
THE RELATIONAL DRIVERS OF WILLINGNESS TO DEAL: A STUDY IN BRAZILIAN COFFEE CHAIN

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Abstract

Coordination and performance of supply chains depend on transactions and relationships among agents (WILLIAMSON, 2008). As for cooperative forms, Zylbersztajn (1999) emphasized it as potentially related to cost reduction, from advantages of managing sunk costs and power imbalances. In this case, relationship between coffee farmers and cooperative company were studied. Considering the importance of business-to-business relationships in supply chain performance, the relevance of cooperative forms and the diversity of approaches to study interorganizational relationship, the aim of this paper is to analyze relational drivers of willingness to deal between coffee agents in Brazil, specifically concerning coffee producers and a cooperative in Minas Gerais. Field research comprised a range of 105 cooperated coffee farmers in a local survey conducted in Brazil. Questionnaires were applied either through *in loco* interviews or by telephone. Regression analysis was conducted, and dependent variable “willingness to deal” was correlated to independent ones “contact density”, “trust”, “reciprocity”, “efficiency” and “authority”. As hypothesized, trust had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .24, p < .03$), lending support to H₁. As hypothesized, contact density had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .20, p < .07$), lending support to H₂. Contrarily to our expectation, authority had a non-significant impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .03, p < .73$), not lending support to H₃. Contrarily to our expectation, efficiency had a non-significant impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .07, p < .47$), not lending support to H₄. Finally, reciprocity had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .22, p < .03$), lending support to H₄. To sum up, coffee farmers’ willingness to deal are explained by reciprocity, contact density and trust. Thus, it indicates that stronger ties between cooperative and farmers, as well as good quality of relationship are important to promote interorganizational relationship.

Key words: business to business, interorganizational relationship, quality of relationship, trust.

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1. Introduction

During the last decades, a great research effort has been directed to study the industrial relationship paradigm, considering it as a critical issue in providing favorable structure for a smoother flow of information, exchange, relationship process, satisfaction in management and performance. Relationship marketing is one of the most fragile and tenuous activities associated with supply chain management and the most susceptible to breakdown.

Coordination and performance of supply chains depend on transactions and relationships among agents (WILLIAMSON, 2008). As for cooperative forms, Zylbersztajn (1999) emphasized it as potentially related to cost reduction, from advantages of managing sunk costs and power imbalances. In the present case, relationship between coffee farmers and cooperative company were studied. According to Giovannucci and Ponte (2005), coffee is one of the first internationally traded products, where collective efforts were undertaken to develop standards on processes and products, such as those addressing social and environmental concerns.

Considering the importance of business-to-business relationships for supply chain performance, the relevance of cooperative forms and the diversity of approaches to study interorganizational relationship, the aim of this paper is to analyze relational drivers of willingness to deal between coffee agents in Brazil, specifically concerning coffee producers and a cooperative in Minas Gerais state.

Besides this introduction, the next topic discusses the theoretical model as well as the hypotheses supporting this research. Further, we present methodological procedures, followed by data analysis. Results are discussed then, and final remarks are presented.

2. Theoretical background

According to USDA (2013), in 2012 Brazil was the most important coffee producer in the world being the first for Arabica Coffee and the second for Robusta, behind Vietnam. Also, Brazil was the first in exports and the third most relevant consumption market, following European Union and United States (USDA, 2013)

Data by Embrapa (2012) points out Minas Gerais as the most important state in coffee production in Brazil, with an amount of 26.6 million bags in 2012. According to Pedini (2011), Minas Gerais would certainly present a different socioeconomic arrangement if it hadn't developed coffee production: besides its favorable topography, family production enforced coffee growing in the state. According to the same source, coffee is responsible for economic performance in the region, and innovative practices have been imposed by cooperatives, in order to fit current market requirements, specifically related to sustainable practices.

In that scenario, the southern region of the state is highlighted, considering genetic improvement, differentiated handling, as well as organic coffee production (EMBRAPA, 2012). Moreover, Minas Gerais is facing the emergence of a new market, directed to differentiated products, such as sustainable and gourmet coffees. Coffee cooperatives, in that

context, is understood as an organizational form constructed, in theory, to answer cooperated producers' demands, offer inputs at affordable prices and support services.

Regarding the advantages of cooperative integration, Zylberztajn (1999) remarks that is concerns possible relations for cost reduction, due to advantages to manage sunk costs and to counterbalance market power.

Mohr and Spekman (1994) conclude that literature has focused on cooperation matter, mainly in agribusiness sector, according to behavioral features which distinguishes it from other relational forms. Behavioral features include communication (accessibility), information sharing, conflict solving, interdependency and trust as important attributes to settle partnerships as a relation cooperative – cooperated producer. Figure 01 illustrates such idea.

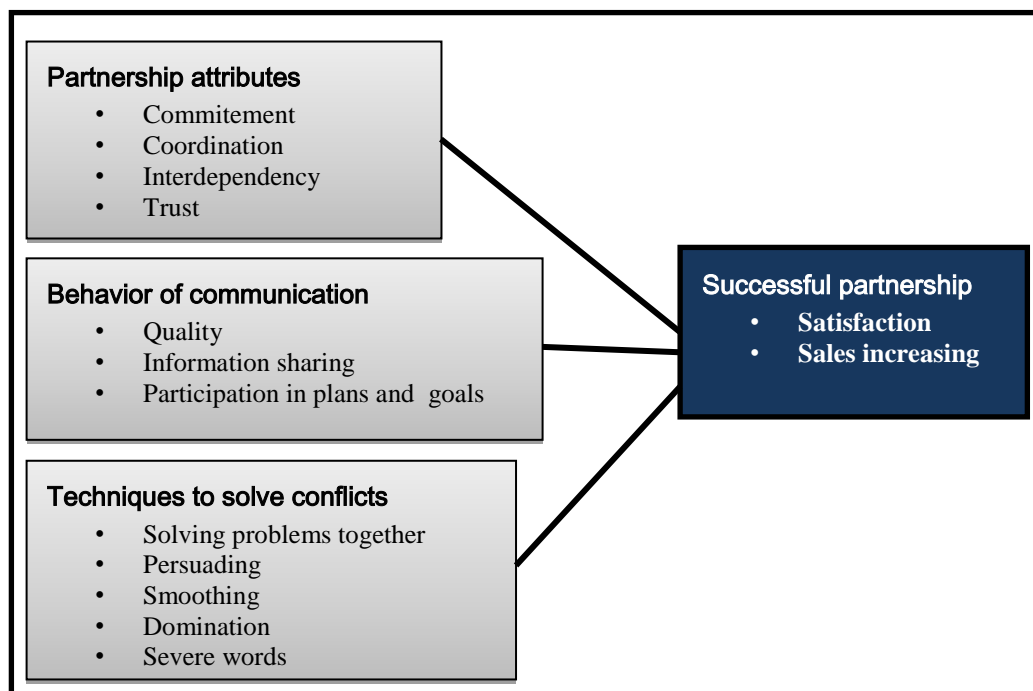


Figure 1: Factors linked to successful partnerships (cooperation)
Source: Mohr and Spekman (1994)

When considering interorganizational relationships, literature highlights two approaches: the economic approach and the behavioral perspective. Considering economic view, Barney and Hansen (1994) points out relationships are based on opportunistic behavior, with or without the presence of trust. Thus, mechanisms of protection are necessary, such as contracts. Behavioral view, on the other side, is based on trust, not demanding legal protection.

The linkage among factors influencing relationships and performance are translated into different theoretical domains (e.g. theory of reciprocity, transaction cost economics, under-equity approach). Conflict, opportunism and injustice contribute to explain results and how much those factors impact on relationship (FEHR; GÄCHTER 2000, HIBBARD; KUMAR; STERN 2001, KUMAR; SCHEER; STEENKAMP 1995B, WILLIAMSON, 1975)

Thus, when considering economic approach, literature consists of several publications on interorganizational relationships, using Transaction Cost Economics as main focus (EGNIS; PEDROZO; ESTIVALETTE, 2005). Nevertheless, the joint of such perspectives

with the behavioral approach turns out to be more complete by investigating specific features of cooperative relationships (ESTIVALETE, 2007; ESTIVALETE; PEDROZO; BEGNIS, 2007).

Also, as emphasized by Frazier and Rody (1991) and Gaski (1984), it is possible to find on literature business-to-business studies considering opportunism (GUNDLACH; ACHROL; MENTZER, 1995; WATHNE; HEIDE, 2000). A classical paper by Steenkamp, for instance, highlights the importance of equity in interorganizational relationships, revealing that the perception of justice strongly influences the quality of relation.

Supporting adverse effects of contracts, previous researches discussed contract efficiency (BROWN; DEV; LEE, 2000; JOSKOW, 1987; WUYTS; GEYSKENS, 2005; YOUNG; WILKINSON, 1989). Cannon, Achrol and Gundlach (2000, p. 191), for instance, stress that “contracts are efficient when improve performance of suppliers, individually or jointly”, while Jap and Ganesan (2000, p. 241) suggest that contracts are similar to pre-nuptial arrangements, generally being complex and reducing ex-post efficiency.

Considering marketing perspective, cooperation and flexibility are relational behaviors operating as channels for success, since they support the integration of knowledge and resources and help the rearrangement of resources (ANDERSON; NARUS 1990; JOHNSON ET AL 2003; MORGAN; HUNT, 1994)

Finally, regarding organizational relationships formation, some studies reveal the existence of some basic factors to explore such relationships. According to Dollinger, Golden and Saxton (1997), trust is a decisive factor for the success of cooperative strategies, also being a key factor for the construction of relationship. Thus, authors points out reputation and trust as impact variables on willingness to deal and on future decisions regarding relationship between cooperative and cooperated producers. For Hewett and Bearden (2001), Johnston et al (2003), and Song, Di Benedetto e Zhao (2008), trust and commitment influence performance through cooperative, reflecting its flexibility and access of members.

2.1 Hypothesis

Studies (FEY, 1996; LANE; SALK; LYLES, 2001) found that trust and commitment are positively related to alliance performance, suggesting that both variables should be fundamental in the industrial relationship. In addition, researchers investigating the effects of relationships typically apply social exchange theory to relationship dyads to model the influence of trust, or relationship quality, on performance (MORGAN; HUNT, 1994).

According to Palmatier (2008), quality of relationship can be understood as a latent construct, involving multiple first-order factors, namely commitment, trust, reciprocity, norms and exchange efficiency. Consistent with extant literature, relationship quality and its individual components, such as trust, reciprocity and exchange efficiency, positively affect a wide range of seller outcomes that increase the customer’s value to the seller (CROSBY; EVANS; COWLES 1990; DE WULF; ODEKERKEN-SCHRÖDER; IACOBUCCI, 2001; PALMATIER ET AL, 2006; SIGUAW; SIMPSON; BAKER, 1998).

Based on that:

H1: **Trust** is positively associated to willingness to deal.

H2: **Contact Efficiency** is positively associated to willingness to deal.

H3: **Contact Reciprocity** is positively associated to willingness to deal.

According to Houston et al. (2004), contact density is similar to the concept of network density, or the level of interconnectedness among network members, as well as to the degree of centrality, or the number of direct ties between a specific member and other network members. Network research shows that the forms of network interconnectedness (i.e., level of interconnectedness among network members) positively affect cooperation, knowledge transfer, communication efficiency, and product development performance (TSAI, 2001). Because of that, we believe that it affects willingness to work with the cooperative. According to Palmatier (2008), the seller that has more interpersonal ties (i.e., contact density) with a customer should gain better access to information and sales opportunities and be more efficient at building and maintaining customer relationships, thus increasing the seller's ability to generate profits. We proposed that:

H4: **Contact Density** is positively associated to willingness to deal.

Authority indicates the decision-making capability of the relational contacts with an exchange partner, in our case the farmer (PALMATIER, 2008). Contact authority is similar to the network concepts of attractiveness and social capital of network partners, which capture the extent to which network partners have unique knowledge, skills, and capability to influence resource decisions (ANDERSON; HAKANSSON; JOHANSON, 1994).

H5: **Contact Authority** is positively associated to willingness to deal.

3. Methodological procedures

Data collection comprised a range of farmers in a local survey conducted in Brazil. The conceptual model of the impact of interfirm relational drivers on willingness to deal was supported through dyadic data across business-to-business exchanges. In this case, coffee producers represent the sellers and the cooperative, the buyer. Sample comprised 105 cooperated coffee producers from eight counties in the Southern Minas Gerais, including micro ($n = 37$), small ($n = 54$), and medium-size ($n = 14$) farmers. Questionnaires were applied either through *in loco* interviews or by telephone, between December, 2012 and February, 2013.

The variables were measured by a Likert scale of eleven points. The anchors of the standard scale are labeled from “low” (0) to “high” (10). Such extension ensured greater sensitivity and comparability with other scales (DAWES, 2008). Rossiter (2002) argues that a single-item measure is sufficient if the construct is such that in the minds of raters (e.g., respondents in a survey), (1) the object of the construct is “concrete singular,” meaning that it consists of one object that is easily and uniformly imagined, and (2) the attribute of the construct is “concrete,” again meaning that it is easily and uniformly imagined. Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007) found that there is no difference in the predictive validity of the multiple-item and single-item measures and demonstrated that single-item measures are equally as valid as multiple-item measures. Regression analysis was conducted, and dependent variable “willingness to deal” was correlated to independent ones “contact density”, “trust”, “reciprocity”, “efficiency” and “authority”.

Considering the questionnaire, control variables are: (1) “farm area”, in hectares, as a representative of the size of rural producer, ranked in small, medium and large producers; (2) “length of relationship”, expressed in years coffee producer is engaged in the cooperative organization; (3) also, the “type of relationship” was considered as a control variable, considering the involvement of coffee producer in specific specialty coffee program, such as 4C, Nespresso Program and UTZ Certification; (4) Finally, “frequency” was considered as the recurrence of relations with the cooperative as well as the use of other services offered by the cooperative organization.

In this case, coffee producer could construct different ranges of relationships, varying from the merely coffee selling to the use of other services, such as the purchase of inputs and the use of rural credit through the cooperative.

Conceptual model on the impact of relational drivers to willingness to deal with cooperative was constructed based on Palmatier (2008). Variables considering quality of relationship (trust, commitment and reciprocity), as usually modeled (MORGAN; HUNT, 1994; SIMPSON; BAKER, 1998), are complemented with interfirm ties (contact density), relational authority, based on control variables.

For Berry (1995), the construction of strong ties represents efficient strategies, explained by trust, commitment or the combination of both. Chart 1 brings a summary of variables considered for interrelational performance, conducting the present research.

Quality of relationship	The quality of relationship can be expressed as a latent construct with multiple first-order factors, namely commitment, trust, reciprocity, norms and Exchange efficiency. (PALMATIER, 2008)
Contact Density	The concept of contact density reveals the linkage between seller and buyer. Considering its position, supplier may also identify and refine business opportunities (PALMATIER, 2008). In this study, cooperative assumes the position of offering relational optimization for producers.
Contact Authority	Contact authority indicates the capability of decision-making considering relational contract with a partner (PALMATIER, 2008).

Chart 1 - Relational drivers of willingness to deal between coffee producers and cooperative
Source: Based on Palmatier (2008)

Thus, each driver influences interfirm relational performance, which suggests an investigation of producer’s willingness to deal with cooperative. To sum up, figure 2 brings the theoretical model representing dependent variable “willingness to deal” as influenced by relational drivers (trust, contact density, contact authority, reciprocity and efficiency), as well as control variables.

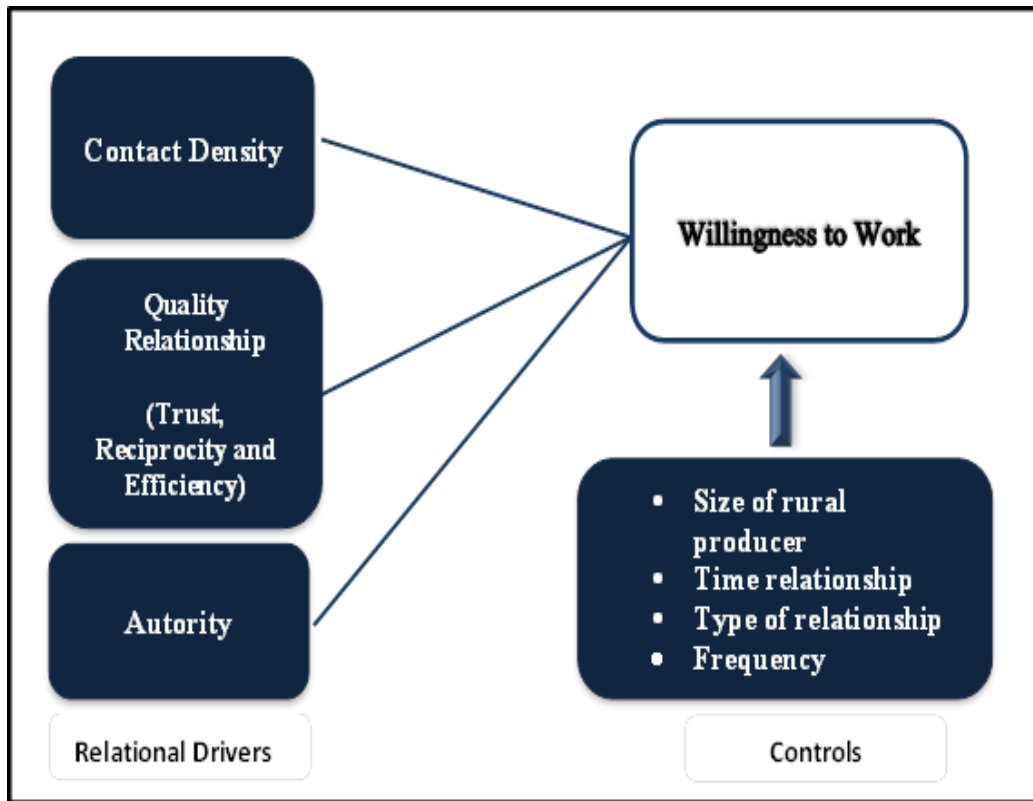


Figure 2 – Theoretical model: relational drivers of willingness to deal
Source: the authors, 2013.

4. Results

The correlation matrix on Table 1 provides an initial inspection of the relationship between variables in study. The correlation values range from 0.00 to 0.58. Some remarks can be made in that case. The correlation analysis revealed that the time that the farmer deals with the cooperative is not associated with the other variables, but authority and interaction with the cooperative. Also, the higher the number of hectares (1 = 10.000m²), the lower the authority exercised by the cooperative over the farmer. In addition, the larger the farm, the higher the interaction with the cooperative.

Table 1: Correlation matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Willingness to deal	1							
2. Reciprocity	.530**	1						
3. Authority	.394**	.467**	1					
4. Contact density	.522**	.578**	.597**	1				
5. Efficiency	.432**	.486**	.373**	.485**	1			
6. Trust	.542**	.584**	.451**	.561**	.588**	1		
7. Interaction with the cooperative	-.17	-.246*	-.16	-.13	-.05	-.235*	1	
8. Time in months in the deal with cooperative	-.19	.05	-.269**	-.04	.10	-.07	.205*	1
9. Hectares	-.12	.01	-.234*	.00	-.02	-.07	.209*	.612**

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

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

Source: database, 2013.

The regression analysis on Table 2 provides an inspection of the relationship test between variables in study. The collinearity test, standardized and non standardized beta values are presented. As a rule of thumb, a variable whose VIF values are greater than 10 may merit further investigation. Tolerance, defined as 1/VIF, is used by many researchers to check on the degree of collinearity. A tolerance value lower than 0.1 is comparable to a VIF of 10. The Durbin-Watson statistic has a range from 0 to 4 with a midpoint of 2. The observed value in our example is very small, close to zero, which is not surprising since our data are not truly time-series. Table 2 illustrates all hypothesized relationships tested.

Table 2: Regression analysis

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
<i>Constant</i>	.26	.40		.65	.51		
Reciprocity	.20	.09	.22	2,102	.03	.54	1,829
Authority	.03	.09	.03	,338	.73	.61	1,632
Contact density	.18	.10	.20	1,821	.07	.48	2,069
Efficiency	.09	.13	.07	,717	.47	.60	1,651
Trust	.28	.12	.24	2,179	.03	.50	1,999

Note: R2 = 0.39 R2 Adjusted = 0.37 Durbin Watson = 1.56

Source: Database, 2013.

As hypothesized, reciprocity had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .22$, $p < .03$), lending support to H3. Contrarily to our expectation hypothesized, authority had a non-significant impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .03$, $p < .73$), not lending support to H5. Nevertheless, we found that in a cubic equation, authority had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal. In mathematics, a cubic function is a function of the form $f(x) = ax^3 + bx^2 + cx + d$, where a is nonzero; or in other words, a function defined by a polynomial of degree three.

As hypothesized, contact density had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .20$, $p < .07$), although it is significant at 10%, lending support to H4. Considering the statement by interviewed producer P17: “near us we have other two coffee cooperatives, but good service and the fact of knowing the people here, especially at the time of price negotiation... I’ve been a cooperator here for years...”

Contrarily to our expectation hypothesized, efficiency had a non-significant impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .07$, $p < .47$), not lending support to H2. It can be understood through the statement of one producer, reinforcing that despite his dissatisfaction with services offered by the organization, he keeps the relational. P 76 states that:

“I have been cooperated for more than 20 years, I do not believe in services cooperative has offered us recently. Input prices are higher than those in other cooperatives, I do not see any incentives from them in this sense. Also, when we need to pay the input the following harvest, rate is too high, price is already bad, then it gets harder...”

Finally, as hypothesized, trust had a significant and positive impact on willingness to deal ($\beta = .24$, $p < .03$), lending support to H1. According the statement by producer P19:

“My main linkage has been at the time of selling coffee, although the good relationship we have. I use services as indicated by the cooperative, such as specific technical assistance, especially in bad harvest years”.

Considering contact density, it is important to mention that 67% of producers assumed any form of contractual relation with the cooperative, involving coffee sale. In many situations, producer links coffee production to have production inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, etc). Such kind is a long-term contract is, to be charged at the time of harvest, as stated by some producers, such as P15:

“I bring a good relationship with the cooperative, I know directors and people from the warehouse. By the time of taking care of the land, the coffee crop, to get fertilizers for the following year, I get to deal well with the cooperative, to buy the necessary inputs. I’ve already used CPR, but I don’t know if I’ll get any loan this year...”

CPR (Cédula do Produtor Rural) is a bond directed to rural producers in Brazil. According to Cooxupé (2003), CPR represents a kind of contract through which rural producer gets committed to sell production in advance, receiving the payment e assuming the obligation of providing the product on a specific date. Resources are limited and not all producers can access such credit, depending on a financial institution endorsement.

Thus, being a long-term pre-fixed contract, it is relevant to examine how coffee producers consider such kind of contract (a variant of “type of relationship”) and their willingness to deal with the cooperative.

On the other hand, some producers emphasized that willingness to deal with the cooperative is affected by the commitment of the latter on fulfill the contract, affecting future relationships between producers and cooperatives. Considering questions: what is your willingness to deal with that cooperative in the future? Can you see that as a long-term relationship? A medium-size producer stated: “Due to current coffee price context, I feel discouraged in investing this year, so I didn’t renew contract, fearing future price oscillations, so I would lose even more...”

Finally, background analysis shows that coffee certification brings a considerable contact density, since certification demands assistance, advising and services from the cooperative itself. In this sense, one can observe that 100% of cooperated producers are certified 4C, which can enforce relationship and willingness to deal with the cooperative. According to producers P32 and P41, respectively:

“Certification brought me a new perspective on coffee market, the way to deal with employers, I learned a lot with UDS (Unidades Demonstrativas) visits in certified farms during coffee events, provided by the cooperative...”

“I just needed to adequate some measures, change what I used in the crop, the farm got more organized after certification, through service indicated by the cooperative and a reliable agricultural engineer...”

5. Conclusions

Statistical analysis confirmed drivers of coffee farmers’ willingness to deal. According to this research, willingness to deal is explained by reciprocity, contact density and trust. Thus, it indicates that strong ties between cooperative and farmers, as well as good quality of relationship are important to promote interorganizational relationship.

Considering the complexity of relationship involving coffee producers and cooperative, in the present case, further empirical studies should be, to comprehend interorganizational relationship involving cooperatives. Also, other studies could be helpful to understand coffee producers’ willingness to deal according to different types of certification.

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