

Relationship Transparency-Trust Cycle: A Matter of Trust and Competency for Frontline Managers

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Abstract

The effectiveness and competencies of a frontline manager are of utmost importance. Study maps the phenomenon of relationship transparency-trust cycle in business marketing. Additionally, it develops a framework for organizations and managers to implement. Applying an extensive interdisciplinary literature review and the Delphi technique, this study identifies cyclic relationship transparency and interpersonal trust phenomena. Answers to research questions were collected from 12 conveniently chosen experts in business marketing. Extant literature in the area of relationship transparency mostly reflects unidirectional observations. This study discusses an integrated framework of relationship transparency, interpersonal trust, and business outcome, which could conclusively explain the antecedents, consequences, and far-reaching effects of relationship transparency. Uniquely, research also explores relationship transparency as a frontline manager's competency. This framework offers useful guidelines for practitioners for professional development in managing relationships for intended and sustainable business outcomes. Further, this reflects several research propositions for future empirical work on relationship transparency and competency.

Keywords

Competency, Frontline Manager, Inter-organizational Trust, Interpersonal Trust, Relationship Transparency

Imprint

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1. Introduction

The personal effects of a key account manager in the B2B space are of utmost importance, especially when it comes to business generation in a highly competitive environment. Effectiveness is delivered through certain sets of competencies required for the role and the industry. Building desirable competencies in a salesperson is a crucial part of human resource processes toward organizational goals [1]. As suggested by Lucia and Lepsinger, the competencies are specific skills, knowledge, personal characteristics, and behaviours, which are needed to effectively perform a role in the organization toward its strategic objectives. It is argued by Gunasekaran et al. that supply chain human competency development is an evergreen area, which has a great potential for researchers, which is due to the reasons that the supply chain depends on smart managers and their way of handling people, relationships, and contemporary issues [2].

Every seller aims to gain the highest level of his buyer's trust, and transparency is among key personal factors driving interpersonal trust. Transparency has been studied in the past by researchers from many disciplines. An investigation of the extant literature reveals that there are several different conceptions and definitions of transparency. However, neither is one commonly agreed inclusive definition of relationship transparency in business marketing nor has this been identified as a vital antecedent of trust in practice impacting customer happiness and organizational performance [3].

Literature suggests that there are many definitions of transparency across disciplines. Practitioners and academic researchers are seen acknowledging that transparency substantially influences the relationship between interacting parties. Academic efforts to conceptualize relationship transparency and identify the constructs' determinants in the industrial marketing context are minimal [4]. Some studies have noted transparency as an organizational trait and explored its impact on many different aspects. Su et al. (2011) suggest, if the intellectual capital information to key partners can be made transparent, businesses may benefit. They explain that this strategy demonstrates sincerity, honesty, and professionalism that enable transparency. Transparency may provide a competitive advantage by improving shareholder certainty [5].

Very little literature in the past talked about relationship transparency, especially in business marketing, and hardly tried to demonstrate a conclusive framework showing linkages among relationship transparency, interpersonal trust, and outcomes related to customer and business. This paper attempts to frame the antecedents and consequences of relationship transparency to bridge this gap. It discusses its role in the buyer-seller relationship and key business outcomes in business marketing [6]. The authors also introduce typical relationship transparency and interpersonal trust phenomenon, which may prove to be instrumental in managing sustainable business relationships.

The literature surveyed reflects a considerable amount of research on transparency. However, there is hardly any comprehensive study conducted regarding the relationship transparency in business marketing demonstrating its long-term effect on the outcome. This study aims to fill the gap by reflecting the effect of relationship transparency on trust and the effect of trust on relationship transparency and marketing performance indicators, which makes it unique in its approach and shall give rise to many testable propositions [7].

The effect of trust gained through relationship transparency, which can be executed as a competent behavior, has also not been studied specifically. Deshpande (2009) presented competencies simpler using “building blocks,” where the term *block* represents a group of related competencies. Deshpande further explained that the competencies are primarily generic at the model’s base and apply to many roles and industries. However, as the user moves up the model, the competencies become role and industry-specific [8]. It was explained by Spencer et al. that “Competencies can be motives, traits, self-concepts, attitudes or values, content knowledge, or cognitive or behavioural skills - any individual characteristic that can be measured or counted reliably and that can be shown to differ significantly between superior and average performers.” The holistic definition and explanation are that the skills, knowledge, and abilities that underlie effective job performance and are observable, measurable, and can distinguish a superior from an average performance can be considered as individual-based competency [9].

The competencies, as stated by Wickramasinghe and de Zoyza, which can be defined in terms of a set

of behaviours, can be developed by individuals. Therefore, relationship transparency looks eligible to become frontline manager’s role-specific competency as it improves his/her effectiveness to perform that role, can be learned and developed over time [10].

2. Research Method and Data

The concept of relationship transparency has not been studied in all possible areas. Therefore, it still requires theoretical development concerning the context every time it is being studied. Building on the extant literature, authors attempt to advance the conceptualization of transparency and re-conceptualize the term “relationship transparency” in the context of business marketing [11]. This paper also integrates key drivers and the effect of relationship transparency, keeping a view of business marketing. Researchers chose to follow a literature review method and expert opinions as to the Delphi method for their study. As noted by Skulmoski et al., the Delphi method has its origins in the American business community. It has since been widely applied throughout the world in many Industry sectors, including health care, defense, business, education, information technology, transportation, and engineering [12]. Their study suggests that the Delphi method can be helpful when there is incomplete knowledge about phenomena and also that the method can be applied to problems where it could benefit from the subjective judgments of individuals on a collective basis when analytical techniques are not likely to work clearly, and better to focus their collective human intelligence on the problem at hand [13].

Most studies involving transparency and trust are about the transparency of various systems due to the issues that surfaced from time to time regarding business ethics, practices, and values. Researchers chose a specific area of relationship transparency, and the entire focus of the study is on B2B buyer-seller performance and the outcome involving the idea of relationship transparency. This study poses propositions based on literature surveys and expert opinions collected on the specific phenomenon. These propositions can be tested empirically in future research [14].

The context for this qualitative study is the working relationship between business buyers and sellers. Such relationships involve many aspects of interpersonal trust that develop over time. As discussed previously, the focus of this study is to identify the entire phenomenon of transparency, trust, customer happiness, and busi-

ness outcomes in a B2B interpersonal relationship [15]. Hence, the researchers chose to follow the Delphi method for this exploratory study to resorts to experts' opinions. The idea was to probe their real-life experience.

Since expert opinion is sought and as suggested by Skulmoski et al. & Fink and Kosecoff, a purposive sample is necessary. Here, people are selected not to represent the general population, rather based on their expert ability to answer the research questions, which can help researchers reach their goal of such knowledge investigations [16].

The idea of one-to-one interviews was support by Breen, which helps probe individual experiences and encourages self-reflection on issues at hand. At the same time, the same could be distorted if social pressure were placed. It was suggested by Skulmoski et al. that the potential sample size is positively related to the number of experts. The sample participants may not represent a wider population, which impinges upon result generalization [17].

From a theoretical standpoint, the proposed framework is expected to provide clarity in understanding the concept of relationship transparency and throw light on issues such as "why certain interactions between buyer and seller yield higher level of information exchanges, how the subjective perception of being informed helps accelerate the trust-building process, and what is the impact of transparency on the buyer-seller relationship in the business marketing?" [18].

Breen advised that depending on the complexity of a problem, after 10 to 12 interviews, the investigation theoretically saturates. Researchers collected answers to their research questions from 12 conveniently chosen senior practitioners in business marketing to satisfy the purpose of this study. These experts had field experience ranging from 10 to 35 years, while some are practicing even now or till the recent times [19].

Expert opinions were collected electronically at the convenience of experts to obtain a balanced view of vast experience and contemporary knowledge of practices and challenges in the field. Experts were selected from the industrial product manufacturing sector in India. Experts were either the practitioners or the veterans in business marketing.

The profile of respondents is shown in Table 1. These interviews were focused on gaining expert's own opinions and a feeling through their in-depth experience. A brief set of pointers were kept handy during the interviews. The background and the purpose of

Table 1
Profile of respondents

Re-spondent	Industry	Role	No. of Years of Experience
A	Manufacturing	Marketing	14
B	Manufacturing	Business Head	33
C	Manufacturing	Marketing	17
D	Manufacturing	Business Head	35
E	Manufacturing	Marketing	25
F	Manufacturing	Marketing	16
G	Manufacturing	Marketing	18
H	Manufacturing	Business Head	25
I	Manufacturing	Business Head	11
J	Manufacturing	Business Head	25
K	Manufacturing	Marketing	30
L	Manufacturing	Marketing	28

the study were explained to these respondents before detailed interaction. Open-ended queries were asked, wherever required, to make the interviewer cover most of the aspects of this study. The process relied on probing rather than asking straight close-ended questions. Ideas were expanded during discussions. The setup for the interview was informal; however, professional and non-influencing [20].

The context was discussed with these experts as an overall topic of the research. The relevant notes were taken to develop the integrative conceptual framework based on their practices, observations, and opinions.

Detailed analysis of the opinions and perceptions recorded suggests a bi-directional phenomenon in the relationship between transparency and trust, where both the attributes drive each other. Furthermore, interactions suggested, once the relationship transparency and trust result in customer happiness and positive business performance, interacting partners feel safe and comfortable becoming further transparent. Then they tend to trust each other more. It was suggested by Jones et al. that more emphasis should be placed on building and maintaining trust than the need to "build a relationship through social bonding." Their study explains that this should be preferred, at least with the top key account [21].

Analysis of these inputs reflects the acyclic and far-reaching effect of relationship transparency. Hence, researchers propose a model showing the cyclic nature of transparency and trust in a B2B relationship. This study provides an unexplored perspective

in identifying a model of relationship transparency in B2B and depicting such a cyclic phenomenon within the transparency-trust framework.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Concept of Relationship Transparency

While researchers across many disciplines addressed transparency in different contexts, there has been some effort, though initial, to have an integrative approach. It was concluded by Lamming et al. that it is possible to develop a practical way of working out two-way transparency, managed and selective, to exchange sensitive information and tacit knowledge. Their study suggested that the firms may expect significant benefits because of this. They explain that the transparency in any supply chain relationship is fundamentally linked with action and commitment rather than posture and pretense. In most contexts studied, transparency involves bilateral sharing of information, which should hold in individuals' context [22].

Many firms acknowledge that the competition is no longer between the players; in effect, it is between two supply chains. Behind every successful player, there are many committed ones as well. Floret noted that transparency is an open and honest sharing of good and bad experiences. This study also suggests that transparency is dynamic, and it gets evolved. Researchers believe this dynamic nature of transparency makes it a personal competency and an effective driver of interpersonal trust. Transparency seems to have that strength, developing a continuous cycle of act-effect-outcome between buyer and seller.

Eggert and Helm suggested that the relationship transparency in interaction is an individual's perception of being informed about the other party's relevant actions and properties. Their study explains that the judgment of relationship transparency by an individual calls for a subjective evaluation. Therefore, perception is a vital element in relationship transparency. Hence, our study proposes, the aspect of belief also plays a key role in relationship transparency. Interacting partners will always have some preconceived idea about the type and quality of information they are mutually expecting to receive [23].

The majority of the studies have referred to transparency as a mainly open sharing of information. However, neither it is always possible due to human interaction and intervention, nor does it mean the complete satisfaction of the information need at the

receiving end, which is why a buyer, or a seller, may claim a relationship to be less transparent if some part of the perceived value is missing, which is irrespective of the openness in information sharing. Hence the definition should be mentioning the type, and the quality of information exchanged concerning the partners' information needs.

In a B2B buyer-seller relationship, both parties require various types of information about services, industry, competition, action plans, investments, etc. The perception of openness during interactions is as important as the act of openness itself. Since the definition of relationship transparency in business marketing yet needs enhancement, authors tried to redefine the relationship transparency and then identified an integrative framework [24].

3.2. Key Drivers of Relationship Transparency

While a great deal of study has been conducted regarding the role of transparency in a relationship, hardly any study identified the holistic view of the drivers of relationship transparency, the effect of transparency on trust, and further, how the relationship transparency relates with the customer happiness and business outcomes. Therefore, this research also attempts to fill the gap by identifying the entire cycle of relationship transparency, trust, and operational outcomes. It was ideated by Wotruba that if the stages in the evolution of selling were used as moderating variables, the researchers attempting to show relationships between personal characteristics and selling success might produce better results, which is because individuals with similar personality traits or demographics may not be equally successful in sales jobs at the different evolutionary stage. His study suggests problem-solvers also need training on various internal company resources and how-to-bring coordination and cooperation among these resources. At the same time, persuaders and prospectors are more likely to learn how to rely on their skills and initiatives in generating business.

The key drivers observed from the extant literature and then refined through the focus group interviews with the business marketing practitioners are, as follows [25].

3.2.1. Knowledge of Interacting Partner's Needs

Action backed by customer research is likely to result in an expected reaction and outcome in a buyer-seller relationship. This aspect influences both

the interacting partners to start relating fast, engage each other early, and speed up the perception process. Hence, the interacting partner's needs are a potential driver of relationship transparency in business marketing. Norapol noted that suppliers should consider building and maintaining social bonds with buying companies because social bonding can facilitate strong, ongoing relationships. Social bonding occurs between the buyers and suppliers in the relationships personally and socially; therefore, suppliers should talk openly with their buying companies as friends, provide support or advice, and share emotional concerns like they treat family members. Frontline managers play a crucial role in mapping and exchanging knowledge about the interacting partner's needs [26].

3.2.2. Collaborative Initiatives

Collaborative initiatives foster transparency between partners. For collaboration to be effective, partners in the process need to share their respective strengths and weaknesses to be mutually managed effectively. Even when partners are aware of each other's weaknesses, they do not intend to misuse them since they are responsible for the collective outcome. As the collaborative relationship progresses, the intent of being transparent and being responsible for outcomes together becomes stronger. Sharing more and more information mutually reduces information asymmetry and the potential for perceived opportunism. The results of the knowledge investigation conducted by Rajagopal showed that the buyer-supplier relationship quality and co-dependency significantly affect supplier performance.

Organizations in long-term business bonding will generally be afraid of a negative outcome of potential opportunism. Such firms, in the first place, would initiate a serious dialogue with those potential vendors only who are willing to share information during the start of the collaboration process. They would consider this as a potential vendor's trustworthiness. The higher the partner's willingness to share information, the higher is the initial trust; the higher the trust later, the higher is transparency further. Hence, collaborative initiatives should be a potential driver of relationship transparency in business marketing [27].

3.2.3. Reflection of Cultural Similarities by Interacting Partners

Similarity triggers a feeling of familiarity. People feel comfortable with familiar people in the situation.

People find it easy to connect among those who exhibit similar attributes, choices, or habits. Later, the whole duration of the relationship may not depend on this initial reason. There could be other key variables of the relationship, which may be more dominant and could take over the cause-and-effect phenomenon.

Among the first processes in business, marketing is related to the exchange of relevant business capability information. If one interacting partner observes some reflection of similarities from the other side, one feels interested in exchanging greater information. If the similarities are completely missing, one may have to use some interpreter or mediator. The use of mediators reduces the chances of a strong direct relationship. Such interactions may also see a loss or absence of emotions and feelings for each other. In such situations where interacting partners come from a very different set of cultures, an alternative strategy for them could be to accept the culture of interacting partner and get into the mode of relationship learning as soon as possible, which shall influence the other partner to perceive positively and help continue the process of relationship building. Hence, both parties can induct transparency early into the relationship. Therefore, a reflection of cultural similarities by interacting partners should be considered a strong driver of relationship transparency in business marketing [28].

3.2.4. Type and Quality of Information Exchange

It was noted by Moberg et al. that the research on information exchange is scarce, which is even when the information exchange among trading partners is consistently mentioned as a key requirement of a successful supply chain. It was identified by Hofstede three prime elements of quality of information; these are quality of data, quality of format and quality of meaning. The results of a study conducted by Squire et al. indicate that the extent of cooperation positively influences knowledge transfer; however, this cooperation is moderated by the level of trust and the performance of the supplier firm.

Authors believe systematic sharing of information reduces the surprise element. When practiced well, it improves one's predictability and reliability. Quality of information is the fundamental attribute of information exchange universally as it reflects the relevance, which is core to satisfy the purpose of exchange. Therefore, type and quality of information exchange

should be considered a key driver of relationship transparency in business marketing.

3.3. Effect of Relationship Transparency and its bidirectional effects

Relationship transparency is the beginning, not the destination. It is the beginning of the Relationship Transparency-Trust Cycle (RTTC), a phenomenon which we have identified in our research through focus group interviews based on the limited literature available. We are proposing the framework of this phenomenon in our study further. Transparency contributes to the success of a relationship in many ways. In the context of business marketing, Eggert and Helm mentioned in their study that relationship transparency delivers value to the customer, increases customer satisfaction, and ultimately leads to many favorable behavioral intentions. A very important goal in a B2B relationship is to get frequent referrals in the industry for business or further networking. Word-of-mouth helps drive this goal. Apart from making repeat purchases, a happy customer is always willing to give referrals and connect his supplier to other opportunities in the industry [29].

Participants of the expert interviews suggest that a happy customer in his organization reduces the competition for his favorite seller. In the bargain, the seller's knowledge of the buyer and attitude towards him helps reduce the purchase efforts and cost for the buyer. Buyers engage in repeat purchases happily. Happy buyer and seller drive their respective teams and provide their organization's various opportunities to engage at all levels. These are opportunities for co-creation and co-development initiatives may surface since the teams on both sides are happy and transparent. Happy teams become more transparent and share key goals of their organizations to see the possibility of working together to outperform the supply chain of the competition. Bharti and Agrawal suggested that high customer involvement activity, preferably at each stage of product and service development, can qualify to be identified as co-creation.

It was noted by Lamming et al. that the development from a simple provision of data to two-way sharing of sensitive information in the pursuit of value creation heightens the richness of the knowledge environment in the supply network. Health and medicine are such important fields in which the impact of subjective perception of being informed, i.e., transparen-

cy between a physician, a surgeon, a trainer, a nutritionist, or their health-related institution, and one's or its patient or follower has been researched extensively. Notwithstanding this aspect, many health-related ventures these days are coming under the scanner of inappropriate or unethical practices. Penetration of such news creates distrust in the whole system, at least in the audience of that sector.

Experts suggest that the practice of transparency is critical in relationships, such as physician-patient, surgeon-patient, trainer-trainee, coach-coachee, etc., for the whole system to function respectfully. Otherwise, the entire industry gets affected. In such industries, institutions or individuals perceived as transparent are always treated with great respect. They also get the benefit of word-of-mouth, and hence, gain enormous competitive advantage. It is observable that, for them, relationship transparency is a crucial aspect of business behavior.

One can expect relationship transparency to directly and positively affect customer satisfaction, feelings, and happiness and indirectly affect future interactions and word-of-mouth. The authors elaborate on these impacts in the following sections.

3.3.1. Direct Effect of Relationship Transparency on Trust

Hall and Stamp (2003) explain, "When you are honest about a weakness, you increase your credibility." Customers trust more when you express that you are the best honestly and openly. The mere fact that you admit to less than spectacular results in any situation or condition at all will dramatically increase customers' trust. Rogers noted that with all the advantages, it makes sense to develop trust pathways beneficial to organizations. The time and effort of constructing a trusted pathway are far outweighed by improved quality relationships, reduced misunderstanding, efficient monitoring strategy, and effective feedback by mapping out the trust pathways.

Authors agree with this as it keeps the trust between buyer and seller and disarms the seller's competitors. Customers expect sellers to behave dependably. Here, consistency avoids surprises. Customers do not want to discover that one is different in certain situations than customers expected to be, based on their behavioral pattern. If found so, it brings the responsibility on customers to carry out many tasks to be assured that they would be getting what they expect, which is

the unwanted situation in a buyer-seller relationship in business marketing. That is what competitors want. That is when competitors get an opportunity to score better and replace the existing seller with a buyer. It is logical to deduce that relationship transparency impacts customer trust directly.

It was noted by Murphy et al. that relationship marketing rests on the premise that customers and sellers are long-term partners in an exchange process based on trust and rooted in the marketing concept. They also mention that it would be useful to redefine trust as something to be created between buyer and seller. Anderson and Narus (1990) explain trust as “the firm’s belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm and not take unexpected actions that will result in negative outcomes for the firm.” Mechanisms were identified by Schilke and Cook that drive the progression of trust across levels as the inter-organizational relationship unfolds. Starting as the key individual trait at the beginning of a new collaboration, they explain how trust gradually becomes part of the fabric of organizational action. Trust is correlated with the increased information sharing in the buyer-seller relationship. Based on this, the authors also conclude that transparency increases trust Figure 2. Authors believe trust increases with a positive and favorable behavior between the two interacting parties, which comes from perceived transparency. In the literature available, relationship Transparency has been identified as a driver of trust [30].

3.3.2. Direct Effect of Relationship Transparency on Customer Happiness

Eggert and Helm argued that relationship transparency plays a crucial role in initiating and strengthening the buyer-seller relationship. The authors agree with the previous authors and expect the same in this study. Furthermore, the authors suggest that relationship transparency, when it covers the openness of the exchanges, will play a vital role in customer happiness. A buyer perceiving a relationship as transparent is expected to experience happiness when expected information is exchanged, and expected transactions are made.

A buyer would feel happier when he is fully informed of all the required aspects of exchanges Figure 1 and of the fact that the interacting partner is not behaving unfavorably, which would affect the performance of both the interacting partners positively and

hence the level of trust will increase between them along with the feeling of happiness within. Hence, we propose:

Proposition P1: Relationship transparency in business marketing increases customer happiness

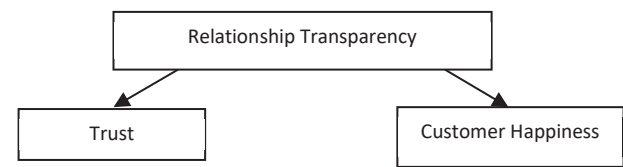


Figure 1: Direct effect of relationship transparency

3.3.3. Moderating Effect of Relationship Transparency

In a study, Balliet and Van Lang found that the relationship between trust and cooperation was stronger during individuals than inter-group interactions. Further to the direct impact of relationship transparency on trust and customer happiness, authors believe that relationship transparency has, although indirect, a positive effect on various business outcomes Figure 2. This aspect is again critical for referral goals in the B2B relationship. Since the purchase cycle in B2B is often too long, one high-performing salesperson needs a lead from their satisfied and happy customers, filling their performance gap, continuously shortening the cycle of business conversion, and making them look consistent. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition P2: Greater the trust and happiness levels of interacting partners, better are mutual business outcomes.

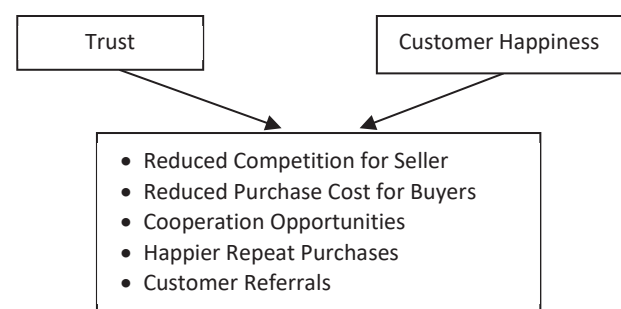


Figure 2: Moderating effect of relationship transparency

3.3.4. Concurrent Effect of Business Outcome on Relationship Transparency

It was found by Akkermans et al. that a high level of trust between a buyer and a seller’s organizations increases the willingness to share information and knowledge more openly and thus leads to higher levels of relationship transparency, which happens through

a long process and performance trail. Buyer and seller get into repeat exchanges based on trust. Mechanized processes decrease selling costs and buying costs for the seller and the buyer, respectively, discouraging competition. Repeat and frequent exchanges and the absence of severe competition generate a feeling of oneness between a buyer and seller. This feeling of oneness brings further cooperation and more transparency in their mutual business practice. It was suggested by Schippmann & Campion et al. that the competency models are also associated with business vision, goals, and strategy. Also, Roth well sets the groundwork for future practices in workforce performance improvement by proposing models for Human Performance Improvement, in which he distinguished new roles, competencies, and outputs.

It was suggested by Akkermans et al., an increase in trust leads to an increase in transparency, and so the decision-making quality, which leads to better supply chain performance, which further leads to habit, which in turn increases trust further. The result of this is a virtuous cycle. On occasion, for attaining a higher level of transparency with the same amount of effort through other determinants, a higher amount of trust is essentially required.

Practicing and delivering the perceived transparency by one partner can immediately trigger a positive belief and confidence in the interacting partner, which should accelerate the process of fulfilling exchanges and building trust. Unbroken trust must lead to repeat exchanges and collective initiatives. More collective initiatives or co-development initiatives should generate a feeling of oneness Figure 3.

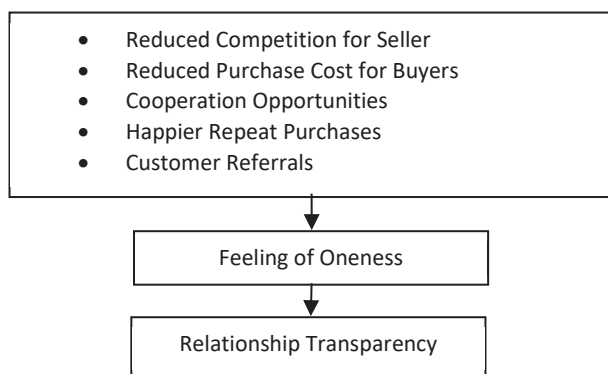


Figure 3: Effect of business outcome on the feeling of oneness and Further on relationship transparency

The feeling of oneness should further encourage the practice of transparency Figure 3, which will ensure higher levels of transparency if the cycle remains unbroken. Hence, we propose;

Proposition P3: Greater the business outcome, stronger is the feeling of oneness.

Proposition P4: Feeling of oneness enhances the level of relationship transparency.

4. Results and Discussion

This study redefines the relationship transparency in B2B and reflects an integrative model to explain the phenomenon of relationship transparency-trust-cycle. The proposed definition of relationship transparency unambiguously incorporates the material aspect and the perception of information exchange.

4.1. Re-conceptualizing and Redefining Relationship Transparency in B2B

Table 2 here shows the definitions suggested by the experts. These inputs are very close to the definitions of relationship transparency found in the literature reviewed.

Table 2
Illustrative quotes how practitioners describe relationship transparency

Respondent	Expert Opinion	Key Aspect of Definition
A	"It is a relationship in which controlled information is exchanged for mutual benefit."	Information Exchange
D	"Exchange of specific information to arrive at a win-win situation for both buyer and seller."	
K	"Better Understanding between both parties for long-term association."	Understanding of Needs and Value Addition
I	"Buyer to define his requirement/ need appropriately and Seller to understand buyer's requirement specifically is the best way to achieve transparency in a business relationship."	

There are three key aspects for the smooth functioning of the act and the effect of relationship transparency. First, at any particular time, the perception needs to be the same as a reality for transparency to hold for long and for partners to act effortlessly. If the reality of information shared is different from one's perception, one will not consider the interacting partner transparent. However, suppose the information is tampered, in the short term to suit the perception of the interacting partner to help the partner consider the sharing party is transparent. In that case, it can pose a risk of change of this status when the observer learns

about the reality of the information in due course of time and changes his perception, which will be closer to the reality, which is more likely to deteriorate the relationship in the long term as the observer also expects the information-sharing partner to educate him in the best possible manner at an appropriate time [31].

The second main aspect of relationship transparency is about the expectations set. If the observer learns the information from any other sources and finds that the reality is different from his perception and accepts it, the observer would change the perception from that moment. However, the same observer is likely to assign another source a higher value than the original interacting partner in focus, which might begin a decline in the relationship. Hence, it is in the interest of interacting partners to provide each other necessary help in forming desired perceptions.

Then the third important aspect is the actual act of sharing whatever is expected and perceived, which is the most visible part of the act, which indicates the observer must not experience a restriction of information by any measure. The observer considers sharing partners as transparent when he receives the un-tampered and unrestricted amount of information. If the observer experiences that the sharing party is restricting some part of the information, knowingly or unknowingly, the observer starts considering the interacting partner as non-transparent. For the receiver, the quantum and the process of sharing information are as important as the quality and relevance of the information.

Hence, there are three main aspects in our definition of relationship transparency in business marketing. Firstly, transparency is an observer's subjective perception. This observer could be a buyer or a seller in the context of relationship transparency. The second aspect deals with the expectations setting between interacting partners in terms of timing, quality, and the type of information shared. The third aspect is the experience of unrestricted sharing.

Authors propose to define that "relationship transparency in business marketing is the satisfaction of expected information as well as meeting the perception of unrestricted exchanges between interacting partners." Interacting partners, individuals or firms, in a buyer-seller relationship will always have some perception about the information, goods, or services they are likely to receive from the other party. This perception could also be about the nature of the information they receive or whether it is tampered or

un-tampered. When they feel the information being shared is un-tampered, they consider the other party as transparent. When the observers doubt the information being shared with them is tampered with, they do not consider the interacting partner is transparent.

4.2. Relationship Transparency as Personal or Individual-Based Competency

Relationship Transparency-Trust Cycle Figure 4 suggests that the way transparency drives trust, trust also positively affects transparency in a relationship through its various effects, especially here in a business relationship. Mondal (2013) mentioned the establishment of trust makes employers and employees transparent. Further, he suggests, behavioral competencies are harder to develop, although these are key indicators of an individual's approach toward his/ her work. He went on to state that competency embraces ethical practices and behavior in the workplace. However, researchers believe relationship transparency can be observed as a personal competency, which can serve as a differentiator for frontline managers.

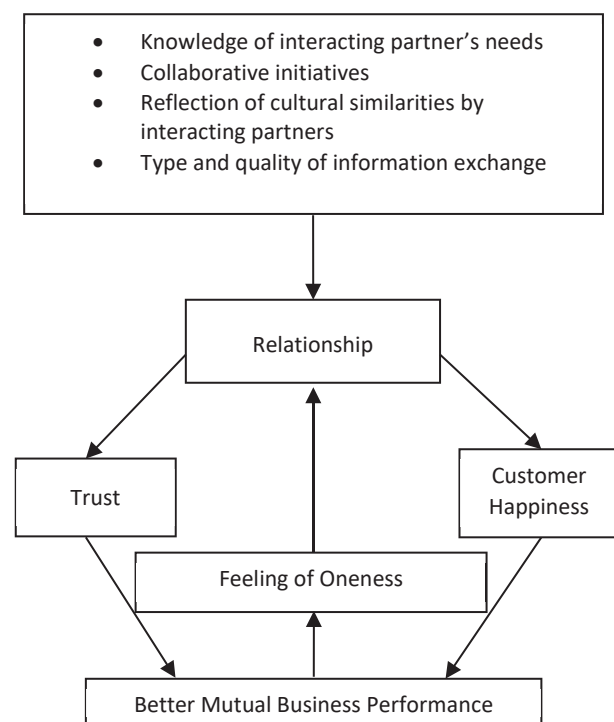


Figure 4: A Framework of relationship transparency-trust-cycle (RTTC)

In this regard, Table 3 links the literature review with the experts' view on the element of personal or individual-based competencies, which prepares the ground for further qualitative and empirical research on relationship transparency as an individual-based competency.

Table 3

Elements of personal or individual-based competencies

Elements of Competency	Previous Authors and Year of Reference	Elements also mentioned by the Respondent Experts During Entire Responses	Frequency of Mention of the Corresponding Element by Respondent Experts
Knowledge, skills, and abilities, which are observable, measurable, and can be distinguished	Soderquist et al. (2010)	Information exchange and/ or knowledge sharing, Responsiveness	7
Skills, knowledge, personal characteristics, and behaviors that are needed to meet strategic objectives	Lucia and Lepsinger (1999)	Providing help and support	
Behaviors, which can be developed	Wickramasinghe and de Zoysa (2009)	Friendly behavior; Communication	2
Ethical practices, harder to see and key indicators of performance	Mondal (2013)	Trustworthy behavior, honest behaviour	4
Role-specific and industry-specific	Deshpande (2009)	Mutual performance enhancement; Value addition	2
Any individual characteristic that can be measured	Spencer et al. (1994)	Value system	3

4.3. Integrated Framework of Relationship Transparency-Trust-Cycle (RTTC)

Further to the efforts, in this study, we propose an integrative model of relationship transparency in effect in defining the relationship transparency in business marketing. This proposed model reflects the key drivers of relationship transparency in the context of a buyer-seller relationship in business marketing, its effect on trust, customer happiness, and the business outcome. Opinions obtained from experts suggest that there are six key drivers of relationship transparency. These drivers are mentioned in the following Table 4 and the examples of responses in the form of short text as illustrative responses from the overall responses collected.

Responses from experts corresponding to propositions and the proposed model have been summarized in Table 5.

It observes a Relationship Transparency-Trust-Cycle (RTTC), which may be considered working like a fly-wheel. This cycle attains higher transparency, trust, and happiness when it keeps running under a relationship momentum. Once disrupted, it may negatively affect customer trust, happiness, and other business outcomes and can further affect the functioning of relationship transparency.

Eventually, transparency continues to go up in a continuously collaborative relationship, which suggests a cyclic effect of relationship transparency and trust. Both influence each other and gather momen-

tum over a period, which continues till some external force or element, breaks the momentum. This external element could be opportunistic or unethical behavior, entry of a strong competitor, disruption of technology, and any similar controllable and uncontrollable acts or events.

5. Managerial Implications and Conclusion

The inclusive model of relationship transparency in business marketing generates several testable research propositions from this study. However, the next essential issue is the operationalization of the proposed model. Also, it will be interesting to empirically test the qualification of relationship transparency as a key competency of a frontline manager.

It was noted by Sapienza et al. in their study that one's beliefs and preferences drive the behavior of a sender in a trust game. The conceptualization in this research also pivots on two fundamental notions. First, the perception of openness of exchanges is also related to the "belief" concept. The second is the actual performance of information sharing related to the "trust" concept. Belief helps start a relationship transparency-trust cycle sooner, and the trust keeps it going and helps sustain it longer. The higher the trust, the higher is the transparency and frequencies are these exchanges. The higher the exchange, the better are the performances of interacting partners. The higher the performance, the better are the feelings. Better the feeling,

Table 4

Drivers of relationship transparency as per expert opinion

Respondent	Illustrative Responses	Frequency of Response	Drivers of Relationship Transparency
G	"A relationship ... by sharing the complete visibility is provided to the supplier into the vision, mission and business plans".	3	Type and Quality of Information Exchange
B	"Urge to remain friends beyond business."	2	Collaborative Initiatives
F	"Self and company-based value systems"	2	Reflection of Cultural Similarities by Interacting Partners
I	"Long-term relationship and willingness to contribute in mutually improving the business process"	3	Knowledge of Interacting Partners' Needs
J	"Factors such as one's reputation, performance satisfaction, trust, mutual goals, interdependence, and lasting commitment."	2	Trust
A	"On time ... Response and Services"	1	Customer Happiness

Table 5

Summary of responses w.r.t. the proposed model

The aspect of Proposed Model - RTTC	Mention of Dependent Variable by the no. of Respondent Experts	Corresponding Propositions (P1, P2, P3, and P4)
Effects of relationship transparency on Trust, Performance, Happiness, etc.	Trust: 06 Performance/ Happiness: 04 Others/ No response: 01	P1: Relationship transparency in business marketing increases customer happiness
Relationship transparency affects trust-building	Yes: 11 No: 01	P1: Relationship transparency in business marketing increases customer happiness
Trust affects transparency	Yes: 11 No: 01	P4: Feeling of oneness enhances the level of relationship transparency
Relationship transparency affects business generation outcome	Yes: 12 No: 00	P2: Greater the trust and happiness levels of interacting partners, better are mutual business outcomes
Relationship transparency affects customer happiness	Yes: 11 No: 01	P1: Relationship transparency in business marketing increases customer happiness
Customer happiness affects seller's performance	Yes: 12 No: 00	P3: Greater the business outcome, stronger is the feeling of oneness

higher are the happiness levels. Higher the happiness, higher goes transparency. And the cycle can continue to perform better and better.

For practicing managers, the framework of relationship transparency offers key guideposts to manage better buyer-seller relationships in the B2B context, facilitating building the orientation of salespersons towards building trust and delivering customer happiness. The proposed model offers potential operationalization through coaching and training desired attitude and interpersonal behavior. At the same time, this study sets a few propositions, which are opportunities for researchers and practitioners to conduct future research.

6. Conclusion

Blockchain technology is one of the most popular, and its features are thought to disrupt various business processes, industries, and intermediary services. Despite the high expectations, there is currently a lack of

knowledge about where and how, i.e., which (combinations of) features are relevant for specific industries, business processes, and how they should be designed. These types of questions must be addressed to deploy technology to business cases effectively. To develop a more detailed blockchain use case, we examined the current state and trends in retail banking and lending, both with and without blockchain. We can automate and drastically reduce lending fixed costs in this way, allowing more retail clients to participate in the market. As a result, clients in need can receive short-term low-volume loans, while other clients can benefit from higher returns. Finally, we identified the United States as a potential entry market. We developed a proposed solution to address it and antecedents for a business plan, which is currently being tested with business experts and can thus serve as a starting point for what could potentially be a profitable business filling a consumer need.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Author contributions

The authors read the ICMJE criteria for authorship and approved the final manuscript.

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