The Role of Interpersonal Liking in Building Trust in Long-Term Channel Relationships

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This article explores the important role of liking in the development of the buyer's trust in the sales rep. The authors argue that liking's role is richer and qualitatively different from that of the more cognitive antecedents of trust. They posit that many cognitive antecedents of trust operate mainly through liking. They argue that as the buyer–sales rep relationship matures, liking plays an even more important role in influencing trust. The authors empirically test a model delineating the mediating role of liking in developing trust. They find that when the relationship between the buyer and the sales rep is young, liking partially mediates the effect of similarity of business values and fully mediates the influence of frequency of personal interaction on trust. Moreover, as the buyer's relationship with the rep ages, liking takes the foreground in trust development, while more cognitive antecedents recede into the background.

Considerable effort has been devoted to examining the role of trust in relationship development in long-term sales transactions, particularly those within distribution channels (Doney and Cannon 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Trust leads to successful relationships and improves communication, cooperation, satisfaction, and purchase intent (e.g., Anderson and Narus 1990; Doney and Canon 1997; Mohr and Nevin 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Most research, however, has focused on trust as a firm-level construct (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994). Even though a strong link exists between trust in the dyad and trust in the supplier firm (Doney and Cannon 1997), development of trust in the buyer-seller dyad remains relatively unexplored.

Previous attention has focused on the more cognitive antecedents of trust between buyers and sellers, those more impersonal, detached, and dispassionate analytical antecedents such as a common value system and frequency of interaction. Less attention has been paid to the role played by more personal and emotional factors—such as the buyer's liking for the sales rep. Liking has long been believed to be a powerful human motivator for relationship development and maintenance (e.g., Altman and Taylor 1973). Liking, as a basis for trust, creates a personal attachment, thus reinforcing economic bonds. Here, we explore how liking influences the development of buyer trust in the sales rep.

Since the role of liking in a relationship is qualitatively different from these more cognitive factors, it is especially informative to explore its complex relationships with trust and its antecedents. As it happens in most human associations, when two individuals come in contact and find that they have common interests, a shared outlook, or merely happen to meet frequently, the development of an emotional bond or liking as well as trust in each other is facilitated. In fact, over a period of time, the emotional bond can become the driving force in the relationship and the

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nurturer of trust, and the other factors that played an important role in the beginning may no longer have a direct influence on trust. It is not that these other factors (e.g., common interests and shared outlook) become irrelevant for the relationship or trust; they may still play an important role in enhancing liking and thus may indirectly influence trust. Furthermore, it is likely that, as the relationship between the buyer and the sales rep matures, the buyer's liking for the sales rep takes the foreground and becomes an even more critical determinant of that buyer's trust, while the more cognitive elements of trust recede into the background and cease to have any direct relationship with trust.

Examining the role of interpersonal liking in building interpersonal trust between buyers and sellers is particularly crucial because it can influence both channels research and practice. For instance, if buyer liking is shown to have an influence on trust in the sales rep, especially if cognitive antecedents operate through liking, we will have compelling evidence for the inclusion of this construct in future channels research. Moreover, the inclusion of liking may offer greater explanatory power beyond models that rely solely on the more cognitive aspects of the relationship (e.g., Abelson, Kinder, Peters, and Fiske 1982). As a practical matter, the central role of liking has important implications for the way buyer-seller relationships are managed. For instance, supplier firms usually tend to have a high rate of sales rep turnover, and with every outgoing sales rep, crucial emotional bonds with the buyer are snapped. Firms may want to ensure that liking between the buyer and the old sales rep is transferred to the new rep as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. Alternatively, a stronger focus on keeping reps assigned to buyers who like them for longer terms may be important in maintaining trust in critical relationships.

One recent examination of trust is especially interesting because it explores interpersonal trust and its positive influence on firm-level trust. Regarding interpersonal trust, Doney and Cannon (1997) find that trust is positively influenced by perceived similarity between the buyer and the seller, frequency of business contact, and perceived sales rep likability. These researchers also examine the effect of the length of buyer-seller relationship on trust but find no relationship. Doney and Cannon (1997), however, treat sales rep likability as an exogenous antecedent of trust and do not examine any potential mediating role this type of bond can play between the more cognitive antecedents and trust. Also, while these researchers do not find any support for length of the buyer-seller relationship as an antecedent of trust, they do not explore if the length of relationship might moderate the effects of antecedents on trust; that is, as suggested earlier, with an increase in the length of the relationship, certain antecedents become more crucial in influencing trust than others. In sum, by reconceptualizing the relationships among these variables, it may be possible to discover the richer and more complex dynamics of the role of buyer liking for the sales rep in building trust at the dyad level. As such, the two specific objectives of this research are to examine (1) if cognitive antecedents (i.e., perceived similarity of values and frequency of contact) influence buyer trust in the sales rep *largely* through liking and (2) whether, as the length of selling relationship increases, liking plays an increasingly important role as a mediator, that is, the more cognitive antecedents influence trust *only* though liking.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF TRUST

Trust has emerged as a critical construct in a variety of disciplines, and, as a result, there exist several different conceptualizations of the construct. Commonly, trust has been viewed as (1) an expression of confidence between the partners in an exchange or a relationship of some kind (Bateson 1988; Garbarino and Johnson 1999), (2) a belief that no partner to the exchange will exploit the other's vulnerability (Dwyer and Oh 1987), or (3) the willingness to rely on the other party (Moorman, Deshpandé, and Zaltman 1993). Similarly, trust has been defined as positive expectations about another party's motives in situations entailing risk (Das and Teng 1998).

We define *trust* as confidence in the other party's reliability and integrity. Trust is the foundation of cooperation, in part because it normatively prohibits behaviors that harm the other partner (John 1984). Trust is also conceptualized as a cumulative process that develops over the course of repeated, successful interactions. The role of contracts as a means both of protection and of providing stability is reduced as dyads become more relational; in short, trust supplants contracts in providing that key sense of predictability in relationships.

Recently, some researchers in marketing have suggested that in addition to integrity and reliability (which they equate with credibility), trust also consists of a benevolence dimension (Ganesan 1994; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995). A closer examination of the benevolence dimension reveals that it encompasses both friendship between partners and making sacrifices for the other partner (Ganesan 1994). McKnight, Cummings, and Chervany (1998) also suggest that trust consists of two main dimensions: trusting intentions (i.e., willingness to depend on other) and trusting beliefs (i.e., believing that the other is benevolent and honest).

While other researchers recognize that the dynamics of trust are complex, they tend to suggest a more global conceptualization of trust and consider many of the dimensions of trust suggested above to be antecedents of trust. For example, Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) suggest that benevolence and integrity of trustor and trustee

lead to trust (which they define as the willingness of a partner to be vulnerable to the actions of the other partner based on the expectation that the other will perform action important to the trustor).

From among these varied treatments of trust, our focus is on the perspective that considers trust as a global, unidimensional construct (e.g., Doney and Cannon 1997; Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Jones and George 1998; Morgan and Hunt 1994). This unidimensional conceptualization is quite consistent with the operationalization of trust by Doney and Cannon (1997). Doney and Cannon begin by proposing trust as two-dimensional but find that, practically, trust emerges as a unidimensional, global concept, as do Joshi and Stump (1999). The focus of this research is to examine the rich role of liking in the development of trust and to build on the work of Doney and Cannon. Our unidimensional conceptualization of trust also has the benefits of brevity and simplicity and is more generalizable across situations (Kumar, Stern, and Achrol 1992).

A MODEL OF THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LIKING IN DEVELOPING TRUST

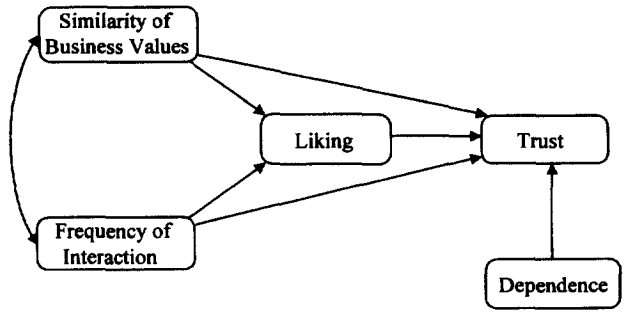
The goal of this article is to explore the influence of the buyer's liking for the sales rep on the buyer's trust in the sales rep. In addition, we examine how liking mediates the impact of both similarity of business values and frequency of personal interaction on the development of buyer trust, as well as how that mediation varies depending on the age of the relationship in the dyad (i.e., younger vs. older rep relationships). This model (see Figure 1) challenges the view that these antecedents of buyers' trust operate in the same causal plane, that is, where similarity, frequency, liking, and relationship age contribute directly and similarly to trust.

The Influence of Liking on Trust

Liking is the global affective attachment that the buyer has for the rep. Specifically, it is an emotional connection that one feels for another that can be viewed as fondness or affection—a feeling that goes beyond the mere acceptance of a competent business partner. It is an attraction to the rep such that the buyer would desire to "be around" the other out of choice, even if business ties were to terminate (Swan, Trawick, and Silva 1985).

It is intuitively appealing to think of liking as an important determinant of buyer trust in the sales rep, although liking tends to be underestimated in business transactions because of its emotional and affective basis. Buyer trust is enhanced by liking for the sales rep because of the fact that more favorable motives are assigned to liked people, an action that builds trust. Essentially, liking acts as an emotional bond that nurtures trust.

FIGURE 1
A Conceptual Model of the Mediating Role of Liking in Developing Trust



Previous research has found that liking has a significant impact on trust (Doney and Cannon 1997; Hawes, Mast, and Swan 1989; Swan, Trawick, Rink, and Roberts 1988; Swan et al. 1985). In general, greater liking leads to greater trust. Interestingly, in Doney and Cannon's (1997) research, likability was the strongest predictor of all of the antecedents of interpersonal trust that they examined.

Thus, in the context of a buyer-seller dyad, we suggest that the greater the liking the buyer has for the sales rep, the greater the trust in that sales rep. We expect this relationship between liking and trust to be true regardless of the age of the rep relationship due to liking's inherent, fundamental role in the development of trust.

Hypothesis 1: Buyers who exhibit greater liking for their supplier's sales rep also exhibit higher levels of trust in that rep.

The Role of Liking in the Development of Buyers' Trust in Sales Reps

We take two antecedents common in previous research that have been shown to have strong links to trust—perceived similarity of business values and frequency of personal interaction—to help uncover the mediating role of liking.

Similarity of Business Values and Trust

Similarity of business values exists when the buyer believes that his or her business values are similar to that of the trading partner. Values represent fundamental beliefs and approaches to the market and are not especially prone to change due to whims. There are two levels of value similarity in any buyer-seller exchange. There is the convergence of core values at the firm level between the buyer

firm and the seller firm. Firms will generally choose to do business with other firms only to the extent to which there is some match in the firms' approach to the market. Without firm-level similarity, there is likely to be conflict, miscommunication, and divergent strategies and tactics, all of which make the transaction too costly to maintain.

At another level is dyad-level value similarity, which is the convergence of values between the individual buyer and seller. Even if firms exhibit the same fundamental values, there are a variety of ways these values can be manifested and affect everyday transactions. These values that guide the interpersonal buyer-seller relationship are the focus of this research.

When dyad-level values are similar, behavior is more easily understood and attributions more easily made. Similarity is likely to reduce overall uncertainty associated with the trading partner, due to the implicit (or explicit) acceptance of common goal systems and daily procedures. The buyer perceives that both parties place value on the same issues and does not have to worry about being led astray.

Similarity of business values is expected to have a positive relationship with liking, with liking being a mediator between similarity of business values in the dyad and trust. Research on interpersonal relationships has consistently uncovered strong links between perceived attitudinal (e.g., value) similarity and liking (e.g., Byrne 1971). In short, we like people whom we perceive to be similar to us, largely because we easily identify with them. These results also have been documented in other business contexts such as person evaluations in hiring decisions (Gallois, Callen, and Palmer 1992). Similarly, social identity theory suggests that to the extent the sales rep is seen as similar to the buyer on some important characteristic of the relationship (e.g., business values), a perception of in-group status for the rep is created (Mackie and Goethals 1987). Positive attributes we assign to ourselves are transferred to those people assigned in-group status, which increases liking, while negative attributes are discounted or ignored.

As the relationship between the buyer and seller rep develops, liking tends to become a relationship norm, a heuristic that maintains trust levels, mitigates the effects of transaction failures, and gradually replaces the buyer's reliance on more cognitive evaluations of the sales rep. This "liking heuristic" is similar to Wright's (1975) "affect heuristic," which suggests that consumers develop an overall liking for products over time. When faced with product choices and related decisions, consumers rely on their liking for a product rather than perform a series of evaluations of the product's features. In other words, with the development of the relationship, the direct link between a more cognitive antecedent such as similarity of business values and trust becomes weaker, and similarity indirectly influences trust by enhancing liking.

In younger buyer-seller relationships, however, in addition to the indirect effect of similarity of business values through liking on trust, the direct effect of similarity on trust also persists. Relationships that are relatively new go through a lengthy process of norm development, including the development of liking. Until norms are developed, buyers test and evaluate the relationship by relying heavily on external signals such as common value systems to help them fill in the gaps in their knowledge of the other party, in the "intentionality" process of trust development (Doney and Cannon 1997). In other words, in younger relationships, liking is a partial mediator, with similarity of business values having both direct positive effects on trust and indirect positive effects on trust through liking. This partial mediation reflects the continued reliance by buyers in younger relationships on similarity of values as an external signal.

In older rep relationships, parties do not need to rely directly on the assessment of similarity to establish trust because liking has already been established. Thus, in older relationships, we expect liking to fully mediate the relationship between similarity of business values and trust. Similarity of business values assumes the role of sustaining and strengthening liking, thereby influencing trust indirectly.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between the buyer's perceived similarity of business values in the dyad and the buyer's trust in the sales rep is mediated by the buyer's liking for the rep and depends on the age of the rep relationship such that:

Hypothesis 2a: Buyers who perceive that their business values are similar to those of the sales rep exhibit more liking for that sales rep, irrespective of the age of the rep relationship.

Hypothesis 2b: In younger rep relationships, liking partially mediates the relationship between value similarity and trust. Value similarity has a direct positive effect on trust in addition to an indirect positive effect on trust through liking.

Hypothesis 2c: In older rep relationships, liking fully mediates the relationship between value similarity and trust. There is no direct effect of value similarity on trust in the older group.

Frequency of Personal Interaction and Trust

Frequency of personal interaction is commonly assumed to be an important antecedent of buyer trust. With an increase in frequency of interaction, parties can more easily exchange information, and they can more easily predict each other's behaviors due to increased time spent together across various situations (Doney and Cannon 1997). Here, we explore frequency of personal contact, which includes personal visits and telephone communications.

Frequency of personal interaction is expected to have a positive relationship with liking, with liking being a mediator between frequency of personal interaction and trust. How frequently parties come into contact has been postulated as having a significant effect on trust (Doney and Cannon 1997). In short, more frequent contact between the buyer and the seller provides a number of benefits that would likely contribute to trust. Foremost among these benefits is that buyers have more opportunity to observe the rep's behaviors, and thus the buyer can better predict outcomes or behaviors in future interactions (Doney and Cannon 1997).

Frequent contact leads to individuation, where parties evaluate each other in terms of their personal qualities rather than simply as members of a business transaction or representatives of another firm. Individuation occurs, in part, because frequent interaction increases opportunities for both buyer and seller to gather personal information as well as see and empathize with others' perspectives (Wilder 1986). Thus, we expect frequency of personal interaction to increase buyer liking for the sales rep. However, if the relationship fails to yield positive experiences, the buyer is likely to limit the interaction as much as possible, limiting the opportunity for liking to emerge.

Liking should mediate the relationship between frequency of personal interaction and trust in different ways depending on the age of the relationship. Over a period of time, liking gradually replaces the buyer's reliance on more cognitive evaluations of the rep. Younger buyer–sales rep relationships need more frequent interactions than older rep relationships because such interactions help buyers acquire important information about the sales rep. Moreover, with personal contact, buyers have the opportunity to observe nonverbal cues that assist in the assessment of trustworthiness. Verbal contact also yields cues and signals, as buyers listen to the paralanguage of the conversation (e.g., tone). Furthermore, frequent contact is an important relationship signal that indicates to the buyer that he or she is important to the seller. Thus, liking will be a partial mediator in the younger rep relationship, with frequency of personal interaction having both a direct effect on trust and indirect effects on trust through liking.

As with value similarity, in older rep relationships, parties will not rely directly on these external cues because of the liking heuristic. In older rep relationships, we expect liking to fully mediate the relationship between frequency of personal interaction and trust. The role of personal interaction becomes one of sustaining and reinforcing liking, which, in turn, affects trust.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between frequency of personal interaction and buyer's trust in the sales rep is mediated by the buyer's liking for the rep and depends on the age of the rep relationship such that:

Hypothesis 3a: When frequency of personal interaction increases, buyers exhibit more liking for the sales rep, irrespective of the age of the rep relationship.

Hypothesis 3b: In younger rep relationships, liking partially mediates the relationship between frequency of personal interaction and trust. Frequency of personal interaction has a direct positive effect on trust in addition to an indirect positive effect on trust through liking.

Hypothesis 3c: In older rep relationships, liking fully mediates the relationship between frequency of personal interaction and trust. There is no direct effect of frequency of personal interaction on trust in the older group.

METHOD

The Sample

The hypothesized model was tested in a nationwide study using wholesale franchisees for new agricultural machinery (SIC 508303) via field mail surveys. Respondents provided information about the relationship with their major supplier's sales rep during the previous 12 months. General managers and owners (dealers) completed the surveys, which was appropriate given the size of these operations (fewer than 13 employees on average) and the fact that pretests indicated that, overwhelmingly, the dealer is the purchase liaison with the sales rep. In these operations, there is typically just one buyer—the dealer—who is best informed about the dynamics of the buyer-seller relationship.

Here, we examine relationships with very long histories, in which the logistical and operational issues at the firm level are likely to be more settled and the value of the business relationship for both partners has been well established. The sample includes dealers whose relationship at the firm level is greater than 25 years. A total of 238 long-term dealers' responses are used in this study. The average age of these long-term firm relationships is 40 years.

The sample has been partitioned according to length of the sales rep relationship using a median split for purposes of moderator analysis and comparison. The average age of the rep relationship in the younger group (n = 110) is 1.2 years, while the average age of the rep relationship in the older group (n = 128) is 9.25 years. This difference is worth noting, given that buyers have only periodic personal contact with the seller's sales rep. The younger rep relationships are, in effect, quite young, likely having fewer than a half dozen sales rep visits. The age difference between the two groups is statistically significant ($F_{(1,237)} = 142.594, p < .001$).

The sample has been tested for both representativeness and response bias. The sample is representative of the

national population in terms of both company size and geographic dispersion. Using techniques suggested by Armstrong and Overton (1977), data from late respondents were examined for profile differences and response bias. Data also were collected from a sample of nonrespondents in telephone surveys on profile variables and a random selection of scale items. *t*-tests indicated no significant response bias in these data in comparisons between the main sample and both late respondents and nonrespondents. Data from late respondents were pooled with the main sample, yielding a final response rate of 46.9 percent.

Data Collection Procedures

Two separate pretests using dealers from the sample were used to assess survey format, to gauge effectiveness of various incentives, and to hone scales. Results of the pretests indicated that, to maximize response rate, the survey should be developed using Dillman's (1978) total design method with telephone prenotification and no cash or nominal gift incentive. Based on pretests, in-depth interviews with several dealers, and item-sorting tasks and review by several market researchers, scales were pared to a "best set" of items from original lists ranging from 8 to 10 items each.

The surveys were mailed directly to managers or owners who agreed to complete the survey in telephone screening and whose firms fit the screening criterion (i.e., new equipment sales). The final sample included surveys returned at least 90 percent complete. Follow-up postal cards were mailed 2 weeks after the initial mailing as a reminder/thank-you.

Scale Development

All measures were multiple-item scales based on previously developed measures where available (see Table 1). Scale items were pretested in a mail questionnaire with a sample of 50 dealers randomly selected from the sampling frame. On the basis of two pretests and in-depth interviews with dealers, the survey was revised and administered to the full sample. We used summations of the scales for the structural model test by employing methods previously documented (e.g., Ganesan 1994; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Using the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, we calculated the measurement variance ($\theta\delta$ or $\theta\varepsilon$) associated with each scale using the formula $1 - \rho$ (ϕ) (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are reported in Table 2. Scale-level correlations and descriptive statistics for both groups are reported in Table 3.

Trust was operationalized as the buyer's confidence in the supplier's rep's reliability and integrity (with items from Johnson-George and Swap 1982; Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna 1985; Wheeless 1978). *Liking* was measured as the buyer's general level of liking for the sales rep (with items from O'Reilly and Chatman 1986; Wheeless 1978). Similarity of business values (*similar*) was measured as the degree to which the buyers perceived the seller's reps' business values to be similar to their own. Frequency of personal interaction (*frequent*) measured the dealer's perception that the sales rep interacted with them often and included both face-to-face and telephone contact. Since it is possible that a buyer's dependence on the supplier may have an effect on the relationship between parties (Ganesan 1994), we have included dependence as a covariate in our structural model in both groups. *Dependence* was measured as percentage of sales attributable to the major supplier.

Confirmatory factor analysis using covariance structures analysis was employed to assess factor structures to provide evidence of discriminant validity.[1] Confirmatory factor analysis yielded clean scales where each item exceeded all fit indicators, including percentage of variance extracted, size of factor loading, and size of residuals, $\chi^2(84) = 225.89$, $p = .002$, Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = .886, Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) = .85, root mean square residual (RMSR) = .092, Normed Fit Index (NFI) = .94, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .91. Scale reliabilities were assessed using ρ (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Scale reliabilities were high: *trust*, $\rho = .91$; *similar*, $\rho = .93$; *liking*, $\rho = .89$; *frequent*, $\rho = .90$. Table 4 includes the test of the structural model, which includes the calculated measurement error.

RESULTS

The hypothesized model was tested via covariance structures analysis in a two-group stacked model to explore possible moderator effects of the age of the rep relationship (i.e., younger versus older relationships between the buyers and sales reps; see Figure 2). The fit of the model is acceptable, $\chi^2(6) = 11.96$, $p = .063$, GFI = .97, NFI = .98, Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = .97, CFI = .99. In addition, other model fit tests, including examination of standardized residuals and modification indices, suggest that the model fit is good.

To further test the mediating effects of *liking*, we performed the mediation tests suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The results are consistent with our structural model, with all predictors' effects on *trust* being attenuated substantially (or disappearing) with the inclusion of *liking* into the model (see Table 5 for mediation tests). Follow-up of the Baron and Kenny test using a regression technique suggested by Chandy and Tellis (1998) finds that R^2 increases substantially with the inclusion of *liking* as an antecedent in a model predicting *trust* with the antecedents *similar*, *frequency*, and *dependence*. Moreover, a

TABLE 1
Scale Properties and Items

	Original Scale	*Final Scale*	ρ	*Scale Items*
Interpersonal trust (*trust*)	5 items	4 items	.927	I can rely on the supplier's rep to keep the promises he makes. I trust my major supplier's rep completely. I know that this supplier's rep will deal with us fairly. I can expect my major supplier's sales rep to tell me the truth.
Interpersonal liking (*liking*)	5 items	3 items	.900	Even without our business ties, I would choose to be around the supplier's rep. I like my supplier's rep as much as other people that I know. I enjoy being around this supplier's sales rep.
Similarity of business values (*similar*)	5 items	4 items	.934	The supplier's rep and I share the same basic business values. The supplier's rep and I agree about how to sell farm equipment. The sales rep and I think alike about how to sell farm equipment. I think that my business values are similar to the supplier's rep's.
Frequency of personal interaction (*frequent*)	5 items	3 items	.912	The supplier's rep and I conduct business together frequently. I deal with this supplier's rep on a frequent basis. I frequently come into contact with the supplier's rep.

NOTE: All scales are 7-point Likert-type questions anchored with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree*.

TABLE 2
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

	Estimate (standardized)								
Item	*Trust*	*Liking*	*Similar*	*Frequent*	*Estimate (standardized)*	T	p	δ	*SMC*
Trust 1	1.00 (1.65)					NA	NA	.50	.85
Trust 2	.81 (1.34)					17.44	<.001	.97	.65
Trust 3	.95 (1.57)					24.99	<.001	.35	.87
Trust 4	.82 (1.36)					18.07	<.001	.90	.67
Liking 1		.93 (1.52)				19.56	<.001	.73	.76
Liking 2		.88 (1.44)				17.02	<.001	1.06	.66
Liking 3		1.00 (1.64)				NA	NA	.59	.82
Similar 1			1.00 (1.56)			NA	NA	.37	.87
Similar 2			.94 (1.46)			20.93	<.001	.73	.75
Similar 3			.90 (1.40)			21.68	<.001	.59	.77
Similar 4			.88 (1.37)			20.76	<.001	.65	.74
Frequent 1				.95 (1.44)		19.55	<.001	.70	.75
Frequent 2				1.00 (1.52)		NA	NA	.38	.86
Frequent 3				.95 (1.44)		18.96	<.001	.78	.73
ϕ21 (liking/trust)					2.27 (.78)	8.98	<.001		
ϕ31 (liking/similar)					2.24 (.80)	9.25	<.001		
ϕ32 (trust/similar)					2.08 (.74)	8.95	<.001		
ϕ41 (liking/frequent)					1.89 (.69)	8.47	<.001		
ϕ42 (trust/frequent)					1.68 (.62)	7.90	<.001		
ϕ43 (similar/frequent)					1.73 (.69)	8.43	<.001		

Model fit statistics
$\chi^2_{(6)} = 225.89$ ($p = .002$)
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = .886
Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) = .85
Root mean square residual (RMSR) = .092
Normed Fit Index (NFI) = .94
Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .91

NOTE: NA = not applicable. SMC = squared multiple correlation.

significant increase in R^2 is found for each group ($p < .001$ in both groups).

To more rigorously test the structural integrity of our mediation model, we performed additional mediation tests

TABLE 3
Correlations Among Model Constructs, Scale Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Liking	.900	.751***	.846***	.676***	−.241**
2. Trust	.804***	.927	.727***	.573***	−.220*
3. Similar	.748***	.759***	.934	.678***	−.242**
4. Frequent	.693***	.677***	.692***	.912	−.180*
5. Dependence	.051	.007	−.002	−.055	—
Means					
Younger group	4.46	4.84	4.43	4.01	76.32
Older group	4.95	5.13	4.72	4.71	73.52
Standard deviations					
Younger group	1.67	1.46	1.50	1.56	18.75
Older group	1.55	1.40	1.49	1.44	18.52

NOTE: Younger rep relationship group (n = 110) below diagonal; older rep relationship group (n = 128) above diagonal; scale reliability (n = 238) on the diagonal.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

using structural equations. We tested a model with *similar* and *frequent* as joint mediators, with the resulting model fit statistics inferior to our reported model, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 8.17$, $p < .05$. In separate tests, the mediating effects of both *frequent* and *similar* were assessed. We transposed the roles of *liking* with one of the antecedents (in separate tests) and reran the two-group model. *Frequent* was not a strong mediator in the model, having no direct effects on *trust* at all in the older group (older group: $\beta_{21} = -.021$, $p > .50$) and only weak direct effects on *trust* in the younger group (younger group: $\beta_{21} = .120$, $p = .09$). The effects were essentially the same for *similar* (younger group: $\beta_{21} = .265$, $p < .01$; older group: $\beta_{21} = -.016$, $p > .50$). Given the overall pattern of results, we concluded that there is sufficient evidence for *liking* as a critical mediator.

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, *liking* has a significant positive impact on *trust* in both the younger rep relationship group ($\beta_{21} = .57$ [unstandardized], $T = 4.84$, $p < .001$) and the older rep relationship group ($\beta_{21} = .74$ [unstandardized], $T = 2.63$, $p < .01$). *Similar* is positively related to *liking* in the younger group ($\gamma 11 = .63$ [unstandardized], $T = 5.31$, $p < .001$) and in the older group ($\gamma 11 = .84$ [unstandardized.], $T = 9.87$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2a. Hypothesis 2b, which predicts a partial mediation in the younger rep relationship group, is also supported. *Similar* is positively (directly) related to *trust* in the younger group ($\gamma 21 = .27$ [unstandardized], $T = 2.16$, $p < .01$), with a significant indirect effect of *similar* on *trust* through *liking* (indirect effect = .36, $T = 3.63$, $p < .001$). We also have support for Hypothesis 2c. As expected, in the older rep relationships, *similar* has no significant direct relationship to *trust* ($\gamma 21 = .10$ [unstandardized], $T = .370$, *ns*), although the indirect effect through liking is significant (indirect effect = .62, $T = 4.76$, $p < .001$). These results support our contention that liking fully mediates the relationship between similarity of business values and trust in older rep relationships.

As predicted in Hypothesis 3a, *frequent* is significantly related to *liking* in both age-groups (younger group: $\gamma 12 = .35$ [unstandardized], $T = 3.03$, $p = .001$; older group: $\gamma 12 = .15$ [unstandardized], $T = 1.71$, $p < .05$). There is support for Hypothesis 3b, which predicted a mediating effect for *liking* on the *frequent-trust* relationship. Here, however, *liking* fully (rather than partially) mediated the relationship between *frequent* and *trust* in the younger rep relationships, with the direct effect of *frequent* on *trust* not significant ($\gamma 22 = .09$ [unstandardized], $T = .85$, $p = ns$). Moreover, there is a significant indirect effect of *frequent* on *trust* through *liking* in the younger group (indirect effect = .20, $T = 2.55$, $p < .01$), which supports this full mediation. In the older rep group, *frequent* was not significantly related to *trust* directly. The indirect effect of *frequent* on *trust* through *liking* was significant, although marginally (indirect effect = .11, T = 1.31, $p = .095$), which supports Hypothesis 3c. Thus, there is support for *liking*'s mediating the effects of *frequent* on *trust* in older relationships.

This structural model includes the control variable *dependence*, which other research has found to affect the nature of buyer-seller relationships (Ganesan 1994). Here, however, *dependence* had no significant effect on trust in either group (younger group: $\gamma 23 \leq .001$, $T = 1.05$, *ns*; older group: $\gamma 23 \leq .001$, $T = .24$, *ns*).

DISCUSSION

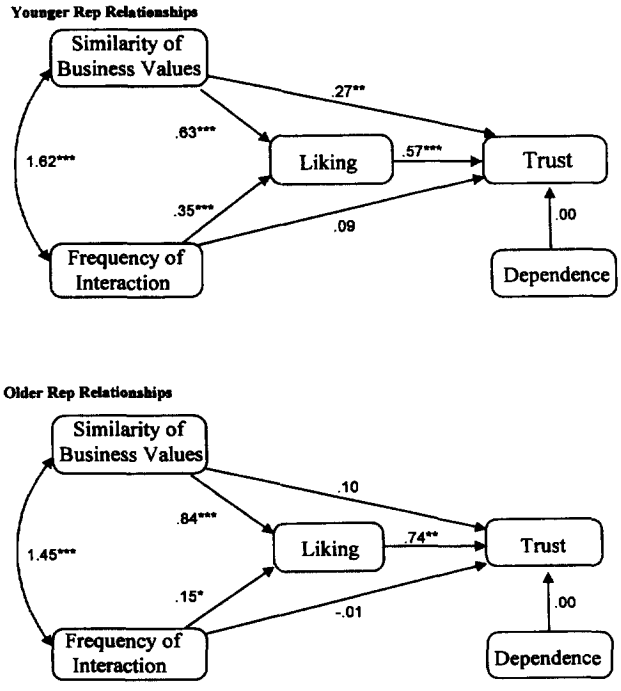
The results suggest that liking is an important, and too long overlooked, variable in understanding trust. Regardless of the age of the sales relationship and in the presence of two different cognitive antecedents frequently examined as leading to trust (in this study, similarity of business values and frequency of personal interaction), liking has a major influence on trust. More important, we found that liking serves a critical mediating role in how similarity of business values and frequency of interaction affect the development of buyer trust in the sales rep. In other words, not only is liking an important determinant of trust in its own right, but the widely studied more cognitive antecedents of trust—similarity of business values and frequency of personal interaction—operate *through* liking.

As we hypothesized, we found that the age of the sales rep relationship did affect the nature of the liking mediation. For similarity of business values, liking partially mediates its effects on trust in younger dyadic relationships but fully mediates its effects on trust in older dyads. Frequency of personal interaction has significant positive effects on liking in both groups. Indirect effects suggest that liking fully mediates the effect of frequency of personal interaction on trust in the younger relationship group

TABLE 4
Results of the Structural Model Test

	Younger Rep Relationships				*Older Rep Relationships*			
	Estimate	*Standardized*	T	p	*Estimate*	*Standardized*	T	p
Structural model								
γ11 similar → liking	.63	.58	5.31	<.001	.84	.84	9.87	<.001
γ21 similar → trust	.27	.25	2.16	<.01	.10	.03	0.37	*ns*
γ12 frequent → liking	.35	.33	3.03	<.001	.15	.14	1.71	<.05
γ22 frequent → trust	.09	.08	0.85	*ns*	−.01	−.02	−0.08	*ns*
γ23 dependence → trust	.00	.06	1.05	*ns*	.00	.01	0.24	*ns*
β21 liking → trust	.57	.61	4.84	<.001	.74	.83	2.63	<.01
ϕ21 similar, frequent	1.62	.75	5.94	<.001	1.45	.74	6.32	<.001
Error terms								
ζ11 dependent variable *liking*	.72	.28			.25	.11		
ζ22 dependent variable *trust*	.42	.18			.62	.29		
Measurement model (both groups)								
θδ11 similar = .160								
θδ22 frequent = .202								
θε11 liking = .270								
θε22 trust = .199								
Model fit statistics								
$\chi^2_{(6)} = 11.96$ ($p = .063$)								
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = .97								
Expected Cross-Validation Index (ECVI) = .25								
Root mean square residual (RMSR) = 3.05								
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .065								
Normed Fit Index (NFI) = .98								
Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .99								

FIGURE 2
The Mediating Role of Liking in Developing Trust: Results



*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

rather than partially mediating it. In the older relationship group, as expected, liking fully mediates between frequency of personal interaction and trust.

Because it acted in an unexpected way, frequency of personal interaction deserves more explanation. Compared to similarity of business values, frequency is not as strong a relationship signal, especially in the younger relationship group. While similarity has been shown to engender in-group identification (e.g., Mackie and Goethals 1987), it seems that frequency of personal interaction is more likely to be seen as a good business practice rather than a specific relational cue and thus does not directly affect trust. But, as our results suggest, more frequent interactions create opportunities for liking to develop, enhancing the relationship. In the formative stages of a relationship, frequency of interaction may signal the rep's interest in the buyer and the value the rep places on the buyer, and even how much the rep likes the buyer, engendering liking and thus trust in the rep by the buyer.

Research Implications

The most prominent contribution of this research is that of the mediating role of liking in building trust in relationship selling; thus, we provide a new theoretical

TABLE 5
Tests of Mediation for Liking

	b	T	p	*Note*
Group 1: Younger rep relationships				
Trust regressed on				
Model 1				
Liking	.758	14.079	.0000	
Model 2				
Frequent	.296	3.571	.0005	
Similar	.575	6.619	.0000	
Dependence	.004	0.854	.3948	
				$R^2 = .62$
Model 3				
Liking	.458	5.787	.0000	
Frequent	.137	1.768	.0800	Partial mediation
Similar	.308	3.472	.0008	Partial mediation
Dependence	.004	1.021	.3097	
				$R^2 = .71$
				Test for change in R^2: $F_{(1, 105)} = 32.59, p < .001$
Group 2: Older rep relationships				
Trust regressed on				
Model 1				
Liking	.730	12.773	.0000	
Model 2				
Frequent	.153	1.772	.0789	Marginal significance
Similar	.641	7.438	.0000	
Dependence	.001	0.364	.7162	
				$R^2 = .54$
Model 3				
Liking	.442	4.077	.0001	
Frequent	.063	0.750	.4545	Full mediation
Similar	.307	2.670	.0086	Partial mediation
Dependence	.001	0.227	.8206	
				$R^2 = .59$
				Test for change in R^2: $F_{(1, 123)} = 15.00, p < .001$

understanding into how trust is developed and the important role of liking. Moreover, our results open the door for examining individual affective processes involved in trust; we need not limit ourselves strictly to a firm-level view of trust.

Our study also indicates that models of trust development may have to account for the changing nature of the sales relationship over time. Clearly the relationship of one year between buyer and sales rep is going to be qualitatively different from one where the same people have worked with each other for many years. The results suggest that trust may become more affect based over time. McAllister (1995) explores affect-based trust and cognition-based trust. Our results regarding the importance of liking in the relationship may provide some insight into affect-based trust. We, in fact, go a step further than McAllister and suggest that cognition, instead of acting contemporaneously with affect, works *through* affect over time. Our results suggest that cognition-based trust may exist early in the buyer-seller relationship, but that, as time passes and liking is developed, trust becomes affect driven. Liking, then, supplants cognition as the basis of trust. The evolution of liking and trust is a long-term process, and longitudinal studies likely would provide insights into trust processes. For instance, during trust development, there may be many times when doubts arise, when liking falters, or trust is broken. We need to examine if and how these setbacks are overcome. In addition, future research can also explore the development of buyer-seller trust in interactions occurring via the Internet.

These findings also have important implications for research into sales relationships and selling dynamics. Our study suggests that researchers should take into account the role of liking in buyer-seller relationships. For instance, when using the transaction cost framework (e.g., Williamson, 1985), it is important to recognize that both liking and trust between parties could be viewed as transaction-specific assets that may increase both perceived and real switching costs. An affective attachment to a rep may help push switching costs high enough to discourage shifting to an alternative supplier, especially in long-standing buyer-seller relationships, due not only to the comfort factor of the friendly working relationship but also to the mental, emotional, and monetary costs associated with

having to establish a new relationship. Furthermore, since each relationship evolves along its own trajectory, the switcher assumes the risk that liking (and subsequent trust) may not develop or may be delayed in the new relationship. The upshot is that, given the evidence from this study, researchers may need to rethink the myriad of models regarding dyadic relationships and consider adding variables that tap into the more affective and emotional side of these relationships.

Our findings, combined with a growing body of management research, provide additional evidence that more emotional- and affect-based constructs can be measured reliably in contexts beyond individual decision making or the intimate interpersonal exchange. Indeed, positive affect for another, or liking, might be measured not only within the firm and for the firm (e.g., Longenecker, Jaccoud, Sims, and Gioia 1992; Park, Sims, and Motowidlo 1986) but also, as here, between individuals in different firms.

Managerial Implications

Managers must recognize that buyers by and large *should* develop a liking for sales reps to strengthen trust in the long term. This relationship between liking and trust, in turn, suggests two important implications. First, salespeople who are liked by their buyers are also likely to be trusted more by those buyers, and this is yet another reason for managers to be hesitant transferring or moving these reps too often. It is clear that when a rep is new and the relationship is young, trust is based to some degree on similarity of values, and although not tested in our research, other more cognitive assessments as well as the sales rep's follow through on supplier promises to the buyer. However, as the relationship matures, the buyer simply relies on liking to maintain and continue to build trust. Thus, a constantly revolving door of reps forces buyers to start from scratch each time. Trust is undermined each time a sales rep is replaced. The impact of this constant detaching and the subsequent attempts to rebuild interpersonal trust in the long term is a critical issue. The buyer must evaluate how similar the new rep's values are to his or her own values, as well as other aspects of the rep, to determine liking for the new rep. Valuable time by both parties must be given up to this ritual dance in every new relationship. Each time it occurs, there is a chance that interpersonal liking or trust will not emerge in the new relationship or will be significantly delayed. Since interpersonal trust is correlated with firm trust (Doney and Cannon 1997), the buyer's trust in the seller's firm faces potential erosion as well.

A corollary to this implication is whether some of this liking, in effect, can be transferred by liked reps to new reps. Can reps who enjoy being liked by buyers transfer that affect or liking by showing liking for the new reps, touting the new reps' similarity to themselves, or simply demonstrating or showing liking for the new reps? If so, the cost-saving method of placing new reps without any overlap with the prior rep may be shortsighted. Additional research is needed in this area; however, our results certainly hint that affect transfer among reps is an important issue that sales managers may want to consider.

Furthermore, while the trade literature on business-to-business selling has suggested that it is important that a successful rep forge strong personal relationships with buyers, this affective role of the salesperson has been overlooked. Liking, by its very nature, is prosocial and may have notable effects on culture in the dyad; for example, because of its nature and its ties to trust, liking may reduce opportunism and information game-playing—and their associated costs.

Finally, performance evaluations of sales reps, while long on objective factors (e.g., number of calls made per account, number of new accounts opened by the rep, etc.), are short on affective measures (e.g., feedback from customers regarding levels of liking, friendship, comfort level in the relationship, positive regard, or appreciation). In fact, a significant effort needs to be devoted to comprehensive assessment of affect-based performance. Our findings suggest that it is important to recognize the influence of affect on buyer-seller relationships and that due credit be given to sales reps who can forge stronger emotional ties with their buyers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any other research, this study has its limitations. The conclusions of this study are best suited to firm relationships that have a long history. Because we have studied relationships in which dependence is very high and the relationship in place for a long time, our results are best generalized to similar relationships, as in franchising. Clearly, there are trends in many industries toward these long-term relationships. Supply chain management, which is increasingly common as a strategic tool, not only thrives with these long-standing relationships but, in fact, demands them. Another example of the trend in this direction is "preferred vendors." Moreover, with the advent of coordinated interfirm and supply chain operations and data exchange, the role of trust has become paramount. However, there is a real need for understanding the dynamics of these buyer-seller dyads in relatively young, less-defined firm-to-firm contexts and in situations where sales reps make cold calls.

There are a number of issues that we have not been able to address in this research, and we urge researchers in this area to explore the rich dynamics of dyadic relationships. We have found evidence that liking is an important determinant of trust in the dyad. Now the task becomes one of

understanding how dyads grow or respond to fundamental changes in the nature of the transaction. How do dyads respond to stress when values change at the firm level, and, more important, how does firm reputation affect dyadic responses to these changes? Can dyads with trust and liking absorb the uncertainty associated with corporate takeovers? How does conflict affect liking and, subsequently, trust? We also do not yet know how ingratiating behaviors affect liking and trust in the long term. In addition, we still have only the barest understanding of communication dynamics, both in the dyad and between firms. Since long-term cooperation, trust, and commitment are tied to the communication mechanisms used to govern the relationship (Mohr and Nevin 1990), understanding communication's role in the development of liking, and subsequently trust, is a critical research and managerial need.

NOTE

1. Additional tests of discriminant validity also were performed. For each pair of constructs, items were collapsed into a single factor and compared to the hypothesized two-construct model; model comparison included improvement in fit and chi-square difference tests. All constructs passed this test. In addition, tests comparing average variance extracted to the square pairwise interconstruct correlations (Fornell and Larcker 1981) indicate discriminant validity among our constructs.

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