

## Characterization of Key Account Management in the Chinese Context: A Systematic Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

*The stage of development of and speed of cultural change in the Chinese market created an environment that differs considerably from that in the West; thus, examining key account management (KAM) in China and concluding its characteristics are necessary. This research adopts the systematic literature review method to review the relevant literature on KAM, including KAM theories, KAM models, KAM empirical studies and KAM practices in China. This study aims to identify and analyze the factors influencing the characteristics of KAM in the Chinese context. And this study summarizes the main factors affecting KAM in China as well as their influence and outcomes. Based on those factors, KAM theories, and Chinese context, the author would make five propositions on the aspects of KAM orientation (KAMO), organization behavior (OB), and relational model ("guanxi" model) to infer the difference and characteristics of Chinese KAM.*

*Keywords:* China; "Guanxi" model; key account management; management orientation; organizational behavior; relationship marketing

### INTRODUCTION

China is currently a highly competitive environment, where global companies compete for access to supply chain partners and to develop China's domestic market. This competition can be seen among not only international enterprises but also Chinese companies dedicated to modernizing their operations and changing the ways in which they conduct business to win customer loyalty in the domestic and global market.

Therefore, to continuously gain advantages in China's highly competitive business environment, corporate competitors typically search for time-tested practical methods outside the country that will enable them to adapt to the Chinese context.

Western enterprises are generally familiar with the advantages of relationship marketing (RM) and market orientation as well as mechanisms for serving key accounts (KAs) through KA management (KAM). Thus, Western suppliers combine their Chinese strategies with their relationship-building practices to serve key customers (i.e., KAs) and conduct marketing activities to establish, develop, and maintain successful relationships (Hunt and Morgan, 1994). Meanwhile, KAM is an emerging practice in China. Chinese suppliers have been learning to become market oriented and serve their Western KAs effectively but have also set their sights on KAM in the process. KAM is a customer-oriented resource system that enables an organization to realize profit growth through the provision of special personnel and/or services to its most important customers (i.e., KAs; Homburg et al., 2000).

Numerous studies contributed to the literature on KAM, but only a few integrated the characteristics of KAM in the Chinese context. The Chinese context is a special environment including China's market development path and scale, culture, and socialist system, which created conditions with Chinese characteristics. In other words, the stage of development of and speed of cultural change in the Chinese market created a context that differs considerably from that in the West.

However, few studies integrated KAM theories with China's current situation; thus, this study aims to integrate the literature and Chinese context to explore the characteristics of KAM in China.

In addition, China has a socialist system, Confucian culture, and the largest population in the world. Therefore, to understand KAM in the Chinese context, this study examines the basic characteristics and development of KAM in the country by reviewing the literature and summarizes the factors affecting KAM in China based on the literature. Thus, the systematic literature review (SLR) method is the most suitable approach for achieving the research objectives.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

KAM aims to provide special treatment to a company's most important clients in terms of marketing, sales, and service administration (Barrett, 1986). KAM is defined as an approach for achieving maximum sales from a set of identified and specified internal and external customers (Wnek, 1996).

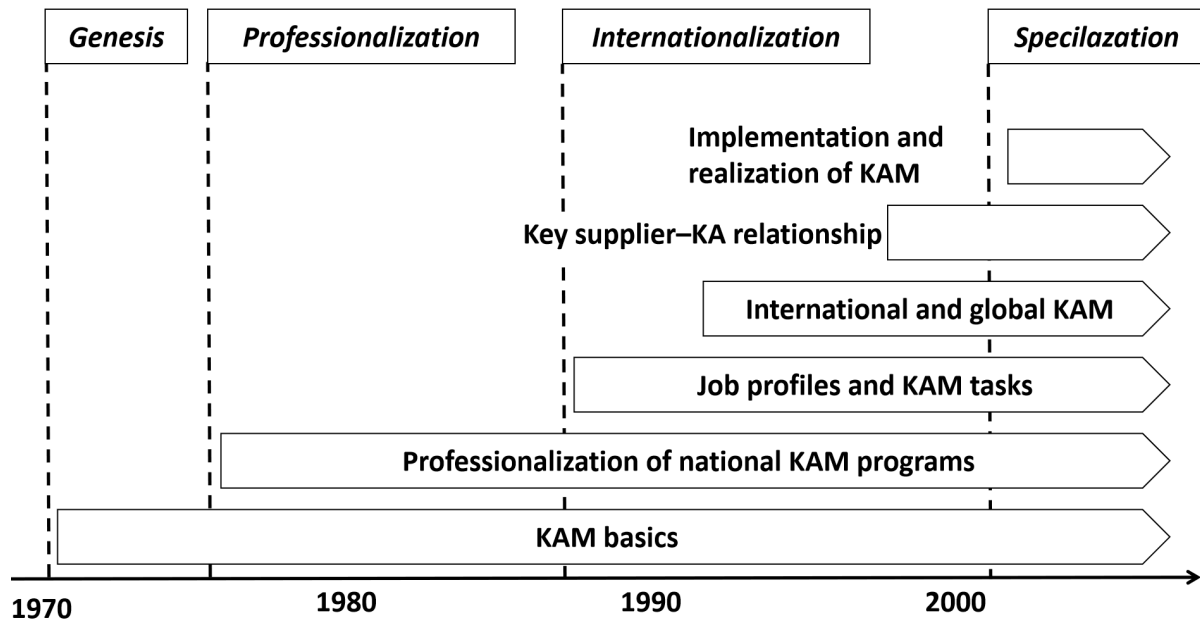
KAs are clients who are essential to an enterprise from financial and nonfinancial perspectives. According to Pardo (1999), KAs are a company's most crucial customers and have an impact on a supplier's business strategy (Pardo, 1999). In addition, Millman and Wilson argued that KAs are clients of strategic importance in the business-to-business market (Millman and Wilson, 1995).

The importance of strategy is related to sales revenues, profitability, the centralized purchasing system, and other factors (Barrett, 1986; Colletti and Tubridy, 1987). However, various terms are used in the literature, and the term "KAs" is used for large customers, strategic customers, global customers, and country customers, who have knowledge on the aforementioned factors (Sengupta et al., 1997).

The correct and proper management of KAs is strategically crucial to a business or an organization. Buyers and sellers establish a relationship by identifying KAs and analyzing the variables of the relationship, including the relationship between the buyers and sellers, balance of power, exchanged information, conflicts, cooperation, and commitment of the decision-making units (Pels, 1991). Relationship management is a key point in KAM, which is a framework in which opportunities can be created to build strong relationships between buyers and sellers to achieve high profits by satisfying customers.

The provision of different services to the most important customers is based on the common sense of a competent salesperson. To establish a professional appraisal organization, having a systematic structure, engaging in process and personnel construction, and not being a lone wolf are necessary. The notion of KAM has existed for many years, and the degree of professionalization in research and practice has increased over time, which is outlined in the chronological diagram in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Development of KAM from the 1970s to the present



## METHODOLOGY

The SLR method, which allows the identification, analysis, and presentation of all the studies relevant to the research objectives, is adopted in this research. The SLR protocols can provide a transparent, reproducible, and comprehensive research process and ensure the authenticity of research results.

In this study, the literature is reviewed, including that on KAM, KAs in China, Chinese suppliers with KAs, Chinese KA managers, and so on, to describe the characteristics of KAM in the country in different aspects using SLR to ensure that the selected articles can further the research. In addition, descriptive and thematic analyses of the SLR findings are conducted to evaluate and synthesize the search results qualitatively.

The research objective of this thesis is to identify the characteristics of KAM in China by reviewing the published literature. Thus, the most essential keyword in this thesis is “key account management,” which is included in all the search strings to ensure the searched topic and relevant results. Moreover, synonyms of and alternative terms for “key account management” are included in the search strings.

The search strings are developed using Boolean logic (AND, OR, NOT), whose operation is supported in Scopus and Web of Science (WOS).

The keyword “characteristics” can infer the factors influencing the characteristics of KAM, which can be defined as circumstances, facts, or influences that contribute to a result. Factors influencing characteristics may include influence(s), issue(s), effective(ness), and relationship(s); thus, such words are included in the search strings.

In addition, the KAM research area is the business-to-business field, whose accounts include manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, buyers, and sellers. Therefore, such accounts are included in the search strings.

TABLE 1. Keywords and Search Strings

Keywords	Search Strings
Key account management	"Key account management" OR "Key account management in China" OR "key accounts"
Characteristics	factor* OR influence* OR issue* OR effective* OR relationship*
Key accounts in business-to-business field	manufactur* OR supplier* OR buyer* OR seller* OR distribut*

Source: The Author (2021)

When the keyword search process is completed, the selection criteria (details of the inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed in Table 1 are applied to review and assess the retrieved papers.

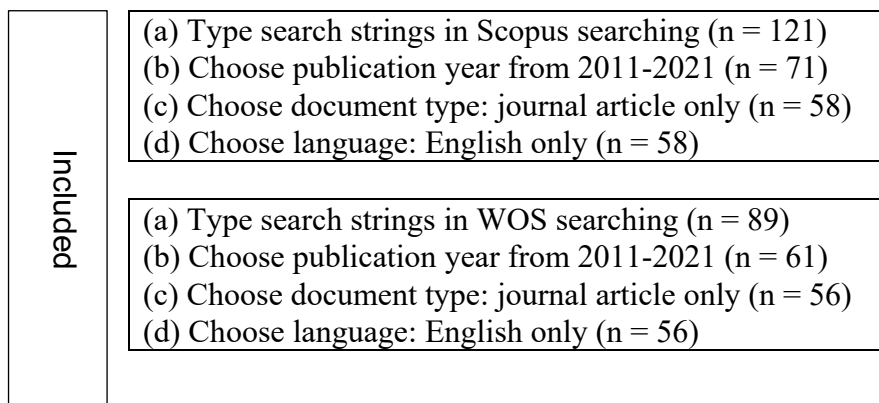
The inclusion and exclusion criteria can ensure that the final research theses selected are relevant to this study, limit the number of articles and other aspects, and guarantee that the results are properly screened and filtered through a high-quality, transparent, and impartial process, so the final search results are relevant and unbiased.

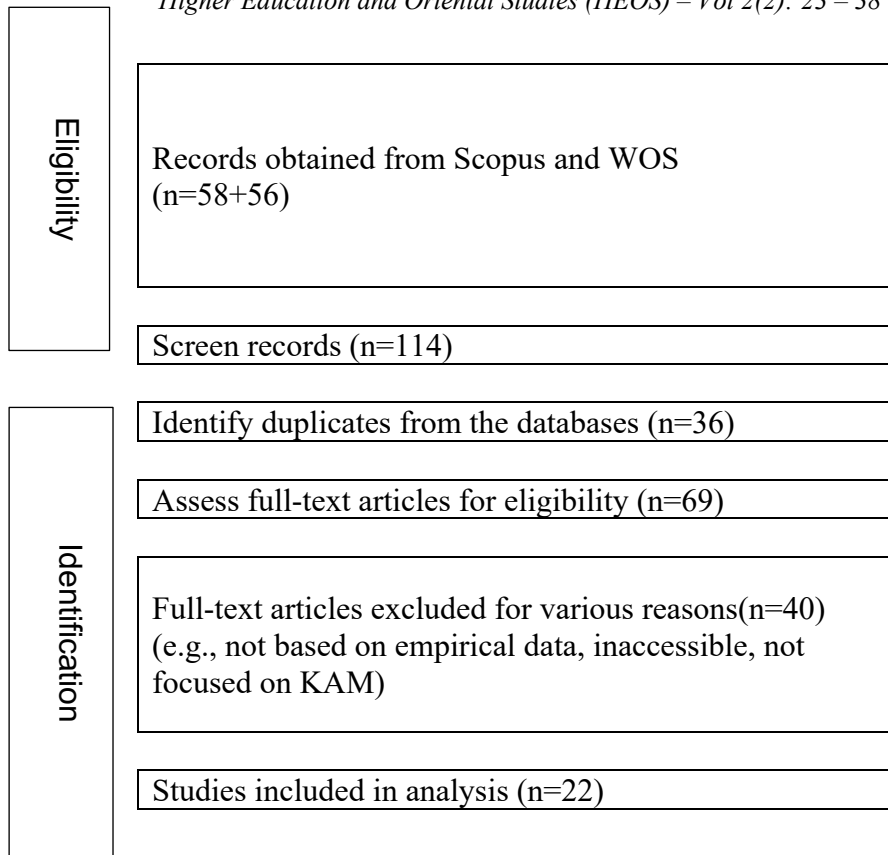
TABLE 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion	Justification
Relevance	Search terms are included in the title and/or abstract and discussed in accordance with the aim of the research	Search terms not included in the title and/or abstract or not relevant to the aim of this research	To ensure that papers are relevant within the research context and will achieve the objectives of this thesis
Article Source	Scholarly journals	All other source types	To guarantee the high quality of literature reviews.
Industry	Any industry but must be relevant to key account management	Not restricted but must be relevant to key account management	To ensure the relevant literatures is about key account management
Language	Only in English	Any other language	English is a universal language for papers
Availability	Full text available	Full text unavailable	Required to enable further analysis

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis is used in this study to explore and develop a systematic search process (Moher et al., 2009), which is presented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. Flow of systematic review search





In summary, 114 articles on marketing capabilities, sustainable consumption, and firm performance are retrieved from the two academic databases (i.e., Scopus and WOS), which are searched using the SLR method. The results yield 36 identical articles published in both databases. After the 36 duplicate articles are excluded, only 78 articles remain. Articles not based on empirical data, those that are inaccessible, and those not focused on KAM are also excluded. Thus, only 22 journal articles are included in this study.

## RESULTS

Following the research objectives, the SLR of the 22 articles on KAM highlights two main findings: the conceptual framework of KAM and factors influencing KAM, combined with the Chinese context. The two findings are reported in this section, and five propositions are presented.

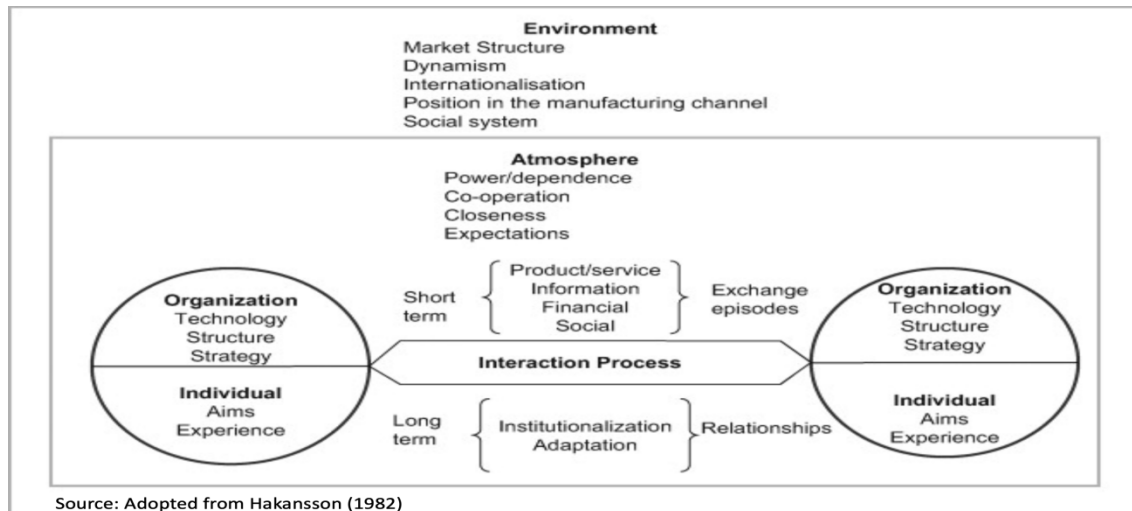
### FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALIZING KAM

The background of KAM in the context of Western developed economies is described in the interaction approach developed by Hakansson, which dominated the ideology of Europeans in terms of their observations, explanations, and understanding of interorganizational trade in the mid 1970s (Hakansson, 1982).

In the Hakansson interaction approach model, which is presented in Figure 3, four major variables affect trade, namely, actors, interactive processes, exchanged conditions, and external environmental factors. Specifically, actors represent the employees of the relevant business enterprises in the trade; interactive processes represent the exchanged processes between clients and suppliers; exchanged conditions mainly include professional proficiency, cooperation, proximity, status, power, and other elements; and external environmental factors represent those surrounding the interorganizational exchange, such as culture, politics, society, the economy, and other elements. The model enables researchers to understand the changes in

and transformation of the marketplace, which may arise from the intensity and concentration of the actors in the market, growing complexity of the exchanged contents and processes, and increasing competitive pressure creating increased differentiation in the market.

FIGURE 3. Interaction model

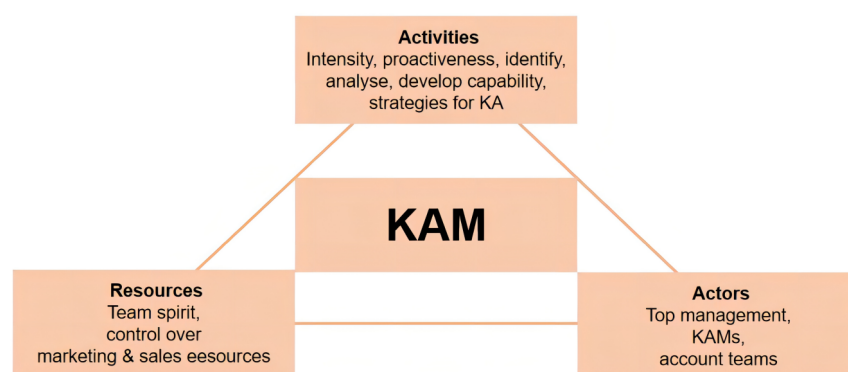


KAM is an approach used by an organization to manage its internal and external networks (Pardo, 1994; Holt and McDonald, 2000) and create value by implementing specific procedures for KAs (Wengler et al., 2006). However, this approach emphasizes the cooperation of various business departments, including the product department, sales areas, and other functional groups, to implement specific procedures and provide special treatment to top and important customers, which cannot be done by individuals (Workman et al., 2003).

According to the literature, in the three schools of thought in relationship marketing (RM), the industrial marketing and purchasing (Palmer et al., 2005) network approach, combined with RM, is the most relevant and practical method for providing a useful framework for understanding and analyzing KAM. The other two schools of thought in RM are the Anglo-Australian school (Egan, 2008) and Nordic school (Baines, Fill, and Page, 2008).

Specifically, according to the IMP approach, the evolution and development of business relationships occur in terms of changes in three dimensions, namely, actors, resources, and activities (Håkansson and Johanson, 1992; Homburg et al., 2002; Workman et al., 2003), which can represent the essence of commercial relationships and construct the organizational aspects of KAM (Shaw, 2003). To effectively understand the KAM framework, AlHussan, Al-Husan, and Fletcher-Chen created a chart to show the novel conceptual framework (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. KAM conceptual framework



Source: Adapted from Håkansson and Johanson (1992); Homburg et al. (2002); Workman et al. (2003)

In the KAM framework, actors are the top management and employees involved in the KAM team, such as senior KA managers and sales teams. Resources are utilized and controlled by the actors, who also generate resources, including technologies and human, marketing, interactive, and organizational shared resources. Activities are created by a combination of actors and resources, which are KA strategies, such as competition intensity, development capability, technical and commercial problems, manufactured products, and so on, connected to and exchanged between an organization and company via interactive processes such as business resource sharing.

In addition, some scholars argued that studies should focus on not only the organizational aspects of KAM but also its relational aspects (Ivens and Pardo, 2007; Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2011). Interactions among organizations are crucial to the establishment and development of relationships and substance (Shaw, 2003), including not only the activities necessary to build a business relationship, such as visits, phone calls, and meetings, but also social activities and interpersonal relationships (Huang and Wilkinson, 2006). Changes in such relationships are reflected in the relationship attributes; thus, to determine the factors influencing the characteristics of KAM, considering its relational aspects is necessary.

#### KAM ORIENTATION (KAMO) INFLUENCING CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE KAM

A KAMO is a factor contributing to and facilitating the success of an organization's KAM. Gounaris and Tzempelikos defined the KAMO as a multidimensional construct integrating attitudinal and behavioral values, including customer orientation, top management commitment, cross-functional coordination, customization capabilities, top management involvement, and cross-functional support (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2013), which summarize the most commonly observed characteristics of companies effectively engaging in KAM.

It can be inferred that an advanced KAMO is more likely to be present in Western enterprises than in Chinese enterprises, because Chinese enterprises adopted KAM later than Western countries. Moreover, Chinese suppliers transformed from being state controlled to being market driven only in the last decade and thus have relatively new KAM projects, which are currently in the rapid transformation phase and on a steep learning curve. Compared with the Western KAM experience, the first generation KAMs usually lack the instruction and oversight by western suppliers, could be expected to be less advanced, lagging behind in the intensity and source of activities, horizontal and vertical involvement of actors, delineation of sources of power for utilising resources, and formalisation (Homburg et al., 2002).

Some scholars predicted the considerable differences in the development level of the KAMO of Chinese suppliers in different regions of China, because of the country's large and diverse land area and relatively nonuniform manufacturing distribution. Specifically, the eastern region is modern and advanced, whereas the western region remains traditional and is lagging behind. Thus, utilizing an integrated business model or standardized management in China may be difficult owing to suppliers' different degrees of development.

The conclusions below can be inferred based on scholars' opinions, combined with Chinese suppliers' current state of development, the early development of KAM programs in the West, and the different levels of manufacturing in Chinese regions.

The KAMO of most Chinese suppliers in West China lags behind that of their rivals in Western countries, mainly because suppliers from developed countries exert a considerable impact on suppliers located in East China, such as in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and other eastern cities, but have little effect on and engage in minimal competition with suppliers in Western China. Most suppliers in the aforementioned cities in Eastern China have business partnerships with foreign suppliers and adequate business capabilities to compete with

foreign suppliers. Moreover, some suppliers have the same level of KAMO owing to challenges and pressure from competitors and thus have considerable practical KAMO experience.

PROPOSITION 1

The level of development of Chinese suppliers' KAMO will affect KAM in China. Meanwhile, owing to the different levels of manufacturing in Chinese regions, the KAMO of western Chinese suppliers lags behind that of suppliers in Western developed countries; however, eastern Chinese suppliers have a competitive KAMO equal to that of suppliers in Western countries.

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR (OB) INFLUENCING CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE KAM

OB is a theory related to KAM, which is the academic examination of how individuals behave in groups, whose principles are used mainly to improve business operations. In addition, research on OB aims to improve job performance, effectiveness, and satisfaction; promote innovation; and encourage leadership. Effective supervision, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are the relevant and important factors affecting the success of KAM in China, especially during the rapid transition period of Chinese suppliers' adoption of KAM (Murphy & Li, 2015).

An effective supervisor is one who can recognize his/her emotions in certain situations as well as those of others, is compassionate, and has excellent social skills. Moreover, he/she listens to his/her team, resolves conflicts, and leads the team forward. The importance of an effective supervisor was proven and demonstrated in various work environments, such as sales management and social services (Barak et al., 2009). The effectiveness of a supervisor is reflected in employees' perception of whether he/she can effectively help them obtain increased work knowledge or improve their performance (Murphy & Li, 2015).

In general, owing to the long history of supervisory staff development in the West, many KA managers and top managers are educated in Western universities, such as in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Finland, and other Western countries. This finding indicates that such supervisors received quality education and considerable opportunities to undergo advanced training; thus, most have excellent personal skills and managerial abilities. In addition, supervisors of Chinese suppliers are often under intense pressure to adapt to the system quickly owing to the performance requirements of Western KAs. Thus, they push employees to increase their output and improve their output quality. As a result, factors such as lack of preparation, ambiguous roles, pressure to improve performance, and other disruptive pressures may have a considerable impact on the effectiveness of supervision, which may affect the effectiveness of KAM.

PROPOSITION 2

Supervisors' education level and personality will directly affect their management of employees and indirectly affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the company's KAM.

Job satisfaction refers to employees' level of contentment with their job, which goes beyond their daily responsibilities and includes satisfaction with organizational policies and team members or managers. Thus, the effect of work on employees' personal lives and link between job satisfaction and performance were extensively examined.

Numerous studies showed that most employees in developing and developed countries experience considerable stress and pressure from the overhaul of company cultures, pressurized work environments, and being supervised by personnel under similar considerable pressure. Moreover, hindrance-type stressors are typically associated with negative effects on satisfaction (Ahsan et al., 2009; Podsakoff et al., 2007).



PROPOSITION 3

Chinese employees may experience more work pressure than Western employees; thus, their job satisfaction is relatively low, which will directly affect their work efficiency and indirectly affect the performance of their supervisor/KA manager and company.

Meanwhile, affective commitment is generally defined as an individual's emotional attachment to an organization.

According to Meyer and Allen, affective commitment is an employee's emotional attachment to and identification and engagement with his/her organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Compared with the staff of companies in stable Western countries experiencing less dynamic changes, the staff of Chinese enterprises that only recently implemented KAM will experience more stressful working conditions. Thus, the employees of Chinese companies implementing KAM are under considerable pressure to meet certain performance expectations. In addition, in China, where job opportunities are abundant, social effects, including the temptation to change jobs and expectations of promotions and high salaries, may negatively affect the traditional relationship between companies and employees. Thus, expectations on the commitment of Chinese employees are lower than those on the commitment of employees of Western enterprises.

PROPOSITION 4

Compared with the working environment and organizational changes in the West, the KAM environment in China is more unstable, so the affective commitment of employees is more dynamic, which will directly affect their performance and their company's KAM.

RELATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE KAM – *GUANXI* MODEL OF CHINA

A central concept in marketing states that marketing activities aim to establish, develop, and maintain successful exchange relationships (Fruchter & Sigue, 2005; Hunter, 2014). KAM originates from RM and is defined as the implementation of RM, which is considered as the newest pattern of approach in customer relationship management (McDonald et al., 1997; Wengler, 2006, 2007; Davies and Ryals, 2009; Godson, 2009; Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2013). Specifically, based on RM theories, KAM discusses how to develop and maintain corporate partners, how to manage and maintain a corporate relationship with big customers, and how to integrate the internal and external factors of an organization (Gupta & Melevar, 2002). Therefore, the target of KAM implementation is the establishment of long-term, loyal, trusting, cooperative, open, genuine, and equal relationships between businesses and their customers, which will enable the former to reap long-term interests and profits instead of short-term benefits (Benette, 1996).

Relationship development is considered as a factor affecting KAM success. For instance, collaborative communication and investment in specific relationships (Ivens et al., 2009) can create highly credible and reliable relationships. Some enterprises prioritize their relationship development department to invest exclusively in alliance management regardless of their executive and operational levels (Ivens et al., 2009). Hence, various actors are involved in the development of relationships, who are dependent on decisions on how to serve KAs best through different forms, sources of power, and role prioritization.

The *guanxi* relationship in the Chinese context plays an important role in many aspects. Although *guanxi*, whose importance is associated with and definition is close to the meaning and concept of interpersonal relationships in China, is based on relationships, individuals can

reap benefits, resources, and advantages from *guanxi* when doing business (Davies et al., 2009), whose pattern of manifestation is respect for and approval and recognition of one's status and reputation.

According to survey, interview, and questionnaire data and research reports, on the differences in the ways relationships are built between Chinese and Western enterprises, Chinese KAM top management provided answers and shared their opinions, which are summarized below.

Most executives of Western enterprises rely on their reputation, efficiency, confidence, and other factors to improve their internal status in their company. However, in China, the *guanxi* between leaders is the main determinant of internal status, premised on their sufficient excellent professional abilities. In other words, Western enterprises tend to employ trustworthy and measurable standards to quantify and assess employees, whereas Chinese enterprises evaluate their staff based on a combination of personal work abilities and ability to deal with *guanxi*. From the Chinese perspective, the ability to deal with *guanxi* is as important as or may be more important than personal work abilities, which represents a comprehensive personal ability to handle individuals and business, which is important for managers and can influence employees and the entire company.

It can be inferred from the above discussion that in the development of KAM in China, cooperating with local suppliers would be easier than cooperating with suppliers from Western countries for Chinese enterprises, who would be able to establish a solid *guanxi* relationship with their Chinese KAs.

#### PROPOSITION 5

Owing to the *guanxi* model, Western enterprises tend to employ trustworthy and measurable standards to quantify and assess their employees, whereas Chinese enterprises evaluate their staff based on a combination of personal work abilities and ability to deal with *guanxi*. Thus, *guanxi* is a relational factor affecting KAM in China.

#### DISCUSSION

This research explores the factors influencing the characteristics of KAM from the perspective of a certain country (i.e., China) by reviewing and summarizing the literature for future research. This research determines that the “characterization of KAM in the Chinese context” topic is worthy of further research.

Researchers may need to determine how to establish a framework and system suitable for the development of Chinese enterprises' KAM and examine the development status of Chinese enterprises, how Chinese enterprises should conduct resource integration, how organizational reform should be carried out, how to train KA managers, and other aspects.

In terms of OB and KAM, each enterprise type has a different organizational culture, and its influence on employees will also differ. In addition, owing to the nature of different trades, KAM connections will also differ. In this study, data references in the literature are limited, perhaps because the service data of some suppliers in China for Western companies are insufficient to verify the conclusions completely. Furthermore, this topic is examined by only a limited number of scholars; thus, the number of corresponding studies is relatively small. Understandably, the scant data cannot address the research target. Therefore, the next step can be to conduct considerable empirical research to increase the number of research objects and obtain convincing data and evidence.

#### CONCLUSION

This study summarized the major factors influencing the characteristics of KAM in China based on the retrieved literature. In the organizational aspect, it was found that the KAMO and OB can affect KAM in China. The OB factor includes supervision effectiveness, job satisfaction, and affective commitment. In the relational aspect, *guanxi* is the main factor influencing Chinese KAM. After the KAM factors in China were analyzed, five propositions were integrated based on the research results of the characterization of KAM in the Chinese context.

This study has several limitations that should be addressed for the further research. The first limitation is that the findings and conclusions are based on data from the retrieved literature, which are historical data or a snapshot of a given situation at a specific point in time. Moreover, the documents were obtained by searching for specific keywords. With the increase in the number of research databases, documents are constantly being updated, and the knowledge system is continuously expanding, which can lead to limitations in future research. The second limitation is that the data from the literature are also subject to limitations, such as those in the original data collection, such as from a single information provider, small sample survey data, and the different cognition degrees of interviewers. The third limitation is that the resulting propositions, which are considered from a single perspective, combined with the Chinese context, may lead to one-sided results that are not comprehensive or adequately representative.

After the presentation of the five developed proposals, as the main research direction of this review, semi structured interviews and case studies can be conducted, which can produce new and valuable insights. Through empirical research, other scholars can determine whether the proposals are established and consistent with the current situation of major customers in China. This review is of considerable significance to readers who lack understanding of the basic characteristics and development of KAM in China.

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