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Customer satisfaction and loyalty in B2B relationships: a systematic review of relational and digital drivers

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Abstract
Business-to-business (B2B) relationships form the foundation of competitive advantage in modern supply chains; however, research on the factors influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty remains fragmented and dominated by pre-digital relational paradigms. This study aims to synthesize the key determinants of B2B customer satisfaction and loyalty through a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol. A total of 47 articles indexed in Scopus and Emerald Insight from the 2020–2026 period were systematically analyzed. The results indicate that trust and commitment are the most consistent determinants of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, information technology-enabled transparency, the quality of tracking information, and ethical data governance strengthen trust formation within digital B2B ecosystems. Conversely, conflict and opportunism act as moderators that weaken the link between satisfaction and loyalty. This study proposes a shift in perspective from dyadic relationships to a digitally integrated, network-based approach and emphasizes the importance of strengthening digital capabilities and relational investments to enhance B2B customer loyalty.

Keywords: B2B Relationships, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, Relationship Quality, Digital Transformation

Abstrak
Hubungan *business-to-business* (B2B) merupakan fondasi keunggulan kompetitif dalam rantai pasok modern, tetapi kajian mengenai faktor yang memengaruhi kepuasan dan loyalitas pelanggan masih terfragmentasi dan didominasi paradigma relasional pra-digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan mensintesis determinan utama kepuasan dan loyalitas pelanggan B2B melalui *systematic literature review* berbasis protokol PRISMA 2020. Sebanyak 47 artikel terindeks Scopus dan Emerald Insight periode 2020–2026 dianalisis secara sistematis. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa kepercayaan (*trust*) dan komitmen merupakan determinan paling konsisten terhadap kepuasan dan loyalitas pelanggan. Selain itu, transparansi berbasis teknologi informasi, kualitas informasi pelacakan, dan tata kelola data yang etis memperkuat pembentukan kepercayaan dalam ekosistem B2B digital. Sebaliknya, konflik dan oportunisme berperan sebagai moderator yang melemahkan hubungan kepuasan dengan loyalitas. Penelitian ini mengusulkan pergeseran perspektif dari hubungan diadik menuju pendekatan berbasis jaringan yang terintegrasi secara digital serta menekankan pentingnya penguatan kapabilitas digital dan investasi relasional untuk meningkatkan loyalitas pelanggan B2B.

Kata kunci: Hubungan B2B, Kepuasan Pelanggan, Loyalitas Pelanggan, Kualitas Hubungan, Transformasi Digital

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1. Introduction

Walk through any large-scale distributor network and something becomes apparent quickly: product specifications matter less than the people and processes behind them. In markets where two suppliers offer technically comparable products at similar prices, what keeps a distributor renewing its contract year after year is rarely quantifiable in a product catalogue. B2B sales cycles are long, relationship capital accumulates slowly, and losing a key distribution partner carries costs that extend well beyond the immediate revenue gap. The academic literature has been formalising this practitioner intuition through research on relationship quality and its downstream effects on loyalty (Arthur et al., 2024; Ferro-Soto et al., 2023), yet a persistent gap remains between what field experience suggests and what existing theoretical frameworks adequately explain.

Researchers have approached B2B satisfaction and loyalty from several angles. The Relationship Quality (RQ) framework treats trust and commitment as central mediating variables linking relational investments to loyalty outcomes (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Service Quality (SQ) research examines how operational and functional performance shapes partner perceptions (Trivedi et al., 2023; Gaudenzi et al., 2021). Service-Dominant Logic shifts attention toward value co-creation, arguing that satisfaction emerges from how partners collaborate, not merely from what is delivered (Sales-Vivo et al., 2021a). Justice theory contributes by explaining how perceptions of fairness during conflict or recovery shape satisfaction independently of operational performance (Ahmad et al., 2024).

Despite this accumulated work, existing systematic reviews leave critical ground uncovered. Studies such as Li et al. (2021), focused on contractual governance, and Miller et al. (2021), addressing trust and opportunism, each illuminate one corner of the problem without connecting it to the others. Neither accounts for how digital transformation is altering the constructs they examine, nor do they integrate the dysfunctional dynamics, conflict, opportunism, and informational asymmetry, that practitioners in high-volume B2B channels encounter as operational realities rather than theoretical edge cases. Most established frameworks also continue to assume that trust is built primarily through interpersonal interaction, an assumption that platform-mediated B2B transactions, AI-driven analytics, and real-time supply chain visibility tools are making empirically untenable (Habjan, 2023; Wang, 2025).

This review addresses these gaps by synthesising 47 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2026 through an integrated analytical framework that maps relational, operational, digital, and dysfunctional determinants of B2B satisfaction and loyalty within a single codified structure. The study contributes by: extending the KMV model to incorporate digitally mediated trust mechanisms; treating dark-side constructs as theoretically significant moderators of the satisfaction-to-loyalty pathway; and identifying the sectoral and methodological gaps that most urgently require empirical attention.

Three research questions guide this review:
RQ1: What are the primary determinants of customer satisfaction in B2B relationships?
RQ2: What are the primary determinants of customer loyalty in B2B relationships?
RQ3: How does digital transformation reshape the mechanisms through which satisfaction and loyalty are built in B2B contexts?

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations and Coding Framework

Theory in systematic literature reviews has a habit of appearing decoratively: cited in the introduction, then absent from the actual analytical process. This review takes a different approach. The five frameworks below function as explicit coding categories through which the 47 articles were sorted and synthesised. Table 1 maps each theory to its analytical function, coding category, and representative literature.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework Mapping: Analytical Function and Coding Category

Theory	Analytical Function	Coding Category	Representative Articles
Relationship Marketing (RM)	Explains logic of long-term B2B exchange and strategic value of partnership stability	Relational factors	Arthur et al. (2024); Ferro-Soto et al. (2023, 2025)
Social Exchange Theory (SET)	Explains why trust and commitment persist: partners remain when relational rewards exceed costs	Relational factors	Badrinarayanan et al. (2024); Guan et al. (2025)
KMV Model (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)	Trust and commitment as Key Mediating Variables; extended here to include digitally mediated trust	Relational factors	Ferro-Soto et al. (2023); Arthur et al. (2024)
Service-Dominant Logic (SDL)	Value co-creation as joint process through which satisfaction emerges from collaboration, not delivery alone	Relational factors	Sales-Vivo et al. (2021a, 2021b); Berenguer-Contri et al. (2024a, 2024b)
Justice Theory	Post-recovery satisfaction and dark-side phenomena through distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness	Operational factors	Ahmad et al. (2024); Ferro-Soto et al. (2024b); Jyh-Liang et al. (2022)
Digital Business / IT Adoption	How technology-mediated coordination reshapes trust-building, transparency, and relational governance	Digital factors	Habjan (2023); Rai et al. (2022); Behera & Bala (2023); Wang (2025)

Source: Synthesised by authors from reviewed literature (2020-2026)

The KMV Model and Its Digital Extension

Morgan and Hunt's (1994) KMV model positions trust and commitment as the mediating variables through which relational investment converts into loyalty behaviour. The broader RM paradigm, grounded in Social Exchange Theory, argues that inter-organisational relationships are sustained when relational rewards consistently outweigh costs (Arthur et al., 2024). What the original model did not anticipate is that the mechanisms through which trust is built are changing structurally. Platform reliability metrics, order tracking accuracy, and proactive data-sharing practices are becoming primary trust signals in high-volume, low-contact B2B environments (Habjan, 2023; Rai et al., 2022). This review extends the KMV framework by coding for these digitally mediated trust antecedents as a theoretically distinct but connected sub-category.

Service-Dominant Logic, Justice Theory, and the Dark Side

Service-Dominant Logic reconceptualises value as emerging through interaction rather than delivery (Sales-Vivo et al., 2021a). In distribution contexts, satisfaction in mature partnerships reflects how well partners collaborated around delivery, not just what was delivered. Gligor and Maloni (2022) introduce a necessary qualification: co-creation demands that exceed a distributor's organisational capacity can paradoxically reduce satisfaction, a failure mode that positive-valenced models consistently miss. Justice theory provides analytical vocabulary for two related problems: how fairness perceptions during service recovery shape post-failure satisfaction (Ahmad et al., 2024), and how conflict and opportunism structurally decouple satisfaction from loyalty, creating retained but disengaged customers who are actively evaluating alternatives (Ferro-Soto et al., 2024b). This decoupling, retained without being loyal, is among the most practically significant and theoretically underexplored findings in the reviewed literature.

Key Constructs and Research Gaps

Loyalty in B2B markets combines behavioural dimensions, repeat purchasing and business allocation, with attitudinal dimensions, psychological commitment and willingness to recommend (Dick & Basu, 1994). The critical observation from the reviewed literature is that attitudinal loyalty is more fragile than behavioural loyalty: customers can maintain high purchase volumes while simultaneously evaluating alternative suppliers. Logistics Service Quality dimensions, particularly order accuracy and tracking transparency, function as necessary but insufficient conditions for satisfaction: their absence destroys trust quickly, but their presence does not generate loyalty (Gaudenzi et al., 2021; Rai et al., 2022).

Three gaps justify this review's contribution. First, no existing systematic review integrates relational, operational, digital, and dysfunctional determinants within a single analytical framework, leaving the field unable to explain why high-service-quality suppliers sometimes lose loyal accounts. Second, dominant measurement instruments for trust and commitment were validated in pre-digital contexts and have not been systematically re-examined for platform-mediated B2B environments. Third, manufacturing and multi-industry studies account for over half the literature, while digital-native B2B sectors and qualitative process-level research remain systematically underrepresented.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the integrated conceptual framework proposed in this review. Three antecedent categories, relational, operational, and digital factors, drive customer satisfaction as the central mediating mechanism. Dark-side moderators, including conflict, opportunism, and unethical data practices, disrupt the satisfaction-to-loyalty pathway. The dashed arrow from digital factors to relational factors reflects emerging evidence that IT transparency enhances trust and commitment, amplifying relational antecedents rather than operating independently.

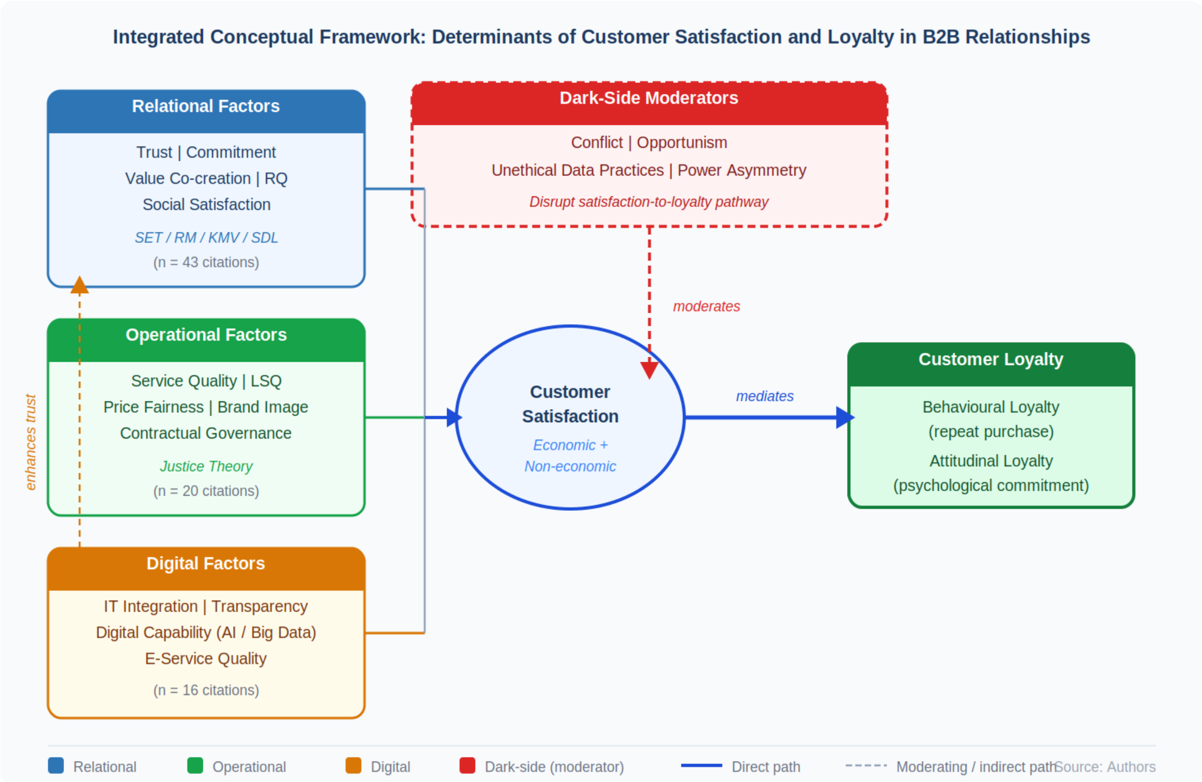

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Determinants of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty in B2B Relationships. Source: Authors.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, comprising a 27-item checklist and structured flow diagram (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA 2020 was selected for its enhanced requirements for search strategy transparency, study selection rationale, and bias assessment.

Table 2. Boolean Search Strings Applied Across Databases

Database	Search String	Filters Applied
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("B2B" OR "business-to-business" OR "distributor relationship" OR "inter-organizational") AND ("customer satisfaction" OR "customer loyalty" OR "B2B satisfaction" OR "B2B loyalty" OR "relationship quality" OR "customer retention") AND ("trust" OR "commitment" OR "service quality" OR "digital innovation" OR "value co-creation" OR "inter-organizational trust" OR "digital integration"))	Year: 2020-2026; Language: English; Type: Article; Source: Journal
Emerald Insight	("B2B" OR "business-to-business" OR "distributor" OR "supplier") AND "satisfaction" OR "loyalty" OR "relationship quality") AND ("trust" OR "commitment" OR "digital" OR "service quality" OR "value co-creation")	Year: 2020-2026; Language: English; Peer-reviewed only

Source: Authors

Two databases were selected (Table 2). Scopus was chosen as the primary source due to its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed business and marketing literature with full Boolean query support. Emerald Insight was included for its specialisation in management, marketing, and logistics journals where key B2B publications appear. Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest were not included due to institutional access constraints, acknowledged as a limitation in this research. Preliminary cross-database checks confirmed no high-citation B2B satisfaction articles from 2020 to 2026 appeared exclusively in those databases without Scopus coverage.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Type	Criteria	Rationale
Inclusion	Peer-reviewed journal articles only	Ensures scientific rigour
Inclusion	Published 2020-2026	Captures post-COVID and digital transformation era
Inclusion	Explicitly focused on B2B relationships or inter-organisational marketing	Directly addresses RQ1-RQ3
Inclusion	Full text available via Scopus or Emerald Insight	Enables complete extraction and coding
Inclusion	Written in English	Ensures reliable synthesis and coding consistency
Exclusion	Not B2B context (B2C-only, C2C)	Outside scope
Exclusion	Non-peer-reviewed (reports, theses, blogs)	Below quality threshold
Exclusion	Language other than English	Cannot be reliably synthesised
Exclusion	Purely theoretical, no empirical data	Limits frequency analysis validity
Exclusion	Duplicate records across databases	Prevents double-counting

Source: Authors

PRISMA 2020 Selection Process

The selection process followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 framework. Figure 2 presents the complete flow diagram. All numbers are internally consistent: 216 minus 12 duplicates equals 204; 204 minus 139 title/abstract exclusions equals 65; 65 minus 3 not retrieved equals 62; 62 minus 15 full-text exclusions equals 47. The 139 articles excluded at screening were removed for: not B2B context (n=78), insufficient B2B relevance (n=42), not peer-reviewed (n=8), language (n=10), and no abstract (n=1). Fifteen articles excluded at full-text review were removed for: insufficient focus on satisfaction or loyalty outcomes (n=8), purely theoretical without empirical data (n=4), indexed only in SINTA outside Scopus and Emerald (n=1), and outside B2B scope upon full reading (n=2).

Data Extraction and Coding

The 47 articles were analysed using thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding proceeded in three stages: systematic extraction of each article's key variables, context, and findings; inductive categorisation into four thematic clusters (relational, operational, digital, social); and cross-article synthesis identifying frequency patterns and theoretical tensions. Coding was performed by the primary researcher through systematic reading of abstracts, theoretical frameworks, and findings sections.

The scheme was subsequently verified through peer-checking with the research supervisor to reduce interpretive bias. One article may contribute to multiple categories. Frequency counts reflect article occurrence, not effect size or causal strength.

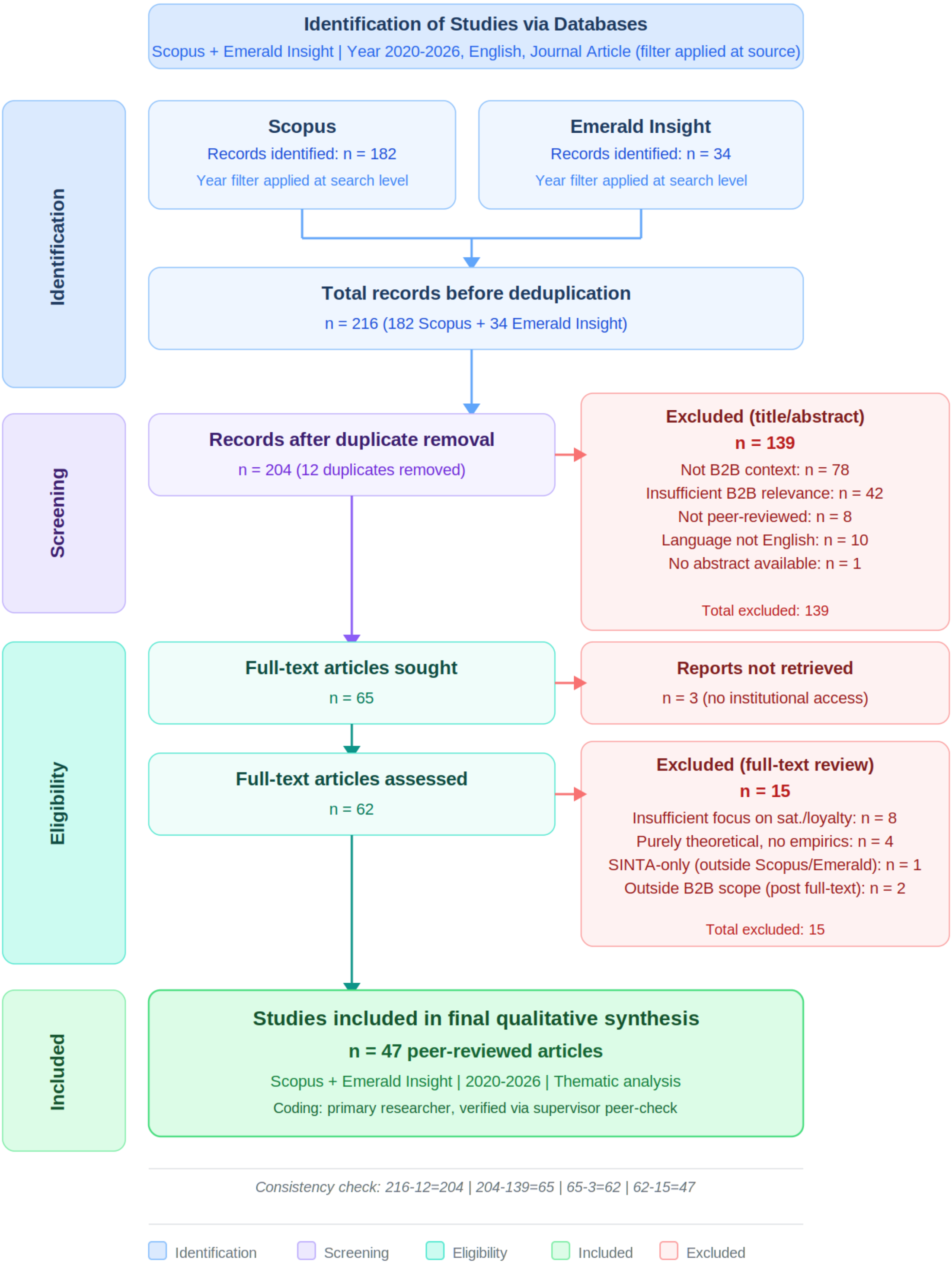

Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram.
Source: Authors, based on Page et al. (2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Bibliometric Overview

Table 4. Distribution by Year, Method, and Sector

Category	Sub-group	n (%)	Notes
Publication Year	2020	7 (14.9%)	Growth phase
	2021	10 (21.3%)	Peak relational studies
	2022	4 (8.5%)	Publication lag post-COVID
	2023	12 (25.5%)	Highest annual output
	2024	5 (10.6%)	Stable output
	2025	9 (19.1%)	Digital themes dominant
Method	Quantitative	44 (93.6%)	SEM, PLS-SEM, regression
	Qualitative / Mixed	3 (6.4%)	QCA, AHP-survey
Sector	Multi-industry	13 (27.7%)	Cross-sectoral generalisability
	Manufacturing	9 (19.1%)	Supply chain, industrial
	FMCG / Retail	7 (14.9%)	Hybrid B2B-B2C
	Logistics / Services	11 (23.4%)	LSQ, consulting, healthcare
	Agriculture / Digital / High-tech	7 (14.9%)	Emerging and niche sectors

Source: Authors

The temporal distribution confirms sustained growth, peaking in 2023 at 12 articles, consistent with delayed publication of research initiated during pandemic-era supply chain disruptions. The quantitative dominance (93.6%) provides robust construct validation but leaves process-level dynamics largely unexplained. Sectoral concentration in manufacturing and multi-industry studies limits generalisability to the digital-native B2B environments where platform-mediated interaction is replacing interpersonal relationship management.

Determinants of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

Table 5. Distribution of Determinants of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty in B2B Relationships

Category	Determinant	Freq.	S only	L only	Both
Relational	Trust	16	6	2	8
Relational	Commitment	12	5	2	6
Relational	Value co-creation	5	4	0	1
Relational	Relative dependence	4	1	0	3
Relational	Cooperation / Social Satisfaction	4	3	0	1
Relational	Perceived value (relational)	2	0	2	0
Operational	Service quality	7	5	0	2
Operational	Price fairness	4	3	0	1
Operational	Conflict and opportunism	4	2	0	2
Operational	Brand image / CSR	5	1	1	3
Operational	Contractual governance	3	1	0	2
Operational	Product quality / Justice / Agility	5	4	1	0
Digital	IT integration and information sharing	3	0	0	3
Digital	Digital capability (AI / Big Data)	3	0	1	2
Digital	E-service quality / Digital innovation	4	1	0	3
Digital	Tracking info quality / ICT / Ethics	3	0	2	1
Social	Psychological contract / Network ext.	2	0	0	2

Note: S = satisfaction only; L = loyalty only; Both = both outcomes. Coding by primary researcher, verified via supervisor peer-check. Source: Authors.

Table 5 presents the complete distribution of determinants from thematic coding. Frequency counts reflect article occurrence and are not weighted by effect size or methodological quality; they should not be interpreted as evidence of relative causal strength.

4.2 Discussion

Relational Constructs and Their Digital Extension

Trust (n=16) and commitment (n=12) consistently top the frequency table, validating the KMV model's core propositions across industries and geographies (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Arthur et al., 2024). The practitioner intuition that relational credit accumulated over time allows partnerships to survive operational failures is well-supported. What the literature adds is theoretical precision: trust and commitment do not produce loyalty directly but function as mediators that translate operational performance and relational investment into behavioural outcomes (Arthur et al., 2024). Identical delivery improvements produce meaningfully different loyalty effects depending on the baseline trust level of the relationship.

Where the reviewed literature departs from conventional account management wisdom is on how trust is built. Habjan (2023) shows that distributors receiving accurate, timely, and proactively shared information from their suppliers become less price-sensitive, not because operational needs are better served, but because information-sharing signals genuine partnership rather than transactional management. Rai et al. (2022) find that tracking information quality builds cognitive trust in logistics relationships precisely where face-to-face relationship investment is structurally limited. Together, these findings indicate that the KMV model requires extension to accommodate a category of institutionally and technologically mediated trust that operates alongside, and is not reducible to, the interpersonally constructed trust the original model theorised.

Operational Factors, Co-Creation, and the Dark Side

Service quality (n=7) and price fairness (n=4) function as hygiene factors: their effects run predominantly to satisfaction only, confirming an asymmetric logic consistent with two-factor theory. Operational reliability and fair pricing are expected by B2B partners; their absence is immediately and intensely dissatisfying, but their presence alone does not generate loyalty. Value co-creation (n=5) presents the opposite profile: its effects concentrate in the both categories, indicating that collaborative engagement generates present satisfaction and forward-committed loyalty simultaneously. Co-creation demands that exceed distributor absorptive capacity, however, can paradoxically reduce satisfaction, a failure mode that positive-focused models consistently miss (Gligor & Maloni, 2022).

The conflict and opportunism cluster (n=4) deserves particular attention. Ferro-Soto et al. (2024b) demonstrate that conflict and opportunism do not merely reduce satisfaction scores but structurally decouple satisfaction from loyalty, producing retained customers who are actively evaluating alternatives. This is the at-risk account: still buying, still reporting reasonable satisfaction, already running a competitive tender.

Non-economic satisfaction, the relational and social dimension, deteriorates faster and recovers more slowly than economic satisfaction when conflict emerges, creating a structural vulnerability invisible to account management systems that privilege revenue and profitability metrics (Jyh-Liang et al., 2022).

The Digital Gap and Its Theoretical Implications

Sixteen citations across nine digital constructs is strikingly low against the operational centrality of digital systems in contemporary B2B distribution. ERP integration, real-time inventory visibility, and algorithmic order management are core infrastructure in most large manufacturer-distributor relationships, yet the academic literature treats these capabilities as emerging rather than established. IT integration and information sharing (n=3) is the only construct in the dataset that exclusively affects both satisfaction and loyalty, suggesting that digital connectivity operates relationally rather than merely operationally. Behera and Bala (2023) document the dark-side variant: unethical use of behavioural analytics to exploit informational asymmetries constitutes a form of relational betrayal that existing trust frameworks have no instrument for measuring. The implication is not merely that more digital research is needed but that the theoretical frameworks inherited from the pre-digital era require structural revision, not incremental extension, to remain applicable to the B2B environments they are meant to explain.

5. Conclusion

Trust and commitment remain the central variables across the reviewed period, consistently mediating the relationship between relational and operational antecedents and loyalty outcomes. Operational factors, primarily service quality and price fairness, function as necessary baseline conditions whose absence destroys trust but whose presence does not guarantee loyalty. Value co-creation is the construct most robustly associated with durable loyalty, transforming transactional partnerships into collaborative ones that are difficult to abandon. Customer satisfaction is not an endpoint but the mediating mechanism through which all antecedents translate into behavioural loyalty outcomes.

This review makes four distinct contributions. First, it extends the KMV model by demonstrating that trust-building mechanisms are increasingly digital in contemporary B2B contexts: IT-enabled transparency and tracking information quality build cognitive trust through channels that interpersonal relationship management cannot fully replicate. Second, dark-side constructs, specifically conflict, opportunism, and unethical data practices, are repositioned as moderators that structurally disrupt the satisfaction-to-loyalty pathway rather than as peripheral antecedents. Third, an integrated conceptual framework mapping relational, operational, digital, and dysfunctional determinants within a single structure addresses the fragmentation that has characterised prior systematic work (Li et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2021). Fourth, by coding 47 articles against six explicit theoretical frameworks, the review establishes a replicable analytical structure that future B2B SLRs can build upon.

Digital transformation is restructuring the mechanisms through which the existing relational constructs operate, not adding a new variable alongside them. IT-enabled transparency reduces price sensitivity and builds cognitive trust in ways that interpersonal management cannot achieve at scale. Ethical data governance is emerging as a relational construct in its own right: its violation is a form of relational betrayal that conventional trust recovery mechanisms may not adequately address. The most significant contributions to B2B relationship theory over the coming decade are likely to come from researchers who treat this digital reconfiguration as a structural theoretical problem rather than an empirical addendum.

Three recommendations stand out. First, account health systems that aggregate economic and non-economic satisfaction into a single index cannot detect the early deterioration that predicts account loss; separating these dimensions and treating non-economic satisfaction as a leading indicator would substantially improve account retention interventions. Second, co-creation programmes in key account management must be calibrated to distributor absorptive capacity; mandating collaborative activities without this calibration risks the satiation effects documented by Gligor and Maloni (2022). Third, investment in IT integration and proactive information-sharing with key distributor partners is a relational investment that builds cognitive trust and reduces price sensitivity, with returns visible in multi-year retention data rather than short-term operational KPIs.

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the literature search was restricted to Scopus and Emerald Insight, excluding databases such as Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest due to institutional access constraints, which may have limited the comprehensiveness of the evidence base. Second, only English-language publications were included, potentially overlooking relevant studies published in Spanish, Mandarin, Portuguese, Indonesian, and other languages. Third, the review focused on studies published between 2020 and 2026, thereby excluding foundational pre-digital relationship marketing research that remains theoretically significant. Fourth, grey literature, including industry reports, conference proceedings, and practitioner publications, was not considered, potentially limiting practical insights. Fifth, no formal methodological quality appraisal was conducted using validated instruments such as MMAT or CASP, with study quality inferred from indexing and peer-review status. Sixth, data extraction and coding were performed by a single researcher without intercoder reliability testing, increasing the risk of subjective interpretation. Finally, the predominance of manufacturing-focused studies may limit the generalisability of the findings to digital-native B2B settings. Future research should address these limitations by expanding database coverage, incorporating multilingual and grey literature, integrating cross-era comparisons with foundational studies, applying validated quality appraisal tools, implementing dual independent coding with intercoder reliability assessment, and examining emerging contexts such as platform-mediated B2B ecosystems, SaaS distribution, and technology reseller networks.

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