



## BUILDING SME PERFORMANCE THROUGH RELATIONSHIP QUALITY. THE ROLE OF SUPPLY CHAIN FLEXIBILITY

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**ABSTRACT. Background:** Although the existing literature has examined the connection between relationship quality and SME performance, no attempt has been made to assess the impact of supply chain flexibility on this association. The impact of supply chain flexibility is important because although SMEs are inherently more flexible than large firms, allowing them to respond more quickly to changing customer needs and environmental conditions, they seek to build their advantage on relational resources due to their limited financial and human resources. However, previous research suggests that maintaining relationship quality is costly and not always cost-effective. This raises the question of whether relationship quality affects SME performance per se or whether it has an indirect effect through supply chain flexibility. The purpose of this article is to examine the role that supply chain flexibility plays in the connection between relationship quality and SME performance.

**Methods:** Combining relationship quality with SME performance, we analysed how supply chain flexibility moderates this association. Data collected from 1286 Polish SMEs using the CAPI method were analysed using SEM modelling.

**Results:** The results confirm the direct impact of relationship quality on both supply chain flexibility and SME performance. The study also provides empirical evidence that supply chain flexibility moderates the impact of relationship quality on SME performance and that this impact is stronger than the direct impact of relationship quality on SME performance.

**Conclusions:** Our findings have important implications for SME managers, providing arguments for the desirability of managing relationship quality in conjunction with supply chain flexibility. While previous research suggests that relationship quality is important for SMEs because it can be treated as a substitute for limited tangible assets as well as financial, infrastructural and human resources, our research has demonstrated the desirability of building relationship quality in conjunction with supply chain flexibility, which seems to be an important insight given the limited resources of SMEs.

**Key words:** relationship quality, supply chain flexibility, performance, SME.

### INTRODUCTION

SMEs, which account for more than 99% of enterprises in the European Union and are one of the engines of economic growth in the European economy [Commission et al. 2023], are widely considered to be vulnerable in a highly competitive business environment due to limited financial, human and other resources [Cardoni et al. 2023]. In an effort to overcome the challenges of accessing financial and infrastructural resources, SMEs emphasize the formation of relational assets. In this context, Ismail et al. [2014] point out that building strong and close

partnerships, described as relationship quality, is critical to SME performance. Similarly, Mansor et al. [2022], who define relationship quality as a two-dimensional construct based on trust and commitment, suggest that relationship quality enhances SME business performance.

One area where the quality of relationships is particularly important is in supply chains, where proper relationship management should provide organizations with the appropriate agility and flexibility. Referring to the proposal of Enrique et al. [2022] that supply chain flexibility be defined as the ability to respond to changing environments by adapting the

necessary supply chain processes quickly and with minimal use of resources, it is reasonable to assume that such actions will be driven by a desire to ensure the quality of the relationship. Kumar et al. [2013] point out that supply chain coordination and flexibility reflects the system's ability to respond quickly and correctly to changes resulting from both inside and outside the system and positively impacts the performance of SMEs in changing global conditions. Benzidia and Makaoui [2020] emphasize that under current market conditions, supply chains must be flexible enough to manage information uncertainty and sudden changes in demand, requiring changes in lead times and product quality and quantity. Lu et al. [2023], on the other hand, indicate that the attributes of SME network connections in flexible supply chains help SMEs raise working capital.

While the focus of the existing literature on the role of responsiveness to customer needs and speed to market of new products highlights the importance of supply chain flexibility to SME performance [Benzidia and Makaoui 2020], there is a research gap related to the impact of relationship quality on SME performance through its effect on supply chain flexibility. Moreover, a review of the existing literature reveals that the empirical evidence supporting these linkages is still limited and the results are not conclusive [Fynes et al. 2005; Liao and Barnes 2015; Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu et al. 2020].

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to examine the role that supply chain flexibility plays in the association between relationship quality and SME performance. In our study, we used existing measures from previous research related to SME relationship quality and supply chain flexibility. The data presented in this paper come from an empirical study of 1286 SMEs in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region, conducted as part of the Regiogmina research project. The results confirm that relationship quality and supply chain flexibility affect SME performance. The study also provides empirical evidence that supply chain flexibility plays a key role in the link between relationship quality and SME performance.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Trapp et al. [2023] indicate that relationship quality is particularly important for SMEs to ensure success. A similar conclusion is reached by Kwiatek et al. [2020], who find that relationship quality has a direct impact on SME sales and customer share of wallet. Research by Gottfredson et al. [2022] also suggests that relationship quality is critical to organizational performance, while Efrat & Øyna [2021] note the impact of SME resource organics on how they operate and conclude that relationship quality impacts performance improvement. Liu [2021] suggests that although SMEs need to put more effort into maintaining relationship quality due to the need to overcome resource and development constraints, the results indicate that partnership quality influences the delivery of excellent organizational performance.

Pointing to the key role of small and medium-sized enterprises in local and global supply chains, Tipu and Fantasy [2014] note that supply chain volume flexibility is positively related to company performance, market share and market share growth. The results of Benzidia and Makaoui [2020] defining supply chain flexibility through three main aspects – product development, procurement/sourcing and manufacturing – suggest that supply chain flexibility contributes to improvements in SME performance. Amit Chandak [2018] points out that in a competitive environment, flexibility provides a mechanism to respond quickly to changing customer needs, while ensuring optimization of cost levels, on-time delivery, elimination of organizational disruption, and reduction of productivity losses. At the same time, research results suggest that supply chain flexibility positively affects supply chain performance, as well as the business performance of SMEs. In examining the impact of ambidexterity on the supply chain, Rohieszan et al. [2021] suggest that flexibility ensures the growth and survival of firms in a hostile competitive environment. Kumar et al. [2013] indicate that facing a dynamic and complex global environment requires SMEs to coordinate with supply chain members, while emphasizing that a coordinated and flexible supply chain affects the profitability and sustainability of

buyer-supplier relationships in a changing global environment.

Fynes et al. [2005] suggest that the quality of supply chain relationships has a positive impact on supply chain performance, meaning that by developing and engaging in deep supply chain partnerships, suppliers can improve supply chain performance. At the same time, Fynes et al. emphasize that growing and maintaining quality relationships is a complex process and requires significant investment in resources; however, these relationships should be viewed as investments that generate future potential revenue rather than costs. Also, Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu et al. [2020] point out that supply chain decision makers should build quality relationships with supply chain members to gain competitive advantage, although their research shows that supply chain relationship quality does not affect supply chain performance, nor does it directly affect firm performance. They argue that ensuring high relationship quality results in a reduction in the number of conflicts and an increase in the level of trust and commitment, leading to increased satisfaction with supply chain cooperation. Liao and Barnes [2015] suggest that relationship quality, as described by the structure and management of social interactions, can induce or limit the sharing of ideas and strategic resources among supply chain members and motivate the development of knowledge sharing mechanisms across company boundaries. Referring to the importance of knowledge acquisition in creating flexibility in product innovation, Liao and Barnes note that in

high-quality relationships, SMEs tend to believe that the supplier can make valuable contributions to the reduction of complexity and uncertainty in the product innovation process. Examining the impact of flexibility on relationship quality, Han, Sung and Shim [2014] note an emerging conflict of interest: it can be difficult for a supplier to maintain flexibility in its relationships with buyers, as maintaining the availability of resources required for the production process is a complex and costly task. Responding to buyer requests for adjustments can create value for the buyer while reducing value for the supplier if it negatively impacts operational efficiency or effectiveness in the central or other buyer relationships.

Taking into account this analysis of the research on supply chain flexibility, relationship quality and SME performance, we have formulated the research model presented in Figure 1 and have proposed four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Relationship quality has a direct positive effect on SME performance.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship quality has a direct positive effect on the supply chain flexibility.

Hypothesis 3: Supply chain flexibility has a direct positive effect on SME performance.

Hypothesis 4: Supply chain flexibility plays a mediating role in the relationship between relationship quality and SME performance.

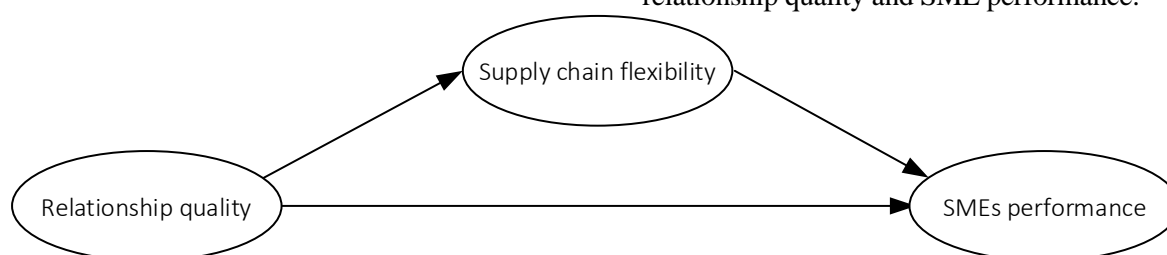


Fig1. The relationship between relationship quality, supply chain flexibility and SME performance – a conceptual model

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the study, we used existing measures from previous survey and, where possible, we adapted the items for the specifics of the survey. All measurement scales, which were originally in

English, were translated into Polish using a back-translation method. The study used a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”. To operationalize supply chain flexibility we used a measurement scale taken from a study by Benzidia and Makaoui [2020] referring to: (1) the ability to

change the quantity of a supplier's order; (2) the ability to change the delivery times of a supplier's order; (3) the ability to change production volume capacity and (4) the ability to reduce development cycle times. To measure relationship quality, we used an approach based on the concept of Lages, Lages and Lages [2011], assuming that the construct of relationship quality includes four variables: (1) information sharing; (2) communication quality; (3) long-term orientation; and (4) satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that company size impacts SME performance [Quoc Trung 2021]. Company size was calculated based on the number of employees.

The data presented in this study comes from empirical research as part of the research project Regiogmina. The respondents were owners and managers of SMEs in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship, Poland. The initial sample included 3943 SMEs. Finally, complete questionnaires were obtained from 1286 companies, representing a return of 32.6%. For the purposes of this study, an SME was defined as having fewer than 250 employees and an annual turnover not exceeding 50 million euros, and/or whose total annual balance sheet did not exceed 43 million euros. In the sample, 79% of

businesses were small enterprises and 21% were medium-sized enterprises.

Before proceeding with the full data analysis, a data verification was carried out to check the data's validity and eliminate extreme outlier observations (resulting, for example, from erroneous data entry by the interviewer). A boxplot was used for this purpose. Then, the full data analysis was carried out.

## RESULTS

In order to examine the role of supply chain flexibility in the context of the connection between relationship quality and SME performance, synthetic indicators were created to measure each phenomena.

For each proposed latent construct, the authors conducted a factor analysis (the eigenvalues and percentage of total explained variance for each synthetic indicator are shown in Table 1). Subsequently, the Kaiser criterion and Cattell's scree plot were used to verify the structure of the measurement construct. In order to determine a reliability coefficient and a measure of the internal consistency of propose measures, Cronbach's alpha was calculated.

Table 1. Eigenvalues and percentage of total explained variance

Construct	Component	Eigenvalue	Cumulative % of explained variance
Relationship quality	1	2.17	54.37
	2	0.89	76.72
	3	0.54	90.18
	4	0.39	100.00
Supply chain flexibility	1	2.52	62.98
	2	0.73	81.25
	3	0.55	94.99
	4	0.20	100.00
SMEs performance	1	3.70	61.59
	2	0.82	75.22
	3	0.56	84.53
	4	0.39	91.01
	5	0.28	95.69
	6	0.26	100.00

The analysis shown in Table 1 confirms the one-factor construct of indicators (according to the Kaiser criterion). An additional visualization based on Cattell's scree plot confirmed the one-factor nature of the measures. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient values for relationship quality, supply chain flexibility and SME performance measures were 0.71, 0.80 and 0.87 respectively. These values can be considered acceptable.

In the next step, an SEM analysis was carried out to verify the hypotheses formulated

earlier. Three additional paths resulting from the inclusion of a control variable (company size) were added to the previous hypothesis-defined model.

The inclusion of a control variable made it possible to calculate the values of the fit indices by avoiding the construction of a saturated model. The final model, including the size of the organization as a control variable, is shown in Figure 2.

The path analysis led to the results shown in Table 2.

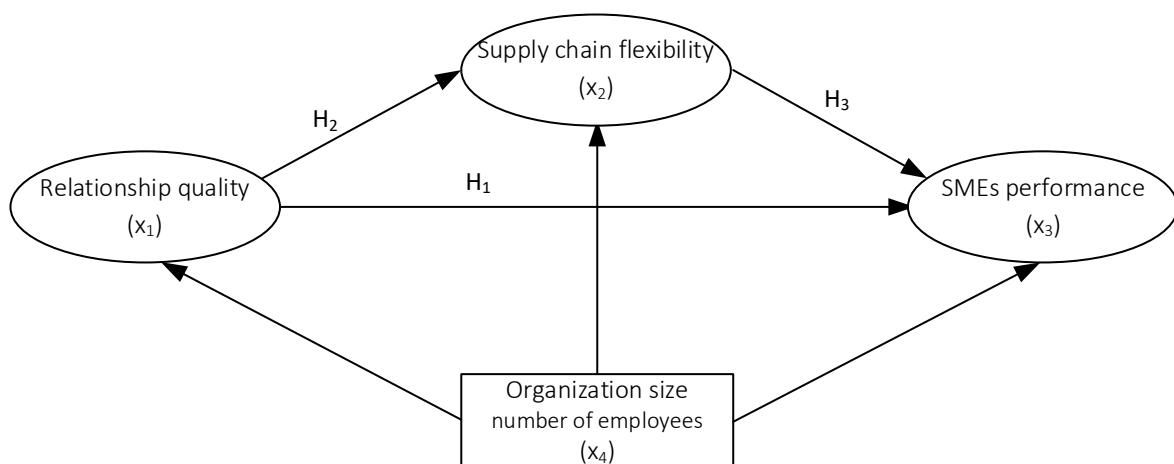


Fig. 2. Conceptual diagram with control variable

Table 2. Results of SEM analysis

Path symbol	Path description	Coefficient	p-value
$P_{31} (H_1)$	Impact of relationship quality on SME performance	0.24	0.00
$P_{21} (H_2)$	Impact of relationship quality on supply chain flexibility	0.68	0.00
$P_{32} (H_3)$	Impact of supply chain flexibility on SME performance	0.59	0.00
$P_{14}$	Impact of organization size on relationship quality	0.10	0.00
$P_{24}$	Impact of organization size on supply chain flexibility	0.06	0.00
$P_{34}$	Impact of organization size on SME performance	0.02	0.20
$E_1 \rightarrow X_1$	Impact of residual variable on relationship quality	0.99	0.00
$E_2 \rightarrow X_2$	Impact of residual variable on supply chain flexibility	0.73	0.00
$E_3 \rightarrow X_3$	Impact of residual variable on the SME performance	0.63	0.00



After removing the statistically insignificant path (P34), the final results of the analysis were obtained. For the final model

(presented in Figure 3), the values of all goodness-of-fit indices of the final model were the same and amounted to 0.99, while the p-value and SRMR for the model were 0.20 and 0.007, respectively.

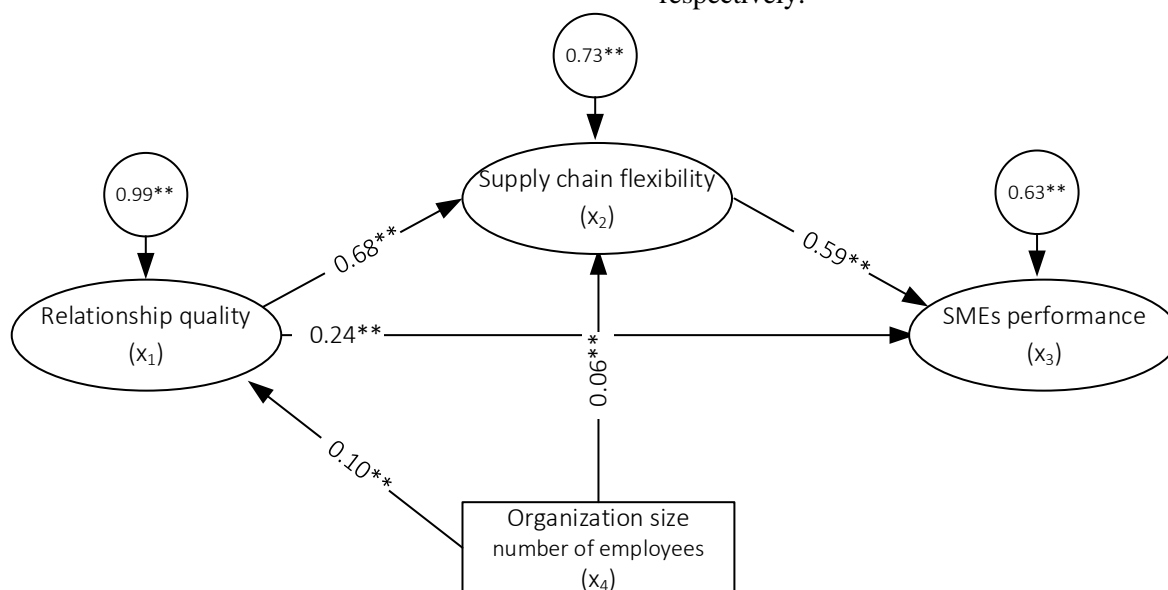


Fig. 3. Final results of SEM analysis. \*p value < 0.05, \*\*p value < 0.01

The final model presented above supports hypotheses H1, H2 and H3. Importantly, the p-values for the paths describing the relations referenced in the hypotheses were below 0.01.

It is worth noting that although hypothesis 1, which states that relationship quality has a direct positive impact on SME performance, was positively verified, this impact should be characterised as weak (0.24). The connections between relationship quality, supply chain flexibility and SME performance are interesting. The impact of relationship quality on supply chain flexibility (0.68) and supply chain flexibility on SME performance (0.59) should be described as substantial. This means that the impact of relationship quality on SME performance through the mediating variable, supply chain flexibility, is higher (0.40) than the direct impact of relationship quality on SME performance (0.24), and the value of this impact should be described as moderate.

## DISCUSSION

The results show that relationship quality is positively related to SME performance, which

confirms the correctness of the first hypothesis. Although, in light of previous research [Chu, Wang, and Lado 2016], the existence of such an impact might have been expected, the relatively low level of strength of the observed relationship is noteworthy. It should be noted, however, that previous studies suggesting a strong impact of relationship quality on performance did not directly apply to SME companies. The results obtained can therefore be considered a demonstration of a high level of pragmatism on the part of SME managers, who, with their limited resources, are aware that relationship quality does not generate value per se, but allows for the creation of conditions that enable performance growth.

Our findings confirmed the correctness of the second hypothesis, according to which an increase in the level of relationship quality is translated into improved supply chain flexibility. This result, which is consistent with the findings of previous research [Fynes et al. 2005], can be explained by referring to the positive effects of ensuring high relationship quality – a reduction in the number and intensity of conflicts and an increase in the level of trust and commitment, translating into increased satisfaction with

supply chain cooperation [Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu et al. 2020].

The results obtained support the third hypothesis – that supply chain flexibility contributes to improving SME performance – which is consistent with previous results [Amit Chandak 2018; Benzidia and Makaoui 2020; Tipu and Fantazy 2014]. This means that in a dynamic environment, SMEs that coordinate adaptively and flexibly with other members of the supply chain have the ability to improve their performance [Kumar et al. 2013].

The results of the hypothesis testing clearly support our prediction that supply chain flexibility plays a mediating role in the association between relationship quality and SME performance (the fourth hypothesis). This observation reinforces the conclusions drawn in the earlier discussions about the supportive nature of relationship quality, which should be treated by managers as a resource that generates future potential revenue [Fynes et al. 2005] rather than something that is valuable per se. The strength of the mediating relationship we observed (0.40) is greater than the strength of the direct effect of relationship quality on performance (0.24), making a compelling case for the development of relationship quality in SMEs. It should be noted that developing and maintaining relationship quality requires a significant investment in resources [Fynes et al. 2005], which, if it generates little benefit, may discourage SMEs from developing relationship quality given their limited financial and physical resources [Kuhlmeier and Knight, 2010]. The results of our study are consistent with those of Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu et al. [2020], suggesting that decision makers in supply chains should ensure the quality of relationships with supply chain participants, but that relationship quality does not directly affect supply chain performance and company performance.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of the study was to examine the role that supply chain flexibility plays in the link between relationship quality and SME performance. Our findings suggest that both relationship quality and supply chain flexibility affect SME performance. At the same time, our

results reveal that supply chain flexibility plays a key role in the association between relationship quality and SME performance, not only directly affecting SME performance but also acting as an important mediating variable.

There are few studies that point to the moderating role of supply chain flexibility; moreover, it can be noted that research on supply chain flexibility is not advanced. Our study makes an original contribution by showing that while relationship quality affects SME performance, the impact is stronger when it is realized through supply chain flexibility. Thus, the results provide insight into why SMEs that use relationship quality to improve supply chain flexibility perform better. Previous studies have focused on the direct effects of supply chain flexibility or relationship quality on SME performance [Benzidia and Makaoui 2020; Fynes et al. 2005; Ismail et al. 2014; Kumar et al. 2013; Liao and Barnes 2015; Tipu and Fantazy 2014; Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu et al. 2020] without attempting to find a link between the interdependent effects of these variables.

Our research offers several practical implications for managers. First, the results of our study confirm the conclusions of previous research on the impact of supply chain flexibility and relationship quality on SME performance, indicating the validity of implementing measures in these areas. Second, our research suggests that while relationship quality alone generates some benefits, by embedding relationship quality in supply chain flexibility, SMEs perform better. This observation is consistent with the suggestion of Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu et al. [2020], indicating that supply chain decision makers should build quality relationships with supply chain members to gain competitive advantage. Given the observation of Fynes et al. [2005] that increasing and maintaining high quality relationships is a complex process and requires significant investment in resources, it can be assumed that SME managers should make greater efforts to realize the potential of relationship quality in supply chain flexibility by ensuring an adequate level of relationship quality, thereby affecting performance. Accordingly, our results provide managers with guidance on optimal resource allocation.

Our study has some limitations that provide a starting point for further research. First, the study was focused, as part of the Regiogmina project, on SMEs based in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship. Although the structure of SMEs in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie is not fundamentally different from the structure of SMEs in Poland [Zastempowski and Cyfert 2023], we believe it would be worth extending our study to SMEs in Central Europe, taking into account the impact of cultural variables. Second, in the survey we did not refer to entire flexible supply chains, but recorded the views of single supply chain participants, asking them about their assessment of the impact of relationship quality on SME profitability. In future research, it would be worthwhile to expand the scope of the study and try to include the perspectives of all the participants in flexible supply chains. Third, although the research sample was large, which allowed us to formulate general observations, it should be noted that we did not take into account the specifics of industries where, due to sectoral considerations, the impact of relationship quality on SME performance may differ. In future research, it would be worthwhile to conduct a comparative study and examine the connections between relationship quality, flexible supply chains and SME profitability in the context of sectoral determinants.

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