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Constructing virtual channel power model

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Electronic commerce (E-commerce) is providing an alternative channel model for selling products. With the development of the E-commerce, enterprises have to face a new business model, and supply chain management (SCM) is the optimal solution to implement and integrate E-commerce and competitive advantage of outsourcing. In this day, who owns the channel can lead the entire market. Among the upstream and downstream there generally exists unequal channel power. We explored Taiwan's virtual channel clothing industry of the causal relationship of satisfaction of the channel members with channel power source and power. In order to explore their causal relationship, SEM oriented structural model path analysis is adopted. Therefore the channel distributors and the retailers can take and maintain mutually beneficial cooperative model, by such a power model so that the both sides are able to reap greater benefits.

Key words: Virtual channel, channel power, structural equation model, e-commerce, e-supply chain.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing prosperity in the commercial application of network technology in the end of the 20th century has changed the structure of the commercial competition, from which the E-commerce is produced, providing an alternative channel model for selling products, which enables consumers purchase products online at home directly via computer and network equipments, saving transport costs to go out to search and shop (Bakos, 1997). Peterson et al.□1997□noted that virtual channel has the transaction function, which can cross the time and space constraints, enabling easy transaction completion through virtual channel, with markets scattered at various places and even various countries. Institute for Information Industry (2008) has also noted that in the first quarter of 2008, Taiwan's online population reached 10.09 million with 44% penetration rate of the Internet networking applications. Thus, the Internet in Taiwan has vigorous development; E-commerce cannot be ignored with regard to the importance of Taiwan's enterprises.

The SCM has become the academia and industry focus in the last few decades. For all the business and development, from inside to outside, enterprises outsourced, only to retain their own core competence, in order to capture competitive advantage. With the development of the E-commerce, enterprises have to face a new business model, and SCM is the optimal solution to implement and integrate electronic business and competitive advantage of outsourcing.

In related research on channels, the channel power has often been discussed. Mayo et al. (1998) noted that channel satisfaction is an important factor to channel power. Kasulis et al. (1999) believe that with regard to channel management, timely incentives are needed for those channel retailers with excellent performance. Goodman and Dion (2001) indicated that the appropriate use of the channel power would be a help to good performance. Chang and Chuang (2007) also indicated that the channel leader often can dominate the market.

Channel retailers and distributors both cooperate and compete, therefore, the topic aimed at the management behavior produced by channel power, constantly catches the attention from both academia and industry; among which (Lin et al., 2005) all referenced the channel power

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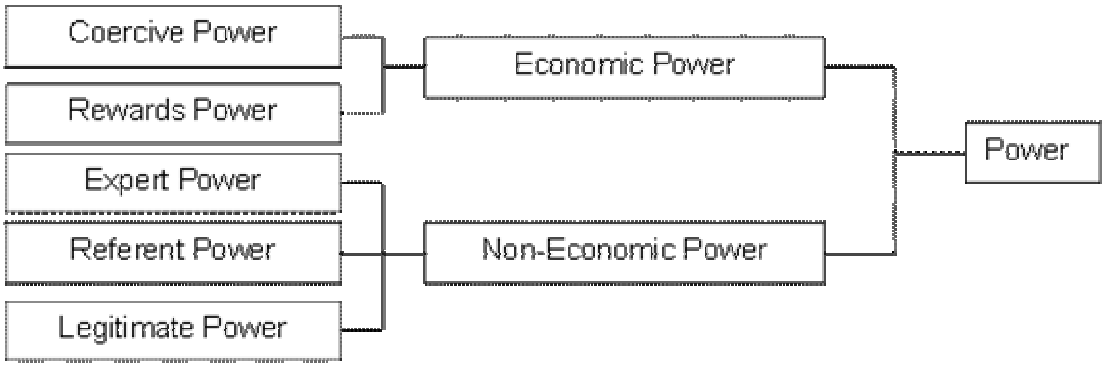

Figure 1. Etgar's power correction model (1978).

and conflict theory of the distribution channel (Gaski, 1984), to explore the channel power relations among channel members. However, few articles discuss the channel power relations among virtual channel members. This study, through the channel power model of the clothing industry, used the industry as a reference to channel management.

LITERATURE

Economic power and non-economic power

French and Raven (1959) indicated that the power source, known as the power base in the study, can be broken down into five kinds of the power: coercive, rewards, expert, legitimate and referent power.

Etgar (1978) proposed to divide the channel power source into two kind of powers "economic and non-economic" (Figure 1). This is because economic power can be directly applied to all other channel members, and has a direct correlation against specific performance of channel members although non-economic power in this regard is more of a lack of flexibility, and of less relevant with the specific performance of the members. Howell (1987) explores the causal relationship among power sources, with economic power as independent variable, and non-economic power as dependent variable. In addition, this study explored the casual link among other two dependent variables of powers, the degree of satisfaction and power source.

Gaski (1984) believes that power source and power should be differentiated into two categories: the exercised and the unexercised. The exercised coercive power can decrease the satisfaction degree among the members whereas the unexercised coercive power indicates the generosity of the channel distributor, thus can increase the satisfaction degree of the members. The exercised non-coercive power is helpful to improve the satisfaction degree of the channel retailers whereas the unexercised non-coercive power is a sort of non-practical assistance as far as the channel retailer is concerned, and thus can decrease the satisfaction degree of the channel retailer. This study adopts the power correction mode of Etgar (1978), and the theory of Howell (1987) to explore the channel power model of the clothing industry.

Degree of satisfaction

Anderson (1973) determines "satisfaction" as the gap between the perception and expectation towards products or services. A great deal of difference between perceived value and expectation towards products or services in the positive direction leads to better satisfaction. Therefore, channel members' satisfaction constitutes an important construct in the domain of channel management research, as it conveys the message of anticipation whether members stay in the incumbent channel or defect to other channel (Geyskens et al., 1999). The degree of satisfaction of the channel retailer is defined as a positive emotional state, coming from evaluation of the channel retailer with regard to various working relationship (Frazier et al., 1989). Ruekert and Churchill (1984) consider four aspects, products, finance, social interaction and support, to measure the level of satisfaction among members. Rust and Lemon (2001) pointed out that the capability to improve service delivery enables the development of better relationships among members. Howel (1987) takes the power sources of economic impact as the independent variable and that of non-economic impact as the dependent variable to explore the causality of different power sources. Here, we adopt Etgar's revised version of power sources model and Howell 's conceptual framework to explore how power sources of either economic or non-economic impact affect the wholesalers' channel power as well as retailer members' satisfaction.

E-commerce and E-supply chain

Kalakota and Robinson (1999) pointed out that due to the rapid development of information technology and network

technology SCM has had a new interpretation, whose focus of change is not just the use of new Internet technologies but, more importantly, the business operation model and its key processes corresponding to changes in technologies. In this brand-new business model, it is no longer business-to-business competition, rather supply-chain and supply-chain competition.

There are four factors that is market share, global logistics, service and customization used to push through e-supply chain. Li et al. (1999) indicated that the information highway provided cross regional businesses with many opportunities. Many ISP industry practitioners develop over the Internet and take advantage of different communication services. Based on Internet technology, an integrated SCM system was proposed to help coordinate strategy and operational practices for all members of the supply chain.

Chen and Shen (2005) pointed out that the concept of e-supply chain emphasized that enterprises must, under the premise of solid and cooperative relationships, fully integrate information flow, logistics flow and cash flow, synchronize information with zero time difference, create a comprehensive resource of the virtual operating environment so as to further exert the benefits of the whole supply chain system. E-supply chain has the following characteristics, organizations must be transformed and the operation model be adjusted from function-oriented to business process-oriented; it must be a comprehensive resource of the virtual operating environment; it must be a zero time difference information synchronization adjustment. However, e-supply chain also has channel power relations of channel members, so it is hoped that this study will provides practitioners reference to the channel management through the channel power model of the clothing garment industry.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Lusch (1976) found that conflicts among channel members have obvious positive correlation with coercive power, and negative correlation with non-coercive power. Etgar (1978) proposed that the power source be divided into "economic and non-economic". Dwyer and Walker (1981) believe that the dominant channel member may acquiesce and allow their needs and aspirations be replaced with that of other channel retailers. Hart and Saunders (1998) indicated that the channel retailers affect the behavior of their cooperation party so as to achieve the goal they pursue, and the exercise of power source affects the power level of the two sides. Stern et al. (1996) mentioned that channel power source could change, through external variables and the efforts that the channel retailers themselves operate the organization, the channel power source and will have different changes. And the channel retailers of each class will seek the appropriate opportunities to invest and develop their own power source.

According to these arguments, although many studies' reports about distribution channel confirmed that different power source will affect strength of power and level of satisfaction, few aimed at whether economic and non-economic power will affect with one another. Hence this study infers that:

H_1: economic power has positive correlation with regard to its impact on non-economic power.
H_2: economic power has positive correlation with regard to its impact on channel power.
H_3: non-economic power has positive correlation with regard to its impact on channel power.
H_4: economic power has positive correlation with regard to its impact on level of satisfaction.
H_5: non-economic power has positive correlation with regard to its impact on level of satisfaction.
H_6: power has positive correlation with regard to its impact on level of satisfaction.

The survey instrument is developed in five steps (Churchill and Iacobucci, 2005): (1) generate question items based on literature review, (2) consult with domain experts about the robustness of construct, contents, and operational variables, and item wording, (3) design the questionnaire for pre test and revision, (4) use cronbach's coefficient alpha, item-to-total correlations, exploratory factor analysis to cross out the inappropriate items, and (5) collect the primary data for confirmatory factor analysis to test instrument reliability and validity (Table 1).

Byrne (1994) regards structural equation modeling (SEM) as a statistical methodology, which is a sort of technology applicable to the identification and estimation of linear relation model among a group of variables (MacCallum and Austin, 2000). It can deal with the complex relationships among variables using statistical model, therefore it not only involves analysis and interpretation of the research data, but also relates to the choice of the variables studied. SEM includes two stages: measurement model analysis and structural model analysis. The measurement model verifies whether the measuring variable can accurately measure other latent variables in the research model (Wang, 2009).

The SEM path analysis has two kinds of application modes: Path Analysis with Observed Variables (PA-OV), and Path Analysis with Latent Variables (PA-LV). PA-OV can be said to be a sort of structural modeling analysis without any latent variable. And PA-LV method is to use the integrated model analysis with path analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, whose structural model can presume all direct or indirect causal relationships, and which can conduct parameter estimation in order to examine its significance. Furthermore, the measurement model can be used to detect the underlying factors behind a group of measurement variables, verifying researcher's assumption.

Table 1. Items in the questionnaire questions.

Dimensions	Item	Brief definition
Satisfactory Degree	1	Supplier product quality and quantity. (Ruekert and Churchill, 1984)
	2	Service provider business attitude of staff. (Dwyer and Walker,1981)
	3	Suppliers to provide complete product line. (Ruekert and Churchill, 1984)
	4	Suppliers of fair and reasonable offer. (Lin et al., 2005)
	5	Suppliers in product prices on the level of consultation. (Lin et al., 2005)
	6	Supplier management and operation of the proposal. (Lin et al., 2005)
	7	Supplier delivery time. (Dwyer and Walker,1981)
	8	Vendor technical support. (Dwyer and Walker,1981)
	9	Quality of service provided by the supplier. (Lin et al., 2005)
	10	Suppliers provide product visibility. (Lin et al., 2005)
Channel power	11	Suppliers of retail prices of products. (Mayo et al., 1998)
	12	Suppliers on the way of furnishings store. (Mayo et al., 1998)
	13	Suppliers selling the type of product. (Kasulis et al., 1999)
	14	The number of suppliers of orders. (Gaski and Ray, 2001)
	15	Suppliers of promotional activities. (Kasulis et al., 1999)
	16	Suppliers of payment. (Kasulis et al., 1999)
	17	Suppliers affect the delivery time. (Mayo et al., 1998)
	18	Suppliers to ensure the impact on after-sales service. (Mayo et al., 1998)
	19	Suppliers and other contacts of suppliers. (Mayo et al., 1998)
	20	Suppliers handle customer complaints, or claims of the event. (Gaski and Ray, 2001)
Non-economic Power	21	Suppliers are experts in the industry. (Gaski and Ray, 2001)
	22	Suppliers with good credit industry (Jeong et al., 2003)
	23	Provider reserves the right to set uniform retail prices (Gaski and Ray, 2001)
	24	Suppliers to provide adequate advertising. (Jeong et al., 2003).
	25	Suppliers have extensive experience in marketing and manufacturing (Rust and Lemon, 2001).
	26	Suppliers aware of the company's operation (Rust and Lemon, 2001).
	27	Supplier the right to request companies (Gaski and Ray, 2001).
	28	Promotional gifts supplier (Jeong et al., 2003).
	29	Can be obtained from the supplier's recommendations and technical expertise (Jeong et al., 2003).
	30	Suppliers and companies similar to the views and opinions (Jeong et al., 2003).
	31	Supplier compliance requirements of City's responsibility (Rust and Lemon, 2001).
	32	Suppliers at any time accept the return of defective products (Gaski and Ray, 2001).
	33	Supplier class skills (Gaski and Ray, 2001).
	34	Auto companies often approach with suppliers (Ruekert and Churchill, 1984).
	35	Company is obliged to do according to the recommendations of suppliers (Rust and Lemon, 2001).
	36	Suppliers to provide more discounts for companies to comply with terms of offer (Gaski and Ray, 2001).
	37	Suppliers have sufficient expertise to determine a more accurate result. (Rust and Lemon, 2001).
	38	The attitude of suppliers the company satisfied (Jeong et al., 2003).
	39	Provisions of the law dominated the company's relationships with suppliers (Ruekert and Churchill, 1984).
	40	Providers a flexible order system to reduce the burden on the company's stock (Gaski and Ray, 2001).
Economic Power	41	Suppliers deliberately delayed delivery. (Dwyer and Walker,1981)
	42	Suppliers to shorten payment terms. (Dwyer and Walker,1981)
	43	Cooperation between suppliers or distribution rights revoked. (Goodman and Dion, 2001)
	44	Cancel discount or reward providers. (Dwyer and Walker,1981)
	45	Suppliers do not give priority to send out goods. (Lin et al., 2005)

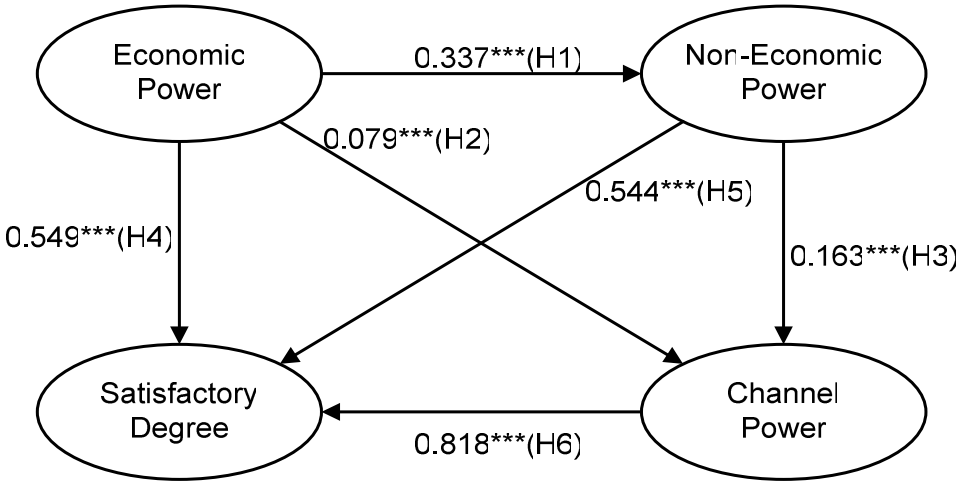

Figure 2. The verification result of the model in this study.

This study adopts SEM-oriented structural modeling path analysis, which is different from the regression-oriented path analysis. The latter cannot deal with latent variables. The regression-oriented path analysis is often used to explain or predict the explanative variables of the other variables, with the assumption of no measurement error. On the other hand, SEM-oriented structural modeling path analysis can not only deal with latent variables, but also inspect path causal relationships; it can also control measurement error. Therefore, this study adopted PA-LV methodology to conduct analysis and verification.

DATA ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION

In this study, the main target being the virtual store clothing industry retailers, this study used random sampling of 113 valid questionnaires. Of the respondents 90.3% were mainly managers, while retailers with ten years of experience mainly accounted for 69% less than main dealers who accounted for 55.8%. 36.3% were male while 63.7% were women and those whose age group where mainly under the age of 30 where 86.7%.

This study developed questionnaire items in accordance with various aspects. It applied reliability analysis to examine reliability, and used KMO sphericity test to analyze validity. Using reliability analysis on the screened items, the analysis result is the Cronbach α value of 0.982 while KMO value is 0.764, Bartlett Chi-Square value is 7024.040, and P-value is less than 0.001. This study had excellent reliability and reasonable construct validity. Structural equation modeling analysis is conducted aiming at the framework of this study, in order to understand the compatibility level between the overall model and the data collected. In model verification, if the model is unable to be recognized, parameter estimation is then unable to conduct, thus the model has to be corrected, either by decreasing the number of parameters estimated or adjusting the causal relationships so as to obtain the best model. Huang and Shih (2010) gave an adequate measurement model and the hypotheses can be tested by examining the structural model (Figures 2 and 3). The adaptability verification for the relationship model of the structural equation modeling is compared with the criteria level (Hair et al., 1998; Chen, 2009) and the result is show in Tables 2.

With regard to conducting the verification of H_1 - H_6, H_1 correlation coefficient is 0.337. H_2 correlation coefficient is 0.079. H_3 correlation coefficient is 0.163. H_4 correlation coefficient is 0.549. H_5 correlation coefficient is 0.544. H_6 correlation coefficient is 0.818 and the P-values are all less than 0.001. Therefore all six assumptions in this study are supported. It is shown that the economic power and non-economic power have significant positive impact on channel power and degree of satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the economic power has significant positive impact on the non-economic power. Hua and Sheub (2005) pointed out that when the channel distributors take full advantage of economic power, it would relatively impact on perception the channel retailers incur on the non-economic power of the channel distributors. The majority of enterprises in Taiwan belong to small-to-medium sized, and they relatively lack experience in aspects of management philosophy, technical capabilities and after-sales service etc.

They are not as adequate as the large enterprises in resources such as finance and marketing, which is of the same situation with regard to the virtual channel distributors and retailers. Therefore majority of virtual channel distributors adopt the reward power of the economic power, such as giving discounts, providing gifts

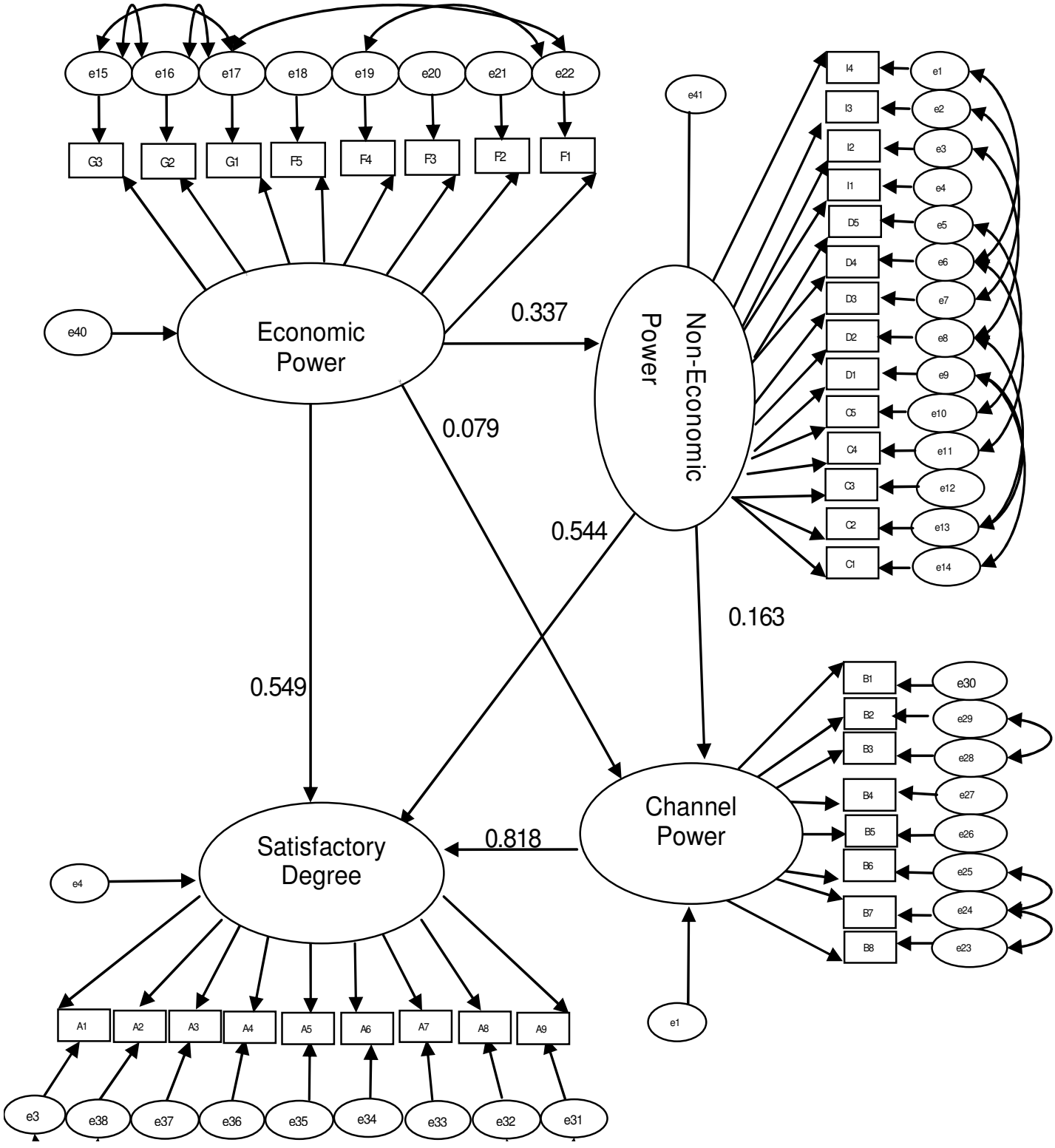

Figure 3. The channel power model.

for promotional activities and the return guarantee for the sub-prime goods, in order to enhance the cooperative relationship with the retailers, prevent the cooperative relationship between two sides from affecting and being detriment to their own business operation. Such an approach can not only enhance their economic power for

Table 2. Adaptability examination for the structural equation modeling in this study.

Adapter indicators	Model adaptation	Criteria	Result
CMIN/DF	2.976	<3	Applicable
GFI	0.914	<0.05	Applicable
AGFI	0.903	>0.9	Applicable
RMR	0.049	>0.9	Applicable
RMSEA	0.021	<0.08	Applicable
NFI	0.922	>0.9	Applicable
RFI	0.957	>0.9	Applicable
IFI	0.864	>0.9	Marginal applicable
CFI	0.916	>0.9	Applicable

themselves, but also enhance their non-economic power positively.

Both economic and non-economic power have positive impact on channel power, although relatively minor impact. In Chinese culture, it emphasizes ethics, family and norms, that is to say, one cannot forsake the collective values social values recognized by the society. Advocating Confucian thought is what many people agree will gradually form a social life of the family ethics and norms, regarded as granted, are turned into a so-called social order. As long as one is able to develop step by step in accordance with the established social order, one can be assured of living in that society, in which the accomplishment of personal values is also included. Taiwan is also pursuing the Confucian thinking, so it is also ethics-family-norms centered. The virtual channel retailers are groups of young generation, brave enough to taste new changes, Taiwan people do not forsake the virtues of benevolence, righteousness and trustworthy. The channel distributors exercise economic and non-economic power, the retailers tend to think it is instead the manifestation of benevolence, righteousness and trustworthy between distributors and themselves, which is also different from the channel power perceived by the virtual channel retailers. The impact on channel power that the economic and non-economic power of the virtual channel distributor exerts is not that intense, on the contrary.

All of economic power, non-economic power and power have direct positive impact on the satisfaction degree. In 2002, Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and according to the provisions of the World Trade Organization Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, it is provisioned that the member states abolish textile and clothing quota control in 2005, making textile trade to have a fully competitive situation. Taiwan's virtual channel clothing industry distributors take view of this in order to enhance the channel retailers' willingness to cooperate with them and improve the satisfaction degree of the channel retailers by making use of the best of all kinds of various privileges or provide various latest trend information etc. such as providing the latest popular clothing style for the retailers to sell, and accepting completely the return of sub-prime goods, giving appropriate discounts according to the order amount with regard to ordering, alleviating retailers load and improving the satisfaction degree of the retailers, increasing mutual willingness to cooperate continually, achieve the ultimate goal for both sides to profit.

However the virtual channel situation in Taiwan, which faces mature market and fully competitive circumstances, makes the majority of channel distributors adopt the reward power of economic power and non-economic power. They are more reluctant to adopt the coercive power of economic power in order to ensure cooperation with channel retailers and maintain the satisfaction degree of channel retailers, and in this way protect their channel and interests since majority of retailers are willing to cooperate with the policy promotion of the virtual channel distributors. The competition is fierce in the virtual channel retailer market of Taiwan's virtual channel clothing industry, if the channel retailers can get the support and help of their channel distributors, they will have more resource to compete with their rivals in the market. Therefore the channel distributors and the channel retailers should take and maintain the mutually beneficial cooperative model, hoping that such a power model can benefit both sides thereby enabling them reap greater benefits.

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