often, channel research draws on a classification by French – Raven (1959) who differentiate between five sources of power (see Hunt – Nevin, 1974: p. 187; Goodman – Dion, 2001: p. 290 f.):

- **Reward Power:** is based on the potential of a manufacturer to reward a distributor for certain behaviour.
- **Coercive Power:** is based on the potential of a manufacturer to punish a distributor for certain behaviour.
- **Legitimate Power:** is based on the recognition of a manufacturer's power on the part of a distributor (the reason might be either a legal agreement or a traditionally institutionalised behaviour).
- **Referent Power:** is based on an emotional relationship between a manufacturer and a distributor (the distributor wants to be associated with the manufacturer).
- **Expert Power:** is based on superior knowledge of a manufacturer in a certain field and the recognition of this superiority by the distributor.

These sources of power have often been classified and supplemented. In this context, many scholars differentiate between economic and directly controllable sources of power on the one hand, and non-economic and not directly controllable sources of power on the other hand. Well accepted throughout the literature is a classification into "mediated" and "non-mediated" sources of power (see Frazier – Summers, 1986: p.

172; Boyle et al., 1992: p. 463; Boyle – Dwyer, 1995: p. 190 f.). *Mediated power* describes those sources of power which can be directly controlled through the manufacturer, whereas *non-mediated power* refers to sources of power that can not be directly controlled. The effect of non-mediated power can thus not be directly influenced by the manufacturer but requires the recognition of the power through the distributor. Accordingly, it requires a perceptional change (see Boyle – Dwyer, 1995: p. 191; Brown – Lusch – Nicholson, 1995: p. 365).

Applying a meta-analysis, Johnson et al. (1993) could provide evidence for the appropriateness of the distinction between mediated- and non-mediated sources of power. They use a classification of seven sources of power into the respective groups developed by Johnson – Koenig – Brown (1985). The sources of power by French – Raven have been supplemented by „information power“ and an explicit dichotomisation of "legitimate power" into "legal-" and "traditional-legitimate" power. Information power refers to the possibility to pass on specific information aimed at convincing the distributors of the favourability of certain behaviours (see Kasulis – Spekman, 1980: p. 183). Traditional legitimate power describes power based on internalised values and norms or existing convention. Legal legitimate power is enforced through contracts or applicable law (see Brown – Frazier, 1978; Kasulis – Spekman, 1980 p. 183). The final classification is as follows:

- **Mediated Power:** reward power, coercive power, legal legitimate power.
- **Non-mediated Power:** expert power, referent power, information power, traditional legitimate power.

This classification into mediated- and non-mediated power with the respective seven sources of power will also be applied in this elaboration.

Brown – Lusch – Nicholson (1995) were able to prove empirically that the use of mediated power increases instrumental commitment and decreases normative commitment. The use of non-mediated power leads to the opposite effect. With regard to the effect of power, one can therefore expect a negative influence of mediated power on normative commitment and a positive influence on instrumental commitment.

As already mentioned, the determinant „power“ can be classified as both an economic determinant and a behavioural determinant. Apparently, the mediated sources of power have a more economic background whereas the non-mediated sources, due to the fact that they are based on a perceptional change on the part of the distributor, tend more towards the behavioural determinants. However, this distinction is not clear-cut (e.g. the effect of expert- or information power is based on decisions by the distributor which can have a clearly economic background) and is more done for reasons of clarity and simplicity than because of an apparent delimitation.

Interdependencies as those between power and dependence do also exist between power and supplier role performance, the subsequently discussed determinant. *Supplier Role Performance* can be generally defined as „how well the supplier firms actually carries out its channel roles“ (Kim – Frazier, 1997a: p. 857). It therefore refers to the ability of the manufacturer to generate superior benefits for the distributors and – or the final customers. The commitment inducing effect of supplier role performance is based on the negative correlation between the performance and the substitutability of a manufacturer. This is in accordance to assumptions of Social Exchange Theory (see Heide – John, 1988: p. 23; Anderson – Narus, 1990: p. 43).

The determinant „supplier role performance“ has apparent similarities to the determinant "relationship benefits“ which has been investigated by Morgan – Hunt (1994). However, "relationship benefits" refer to one explicit result of supplier role performance. The determinant "product saleability" which has been investigated by Goodman – Dion (2001) is also similar to supplier role performance but does also focus on one specific aspect of performance. While the results of Morgan – Hunt do not show a significant effect of "relationship benefits" on commitment, the determinant "product saleability" has the strongest positive effect of all determinants in the model developed by Goodman – Dion (see Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 30; Goodman – Dion, 2001: p. 297).

For this elaboration, a positive effect of supplier role performance especially on the instrumental dimension of commitment will be assumed. This assumption is based on the fact that a high correlation between supplier role performance and the customer's demand through which in turn economic figures are affected seems to be evident.

Finally, the following five economic determinants will be considered in this elaboration: vertical integration, transaction specific investments, dependence, mediated power and supplier role performance. With regard to the effect on commitment, a positive correlation primarily with the instrumental dimension of commitment will be assumed.

Behavioural Determinants

Four behavioural determinants fulfil the criteria described in this chapter. One of these four determinants, the non-mediated power, has already been discussed in the previous chapter. Out of the remaining three, the determinant "trust" is most often cited.

Trust can be defined as the willingness to rely on an exchange partner (see Moorman – Deshpandé – Zaltman, 1993: p. 82; Andaleeb, 1996 p. 79). The importance of trust for generating commitment can be attributed to the fact that trust reduces opportunistic behaviour which in turn leads to more risky investments and finally to an increased mutual dependence (see Anderson – Narus, 1990: p. 45; Ganesan, 1994: p. 3). The positive effect of trust on commitment was proven by Morgan – Hunt as well as Goodman – Dion. Their empirical research showed a highly significant positive correlation between trust and commitment (see Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 30; Goodman – Dion, 2001: p. 295). An indication of the effect of trust on the different dimensions of commitment is given through empirical research by Geyskens et al. (1996). They can show that trust increases normative commitment („affective commitment") and decreases instrumental commitment („calculative commitment") (see Geyskens et al., 1996: p. 312 f.).

Besides the positive effect on commitment, interdependencies between trust and other determinants of commitment can be expected. In this context, empirical evidence was provided for a positive effect of the perceived quality of past communication on trust (see Anderson – Narus, 1990: p. 50 ff.; Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 30).

Communication can be defined as *"the formal as well as informal sharing of information or meaning between the distributor and the manufacturer firm."* (Anderson – Narus, 1984: p. 66). Mohr – Nevin (1990) describe the role of communication as the *„glue that holds together a channel of distribution"* (Mohr – Nevin, 1990: p. 36). For the purpose of this elaboration the focus will not be on communication in general but on the *perceived communication quality*. Adding these subjective and valuing elements („perceived –quality) seems reasonable, taking into account that communication can be perceived in very magnitude ways.

With regard to the effect of perceived communication quality on commitment, one can look at empirical research by Mohr – Fisher – Nevin (1996). They point out that communication can serve to emphasize mutual interests and goals, which then lead to voluntary adjustments between the exchange partners (see Mohr – Fisher – Nevin, 1996: p. 103). Concerning the effect on the two dimensions of commitment, the focus on "voluntary adjustments" provides a hint that primarily the normative dimension of commitment will be positively affected.

Positive interrelations with other determinants, namely trust, have already been mentioned. In this respect, communication can also serve to put out shared values. *Shared Values* are defined as *„the extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong"* (Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 25). They determine the patterns of behaviour deemed appropriate and thus function as a moral obligation between the exchange partners (see Gundlach – Achrol – Mentzer, 1995: p. 84).

Shared values play a pivotal role in Relational Exchange Theory. One of the core assumptions of this theory is that shared values can function as governance mechanism in an exchange relationship and prevent the partners from behaving opportunistically (see Dwyer – Schurr – Oh, 1987: p. 21; Heide, 1994: p. 74). Referring to the enforcement of governance mechanisms Heide (1994) stresses that *„to the extent that common values have been established, the need for explicit enforcement could be low in general."* (Heide, 1994: p. 78).

A significantly positive effect of shared values on distributor commitment was shown by Morgan – Hunt (1994) as well as Zineldin – Jonsson (2000). Regarding the effect on the two dimensions of commitment it is apparent that especially a positive influence on the normative dimension can be expected. The most evident indicator for this assumption is the fact that internalisation, which refers to the existence of shared values or mutual goals, is one of the two components of normative commitment (see O'Reilly III – Chatman, 1986: p. 493; Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 25).

The following four behavioural determinants will be considered for this elaboration: non-mediated power, trust, perceived communication quality and shared values. Concerning the effect on the dimensions of commitment, a positive effect on the normative dimension can be generally assumed.

Combination of the two Streams of Research into a first Model of Internal Brand Management for the Target Group „Distributors"

As already mentioned, the construct of *Brand Commitment* is generally applicable to the target group "distributors". Only the dimensions have to be adapted. For the Brand Commitment of distributors a two-dimensional structure with the dimensions instrumental and normative commitment can be considered appropriate. Normative commitment covers the components identification and internalisation which have been separately conceptualised by Burmann – Zeplin. Instrumental commitment basically reflects the dimension which Burmann – Zeplin called "compliance". However, the term instrumental commitment seems to fit better to the construct of Brand Commitment since this is understood as an attitudinal construct. In contrast, the term "compliance" seems to describe a behavioural rather than an attitudinal dimension. This would better fit as a dimension of the Brand Citizenship Behaviour construct.

The definition of Brand Commitment will be modified and supplemented for the distributor context. *Brand Commitment of Distributors* will be defined as *„the degree of psychological attachment of a distributor to a manufacturer brand which can be based on both instrumental and normative commitment."* The explicit remark on the manufacturer brand is necessary since an unspecific reference to "a brand" could also refer to a retail brand.

The focus on commitment in channel relationships is based on the assumption that commitment can lead to a positive and non-opportunistic behaviour in the relationship (see De Ruyter – Moorman – Lemmink, 2001: p. 275). However, with regard to the behavioural results of commitment in channel relationship the state-of-the-art of channel research offers nearly no insights. The critique brought forward by Payan – McFarland (2005) that channel research is solely focussed on the generation of commitment (they refer to "relational outcomes") and is ignoring behavioural outcomes has to be acknowledged (see Payan – McFarland, 2005: p. 66). Due to the lacking theoretical basis for adaptations, the three dimensions of Brand Citizenship Behaviour identified by Burmann – Zeplin will be transferred to the newly developed model for distributors. Only a fourth dimension termed *compliance* will be added. This addition will be made because of the fact, that a manufacturer has generally less power to control the behaviour of distibutors than that of employees. Simple compliance to the brand identity can therefore already be interpreted as an important first step for a consistent implementation of the brand identity. Moreover, the instrumental dimension of commitment will be better reflected through an integration of a rather "weak" behavioural outcome dimension like compliance. It will be defined as a behaviour that is congruent to the brand identity because of perceived economic necessity (see Morgan – Hunt, 1994: p. 25 f.; Payan – McFarland, 2005).

Considerable changes have to be made with regard to the determinants of Brand Commitment. For the context factors structure- and culture-fit Zeplin empirically discovered direct effects on commitment (see Zeplin, 2006: p. 222). Therefore, they will be interpreted as direct determinants of commitment in this elaboration. For the adaptation of the *culture-fit* to a distributor context the behavioural determinants of distributor commitment will be utilised. Since a common corporate culture does not exist in the distributor-manufacturer context, this determinant will be referred to as *relationship-culture-fit*. It generally concerns the quality of interorganisational and interpersonal cooperation. The components are: non-mediated power, trust, perceived relationship quality and shared values. These components have to fit to the brand identity and be generally well managed.

The *structure-fit* is reflected by the economic determinants. They are represented by the degree of vertical integration, transaction specific investments, economic dependence, the use of mediated power and the perceived supplier role performance. Just like the structure-fit in the existing model of internal brand management, these are structural aspects (vertical integration, transaction specific investments, and economic dependence) and incentive aspects (mediated power, supplier role performance).

It will be assumed that the structure-fit has mainly a positive effect on the instrumental dimension of commitment, whereas the culture-fit correlates with normative commitment.

A transfer of the levers to generate Brand Commitment is not easily done. Further research is necessary in this respect. Prior to further research the three levers (ensuring person-(distributor)-brand-fit through HR (in this context referred to as distributor management), communication of the brand identity and brand oriented leadership) will be transferred to the new model without adjustments. A global effect on commitment will be assumed for these levers.

The context-factors "competencies" and "resources" will also be transferred without adjustments from the old to the new model. Moderating effects on the causal relationship between Brand Commitment and Brand Citizenship Behaviour can be expected for these context-factors.

With regard to the causal relationship between Brand Commitment and Brand Citizenship Behaviour it will be further assumed, that normative commitment has a stronger positive effect on Brand Citizenship Behaviour than merely instrumental commitment. This assumption is backed both by empirical research in the field of Organisational Commitment and the study of Burmann – Zeplin (see O'Reilly III – Chatman, 1986: p. 496 f.; Brown – Lusch – Nicholson, 1995: p. 381 f.; Zeplin, 2006: p. 91 f.).

The new model will be further supplemented by another result figure, next to the existing Brand Relationship Quality. It will thus be assumed that instrumental Brand Commitment leads to a behaviour which is consistent to the brand identity regarding formal criteria. This can be attributed to the economic background of instrumental commitment and the monetary incentives which force a distributor to formally comply with the requests of the brand carrying institution. Formal criteria may be the use of certain displays or more generally the store design. Enthusiasm for the brand and a behaviour which is often described as acting as a "brand ambassador" can not be expected. Such behaviour requires a normative nature of Brand Commitment. Only this will lead to a behaviour that is content wise consistent to the brand identity. Normatively committed distributors live up to the brand promise at any time because they identify themselves with the brand and share the same norms, values and goals. They voluntarily "live the brand" even in situations which are out of the scope of control of the brand carrying institution. The brand is integrated with regard to content criteria.

Finally, it will be assumed that content based brand integration has a greater positive effect on Brand Relationship Quality than formal brand integration (see Esch, 2005b: p. 721). This assumption appears plausible because personal and experience based communication (which can only be fully integrated on the basis of contents) can be expected to have a much stronger effect on the development of a brand image than any kind of formally integrated brand (mass) communication.

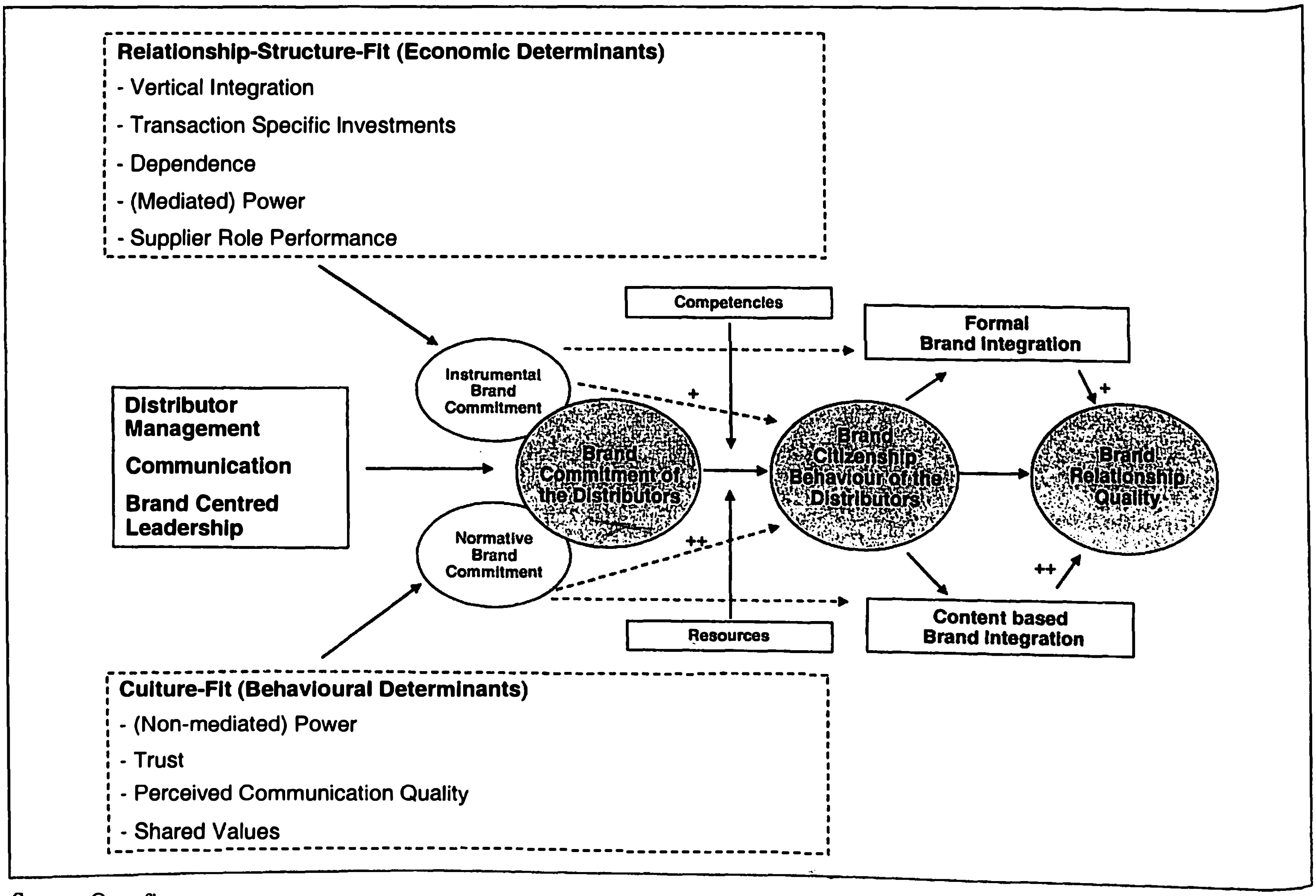
The resulting model is presented in *figure 3*.

Conclusion

Starting point of this elaboration was the recognition that, amongst other things, particularly the personal contact between a distributor and a final customer is able to shape the brand image of final customers and thus the Brand-Customer-Relationship. Accordingly, the behaviour of the distributors as "front-line" brand representatives has a great importance for the consistent implementation of the brand

Figure 3.

Model of Internal Brand Management for the Target Group "Distributors"



Source: Own figure

identity. At the same time, the question, how distributors can be transformed into "brand ambassadors" has not been answered by the existing body of literature on brand management. The elaboration at hand was a first step into this direction. However, it may rather be understood as a starting point for further research activities than as a final model of internal brand management for distributors.

The most obvious need for further research concerns the empirical testing of the so far only conceptualised model. Moreover, the dimensions and determinants of the pivotal constructs need to be assessed with regard to their completeness. In this context, especially brand related environmental factors, such as the perception of the brand by the customers, have to be considered. Such environmental factors have so far been ignored by large parts of the literature on distributor commitment as well as by Burmann – Zeplin.

These and other areas for further research will be partly cleared through a research project of the Chair for innovative Brand Management (LiM) at the University of Bremen.

Explanatory Notes

[1] A brand can be defined as a bundle of benefits with specific attributes that assure that the bundle of benefits differentiates itself from other bundles of benefits which serve the same basic needs in a sustainable way and from the point of view of relevant external target groups. See Burmann – Blinda – Nitschke (2003), p. 3; following Keller (1993), p. 3 f..

[2] Distributors are legally and economically independent actors in the distribution systems that autonomously fulfil channel activities. See Meffert (2000), p. 600. In contrast to other delimitations, for the purpose of this elaboration also actors who are bound by contract (e.g. Franchisees) will be classified as distributors.

[3] The term „attitude" can be defined as a state of a learned and relatively stable disposition to continuously behave in a specific situation towards a certain object more or less positive or negative. See Trommsdorff (2004), p. 159.

[4] For an overview of the different conceptualisations and operationalisations of the construct „distributor commitment" see the tables in Kim – Frazier (1997b), p. 142 f.; Kim – Frazier (1997a), p. 849 ff.; as well as based on the aforementioned Gilliland – Bello (2002), p. 26 f.; Bordonaba-Juste – Polo-Redondo (2004), p. 106 f.

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