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Article

Outcomes of relationship quality in business-to-business contexts: A South African concrete product market perspective

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MARKETING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Outcomes of relationship quality in business-to-business contexts: A South African concrete product market perspective

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Abstract: Business to business (B2B) relationships in South Africa's concrete product market are characterised as transactional, asymmetrical and adversarial. This study examines the outcomes of relationship quality satisfaction in South Africa's construction industry. Quantitative data was collected from 560 concrete product suppliers in South Africa. Expectation, involvement and flexibility emerged as the major factors that favourably influence perceptions of relationship quality. Moreover, the study showed low levels of trust, forgiveness, and communication between concrete product suppliers and civil contractors. Increased collaboration, trust and communication are recommended as strategies for managing incidences of conflict. The findings of this study underscored the need by concrete product suppliers (CPS) and civil engineering managers to improve the quality of communication. To be effective, communication should be planned in a manner that is proactive such that market information is timeously shared in a way that minimises risk exposure. Quality communication may also be enhanced by leveraging the power of internet enabled channels, whilst being attentive to reduce incidence of information leakage. The study findings also suggest the need to invest in trust building, since lack of trust breeds uncertainty which compromises project quality.

Subjects: Construction Business Management; Relationship Marketing

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study contributes toward efforts aimed at building mutually beneficial long-term relationships in the concrete product market in South Africa. It seeks to minimise conflicts and adversarial relationships that characterise the industry. This enquiry was carried out in Gauteng province of South Africa among civil and building engineering contractors as regular users of concrete products. Results reveal information sharing and flexibility measures of relationship intention to significantly impact relationship quality. Also, relationship quality positively impacted B2B relationship commitment and satisfaction in the concrete product market.



Keywords: B2B; concrete products; relationship intention; relationship marketing; relationship quality

1. Introduction and background

The nurturing and sustenance of symbiotic relationships is an established practice for enhancing competitive advantage in business-to-business (B2B) exchanges (Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017; Raghubanshi et al., 2021). Central to the focus on relationship building is the realisation that the development of relationships enhances organisational efficiencies (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019). The creation of long-term competitive advantage is, however, known to be contingent on relationship quality (Vishwanathan et al., 2020). The establishment of quality relationships is more critical in B2B contexts characterised by transactional exchanges and susceptible to conflict (Jiang et al., 2016; Nyadzayo et al., 2020). This gains support from the self-determination theory (SDT) which posits that relationship quality helps to overcome operational challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The concrete product market in South Africa operates from a B2B framework where the development of relationship quality is a necessity. Concrete is the most preferred building material approved by the South African government for public and private investment in infrastructure developments (Khumalo et al., 2014). Concrete products are defined as basic construction-building material made from a combination of fragmented stone, cement, and water, which can be discharged into steel moulds to form a stone-like reinforcement material (Valente et al., 2019).

Over the years, significant investments by the South African government in infrastructure development and projects have been witnessed in both the public and private sectors (Ludick et al., 2021). Between 2016 and 2019, the South African government invested about R500 billion in civil engineering projects (Construction Industry Development Board 2017). Despite the enormous support by the South African government, the majority of the construction projects were stalled resulting in project delivery failures (Mafundu & Mafini, 2019; Pillay & Mafini, 2017). One of the major contributing factors was identified as the prevalence of adversarial business relationships in South Africa's concrete product and construction industries (Mafundu & Mafini, 2019; Pillay & Mafini, 2017). Civil and building engineering contractors who use concrete products largely engage in transactional exchanges referred to as sub-contractor business models (Ismael, 2022). This model is perceived to compromise the development of long-term quality relationships (Barbosa et al., 2017). This is so because, a common procurement arrangement for a building project is awarded to the main contractor (civil and building contractor), while the role of material supply is assigned to another sub-contracted party. According to De Valence (2019), this sub-contracting process has the inherent challenge of triggering conflict if material supplied by sub-contractors fail to comply with the main contractor's designs and specifications. As contractors and sub-contractors often work on once-off projects, De Valence (2019) notes that the intention to develop long-term quality relationships is usually not prioritised. Thus, this study examines the outcomes of relationship intention in business-to-business relationship building. In particular, it seeks to understand antecedents of relationship building intentions between civil and building engineering contractors and their concrete product suppliers (CPSs).

Although the importance of relationship building in the concrete product market is important, it remains under-researched in South Africa. Studies on relationship-building intention thus far have been focussed on personal tax services (Mostert & Luttig, 2018), retail clothing industry (Kuhn & Mostert, 2018); (Steyn & Mostert, 2022) and the banking industry (Spies & Mostert, 2015). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to address this research gap by addressing the following research objectives: (1) what are the antecedents of relationship intention that influence relationship quality, (2) to ascertain the effect of relationship quality on customer satisfaction and repeat business intention? This study is motivated by the need to build mutually beneficial relationships in the concrete product market in South Africa, a sector which is characterised by adversarial relationships. The novelty of this study is premised on the proposition that fostering relationship quality intention is the bedrock of enhancing relationship quality and customer satisfaction.

Despite this, there are mixed findings on the precursors of relationship quality (e.g., Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007; Jiang et al., 2016; Nyadzayo et al., 2020); hence, this study seeks to contribute to this debate.

Noting that relationship marketing and relationship intention have been extensively explored in Business-to-Customer (B2C) perspectives, their application in B2B buyer-supplier environment, particularly in the South African context, remains under-explored. The dearth of research in the B2B context prompts this study in the concrete product market. Also, the South African business environment is characterised as volatile and turbulent due to economic downturn (Mafundu & Mafini, 2019; Pillay & Mafini, 2017). Relationship marketing scholars (e.g., Masitenyane & Mokoena, 2020) stress the strategic role of relationships in a turbulent business environment. Thus, this study offers important insights to concrete product suppliers who intend to create sustainable competitive advantage through relationship-building strategies. The remainder of this study is structured as follows: The next section reviews literature on antecedents of relationship intention. This is followed by the research methodology. The last sections focus on the discussion of results, conclusion and recommendations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theorising relationship quality building

The importance of relationship quality in B2B exchanges is widely acknowledged (Jiang et al., 2016; Ledikwe & Roberts-Lombard, 2022). Relationship quality measures the strength, cohesiveness and depth of synergistic collaboration between trading partners (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). It also assesses the extent to which business exchanges meet the expectations of trading partners (Hani et al., 2022). In B2B exchanges, relationship quality is regarded as a source of competitive advantage because it promotes stable, long-term mutually beneficial buyer-supplier relationships (Yue, 2022). It is for these reasons that relationship quality is regarded as a cornerstone for successful B2B exchanges (Hani et al., 2022). The concept of relationship quality is underpinned by the relationship marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and social exchange theory (Homans, 1958).

The relationship marketing theory (RMT) perceives B2B relational exchanges as a source of competitive advantage as it contributes to joint value creation for the parties involved (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The RMT advocates for the development and sustenance of mutually beneficial long-term relations between trading parties in a manner that improves efficiency and organisational performance (Larentis et al., 2018). The social exchange theory (SET) underlines the importance of social interaction in relational exchanges (Homans, 1958). The SET acknowledges the role of non-financial factors such as communication, trust and respect in relationship building (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019). Additionally, SET focuses on relational rents or non-economic rewards that accrue to trading partners such as reciprocity, collaboration and empathy (Cortez et al., 2023). Such social exchanges are known to enable mutual benefit and minimise conflict (Homans, 1958). Thus, the SET is applied in this study to identify the dimensions of relationship quality between contractors and subcontractors in the concrete product market. The RMT is also employed in this study to understand the outcomes of relationship quality.

3. Hypotheses development and conceptual framework

3.1. Antecedents of relationship quality

Relationship quality is developed from a set of intangible values that accrue to partners in a mutually beneficial relationship (Palmatier, 2008; Santouridis & Veraki, 2017). Drawing from the SET and existing literature, the precursors of relationship quality include expectations, involvement, trust, flexibility and information sharing (Izogo, 2016; Santouridis & Veraki, 2017). The interaction of these precursors and relationship quality is discussed as follows:

3.1.1. *Expectations and relationship quality*

Expectations denote buyers' opinions about the quality of the relationship with their supplier, comprising the quality, cost and time frame in which an order is delivered (Wakeham, 2022). Lemay and Venaglia (2016) mention that customer expectations point out to the degree or extent of product and relationship quality experienced when dealing with their supplier. In a highly competitive concrete product market, CPSs need to understand main contractors' needs in order to meet or exceed their expectations (Masitenyane et al., 2020). For example, civil and building engineering contractors would expect that CPMs will deliver good-quality products and services. If CPMs successfully live up to the customers' expectations, this will likely result in customers having a positive long-term relationship-building intention with them. This is true, since accurately delivered customer expectations usually benefit the relationship quality (Naudé & Buttle, 2000). Other researchers support the view that a relationship between customer expectations and supplier relationship quality does exist (Forkmann et al., 2022; Sornsri, 2018). Therefore, this study also hypothesised that:

H₁: Expectations that B2B partners positively influence relationship quality

3.1.2. *Involvement and relationship quality*

Involvement refers to the degree to which B2B partners willingly collaborate in joint planning and problem solving (Qiao et al., 2022). As buyers and suppliers get highly involved in relational exchanges, they become eager to deal with any challenges in a manner that enhances relationship quality (Hurtak et al., 2022). Also, the more B2B partners are involved in relational exchanges, they tend to be more satisfied with their B2B relationships (Qiao et al., 2022). In order to enhance beneficial involvement and engagement, Behera and Bala (2023) underscore the need for B2B partners to understand the scope of their involvement, including their duties and obligations. When B2B partners are deeply involved and committed, Holmlund (2008) notes that they are more willing to develop long-term relationship intentions. Previous studies support the view that customers who are involved with their supplier's activities have a high relationship quality (Kuhn & Mostert, 2018; Vesel & Zabkar, 2010). Based on the forgoing discussion, it is hypothesised that:

H₂: Involvement has a positive effect on relationship quality

3.1.3. *Forgiveness and relationship quality*

B2B exchanges are susceptible to conflict and disagreements (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016; Masitenyane & Mokoena, 2020). It is for this reason that forgiveness is regarded as a key factor in managing relational exchanges. Forgiveness incorporates emotional, cognitive and motivational responses to service failure situations in buyer-supplier relationships (Karahan, 2023; Lemay & Venaglia, 2016). Conflict resolution and mitigation skills are critical given that project delivery failure may involve administrative, financial, legal and technical intricacies that can render a transaction invalid (Kuhn & Mostert, 2018). In B2B relationships, the propensity for forgiveness is central to enhancing relationship quality as it signifies a partner's commitment to relational exchanges (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016). Forgiveness is also regarded as beneficial to buyer-supplier relationships because it insulates business partners to costs associated with prospecting and formulating new collaborative working relationships (Freedman, 2023). B2B partners who are prepared to forgive were found to hold greater relationship-building potential (Burnette et al., 2012; Steyn & Mostert, 2022). As B2B partners forgive each other and honestly learn from their mistakes, relationship quality is expected to be enhanced in the long term. Previous studies (e.g., Kim et al., 2012; Lemay & Venaglia, 2016) showed a relationship between forgiveness and relationship quality. Accordingly, it can be hypothesised that:

H₃: Forgiveness exerts a positive effect on relationship quality

4. Trust and relationship quality

Trust symbolises the willingness of B2B partners to take risks by being transparent in relational exchanges (Alhabash et al., 2015). Trust refers to a feeling of confidence reposed in other relational partners, stemming from the belief that their business relationship is guided by honesty, transparency and openness (Masitenyane & Mokoena, 2020; Singh & Jain, 2015). Trust as an essential component of social exchange theory (SET) assumes reciprocal and socially beneficial connections amongst the relational partners (Forkmann et al., 2022). Previous studies (e.g., Espejel et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2019) showed a positive association between trust and relationship quality. Thus, it follows that trust in the concrete product market exists if concrete product users have confidence in their CPSs ability to fulfil promises and satisfy their needs. It is thus hypothesised that:

H₄: Trust has a positive effect on relationship quality

5. Communication and relationship quality

Communication is central to the formation of quality B2B relationships (Luu et al., 2018). It involves the sharing and exchange of information in buyer-supplier relationships. Information sharing refers to the operational or transactional data imparted by B2B partners (Scheer, 2022). In B2B relational exchanges, the quality of the information shared depends on its accuracy and consistency (Berraies et al., 2017). The information shared on a consistent basis helps organisations to keep customers informed about specific aspects of their relationship, which translate into trust, commitment and satisfaction (Loureiro et al., 2018). In this study, information sharing denotes open communication networks that address customers' emotional expectancies to improve their service experiences (Pascual-Nebreda et al., 2023). It also includes feedback from B2B partners. Feedback from customers is essential for relationship development because it lays the foundation for the aggrieved to lodge complaints and make proposals or recommendations for improvement (Liu & Mattila, 2015; Sornsri, 2018). According to Luu et al. (2018), the type of information shared between the exchange partners may root out supply chain ineffectiveness and result in a positive relationship quality. Previous studies (e.g., Luu et al., 2018; Widadie et al., 2023) found a positive relationship between information sharing and relationship quality. Thus, it can be hypothesised that:

H₅: Communication has a positive effect on relationship quality

6. Flexibility and relationship quality

B2B projects are characterised by a variation in scope, completion lead times and complexity (Bamel & Bamel, 2018). It is for this reason that interimistic relationships are a special feature of B2B contexts. An interimistic is a business relationship that is short-term in perspective (Zafaria et al., 2023). As a result, Yu et al. (2017) note that the nature of relationships between contractors and subcontractors is situated on a continuum of transactional and repetitive. Given this background, flexibility is a critical skill that capacitates B2B partners to be accommodative to the variation in skill sets required at each stage of the project is an ever-changing competence expectancy that assists to gain competitive advantages (Bamel & Bamel, 2018; Yu & Huo, 2019). In the B2B context, flexibility is viewed as a strategic managerial tool used to adjust business operations relating to pricing, response time and product standardisation when the need arises (Yu et al., 2017). Such flexible capability can inspire the supplier to render services of outstanding quality with reference to convenience, accessibility and fine-tuned delivery schedules that can bring greater levels of satisfaction and relationship superiority (Khan et al., 2021). Prior studies (e.g., Dopfer et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2021) found a positive relationship between organisational flexibility and relationship quality. It is therefore, hypothesised that:

H₆: Flexibility has a positive impact on relationship quality

7. Outcomes of relationship quality

Relationship quality measures the overall strength of the collaborative relationships between B2B partners. Relationship satisfaction and relationship continuity intention are identified as outcomes of relationship quality (Hoppner et al., 2015; Jiang et al., 2016). The most immediate outcome of relationship quality is satisfaction in the form of social and economic (Hoppner et al., 2015). Social satisfaction assesses the context in which business exchanges are conducted. It evaluates the psychosocial aspects such as collegiality, empathy and goodwill (Jiang et al., 2016). Alternatively, economic satisfaction denotes the economic benefits that accrue to B2B partners (Jyh-Liang et al., 2022). It is therefore hypothesised that:

H₇: Relationship quality has a positive effect on relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction acts as a motivating factor for relationship continuity intention for B2B partners (Jiang et al., 2016). B2B partners who are satisfied with their relational exchanges were also found to be more willing to expend more effort in maintaining the relationship (Jiang et al., 2016). Moreover, the possibility of conflict is also minimised (Hoppner et al., 2015). Prior studies showed a positive relationship between satisfaction and relationship continuity intention (Lai et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2007). It is thus hypothesised that:

H₈: Relationship satisfaction has a positive influence on relationship continuity intention

Consistent with the hypotheses formulated, expectations, involvement, trust, forgiveness, flexibility, and information sharing are proposed as precursors of relationship quality. In turn, relationship quality is expected to influence relationship satisfaction. Finally, relationship satisfaction is expected to have a positive effect on relationship continuity intention. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model.

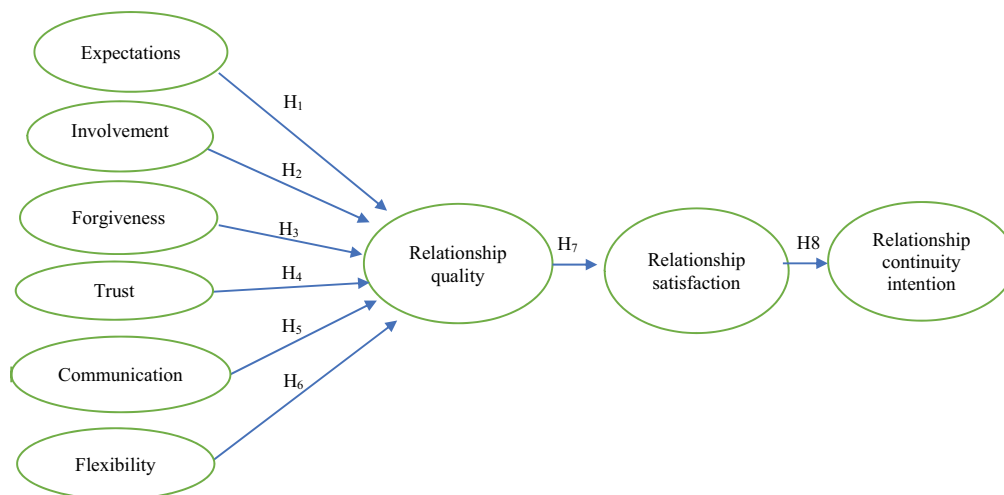
8. Materials and methods

8.1. Research design and measurement scales

A survey research design was chosen with the aim of identifying precursors of relationship quality and its outcomes. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from South African concrete product suppliers in the construction industry. The study constructs were operationalised using validated scales adapted from previous related studies. A five-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”. Expectation was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Naudé and Buttle (2000). Involvement was measured using 4-item scale adapted from Voldnes et al. (2012) and Ryciuk (2017). A 3-item scale adapted from Kim et al. (2012) was used to measure forgiveness. Trust was measured using a 4-item scale adapted Aks and Harris (2006). Communication was operationalised using a 5-item scale adapted from Luu et al. (2018). A 4-item scale from Yu et al. (2017) was used to measure flexibility. Relationship satisfaction was operationalised using a 6-item scale incorporating economic and non-economic indicators adapted from Andaleeb (1996) and Sanzo et al. (2003). A 4-item scale adapted from Hoppner et al. (2015) was used to measure relationship quality.

Relationship continuity intention was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Ryciuk (2017). All the measurement scale items were rephrased to suit the research context of the construction industry. Prior to the main survey, a pilot study was with 50 respondents to assess question readability and clarity. The pilot study results confirmed the reliability of the measurement scales used to operationalise study constructs, with all Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2014).

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.



8.2. Sampling method and data collection

Cross sectional data was collected from a purposive sample of project managers of CPMs operating in Gauteng province of South Africa. The study respondents were drawn from CPMs who were registered with the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) of South Africa. The recruitment of respondents was guided by Brown et al. (2018) argument that relationship-building efforts are difficult in once-off projects. To address this concern, a screening question was used in order to collect data only from subcontractors who have worked with principal contractors on more than one project. A total of 600 respondents were distributed by trained fieldworkers. Of the 600 distributed questionnaires 590 were returned. After screening the returned questionnaires for completeness and incidences of unengaged responses, 560 were considered for data analysis. An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess non-response bias by comparing the scores of responding and nonresponding sales executives based on revenue and number of employees. A non-significant difference ($p > 0.05$) was found indicating the absence of non-response bias.

8.3. Data analysis

SPSS 26 and AMOS 26 softwares were used for data analysis. SPSS was used for computing descriptive statistics, normality test, common method bias assessment and correlation analysis. AMOS for measurement and structural model assessment, and path analysis was employed to conduct structural equation modelling (SEM).

9. Results

9.1. Sample profile

The age of project managers who responded was evenly spread. Twenty-eight percent ($n = 157$) were within the

40–45 years' age category, while 35% ($n = 196$) of the respondents' ages ranged from 46 to 50 years. Lastly, 37% ($n = 207$) was constituted by project managers aged from 51 years and above. In terms of ownership, all companies were privately owned with 65% ($n = 364$) within the small-to-medium enterprise category. The number of employees for participating companies ranged from 150 to 2000. All participating companies were in operation for a period more than 5 years. Data on annual revenues was not availed to fieldworkers.

9.2. Common Method Bias (CMB) and data normality assessment

This study relied on self-reported data which makes it susceptible to CMB. Harman's single-factor test was employed to assess the possibility of CMB. The results of an un-rotated exploratory factor

analysis constrained to a single factor resulted in a maximum explained variance of 39.21%, an indication that CMB was not a problem in this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Data normality was assessed by inspecting the skewness and kurtosis values. All skewness and kurtosis values were below +3 and -3, suggesting that the data were normally distributed (Pallant, 2016).

9.3. Measurement model assessment

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess reliability, validity and fitness of the measurement model. The measurement model consisted of nine constructs and 33 indicator variables. Reliability of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability. Scale reliability is evident as all Cronbach's alpha coefficients and composite reliability values are above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Pallant, 2016). The average variance extracted (AVE) was used to assess convergent validity. As shown in Table 1, AVE values were all above the recommended 0.5 level, indicating attainment of convergent validity (Hair et al., 2014). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of AVE and absolute correlation coefficients. Discriminant validity is evident as the square of AVE values in Table 1 are greater than the correlation coefficients in Table 2. The fitness of the measurement model was assessed for the chi-square statistic with degrees of freedom CMIN/DF, the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and comparative fit index (CFI). The measurement model fitted well with the data as shown by CMIN/DF = 2.511, GFI = 0.852, RMSEA = 0.068, CFI = 0.932, IFI = 0.927 and TLI = 0.918. Table 1 shows the reliability and validity indicators of the measurement model.

9.4. Correlation analyses

Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to examine the degree of association between variables. The correlation coefficients were all below 0.8 indicating the absence of collinearity (Hair et al., 2014). Table 2 provides the correlation matrix.

9.5. Structural model—goodness-of-fit and path analyses

Structural equation modelling was used to conduct path analysis using the maximum likelihood technique. Prior to hypotheses testing, the structural model was assessed for goodness-of-fit and the fit indices indicated satisfactory model fit (Hair et al., 2014). The structural model showed evidence of a good fit with CMIN/DF = 2.011, GFI = 0.874, RMSEA = 0.053, CFI = 0.916, IFI = 0.913 and TLI = 0.921. Table 3 shows results of hypotheses testing results.

10. Discussion of results

Expectation, involvement and flexibility emerged as the major factors that shaped perceptions of relationship quality in this study. This finding, which is consistent with that of prior studies (e.g., Lemay & Venaglia, 2016; Wakeham, 2022) confirm the role of fulfilled expectations in enhancing the relationship quality of B2B partners. A high degree of concrete product suppliers' involvement in joint planning was also confirmed in this study as shown by a positive significant relationship between involvement and relationship quality. As noted by Stanko et al. (2007), higher level of involvement is an indicator of relationship commitment. The positive effect of flexibility on relationship quality is consistent with findings from previous studies (Bamel & Bamel, 2018; Zafaria et al., 2023). Although flexibility is an inherent feature of B2B relationships, especially in project management, it has the unintended consequences of increasing perceptions of uncertainty and vulnerability. For instance, Zafaria et al. (2023) note that this compels B2B partners especially the weaker ones to continuously seek new partners, thereby weakening the social bond with existing partners.

Of major concern to this study are low levels of trust, forgiveness, and communication between concrete product suppliers and civil contractors. Previous studies (e.g. Lagiman, 2017; Martin & Benson, 2021; McLaren & Loosemore, 2019) also reported the prevalence of trust deficit between principal contractors and subcontractors. For example, a study by Martin and Benson (2021) revealed that trust is compromised by soft aspects such as delayed payments, lack of fairness

Table 1. Reliability and validity measures

Research construct	Descriptive statistics		Cronbach's test		CR	AVE	AVE √ ROOT	Factor loadings
	Mean	SD	Item total	α Value				
Expectations	B1	0.55	0.763	0.82	0.83	0.62	0.79	0.759
	B2		0.723					0.845
	B3		0.761					0.748
Involvement	B4	0.94	0.796	0.80	0.84	0.64	0.80	0.792
	B5		0.758					0.869
	B6		0.767					0.740
Trust	B7	0.72	0.804	0.87	0.88	0.62	0.79	0.791
	B8		0.713					0.762
	B9		0.747					0.782
	B10		0.792					0.750
	B11		0.830					0.793
Forgiveness	B12	0.92	0.809	0.86	0.86	0.68	0.82	0.875
	B13		0.818					0.808
	B14		0.740					0.787
Flexibility	B20	0.89	0.795	0.87	0.88	0.65	0.81	0.794
	B21		0.780					0.851
	B22		0.742					0.732
	B23		0.819					0.834
Information sharing	B27	1.02	0.759	0.85	0.86	0.55	0.74	0.703
	B28		0.723					0.789
	B29		0.714					0.753
	B30		0.779					0.720
	B31		0.789					0.748

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Research construct		Descriptive statistics		Cronbach's test		CR	AVE	AVE √ ROOT	Factor loadings
		Mean	SD	Item total	α Value				
Relationship quality	C1	3.20	0.92	0.797	0.89	0.91	0.71	0.84	0.782
	C2			0.825					0.889
	C3			0.851					0.869
	C4			0.816					0.830
Relationship Satisfaction	E1	3.00	0.84	0.718	0.87	0.89	0.57	0.75	0.749
	E3			0.751					0.760
	E4			0.750					0.727
	F2			0.792					0.717
F3	0.772	0.788							
F4	0.755	0.777							
Relationship continuity intention	G1	3.20	0.69	0.794	0.86	0.88	0.65	0.81	0.785
	G2			0.752					0.737
	G3			0.727					0.843
	G4			0.762					0.850

Table 2. Correlation matrix

CONSTRUCT	EXP	IV	FG	TR	COM	FL	RQ	RS	RCI
EXP	0.79								
IV	.444**	0.80							
FG	.430**	.521**	0.79						
TR	.466**	.216**	.301**	0.82					
COM	.015	.109**	-.018	.029	0.81				
FL	.230**	.034	.438**	-.023	.072	0.74			
RQ	.551**	.554**	.119*	.142*	.119*	.290**	0.84		
RS	.340**	.391**	.295**	.173*	.232**	.156**	.013	0.75	
RCI	.342**	.112**	.272**	.240**	.074*	.236**	-.027	.135*	0.81

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; EXP = expectation; I = Involvement; FOG = Forgiveness; COM = Communication; FL= flexibility; TR = Trust; RQ = relationship quality; RS = relationship satisfaction; RCI = Relationship continuity intention; **AVEs are in bold**

Table 3. Hypotheses testing results

Path	Path coefficient	t-values	p-values	Decision	R-squared
Expectation → Relationship quality	0.22	3.40	0.001	Supported	56 %
Involvement → Relationship quality	0.43	6.09	0.001	Supported	
Forgiveness → Relationship quality	0.01	0.11	0.275	Not supported	
Trust → Relationship quality	-0.33	-4.14	0.001	Not Supported	
Communication → Relationship quality	0.03	0.02	0.186	Not supported	
Flexibility → Relationship quality	0.37	6.94	0.001	Supported	21 %
Relationship quality → Relationship satisfaction	-0.66	-5.02	0.001	Not supported	
Relationship satisfaction → Relationship continuity intention	0.04	0.30	0.810	Not supported	15 %

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

and integrity. As this study only sampled CPMs who had engaged in recurring projects with principal contractors, the expectation was that trust could have been embedded. As exchanges in B2B are of capital nature and highly involving, trust breaches also led to a lack of forgiveness which further compromises relationship quality. Also, communication was found to be weak in this study, and this further compromises relationship quality. This result does not imply complete absence of communications, rather it may suggest that the quality of communication is not good enough to foster relationship quality. This result is consistent with findings from previous studies (e.g., Cortez & Johnston, 2020; Mason & Leek, 2012) wherein the centrality of quality communication in relationship building. A possible explanation to the prevalence of mistrust in this study could be explained by Sigalov et al. (2021) question of whether contracting partners are equipped with the requisite communication skills to build trust in the construction industry.

Relationship quality was found to have a negative effect on concrete product suppliers' satisfaction, and this also resulted in adverse effects on relationship continuity intention. This finding is not consistent with previous studies (e.g. Gadde & Dubois, 2010; Vesel & Zabkar, 2010). This result indicates that subcontractors are not satisfied with their relationship with principal contractors. Nyaga et al. (2010) attribute low levels of satisfaction in B2B relationships to a predominant focus on economic aspects at the expense of social aspects. In the same vein, Goall et al. (2014) note that social aspects of relationships such as poor communication are more relevant to conflicts and adversarial relationships. The insignificant relationship between relationship satisfaction and relationship continuity intention points to low levels of relationship commitment between subcontractors and contractors.

11. Managerial and theoretical implications

The findings of this study have three major implications for managers in the concrete product market and civil engineering who intend to build long-term mutually beneficial relationships. First, the insignificant relationship between forgiveness and relationship quality suggests the need for investment in conflict resolution. Increased collaboration, trust and communication are recommended as strategies to managing the possibility of conflict (Mclaren & Loosemore, 2019). Secondly, the study underscored the need by concrete product market and civil engineering managers to improve the quality of communication. To be effective, communication should be planned in a manner that is proactive such that market information is timeously shared in a way that minimises risk exposure. Quality communication may also be enhanced by leveraging on the power of internet enabled channels whilst being attentive to reduce incidences of information leakages. The results point to the need to invest in trust building, improvements in satisfaction, involvement of subcontractors in project planning and stimulating a favourable relationship atmosphere. Lack of trust breeds uncertainty which compromises project quality. As suggested by Cortez and Johnston (2020), a shared culture anchored on open communication, integrity and joint planning may assist in building trust. This study contributes to the existence of knowledge by extending the application of relationship quality theory to B2B relationships in the construction industry. By assessing relationship quality from a sub-contractor perspective, this study contributes to efforts to incorporate the marginalised voice of subcontractors in B2B relationship-building strategies (Loosemore, 2014). Another theoretical contribution of this study is in the form of a proposal which tested novel precursors of relationship quality such as forgiveness and flexibility.

12. Limitations and future research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in view of the following limitations: First, the study focused on one specific relationship, that is CPMs and civil construction principal contractors. To enhance generalisation of study findings, future studies may focus on understanding relationship quality perceptions of other subcontractors. This is important because subcontractors are a heterogeneous group with diverse relationship expectations. Second, this study relied on data collected only from subcontractors (CPMs). In order to have a holistic view of relationship-building challenges in the construction industry, future studies may consider collecting data from both principal contractors and subcontractors to understand accounts from both parties.

13. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of relationship quality dimensions on relationship satisfaction and relationship continuity intention. Expectation, involvement and flexibility emerged as the major factors that shaped perceptions of relationship quality in this study. Moreover, the study showed low levels of trust, forgiveness, and communication between concrete product suppliers and civil contractors. Increased collaboration, trust and communication are recommended as strategies for managing the possibility of conflict. The findings of this study underscored the need by concrete product market and civil engineering managers to improve the quality of communication. To be effective, communication should be planned in a manner that is proactive such that market information is timeously shared in a way that minimises risk exposure. Quality communication may also be enhanced by leveraging on the power of internet enabled channels whilst being attentive to reduce incidences of information leakages. The results point to the need to invest in trust building, improvements in satisfaction, involvement of subcontractors in project planning and stimulating a favourable relationship atmosphere. Lack of trust breeds uncertainty which compromises project quality.

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Authors' contributions

L.A. Masitenyane was the project leader and was responsible for the problem formulation, conceptual development, literature review and data collection. A. Muposhi was responsible for methodology formulation, while B.A. Mokoena was responsible for the statistical analysis.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Data availability statement

Data that was used for this study is confidential.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

Ethical consideration

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