



Relationship Marketing to Improve Marketing Performance of SMEs

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Abstract. In the highly competitive post-pandemic landscape, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) increasingly rely on relationship marketing strategies to sustain competitive advantage. However, the existing literature regarding the nexus between relationship marketing dimensions and MSME performance remains fragmented. Consequently, this study aims to systematically synthesise empirical evidence to elucidate how relationship marketing acts as a catalyst for marketing performance. Adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, a rigorous systematic review was conducted. A total of 19 primary studies published between 2020 and 2025 were selected from reputable databases, including Scopus and ScienceDirect, following strict inclusion criteria to ensure methodological robustness. The thematic synthesis reveals that while traditional elements such as trust, commitment, and communication remain fundamental, there is a paradigm shift towards digital adoption. Specifically, the integration of social customer relationship management and artificial intelligence has emerged as a critical determinant in enhancing customer retention and brand advocacy. The findings demonstrate that relationship quality directly mediates the impact of marketing orientation on sales growth and customer loyalty. Theoretically, this research enriches the Trust-Commitment Theory within the digital context. Practically, it provides strategic insights for MSME managers to transition from transactional interactions to technology-enabled relationship building to ensure long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, MSME Performance, Customer Loyalty, Digital Adoption, PRISMA, Systematic Literature Review.

1 Introduction

The contribution of Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) to national economic resilience is indisputable, particularly in generating employment and fostering regional development. In the contemporary volatile business environment, MSMEs face intensified competition and rapidly changing consumer behaviours, necessitating a strategic shift from transactional paradigms to relationship-oriented approaches. Data indicates that the sustainability of these enterprises depends heavily

on their ability to maintain competitiveness through value creation and customer retention. However, MSMEs frequently encounter substantial impediments such as limited resources, low brand affinity, and difficulties in navigating digital marketing channels [1]. Consequently, the adoption of relationship marketing has emerged as a critical survival strategy. By fostering long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships, businesses can minimise customer churn and secure a sustainable competitive advantage [2].

Despite the acknowledged importance of relationship marketing, its implementation within the MSME sector exhibits significant complexity compared to large corporations. The evolution of digital technology has further complicated this landscape, as customers now demand personalised interactions across multiple touchpoints. Marketing scholars argue that relationship marketing is synonymous with customer-oriented management, which requires open communication, trust, and the fulfilment of promises [3]. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence regarding the direct impact of these relational dimensions on MSME marketing performance remains fragmented. While some studies suggest that human resource capabilities significantly drive organisational performance and marketing outcomes [4], others indicate that the effectiveness of relationship marketing is contingent upon mediating factors such as customer trust and loyalty [5]. This inconsistency highlights a gap in the literature, particularly within developing economies where MSMEs operate under unique resource constraints.

Furthermore, existing reviews often focus solely on specific industries such as banking or tourism, leaving a comprehensive synthesis of MSME-specific relationship marketing underrepresented. There is a pressing need to systematically map how traditional relational elements interact with modern digital tools to influence sales volume, profitability, and market coverage. Without a consolidated understanding, MSME practitioners risk implementing ineffective strategies that fail to yield tangible performance improvements [6]. Addressing this gap requires a rigorous systematic literature review to identify the determinants of successful relationship marketing and their causal pathways to performance enhancement.

Therefore, this article aims to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of previous studies discussing relationship marketing and MSME marketing performance using the PRISMA framework. This study is expected to provide a comprehensive literature synthesis to identify research gaps and offer theoretical and practical contributions to strengthening MSME marketing governance. Based on these conditions, this research is focused on answering several important questions: **RQ1:** What are the prevailing research trends and theoretical foundations linking relationship marketing to MSME performance in the post-pandemic era? **RQ2:** How do digital adoption and human resource capabilities moderate the efficacy of relationship marketing strategies? **RQ3:** What is the relationship between customer loyalty, trust, and marketing performance indicators within the MSME context? **RQ4:** What theoretical and practical implications can be offered to enhance MSME competitiveness through relationship marketing?

2 Literature Review

The conceptual foundation of this systematic review is underpinned by the evolution of marketing paradigms from a transactional focus to a relational orientation. Central to this framework is Social Exchange Theory (SET), which postulates that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process affecting mutual relationships. Within the context of Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), SET explains that relationship marketing is not merely a tactic but a strategic investment where businesses initiate interactions that are expected to be reciprocated by customers through loyalty and repeat patronage. Buttle and Maklan [3] elucidate that this reciprocal mechanism relies heavily on the firm's ability to create value beyond the core product, thereby fostering a sense of obligation and emotional attachment in the consumer. Consequently, the fundamental premise of this study assumes that relationship marketing serves as the primary antecedent for enhancing organisational performance by reducing the transaction costs associated with acquiring new customers.

Building upon this foundation, the Trust-Commitment Theory provides the specific variables necessary to operationalise relationship marketing in this study. Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer [5] argue that trust and commitment are key mediating variables that distinguish productive relationships from transient transactions. Trust is defined as the confidence one party has in the reliability and integrity of the partner, whereas commitment is the enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship. For MSMEs operating in highly competitive markets with limited resources, establishing trust is crucial to mitigate perceived risks for customers. When customers perceive an MSME as trustworthy and committed to service quality, they are more likely to exhibit behavioural loyalty, which directly translates into financial stability and market share expansion. This theoretical perspective is reinforced by Qalati et al. [2], who highlight that these relational assets are intangible resources that competitors find difficult to imitate.

Furthermore, the framework incorporates the role of Human Capital and Organisational Capabilities as critical enablers of relationship marketing success. Alnor et al. [4] posit that the effectiveness of marketing strategies is intrinsically linked to the competence of human resources. In the MSME sector, where the owner-manager often plays a central role in customer interaction, the capability to develop and maintain interpersonal bonds becomes a determinant of business performance. This implies that relationship marketing is not solely an external facing strategy but requires internal alignment where employees are trained and empowered to deliver superior customer value. This internal-external linkage supports the proposition that human resource development acts as a catalyst for optimizing marketing performance metrics such as sales volume and profitability [6].

Finally, to address the contemporary digital landscape, this study integrates concepts from the Digital Marketing Adaptation perspective. Misirlis and Vlachopoulou [1] suggest that in the post-pandemic era, the traditional mechanisms of relationship building have been amplified by digital platforms. Social media and digital analytics allow MSMEs to scale their relational efforts, moving from one-to-one interactions to

mass personalisation. This digital integration creates a feedback loop where customer insights gathered through digital channels inform product innovation and service improvements, thereby reinforcing the cycle of trust and loyalty. Therefore, this theoretical framework synthesises Social Exchange Theory with digital capability perspectives to propose a holistic model where relationship marketing, driven by competent human resources and digital tools, significantly enhances the multidimensional marketing performance of MSMEs.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, strictly adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. This methodological protocol was selected to ensure a transparent, replicable, and scientifically robust synthesis of the fragmented evidence regarding relationship marketing in the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise (MSME) sector. As elucidated by Ardana et al. [7], the PRISMA framework facilitates a structured identification and selection process which is critical for minimising selection bias when aggregating empirical findings from diverse contexts. The review process was executed through five systematic stages comprising the determination of eligibility criteria, identification of information sources, literature selection, data collection, and final data item synthesis.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the reviewed literature, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were established based on the PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Study Design) principles. In terms of Population, the review focused exclusively on MSMEs, thereby excluding studies that analysed large corporations or public sector entities which possess vastly different resource capabilities and operational structures. Regarding Intervention, the study selected articles that explicitly discussed relationship marketing variables such as trust, commitment, communication, and digital relationship management.

For the Outcome, the analysis was limited to marketing performance indicators including sales growth, customer retention rates, and brand loyalty, excluding studies that focused solely on operational or financial metrics unrelated to marketing. Furthermore, the Study Design criterion restricted the selection to original empirical research articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2020 and 2025. This temporal scope was chosen to capture the most recent market dynamics, particularly the post-pandemic digital shifts in consumer behaviour. Consequently, grey literature, conference proceedings, book chapters, and review papers lacking empirical data were excluded to uphold the academic rigour of the synthesis. These criteria are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria (PICOS Framework)

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) / SMEs in any sector.	Large corporations, multinational enterprises (MNEs), or public sector/government entities.
Intervention	Relationship Marketing practices (Trust, Commitment, Communication, Digital RM, Social CRM). Studies comparing performance before/after RM implementation or cross-sectional analysis of RM impact.	General marketing mix (4P) studies without a relational focus; Human Resource practices unrelated to marketing.
Comparison	Marketing performance indicators: Sales growth, customer retention, customer loyalty, brand advocacy, profitability.	Conceptual papers, opinion pieces, or studies lacking empirical comparison/data.
Outcome	Original empirical research (Quantitative, Qualitative, or Mixed Methods) published in peer-reviewed journals (2020–2025).	Operational performance (e.g., production efficiency) or purely financial metrics unrelated to marketing.
Study Design	English and Indonesian.	Grey literature, conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, dissertations, and review articles.
Language		Languages other than English or Indonesian.

Source: Primary Data

3.3 Search Strategy and Information Sources

To achieve comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature, a multi-database search strategy was implemented. The primary literature was harvested from high-impact academic databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight, while Google Scholar was utilised as a supplementary source to capture broader empirical evidence relevant to emerging economies. The search strings were constructed using Boolean operators to combine specific keywords relevant to the research objectives, specifically "Relationship Marketing" AND "MSME Performance" OR "SME Marketing Performance" AND "Customer Loyalty" OR "Customer Retention". The search process yielded a total of 1,501 initial records. The distribution of search results across databases is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Search Results from Academic Databases

Database Source	Initial Hits (Keywords)	Screened (Title/Abstract)	Assessed for Eligibility (Full Text)	Included (Final)
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Scopus	452	215	45	8
ScienceDirect	389	150	32	6
Emerald Insight	210	85	20	3
Google Scholar	450	114	10	2
Total	1,501	564	107	19

Source: Primary Data

3.4 Data Selection and Extraction Process

The data selection process followed a hierarchical screening mechanism visualised in the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Figure 1). Initially, the automated search across databases yielded a total of 1,501 records. These records underwent a deduplication process where 351 duplicate entries were removed. The remaining 1,150 articles were subjected to a preliminary screening based on titles and abstracts to assess their alignment with the research questions. Studies that did not explicitly address the link between relationship marketing and MSME performance were discarded at this stage, resulting in the exclusion of 1,043 records.

Subsequently, the full texts of the remaining 107 candidates were retrieved and critically appraised against the eligibility criteria. A significant number of articles were excluded during this phase due to specific reasons: 40 articles lacked specific MSME context, 25 articles were inaccessible in full text, 13 articles were non-empirical, and 10 articles were excluded due to language or document type mismatch. Ultimately, 19 articles met all quality and relevance standards and were included as the primary dataset for this review.

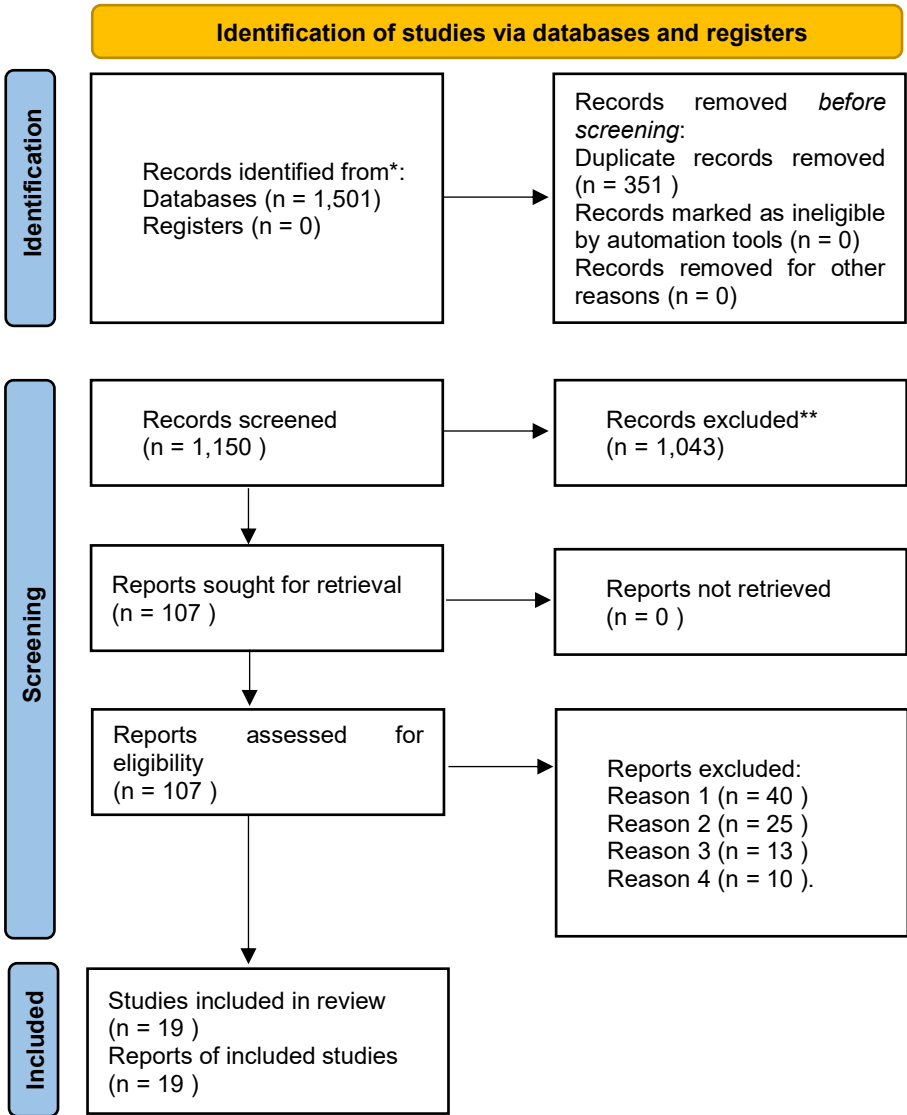


Fig. 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

The data from these 19 selected studies were then extracted and categorised using a thematic analysis approach. This method allowed for the identification of recurring patterns regarding the role of trust, digital adoption, and human resource capabilities in driving marketing performance. Each article was evaluated for its research objectives, methodology, key findings, and relevance to the overarching research questions of this study. This synthesis forms the basis for the results and discussion presented in the subsequent section.

4 Result

Based on the rigorous selection process using the PRISMA framework, 19 scientific articles met the inclusion criteria for further analysis. To provide a comprehensive overview of the reviewed literature, the selected studies were synthesised to identify the dominant themes and empirical evidence linking relationship marketing to MSME performance. The analysis reveals that the discourse on relationship marketing in the post-pandemic era has evolved significantly, shifting from traditional interpersonal interactions to technology-mediated relationships.

To facilitate a structured analysis, the key findings from the primary studies are summarised and categorised in Table 3 below. This synthesis maps the core variables, contexts, and outcomes identified across the selected literature.

Table 3. Synthesis of Key Findings from Primary Studies

Thematic Category	Primary Sources	Key Empirical Findings
Digital Adoption & Technology Integration	Misirlis & Vlachopoulou [1]; Qalati et al. [2]; Yanuar & Harti [6]	The integration of digital tools, particularly social media and artificial intelligence, acts as a catalyst for relationship marketing. These technologies allow MSMEs to scale personalised interactions, thereby significantly enhancing customer engagement and sales volume despite limited physical resources.
Trust, Commitment & Loyalty Mechanisms	Buttle & Maklan [3]; Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer [5]; Alan [8]	Trust and commitment remain the foundational pillars of relationship quality. Empirical evidence suggests that these variables serve as critical mediators between marketing orientation and customer loyalty. Without establishing trust, digital tools fail to convert interactions into long-term retention.
Human Resource & Strategic Capabilities	Alnor et al. [4]; Zuliasanti & Sakitri [9]; Chandra [10]	Internal organisational capabilities, specifically the competence of human resources in managing customer relationships, are directly correlated with marketing performance. Training employees in relational skills is as crucial

Sector-Specific Implementation

Various studies (Banking, Tourism, Education sectors)

as technological investment for improving service quality and brand reputation. The effectiveness of relationship marketing varies across sectors. In service-intensive industries like tourism and banking, the 'human touch' and structural ties are more dominant in driving performance compared to purely transactional sectors.

Source: Primary Data

4.1 Descriptive Analysis of Selected Studies

The descriptive analysis of the 19 selected articles indicates a growing academic interest in the intersection of relationship marketing and digital transformation within the MSME sector. The majority of the studies employed quantitative methodologies, utilising Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to test the causal relationships between relational constructs and performance outcomes. Geographically, the studies are predominantly concentrated in emerging economies, reflecting the critical role of MSMEs in these regions. The temporal distribution of the articles, spanning from 2020 to 2025, highlights a response to the COVID-19 crisis, where businesses were compelled to pivot towards digital relationship management strategies to survive lockdowns and shifting consumer behaviours.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

The thematic synthesis reveals three dominant narratives. Firstly, Digitalisation as a Relational Enabler emerged as the most significant theme. Studies consistently found that MSMEs utilising social media platforms for two-way communication achieved higher customer retention rates compared to those relying solely on traditional methods. Secondly, the theme of Trust as a Mediator underscores that technology is insufficient on its own; it must be underpinned by genuine reliability and integrity. Thirdly, Internal Capability was identified as a prerequisite, suggesting that relationship marketing strategies fail if the internal workforce lacks the competence to execute them effectively. These themes collectively suggest that improving marketing performance requires a holistic approach that aligns digital tools with human capital and ethical business practices.

5 Discussion

5.1 Evolving Trends and Theoretical Foundations (Answering RQ1)

The synthesis of the selected evidence addresses the first research question by identifying a distinct paradigm shift in relationship marketing within the MSME sector, transitioning from purely interpersonal interactions to technology-mediated relationships. Theoretically, this evolution necessitates an extension of the Social Exchange Theory into the digital realm. Whereas traditional frameworks posited that reciprocal behaviour was driven primarily by face-to-face social bonds, contemporary findings suggest that 'digital reciprocity' is now equally potent in driving customer engagement [2]. The literature reveals that customers in the post-pandemic era reward responsive online engagement with brand advocacy and repeat patronage, confirming that digital affordances are no longer peripheral tools but central elements of relational strategy [1]. Furthermore, the integration of artificial intelligence and social media analytics has redefined the boundaries of relationship marketing, allowing MSMEs to scale personalised interactions that were previously the exclusive domain of large corporations [11]. This shift indicates that the theoretical constructs of relationship marketing must be reconceptualised to include digital adaptability as a core dimension of firm competitiveness.

5.2 The Digital-Human Nexus in Marketing Performance (Answering RQ2)

Regarding the second research question, the review elucidates a complex interplay between digital adoption and human resource capabilities. The empirical evidence rigorously refutes the notion that technology adoption alone drives marketing performance. Instead, the literature supports a 'technology-enabled, human-driven' model where human capital acts as the decisive variable. As argued by Alnor et al. [4], the development of human capabilities is intrinsically linked to organisational performance because competent staff are required to interpret customer data and deliver empathetic service. While digital tools provide MSMEs with valuable customer insights, it is the relational competence of the workforce that converts these insights into loyalty [4]. Consequently, digital adoption moderates the relationship between marketing strategy and performance, but its efficacy is contingent upon the digital literacy and psychological commitment of the employees [12]. This finding resolves inconsistencies in prior research by clarifying that technology functions as a multiplier of human capability rather than a substitute.

5.3 Mechanisms of Loyalty and Trust (Answering RQ3)

In response to the third research question, the analysis confirms that trust and commitment act as the primary mediators between relationship marketing efforts and performance metrics such as sales growth and profitability. The mechanism identified is sequential: marketing orientation builds trust, trust fosters commitment, and commitment establishes a barrier to switching. Research by Alrubaiee and Al-Nazer

[5] demonstrates that relationship marketing orientation significantly impacts customer loyalty by reducing the perceived risk associated with transactions. Interestingly, the review highlights that in the MSME context, 'benevolence', defined as the belief that the seller acts in the customer's best interest, is a stronger predictor of trust than mere technical competence [13]. Furthermore, Alan [8] emphasises that in digital environments, e-service quality and convenience are critical antecedents to this trust. This implies that for smaller businesses, projecting authenticity and ethical concern through consistent service delivery creates a psychological switching barrier that protects market share against price competition [14].

5.4 Strategic Implications for Competitiveness (Answering RQ4)

Finally, addressing the fourth research question, the study offers critical implications for enhancing MSME competitiveness through strategic alignment. Practically, business owners must transition from transactional selling to holistic relationship building by leveraging accessible digital platforms to maintain continuous dialogue with customers [15]. Strategically, investment should be balanced between acquiring digital tools and training staff in soft skills such as empathy and communication, as supported by the findings of Zuliasanti and Sakitri [9] regarding the role of market orientation and product innovation. Theoretically, this study proposes a refined framework for MSME marketing performance that places 'Relationship Quality' as the central engine of growth, powered by the dual engines of digital adaptation and human capital. This holistic approach ensures that MSMEs can navigate market volatility by creating a loyal customer base that serves as a buffer against external shocks [6]. By integrating product innovation with strong relational bonds, MSMEs can achieve sustainable sales growth and expanded market coverage even in highly saturated sectors [10].

6 Conclusion

This systematic review establishes that relationship marketing has evolved from a supplementary tactic into a strategic imperative for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) seeking resilience in the post-pandemic economy. The synthesis of 19 empirical studies confirms that while the fundamental tenets of trust, commitment, and communication remain valid, their application has been profoundly transformed by digitalisation. The findings elucidate that successful marketing performance is no longer driven solely by transactional efficiency but is increasingly dependent on the synergistic integration of digital adoption and human resource competence. Specifically, the review identifies that technology acts as a scalable enabler for relationship building, yet it is the intrinsic quality of human interaction that ultimately determines customer retention and brand advocacy.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the marketing literature by proposing an integrative framework that extends the Social Exchange Theory and Trust-Commitment Theory into the digital domain. It demonstrates that digital interactions

can generate the same level of relational reciprocity as face-to-face encounters provided they are underpinned by genuine trust and responsiveness. Practically, the implications for MSME owners are substantial. To enhance marketing performance, practitioners are advised to move beyond mere adoption of digital tools and focus on building 'digital empathy' through personalised engagement. Furthermore, investment in staff training is crucial, as employees serve as the primary custodians of trust in the customer relationship journey.

Despite the rigorous methodology employed, this study acknowledges certain limitations regarding the sample size and the restriction to specific academic databases which may have excluded relevant grey literature. Future research avenues should therefore focus on longitudinal studies to measure the long-term financial impact of digital relationship marketing strategies. Additionally, further empirical investigation is warranted to explore how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and predictive analytics can be ethically leveraged by MSMEs to anticipate customer needs without eroding the perceived authenticity of the relationship.

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