

Relationship Marketing and Trust Building in International Sales Channels



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ABSTRACT

Relationship marketing has become a central strategy for firms operating in international sales channels, where uncertainty, cultural distance, and opportunism pose significant challenges. This empirical study examines the role of relationship marketing practices in building trust and improving international sales channel performance. Primary data were collected from 389 respondents involved in international sales, exports, and channel management. Using reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, the study finds that communication quality, commitment, cooperation, and relational bonds significantly influence trust, which in turn positively affects channel performance. Trust also plays a mediating role between relationship marketing practices and performance outcomes. The findings reinforce contemporary international marketing theories and provide actionable insights for managers seeking sustainable global channel relationships.

***Keywords:** Relationship marketing, trust, international sales channels, channel performance, global marketing*

INTRODUCTION

International sales channels allow firms to access global markets through distributors, agents, and strategic partners. Yet handling these channels is a complex process, as they come with cultural differences, institutional diversity, geographic distance, and higher transaction risks. Traditional transactional approaches are often inadequate in sustaining long-term international relationships. Therefore, relationship marketing has become an important factor with a long-term view, cooperation, and mutual trust. At international sales channels, trust is extremely significant. It lowers uncertainty, discourages opportunistic behavior, and increases the efficiency of coordination. Best practices in relationship marketing; for example, effective communication, commitment, cooperation, and relational bonding are the levers of trust building across borders. Although much was conceptualized, empirical evidence regarding the relationship marketing–trust–performance nexus in international sales channels is scarce. This article fills this gap with data from 389 respondents.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of relationship marketing focuses on establishing, maintaining, and enhancing long-term relationships between firms and their partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The Commitment–Trust Theory argues that trust and commitment are the key mediators in successful relational exchanges. In international

contexts, trust becomes even more crucial due to cultural distance and information asymmetry (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Entry mode and channel structure significantly influence relationship dynamics in international markets (Cavusgil et al., 2014). Studies suggest that communication quality improves transparency and reduces conflict, thereby strengthening trust (Kotabe & Helsen, 2020). Commitment reflects a firm's intention to maintain a relationship, while cooperation enables joint problem-solving in dynamic environments (Hill, 2021).

Recent research highlights the role of digitalization in enhancing relationship marketing effectiveness, enabling real-time communication, knowledge sharing, and virtual collaboration across borders (Autio et al., 2022). Strategic flexibility allows firms to adapt relational strategies to local market conditions, fostering trust and improving channel performance (Luo & Zhang, 2025). Dynamic capabilities, such as absorptive capacity and innovation management, support firms in responding to uncertainty in international channels and sustaining relational advantages (Teece, 2024). Sustainability orientation and governance mechanisms further enhance trust and long-term performance in global sales channels (Verbeke & Kano, 2023). Empirical studies indicate that communication quality, commitment, cooperation, and relational bonds are positively associated with trust in international channels (Contractor, 2023; Nambisan et al., 2022). Cultural and institutional environments moderate the effectiveness of these practices, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive strategies (Buckley & Casson, 2024). Trust not only reduces opportunistic behavior but also facilitates knowledge transfer, resource sharing, and joint innovation among international partners (Autio et al., 2022). Firms that embed trust into formal and informal governance mechanisms experience lower transaction costs and improved coordination efficiency (Verbeke & Kano, 2023).

Several studies highlight the mediating role of trust in translating relationship marketing practices into channel performance outcomes (Kotabe & Helsen, 2020; Luo & Zhang, 2025). For example, relational bonds strengthen affective and cognitive trust, which enhances commitment and collaborative behavior (Hill, 2021). Digital platforms further amplify relational efforts by providing data-driven insights, monitoring tools, and feedback systems that reinforce trust and cooperation (Nambisan et al., 2022). Despite this, research findings vary regarding which relationship marketing dimensions most strongly predict trust and performance, suggesting potential interaction effects and contextual contingencies (Cavusgil et al., 2014). Furthermore, cross-cultural studies show that in high-context cultures, relational bonds and personal interactions are more influential in building trust, whereas in low-context cultures, formal communication and contractual clarity carry greater weight (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Contractor, 2023). Emerging market multinationals demonstrate that combining relational and transactional strategies can yield superior performance in uncertain institutional environments (Luo & Zhang, 2025). Studies also point to the moderating role of environmental dynamism, indicating that trust becomes more critical when international markets are volatile or competitive (Teece, 2024). Recent contributions emphasize integrating sustainability and ethical practices into relationship marketing as a means to reinforce trustworthiness and reputation among global partners (Verbeke & Kano, 2023). Furthermore, scholars suggest that combining digital tools with traditional relationship practices allows firms to achieve relational resilience and long-term competitive advantage (Autio et al., 2022; Nambisan et al., 2022). Overall, while the literature broadly supports the

positive influence of relationship marketing on trust and channel performance, there remains a need for updated empirical studies that account for digitalization, sustainability, and emerging market contexts (Buckley & Casson, 2024; Luo & Zhang, 2025).

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of relationship marketing practices on trust in international sales channels.
2. To analyze the relationship between trust and international sales channel performance.
3. To assess the mediating role of trust between relationship marketing practices and channel performance.

Research Hypothesis

1. **H1:** Relationship marketing practices have a significant positive impact on trust in international sales channels.
2. **H2:** Trust has a significant positive impact on international sales channel performance.
3. **H3:** Trust mediates the relationship between relationship marketing practices and international sales channel performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A descriptive and analytical research design was adopted using a quantitative approach. Primary data were collected from 389 respondents engaged in international sales, exports, and channel management. A structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was administered using online and direct survey methods. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used.

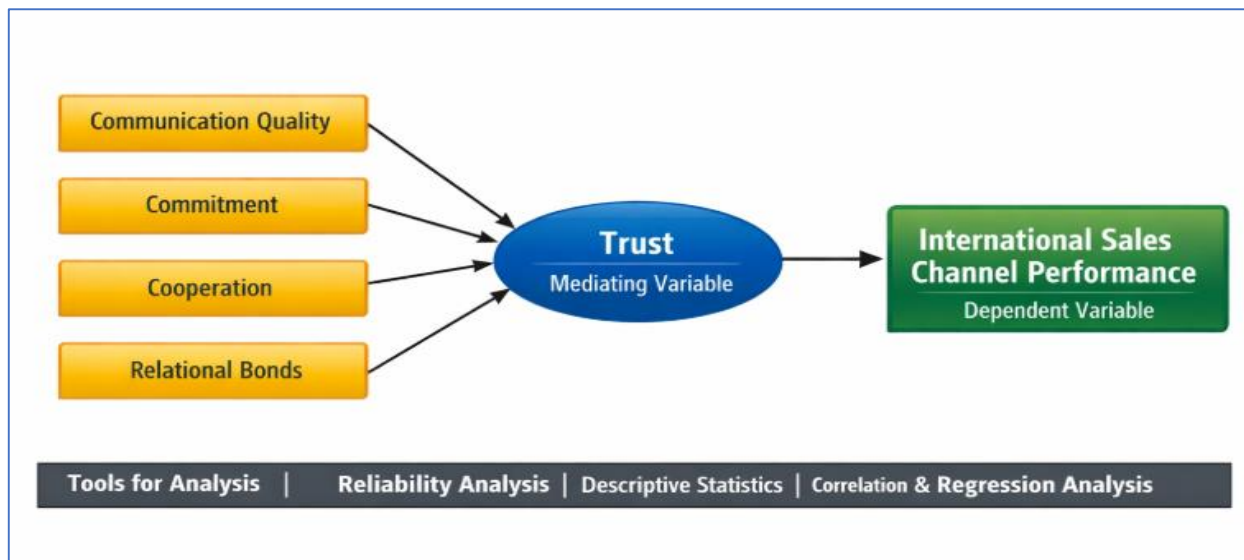


Figure 1: Research Model

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Communication Quality	5	0.86
Commitment	4	0.84
Cooperation	4	0.82
Relational Bonds	4	0.80
Trust	5	0.88
Channel Performance	5	0.85

The reliability analysis demonstrates strong internal consistency for all constructs used in the study. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.80 to 0.88, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Trust shows the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$), indicating robust measurement of the construct. Communication quality and channel performance also exhibit high reliability, reflecting consistency in respondents' evaluations. Commitment and cooperation show satisfactory alpha values, confirming dependable measurement. Relational bonds meet acceptable reliability standards, supporting their inclusion in the analysis. Overall, the results confirm the reliability and suitability of the measurement scale for further statistical analysis.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Communication Quality	4.12	0.61
Commitment	4.05	0.64
Cooperation	3.98	0.68
Relational Bonds	3.90	0.72
Trust	4.08	0.59
Channel Performance	4.15	0.57

The descriptive statistics indicate high mean scores for all study variables, suggesting a generally positive perception of relationship marketing practices and outcomes among respondents. Channel performance records the highest mean (4.15), reflecting strong effectiveness of international sales channels. Communication quality (4.12) and trust (4.08) also show high mean values, highlighting their importance in international relationships. Commitment and cooperation exhibit relatively strong agreement, indicating consistent relational efforts across channels. Relational bonds show a slightly lower mean, suggesting scope for further strengthening interpersonal and structural ties. The relatively low standard deviations indicate consistency in respondents' perceptions across variables.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

Variable	CQ	COM	COOP	RB	Trust	Performance
Communication Quality (CQ)	1					
Commitment (COM)	0.61**	1				
Cooperation (COOP)	0.58**	0.60**	1			
Relational Bonds (RB)	0.55**	0.57**	0.59**	1		
Trust	0.69**	0.66**	0.64**	0.62**	1	
Channel Performance	0.63**	0.61**	0.60**	0.58**	0.72**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

The correlation analysis reveals strong and positive relationships among all relationship marketing dimensions, trust, and channel performance at the 1% significance level. Communication quality, commitment, cooperation, and relational bonds are highly correlated with trust, indicating their critical role in trust formation. Trust shows the strongest correlation with channel performance ($r = 0.72$), highlighting its central importance in driving performance outcomes. The positive associations between relationship marketing variables and performance suggest that relational strategies enhance channel effectiveness. The inter-correlations among the independent variables indicate complementary rather than conflicting relationship marketing practices. Overall, the results support the theoretical linkage between relationship marketing, trust, and international sales channel performance.

Table 4: Regression Analysis – Relationship Marketing → Trust

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Communication Quality	0.32	6.84	0.000
Commitment	0.29	6.12	0.000
Cooperation	0.21	4.95	0.000
Relational Bonds	0.18	4.21	0.000
R ²	0.58		

The regression results show that all relationship marketing dimensions have a positive and statistically significant influence on trust in international sales channels ($p < 0.001$). Communication quality ($\beta = 0.32$) and commitment ($\beta = 0.29$) emerge as the strongest predictors, indicating their critical role in trust building. Cooperation and relational bonds also significantly contribute to trust, though with comparatively lower effect sizes. The R² value of 0.58 indicates that these variables jointly explain 58% of the variance in trust.

Table 5: Regression Analysis – Trust → Channel Performance

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Trust	0.72	15.36	0.000
R ²	0.52		

The regression results indicate that trust has a strong and statistically significant positive impact on international sales channel performance ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$). The high t-value (15.36) confirms the robustness of this relationship. The R² value of 0.52 suggests that trust alone explains 52% of the variance in channel performance. This highlights trust as a key determinant of effectiveness and success in international sales channels.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- Practices of relationship marketing have a strong and positive impact on trust in international sales channels.
- The quality and consistency of communication are strong predictors of trust.
- International sales channel performance is significantly positively affected by trust.
- Trust partially mediates the relationship between relationship marketing practices and channel performance.
- Relationally focused organizations have better coordination efficiency and long-term performance.
- International channel partners act cooperatively, which decreases conflicts and increases joint problem-solving capabilities.
- In cross-border relationships, closer relational bonds enhance sharing of information and minimize opportunistic behavior.

- Higher levels of trust lead to greater channel partner satisfaction resulting in relationship continuity.
- Relationships based on trust lead to better adaptability in a dynamic and uncertain international marketplace.
- Relationship marketing strengthens mutual dependence, building long-term channel stability.
- The transaction and monitoring costs of firms using trust-oriented channel governance are lower.
- Good relationship marketing improves strategic alignment between companies and their international partners.
- Trust encourages cross-border cooperation, collaboration, and knowledge sharing during innovation across international sales channels.
- Culturally sensitive relationship practices positively moderate the trust-building process.
- Long-term relational orientation improves resilience and performance sustainability in global sales operations.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several important implications for managers operating in international sales and distribution environments. First, managers should recognize relationship marketing as a strategic investment rather than a short-term operational activity. Establishing transparent and consistent communication systems with international channel partners is essential for reducing information asymmetry, minimizing misunderstandings, and aligning expectations across geographically and culturally diverse markets. Regular information sharing, feedback mechanisms, and the use of digital communication platforms can significantly enhance mutual understanding and trust.

Second, long-term commitment must be visibly demonstrated through relationship-specific investments such as training programs, joint planning initiatives, shared performance metrics, and resource support for channel partners. Such commitment signals reliability and partnership orientation, encouraging channel members to reciprocate with higher levels of loyalty and cooperation. Managers should also foster cooperative practices by involving international partners in decision-making, joint problem-solving, and strategic discussions, which enhances flexibility and responsiveness in dynamic global markets.

Third, building strong relational bonds across cultures requires managers to develop cross-cultural competence and sensitivity. Understanding local business norms, values, and relationship expectations enables firms to strengthen social and structural ties with channel partners. These relational bonds help reduce conflicts, enhance coordination efficiency, and create a collaborative environment that supports long-term performance. Finally, managers should adopt trust-based governance mechanisms that complement formal contracts, such as relational norms, mutual dependence, and informal control systems. By embedding trust into governance structures, firms can reduce monitoring costs, manage uncertainty more effectively, and achieve sustainable performance in international sales operations.

CONCLUSION

This study provides strong empirical evidence that relationship marketing plays a pivotal role in building trust and enhancing performance in international sales channels. Drawing on data from 389

respondents engaged in cross-border sales and channel management, the findings clearly demonstrate that relationship marketing practices – such as effective communication, commitment, cooperation, and relational bonding – significantly strengthen trust between international channel partners. Trust, in turn, acts as a key mediating mechanism that translates these relational efforts into improved channel performance, coordination efficiency, and long-term relationship stability. The results reinforce established international marketing and relationship management theories by confirming that trust is not merely an outcome of relational exchanges but a strategic asset that enables firms to manage uncertainty, reduce opportunistic behavior, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in global markets. In the context of increasing globalization, digitalization, and market volatility, the study highlights that firms emphasizing long-term, trust-based relationships outperform those relying solely on transactional approaches. Overall, this research makes a meaningful contribution to the international marketing literature by offering robust empirical validation of the relationship marketing–trust–performance linkage and provides actionable insights for multinational firms seeking to build resilient and high-performing international sales channels.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited by convenience sampling and cross-sectional design, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported data also raises the possibility of response bias. Future research may employ longitudinal data to capture changes in relationship dynamics over time. Cross-country comparative studies could provide deeper insights into cultural and institutional influences on trust building. Additionally, advanced techniques such as structural equation modeling may be used to test complex causal relationships more robustly.

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