

## **Relationship Quality in Business-to-Business Contexts: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda**

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### **Abstract**

This literature review paper examines relationship quality within industrial marketing, emphasising its role in fostering productive relational exchanges. Relationship marketing (RM) has become central in marketing exchanges, focusing on long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between buyers and sellers. The concept of relationship quality, reflecting the degree to which a relationship meets customer needs, is fundamental in this context. The paper adopts the 4 Ws framework to review 120 relevant articles systematically. Commitment, trust, and satisfaction consistently emerge as critical dimensions of relationship quality. However, variations in operationalisation exist across diverse research environments. The review highlights the need for context-specific analyses and suggests exploring the interplay between relationship quality and brand-related constructs. This paper enhances our understanding of relationship quality's impact on industrial marketing by identifying research gaps and proposing future directions.

**Keywords:** Relationship quality, Industrial marketing, Relationship marketing, Customer satisfaction, Commitment, Trust, Business-to-business (B2B) marketing.

### **Introduction**

Relationship marketing (RM), the formation, growth, and maintenance of productive relational exchanges, has occupied a central place in marketing exchanges (Griffith, 2016). The initial emphasis of marketing research was predominantly on the economic exchanges between buyers and sellers; however, the focus has now evolved to an understanding of the behavioural interactions between the parties involved (Leonidou, Samiee, Aykol, & Talias, 2014). Relationship marketing is essential when services are complex, personalised, given through constant transactions, and include several novice

customers (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). Smith (1998) highlights that relationship quality has transformed into a fundamental construct within the domain of relationship marketing.

Over the past two decades, practitioners and scholars have focused on creating long-term, mutually beneficial relationships (Kumar, 1996). Relationship quality has emerged as a critical aspect in this setting. According to Athanasopoulou (2009), a successful relationship is one with good relationship quality and vice versa. Through the work of Dwyer, the idea of relationship quality initially rose to prominence in 1987. (1987). According to Dwyer and Oh, the degree of satisfaction and trust one has in their exchange partner, and low levels of optimism are indicators of a relationship's quality (Dwyer & Oh, 1987). Relationship quality has been the subject of extensive research since 1995. (Athanasopoulou, 2009). The relationship quality studies that fall under the purview of industrial marketing are the topic of this paper.

### **Review Methodology & Organizing Framework**

The articles included in this literature review were identified through a thorough search of numerous databases, including EBSCO, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Jgate, ProQuest, and Research Gate. The goal was to compile all pertinent research on relationship quality that has been conducted, specifically in the context of industrial marketing or business-to-business marketing. Keywords like "Relationship quality in business market," "Relationship quality in industrial markets," and "Relationship quality in B2B marketing" were used to narrow the search.

After finding the articles, a quality check was done to determine which ones were from the most prestigious and respected journals. For this literature review, journals in Web of Science and the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) were highly prioritised. In the end, 120 papers were considered appropriate for analysis and inclusion in this analysis.

This literature review's methodology adopted a concept-driven systematic review approach to analyse prior research and identify research topics that increase understanding of relationship quality (Webster & Watson, 2002; Vashisht, Royne, & Sreejesh, 2019). Moreover, the author employed the 4 Ws framework as a methodical approach to comprehensively understand the variable under investigation (Callahan, 2014; Rosado-Serrano, Paul, & Dikova, 2018). This literature review seeks to provide a thorough overview of the research undertaken on relationship quality in the industrial marketing domain by using this stringent methodology and organising structure, contributing to advancing future knowledge on this topic.

### **Review Discussion**

#### *Concept of relationship quality*

The degree to which a relationship serves a customer's needs and is deemed appropriate for doing so is called its relationship quality (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). The majority of early studies on relationship quality focused on elements like customer satisfaction and salesperson interactions that foster trust (Crosby et al., 1990). The nature of the partnership greatly impacts how a firm develops, whether it experiences financial success or failure, and how the relationship concludes (Holmlund, 2008). Although relationship quality has been the subject of extensive and well-known research, the construct has not yet been defined precisely. Scholars usually assert that the concept is known

intuitively, according to Holmlund (2008), which leads to a shortage of severe conversations regarding its definition. According to Holmlund, perceived relationship quality is determined by how relevant persons from each organisation in the dyad evaluate business interactions.

Crosby made one of the first attempts to define relationship quality, viewing it as the salesperson's capacity to lower perceived uncertainty for consumers (Crosby et al., 1990). Borrowing the conceptual framework used to define product quality, relationship quality was also established to indicate the relationship quality between two business parties. As a result, the degree to which a connection is acceptable for satisfying the customer's related needs is termed relationship quality (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997).

#### *Dimensions of Relationship Quality*

Although there has been a lot of research on relationship quality, there is still disagreement over the precise aspects of this construct. Although it is generally acknowledged that relationship quality is a higher-order construct, there isn't a lot of consensus in the literature regarding the specific dimensions. However, a vast body of research consistently sees commitment and trust as essential determinants of relationship quality (Hewett et al., 2002).

Three elements of relationship quality were established by Hennig-Thurau and Klee: the customer's overall opinion of quality, trust, and commitment. They see relationship quality as a multifaceted, higher-order concept measuring a partnership's health (Leonidou et al., 2014). Dorsch et al. (1998) proposed that relationship quality is a higher-order construct consisting of commitment, contentment, limited opportunism, customer orientation, and ethical profile. Similarly, Hewett et al. (2002) suggested that trust and commitment are first-order constructs, while relationship quality serves as a higher-order construct in their conceptual framework.

Depending on the research domain, several relationship quality dimensions are adopted. Although trust, commitment, and satisfaction are frequently used dimensions, the retail and business-to-business fields may choose to employ different ones (Athanasopoulou, 2009). Osobajo and Moore (2017) claim that different definitions and degrees of relationship quality exist depending on the circumstance. Both interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships can be included when discussing the concept of relationship quality. The dimensions chosen depend on the particular field of study. However, it is universally acknowledged in the research on relationship quality that it is a multi-dimensional construct or meta-construct with associated dimensions (Osobajo & Moore, 2017).

For example, Ural (2009) conducted a study on Turkish exporters, investigating relationship quality through information sharing, communication quality, long-term orientation, and satisfaction. Additionally, Vesel and Zabkar (2010) explored relationship quality in retail by examining trust, commitment, and satisfaction as influential aspects impacting customer loyalty. Their findings shed light on the importance of these dimensions in understanding and fostering successful relationships in their respective contexts.

Woo and Ennew (2004) used factors like cooperation, adaptation, and atmosphere to gauge relationship quality in the setting of an industrial market. Their research examined the impact of relationship quality on customer happiness, service quality, and behavioural intention (Woo & Ennew, 2004).

Barnes et al. (2016) used cooperation, commitment, and satisfaction as variables for assessing relationship quality. Through the mediating variable of inter-organisational trust, their study demonstrated that interpersonal factors like communication and credibility favour relationship quality.

In business-to-business relationships, Jiang and Shiu (2016) presented communication, long-term orientation, economic satisfaction, and social satisfaction as relationship quality factors. The authors posited that loyalty and trust were the foundations of good relationships (Jiang & Shiu, 2016).

In 2015, Hoppener, Griffith, and White conceptualised the relationship between reciprocity, relationship quality, and performance satisfaction. To gauge relationship quality, they utilised satisfaction, commitment, and conflict measures as critical indicators. Their study provided valuable insights into the interplay of these variables and their impact on overall performance satisfaction within the context of their research.

A meta-analysis of the literature was done by Leonidou, Samiee, Aykol, and Talias (2014) to investigate the causes and effects of the quality of the exporter-importer relationship. They considered relationship quality a construct with the axes of cooperation, dedication, and trust. They found that opportunism, conflict, communication, cultural remoteness, and adaptation were the precursors.

Relationship quality was described as a multi-dimensional construct by Rauyruen, Miller, and Barret (2007), with perceived service quality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

In their investigation of the business-to-business market, Naude and Buttle (2000) found trust, contentment, power, and profit as significant elements of relationship quality. They concluded that no one theory can adequately explain the concept of relationship quality.

Relationship quality was considered an outcome variable, and relational knowledge storage was an antecedent in a study by Johnson, Sohi, and Grewal (2004). Trust, commitment, and stability were employed in their research to gauge the quality of relationships (Johnson, Sohi, & Grewal, 2004).

Numerous studies have emphasised the importance of the salesperson's role in relations and interactions (Hall et al., 2014; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997; Kaufman, Jayachandran, & Rose, 2006; Newell, Wu, Leingpibul, & Jiang, 2016).

#### Future Research Directions and Implications

Since its inception in 1987, relationship quality research has undergone substantial progress, with numerous studies undertaken in various fields. However, studies have not agreed upon the specific definition or aspects of relationship quality. This lack of agreement is apparent in research concentrating on business-to-business markets, where there is considerable variation in how this variable is examined. While other studies focus on particular facets of the construct, some embrace a holistic relationship quality framework.

According to the body of existing research, satisfaction, commitment, and trust are crucial relationship quality factors in various circumstances. These characteristics are frequently acknowledged as essential determinants of how strong and appropriate a relationship is. However, their relative relevance and operationalisation may change depending on the research environment.

There is no agreement on the characteristics of this construct, given the diverse methods and situations used in relationship quality research. This gap might be ascribed to the various contexts in which relationship quality is researched and the various viewpoints used by researchers.

The reviewer also noted a void in the research investigating the interactions between relationship quality and brand-related characteristics. While the relationship between relationship quality and customer happiness, loyalty, and other outcome variables has received substantial research, its connection to brand-related constructs has received less attention. The gap in the study pertaining to brand-related constructs in the relationship quality literature indicates a chance for further investigation into the interaction between relationship quality and brand variables, expanding our knowledge of how these elements interact in the marketing space.

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