

# Determinants of Trust in Business-to-Business Relationships: The Role of Relationship Quality, Service Quality, and Communication

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the determinants of trust in business-to-business (B2B) relationships and develop an integrative conceptual framework linking relationship quality, service quality, and communication with trust. Previous studies analyzed these determinants separately, limiting understanding of their combined effect on inter-organizational collaboration. A systematic literature review following the PRISMA framework was conducted using Scopus-indexed journals (2021–2026). From 620 records, 37 articles met eligibility criteria, and 30 were synthesized through thematic analysis. Findings show that relationship quality is the strongest predictor of trust, encompassing satisfaction, commitment, continuity, and conflict reduction. Service quality enhances trust through reliability, responsiveness, efficiency, and partner competence. Communication acts as a moderator by increasing transparency, reducing information asymmetry, clarifying expectations, and facilitating knowledge sharing. The proposed conceptual model positions relationship quality and service quality as antecedents of trust, with communication strengthening and moderating trust formation. Theoretically, the study frames trust as a dynamic relational capability shaped by operational performance, relational experience, and information exchange. Practically, it suggests firms should manage trust strategically through consistent service delivery, long-term relationship investment, and structured, transparent communication. Limitations include reliance on literature-based synthesis; future research should empirically test the model across diverse B2B contexts.

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## Introduction

Business developments in the digital era have increased collaboration among organizations, particularly in business-to-business (B2B) relationships. Firms no longer depend only on operational efficiency and product quality, but also on their capacity to build sustainable and long-term relationships with business partners. B2B relationships are complex because they involve interdependence, high transaction value, and continuous coordination across organizational boundaries (Sityawan et al., 2022). In this context, trust becomes a central relational asset because it reduces uncertainty, supports openness in information exchange, and strengthens collaboration between partners (Jang & Lee, 2022).

Trust is widely understood as a partner's confidence that another party will act reliably, honestly, and in accordance with mutually accepted expectations. A high level of trust allows firms to maintain stable relationships, minimize conflict, and improve collaboration. Conversely, weak trust may increase opportunistic behavior, coordination costs, and dissatisfaction. Empirical studies in supply chain and partnership settings show that trust improves integration, collaboration,

commitment, loyalty, and business performance (Ahamed & Noboa, 2022; Kim & Lee, 2024; Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2023).

Previous research identifies several determinants of trust in B2B relationships. Relationship quality is one of the most important determinants because it reflects satisfaction, commitment, and the stability of long-term interaction between partners. Higher relationship quality strengthens confidence in partner reliability and integrity, thereby reducing uncertainty in collaborative (Masitenyane et al., 2023; Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2023). Service quality also contributes to trust because reliable and responsive service performance increases partner confidence in a firm's competence and professionalism (Habjan, 2023; Hussein Ali et al., 2022; Osarenkhoe et al., 2024).

Communication is another strategic factor linked to trust formation, but its conceptual role varies across studies. In B2B settings, communication may refer to information sharing, communication quality, timeliness, accuracy, responsiveness, transparency, or adequacy of exchanged information. These dimensions help partners clarify expectations, coordinate tasks, reduce information asymmetry, and interpret service performance more accurately (Darko & Vlachos, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2023). However, because these constructs are not always measured in the same way, communication should not be treated as a single empirical variable without conceptual clarification.

Although many studies have examined trust, the evidence remains fragmented in four specific ways. First, theoretical mechanisms are inconsistent because trust is sometimes positioned as an antecedent, mediator, outcome, or relational capability. Second, relationship quality overlaps with satisfaction and commitment, creating a risk of construct redundancy when its direction relative to trust is not clarified. Third, the empirical contexts are heterogeneous, including logistics, tourism, healthcare, construction, agriculture, export-import relationships, and supply chains. Fourth, measurement approaches differ across studies, with some reporting direct associations, others emphasizing indirect pathways through satisfaction, commitment, knowledge sharing, or value co-creation, and only limited evidence testing interaction effects (Berenguer-Contri et al., 2024; Gil-Saura et al., 2025; Shan et al., 2023; Sutanto et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to identify, analyze, and synthesize the determinants of trust in B2B relationships by integrating relationship quality, service quality, and communication within a systematic literature review and by formulating a conceptual proposition for future empirical testing.

## **Method**

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) with qualitative synthesis to examine the formation of trust in B2B relationships. The review was guided by the PRISMA 2020 logic of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. A non-registered review protocol was prepared before screening to define the research question, database, search syntax, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening stages, data-extraction fields, and quality-appraisal procedure. Two reviewers independently screened titles, abstracts, and full texts; disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. The SLR approach was selected because it enables a transparent and replicable process for identifying, screening, and synthesizing studies on service quality, relationship quality, communication, and trust in inter-organizational contexts.

The literature search was conducted in Scopus because it indexes peer-reviewed international journals and provides advanced search operators that support reproducible retrieval. The final search was conducted on 21 June 2026. Records were exported in CSV and RIS formats, including citation information, abstracts, keywords, source titles, publication years, and DOIs where available. Google Scholar was used only as a supplementary conceptual-reading tool to clarify terminology; it was not

used as a source of articles in the final synthesis. The exact Scopus query, searched fields, filters, and supplementary procedure are reported in Table 1.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles written in English, published between 2021 and 2026, available in full text, and directly related to trust in inter-organizational or B2B relationships. The 2021-2026 window was selected to capture recent post-pandemic and digitally mediated B2B relationship research, while the 2026 data were interpreted cautiously because publication and indexing for that year were incomplete at the search cut-off date. Studies were excluded when they focused on business-to-consumer relationships, individual consumer behavior, non-journal materials, conference proceedings, editorials, non-English publications without an English version, or articles outside the selected publication period.

**Table 1.** Scopus Search Strategy and Reproducibility Information

<b>Item</b>	<b>Reproducibility information</b>
Database	Scopus Advanced Search; source type limited to journals and document type limited to articles.
Search date	21 June 2026.
Searched fields	TITLE-ABS-KEY.
Exact query	TITLE-ABS-KEY((trust OR "inter-organizational trust" OR "interorganizational trust") AND ("business-to-business" OR B2B OR "inter-organizational relationship*" OR "supply chain") AND ("relationship quality" OR "service quality" OR communication OR "information sharing" OR satisfaction OR commitment OR "value co-creation"))
Filters	Publication years 2021-2026; English language; journal articles; peer-reviewed journal sources.
Supplementary reading	Google Scholar was used only for conceptual orientation and terminology checking; no Google Scholar records were included in the final synthesis.

**Table 2.** Literature Search Strategy

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Search strings and combinations</b>
Trust	"trust" OR "inter-organizational trust"
Business-to-Business	"business-to-business" OR "B2B"
Relationship Quality	"relationship quality"
Service Quality	"service quality"
Communication	"communication" OR "information sharing"
Keyword combination	"trust" AND ("business-to-business" OR "B2B") AND ("relationship quality" OR "service quality" OR "communication")

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 logic of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The initial Scopus search identified 620 records. After removing 7 duplicate records, 613 records were screened by title and abstract. A total of 561 records were excluded because they did not match the research focus, leaving 52 full-text reports for eligibility assessment. Fifteen full-text reports were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Thirty-seven studies were retained as the eligible mapping set. To avoid including tangential sources in the qualitative argument, a pre-specified analytical relevance screen was then applied: studies had to operationally connect trust with at least one of the focal mechanisms, namely service quality, relationship quality, communication, information sharing, satisfaction, commitment, relational governance, or value co-creation in a B2B or

inter-organizational context. Seven eligible studies were excluded from the final synthesis because trust was peripheral or not operationally linked to the focal mechanisms. Thus, the final analytical corpus consisted of 30 peer-reviewed journal articles.

**Table 3.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

No.	Aspect	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1	Research topic	Articles discussing trust, relationship quality, service quality, and communication.	Articles unrelated to the selected variables.
2	Research context	Studies conducted in inter-organizational or B2B relationships.	Studies focused on B2C or individual consumer behavior.
3	Publication type	Articles published in scientific journals.	Books, conference proceedings, editorials, or non-peer-reviewed reports.
4	Language	Articles written in English.	Articles in other languages without an English version.
5	Publication period	Articles published between 2021 and 2026.	Articles published outside the selected period.
6	Availability	Articles with accessible abstracts and full texts.	Articles with only title information or inaccessible full text.

### **Data Extraction and Quality Appraisal**

Data were extracted using a structured matrix that recorded bibliographic data, research design, sector and country, sample or data source, focal constructs, trust dimension or operationalization, reported direction of evidence, and methodological transparency. Quality appraisal was used to weight interpretation rather than to exclude studies automatically. Each article was rated as high, moderate, or contextual based on the clarity of research design, sample or data source, construct operationalization, analytical procedure, and relevance to the focal trust mechanism. This procedure prevents tangential studies from being treated as direct causal evidence.

**Table 4.** Data Extraction and Quality Appraisal Framework

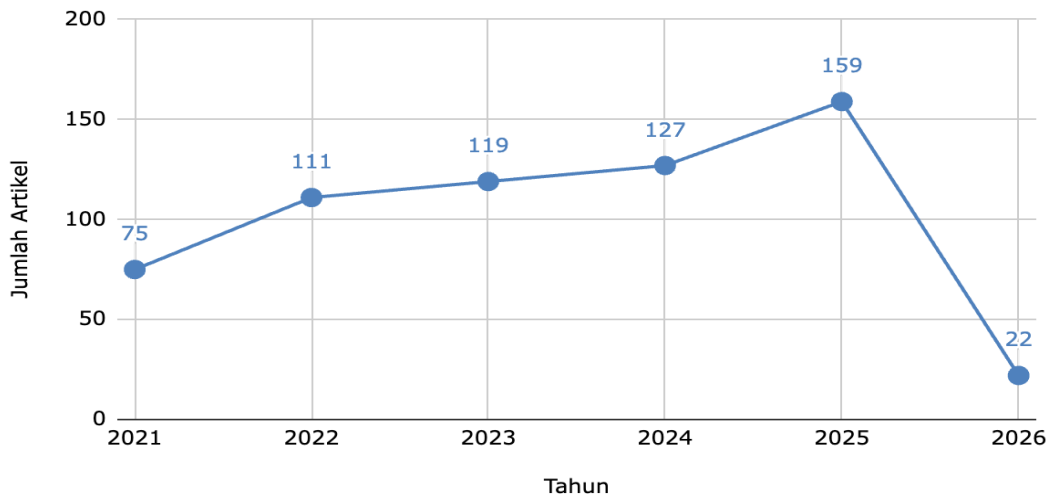
Extraction domain	Information recorded	Purpose in synthesis
Bibliographic profile	Author, year, journal, DOI, publication year.	Ensures traceability and avoids unsupported source-to-claim matching.
Study context	Research design, sector, country, and sample or data source.	Identifies boundary conditions across heterogeneous B2B contexts.
Construct mapping	Trust dimension, relationship quality, service quality, communication or information-sharing construct, and related mediators such as satisfaction or commitment.	Clarifies whether each study provides direct, indirect, or contextual evidence.
Evidence direction	Positive, negative, mixed, indirect, or not directly tested.	Prevents causal overstatement in a narrative synthesis.
Quality rating	High, moderate, or contextual based on methodological transparency and relevance to the focal mechanism.	Weights interpretation without claiming meta-analytic effect size estimation.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Annual Development of Scopus Records on Trust in B2B Relationships**

The search results indicate that scholarly attention to trust in business-to-business (B2B) relationships has shown a generally increasing pattern during the 2021–2026 period. As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of Scopus records retrieved through the search string increased from 75 records in 2021 to 111 records in 2022, followed by 119 records in 2023 and 127 records in 2024. The highest

number of retrieved records was recorded in 2025, with 159 articles. This trend suggests that trust, relationship quality, service quality, and communication have become increasingly important topics in B2B marketing, supply chain management, logistics, and inter-organizational collaboration research.

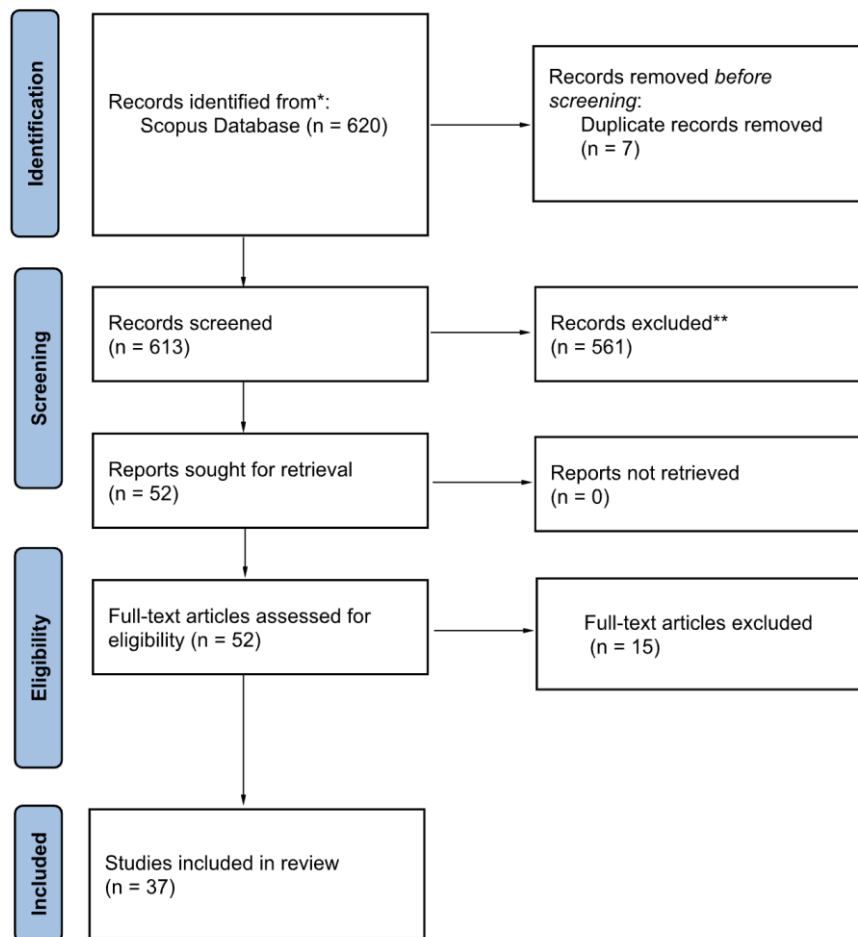


**Figure 1.** Annual Scopus Records Retrieved by the Search

The lower number of records in 2026, namely 22 articles, should not be interpreted as a decrease in research interest. Instead, it reflects the incomplete publication and indexing cycle at the time of the search, which was conducted on 21 June 2026. Therefore, the publication pattern presented in Figure 1 confirms that the topic remains relevant and continues to develop within contemporary B2B research. The increasing number of studies also provides a strong basis for conducting a systematic literature review, as it indicates that existing knowledge on trust formation in B2B relationships has expanded but remains dispersed across different research contexts and theoretical perspectives.

### ***Article Identification and Selection Process***

The article selection process followed the PRISMA framework to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor. As shown in Figure 2, the identification stage produced 620 records from the Scopus database. After duplicate removal, seven records were excluded, leaving 613 records for title and abstract screening. At this stage, 561 records were excluded because they did not directly address the focus of this review, particularly the relationship between trust, relationship quality, service quality, communication, and B2B or inter-organizational relationships.



**Figure 2.** PRISMA Flow Diagram of Article Selection Process

After the screening process, 52 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. No reports were excluded due to retrieval failure, indicating that all potentially relevant full-text articles were accessible for further examination. However, 15 full-text articles were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, such as focusing on business-to-consumer contexts, individual consumer behavior, non-relational marketing issues, or variables that were not directly connected to the conceptual focus of this study. Consequently, 37 articles were included in the review. From these eligible studies, 30 peer-reviewed journal articles were selected for the final synthesis because they were the most relevant to the development of the conceptual framework on trust formation in B2B relationships.

The PRISMA process strengthens the credibility of the review by demonstrating that the final dataset was not selected arbitrarily. Instead, it was obtained through a systematic filtering process based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This procedure is important because trust in B2B relationships is discussed across various fields, including supply chain management, logistics, tourism, healthcare, construction, technology-enabled services, and strategic alliances. Therefore, the screening process helped ensure that only studies with strong conceptual and empirical relevance were included in the synthesis.

### ***Literature Synthesis on Determinants of Trust***

Table 4 presents the synthesis of 30 articles that explain the determinants of trust in B2B relationships. The reviewed studies show that trust is not formed through a single factor, but through the interaction of several relational and operational mechanisms. Three dominant determinants emerged from the

synthesis: relationship quality, service quality, and communication. These determinants appeared consistently across different B2B contexts, including supply chain partnerships, logistics service relationships, tourism supplier relationships, construction markets, healthcare services, agricultural supply chains, and digital vendor-managed inventory systems.

**Table 4.** Literature Synthesis on Determinants of Trust in B2B Relationships

No.	Author (Year)	Focus and Context	Key Findings
1	(Habjan, 2023)	IT-enabled information, service quality, satisfaction; B2B transportation.	IT-enabled information improves transparency and operational efficiency, which enhances perceived service quality and customer satisfaction.
2	(Rinenggo et al., 2024)	Trust, perceived value, loyalty; Indonesian healthcare B2B.	Trust increases loyalty directly and indirectly through perceived value; switching cost does not significantly strengthen this relationship.
3	(Andersson et al., 2022)	Coordination, satisfaction, cooperation; B2B supply chains.	Coordination improves economic and relational satisfaction, which subsequently enhances cooperation in collaborative sales partnerships.
4	(Masitenyane et al., 2023)	Relationship quality, satisfaction, continuity; construction market.	Relationship quality strengthens satisfaction and long-term relationship continuity through expectation alignment and flexibility.
5	(Jyh-Liang et al., 2022)	Opportunism, conflict, economic and noneconomic satisfaction.	Opportunism increases conflict and weakens satisfaction, while satisfaction remains important for relationship outcomes.
6	(Samanta, 2022)	Relationship marketing and strategic branding; Greek SMEs.	Relationship marketing supports business development and trust building, particularly in early stages of B2B development.
7	(Rahmasari et al., 2024)	CRM, brand image, satisfaction, loyalty; Indonesian logistics.	Brand image influences satisfaction and loyalty, while customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand perception and loyalty.
8	(Fagundes et al., 2023)	Social media, engagement, brand equity; B2B marketing.	Social media enhances B2B brand equity through interaction and engagement, while brand heritage strengthens the effect.
9	(Bougadir et al., 2025)	Relational governance, contractual governance, innovation; SMEs.	Relational governance is a primary driver of innovation, while contractual governance provides structural support for collaboration.
10	(Gil-Saura et al., 2025)	Value co-creation, trust, commitment, satisfaction; tourism B2B.	Value co-creation enhances trust and commitment, which then improve social and economic satisfaction.
11	(Osarenkhoe et al., 2024)	Service quality, satisfaction, trust; vendor-managed inventory.	Efficiency and responsiveness strengthen perceived service quality, which contributes to satisfaction and trust.
12	(El Hammoumi et al., 2024)	Trust, commitment, innovation; strategic alliances.	Trust and commitment significantly influence innovation performance; knowledge exchange has a weaker direct role.
13	(Kim & Lee, 2024)	Trust, commitment, collaboration, supply chain performance.	Cognitive trust improves collaboration and performance; commitment strengthens collaborative outcomes.
14	(Kim, 2024)	Cognitive trust, commitment, agility, supply chain performance.	Trust improves commitment and supply chain agility, although agility may not always directly improve performance.
15	(Shan et al., 2023)	Trust, knowledge sharing, innovation; manufacturing firms.	Trust is a dominant antecedent of innovation because it facilitates knowledge sharing across supply chain partnerships.

No.	Author (Year)	Focus and Context	Key Findings
16	(Sutanto et al., 2023)	Trust, supply chain capability, application, performance.	Supplier trust, capability, and system application improve supply chain performance in retail competition.
17	(Ma et al., 2022)	Relationship quality, knowledge sharing, technological innovation.	Stakeholder relationship quality enhances innovation through knowledge sharing, while communication influences indirect pathways.
18	(Ho et al., 2023)	Trust, commitment, collaboration; agricultural supply chain.	Trust and commitment strengthen collaboration, while risk and opportunistic behavior weaken partnership quality.
19	(Lee & Kim, 2023)	Information sharing, cognitive trust, emotional trust, commitment.	Information sharing improves cognitive and emotional trust, which subsequently strengthens commitment.
20	(Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2023)	Trust, satisfaction, supplier relationship continuity.	Trust is a strong determinant of satisfaction and long-term continuity in tourism supplier relationships.
21	(Hussein Ali et al., 2022)	Sustainable logistics service quality, relationship quality, trust.	Service quality enhances relationship quality and indirectly strengthens trust through satisfaction and partner evaluation.
22	(Darko & Vlachos, 2022)	Trust, collaboration, 3PL relationships, value creation.	Trust, collaboration, and information sharing are key drivers of relationship value in logistics partnerships.
23	(Sityawan et al., 2022)	Trust, commitment, strategic partnership, SME performance.	Trust and commitment mediate the relationship between partnership quality and business performance.
24	(Jang & Lee, 2022)	Trust, relationship commitment, integration, collaboration, performance.	Trust and commitment improve supply chain performance through integration and collaboration.
25	(Ahamed & Noboa, 2022)	Trust, commitment, export performance; export-import relationships.	Affective commitment mediates the effect of trust on performance, while calculative commitment can weaken outcomes.
26	(Santana et al., 2021)	Trust, commitment, expected value, relational attractiveness.	Commitment is the strongest determinant of relational attractiveness, followed by trust and expected value.
27	(Maloku, Çera, Poleshi, et al., 2021)	Relationship quality, conflict, contract farming.	Relationship quality improves partner outcomes, while conflict acts as a mediating mechanism that weakens relationships.
28	(Maloku, Çera, Metzker, et al., 2021)	Access to information, satisfaction, commitment, trust.	Access to information improves satisfaction, commitment, and trust, although the effect of trust may vary by context.
29	(Mukhsin & Suryanto, 2021)	Trust, commitment, supply agility, supply chain performance.	Trust indirectly affects performance through supply agility, while commitment has direct and indirect effects.
30	(Berenguer-Contró et al., 2024)	ICT, value co-creation, trust, loyalty; B2B services.	ICT strengthens value co-creation, which enhances trust, commitment, and loyalty in service relationships.

The studies summarized in Table 4 indicate that relationship quality is one of the strongest relational foundations of trust. Studies by Masitenyane et al. (2023), Moliner-Velázquez et al. (2023), and Maloku, Çera, Metzker, et al. (2021) show that satisfaction, commitment, relationship continuity, and conflict reduction are central components that support trust development. These findings suggest that firms tend to trust partners with whom they experience consistent, flexible, and mutually beneficial interactions. In this sense, relationship quality functions not only as an outcome of previous interactions but also as a mechanism that shapes future trust.

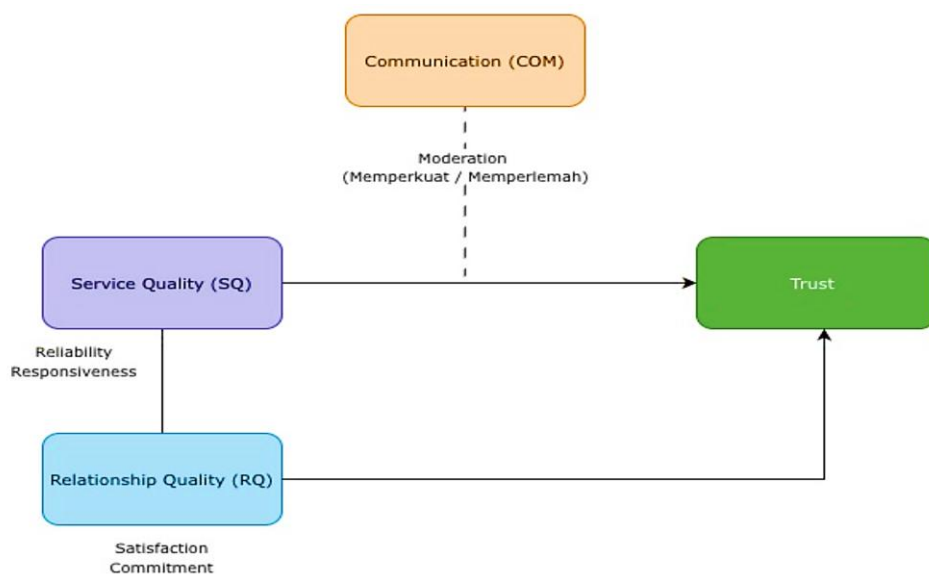
Service quality also emerged as a major determinant of trust. Studies by Habjan (2023), Hussein Ali et al. (2022), and Osarenkhoe et al. (2024) demonstrate that reliability, responsiveness, efficiency, information quality, and service consistency influence how business partners evaluate the competence and professionalism of a firm. In B2B contexts, service quality is especially important because business customers often depend on suppliers or partners to maintain operational continuity. When service providers demonstrate reliable performance, partners are more likely to perceive them as competent and trustworthy.

Communication was identified as a strategic factor that strengthens the relationship between operational performance and relational trust. Studies by Lee & Kim (2023), Darko & Vlachos (2022), Ma et al. (2022), and Shan et al. (2023) show that information sharing, transparency, knowledge exchange, and communication clarity contribute to stronger trust and commitment. Communication helps reduce uncertainty, prevent misunderstanding, and limit information asymmetry between partners. Therefore, communication does not merely function as a supporting variable, but also as a relational mechanism that can strengthen or weaken the effect of service quality and relationship quality on trust.

**Emergent Conceptual Pattern**

The synthesis further indicates that trust formation in B2B relationships follows an integrative pattern. Service quality provides evidence of operational competence, relationship quality provides confidence in the continuity and integrity of the partnership, and communication provides the transparency needed to interpret partner behavior. These three dimensions complement one another. High service quality may not generate strong trust if communication is weak, while strong communication may not be sufficient if service delivery is inconsistent. Similarly, relationship quality is difficult to maintain when firms fail to provide reliable service or transparent information.

This pattern becomes the basis for the conceptual model presented in Figure 3. The model positions service quality and relationship quality as direct antecedents of trust, while communication acts as a moderating mechanism. In this framework, communication strengthens the influence of service quality and relationship quality on trust by increasing clarity, reducing uncertainty, and improving mutual understanding between business partners.



**Figure 3.** Conceptual Research Model

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that trust in B2B relationships is formed through the interaction of relationship quality, service quality, and communication. This synthesis confirms that trust should not be understood as a single relational outcome, but as a multidimensional construct shaped by repeated interaction, perceived competence, operational reliability, and transparent information exchange. Compared with previous studies that tend to examine trust through isolated variables, this review provides a more integrative interpretation by positioning relationship quality and service quality as core antecedents of trust, while communication functions as a strengthening mechanism that connects operational performance with relational confidence.

The finding that relationship quality is a central determinant of trust is consistent with Masitenyane et al. (2023), who found that relationship quality strengthens satisfaction and long-term continuity in B2B markets. Similar evidence is also reported by Moliner-Velázquez et al. (2023), who emphasized that trust and satisfaction are essential for maintaining supplier relationship continuity in tourism business networks. However, the present study extends these findings by showing that relationship quality does not only operate as an outcome of satisfaction and commitment, but also as a relational mechanism that enables trust to develop across different B2B contexts. This means that the continuity of interaction, expectation alignment, partner flexibility, and commitment should be interpreted as relational resources that reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in partner reliability.

The results also align with Maloku, Çera, Metzker, et al. (2021), who demonstrated that conflict weakens relationship quality in contract farming relationships. This finding is further supported by Jyh-Liang et al. (2022), who explained that opportunism increases conflict and reduces satisfaction in B2B relationships. Compared with these studies, the present review highlights that trust is not only built through positive relational experiences but also through the ability of partners to manage relational risks. Conflict, opportunism, and dissatisfaction may weaken trust when firms fail to maintain fairness, consistency, and mutual commitment. Therefore, relationship quality becomes important not merely because it creates satisfaction, but because it provides a relational safeguard against uncertainty, opportunistic behavior, and instability.

The finding on service quality supports Habjan (2023), who showed that IT-enabled information improves transparency, perceived service quality, and satisfaction in B2B markets. It is also in line with Hussein Ali et al. (2022), who found that sustainable logistics service quality improves relationship quality and indirectly strengthens trust. In addition, Osarenkhoe et al. (2024) showed that efficiency and responsiveness contribute to satisfaction and trust in digital vendor-managed inventory systems. Compared with these studies, the present review offers a broader explanation by showing that service quality functions as an operational signal of competence. In B2B relationships, partners do not rely only on emotional closeness or relational commitment; they also assess whether the other party can perform consistently, respond quickly, provide accurate information, and deliver reliable services. Thus, service quality becomes the operational foundation upon which relational trust is built.

The role of communication in strengthening trust is consistent with Lee & Kim (2023), who found that information sharing improves cognitive and emotional trust and subsequently strengthens commitment in supply chain relationships. This finding is also supported by Darko & Vlachos (2022), who emphasized that trust, collaboration, and information sharing are essential for creating value in third-party logistics relationships. However, this study advances the discussion by positioning

communication not only as a direct antecedent of trust but also as a moderating mechanism. Effective communication helps partners interpret service reliability, understand relational commitment, and reduce information asymmetry. Therefore, even when service quality and relationship quality are strong, trust may not develop optimally if communication is unclear, delayed, or inconsistent.

The synthesis also corresponds with Ma et al. (2022), who showed that stakeholder relationship quality enhances technological innovation through knowledge sharing, and with Shan et al. (2023), who found that trust facilitates knowledge sharing and innovation in manufacturing supply chain partnerships. Compared with these studies, the present review emphasizes that communication and knowledge exchange are not merely supporting processes for innovation, but also core mechanisms in trust formation. When firms communicate openly, share relevant knowledge, and provide transparent information, partners are more willing to exchange resources and engage in collaborative problem solving. This strengthens the argument that trust in B2B relationships develops through both relational confidence and informational clarity.

The findings further support Berenguer-Contró et al. (2024), who showed that ICT strengthens value co-creation, trust, commitment, and loyalty in B2B service relationships. Similarly, Gil-Saura et al. (2025) found that value co-creation enhances trust and commitment, which then improve social and economic satisfaction in tourism B2B relationships. Compared with these studies, this review contributes a more specific conceptual explanation by identifying communication as the mechanism that allows digital interaction, information sharing, and value co-creation to influence trust. This indicates that digital tools and ICT do not automatically create trust; their effect depends on whether they support transparent, timely, and meaningful communication between partners.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative conceptual framework that combines relationship quality, service quality, and communication in explaining trust formation in B2B relationships. Previous studies often discuss these variables separately or place trust only as a mediator or outcome within a specific industry. This study advances the literature by synthesizing recent Scopus-indexed studies from 2021 to 2026 and proposing that trust emerges from the interaction between operational performance and relational experience, supported by communication as a moderating mechanism. In this sense, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of trust formation by linking competence-based trust, relationship-based trust, and communication-based trust within a single conceptual model.

The theoretical implication of this study is that trust in B2B relationships should be conceptualized as a dynamic relational capability rather than a static psychological perception. The proposed framework enriches relationship marketing and B2B management literature by integrating operational, relational, and communicative perspectives. Service quality explains how competence and reliability create initial confidence, relationship quality explains how satisfaction and commitment strengthen long-term trust, and communication explains how transparency and information exchange shape the interpretation of partner behavior. This integrative perspective can help future researchers develop more comprehensive empirical models of trust in inter-organizational relationships.

The practical implication of this study is that managers should not treat trust as an automatic consequence of repeated transactions. Trust must be actively managed through consistent service delivery, relationship investment, and transparent communication routines. Firms need to improve reliability, responsiveness, efficiency, and operational consistency because these elements signal competence to business partners. At the same time, firms should strengthen relationship quality by maintaining satisfaction, commitment, fairness, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Communication

should also be institutionalized through regular information sharing, clear problem reporting, transparent negotiation, and timely coordination, especially in industries characterized by uncertainty, supply chain complexity, and high interdependence.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the review relies primarily on Scopus-indexed articles, which may exclude relevant studies from other databases such as Web of Science, Emerald, ScienceDirect, EBSCO, or regional academic databases. Second, the review focuses on articles published between 2021 and 2026, which strengthens the recency of the synthesis but may limit engagement with older foundational theories of trust and relationship marketing. Third, the study uses a qualitative synthesis approach, so the proposed conceptual model has not yet been empirically tested. Fourth, the reviewed articles come from various industries and countries, which provides broad insight but may also create contextual variation in how trust, communication, service quality, and relationship quality are measured. Therefore, future research should empirically test the proposed model using quantitative methods such as structural equation modelling, compare the model across industries and cultural contexts, and examine whether digital communication platforms strengthen or weaken trust formation in contemporary B2B relationships.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that trust in business-to-business (B2B) relationships is formed through the integration of operational, relational, and communicative mechanisms. Based on the systematic literature review of Scopus-indexed articles, the findings show that service quality contributes to trust by demonstrating reliability, responsiveness, efficiency, and partner competence, while relationship quality strengthens long-term trust through satisfaction, commitment, continuity, and reduced relational uncertainty. Communication plays a strategic role by improving transparency, reducing information asymmetry, clarifying expectations, and strengthening the effect of service quality and relationship quality on trust. The novelty of this study lies in the development of an integrative conceptual framework that positions communication as a moderating mechanism in the relationship between service quality, relationship quality, and trust, thereby extending previous B2B trust studies that often examine these variables separately. Theoretically, this study contributes to relationship marketing and B2B management literature by explaining trust as a dynamic relational capability shaped by competence-based performance, relational experience, and information exchange. Practically, the findings imply that firms should manage trust strategically by maintaining consistent service delivery, investing in long-term relationship quality, and institutionalizing transparent communication routines with business partners. However, this study is limited by its reliance on Scopus-indexed articles, its focus on the 2021–2026 publication period, and its qualitative synthesis design, which means that the proposed model still requires empirical validation. Future research is therefore recommended to test the framework using quantitative methods, such as structural equation modelling, across different industries, cultural settings, and digital B2B environments.

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