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Using an assimilation and contrast framework, the authors assess the buffering and amplifying effects of relationship commitment on organizational buyers' intentions to switch suppliers when a relationship is strained by the incumbent's own misbehavior. The results of three studies show that both calculative and affective commitment buffer incumbent suppliers against minor incidences of their own misbehavior but that affective commitment also reliably amplifies the adverse effects of an incumbent supplier's flagrant opportunism. Process tests indicate that buyer perceptions of supplier conformance to normative standards account for (completely mediate) the observed buffering and amplification effects in a manner consistent with the underlying assimilation and contrast framework.

Keywords: relationship commitment, business-to-business relationships, buffering and amplifying effects, opportunism and ethical violations, assimilations and contrast

Buffering and Amplifying Effects of Relationship Commitment in Business-to-Business Relationships

Commitment between buyers and sellers has been well established as a crucial factor in relationship development and continuity (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Research has shown that relationship commitment has many benefits, including reducing uncertainty, increasing exchange efficiency and satisfaction, and enhancing performance and profitability (e.g., Anderson and Weitz 1992; Brown, Lusch, and Nicholson 1995; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Lusch and Brown 1996). Even so, several studies (e.g., Anderson and Jap 2005; Grayson and Ambler 1999; Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003) have investigated a "dark side" of close relationships. The current research explores both the benefits (buffering effects) and the dark side (amplification effects) of commitment to business-to-business relationships and makes theoretically grounded predictions regarding conditions under which each type of effect occurs. We report three studies using an assimilation and contrast framework in which we predict and find systematic buffering (assimilation) and amplifying (contrast) effects of commitment on threats to relationships posed by supplier misbehavior (unethical behavior and opportunism).

Incumbent suppliers might believe that a buyer's commitment provides a cushion they can use to extract extra rents from a relationship or a buffer to protect them from consequences of their own misbehaviors. We suggest that under certain conditions, this supposition is well grounded, whereas in others, it is not; indeed, a buyer's commitment can backfire on the supplier and intensify threats to the relationship. We investigate when a buyer's commitment has buffering effects that protect incumbent suppliers against their own misbehaviors and when it amplifies the adverse effects of relational threats. Understanding the circumstances in which buyer commitment buffers suppliers against their own misbehaviors and when it amplifies threats to relationships can provide useful insights both for "in-suppliers" that

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are interested in maintaining the quality of ongoing relationships and for "out-suppliers" that want to encroach on competitors' committed relationships. For example, in-suppliers would benefit from knowledge of circumstances that increase or decrease their vulnerability to competitive threat, whereas out-suppliers could formulate more effective selling strategies with knowledge of circumstances in which buyers are most likely to entertain competitive overtures (Brown 1995).

If commitment buffers existing relationships against opportunism or unethical behavior, it is likely to do so only to a limited degree. Although commitment may cause mild incidences of misbehavior to be assimilated to a standard of normative behavior, resulting in buffering effects, when supplier misbehavior becomes conspicuous, it is likely that buffering effects will attenuate and cease to bind the buyer to the incumbent. We suggest that at least for modest levels of supplier misbehavior, status quo bias will result in greater stability in the relationship (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991; Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988). Such status quo bias is based on the switching costs of calculative commitment and the social bonds of affective commitment. As supplier misbehaviors become more serious, the buffering effects of both calculative and affective commitment are likely to attenuate, and at severe levels of misbehavior, affective commitment may amplify the effects of misbehaviors on switching intentions.

When affectively committed buyers become aware of unethical or opportunistic seller behaviors, they may believe that their trust has been betrayed and become motivated to switch suppliers. The possibility that commitment can backfire and amplify threats to buyer–seller relationships has not previously been investigated.

The objectives of this study include assessing (1) when and to what extent commitment buffers, has no binding effect on, or amplifies the effects of supplier opportunism or unethical behavior on buyers' switching intentions; (2) the differential effects of two types of supplier misbehavior (ethical violations and opportunism); (3) the differential buffering and amplifying effects of two forms of relationship commitment (affective and calculative); and (4) the theoretical process through which these effects occur.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The Role of Commitment in Buyer–Seller Relationships

The relationship marketing literature has focused primarily on two forms of commitment: calculative and affective (Fullerton 2003; Gilliland and Bello 2002; Gustafsson, Johnson, and Roos 2005; Johnson et al. 2001). Calculative commitment reflects the extent to which exchange partners perceive the need to preserve a relationship to avoid the switching costs involved in leaving. This form of commitment is grounded on an "instrumental realization of the benefits of staying and the costs of leaving" (Gilliland and Bello 2002, p. 28). Several studies highlight the calculative aspect of commitment. For example, Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer (1995) describe commitment as being grounded on acts such as idiosyncratic investments, proprietary information disclosure, and adaptation to partners' requirements.

In contrast, affective commitment reflects social and psychological attachment to an exchange partner based on feelings of identification, loyalty, and affiliation (Bansal, Irving, and Taylor 2004; Geyskens et al. 1996; Gilliland and Bello 2002; Gustafsson, Johnson, and Roos 2005; Verhoef 2003). It is characterized by sentiments of allegiance and faithfulness and reflects a party's positive feelings toward its exchange partner. Whereas calculative commitment is grounded on rationality and economic concerns, such as switching costs, affective commitment has emotional roots and grows from social exchange (Gustafsson, Johnson, and Roos 2005).

Opportunism and Unethical Behavior as Threats to Relationship

From an incumbent supplier's perspective, buyer commitment becomes most valuable when a relationship is challenged or strained (e.g., by an incumbent supplier's perceived violation of relational or societal norms). Although many types of supplier error can potentially challenge business-to-business relationships, we focus on two types of supplier misbehavior, opportunism and ethical violations, which occur frequently and threaten long-term business relationships.

We define opportunism as transgression of the norms of a specific business relationship through behaviors such as evading obligations, taking advantage of contractual loopholes, and exacting unfair concessions when market conditions allow (Hadfield 1990; Heide, Dutta, and Bergen 1998; Murry and Heide 1998; Stern, El-Ansary, and Coughlan 1998; Wathne and Heide 2000). As such, opportunism represents a personal, a social, and an economic challenge to relationships, involving actions by one party that are directly detrimental to the interests of the other. Such behavior is likely to provoke a sense of betrayal of trust in the aggrieved party.

We define unethical behaviors as transgressions of relational or societal norms of fairness and honesty, such as providing false information about products and services, exploiting workers, manipulating data, and using high-pressure sales and negotiation tactics (e.g., Kaptein 2008). Although, in general, unethical behavior can be either directed personally against the other party to the relationship or focused on issues exogenous to the relationship, for purposes of this study, we operationalize it as violations of societal norms (rather than as transgressions of specific relational norms).[1] This narrow operationalization results in a clear distinction between opportunism (violations of specific relational norms) and unethical behavior (violations of societal norms that are not personally directed against the other party to the relationship). This distinction leads to theoretically grounded hypotheses predicting differential effects of commitment with respect to opportunism and unethical behavior.

The business press is rife with examples of opportunism, such as suppliers cutting out channel members by selling direct to major customers to increase margins and attempting to increase penetration by adding new distributors in what had been protected territories, and of unethical behaviors, such as spreading false rumors, selling coercively, failing to uphold industry and professional standards, and sell-

[1]Although from an institutional theory perspective Grewal and Dharwadkar (2002) suggest that societal norms influence relational norms, we manipulate the two types of buyer misbehavior orthogonally to permit clean tests of our hypotheses, which make clear distinctions between the two.

ing products suppliers know to be substandard. These types of supplier misbehavior have not previously been investigated as threats to relationships that may be buffered or amplified by commitment.

Assimilation and Contrast

Social judgment theory holds that people's prior judgments or attitudes produce systematic distortions in perceptions of social stimuli (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Sherif and Hovland 1961). The theory posits that social stimuli falling within a "latitude of acceptance" become assimilated to an anchor (i.e., prior judgment) that serves as a standard of reference and thus are judged as more similar to the anchor than they actually are. For example, a buyer's prior perception that an incumbent supplier's behavior has conformed to normative standards serves as an anchor, and behaviors that do not differ too greatly from this anchor are assimilated and judged acceptable. Therefore, supplier behaviors that are assimilated to a normative standard result in buffering effects, in which relational threats are dampened.

Stimuli that are sufficiently discrepant from an anchor fall into a "latitude of rejection," resulting in contrast effects, which make them appear more dissimilar from the standard than they actually are. For example, flagrantly unethical or opportunistic supplier behaviors, being clearly discrepant from a normative standard, fall into the latitude of rejection and prompt contrast effects, resulting in increased buyer switching intentions. Contrast effects result in amplification of relational threats posed by supplier misbehavior.

Between the latitudes of acceptance and rejection, the theory posits a "latitude of noncommitment," in which neither contrast (amplification) nor assimilation (buffering) effects occur. The theory holds that the width of this latitude, like the widths of the latitudes of acceptance and rejection, is a function of the self-relevance to the perceiver of the phenomenon being judged. Calculative and affective commitment represent motivational influences that affect the widths of the latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment and, therefore, whether buffering, amplifying, or null effects occur at given levels of relational threat. Relational commitment is likely to carry with it a motivationally driven tendency to perceive and interpret supplier behaviors as being consistent with normative standards and, therefore, to result in assimilation (i.e., buffering) effects.

Moderating Effects of Calculative Commitment

When calculative commitment is high, buyers make tangible or intangible investments that are specifically tailored to the existing relationship and difficult to redeploy without substantial loss in value (Burnham, Frels, and Mahajan 2003; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Heide and John 1992; Seabright, Levinthal, and Fichman 1992; Williamson 1985). Buyers that are committed to a supply relationship through economic switching costs (i.e., calculative commitment) are likely to assimilate supplier behaviors that differ mildly from a normative standard because they have little alternative to remaining in the relationship, and they will be motivated to maintain cognitive consistency (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Festinger 1957). Therefore, at modest levels of supplier misbehavior (either ethical violations or opportunism), we expect assimilation (buffering) effects of calculative commitment.

As supplier misbehavior becomes more conspicuous, it becomes increasingly difficult for buyers to assimilate such behavior to a normative standard. Even so, we suggest that for buyers high in calculative commitment, the latitude of noncommitment, in which neither assimilation nor contrast effects occur, will be wide enough to encompass even serious instances of supplier misbehavior. Although a supplier's aberrant behavior may violate social or societal norms implicit in the relationship, the buyer's economic investments in the relationship should constitute an inertial motivational force that influences buyer perceptions and interpretations and binds the parties together. Although a supplier's violation of relational norms may provoke discord, buyers' calculative commitment should weigh in favor of continuance. When a supplier's unethical and opportunistic behavior is conspicuous, however, the risk of economic harm to the buyer may become serious enough to override switching costs and prompt a change of supplier. Even then, because the latitude of noncommitment is relatively broad (compared with conditions in which the buyer has a deep personal psychological commitment), contrast effects resulting in boomerang and threat amplification may not occur. Thus, we posit that calculative commitment should have (1) buffering effects at low levels of supplier misbehavior and (2) no effect at high levels of supplier misbehavior.

H_1: Calculative commitment has a buffering (assimilation) effect on buyers' switching intentions when ethical violations are mild and no effect when they are severe.

H_2: Calculative commitment has a buffering (assimilation) effect on buyers' switching intentions when opportunism is mild and no effect when it is severe.

Moderating Effects of Affective Commitment

In contrast to calculative commitment, affective commitment involves a strong sense of identification, loyalty, affiliation, and obligation. Gustafsson, Johnson, and Roos (2005, p. 211) describe affective commitment as "hotter, or more emotional" than calculative commitment, which is "colder, or more rational." People develop personal relationships that supplement and reinforce their formal roles (Lawler and Yoon 1998; Ring and Van de Ven 1994). As such, affective commitment also constitutes a motivational influence that favors assimilation of mild levels of supplier misbehavior. Affectively committed buyers are likely to interpret ambiguous supplier behaviors in a manner consistent with the positive affective tone of the relationship, leading to assimilation (buffering) effects when supplier misbehavior is mild (Finkel et al. 2002). Thus, at mild levels of supplier misbehavior, we expect that affective commitment has a buffering effect on buyer switching intentions.

Affective commitment may also contribute to a relatively broad latitude of noncommitment because affectively committed buyers may be inclined to give suppliers the benefit of the doubt when they suspect (but have not confirmed) misbehavior. This is especially likely when the supplier's misbehavior is not perceived as being directed at the buyer personally. However, when supplier misbehavior is severe and the buyer construes it as being directed specifically at it (e.g., as in the case of severe opportunism), contrast (amplification) effects are likely. Affectively committed buyers are likely to perceive opportunism as betrayal of the personal trust they have invested in the relationship, leading to nega-

tive reactions (Finkel et al. 2002; Morrison and Robinson 1997). Extending oneself to another entails exposure to risk and vulnerability. Although such exposure creates motivational tendencies toward assimilating mild levels of supplier misbehavior, it may have the opposite effect when supplier misbehavior is perceived as being personally directed and severe enough to fall into the latitude of rejection. When the supplier exploits the buyer's exposure opportunistically, negative affect and deterioration of the relationship are likely. As a result, damage to the flow of social reciprocity in the relationship may be irreparable and lead to dissolution. The buyer's affective commitment is likely to have a boomerang effect, making the likelihood of switching greater than it would be in a less committed relationship (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Sherif and Sherif 1967). When buyers perceive that the supplier's behavior is unacceptable (i.e., falls into the latitude of rejection), a sense of personal betrayal, leading to contrast effects, is likely.

Antia and Frazier (2001) provide some evidence for the buffering and amplification effect in the context of franchising relationships. They show that franchisors are more tolerant of franchisees' violations of contractual obligations when relationalism is high, suggesting a buffering effect when affective commitment is high. However, this effect is attenuated and leads to an amplification effect when violations affect transaction-specific investments. In other words, when the relationship between the principal and the agent is strong and severe violations take place, principals are more likely to enforce harsh sanctions. Chandrashekaran and colleagues (2007) show that long-standing customers and customers who have had favorable experiences in the past may be more sensitive to problems and less forgiving than new customers.

We expect that contrast (amplification) effects are more likely to result from opportunism than from unethical behavior (which we operationalize as not being directed specifically against the buyer) because buyers will have a wide latitude of noncommitment and tend to give suppliers the benefit of the doubt when suppliers are accused or suspected of unethical behavior that is not directed personally against the buyer. On the basis of the foregoing reasoning, we posit the following:

H_3: Affective commitment has a buffering (assimilation) effect on buyers' switching intentions when ethical violations are mild and no effect when they are severe.

H_4: Affective commitment has a buffering (assimilation) effect on buyers' switching intentions when opportunism is mild and an amplification (contrast) effect when it is severe.

In summary, H_1 and H_3 predict identical effects of calculative commitment and affective commitment with respect to ethical violations; specifically, both should have buffering effects on buyers' switching intentions when ethical violations are mild but no effect when they are severe. In contrast, H_2 and H_4 predict differential effects of the two forms of commitment with respect to opportunism. In particular, calculative commitment should have a buffering effect when opportunism is mild but no effect when it is severe, whereas affective commitment should have a buffering effect when opportunism is mild but an amplification effect when it is severe.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we conducted four separate 2×2 between-subjects factorial experiments with undergraduate students from a large public university. This study subjected the theory-based predictions to a rigorous falsification attempt (Popper 1963) before proceeding to field-based applications of the theory (Calder, Phillips, and Tybout 1981). We conducted the experiments separately to ensure that manipulations did not have unintended spillover effects. Specifically, we believed that manipulating affective and calculative commitment orthogonally would be difficult.

The first experiment examined the effects of calculative commitment and ethical violations (H_1), the second experiment examined the effects of calculative commitment and opportunism (H_2), the third experiment examined the effects of affective commitment and ethical violations (H_3), and the fourth experiment examined the effects of affective commitment and opportunism (H_4). A total of 440 study participants completed the four experiments that collectively constitute Study 1.

In each experiment, we randomly assigned participants to different experimental conditions. In all conditions, study participants assumed the role of a purchasing manager responsible for buying microchips for a midsize electronic equipment manufacturer. Joshi and Arnold (1997) found that similar scenarios using microchips were realistic and effective.

We asked participants to evaluate an incumbent supplier and to decide whether to switch to an alternative supplier during a year-end performance review. Scenarios described the alternative supplier as capable of providing the same quality chips as those supplied by the incumbent. Participants then received the commitment manipulation (either calculative or affective commitment, depending on the experiment). The calculative commitment manipulation emphasized the buyer's dependence on the supplier and the costs of switching, whereas the affective commitment manipulation highlighted the buyer's closeness to and identification with the supplier (see Web Appendix A at http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

In addition to information describing the supplier relationship, participants in the ethical violations condition also received information about ethical violations committed by the incumbent supplier. This included providing false information, manipulating performance data, and using high-pressure sales tactics. Participants in the opportunism condition received information about the incumbent supplier's opportunism. This included behaviors that were prohibited either explicitly or implicitly by the buyer. As we noted previously, ethical violations were described as not being directed specifically at the buyer but rather as violations of societal norms of fairness and honesty, whereas opportunism was described as violating specific norms of the buyer–seller relationship. We report manipulation checks in Web Appendix B (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

Dependent Measure

Participants indicated their likelihood of switching from the incumbent to an alternative supplier on a scale ranging from 0 ("not at all likely to switch") to 100 ("extremely

likely to switch").[2] The next section discusses the results of Study 1, which we depict in Figure 1.

Calculative Commitment

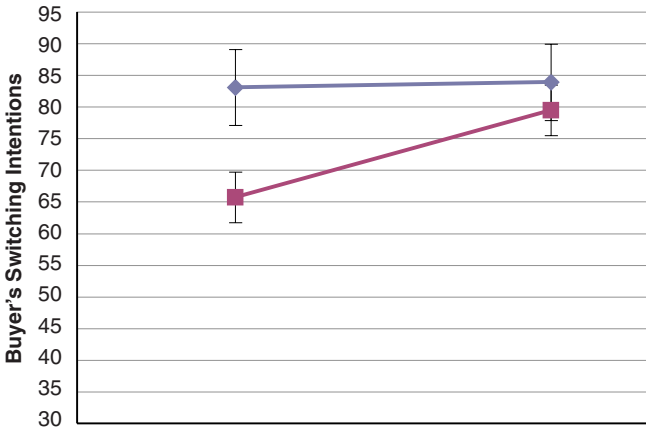
H_1 predicted a buffering (assimilation) effect of calculative commitment when ethical violations are mild but no effect when they are severe. Consistent with this prediction, the calculative commitment × ethical violations interaction was marginally significant ($F_{1, 63} = 2.78$, $p < .10$). To better understand the form of the interaction, we analyzed the simple main effects of ethical violations on switching intentions at high and low levels of calculative commitment. The results show that the buffering effect of calculative commitment on switching intentions is significant for mild (low calculative commitment = 83.13 versus high calculative commitment = 65.71, $p < .05$) but not for severe (low calculative commitment = 83.89 versus high calculative commit-

[2]We also assessed the likelihood that the respondent would continue to buy from the current supplier on a 0% (definitely switching to a new supplier) to 100% (definitely continuing with the current supplier) scale. The results are almost identical to the dependent variable that measured the extent to which they would switch.

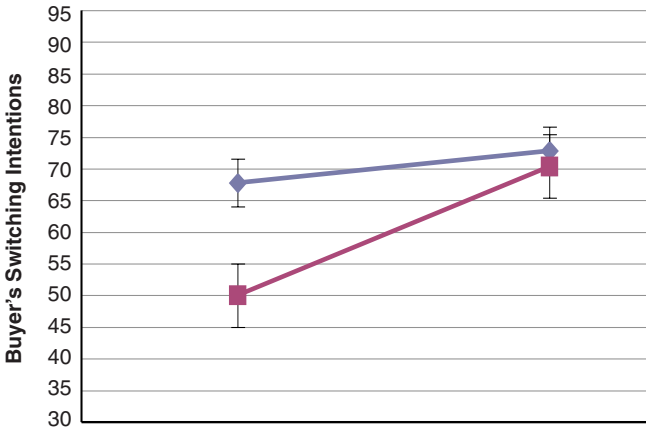
Figure 1

STUDY 1 RESULTS: ILLUSTRATING BUFFERING AND AMPLIFYING EFFECTS IN THE FACE OF INCUMBENT MISBEHAVIORS AND VIOLATIONS

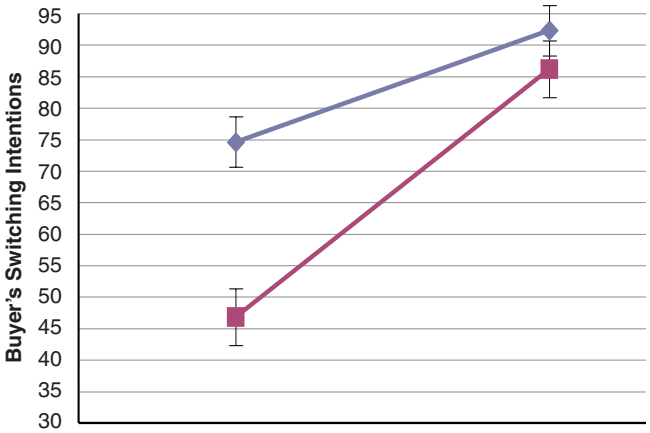
Calculative Commitment (CC) × Ethical Violations (H_1)



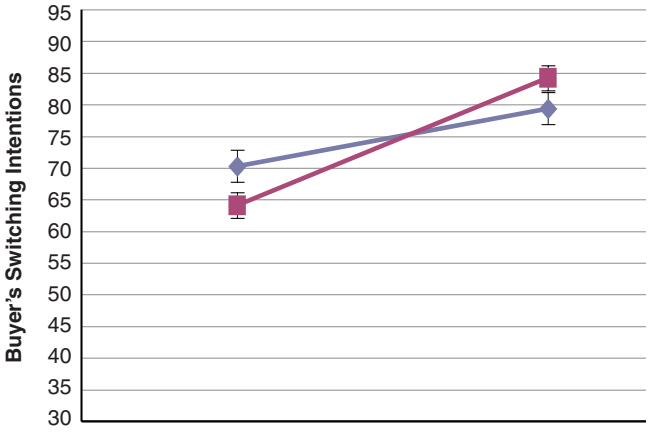
Calculative Commitment (CC) × Opportunism (H_2)



Affective Commitment (AC) × Ethical Violations (H_3)



Affective Commitment (AC) × Opportunism (H_4)



Notes: Error bars reflect standard error of the mean.

ment = 79.47, not significant [n.s.]) ethical violations. Thus, calculative commitment buffers relationships against mild but not against severe ethical violations.

As H_2 predicted, we found a significant buffering effect of calculative commitment against mild opportunism but no effect when opportunism was severe. The calculative commitment × opportunism interaction was significant ($F_{1, 96}$ = 4.0, $p < .05$). Analysis of simple main effects showed a significant buffering effect when opportunism was mild (low calculative commitment = 67.8 versus high calculative commitment = 50.0, $p < .05$) but not when it was severe (low calculative commitment = 72.8 versus high calculative commitment = 70.4, n.s.). Thus, calculative commitment buffers relationships against mild but not against severe opportunism.

Affective Commitment

As H_3 predicted, we found a significant buffering effect of affective commitment against mild ethical violations; the calculative commitment × ethical violations interaction was significant ($F_{1, 140}$ = 12.13, $p < .01$). Examination of the simple main effects indicated a strong buffering effect of affective commitment on switching intentions when ethical violations were mild (low affective commitment = 74.6 versus high affective commitment = 46.8, $p < .01$) but no effect when the ethical violations were severe (low affective commitment = 92.3 versus high affective commitment = 86.2, n.s.). Thus, affective commitment buffers relationships against mild but not against severe ethical violations.

As H_4 predicted, the affective commitment × opportunism interaction was significant ($F_{1, 139}$ = 3.74, $p < .05$). Analysis of simple main effects showed a marginally significant buffering effect in the mild opportunism condition (low affective commitment = 70.26 versus high affective commitment = 64.12, $p < .10$) but a marginally significant amplifying effect of affective commitment on switching intentions in the severe opportunism condition (low affective commitment = 79.4 versus high affective commitment = 84.20, $p < .10$). Thus, affective commitment buffers the incumbent supplier against mild opportunism, but when opportunism is severe, affective commitment produces a contrast effect, amplifying switching intentions.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support all four hypotheses. Calculative commitment had buffering effects when both ethical violations and opportunism were mild, but these effects attenuated when the misbehaviors were severe. Affective commitment had similar buffering effects when ethical violations and opportunism were mild. However, when opportunism was severe, affective commitment amplified switching intentions. Thus, affective commitment can produce either buffering or amplifying effects, depending on the severity of supplier misbehavior and whether the buyer assimilates or contrasts the behavior with respect to a normative standard of behavior.

Study 2 extends the investigation to executive and working MBA students with an online data collection procedure. As we describe and report in the following sections, Study 2 tests the same hypotheses as Study 1, but it also extends the work by testing a mediation hypothesis that reflects the theoretical process through which buffering and amplifying effects occur.

STUDY 2

As in Study 1, we conducted four separate 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial experiments using executive MBA and working MBA students from two large public universities. We conducted these experiments using an online survey Web site (Qualtrics). We ran the experiments separately to avoid unintended spillover effects of the manipulations.

Four hundred twenty study participants completed the four experiments that constitute Study 2. All were full-time executives or managers in organizations in the southwestern United States, their average age was 28.5, they had an average of 4.78 years of full-time work experience, and 67% were men. We randomly assigned participants to conditions. Procedures and manipulations are similar to Study 1; we describe them, along with manipulation check results, in greater detail in Web Appendixes A and B (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

Dependent and Process Measures

Participants indicated their likelihood of switching from the incumbent to an alternative supplier on a scale ranging from 0 ("not at all likely to switch") to 100 ("extremely likely to switch").[3] Our theoretical framework posits that assimilation (buffering) effects result from buyers perceiving supplier actions as consistent with a normative standard, whereas contrast effects result from buyers perceiving supplier actions as discrepant from a normative standard. Thus, to assess the theoretical process underlying the hypothesized effects, we asked study participants to rate the extent to which they perceived the supplier's behavior as conforming with what they would expect, being typical of supplier behavior, and being acceptable. We combined these three items into a composite index ($\alpha = .72$) of conformance to a normative standard of behavior.

Consistent with the theoretical framework, we reasoned that buyer perceptions of the supplier's conformance to a normative standard would mediate the buffering and amplifying effects of commitment on buyer switching intentions. In other words, if buffering effects occur by assimilating mild instances of supplier misbehavior to a normative standard, controlling for buyer perceptions of conformance to normative standards should account for (i.e., completely mediate) the buffering effects. Likewise, because we conceptualize amplification (contrast) effects as resulting from perceiving supplier behavior as clearly discrepant from normative standards, we expect that buyer perceptions of conformance to normative standards will completely mediate the predicted amplification effect.

Calculative Commitment

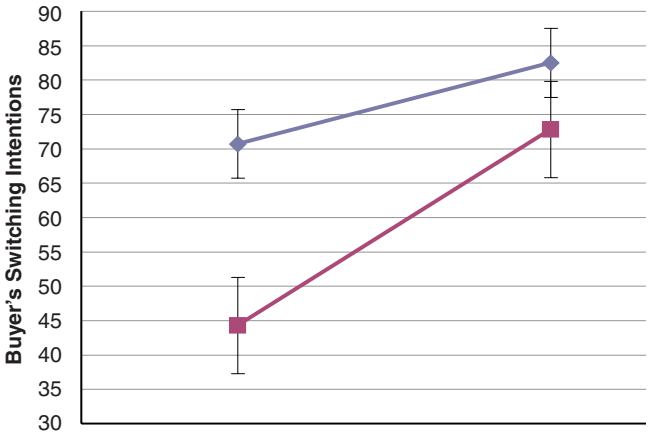
We depict the results of Study 2 in Figure 2. Consistent with H_1, the calculative commitment × ethical violations interaction was significant ($F_{1, 106}$ = 4.58, $p < .05$). To probe the interaction, we analyzed the simple main effects of ethical violations on switching intentions at high and low levels of calculative commitment. The results show the predicted

[3]Similar to Study 1, we assessed the likelihood that the respondent would continue to buy from the current supplier on a 0% (definitely switching to a new supplier) to 100% (definitely continuing with the current supplier) scale. The results are almost identical to the dependent variable that measured the extent to which they would switch.

Figure 2

STUDY 2 RESULTS: ILLUSTRATING BUFFERING AND AMPLIFYING EFFECTS IN THE FACE OF INCUMBENT MISBEHAVIORS AND VIOLATIONS

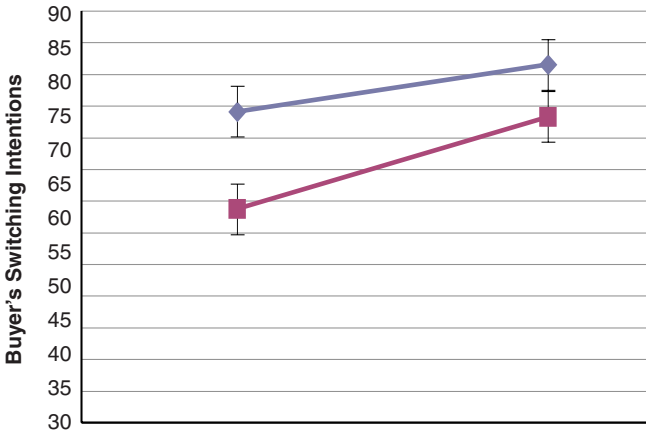
Calculative Commitment (CC) × Ethical Violations (H_1)



	Mild	Severe
Low CC	70.7	82.5
High CC	44.3	72.8

Severity of Ethical Violations

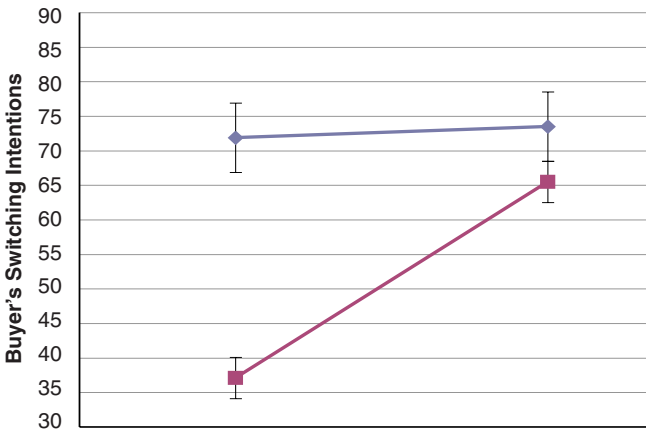
Calculative Commitment (CC) × Opportunism (H_2)



	Mild	Severe
Low CC	79.1	86.5
High CC	63.7	78.3

Severity of Opportunism

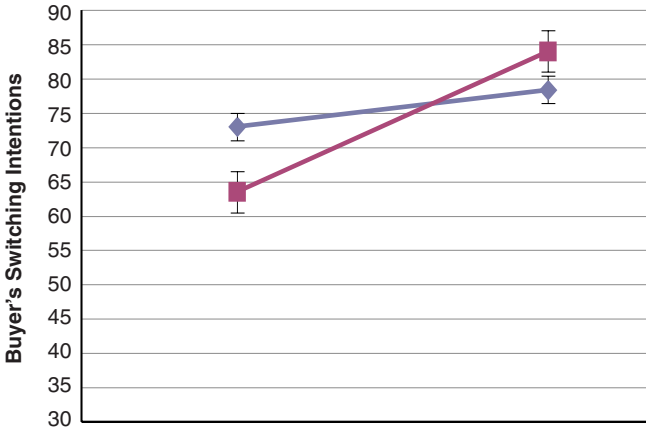
Affective Commitment (AC) × Ethical Violations (H_3)



	Mild	Severe
Low AC	71.9	73.5
High AC	37.1	65.5

Severity of Ethical Violations

Affective Commitment (AC) × Opportunism (H_4)



	Mild	Severe
Low AC	73	78.4
High AC	63.5	84

Severity of Opportunism

Notes: Error bars reflect standard error of the mean.

buffering effect of calculative commitment on switching intentions for mild (low calculative commitment = 70.7 versus high calculative commitment = 44.3, $p < .01$) but not for severe (low calculative commitment = 82.5 versus high calculative commitment = 72.8, n.s.) ethical violations. Thus, calculative commitment buffers relationships against mild but not against severe ethical violations.

As H_2 predicted, we found a significant calculative commitment × opportunism interaction, indicating a buffering effect of calculative commitment when opportunism was mild (low calculative commitment = 79.1 versus high calculative commitment = 63.7, $p < .01$), but no effect when opportunism was severe (low calculative commitment = 86.5 versus high calculative commitment = 78.3, n.s.). Thus, calculative commitment buffers relationships against mild but not against severe opportunism.

Affective Commitment

As H_3 predicted, the affective commitment × ethical violations interaction was significant ($F_{1, 90} = 9.81$, $p < .01$). Examination of the simple main effects indicated a buffering effect of affective commitment when ethical violations were mild (low affective commitment = 71.9 versus high affective commitment = 37.1, $p < .01$) but no effect when ethical violations were severe (low affective commitment = 73.5 versus high affective commitment = 65.5, n.s.).

Consistent with H_4, we also found a significant affective commitment × opportunism interaction ($F_{1, 125} = 8.02$, $p < .01$). As predicted, we found a significant buffering effect when opportunism was mild (low affective commitment = 73.04 versus high affective commitment = 63.50, $p < .05$) but a marginally significant amplifying effect of affective commitment when opportunism was severe (low affective commitment = 78.42 versus high affective commitment = 84.10, $p < .10$). Affective commitment buffers the incumbent supplier against mild opportunism, but when opportunism is severe, affective commitment amplifies switching intentions.

Mediation and Process Testing

Mediation tests of the assimilation and contrast process underlying these effects uniformly indicated that buyer perceptions of conformance to a normative standard completely mediated the buffering and amplification effects. Details appear in Web Appendix C (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 using executive and working MBA students and a different data collection method. As in Study 1, we found that calculative commitment buffers relationships when supplier misbehaviors are mild. When misbehaviors become severe, however, the buffering effects of calculative commitment attenuate and no longer protect the incumbent supplier from relational threats posed by their own misbehaviors.

As in Study 1, we found similar buffering (assimilation) effects of affective commitment at mild levels of both ethical violations and opportunism. However, when opportunism was severe, affective commitment again amplified switching intentions. Perceived conformance to normative standards completely mediated the observed buffering and amplification effects, supporting the assimilation and contrast process posited to explain these effects.

Study 3 extends the investigation to a field setting in which practicing organizational buyers rate their calculative commitment and affective commitment with respect to an actual incumbent supplier and then respond to scenarios of misbehaviors by this supplier. Thus, in Study 3, we measure rather than manipulate commitment.

STUDY 3

Sampling and Data Collection

We sampled from a list of purchasing professionals in four Standard Industrial Classification groups.[4] These include fabricated metal products; industrial and commercial machinery and computer equipment; electronic and electrical equipment components; and measurement, control, and analysis equipment. We received 92 responses (from approximately 400 valid e-mail addresses), representing roughly a 23% response rate, which approximates response rates in comparable Web-based surveys (e.g., Kaplowitz, Hadlock, and Levine 2004). The majority of respondents (75%) were men, 50% worked for companies with sales of more than $250 million, and the average age of the respondent was 50 (ages ranged from 32 to 64 years).

Stimuli and Measures

The study was organized into four parts. In the first (Part A), we asked study participants to identify a current supplier whose products were important to their firm but who could potentially be replaced without doing substantial harm to their operations. Then, we asked participants to provide background information about this supplier (the type of product purchased, how long they have done business with the supplier, and the percentage of procurements in the product category represented by the supplier) and to respond to the commitment measures with respect to this relationship. We measured calculative and affective commitment using 11 and 5 items, respectively (see Web Appendix B at http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10). We also asked them to indicate the likelihood that they would switch to a new supplier over the next six months on a scale of 0 ("not at all likely to switch to a new supplier") to 100 ("extremely likely to switch to a new supplier"). This constitutes the preexisting or baseline standard of switching intentions (i.e., at status quo, before manipulations).

In Part B, we asked study participants to imagine that they were reviewing their relationship with the incumbent supplier. We emphasized a single factor (either unethical behavior or opportunism) as being central to this evaluation. We then presented the scenario, manipulating either unethical behavior or opportunism as the evaluation factor. We manipulated these factors (i.e., unethical behavior, opportunism) sequentially (i.e., one in Part B, one in Part C) in separate scenarios. After reading the Part B manipulation scenario, participants indicated their likelihood of switching to a new supplier over the next six months.

In Part C, we again asked participants to focus on the relationship with the supplier they described in Part A. In this section, we manipulated the remaining supplier misbehavior and measured likelihood of switching in the same manner as in Part B. To minimize the impact of the previously manipulated factor, we emphasized that the two tasks were separate.[5] The fourth and final part of the study included demographic items and other control variables.

Experimental Design

The design consists of two between-subject factors (ethical violations and opportunism), each consisting of two levels (mild and severe). The manipulations were the same as in the previous studies. To avoid sequence effects, we counterbalanced the order of presentation of the unethical behavior and opportunism manipulations. Measures, measurement model validation, control variables, and manipulation check results appear in Web Appendix B (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

[4]Additional methodological details appear in Web Appendix D (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

[5]To assess the extent to which the manipulation in the previous part affected the results, we ran regressions including the previous manipulation and also included sequence as a covariate. Both of these were not significant, suggesting that the participants treated both scenarios as separate tasks.

Analysis and Results

We tested the hypotheses using ordinary least squares regression. Because we manipulated the supplier misbehaviors independently of one another and measured switching intentions with respect to each, we conducted separate analyses for unethical behaviors and opportunism, respectively. In both models, we included calculative and affective commitment, ethical violations (or opportunism), the interactions of calculative and affective commitment with the supplier misbehavior, and the four control variables as independent variables.

To test the hypothesized buffering and amplifying effects, we examined the interactions between commitment (both calculative and affective) and supplier misbehaviors. Significant interactions indicate differential buffering (or amplifying) effects across levels of supplier errors. We also examined the simple main effect of commitment at different levels of supplier errors. The results appear in Table 1 and Figure 3.

Calculative Commitment

As Table 1 and Figure 3 show, consistent with H_1, we found a marginally significant calculative commitment × ethical violations interaction (b = .37, $p < .10$). The simple slopes indicate a buffering effect of calculative commitment when ethical violations are mild ($b_{mild} = -.38$, $p < .05$). This effect attenuates when ethical violations are severe ($b_{severe} = -.01$, n.s.), suggesting that when economically committed buyers obtain conclusive evidence of ethical violations, they become concerned about risking future investments in the relationship.[6]

We did not find a buffering effect of calculative commitment for either mild (b = –.04, n.s.) or severe (b = .11, n.s.) opportunism. Thus, the results of Study 3 do not support H_2, because calculative commitment does not buffer the incumbent supplier against even mild opportunism.

Affective Commitment

Contrary to H_3, affective commitment did not interact with ethical violations (b = .09, n.s.). Thus, H_3 is not supported in Study 3. In contrast to the results of Studies 1 and 2, affective commitment did not buffer the incumbent supplier against mild unethical behavior.

Consistent with the prediction of H_4, we found a significant affective commitment × opportunism interaction (b = .37, $p < .05$). The simple slopes (at low and high levels of affective commitment) for mild and severe opportunism are significantly different from each other, and each slope is significant in the predicted direction ($b_{mild} = -.27$, $p < .05$; $b_{severe} = .10$, $p < .10$).[7] These findings indicate both the predicted buffering and the predicted amplification effects and suggest that affectively committed buyers are willing to give incumbent suppliers the benefit of the doubt when opportunism is mild but perceive severe opportunism as a betrayal of trust, to which they react swiftly and negatively.[8]

Mediation and Process Testing

We again tested the processes implied by the assimilation and contrast framework by assessing whether conformance to normative standards mediated the observed effects. Conformance to normative standards was strongly related to the interaction of commitment and supplier misbehavior for the significant calculative commitment × unethical behavior and affective commitment × opportunism interactions, and inserting conformance to normative standards into the equation caused the interaction parameter estimates to drop to nonsignificance. This again indicates that controlling for conformance to normative standards accounts for (completely mediates) the observed buffering and amplification effects in a manner consistent with the assimilation and contrast framework. Details appear in Web Appendix D (http://www.marketingpower.com/jmrapril10).

Discussion

The results of Study 3 again indicate differential effects of calculative and affective commitment with respect to both ethical violations and opportunism. Calculative commitment buffered the incumbent supplier against its own

Table 1
RESULTS OF STUDY 3

	Switching Intentions (Standardized Coefficients)	
Independent Variables	*Ethical Violations Model*	*Opportunism Model*
Buyer Commitment to the Supplier		
Affective commitment	–.21	–.27**
Calculative commitment	–.38**	–.04
Level of Supplier Misbehaviors		
Level of ethical violations (severe versus mild)	.29***	
Level of opportunism (severe versus mild)	—	.37***
Interactions		
Opportunism × affective commitment	—	.37**
Opportunism × calculative commitment	—	.15
Ethical violations × affective commitment	.09	
Ethical violations × calculative commitment	.37*	
Covariates		
Length of personal relationship	.18	.07
Length of company's relationship	–.31**	–.16
Number of suppliers	–.26**	–.36***
Percentage of procurements from the supplier	–.02	–.02
F	2.4**	3.37***
Adjusted R^2	.15	.23%

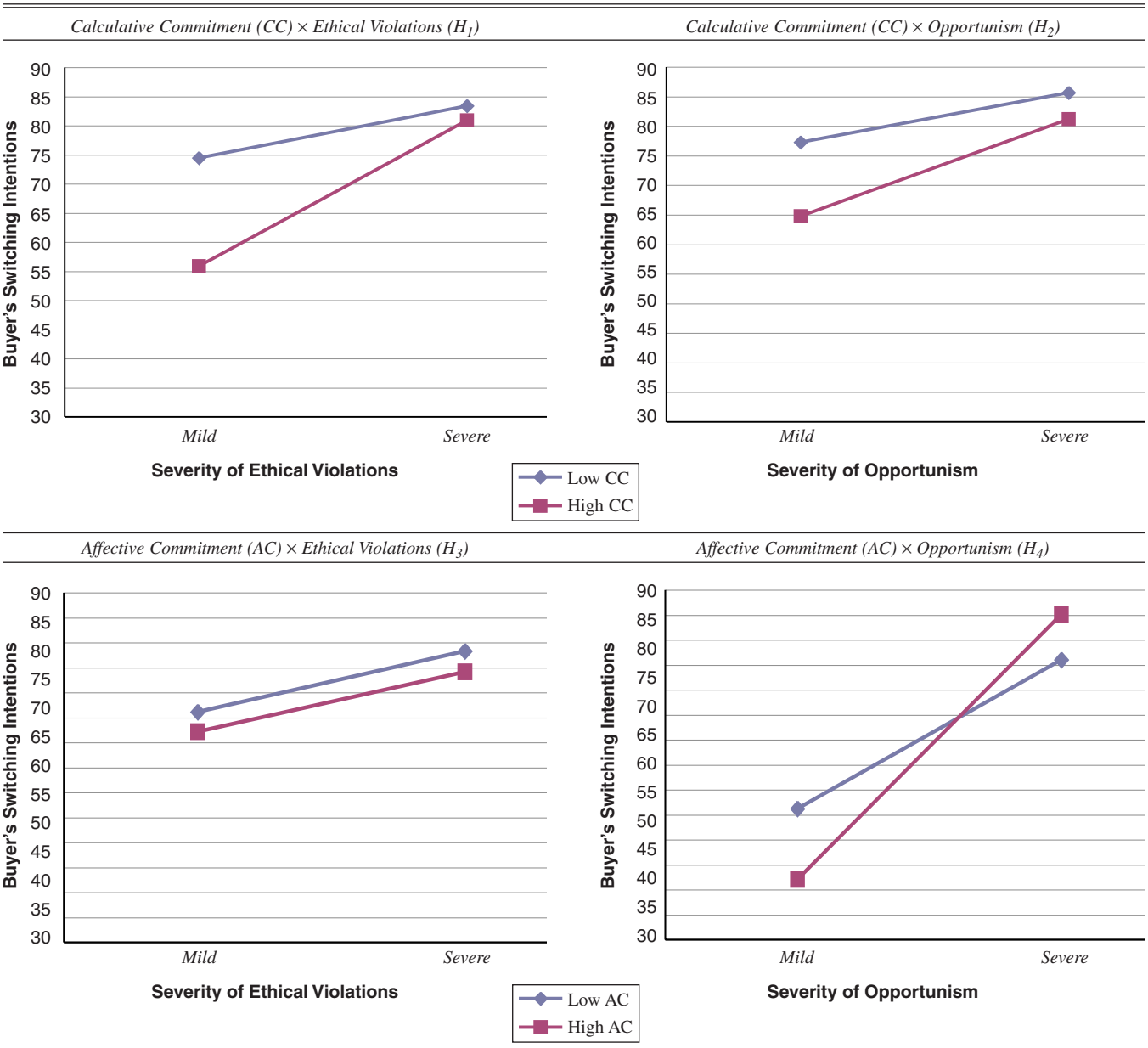
*$p < .10$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.

[6]We obtained the parameter estimate for the severe condition by adding the calculative commitment estimate for mild-level ethical violations (–.38) to the calculative commitment × ethical violations estimate (.37), which resulted in a parameter estimate of –.01.

[7]To test whether the slopes are significantly different from a hypothesized value of zero for each level of ethical violation, we first calculated the standard error for each level using the covariance matrix for the estimates. We then obtained the t-values and their significance by dividing the slope for a given level by its standard error (for more details, see Jaccard, Turrisi, and Wan 1990).

[8]Again, we obtained the parameter estimate for severe condition by adding the baseline estimate (–.27, $p < .05$) to the estimate when severity is high (.37, $p < .05$), which resulted in the beta estimate of .10.

Figure 3
STUDY 3 RESULTS: ILLUSTRATING BUFFERING AND AMPLIFYING EFFECTS IN THE FACE OF INCUMBENT MISBEHAVIORS AND VIOLATIONS



Notes: Both calculative commitment and affective commitment are continuous variables in this study. To derive point estimates, we assessed the effects of calculative and affective commitment at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean. The switching intention estimates are based on unstandarized parameter estimates.

ethical violations, whereas affective commitment did not. These results support the idea that calculative commitment constitutes an inertial force that ties the buyer to the incumbent in the face of mild supplier violations of societal norms.

As we predicted, affective commitment buffered the incumbent supplier against mild opportunism because buyers apparently assimilated small transgressions to a normative standard of behavior, but it amplified buyers' switching intentions when opportunism was severe. This suggests that affectively committed buyers experience a sense of betrayal and react negatively when the incumbent flagrantly violates the relational contract. As in Study 2, we found that buyer perceptions of the supplier's conformance to normative standards mediated the observed buffering and amplification effects in a manner consistent with the assimilation and contrast framework. In this study, however, affective commitment did not buffer incumbent suppliers against mild unethical behavior as it did in Studies 1 and 2.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of these studies indicate complex effects of relationship commitment that substantially extend what has previously been reported. In particular, they provide consis-

tent evidence of amplification (contrast) effects, in addition to demonstrating systematic buffering (assimilation) effects of calculative and affective commitment when interorganizational relationships are strained by supplier misbehavior.

Amplification Effects

All three studies provide evidence of amplification effects of affective commitment when incumbent suppliers behave opportunistically. In all three studies, affective commitment buffered the incumbent supplier against mild opportunism but amplified buyer switching intentions when opportunism was severe. This strongly suggests that affectively committed buyers assimilate mild incidences of opportunism to normative relational standards, whereas they perceive severe opportunism as betrayal of the relational contract, leading to amplification (contrast) effects.

As these patterns indicate, buyers responded more severely to an incumbent's opportunism (e.g., violating their obligations in the relationship) than to unethical behavior. A plausible reason is that opportunism is directed specifically toward the buyer in the relationship, whereas unethical behavior may or may not directly threaten the buyer's immediate interests. This is likely to result in a narrower latitude of acceptance and a broader latitude of rejection for opportunism than unethical behavior because buyers are more sensitive to violations of specific relational norms than to violations of general societal norms (at least until the latter become conspicuous or flagrant).

Buffering Effects

All three studies also show systematic evidence of buffering effects. Although we predicted buffering effects for mild incidences of both types of supplier misbehavior, the most consistent buffering effect was that of calculative commitment in response to mild ethical violations. In all three studies, calculative commitment buffered buyer switching intentions when ethical violations were mild. When these misbehaviors were severe, however, the buffering effects of calculative commitment attenuated and no longer protected incumbent suppliers from relational threats posed by their own misbehaviors. These results suggest that the perceptual and motivational impulses leading to buffering (assimilation) effects occur consistently in the types of supply relationships we studied. Specifically, commitment causes buyers to assimilate mild incidences of supplier misbehavior to a normative standard, but this tendency attenuates as misbehavior becomes more severe.[9]

Even so, in a manner consistent with the conceptual framework, amplification effects occurred only for affective commitment in response to severe opportunism. High calculative commitment did not lead to amplification (contrast) effects for either ethical violations or opportunism, suggesting that economic ties to the relationship tend to subdue responses to supplier misbehavior. However, the results clearly show that incumbent suppliers cannot rely on relationship commitment (affective and calculative) to buffer buyer switching intentions against serious ethical violations and opportunism.

The finding that calculative commitment did not buffer against opportunism in Study 3 and severe opportunism elicited amplification effects in all three studies suggests that opportunism (which we defined operationally as a transgression of specific relational norms) constitutes a more serious threat to relationship continuity than ethical violations (which we defined operationally as not being directed specifically at the relational partner).

When buyers with high calculative commitment encountered mild ethical violations, we found strong buffering (assimilation) effects, but when they encountered severe ethical violations, these effects attenuated, suggesting that buyers were concerned about potential negative implications for the relationship, even though the ethical violations were not specifically directed at them. In contrast, when affectively committed buyers encountered severe opportunism, they experienced a sense of betrayal, leading to a strong negative reaction (i.e., an amplification effect). Thus, the results provide clear insights regarding conditions under which buffering and amplification effects emerge.

Managerial Implications

The findings indicate that while relational bonds may buffer incumbent suppliers against minor misbehaviors, they may work against suppliers that behave opportunistically. Suppliers that believe relational bonds provide a margin for error in such circumstances may be unpleasantly surprised when buyers respond by entertaining bids from competitors.

Although we are unaware of previous studies assessing the adverse (amplifying) effects of relationship commitment, the relationship marketing literature has frequently extolled the benefits of commitment in promoting relationship continuity, effectiveness, and performance (e.g., Anderson and Weitz 1992; Brown, Lusch, and Nicholson 1995; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Lusch and Brown 1996). The findings highlight the limitations of commitment when a relationship is strained by supplier misbehavior and the potential for commitment to backfire under these circumstances. The consistency of amplification effects across the three studies suggests that suppliers cannot rely on buyer commitment to ensure continuity when supplier actions transgress relational norms. Although we found a consistent, albeit modest, tendency for buyers to give the supplier the benefit of the doubt in response to mild transgressions, there is also a reliable tendency for buyers to consider switching when the incumbent's misbehavior is conspicuous and undeniable.

Managers should be aware of the differential buffering effects of the two types of commitment. A buyer's calculative commitment tends to be less sensitive to supplier misbehavior than affective commitment. Buyers' calculative investments in the relationship constitute an inertial force toward continuance. In contrast, affective ties are highly sensitive to supplier misbehaviors, especially opportunism, and amplify switching intentions. Understanding the bases and dynamics of commitment can help "in-suppliers" improve relational dynamics and "out-suppliers" enhance their chances of penetrating new accounts.

[9]Note that our assimilation and contrast explanation of buffering effects is not incompatible with a purely economic perspective, in that switching costs bind buyers to relationships strongly enough that the relationships can survive mild levels of misbehavior but not strongly enough to survive severe misbehaviors.

Limitations and Further Research

This research has several limitations. We focus on a single dependent variable, switching behavior. A promising avenue for further research is to consider actual switching behavior. Our studies also focused specifically on buyer responses to supplier misbehaviors. It would be worthwhile to investigate the effects of commitment in response to offers from alternative suppliers. For example, understanding more specifically how buyers make trade-offs between the status quo and superior offers from alternative suppliers would be desirable.

Another worthwhile set of issues is whether the challenges to relationships that we studied influence buyers' desire to renegotiate terms with the incumbent. Research on these issues might provide a more complete understanding of the factors that drive buyers' switching decisions and the dissolution of committed buyer–seller relationships.

Virtually the same issues could be analyzed from the supplier's perspective. For example, it would be worthwhile to assess suppliers' perceptions and thought processes in regard to their own misbehavior. Such research could investigate suppliers' explanations and accounts of their misbehavior and how buyers perceive and respond to them.

Note that additional types of supplier errors, such as poor performance, could threaten relationships in ways that we did not study. Research on the effects of commitment in response to other types of supplier shortcomings could shed additional light on the buffering and amplifying effects of commitment.

CONCLUSION

Under most conditions, buyer commitment to supply relationships works to buffer incumbent suppliers against mild incidences of unethical behavior and opportunism. When these misbehaviors are mild, buyers tend to assimilate them to normative standards of behavior, resulting in buffering effects. When supplier misbehavior becomes severe, however, the type of commitment makes a difference, as calculative commitment and affective commitment moderate the relationships between misbehaviors and switching intentions differently. Whereas calculative commitment neither buffers nor amplifies the effects of severe supplier misbehavior, affective commitment amplifies buyer switching intentions in response to severe opportunism. Thus, although relationship commitment is beneficial and worthy of cultivation, it can backfire when trust is abused. Opportunism is the catalyst that transforms the relational buffer of affective commitment into leverage for challengers wanting to overturn a relationship. In these studies, we show these conceptually grounded but previously unexplored effects of relationship commitment, with implications for both incumbents' defenses and challengers' account penetration strategies. We hope that we have also raised questions that will stimulate further research in this area.

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