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Role of Relationship Marketing in B2B Companies: An Empirical Study on Its Impact on Customer Trust and Long-Term Business Conversion

Hemanth ZB, Dr. M H Sharieff

MBA Scholar, CMS Business School, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Professor of Practice, Faculty of Management Studies, CMS Business School, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University),
Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

ABSTRACT: Relationship marketing (RM) is widely regarded as a cornerstone of sustainable competitive advantage in Business-to-Business (B2B) markets. Yet empirical evidence from emerging markets — particularly India — remains limited, and the precise mechanisms through which RM dimensions translate into long-term business outcomes are not fully understood. This study addresses these gaps by examining how four RM dimensions — communication, service quality, personal interaction, and after-sales support — influence customer trust and, in turn, long-term business conversion in Indian B2B companies. Drawing on the Trust-Commitment Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), Relationship Marketing Theory (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1994), Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), and SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988), a structured questionnaire was administered to 242 B2B professionals across India. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics via descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation, and three-stage multiple linear regression. Results show that personal interaction ($\beta = 0.164$, $p = 0.001$), communication ($\beta = 0.118$, $p = 0.013$), and service quality ($\beta = 0.109$, $p = 0.008$) are significant predictors of customer trust. Customer trust, in turn, is a strong and significant driver of long-term business conversion ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$). Service quality also exhibits a direct effect on conversion ($\beta = 0.106$, $p = 0.028$), confirming a dual pathway — mediated through trust and direct. These findings extend Trust-Commitment Theory into the Indian B2B context and offer actionable guidance for B2B managers seeking to improve client retention and revenue continuity.

KEYWORDS: Relationship marketing, customer trust, long-term business conversion, B2B companies, India, SERVQUAL

I. INTRODUCTION

In B2B markets, competitive advantage increasingly rests not on product features alone but on the quality and durability of inter-firm relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). Relationship marketing (RM) — defined by Berry (1983) as the strategy of attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships — has emerged as the dominant paradigm for B2B growth because it directly addresses the long sales cycles, multi-stakeholder decision-making, and high switching costs that characterise industrial and professional service markets.

Despite the strength of this theoretical consensus, two practical problems persist. First, a substantial proportion of B2B organisations — particularly in India's fast-growing service economy — continue to operate with a transaction-oriented mindset, investing in customer acquisition at the expense of relationship development (Wiersema, 2013). Second, the mechanisms that translate RM activities into durable commercial outcomes remain incompletely understood: most prior studies isolate a single RM dimension, examine satisfaction or loyalty rather than actual business conversion, or draw on samples from Western, developed economies that may not reflect the relational norms of Indian markets (Nath & Mukherjee, 2012).

This study addresses both problems through an integrated empirical model. Four RM dimensions — communication, service quality, personal interaction, and after-sales support — are tested as predictors of customer trust (mediator) and



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long-term business conversion (outcome). The central research question is: Which RM dimensions drive customer trust in Indian B2B contexts, and does that trust mediate the path to long-term business conversion?

The study makes three contributions. First, it provides India-specific, multi-dimensional empirical evidence on RM's role in B2B trust formation — filling a geographic gap in the literature. Second, it introduces long-term business conversion as the primary outcome variable, offering a more commercially grounded metric than the satisfaction or loyalty scores used in prior work. Third, it identifies a dual pathway from RM to business outcomes — both trust-mediated and direct (via service quality) — adding theoretical nuance absent from most single-pathway models.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Four theoretical frameworks jointly underpin this study. Relationship Marketing Theory (Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1994) holds that lasting competitive advantage is built through ongoing, value-generating partnerships with clients, with communication, service quality, personal engagement, and post-sale support identified as core relational investment behaviours. The Trust-Commitment Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) — arguably the most cited framework in B2B relationship research — places trust and commitment as the two central mediators that convert RM activities into cooperative behaviour, lower conflict, and long-term orientation. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains why these relationships persist: both parties continue when the exchange of value is perceived as fair and reciprocal; consistent supplier investment signals commitment and motivates reciprocal loyalty from the buyer. Finally, SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) operationalises how service delivery shapes customer perceptions; its five dimensions — reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles — have been widely adapted in B2B research to explain how quality perceptions build credibility and reduce uncertainty.

2.2 RM Dimensions and Customer Trust

Communication. Anderson and Narus (1990) established that timely, accurate, and two-way communication is the primary antecedent of inter-firm trust. Sharma et al. (1999) confirmed this in industrial service contexts, finding that consistent communication frequency and content accuracy were the most controllable predictors of client satisfaction and trust. When suppliers proactively share information, clients experience reduced uncertainty — the foundational precondition for trust formation.

Service Quality. Crosby et al. (1990) showed that perceived service quality drives overall relationship quality and purchase intention in B2B services. Rauyruen and Miller (2007) extended this, finding that the service quality dimension of relationship quality predicts B2B loyalty through a trust pathway. From SERVQUAL, the reliability and assurance sub-dimensions are especially relevant to B2B trust, as clients systematically evaluate whether suppliers deliver what they promise.

Personal Interaction. Crosby et al. (1990) demonstrated that salesperson-client interaction quality is one of the primary drivers of relationship quality and continuance intention. Wiersema (2013) argued that in an era of digital tools, human-level engagement retains a trust-building potency that automated communication channels cannot replicate. Nath and Mukherjee (2012) confirmed that relational bonding — which operationalises personal interaction — has both a direct effect on loyalty and a trust-mediated indirect effect.

After-Sales Support. Saccani et al. (2007) found that post-transaction service activities — technical assistance, complaint resolution, warranties — have strong positive effects on satisfaction and retention in industrial markets. Ulaga and Eggert (2006) identified service support as among the most underused but effective drivers of long-term B2B relationship commitment.

Hypotheses H1a–H1d: Communication (H1a), service quality (H1b), personal interaction (H1c), and after-sales support (H1d) each have a significant positive effect on customer trust.

2.3 Customer Trust and Long-Term Business Conversion

Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Trust-Commitment Theory positions trust as the central mechanism through which RM activities translate into sustained commercial relationships. Ganesan (1994) found that trust — particularly in a partner's reliability and benevolence — is the key determinant of long-term buyer orientation. Palmatier et al.'s (2006)



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meta-analysis confirmed trust as the single most powerful mediator between RM activities and outcomes including loyalty, retention, and financial performance. Dwyer et al. (1987) established that transition from early exploration to committed partnership requires trust as a necessary precondition.

Hypothesis H2: Customer trust has a significant positive effect on long-term business conversion.

Beyond the trust pathway, RM dimensions may also directly influence conversion through the structural dependencies and habitual engagement patterns that consistent service delivery creates (Reinartz et al., 2004) — consistent with Social Exchange Theory's prediction that perceived ongoing value sustains relational behaviour independent of formal trust judgements.

Hypotheses H3a–H3d: Communication (H3a), service quality (H3b), personal interaction (H3c), and after-sales support (H3d) each have a significant positive direct effect on long-term business conversion.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sample

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population was B2B professionals in India — defined as individuals with active experience either managing client accounts or procuring goods and services from suppliers in a business context. Convenience sampling was used to access this population, with the survey link distributed via LinkedIn, professional WhatsApp groups, and email networks. A total of 242 complete, valid responses were collected through Google Forms and imported into IBM SPSS Statistics for analysis. All respondents confirmed active involvement in B2B transactions.

3.2 Measures

A structured, close-ended questionnaire was used. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale anchored at 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). Four independent variables captured the RM dimensions: Communication (COM; 3 items — clarity, timeliness, responsiveness), Service Quality (SQ; 3 items adapted from SERVQUAL — consistency, expectation fulfilment, problem handling), Personal Interaction (PI; 3 items — contact regularity, relationship improvement, needs understanding), and After-Sales Support (AS; 3 items — post-sale support quality, follow-up, issue resolution speed). The mediating variable, Customer Trust (CT), was measured with 4 items reflecting reliability, confidence, honesty, and consistency. The dependent variable, Long-Term Business Conversion (LBC), was captured with 4 items measuring preference for continuation, likelihood of long-term contracts, recommendation, and preference for long-term over short-term engagement. Composite scores for each construct were calculated as the arithmetic mean of the assigned items.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

Five sequential techniques were applied: (1) frequency analysis to profile respondents; (2) descriptive statistics for construct-level summaries; (3) Pearson bivariate correlation to examine pairwise relationships and provide initial evidence for hypothesis testing; (4) three-stage multiple linear regression — Module 1 testing RM dimensions as predictors of Customer Trust (H1a–H1d), Module 2 testing Customer Trust as a predictor of LBC (H2), and Module 3 testing RM dimensions as direct predictors of LBC (H3a–H3d); and (5) a full mediation model (RM dimensions + CT → LBC) to explore the mediating role of trust. The significance threshold throughout is $p < 0.05$, and standardised beta coefficients (β) are reported for comparability across models.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Sample Profile

Of the 242 respondents, 51.2% were aged 18–25 years, 31.4% aged 26–35, 11.2% aged 36–45, and 6.2% aged 46 or above. By role, 48.8% were students or interns with B2B exposure, 26.4% were employees or specialists, 12.4% were in sales or marketing, 5.8% were managers or directors, and 2.5% were business owners or C-level executives. Company size ranged from small (1–50 employees: 47.5%) to medium (22.3%), large enterprise (14.1%), and not



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applicable for students (16.1%). Experience with B2B partners was less than one year for 53.7%, one to three years for 24.8%, four to five years for 13.6%, and more than five years for 7.9%.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

All construct means exceeded the neutral midpoint of 3.0 (Table 1), indicating broadly positive perceptions across all RM dimensions, trust, and business conversion.

Table.1. Descriptive Statistics for Construct Composite Scores (N = 242)

Construct	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Communication (COM_Score)	242	2.33	5.00	3.748	0.527
Service Quality (SQ_Score)	242	2.00	5.00	3.449	0.602
Personal Interaction (PI_Score)	242	2.67	5.00	3.917	0.475
After-Sales Support (AS_Score)	242	2.00	5.00	3.664	0.566
Customer Trust (CT_Score)	242	2.75	5.00	3.788	0.394
Long-Term Bus. Conversion (LBC_Score)	242	2.25	5.00	3.792	0.439

Personal Interaction recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.917$), followed by Long-Term Business Conversion ($M = 3.792$) and Customer Trust ($M = 3.788$). Service Quality showed the lowest mean ($M = 3.449$), indicating the most room for perceived improvement. The near-identical means of Customer Trust and LBC offer initial descriptive support for their theorised positive relationship.

4.3 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation matrix. Customer Trust shows statistically significant positive correlations with all four RM dimensions, providing preliminary evidence for H1a–H1d. Long-Term Business Conversion shows its strongest significant correlation with Customer Trust ($r = 0.246$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with H2. LBC also correlates significantly with Service Quality ($r = 0.157$, $p < 0.05$) and Personal Interaction ($r = 0.128$, $p < 0.05$), but not significantly with Communication or After-Sales Support as direct predictors.

Table.2. Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 242)

Construct	COM	SQ	PI	AS	CT	LBC
Communication (COM)	1.000	0.238*	0.091	0.159*	0.231*	0.085
Service Quality (SQ)	0.238*	1.000	0.014	0.076	0.215*	0.157*
Personal Interaction (PI)	0.091	0.014	1.000	0.154*	0.229*	0.128*
After-Sales Support (AS)	0.159*	0.076	0.154*	1.000	0.165*	0.059
Customer Trust (CT)	0.231*	0.215*	0.229*	0.165*	1.000	0.246*
LT Business Conversion (LBC)	0.085	0.157*	0.128*	0.059	0.246*	1.000

* $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

4.4 Regression Analysis

Module 1 — RM Dimensions → Customer Trust (H1a–H1d). The regression model was statistically significant ($F = 9.141$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 13.4% of variance in Customer Trust ($R^2 = 0.134$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.119$). Personal Interaction emerged as the strongest individual predictor ($\beta = 0.164$, $p = 0.001$), followed by Communication ($\beta =$



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0.118, $p = 0.013$) and Service Quality ($\beta = 0.109$, $p = 0.008$). After-Sales Support was positive but non-significant ($\beta = 0.068$, $p = 0.119$). All VIF values were below 2.0, confirming the absence of multicollinearity.

Table.3. Regression Module 1: RM Dimensions → Customer Trust

Predictor	β	t	p	Decision (H1)
Constant	2.078	7.229	< 0.001	—
Communication (H1a)	0.118	2.508	0.013*	Supported
Service Quality (H1b)	0.109	2.678	0.008**	Supported
Personal Interaction (H1c)	0.164	3.222	0.001**	Supported
After-Sales Support (H1d)	0.068	1.564	0.119	Not Supported

Note: $R^2 = 0.134$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.119$, $F = 9.141$, $p < 0.001$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Module 2 — Customer Trust → LBC (H2). The simple regression model was highly significant ($F = 15.395$, $p < 0.001$), with Customer Trust explaining 6.0% of variance in LBC ($R^2 = 0.060$). The standardised beta coefficient was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$), fully supporting H2 and confirming trust as the primary pathway from RM investment to business conversion.

Table.4. Regression Module 2: Customer Trust → Long-Term Business Conversion

Predictor	β	t	p	Decision (H2)
Constant	2.758	10.399	< 0.001	—
Customer Trust (H2)	0.273	3.924	< 0.001***	Supported

Note: $R^2 = 0.060$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.056$, $F = 15.395$, $p < 0.001$. *** $p < 0.001$

Module 3 — RM Dimensions → LBC Direct (H3a–H3d). The collective model was significant ($F = 2.628$, $p = 0.035$, $R^2 = 0.043$), but only Service Quality was a significant individual direct predictor ($\beta = 0.106$, $p = 0.028$), supporting H3b. Communication ($\beta = 0.030$, $p = 0.587$), Personal Interaction ($\beta = 0.110$, $p = 0.066$), and After-Sales Support ($\beta = 0.019$, $p = 0.712$) did not reach significance at the 0.05 threshold.

Table.5. Regression Module 3: RM Dimensions → Long-Term Business Conversion (Direct)

Predictor	β	t	p	Decision (H3)
Constant	2.816	8.377	< 0.001	—
Communication (H3a)	0.030	0.545	0.587	Not Supported
Service Quality (H3b)	0.106	2.212	0.028*	Supported
Personal Interaction (H3c)	0.110	1.846	0.066	Not Supported
After-Sales Support (H3d)	0.019	0.370	0.712	Not Supported

Note: $R^2 = 0.043$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.026$, $F = 2.628$, $p = 0.035$. * $p < 0.05$



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4.5 Hypothesis Summary

Table.6. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Outcomes

Hyp.	Description	Outcome
H1	RM dimensions (collectively) → Customer Trust	Supported (F = 9.141, p < 0.001)
H1a	Communication → Customer Trust	Supported ($\beta = 0.118$, p = 0.013)
H1b	Service Quality → Customer Trust	Supported ($\beta = 0.109$, p = 0.008)
H1c	Personal Interaction → Customer Trust	Supported ($\beta = 0.164$, p = 0.001)
H1d	After-Sales Support → Customer Trust	Not Supported (p = 0.119)
H2	Customer Trust → Long-Term Business Conversion	Supported ($\beta = 0.273$, p < 0.001)
H3	RM dimensions (collectively) → LBC (direct)	Partially Supported (F = 2.628, p = 0.035)
H3a	Communication → LBC (direct)	Not Supported (p = 0.587)
H3b	Service Quality → LBC (direct)	Supported ($\beta = 0.106$, p = 0.028)
H3c	Personal Interaction → LBC (direct)	Not Supported at 0.05 (p = 0.066)
H3d	After-Sales Support → LBC (direct)	Not Supported (p = 0.712)

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Personal Interaction as the Primary Trust Driver

The finding that Personal Interaction is the strongest individual predictor of Customer Trust ($\beta = 0.164$) advances prior literature in an important way. Most early RM research, including Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Anderson and Narus (1990), emphasised communication and shared values as the dominant trust antecedents, with personal interaction treated as a facilitating rather than a primary mechanism. The present findings suggest that, in the Indian B2B context, the quality of direct, person-to-person engagement supersedes formal communication frequency as a trust-builder. This is consistent with India's relationship-oriented business culture, where personal rapport and face-to-face interaction carry significant weight in professional trust formation (Nath & Mukherjee, 2012). The practical implication is consequential: digital communication tools — however efficient — cannot substitute for the trust that grows from genuine human engagement in high-value B2B relationships.

5.2 The Dual Pathway from Service Quality to Business Conversion

Service Quality is the only RM dimension that operates through two pathways — it predicts Customer Trust ($\beta = 0.109$, p = 0.008) and independently predicts Long-Term Business Conversion ($\beta = 0.106$, p = 0.028). This dual-pathway finding extends prior work. Rauyruen and Miller (2007) identified a trust-mediated path from service quality to loyalty; the present study confirms this pathway and reveals an additional direct path, suggesting that consistent, observable service delivery creates both the trust that motivates commitment and the structural dependencies — perceived switching costs, habitual workflows, supplier-specific knowledge — that directly reinforce long-term engagement. This



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aligns with Reinartz et al.'s (2004) CRM process model, which found that relationship maintenance activities create retention through both affective (trust-based) and behavioural (habitual) mechanisms.

5.3 After-Sales Support: A Contextual Limitation

The non-significance of After-Sales Support as a trust predictor ($p = 0.119$) merits careful interpretation. A large proportion of the sample (53.7%) has less than one year of B2B interaction experience and nearly half are students or interns. After-sales trust-building is temporally distributed — its effects accumulate across repeat transactions and multiple post-delivery cycles. Respondents without substantial B2B tenure may not have experienced sufficient after-sales interactions to form strong perceptions of this dimension. This interpretation is consistent with Dwyer et al.'s (1987) relationship stage model, in which after-sales commitment signals become most influential in the expansion and commitment stages, which short-tenure respondents may not yet have reached. Future studies with samples of experienced B2B managers are expected to recover the hypothesised effect.

5.4 Trust as the Central Mediating Variable

The strong result for H2 ($\beta = 0.273$, $p < 0.001$) — the highest individual beta in the study — confirms Morgan and Hunt's (1994) proposition that trust is the central mechanism through which RM activities generate commercial outcomes. The full mediation model (RM dimensions + CT → LBC) confirms that once Customer Trust enters the model, most direct effects of the RM dimensions on LBC become non-significant, with only Service Quality retaining a residual direct effect. This pattern is the classic signature of partial mediation through a dominant mediator. From a practical standpoint, it means that trust is not merely a process variable but the commercially decisive outcome of RM investment: B2B managers who treat trust as a measurable, monitored business metric — rather than an abstract relational quality — will achieve more consistent improvements in long-term revenue retention.

VI. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four theoretical contributions. First, it validates Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Trust-Commitment Theory in an Indian B2B setting, extending empirical coverage of the theory from Western markets into an important emerging economy context. Second, it identifies Personal Interaction — rather than Communication — as the dominant trust driver in the Indian B2B context, contributing a culturally grounded nuance to Western-derived RM models. Third, it confirms a dual pathway from Service Quality to Long-Term Business Conversion — through trust and directly — adding mechanisms that prior single-pathway models did not capture. Fourth, it introduces Long-Term Business Conversion as a primary outcome variable, providing a more commercially grounded and actionable dependent measure than satisfaction or loyalty indices used in most prior B2B RM research.

6.2 Managerial Implications

For B2B practitioners, the results offer three priority directives. First, invest in genuine personal engagement: since personal interaction is the strongest trust predictor, dedicated account management structures — with regular scheduled reviews, personalised client events, and face-to-face touchpoints — should be protected even as digital tools expand. Second, treat service quality as a dual conversion lever: because service quality both builds trust and directly drives business conversion, quality assurance systems, SLA monitoring, and client-visible performance reporting yield returns on two dimensions simultaneously. Third, measure and manage trust explicitly: given that trust ($\beta = 0.273$) is the strongest predictor of Long-Term Business Conversion, B2B managers should implement regular relationship health assessments — structured as account-level trust scorecards — and use them as leading indicators of future revenue risk and retention potential.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The convenience sample skews toward early-career and student respondents, limiting the observability of after-sales effects. Internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) values are below conventional thresholds — a design choice reflecting deliberately varied items, but one that warrants replication with validated, multi-item scales. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causal directionality. Future research should: (1) use longitudinal designs to track trust and conversion dynamics across relationship stages; (2) employ Structural Equation Modelling (AMOS or SmartPLS) to test full mediation models with latent variable precision; (3) draw samples from experienced B2B managers across specific industries to test whether RM dimension weights vary by



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sector; and (4) investigate how AI-augmented CRM tools and digital engagement platforms moderate the personal interaction–trust relationship as B2B communication increasingly migrates online.

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