

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **An examination of the major behavioral aspects of distribution channels in an export channel design**

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**This paper concentrates on the behavioral aspects of distribution channels in an export channel design from the perspective of the exporter. Based on the argument that channel conflict and satisfaction are among the major determinants of channel efficiency and performance, the perceived degrees of channel conflict and satisfaction are examined as well as the three antecedents of channel conflict, namely the channel power, cultural distance and distribution system quality, as they are regarded among major factors affecting the channel conflict. In conducting the analysis, questionnaire survey was undertaken among 30 exporter companies that are members of Ankara Chamber of Commerce and Likert scaling technique is used. The findings from the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis suggest that the Turkish exporter do not regard the level of exercised power in a marketing channel system and the cultural distance between the foreign channel member' markets as important sources of conflict while the international distribution system quality seems to be perceived as a major source of channel conflict. The findings also suggest that there exists a close relationship between the perceived channel conflict and the channel members' satisfaction.**

**Keywords:** Export channel, behavioral aspects, channel conflict, satisfaction, power.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although 'globalization', a well known and widely used term for a long time, continues to affect business in all aspects, there is, surprisingly, a limited body of knowledge and academic study regarding the international distribution channels, especially the export channels, which lacks in fulfilling the literature gap on the issue.

Export channels, as being more socially and culturally diverse and sophisticated and differ from the domestic channels in many aspects as the channel length, infrastructure and integration access, require specialized studies focusing on the international distribution channels, designed to fit to the international environments, pointing to the additional complexities that arise

from the international activities firms engage with. Although the behavioral aspects of distribution channels which mainly concentrates on channel power, conflict, coordination and satisfaction, and hence, has a stake on the channel performance and success, has received extensive attention in domestic channel studies (Gaski and Nevin, 1985; Hunt et al., 1987; Lusch, 1976; Rosenbloom, 1973; Hunt and Nevin, 1974; Skinner et al., 1992), the international dimension of the topic (Shoham et al., 1997; Sachdev et al., 1994; Rosson and Ford, 1980; Raven et al., 1993; Balabanis, 1998) has received limited attention scholarly.

With regard to domestic distribution channels, there are a lot of studies seeking to explain the antecedents and consequences of channel conflict. For example, Rose et al. (2007) examines manufacturer' perceptions of task and emotional conflict in domestic channels of distribution. Both are expected to depend on three antecedents (centralization, esprit de corps, and communication barriers) and to affect performance

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relative to competitors and manufacturer's satisfaction directly and indirectly through strategy quality and their result support a positive link between task and emotional conflict and the deleterious effect of emotional conflict on satisfaction and performance. Another study (Hu et al., 2010) found that there are significant positive influences on the channel conflicts caused by both the economic and non-economic powers and positive influence upon the channel climate resulted from the channel conflicts as well in Taiwan domestic market between manufacturer and distributors. Power plays a significant role in the supply chain, and the different sources of power have differing impact on inter-firm relationships and the performance of the entire supply chain (Maloni and Benton, 2000). Lee (2001) also recommends that channel members in different cultures may have different perceptions of power sources. Though the importance of power and dependence has received the attention of academic scholars and practitioners, research investigating how power and dependence affect the retailer's purchasing decision and supply chain performance is rare.

A number of studies differentiated the coercive and noncoercive sources of power (Gaski, 1984) and examined their linkage to conflict, satisfaction and performance (Hunt and Nevin, 1974; Lusch, 1976; Gaski and Nevin, 1985). Some studies, also, differentiated the effects of exercised and unexercised sources of power both in domestic marketing channels (Gaski and Nevin, 1985) and in international distribution channels (Raven et al., 1993). Environmental uncertainty has also raised some attention in channel studies (Klein et al., 1990; Celly and Fraizer, 1996). One study (Shahom et al., 1997) examined the effects of cultural distance, regarded as an important measure of the perceived environmental uncertainty, on the international channel conflict. Distribution system quality has also been examined in some channel studies. One study (Shahom et al., 1999) examined the effects of the quality of the international distribution channel used on the decision-making centralization in the international channels. In another study, (Shahom et al., 1997), in addition to the effects of cultural distance, the effects of distribution system quality on channel conflict is also examined.

In the retailing industry, there is also trading conflicts between suppliers and retailers. For example, in their study Bradford et al. (2004) examined the effect of conflict and conflict management between independent businesses in retail sector. Moreover, Scot and Parkinson (1993) examined the relevance of the constructs of power, conflict and co-operation in the UK food channel from the supplier's perspective; Dickson and Zhang (2004) investigate perception of Chinese retailers for their foreign brand apparel suppliers and explored the use of power theory for explaining these relationships.

In this study, in addition to the channel conflict and satisfaction, three important antecedents of international

channel conflict, namely power, cultural distance and distribution system quality, are also examined.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the limited international distribution channels literature in that it focuses on the perceptual view of the selected exporter companies with regard to five distinct dimensions, specifically the channel conflict, satisfaction, power, cultural distance and distribution system quality. The study concentrates on the behavioral aspects of the international distribution channels which are understudied scholarly given its importance and it incorporates three antecedents of channel conflict, which have relatively been under-researched in international marketing channels. Besides, it is also aimed to provide support to the limited existing body of knowledge in international distribution channels. One distinctive feature of this study is that it takes the perspective of the exporter in contrast to the most of the studies taking the perspective of the buyer. In sum, within the scope of the study, how Turkish exporter companies perceive their major trading partner(s) and their export channels with regard to five important determinants of channel efficiency and performance is examined.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

### Conflict

According to Mullen (1963), channel conflict is part of the exchange process, with the seller attempting to obtain the highest possible return and the buyer attempting to purchase the good for as little as possible. Stern and El-Ansary (1992) defines channel conflict as '...a situation in which one channel member perceives another channel member(s) to be engaged in behavior that is preventing or impeding it from achieving its goals. Based on a research (Pondy, 1967), conflict has been classified into five stages: Latent conflict –underlying sources of conflict, Perceived conflict –conflict that is only perceived with no conditions of latent conflict exist, Felt conflict –tension, anxiety and dissatisfaction, in addition to the perception, Manifest conflict –behavior that blocks the goal achievement of another channel member, Conflict aftermath –post conflict behavior (Berman, 1996; Gaski, 1984). In the content of this study, I prefer another definition of conflict, provided by Gaski (1984) that points to the manifest conflict which directly affects one channel member's behavior toward another and, consequently, has a more direct affect on satisfaction and performance: '...channel conflict will be considered to be the perception on the part of a channel member that its goal attainment is being impeded by another, with stress or tension the result.'

Conflict in channels can be viewed as the frequency and intensity of disagreements between channel members and the inevitable interdependencies among

channel members creates conflicts of interest. The greater the interdependence, the greater the opportunity for interference with goal attainment, and hence the greater will be the potential for conflict among organizations (Stern and El-Ansary, 1992). Thus, differing levels of conflict between channel members is doomed to exist. It is argued that low levels of channel conflict have little impact on channel efficiency; moderate levels may actually increase efficiency, while high levels of conflict may detract from channel efficiency (Rosenbloom, 1973). This may be due to the channel members having a tolerance threshold for disagreements and conflicts and react to conflict whenever it exceeds their threshold levels and the fact that some conflict may enforce innovation and discourage channel members from becoming complacent whereas high levels of conflict can lead to bitter feelings, stress, tension, lack of trust, legal disputes and severing of relations where both parties hold high switching costs (Berman, 1996).

Within the light of the above arguments, it is important to examine the perceived degree of channel conflict as it is one of the major determinants of channel satisfaction, efficiency and performance.

## Power

According to Berman (1996), channel power '...is the ability of a channel member to control or influence the marketing strategy of an independent channel member at another level in the channel.' A similar definition is provided by Stern and El-Ansary (1992): 'Power is the ability of one channel member to get another channel member to do what it otherwise would not have done.' It should be noted that in both definitions power is regarded as an ability; a potential, rather than actual enforcement. Conflict is argued to be a by-product as well as a cause of power (Stern and El-Ansary, 1992). It is also argued that, if a channel member has more power over another and employs its power to exploit the others dependence, this increased interdependency will foster the possibility of channel conflict as discussed before.

There may be fundamental differences between the consequences of the exercised power sources and unexercised power sources. Thus, some researchers have differentiated between the exercised and unexercised power in examining their impacts on the channel behavior (Gaski and Nevin, 1985; Raven et al., 1993).

In addition to the exercised and unexercised power, another useful classification made regarding the power sources is the differentiation between the coercive and noncoercive sources of power. Coercive power, in contrast to reward power, is based on the ability of one channel member to punish another channel member while noncoercive power consists of reward power, referent power, expertise power, persuasion power, legitimate power and information power (Berman, 1996).

The results of the past researches have supported that exercised power has stronger effect both on channel conflict and satisfaction, especially for coercive power sources (Gaski and Nevin 1985; Gaski, 1984). Additionally, the noncoercive sources of power are found to reduce channel conflict whereas coercive sources of power are found to increase conflict (Skinner et al., 1992; Gaski and Nevin, 1985; Lusch 1976). Lusch (1976) also argued that among the coercive and noncoercive power sources, coercive sources of power explain the largest amount of variance in the channel conflict. Given these arguments, it is clear that power is one of the main determinants of channel conflict and hence satisfaction as well as channel performance. Based on the above argument and past empirical research findings, we propose that power is related positively with conflict. Thus:

H<sub>1</sub>: The higher the level of exercised power in a marketing channel system, the higher the perceived channel conflict.

## Cultural distance

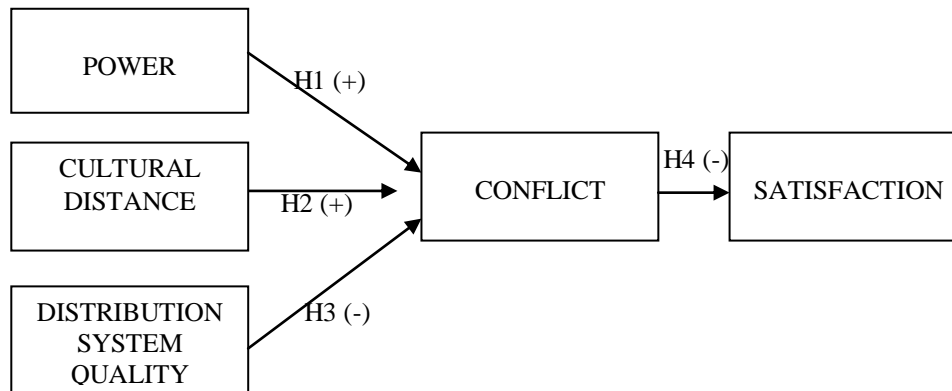
Culture is defined as '...an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristics of the members of any given society' (Czinkota et al., 1996). An alternative definition is provided by Griffin and Pustay (1999, p. 326): 'Culture is the collection of values, beliefs, behaviors, customs and attitudes that distinguish a society.' From these definitions, it is clear that societies exhibit some differences from each other.

A cultural cluster comprises countries that share many cultural similarities, although differences do remain (Griffin and Pustay, 1999). Thus, it is logical to expect minor differences between the societies in the same cultural cluster while major differences may be observed between countries in different cultural clusters.

According to Reid (1986), cultural distance is '...the perceived importance of cultural [dis]similarity in different dimensions such as language, business habits, cultural environment, legal environment, etc...' Given that a society's culture determines the rules that govern how firms operate in the society (Griffin and Pustay, 1999), cultural distance increases the potential for misunderstandings and makes international operations more complex (Shahom et al., 1997) which in turn may foster channel conflict.

Thus, it is important to examine the perceived degree of cultural (dis)similarities among the markets of major trading partners which may have considerable effect on channel satisfaction and performance.

H<sub>2</sub>: The larger the cultural distance between the foreign channel members' markets, the higher the perceived channel conflict.



**Figure 1.** The graphical presentation of the relationships as postulated in the hypotheses.

### Distribution system quality

Distribution quality includes a number of strategic components: (1) visits to overseas markets, leading to high intensity of contact with foreign customers; (2) channel quality; and (3) use of highly trained salespeople (Shahom et al., 1999).

Past research findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between the components of distribution system quality and international performance (Shahom and Kropp, 1998; 1997). Shahom et al. (1997) argued that, to the extent close contacts are maintained with high quality channels, the frequency and strength of conflicts may be reduced, leading to improved performance.

It is also argued that channel members can empower information sharing through a frequent and two-way communication process (Mohr and Nevin, 1990; Hunt, 1995; Mohr et al., 1995) leading to enhanced trust between parties (Anderson and Narus, 1990) as this process can help removing some of the uncertainties, possible conflict generating suspicions and misunderstandings. Thus, frequent two-way communication, through increasing the level of cooperation, helps in the early detection and prevention of conflict, and hence, increases the level of satisfaction.

Thus, the perceived distribution system quality can be argued to be a considerable factor that effects channel efficiency and performance through its effect on channel conflict and satisfaction. In this respect, the perceived level of distribution system quality is also measured with the content of this study.

H<sub>3</sub>: The higher the international distribution system quality, the lower the perceived channel conflict.

### Satisfaction

Satisfaction is defined as '...a dealer's overall approval of the channel arrangement' (Gaski and Nevin, 1985). A

similar definition is provided by Berman (1996): 'Channel satisfaction is the overall evaluation of the relationship between two channel members'. According to Schul et al. (1985), channel member satisfaction refers to members' attitudes and feelings toward the internal environment of the channel organization and the relationships between that environment and other institutions in the channel.

The cooperative efforts of channel members are argued to result in greater efficiency and achievement of goals, leading to higher levels of satisfaction (Berman, 1996). In turn Hunt and Nevin (1974) argued that channel satisfaction may lead to higher morale, greater cooperation within a channel, fewer terminations of relationships, fewer lawsuits, and reduced efforts to file class action suits and to seek protective legislation. Hence, it is a straightforward conclusion that there is a negative relationship between satisfaction and conflict. Past research findings also provide support for this conclusion: Conflict relates inversely with satisfaction (Skinner, Gassenheimer and Kelly, 1992; Gaski and Nevin, 1985; Gaski, 1984; Fraizer, Gill and Kale, 1989).

The channel satisfaction is a major factor of channel efficiency and performance and thus included within the research scope of this study (Figure 1).

H<sub>4</sub>: The higher the level of perceived channel conflict, the lower the channel members' satisfaction.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Sample and instrument

For the analyses, first of all a questionnaire<sup>1</sup> survey was conducted among 30 exporter companies that are members of Ankara Chamber of Commerce. The main data collection was

<sup>1</sup>The ten item measurement scale of Gaski and Nevin (1985) is used to measure the channel conflict, which has been developed to measure channel conflict in domestic markets and has also been applied to international marketing channels as well (Shahom et al., 1997).

questionnaire sent to companies via e-mail. In order to examine behavioural aspects of the international distribution channel, we employed the questionnaire of Gaski and Nevin (1985), which they used in their research entitled "The Differential Effects of Exercised and Unexercised Power Sources in a Marketing Channel" and applied to international marketing channels by Shahom et al. (1997), in paper entitled "Conflict in International Channels of Distribution". The employed questionnaire is composed of 5 main parts where each is included to measure a different dimension of the research: The first part of the questionnaire measures the channel conflict; the second part of the questionnaire measures satisfaction; the third part measures cultural distance; the fourth part measures distribution system quality and the final part measures power. For the channel power dimension, both the coercive (questions 15-19) and noncoercive (questions 1-14) sources of power are addressed. Likert scaling technique was employed which enabled the increase in variation in the possible scores, by coding from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" instead of merely "agree or disagree". Every respondent was asked to fill out the questionnaire by choosing one of the five optional answers. Then weights were assigned from 1 to 5 for each optional answer. In order to evaluate the construct validity the principal components analysis was conducted using VARIMAX rotation. The results are given in Table 1 and show each scale items were loaded to relevant factors with strong factor loadings addressing the construct validity of the measure. In addition to construct validity, to ensure the reliability of scales Cronbach's alpha coefficients were evaluated. According to Table 2, reliability of the scales with alpha coefficients is ranging from 0.835 to 0.635.

### Reliabilities

Because all the questions are proven to be reliable in prior scientific research (Gaski and Nevin 1985; Shahom et al., 1997) no factor analysis has been done. To prove that all questions are reliable, for each construct a reliability test is executed.

### Mediating of questions into construct scores

In order to test the hypotheses all the construct-specific items are mediated into construct scores. This construct score is the mean of the measures of all questions related to the specific construct.

## RESULTS

The means, standard deviation of the variables are given in Table 3. The coefficients according to Pearson Correlation between these variables are also given in Table 4. The OLS regression model is used to test hypothesis 1 through 4. The model appears to be fairly satisfactory with adjusted R-square (0.442) and F-Value ( $0.00 < 0.01$ ) and seems to support that the research model fits well into the data. The results from OLS regression are summarized in Table 4. This results show support for two of four hypotheses.  $H_1$ , hypothesis proposing the higher the level of exercised power in a marketing channel system, the higher the perceived channel conflict is rejected with -0.126 beta coefficient at  $p > 0.01$  (0.177). The larger the cultural distance between the foreign channel members' markets, the higher the perceived channel conflict, and it is also not significant at

$p < 0.01$  (0.204) and with 0.127 beta coefficient not supporting the  $H_2$ . On the other hand,  $H_3$  hypothesis proposing the higher the international distribution system quality, the lower the perceived channel conflict is confirmed with at  $p < 0.01$  (0.009) with -0.249 beta coefficient. Finally  $H_4$  hypothesis proposing the higher the level of perceived channel conflict, the lower the channel members' satisfaction is also confirmed with at  $p < 0.01$  (0.001) with -0.342 beta coefficient; then  $H_4$  is accepted. The results are summarized graphically in Figure 2.

## Conclusions

In this paper we examined the behavioral aspects of international distribution channels in an export channel design; Turkey. For this purpose we seek evidence on the impact of the level of exercised power in a marketing channel system, the cultural distance between the foreign channel members' markets and the international distribution system quality on the perceived channel conflict and then search for the impact of perceived channel conflict on the channel members' satisfaction.

Our results indicate that Turkish sampled exporters do not regard the level of exercised power in a marketing channel system and the cultural distance between the foreign channel member' markets as important sources of conflict while the international distribution system quality seems to be perceived as a major source of channel conflict. The findings also suggest that there exists a close relationship between the perceived channel conflict and the channel members' satisfaction, as expected.

These results are somewhat surprising in that although the theory suggests a well-documented (well-developed) linkage both between the level of exercised power and channel conflict, and between the cultural distance and channel quality conflict, our findings do not provide support for these hypothesis. But considering the geographical, historical and ethnical characteristics of Turkey, it can provide a partial explanation for the obtained results. First of all, Turkey lies between Europe and Asia, and inherits close relations with both sides of her borders for centuries. This fact provides a better understanding of different cultures and enables Turkish exporters to be more tolerant to different cultures, which is also doubled with the culturally diverse ethnic structure of the country. These facts may argue to provide an inherited ability to live with different cultures as well as manage cultural diversity issues. Additionally, Turkey carries considerable part of her trade with the Arab Region and, as very well known, besides the historical ties between these two cultures, nations such as living together within the same borders under the Ottoman governance starting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to late eighteens and early nineteens, they share the same religious beliefs. So, Islam may argue to play a binding force and contribute an additional source of reduced



**Table 1.** Contd.

Giving trade discounts and incentives to your distributor.		0.633	
Giving personnel training to your distributors	0.702		
Provide promotional materials to your distributors.		0.790	
Organizing activities such as party. picnic. etc. to your distributors.			0.590
Applying stock discounts to your distributors.		0.530	
Providing finance/credit to your distributors.	0.596		
Providing raw material to your distributors.		0.598	
Providing business consultancy to your distributors.			0.811
Providing pricing consultancy to your distributors.			0.812
Providing samples to your distributors.		0.581	
Providing ordering consultancy to your distributors.		0.727	
Providing consultancy for inventory management to your distributors.		0.630	
Making product publicity to your distributors.		0.688	
Delivering goods lately			0.525
Applying legal sanctions.			0.817
Stop selling for a certain period of time.			0.578
Applying high prices.	0.776		
Not delivering products according to specifications defined by distributors.			0.874

Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; <sup>a</sup>Rotation converged in 27 iterations.

**Table 2.** The Cronbach's alpha statistic.

Research construct		Cronbach's test		N
		Item total	α value	
CON	C1	0.831	0.835	30
	C2	0.814		30
	C3	0.815		30
	C4	0.811		30
	C5	0.828		30
	C6	0.815		30
	C7	0.828		30
	C8	0.809		30
	C9	0.815		30
	C10	0.830		30
SAT	S1	0.211	0.810	30
	S2	0.209		30
	S3	0.811		30

Table 2. Contd.

CDIS	CD1	0.678		30
	CD2	0.738		30
	CD3	0.710	0.805	30
	CD4	1.000		30
DSQ	DQ1	0.586		30
	DQ2	0.517	0.635	30
	DQ3	0.514		30
POW	P1	0.779		30
	P2	0.781		30
	P3	0.766		30
	P4	0.771		30
	P5	0.759		30
	P6	0.762		30
	P7	0.772		30
	P8	0.756		30
	P9	0.772		30
	P10	0.774	0.782	30
	P11	0.773		30
	P12	0.758		30
	P13	0.756		30
	P14	0.776		30
	P15	0.798		30
	P16	0.761		30
	P17	0.765		30
	P18	0.793		30
	P19	0.791		30

Variables: CON= Conflict; SAT= Satisfaction; CDIS= Cultural Distance; DSQ= Distribution System Quality; POW= Power

perception of cultural distances between these two trade partners. However, our research results should be interpreted consciously due to some exogenous facts. As our sample consist firms that are members of Ankara Chamber of Commerce, they are all located at Ankara. So, taken into

account the cultural and ethnical diversity of Turkey, it may be misleading to draw a generalized conclusion for the whole country. Another remarkable point may be to examine the topic from both trade partners' view comparatively, but due to the geographically dispersed structure of

the sampled firms' exporting map and the difficulties in routing the questionnaire to the appropriate person in an organization, since a supply chain encompasses many units within the organization, we lack to include the importers' view. So, actually, our results may be argued to



**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of and inter-correlation matrix between independent variables.

Variable	Mean	Std	CON	SAT	CDIS	DSQ	POW
CON	3.660	0.880	1	-0.351**	0.017	-0.236*	-0.066
SAT	2.689	0.642	-0.351**	1	0.334**	0.171	0.017
CDIS	2.407	0.845	0.017	0.334**	1	0.177	-0.167
DSQ	3.611	0.982	-0.236*	0.171	0.177	1	-0.162
POW	2.737	0.576	-0.066	0.017	-0.167	-0.167	1

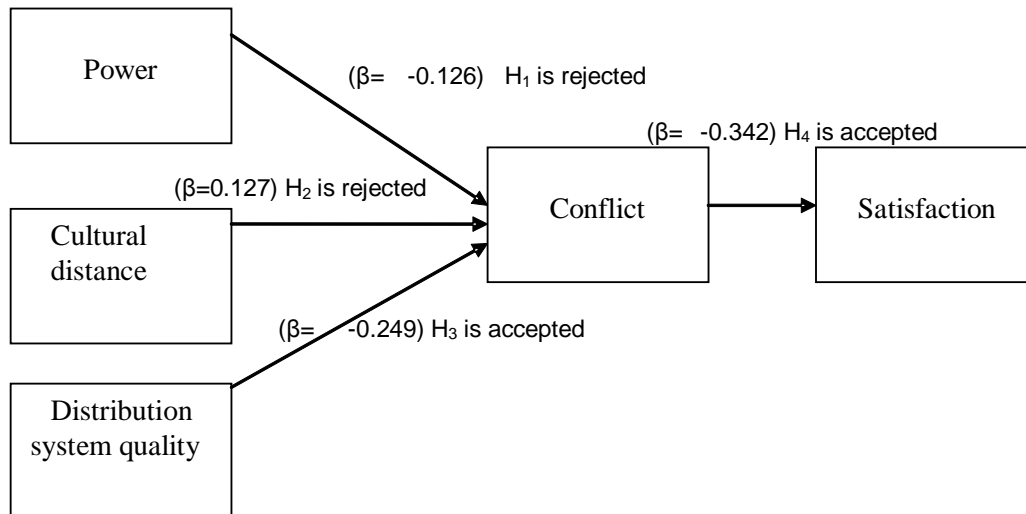
\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

1= Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree; Variables: CON= Conflict; SAT= Satisfaction; CDIS= Cultural Distance; DSQ= Distribution System Quality; POW= Power

**Table 4.** Regression analysis.

	Standardized beta coefficients	T	Sig.
<b>(Constant)</b>			
SAT	-0.342	-3.470	0.001**
CDIS	0.127	1.279	0.204
DSQ	-0.249	-2.679	0.009**
POW	-0.126	-1.360	0.177
R square		0.432	
Adjusted R square		0.417	
F		29.632	0.000

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; Variables: CON= Conflict; SAT= Satisfaction; CDIS= Cultural Distance; DSQ= Distribution System Quality; POW= Power.



**Figure 2.** Graphically summary of results.

reflect the perceptions of the sampled exporters, rather than being a realized fact. Nevertheless, we believe that our research contributes to the prevailing literature on international distribution channels in many aspects. First, it concentrates on the behavioral aspects of the

international distribution channels which is understudied scholarly given its importance and incorporates three antecedents of channel conflict, which have relatively been under-researched in international marketing channels. Second, by taking the perspective of the

exporter in contrast to the most of the studies taking the perspective of the buyer, it aims to provide evidence on the “counterparts” perception on the examined relations. Actually, some of our contradictory findings may be due to the reflection of this fact. For example, it may be possible for power dimension to be a more effective tool from the importers’ point of view. This may be an interesting topic to investigate for future research. Besides, this research also concentrates on an emerging market setting, in which the operating firms have to struggle with the market imperfections prevailing in the structural arrangements of such markets. Also, emerging countries usually provide considerable export incentives for exporter firms. Hence, firms operating in an emerging market may have different and/or additional motives for exporting compared with their counterparts operating in developed markets which may affect their perceptions on the behavioral aspects of distribution channels. We believe that this distinction offers another remarkable area of research for future studies.

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