

Mapping Relational Capability in Business Studies: A Systematic Literature Review of 2013–2023 Research Trends

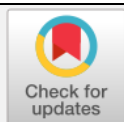
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ABSTRACT

Building and maintaining effective relationships is crucial for business success. Therefore, this study reviews existing research and provides a comprehensive overview of relational capability (RC). Recognizing the importance of RC, this study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) by analyzing 221 articles from the Scopus database (2013–2023) using the Publish or Perish software. After applying specific selection criteria, 83 articles focusing on RC were chosen for in-depth analysis. The findings reveal significant gaps in RC research, particularly in terms of theoretical approaches, methodologies, and contextual applications, which offer opportunities to enrich the existing body of knowledge. The study emphasizes that RC skills – such as communication, empathy, trust-building, conflict resolution, and collaboration – are essential for sales professionals to understand customer needs, build strong relationships, and achieve sales targets. This study contributes to the understanding of relational capability by integrating various theoretical frameworks and employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. It offers a comprehensive overview of organizational interactions and their implications for sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Business Performance; Interaction; Qualitative Research; Marketing Capabilities; Relational Capability; Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Relational capability is a valuable marketing concept for practitioners, and it describes the importance of creating relationships within the network (Singh et al., 2023). Relational capability enables companies to build and manage strong relationships with their customers. This concept must be applied in the marketing world so that companies can survive in a dynamic business and create a competitive advantage (Pigola & da Costa, 2024). Relational capabilities are becoming increasingly important as business paradigm changes occur due to technological advances and digitalization, which influence the transformation of provider-customer relationships (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Relational capability is crucial for marketing in the digital era as customers have more access to information. It helps companies build trust and communicate effectively with customers, enabling them to dominate the market and manage strong relationships with their salesforce.

Research on relational capability has gained interest in the service industry, focusing on an organization's ability to manage customer relationships effectively and sustainably. Research in this field is essential because it leads to a better understanding of how an organization can improve customer relations, competitive advantages, and long-term success in business. Research on relational capabilities can help companies build long-term customer relationships and improve sales performance (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021). The study of relational capability has emerged as a crucial area of research in recent years. Building and maintaining effective relationships has become paramount in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. This importance is particularly pronounced in the context of business practice. Relational capability encompasses diverse skills, including effective communication, empathy, trust-building, conflict resolution, and collaboration. These skills are highly relevant to sales professionals as they directly impact their ability to understand customer needs, establish strong and lasting client relationships, and ultimately achieve their sales targets.

This study addresses key research questions regarding relational capability by examining the application of marketing theory in its conceptualization, the predominant research methods employed, and the diverse contexts explored in its investigation. By answering these questions, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the approaches and methodologies that underpin relational capability studies, thereby offering valuable insights for shaping future research agendas.

Research on relational capability has been extensively conducted over the past few decades and continues to attract scholarly interest in further exploration of this concept. Within the marketing context, relational capability highlights an organization's ability to establish and manage customer relationships. This ability to build and maintain strong customer relationships offers various advantages that support business growth and sustainability. Effective customer management enables organizations to respond promptly and accurately to market changes. Information derived from customer interactions can be leveraged to identify market trends, adjust marketing strategies, and foster innovation (Indriastuti, 2019; Ngugi et al., 2010). Moreover, by understanding customer needs and preferences, organizations can deliver more tailored products or services, enhance customer satisfaction, and build loyalty. This, in turn, increases the potential for organizations to achieve competitive advantage, establish long-term customer relationships, and improve (Chang & Huang, 2022; Farida & Nuryakin, 2021; Matanda et al., 2016; Pigola & da Costa, 2024; Zardini et al., 2023). Such outcomes contribute to a sustainable positive impact on organizational success.

The concept of relational capability has attracted significant attention from researchers across various fields, reflecting its importance in theory and practice. Scholars have explored relational

capability from multiple perspectives, highlighting its critical role in fostering and managing connections within organizational and individual contexts. For instance, relational capability involves integrating knowledge-sharing routines with organizational capabilities to strengthen relationships and improve collaboration (Rungsithong et al., 2017). Similarly, Chang defines it as a company's ability to develop, maintain, and manage relationships with external parties, including customers, suppliers, and partners, ensuring enhanced coordination and improved business outcomes (Chang & Huang, 2022). Giraldi et al. extend this idea, focusing on the collective aspect of relational capability, where human and cultural relational capital drive innovation and competitive advantage (Giraldi et al., 2024). Pigola and Rezende offer a complementary perspective, stressing that relational capability enables organizations to acquire knowledge from others, facilitating growth and innovation (Pigola & da Costa, 2024).

Specialized applications of relational capability include niche-based and network-based approaches. Udayana describes niche-based relational capability as a salesperson's ability to establish meaningful connections with like-minded customers, fostering partnerships based on shared values (Udayana, 2022). In contrast, previous research explore network relational capability. Cavazos-Arroyo highlights its role in building trust and strengthening networks for resource access and influence (Cavazos-Arroyo & Puente-Diaz, 2023). Zardini et al. focus on leveraging network-specific assets like location and human capital to support collaboration and drive progress (Zardini et al., 2023). These diverse interpretations underscore the adaptability of relational capability across different settings, making it a cornerstone for achieving organizational growth and sustainability.

2. Research Methodology

This research utilized articles from the Scopus database generated from the Publish or Perish tool and applied multiple criteria. Firstly, it includes sources such as articles, conference proceedings, books, and theses. Secondly, it gathers data from articles published in reputable international journals indexed by the Scopus database. Lastly, the study exclusively focuses on articles written in English, excluding those in other languages from the search results. The data gathered is carefully preserved in an Excel spreadsheet to provide a smooth export for mapping purposes. According to McGrail et al., several steps must be taken to do a comprehensive literature review (McGrail et al., 2006). It starts with defining the research question, developing a search strategy, conducting the search, screening and selecting literature, reading and evaluating the literature, organizing the literature and writing the literature review.

The research methodology comprises five separate phases, as delineated by previous research (Indarti et al., 2020; Rini & Ferdinand, 2021), as presented in **Figure 1**. **Figure 1** shows a coherent flowchart that defines the methods utilized in this literature study. It illustrates the steps that are involved. First, collecting articles. Following bibliometric analysis guidelines, data is collected by examining publications containing titles, abstracts, or keywords related to the research topic. This is achieved by strategically selecting keywords, with a focus on "relational capability" "performance" and "marketing." These keywords ensure a targeted retrieval of data relevant to the investigation, emphasizing the intricate connections between relational capability, performance, and marketing dynamics in the industry. Second, classifying search outcomes. Utilizing the Publish or Perish (PoP) tool, we curated 221 Scopus articles from 2013 to 2023, excluding conference papers and reviews to focus solely on scholarly articles. Third, assembling initial data. The systematic classification of publications is accomplished by an accurate technique, which involves careful categorization based on publishers, year of publication, and themes extracted from abstracts. Microsoft Excel is strategically employed as a highly versatile

and efficient tool for the systematic organization and categorization of this vast data set. According to this classification scheme, publications are grouped according to their publishers, enabling us to obtain valuable insights into the diverse scholarly institutions contributing to literature.

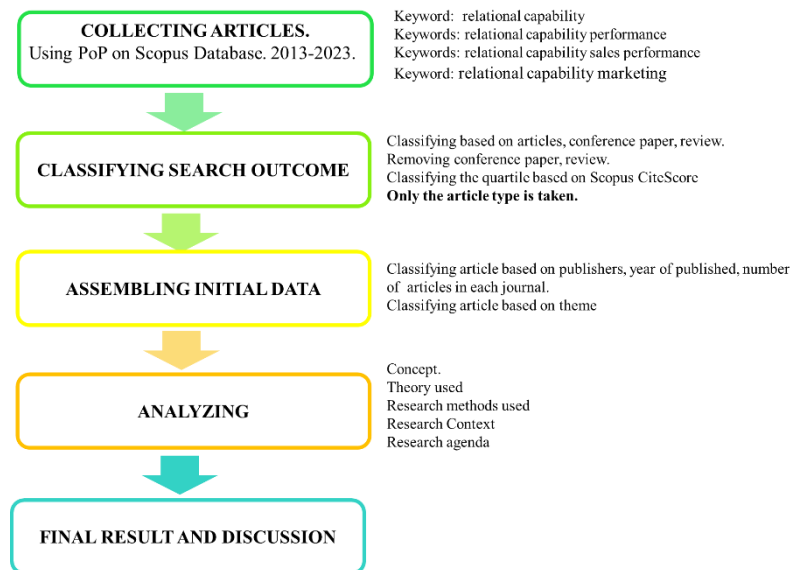


Figure 1. Research Stage of Literature Review Analysis
Source: developed for this research (2024)

Content analysis is vital in literature reviews, offering a systematic approach to analyzing scholarly works. Further refinement of 221 Scopus-indexed articles has been achieved by sorting papers into Q1 and Q2 quartiles and applying thematic categorization, resulting in a final selection of 83 papers closely aligned with our research issue. **Figure 2**, **Figure 3**, and **Figure 4** show several publications related to relational capability over the decade.

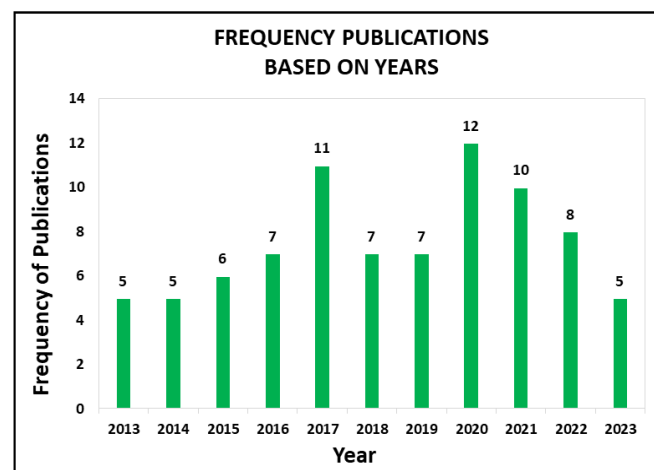


Figure 2. Number of Publications on 2013-2023
Source: developed for this research (2024)

The distribution of publication frequency from 2013 to 2023 in **Figure 2** demonstrates a fluctuating trend. The year 2020 saw the highest number of publications, a total of 12 articles,

closely followed by 2017, with 11 articles. The data also reveal lower publication activity in earlier years, such as 2013 and 2014, as well as in 2023, each contributing only five publications. This trend indicates an overall increase in research interest over the decade, with notable peaks in specific years.

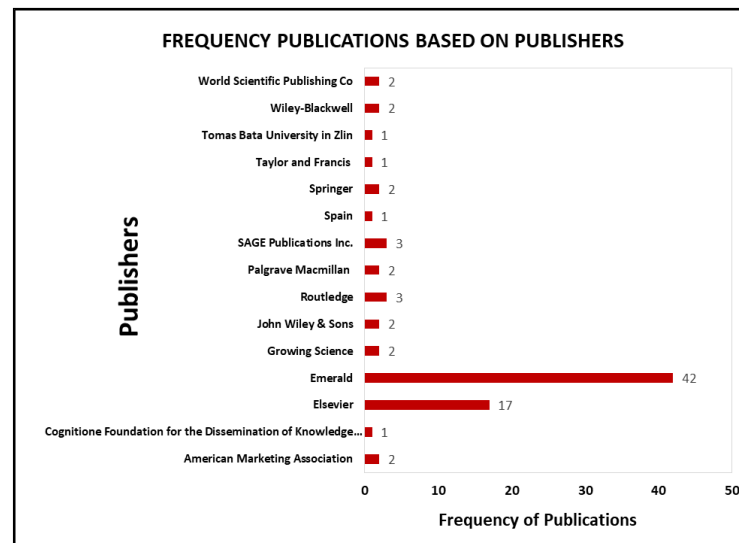


Figure 3. Number of Publications based on Publishers
Source: developed for this research (2024)

An analysis of the frequency of publications by publishers in **Figure 3** shows a significant dominance by Emerald, which accounts for 42 publications. Elsevier ranks second, contributing 17 publications. Other publishers, such as SAGE Publications Inc., Palgrave Macmillan, and Routledge, each recorded only three publications. Most of the remaining publishers demonstrate minimal contributions, with frequencies ranging from 1 to 2 publications. This suggests a reliance on a few publishers to disseminate research in the field.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of articles across journals, highlighting a concentration of publications in a few key journals. The Journal of Business Research and the Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing lead with 10 and 11 articles, respectively. These are followed by the International Journal of Operations and Production Management and the International Journal of Logistics Management, each accounting for five articles. Most other journals feature only one article, indicating that while the research is distributed across a wide range of journals, most contributions are concentrated in a small subset of prominent journals.

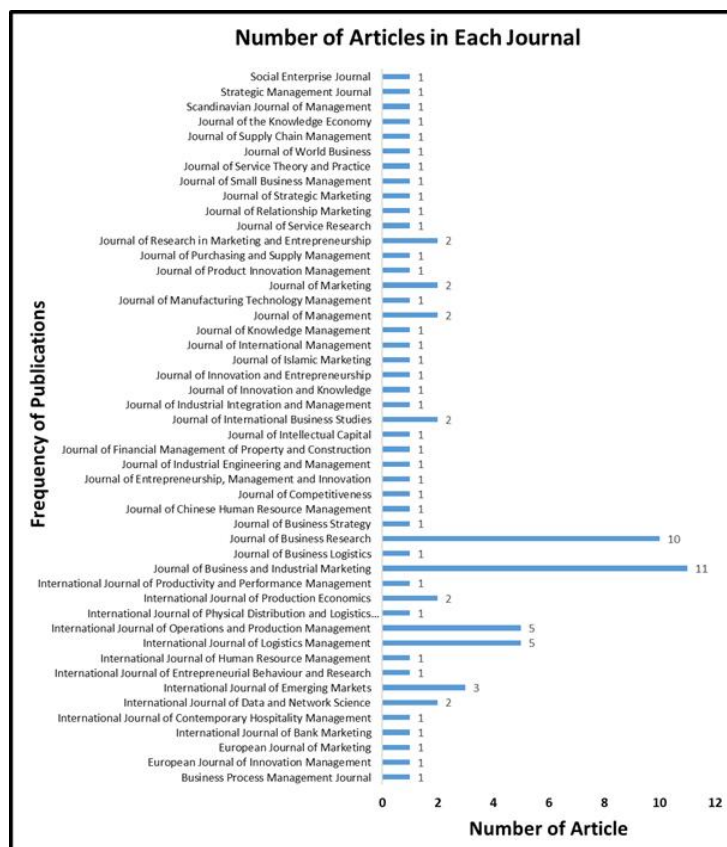


Figure 4. Number of Articles in Each Journals
Source: developed for this research (2024)

3. Results

Table 1 below summarizes various researchers' theories, methods, and research contexts. It highlights potential research opportunities that could further enrich the body of knowledge in marketing studies.

Table 1. Various Definitions, Theory, Methods and Contexts on Relational Capability

Researcher	Definition	Theory	Method	Context
(Mention & Bontis, 2013)	An organizational interaction with external stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, competitors, and trade associations, with professional associations playing a significant role in the banking industry.	Resource-Based View (RBV)	Quantitative Method	Banking sector
(Y. Wang & Rajagopalan, 2015)	A firm's knowledge, routines, and structures for managing a particular type of alliance, measured by the	Relational view	Literature Review	Alliance formation firms

Researcher	Definition	Theory	Method	Context
	total number of relations and the deviation in a year from the average activity of an alliance type			
(Lin et al., 2016)	A firm's proactive interaction with various stakeholders fosters knowledge exchange, opportunities, and process improvements, thereby enabling management innovation.	Relational capability	Quantitative Method	manufacturers firms
(Matanda et al., 2016)	Organizational assets that enhance competitiveness by facilitating joint activities with external partners, managing interfirm relationships, promoting knowledge transfer, stimulating innovation, and improving flexibility.	Resource-Based View (RBV)	Quantitative Method	Exporting firms
(Alves et al., 2016)	A learning process from Inter-Organizational Cooperation involves efficiency, structural interaction, personal relationships, cooperative behaviour, commitment, communication, trust, and coordination among partners.	Theory of Relational Capability	Literature Review	-
(Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2016)	The behavioural tendencies of salespeople to develop and maintain buyer-seller relationships encompass relational selling behaviours.	Theory of goal-directed behaviors	Quantitative Method	B2B in various industries
(Navarro-García et al., 2016)	An organization's value derives from its customer, supplier, and partner relationships.	Intellectual capital theory	Quantitative Method	SMEs
(Rungsithong et al., 2017)	A firm's ability to effectively manage inter-organizational relationships, promote knowledge sharing, and develop complementary	Relational view theory	Quantitative Method	Buyer-supplier relationships

Researcher	Definition	Theory	Method	Context
	capabilities ultimately leads to improved operational and strategic performance.			
(Obayi et al., 2017)	An organization's capacity to effectively manage inter-organizational relationships, utilize external knowledge, and coordinate technological, technical, and socio-cultural systems with partners for mutual advantage.	The relational view of strategic management	Quantitative Method	Supply chain retail
(Sánchez-Gutiérrez et al., 2019)	Managerial relationship capability involves identifying customer needs, understanding factors, adapting to them, and leveraging relationships to identify new business opportunities.	Resource-Based View (RBV)	Quantitative Method	SMEs in the furniture manufacturing sector
(Malca et al., 2020)	Relationship-building capabilities enable firms to adapt to competitive changes and counterparts' needs, generating value in the exporter-importer dyad. Based on trust and commitment, these rare skills facilitate knowledge transfer, anticipation, and foresight.	Resource-Based View (RBV)	Quantitative Method	SMEs
(Mishra & Anning-Dorson, 2022)	A firm's dynamic and customer-oriented ability to manage interactions with external entities, adapting to changing customer needs and behaviours, enhancing performance during internationalization.	SDL, RBV of the firm, dynamic capabilities	Quantitative Method	Multinational service companies
Chang (2022)	A firm's ability to establish, develop, and manage relationships with external entities like customers, suppliers, and partners, focusing on communication, trust-building, and	RBV of the firm.	Quantitative Method	Exporting firms

Researcher	Definition	Theory	Method	Context
	collaboration for competitive advantages.			
(Cavazos-Arroyo & Puente-Diaz, 2023)	Social enterprises' capacity to build and maintain relationships within their networks enhances their ability to access resources and drive change.	RA Theory	Quantitative Method	Social enterprises
(Zardini et al., 2023)	Firms' ability to manage inter-firm relationships effectively, fostering value co-creation and innovation, and leveraging collective competencies for competitive advantage.	The relational view	Mixed Method.	Agri-food sector.
(Pigola & da Costa, 2024)	The set of skills or competencies used by organizations, especially SMEs, to effectively manage and leverage their relationships and networks for strategic innovation and competitive advantage.	Relational view	Literature Review	SMEs

4. Discussion

4.1. RQ 1: How is the marketing theory approach applied in relational capability studies?

Theory is crucial in relational capability as it provides a structured framework for understanding and managing inter-organizational relationships. It offers a systematic approach to understanding the complexities of these connections, providing valuable insights into knowledge sharing and the development of complementary capabilities. Based on a comprehensive literature review encompassing various studies on relational capability, we classified the theories as follows.

Resource-Based View (RBV) theory can be applied to various companies, including Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). The RBV theory posits that a firm's sustainable competitive advantage is derived from its ability to acquire, develop, and deploy valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources and capabilities. Suppose the paper were to discuss the RBV. In that case, it might explore how a firm's internal resources, such as its ability to integrate and collaborate effectively or its technological capabilities, contribute to its overall performance and competitiveness in the market (Adams et al., 2014). This theory posits that the key to a firm's sustainable competitive advantage lies in possessing valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources and capabilities. According to RBV, firms are collections of heterogeneous resources and capabilities that are imperfectly mobile across firms. This heterogeneity and immobility of resources lead to differences in firm performance (Adams et al., 2014; Matanda et al., 2016; Mention & Bontis, 2013). The theory suggests that these relational capabilities are valuable because they enable firms to meet their international partners' needs

better, adapt to changing market conditions, and anticipate future demands. These capabilities are rare and difficult to imitate because they are built on unique historical conditions and complex social phenomena, such as trust and commitment within the exporter-importer relationships (Malca et al., 2020).

The relational view is an extension of the firm's RBV, which emphasizes the role of internal resources and capabilities in achieving competitive advantage. However, the relational view argues that unique inter-firm resources and joint learning processes can lead to relational rents, which are supernormal profits that neither firm can generate in isolation. This theory is used to explain how relational capabilities, such as the ability to manage buyer-supplier relationships, mediate the relationship between supply chain flexibility and operational performance (Obayi et al., 2017; G. Wang et al., 2015). The relational view theory highlights the significance of inter-organizational ties and networks in attaining a competitive edge. This perspective posits that relational skills play a crucial role in the success of organizations, especially SMEs, by enabling them to effectively tackle strategic issues and sustain their performance and competitive advantage. The interpretive paradigm is utilized to gain insights into the essence of relational capacities in SMEs and to explore how these talents can be effectively harnessed to tackle strategic challenges. In addition, the research adheres to epistemological standards for evaluating the accuracy and excellence of research results, guaranteeing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This analytical approach aligns with the relational view theory, since it facilitates a thorough examination of the qualitative elements of relational capacities and their influence on strategic innovation in SMEs (Pigola & da Costa, 2024; G. Wang et al., 2015; Zardini et al., 2023). The relational view is used to understand how relational resources such as buyer's trust in suppliers and supplier involvement affect the firm's tacit knowledge integration capabilities (TKIC) and business performance. The research underscores the importance of managing these relationships effectively to leverage the full potential of tacit knowledge integration and achieve a competitive edge in the market (Parente et al., 2022).

The network theory is also related to relational capability, which is applied to the context of marketing and strategic management of firms. Network theory, particularly in its marketing application, emphasizes the interdependence within industry networks rather than competition between isolated business units. This approach is seen as more reflective of the cooperative, interconnected nature of modern business relationships. The paradigm of network theory in this context can be understood as a cooperative approach, which considers the relationships between economic units, focusing on their interdependence and mutual interaction as a means of cooperation (Perry & Pyatt, 2015).

The theory of embeddedness is founded on the idea that economic actions are deeply enmeshed in networks of interpersonal relations. It emphasizes the importance of social structures in economic outcomes and posits that economic behaviour is not solely driven by market forces but also by the relationships and networks in which firms are involved. Embeddedness theory is concerned with exchange and communication networks. The exchange network focuses on a firm's commercial relations with partners, suppliers, and customers. At the same time, the communication network also includes individuals and organizations that provide focal firms with needed contacts and business knowledge for their operations. This theory suggests that firms are embedded in a web of social, economic, and political relationships that can provide access to resources, information, and opportunities (Pomegbe et al., 2020).

The dynamic capabilities framework suggests that the key to achieving and sustaining competitive advantage lies in a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. This theory emphasizes the

role of strategic management in adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring organizational skills, resources, and functional competencies toward changing market dynamics. The research thus contributes to the literature on dynamic capabilities by highlighting the importance of relational resources and tacit knowledge integration in enhancing firm performance, particularly in industries characterized by complex supplier-buyer relationships and rapid technological advancements (Parente et al., 2022). The Resource Advantage Theory of Competition (RAToC) offers another vital perspective. It emphasizes the role of resources in achieving a positional advantage in the marketplace (Hunt et al., 2006). Researching how SMEs use their relational competencies to navigate and succeed in competitive arenas can provide valuable insights into effective resource allocation and utilization strategies.

4.2. RQ 2: What are the predominant research methods employed in the study of relational capability?

This research article presents a comprehensive methodological framework for studying relational skills, combining quantitative, longitudinal, and qualitative approaches. The quantitative aspect uses SPSS, while the longitudinal aspect uses Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) AMOS and Partial Least Squares (PLS). Qualitative depth is achieved through in-depth interviews and the Atlas TI program. A mixed-methods research strategy is employed, combining both inductive and deductive methodologies. This fusion enhances the study's comprehensiveness by combining the deductive approach of quantitative analyses with the insightful inductive exploration of qualitative research. A comprehensive literature assessment is conducted, providing a comprehensive analysis of the research and identifying areas for further investigation. This approach enhances our understanding of relational capabilities and aims to improve scholarly discourse and provide valuable insights into relational capabilities research.

4.3. RQ 3: How are various research contexts investigated in examining relational capability?

The application of the relational capability concept involves the strategic management of relationships and partnerships within these industries. It encompasses the ability of organizations to effectively cultivate, manage, and leverage relationships with various stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, and other business partners. In the banking sector, for instance, relational capability is crucial for fostering trust with clients and creating long-term customer relationships. Chinese manufacturers benefit from strong supplier relationships for a stable and efficient supply chain. Small fresh produce suppliers rely on effective relationships with retailers and distributors to ensure the timely and fresh delivery of their products (Addison et al., 2017; Cavazos-Arroyo & Puente-Diaz, 2023; Kadic-Magljalic et al., 2016; Mention & Bontis, 2013).

In the automotive industry, the concept is applied to enhance collaborations with suppliers, ensuring the timely and high-quality delivery of components. Financial and insurance sectors utilize relational capability to establish client trust and credibility. The tourism industry focuses on building relationships with travel agencies, hotels, and other service providers. Manufacturing, information technology, pharmaceutical, transportation, storage, construction, and energy sectors leverage relational capability to manage complex supply chains and enhance collaborations with various partners. In the machine-tool industry, it is crucial to maintain relationships with both suppliers and clients to ensure the efficiency and quality of production processes (Adams et al., 2014; Alves et al., 2016; Chang & Huang, 2022; Rungsithong et al., 2017; Y. Wang & Rajagopalan, 2015; Zardini et al., 2023).

SMEs in various industries, including the furniture, fashion, and retail sectors, rely on strong relationships with suppliers, distributors, and customers for sustainable growth and competitiveness. Third-party logistics providers utilize Relational Capability to establish partnerships with diverse clients, optimizing logistics operations (Farida & Nuryakin, 2021; Giraldi et al., 2024; Matanda et al., 2016; Navarro-García et al., 2016; Sánchez-Gutiérrez et al., 2019). In the context of social enterprises, relational capability is fundamental for building strong connections with communities, donors, and beneficiaries, contributing to the social impact of these organizations. Overall, the concept of relational capability proves to be versatile and instrumental across a wide array of industries and organizational types (Cavazos-Arroyo & Puente-Díaz, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of relational capability (RC) and its impact on organizational performance across diverse sectors, including banking, export-oriented industries, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and hospitality. Through a rigorous systematic literature review, the research underscores the strategic importance of RC in enhancing business competitiveness and identifies critical gaps in the existing body of knowledge.

The findings emphasize the vital role of key relational skills—such as communication, empathy, trust-building, and collaboration—in enabling organizations to foster effective interactions, particularly in sales and customer-facing roles. These capabilities are not only essential for meeting sales targets but also for building enduring relationships that support long-term success.

Theoretically, this study refines and extends the concept of relational capability, positioning it as a pivotal element in sustaining competitive advantage, particularly in dynamic and resource-constrained environments. By synthesizing insights from diverse theoretical perspectives, the study clarifies the mechanisms through which relational capabilities—especially trust, collaboration, and network management—influence firm strategy, performance, and the development of long-term partnerships.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings offer actionable guidance, particularly for SMEs, on how to develop and manage relational capabilities effectively. Strategic relationship management enables firms to better leverage external resources, strengthen stakeholder ties, and respond adaptively to evolving market conditions—ultimately improving their prospects for sustainable growth and long-term success in competitive landscapes.

However, this study is subject to several limitations. First, it relies exclusively on the Scopus database, potentially limiting the breadth of the literature reviewed. Second, the scope of the analysis is constrained to 83 articles identified using the Publish or Perish software, which may not fully capture the breadth of customer-centric studies. Third, the research predominantly focuses on business-to-business (B2B) contexts, with limited representation of business-to-consumer (B2C) environments.

To address these limitations and advance the field, future research is encouraged to explore the intersection of entrepreneurial orientation, relational competencies, and business performance, especially within the context of SMEs. Additionally, alternative theoretical frameworks—such as Service-Dominant Logic (SDL)—should be considered. SDL, with its emphasis on value co-creation through stakeholder interactions, offers a promising lens for understanding relational capability.

Future studies may further enrich the literature by adopting diverse methodological approaches—quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods—to capture the complex dynamics of relational capability. Such efforts could provide a more holistic understanding of how relational competencies shape organizational interactions and influence performance, particularly in service-driven and entrepreneurial settings. These insights would not only deepen theoretical understanding but also inform practical strategies for managers and policymakers aiming to cultivate sustainable competitive advantages.

6. Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their gratitude to all researchers and practitioners whose work has contributed to the development of relational capability studies. We also appreciate the reviewers' valuable contributions and constructive comments, which have helped refine this paper.

7. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors would like to express their gratitude to all researchers and practitioners whose work has contributed to the development of relational capability studies. We also appreciate the reviewers' valuable contributions and constructive comments, which have helped refine this paper.

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