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Supply Chain Collaboration within the Automotive Industry

An Exploration of Factors influencing Supply Chain Collaboration
between Importers and Dealerships

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Abstract

The rise of global and alternative distribution channels in the automotive industry puts pressure on importers and dealerships, as they face the threat of substitution when it comes to the downstream distribution activities in the automotive supply chain. Thus, to attain a competitive advantage automotive importers and their respective dealerships must strive for a high degree of collaboration in their relationship and thereby ultimately increase firm performance of both partners. To be able to foster such automotive supply chain collaboration, this study aims to enhance the understanding of supply chain collaboration by exploring influencing factors on collaboration in the importer – dealership relationship. By using agency and stewardship theory as theoretical perspectives, a holistic and realistic view on the factors, their influences, and interconnections is revealed.

This single-case study examines supply chain collaboration between the independent Danish importer of ŠKODA and its respective ŠKODA dealership network in three embedded sub-cases that have been chosen based on the importer – dealership collaboration structure present in the case firm.

Based on the existing body of knowledge and the findings of this study, an empirical framework was created that displays the factors, their influences, and interconnections on the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration in a principal-agent setting. It was found that *ownership structure* and *culture* influence the collaboration between importer and dealerships by creating the contextual environment in which the collaboration takes place. Further, high *trust*, effective *communication*, and strong *commitment* were found to positively influence each other but also positively affect the factors of *power*, *performance management*, and *alignment*. Here, an interconnection was identified within the latter three factors as well.

Not only did this study contribute to a better understanding of the importer – dealership relationship and supply chain collaboration in the automotive industry in general, but it also contributed to the knowledge on agency and stewardship theory by creating an extended understanding of potential barriers to collaboration in both theoretical perspectives.

Key Words: Automotive Supply Chain Collaboration, Agency Theory, Stewardship Theory, Importer, Dealerships

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The automotive industry is facing pressuring challenges as customer requirements are growing, disruptive technological innovations are coming up, and pressure from competitors is rising (Al-Doori, 2019; Blake, Cucuzza & Rishi, 2003). For example, car dealerships in the EU have to cope with an extended competitive environment “featuring international competition from independent repair services, other dealers, multi-brand distributors, and new distribution channels” (van Riel, Liljander, Semeijn & Polsa, 2011, p.116). Therefore, competitive advantage will not be achieved solely through size anymore and new ways to generate value and to allocate its benefits must be identified in order to maintain success (Blake, Cucuzza & Rishi, 2003). Due to these global developments, the supply chain has become an essential part of the automotive industry (Al-Doori, 2019). Hereby, a strong interdependence among participating stakeholders is required, and a high degree of interconnectedness and complexity evolves in the supply chain (Al-Doori, 2019; Christopher, Mena, Kahn & Yurt, 2011; Kamalahmadi & Parast, 2016). According to Blake, Cucuzza & Rishi (2003), a renewed model built on collaborative relationships between supply chain participants is needed for the automotive industry in order to attain a competitive advantage. Focusing on the identified aspect of supply chain collaboration, where one firm is linked formally to another in order to create greater efficiency and profitability (Birnberg, 1998), contracts are needed to moderate opportunistic behavior from participating partners in order to create stable inter-organizational collaboration (Blumberg, 2001). However, it is not possible to write complete, explicit, and easily implementable contracts as it is difficult to specify all respective business requirements (Coase, 1937). Thus, soft aspects such as relationships become crucial variables of value creation at the supply chain level (Whipple & Roh, 2010). Therefore, it is relevant to understand which factors influence such a collaborative relationship in order to be able to foster it. As evidence in existing literature has been found that improving collaborative relationships has a positive impact on firm performance of respective partners, the aspect of supply chain collaboration is especially interesting (Cao & Zhang, 2011; Choi & Moynihan, 2019). This evidence has also been found in the automotive industry (Al-Doori, 2019; Fites, 1996; Hernández, Lyons, Mula, Poler & Ismail, 2014). Therefore, better understanding the aspect of supply chain collaboration can be crucial for organizational success and is thus of utmost importance within the investigated automotive context.

1.2 Automotive Context

In order to properly understand the phenomenon of supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry, it is essential to understand the relevant automotive supply chain members. Hence, relevant terms will be defined and elaborated in the following.

In the automotive supply chain, car manufacturers or so-called original equipment manufacturers (OEM), such as Volkswagen or BMW, are the most dominant chain members and are argued to “define the processes, rules, and roles to be performed by each channel participant” (Nadin, 2009, p. 317). Supply chain literature acknowledges that operations within a supply chain are either part of an upstream supply chain or a downstream supply chain (Shkoukani, Alnagi, & Abulail, 2013). Upstream operations include processes contributing to product manufacturing, such as procurement and inbound logistics, whereas downstream operations are all about distributing the manufactured product to the end consumer (Shkoukani, Alnagi, & Abulail, 2013). Here, a dealership can be classified as a member of the automotive downstream supply chain (van Riel et al. 2011). When it comes to distributing products and services to the end consumer, dealerships are an important channel for OEMs due to physical customer engagement and their extensive knowledge of relevant consumer trends (Fites, 1996). Teli & Murumkar (2018, p. 2) state that “dealerships represent the car manufacturers at the point of sale and act as a means of continuous contact between the car producers and the customers.” The OEMs manufacture the products that are then sold by the dealerships. Hence OEMs in their core serve as a supplier for the dealerships (Nadin, 2009; van Riel et al. 2011). Although OEMs and dealerships are engaged in downstream activities, oftentimes, further intermediary organizations are positioned between OEMs and dealerships in the automotive downstream supply chain (Koolen, Taminiou & Faber, 2005).

To distribute and sell products and services globally, OEMs create contractual working relationships with importers, who represent the OEM and its interests in a respective country. As argued by Glynn, Motion, Brodie, Beverland, Lindgreen & Napoli (2007) in van Riel et al. (2011, p. 116), an importer “plays a fundamentally different role in the relationship compared to suppliers investigated in most previous studies, by being at the same time the main supplier, and the creator and promoter of the dealership’s brand.” Most OEMs incorporate importers into the downstream supply chain to delegate the management of the dealership network to a specialized organization (van Riel et al. 2011). Therefore, two common types of importers, namely fully-owned importers and independent importers, exist. Fully-owned importers are direct subsidiaries of the OEM and thus, are referred to as national sales companies (van Riel

et al. 2011). Independent importers are not directly owned by the OEM and are engaged in a contractual strategic partnership with the OEM. Boddy, Macbeth & Wagner (2000, p. 1004) define partnering “as a situation in which there is an attempt to build close, long-term links between organizations in a supply chain that remain distinct, but which choose to work closely together”. These two ownership structures are also found when it comes to dealerships. The importer, either OEM owned or independent, is responsible for managing all distribution activities for the OEM in the respective region, hence the dealerships directly report to the importer and consequently also form contracts with the importer. Depending on the country and the OEM, dealerships may be owned by the importer or may be independently-owned. Independently-owned dealerships can, depending on the contractual specificities with the national importer, offer products from different OEMs (Koolen, Taminiau & Faber, 2005).

In this section, relevant terms, players, and relationships in the automotive industry were explained to foster an appropriate understanding of the industry-specific context. The emphasis of the next section will be to elaborate on the underlying problematization, which will be addressed in the intended empirical study.

1.3 Problematization

The aspect of supply chain collaboration has yielded a great number of scientific contributions (Burgess & Singh, 2006; Cao & Zhang, 2011; Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011; Simatupang & Sridharan, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2008; Verdecho, Alfaro-Saiz & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2011). According to Hernández et al. (2014), the supply chain environment in the automotive industry is one of the most recognized. Nonetheless, research on the importer – dealership relationship within the automotive industry still appears to be scarce. A literature review of existing scientific contributions on supply chain collaboration in general as well as in the automotive context has revealed a threefold research gap for the intended study, which will be presented subsequently. The review of academic contributions revealed that this research gap has not yet been addressed adequately in academic research.

First, existing contributions on collaborative relationships within the automotive industry often focused on only a few relationships. According to van Riel et al. (2011, p.116), “literature is largely focusing on relationships further upstream, between suppliers and a manufacturer.” However, vehicle manufacturers and vehicle dealerships are exposed to fiercer competition,

and as a consequence, the downstream markets are gaining in relevance (European Economic and Social Committee, 2011). Still, existing research on downstream supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry mainly investigated the OEM – dealership relationship (Mueller, 2014; Nadin, 2009; Song, 2018; Teli & Murumkar, 2018) or collaborative relationships in general terms (Akpinar, 2017; Blake, Cucuzza & Rishi, 2003; Hernández et al. 2014). According to Jonsson & Zineldin (2003), including an additional intermediary in the supply chain increases the degree of complexity and the flows of information and materials between organizations within the chain become more critical. Therefore, they emphasize the importance to understand how successful relationships between organizations and parties involved can be achieved (Jonsson & Zineldin, 2003). Even though an automotive importer represents an additional intermediary in the supply chain, and its collaboration with the dealerships appears to be of increasing relevance, almost no attention in academic research has been paid to the supply chain collaboration in the importer – dealership relationship.

The second aspect of the threefold research gap concerns the limited amount of knowledge on how to manage collaboration with business partners (Daugherty, Richey, Roath, Min, Chen, Arndt & Genchev, 2006). Even though the value of supply chain collaboration and its impact on firm performance is known and widely investigated, companies still miss out on taking advantage of the potential benefits of such collaborative initiatives (Blake, Cucuzza & Rishi, 2003; Hernández et al. 2014). In general, there is no consensus in current literature as of what the main factors of inter-organizational collaborative relationships are, and there is a lack of consensus regarding the influences among those factors (Verdecho, Alfaro-Saiz & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2011). Busi & Bititci (2006) emphasize the need for further research on factors influencing the collaboration, and Akpinar (2017) calls for a clearer understanding of their connections. Because the importer - dealership supply chain collaboration has not received sufficient focus from academic research yet, no evidence was identified that could provide clear information about how factors influence this collaboration and how these factors are interconnected.

The third part of the identified gap concerns the different theoretical perspectives that can be taken on supply chain collaboration. As already stated in the beginning, contracts are needed to moderate opportunistic behavior from participating partners in order to create stable inter-organizational collaboration (Blumberg, 2001). As it is not possible to write complete, explicit,

and easily implementable contracts (Coase, 1937), issues such as exploitation, suppression, injustice, and unbalanced power relations within contractual relationships can occur (Grimshaw, Willmott & Rubery, 2004). Existing literature often disregarded these topics, even though these issues are essential in order to better comprehend collaboration (Grimshaw, Willmott & Rubery, 2004; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011) are one of a few who have acknowledged this lack in perspective. To contribute filling this gap, they have examined supply chain collaboration through the lens of the principal-agent theory, as this theory focuses on behavioral differences and exploitation in a contractual relationship. However, academic research deems agency theory to be rather one-sided (Tricker, 2019), and it is argued that the suitability of agency theory to understand a real-life phenomenon is increased when a complementary theoretical perspective is considered (Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore, stewardship theory is included as a complementary theoretical perspective for the intended study. Even though incorporating the perspective of stewardship theory enhances credibility to understand supply chain collaboration, a holistic emphasis on both complementing theoretical perspectives in current literature still appears to be scarce.

Summarizing, the problem statement of the threefold research gap reveals that to date, it is still unknown within the automotive industry how the relationship-related factors influence the collaboration between importers and dealerships and how these factors are interconnected in a principal-agent setting¹.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

Based on the background and problematization, the aim of the intended study is twofold. First, by addressing the identified threefold research gap, the thesis aims to contribute to academia. Second, creating an understanding of how factors influence supply chain collaboration for the importer – dealership relationship and how these factors are interconnected enables to derive recommendations on how to foster supply chain collaboration and consequently increase firm performance in the automotive industry for importer and their respective dealerships. Therewith, the study also seeks to contribute to practice.

¹ As fully complete contracts are argued to be unrealistic (Coase, 1937) and stewardship theory is therefore argued to have its limitations in real-life scenarios (Tricker, 2019) the assumption is made that the importer – dealership relationship within the automotive industry is positioned in a principal-agent setting. This circumstance is implied by the term "principal-agent setting", which will be utilized in the subsequent sections. Nonetheless, both agency and stewardship theory are equally important perspectives for this study as a stewardship setting can be seen as a desired state for successful supply chain collaboration which is aspired for.

Hence, the purpose of the intended study is to explore the importer – dealership relationship in order to understand the factors, their influences, and interconnections on supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry. To strike a delicate balance between the contrary perspectives of agency and stewardship theory and to thus, provide for a theoretical foundation which is suitable for understanding a real-life case, the issue of supply chain collaboration will be examined through the lens of both theories.

Thus, this study examines both the relationship-related factors and their influences on supply chain collaboration as well as their interconnections. Therefore, the following research question was derived:

How are relationship-related factors influencing importer – dealership supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry, and how are these factors interconnected?

To address this research question in an adequate way, a single-case study will be pursued. The chosen overarching case is the importer – dealership relationship of Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S, the national independent importer for ŠKODA in Denmark, and its respective dealerships.²

Thereby, the strategic significance of this study lies in understanding how the identified factors influence collaboration between importers and their respective dealerships and how those factors are interconnected. This understanding is key for deriving strategies and operational measures to foster collaborative relationships and thus, increase firm performance. Therefore, this study may provide significant value for importers and their respective dealerships and may enable them to proactively achieve a higher degree of collaboration.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This section is part of the introduction which is the first of six distinct chapters. The introduction is followed by a chapter in which relevant literature and theory are reviewed. As this thesis aims to identify how factors influence importer – dealership supply chain collaboration and how those factors are interconnected to foster this collaboration in a principal-agent setting, literature from research areas on agency and stewardship theory as well as supply chain collaboration are synthesized. The existing body of knowledge on influencing

² When the term “importer” hereafter is utilized with regard to the empirical part of the study, it is then referred to an independent importer.

factors on supply chain collaboration is combined and structured in a preliminary framework. This framework serves as the initial template for the empirical study. In chapter 3, the reader gains insights into the empirical study's underlying methodology sections. In the fourth chapter, the empirical findings are presented, and an empirically close framework is presented based on the analyzed data. In the following chapter five, the focus lies on analyzing and discussing the differences between the preliminary and the empirical framework to ultimately synthesize the existing body of knowledge with the empirical findings in an agency setting. The thesis concludes with a summary of the study related to the main research question in chapter six, including theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the study, as well as an elaboration on the need for future research.

2 Literature Review

This section aims to review academic contributions on the chosen theory and literature on supply chain collaboration to provide the foundation for the subsequent empirical study and the investigation of the identified research gap. Further, the literature review is conducted across diverse research fields and various contexts to enable the intended research to be based on a literature review that is sufficient in breadth and depth, which according to Hart (2018), significantly contributes to its appropriateness. While reviewing relevant literature in various contexts, emphasis is put on identifying factors that have an evidenced influence on supply chain collaboration and, if possible, illustrating how these factors influence the collaboration and how they might be interconnected. Therefore, the aim of identifying factors is to cluster the broad and complex area of supply chain collaboration into smaller sections, in which more specific influencing aspects may be found. Further, their influences and interconnections will be investigated throughout the empirical study.

2.1 Principal-Agent and Principal-Steward Theory

Related common assumptions are that collaboration is voluntarily embraced by stakeholders, that common goals are shared, and that power is distributed equally (Hardy & Phillips, 1998). As stated in the introduction, investigations though often fail to consider issues such as exploitation, asymmetrical power relations, and repression (Grimshaw, Willmott & Rubery, 2004). However, in literature it is argued that these critical issues are crucial for “understanding collaboration, particularly when partners have different goals, values, and beliefs and when the distribution of power between these partners is unequal“ (Hardy & Philips, 1998, p. 218).

Two closely related theories which address these issues of collaborative relationships are the principal-agent and principal-steward theory. Principal-agent and principal-steward theory, in the following called agency and stewardship theory, have their origin in the field of corporate governance and look at the issue of structuring and managing contract relationships (Tricker, 2019). Specifically, these theories address the behavior of the two contracting parties in their relationship, including difficulties and potential barriers to collaboration. They hereby adopt opposing perspectives. Hence, both will be examined in the following section to provide for a feasible and credible theoretical foundation.

2.1.1 Agency Theory

Although corporate governance often applies agency theory to the relationships between shareholders, board of directors, and top management, the contractual relationships between organizations as well as managers and employees have been subject to application and research as well (Van Slyke, 2007; Kostova, Nell & Hoenen, 2018). Moreover, academic research urges that the application of agency theory should be expanded to a larger variety of contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989). Jensen & Meckling (1976, p. 308) state that the agency theory “involves a contract under which one or more persons engage other persons to perform some service on their behalf which includes delegating some decision-making authority to the agent.” The main reasons for a principal to choose to contract with an agent are cost and expertise related. In cases where the costs for developing resources and capabilities or expertise in-house exceed those of contracting, a principal is likely to contract with an agent (Van Slyke, 2007). Through contracting, the principal and agent agree on the terms of that specific contract (Van Slyke, 2007). These contracts specify the responsibilities of the agent and its duties towards the principal. A very common and traditional example of a principal-agent contract is when the board of directors hires a CEO, whose responsibility it is to manage the company and its business operations, ensuring that the principals’ interests and agreed-upon goals are met. In the investigated principal-agent setting, the importer serves as a principal, whose interests the dealerships, as agents, must fulfill. Therefore, the importer for instance provides the dealerships with clear targets that need to be reached and monitors whether the dealerships fulfill their duty.

Agency theory highlights the issue of information asymmetry, which is given when one party has access to information that the party does not possess (Van Slyke, 2007). Profound research points out that the theoretical focus of the agency theory is to provide accountability by mitigating the risk of opportunistic behavior, which can result from exploiting information asymmetry (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Van Slyke, 2007). Moreover, Van Slyke (2007) outlines two main assumptions that characterize the principal-agent model. First, it is assumed that goal conflicts between the power and budget/wealth-maximizing behavior of the principal and the utility-maximizing behavior of the agent are ubiquitous. Second, it is believed that agents have access to more information, which they can utilize to exploit selfish opportunities instead of prioritizing the principal’s interests (Van Slyke, 2007). According to Tricker (2019, p.66), agents primarily “seek to maximize their own personal benefit and to take actions that are advantageous to themselves, rather than

prioritizing the principals' interests." Further, he argues that if both principal and agent are utility maximizers, agents are likely to act opportunistic rather than in the best interest of the principal, which results in the so-called agency dilemma. Due to the agency dilemma, inefficiencies can arise from contracts. To better manage and control the efficient fulfillment of the contracts, it is argued that a combination of incentives, sanctions, and monitoring mechanisms effectively enables the principal to "align the actions of the agent with the goals of the principal" (Van Slyke, 2007, p. 162). Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011, p. 8) further propose

governance structures that reduce information asymmetry and limit the self-seeking behavior of the agent; contractual arrangements and incentive schemes that improve goal congruence and control of agent behavior; and information mechanisms that improve transparency and accountability.

To provide for an objective review of theory, one must also address its limitations. As stated in Tricker (2019, p. 68), critics argue that agency theory has a relatively narrow scope as it is based on "a single, questionable, abstraction that governance involves a contract between two parties, and is based on a dubious conjectural morality that people maximize their personal utility." The principal-agent model is also criticized by Perrow (1986) and Donaldson (1990), who have argued agency theory to be one-sided as it only characterizes an agent's moral and collective behavior in a negative way. Agency theory hereby ignores factors such as loyalty and pride and omits opportunistic behavior by principals (Van Slyke, 2007). Despite its limitations, agency theory "is most relevant in situations in which contracting problems are difficult in terms of goal conflict, measurability and observability" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 71). Eisenhardt (1989) further argues that agency theory is an empirically valid theoretical perspective when it is complemented by additional perspectives. Hence the stewardship theory is examined as a complementary one.

2.1.2 Stewardship Theory

Stewardship theory adopts a perspective that fundamentally differs from agency theory. Although both theories examine contractual relationships and related managerial behavior, stewardship theory brings a more positive and optimistic light on managerial behavior and contractual relationships than agency theory (Van Slyke, 2007). As opposed to agency theory, managers are not characterized as agents but rather as stewards "whose motives are aligned

with the objectives and interests of their principals” (Van Slyke, 2007, p. 164). The main assumption of stewardship theory is that contractual relationships are not shaped by opportunistic managerial behavior and an agency dilemma, but rather by trust, commitment, collective goals, and involvement (Van Slyke, 2007). Stewards place great value on collectivism, making decisions in the best interests of the principal and “view the successes of the organization or contract as accomplishment and incentive for achieving goal alignment” (Van Slyke, 2007, p.165). Unlike agents, stewards do not seek to maximize individual utility and are motivated by intrinsic motivation rather than financial incentives (Van Slyke, 2007). A true steward embraces cooperation even when goals are not perfectly aligned with the principals’, as the steward values the utility gained from contractually aligned behavior higher than the utility that could be achieved through opportunistic, self-serving behaviors at the expense of the principal’s goals (Davis, Schoorman & Donaldson, 1997). A key success factor for a principal-steward relationship is an “initial mutual disposition of principal and steward towards trust and the realization of collective interests” (Van Slyke, 2007, p. 165). This is a key difference between stewardship and agency theory, as the initial disposition here is on the principal’s mistrust in the agent’s intentions and behavior. In a principal-steward relationship, reputation and trust are the main incentives for behavioral alignment, while monitoring is utilized for sanction purposes. However, monitoring of stewards is “less coercive and directed toward relational alignment“ (Van Slyke, 2007, p. 166).

Similar to agency theory, one significant limitation of stewardship theory lies in its narrow perspective and assumptions on individuals and managerial behavior. Stewardship theory is based on the assumption that managers ubiquitously embrace altruism. However, it neglects potential downfalls of managerial behavior. Moreover, as argued in Tricker (2019), stewardship theory is rather normative than predictive and, due to incomplete contracts, rather unrealistic in real-life scenarios. Literature on stewardship theory outlines that stewardship theory is an acknowledged theory and has been utilized to describe bureaucratic behavior, however, it is still largely untested (Van Slyke, 2007). Within the scope of this thesis, stewardship theory will serve as a complement to agency theory.

2.1.3 Comparison of the Core Principles of Agency and Stewardship Theory

To best understand the key difference between agency and stewardship theory, it is well-advised to briefly consider the way the principal in that respective relationship rewards and sanctions managerial behavior. The principal in a principal-agent relationship utilizes coercive

and compliance-based, strict monitoring and reporting mechanisms, incentives, and sanctions to align goals, while the principal in stewardship theory follows a different philosophy. In a principal-steward relationship, principals heavily prioritize and invest in developing relationships with the steward based on trust to achieve long-term goal alignment (Van Slyke, 2007). According to Glinkowska & Kaczmarek (2015), the biggest difference between the two complementary theories is their respective approach to motivation. They state that agents are motivated solely by financial motivators, whereas stewards are motivated by satisfactory remuneration and not by financial incentives. Further, research points out that agency and stewardship theory also differ significantly in terms of their respective characteristic factors. While agency theory is shaped by individualism, high power distance, and control mechanisms, stewardship theory embraces collectivism, low power distance, engagement, and trust (Glinkowska & Kaczmarek, 2015).

2.1.4 Research and Implications of Agency and Stewardship Theory on Supply Chain Collaboration

Current research of agency and stewardship theory on collaboration will be examined in the following to determine the role that agency and stewardship theory play when investigating how collaboration can be fostered between automotive importers and dealerships.

In a principal-agent relationship, collaboration is at risk due to the described agency dilemma and conflict of interests (Van Slyke, 2007). However, it can be argued that a principal-steward relationship adheres to a higher willingness and degree of collaboration of both parties based on its characteristics. Comparing the two theories and their underlying relationship scenarios, it seems obvious that a principal-steward relationship is more desirable and more beneficial for corporate performance, as the degree of collaboration might be significantly higher than in a principal-agent relationship. Previous literature focusing on the impact of agency theory on collaboration has revealed that organizations need to strive for synergies between partner organizations in the supply chain, which can only be achieved through effective collaboration (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011). According to Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011, p.11) “investigating supply network aspects like collaboration from an agency theory perspective is a useful alternative approach that can bring about tangible benefits.” Thus, agency and stewardship theory are in this context considered relevant to frame the contractual relationships that importers and dealerships engage in. Stewardship theory will be utilized to investigate and describe desirable conditions when it comes to supply chain collaboration between an importer

and its dealerships, whereas agency theory provides for the theoretical foundation of the real-life case.

Research argues that the factors and their respective impact on collaboration vary depending on the type of parties involved in the contractual relationship and the overall context (Verdecho, Alfaro-Saiz & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2011). To best provide for a profound theoretical foundation for the empirical study, literature on supply chain collaboration will be reviewed in the following.

2.2 Supply Chain Collaboration

The term supply chain collaboration is already widely investigated in existing literature. Thus, different types of collaboration as well as different degrees of collaboration for different purposes can be identified (Hudson, Hardy, Henwood & Wistow, 1999). There is work based on factors that influence inter-organizational relationships, work that provides conceptual frameworks of collaboration as well as work that presents empirical models of collaboration (Verdecho, Alfaro-Saiz & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2011). However, it is out of scope of this research to look into all of those. Moreover, while existing frameworks are considered to ensure the identification of factors in the most all-encompassing way possible, this study is not limiting itself to one single framework on supply chain collaboration only, as the intended research aims to focus on a relationship that is not represented in an existing framework yet.

According to Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011), there is no generally acknowledged definition or conceptualization of supply chain collaboration. Therefore, there is a need to better understand the elements that make up supply chain collaboration and how those elements are interconnected (Barratt, 2004). Hudson et al. (1999) argue that if the same ends can be achieved more efficiently by working together rather than separately, firms will collaborate. Nonetheless, real collaboration is an agreement among supply chain partners and thus more than only allocating a function or service to an external party, as both partners combine their resources for shared benefits (Bowersox, Closs & Stank, 2003). In this study, collaboration in the supply chain is defined according to Simatupang and Sridharan (2008, p. 402) as “the cooperation among independent, but related firms to share resources and capabilities to meet their customers’ most extraordinary or dynamically changing needs.” Based on the subsequent literature research possible factors might be found that do have an influence on supply chain collaboration.

2.3 Factors Influencing Supply Chain Collaboration

Factors influencing supply chain collaboration must be understood to actually understand supply chain collaboration itself (Barratt, 2004). However, there is neither an agreement on what main factors influence collaborative relationships nor what the influences between them are (Verdecho, Alfaro-Saiz & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2011). Therefore, comprehensive literature research focusing on supply chain collaboration has been conducted to identify multiple factors that might influence this type of collaboration. Moreover, influences and connections were aimed to be identified in previous literature as well. Nonetheless, the importance of providing some limitations based on time and scope to the identified factors must be stated to provide for objectivity. Literature suggests an extensive range of factors influencing supply chain collaboration. However, the depth of research for each respective factor strongly varies. Hence, to provide for a feasible scope, only factors that were addressed by at least four independent research papers focusing on reviewing literature on supply chain collaboration were considered for this study. It can be argued that these factors throughout literature are deemed to be of main relevance. As this study consequently cannot investigate all factors found in literature, further research on other factors in specific cases and scenarios may bring tangible benefits and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on supply chain collaboration.

The factors that have been mentioned by at least four independent research papers to be important influencing factors on collaboration among supply chain partners are *trust and commitment* (Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Tasoluk, Yaprak & Calantone, 2006; Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Hudson et al. 1999; Fites, 1996; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014), *communication* (Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Cao & Zhang, 2011; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014), *performance management* (Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Hudson et al. 1999; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011), *goal congruence* (Angerhofer & Angelides, 2006; Cao, Vonderembse, Zhang & Ragu-Nathan, 2010; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014; Simatupang & Sridharan, 2008), and *decision synchronization* (Cao et al. 2010; Cao & Zhang, 2011; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011). All factors will be described in more detail in the following to create a common understanding of each factor and its influencing aspects. Where existing literature allows, findings within an agency setting will be stated as well.

2.3.1 Trust and Commitment

Multiple studies have shown that successful collaborative relationships depend on high levels of trust (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Ellram, 1995; Kim, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Smeltzer, 1997). Spekman (1988, p.79) highlighted trust to be “the cornerstone of the strategic partnership.” Commitment by the supply chain partners involved was also identified to play a crucial role for collaboration, as it essential for the entire relational exchanges between the company and its business partners (Dennis & Kambil, 2003; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). In general, a serious business commitment without trust is difficult to imagine (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Also, evidence in the literature has been found that there is a positive and significant relationship between the level of trust and the degree of commitment (Kwon & Suh, 2005). As the two factors are difficult to keep apart and no clear root cause can be stated based on existing literature, trust and commitment are combined into one connected possible factor influencing supply chain collaboration.

From a classical point of view, trust can be defined as an assumption of an individual or an organization that another individuals’ or organizations’ given word can be counted on (Rotter, 1967). Similarly, Anderson and Narus (1990, p.45) argue that trust is rooted in

the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm as well as not take unexpected actions that will result in negative outcomes.

Based on the commitment-trust theory, Morgan & Hunt (1994, p.23) define commitment as

an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship endures indefinitely.

Especially in supply chain relationships, issues of trust and commitment can be important as they “often involve a higher degree of interdependency between companies”, as stated by Kwon & Suh (2005, p. 26). The set of aspects and actions that trust is deriving from is rather complex (Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). Literature states that trust will decrease once a supply chain partner believes that the other acts opportunistically (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Therefore, firms who are aiming for high trust relationships with high commitment should decrease their

selfish behavior, adapt to the other parts needs and establish shared values (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Kanter, 1994; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). Thus, the length of a relationship also illustrates an important aspect of trust and commitment (Daugherty et al. 2006; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014), and companies engaging in supply chain collaboration must find a way to collaborate for the long haul in order to survive (Daugherty et al. 2006). Existing literature also argues that effective formal and informal communication between participating parties by pursuing an open dialogue about most decisions and sharing not only critical but also strategic information is crucial for being able to foster trust and commitment and to enjoy the full benefits of supply chain collaboration (Dennis & Kambil, 2003; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Kanter, 1994; Kwon & Suh, 2005; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000).

2.3.2 Communication

Previous literature states that effective communication between partners is of utmost importance for fostering supply chain collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Cao & Zhang, 2011; Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Thereby, communication “captures the utility of information exchanged”, hence its importance for collaboration and partnerships is deemed very significant (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). According to Cao & Zhang (2011, p. 166), an “open, frequent, balanced, two-way, multilevel communication” is an indicator for a close relationship which can be assumed to embody a high degree of collaboration. Literature and studies on supply chain collaboration especially highlight the significance of information sharing as a communication process in the field of supply chain collaboration. Research on aspects influencing supply chain collaboration revealed that information sharing is one of the most important influences on supply chain collaboration (Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014). Here, Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod (2014, p. 194) state that information sharing refers to “the exchange of critical, often proprietary, information between supply chain members.” Sharing information enables the collaborating partners to independently maintain a strong relationship over time and is thus beneficial for supply chain collaboration (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). The availability of information throughout the supply chain is crucial for supply chain collaboration and has been, among others, investigated by Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011). They argue that information sharing can contribute to reducing information asymmetry, which, as outlined before, is a core issue in supply chain collaboration. Research suggests that by sharing information, uncertainty and goal conflict among the partners can be reduced (Nishat Faisal,

Banwet & Shankar, 2007), which would contribute to fostering collaboration between supply chain partners.

2.3.3 Performance Management

A Performance Management System (PMS) is a term that describes a “holistic approach to the management and control of organizational performance” (Ferreira & Otley, 2009, p. 264). It includes an array of financial and non-financial performance measures and is used by firms to make key objectives and goals by the management clear (Ferreira & Otley, 2009). Therefore, an alignment between measures and organizational objectives is necessary (Ittner & Larcker, 2003). Existing literature on control frameworks distinguishes between coercive and enabling control systems (Ahrens & Chapman, 2004). Pursuing a top-down control approach with centralization and preplanning emphasizes coercive use while involving employees and increasing their autonomy and engagement emphasizes the use of enabling control (Adler; Paul S. & Borys; Bryan, 1996). Hereby, evidence in literature deriving from the context of ministerial steering of agencies using agency and stewardship theory states that the type of relation and the practices of performance management do have an influence on the impact of performance measurement (Bjurstrøm, 2020). Thereby, Bjurstrøm (2020) states that the type of relationship needs to be considered to improve the impact of the desired control.

Evidence has been found that improved performance has a positive influence on collaboration among companies (Vereecke & Muylle, 2006). Therefore, employee motivation is a crucial aspect as it displays a fundamental component of human performance (Cerasoli, Nicklin & Ford, 2014). Behavior can either be motivated intrinsically, which is based on its own sake, or extrinsically, which is influenced by instrumental gains or losses, such as incentives (Cerasoli, Nicklin & Ford, 2014). Generally, it is important to align incentives with shared interests and rewards to be able to foster supply chain collaboration (Hudson et al. 1999; Fites, 1996; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014). According to Simatupang and Sridharan (2005, p. 264), incentive alignment is the “process of sharing costs, risks, and benefits among supply chain partners” and “includes determining costs, risks, and benefits as well as formulating incentive schemes.” By considering the aspect of incentive alignment and sharing gains as well as losses equally, supply chain collaboration can be improved, and members are motivated to behave according to the overall objectives (Simatupang & Sridharan, 2002, 2005). In general, incentives must be selected carefully as individual reactions based on compensation are less rational (Bevilacqua, 2009). An agent may perceive a reward as either positive or negative depending on the respective principal and whether its actions are kind or

hostile (Fehr & Falk, 2002). Thereby, the type of action varies depending on the consequences and fairness of the principal's intention (Fehr & Falk, 2002).

Furthermore, a participatory process and feedback on performance contribute to motivating individuals and therefore improves organizational performance (Groen, Wouters & Wilderom, 2012, 2017). As collaborative performance evaluation increases motivation and the willingness to collaborate, individuals are expected to collaborate more if they are able to participate in goal setting (Choi & Moynihan, 2019; Groen, Wouters & Wilderom, 2012). Therefore, an important aspect of employee engagement at work is leadership and the respective personality of the leading manager, as it has a significant effect on employee engagement (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). Here, it is also crucial that rewards are based on the desired behavior (Kerr, 1995).

2.3.4 Goal Congruence

According to Cao et al. (2010, p. 6618), goal congruence is “the extent to which supply chain partners perceive their own objectives are satisfied by accomplishing the supply chain objectives.” They further argue that the partners' attributes, values, beliefs, and practices must be mutually understood to some degree to achieve congruence in the setting of supply chain collaboration (Cao et al. 2010). When the goals of supply chain partners are truly congruent, the respective partners perceive their objectives to coincide with those of the supply chain fully (Cao et al. 2010). However, when goals between supply chain partners are not congruent and incompatible, collaboration is difficult to be fostered (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011). Jin & Hong (2007) add that when goal congruence is ensured, supply chain partners are more likely to work together. Hence, goal congruence is again argued to contribute to an increased degree of collaboration. Lambert, Emmelhainz & Gardner (1999), as described in Cao et al. (2010), propose that goal congruence can be fostered by establishing a shared vision between the supply chain partners as this links the respective firms through shared outcomes. Among other measures, contractual arrangements and incentive schemes are proposed as means of achieving goal congruence in a principal-agent setting (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011).

2.3.5 Decision Synchronization

Decisions in supply chain planning are crucial to a firm's operational success as they are required to determine the most efficient and effective way to use a firm's resources in order to achieve specific objectives (Cao & Zhang, 2011). Simatupang & Sridharan (2002), as stated in

Cao & Zhang (2011, p. 166), refer to decision synchronization as “the process by which supply chain partners orchestrate decisions in supply chain planning and operations that optimize the supply chain benefits.” Thereby, decision synchronization aims to “align partners and to coordinate decisions on inventory replenishment, order placement, and order delivery” (Cao et al. 2010, p. 6619). According to previous supply chain literature, coordinated and joint decision-making can lead to higher profitability through lower total costs compared to individual decision making, hence decision synchronization is argued to provide synergistic benefits to the supply chain partners (Lee, Padmanabhan & Whang, 1997; Simatupang & Sridharan, 2008). Further, it is argued that conflicting goals between partners negatively affect decision making and thus decision synchronization, which negatively impacts performance (Lee, Padmanabhan & Whang, 1997). According to Harland, Zheng, Johnson & Lamming (2004), decision synchronization is a key element of supply chain collaboration.

2.4 Literature on Supply Chain Collaboration within the Automotive Industry

This section provides an overview of literature focusing on supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry and therefore reviews existing studies in the same empirical area and context of the intended research. The aim of this section is to review the identified factors in an automotive context and to challenge if these factors are still applicable in this setting. Also, new factors might arise that have not been mentioned in literature focusing on other contexts yet. However, as supply chain collaboration in the relationship between importers and dealerships from a principal – agent perspective has not been examined in previous research, factors from and apart from the automotive context may still be applicable. Thus, already identified factors based on justified criteria that are not mentioned in the literature focusing on the automotive industry will not be erased, as the research shall not be biased and needlessly restricted.

Besides literature focusing on the OEM – dealership relationship (Mueller, 2014; Nadin, 2009; Song, 2018; Teli & Murumkar, 2018) or on collaborative relationships in general terms (Akpınar, 2017; Blake, Cucuzza & Rishi, 2003; Hernández et al. 2014), one study has been found that somehow also focuses on the importer - dealership relationship. It investigates the relationship between a car dealership and its main suppliers, who are defined as the OEM or its national sales representative (van Riel et al. 2011). However, as the OEM and its national sales representative, the importer, are grouped as the main supplier, they are considered to be equal collaboration partners. Thus, no clear distinction can be made, and no distinct factors of

influences on supply chain collaboration can be identified out of this study for the relationship to be investigated in the intended research. Moreover, the study from van Riel et al. (2011) investigates how the car dealership perceives threats and opportunities in a more competitive environment while focusing on commitment and its influencing aspects from a relationship marketing perspective. Therewith, the literature research on supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry has confirmed the research gap that is intended to be investigated in the aimed study.

Existing literature that has been reviewed emphasized trust (Mueller, 2014; Nadin, 2009; Teli & Murumkar, 2018; van Riel et al. 2011), commitment (Mueller, 2014; Teli & Murumkar, 2018; van Riel et al. 2011), communication (Al-Doori, 2019; Hernández et al. 2014; Mueller, 2014; Teli & Murumkar, 2018), decision synchronization (Al-Doori, 2019; Nadin, 2009; Teli & Murumkar, 2018; van Riel et al. 2011), performance management (Al-Doori, 2019; Hernández et al. 2014; Song, 2018) as well as goal congruence (Akpınar, 2017) as influencing factors of supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry. Therefore, all identified factors from literature in the automotive context appear in the previously conducted literature review from other contexts and angles and can thus be deemed as justified.

However, two factors were identified that have been less emphasized in literature focusing on other industries but seem relevant in the automotive context as they have been addressed in existing research papers frequently. Thus, they are included in the literature search just now as an addition to the basis for the intended research. The first factor is satisfaction. Mueller (2014) states that an OEM should guarantee satisfying experiences for an enhanced collaborative OEM – dealership relationship. Thereby, a satisfying interaction between two parties can be achieved by collaborative decision making between OEM's and dealerships and by considering the dealerships' point of view (van Riel et al. 2011). According to Azila et al. (2011), as emphasized in Teli & Murumkar (2018), satisfaction appears to be an important factor as a higher level of channel satisfaction is linked to a higher level of support. Also, evidence has been found by van Riel et al. (2011) that satisfaction is an influencing aspect of commitment. The second influencing factor is power. This factor has been identified based on its importance in the automotive context as it also has been mentioned in research papers within this context frequently (Akpınar, 2017; Mueller, 2014; Nadin, 2009; Teli & Murumkar, 2018). Especially in a principal-agent setting, this factor plays a decisive role, as power that is not equally distributed between partners involved influences supply chain collaboration (Daugherty et al. 2006). Further, power can be seen as a key factor for organizational performance and success (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011). However, Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011) argue that

power can have negative effects on supply chain collaboration if it is not relieved by affirmative leadership, as exclusivity of control can reduce trust in a supply network partner relationship. In the automotive context, asymmetrical power generates a sense of strong reliance (Nadin, 2009). Further, the aspect of power imbalance influences the relationship between supply chain partners such as an OEM and its dealerships (Mueller, 2014). In an OEM – supplier relationship, power is designated by the importance of the resource and the extent to which the resource is required by the partner, by the degree to which one party has control over it, and by the alternatives or substitutes of the resource and its availability (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). However, as the described resource importance, resource control, and resource alternatives change, power and power differences can alter over time (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

2.5 Applicability of Influencing Factors in a Principal-Agent Setting

This study assumes that the underlying mechanisms of agency theory and stewardship theory are applicable in the relationship between automotive importers and dealerships, with the former being a principal and the latter being an agent. Hence, the applicability of the identified factors in such a setting will be discussed in the following.

Trust and commitment play a vital role in supply chain collaboration and are also an underlying issue in agency and stewardship theory, as the principal-agent relationship is based on mistrust, whereas the principal-steward relationship is built on trust (Van Slyke, 2007). Moreover, stewards display higher commitment to represent the interests of the principal than agents, as agents may be more committed to representing their own interests as well.

The factor communication also illustrates a key issue in the principal-agent setting, as the availability and distribution of information among the partners in a collaborative relationship are crucial. As described in section 2.1.1, one of the core issues leading to an agency dilemma is information asymmetry, which can significantly be reduced through effective communication. Consequently, poor communication and a low degree of information sharing can “breed mutual distrust and loss of confidence in supply chain relationships, leading to politically motivated behaviour”, especially when the parties’ goals are conflicting (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011, p. 10). As this is a very common issue between a principal and an agent, the significance of communication for fostering supply chain collaboration in a principal-agent setting is highlighted. In a principal-steward relationship, communication can be assumed to be of utmost importance as well, as communication has been suggested to be crucial for successful collaboration. However, the exploitation of information asymmetries by

the steward is rather unlikely due to the aforementioned characteristics of a principal-steward relationship.

Performance management is also a relevant factor in a principal-agent setting, as it is needed to achieve goal congruence and to actively foster collaboration. Therefore, the literature review yielded that by using incentive schemes, goal congruence can be achieved (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011). In a principal-steward relationship, performance management plays a minor role, as stewards are motivated intrinsically and not by incentives (Van Slyke, 2007). However, in a principal-agent setting, performance management is a key factor to investigate. Academic research specifically emphasizes the need for aligning incentives with shared interests and rewards to ultimately foster supply chain collaboration (Hudson et al. 1999; Fites, 1996; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014). Thus, performance management systems inarguably have a significant influence on fostering collaboration in a principal-agent setting as it addresses the financial motives of the agent.

Looking at the factor of goal congruence in a principal-agent setting, conflicting goals between principals and agents are a common issue in agency theory. Consequently, the goals of a principal and the goals of an agent are rarely ever fully congruent. Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011) investigate goal congruence through the theoretical lens of agency theory and outline that a lack in goal congruence arises from the potential opportunistic and selfish behavior of the agent. Further, goal congruence influences decision synchronization, as conflicting goals are proven to negatively affect joint decision making and decision synchronization (Lee, Padmanabhan & Whang, 1997). In a principal-agent setting, neither goals are likely to be fully congruent, nor decisions are synchronized and hence collaboration is negatively affected. However, in a principal-steward setting, goals are fully congruent and as both parties embrace collectivism and mutual goals. Therefore, decisions can be assumed to be more synchronized than in a principal-agent relationship.

The factor of satisfaction is also applicable in a principal-agent setting, as the degree of satisfaction is likely to influence the behavior of the agent. A dissatisfied agent may negatively affect collaboration as the agent may take self-utility maximizing actions. In a principal-steward relationship, stewards achieve their satisfaction by fulfilling the interests of the principal, which in turn leads to a satisfied principal. Thus, it can be suggested that the degree of satisfaction of both respective parties is likely to be higher in a principal-steward than in a principal-agent relationship.

Lastly, the factor of power is a key factor to consider in a principal-agent setting, as imbalances in power between two parties can enable the more powerful party to exploit opportunities in a

self-utility maximizing manner. Moreover, power plays a decisive role in this setting, as power that is not equally distributed between the involved partners negatively influences supply chain collaboration (Daugherty et al. 2006). However, in a principal-steward relationship, the necessity of exercising power is lower due to the absence of exploitation and self-utility maximization.

2.6 Preliminary Framework

This section aims to present and explain the ensuing preliminary framework. It is important to state that the identified factors, their influences, and interconnections were derived from the existing body of knowledge of supply chain collaboration described in this chapter. Hereby, applicability of identified factors was validated in the automotive context and then discussed in terms of their relevance in a principal – agent setting. The identified factors, their influences, and interconnections were aggregated in a preliminary framework (Figure 1).

It ought to be emphasized that the preliminary framework serves as the initial template for all study participants within the template analysis proposed by King (2004) and is thus likely to be adjusted depending on the empirical data of the study. The identified influencing factors of supply chain collaboration are rather complex and also interwoven, as illustrated in the preliminary framework. This once again emphasizes that there is no clear understanding about how those factors influence supply chain collaboration and how those factors are connected.

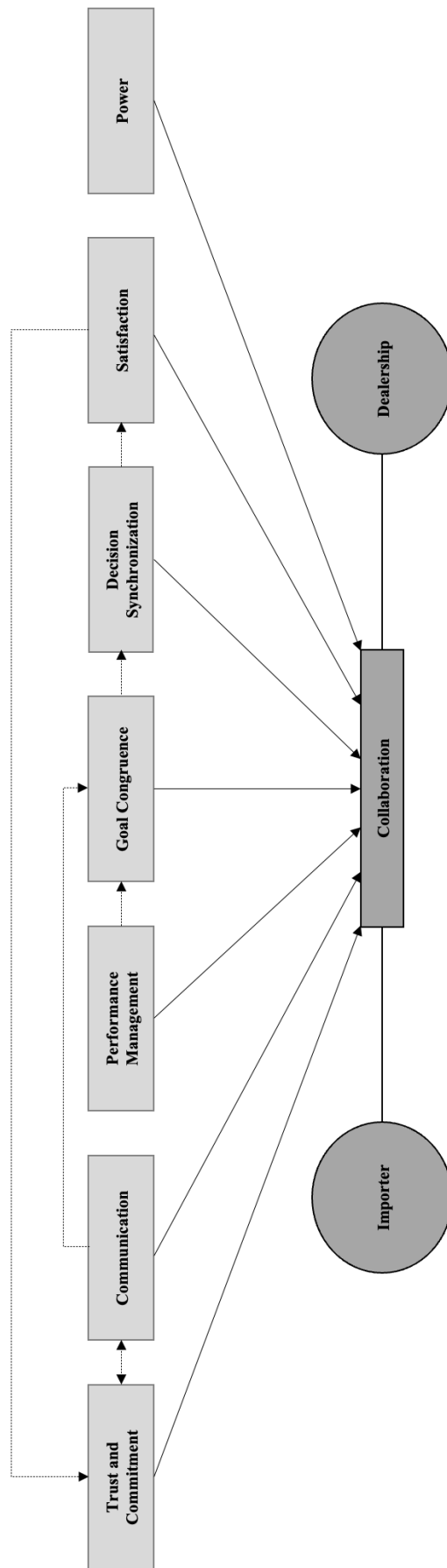


Figure 1 - Preliminary framework (based on literature review and created by authors)

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

Existing literature on research methods emphasizes to clearly define the research question before going into detail regarding the research approach and design, as the research question influences the choice of an adequate and suitable approach and design (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Swanborn, 2010). Following this line of reasoning, the research question will be addressed first to understand the question and its nature. Afterwards, the research approach and design will derive. The research question for the intended study is aligned with the purpose of its research to explore factors influencing the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry to enhance the understanding of the factors, their influences, and interconnections. Therefore, the purpose of the research can be classified as exploratory, as it intends to find out “what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light” (Robson, 2002, p.59). The threefold research problem is intended to be addressed with the following research question:

How are relationship-related factors influencing importer – dealership supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry, and how are these factors interconnected?

A qualitative research approach was selected to adequately address the research question, as it enables to understand underlying aspects behind a phenomenon (Robson, 2002). Further, as the influences and interconnections of factors and the factors themselves are not completely known in advance, this approach seems suitable for the chosen research intention. Therefore, it precludes a quantitative research approach as such an approach tests “objective theories by examining the relationship among known variables” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.41).

Based on the qualitative research approach and the relationship between theory and research, an abductive approach has been chosen. This approach seems suitable, as it combines both empirical findings and theoretical insights (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Further, according to Dubois & Gadde (2002, p.559), this approach is “fruitful if the researcher’s objective is to discover new things — other variables and other relationships” as “new combinations are developed through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality.” Hence, existing literature can be taken into consideration while still allowing for flexibility and exploration of potential new factors, influences, and

interconnections. A deductive approach seems less suitable, as in such an approach research process is driven by theory in all its phases (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018), and propositions developed from current theory are tested (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Again, existing literature might not adequately generate such testable propositions for the intended study. An inductive approach also seems less suitable, as this approach derives theory from data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and theories are seen as the result of the research process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). Nonetheless, existing literature might provide valuable input and could imply helpful directions for the intended study.

Further, the chosen research strategy is based on the nature of the research question and its objectives (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Therefore, an exploratory single-case study is selected. The overarching case chosen for this single-case study is the importer – dealership relationship. Within this research strategy theory is not tested but modified based on the case firm's experiences. This strategy is common for qualitative studies and allows to explore and therefore better understand potential factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the bounds between the contextual conditions and the case are unlikely to be sharp, this research strategy seems to be an appropriate design as it contributes to the research goal to investigate supply chain collaboration in depth and within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). A justification for a single-case study is the illustration of a representative or typical case with the goal “to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation” (Yin, 2009, p.48). As the intended research of the case study represents a typical collaborative relationship within the automotive industry, the research strategy seems appropriate. Therefore, it can be argued that it is meeting the conditions to significantly contribute to the knowledge and to explore and build up theory (Yin, 2009).

For the research strategy, an embedded design was chosen, as this design enables to investigate multiple embedded sub-cases (Yin, 2009). For the overarching case of the importer – dealership relationship, the unit of analysis focuses on the relationship between importer and dealerships with three embedded sub-cases. These sub-cases have been chosen based on the importer – dealership collaboration structure present in the case firm. Thus, the first embedded case is the relationship between the importer and the importer-owned dealerships, the second embedded case is the relationship between the importer and the single-brand independently-owned dealerships that offer ŠKODA as their only brand, and the third embedded case is the relationship between the importer and multi-brand independently-owned dealerships that offer more car brands than only ŠKODA. The sub-cases will be explained in more detail in section 3.3. However, the chosen design seems appropriate, as it enables a transparent analysis of the

importer – dealership relationship while considering differing ownership structures and possible underlying characteristics. However, it is essential to address some of the limitations of the chosen design right away, even though a section on validity and reliability will indicate further limitations later. Based on the context and the embedded sub-cases investigated in the study, there might be the risk of not returning to the larger, holistic aspects of the case (Yin, 2009). Also, it is difficult to reveal what findings are unique to the organizations and what findings are common to other firms. Therefore, multiple case studies may seem preferable and additional cases could strengthen the research (Hartley, 2004). While being aware of the limitations, a single-case study still seems to be an appropriate research strategy as focusing on one case of the importer – dealership relationship but in detail is considered to be compensating the potential weaknesses. The chosen design can even be beneficial, as “subunits can often add significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single-case” (Yin, 2009, p.52).

3.2 Choice of Case Company

This section will provide the required insights into the company on which the empirical case study is based.

As previously described, the chosen overarching case is the importer – dealership relationship of the company Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S and its respective dealerships. Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S, hereafter referred to as “the importer”, is the independent Danish importer for various brands of the Volkswagen group, including, among others, Volkswagen Passenger Cars, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, ŠKODA, and Porsche (Semler Mobility, 2021). In this study, the focus is placed on the brand of ŠKODA and the respective ŠKODA dealerships. An important difference between these dealerships lies in their ownership structure. 11 of the 44 dealerships are ŠKODA dealerships owned by the importer, whereas the other 33 dealerships are independently-owned dealerships following the franchise model. Hereby, it must be emphasized that the portfolio of offered brands of a dealership is embodied in the ownership structure and can be distinguished further. Dealerships can either have a single-brand offering, in this case only ŠKODA, or a multi-brand offering, such as ŠKODA, Nissan, and Renault. Thus, multi-brand independently-owned dealerships can be engaged with importers from brands outside the Volkswagen Group. Therefore, these dealerships offer products and services from both Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S as well as other importers.

The reasons why Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S and their respective ŠKODA dealerships are deemed an appropriate case are manifold. First, Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S is an independent importer with a respective dealership network, which aligns with the setting of the research. Second, collaboration between Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S and its dealerships plays an important role as it has an influence on the operational success and performance of both parties and therewith aligns with the aspects discussed in the introduction where collaborative relationships have a positive impact on firm performance of respective partners (Cao & Zhang, 2011; Choi & Moynihan, 2019). Lastly, by interviewing both corporate employees of the importer and employees of the respective dealerships, the investigated topic can be assessed from both of their perspectives. As collaboration is fostered between two parties in a relationship, it is crucial that both sides of the importer – dealership relationship are included in the study.

3.3 Data Collection

Multiple forms of data for this single-case study are collected by semi-structured qualitative interviews and by analyzing internal company documents, such as presentations and dealership contracts. As the intended research is focusing on exploring the collaborative importer – dealership relationship as a specific issue, the use of semi-structured interviews seems to be useful (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Also, the chosen approach to collect information via semi-structured interviews allows acting in a flexible manner by being able to adapt questions based on the context and still follow a list of themes and questions that need to be answered (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Moreover, the data sources based on internal company documents enable to obtain language and words of participants as well as current factors of collaboration within the investigated case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

All interviews were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams calls due to the geographical distance and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Interview questions contained generally open-ended questions and are provided in Appendix A and B. Even though three embedded sub-cases are observed, all interviewees were interviewed with the same interview guide, only slightly adapted to both the importer and dealership side to achieve comparability. This guide provided areas that should be covered in every interview concerning the identified factors, their influences, and interconnections. To aim for unbiasedness, the interview partners were first asked which factors they experience themselves to address the identified factors only then afterwards. However, it is important to emphasize that interviewees may still be subject to

personal biases based on their perceptions and respective positions, which may consciously or unconsciously cause them to highlight specific factors or aspects.

In total, ten interviews were carried out within the single-case study, after which a high degree of saturation could be observed. As there is no specific answer regarding sample size, different criteria have been pre-defined in order to purposefully select participants and to guarantee suitable respondents to address the research question in an adequate way (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Out of the ten interviews, four interviews have been conducted on the importer side of Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S. The interviewees have been selected based on the criteria of their relationship to the respondent on the dealership side and their degree of collaboration. Therefore, the Head of Operations and Dealership Network of ŠKODA as well as the three existing Area Managers for ŠKODA, who are the respective contact person for importer-owned, single-brand independently-owned, and multi-brand independently-owned ŠKODA dealerships, have served as respondents on the importer side. On the dealership side, six dealership employees were included in the data collection process. More precisely, for each embedded sub-case, two different employees from two different dealerships have been interviewed. Thus, all variations in ownership structure and portfolio of offered brands have been covered with two respondents each. An overview of the interviewees' specific position, their link to importer – dealership collaboration, and allocation to the embedded sub-cases are provided in Table 1. The respective interview partners on the dealership side have been selected based on three criteria. First, the interview partner must be employed at a dealership offering either only ŠKODA or both ŠKODA and further brands to be the matching counterpart in collaboration with the ŠKODA importer. Second, respondents need to have a specific degree of collaboration with the importer and must therefore be in close and regular contact. Third, the collaborative importer – dealership relationship must be existing for more than six months to ensure that an actual relationship could be built up.

Table 1 - List of respondents of semi-structured interviews (created by authors)

| Position (Company) | Link to importer - dealership collaboration | Type of dealership | Embedded sub-case | Via |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Head of Operations and Dealership Network (Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S) | Holistic view on collaboration between importer and dealerships (managerial perspective) + responsible for handling and collaborating with 4 dealerships | Entire dealership network | 1, 2, 3 - (importer side) | Zoom |
| Area Manager (Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S) | Responsible for handling and collaborating with 11 dealerships | importer-owned | 1 - (importer side) | Zoom |
| Area Manager (Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S) | Responsible for handling and collaborating with 17 dealerships | independently-owned; single-brand | 2 - (importer side) | Zoom |
| Area Manager (Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S) | Responsible for handling and collaborating with 12 dealerships | independently-owned; multi-brand | 3 - (importer side) | Microsoft Teams |
| Head of Sales (Dealership - anonymous) | Main person of contact for the importer | importer-owned | 1 - (dealership side) | Zoom |
| Head of Sales (Dealership - anonymous) | Main person of contact for the importer | importer-owned | 1 - (dealership side) | Zoom |
| Chairman of the Dealership Board and Owner (Dealership - anonymous) | Knowledge about the collaboration between importer and dealerships through the dealership board | independently-owned; single-brand | 2 - (dealership side) | Zoom |
| Dealer Principal + Head of Sales (Dealership - anonymous) | Main person of contact for the importer | independently-owned; single-brand | 2 - (dealership side) | Zoom |
| Head of Sales (Dealership - anonymous) | Main person of contact for the importer | independently-owned; multi-brand | 3 - (dealership side) | Zoom |
| Director and Co-Owner (Dealership - anonymous) | Main person of contact for the importer | independently-owned; multi-brand | 3 - (dealership side) | Zoom |

3.4 Data Analysis

As the procedure of analyzing data in empirical research helps to understand and make sense of the collected data and is argued to be mandatory in research methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), this section explains how the generated data of the empirical case study is processed and analyzed.

In qualitative research, researchers are able to select their respective methods for data analysis among a wide range of existing approaches (King, 2016). Many of these belong to the very common group of thematic approaches. All forms of thematic analysis embody two inter-related core processes. First, defining themes, and second, organizing them into a structure capable of capturing and displaying conceptual relationships between these themes (King, 2016). According to King (2016), thematic analysis is the most widely and frequently used form of qualitative research analysis. One widely known generic thematic method for analyzing data is the so-called template analysis which has been proven to be beneficial in real-world settings (King, 2016). The template approach, as argued by King (2016), can be applied to research settings with any kind of textual data. According to King (2016) and King, Horrocks & Brooks (2018), interviews are the most popular type for data collection in qualitative

research and are also most often analyzed through a template analysis. As the ensuing empirical study can clearly be classified as a real-world case and is based on interviews, such a template approach seems appropriate for the purpose of structuring, processing, and analyzing the collected data.

Thereby, a template analysis serves its purpose of analyzing and structuring data through a template consisting of different codes. King (2004), as stated in Cassell & Symon (2004, p. 256), suggests that in its core, a template is “a list of codes which represent themes that were identified from the collected textual data.” A code is hereby defined as

a label attached to a section of text to index it as relating to a theme or issue in the data which the researcher has identified as important to his or her interpretation (King, 2004, p. 257).

In general, templates aim at representing distinct relationships between themes and are organized accordingly (King, 2004).

The reasons for choosing a template approach in this research setting are manifold. First, King (2016) argues that template analysis is a method that well balances flexibility and structure. As opposed to wider methodology concepts such as grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the template approach is not bound to particular methodological commitments but rather enables the user to utilize various techniques (King, 2004). This flexibility is argued to be beneficial for the intended research. Second, the template analysis distinguishes itself from other data analysis approaches through its iterative design. Being able to move back and forth between the collected data and the template is a key benefit that the application of the template analysis embodies (King, 2016). Third, research suggests that template analysis is particularly effective when the perspectives of different groups in a specific context are compared (King, 2004). As the conducted study compares and includes the perspectives of the importer as well as the dealerships, the template analysis is deemed a suitable approach to analyzing data within this study. Furthermore, the template analysis is based on an initial template which is created based on existing literature and theory and thus enables the findings to be embodied into the current pool of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

For credibility reasons, some limitations of the template approach ought to be stated hereafter. One major challenge that arises when a template analysis is conducted is to handle the large degree of flexibility, especially when it comes to the coding structure (King, 2016). King

(2016) urges that the high degree of flexibility may lead to very complex coding templates that are difficult to manage. Therefore, the eight steps of coding from Tesch's (1990) will be followed, that are emphasized in Creswell & Creswell (2018). Another key challenge proposed by King (2004) is to develop an initial template which is neither too simple nor too complex. To mitigate this risk, the initial template is based on factors of influences which were identified through reviewing relevant literature and theory and could be classified as key influences. By focusing on key influencing factors only, overall complexity can be kept in an appropriate scope.

Despite the limitations, the template analysis was selected as its advantages are deemed to outweigh its limitations in this research setting. Based on the review of prior contributions to literature and theory in section 2, a first set of themes was identified *a priori* and summarized in the preliminary framework in section 2.6, which will serve as the initial template for the template analysis. The template analysis will serve as an iterative analytical technique to continuously revise and adjust the initial template to ultimately explore themes and represent relationships between them (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Throughout the conducted study, further themes may emerge, and the already identified themes may be modified throughout the process of analyzing the conducted data, hence the initial template is likely to be adjusted.

3.5 Issues of Validity and Reliability

According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), a validity and reliability section is an important part of research studies as they serve the purpose of explaining the procedures and steps that were undertaken to validate the study's empirical findings and to ensure their accuracy and credibility.

Thereby, researchers should utilize and apply validity strategies to their studies to elaborate on the accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The conducted empirical study aims to identify influences of factors and their interconnection on collaboration in the automotive importer – dealership relationship. To provide for valid findings, data gathered through interviews with the importer and the dealerships will be triangulated and converged. Triangulation is argued to increase the degree of validity of a study, as evidence from different data sources is examined and used to create a coherent picture (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, the respective perspectives of both parties on collaboration will be included in the empirical study to provide valid and reliable findings.

In addition to data triangulation, member checking will be utilized to ultimately “determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by ... providing the participants with an opportunity to comment on the findings” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 274). In addition to investigating the validity of a study’s findings, researchers should strive for a high degree of reliability in their empirical, qualitative case studies to enable future research to build on it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To provide for a reliable empirical study, research advocates such as Yin (2009) suggest that reliability can be fostered by thoroughly documenting the conducted procedures. Yin (2009) further argues that detailed procedures of the conducted case study enable future researchers to follow these respective procedures, hence the utilized questionnaires are available in the appendix. To further provide for reliable findings, all transcripts are reviewed by each interviewee to identify potential mistakes in the transcription. Furthermore, the advice of Gibbs (2007) was followed, who argues that derived empirical results should be compared to ultimately cross-check the developed codes. Although the research team consists of merely two individual researchers, this reliability procedure was profoundly executed. For case studies to contribute to understanding a phenomenon beyond the respective immediate case, Cassell & Symon (2004) argue that analytical generalization has to be ensured. Analytical generalization means to examine processes in context to “reveal processes which can be proposed as general or as specific to that organization” (Cassell & Symon, 2004, p. 331). To foster strong generalizations throughout this case-oriented research, the thesis is written with a clear framework based on an existing body of knowledge, which contributes to an appropriate degree of generalization (Cassell & Symon, 2004).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

There is the need to identify and address ethical issues that might come up during this study (Berg, 2001; Bickman & Rog, 1998; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), emphasis must be placed on ethical issues before the study is conducted, at the beginning of the study, during data collection and data analysis, as well as during reporting, sharing, and storage of the data. By addressing and elaborating on how to engage with those ethical issues, further integrity of the study as well as trustworthiness and validity of the research process and its findings can be guaranteed (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

Generally, there are four ethical considerations to which researcher should be committed, concerning the issues of harm, privacy, consent and deception (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018;

Berg, 2001). Therefore, research participants need to be protected by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the following, these issues will be addressed, and measures will be explained that have been taken into account in order to overcome them.

The first ethical consideration focuses on harm that can be caused to the participants involved in the study. To avoid such harm as stress for research participants, interviews have been scheduled based on interviewees' preferences, and meeting requests have been sent out well in advance. Further, interviews have been held remotely to avoid personal contact due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, interview statements and transcripts have been sent back to interviewees to provide the ability to check for harmful quotations in content. Furthermore, to secure the research participants' privacy, their identity has been anonymized and been limited to job title and job description only. Additionally, interviewees got the possibility to avoid answering questions during the interview to protect their privacy. To address the ethical consideration concerning the lack of informed consent, research participants have been provided with overall information regarding the extent of time, potential impact, and outcome of the study well in advance. By identifying and being in close contact with the Head of Operations and Dealership Network as the key personnel and individual in authority, local approval, as well as access to study participants, was obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lastly, several measures have been taken to avoid deception. By discussing the purpose of the study and how data will be used with the participants, the understanding of participating in a research study has been developed. Therefore, deceiving participants can be avoided (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further, presenting research in a realistic and honest way by providing an accurate account of the information was kept in mind when stating information related to the research setting.

4 Empirical Results

This chapter is of significant importance for addressing the research question of how relationship-related factors are influencing supply chain collaboration between importers and dealerships and how those factors are interconnected. After introducing the studied case, an overview of the empirical findings drawn from the collected data is stated. The data has been gathered from ten semi-structured interviews and internal company documents and was analyzed using the preliminary framework as a template. However, this template was refined during data analysis to generate a holistic and more complete picture.

4.1 Case Description

Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S belongs to the Semler Mobility division of the family-owned umbrella organization Semler Gruppen A/S. The group has its roots in the year 1917, and as of today, more than 2000 employees (Semler Gruppen, 2021). As an importer, Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S is engaged in a contractual relationship and thus entrusted by ŠKODA Auto a.s. in the Czech Republic to manage the national distribution of ŠKODA vehicles in Denmark. The factory of the OEM plays an important role for the importer – dealership collaboration, as it produces the cars that the importer then has to distribute among its dealership network. Thereby, the factory sets clear targets regarding cars to be sold that must be reached by the importer. In turn, Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S passes these goals on to the dealerships. Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S tackles this challenge through their network of 44 dealerships. However, an analysis of the contracts of all three different types of dealerships based on their ownership structure yielded that all dealerships have the same contract and conditions with the importer. Thus, on paper, no distinction for the contractual relationship with the importer is made, and all are treated equally in collaboration. Hereby, it must be emphasized that the contracts grant the importer most of the decision rights a high degree of influence and power on strategic and operational decisions.

As this research focuses on supply chain collaboration between importer and dealerships, it is important to explain how collaboration is pursued between Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S and its ŠKODA dealerships. When it comes to collaborating with its dealerships, Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S must respect the law of competition, which prohibits the sharing of detailed market- and competition-related information of a specific dealership with other dealerships. The importer is organized by Area Managers who are responsible for the dealerships in their respective area, hold regular meetings, and are the first point of contact for the dealerships.

Here, one Area Manager collaborates with the importer-owned dealerships, one with the single-brand independently-owned dealerships, and one with the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships. In addition, there is a dealership board which conducts monthly meetings together with the Head of Operations and Dealership Network of ŠKODA and the CEO of Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S. The members of the dealership board include five to six elected dealership representatives from importer-owned, single-brand independently-owned, and multi-brand independently-owned dealerships. In those board meetings between the importer and dealerships, upcoming changes, strategies, or information from the factory are discussed. Further, the dealership representatives can address problems or concerns from all dealerships.

4.2 Findings

The following sub-sections state the findings collected from the gathered data. Each headline of a sub-section presents the findings of an identified factor that influences the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration. Quotes in italics were selected based on representativity and to prevent an excessively high number of factors as well as to provide for feasibility, only factors mentioned by at least two respondents of each embedded sub-case have been included. As the research intends to identify how those factors are influencing the collaboration and how they are interconnected, the findings from both importer and the dealership interviews have been synthesized to get a complete picture of the actual factors. Thereby, possible blind spots can be revealed, similarities or differences between the three embedded sub-cases can be presented, and influences, as well as interconnections, can be illustrated. In chapter 5, those findings will be put into perspective with previous literature, and the modification of the empirical framework will be discussed.

4.2.1 Open & Honest Dialogue

All interviewees across all three embedded sub-cases stated that both importer and dealerships are dependent on each other and that communication is essential for a good and effective collaboration. The Head of Operations and Dealership Network at Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S argued dialogue to be “the main important factor” in collaboration with the dealerships. This claim was supported by all other interviewees in this study. When it comes to communication between an importer and its dealerships, the gathered data yielded that good collaboration between an importer and its dealerships is based on honest and transparent communication. According to the Area Manager of the importer-owned dealerships, honest

dialogue and information sharing is of utmost importance to create a mutual understanding among the dealerships and the importer. This claim was supported by all other interviewees from the importer side, further arguing that honestly and transparently communicating problems and sharing information on operational bottlenecks, such as delivery problems, is important for both parties to collaboratively find a solution and thus, foster collaboration. According to the majority of the interviewees, honest and transparent communication is also highly relevant for fostering trust. In general, it was found that communication and trust seem to be strongly interconnected. The Head of Operations and Dealership Network at Skandinavisk Motor Co. A/S stated that “good communication sets up trust” and that when trust is fostered, communication becomes more honest, transparent, and thus effective. This finding was supported across all sub-cases.

4.2.2 Information and Knowledge Sharing

One aspect of communication that was found to be highly relevant for collaboration is the sharing of information. All interviewees from both the respective dealerships and the importer stated their dependency on the access to information of the other party. It was found that information sharing is equally important for dealerships and importers. Dealerships are dependent on information concerning the delivery and production processes, and the importer is dependent on market-specific knowledge that the dealerships can provide. Further, it was stated by all interviewees from the importer side that sharing knowledge on customer data and benchmarks is helpful for the dealerships to improve performance and that they as importers are dependent on the customer and knowledge of the dealerships to make the right decisions. All interviewees argued that the importer serves as the communication channel between the OEM/factory and the dealerships as the dealerships do not stand in direct contact with the factory of the OEM. When elaborating on the importance of information sharing, the most commonly used example was that of the importer sharing information about bottlenecks in car delivery due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. All dealership interviewees across all sub-cases stated that shared information about delivery problems would enable them to provide transparency and information to the final customer.

The Area Manager of the importer-owned dealerships argued that between an importer and a dealership “you share information on your goals, you share information on your problems, on reasons why you made the decision, and then you try to find a way how you can move forward.”

All interviewees have acknowledged the importance of information sharing when it comes to the performance of the dealerships, as this creates transparency and visibility. Information sharing and transparency were found to affect performance management as clearly communicating goals and explaining why and how they were created to the dealerships would lead to a mutual understanding and to an increase in performance as the dealerships “would be willing to go the extra mile if they understand why”, as stated by the Area Manager of the importer-owned dealerships. Further, it was found that information sharing and transparency affect whether trust is gained. It was found that the higher the degree of shared information and transparency, the higher the degree of trust in the respective relationship. The interviews yielded that it is important to both sides to share information but also to listen to the other party, as this was argued to positively affect trust and thus collaboration.

4.2.3 Type of Interaction

Another aspect of communication that was highly stressed by all interviewees across all embedded sub-cases is the type of interaction. It was found that a delicate balance between online/virtual interaction and physical interaction is highly important for collaboration between an importer and its dealerships. It was repeatedly argued by all interviewees across all three sub-cases that physical interaction is essential for a good collaboration. The chairman of the dealership board stated that:

We as humans are demanding to interact in person. It's much more trustworthy if you're talking about difficult things in person than just to interact through the screen. I think it has had a negative effect on our collaboration with the importer that we weren't able to meet physically during the pandemic.

The Area Manager of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships emphasized that physical interaction is important to fully dive into the dealership's world and to maximize information sharing and create a mutual understanding. This claim was supported by all other interviewees in every embedded case. He further argued that he is “not as informed about what's going on out there as usually” since he has not been able to physically visit the dealerships. Moreover, it was widely argued by the dealerships that “when you talk face to face with the importer, they can see some things from our perspective”. One of the interviewees of the importer-owned dealerships stated that “to trust a person, you have to meet that person”. Further, the interviews revealed that online communication is also important as it has positive

effects on productivity and collaboration by allowing for a high frequency of communication which was found to increase collaboration between importer and dealerships. However, it was widely emphasized that it is needed to be complemented by physical interaction between the importer and the dealerships as informal communication has a positive effect on trust and collaboration. Both interviewees from importer-owned and single-brand independently-owned dealerships stated that mere online communication with large audiences would not provide for the environment to communicate and share information honestly and transparently by explaining: “They don't speak very free there. Because there are sitting 50 dealers and the dealers don't get into a lot of interaction in those meetings.”

Informal communication and physical interaction were claimed by nearly all interviewees to ease an open dialogue and to increase commitment among the dealerships. This was argued to foster their willingness to perform. The Area Manager for the importer-owned dealerships stated in that regard: “I can move them more if I can go out and look them in their eyes”.

4.2.4 Frequency of Interaction

Besides information sharing and the type of interaction, the frequency of interaction was also found to be an important influence on the collaboration between an importer and dealerships. All interviewees across all sub-cases stated that they would deem a high frequency of interaction to be very important for a good collaboration. Thereby, all interviewees highlighted frequent communication to be important for effective information sharing and for maintaining a close and collaborative relationship. Moreover, all interviewees across the embedded cases mutually agreed on the fact that the frequency of physical interaction would have an even more important effect on collaboration.

4.2.5 Clarity of Communication

The fourth aspect of communication that was found to be highly relevant for the collaboration in the importer – dealership relationship is the clarity of communication. The Area Manager of the single-brand independently-owned dealerships emphasized the importance of confirming the shared and agreed upon information to avoid misunderstandings and to provide clarity. Hereby a difference between the three embedded sub-cases was found. The Area Manager dealing with the importer-owned dealerships stated that all those dealerships could be approached with the same style of communication and, thus, by the same “language”. The two Area Managers handling the independently-owned dealerships, on the other hand, stated that

each dealership must be treated individually, including a very individual style of communication. They explained that communication must be done with an individual language for each of the respective dealerships instead of generic communication to avoid misunderstandings. The statement from the Area Manager of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships highlighted this need: “It would be quite hard to reach targets if you just write in one email to 44 persons. It can be misunderstood in 44 ways.” It was found that clarity of communication is achieved through varying communication styles. Another finding that the empirical data yielded is that both dealerships and importers highly valued transparency and clarity when it comes to expectations and target setting, as thereby a mutual understanding can be fostered.

4.2.6 Trust

The interviews revealed trust as an influencing factor of utmost importance for the collaboration between the importer and its dealerships. The Head of Operations and Dealership Network argued trust to be one of the most important factors influencing the collaboration. This claim was supported by all other interviewees. It was found that trust in fact is a fundamental requirement for collaboration as both parties highlighted the need to be able to trust the other party and trust the agreements that were made. The Head of Sales of one of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships stated that “trust is a big factor. If they tell us this car will be delivered next week, we have to trust them.” The chairman of the dealership board also highlighted that: “We can't have a contract with each other if we do not trust each other.”

All interviewees of the importer stated that they would continuously strive for dealership relationships that are based on trust as this would increase the degree of collaboration for that relationship. All interviewees of the three types of dealerships also highlighted that trust would be of utmost importance for collaboration with the importer. When it comes to building trust, honesty has been found to be of significant importance. The Head of Sales of one of the importer-owned dealerships stated that:

Trust is also a big thing when it comes to being honest. If you trust somebody you sit in front of it's easier to be honest, it's easier to tell the right story, the right explanation, not talk around the subject, but really get to the core of it and try to reach a good thing for all of us.

Besides honesty, physical interaction and frequent communication were found to be interconnected with trust, as it was stated that they serve as trust-building influences and were found to be equally important for both importer and dealerships across all three sub-cases. Moreover, it was mentioned that transparency, the sharing of information as well as the length of the relationship are factors that influence the degree of trust between the importer and a dealership, but of varying importance. The Head of Operations and Dealership Network urged in that regard: “time has an effect on trust if you communicate in the right way, because bad communication over five years is not creating trust.”

Trust was also found to be affected by the degree of commitment in the relationship, which was especially highlighted by all dealership respondents. It was found that when one party perceived the other party to be committed by, for example, providing support, trust is increased. Further, it was found that a lack of commitment negatively affects trust. The Area Manager of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships stated regarding commitment that “you won't drive them towards the goals that we need to get if they don't trust you”. Moreover, the respondents from the importer side highlighted that trust is of utmost importance for collaboration due to the potential opportunistic behavior of the dealerships. One respondent of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships stated that in months where the dealership has difficulties with reaching their goals, they might “make bad decisions to reach the goal”. This was also highlighted by the respective Area Manager who explained that “sometimes the dealers can just put out some customer names just to have the cars to themselves so other dealers can't take them.” However, one of the single-brand independently-owned dealerships stated that in situations of conflict and when bad decisions were made, “we can be honest, based on some kind of trust.”

4.2.7 Commitment

One frequently mentioned factor influencing the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration was commitment. The interviews yielded that commitment is crucial when it comes to supporting each other, which was argued to strongly influence the collaboration. The Area Manager for the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships stated:

I would say that if they feel that I'm committed to helping them reach their goals and standing up for them in situations where they need it, it's an important factor of the collaboration with the dealer.

It was thereby found that commitment from the importer towards the dealerships is very important as it shows the dealerships that they can rely on the importers support. All interviewees across all sub-cases specifically highlighted that commitment is fostered through physical interaction. Also, commitment was argued to be affected by the degree of trust in the relationship, as it was widely argued that if a dealership trusts the importer, the dealership would be willing to go the extra mile, thus being committed. All respondents of the respective dealerships stated that a lack of commitment on the importer side creates dissatisfaction among the dealerships. Both interviewees from the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships argued that the employees at the importer have not personally invested money into the business, as investments are made by the importer and not by the individuals. Further, they explained that they invested their own money in developing their dealership and rely on the importer to be committed, as this is essential for their dealerships to be successful. It was found that the issue of lacking commitment on the importer side was emphasized by nearly all interviewees on the dealership side. Thereby a lack of commitment was argued to lead to dissatisfaction among the dealerships, which was stated to negatively affect collaboration. On the other hand, the commitment of the dealerships was also stressed by the respondents of the importer side to be of utmost importance. It was argued that commitment from the dealerships is especially important when it comes to reaching targets. The Area Manager of the single-brand independently-owned dealerships explained that “if they aren’t committed to reaching a target, I think they cannot reach it.” He further argued that a mutual understanding of the goals and targets creates commitment among the dealerships to reach this target.

4.2.8 Satisfaction

The interviews yielded that satisfaction has an influence on the collaboration between the importer and the dealerships. All respondents from the dealerships highlighted the importance of the importer sharing information that they received from the OEM or factory on critical supply chain processes, such as delivery times and bottlenecks. The dealerships stated that it is of utmost importance to be informed about car delivery delays or the production status. All interviewees across all three embedded cases stated that production bottlenecks and problems

heavily affect the extent to which they are satisfied. The current delay in car deliveries due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in combination with ambitiously high targets, was stated to be demotivating. The Area Manager of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships supported this claim and stated: “The dealerships are pretty fed up with the situation as it is right now, because of the production problem”. It was argued in that regard that dissatisfaction leads to a lack of motivation and thus negatively affects the degree of commitment. The impact of satisfaction on commitment was also found to be influenced by the perceived degree of commitment between two collaborating parties. The interviews yielded that a low degree of commitment negatively affects satisfaction and motivation. The Head of Sales of one of the importer-owned dealerships claimed:

For the dealerships it can sometimes feel like we are running a marathon and if we talk to the importer, they tell us they have a meeting with the factory in a month or two. So, it doesn't feel like they are running as well. But we are running here and have to satisfy our customers. But they probably feel the same way the other way around also sometimes.

Throughout the interviews, it was found that the degree of fairness affects the degree of satisfaction. The Area Manager of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships explained: “We don't want to be unfair. We don't get anything out of being unfair”. However, it was found that some of the dealership respondents believe that the relation of how much the importer profits from a sold car and how much a dealership profits from a sold car is not fair. One of the single-brand independently-owned dealerships stated:

I think the importer sets everything up so that they earn the most and grant the dealers just enough to be successful. I think too much money goes to the importer, given the fact that we need to issue significant investments and need to achieve a return on that investment.

4.2.9 Creating the Why

Both the importer as well as the dealership interviewees across all sub-cases highlighted the urgency to create a why which was explained as creating a common purpose and an understanding of why things are done the way they are done in the collaboration. Transparent communication and open dialogue were argued to be key to create such a mutual understanding

and to communicate that purpose. With that regard, the Area Manager of the single-brand independently-owned dealerships highlighted:

It improves the collaboration from the dealerships if you tell them why we want this and keep the information flowing. They have a better understanding on what drives the KPI and why they should do it and then they are also more committed.

4.2.10 Same Goals

One important factor that has been mentioned in connection to collaboration between importer and dealerships was aiming for the same goals. Respondents from the dealership side of all embedded sub-cases argued that importer and dealership goals are not always aligned, as it was perceived that the importer is also aiming for its own profitability goals. The Area Manager of the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships stated that dealerships often pursued short-term goals while the importer is also taking long-term strategic perspectives into account. However, being in the same boat when it comes to the overall goals was argued to be an important influencing factor to foster the willingness to collaborate. Aligned with the previous statements, the Head of Sales from a multi-brand independently-owned dealership explained:

Sometimes you can say goals are going into different directions. But I think there will always be these few points. But in the big picture, I feel like we're moving in the same direction, the understanding of the customer, the car and so on. So, in the big picture we are moving the same way and we are understanding each other.

4.2.11 Decision Making

The interviews revealed that final decisions are mainly made by the importer. However, it was argued across all sub-cases that aligning decisions and considering the effect on the other party is relevant for a good collaboration. Nonetheless, the interviews from the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships revealed that mostly only strategic decisions are the ones that are aligned with the importer, as they have a long-term effect on both parties. One Sales Manager explained in that regard:

In my dealership I have to make decisions every day. And I have to make them fast. And it's not always that I think of the importer and what effect it would have. So, decisions

are made with and without connection. But that's smaller and here and now decisions and for the longer term we are talking.

Also, it was stated by the Head of Operations and Dealership Network that the dealership board represents a useful collaboration tool to discuss and align decisions between importer and dealerships and to reality-check intentions from the importer side with the assessment of the dealership board members. He further explained that aligning decision creates greater commitment among all dealerships:

If I'm changing for example the bonus system, then I will have a dialogue in the board meeting to explain what I will do, if this is okay with them, do we have any weaknesses or whatever, and have an open dialogue. And then also when a dealer says: "What are you doing? This doesn't make sense", I can tell him the chairman of the board agreed and then he says okay.

4.2.12 Target Setting

Nearly all interviewees from all embedded sub-cases highlighted the importance of target setting, as it has a significant influence on the motivation to collaborate. Even though it became obvious that dealerships only have a minimum of influence on setting targets as they are mainly set top-down by the factory and carried forward by the importer, it was claimed by all respondents of all sub-cases that multiple aspects of target setting need to be taken into account as they influence the collaboration. Throughout nearly all interviews in each embedded sub-case, the necessity of ambitious but realistic targets became obvious as a main aspect of target setting. The statement from a CEO of a multi-brand independently-owned dealership reflected the fundamental attitude of all interviewed dealerships and perceptions of the importer:

It is good to have something to run for. But I always say if the goals are in reach, it is motivating. But if the goals are so high that they are not realistic it is demotivating.

Even though the importer side must fulfill targets from the factory itself, the importance of appropriate target setting towards the dealerships to foster the motivation and therefore the willingness to collaborate was emphasized by all respondents of the importer as well. Hereby, transparent communication and open dialogue to explain and discuss targets were argued to be

useful to agree on targets that are also in line with the requirements of the factory. A mutual understanding between both parties was argued to be important to commit to the set targets. The interviewed Head of Operations and Dealership Network, for instance, stated:

It is important to have this communication to explain what the intended direction is going to and what we want from a dealer. We must provide clear expectations and agree on targets. To motivate and create the why, the dialogue is very important.

4.2.13 Motivation and Incentives

All importer respondents acknowledged that targets are ambitious to reach but also linked with financial bonuses to increase the dealerships' motivation and willingness to collaborate. The Area Manager from the importer-owned dealerships illustrated in that regard: "I have to put a little carrot out there to make them run for me." Further, it was claimed from the importer side that the dealerships are heavily driven by financial incentives and bonus agreements. All interviewees agreed that dealerships are incentivized financially, although the opinions of the interviewees differed in terms of the underlying degree of fairness. It was found that some of the independently-owned dealerships were critical towards the compensation structure, consisting of bonuses and their earnings per car sold, whereas one Area Manager stated that "the compensation package of the dealerships is quite lucrative compared to other parts of the industry." Several dealership respondents across all sub-cases claimed that financial bonuses do have an influence on collaboration but take up too large of a share of their income and therefore create a high dependency on reaching ambitious targets. However, non-financial rewards such as praise and recognition were stressed by all interviewees across the embedded sub-cases to influence the collaboration as it creates motivation and excitement. This is, for example, illustrated by the Area Manager of the importer-owned dealerships:

Every week when I send out my benchmark to the whole area, I try to point out those who are doing very good in green and those who are performing very bad in red. Here, it is very important that I always try to explain in short terms why those dealerships are doing good and why other dealerships are at the very end. I can see every time that there are dealerships who say I want to be on the top and I am going to find out how I get up there. And I also create excitement for those dealerships who are green because they are always happy about their good performance.

Moreover, the Area Manager from the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships claimed that creating value for the dealerships is essential when it comes to targets and motivation:

We also need to remember that what is in for me is one of the most important questions that the dealers ask themselves, because they are professional businesses. They of course are there to earn money, not just to help Skandinavisk Motor Company. So, it is a good lesson to see it from their perspective and tell them what is in for them.

The interviews further yielded that besides setting ambitious yet realistic targets, goals from the importer and goals from the dealerships must go in the same direction. Thereby, all respondents from each embedded sub-case agreed on the same main goal to sell as many cars as possible.

4.2.14 Monitoring and Evaluating Performance

Respondents from each sub-case emphasized monitoring and evaluating performance as highly relevant and omnipresent in their collaborative relationship. Especially the significance of a collaborative performance evaluation between importer and dealerships was highlighted within all embedded sub-cases. This is best exemplified by a statement from a Sales Manager of an importer-owned dealership:

It's almost one of the most important things and that's also one of these things that I work with my guys on everyday - making changes, making progress, making better results And therefore, you need to know where are we good at. We need to know where and how to improve. And we also need to enjoy the success together and celebrate when we are good.

Further, all interviewees across all three embedded sub-cases emphasized the importance of transparency and information sharing in measuring and evaluating the performance of the dealerships, as this allows the dealerships to optimize their performance. The Head of Operations and Dealership Network further stated:

I think it's very important to be transparent and to give the dealers visibility the whole time to see, okay, where is the target and how do I perform against this target?

When it comes to monitoring the performance of the dealerships, all respondents of the importer emphasized the importance of striking a delicate balance between monitoring the dealerships and granting them an appropriate degree of autonomy. It was found that it depends on the degree of trust, to which extent the importer grants autonomy to the dealerships. The Area Manager from the importer-owned dealerships highlighted the aspect of trust when it comes to monitoring the performance of dealerships:

Sometimes I also have to say okay we have a deal that you do all that you can in this month to get what you are possible to and then we follow up next month ... So I trust them if they promise me that if I let them in peace they have done what we have made an agreement about.

4.2.15 Power Distribution

It was highlighted by all respondents in the embedded sub-cases that there is a power imbalance between importer and dealerships, as the importer exercises all its power based on the contractual arrangements. The Head of Operations and Dealership Network pointed out that the best way is to talk with the dealerships and to motivate them. However, he argued that the importer side has the final decision power in the end by stating:

We have allowed them to handle our brand so in the end it's up to us to say how things should be done. And sometimes collaboration is also to tell how it should be and not to explain and discuss the why. In the end, it's not up to the dealers to decide, they need to do it.

Due to the described power imbalance, the autonomy of dealerships from each sub-case was argued to be very limited. A CEO of a multi-brand independently-owned dealership explained: “We can move things like in a box, but we have lines that we have to deal with ... and it’s always done within these little lines that the contract provides.” The Head of Operations and Dealership Network argued for the need of power, especially in the collaborative relationship with the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships, as they experience a higher degree of autonomy due to a lower degree of dependency as they offer multiple brands and therefore have several suppliers. All respondents from the importer site agreed but highlighted the need

of granting the dealerships a certain degree of autonomy, as it makes business processes much smoother.

4.2.16 Degree of Dependency

All interviews across all embedded sub-cases agreed on a clear interdependence between importer and the dealerships, as the importer is dependent on the dealerships to gain market knowledge and the dealerships are dependent on the importer as their supplier of cars and products as well as information from the factory. Therefore, it was argued that a good and transparent collaboration is needed, as both parties can't do it without the respective other. The Owner of a single-brand independent dealership, for example, stated:

We can't do it alone. Neither the importer, nor the dealerships. So, it's very important that we interact ... meet up and share information. And that's how both of us can reach their targets.

The Area Manager of the single-brand independently-owned dealerships agreed with the previous statements as he argued: "We are aware that we need the dealers, and we need their opinion and their insights to be as competitive and strong in the market as possible."

4.2.17 Type of Leadership

The interviews highlighted that the style of leadership has an influence on the degree and extent to which collaboration is enabled. Thereby, different powerful leadership styles were described across the embedded sub-cases. All importer respondents described their leadership style with a good cop bad cop metaphor, where support and understanding are provided, but it is also made sure to follow goals and agreements. This is exemplified by one of the Area Managers:

Be understanding if things aren't going the way a dealer wants them to go. And of course, also be the tough guy who needs to tell them how we want it and that we want it now. So, it's really a balance ... But it is important to have this role, so the dealers don't see Skandinavisk Motor Company as the mothership that doesn't listen or care about the dealers.

The sub-cases focusing on the importer-owned and single-brand independently-owned dealerships also described the supportive and understanding importer's leadership style. One Sales Manager from an importer-owned dealership explained in that regard: "Some aspects are top-down, but they don't say to me that I have to do that or otherwise I am gone. We are talking about it and make sure that we are walking in the same direction and are going forwards, not backwards." However, the perceived leadership style by the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships was argued to be a powerful top-down approach with a lower willingness and ability to collaborate. This is echoed by a respective Dealer Principal and Co-owner of one of these dealerships: "The rough way to say is that it's a dictatorship. It's not, but they set out some guidelines and how we should do it."

4.2.18 Culture

The factor of culture has been mentioned by several respondents across all embedded sub-cases as another aspect influencing the collaboration between importer and dealerships. Hereby, various perceptions on culture have been described by the different interviewees of the different embedded sub-cases. It was pointed out by the respondents of the sub-case focusing on the importer – importer-owned dealership relationship that the cultural mindset at independent dealerships is perceived as a "them and us" attitude, which makes it is hard to trust each other. The interviewed Head of Operations and Dealership Network, for example, presented his perception of the cultural differences in independent dealerships:

Some of them still have an old-school culture where you were really against the importer and just thought that the importer was here with the only purpose to take the dealer's money and control the dealer. We also have dealers where we think they are afraid of us. They think that the only purpose is to control them and take their money. So, I think it also matters which person is the CEO of the dealership.

This was also pointed out by a sales manager from an importer-owned dealership:

We might be closer to the importer than perhaps some of the privately owned dealerships because I can hear sometimes that they do not feel the same. I don't know if it's a factual thing because I think it's actually a cultural thing.

Respondents from the independent dealerships, such as one Director and Co-Owner of a multi-brand independently-owned dealership, agreed on the previous statement, as he mentioned: “we as independently-owned dealerships think there are differences even though this is just our perception and not the actual case”.

5 Discussion

Based on the empirical results, this chapter aims to discuss the main findings and seeks to put them into perspective with previous research. Hereby, it was focused on the main findings that are considered relevant to be addressed for each factor, as they align with the purpose of this study to deepen the understanding of the automotive importer – dealership supply chain collaboration. Thereby, the goal is to formalize a whole of findings on how relationship-related factors are influencing importer – dealership supply chain collaboration and how they are interconnected to show the significance of this whole in a body of knowledge. To discuss the results in an organized way, the structure of the preliminary framework will be used as a guidance. Here, it is worked from the general factor level to the respective, influencing aspects of each factor to the new general findings. By first discussing all factors and their influence on the importer – dealership collaboration and then drawing interconnections between those various factors, the research question is addressed in two steps to fulfill the purpose of this study. When presenting the findings in comparison to existing research, the reasons for the decided creation of the empirical framework will be addressed.

5.1 Factors and their Influences on the Importer – Dealership Supply Chain Collaboration

5.1.1 Trust and Commitment

In previous literature trust and commitment were argued to be main influencing factors on supply chain collaboration, as high trust and commitment in a relationship foster the degree of collaboration (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). The findings on trust and commitment are mainly consistent with literature and have even strengthened the importance of both factors, as the findings highlighted trust and commitment as being two of the most important factors positively influencing supply chain collaboration between importer and dealerships. Also, the strong interconnection of both factors was emphasized by all interviewees. Hereby, the findings refined the trust and commitment connection for the investigated case, as the empirical results stated that one party showing commitment towards the other party increases the trust placed on the committed party while trusting a party enhances the commitment offered to this party. Further, the findings indicated the determinant factor for each respective collaboration partner to gain trust and commitment, as this has not been adequately addressed in previous literature yet. The empirical results revealed that the respondents of the dealerships highlighted the importance of perceiving commitment from the

importer side to build up trust while the importer emphasized the need for trust to commit to a collaborative relationship with the dealerships. Here, the findings confirmed that the existence of the possibility for dealerships to cheat hinders the importer to fully trust the dealerships, as this is aligned with Morgan and Hunt (1994), who stated that trust decreases when a supply chain partner acts opportunistically. As this finding applies to all embedded sub-cases, it can be argued that the factor trust is a challenging yet crucial factor for a good collaboration between importer and dealerships, as it is difficult to fully achieve trust in the investigated case. Looking through the theoretical lens, this finding leads the importer – dealership relationship more towards a principal-agent setting, as it was also found in literature that a principal-agent relationship is rather based on mistrust while a principal-steward relationship is based on trust (Van Slyke, 2007).

Moreover, the findings from the investigated case enabled to confirm and further identify specific aspects impacting each factor. As those new findings can mainly be assigned to either trust or commitment, it is argued to be reasonable to treat both factors separately from each other. This was also illustrated in the empirical framework (Figure 2).

5.1.1.1 Aspects of Trust

Besides the aspect of opportunistic behavior that has already been confirmed to negatively impact trust, the empirical results from all embedded sub-cases revealed honesty as one new aspect impacting trust in the context of the investigated case. As the findings revealed that honesty in a collaborative relationship between importer and dealerships leads to the ability to address wrongdoings right away and to provide true explanations, it can be argued that this aspect positively supports building up trust. Thereby, it mitigates the negative influence of opportunistic behavior on collaboration between importer and dealerships, as honesty leads to the ability to adequately address and deal with cheating.

Moreover, the aspect of the length of the relationship that has been addressed by Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod (2014) can partly be confirmed by the empirical results, as the findings are aligned with literature stating that time has an influence on trust and thus fosters supply chain collaboration. However, the empirical results revealed that the aspect of the length of the relationship is less important for the investigated case than pointed out in existing literature, as other influencing factors were found to play a more important role which will be addressed later on.

5.1.1.2 Aspects of Commitment

Previous findings in literature did not adequately address aspects that do actually impact commitment and therefore influence supply chain collaboration. The empirical results revealed in all sub-cases that support, satisfaction, and mutual understanding are aspects impacting commitment in the investigated case. Following the structure of the preliminary framework, the aspect of satisfaction and its impact on commitment will be addressed separately in the sub-chapter 5.1.6. However, both aspects of support and mutual understanding refined current literature as it was revealed for the investigated case that these aspects positively affect commitment and therefore foster the willingness from importer and dealerships to collaborate. Considering both theoretical perspectives of principal-agent and principal-steward, it can be argued that the aspects impacting commitment enable the importer – dealership relationship to be drawn more towards a desired principal-steward setting. As commitment is positively affected by the identified aspects, the dealerships are encouraged more to fulfill the importer's objectives by engaging in supply chain collaboration. However, a true principal-steward relationship is perceived as unrealistic by previous literature. This can also be confirmed for the investigated case, as there will always be topics that are not fully aligned between importer and dealerships based on their individual businesses and interests.

5.1.2 Communication

Previous literature highlighted the factor of effective communication as an important influence on supply chain collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Cao & Zhang, 2011; Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Based on the knowledge from previous literature, the empirical results from the investigated case revealed multiple findings that are all contributing to the broader factor of communication. Thus, all those findings from the investigated case concerning communication were placed as aspects of this factor. Hereby, these findings concerning communication were confirmed by all interviewees to be one of the main influences on importer – dealership supply chain collaboration, besides trust and commitment. As all the revealed findings are argued to be aspects impacting communication, the empirical results enabled to refine and clearly separate the existing body of knowledge concerning this factor. Hence, an even better understanding of communication for the investigated case was generated based on the adopted structure. It was revealed that the factor communication can be broken down into the findings illustrating the aspects of open and honest dialogue, information and knowledge sharing, the type of interaction, frequency as well as clarity of communication. Here, some findings are

confirmed by previous literature, as Cao & Zhang (2011) also emphasized the aspects of open and frequent communication, and the aspect of information sharing was highlighted by Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod (2014). However, the aspects of knowledge sharing, the importance of physical interaction, the need for clarity of communication as well as transparency were findings that have not been adequately addressed in previous literature yet. Thus, the empirical results extended the existing body of knowledge for the investigated case.

In general, the positive influence of effective communication on supply chain collaboration was acknowledged in both literature and the findings. Due to the identified aspects, the meaning of effective can be refined and broken down even further for the factor of communication. Therewith, the detailed aspects emphasize how to improve communication for the investigated case. Thus, communication can be influenced accordingly to foster supply chain collaboration between importer and dealerships. With regard to the theoretical perspectives, it can be argued that the revealed knowledge on communication enables the importer – dealership relationship to be shifted more towards a principal-steward relationship, as it is thus known how to avoid information asymmetry and mistrust by effective communication.

5.1.3 Performance Management

Based on the knowledge from previous literature, the empirical results from the investigated case revealed multiple findings that are all contributing to the broader factor of performance management. Thus, all those findings concerning performance management were placed as influencing aspects of this factor. Vereecke & Muylle (2006) stated that improved performance due to effective performance management positively influences supply chain collaboration. This can be confirmed for the investigated case based on the empirical results. Hereby, the findings refined the existing body of knowledge, as the empirical results revealed multiple aspects impacting the factor of effective performance management for the investigated case. The first identified aspect that was highlighted by interviewees in every sub-case is target setting. Although the existing body of knowledge has elaborated on target setting, it has not been considered as important for supply chain collaboration as the empirical findings have yielded it to be for the investigated case. Due to the finding that targets must be set ambitious yet realistic to enable effective performance management, the existing body of knowledge was able to be refined for the investigated case.

The second aspect that was found to impact the factor of performance management is motivation and incentives. The findings claimed this aspect to be highly relevant for supply chain collaboration within all sub-cases, as it was revealed that incentives are used to trigger motivation of the dealerships and therefore improve their performance. To ultimately foster supply chain collaboration, literature on performance management emphasized aligning incentives with shared interests (Hudson et al. 1999; Fites, 1996; Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011; Hudnurkar, Jakhar & Rathod, 2014). The empirical results support this claim as they yielded that incentives can be utilized to align goals between the importer and the dealerships. The third aspect was identified within the finding of motivation and incentive, which is the aspect of fairness. Based on the empirical results, it can be argued that a dealership's perceived unfairness in incentive schemes negatively affects motivation and therefore hinders the collaboration with the importer. This is aligned with previous literature, as Fehr & Falk (2002) also emphasized the impact of the principal's fairness on either positive or negative perception of an agent on a reward. The next aspect revealed was creating and communicating value for the dealerships when it comes to targets set by the importer. This was found to increase commitment and thus increase the willingness to collaborate among the dealerships. In previous literature, this finding has not been highlighted adequately. Hence, the existing body of knowledge was able to be refined. As a last aspect, monitoring and evaluating performance was identified. All three embedded sub-cases deemed transparent monitoring and a collaborative evaluation of performance to be of utmost importance for motivation and thus performance. Here, the empirical results are congruent with existing literature, as collaborative performance evaluation was found to increase the willingness to collaborate (Groen, Wouters & Wilderom, 2012, 2017).

In general, it can be argued that performance management seems more relevant in a principal-agent relationship than in a principal-steward relationship, as agents need to be monitored stronger due to their opportunistic behavior, while stewards require less monitoring due to their intrinsic motivation. As the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration takes place in a principal-agent setting, the factor of performance management seems to have an important influence on the collaboration. Therefore, this factor needs to be approached properly to lead to effective performance management, as the likelihood of opportunistic behavior can be mitigated. Thus, all aspects must be considered as stated above. Taking previous literature into account, all embedded sub-cases rather point towards a principal-agent relationship, as financial incentives are needed to motivate the dealerships. According to Glinkowska &

Kaczmarek (2015), a steward can be motivated solely by satisfactory remuneration, which is not the case for the respective dealerships.

5.1.4 Goal Congruence

As stated by Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011), goal congruence positively affects supply chain collaboration. This can be confirmed based on the empirical results, as all interviewees highlighted that having the same goals was highly relevant for the importer – dealership collaboration. Congruent goals positively affect collaboration, as they cause both importers and dealerships to work towards the same goal, thus fostering collaboration. However, the empirical findings in all three embedded sub-cases revealed that fully congruent goals between importers and dealerships are not likely, as both parties are individual businesses aiming for sufficient profitability and therefore pursue some goals that are not fully congruent. Overall, the findings are aligned with previous literature, as it is emphasized that fully congruent goals are unlikely in a principal-agent setting due to conflicting interests (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011). Looking at the absence of fully congruent goals in the collaboration between importers and dealerships, this factor tends to place the importer – dealerships relationship more towards a principal-agent than a principal-steward relationship, as fully congruent goals would be a fundamental condition for a principal-steward relationship.

5.1.5 Decision Synchronization

Decision synchronization was a further factor that was highlighted frequently in literature and was found to affect supply chain collaboration. All interviewees in the three embedded sub-cases highlighted the importance of aligning decisions and taking the other party into consideration when making decisions, as it positively affects the importer – dealership collaboration. Therefore, this finding confirmed previous literature, as Simatupang & Sridharan (2008) also emphasized these benefits of decision synchronization. However, a slight difference between the embedded-sub cases was revealed, as the respondents from the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships indicated an overall lower synchronization of decisions compared to the other sub-cases. It was found that not all decisions between an importer and especially multi-brand independently-owned dealerships are synchronized, and a distinction between decisions that are and are not synchronized can be made. Here, mostly long-term strategic decisions were the ones that were synchronized as they affect and concern both parties, while short-term decisions were made spontaneously on a daily basis. It can

therefore be assumed that fully aligned decisions between importers and dealerships are rather unlikely. This is especially the case between multi-brand independently-owned dealerships and importers, since these dealerships have a higher degree of autonomy due to their independent businesses and thus, feel less committed to synchronize all decisions. However, it can be argued that a full principal-steward setting is not desirable in all sub-cases either, as an alignment of every decision would also cost too much time. Concluding, as the factor of decision synchronization cannot fully be achieved, a true principal-steward relationship as described in literature cannot be reached for the investigated case.

The discussion on goal congruence and decision synchronization revealed that both literature and the findings of this study emphasized the alignment of goals and decisions. Further, the empirical results yielded that both importer and dealerships perceive aligned goals and aligned decisions to be very important for fostering supply chain collaboration. As displayed in the preliminary framework, literature has indicated an interconnection between goal congruence and decision synchronization, as conflicting goals are argued to affect decision synchronization negatively. As the empirical results strengthened the already existing body of knowledge and revealed that for the investigated case, goal congruence and decision synchronization in their respective core emphasized alignment, goal congruence and decision synchronization were grouped as aspects impacting the factor of alignment in the empirical framework (Figure 2). Thereby, it can be argued that a high degree of alignment positively influences collaboration between importer and dealerships. Hence, the findings enabled to refine the existing body of knowledge for the investigated case due to this adaption of the factor of alignment. Moreover, the empirical study yielded that besides goals and decisions, the purpose (“the why”) ought to be aligned between an importer and its dealerships. In all embedded sub-cases, “creating the why” was emphasized as essential for a mutual understanding. Further, this was crucial for the parties to be committed to each other, which was stated to influence supply chain collaboration positively. Thus, purpose alignment was found to be another influencing aspect of alignment and was thus added in the empirical framework (Figure 2). Therewith the existing body of knowledge for the investigated case was further refined.

5.1.6 Satisfaction

The empirical results from the investigated case confirmed the findings from the existing body of knowledge, stating that satisfying experiences enhance a relationship between two parties

and therefore foster the collaboration among those parties (Mueller, 2014; van Riel et al. 2011). However, the fact that satisfaction was argued to be achieved by collaborative decision-making in previous literature cannot be confirmed for the investigated case as this was not emphasized in the empirical results. Instead, the findings for the investigated case highlighted the aspect of sharing information needed to achieve satisfaction in the importer – dealership relationship. It can be argued that this difference might occur based on the context the investigated study takes place, as this might be strongly influenced by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, information sharing on crucial parts and delays are more important than ever, as problems and bottlenecks occur frequently. Consequently, getting as much information as possible can decrease uncertainty in those challenging times and therefore increase satisfaction. Based on the importance highlighted in previous literature, satisfaction was listed as an own factor influencing the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration in the preliminary framework. Even though satisfaction and commitment are highly interconnected, the empirical results for the investigated case highlighted satisfaction as an aspect impacting commitment, as the findings revealed that satisfaction positively affects commitment. This finding confirmed the existing body of knowledge, as van Riel et al. (2011) argue that satisfaction can be seen as an influencing aspect of commitment. Therefore, satisfaction was modified accordingly in the empirical framework (Figure 2).

5.1.7 Power

Based on the existing body of knowledge, the empirical results from the investigated case revealed findings that belong to the factor of power. These findings addressed the distribution of power and the degree of dependency and were thus added as aspects impacting the factor of power. Both were emphasized in previous literature, as Daugherty et al. (2006) acknowledged that power not being distributed equally among partners influences supply chain collaboration, and Nadin (2009) stated that asymmetrical power generates a sense of strong reliance. Therewith, the findings confirmed the existing body of knowledge but even refined it, as the causal effects on the importer – dealership relationship were found. For the investigated case, the findings revealed that a strong power imbalance hinders while a high degree of dependency fosters their supply chain collaboration. Due to the high degree of dependency on both sides, power distribution becomes less asymmetrical in the investigated case. Further, an accompanying aspect became apparent in the findings of power distribution and was added as an additional aspect of the factor of power.

For the investigated case, this is about the aspect of the degree of autonomy. Even though this aspect is closely related to the aspect of power distribution, existing literature has not yielded this refinement in a sufficient way. Especially for the investigated case, this finding was decisive, as differences between the embedded sub-cases were found. It can be argued that the lower the degree of dependency of a dealership, the higher the degree of its autonomy and therefore, the higher the need for respective importer power to obtain the set targets. As multi-brand independently-owned dealerships experience a lower degree of dependency as they have other importers they can rely on, the cause for the revealed differences in the findings can be explained. Overall, this causal relationship yielded to have a negative impact on the importer – dealership collaboration, as the higher need for power increases the power imbalance between importer and dealerships and therefore negatively affects their collaboration. This is also confirmed with current literature, as it is stated that power negatively affects supply chain collaboration (Natour, Kiridena & Gibson, 2011).

The type of leadership is the last finding from the investigated case that was added as an aspect impacting the factor of power. The influence of leadership on power can be confirmed by both the findings and literature. Natour, Kiridena & Gibson (2011) emphasized the fact that the negative influence of power on supply chain collaboration can be weakened by affirmative leadership. The empirical results for the investigated case revealed the leadership style perceived by the importer-owned and single-brand independently-owned dealerships to be more supportive and thus power pressure reducing as the leadership style perceived by the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships, where it was described as a dictatorship. Hence, the aspect of leadership also revealed differences among the embedded sub-cases.

Based on the previous discussion, it can be argued that the collaboration in the first and second embedded sub-cases is less negatively influenced by the factor of power compared to the collaboration in the third embedded sub-case, as power plays a greater role in the latter relationship. For the investigated case, the factor of power is crucial as it can lead to a relationship which tends to be more towards a principal-agent relationship and therefore hinders importer – dealership supply chain collaboration.

5.1.8 Culture

The empirical results of the investigated case have revealed that the culture of the organization also has an influence on their supply chain collaboration. This finding was highlighted within all sub-cases. The factor of culture has not yet been sufficiently emphasized in previous

literature, as no clear findings of aspects of the factor of culture itself nor its influence on collaboration have been fully addressed. Therefore, the findings extended the existing body of knowledge by revealing organizational culture as an important factor influencing the importer – dealership collaboration and was added in the empirical framework (Figure 2). More precisely, the empirical results have indicated that the culture of the organizations is a factor influencing the overall context the collaboration takes place. It was found that organizational culture sets the tone of the environment for all other identified factors. As the culture perceived and the values and mindset that follow from this organizational culture create either hindering or fostering fundamental attitudes towards the collaborative relationship, it can be argued that the organizational culture determines whether collaboration is made easier or more difficult right from the start. Thereby, the perceived cultural differences within the embedded sub-cases described in the findings section might occur as importer-owned dealerships happened to experience the same or a closely related organizational culture as the one of the importer, while independently-owned dealerships might pursue a culture accompanying a different mindset or values. Here, the greatest difference can be seen in the multi-brand independently-owned dealerships. Thus, a clash of cultures can hinder the collaboration for the investigated case, as for example, the general level of mistrust can be higher in independently-owned dealerships, which negatively influences the collaboration.

Looking through the theoretical lens, it can be argued that culture might set the tone whether the relational setting starts off either as a principal-agent or principal-steward relationship. Even though all embedded sub-cases take place in a principal-agent setting, findings suggest that importer-owned dealerships might start off more towards the tendency of a principal-steward relationship, while single-brand or multi-brand independently-owned dealerships start off more towards the direction of a principal-agent relationship.

5.1.9 Ownership Structure

Even though ownership structure is not a finding that has been clearly stated by respondents of the investigated case to be a decisive factor influencing the collaboration, answers from all respondents revealed obvious differences among the three embedded sub-cases. Therefore, the chosen sub-cases for the investigated overarching case enabled to highlight differences on how some of the identified factors influence the importer – dealership collaboration for each respective sub-case, as pointed out in the previous discussion. Since the contractual arrangements are the same for each relationship, it can be argued that these differences occur

due to the different underlying characteristics of each embedded sub-case, which happened to be the ownership structure with the portfolio of offered brands. Therefore, the ownership structure seems to be an important influencing factor on the importer – dealership collaboration and was added in the empirical framework (Figure 2), as it sets the whole context in which the collaboration takes place. Here, it becomes obvious that both new findings of organizational culture and ownership structure set the tone for the context of the importer – dealership relationship. Further, the empirical results for the investigated case revealed that both factors are related, as different organizational cultures in the embedded sub-cases were highlighted based on different ownership structures. Thus, it can be argued that both factors set the context where the collaboration takes place, while the ownership structure might have an influence on the cultural setting for the mindset towards the importer – dealership relationship. Here the assumption from the previous sub-chapter is supported, as it again becomes visible that the importer-owned dealerships might start off with a tendency towards a principal-steward relationship, while independently-owned dealerships might start off more towards the direction of a principal-agent relationship.

5.2 Interconnections of Factors Influencing Importer – Dealership Supply Chain Collaboration

After discussing all factors and their influence on the importer – dealership collaboration, interconnections between those various factors will be elaborated on in the following.

It was revealed that the factors ownership structure and culture have an influence on all other identified factors, as they both create the contextual environment in which the importer – dealership collaboration takes place. Thereby, ownership structure was found to affect and shape culture, as it was identified that the cultural setting for the respective mindset of importer and dealerships towards the collaborative relationship is influenced by the respective ownership structure. As all the other identified factors and aspects interact in the respective ownership-driven cultural setting, both factors were arranged as a frame in the empirical framework (Figure 2). Furthermore, as stated in the findings and the discussion, the factors trust, commitment, and communication were found to be highly interconnected, as made clear by arrows between those factors. Moreover, trust, commitment, and communication were revealed to be the three most fundamental and relevant factors for collaboration between importers and dealerships, and it was found that all the other factors are influenced by these three. This chain of influence and interconnection is illustrated in the empirical framework

(Figure 2) due to the hierarchical separation of the factors. That is why the factors power, performance management, and alignment are placed below the factors of trust, commitment, and communication, as the first three are influenced by the last three. Further, a connecting line was identified between the factors power, performance management, and alignment, which is illustrated by arrows in Figure 2. Power was found to affect performance management, as the importer exerts its power through the way performance management is structured and conducted. Further, performance management influences alignment, as effective performance management contributes to aligning goals and decisions.

5.3 Empirical Framework

This section concludes by introducing the empirical framework that was created based on the empirical findings which have previously been discussed in relation to the existing body of knowledge. Therefore, the identified influences and interconnections take previous research on supply chain collaboration into consideration. However, as previous literature lacks sufficient academic contributions regarding the factors, their influences, and interconnections, the empirical framework is mainly driven and modified by the empirical findings of the investigated case.

The empirical study has revealed not only influencing factors and their impact on importer – dealership collaboration as well as how those factors are interconnected, but also specific aspects that impact each respective factor were identified and incorporated in the empirical framework (Figure 2). Furthermore, it shall be emphasized that although the empirical findings for each embedded sub-case revealed some differences regarding the influences of a respective factor on the collaborative importer – dealership relationship, the same framework illustrated in Figure 2 is applicable for all sub-cases. This is because overall, all influencing factors are shown in the empirical framework as well as their interconnections were confirmed in all embedded sub-cases and are thus applicable for all of these. The only difference is that some factors in each sub-case might affect collaboration differently or to another extent based on its underlying characteristics, as described in the previous discussion. In the end, the one empirical framework represents the expanded body of knowledge on the importer – dealership supply chain collaboration and is applicable in all embedded sub-cases.

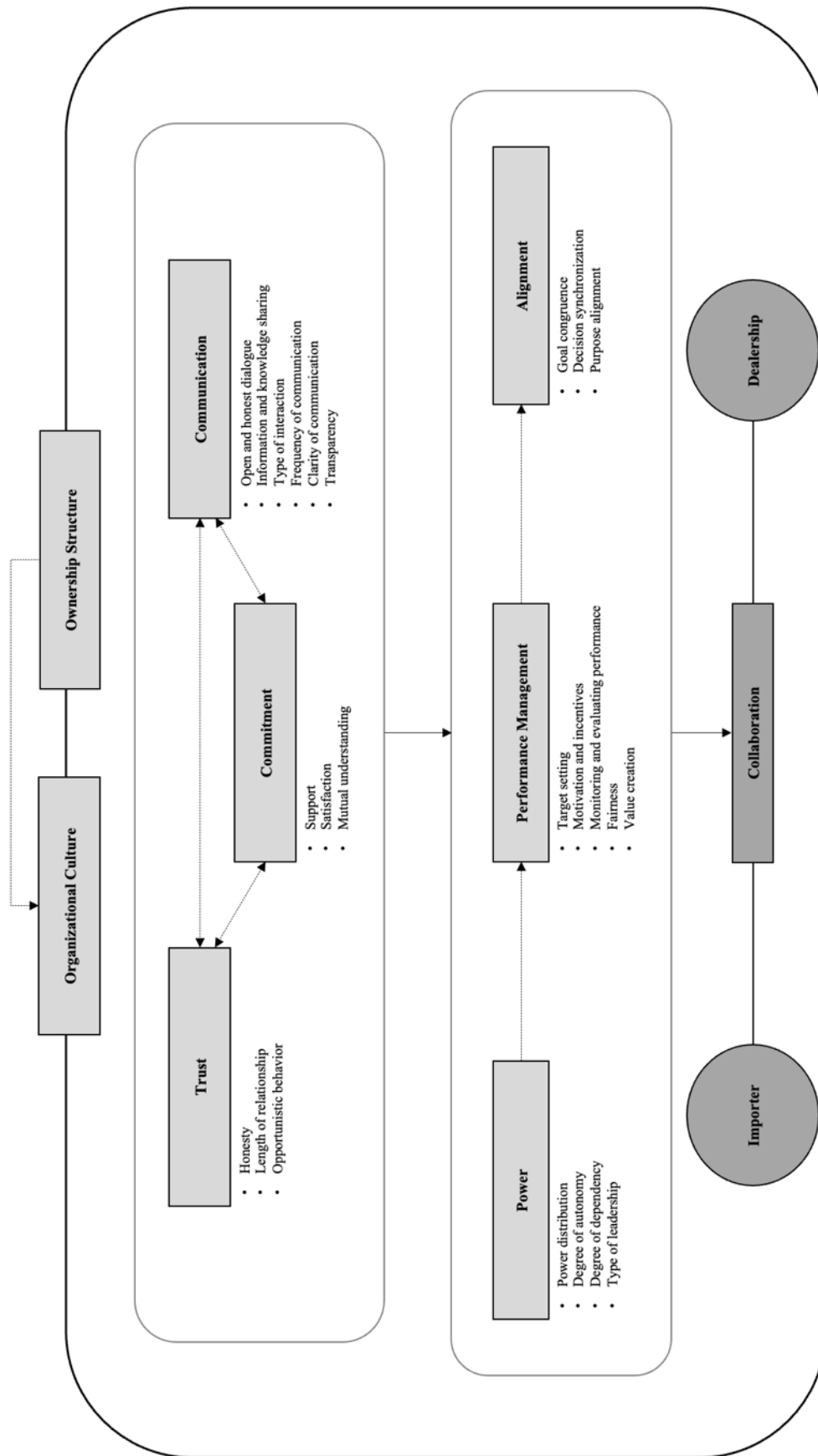


Figure 2 - Empirical framework on factors influencing importer – dealership supply chain collaboration and their interconnections (created by authors)

6 Conclusion

This research has been conducted to further contribute to the understanding of the influencing factors on supply chain collaboration by investigating collaboration between an automotive importer and dealerships based on a single-case study with three embedded sub-cases. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research question has been phrased:

How are relationship-related factors influencing importer – dealership supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry, and how are these factors interconnected?

The research question was addressed by identifying how the factors influence importer – dealership supply chain collaboration within the automotive industry and how those factors are interconnected in a principal-agent setting. The findings of the investigated case enabled to modify a framework with a chain of influences illustrated in different hierarchical levels as well as interconnections for the respective factors (Figure 2).

It was found that *ownership structure* and *culture* influence the collaboration between importer and dealerships by creating the contextual environment in which the collaboration takes place. Therefore, all other identified factors, their influences, and interconnections occur within this contextual environment. Further, it was identified that the factor *ownership structure* has an impact on the factor of *culture* by influencing the cultural setting for the respective mindset of importer and dealership towards the collaborative relationship. Moreover, the factors *trust*, *communication*, and *commitment* were found to be in the center of influencing aspects of all the identified factors. Thereby, high *trust*, effective *communication*, and strong *commitment* positively influence each other but also positively affect the other factors of *power*, *performance management*, and *alignment*. The former three factors therefore influence how the latter three factors are shaped and how this in turn affects collaboration between importers and dealerships. Further, an interconnection was identified within the latter three factors, as high *power* affects *performance management* while effective *performance management* contributes to fostering *alignment*.

The above-mentioned factors and interconnections influence to what degree supply chain collaboration between importers and dealerships can be fostered and how it may develop in a principal-agent setting.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The endeavor of this study was to contribute to academic research by addressing the defined threefold research gap. As theoretical contributions on collaborative relationships in the automotive context are limited to only a few relationships, the findings of the investigated case refined the understanding of inter-organizational collaborative relationships and extended the contributions by the collaborative relationship between importer and dealerships. Thereby, the call from Jonsson & Zineldin (2003) was followed, as they emphasized the need of understanding how successful relationships between supply chain parties can be achieved. Thus, by revealing the findings of the investigated case, the first part of the threefold research gap was addressed.

Moreover, the empirical results of this study enabled the identification of factors and their influences on importer – dealership supply chain collaboration and further revealed interconnections among these factors. This allowed addressing the second aspect of the threefold research gap, as the knowledge on how to manage collaboration was extended by contributing to a consensus of the main factors, their influences, and connections for the investigated case. Therewith, the invocation of Busi & Bititci (2006) to increase the understanding on factors influencing collaboration and of Akpınar (2017) to reveal a clearer understanding of their interconnections was followed.

Further, the theoretical perspectives applied to the importer – dealership relationship took issues such as unbalanced power and information asymmetry into account. Following the line of reasoning from Grimshaw, Willmott & Rubery (2004), this enabled to better comprehend collaboration. By applying both, an agency and stewardship perspective, a holistic view on supply chain collaboration in the automotive industry was revealed, and the credibility of the understanding of supply chain collaboration was enhanced. But not only did this study contribute to a better understanding of supply chain collaboration in the automotive industry, but it also added to the knowledge on agency and stewardship theory. By revealing aspects and their impact on each influencing factor, the knowledge on characteristics of each factor that move a relationship more towards a principal-agent or principal-steward relationship were refined. Further, the influence of the factors ownership structure and culture were identified. Thus, the empirical study contributed to an extended understanding of potential barriers to collaborate in both theoretical perspectives, as those two factors were not emphasized in previous literature on these two formal theories sufficiently. Therefore, the third research gap was addressed as well.

6.2 Practical Implications

This study aims to provide practical implications for importers and dealerships on how to foster supply chain collaboration within their relationship. As it was identified how the factors influence the collaboration and how these factors themselves are impacted by individual aspects, practical implications were able to be derived to positively affect each factor and thus improve the collaboration between importer and dealerships.

As ownership structure and culture influence the contextual environment the collaboration takes place in and the findings revealed that importer-owned dealerships have a tendency towards a principal-steward relationship while independently-owned dealerships indicated a tendency more towards a principal-agent relationship, it is suggested to adapt contracts according to the ownership structure in order to enable a more favorable setting for each respective type. Further, when developing the dealership network, importers may consider reducing the number of ownership structures for the dealerships to be able to develop a common cultural setting and respective mindsets to foster collaboration. For short-term practical implications, cultural change actions which will be jointly developed in workshops with the importer and independently-owned dealerships are proposed.

Furthermore, practical implications to increase trust, commitment, and effective communication are argued to be crucial, as it was found that these three factors are the most important ones and are influencing all the others. Therefore, both employees of an importer as well as employees and owners of dealerships must be aware of the importance and positively impact these factors through physical team building or afterwork events.

Also, the importance of sharing information and knowledge in a frequent and transparent way is proposed to be stressed even further. Besides the Dealership Board as a crucial collaboration tool that fosters the importer – dealership collaboration, regular round tables exceeding the scope and circle of participants of the Dealership Board are proposed to openly discuss different topics such as new car models, bottlenecks, or strategic changes.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The existing body of knowledge emphasized a wide range and number of factors influencing supply chain collaboration. Within the scope of this study, only the most frequently stated factors addressed by at least four independent research papers were incorporated due to the general limitations of time and scope of the study. Hence, this study is limited to these factors and their influences and interconnections. Therefore, future research may investigate whether

other, less frequently stated factors may be of specific importance for supply chain collaboration between importers and dealerships. Another limitation is concerned with the approach and design of this research study. As this study has examined the identified research gap through a qualitative research design and approach, the research gap is not addressed in a quantitative manner. Thus, no quantitative examination of the influences and interrelations of the identified factors affecting supply collaboration between importers and dealerships was conducted, neither by prior studies nor by this study. Hence, further research may quantitatively investigate the identified factors regarding their importance and weigh the different factors and their influences according to their relevance for supply chain collaboration. Clearly identified differences in importance between influencing factors may be particularly interesting for collaboration parties at both, importer and dealership side to actively focus on the factors with the highest relevance to foster collaboration with the respective party and thus being able to increase performance. Moreover, future research with an even greater number of interviewees may identify further factors influencing supply chain collaboration between importers and dealerships. Also, as this study focuses only on independent importer, future research on the collaborative relationship with OEM-owned importer and their respective dealerships might reveal additional contributions to the existing body of knowledge. Possible limitations due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on the context and setting of this study must also be addressed, as factors may have been perceived differently in relevancy due to changed circumstances and a high degree of uncertainty.

Lastly, limitations regarding the generalizability of the findings of this single-case study must be acknowledged, as the results might only be applicable for the chosen case firm and their respective dealerships. However, as the empirical results have been analyzed and confirmed based on the existing body of knowledge conducted from various contexts and different relationships, it can be argued that the results of this study are deemed generalizable to a certain degree in other industries and for other collaborative relationships. However, future research in form of multiple-case studies for other brands in the automotive industry and in other countries is deemed to be interesting to see whether differences in the factors, their influences, and interconnections occur.

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Appendix A – Interview Questionnaire (Importer)

General Questions:

1. Are we allowed to record (video and audio) the interview?
2. What is your role in the company?
3. What are your responsibilities and tasks?

Importer-specific questions:

1. Does collaboration play an important role in the relationship with your dealers (importer – dealership relationship)?
 - a) *If yes, why is this the case?*
 - b) *If no, why would you say it does not?*
2. In general, what factors do you think influence your collaboration with the dealerships?
3. Are there any factors that might influence collaboration? When and how does it show?
 - a) How important is trust and what does it have an influence on?
 - b) How important is commitment and what does it have an influence on?
 - c) How important is goal congruence and what does it have an influence on?
 - d) How important is decision synchronization and what does it have an influence on?
 - e) How important is communication and what does it have an influence on?
 - f) How important is performance management and what does it have an influence on?
 - g) How important is power and what does it have an influence on?/ What role does power play in your relationship and how does it affect collaboration?
 - h) How important is satisfaction and what does it have an influence on?
4. How would you describe the collaboration between you and your dealerships?
5. Where are strength and weaknesses in the collaboration?
6. If collaboration is not going well, what could be potential reasons?
7. Can you see differences among the different dealerships?
8. Why do you think these differences occur?
9. How do you usually interact with the dealers? And how could this have an impact on collaboration?
 - a) *What measures are you taking to foster collaboration with your dealerships?*
 - b) *If any, which ones would you deem to be the most effective/ineffective?*
10. Can you see any interconnections between the influencing factors that we have talked about? If yes, which interconnections can you see?

Appendix B – Interview Questionnaire (Dealerships)

General Questions:

1. Are we allowed to record (video and audio) the interview?
2. What is your role in the company?
3. What are your responsibilities and tasks?

Dealership-specific questions:

1. What is the ownership structure between you and Skandinavisk Motor A/S like?
2. Is Skandinavisk Motor A/S your only supplier?
3. How long have you been in a contractual relationship with Skandinavisk Motor A/S?
4. Does collaboration play an important role in the relationship with Skandinavisk Motor A/S (importer – dealership relationship)?
 - a) *If yes, why is this the case?*
 - b) *If no, why would you say it does not?*
5. In general, what factors do you think influence your collaboration with the importer?
6. Are there any factors that might influence collaboration? When and how does it show?
 - a) How important is trust and what does it have an influence on?
 - b) How important is commitment and what does it have an influence on?
 - c) How important is goal congruence and what does it have an influence on?
 - d) How important is decision synchronization and what does it have an influence on?
 - e) How important is communication and what does it have an influence on?
 - f) How important is performance management and what does it have an influence on?
 - g) How important is power and what does it have an influence on?/ What role does power play in your relationship and how does it affect collaboration?
 - h) How important is satisfaction and what does it have an influence on?
7. How do you usually interact with the importer? And how could this have an impact on collaboration?
8. If you imagine the best collaboration possible, what needs to be ensured that this collaboration can be considered best? When would you consider collaboration as good/successful?
 - a) *What measures are you taking to foster collaboration with your importer?*
 - b) *If any, which ones would you deem to be the most effective/ineffective?*
9. Where are strength and weaknesses in the collaboration?
10. Can you see any interconnections between the influencing factors that we have talked about? If yes, which interconnections can you see?