Article

Research on the Commitment Model of Medical Device Industry Dealers: An Empirical Study of a Pet Medical Devices Distribution Channel

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Abstract

The Journal of Sustainability Insights, vol. 1, no. 1, November 1, 2026. DOI: 10.00000/tjosi. The medical device industry is a business-to-business market marked by technological intensity, professional specialization, and strict regulation, where manufacturer–dealer relationships are shaped by information asymmetry, goal divergence, and coexisting cooperation and competition. This study examines how dealer commitment is formed and weakened in a bounded pet medical device manufacturer–dealer context in China. Drawing on principal-agent theory, relationship marketing, and coopetition theory, it proposes a model in which opportunism influences commitment through conflict, satisfaction, and trust, while competitive intensity weakens the trust–commitment link. Cross-sectional survey data from 49 dealer-side managers of a leading pet healthcare diagnostics firm were analysed using reliability and validity testing, confirmatory factor analysis, path analysis, bootstrap mediation with 5,000 resamples, and hierarchical regression. All hypotheses were supported: opportunism increases conflict, conflict reduces satisfaction, satisfaction strengthens trust, and trust is the strongest direct predictor of commitment. A significant negative serial indirect path from opportunism through conflict, satisfaction, and trust to commitment was found, alongside competing positive indirect paths involving trust. Competitive intensity significantly weakened the positive effect of trust on commitment. The findings contribute to channel governance by delineating a sequential relational process and identifying competitive intensity as a boundary condition. Because the evidence is single-firm, dealer-side, and cross-sectional, generalization should be theory-based and cautious.

Keywords: principal-agent theory; opportunism; conflict; trust; interorganizational commitment; competitive intensity; pet medical device sector

1. Introduction

The medical device industry is a business-to-business (B2B) market marked by high technological intensity, strong professional specialization, and strict regulatory oversight. Products in this sector

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often have long life cycles, high switching costs, and complex decision processes involving multiple stakeholders. Within this setting, dealers play a critical channel role by linking manufacturers with end users through sales, technical support, after-sales service, compliance coordination, and market feedback. Channel management is therefore not a narrow sales issue but a core governance concern that directly affects market access, service quality, and long-term relationship stability.

At the same time, manufacturer–dealer relationships in the medical device industry are difficult to manage. Manufacturers expect dealers to represent their products effectively and align with their market strategy, yet dealers may also carry competing brands and pursue their own commercial interests. The relationship is thus shaped by both cooperation and competition. Under these conditions, information asymmetry and goal divergence increase the risk of opportunistic behaviour, including information distortion, selective disclosure, weak compliance, and other self-interested actions [16,92,97]. Such behaviour can intensify conflict, weaken trust, and undermine channel stability over time.

These challenges are magnified by the nature of the industry itself. Medical device products are often technically complex, updated quickly, and subject to strict requirements for quality, traceability, training, and after-sales responsibility. As a result, channel performance depends not only on economic incentives but also on whether the manufacturer–dealer relationship remains stable, trustworthy, and cooperative over time. In professional and high-risk industries such as medical devices, relational continuity is not peripheral; it is central to effective channel governance.

The motivation for this study comes from a clear gap in the literature. Research on principal-agent relationships in channel management has traditionally emphasized incentives, monitoring, and information asymmetry, while giving less attention to relational and non-economic mechanisms such as conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment [16,45,75]. More recent work suggests that channel governance is rarely a simple matter of tighter control: contracts can serve both safeguarding and coordinating roles, control can interact with trust in dynamic ways, and fairness and legitimacy can shape whether governance mechanisms work as intended or backfire [22,66,94]. Yet these relational conditions are central to long-term channel continuity in B2B settings.

This article therefore examines how dealer commitment is formed and weakened in pet medical device channel relationships. Drawing on principal-agent theory, relationship marketing, and coopetition theory, it develops a model in which opportunism influences commitment through conflict, satisfaction, and trust, while competitive intensity weakens the relationship between trust and commitment. Commitment is treated as the focal long-term relational outcome because it captures a deeper willingness to maintain and support the relationship over time rather than mere repeated dealing or passive continuation [2,39]. The purpose is to construct and test a quantitative model of dealer commitment in a bounded pet medical device manufacturer–dealer setting, with opportunism as the initiating relational hazard, conflict as its immediate consequence, satisfaction as the broader evaluation of relationship worth, trust as the core relational mechanism, and commitment as the focal outcome [41,75,96].

The central research question is: *How does opportunistic behaviour influence dealer commitment in manufacturer–dealer relationships in the pet medical device sector?* Three sub-questions structure the inquiry: (1) Does opportunistic behaviour increase conflict in the manufacturer–dealer relationship? (2) Do conflict, satisfaction, and trust form a sequential relational pathway through which oppor-

tunism affects dealer commitment? (3) Does competitive intensity weaken the positive relationship between trust and dealer commitment?

The study is deliberately context-bounded. It does not claim to represent the wider medical device industry. Instead, it provides focused evidence from one leading pet healthcare diagnostics firm and its dealer network in China. Market leadership strengthens the analytical relevance of the case but does not remove the limits of a single-enterprise design. Accordingly, the findings are strongest for similar pet healthcare channel settings, and any extension to adjacent human medical device contexts should be theory-based and cautious because those settings may involve hospital procurement systems, buying groups, and additional professional decision-makers [1,18,31]. Within these boundaries, the study makes four contributions: it extends principal-agent research beyond a narrow focus on incentives and monitoring; it adds a channel-management perspective to coopetition research; it offers a relational explanation of how commitment forms and deteriorates through a sequential process; and it provides practical guidance for governing medical device channels under competitive pressure.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Section 3 describes the research design, measurement, data collection, and analytical strategy. Section 4 reports the empirical results. Section 5 discusses the findings, theoretical contributions, boundary conditions, and managerial implications. Section 6 concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Principal-Agent Theory and Channel Governance

Principal-agent theory explains situations in which one actor delegates work to another whose behaviour cannot be perfectly observed or verified. In marketing and channel settings, such relationships are common because firms rely on distributors, dealers, sales representatives, and service partners to perform tasks on their behalf [16,25,73]. The core problems are adverse selection and moral hazard. Adverse selection arises when the principal cannot fully assess the agent's true capability or intentions before entering the relationship; moral hazard arises afterwards, when the agent may shirk, distort information, or act in self-interest because its behaviour is difficult to monitor completely [16,92]. Information asymmetry is therefore a defining feature of the principal-agent setting rather than a peripheral issue.

This logic makes opportunism central. When the agent has discretion and the principal cannot fully observe effort or verify all actions, the agent may pursue private benefit at the principal's expense through selective disclosure, misrepresentation, or noncompliance [53,97]. Principal-agent theory thus explains why control mechanisms, incentives, screening, and monitoring become necessary in delegated exchange. In channel management, manufacturers routinely depend on downstream intermediaries who possess superior local information about customers, demand, and competitive conditions, while the manufacturer cannot fully observe their effort, reporting accuracy, or policy adherence [83]. Governance mechanisms such as monitoring, incentives, contractual safeguards, partner selection, and socialization aim to reduce information asymmetry and increase compliance [46,55].

The literature distinguishes behaviour-based and outcome-based controls and highlights formalization, centralization, communication routines, and performance evaluation as complementary de-

vices [7,14,34,77]. Importantly, agency control is not uniformly positive. Monitoring and contractual enforcement can curb opportunism, but some forms of control may backfire by crowding out relational goodwill or triggering defensive responses [23,46]. Governance effectiveness depends on how formal and relational mechanisms interact, and on the fit between control mix, observability, dependence, and environmental uncertainty [21,43].

Recent research refines this channel view. Agency theory remains valuable in B2B and supply relationships, but works best when governance is treated as a broader menu of contractual, relational, informational, and organizational mechanisms [25,73]. Contracts in manufacturer–distributor relationships do not only safeguard against opportunism; they also coordinate by clarifying expectations and supporting joint action [66]. Contract specificity and enforcement can jointly curb opportunism, yet enforcement by itself may intensify conflict if perceived as heavy-handed [98]. Control mechanisms are also becoming more networked, as distributor compliance may be shaped by peer-based controls such as whistleblowing [52].

Despite its strengths, principal-agent theory has clear limits for this study. It tends to treat exchange mainly as an incentive and information problem, giving less attention to the relational states through which channel relationships strengthen or deteriorate over time. Conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment are not side issues in ongoing manufacturer–dealer relationships; they are core mechanisms shaping whether the relationship remains workable [41,75]. Agency theory also typically assumes economically rational actors, whereas interfirm behaviour is shaped by fairness perceptions, reciprocity, and relational norms [63,97]. These limitations motivate the integration of relationship marketing and coopetition perspectives.

2.2. Relationship Marketing, Social Exchange, and Relationship Quality

Relationship marketing treats trust and commitment as central to enduring interorganizational exchange [32,75]. Commitment refers to a dealer's enduring intention to maintain the relationship, continue cooperation, and invest resources to preserve the exchange [9,75]. It reflects a deeper willingness to support the relationship over time rather than passive continuation, and it may contain affective, calculative, and normative elements [2,78]. Social exchange theory complements this view by emphasizing reciprocity, fairness, and mutual benefit: when exchanges are consistently rewarding, the focal firm infers that the partner is reliable and motivated to continue mutually beneficial behaviour [19,63].

Relationship quality is best understood as a multidimensional system rather than a single global attitude [84]. Following this view, conflict captures relational friction, satisfaction captures the overall evaluation of relationship worth, and trust captures confidence in the partner's honesty and dependability [41]. Trust is treated here as the core relational mechanism through which prior exchange experience is translated into commitment [11,30,39]. This multidimensional treatment is important because the present model depends on preserving a sequence among the constructs: if trust and commitment, or conflict and opportunism, were empirically indistinguishable, the structural claims would be far weaker.

2.3. Coopetition and Competitive Intensity

Coopetition refers to the coexistence of cooperation and competition within the same interorganizational relationship [15,64]. Manufacturer–dealer relationships are rarely purely cooperative or

purely competitive: firms need each other to create value while competing over margins, customers, territory, information, and channel influence [67,101]. This duality helps explain why relational mechanisms such as satisfaction, trust, and commitment remain important, yet are vulnerable to opportunism and conflict when competitive pressure intensifies [65].

Competitive intensity is treated not as an internal relationship-quality variable but as an external contextual condition reflecting the degree of rivalry and market pressure surrounding the focal relationship [3,28]. Recent channel research shows that rivalry is often embedded in channel structure through manufacturer encroachment, dual distribution, and multichannel overlap rather than existing only as general market competition [17,49,68,93]. Under stronger rivalry, trust remains valuable but may translate less strongly into commitment because competition heightens strategic vigilance, makes alternatives more salient, and keeps value-appropriation concerns active [3,85].

2.4. Theoretical Synthesis and Hypotheses

The three lenses play distinct but complementary roles. Principal-agent theory explains the origin of opportunism and governance risk; relationship marketing and social exchange explain how those hazards are converted into conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment; and coopetition theory explains why competitive intensity conditions the trust–commitment link. Table 1 summarizes these roles.

Table 1. Comparison of the main theoretical lenses.

Lens	Core focus	Explains in this study	Role in the model
Principal-agent	Delegation, information asymmetry	Why opportunism arises and governance is needed	Origin of relational hazard
Relationship marketing	Long-term exchange, trust, commitment	Why trust and commitment are central outcomes	Core relational outcomes
Social exchange	Reciprocity, fairness, mutual benefit	The sequence from conflict to satisfaction to trust	Relational transition mechanism
Resource dependence	Dependence asymmetry, power	Why commitment persists under interdependence	Structural interpretation
Coopetition	Simultaneous cooperation and competition	Why rivalry weakens the trust–commitment link	Contextual boundary condition

Drawing on these lenses, the model proposes a sequential relational process and six hypotheses. Opportunism is the initiating hazard. When one partner pursues private gain that is difficult to observe, relational norms are undermined and open disagreement becomes more likely [53,97]; meta-analytic evidence links opportunism to greater conflict and poorer relational outcomes [96,98]. Hence:

- **H1.** Opportunism positively affects conflict.

Conflict disrupts coordination, raises relational costs, and weakens positive evaluations of the exchange [20,38]. In industrial distribution, manifest conflict is negatively related to channel-member satisfaction, and meta-analytic work reinforces this result [36,41].

- **H2.** Conflict negatively affects satisfaction.

Repeatedly satisfactory interactions reduce uncertainty about the partner and strengthen beliefs that the partner is dependable, fair, and willing to preserve the relationship [42,87]. Evidence from dealer–supplier settings supports a positive satisfaction-to-trust path [76,79].

- **H3.** Satisfaction positively affects trust.

The trust-to-commitment link is the most firmly established relationship in the model. Commitment-trust theory argues that firms are more willing to invest in and make short-term sacrifices for relationships they view as reliable and honest [8,75]. This result is robust across marketing channels and supply relationships [10,11,39,61].

- **H4.** Trust positively affects commitment.

As competition grows, firms face stronger pressure on margins, customer retention, and channel position. Rivalry raises strategic vigilance and makes alternatives more salient, so the conversion of trust into commitment weakens [3,65,85,93].

- **H5.** Competitive intensity negatively moderates the positive relationship between trust and commitment.

Finally, relationship quality does not usually collapse all at once. It tends to deteriorate in stages, from visible tension to weaker evaluations, then to reduced confidence, and finally to lower willingness to maintain the exchange [20,41,75]. Because conflict is the most immediate manifestation of strain, satisfaction is more evaluative and global, and trust is deeper still, the ordering from conflict to satisfaction to trust is theoretically meaningful rather than arbitrary [32,87].

- **H6.** Opportunism influences commitment through the serial mediation path of conflict, satisfaction, and trust.

Table 2 summarizes the hypotheses and their expected signs.

Table 2. Research hypotheses and expected signs.

Hypothesis	Proposed relationship	Expected sign	Main theoretical basis
H1	Opportunism → Conflict	Positive	Principal-agent and governance research
H2	Conflict → Satisfaction	Negative	Channel conflict research
H3	Satisfaction → Trust	Positive	Relationship quality research
H4	Trust → Commitment	Positive	Commitment-trust theory
H5	Trust × Competitive intensity → Commitment	Negative moderation	Coopetition and channel structure
H6	Opportunism → Conflict → Satisfaction → Trust → Commitment	Serial mediation	Sequential relationship-quality logic

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Context

This study uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to test the proposed relationships among opportunism, conflict, satisfaction, trust, commitment, and competitive intensity in a bounded pet healthcare manufacturer–dealer context in China. The design is appropriate because the model contains direct, indirect, and moderating effects that can be examined within a single empirical framework, and because the focal constructs are relational, perceptual, and difficult to observe directly [29,61,75]. The study intentionally avoids claiming statistical representativeness of the wider medical device industry. Selecting one leading firm improves contextual coherence by reducing between-firm variation in channel structure, product domain, and governance environment, but analytical salience should not be confused with representativeness. A cross-sectional design is better suited to testing theory-consistent associations than to establishing temporal order; the hypothesized sequence should therefore be read as a theoretically grounded relational process rather than as directly observed change over time [74,89].

3.2. Questionnaire Development and Measurement

The questionnaire preserved conceptual equivalence with established scales while adapting wording to the manufacturer–dealer setting in China. Five principles guided the design: the instrument is theory-driven; wording is concise; items avoid double-barrelled statements; wording is neutral; and sensitive background items are limited and placed away from the main construct blocks. Because the focal constructs refer to an interorganizational relationship, the questionnaire consistently used organizational framing ("we" and "our") and instructed respondents to answer with reference to one focal manufacturer.

All attitudinal constructs were measured on seven-point scales. Opportunism, conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment used multi-item agreement scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Competitive intensity used a single seven-point evaluative item ranging from 1 = no competition to 7 = extremely competitive. Item wording was adapted from closely related interorganizational and channel studies [29,42,62,75]. Table 3 reports the measurement focus of each construct.

Table 3. Measurement focus of constructs.

Construct	Main source	Measurement focus
Opportunism	Davies et al. (2011)	Distortion, withholding, noncompliance, self-benefit
Conflict	Davies et al. (2011)	Tension, communication difficulty, disagreement
Satisfaction	Davies et al. (2011); Geyskens & Steenkamp (2000)	Overall evaluation of the relationship
Trust	Lado et al. (2008); Morgan & Hunt (1994)	Honesty, promise keeping, sincerity, dependability
Commitment	Lado et al. (2008); Anderson & Weitz (1992)	Long-term orientation, maintenance, resource investment
Competitive intensity	Ahamed (2015); Dalsace & Jap (2003)	Perceived market rivalry around the focal relationship

The development process combined scale selection, contextual adaptation, wording revision, and pretesting. Two rounds of pilot testing and interviews with five sales managers from a leading manufacturer and two management professors refined wording, tone, and control-variable items to fit a small, agile, dealer-side business context and a predominantly young respondent group. Data were collected through Questionnaire Star, a widely used Chinese online survey platform supporting WeChat, email, and QR-code distribution. Built-in IP-based duplicate prevention, response-time monitoring, and attention-check items were used to protect data quality. Control variables (work experience, relationship duration, sector, firm size, and respondent role) were placed after the core construct blocks.

3.3. Data Collection and Sample

The respondents were dealer-side managers (from distributors, agents, and dealers) responsible for interfacing with a focal manufacturer. These boundary-spanning informants have direct knowledge of day-to-day coordination, information exchange, dispute handling, and overall relationship quality [54,57,58]. A non-probability design combining convenience and snowball sampling was used, with initial contacts drawn from industry associations, MBA alumni networks, and the researcher's professional connections. Formal collection ran from October 2025 to January 2026. Questionnaires were distributed anonymously, participation was voluntary, and trap questions and screening checks identified careless responses; respondents were offered research feedback or a small incentive.

A total of 80 questionnaires were distributed and 59 were returned, yielding an initial response rate of 73.8 percent. After screening, 10 returned questionnaires were excluded because of obvious patterned responding (e.g., zigzag answering or repeated identical options) or completion in less than 60 seconds. The final valid sample therefore comprised 49 questionnaires, corresponding to a valid response rate of 61.3 percent relative to distributed questionnaires and 83.1 percent relative to returned questionnaires. Although 49 cases is modest for structural modelling, simulation evidence shows that required sample size depends on model characteristics, and smaller samples can be workable when the measurement model is strong and structural relationships are substantial [13,100]. The mediation effects were tested with bootstrap procedures, which are recommended for

indirect effects in small to moderate samples [90,99]. Table 4 reports the firm-size distribution of the valid sample.

Table 4. Firm size distribution of the valid sample ($N = 49$).

Firm size (employees)	Frequency	Percentage
1–5	13	27%
6–20	21	43%
21–50	9	18%
51–100	5	10%
More than 100	1	2%
Total	49	100%

The sample is dominated by small firms, respondents in first- and second-tier cities, long-term formal contractual relationships, and relatively established manufacturer–dealer ties. Most participants were owners, executives, sales managers, or sales staff with more than one year of work experience, consistent with the aim of capturing informed assessments of ongoing channel relationships.

3.4. Data Preparation and Analytical Strategy

Questionnaires with patterned responding or unrealistically short completion times were removed before analysis. The remaining data were checked for missing values and outliers; isolated missing values were handled by mean substitution to preserve the limited sample, and box-plot inspection revealed no extreme outliers requiring deletion. Composite mean scores were computed for each multi-item construct.

The empirical analysis followed the two-step approach recommended for structural equation modelling [6]. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) first assessed the measurement model and convergent and discriminant validity; path analysis then tested the structural sequence. Bootstrap resampling with 5,000 draws tested indirect and chain-mediated effects [44,82,90], and hierarchical regression tested moderation because competitive intensity was measured with a single item and the sample was limited [5]. Model fit was evaluated with multiple indices, especially χ^2/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR [48]. Because of the modest sample, fit assessment emphasized the overall pattern across indices rather than any single statistic. Because all focal variables came from the same respondents, procedural remedies (anonymity, neutral wording, separation of construct blocks, attention checks) were built into the design and Harman's single-factor test was used as a preliminary diagnostic [71,81]. The analysis was conducted with SPSSAU, AMOS, and the PROCESS macro.

The five equations used for the chain-mediation test are:

$$\text{Conflict} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1\,\text{Opportunism} + \varepsilon_1, \tag{1}$$

$$\text{Satisfaction} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\,\text{Opportunism} + \beta_2\,\text{Conflict} + \varepsilon_2, \tag{2}$$

$$\text{Trust} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1\,\text{Opportunism} + \gamma_2\,\text{Conflict} + \gamma_3\,\text{Satisfaction} + \varepsilon_3, \tag{3}$$

$$\text{Commitment}_{\text{total}} = \delta_0 + \delta_1\,\text{Opportunism} + \varepsilon_4, \tag{4}$$

$$\text{Commitment}_{\text{direct}} = \theta_0 + \theta_1\,\text{Opportunism} + \theta_2\,\text{Conflict} + \theta_3\,\text{Satisfaction} + \theta_4\,\text{Trust} + \varepsilon_5. \tag{5}$$

The proposed serial indirect effect is the product of the four substantive links:

$$\mathrm{Ind}_{\mathrm{serial}} = \alpha_1 \, \beta_2 \, \gamma_3 \, \theta_4. \tag{6}$$

The moderation test was specified as:

$$\mathrm{Commitment} = \lambda_0 + \lambda_1 \, \mathrm{Trust} + \lambda_2 \, \mathrm{CI} + \lambda_3 \, (\mathrm{Trust} \times \mathrm{CI}) + \sum_k \mu_k \, \mathrm{Control}_k + \varepsilon, \tag{7}$$

where CI denotes competitive intensity. Predictor and moderator were mean-centred before constructing the interaction term to reduce nonessential multicollinearity.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model

The revised measurement model showed acceptable fit for hypothesis testing. All multi-item constructs had composite reliability above 0.88 and average variance extracted (AVE) above 0.60, and the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with the other focal constructs, supporting convergent and discriminant validity. GFI (0.674) and NFI (0.818) fell below the conventional 0.90 benchmark, but these indices are sensitive to small samples and were treated as secondary rather than decisive criteria [48]. All modification indices involved covariances within constructs rather than across constructs, suggesting substantive item overlap rather than purely statistical tuning. Substantively, the CFA results support treating opportunism, conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment as related but distinct components of channel relationship quality. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first unrotated factor explained 48.23 percent of the variance, falling to 38.86 percent after rotation; common method bias is therefore a live concern but is not likely to invalidate the findings, particularly given that Harman's test is a weak diagnostic on its own [4,47].

4.2. Path Analysis

After validating the measurement model, path analysis was conducted using composite mean indicators to reduce estimation burden in the small sample [12]. Table 5 reports the structural results. All four hypothesized direct paths were significant and in the expected direction. Opportunism had a significant positive effect on conflict, supporting H1 ($\beta = 0.754$, $p < 0.001$). Conflict had a significant negative effect on satisfaction, supporting H2 ($\beta = -0.415$, $p = 0.001$). Satisfaction had a significant positive effect on trust, supporting H3 ($\beta = 0.634$, $p < 0.001$). Trust had a very strong positive effect on commitment, supporting H4 ($\beta = 0.910$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Path coefficients and hypothesis testing results.

Hypothesis / path	**Unstd.** B	**SE**	z **/ CR**	p	**Std.** β	**Result**
H1: Opportunism → Conflict	0.862	0.107	8.040	0.000	0.754	Supported
H2: Conflict → Satisfaction	−0.219	0.069	−3.195	0.001	−0.415	Supported
H3: Satisfaction → Trust	0.819	0.143	5.735	0.000	0.634	Supported
H4: Trust → Commitment	0.796	0.052	15.345	0.000	0.910	Supported

Note: Unstd. = unstandardized; Std. = standardized; CR = critical ratio.

The relative strength of the paths is informative. The strongest coefficient appears in the trust-to-commitment link, reinforcing the view that commitment in this context depends heavily on whether the manufacturer is perceived as honest, dependable, and worthy of continued cooperation. By contrast, the conflict-to-satisfaction and satisfaction-to-trust links are more moderate, which is theoretically plausible because these stages reflect broader relational evaluation rather than a direct behavioural intention. Trust therefore acts as the final conversion mechanism through which prior relational experience is translated into commitment.

4.3. Chain Mediation

Bootstrap resampling with 5,000 draws estimated the indirect effects and their 95% confidence intervals. Table 6 reports the specific indirect paths. The core serial path from opportunism to commitment through conflict, satisfaction, and trust was significantly negative (effect $= -0.194$, Boot SE $= 0.060$, 95% CI $[-0.310, -0.076]$), supporting H6. Three additional paths were significant: opportunism $\rightarrow$ trust $\rightarrow$ commitment was positive (0.257, CI $[0.021, 0.648]$), opportunism $\rightarrow$ conflict $\rightarrow$ trust $\rightarrow$ commitment was negative (-0.214, CI $[-0.451, -0.057]$), and opportunism $\rightarrow$ satisfaction $\rightarrow$ trust $\rightarrow$ commitment was positive (0.153, CI $[0.022, 0.277]$). The remaining paths were not significant because their confidence intervals included zero.

Table 6. Bootstrap results for mediation paths (5,000 resamples).

Indirect path	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Result
Opp. → Conflict → Commitment	0.077	0.060	−0.036	0.207	n.s.
Opp. → Satisfaction → Commitment	−0.015	0.039	−0.087	0.076	n.s.
Opp. → Trust → Commitment	0.257	0.166	0.021	0.648	Significant +
Opp. → Conflict → Satisfaction → Commitment	0.019	0.047	−0.097	0.093	n.s.
Opp. → Conflict → Trust → Commitment	−0.214	0.102	−0.451	−0.057	Significant −
Opp. → Satisfaction → Trust → Commitment	0.153	0.064	0.022	0.277	Significant +
Opp. → Conflict → Satisfaction → Trust → Commitment	−0.194	0.060	−0.310	−0.076	Significant −

Note: Opp. = opportunism; LLCI/ULCI = lower/upper level of the 95% confidence interval; n.s. = not significant.

The coexistence of positive and negative indirect paths resulted in a non-significant total indirect effect of opportunism on commitment because the confidence interval included zero. This pattern should not be read as evidence that opportunism is beneficial. A more careful interpretation is that dealer-side respondents may still evaluate the relationship favourably from their own standpoint when opportunistic behaviour produces short-term advantage, flexibility, or perceived private gain [50,97]. Resource dependence logic offers a compatible reading: firms may continue to value and maintain an exchange that provides important resources or market access despite underlying strain [24,35]. The overall pattern still favours a cautionary interpretation because the core serial pathway is negative and the positive paths appear more conditional and fragile than the destructive path.

4.4. Moderation by Competitive Intensity

Because competitive intensity was measured with a single item and the sample was small, its moderating role was tested through hierarchical regression rather than a latent interaction model. Control

variables were entered in Model 1, the main effects of trust and competitive intensity in Model 2, and the interaction term in Model 3. Table 7 reports the results.

Table 7. Hierarchical regression results for the moderation effect.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Firm size	−0.016	−0.042	−0.014
Annual sales	0.139	0.047	0.095
Years of cooperation	0.150*	0.099	0.086
Contract type	0.102	0.102	0.096
Operating region	0.177*	0.086	0.085
Respondent position	−0.153*	−0.089	−0.090
Respondent work experience	−0.059	−0.039	−0.037
Trust		0.945**	0.775**
Competitive intensity		0.234**	0.154*
Trust × Competitive intensity			−0.164*
R^2	0.882	0.913	0.926
ΔR^2	0.882	0.030**	0.013*
F	37.446**	45.220**	47.491**

Note: Entries are standardized coefficients. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

Trust remained a strong positive predictor of commitment across all three models. After competitive intensity was added in Model 2, both trust and competitive intensity had significant positive main effects. When the interaction term was entered in Model 3, the trust-by-competitive-intensity interaction was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.164$, $p < 0.05$), and the increment in explained variance was significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.013$, $p < 0.05$). Although the incremental effect is modest, the result indicates that competitive intensity weakens the positive effect of trust on commitment, supporting H5. In practical terms, the same level of trust translates into less commitment under stronger rivalry because market pressure raises perceived alternatives, short-run performance concerns, and defensive behaviour [3].

4.5. Summary of Hypotheses

Table 8 summarizes the hypothesis-testing results. All six direct, mediation, and moderation hypotheses were supported, showing that dealer commitment is shaped by a connected relational process rather than by a single isolated driver.

Table 8. Summary of hypothesis testing results.

Hypothesis	Content	Result
H1	Opportunism positively affects conflict	Supported
H2	Conflict negatively affects satisfaction	Supported
H3	Satisfaction positively affects trust	Supported
H4	Trust positively affects commitment	Supported
H5	Competitive intensity negatively moderates trust → commitment	Supported
H6	Serial mediation through conflict, satisfaction, and trust	Supported

5. Discussion

5.1. The Sequential Path from Opportunism to Commitment

This study explains how dealer commitment is formed and weakened within a bounded pet healthcare manufacturer–dealer context in China. The central conclusion is not that the entire medical device industry follows one uniform relational pattern, but that in this focal setting commitment emerges through a connected process involving opportunism, conflict, satisfaction, trust, and competitive intensity. All six hypotheses were supported. From principal-agent theory, opportunism arises because partners operate under information asymmetry, incomplete monitoring, and goal divergence [16,51]. Transaction cost logic treats opportunism as a core exchange hazard that raises safeguarding needs and coordination costs [45,97]. Relationship marketing and social exchange theory explain why these governance problems become relationally consequential: conflict makes the relationship less rewarding, reduced satisfaction weakens the basis for trust, and weaker trust lowers the willingness to invest in the relationship [63,75]. Resource dependence and the relational view add that commitment reflects both a relational attitude and a willingness to sustain a strategically important exchange under interdependence [26,33,35,60,86].

5.2. Trust as the Core Driver of Commitment

Trust is the central mechanism in this model. In the path model it had a very strong effect on commitment ($\beta = 0.910$), and in the final commitment equation of the mediation analysis it remained the dominant predictor even after opportunism, conflict, and satisfaction were included. Positive evaluations did not strengthen commitment by themselves once trust was taken into account; satisfaction contributed mainly by building confidence that the manufacturer was honest, reliable, and worthy of continued cooperation. This finding is highly consistent with relationship marketing theory, which treats trust as the psychological foundation of long-term exchange [10,39,75]. Once a dealer believes the manufacturer is honest, dependable, and unlikely to behave opportunistically, perceived vulnerability declines and willingness to invest increases [40,95]. Trust is therefore not merely one antecedent among many but the key mechanism through which other positive evaluations are converted into enduring commitment.

5.3. Dual Pathways of Opportunism and the Destructive–Restorative Asymmetry

The findings suggest that opportunism may activate two competing indirect mechanisms. The negative path aligns with agency, transaction cost, and relational exchange reasoning: opportunism dis-

rupts coordination, raises safeguarding costs, and weakens exchange stability, so conflict rises, trust weakens, and continuity becomes harder to sustain [36,96,98]. The positive path requires a more cautious reading. It may reflect the dealer's own view that the relationship remains beneficial from its standpoint even when the same behaviour is potentially harmful from the manufacturer's perspectivean instrumental and potentially fragile form of commitment sustained by perceived benefit and dependence rather than by healthy relational conditions [19,24,50].

The coexistence of positive and negative indirect paths resulted in a non-significant total indirect effect, which helps explain why prior research has not always reached uniform conclusions about opportunism and commitment [27,56]. The most careful conclusion is not that opportunism is beneficial, but that it may create short-term self-perceived gains while simultaneously damaging the relational conditions required for enduring commitment. More generally, the results point to an asymmetry: negative conflict-based routes appear strong and robust, whereas the satisfaction-based route reflects conditional relational preservation from the focal actor's perspective [41,87]. This conclusion should remain tightly bounded because it draws on dealer-side perceptions from one channel; matched dyadic research is needed before extending the pattern [58,63,69].

5.4. Competitive Intensity as a Boundary Condition

Competitive intensity had a positive main effect on commitment but significantly weakened the positive effect of trust. Rivalry does not replace trust; it reduces how strongly trust alone can be converted into deeper commitment [3]. This conclusion fits the broader channel view that commitment is shaped by both internal relationship quality and the external competitive environment, and it aligns with recent work showing that rivalry is often embedded in the relationship itself through encroachment, dual distribution, and channel overlap [17,49,68,93]. The implication is not that trust becomes unimportant under competition, but that it becomes less sufficient on its own. The same level of trust can therefore produce different levels of commitment depending on how much rivalry surrounds the relationship, preventing the model from being read as purely linear or universal [65,85].

5.5. Theoretical Contributions and Boundary Conditions

The study makes four theoretical contributions. First, it extends principal-agent reasoning by showing that the consequences of opportunism are not limited to immediate control failure but initiate a broader relational process through conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment [16,45]. Second, it strengthens the commitment-trust view by showing that trust is the most immediate and powerful predictor of commitment in the focal context [10,75]. Third, it shows that opportunism has more complex downstream consequences than a uniform negative model implies, distinguishing shared relational quality from actor-specific perceptions of benefit [50,96]. Fourth, it contributes to coopetition and contingency research by treating competitive intensity as a boundary condition rather than mere background context [3,15]. Together these contributions position the study as an integrative framework linking governance hazard, relationship quality, and competitive context.

These contributions must be read within clear limits. The evidence comes from a single leading pet healthcare firm, dealer-side respondents, a cross-sectional survey, and 49 valid cases. Statistical power is modest, particularly for interaction tests [72,100]. The findings are strongest for pet healthcare manufacturer–dealer relationships sharing repeated exchange, dealer discretion, information asymmetry, technical coordination needs, and competitive pressure. Extension to human medical

device channels should remain limited and theory-based because those settings involve stronger regulation, more complex procurement, and additional decision actors that may reshape the same mechanisms [1,18,31,59].

5.6. Managerial Implications

The findings yield practical guidance at three levels. For manufacturing firms, opportunism should be prevented early through transparent information sharing, clear role definitions, regular cooperation reviews, and incentives that reduce the appeal of self-serving behaviour [96,98]. Conflict should be treated as an early-warning signal rather than a routine cost, with firms monitoring complaints, communication breakdowns, and coordination resistance and intervening through mediation and clarification [20,88]. Trust should be built operationally rather than symbolically: price-stabilization rules, transparent grievance procedures, written policy-change notices, documented service standards, and clear territory responsibilities make manufacturer conduct predictable and verifiable. Formal and relational governance should be combined rather than treated as substitutes [23,70].
For channel partners, the results warn against "dangerous satisfaction": short-term gains can produce favourable evaluations even while opportunism weakens deeper relational foundations [37,50]. Dealers should evaluate the relationship on broader criteria such as response speed, transparency, support stability, and fairness, and should assess whether their commitment reflects genuine confidence or merely difficulty of exit [24,80]. Trust also requires reciprocal behaviour, so information accuracy and agreement compliance should be treated as investments in relationship stability [97].
At the governance-system level, strategies should be tailored to the competitive environment. In lower-rivalry settings firms can lean more heavily on relational governance and trust-building; in higher-rivalry settings contractual safeguards, monitoring, and clearer rules on customer allocation and service responsibility should be strengthened alongside trust [3,17,49]. firms should also establish a multidimensional relationship evaluation system that monitors opportunism, conflict, satisfaction, trust, and commitment together, and should align operational, relational, and strategic levels of channel management so that commitment is not undermined by inconsistent communication or poorly handled channel competition [41,75].

6. Conclusions

This article examines how dealer commitment is formed and weakened in a bounded pet medical device manufacturer–dealer context in China. Using survey data from 49 dealer-side managers and a combination of CFA, path analysis, bootstrap mediation, and hierarchical regression, it shows that commitment emerges through a connected relational process. Opportunism significantly increases conflict, conflict reduces satisfaction, satisfaction strengthens trust, and trust strongly increases commitment. Trust is the strongest direct predictor, while competitive intensity weakens the translation of trust into commitment. The significant negative serial indirect path from opportunism through conflict, satisfaction, and trust to commitment supports a sequential erosion interpretation, even though competing positive indirect paths involving trust are also present.
For practice, the results suggest that stable channel relationships depend not only on formal control but also on limiting opportunism, managing conflict early, maintaining satisfaction, and building trust under competitive pressure. Manufacturers should make conduct predictable through clear

rules and reliable support, while dealers should distinguish healthy commitment from dependence-based lock-in and avoid mistaking short-term gain for relational health.

Several limitations shape the interpretation. The sample is modest ($N = 49$), single-source, dealer-side, cross-sectional, and drawn from one focal enterprise, so temporal precedence cannot be established and key-informant bias remains possible [57,74]. Common method bias cannot be dismissed, and competitive intensity was measured with a single item, which limits construct richness and reliability assessment [81,91]. Future research should replicate the model with larger samples, use longitudinal or repeated-measure designs to test temporal order, collect matched manufacturer–dealer dyads, replace the single-item competitive-intensity measure with validated multi-item scales, and test boundary conditions such as relationship length, dependence, and monitoring. A staged research pathreplication within pet healthcare, comparison across adjacent animal-health settings, and only then careful testing in human medical device channelsis more consistent with the evidence base than any direct claim of broad generalizability.

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