

Exploring the role of relationship management and relationship quality in B2B: empirical insights and future research directions

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Abstract

Purpose – In the past few decades, relationship management (RM) theory and RM strategies in business-to-business (B2B) contexts have evolved tremendously, driven by constant innovation. Hence, the purpose of this study is to understand the trends and evolution of RM and relationship quality (RQ) in B2B contexts and empirical insights on RM and RQ in B2B, which in turn would provide insights into trends and future research directions.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded on the industrial marketing and purchasing group, this study adopts a critical systematic literature review to provide a comprehensive analysis of the past, current and future trends in empirical research insights of RM and RQ in B2B markets.

Findings – This study provides some novel insights into RM in B2B context by using a multidimensional approach to RM and RQ and analyzing prior marketing research from three perspectives: the evolution of RM and RQ in B2B context; prior empirical research; and practical business insights. Overall, these perspectives inform the development of an evolving side of RQ in B2B contexts, leading to some predictions regarding the future of RM in B2B markets.

Practical implications – The exploratory results of this study shed light on the key factors that drive RQ and the importance of RM in B2B markets in the digital age where customers still long for human interaction regardless of the prevalence of advanced technology.

Originality/value – In the wake of advanced technologies and particularly, B2B companies had to turn to virtual platforms and embrace digital transformation to establish and manage their customer relationships. Yet, managing relationships via digital channels has its own challenges for both B2B practitioners and scholars. This indicates that there is still a huge need for attuned RM strategies that align with the changing environments – mainly driven by technological advancement – in B2B markets.

Keywords Advanced technology, Business-to-business marketing, Empirical insights, Relationship management, Relationship marketing, Relationship quality, Systematic literature review

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The move toward advanced technology and digital transformation has been a focus for businesses in recent years (Alalwan *et al.*, 2021; Quach *et al.*, 2022). In particular, evidence shows that business-to-business (B2B) firms that leverage digital transformation can drive shareholder returns by 8% and increase revenue growth by five times compared to their counterparts (Caitlin *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, research on interfirm relationships has also received heightened attention among B2B marketing scholars (Casidy and Nyadzayo, 2019; Chang *et al.*, 2021; Doney and Cannon, 1997; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Tzempelikos, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). This is because the nature of any exchange that occurs between B2B partners

(e.g. customer and supplier firms) is particularly germane to explaining factors that influence B2B firm performance (Kingshott *et al.*, 2020; Luu *et al.*, 2018).

Digital technologies can enhance relationships by providing highly personalized experiences and facilitating rich information exchange between buyer and seller (Parise *et al.*, 2016), thereby enhancing trust among customers (Pandey *et al.*, 2020). In fact, digital transformation has been dubbed the “future of B2B customer experience,” as it can help B2B firms to provide consistent and high-quality customer interactions and forge meaningful relationships (Morgan, 2020). However, there is limited research on B2B relationship management (RM) in the digital era (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020;

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Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
38/5 (2023) 1055–1086
© Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0885-8624]
[DOI 10.1108/JBIM-05-2021-0267]

The authors are immensely grateful to the Editor(s) and the two anonymous Reviewers for their invaluable and constructive feedback.

Received 25 May 2021
Revised 10 December 2021
31 March 2022
24 June 2022
Accepted 1 July 2022

Shree *et al.*, 2021). In addition, the challenges and complexities of managing B2B relationships via digital tools are well documented in prior literature, as most B2B firms have not mastered the digital capabilities needed to operationalize customer-centricity (Caitlin *et al.*, 2016; Hofacker *et al.*, 2020; Pandey *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2020; Shree *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, given the continued digital transformation, which also requires strong culture and commitment from the firm as well as a customer mindset shift, B2B businesses should pay close attention to the management and quality of relationships when interacting with customers via digital platforms.

Relationship quality (RQ) signifies a construct reflecting the strength of inter-organizational relationships that stimulate strong and more intimate partnerships, which increase the effectiveness of the network of organizations (Griffith and Harvey, 2001). Generally, the relationship marketing literature views the quality of the relationship between exchange partners as an important factor in the permanence and strength of this relationship (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002). More importantly, RQ has also been linked to relationship performance and business performance (Palmatier *et al.*, 2007). According to Ivens and Pardo (2007), RQ is a central indicator of long-term success in key account management, that is, the organizational manifestation of business relationships. Therefore, a strong link exists between relationship marketing and RQ, as high RQ can enhance relationship-building effectiveness (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995a, 1995b). Thus, RQ and relationship marketing result in fostering long-term and more stable exchanges, thereby benefitting both parties. As a result, RQ has to be posited as an antecedent of relationship continuity (Lai *et al.*, 2008; Wong *et al.*, 2007). In addition, RM has been known to create solid relationships between customers and service providers that improve customer loyalty, customer satisfaction and business revenues (Evans and Laskin, 1994; Quach *et al.*, 2020; Steinhoff *et al.*, 2019; Thaichon *et al.*, 2019). Palmatier *et al.* (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of factors influencing the effectiveness of RM and also considered RM as an antecedent of RQ. As illustrated in Table 1, RQ is the function of relationship marketing as it embeds itself within RM.

However, the majority of studies and concepts in RQ have been conducted and empirically tested first in the business-to-customer (B2C) context. Eventually, the past few decades have witnessed a surge in research focusing on RQ in the B2B context, and research on buyer–seller relationships remains predominant

in the B2B context than in B2C (Casidy and Nyadzayo, 2019; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Jiang *et al.*, 2016). RQ is more vital in B2B markets where relationships between clients and service providers could take longer to establish, last longer, reveal high switching costs and have a strong impact on outcomes when compared to B2C contexts (Zhang *et al.*, 2014).

The recent push toward digital transformation is because of multiple factors such as cost-saving and reducing cycle times (Sheth, 2020), enhancing stakeholders’ value creation (Mu *et al.*, 2022), implementing multichannel or omni-channel strategies (Thaichon *et al.*, 2020), crisis and pandemic management (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Obal and Gao, 2020) and introducing new technologies (Alalwan *et al.*, 2021; Quach *et al.*, 2022). Among others, B2B scholars have focused on value co-creation or co-creation in the B2B context (Vargo and Lusch, 2011) and B2B social media (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016; Chakravarty *et al.*, 2014). However, B2B relationships remain a central topic that will continue to evolve given the dynamic nature of relationships and everchanging business environments. For instance, B2B companies have had to turn to virtual platforms and embrace digital transformation to establish and manage their customer relationships and sustain their hard-won reputation. Yet, managing relationships via digital channels has their challenges, as companies grapple with understanding the most appropriate dimensions of RQ and RM through virtual platforms. Nevertheless, the understanding of RQ (Antwi, 2021) and RM (Gamage *et al.*, 2021; Le *et al.*, 2021) through virtual platforms and digital transformation is mainly from the B2C perspective. Hence, there is a demand for exploring the RQ and RM through virtual platforms and digital transformation from the B2B perspective.

In mapping the future of B2B marketing theory, Cortez and Johnston (2017, p. 97) also concluded and emphasized that “Understanding how to link customer relationships and long-term profitability will contribute to closing the gap between B2B marketers’ challenges and scientific research.” As a result, this study aims to understand the:

- trends and evolution of RQ and RM in B2B contexts; and
- empirical insights on RQ and RM in B2B, which in turn would provide insights into trends and future research directions.

In terms of methodology, this study used a literature review analysis as suggested and done by Robert Palmatier (Palmatier *et al.*, 2018; Thaichon *et al.*, 2018; Quach *et al.*, 2022). First, we

Table 1 The connection between relationship management and relationship quality

Context	RM	RQ
Definition of term	RM is the aspect relevant to establishing, maintaining, enhancing and commercializing relationships with relevant stakeholders (Gummesson, 1994; Peterson, 1995)	RQ is the quality of intangible aspects in a business relationship such as services and communication or social interactions in sales and customer service (Holmlund, 2008)
Connection	RM is a weapon for improving relationship quality dimensions with service provision (Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005) The understanding of interfirm relationship performance between relevant parties and stakeholders is underpinned by RM frameworks (Palmatier <i>et al.</i> , 2006)	RQ dimensions such as loyalty and satisfaction are influenced by RM (Steinhoff <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Thaichon <i>et al.</i> , 2019), while customer satisfaction and commitment serve to significantly contribute to relationship marketing outcomes such as customer loyalty (Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2002) Hence, RQ focuses on the overall nature of the relationship in terms of communication, satisfaction, etc.

collected relevant papers via the Web of Science Core Collection between 1990 and 2021 (i.e. Timespan: all years)(Figure 1) and used the following keywords/topics: (“relationship management” “b2b”) or topic: (“relationship management” “business to business”) or topic: (“relationship management” “business-to-business”) or topic: (“relationship development” “b2b”) or topic: (“relationship development” “business to business”) or topic: (“relationship development” “business-to-business”) or topic: (“relationship quality” “b2b”) or topic: (“relationship quality” “business to business”) or topic: (“relationship quality” “business-to-business”) or topic: (relationship “b2b”) or topic: (relationship “business to business”) or topic: (relationship “business-to-business”) or topic: (“relationship orientation” “b2b”) or topic: (“relationship orientation” “business to business”) or topic: (“relationship orientation” “business-to-business”) or topic: (“intention to purchase” “b2b”) or topic: (“intention to purchase” “business to business”) or topic: (“intention to purchase” “business-to-business”) or topic: (satisfaction “b2b”) or topic: (satisfaction “business to business”) or topic: (satisfaction “business-to-business”) or topic: (commitment “b2b”) or topic: (commitment “business to business”) or topic: (commitment “business-to-business”) or topic: (loyalty “b2b” “business to business” “business-to-business”).

We have included all relevant articles within the business or management categories databases. Thus, we refined our search by focusing on the Web of Science categories: (business or management) and Web of Science categories: (business or management) with the following Indexes: Sci-expanded, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH, BKCI-S, BKCI-SSH, ESCI, CCR-EXPANDED and IC.

To obtain texts relevant to this research, we first classified themes for research as (1) “Evolution of RQ and RM,” (2) “Empirical studies of RQ and RM” and (3) “Digitization

impacts on RQ and RM.” The searches were limited to full-texts in the English language. During the search, the abstracts were carefully read, and only papers relating to RM and RQ were selected by applying the following criteria:

- The article pertains to RM and RQ in B2B contexts. Specifically, the empirical research in B2B in relation to RQ, digitalization impacts on RQ and theoretical papers on RQ were explored.
- The article focuses on RQ dimensions (trust, satisfaction and commitment) and themes like digitalization, particularly keywords such as AI, big data analytics, e-services and ICT impacts that influence RM were also highlighted.

For the purpose of this article, we defined the relationship constructs that constituted our literature review’s keywords in Table 2. Subsequently, the process described above led to the selection of 1,095 papers, which were used to facilitate the first stage of our research process, and the selected papers were reviewed with the objective of identifying important topics related to RQ, as discussed next.

2. Evolution of relationship quality and relationship management in business-to-business

Based on the historical overview of trend changes suggested by Palmatier *et al.* (2018) and Quach *et al.* (2020), we have identified four main phases in the evolution of RQ and RM in B2B and the associated key trends: Phase 1 (Pre-2000: Conceptualization of the RQ and RM process in B2B); Phase 2 (2001 to 2009: Exploring the drivers and outcomes of RQ and RM in B2B); Phase 3 (2010 to 2014: Understanding capabilities and value co-creation within B2B); and Phase 4 (2015 to 2021: Digitalization of social media and its implications in B2B) (Table 3).

Figure 1 Evolution of relationship management in business-to-business

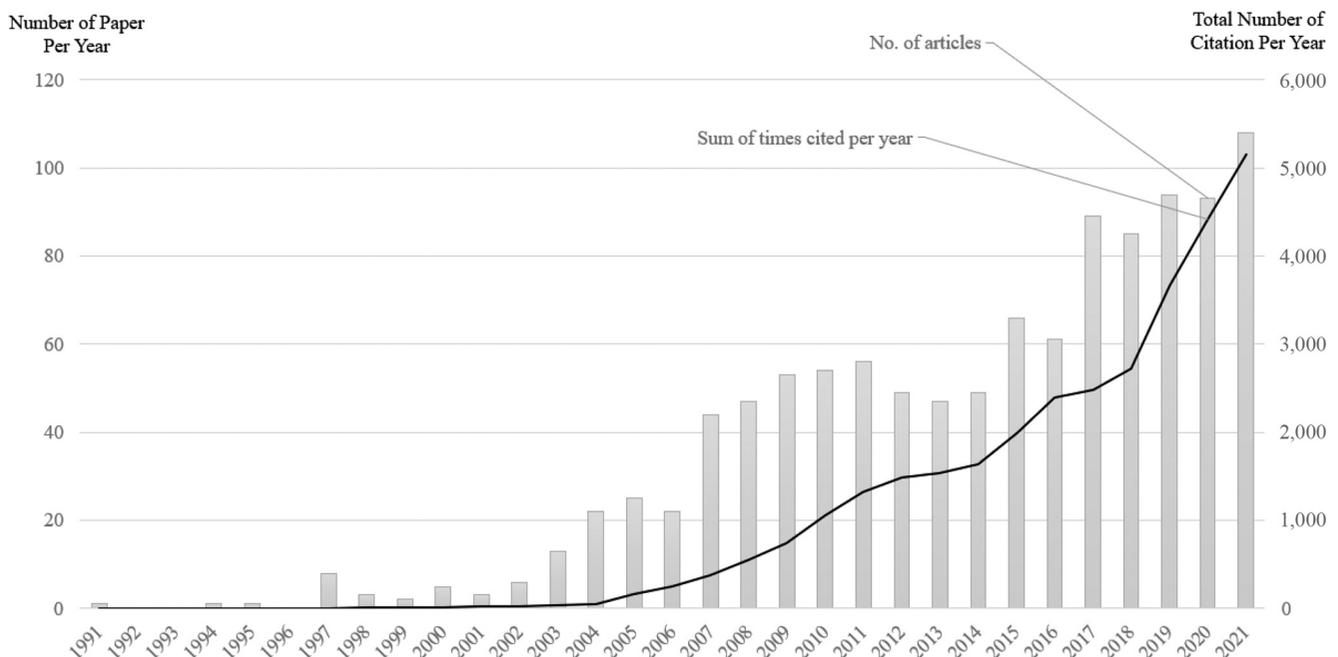


Table 2 Definitions of key constructs

Construct	Definitions	Source
Relationship management	Aspects relevant to establishing, maintaining, enhancing and commercializing relationships with relevant stakeholders	Gummesson (1994) and Peterson (1995)
Relationship quality	The quality of intangible aspects in a business relationship such as services and communication or social interactions in sales and customer service	Holmlund (2008)
Relationship orientation	The proactive creation, development and maintenance of relationships with relevant stakeholders that would result in mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises at a profit	Panayides (2007)
Trust	A general perception of fairness considering the inputs to a relationship relative to the outcomes received	Yuan <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Ertürk and Vurgun (2015)
Commitment	An implicit or explicit pledge of relational continuity between exchange partners	Dwyer <i>et al.</i> (1987)
Behavioral loyalty	The proportion of buying from a service provider and the tendency to purchase the same brand or product over time	Russell-Bennett (2001) and Thaichon and Jebarajakirthy (2015)
Attitudinal loyalty	A psychological process that drives customers to pay a premium price for a service provider and have them serve as passionate brand advocates	Ferm and Thaichon (2021) and Rundle-Thiele (2005)
Satisfaction	Customer's feelings of joy, fulfilment and delight towards a service provider and its services or products through their overall experience with the company	Thaichon and Quach (2015) and Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> (1996)

Regarding the *number of papers per year*, there has been limited research on RQ and RM before 1997. Phase 1 (Pre-2000) was the foundation era for researchers and B2B businesses in terms of the conceptualization and application of the RQ and RM processes (Filiatrault and Lapierre, 1997; Lapierre *et al.*, 1999). Researchers started to pay more attention to RQ and RM from 1997 to 2003. The number of papers increased significantly between 2003 and 2005 and again between 2007 and 2011 (Phase 2) on account of rising interest in exploring the drivers and outcomes of RQ and RM such as building on-going relationships with key stakeholders (Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). The number of articles remained stable in 2012 (Phase 3) and started to grow again from 2015 (Phase 4) to 2021. These changes reflect the new trends in the digitalization of social media and their implications (Chakravarty *et al.*, 2014), as well as co-creation in B2B (Franklin and Marshall, 2019).

Regarding the *total number of citations per year*, Figure 1 indicates that there has been a slight increase in the number of citations in the pre-2000 period followed by rapid development between 2001 and 2009. In particular, the first sign of growth in RQ and RM's citation number was from 2004. It became stable between 2007 and 2011 and peaked in 2012. The number of citations swiftly increased from 2014 to 2016 and again from 2018 to 2021.

The same approach was also taken by other studies published by Palmatier such as Quach *et al.* (2020), Thaichon *et al.* (2018) and Arli *et al.* (2018). Each phase is characterized by key trends and disruptions recognized during the period. Besides, it can be observed from Figure 1 that the research in RM in B2B settings has received more attention and significant shifts are manifest around 2004, 2007, 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2021. The next sections discuss each of the main periods in the evolution of RM in B2B.

2.1 Pre-2000: conceptualization of the relationship quality and relationship management process in business-to-business

The two key trends during the pre-2000 were around understanding the benefits of RQ and RM in B2B, as well as the

conceptualization and application of the RM process in B2B. To start with, there were not many studies around RM in B2B before the 1990s, as the concept of the RM was not clear and well-established. Although there were numerous frameworks and models that have contributed to the understanding of interfirm relationships in business markets (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1990; Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Frazier, 1983; Hallen *et al.*, 1991), prior evidence strongly suggests that researchers in the 1990s focused on exploring and understanding more the benefits of RQ and RM in B2B. This also included the business networks and dyadic business relationships among supplier business units, customer business units and firms within business networks (Anderson *et al.*, 1994).

On one hand, there was no clear and commonly accepted definition of RQ and RM in the 1990s. Hence, some significant efforts need to be spent on defining and understanding RM in B2B (Evans and Laskin, 1994). Nevertheless, researchers have gained perspective and light on the topic, and subsequently, marketing relationships have evolved over time (Keep *et al.*, 1998). A key theoretical framework that has helped to drive studies to understand the concept of relationships during this period was the social exchange theory (SET). The SET helps to highlight the rewards of close and long-term relationships (Gundlach and Murphy, 1993). It involves the active involvement and participation of the business client, which was critical for the expansion of healthy long-term relationships and professional links (Chang *et al.*, 2012). In fact, scholars began to explore the conceptualization and application of the RM process in B2B contexts (Filiatrault and Lapierre, 1997; Lapierre *et al.*, 1999). Others searched for relevant concepts such as satisfaction, expectations, service partnerships, empowering employees, perceived value, repurchase intentions, loyalty and post-purchase evaluation processes (Evans and Laskin, 1994). Nevertheless, the concept of RM has gained acceptance as a valuable tool for B2B firms (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Lapierre *et al.*, 1999). Prior studies have divided their attention to specific relevant concepts to RM in B2B focusing on the benefits, antecedents and business practices. For example, perceived value (Patterson and Spreng, 1997), customer satisfaction (Patterson *et al.*,

Table 3 Evolution of relationship quality and relationship management in business-to-business contexts

Era	Key trends	Key insights	Illustrative articles
Pre-2000: Conceptualization of the RQ and RM process in B2B	Conceptualization and application of relationship marketing process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers were concentrating on the conceptualization and application of relationship marketing process in B2B (Filiatrault and Lapierre, 1997) • Many looked for relevant concepts such as satisfaction, expectations, service partnerships, empowering employees, perceived value, repurchase intentions, loyalty and post-purchase evaluation processes (Evans and Laskin, 1994) 	Anderson <i>et al.</i> (1994); Filiatrault and Lapierre (1997), Keep <i>et al.</i> (1998) and Lapierre <i>et al.</i> (1999)
	Understanding the benefits of relationship marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no commonly accepted definition of relationship marketing in the 1990s • This triggered investigations on defining relationship marketing and understanding relationship marketing in B2B (Evans and Laskin, 1994) 	
2001 to 2009: Exploring the drivers and outcomes of RQ and RM in B2B	Interrelationships of RQ and its influence on long-term relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a shifting period of relationship marketing research in the B2B context • There was an increased number of studies in interrelationships of RQ and its influence on long-term relationships and survival during this period (Lam <i>et al.</i>, 2004; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006) • There were also efforts in exploring company reputation and its influence on customer behavioral intentions (Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Keh and Xie, 2009) 	Cretu and Brodie (2007); Keh and Xie (2009); Lam <i>et al.</i> (2004) and Ulaga and Eggert (2006) Caceres and Paparoidamis (2007) and Pavlou (2002)
	Trust and its implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research on understanding trust and commitment and the implications in B2B were other research perspectives that emanated from the B2C context (Pavlou, 2002; Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007) 	
2010 to 2014: Understanding capabilities and value co-creation within B2B	Early-stage of co-creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During this period, there was limited understanding and research in terms of value co-creation or co-creation within the B2B context (Vargo and Lusch, 2011) • This led to a new research agenda and business practice in shared resources and co-creation in the following years until present (Chowdhury <i>et al.</i>, 2016) 	Chowdhury <i>et al.</i> (2016); O'cass and Ngo (2012); Powell and Swart (2010) and Vargo and Lusch (2011) Ganesan <i>et al.</i> (2010) Chakravarty <i>et al.</i> (2014); Janita and Miranda (2013) and Jussila <i>et al.</i> (2014)
	Commitment and its implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment and its implications were another obvious research area that gained traction (Ganesan <i>et al.</i>, 2010) 	
2015 to 2021: Digitalization of social media and its implications in B2B	Early-stage of the internet-based platforms and social media use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Another early development was the internet-based B2B platforms (Chakravarty <i>et al.</i>, 2014) and social media usage in B2B contexts (Jussila <i>et al.</i>, 2014) 	
	Digitalization of social media and its implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses were starting to investing and adopting the fast-moving new trend of digitalization, particularly social media (Pagani and Pardo, 2017) • It led to increased research that explored the factors that influence a company's decision to adopt new technologies • This including external factors, organizational factors, characteristics of technology and relationships (Asare <i>et al.</i>, 2016) 	Asare <i>et al.</i> (2016); Gregory <i>et al.</i> (2019); Iankova <i>et al.</i> (2019), Pagani and Pardo (2017) and Wang <i>et al.</i> (2016) Chowdhury <i>et al.</i> (2016); Jouny-Rivier <i>et al.</i> (2017); Kaski <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Tuan <i>et al.</i> (2019)
	Inter-organizational cooperation and value co-creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The practices and capabilities for collaborative value co-creation were less understood at the start, predominantly, in more and more boundaryless with the inter-organizational cooperation, technology and social media relationships • This led to more studies focusing on the benefits of co-creation until present (Tuan <i>et al.</i>, 2019) 	

1996), trust (Blois, 1999), adaptive behavior (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999) and cultural orientation (Deshpandé and Farley, 1999).

2.2 2001 to 2009: exploring the drivers and outcomes of relationship quality and relationship management in business-to-business

Even though scholars paid more attention to perceived value, satisfaction, commitment and loyalty (Filiatrault and Lapierre, 1997; Lapierre *et al.*, 1999), little was identified about their interrelationships, as the earlier investigation has mostly observed these relationships in B2C contexts (Lam *et al.*, 2004). Yet, many businesses pursue innovative ways to differentiate themselves in buyer–seller relationships (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). As a result, there was an increase in the number of researchers who focused on understanding the drivers and outcomes of RQ and its influence on long-term relationships and survival during the 2001–2009 period (Lam *et al.*, 2004; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006).

Many of these studies examined the antecedents of RQ and customer loyalty in a B2B situation (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007). This was because businesses realized that long-term and strong ongoing relationships with key parties were an important strategy in an intensely competitive business environment during the time (Arnett *et al.*, 2003). For example, this can be attested by previous studies such as (1) the impact of RQ and customer loyalty by Rauyruen and Miller (2007), (2) the impact of organizational complaint handling and its influence on customer loyalty by Homburg and Fürst (2005); (3) the impact of interrelationships of RQ such as value, commitment, satisfaction, trust and its influence to behavioral outcomes by Ulaga and Eggert (2006); (4) the impact of job satisfaction of a company's employees and its influence to customer satisfaction by Homburg and Stock (2004); and (5) the impact of online trust in a B2B context by Shankar *et al.* (2002).

Another research area of focus during this period was customer trust (Pavlou, 2002) or commitment and trust (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007) in B2B. From its origin in SET, trust and commitment are the key concepts in RM study (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Besides, the commitment-trust theory of RM by Morgan and Hunt (1994) helped to theorize that successful RM requires relationship commitment and trust. For instance, a study by Gounaris (2005) investigated the antecedents of trust and commitment and its overall impact on RQ. A few studies also looked at ways to shape a trustworthy trading environment in the online and digital economy (Pavlou, 2002). Likewise, some scholars aimed to discover the effects of trust and commitment among product quality, relationship satisfaction and loyalty (Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007).

During the same period, there were also efforts in exploring corporate reputation and its influence on customer behavioral intentions (Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Keh and Xie, 2009) and brand equity (Lai *et al.*, 2010). Branding research mainly focused on the B2C context at the time. Attention was focused on the impact of brand image and corporate reputation on customers' perceptions of product quality, customer value and customer loyalty in B2B markets (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). Some examined how corporate reputation impacted business

customers' behavioral intentions such as identification, trust and commitment (Keh and Xie, 2009), while others explored the influence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate reputation on brand equity in B2B markets (Lai *et al.*, 2010).

Other studies focused on value strategies (Flint *et al.*, 2002; Palmatier, 2008) and value creation (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). A study by Ulaga and Eggert (2006) concluded that the benefits of relationships show greater potential for differentiation in key supplier relationships than cost considerations. However, little was recognized about the dynamic nature of how to perceive value and its implication on RQ in B2B markets. During this time, businesses started to accept customer value strategies with the intention of growing profits and guaranteeing long-term survival (Flint *et al.*, 2002). Zhang *et al.* (2021) examined how relative contractual and relational governances impact sellers' value appropriation via buyer's trust, perceived justice and opportunism in the context of B2B relationships. Hence, these were the drivers behind the concept of value in the B2B context.

2.3 2010 to 2014: understanding capabilities and value co-creation within business-to-business

Research agrees that shared resources between suppliers' and buyers' firms occasionally could lead to stronger competitive advantages and long-term relationships between supplier and buyer (Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Yet, there was a significant dearth of research regarding learning capabilities and value co-creation between business partners (Cheung *et al.*, 2010). Besides, there were also inadequate understanding and research on value co-creation or co-creation within the B2B setting (Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Overall, it was partly because several studies have been using SET and commitment-trust theory to explain their research until this period. The year 2010 then emerged as a period that saw the literature and business strategy addressing the concept of value co-creation which was derived from service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Customers not only were passive receivers of value but also involved in the co-production of value.

This update led to a new research agenda and business practice in shared resources and co-creation in the following years until the present (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2016; O'Cass and Ngo, 2012; Powell and Swart, 2010). Among the first group of researchers, Vargo and Lusch (2011) then explored the concept of value creation and co-creation in the B2B context. This research stream helped businesses and investigators to better understand and manage the dissemination and co-creation of resources in and between firms.

Shortly after, there was a snowballing number of studies that sought to understand the implications of relationship value (Biggemann and Buttle, 2012) and value creation in business relationships (O'Cass and Ngo, 2012). Previous studies often argue that value creation, usage, purchasing and marketing were intertwined processes (Grönroos, 2011). Simultaneously, few studies were aimed at examining to what extent is the creation of superior performance, relationship and co-creation value driven by customer orientation, market orientation, marketing capabilities and product innovation (O'Cass and Ngo, 2012). Others explored the relationship between

customer orientation, value creation and relationship development with customers (Singh and Koshy, 2011).

Another apparent research area of focus was “commitment” and its implications on business outcomes (Ganesan *et al.*, 2010). During that period, more focus was on customer commitment in the B2C context than in B2B. This led to a call for studies on B2B customer commitment. Hence, many studies examined how RQ impacts the links between customer commitment, loyalty and other relevant constructs. For instance, (1) commitment, trust, product quality, attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Čater and Čater, 2010); (2) commitment and firm buyers’ intentions to switch suppliers (Ganesan *et al.*, 2010); and (3) service quality, service differentiation, trust and commitment (Chenet *et al.*, 2010).

Studies on commitment were strongly linked to trust and trust in B2B RM (Chang *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, during this period, trust has become an important factor for companies to achieve from the B2B relationship perspective (Finch *et al.*, 2010). This business practice, in turn, led to more demand for research on trust and its implications in a B2B context. For example, this included understanding (i) conflict handling typologies and their impact on commitment and trust in a B2B context and outsourcing relationship (Ndubisi, 2011); (ii) affective trust and cognitive trust and their effects on business relationship outcomes (Dowell *et al.*, 2015); and (iii) the effects of customer equity drivers on customer loyalty via customer trust (Ramaseshan *et al.*, 2013).

Business customer loyalty or intention to continue is also an ultimate outcome from the business perspective and a relevant aspect of commitment and trust. Once again, this creates a trend in understanding what breaks trust in a customer–supplier relationship and how to repair it (Laequddin and Sardana, 2010). At the same time, research agender on how to maintain the positive outcome of the relationship between service performance, service quality and loyalty intentions (Briggs and Grisaffe, 2010), as well as to increase competitive offerings and future purchase expansion (Scheer *et al.*, 2010).

Studies investigated the impacts of customer relationship management (CRM) practices on firm performance and customer satisfaction and in B2B marketplaces were also relevant during the period (Geigenmüller *et al.*, 2012a, 2012b). On the other hand, researchers continue to explore the relevant concepts to business reputation such as the perception of characteristics of inter-firm partnerships (Money *et al.*, 2010), CSR and brand performance (Lai *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, this led to a more focus on industry competitive dynamics and customers’ relational orientation (Briggs and Grisaffe, 2010).

Another early development was the internet-based B2B platforms (Chakravarty *et al.*, 2014), electronic B2B markets (Janita and Miranda, 2013) and B2B social media usage (Jussila *et al.*, 2014). During this time, there was a consensus and a mutual argument in B2B firms that social media is only useful in the B2C sector. Similarly, research on social media usage in the B2B division gained limited attention in the literature (Jussila *et al.*, 2014). For a while, scholars had to wait a few more years for the electronic B2B market and social media research to gain traction and become accepted. However, there were a few studies in this research stream that are notable. For example, Janita and Miranda (2013) investigated the influence of B2B e-marketplace’s image,

satisfaction, quality and value on business customer loyalty. This was an exception despite the early development of internet-based B2B platforms and social media usage in B2B. Eventually, this research stream continued to be a major trend in the next period and beyond.

2.4 2015 to 2021: digitalization of social media and its implications in business-to-business

This research period was an extension of the early development of internet-based B2B platforms and B2B social media in the previous period (Chakravarty *et al.*, 2014). This emerged as the true era of social media networks, as it created substantial changes and opportunities for business relationship development (Guesalaga, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2016). The fact that there was an earlier shortage of research in this area was not a long-term issue, as studies and business practices quickly caught up. Social media has not only dramatically changed how business customers and sellers interact but also increased business customers’ involvement through social media and would positively influence company performance (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, there was an early acknowledgment that social media can advantage B2B sales management and personal selling (Guesalaga, 2016). Hence, scholars have looked at the pace of social media networks’ development and their impact on competitive advantage (Quinton and Wilson, 2016).

Despite the trend emerging from B2C markets (Pagani and Pardo, 2017), B2B firms started to invest and rapidly adopted this fast-moving new trend of digitalization of social media. Later, it led to some significant demand to explore constructs that impact a firm’s decision to adopt B2B technologies, such as the characteristics of technology, external factors, organizational factors and relationships (Asare *et al.*, 2016). This was also part of extending the literature on sales technology as businesses adopted social media as a foundation for the incorporation of buyer and seller interactions (Ogilvie *et al.*, 2018).

This new way of media communication also impacted satisfaction in B2B relationships in a positive way. Interestingly, a study by Murphy and Sashi (2018) indicated that digital communication has a positive influence on dyadic contact, rationality and reciprocal feedback, however not as strong a positive influence with social interaction (Murphy and Sashi, 2018). The evidence also shows that e-commerce marketing capabilities would also upsurge a business’s communication efficiency, degree of distribution and company performance (Gregory *et al.*, 2019). Some studies also observed the use of social media by B2B salespeople to support their job functions and attitude toward social media usefulness with positive outcomes (Iankova *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, social media and social media applications have become widely used as channels to communicate with business customers and other stakeholders (Wang *et al.*, 2016).

Another relevant research focus was trust (Ashnai *et al.*, 2016; McKnight *et al.*, 2017) and trust with co-creation (Franklin and Marshall, 2019). For example, Ashnai *et al.* (2016) considered the role of trust in B2B relationships and have explored them at two different levels of operation: the inter-organizational and inter-personal levels. Research further shows that fruitful B2B data exchanges can benefit companies

to advance their operational practices, competitive advantage and inter-organizational cooperation (McKnight *et al.*, 2017). Subsequently, this led to research demand in co-creation and trust (Franklin and Marshall, 2019), as well as co-creation and commitment in B2B relationships (Jouny-Rivier *et al.*, 2017).

By the middle of this period, the paradigm of co-creation or value co-creation in business marketplaces became well-established in the marketing literature (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2016). Yet, the practices and capabilities for collaborative value co-creation were still not clear in B2B contexts, particularly in increasingly boundaryless inter-organizational cooperation, technology and social media relationships. This led to more studies seeking to understand the benefits and implications of co-creation until the 2021 period. For example, Tuan *et al.* (2019) paired CSR with value co-creation in a company's sustainable growth. Jouny-Rivier *et al.* (2017) investigated the aspects that impact organizations' commitment to co-create new services and products with business clients. Also, Kaski *et al.* (2018) explored the bond creation of new customer relationships and engaging customers via solution co-creation and customer-engaging collaboration, while others focused on the dark side of value co-creation in B2B contexts (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2016).

Apart from the aforementioned key trends, there have been numerous studies that continue to examine and offer ways of improving the overall RQ. For example, scholars explored the key success factors of branding such as customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in a B2B context (Elsäßer and Wirtz, 2017); the impacts of buyer–seller relationship orientation on sales process adaptation (Viio and Grönroos, 2016). Finally, research focused on the differential effectiveness of RM strategies across relationship states of commitment, trust, dependence and relational norms (Zhang *et al.*, 2016).

3. Empirical insights on relationship management in business-to-business

Table 4 presents the areas that have received significant attention among empirical studies of B2B RM, namely, B2B RQ, interactions related to RQ, the development of relationships based on firms' attributes, product/service quality and technological influences on RQ.

3.1 Factors that affect relationship quality in business-to-business

In mature B2B markets, relationship maintenance is imperative for firms seeking to increase their market share and profits (Chang *et al.*, 2012). This is because B2B relationships offer opportunities for firms to create competitive advantages and achieve superior results (Ulaga, 2003). For example, such relationships provide opportunities to build long-term relationships with customers, which is the essence of B2B marketing, and improving business relationships can lead to improvements in organizational performance (Vieira *et al.*, 2014). These relational efforts are commonly referred to as the behaviors and actions taken by business partners to develop and enhance mutually beneficial interactions (Grönroos, 2000).

Researchers have investigated these long-term relationships from both sides. For example, Ng (2012) explored the factors

that contribute to the successful development of supplier–distributor relationships using five dimensions of B2B relationships: time, structure, processes, substance and function and value. Moreover, there is a large body of literature that has investigated the various constructs that influence RM, such as trust, commitment and satisfaction, as well as a higher-order combination of those constructs, that is, RQ (Athanasopoulou, 2009). It has been found that, in a B2B context, RQ can develop from a buyer's perspective and that the degree to which a buyer is satisfied with an overall B2B relationship over time can be influenced by product quality; service quality; prices paid for value received; the degree to which the B2B relationship functions as a partnership (Huntley, 2006); and other factors. Thus, RQ is a key construct in the B2B relationship paradigm, and a large body of research has studied this construct in different B2B settings (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2008). Empirical studies have explored how these factors influence B2B RQ in particular.

RQ is a multidimensional higher-order construct that is primarily constituted by the factors listed above: trust, commitment and satisfaction. According to Gestalt theory, these three factors overlap in certain service contexts, for example, the banking industry (Theron *et al.*, 2013). Firms work to satisfy customers, as each interaction contributes to building stable, long-term relationships and preventing customers from switching to other businesses; these dedication-based relationships are derived from the trust (Chang *et al.*, 2012). For example, as Crosby *et al.* (1990) noted, a high RQ can ensure a lasting bond because customers are confident that a service provider will continue to meet and exceed their expectations (and will continually provide relationship satisfaction) and that the provider will not knowingly distort information or otherwise subvert the customer's interests (and will maintain trustworthiness).

Trust is, therefore, a key construct in the development and management of long-term marketing relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). To clarify, trust refers to the confidence that exists between two exchange partners that the other party is reliable and will act with integrity (Heffernan *et al.*, 2008; Macintosh, 2009). Indeed, Doney and Cannon (1997) conceptualized trust as a company's reputation and level of caring, as recognized by a customer, which includes the business's objective reputation and its psychological care for customers. This notion of security-based confidence impacts investment in business relationships (Akrouf *et al.*, 2016) and, through communication, relationship performance in the B2B context (Yeh, 2005). High levels of trust and relationship satisfaction are, therefore, associated with high levels of customer retention and organizational profitability (Wong and Sohal, 2002).

Similarly, commitment is an established determinant of RQ. Commitment refers to the completion of requirements for long-term relationship maintenance (Geyskens *et al.*, 1996). According to Ndubisi (2006), commitment is a central expectation, or norm, within business relationships and is essential to the creation and preservation of marketing relationships specifically (Lacey *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, it indicates a willingness to continue a relationship and serves to stabilize behavior over time; at its core are a long-term view of a particular relationship and a desire to make short-term

Table 4 Empirical insights on relationship management in business-to-business contexts

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
B2B RQ, drivers and dimensions Influence of trust and relational embeddedness	TAM model and trust theory	The sample included 284 buyers and sellers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived ease of use positively influences perceived usefulness of e-marketplaces Perceived ease of use also impacts user trust of e-marketplaces through perceived usefulness and relational embeddedness also leads to enhanced trust in e-marketplace providers Trust and relational embeddedness also impact relationship performance directly The importance of the Affective Trust Scale (ATS) is validated The affective aspects of trust support the reliability and validity of the measure 	Chien et al. (2012)
Influence of affective and security-based trust		The sample included purchasing managers of enterprises of B2B sectors (included qualitative and quantitative surveys)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study confirmed that trust, satisfaction and commitment dimensions are key drivers of long-term relationship building B2B banking clients participating in this study appeared to regroup individual dimensions, in a heuristic fashion, to form new dimensions that influenced their attitude towards staying in a B2B relationship Also, it was observed that the success of the relationship depends on exchange partners It is observed that dimensions such as: (1) relationship policies and practices, (2) relationship commitment, (3) trust in the relationship, (4) mutual cooperation and (5) relationship satisfaction constitute the relational performance, and these, in turn, influence customer loyalty The importance of RQ in increasing customer loyalty was supported Trust, commitment and satisfaction which are core dimensions of RQ influenced customer loyalty Commitment and trust are related in such a way that as customer's affective commitment in the relationship increases, customer binding to the relationship will become stronger Similarly, when customers' perceived quality increases, clients' trust in the service provider will also increase The continuity of the cooperative electronic-based relationships depends on resource trust and relationship commitment Because communication and trust are related to each other, they also impact the relationship performance The effective relationship-building dimensions are non-deception and fulfillment The positive influence of RQ on buyers, repurchase intentions and loyalty is also revealed RQ dimensions included cooperation, adaptation and atmosphere RQ is found to have a positive impact on service quality Key RQ drivers include interaction and benevolence Relationship between RQ, loyalty and willingness-to-pay premium price is mediated by relationship value 	Akrout et al. (2016)
Influence of trust, satisfaction and commitment on maintaining a long-term relationship	Gestalt theory	The survey involved 238 firms in the financial services industry		Theron et al. (2013)
Relationship performance dimensions (RELPERF)		The sample included 400 purchasing managers working in B2B e-marketplaces		Lages et al. (2008)
Business customer loyalty and switching costs, RQ		The sample included 151 hotel managers of one to five-star hotels in Malaysia		Abdul-Rahman and Kamarulizaman (2012)
Impact of trust and commitment on customer intention		The sample consists of 280 firms in Athens		Gounaris (2005)
Resource dependence, trust and relationship commitment		The sample included 851 raw material and spare parts suppliers		Yeh, 2005
Relationship building dimensions in B2B		Survey data was collected from 269 firms in Egypt		Agag (2019)
Cooperation, adaptation and atmosphere	IMP interaction model	The sample includes 98 senior government engineers		Woo and Ennew (2004)
Interaction and benevolence as RQ drivers	RM theory	The sample included 324 respondents who use professional service firms		Casidy and Nyadzayo (2019)

(continued)

Table 4

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
Co-creation and integrity as an antecedent of trust in B2B		The sample included 455 directors, managers in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mediating role of relationship value is significant regardless of relationship duration In B2B relationships, co-creation is identified as an important antecedent of trust The relationship between co-creation and trust is moderated by buyer's business experience 	Franklin and Marshall (2019)
Communication and satisfaction	Media richness theory and Dennis media synchronicity theory	The sample included 328 firms in commercial printing and graphic design industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal communication has a stronger positive association than digital communication 	Murphy and Sashi (2018)
Influence of image, quality, satisfaction and value on client loyalty		Survey sample includes 197 Spanish e-marketplace selling-side users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> However, satisfaction had no direct impact on client loyalty, but that the e-marketplace's image and user-perceived quality and value are antecedents of its clients' loyalty 	Janita and Miranda (2013)
RQ effects, interactions and relationship development through firm attributes				
Role of RQ (trust, commitment and satisfaction) between relationship value and loyalty		The sample included 260 B2B manufacturing companies three self-governing regions in Spain (Valencia, Catalonia and Madrid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust and commitment relationship is evidenced, but any increase in trust would not necessarily increase loyalty On the other hand, increase in commitment may result in the increase of loyalty and loyalty also relates to satisfaction 	Gil-Saura et al. (2009)
Trust and dependence are mediators in relationship building; customer commitment	Social exchange theory	The sample included 577 firms in the timber distribution industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calculative and affective commitments are influenced by attributes such as customer relationship investment, social bonding, relationship termination costs and customer expertise through dependence and trust The relationship between buyers and sellers are mediated by dependence and trust 	Chang et al. (2012)
RQ as a mediator: Relationship strength and switching costs	RM theory	The survey data was collected from B2B buyers in 42 countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship strength is determined by perceived value, switching costs and satisfaction, trust and affective commitment The relationship between perceived value and relationship strength is mediated by RQ 	Barry et al. (2008)
Trust, commitment and behavioral intentions: Corporate reputation and customer behavioral intentions		The sample included 351 customers of three Chinese B2B service firms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer trust and customer identification is influenced positively by corporate reputation Customer commitment mediates the relationships between trust, identification and behavioral intentions Although identification and commitment of customers are somewhat related, they are distinct concepts in the B2B setting 	Keh and Xie (2009)
Role of RQ on a share of the business		The sample included 948 client firm representatives of a Portuguese hotel chain in a B2B services context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer commitment openly pushes a seller's share of the business 	Vieira et al. (2014)
The mediating role of RQ on actual sales and recommendation intention		A mixed method approach was adopted in this study For the qualitative study, 18 executives from the banking, transportation, education and retailing industries participated in the interviews In quantitative research, a sample of 240 key accounts and decision-makers was used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The model suggests that a vendor's performance is supported by synchronized related developments in customer trust, satisfaction and commitment The planned arbitrating role of RQ comparative to the key relational variables and both actual sales and recommendation intention is confirmed 	Huntley (2006)

(continued)

Table 4

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
Decision-making capability of interfirm contacts	Social network and exchange theory	The sample included 446 B2B exchanges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results show that value generated from interfirm associations results from not only the quality of customer ties but also the amount and decision-making ability of interfirm links among interactive drivers • The examination of customer characteristics as moderators suggests that cumulative contact compactness aids vendors that have customers with great employee turnover rates, whereas building relationships with crucial decision-makers produce the highest earnings between customers that are harder to contact 	Palmatier (2008)
Phases of relationship development		The sample included 20 firms in Quebec, Canada, and 10 in France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lasting associations between an expert consulting firm and its clients is contingent on the proper management of the relationship before, during and after the project encounter • It is vital to develop well-organized relationship management practices for each stage of the model and to monitor carefully how this is done 	Filiatrault and Lapierre (1997)
Socialization episodes in developing the RQ between buyers and sellers		Data was collected at an international trade fair in Portugal and gathered information about visitor-exhibitor interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important opinions comprise socializing behaviors valuable to create strong bonds and commitment that eventually, improves the RQ • Product positioning impact the association between information interchange and RQ, and relationship age influences the relationship among social exchange and relationship quality 	Sarmento et al. (2015)
Rapport building		The sample included 14 salespeople who were involved in the qualitative study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outcomes show that salesperson-initiated activities have little effect on rapport building • Few collaborative movements and related skills required to build rapport and to move a relationship forward • Businesses should pursue to change and progress their rapport building skills towards additional customer-engaging associations 	Kaski et al. (2018)
Meditating role of customer satisfaction	Cognition-affect-behavior model	The sample included 268 firms in the courier service industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The link between customer value and customer loyalty is mediated by customer satisfaction • Customer satisfaction and loyalty have important reciprocal effects on each other 	Lam et al. (2004)
Role of sales process adaptation in B2B		A sample of nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews was used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study demonstrates how the buyer-seller relationship orientation impacts sales process alteration and its effects • The conclusions show that both the buyer and the seller have an influence on sales process adaptation 	Vio and Grönroos (2016)
Development of the relationships between service quality and RQ		Online survey data was collected from a sample of 477 purchasing managers in Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results reveal that product quality impacts both positive and negative calculative commitment • RQ and its “social” dimensions such as cooperation and trust have a significant impact on commitment than its “technical” dimensions such as knowledge transfers and a daptation • Cooperation and trust impact affective and normative commitment, while trust positively impacts calculative commitment 	Čater and Čater (2010)
The service quality's impacts on RQ dimensions (cooperate, adoption and atmosphere)		The sample included 721 customers of the certification industry shows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study examines the impact of service quality dimensions (i.e. process service capability, process interactive quality, potential service capability and result quality) on RQ (cooperate, adoption and atmosphere) • Process service capability significantly influences RQ; result quality has a clear 	Su-xian et al. (2010)

(continued)

Table 4

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
Service quality, trust, commitment and service differentiation in business relationships		A sample of 200 business clients from a large European financial services firm was used	<p>influence on cooperate and adoption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no noteworthy influence on the atmosphere Moreover, process interactive quality and potential service capability have no significant impact on RQ Outcomes showed that service quality had an influence on trust, differentiation and relationship outcomes. Trust was found to drive service differentiation In addition, differentiation influenced commitment, which eventually impacted both satisfaction and word-of-mouth Prominently, it was found that service differentiation is a full mediator on this network of relational variables 	Chenet <i>et al.</i> (2010)
Perceived service quality and RQ		The sample consisted of 68 cultural organizations that promote participation in and enjoyment of culture for the citizens of the province of Castellón (Spain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The outcomes revealed a positive stimulus among the dimensions of RQ: satisfaction, trust and commitment Customers must sense happiness with the service received and have confidence on the supplier to establish commitment Customer satisfaction acts as the key influencer of RQ, generating trust and commitment 	Segarra-Moliner <i>et al.</i> (2013)
RQ (trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality) and the influence on customer loyalty	Composite loyalty approach	The sample included 306 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The four dimensions of RQ (trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality) impact attitudinal loyalty Perceived service quality affects behavioral loyalty However, the results indicate that only the organizational level of RQ influences customer loyalty The employee level of RQ does not play a significant role in influencing B2B customer loyalty 	Rauyruen, and Miller (2007)
RQ and loyalty	Behavioral loyalty, RM	The sample included 408 physicians working in the public healthcare sector in Jordan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The results show that both features of customer loyalty (i.e. behavioral and attitudinal) were affected positively by the overall dimensions of RQ (i.e. trust, satisfaction and commitment) Pharmaceutical companies in Jordan to emphasize on refining the RQ between their medical representatives and physicians, as this improves customer loyalty and future business opportunities 	Almomani (2019)
Role of RQ in service quality and business loyalty	Using Grönroos's conceptualization: Theory of trust and commitment	The sample of 234 advertising agencies' clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study includes the concepts of service/product quality, relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment in a business-loyalty model Results confirm the effect of RQ (and its determinants) on business loyalty The role of relationship satisfaction as a mediating variable between the constructs of service/product quality and business loyalty is observed The link between service personnel and the service environment is found to have a positive influence on RQ 	Caceres and Papatoidamis (2007)
Influence of service personnel and environment Service performance: Role of relational exchange	Social exchange theory	An empirical study with a sample of 295 retailing customers in China The survey sample includes 420 3PL service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service performance engenders both social (i.e. trust) and economic (i.e. value) relationship outcomes and, in turn, the outcomes impact customer loyalty intentions The relationship between service performance and customer loyalty intention is completely mediated by relationship outcomes Additional analyses show that characteristics specific to business customers – organizational relationship norms and industry competitive intensity – play a significant role 	Qin <i>et al.</i> (2009) Briggs and Grisaffe (2010)

(continued)

Table 4

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
Service quality and customer loyalty	PZB model of customer satisfaction	The sample included 373 representatives in Taiwan's technology service industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study explores how service quality and brand awareness impact customer satisfaction and loyalty in the B2B technology service industry The outcomes indicated that (i) service quality impacts customer satisfaction, (ii) customer satisfaction impacts customer loyalty and (iii) brand awareness impacts the link between service quality and customer satisfaction 	Huang et al. (2019)
<i>Impact of advanced technology on RQ in B2B</i> Influence of big data analytics on CRM and sales growth		The sample included multi-industry dataset from 417 B2B firms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of customer big data expressively nurtures sales growth (i.e. monetary performance outcomes) and enhances customer relationship performance (non-monetary performance outcomes) Customer big data analytics is found to improve customer relationship performance and sales growth in B2B firms Web 2.0 provides firms with benefits but this is still largely unexplored The study shows that the importance of internet marketing will continue to grow in B2B sectors 	Hallikainen et al. (2020)
Web 2.0 influence in B2B firms		The sample included marketing personnel from six Finnish industrial firms and four Web 2.0 experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study shows that the importance of internet marketing will continue to grow in B2B sectors 	Lehtimäki et al. (2009)
Impact of digital technology on B2B relationships	Network approach	The sample included 30 B2B companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study explores the impact of digitalization, connected digital technologies and applications by companies on B2B exchanges Three main types of the impact of "digitalization" on B2B actors, resources and activities are proposed Five cases of digitization in different industrial sectors and five companies providing digital solutions for businesses illustrate these three types This typology provides an alternative to analyses based on the nature of digital systems used by B2B companies 	Pagani and Pardo (2017)
Big data adoption in the B2B context	Diffusion of innovation theory (DOI), institutional theory, configuration theory and technology-organization-environment (TOE) framework	The sample included a survey of 179 managers in firms such as an online retailer, banking and finance professional service provider, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study suggests a model incorporating factors in technological, organizational and environmental contexts that may affect an organization's decision to adopt big data strategies The study reveals factors like relative advantage, technology competence and others to play a significant role in organizational adoption of big data 	Sun et al. (2020)
Business analytics use in CRM	Dynamic capabilities view	The sample included 170 participants from the firm-level survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describes data management competence and customer response competence as major dynamic capabilities for business analytics use and CRM The study shows the important effect of the actual use of technology in terms of business analytics in the context of CRM 	Nam et al. (2019)
Customer involvement in big data analytics and the impact on B2B innovation	Interactional psychology	Survey data from 148 B2B innovation projects was used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer involvement assists B2B product innovation Results demonstrate that customer need tacitness negatively moderates the relationship performance between customer as data provider (CDP) and new product performance Both customer need diversity and customer need tacitness positively moderate the relationship between CDA and new product performance 	Zhang and Xiao (2020)
Use of sales personal social media in B2B settings	Information communication	The sample included 111 sales professionals in B2B industry selling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The use of social media by salesperson is found to influence information communication behaviors This enhances salesperson responsiveness and customer satisfaction Responsiveness of salesperson is found to have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction Social media plays a significant role in communicating information to customers and firms should decide on how to expend such resources 	Agnihotri et al. (2016)

Jussila et al. (2014)
(continued)

Table 4

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
Social media use between different company sizes and turnover in B2B		The sample included 125 B2B companies in the Finnish technology industry sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study reveals novel knowledge about use, potential and challenges of social media in B2Bs external use • Social media use between different company sizes and turnover is found to be similar • Some external social media uses that were seen as vital by B2Bs were revealed in the study • Statistically significant correlations were found between social media use and potential 	Guesalaga (2016)
The use of social media in sales: the role of customer engagement in social media		The sample included 220 executives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational competence and commitment to social media are crucial causes of social media usage in company deals, as well as individual commitment • Customer engagement with social media also forecasts social media usage in sales and organizational competence and commitment 	Järvinen et al. (2012)
Digital and social media marketing usage in B2B industrial section		Data were collected from a random sample of 145 Finnish B2B companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B2B companies must improve their competences with respect to digital marketing usage and measurement to adjust current practices to fit the characteristics of today's digital media setting 	Uлага and Eggert (2006) Woo and Ennew (2004)
<i>RQ in relationship marketing schools of thought</i>				
Relationship value	IMP perspective	Data were collected through a survey among 400 senior purchasing managers in US manufacturing industries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship value is an antecedent to RQ and behavioral outcomes in the nomological network of relationship marketing 	Nyadzayo et al. (2020)
IMP interaction-based conceptualization and measurement		Data were collected from a sample of 98 senior government engineers from the Staff List of Hong Kong Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value displays a stronger impact on satisfaction than on commitment and trust 	Hani et al. (2021)
Role of customer identification in bridging the gap between RQ and supplier outcomes	Relationship marketing	Data were collected from 389 CEOs and directors of Australian firms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ defined as a higher-order construct of cooperation, adaptation and atmosphere has a positive impact on service quality • Customer identification mediates the effects of affective RQ dimensions (i.e. benevolent trust and affective commitment) on customers' willingness-to-pay premium price (WTP) and positive word-of-mouth behaviors 	Li et al. (2018a)
Role of Relationship Quality (REQL)	Social exchange theory	A total of 200 business customers participated in this survey from a banking sector of Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study confirms three primary dimensions, trust, respect and reciprocity have significant effects on financial self-efficacy and quality of life 	
Role of customer involvement in RQ		Data were collected from 226 respondents of Chinese manufacturers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship quality has positive effects on not only performance but also customer involvement • Customer involvement partially mediates the relationship between relationship quality and performance 	
Relationship strength (commitment, intimacy, satisfaction and partner quality)	Social, media presence theory	Data was collected from an online survey of 200 customers of UK-based B2B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study reveals that a supplier's social media presence has a positive impact on relationship strength indicators such that interactivity enhances perceived partner quality, and responsiveness positively influences commitment 	Karampela et al. (2020)
Communication, interactivity and satisfaction	Media richness and media synchronicity theory; network theory	Data were collected from 328 middle- and upper-level managers through a survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal has a stronger positive association than digital with dyadic contact, social interaction and reciprocal feedback • Digital has a stronger positive association than impersonal with dyadic contact, rationality and reciprocal feedback 	Murphy and Sashi (2018)
Anglo-Chinese business-to-business relationships	Social exchange theory	Data were collected from over 200 Taiwanese trading firms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study implies buyer's perceptions of organizational trust, communication, cooperation, social bonding and the saving of face are higher in Anglo-Chinese relationships • It is also found that cooperation, social bonding and performance are greater 	Yen and Barnes (2011).

(continued)

Table 4

Key constructs	Theory(ies)	Sample	Key findings	Source
Relationship initiation continuators		Data were collected from 401 businesses in China and Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in those B2B relationships surveyed that are relatively more mature than in emerging states The study suggests that contacts, rituals and standards serve as relationship initiation contributors and assert the need to bring processual and contextual dimensions to business relationship initiation 	Aarikka-Stenroos <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Cross cultural examination of RQ		Data were collected from 202 buyers of industrial services from 42 countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study suggests RQ is impacted by perceived economic value, relationship bonds and relationship investments In fact, buyer's expectation of continuity with a service provider is influenced more by relationship quality than by perceived economic value 	Barry and Doney (2011)
Guanxi and Et-Moone relationships: Interpersonal liking	Social exchange theory	Data were collected from 401 businesses in China and Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpersonal liking plays a crucial role in the development of Guanxi and Et-Moone 	Abosag and Naudé (2014)
Business relationships in China (guanxi), South Korea (yongo) and Egypt/Jordan (wasta) and customer loyalty		Survey data gathered from manufacturing companies in China, South Korea, Jordan and Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The key outcomes of interpersonal liking are trust and Guanxi (in the Chinese sample) and Et-Moone (in the Saudi sample) The dimensions of informal relationships, reciprocity, affect and trustworthiness are all positively related to customer loyalty in all four countries 	Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Buyer-seller exchanges in US and BRIC nations	Institutional theory and marketing channel literature	Survey of about 400 US Indian, Brazilian and Russian buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Buyers heavily influenced by regulative enforcement place a relatively greater emphasis on formal information sharing in their partnership efforts to build trust and enhance supplier performance Buyers place a relatively greater emphasis on informal information sharing when their legitimacy derives from the endogenously enforced moral codes of their private networks 	Barry <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Brand image and customer loyalty	Construal level theory (CLT)	Data were collected from B2B customers via an offline survey with a sample size of 125 purchase managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study suggest vendor–customer relationship strength and physical accessibility of the vendor are associated with the construal level of the purchase context It finds the moderated mediation effect of customer satisfaction in goods- and service-based brand image loyalty relationships with construal level as moderator 	Kittur and Chatterjee (2021)
Role of ICT and relationships	Transactional cost and social affect theories	Data were collected from 202 interviews of professional buyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The study suggests despite using technology in transactional B2B, the human touch is required in customer relationships Companies should include salespeople in mediated customer transactions to achieve short-term (e.g. sales) and long-term goals (e.g., propensity to recommend) 	Papakonstantinidis <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Role of SM on RQ	Social media and RM	Data were collected from 12 organizations through 47 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study suggest content marketing is vital for successful relationship development Call-to-action, thought leadership, dissemination and co-creation strategy 	Cartwright <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Moderating effect of RQ on the associations between power bases and relationship success	Signaling theory	Data were collected from 284 Australian suppliers (growers of organic fruits and vegetables) was conducted to elucidate the associations among power, RQ, relationship success and operational performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RQ was found to only moderate the positive relationship between non-coercive power and relationship success Moreover, RQ and relationship success were positively related to the suppliers' operational performance 	Bandara <i>et al.</i> (2017)

sacrifices to obtain long-term benefits (Segarra-Moliner *et al.*, 2013). As a commitment gets stronger, the relationship it involves becomes more stable (Liang and Wang, 2006). Further, in a B2B context, the more a client trusts a service provider, the more committed the client is to the provider (Gounaris, 2005).

Similarly, customer satisfaction is an important variable in business relationships; as Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995a, 1995b) noted, it is also a constant, as all participants are expected to deliver high levels of satisfaction during each business transaction. It is one of the most frequently cited precursors of trust (Dabholkar and Sheng, 2012), mediated by the customer's belief that a business is reliable and that the services it provides offer long-term benefits (Smith, 2003). Moreover, it increases when a transaction exceeds expectations (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). For example, as Lancaster and Lages (2006) found, RM activities offer added value to customers, even when the activities relate to routine products, because they promote customer loyalty and satisfaction. Such positive interactions lead to the long-term continuation of relationships and the improvement of relationship performance through satisfaction. Customer satisfaction with a business or supplier is, therefore, critical to the development of future business exchanges (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). Also important are opportunism (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987); conflict; willingness to invest; the expectation of continuity (Kumar *et al.*, 1995); adaptation; and the transfer of knowledge (Čater and Čater, 2010). In the finance sector, competence, relationship benefits, bonding, customization, the attractiveness of alternatives and shared values are relevant RQ dimensions. Finally, as one study of the RQ of an industrial marketing and purchasing group found, cooperation, atmosphere and adaptation are also key RQ variables (Woo and Ennew, 2004). Evidently, a positive partnering atmosphere can motivate buyers to seek continued cooperation and collaboration from sellers (Huntley, 2006).

However, as Palmatier *et al.* (2006) noted, relationship satisfaction is only a customer's affective response to a relationship, differing from satisfaction with an overall exchange. Satisfaction with an overall relationship is just as important, because it is an outcome of buyer–seller relationships (Smith and Barclay, 1997). Indeed, service providers can benefit from relationships with individual suppliers and customers if the service providers are regarded as competent, that is, if they are perceived to have satisfactory technological and general business skills (Ndubisi *et al.*, 2007). Suppliers can demonstrate such skills by building relationships through social interactions with customers and indirect interactions with customers' families and friends; in turn, these interactions strengthen social bonds with customers (Chang *et al.*, 2012). When a supplier ensures that a customer is pleased with each interaction and transaction, interaction satisfaction creates not only short-term profit but also long-term relationships that can facilitate the pursuit of profit maximization.

In B2B marketing, interaction satisfaction levels are high among, for example, purchasing managers, as these levels are established through cumulative interactions and efficient cooperation with suppliers (Sohn *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, these satisfaction levels depend on experiences relating to the ease of exchanging and collecting information; bargaining power;

after-sales support; and smooth operations, all of which are important in B2B marketing. If interaction satisfaction persists long-term, then a business relationship commitment can be established. Such relationships are built on mutual benefits and trust; the frequency of past interactions; and collaborative activities, and these factors ensure relational embeddedness (Bonner and Walker, 2004). Consequently, transactional uncertainty decreases, trust between exchange partners increases, and exchange partners are motivated to pursue long-term strategic alliances (Chien *et al.*, 2012). Such long-term B2B success is, therefore, reliant on building and sustaining strong customer relationships and can benefit from customer loyalty and engagement (Rauyruen and Miller, 2007). Indeed, relationship strength is a key factor in loyalty orientation, as establishing and maintaining long-term B2B relationships requires suppliers to establish high levels of customer loyalty (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991).

Such relationships also require suppliers to improve all three dimensions of RQ, namely, trust, commitment and satisfaction (Abdul-Rahman and Kamarulzaman, 2012). Indeed, while other elements affect RQ and B2B relationships, Theron and Terblanche (2010) found that these three dimensions (plus communication) are more important than other factors when establishing high-quality relationships. In addition, Jiang *et al.* (2016) established that the key dimensions of RQ are social satisfaction, economic satisfaction and long-term orientation. Casidy and Nyadzayo (2019) also concluded that, in a B2B professional services context, the key dimensions of RQ for a small and medium enterprise owner-manager include trust, competence and perceived long-term orientation. Finally, Lages *et al.* (2008) found that relationship performance is a higher-order concept composed of the following distinct yet related dimensions: relationship policies and practices; relationship commitment; trust in relationships; mutual cooperation; and relationship satisfaction.

3.2 The effects and interaction of business-to-business relationship quality and relationship development

While RQ reflects the strength of a relationship between a buyer and a seller, it also reflects other interactions and influences other outcomes. For example, the perceived importance of a long-term relationship can strengthen the mediating role of its RQ (Huntley, 2006), and improvements to this quality not only create loyal customers but also improve future interactions. In fact, when a firm maintains high-quality relationships, its customers benefit from decreased levels of perceived risk and the fulfillment of long-term vendor interests (Smith, 1998). Further, the development of trust and commitment is of strategic importance, as both dimensions are directly associated with the creation of a high-quality relational atmosphere and directly influence behavioral intentions (Caceres and Papproidamis, 2007). As mentioned above, this is because B2B RQ is essential to establishing long-term relationships and maintaining a consistent competitive advantage. The RQ between a business customer and firm is, therefore, a core factor in the management of B2B relationships.

The three key dimensions of RQ moderate both these relationships and the business's various outcomes, such as customer loyalty (Gil-Saura *et al.*, 2009), actual sales and recommendation intentions. This mediation particularly

affects service quality and business loyalty. A study by [Caceres and Paparoidamis \(2007\)](#) found empirical evidence that relationship satisfaction also mediates the constructs of service/product quality and business loyalty. This study confirmed the significant effect of all components of RQ – relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment – on business loyalty.

Similarly, a study by [Chang et al. \(2012\)](#) found that dependence and trust mediate the effects of customer relationship investment, social bonding, relationship termination costs and customer expertise on calculative and affective commitments. The study suggested that interaction satisfaction strengthens the positive effects of dependence on calculative commitment and the positive effects of trust on affective commitment; further, the complicated relationships between buyers and sellers can be understood in terms of dependence and trust. Trust and commitment also impact customers' behavioral intentions ([Keh and Xie, 2009](#)), while organizational commitment mediates the relationships between satisfaction and repurchase intentions. Studies have found that a number of business attributes support the development of relationships and, in turn, RQ. Institution-based trust has been shown to be a potential first step toward building the inter-organizational trust required for collaborative relationships ([Pavlou, 2002](#)). In general, RQ has a positive effect on both repurchase intentions and loyalty ([Agag, 2019](#)). RQ can also mediate the influence of perceived value on relationship strength ([Barry et al., 2008](#)) and impact the anticipation of future interactions ([Sarmiento et al., 2015](#)). For example, when RQ is high, customers are more willing to recommend a seller's offerings to others and to purchase more from the seller ([Huntley, 2006](#)).

3.3 Service quality and relationship quality

The quality of a relationship and its effects are based on how the relationship has developed between a buyer and a supplier. Another common factor is service/product quality, which in turn enhances RQ. Both product quality and RQ must exist before a buying firm will commit to a supplier, given that different commitment dimensions influence customer loyalty ([Čater and Čater, 2010](#)). Indeed, empirical evidence shows that product quality influences attitudinal and behavioral loyalty in B2B relationships. However, suppliers find it very difficult to differentiate themselves from their competitors solely on the basis of product quality, because of recent technological improvements and increased competition ([Uлага, 2003](#)). Thus, service quality also has an impact on trust, service differentiation and relationship outcomes ([Chenet et al., 2010](#)). That is, service quality is a determining factor in satisfaction, and RQ can improve when customer-perceived market orientation acts as a precursor for service quality, satisfaction and commitment ([Segarra-Moliner et al., 2013](#)). High levels of service quality drive differentiation, which operates as a competitive advantage for firms ([Rust et al., 2002](#)).

To enhance commitment, firms should focus on differentiating their offerings and establishing a position at the “cutting edge” of their industries, as clients are more likely to commit to a firm if its services are perceived to be different from those of its rivals ([Chenet et al., 2010](#)). Relationships do not persist based only on emotional dimensions such as trust and

cooperation, because product/service sourcing is the primary reason many partners enter B2B relationships. Hence, without first receiving a quality core offer (product/service), customers eventually lose motivation to stay in a relationship ([Čater and Čater, 2010](#)).

In addition to these efforts, scholars have noted that firms must focus on the process of building relationships to increase RQ. Given that relationship building is a process, the interactions between the buyers and sellers in fact are developed based on the experience of each phase of the relationship. For example, a study of consulting firms developed a four-phase model for the B2B RM process; the phases were: before the project; at the beginning of the project; during the project; and after the project ([Filiatrault and Lapierre, 1997](#)). Another study found that the decision-making capabilities of inter-firm contacts and interactions that involve these capabilities are also crucial ([Palmatier, 2008](#)).

That is, according to SET and business buying behavior, service performance directly influences both social (i.e. trust) and economic (i.e. value) relationship outcomes, and these outcomes positively affect customer loyalty intentions ([Briggs and Grisaffe, 2010](#)). Thus, the exchange of information is particularly relevant to instilling trust, and social exchanges are particularly important to improving satisfaction, commitment and RQ ([Sarmiento et al., 2015](#)). The socializing behaviors of a firm can also be used to generate relationships and commitment and, ultimately, to enhance RQ ([Sarmiento et al., 2015](#)). This is true in particular of salespeople, who act as the primary boundary spanners for customers in the B2B context ([Homburg and Stock, 2004](#)). There are a number of features of trust, particularly in a B2B context, that must be considered when building relationships ([Blois, 1999](#)); rapport building is an essential requirement of establishing a relational foundation and engaging customers in new business relationships. Indeed, rapport is a harmonious relationship between participants that involves a mutual connection and understanding between, or a perceived similarity to, other participants ([Gremler and Gwinner, 2008](#)). Finally, a study by [Rauyruen and Miller \(2007\)](#) revealed that RQ should also include a service quality dimension, because service quality, like trust, commitment and satisfaction, influences customer loyalty.

3.4 Advanced technology and its impact on relationship management in business-to-business

3.4.1 Importance of technology

Technology has grown to become another important aspect of building B2B relationships, as it facilitates stronger relationship development and provides the impetus for value co-creation that has an impact on RQ ([Pagani and Pardo, 2017](#)). Some emerging technologies that are progressively transforming RM include big data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and advances in communication technology. In fact, RM emphasizes the central role customers play in the strategic positioning of the company, including activities such as training employees to develop personal relationships with customers and communicating with customers through multiple channels ([Jones et al., 2015](#)). Technology can promote RQ by facilitating communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing, thereby increasing trust, commitment and satisfaction with the seller.

For example, customers who are securely attached to the use of smartphone applications experience higher levels of trust, and dimensions related to technology attachment play a critical role in influencing perceptions of trust (Roy *et al.*, 2017).

Discussions of big data-driven business models are becoming more frequent in the contemporary B2B contexts (Sun *et al.*, 2020), as big data analytics transform CRM and sales growth for B2B firms (Hallikainen *et al.*, 2020). Advanced technologies such as big data analytics enable new opportunities for providing more personalized customer experiences, improving opportunities for B2B CRM (Nam *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, in CRM, the emergence of big data analytics has enabled a new wave of strategies to support the personalization and customization of sales and customer service (Anshari *et al.*, 2019). Big data is also useful in identifying customers' actual expectations and predicting their future demands, thus driving financial performance in both the product and service sectors (Yang *et al.*, 2020). Because big data analytics enable better-personalized product recommendations, customized offerings and price optimizations (Martin and Murphy, 2017), these applications can also be used to optimize marketing activities based on real-time information and in a timely manner to address rapidly changing customer needs and preferences (Xu *et al.*, 2016).

In the industrial selling context, buyers are using now social media for their purchases, as they compare products, research the market and build relationships with salespeople. Salespeople can use social media during all steps of the selling process, from prospecting to follow-up (Andzulis *et al.*, 2012). In B2B markets, social media channels such as Twitter may be used to prospect or find opportunities, while LinkedIn may assist in identifying the names of true decision-makers and buyers within an organization (Itani *et al.*, 2017). Social media can also be used to identify new business opportunities and product ideas, deepen relationships with customers and enhance collaboration not only inside firms but also between companies and other parties (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010; Gillin and Schwartzman, 2011). A salesperson's social media usage can impact information communication behaviors, which enhances that salesperson's responsiveness and customer satisfaction. In other words, social media plays an important role not only in communicating information to customers but also as an antecedent to enhancing salespeople's behavior to increase customer satisfaction. This has encouraged managers to carefully assess goals for their sales teams that are related to social media usage (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016). In general, firms should take advantage of the availability of technology platforms, such as social media, and invest in innovative technologies related to big data and blockchain technology, among others.

3.4.2 Role of digitization

Studies have shown that digitization and digitalization are now major trends that affect many aspects of B2B marketing. For instance, digital technology (DT) has transformed B2B firms in that they can now use a wide range of digital systems to manage their interactions with customers and how they approach value creation (Richard and Devinney, 2005). The digitalization of firms has directly impacted relationships with customers from the use of social media pages and mobile

marketing (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016), to the use of big data (Ram and Zhang, 2022; Wedel and Kannan, 2016), the Internet of Things (IoT) (Ng and Wakenshaw, 2017) and AI (Davenport *et al.*, 2020). As Paschen *et al.* (2019b) have noted, "more than mere mediators of B2B transactions, DTs shape industrial marketing processes and outcomes in significant ways and give rise to altogether new industrial marketing opportunities" (p. 1401). Indeed, DTs are progressively transforming B2B companies, as such firms now have access to a wider range of digital systems that can manage – or help manage – interactions with different network actors (Richard and Devinney, 2005).

Accordingly, a number of studies have examined these emerging technologies. For example, Ritter and Pedersen (2020) summarized the impacts of digitization on marketing and noted that the specialization of e-commerce capabilities within marketing has increased the degrees to which firms distribute products and communicate efficiently. Channel integration quality dimensions have positively influenced customer engagement, resulting in positive word-of-mouth marketing and increased loyalty. Further, suppliers and e-tailers have had strong incentives to share information when offering full return policies to consumers (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020). Further, Kumar *et al.* (2020) reviewed 119 relevant articles published in 29 journals between January 1999 and March 2019. The study highlighted the digital role of B2B marketing by classifying digitally mediated B2B marketing literature into four subject clusters:

- 1 frameworks for digitally mediated B2B marketing;
- 2 the digital B2B marketplace;
- 3 value creation through digital marketing; and
- 4 the use of social media in B2B marketing (Kumar *et al.*, 2020).

Other studies noted that marketing through technology, commonly referred to as e-marketing, encompasses a broad set of interaction-enabling technologies that are frequently used in industrial markets. These include CRM software, sales force automation, e-commerce websites and extranets (Trainor *et al.*, 2011). CRM technology, in particular, supports businesses by improving marketing strategies, facilitating communications with buyers and providing improved services and support (Wang *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, buyer-seller partnership success depends, to a great extent, on communication behaviors, such as information sharing and participation (Mangus *et al.*, 2020).

To this end, AI systems have helped companies improve their market knowledge (Paschen *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). Such systems have been used to create precise profiles of customers using structured and unstructured data about customers' past purchases, current behaviors, characteristics and interactions with firms, allowing companies to adapt to customers' needs. Information sharing has become a key relational behavior in industrial relationships (Itani *et al.*, 2020; Mangus *et al.*, 2020; Newell *et al.*, 2019), as it has reduced information asymmetry and uncertainty between organizations (Dyer and Chu, 2003; Pei and Yan, 2019). More so, information acquisition from buyers now helps sellers gain information and leverage buyers' information advantages (Li *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b). Thus, today's marketplace expects the professional salesperson to function as a knowledge broker (Verbeke *et al.*, 2011) who ensures that

information sharing occurs within business relationships. Such relationships are built on interactions, which technology has enhanced through the use of IT and improved information-sharing abilities (Herhausen *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, technology is now essential to successful RM and is used to capture salespersons’ knowledge. Hence, digital relationships have become vital in developing and sustaining successful businesses.

Pagani and Pardo (2017) identified three types of digitalization with respect to RM in B2B. The first was digitalization centered on activity links – DTs optimize existing activities by improving the activities’ coordination. The second was digitalization centered on resource ties – DTs lead to the creation of new activities. The third was digitalization centered on actor bonds – DTs create new ties between actors and, thus, enable new types of relationships (Pagani and Pardo, 2017). Further, studies have found that personal relationships drive interactivity – and digital relationships are more favorable than in-person communications. They allow rationality to be exhibited and reciprocal feedback to be created, both of which are important drivers of relational satisfaction (Murphy and Sashi, 2018). In B2B contexts, de Jong *et al.* (2021) suggested that gamification might be used to increase customer interest in the use of new technologies and enhance their engagement.

Indeed, studies on DT and RM in the B2B industry have examined the use of digital tools, such as AI, online services and digital communication (e.g. electronic media networks) in businesses. However, few have offered insights into how these digital transformations have impacted the quality of relationships, and the overall impacts of new DTs on B2B firms need to be explored (Kang *et al.*, 2020). In particular, few studies have furthered our understanding of DTs’ influence on RQ. Scholars that have examined this topic have explored digitization and emphasized trust, commitment and cooperation as common antecedents to digitalization. For example, Zhang and Li (2019) found that social media usage

affects customer loyalty in B2B contexts. Others found that while DTs can help companies manage their customer relationships, their specific role in RQ management requires further research (Richard and Devinney, 2005). Indeed, the intersection of digitalization and B2B relationships is under-researched (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020). Despite the impact of technology on commitment, collaboration, trust, information exchanges and satisfaction, there is a need for further investigations into the nature of these dimensions in B2B digitized firms. According to Obal and Lancioni (2013, p. 851), there is a dearth of research on “the impact[s] of digital communications on the relationships between buyers and suppliers in industrial marketing.”

This study, therefore, notes digitization capabilities and the need to study RQ in B2B organizations in the digital era. The study sought to shed light on how marketing analytics impact sustained competitive advantage among businesses. It also suggests data partitioning as a form of data management useful for knowledge engineering in B2B marketing experiments and demonstrates the impact of social media technologies on customer relationships and sales performance. In addition, client involvement is shown to have a varied effect on response strategies within client–vendor relationships, particularly in the IT services industry. Finally, key suppliers’ involvement in firms’ IT operations – and the involvement’s effect on performance – is shown to be contingent upon relational and environmental variables.

3.4.3 Type of digital technologies used in business-to-business

The most popular types of digital technologies that are being used in the B2B settings include IoT, cloud computing, data analytics and cybersecurity tools, social media, CRM tools, ERP and Cloud ERP/CRM tools, blockchain technology, AI, big data analytics and machine learning (Table 5).

Big data, machine learning and AI are among the most important forces in online relationship marketing. For instance, in B2C settings, Netflix uses an intelligent recommendation

Table 5 Types of digital technology and usage in business-to-business

Digital technology	Usage in B2B
Big data analytics	Relationship management and sales growth; provides more personalized customer experiences, improving opportunities for B2B customer relationship management
Social media	All steps of the selling process, from prospecting to follow-up
Twitter	Twitter may be used to prospect or find opportunities
LinkedIn	LinkedIn may assist in identifying the names of true decision-makers and buyers within an organization
Customer relationship management software, sales force automation, e-commerce websites and extranets and big data	Supports businesses by improving marketing strategies, facilitating communications with buyers and providing improved services and support; support the personalization and customization of sales and customer service
AI	Helps companies improve their market knowledge; to create precise profiles of customers using structured and unstructured data about customers’ past purchases, current behaviors, characteristics and interactions with firms, allowing companies to adapt to customers’ needs
IoT	IoT and cloud computing are beneficial for the real-time collection of market data and information sharing between stakeholders
Block chain	Can help keep track of and integrate each value-creating activity, while reducing the need for manual monitoring by B2B partners
ERP systems	ERP Systems can be used in a buyer–seller relationship to redesign work routines to eliminate extra manual work and speed up the order-to-delivery process (Salo, 2007)

system enabled by powerful data mining and machine learning through cross-referencing usage patterns across all users to suggest options that match customers' preferences (Rayna and Striukova, 2016). Thus, firms could take advantage of the availability of customer data via online platforms, such as social media and websites, and invest in innovative capabilities to handle big data. For example, social listening techniques, text analytics, photo and video analytics and location-based data are used to effectively improve customer online experiences (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

IoT and cloud computing is beneficial for the real-time collection of market data and information sharing between stakeholders. IoT and blockchain can enhance value co-creation activities and eliminate human involvement in mechanistic processes leading to greater value; they also are likely to raise new challenges that would amplify the soft behavioral aspects of B2B relationships (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020). Blockchain can help keep track of and integrate each value-creating activity while reducing the need for manual monitoring by B2B partners (Queiroz *et al.*, 2019). Digital e-commerce sites such as Alibaba, Amazon and eBay are not only digital marketplaces for buyer–supplier transactions but also increasingly used as a rich platform for multifaceted collaboration across different geographies and time zones to co-create relevant value, because of better use of data analytics, increasingly sophisticated online services and buyers' and sellers' improving capabilities to use such platforms. ERP Systems which can be used in a buyer–seller relationship to redesign work routines to eliminate extra manual work and speed up the order-to-delivery process (Salo, 2007). Finally, social media such as Wikipedia and OhMyNews, blogs, podcasts, content communities (e.g. YouTube and Flickr), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life and Habbo) has made it possible to build and maintain relationships (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). As shown in our empirical findings, the use of customer big data expressively enhances sales growth (i.e. monetary performance outcomes) and improves customer relationship performance (non-monetary performance outcomes and salesperson communication in B2B firms. CRM software, sales force automation, e-commerce websites and extranets (Trainor *et al.*, 2011) are among other digital technologies that are being exploited in B2B.

Some of the key findings from prior studies imply that the use of big data analytics in storytelling enhance customer sensemaking of smart services and can increase smart service sales in the manufacturing sector (Boldosova, 2020). Further, in B2B markets, machine learning can be applied to understand what constitutes salespersons' effective communication in a digital interaction (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020). Additional recent findings show how organizations can use AI to manage B2B marketing operations in dynamic and uncertain environments and how marketing analytics can be used to obtain a sustained competitive advantage (Cao *et al.*, 2019; Mikalef *et al.*, 2021). Another important study to note is on Industry 4.0-based digital servitization approaches concerning the quality of supplier–customer relationships (Grandinetti *et al.*, 2020). This study identifies the levels of relational intimacy and informational openness lead to two subsequent

levels of data-driven efficiency and data-driven effectiveness, impacting significantly on RQ and enabling relational innovation. Given this background, it is plausible to suggest that AI, blockchain, data security/integrity, IoT and big data analytics are the possible digital trends that will shape how B2B relationships are understood and managed for greater impact.

4. Practical insights

The importance of RM, RQ and technology adoption in B2B relationships has also been widely emphasized. For example, research from McKinsey suggests that a healthy data culture, that is, an organizational culture that accelerates the application of data analytics, is becoming increasingly important for leading and lagging companies alike (Diaz *et al.*, 2018). Buyers want to work with organizations that see beyond the deal (Gregg *et al.*, 2020), suggesting that RQ dimensions go beyond trust, commitment and satisfaction. A report published by Ferry (2020) highlights the importance of business relationships, stating that regardless of the setting, selling remains at its heart the act of acquiring, growing and retaining this relationship. This involves a series of “defining moments,” when a customer/prospect evaluates their seller, the experience or their relationship against one's expectations (Ferry, 2020). B2B firms used to more face-to-face engagement need to revisit their processes and skills to proactively drive the positive defining moments that create customer intimacy in changing environments. Nevertheless, technological advances allow the development of multichannel and omnichannel strategies to create a seamless experience for customers (Thaichon *et al.*, 2020). It is possible that B2B businesses can build a stronger RQ with their clients via multiple touchpoints or through omnichannel strategies.

Digital technologies and AI have also significantly transformed the retailing landscape and opened endless opportunities to engage customers across multiple touchpoints (Quach *et al.*, 2022). Amazon is an obvious example in B2C contexts that B2B businesses could leverage on (Teradata, 2017). AI has been implemented by retailers to provide tailored recommendations, curate personalized content and predict future customer value. Thus, B2B businesses could also adopt similar technologies to improve their business performance and RQ with potential future customers by predicting future customer value.

A recent meta-analysis by Jiang *et al.* (2016) in B2B settings, identified additional key dimensions of RQ: social satisfaction, economic satisfaction and long-term orientation. These emerging RQ dimensions are also relevant in the modern business environment. Specifically, communication remains crucial in the digital world, as more conversations take place in virtual settings so that transparency is maintained and trust and commitment are fostered. It is, therefore, important to create valid business reasons for virtual meetings, with the goal of increasing commitment to your relationships (Ferry, 2020). Virtual settings open up avenues of communication that may not be available in face-to-face meetings, enabling for example the sharing of materials for use during and after the session, such as tip sheets, videos, book lists and bespoke online resources.

According to a recent B2B Decision-Maker Pulse survey, sellers indicated that digitally enabled sales interactions are now more than twice as important as traditional sales interactions (Gregg *et al.*, 2020). In addition, a sales practice study conducted with 949 sales leaders from global B2B industries, with particularly strong representation in the technology, manufacturing, health care, professional services and banking/finance sectors, found that only 31% of sales organizations said they effectively identify and gain access to decision-makers, while only 40% indicated that they successfully used questioning skills to reveal buyers' realized and unrealized needs (Matthews and Lunsford, 2020). This indicates that there is still a huge need for attuned RM strategies that align with the changing environments – mainly driven by technological advancement – in B2B markets.

Moreover, there is a need to call for new norms for building trust in the digital world. Although trust will remain a key future dimension for RQ, as it is in the current environment, full transparency is key (Hanisch and Wald, 2014). For example, research shows that many leaders feel liberated by the virtual environment and believe it provides a safe space in which they can be curious, open to different views and willing to engage in dialogue (Gregg *et al.*, 2020). This helps to create intimacy in a virtual environment. For this reason, it is important that interactions are held in a safe place, with the goal of remaining as “human” and authentic as possible, creating a safe space for conversations. Asking powerful questions, such as “What are your safety protocols?” and “How have the past few weeks been?”, can also stimulate discussion and build intimacy in such virtual environments.

B2B organizations can boost RQ by building infrastructure to safeguard their digital interactions with clients and by safekeeping the client's data. As Ferbrache (2020), the global head of cyber futures, articulated, there is a need for new models of trust to be authenticated and identified in our digital world. Moreover, KPMG (a leader in delivering audit, tax and advisory services) research reports that features, loyalty and price can no longer be relied upon to secure or maintain sustainable commercial relationships and that the benchmark for client satisfaction is constantly being reset (Ranade, 2018). This led to the importance of building relationships with clients with new technological advancements and techniques. For instance, businesses should explore the role and use of IoT and blockchain to enhance value co-creation activities and eliminate human involvement in mechanistic processes leading to greater value with clients (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, B2B marketers need to develop a viable digital strategy and the means to refine that digital strategy periodically. There is also a need to redesign infrastructure to make technology and processes more resilient as environments and customer expectations change and to develop practices and behaviors specific to a new selling atmosphere and the virtual environment (Thaichon *et al.*, 2019). For instance, companies should invest in ongoing training on online technology that is relevant to RQ to provide their sales and marketing force with the skills and resources needed to succeed.

5. Conclusions and future research directions

RM is an important firm marketing strategy to achieve higher firm performance. In fact, in the B2B context where business

uncertainty and risks are involved, RM paves a way for building a strong win-win for sellers and buyers. RQ, therefore, needs to be enhanced in a B2B context to reap the benefit of RM. Our systematic review of extant research reveals five basic components of RQ in B2B contexts:

- 1 RQ in B2B context can be conceptualized to be a higher-order construct comprising of several dimensions, not only restricted to the popular three (trust, commitment and satisfaction).
- 2 Going beyond the traditional dimensions, service quality also appears to be a measure of RQ.
- 3 Building trust in a B2B context is further complicated because of the growing influence of technological advancements of RM.
- 4 RQ will strongly influence key outcomes such as customer loyalty and firm performance.
- 5 RQ also plays a critical role in shaping other firm-level variables such as decision-making capability, rapport building, sales capability, customer engagement, business shares and socialization episodes.

In light of our literature review pertaining to the effects of digitization, we observe that RQ in the digital era comprises traditional relationship dimensions. For instance, traditional trust must be leveraged to build digital trust and safety, and digitization can be a means for better inter- and intra-organizational collaboration. Similarly, commitment supports digital advancement and requires assessment in light of digitization. This study conceptualized how digitization capabilities enhance RQ dimensions and which unique dimensions emerge in B2B contexts. As a result, the current research provides a basis for various future studies. For example, it provides a basis for research on how digital transformations and digital trust in B2B organizations affect RQ and other related factors such as commitment, trust, satisfaction, loyalty and collaboration. Future studies could examine the proposed new RQ dimensions in the digital era, given the growing importance of RM. Given that digital communication tools have the potential to enhance coordination and cooperation in B2B markets, researchers should also consider examining the related ethical, privacy, legal and safety concerns that are likely to emerge that, in turn, might impact the RM and RQ.

Further, given the enhancement of inter- and intra-organizational coordination through digital transformations, future research should examine whether coordination and cooperation can be plausible new dimensions of RQ. More specifically, research can explore how existing and new RQ dimensions are influenced by technology? Also, research should address the impact of digitalization on RQ, and how its impact on RQ can be measured? Moreover, further research is required to understand how RQ is affected and mediated by technology and how traditional RQ dimensions support the use of technology to improve business results. More importantly, in the digital era, the key antecedents of RQ should be explored, focusing on how digitalization can be used to enhance RQ dimensions as well as exploring the dark side and ethical issues of digitization on RQ in B2B markets.

This exploratory study discovers some novel insights into RM in B2B context by using a multidimensional approach to RQ and

analyzing prior marketing research from three perspectives – i) the evolution of RQ in B2B context, (ii) prior empirical research and (iii) practical business insights – all of which inform the development of an evolving side of RQ in a B2B context. Each perspective offers unique insights. For instance, by considering relevant trends in the development of RM in B2B as the field continues to evolve, which in turn would lead to some predictions regarding the future of RM in B2B.

Empirical research that has examined RQ across different marketing domains further suggests that the primary motivation for adopting the RM perspective in many contexts is the basis it offers by bringing customers into the central focus of the business, with positive impacts on its performance and growth. The technological advancements, particularly, big data analytics, block chain technology, machine learning and social media, influence will further enhance the firms’ collaborative and CRM efforts. More transference should lead to effective trust-building, adaption and competence commitment, which are key dimensions of RQ. Future research in this direction to understand the impact of new technologies is, therefore, warranted to strengthen the B2B RQ.

Overall, this study has provided an up-to-date systematic review of the literature on key aspects of RM in the B2B contexts. As identified above on practical insights, technological advancements will continue to influence and support sustaining RQ in B2B contexts, thereby forcing firms to make investments in embracing emerging technologies. Also, RM phenomena in the B2B has evolved to a new landscape because of numerous changes presented by emerging technologies such as blockchain and machine learning, big data and data analytics, the IoT and others. Subsequently, these changes have brought opportunities and challenges for both B2B practitioners and scholars. Yet, hitherto, the extant literature shows there is a dearth of studies that have addressed the convergence between research on RM and emerging digital technologies. By integrating prior knowledge, dispersed across diverse conceptual, business practices and empirical domains, this critical review presents an evolving side of RM in B2B by identifying key research gaps and future directions (as shown in Table 6).

First, we observe that the growing multilayers of digital communications will impact RM in B2B facilitated by the

Table 6 Main research gaps and future research directions

Research gaps	Future research directions
<p>Multilayers of online communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still in an early stage and limited literature on multilayers of online communications and interactions in the B2B context • Lack of empirical and understanding of different layers of communications and interactions in the B2B context • There have been more studies and trends in businesses have increasingly used influencer marketing in the B2C context • The literature on digitalization of social media and its implications comes mainly from mature economies <p>Co-producers and co-creation process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business customers have become co-producers in the value co-creation process with firms • Yet, there is limited literature on the co-creation process within the B2B context • Especially, factors that could lead to long-term RQ via value co-creation process • Most of the studies are empirical, based on one or a few case studies and/or mainly from mature economies • The literature on value co-creation process with firms comes mainly from mature economies <p>Technologies and platforms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many new technologies, such as mixed reality, big data and artificial intelligence • Still in an early stage and there is limited literature on big data and machine learning in the B2B setting • Blockchain technologies and their application in firm communications with the business client is also another limited aspect within the B2B context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More attention could focus to understand the impact of social media and online communications within the B2B context • Similarly, factors that could lead to long term RQ via social media and online communications within the B2B context • Future research could delve into different layers of interactions and investigate their inter-relationships in the B2B context • It would be interesting to explore the influencer marketing in the B2B context together with the rise of social media and online communications • Future research could address how digitalization of social media and its implications influences competitive, environmental and societal aspects in emerging economies • More attention could focus to understand the impact of the co-creation process and long-term RQ within the B2B context • Future research could carry out prescriptive research to support decision-making in the B2B context • Address how value co-creation process with firms and its implications influences competitive, environmental and societal aspects in emerging economies • More attention could focus on understanding the impact (opportunities and challenges) of new technologies on relationships within the B2B context • Also, how new technologies could lead to long-term relationship and more effective business management within the B2B context • Future research could address how big data, machine learning and their implications toward B2B operation and long-term relationships management • It would be interesting to explore the blockchain technologies and their application in firm communications/interactions in the B2B context

growing influence of social media, and influencer marketing (among others) continues transforming CRM. In turn, this creates unique opportunities and challenges to strengthen RQ and leverage the same for improved firm performance. Second, realizing that business customers have become co-producers in the value co-creation process, more attention could focus on understanding the impact of the co-creation process and long-term RQ within the B2B context. Finally, our review identified the increasing importance of B2B relationships in the digital age where virtual meetings are increasingly replacing face-to-face meetings. This is being driven by new technologies (such as mixed reality, big data analytics, blockchain and AI) that could lead to long-term relationships and more effective business management within the B2B context. That said, future researchers should also focus on exploring the dark side of technology-led relationships as well as the ethical issues that might arise and the subsequent impact on firm performance.

Despite offering the aforementioned valuable opportune directions for future research, this systematic literature review has some inevitable research limitations. First, as we identified the publications shown in Figure 1 using the keyword-based search method, it is feasible that some papers within this research stream that has different keywords might have been excluded. Also, some valid studies that might have not been published online at the time of writing this paper might have not been captured in this review. Second, we only searched for papers written in the English language, thus excluding other publications in other languages that might have corroborated our findings.

Overall, the contribution that this study makes is on RM and RQ in B2B. The face of RQ in B2B is significantly transforming because of the emerging technologies, which might result in the emergent of new relational facets or dimensions such as e-trust, e-commitment and e-satisfaction. In fact, given the different types of technologies emerging to aid the marketing function, there are many more future research avenues as to how to understand and measure RQ in different contexts of technologies. If digital communication tools are found to enhance coordination, cooperation and follow-ups in B2B organizations, then scholars might consider examining what safety concerns organizations should be prepared for while paying attention to ethical issues that might arise and the subsequent impact on firm performance.

In summary, integrative literature reviews contribute to key B2B marketing topics (Lindgreen and Benedetto, 2018), as the “integration of various viewpoints in a way that can guide future academic research as well as enlighten industry leaders is a worthy scholarly pursuit” (Agnihotri, 2020, p. 298). Hence, in this light, we hope this systematic literature review will contribute to the scholarly discussion and future research on the impetus of this critical research area in B2B marketing.

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