

Burkhardt, Davide; Macdonald, John R.; Bode, Christoph

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

How Relationships End: A Review and Research Agenda of Buyer–Supplier Relationship Dissolution

Davide Burkhart¹  | John R. Macdonald²  | Christoph Bode¹ 

¹Business School, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany | ²Department of Management, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

Correspondence: Davide Burkhart (burkhart@uni-mannheim.de)

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ABSTRACT

Buyer–supplier relationships and their evolution have long been central to supply chain research. A critical element of the relationship lifecycle is dissolution. Understanding how and why buyer–supplier relationships dissolve offers valuable insights for managing these, particularly under stress. This paper presents a structured literature review of buyer–supplier relationship dissolution and related phenomena. The findings reveal a field largely focused on internal drivers—such as poor performance, dissatisfaction, and opportunism—while underemphasizing contextual and coping mechanisms that shape relationship trajectories toward dissolution. To organize these insights, we adopt family stress theory as a guiding framework, highlighting the interplay of stressors, relational resources, and response strategies in shaping dissolution pathways. Based on this synthesis, we identify conceptual gaps and propose a future research agenda centered on escalation dynamics, cumulative stress, multi-actor perspectives, and the role of relational and contextual moderators. In doing so, the study contributes to a more theory-informed understanding of relationship dissolution in the supply chain domain.

1 | Introduction

Managing business-to-business (B2B) exchange relationships poses significant challenges due to a combination of coordination problems (e.g., misunderstandings) and motivation problems (e.g., misaligned interests) (Wang et al. 2010). B2B relationships are inherently multifaceted, complex, and dynamic, as illustrated by the relationship between Amazon and its parcel and logistics providers. In 2019, FedEx ended its U.S. air and ground contracts with Amazon, citing low margins and growing competitive tension as Amazon expanded into logistics services. In early 2025, UPS followed suit by announcing plans to reduce the Amazon volumes it handles for similar reasons. In May 2025, Amazon and FedEx subsequently re-engaged through a multi-year agreement under which FedEx would provide residential delivery for select large packages (SupplyChain247 2025). Within just a few years, these firms

experienced relationship rupture, dissolution, termination, and—in FedEx's case—partial re-engagement.

This example underscores the complex and evolving nature of buyer–supplier relationships—one that extends beyond the traditional “arm's length” versus partnership spectrum (Macneil 1978, 1980), the extensive body of work on collaboration, trust, and commitment (Majchrzak et al. 2015; Palmatier and Steinhoff 2019), and existing research on relationship lifecycles (Dwyer et al. 1987; Jap and Anderson 2007; Ring and de Van Ven 1992, 1994). Indeed, conflict is a common feature of interorganizational relationships (Hibbard et al. 2001; Samaha et al. 2011), highlighting the importance of conflict management, repair, and resilience. How exchange partners respond to stress and crisis profoundly shapes the long-term viability and success of their relationship (Hibbard et al. 2001). Recognizing the early symptoms of relationship deterioration—before reaching the

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point of termination and regardless of the cause—enables the exchange partners to evaluate alternatives, mitigate escalation, or prepare for disengagement (Gassenheimer et al. 1998). For the purposes of this review, *relationship dissolution* is defined as the process through which a buyer–supplier relationship terminates, either formally or informally.

The underlying premise of research on buyer–supplier relationship dissolution is that understanding how relationships end offers valuable insights for managing ongoing relationships more effectively (Tähtinen and Havila 2004). Although the literature on this topic has grown substantially in recent decades, it remains fragmented. Notably, the last comprehensive review dates back more than 20 years (i.e., Tähtinen and Halinen 2002). Since then, the management of buyer–supplier relationships has evolved—shifting toward more collaborative paradigms (e.g., Gulati et al. 2012; Majchrzak et al. 2015; Shamsollahi et al. 2021), extending across longer global supply chains, and becoming increasingly shaped by digital technologies (Choi et al. 2021). At the same time, global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, trade tensions, and armed conflicts have further complicated supply chain relationships, rendering the conditions under which partnerships dissolve more relevant and multifaceted. These developments warrant a renewed examination of this topic. While a single event rarely causes a relationship to end (Hollmann et al. 2015; Pressey and Selassie 2007), few studies examine the cumulative or interacting effects of multiple stressors (i.e., stressor pile-up). Moreover, coping actions—whether enacted individually or jointly—are critical for managing relationship crises, yet they remain underexplored in the context of dissolution and continuation intentions. Addressing these gaps, this review investigates the following research question: “What stressors and mechanisms influence the process of buyer–supplier relationship dissolution?”

To answer this question, the study provides a comprehensive and systematic synthesis of the academic literature on

buyer–supplier relationship dissolution and related phenomena, including relationship termination and the pursuit of alternative exchange partners (i.e., customer or supplier switching). The review proceeds by examining relationship stressors, relationship resources and coping actions, and various manifestations of relationship dissolution. In doing so, it draws on family stress theory as a guiding framework to organize and contextualize extant findings and to advance a future research agenda.

2 | Methodology

We conducted a systematic review of the relevant literature to synthesize key findings and identify existing research gaps. Following established methodological guidelines (Durach et al. 2017) and recent review studies (e.g., Ateş and Luzzini 2024; Baldi et al. 2024), the review process comprised three stages: (i) article identification, (ii) article screening, and (iii) article coding. Figure 1 provides an overview of this process, while the following sections describe each stage in detail, including the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the coding procedures.

The article identification stage began with the selection of relevant academic journals. Drawing on recent review studies (e.g., Ateş and Luzzini 2024; Baldi et al. 2024; Hughes et al. 2025) and methodological recommendations (Ketchen and Craighead 2023), we initially focused on the top supply chain management journals. Given the interdisciplinary nature of B2B relationship dissolution—which intersects substantially with (relationship) marketing and (strategic) management—we broadened our scope to include leading business journals, as identified by the Financial Times 50 list. This approach aligns with recent literature review practices (i.e., Hughes et al. 2025). By incorporating top-tier journals from adjacent disciplines, we aim to ensure comprehensive coverage while maintaining academic rigor (i.e., avoiding “quality erosion”), in line with the recommendations of Ketchen and Craighead (2025).

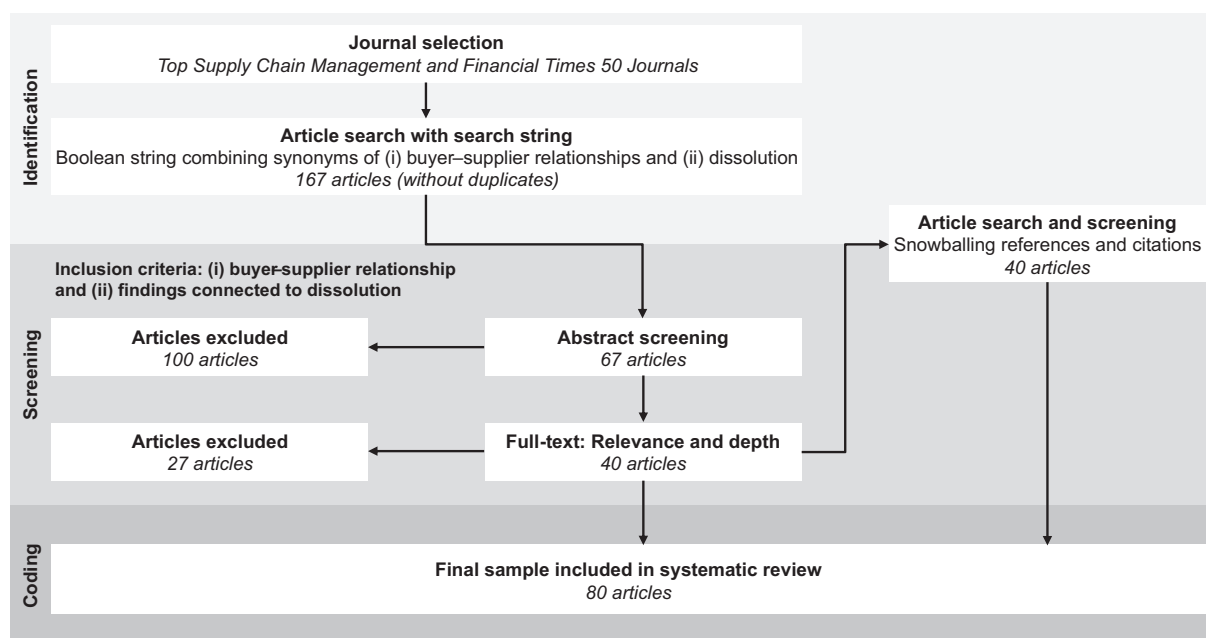


FIGURE 1 | Article identification, screening and coding process.

In addition, we conducted a systematic search across multiple academic databases, including *JSTOR*, *ScienceDirect*, and *ProQuest*. To ensure thorough coverage, we employed a Boolean search strategy that combined relationship dissolution terms such as “termination” and “exit” with keywords commonly used to describe buyer–supplier relationships in different domains (e.g., “channel relationship” in the marketing literature). The final search string was: (“*relationship dissolution*” OR “*relationship exit*” OR “*relationship termination*” OR “*relationship switching*”) AND (supplier OR seller OR channel OR manufacturer OR buyer). We restricted the search to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English and imposed no temporal limits, allowing inclusion of all relevant studies up to June 2025. This procedure yielded an initial sample of 167 articles.

To ensure alignment with the research objective, we applied clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Given the extensive literature on interorganizational relationships, we focused specifically on buyer–supplier relationships and excluded other types of exchanges (e.g., franchise relationships). Because the review centers on dissolution, we included only studies explicitly addressing relationship termination, its antecedents, or its consequences, as well as those examining relevant pre- and post-dissolution factors. Studies on relationship continuity intentions were also included if they investigated negative or stress-inducing factors. Non-empirical contributions—such as conceptual papers, modeling studies, simulations, and editorials—were not excluded, as they often provide valuable theoretical insights (e.g., Chen et al. 2013; Dwyer et al. 1987).

The article screening stage was conducted in two steps. First, we performed an initial review of titles and abstracts to assess relevance. Articles meeting the inclusion criteria then underwent a full-text evaluation. Any discrepancies in selection were resolved through discussion and consensus among the authors. To enhance dataset comprehensiveness, we also employed a snowballing technique, reviewing both cited and citing articles. A summary of the screening process, including the number of included and excluded articles, is displayed in Figure 1.

The final dataset comprised 80 studies published between 1987 and 2025. Most were published after the last major review of the topic (Tähtinen and Halinen 2002), with 17 articles from 1987 to 2001, 28 from 2002 to 2013, and 35 from 2014 to 2025. This distribution highlights growing scholarly attention to relationship dissolution and underscores the need for an updated synthesis. A complete list of the included studies is provided in Table A1 in the web appendix.

In the article coding stage, we extracted and coded information from all selected studies using a structured multi-level approach. Each article was coded for general bibliographic details (e.g., author, journal, year of publication) and, in line with the research question, for key analytical dimensions, including stressors, attenuating and weakening mechanisms, as well as the conceptualization and operationalization of dissolution. We also systematically examined the theoretical lenses employed across the literature and critically discussed how

the application of specific theories shapes the scope of each respective study.

The initial coding was conducted by the first author, while the classification of studies into first- and second-order constructs was carried out collaboratively by the research team. Any discrepancies were carefully discussed and resolved through consensus. Following the coding process, we organized and integrated the findings into our overarching conceptual framework, presented in the next section.

3 | Literature Synthesis

This synthesis adopts family stress theory as its organizing framework. We first justify this theoretical choice by examining how prior studies have approached buyer–supplier dissolution and demonstrating why family stress theory offers a robust and comprehensive lens for understanding dissolution processes. The literature is then organized according to the theory's core components: relationship stressors, resources, coping strategies, and dissolution outcomes.

3.1 | Conceptual Framework

Prior research on buyer–supplier relationship dissolution has drawn on a wide range of theoretical perspectives, many originally developed in interpersonal contexts and subsequently adapted to interorganizational exchange (Smith et al. 1995). As summarized in Table 1, the spectrum spans lenses from relationship marketing (Palmatier and Steinhoff 2019) and communication theories (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000; Halinen and Tähtinen 2002) to theories of conflict response such as the *exit–voice–loyalty*(–*neglect*) framework by Hirschman (1970) and cognitive processing perspectives including attribution and justice theories (e.g., Mir et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2022). Additional perspectives include social exchange, psychological contracts, and transaction cost economics. While these theories offer valuable insights into specific facets of dissolution—such as communication strategies, governance mechanisms, or performance evaluations—their application is often piecemeal, limiting cumulative understanding across studies.

Guided by our research question, we require an organizing framework that synthesizes this fragmented landscape. Specifically, we seek a lens that (i) captures the multi-actor, multi-level complexity of interorganizational contexts, (ii) accommodates the cumulative and iterative nature of relationship stress over time, and (iii) integrates stressors, resources, perceptions, and coping within a unified process view. Family stress theory meets these requirements. First, the theory conceptualizes the family as “an interacting and transacting organization” (Hill 1958, 139), directly paralleling the multi-actor dynamics of buyer–supplier relationships, while also modeling how resource endowments condition stress effects. Second, the theory explicitly addresses the accumulation of stressors over time (stress pile-up), a phenomenon observed in business relationships where multiple pressures compound before any single issue is resolved (e.g., Hollmann et al. 2015; Roos 2002; Schurr 2007). Third, family stress theory integrates coping

TABLE 1 | Theories used to study buyer–supplier relationship dissolution.

Theory	Main focus of theory in dissolution studies	Extant studies
Relationship marketing	Relationship stages, trust, commitment, and (dis)satisfaction	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Basu et al. (2023); Bygballe (2017); Dwyer et al. (1987); Ekici (2013); Ellram (1991); Gedeon et al. (2009); Helm et al. (2006); Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik (2005); Leonidou et al. (2021); Li and Ng (2002); Liu et al. (2021); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Payan et al. (2010); Ping (1994, 1995); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006); Tsiros et al. (2009); Wathne et al. (2001); Zhang et al. (2021)
Interpersonal relationship dissolution	Communication strategies and dissolution quality	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Dwyer et al. (1987); Giller and Matear (2001); Good and Evans (2001); Habib et al. (2020); Halinen and Tähtinen (2002); Pressey and Mathews (2003); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Pressey and Selassie (2007)
Exit, voice, loyalty, neglect	Antecedents of cooperative and uncooperative responses	Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Hibbard et al. (2001); Ping (1993, 1999); Seggie et al. (2013); Vidal et al. (2016); Wagner et al. (2022)
Attribution and justice theories	Relational consequences of supply chain disruptions and their resolution	Blessley et al. (2018); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Polyviou et al. (2018); Wang et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2014)
Social exchange theory	Evaluation of alternatives to attain business goals	Blessley et al. (2018); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Hocutt (1998); Marcos and Prior (2017); Prajogo et al. (2025); Sands et al. (2022); Smith (2002); Yang et al. (2012)
Psychological contract theory	Breaching psychological contracts	Blessley et al. (2018); Harmeling et al. (2015); Mir et al. (2017)
Transaction cost economics	Opportunism and norms	Basu et al. (2023); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Geiger et al. (2012); Leonidou et al. (2021); Marcos and Prior (2017)
Equity theory	Input–outcome ratio	Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Samaha et al. (2011); Smith (2002)
Resource dependence theory	Power dynamics	Prajogo et al. (2025); Rogan and Greve (2015)
Expectancy violation theory	Expectancy violations or confirmations	Burkhart and Bode (2025)
Quasi-Darwinian selection	Dissolution probability	Eyuboglu and Buja (2007)
Relational view	Relational embeddedness	Rogan (2014)
Migration theory	Pull and push factors	Suh and Kim (2018)
Confucian philosophies	Guiding principles for social values and behavioral patterns	Liu et al. (2021)
Prospect theory	Differences in attitude to risky decision-making	Marshall et al. (2011)

mechanisms as central determinants of relationship trajectories, recognizing that the same triggering event can lead to different outcomes depending on how partners respond (e.g., Harmeling et al. 2015). These features address limitations of alternative perspectives, which tend to overlook stressor accumulation, feedback loops, and the active role of coping in shaping dissolution pathways. Against this backdrop, we adopt family stress theory as the organizing framework for our synthesis.

Family stress theory is a well-established framework for examining the stability and quality of close relationships over time (Jaskiewicz et al. 2017; Karney and Bradbury 1995; McCubbin et al. 1980). The theory originates from research on families experiencing the temporary or permanent loss of a husband or father due to military conscription during World War II, which revealed that the impact of such stress varied based on a family's ability to cope (Hill 1949). Building on these observations, Hill (1958) developed a process model wherein the stressor event

(A) interacts with the family's crisis-mitigating resources (B) and the family's perception of the event (C) to determine whether the situation escalates into a crisis (X). The original model was later expanded to incorporate a temporal dimension and coping strategies, as research demonstrated that coping behaviors vary depending on stress severity and a family's adaptive capacity (McCubbin 1979). The resulting *double ABCX* model acknowledges the accumulation of stressors over time and the fact that responses to one crisis influence future crisis responses, leading to either adaptation or maladaptation (McCubbin and Patterson 1983). Empirical research has provided strong support for the double ABCX model (e.g., Bowen et al. 1993; Lavee et al. 1985; Shockley et al. 2021).

Our conceptual framework, displayed in Figure 2, adapts the double ABCX model to the buyer–supplier context. We conceptualize stressor events (A) as the diverse internal and external triggers documented in the dissolution literature. Relationship resources (B) encompass both dyadic resources (e.g., trust, relationship-specific investments) and network resources (e.g., social capital, third-party ties) that moderate the impact of stressors. Perception (C) captures how exchange partners interpret stressors, available resources, and their own coping efforts, providing a critical mediating lens that shapes relationship trajectories. Coping strategies represent the active responses partners employ to manage stress, ranging from constructive problem-solving to destructive blame attribution or withdrawal. Together, these elements determine whether a stressor escalates into a relationship crisis (X), potentially culminating in dissolution, or whether the relationship adapts and persists. The framework incorporates the temporal dynamics emphasized in the double ABCX model, recognizing that coping efforts and outcomes in one crisis episode influence subsequent crisis responses through learning and adaptation, or through depletion and maladaptation. In the following sections, we use this

framework to structure the literature on relationship stressors, resources, coping mechanisms, and dissolution outcomes.

3.2 | Relationship Stressors

According to family stress theory, a stressor is defined as “an event that is capable of causing change and stress, but that does not necessarily do so every time” (Boss 1987, 698). Such events can disrupt the stability of a relationship and may trigger systemic changes (Boss et al. 2016). In buyer–supplier relationships, behaviors and performances are not always as expected (Wang et al. 2010), which can generate stressors (Ping 1993). While some events may strengthen or remain neutral to the relationship, others can weaken it and initiate a dissolution spiral (Hollmann et al. 2015). Some studies employ the *critical incident technique* (e.g., Fleming et al. 2016; Gelderman et al. 2020; Roos 2002) to examine the dynamics of relationship dissolution by analyzing specific, impactful events (critical incidents) and their influence on the trajectory of buyer–supplier relationships. Such triggers often emerge long before the actual termination and can be categorized as either internal or external to the relationship (Giller and Matear 2001). Table 2 provides an overview of stressors examined in the academic literature, illustrating the diversity of factors associated with relationship dissolution.

Most studies have concentrated on internal stressors, particularly the partner's poor performance (e.g., quality, service, delivery), goal or expectancy incongruence, infidelity, changes in key personnel, poor interpersonal relationships, and general dissatisfaction. Additional internal stressors contributing to relationship strain include economic factors such as the discontinuation of product lines or an unfavorable cost–benefit ratio. The latter typically entails a critical assessment of the relationship's

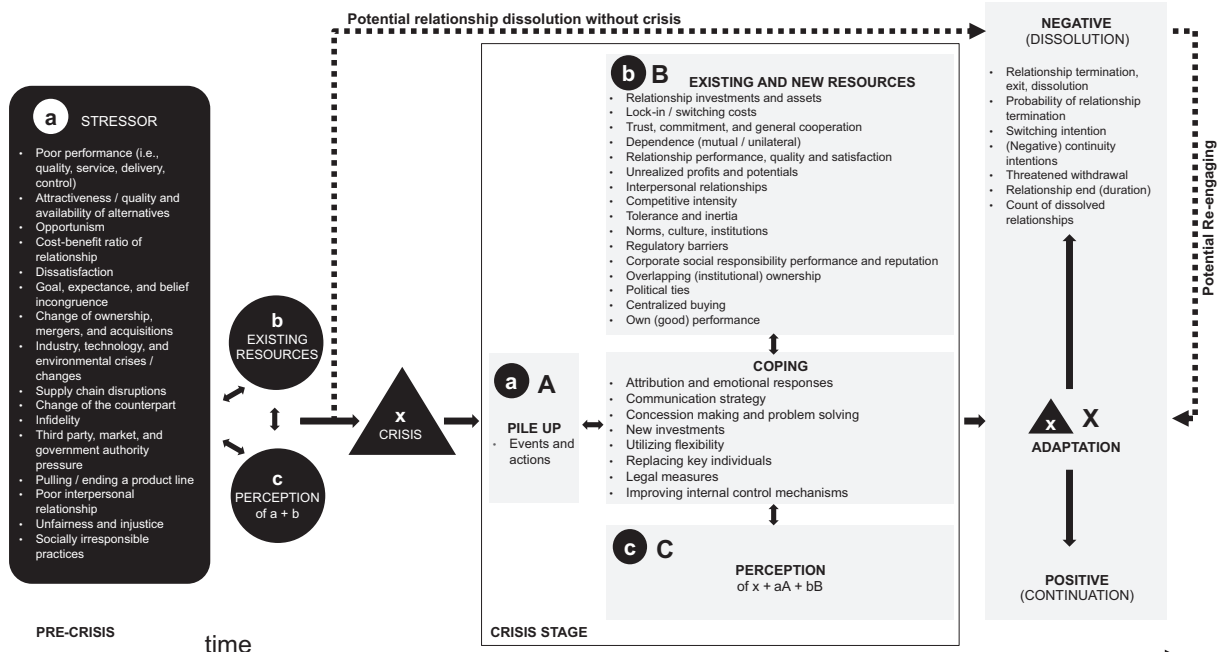


FIGURE 2 | Findings of the literature review mapped in the research framework (ABCX model of family stress theory adapted from McCubbin and Patterson 1983, 12, with major changes). Findings are listed in descending order by the frequency identified in the literature.

TABLE 2 | Relational stressors associated with relationship dissolution.

Characteristics of stressors		Extant studies
Internal	Poor performance (i.e., quality, service, delivery, control)	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Bauer et al. (2018); Chen et al. (2016); Chen et al. (2019); Fleming et al. (2016); Gelderman et al. (2020); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Harmeling et al. (2015); Hollmann et al. (2015); Liu et al. (2021); Marcos and Prior (2017); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Roos (2002); Sands et al. (2022); Vidal et al. (2016); Zhang et al. (2021); Zhang et al. (2006)
	Opportunism	Basu et al. (2023); Ekici (2013); Fleming et al. (2016); Gelderman et al. (2020); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Li and Ng (2002); Liu et al. (2021); Ping (1993); Seggie et al. (2013); Struwe and Slepnirov (2021); Tähtinen and Blois (2011); Vatawala et al. (2022); Zhang et al. (2021)
	Cost–benefit ratio of relationship	Bygballe (2017); Chen et al. (2013); Dwyer et al. (1987); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Helm et al. (2006); Low and Johnston (2006); Marcos and Prior (2017); Pressey and Mathews (2003); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Pressey and Selassie (2007)
	Goal, expectancy, and belief incongruence	Basu et al. (2023); Ekici (2013); Fleming et al. (2016); Harmeling et al. (2015); Marcos and Prior (2017); Mir et al. (2017); Pressey and Mathews (2003); Vidal et al. (2016); Wang et al. (2010); Yang et al. (2012)
	Dissatisfaction	Bygballe (2017); Dwyer et al. (1987); Ekici (2013); Ellram (1991); Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik (2005); Ping (1993); Suh and Kim (2018); Vatawala et al. (2022)
	Change of the counterpart	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Dasgupta et al. (2021); Hollmann et al. (2015); Pressey and Mathews (2003)
	Infidelity	Hibbard et al. (2001); Leonidou et al. (2017); Leonidou et al. (2021); Zhang et al. (2006)
	Ending a product line	Bengtson et al. (2013); Ellram (1991); Hibbard et al. (2001); Hollmann et al. (2015); Pressey and Selassie (2007)
	Poor interpersonal relationship	Gedeon et al. (2009); Liu et al. (2021); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Tähtinen and Blois (2011)
	Unfairness and injustice	Chen et al. (2013); Vidal et al. (2016); Yang et al. (2012)
	Socially irresponsible practices	Prajogo et al. (2025)
External	Attractiveness/quality and availability of alternatives	Basu et al. (2023); Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Geiger et al. (2012); Hocutt (1998); Marshall et al. (2011); Mir et al. (2017); Pick and Eisend (2014); Ping (1993, 1994, 1995, 1999); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Suh and Kim (2018); Tsiros et al. (2009); Wathne et al. (2001); Yang et al. (2012); Zhang et al. (2006)
	Change of ownership, mergers, and acquisitions	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Ellram (1991); Fleming et al. (2016); Freeman (2025); Hollmann et al. (2015); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Rogan (2014); Rogan and Greve (2015); Zhang et al. (2006)
	Supply chain disruptions	Blessley et al. (2018); Burkhart and Bode (2025); Mir et al. (2017); Polyviou et al. (2018); Primo et al. (2007); Wang et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2014)
	Industry, technological, and environmental crises/changes	Bengtson et al. (2013); Heide and Weiss (1995); Hollmann et al. (2015); Wagner et al. (2022); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Roos (2002); Smith (2002)
	Third party, market, and governmental pressure	Chen et al. (2016); Pressey and Mathews (2003); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Trinh and Zhao (2024); Vatawala et al. (2022)

input–output balance, where perceived inefficiencies or comparisons with alternative partners may prompt reassessment or even termination of the exchange relationship.

External stressors may also contribute to relationship dissolution, originating from the broader environment or from

interactions with third parties. Studies examining such stressors highlight the impact of discrete events—such as changes in ownership of a partner, supply chain disruptions, or external pressures from stakeholders or regulatory bodies—as well as more systemic shifts, including broader industry transformations and technological advancements. The availability of

more attractive alternative partners is another frequently cited external factor influencing dissolution decisions.

These stressors may manifest as sudden, acute events or as part of a gradual accumulation of pressures that incrementally push the relationship toward termination (Harmeling et al. 2015). The interplay between internal and external triggers is often complex; external events may initiate or intensify internal stressors. For example, a product safety failure may lead to negative market reactions, media scrutiny, and stakeholder pressure, compounding internal tensions (Chen et al. 2016). Similarly, the cost–benefit evaluation of a relationship is frequently influenced by the perceived attractiveness of alternatives, and vice versa. Moreover, organizational changes such as mergers and acquisitions can result in the replacement or reconfiguration of key relationship counterparts, further destabilizing established ties. Surprisingly, few studies explicitly consider the cumulative effect of multiple stressors, even though dissolution typically emerges from cascading pressures rather than a single triggering event (Hollmann et al. 2015; Pressey and Selassie 2007).

Beyond the specific stressor itself and its characteristics, its subjective perception plays a critical role in shaping relationship outcomes (Boss 1987; McCubbin and Patterson 1983). Factors such as the perceived recency, frequency, and severity of negative events influence whether and how a relationship deteriorates (Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik 2005; Primo et al. 2007; Wang et al. 2022). Moreover, the stage of the relationship significantly affects how an exchange partner's actions are interpreted (Harmeling et al. 2015; Schurr 2007; Wang et al. 2010; Zhang et al. 2006). Although this dynamic is conceptually straightforward, the extant literature has rarely accounted for the idiosyncratic perception of stressors or systematically differentiated their recency and frequency. Additionally, limited research has explored the role of interpersonal factors in buyer–supplier relationship dissolution, such as changes in key personnel or the deterioration of personal relationships. Finally, studies that attribute dissolution to broad factors such as dissatisfaction, opportunism, or misaligned goals, expectations, and beliefs often fail to identify specific triggering events, instead focusing on their consequences.

3.3 | Relationship Resources

Family stress theory emphasizes that the broader relationship context—particularly the availability of resources and prior experiences with stress—plays a critical role in both pre-crisis and crisis phases (Boss 1987; McCubbin and Patterson 1983). The severity of the stressor influences how quickly dissatisfied exchange partners may seek to dissolve the relationship. However, in practice, immediate termination is often constrained by exit barriers such as contractual agreements, power–dependence differentials, and switching costs (Ellram 1991). In this context, relationship resources function as moderating factors that can either buffer or intensify the impact of stressors (Roos 2002). Structural disincentives—such as relationship-specific investments, unrealized financial

benefits, and deferred rebates—can be deliberately built into the relationship to encourage resolution rather than dissolution in response to stressors (Dwyer et al. 1987). In other words, stressors do not necessarily escalate into crises if firms are able to mobilize relational resources and reframe adverse situations in ways that mitigate negative outcomes and preserve relationship stability (McCubbin and Patterson 1983). Resources can be classified as either internal—located within the individual firm or embedded in the relationship—or external, residing in the broader network or environment (Halinen and Tähtinen 2002; Lavee et al. 1985). Table 3 presents an overview of influencing factors related to external and internal resources, as examined in prior research.

Most studies focus on internal resources that attenuate dissolution intentions, including, as mentioned above, relationship-specific investments, various forms of switching costs, and mutual or unilateral dependence. Unrealized financial gains and untapped business potential also serve as deterrents, as firms anticipating future strategic benefits may prioritize conflict resolution and renegotiation over dissolution. The prospect (“shadow of the future”) of lost opportunities and competitive disadvantages further reinforces efforts to sustain the relationship despite ongoing challenges (Heide and Miner 1992).

Another dominant relationship-internal research theme is the role of relational governance mechanisms such as trust, affective commitment, and interpersonal bonds in shaping dissolution dynamics. Trust in a partner's capabilities and competencies can mitigate the negative impact of disruptive events (e.g., Payan et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2014). However, negative events can also erode trust, reinforcing dissatisfaction and accelerating dissolution intentions (Bengtson et al. 2013). Studies also highlight the buffering effect of softer relational factors, such as interpersonal relationships and overall relationship quality and satisfaction, which can help mitigate stressors.

With regard to internal resources, individual-level resources have received comparatively less attention than those embedded in the relationship. These individual resources include factors such as own operational performance and, more recently, corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance. CSR has emerged as a relevant determinant in relationship dissolution, particularly in light of increasing regulatory and normative institutional pressures. Suppliers with weak CSR performance face heightened risks of termination and more severe market backlash following disruptions at major customer firms. In contrast, suppliers demonstrating strong CSR performance tend to be more resilient, remaining relatively insulated from dissolution risks (Trinh and Zhao 2024).

External resources can also play a role in countering dissolution intentions, though they are less frequently addressed in the literature. Relevant external resources include regulatory barriers, institutions, and norms that shape the behavior and expectations of relationship partners. Additionally, competitive intensity may function as a stabilizing resource; in highly competitive environments, firms may be less inclined to exit relationships due to the increased difficulty and risk associated with finding suitable alternatives (Ping 1995).

TABLE 3 | Resources in relationship dissolution.

Factor		Extant studies
Internal	Relationship investments and assets	Blut et al. (2016); Chen et al. (2013); Dwyer et al. (1987); Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Fleming et al. (2016); Giller and Matear (2001); Habib et al. (2020); Harmeling et al. (2015); Heide and John (1990); Hocutt (1998); Li and Ng (2002); Pick and Eisend (2014); Ping (1993, 1995, 1999); Prajogo et al. (2025); Rogan (2014); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006); Vatavwala et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2010); Zhang et al. (2021)
	Switching costs (lock-in)	Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Fleming et al. (2016); Geiger et al. (2012); Heide and Weiss (1995); Helm et al. (2006); Low and Johnston (2006); Marshall et al. (2011); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Pick and Eisend (2014); Ping (1993, 1999); Primo et al. (2007); Suh and Kim (2018); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006); Vatavwala et al. (2022); Wathne et al. (2001)
	Trust, commitment, and general cooperation	Bengtson et al. (2013); Ekici (2013); Habib et al. (2020); Leonidou et al. (2021); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Payan et al. (2010); Samaha et al. (2011); Struwe and Slepnirov (2021); Tsiros et al. (2009); Wang et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2014); Yang et al. (2012)
	Dependence (mutual/unilateral)	Chen et al. (2013); Ekici (2013); Ellram (1991); Eyuboglu and Buja (2007); Fleming et al. (2016); Habib et al. (2020); Hibbard et al. (2001); Hocutt (1998); Prajogo et al. (2025); Trinh and Zhao (2024); Vidal et al. (2016); Wagner et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2010); Yang et al. (2012); Zhang et al. (2006)
	Relationship performance, quality, and satisfaction	Burkhart and Bode (2025); Chen et al. (2019); Fleming et al. (2016); Geiger et al. (2012); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Hibbard et al. (2001); Pick and Eisend (2014); Ping (1993, 1994, 1995, 1999); Sands et al. (2022); Vidal et al. (2016)
	Unrealized profits and potential	Dwyer et al. (1987); Fleming et al. (2016); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Geiger et al. (2012); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Helm et al. (2006); Leonidou et al. (2017); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Payan et al. (2010); Ping (1995); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006)
	Interpersonal relationships	Blut et al. (2016); Dasgupta et al. (2021); Fleming et al. (2016); Gedeon et al. (2009); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Giller and Matear (2001); Leonidou et al. (2017); Leonidou et al. (2019); Marshall et al. (2011); Vatavwala et al. (2022); Wathne et al. (2001); Zhang et al. (2021)
	Tolerance and inertia	Basu et al. (2023); Seggie et al. (2013); Suh and Kim (2018); Vatavwala et al. (2022); Vidal et al. (2016)
	Corporate social responsibility performance and reputation	Ekici (2013); Trinh and Zhao (2024); Vatavwala et al. (2022)
	Centralized buying	Heide and Weiss (1995)
External	Own (good) performance	Prajogo et al. (2025)
	Competitive intensity	Ekici (2013); Ping (1995); Pressey and Mathews (2003); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006); Trinh and Zhao (2024)
	Norms, culture, and institutions	Basu et al. (2023); Eyuboglu and Buja (2007); Marshall et al. (2011)
	Regulatory barriers	Bygballé (2017); Hollmann et al. (2015); Vatavwala et al. (2022)
	Common ownership (institutional overlap)	Freeman (2025)
	Political ties	Zhang et al. (2021)

One notable shortcoming in the literature is the ambiguity regarding the level of analysis at which internal resources are examined—specifically, whether they are deployed at the interpersonal or interfirm level. This is particularly evident in constructs such as trust, cooperation, and relationship

quality or satisfaction, which are sometimes discussed without clear differentiation between individual-level dynamics and firm-level interactions. For instance, strong interpersonal relationships are occasionally cited as contributing to overall switching costs, yet the mechanisms through which

these personal ties influence firm-level decisions remain underexplored (Blut et al. 2016).

3.4 | Coping Strategies

Beyond these structural factors, the exchange partners may engage in coping actions, defined as active strategies and behaviors aimed at managing and adapting to stressors (Burr et al. 1994; McCubbin 1979). Relationship dissolution is rarely triggered by a single event but rather by the cumulative effect (pile-up) of multiple stressors (Pressey and Selassie 2007). Conversely, a combination of positive events or partner actions—whether intentional or not—can counterbalance negative experiences and reduce the likelihood of dissolution. Accordingly, the tendency to dissolve relationships has been described as an anchoring and updating process, in which evaluations are continuously revised in response to positive, neutral, and negative partner actions and events (Hollmann et al. 2015). This aligns with findings from studies that examine supply chain disruptions as relational stressors, emphasizing that the post-disruption response often plays a more critical role in determining relationship continuity than the disruption itself (Chen et al. 2019)—particularly in cases where the disruption is not attributable to a particular actor, such as those caused by force majeure events (Burkhart and Bode 2025; Polyviou et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2022). A summary of coping strategies taken in the pertinent literature is displayed in Table 4.

Coping strategies are frequently examined in terms of emotional responses and attribution processes. For instance, anger (e.g., Polyviou et al. 2018) and the attributions of blame (e.g., Wang et al. 2022) significantly influence relationship outcomes. In line with family stress theory, communication strategy is a particularly salient coping mechanism in preventing dissolution, with one study even emphasizing the need to replace all key personnel interacting with a partner to “start fresh” and prevent further deterioration (Marcos and Prior 2017). Further coping actions include leveraging available flexibility or making

new investments—such as re-purchasing outdated technology to rebuild trust (Bengtson et al. 2013)—as well as taking legal measures, such as issuing formal declarations in response to disruptive events (Burkhart and Bode 2025). Most studies focus on relational coping strategies, either within the relationship (e.g., investments) or directed at the partner (e.g., concession making). However, self-directed coping actions, such as strengthening internal control mechanisms (Bauer et al. 2018), have received comparatively less attention.

Some coping responses, such as emotional reactions, may inadvertently intensify relationship stress and contribute to a pile-up of unresolved tensions, potentially accelerating dissolution. Moreover, the external environment can significantly shape the coping strategies adopted, yet this influence remains underexplored in current research (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000). Overall, despite the fact that relationship dissolution is often the result of prolonged stress accumulation and the coping actions taken in response, rather than isolated incidents (Hollmann et al. 2015; Pressey and Selassie 2007), the topic of coping remains underrepresented in the literature.

3.5 | Relationship Dissolution

Stress does not necessarily escalate into a crisis if the relationship is able to effectively mobilize available resources and frame the situation in a way that maintains stability and resists disruptive change. Conversely, a crisis emerges when the relationship fails to restore equilibrium and is subjected to sustained pressure to modify its structure and interaction patterns—potentially culminating in dissolution if these adaptive efforts prove unsuccessful (McCubbin and Patterson 1983). Thus, before a relationship reaches dissolution, exchange partners may adopt various responses to negative events, including passive acceptance (expecting the issue to resolve itself), supporting the partner in problem-solving, venting (expressing dissatisfaction through complaints), or issuing a withdrawal

TABLE 4 | Coping in relationship dissolution.

Factor	Extant studies
Attribution and emotional responses	Blessley et al. (2018); Chen et al. (2016); Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Gelderman et al. (2020); Hibbard et al. (2001); Mir et al. (2017); Polyviou et al. (2018); Primo et al. (2007); Smith (2002); Tähtinen and Blois (2011); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006); Wang et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2014)
Communication strategy	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Bengtson et al. (2013); Ellram (1991); Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Habib et al. (2020); Halinen and Tähtinen (2002); Leonidou et al. (2021); Marcos and Prior (2017)
Concession making and problem solving	Good and Evans (2001); Heide and John (1990); Primo et al. (2007); Vatavwala et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2014)
Utilizing flexibility	Habib et al. (2020); Halinen and Tähtinen (2002); Heide and Weiss (1995); Smith (2002); Vidal et al. (2016)
New investments	Bengtson et al. (2013); Ellram (1991)
Replacing key individuals	Marcos and Prior (2017)
Legal measures	Burkhart and Bode (2025)
Improving internal control mechanisms	Bauer et al. (2018)

threat (Seggie et al. 2013). The dissolution ultimately occurs when a threshold of tolerance is exceeded, often due to repeated exposure to negative incidents (Hollmann et al. 2015; Seggie et al. 2013). In this context, the notion of “self-fulfilling dissolution” refers to a relationship that begins to deteriorate—often triggered by the apparent decline of the associated product(s), performance issues, or other contextual factors. Instead of engaging in collaborative problem-solving to explore potential remedies, one partner may prematurely disengage from the relationship, thereby accelerating its breakdown (Ellram 1991).

Lifecycle models of inter-organizational relationships (Dwyer et al. 1987; Ellram 1991; Ring and de Van Ven 1994) typically describe dissolution as the final stage of the relationship lifecycle. However, not all relationships follow a sequential progression through each stage, and dissolution can occur at any point, including prematurely (Dwyer et al. 1987). Such cases of dissolution are also referred to as “relationship failure” (Zhang et al. 2006).

As not all relationships progress through every lifecycle stage, some may dissolve without experiencing a distinct crisis phase (cf. Figure 2). While strategic buyer–supplier relationships have often been likened to marriages due to their depth and complexity (Chen et al. 2013), more transactional relationships—such as those involving commodity suppliers—may terminate without the presence of a crisis. In such cases, dissolution can occur as a routine or pragmatic decision, rather than as a response to escalating conflict or structural strain.

The notion of relationship dissolution is variably conceptualized and operationalized across the literature. It spans from broad

definitions such as general relationship termination or exit, (negative) relationship continuity intentions, or threats of withdrawal. Studies adopting the buyer’s perspective often infer the presence of alternative suppliers by examining switching intentions. However, such intentions do not always translate into actual behavior; buyers tend to exhibit reluctance to switch suppliers, often requiring economic justification—such as cost savings or performance improvements—to ultimately legitimize the decision (Blessley et al. 2018). Empirical studies that operationalize relationship termination by counting dissolved relationships are relatively rare, as are studies that assess termination based on the age of the relationship at dissolution; both approaches are used predominantly in the mergers and acquisitions literature (Bauer and Matzler 2014; Freeman 2025; Rogan and Greve 2015). The following Table 5 provides an overview of the operationalization of relationship dissolution in pertinent literature.

The nature of partner interactions during dissolution varies significantly depending on the reasons underlying the termination (Ellram 1991). Dissolution can be voluntary and mutually agreed upon, unilateral and involuntary (initiated by either the buyer or supplier), or bilateral and involuntary, for example when termination is driven by external constraints rather than mutual intent (Giller and Matear 2001; Hocutt 1998; Pressey and Mathews 2003). When termination occurs voluntarily for reasons unrelated to relationship satisfaction, the process tends to be orderly and amicable. However, involuntary or unilateral dissolution often leads to greater complexity and potential conflict (including legal disputes), making it more challenging to manage (Ellram 1991; Giller and Matear 2001).

TABLE 5 | Forms of relationship dissolution considered.

Factor	Extant studies
Relationship dissolution/exit/termination	Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000); Bengtson et al. (2013); Chen et al. (2016); Dwyer et al. (1987); Ekici (2013); Ellram (1991); Gedeon et al. (2009); Geyskens and Steenkamp (2000); Giller and Matear (2001); Good and Evans (2001); Habib et al. (2020); Halinen and Tähtinen (2002); Helm et al. (2006); Hollmann et al. (2015); Li and Ng (2002); Liu et al. (2021); Marcos and Prior (2017); Ping (1993, 1999); Polyviou et al. (2018); Pressey and Mathews (2003); Pressey and Qiu (2007); Pressey and Selassie (2007); Primo et al. (2007); Rogan (2014); Struwe and Slepnirov (2021); Tähtinen and Blois (2011); Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006); Trinh and Zhao (2024); Tsiros et al. (2009); Vatavwala et al. (2022); Vidal et al. (2016); Zhang et al. (2006)
Probability of relationship termination	Basu et al. (2023); Chen et al. (2013); Dasgupta et al. (2021); Eyuboglu and Buja (2007); Ferguson and Johnston (2011); Gassenheimer et al. (1998); Hocutt (1998); Low and Johnston (2006); Morgan and Hunt (1994); Payan et al. (2010); Ping (1994); Yang et al. (2012)
Switching intention	Blessley et al. (2018); Blut et al. (2016); Burkhart and Bode (2025); Bygballe (2017); Geiger et al. (2012); Heide and Weiss (1995); Marshall et al. (2011); Mir et al. (2017); Pick and Eisend (2014); Sands et al. (2022); Suh and Kim (2018); Wang et al. (2022); Wathne et al. (2001); Zhang et al. (2021)
(Negative) continuity intentions	Harmeling et al. (2015); Heide and John (1990); Ping (1995); Prajogo et al. (2025); Wang et al. (2014); Wang et al. (2010)
Threatened withdrawal	Hibbard et al. (2001); Leonidou et al. (2017); Seggie et al. (2013)
Relationship end (duration)	Bauer et al. (2018); Freeman (2025)
Count of dissolved relationships	Rogan and Greve (2015)

During the dissolution stage, parties negotiate the disengagement process, which may involve asset division, reallocation, and adjustments in the broader supply and distribution network (Chen et al. 2013; Dwyer et al. 1987). A well-managed exit strategy that minimizes damage to the initiator, the other party, and the broader network has also been termed a “beautiful exit” (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000). This can be crucial, as the actions taken at this stage influence future interactions, either facilitating or hindering the potential for renewed collaboration in subsequent engagements (Hurmelinna 2018).

3.6 | Re-Entering Relationships

Similar to interpersonal and family relationships, B2B relationships may go through phases of disengagement, reassessment, or temporary pauses before being re-established under changed circumstances. Market dynamics, leadership transitions, evolving business needs, and new strategic opportunities can prompt former partners to reconnect. Maintaining professionalism, open communication, and a positive rapport post-dissolution can facilitate future collaboration. As highlighted in our findings, dissolution strategies that minimize damage are critical, as the process and actions taken during termination influence the potential for re-engagement (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000; Hurmelinna 2018). Conversely, unresolved stressors, operational inefficiencies, or reputational damage may create long-term barriers to reconnection and continue to impact both individual firms and broader supply networks.

While B2B relationship recovery (e.g., Lee et al. 2023; Primo et al. 2007) and customer reacquisition in business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts (e.g., Pick et al. 2016) have received considerable academic attention, the concept of “switch back” in dissolved B2B relationships remains underexplored. Emotional responses play a crucial role in this process. Negative emotions such as guilt or regret can enhance cognitive processing and increase the likelihood of advocating for re-engagement, whereas positive emotions such as joy or relief may lower cognitive engagement, reducing the likelihood of reconciliation (Chugh et al. 2023). Additionally, buyer perceptions of fairness in a win-back offer mediate the relationship between emotional responses and re-engagement decisions, suggesting that trust repair and negotiation strategies play a crucial role in successful re-engagement.

4 | Future Research Opportunities

The literature review reveals multiple avenues for future research, with promising points of interface to adjacent research domains. These avenues will help advance our understanding of buyer–supplier relationship dynamics and dissolution. This section is structured around the key themes identified in the review and organized by our conceptual framework: relationship stressors, resources, coping mechanisms, perceptions, and the processes of dissolution and re-engagement.

Major directions for future research are summarized in Table 6. Among the most promising avenues are, based on the

literature review (cf. Sections 3.2 and 3.6), the dynamics of “pile-up”—where unresolved issues accumulate across multiple relationships—and the mechanisms of “re-entering” previously terminated partnerships. These are underexplored areas that offer substantial theoretical and practical potential for advancing our understanding of relationships and their lifecycles, specifically in business-to-business settings.

Two considerations frame the research questions presented in the sections below. First, as mentioned, many opportunities emerge at the interfaces between the relationship dissolution literature and adjacent domains, such as conflict management (Lumineau et al. 2015), relationship lifecycle theory (Ring and de Van Ven 1994), and risk management (Wang et al. 2014). For example, the research question “Which early warning signals for stressors exist?” (listed in Table 6 and discussed below) closely aligns with the risk management domain, where the objective is to proactively manage risk by considering structural and environmental vulnerabilities (e.g., supplier base composition or the likelihood of natural disasters at a warehouse location). Identifying early warning signals or mitigating stressors proactively may therefore benefit from cross-domain learning and principles drawn from risk management.

Second, buyer–supplier relationships are embedded in layered contexts and do not unfold in isolation (Grönroos 1984). Accordingly, future research should consider the influence of environmental factors from various levels of analysis. At the macro (external) level, stressors may arise from outside the focal relationship—such as geopolitical conflicts, regulatory change, or macroeconomic shocks. For instance, sudden trade restrictions may reduce order volumes below contractual thresholds, triggering disputes over surcharge clauses. At the micro (internal) level, stressors may originate from partner behavior, performance issues, or interpersonal dynamics—such as a grievance stemming from a perceived violation of norms. Reconsidering the question of early warning signals: What are the indicators of emerging macro-level stressors? And what signals point to relationship-level (internal) tensions? These examples illustrate how many research questions can be explored across levels of analysis.

4.1 | Relationship Stressors

While prior research has extensively examined economic and structural drivers of relationship dissolution, the role of interpersonal dynamics remains comparatively underexplored. For instance, changes in key personnel can destabilize buyer–supplier relationships (Pressey and Mathews 2003) and other interorganizational relationships (Seabright et al. 1992), as well as negatively impact financial performance (Shi et al. 2017). Such transitions may lead to knowledge loss, misalignment of skill sets, or a renegotiation of contractual norms. In some cases, however, personnel changes represent a necessary intervention to prevent further deterioration (Marcos and Prior 2017). New relationship managers can even improve outcomes; research suggests that under the right conditions, new relationship managers can enhance overall performance by more than 29%, depending on prior relationship dynamics and their ability to manage relational complexities effectively

TABLE 6 | Future research agenda on buyer–supplier relationship stress and dissolution.

Domain	Examples of future research questions
Relationship stressors	• To what extent do interpersonal factors (such as changes in key personnel or the deterioration of personal relationships) potentially initiate and influence relationship dissolution? • When do these interpersonal factors, in conjunction with other crisis events, help repair the relationship instead? • How does the location of stressor events (i.e., unilateral/internal, dyadic, network/external) influence the course and outcome of a relationship in crisis? • If a stressor spans both the macro- and micro-levels of occurrence, does it lead to different forms of adaptation? • Which early warning signals for stressors exist? • What are implications of unresolved stressors and their repercussions in relationships? • How do business-related stressors and interpersonal (private) stressors interact and pile up? • How do relationship-external and -internal events interact and pile up? • To what extent are changing communication patterns an antecedent of a relationship crisis? • At the risk management interface, what capabilities (of managers or firms) help reduce the likelihood that a stressor escalates into a crisis? • Can firms proactively remove or neutralize specific stressors?
Relationship resources	• Which resources – individual, dyadic, and network—are more effective in different levels of stress? • Which resources—individual, dyadic, and network—are more effective in which contexts?
Coping strategies	• How does the duration of coping influence the relationship outcome? • Which coping mechanisms are effective in low-stress contexts, and which are effective only in high-stress contexts? • Which coping mechanisms are associated with a higher probability of causing more stress in a focal buyer–supplier relationship and/or other relationships? • While most coping behavior is by nature a reactive state, can any behaviors act in a proactive or preventive state?
Perception of stressors, resources, and coping	• To what extent are moderators and mediators studied in the literature components of coping or subjective perception? • How strong is the influence of the perception of the stressor, existing resources, and coping actions on the outcome of a relationship crisis? • In what contexts is not acting perceived as positive or negative? • When does the perception of relationship external events translate into internal stressors? • How do individual differences (e.g., personal, cultural) shape perceptions?
Relationship dissolution	• How are relationship assets distributed after a relationship dissolution? • How do (social) networks of relationships reallocate after relationship dissolution? • How do triadic relationships (i.e., buyer–supplier–supplier or buyer–buyer–supplier) dissolve?
Re-entering relationships	• Why do firms try to re-engage with dissolved relationships? • When do changes in leadership lead to re-entering dissolved relationships? • What are significant barriers to re-entering dissolved relationships? • What are the personal effects and consequences of re-entering relationships? • How does dissolution history affect the initiation of re-entering relationships?

(Schmitz et al. 2020). Future research could examine how interpersonal transitions and key account handovers lead to escalation or de-escalation processes, and how they influence broader relationship trajectories. A deeper understanding of these behavioral factors would enhance models of interorganizational recovery and resilience.

Buyer–supplier relationships are also influenced by the interaction of internal triggers (e.g., strategy shifts, executive turnover) and external disruptions (e.g., regulatory change, market volatility) (e.g., Burkhart and Bode 2024; Chen et al. 2016). Our review underscores the theoretical potential of exploring stressor pile-up in greater depth, especially in today's increasingly complex business environment.

Future research could explore how multiple stressors compound or offset one another over time. Longitudinal designs, in particular, would yield insight into how firms navigate layered stress and how such pressures influence relationship stability. Additionally, the intersection between professional and personal stressors remains largely neglected. Future work might examine how external shocks—such as financial crises or operational breakdowns—interact with individual-level factors such as burnout, personality conflicts, or relational history. A more nuanced understanding of cumulative stressors could advance theories of relationship resilience.

In addition to stressor origin, their scope—whether individual/unilateral (affecting one party), dyadic (impacting both),

or network-level (influencing the broader market)—may shape the crisis trajectory. Future research could explore how stressor scope influences conflict resolution strategies, power asymmetries, and dissolution outcomes. Cross-industry comparisons may also reveal whether particular types of stressors are more salient in specific settings, offering new insights into crisis management across supply chains.

As highlighted in our review, communication plays a central role in coping with relationship stressors. Yet, its function as an early warning signal remains underexplored. Future research should examine how variations in communication—such as frequency, tone, and transparency—serve as indicators of impending dissolution. Emerging tools in text analysis and AI-based sentiment detection could be applied to monitor and predict relationship deterioration based on communication patterns (e.g., Li et al. 2024). A better understanding of these signals could help firms proactively manage tensions and prevent unnecessary ruptures.

Finally, this area offers promising links to the adjacent domain of risk management, where a key objective is to identify and mitigate emerging risks. Research at this interface could draw from established frameworks such as impact–likelihood matrices to assess how perceived communication patterns relate to crisis escalation. More broadly, future studies might ask: Which stressors can be effectively mitigated? What organizational capabilities are required for such mitigation (Pettit et al. 2010)? Exploring these questions could build a bridge between relationship management and supply chain risk research.

4.2 | Relationship Resources

This review underscores the need for further research on the role of internal and external resources in buyer–supplier relationships that moderate and interact with stressors. Future studies should examine how different types of resources and coping strategies influence relationship stability and the risk of dissolution under varying stress levels and business contexts.

As with the location of the stressor, the effectiveness of resources will often depend on whether they are deployed at the individual, dyadic, or network level (Halinen and Tähtinen 2002; Lavee et al. 1985). The effectiveness also depends on the strength of the stressor and whether the resource is being pulled from the environment or resides more internally. Another important consideration is the temporal context of the relationship. Exchange partners with a history of navigating prior stressors (“shadow of the past”) may exhibit greater resilience, having developed shared norms and communication routines that increase the effectiveness of available resources (Eyuboglu and Buja 2007; Marcos and Prior 2017). Similarly, when both parties expect the relationship to continue in the future (“shadow of the future”), they may be more willing to invest in joint resource mobilization, anticipating reciprocal benefits from relationship continuity (Dwyer et al. 1987; Heide and Miner 1992; Payan et al. 2010). Future studies should investigate which resources—such as joint problem-solving, third-party mediation, or contractual adaptations—are most effective in mitigating stress and preventing dissolution.

4.3 | Coping Strategies

The duration and persistence of coping efforts can be critical determinants of buyer–supplier relationship outcomes. Prolonged coping may strengthen the partnership by fostering resilience and adaptive problem-solving; however, extended efforts may also lead to fatigue, partner burnout, and disengagement, ultimately accelerating dissolution (Chen et al. 2016; Ping 1995). This dual possibility mirrors insights from family stress theory: whether a prolonged period of stress binds partners closer together or pushes them toward crisis depends on factors like the resources they can draw on and how they interpret the stressor. Future research could analyze how firms manage extended stress episodes in this light—identifying what organizational resources or relational factors (e.g., mutual trust, open communication) allow prolonged coping to remain constructive instead of draining, thereby pinpointing where continued efforts become unsustainable.

At the same time, not all coping strategies have positive effects; some may inadvertently escalate tension within a relationship or even radiate stress into the wider supply network. For instance, excessive reliance on legal enforcement or unilateral decision-making might give a short-term sense of control but ultimately erode trust and fuel resentment (Burkhart and Bode 2025; Lumineau and Malhotra 2011). Similarly, blaming one’s partner for problems is a maladaptive response that can damage goodwill and intensify conflict (Polyviou et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2022). Such approaches may provide temporary relief yet harm long-term stability, and they can even shift problems onto other parts of the supply chain, amplifying overall stress. Future research should thus identify which coping mechanisms tend to backfire and explore how firms can avoid these counterproductive strategies, instead cultivating constructive coping methods that support long-term relationship stability.

Importantly, not all coping strategies are equally effective under all conditions (Menaghan 1983): while open communication or minor contract amendments may suffice in low-stress settings, high-stress scenarios may require more robust responses such as formal renegotiation or relationship restructuring. Future work should identify which coping mechanisms are context-contingent and explore how firms adapt or shift between them as stressors evolve.

Moreover, building on studies that define stress thresholds (Hollmann et al. 2015), further investigation is needed to determine the tipping point at which coping strategies shift from being beneficial to becoming detrimental. Family stress models suggest that as stressors accumulate or persist over time, they can eventually overwhelm even strong coping capacities—a phenomenon sometimes described as the pile-up of demands. Beyond a certain threshold of strain, well-intended coping efforts may yield diminishing returns or even become counterproductive (Busse et al. 2016). Identifying this tipping point in buyer–supplier relationships could provide early warning indicators of impending relationship breakdown and clarify the limits of relationship resilience. Knowing when prolonged coping starts to do more harm than good would not only advance theory on relationship continuity but also guide managers on how long to persevere with coping efforts versus when to consider alternatives or make strategic adjustments.

4.4 | Perception of Stressors, Resources and Coping

As highlighted in the literature review, perception—of stressors, available resources, and enacted coping strategies—plays a pivotal role in shaping how buyer–supplier relationships experience and respond to stress. Similar to insights from intraorganizational research (i.e., Jaskiewicz et al. 2017), we emphasize that perceptual filters critically influence the trajectory of relationship crises but remain underexamined in interorganizational contexts. The construct of perception intersects with adjacent domains such as conflict management, micropolitics, communication models, expectancy violation and attribution theories, and relationship lifecycle models—each offering conceptual tools to study research questions pertaining to how actors interpret relational disruptions and formulate responses.

At the macro level, perceptions are shaped by broader contextual factors, particularly institutions. Norms embedded in cultural contexts influence the threshold for relationship termination and the willingness to engage in conflict resolution. Cultural differences affect not only how firms interpret stressor events but also which responses they deem appropriate (Marshall et al. 2011). These cultural expectation gaps are echoed in expectancy violation theory, which posits that breaches of relational norms are interpreted through the lens of prior expectations (Roehrich et al. 2025). Future research could explore how cultural frameworks shape perceptual thresholds for dissolution and influence evaluations of coping adequacy.

As highlighted above, environmental events—such as economic crises, geopolitical shifts, or regulatory interventions—can serve as external stressors that may or may not destabilize the relationship, depending on how they are interpreted. When seen through the lens of attribution theory (Weiner 1985), transition from external pressure to internal crisis hinges on subjective assessments: whether a stressor is seen as controllable, persistent, or justifiable. Future research should investigate under what conditions external shocks are perceived as existential threats versus manageable challenges—and how such interpretations are influenced by organizational resilience, leadership cognition, and relational expectations.

From an internal perspective, perceptual asymmetries can be shaped by relationship history. For example, a supplier with a long-standing track record of excellence may be judged more harshly for a single failure than one with a history of underperformance (Chen et al. 2019), highlighting how past interactions bias the perception of present events. Similarly, the stage of the relationship matters: disruptions in the early phase may be interpreted more flexibly than those occurring in mature or high-dependence relationships (Ellram 1991; Harmeling et al. 2015). These observations align with theories that emphasize that subjective definitions of a situation are central to crisis emergence (e.g., Thomas theorem; Thomas and Thomas (1928)). Future research should examine how relationship maturity and history condition the perception of stressor events and identify when these perceptions escalate tensions versus stabilize a relationship.

Moreover, perceptions influence not just the interpretation of stressors but also the evaluation of coping strategies. Whether an action is viewed as constructive or inadequate can differ significantly between partners and contexts. A delay in response, for instance, may be interpreted by one party as strategic patience and by another as neglect. Future studies should explore when inaction is viewed positively (e.g., giving space to recalibrate) versus negatively (e.g., disengagement or abdication of responsibility). Comparative research across industries and cultural contexts could offer valuable insights into these divergent interpretations.

Behavioral aspects and cognitive biases—such as loss aversion, attributional bias, or framing effects—may further distort the interpretation of both stress and coping (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Experimental and scenario-based research could illuminate how different framings of relational crises (e.g., as shared system failures versus partner-specific shortcomings) shape decision-making and dissolution outcomes. This would not only deepen theoretical understanding of perceptual mechanisms in B2B settings but also strengthen ties to the conflict resolution literature.

In sum, perception functions as a critical mediating lens that shapes how stressors, resources, and coping actions are interpreted and acted upon. A more refined understanding of these perceptual processes is essential for explaining variation in relationship outcomes and for identifying intervention points where managerial sensemaking can redirect relationships from rupture toward recovery.

4.5 | Relationship Dissolution

As discussed earlier, the dissolution phase of buyer–supplier relationships entails the negotiation of resource reallocation, adjustments within the supply network, and the redistribution of key assets (Chen et al. 2013; Dwyer et al. 1987). These processes vary significantly depending on the type and cause of dissolution—ranging from mutual agreement to unilateral termination or externally imposed separation (Hocutt 1998; Pressey and Mathews 2003). When relationships end, both tangible and intangible assets—including intellectual property, customer access, contractual rights, and operational knowledge—must be redistributed. Future research should investigate how these assets are divided, whether reallocation follows formal contractual arrangements or informal negotiations, and what factors influence a firm's ability to retain or lose critical resources. Further studies could explore how power asymmetries shape post-dissolution outcomes and whether firms with greater bargaining power are more successful in safeguarding or appropriating key assets.

Importantly, relationship dissolution does not occur in isolation; it reverberates through broader supply networks and industry ecosystems. Scholarship in this area has expanded from dyadic perspectives to triadic and, more recently, tetradic relationship structures (e.g., Choi and Holmen 2023; Durach et al. 2020). In triadic configurations—such as buyer–supplier–supplier or buyer–buyer–supplier constellations—the withdrawal of one party can trigger cascading effects that disrupt interdependent

ties. Future research should examine how supply networks adapt to these disruptions: Do firms seek alternative partners, strengthen existing alliances, or restructure their sourcing strategies?

Another promising direction involves investigating the role of social capital in shaping post-dissolution trajectories. For instance, do firms with strong reputational or relational capital navigate the aftermath of dissolution more effectively? How do trust and prior cooperation influence the ease of resource reallocation or the reconfiguration of disrupted supply chains?

Additionally, more attention is needed to understand how firms proactively manage triadic and network dependencies to reduce the risk of contagion from a single dissolution event. Do firms establish redundancy, modularity, or governance safeguards to insulate the system? Under what conditions are such buffers activated, and how do they affect long-term network resilience?

By addressing these research gaps, scholars can offer a more comprehensive understanding of how organizations manage the consequences of B2B relationship dissolution. Insights from this line of inquiry can inform managerial strategies aimed at minimizing disruption, preserving key assets, and sustaining adaptability within complex interorganizational systems.

4.6 | Re-Entering Relationships

Just as in interpersonal and family settings, B2B relationships may experience phases of disengagement, reassessment, or temporary suspension before being re-established (Dwyer et al. 1987; Ring and de Van Ven 1994). These re-engagement phases can be prompted by shifts in market conditions, leadership changes, evolving strategic priorities, or the emergence of new business opportunities (Palmatier 2008). When reconsidering a former partner, firms evaluate both the strategic value of the customer or supplier and the feasibility of re-engagement. Critical factors include residual relational capital, ease of re-entering the relationship, and anticipated long-term benefits. Sales professionals in particular highlight the importance of overcoming past grievances, leveraging remaining goodwill, and demonstrating renewed value-adding capabilities (Leach and Liu 2014). The relevance of these factors often depends on the original reasons for termination, the degree of formalization in re-entry practices, and prevailing market conditions.

A crucial antecedent of successful re-engagement lies in the nature of the dissolution process itself. As highlighted in the literature, relationship termination strategies that minimize damage and avoid permanent rupture—rather than “burning bridges”—create more favorable conditions for future re-engagement (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000; Hurmelinna 2018). Conversely, unresolved grievances, operational failures, or reputational harm can erect long-term barriers that hinder reconnection. Research on customer betrayal demonstrates that severe relational violations can trigger lasting animosity that fundamentally alters willingness to re-engage (Grégoire and Fisher 2008). Future research should examine how lingering conflicts and perceived injustices shape post-dissolution attitudes and influence re-engagement willingness (Gassenheimer et al. 1998; Samaha et al. 2011).

In addition to firm-level dynamics, broader network structures play a vital role in shaping the feasibility of re-entering dissolved relationships. In triadic constellations or industry-specific ecosystems, third-party actors—such as mutual partners, associations, or key clients—may facilitate or obstruct re-engagement (Ring and de Van Ven 1994). Future studies could explore how social capital, network positioning, and indirect ties influence firms’ ability to restore previously severed ties (Cha et al. 2025). Research might also investigate whether and how organizations deliberately manage their relationship portfolios to preserve optionality for future collaboration.

From an environmental perspective, macro-level developments can serve as catalysts for re-engagement. Strategic realignments, economic disruptions, or shifts in competitive positioning may prompt firms to reconsider prior decisions and reevaluate dormant relationships (Hughes et al. 2025). Future research could investigate the specific triggers that lead firms to initiate re-engagement efforts and examine how exogenous shocks recalibrate perceived relational value. Additionally, more work is needed to understand barriers to re-entry of relationships—such as reputational liabilities, exclusivity agreements, or the presence of better-performing substitutes—and to identify negotiation strategies that improve the likelihood of successful re-engagement.

Finally, the long-term stability of re-engaged relationships warrants focused empirical attention. Do re-established ties yield performance gains and relational durability, or do they remain vulnerable to repeated dissolution? Future research should assess the conditions under which re-established partnerships achieve sustainable collaboration and mutual benefit. Longitudinal studies could provide important insights into the durability of re-engagement efforts, the evolution of trust and performance expectations, and the path-dependent effects of past disruptions.

5 | Conclusion

This review consolidates what we know about why and how buyer-supplier relationships end and where our knowledge remains thin. Viewing dissolution as a stress-and-coping process clarifies three core insights. First, dissolution is rarely triggered by a single event; it typically reflects the accumulation and appraisal of stressors across partners. Second, outcomes depend on the repertoires and timing of coping—from joint problem solving and contractual renegotiation to unilateral sanctions and exit. Third, dissolution follows recognizable pathways (de-escalation, escalation, fracture, re-engagement), shaped by context, power, and time.

Guided by family stress theory, our synthesis integrates multi-actor dynamics, cumulative stress, and coping mechanisms while retaining important mechanisms from transaction cost, social exchange, and justice perspectives. On that basis, we outline a future research agenda that (i) studies bundles and sequences of stressors, (ii) examines capability-based coping repertoires and their boundary conditions (e.g., fairness perceptions, contract use), and (iii) models dissolution trajectories and the conditions under which relationships can be salvaged or re-entered at lower risk.

For practitioners, this review implies that managers should monitor early stress signals, manage fairness perceptions during renegotiation, and align coping strategies with context and timing. For scholars, the agenda calls for longitudinal, multi-actor designs and richer measures of stressor bundles, coping capabilities, and pathway dynamics. Advancing on these fronts will move the field from cataloging reasons for termination to explaining—and ultimately shaping—the process of dissolution in increasingly volatile supply networks.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** jbl70055-sup-0001-Supinfo1.docx.