

Scrutinizing the Manifestation of Relational Norms: A Study of Terminal Operating Company-Liner Shipping Agency Relations

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Port relations with port users are essential for overall supply chain functioning, as the roles assigned to ports grow every day. While port supply chain transactions are generally conducted using contractual governance mechanisms, ports need to develop relational norms to keep their relations with port users at a high level, helping the ports realize their desired performance levels. This study aims to show the role of relational norms through the classification of domains they are manifested in. The goal of the classification is to unravel the specific domain of each norm in terminal operating company-liner shipping agency relations by exploring their occurrence and functioning. The data were gathered through interviews with professionals from terminal operating companies in Aliaga and liner shipping agencies that use at least one of these terminals. Study results show that the norms “flexibility” and “solidarity” are manifested as the financial and operational parts of the relation, while the norm “information sharing” is closely related to the effective use of information exchange platforms and the quality of exchanged information. The findings show how relational norms can add value to relationship performance in contract-based port supply chain relations.

KEY WORDS

- ~ Flexibility
- ~ Information sharing
- ~ Liner shipping agency
- ~ Relational norms
- ~ Solidarity
- ~ Terminal operating company

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1. INTRODUCTION

Maritime transport accounts for approximately 80 percent of the world's cargo volume, and its ability to offer more efficient long distance transport at a comparatively lower cost makes it the driver of global economy (UNCTAD, 2021). Container terminals serve as global supply chain hubs in the maritime network, and the value generated by the terminals has become even more critical to the success of the overall supply chains they are a part of. As container terminals are eminent infrastructural parts of the global supply chains, to which all the other maritime supply chain actors are connected, the competition in this field is increasingly focusing on supply chain integration and solution-oriented managerial philosophy (Song and Panayides, 2008; Seo et al., 2016) rather than on isolated efficiencies. These terminals perform conventional functions, such as act as intermediaries between the sea and the land, meet all complex logistics requirements of their users, allowing them to outperform competitors with similar physical resources and spatial characteristics (Franc and Vand der Horst, 2010). Therefore, the increasing complexity of container terminal tasks requires them to be closer to their users. Operational disruptions can only be avoided if all functions are carried out in coordination with terminal users (Carbone and Martino, 2003; Paixão and Marlow, 2003). Owing to their coordinating role in the maritime supply chain, the relationships between container terminals and their users are more partnerships than simple buyer-supplier relationships (Jacobs and Notteboom, 2011). Consequently, container terminal performance derives from the strength of their relations with their users, as well as from their service capabilities (Pantouvakis and Bouranta, 2017). Within this structure, the terminal operating company (TOC) - liner shipping agency (LSA) relation is of key importance, as it includes many sophisticated and different aspects of operational, financial and contractual relations. The synergy of all these facets of the relationship is vital for the agility of terminals and LSAs with respect to meeting the demands of the maritime supply chain (Paixão and Marlow, 2003).

From the point of view of TOCs, the successful management of inter-organizational relations is the key determining factor for competitiveness, bearing in mind that there is no significant physical difference between present-day ports (Notteboom, 2008). Furthermore, the increasing size and decreasing number of shipping lines in the industry require terminal operators to identify methods that will earn them the loyalty of shipping lines and ensure the sustainability of their businesses (Martin and Thomas, 2001; Franc and Van der Horst, 2010). From LSAs' point of view, a well-managed relationship with TOCs is of the highest importance since their punctuality, reliability and value generation performance depend on their partnership with the terminal. Accordingly, the satisfaction of shippers and forwarders with shipping line services directly depends on the joint performance of the shipping line and TOC (Slack et al., 1996; Heaver, 2002). All these positive outcomes for LSAs do not only meet the needs of their customers, but also generate more profit by meeting operational requirements such as schedule reliability (Elmi et al., 2022). As TOC-LSA relations are relatively significant in the maritime network, their successful management is crucial for the competitiveness and strategic positioning of both parties (Slack, 1993). Baştuğ et al. (2020) found that, in order for both parties to increase their business volumes, their relationship should be based on mutual understanding and, where possible, on joint strategic decision-making processes. Although this finding underscores the basic philosophy of port supply chain management, it is important because it has identified relational elements that have been largely ignored in prior port selection criteria studies.

However, a better understanding of the role of relational elements in the changing port industry dynamics requires an in-depth examination of these elements. Even though literature on port management abounds with studies on the positive and anticipated results of container terminal - terminal user relations, namely cooperation, value creation and integration (e.g. Bichou and Gray, 2004; Song and Panayides, 2008), the process preceding the establishment of a prosperous container terminal - terminal user relationship requires further study. In this respect, based on the propositions of the relational exchange theory, this study examines the concept of relational norms and the nature of their association with the prosperity of container terminal - liner shipping agency relations. Given that the concept of "relational norms" is being newly introduced to port-related literature, this paper aims to examine the different manifestations of these norms in TOC-LSA relations.

Even though port management research covers the role of relational norms such as information sharing (Seo et al., 2016) and flexibility (Shi, 2015), this study is based on theoretical and qualitative research and aims to explain the mechanics of the establishment and sustainment of these norms. More specifically, this paper aims to fill the gap in port management literature by examining the following research questions:

- How are the relational norms of solidarity, flexibility and information sharing manifested in the framework of TOC - LSA transactions?
- How do relational norms influence the joint performance of TOC and LSA?

Aiming to answer these questions, qualitative approach was used and the results inferred from twelve semi-structured interviews, six with interviewees from the three TOCs in the Aliaga port cluster and six with LSA interviewees using at least one of the terminals in the cluster are presented in the paper.

By providing a deeper perspective on the relational norms literature in the port industry, this study will reveal how these norms are manifested within a specific context by showing the mechanics of successful TOC-LSA relational governance.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Relational norms are a set of concepts which have been analyzed by several social sciences including sociology (e.g. Granovetter, 1985), psychology (e.g. Thibaut and Kelly, 1959), politics (e.g. Axelrod, 1986), marketing (e.g. Heide and John, 1992), contract law (e.g. Macneil, 1980) and management (e.g. Gulati, 1995). Considering the immense volume of research done, there is a substantial collection of data on the “norm” concept and its role in several exchange governance types. Norms are behavioral expectations determined by the parties of a relationship to realize their collective goals (Gibbs, 1981). Since they set the limits of acceptable behavior, relational norms are regarded as critical social constructs that shape the governance of inter-organizational exchanges (Griffith and Myers, 2005). Taking mutual interest as their basis, norms enhance stewardship behavior and improve relationships. In other words, they seek to forge a social environment where unilateral interests potentially harmful for the integrity of a relationship are discouraged, and reciprocally beneficial behavior is encouraged (Gundlach and Achrol, 1993).

Each relationship applies these norms with varying efficiency, yet for a relationship to be successful, a minimum level of their application should be determined (Macneil, 1987). As the frequency of exchanges between the parties increases, the norms become more conspicuous. As the relationship progresses, the parties gain a better understanding of each other’s needs and expectations, therefore making the relationship more relevant with respect to social manners (Samouel, 2007). Hence, the growing functionality of mature norms paves the way to increased exchange productivity owing to better coordination (Bello et al., 2003; Ryu and Eyuboglu, 2007).

Although relational norms literature is extensive, a uniform categorization of these norms is still disputable. The main issues are the absence of standardized norms, and widely applicable norm definitions, resulting in overlaps that make it even more difficult to differentiate between dimension ranges (Joshi and Stump, 1999). To overcome these overlaps, various researchers concentrated exclusively on the three most important norm dimensions, i.e. solidarity, flexibility and information sharing, and consider these concepts an indication of the level of relationalism (Heide and John, 1992). In this context, the descriptions of the aforementioned norms are given below, highlighting their variant scopes and specific roles with respect to inter-organizational relation (IOR) governance:

Solidarity: The norm of solidarity is identified as key to IOR, as it places emphasis on the mutual benefit of the parties. In other words, solidarity promotes the creation of common values rather than individual interests (Rokkan and Haugland, 2002). That being the case, both parties expect the other to behave in a manner that

will lend their relationship high value (Heide and John, 1992). In an IOR where solidarity exists, parties react positively to the requirements of the other side and refrain from actions that would have an adverse effect on the other party (Bello et al., 2003). Consequently, solidarity is considered a norm that holds the exchanges together. Correspondingly, by applying this norm, both parties act as a “we”, a shared identity (Kaufmann and Dant, 1992).

Flexibility: The norm of flexibility is described as reciprocal willingness to adapt as circumstances change (Heide and John, 1992). While IORs might be influenced by unexpected and varying conditions, the relationship shaping practices and policies can also change. Hence, the establishment of flexibility between organizations is of vital importance due to the positive effect of comfortable adaptation to varying circumstances (Boyle et al., 1992; Griffith and Myers, 2005). Organizations demonstrating flexibility in relationships with their partners intrinsically show their good intentions and demonstrate that they care for the well-being of the relationship. If the flexibility is reciprocal, both parties may regard the relationship as a strategic treasure that accommodates a wide array of actions with respect to change (Johnson, 1999). To sum up, the norm of flexibility acts as a mechanism of coordination which allows organizations to feel more content, particularly in an environment characterized by risk and uncertainty (Wang and Wei, 2007). The flexibility level of an IOR is fundamentally associated with connections between activities (exchanges occurring at the financial and/or operational level) and resources. This level could be explored through the evaluation of incidents where change adjustments were requested or made. Owing to the role of contracts in explicating the liabilities of the parties in inter-organizational exchanges, the flexibility of the relationship is also demonstrated by the willingness of each party to observe contractual clauses when such adjustments are demanded.

Information Sharing: Anderson and Jap (2005) clarify the norm of information sharing as “formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between organizations.” In a relationship where this norm is advanced, both parties refrain from asymmetric information, and promote high coordination in collective processes instead (Ryu and Eyuboglu, 2007). By ensuring regular information flow, organizations acquire the ability to manage their internal affairs more efficiently and reduce costs (Aulakh et al., 1996; Bello et al., 2003). Particularly in highly unpredictable environments, a piece of information that one party holds may be vital for the other. Hence, sharing such information allows IORs to deal with change and sustain their operations without any hazard (Klein et al., 1990). Besides, sharing information also allows parties to familiarize themselves with each other’s priorities and expectations. As a consequence, parties know more about each other’s businesses and their IOR is more likely to be successful. On the contrary, when information sharing is questionable, joint actions are far more likely to fail, and conflicts between parties are more common.

From the relational exchange theory perspective, these three norms constitute an informal side of an exchange relation and are decisive for its overall quality (Ivens and Pardo, 2007). Particularly for contract-based IORs, such as those between TOCs and LSAs, the absence of relational norms tends to have negative consequences, such as opportunistic exploitation of any gray zones in the contract (Achrol and Gundlach, 1999; Brown et al., 2000). On the contrary, in exchanges characterized by matured relational norms, inter-organizational trust is solidified and contract performance is supported by relational structures. Despite the fact that these boundaries set by the relational exchange theory were proven to be valid in many different forms of IORs, from supply chain relations to strategic alliances, the scope of the norms discussed may change depending on context. Thus, this study explores how relational norms come to the forefront in the specific context of container terminal-liner shipping agency relations.

3. METHODOLOGY

Considering the lacking understanding of the scope and role of the relational norms in TOC-LSA relations, this research adopted a qualitative approach with an exploratory nature. As opposed to quantitative research methods that focus on the generalization of findings, qualitative research focuses on discovery and seeks to arrive at conclusions about a specific topic through the exploration of experiences and perceptions of a specific sample (Wu et al., 2016). Using the qualitative background, the study is focused on all three container terminals located in the Aliaga Region (TCE Ege, APM Terminals and Nemport) alongside with the LSAs that use at least one of the aforementioned terminals for their operations. Studying TOC-LSA relations in the setting of the Aliaga Region was considered convenient due to two main reasons: (a) the fact that TOCs located in this region do not have major geographical/spatial competitive advantages due to closeness, (b) the fact that TOCs located in this region are in fierce competition to maximize their capacity utilization.

To maximize the number of phenomenon variations, the purposeful sampling technique was used which allows researchers to adapt the sample of the study to their specific needs. An effort was made to include participants from different workplaces and various departments to allow findings to encompass different sides of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). The number of participants in the two groups (TOCs and LSAs) was not predetermined and the authors kept collection data from new participants until the data collected from both groups were determined to be saturated (Guest et al., 2016). In the selection of LSA participants, we attempted to include representatives from a variety of different company types with respect to size, cargo volume and point of origin. To summarize, apart from six representatives from the three TOCs, six representatives from six different LSAs have taken part in the interview phase of the research. The interview with TOC-B3 (Terminal Operating Company B, 3rd interviewee) was carried out by phone, whereas all the other interviews were conducted face-to-face in the offices of the participants. Details about interviewees and the interview process are presented in Table 1 below. At the request of the participants, their names, as well as the names of their companies are not disclosed and have been encrypted as shown in the table.

	Company code	Interviewee code	Title	Date of interview	Duration of interview
Container Terminals	Terminal Operating Company A	TOC-A1	Commercial Manager	05.12.2017	1 h 6 min.
		TOC-A2	Operations Manager	05.12.2017	32 min.
	Terminal Operating Company B	TOC- B1	Marketing Assistant	12.12.2017	1 h 25 min.
		TOC-B2	Payment Coordinator	12.12.2017	1 h 25 min.
		TOC-B3	Product Manager	19.03.2018	48 min.
	Terminal Operating Company C	TOC-C	Deputy General Manager	12.12.2017	31 min.
Liner Shipping	Liner Shipping Agency A	LSA-A	Agency Manager	18.01.2018	47 min.
	Liner Shipping Agency B	LSA-B	Agency Manager	20.01.2018	1 h 36 min.

Liner Shipping Agency C	LSA-C	Manager of Documentation, Operation and Customer Services	23.01.2018	56 min.
Liner Shipping Agency D	LSA-D	District Representative	23.01.2018	1 h 45 min.
Liner Shipping Agency E	LSA-E	Agency Manager	25.01.2018	1 h
Liner Shipping Agency F	LSA-F	Operation and Logistics Manager	15.05.2018	30 min.

Table 1. Information on interviews

The semi-structured interview method was selected to allow the participants to wander off whenever predetermined questions seem insufficient to explore the phenomenon in more depth (Berg, 2000). Other than predetermined questions (see Appendix 1) derived from relational norms literature, additional questions have been asked to obtain cases/examples that would further clarify the opinions of the participants on the role of each relational norm.

Participants' consents were obtained prior to recording each interview. The recordings were later transcribed in keeping with the guidelines of Poland (1995) and subsequently translated into English. The interviews have been coded separately by the authors to compare code structures and ensure process reliability. The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 18 was used in all of the above steps. In order to ensure the reliability of the qualitative research, the Wallendorf and Belk (1989) protocol was applied and actions presented in Table 2 taken. According to Wallendorf and Belk (1989), the validity of a qualitative study is based on the extent to which the study manages to defend its credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability and integrity. In this context, credibility is the degree to which representations match interview data. Transferability is the degree of applicability of the findings to the contexts other than the investigated subject matter. Dependability is the extent to which the findings are not dependent on time or source (respondents) and would be stable if the data collection process was repeated. Confirmability is the degree to which interpretations were grounded on the responses of the participants and free from the motivations, interests or perspectives of the interviewer. Finally, integrity is the extent to which interpretations are affected by misinformation or evasions by participants.

Criteria	Action(s)
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Semi-structured interviews were conducted. If the interviewer had any doubts with respect to response interpretation, additional questions were asked to clarify the responses. ▪ Interview coding was carried out separately by each author. Whenever there was a mismatch between the codes, further evaluation was done. Code comparison was made using software MAXQDA 18.
Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participants were selected by purposeful sampling. Participants with various job titles and from companies of different profiles were represented in the sample.

Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The number of the interviews was not predetermined and the data collection phase was sustained until theoretical saturation. ▪ Participants provided examples of the phenomenon that reflected a broad time range.
Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness of potential preexisting biases was ensured by documenting all personal knowledge on the phenomenon prior to the interviews. ▪ Where interviewees asked how other interviewees answered to a particular question, it was left unanswered. ▪ The results section was designed to show the match rate between interpretations and quotes.
Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Names of interviewees and their companies were kept confidential. ▪ In case interviewees provided examples involving other companies, the names of those companies were also kept confidential. ▪ Where interviewees asked some of their responses to be “off the record”, those statements were not transcribed or quoted in the paper.

Table 2. Rigor of the study

4. RESULTS

The qualitative research technique has many challenges, one of which is arranging the results derived from data that include a great deal of interwoven information. Apart from the purpose of the study, this paper also focuses on offering an overview of the contextual nature/meaning of relational norms by demonstrating how each norm is manifested in TOC-LSA relationships. Thus, a thematic process was conducted where the manifestations of a norm were matched with representative quotes, and the theme for each relational norm deduced. The illustration of the findings is supported by tables showing manifestations of relational norms together with representative quotes obtained in the interviews.

4.1. Solidarity in TOC-LSA relations

The reason why the norm of ‘solidarity’ is essential for TOC-LSA relationships is the fact that it is indicative of the characteristics of both partnership and buyer-seller relations. This perspective makes solidarity essential for various facets, such as the operational and financial dynamics of the relationship.

4.1.1. Operational manifestation of ‘solidarity’:

- From the operational perspective of a relationship, the willingness of parties to adopt a *solution-focused approach* is one of the determining factors of solidarity with respect to the confidence established between the parties. Particularly, potential difficulties in ‘the voyage schedule of a liner shipping agency’ have been identified as critical, and LSAs were found to highly value TOCs showing high level of solidarity in such cases.
- Another operational manifestation of solidarity is *bilateral understanding* between the parties. Considering that terminal operations are exposed to a number of disruptions, bilateral understanding prevents damage to the relationship and protects its longevity. Specifically, where

the other party is the cause of ‘operational disruption’ due to a compelling reason, solidarity depends on positive attitude.

- *Procedural integration* is another area where solidarity is manifested. Throughout the relationship, one of the parties may introduce procedural changes in its manner of operation and may request the other party to adapt. In such cases, ‘the other party’s eagerness to adapt’ to the procedural changes and ‘the effort it puts into integration’ have been identified as significant implications of a high level of solidarity.

4.1.2. Financial manifestation of ‘solidarity’:

- When analyzing the financial dimension of the TOC-LSA relationship, solidarity primarily manifests itself in the *joint planning* of offers for ‘special cargo owners’, given that when choosing a liner shipping company, cargo owners consider not only the cost of transportation but also ‘the costs associated with the terminal in use.’ Therefore, convincing a cargo owner may necessitate their joint effort. From the perspective of LSAs, the willingness of TOCs to assist them in financial issues at the expense of lowering their profitability is considered to be an indicator of solidarity. Although such arrangements are not expected to be made for all customers, joint planning actions are vital for those with high profitability opportunities.
- *Debt forgiveness* is another financial manifestation of solidarity. Although rare, when one of the parties has an excessive debt, ‘the other party might request debt forgiveness or restructuring.’ The results show that such modifications are considered natural in TOC-LSA relationships and even play a crucial role in securing the sustainability of the relationship.
- Interviews suggest that *looking out for each other’s monetary interests* is another area where solidarity is manifested. As indicated by interviewees, although such actions are not compulsory duties of the parties, they are strong indications of solidarity with respect to the ‘promotion of shared identity.’ An example would be TOC advising LSA on how to lower unnaturally high terminal-related costs by making some practical adjustments. Table 3 illustrates the aforementioned manifestations of solidarity and quotes interviewee statements.

	Manifestation	Quotes from interviews
Operational	Solution-Focused Approach	Shipping lines occasionally demand departure before the prearranged schedule and ask for faster launch of operations. In such cases, we may supply them with more assets (i.e. cranes, gangs) to accelerate operations in an attempt to solve their problem regarding the voyage schedule (TOC-A1)
	Bilateral Understanding	Due to power cuts, a terminal may be unable to arrange the operations within the deadline. Such disruptions mean financial loss for the ship owner. So the liner shipping agency has the right to charge us the price that is predetermined in the contract. But being aware that it is a long term relationship and that similar delays in the operation may occur, bilateral understanding is valuable in terminal-agency relations (TOC-B2).

Procedural Integration	A system change is being introduced in one of the container terminals we work with. They will request some new cargo specification documents that will need to be presented at the entrance of the containers in advance. Although this change will require extra effort on our part, we will exhibit our eagerness to adapt to it. Such procedural changes may be introduced by either side and the parties should show solidarity in case of disruptions (LSA-F).
Joint Planning	Liner agencies sometimes demand that we make some special offers for a specific customer they want to convince. Later on we work in cooperation with the liner agency to plan the offering jointly. For example, we did this for a big food company recently. We offered them the free time they asked and enabled them to work with our terminal and the liner shipping company that called us (TOC-C).
Debt Forgiveness	Cargo owners could have problems with container clearance due to force majeure. For example a problem in their factory that caused them to do so. The storage fee aggregates to thousands of dollars as a result. The liner shipping agency may request us to do a one-off favor for the sake of their customer and demand that we forgive the debt. In such situations, we try to do our best to protect the well-being of our relationship (TOC-B1).
Looking out for each other's monetary interests	<p>(1) The terminal can't be held liable for warning the liner shipping agency of potential disruption with respect to their containers. But when they do, they gain the agency's trust. Even though not warning would bring them even more income from the storage fee, it would only be a one-time thing. But good relations between the terminal and the liner shipping agency would give better results through increased productivity in the long term (LSA-D).</p> <p>(2) It is the container terminals' duty to conduct the operation requested by the liner shipping company. But sometimes that request may be too costly for them, then we think that we should advise them to do it in a more productive fashion. Even though not giving them the advice would get us even more profit, we do it because we value the solidarity of our relations (TOC-B3).</p>

Table 3. Manifestations of “solidarity” in TOC-LSA relations

4.2. Flexibility in TOC-LSA relations

Having similarities with solidarity, the norm ‘flexibility’ in TOC-LSA relations is manifested in both financial and operational dimensions. When the role of flexibility was discussed, LSA interviewees highlighted that flexibility in operation is profoundly correlated with satisfaction with terminals, and is potentially the dominant factor in their choice of terminal. As the fragile nature of logistics makes it susceptible to frequent circumstance changes, the absence of flexibility has proved to be the main obstacle to the sustainability of the relationship.

4.2.1. Operational manifestation of ‘flexibility’:

- Flexibility-related operational issues include *cut-off dates*, *berthing operations*, *gate operations*, *handling operations* and *operational information flow*. Even though contracts between the parties clearly define the manner of performance of such operations and the liabilities of the parties throughout the process, the interviewees have stated that some contractual clauses are frequently bypassed and there is more flexibility in operations management for the well-being of the relationships.

4.2.2. Financial manifestation of ‘flexibility’:

- When discussing the financial dimension, the flexibility of *tariffs* is generally considered highly relevant. Whenever the economic conditions of seaborne trade change, LSA’s ask for tariff discounts. Allowing additional charge-free time to specific cargo owners is another flexibility requested from LSAs.
- Despite being rare, high-volume liner shipping companies may request *renomination charges* to be reduced as well. Renomination charge is the fee applied to containers reserved for a specific vessel which have not been shipped for various reasons. Keeping in mind that high volume agencies may be exposed to relatively greater risk in such situations, this charge is more likely to cause a disruption. Therefore, interviewees have indicated that when the renomination charge gets exceedingly high, TOC is likely to be flexible and lower the charge. Representative quotes for the manifestation of flexibility are given in Table 4.

	Manifestation	Quotes from interviews
Operational	Cut-Off Dates	Cut-off is the deadline by which containers should enter the terminal. We do our best to be flexible if it is requested. (TOC-C).
	Berthing Operations	In berthing operations, we have a rule called the berthing window. Yet, sometimes the vessel may arrive outside the berthing window granted to a particular shipping line. In such cases, the shipping lines usually demand us to be flexible and we do our best to help them (TOC-C).
	Gate Operations	There might be specific trading seasons and flexible gate hours might be requested by liner shipping agencies. This is sometimes doable. We don’t automatically dismiss such requests (TOC-A1).
	Handling Operations	If a ship owner has a need for slower handling of business, the terminal adapts to his request. If a ship owner requests faster handling of operations, the terminal does its best to accelerate them. This flexibility also helps us arrange our schedule (LSA-A).
	Information Flow	The terminal requires us to prepare an excel document prior to container acceptance. Due to the workload, sometimes this might not be possible. So we try to resolve this matter by telephone exchange of information. Of course it is up to them to accept this or not. Informal relations strongly influence their decision to be strict or flexible (LSA-C).

Tariff	<p>(1) Our company has contracts with shipping lines but we don't need to rely solely on the contract in every situation. For instance, although a contract might guarantee our receivables for a service, the shipping line may ask for a discount saying it would suffer losses otherwise. To ensure the sustainability of our good relations, such requests can be taken into consideration. (TOC-B1).</p>
Renomination Charge	<p>(2) Our company may request extra free time other than the free periods indicated in the contract with regard to empty containers or full export/import containers. You can't request this all the time but circumstances may change or an arrangement could be discussed for a particular (highly profitable) cargo owner. The terminal looks into their financial standing and decides accordingly (LSA-E).</p> <p>The contract we signed with the terminal ensures 30% of the renomination without any charge. Be that as it may, there are times when we exceed the 30% and even push the limits of 60%-70%. This is a consequence of working with high volumes of cargo. For example, in the event that one of them has planning problems, it certainly affects our plans for the vessel. In such cases, we expect the terminal to be flexible and willing to resolve the issue (LSA-B).</p>

Table 4. Manifestation of “flexibility” in TOC-LSA relations

4.3. Information Sharing in TOC-LSA relations

The manifestation of ‘information sharing’, in other respects, is correlated with the efficient use of the platform(s), where the exchange of information takes place, and the quality of exchanges.

4.3.1. Information sharing platform perspective:

- According to LSA interviewees, information sharing differences between the terminals stem from the potential of *electronic data exchange (EDI)* technology that they have in use and the significance these terminals attribute to *meetings* and *reports*. The more efficient the use of such platforms for information exchange, the more satisfied LSAs become, since the information shared by TOCs is exceptionally relevant for the strategic decisions of LSAs.

4.3.2. Information quality perspective:

- From the information quality aspect, the *punctuality* and *correctness* of the information shared are important for information sharing. With respect to the peculiarities of logistics operations, any misleading information or latency in information exchange may result in conflicts with potential fiscal and operational consequences for the entire supply chain. From LSAs’ standpoint, latency or misinformation during information exchange may put their company in a difficult position since they convey the information to the cargo owners or their representatives.
- With respect to the punctuality of the information shared, another important aspect is the *availability* of the parties when the other party requires information.

To summarize, to ensure a smooth TOC-LSA relationship, the parties expect to mutually share quality information, both published in the conventional media or digitally via EDI. The associated interview citations pertaining to the norm of information sharing manifested in the above mentioned dimensions are presented in Table 5.

	Manifestation	Quotes from interviews
Information Sharing Platform	Electronic Data Interchange (EDI)	The integration of EDI facilitates direct information exchange between the terminal and its users. Commercial and operational information is traceable and exchanged by means of this integration. For example, container tracking or conducting gate procedures is accomplished through EDI (TOC-C).
	Meetings	Meeting with liner shipping agencies is key for information sharing. Particularly when we sign a new contract, meetings are an effective means of discussing gray zones. Meetings are also important for the establishment of inter-organizational coordination (TOC-A1).
	Reports	Reports required to be submitted by the terminal are vital information sharing channels. With respect to this matter, report accuracy and content are both essential since we make strategic decisions depending on the information presented (LSA-F).
Information Quality	Punctuality	A terminal may occasionally inform us about vessel departure belatedly. However, there is a time window within which we are required to notify our agency abroad and this may cause problems for us. If there is a punctuality issue with respect to the exchange of information between us and the terminal, it has an impact on the whole chain (LSA-A).
	Correctness	Operating procedures are conducted by following instructions dependent on information sharing. As long as the information received from the liner shipping agency is totally accurate, our drill is successful. The more misleading the information, the greater number of operating problems are encountered (TOC-A2).
	Availability	Staff should be available 24/7. Particularly in hectic hours, it is more difficult to get information from the terminal by phone or e-mail (LSA-F).

Table 5. Manifestation of “information sharing” in TOC-LSA relations

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall goal of this study is to study the contextual manifestations of relational norms in TOC-LSA relations. The main focus of the authors are the norms of solidarity, flexibility and information (also called relationalism). According to relational exchange theory, the introduction of the aforementioned norms in an IOR paves the road to high success rates in the establishment of a quality relationship and joint performances of the parties involved (Ivens and Pardo, 2007). Furthermore, in an inter-organizational relationship where norms are solidified, contract management loses significance and gives way to the informal facets of the relationships, since opportunistic behavior is not expected from the parties and an environment of trust is created (Heide and John, 1992; Brown et al., 2000). Keeping in mind that the levels of joint performance achieved by the parties reflect the overall performance of the maritime supply chain, both parties are expected to expand and secure these relational norms for the sake of their relationship.

Even though the body of literature on relational norms presents information on the ways in which norm development affects relations, the authors did not put sufficient effort into the clarification of this concept, to eliminate any vagueness and abstractness (Joshi and Stump, 1999). In other words, the accumulation of knowledge on the roles of the norms now paves the road for the researcher to examine the norms more closely to better understand the ways in which they manifest themselves. Consequently, this paper dispels any vagueness with respect to the concept by clearly describing how each norm is manifested in the maritime context. Figure 1 demonstrates the conceptual framework inferred from research results.

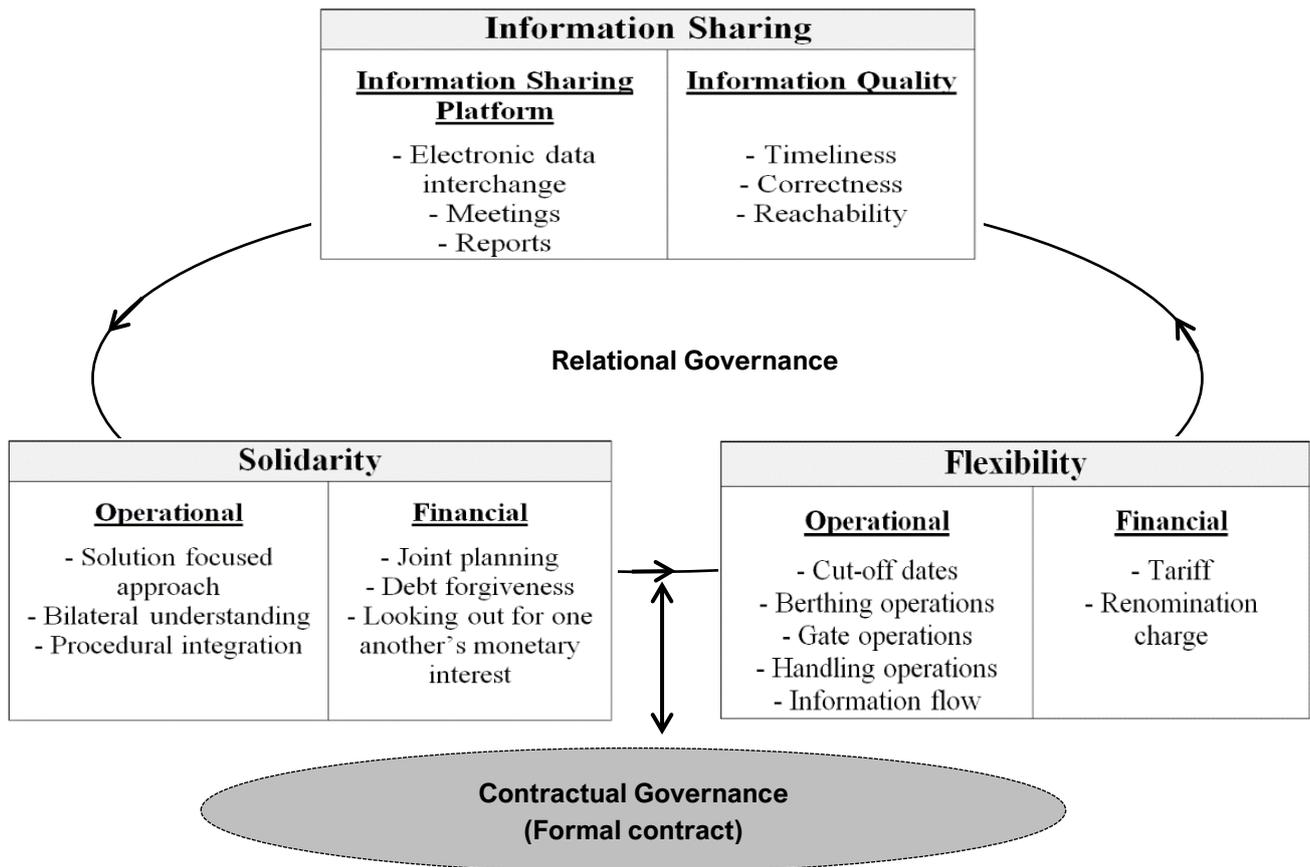


Figure 1. Summary of the results

For instance, the norm of solidarity manifests itself in operational and financial matters in the terminal-agency relationship, and is reflected by the level of shared identity. If the parties treat their relationship more like a partnership than a simple buyer-supplier relationship, they are more prone to interpret the behavior of the other party as solidarity. Particularly, working together is a manifestation of solidarity that is essential for meeting the demands of cargo owners. Likewise, the norm of flexibility is also manifested in operational and financial matters. The parties acknowledge that changing circumstances are intrinsic to logistics and the strictness of any party is detrimental to the sustainability of a high quality relationship. Therefore, parties are expected to show solidarity when the other party disrupts the flow of operation unintentionally, and be supportive when economic conditions render the fulfilment of contracted financial obligations impossible. The norm of information sharing is also highly significant due to the nature of the logistics business. For this norm to be sustained successfully, parties need to keep each other informed and ensure the quality of information, since any disruption in this context could result in reciprocal distrust. In addition to the quality of the information conveyed, these platforms of exchange are also expected to be administered well.

Regardless of the individual functions of each norm, another important matter to be taken into account is their integrated role. The relationship required to bypass the strictness of a formal contract can only be forged if all these norms are present. By contrast, in a low level TOC-LSA relationship, conflict resolution is more likely to be difficult and the level of performance expected from both parties by cargo owners more difficult to realize.

Port management literature continuously emphasizes that (e.g. Carbone and Martino, 2003; Paixão and Marlow, 2003) port environment dynamics are prone to change and the agility of the ports is now considered a key competitive advantage. The key conclusions of this research suggest that the administration of relations between port supply chain actors is another field where change occurs. For these actors to be agile, they are now expected to develop high quality relations through relational governance, rather than to solely stick to their end of a formal contract. As shown in Figure 1, formal contracts form the basis of the relationship and are the points of exchange initiation, then they are complemented with relational norms that are developed throughout the process. Since the strictness of the contracts may have a negative influence on the agility of the parties, a TOC-LSA relationship becomes stronger when governed by relational mechanisms. The agility lost in a relationship by insisting on strict observance of the contract will also be detrimental to the agility required in the TOC-cargo owner and LSA-cargo owner relations.

In our opinion, the results of this research that show how each relational norm manifests itself can serve as guidelines for relational governance mechanisms in TOC-LSA relations, bearing in mind that these results were gathered in a specific region and may differ in other business environments. A more in-depth research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how relational norms are manifested in environments involving different cultures, degrees of institutionalization, power balances and competitiveness levels. Another limitation of this research is that it was based on qualitative data analysis methods that use exploratory approach to study relational norms in a context (TOC-LSA relations) that has not been examined before. It would be useful for future studies to address the role of relational norms in the same context but using quantitative approaches. The findings presented here could serve as the results of a comprehensive preliminary study for these further studies, as they can be used to operationalize relational structures in port supply chain management.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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APPENDIX 1. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General Questions on Port Industry Relations:

- In your view, what is the role of ports in the supply chain?
- How would you describe the port competition in Aliaga?
- How should a terminal operator-liner shipping company relationship be managed? Which aspects are characteristic of a well-managed relationship?
- What kind of differences might occur if the terminal operator- port customer/user relations were governed well or poorly?
- What is the role of contracts in port industry relations?

Questions on Relational Norms:

- What is the role of solidarity in port supply chain relationships? How is solidarity realized and what positive outcomes can it produce? What are the distinctive features of ports in this respect?
- What is the role of flexibility in port supply chain relationships? How is flexibility realized and what positive outcomes can it produce? What are the distinctive features of ports in this respect?
- What is the role of information sharing in port supply chain relationships? How is information sharing realized and what positive outcomes can it produce? What are the distinctive features of ports in this respect?
- Which are the outstanding relational norms in the port-supply chain relationship?
- Are the relational norm strategies of ports standard and applicable to all port users? What kind of factors come into play when these strategies are formed?