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'All you need is trust': examining trust, information sharing, and supplier performance perception in SMEs from a social exchange perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to substantiate the interrelationships between the perceived value of supplier performance, trust, and information sharing in the context of small and medium-sized agribusiness enterprises (SMEs), in an emerging economy. A survey was conducted to collect data from 83 licensed orchid flower exporters (buyer firms) in Thailand. The collected data was used to test hypotheses using path analysis. The empirical findings provide valuable insights into trust in buyer-supplier relationships from a social exchange perspective. Specifically, the study confirms that a high level of perceived value of supplier performance leads to greater trust between the parties, which in turn indirectly increases the level of information sharing. This implies and validates that trust plays a crucial role in fostering positive outcomes and strengthening buyer-supplier relationships. Building mutual trust between buyers and suppliers can ultimately result in more successful supply chain performance. The study suggests that small and medium orchid flower exporters build trust with key suppliers to secure valuable resources and capabilities by sharing information. This study contributes by investigating the sources of trust, the relationship between trust and the mediating role that it plays in linking the perceived value of supplier performance and information sharing within SMEs.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the importance of trust in establishing and maintaining high-performing, effective and efficient and resilient supply chains has gained attention from both academic researchers and practitioners (Bianchi & Abu Saleh, 2020; Blome *et al.*, 2023; Bokrantz & Dul, 2023; Chamola *et al.*, 2022). Over the past two decades, arms-length agreements have been evolving toward collaborative relationships based on trust and information sharing (Corsten & Felde, 2005; Alshurideh *et al.*, 2022). While developing trust can be costly and time-consuming, it is essential for establishing strong buyer-supplier bonds, and increasing performance and satisfaction (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Bodendorf *et al.*, 2022).

In emerging economies, especially between small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the concept of trust appears less formal. It relies significantly on socialisation mechanisms (Manfredi & Capik, 2022). Trust can be described as confidence in the competence and integrity of another party and is widely recognised as a precondition for positive inter-organisational relationships and effective supply chain performance (Han *et al.*, 2021). In general, trust is categorised into competence-based or integrity-based features (Assis *et al.*, 2023; Manfredi & Capik, 2022). SMEs often have limited resources and knowledge, which may hinder the successful establishment of long-term collaboration with their supply chain partners. As a result, Assis *et al.* (2023), who conduct qualitative research in agri-food supply chains, suggest

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that researchers should explore further the elements that enable building trust and attempt to confirm relationships between constructs.

While, trust is considered one most researched constructs in the relationship management literature (Bloemer *et al.*, 2013; Jalal Ahamed & Noboa, 2023), trust theory is still evolving, and its conceptualisation and operationalisation remain hazy (Rani *et al.*, 2018). Importantly, a general understanding of the antecedents and the role of trust in information sharing remains limited. Studying trust in the perishable supply chain composed of SMEs in emerging economies is worthy of investigation and different from the more traditional research setting, between large firms in developed countries (Manfredi & Capik, 2022).

Moreover, previous research has documented antecedents of trust, such as satisfaction, communication, competence, shared values, and co-creation (Franklin & Marshall, 2019), as well as the role of process-oriented mechanisms, such as product delivery reliability and conformance to quality, in establishing and nurturing trust between supplier and buyer firms (Ha *et al.*, 2011; Stuart *et al.*, 2012). This is in line with Bianchi and Abu Saleh (2020) who have also called for further investigation into the antecedent of trust to gain a more complete understanding of trust in supply chain partnerships. In this study, we argue that the perceived supplier performance from the buyer's standpoint can be an important antecedent of trust-led collaborative behaviour. We suggest that the perception of supplier performance may be the root of motivation in the supplier selection decision. While some prior studies have focused solely on supplier trust (Dyer & Chu, 2003) and others on buyer trust (Franklin & Marshall, 2019), our research seeks to clarify the importance of the buyer's trust-information linkage. Specifically, we argue that buyers who are downstream and closer to customers in the supply chain play an important role in the information-sharing process. Our research also aims to distinguish between supplier and buyer trust, which has not been clearly differentiated previously (Gualandris & Kalchschmidt, 2016).

Moreover, researchers have called for further investigation into the antecedent of trust to gain a deeper understanding of trust in supply chain partnerships (Bianchi & Abu Saleh, 2020; Han *et al.*, 2021; Kwon & Suh, 2004). Kwon and Suh (2004) propose that social exchange variables, including perceived satisfaction and partner reputation, positively influence the level of trust in partner firms. Similarly, Selnes (1998) suggests that satisfaction and trust can explain the relationship between two parties. Positive experiences or satisfaction can result from acceptable expectations of how the supplier should behave (Selnes, 1998). Consistent with the work of Barry *et al.* (2008), the perceived value, such as the supplier's performance perception, can provide trust to the buyer who has certain sentiments and expected outcomes. For example, Kwon and Suh (2004) added that supplier reputation, based on the buyer's perception, enhances the supplier's ability to deliver quality products/services. The perception of value from the supplier is an important aspect of the buyer-supplier relationship. Sahay (2003) suggested that managing relationships in the supply chain requires a high level of perceived value, such as highly reliable and dependable service levels. The relationship will be strengthened when both partners can offer support when needed (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Similarly, the characteristics of the offering can influence the buyer's perception of product and service performance (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2001). This raises the question of whether a perceived level of value in the supplier's performance can foster trust in the supplier. As a result, we believe that there is a need to integrate the firms' competencies (e.g. quality and service efficiency and price and delivery efficiency) into the research model, as antecedents to trust to fill the aforementioned research gap. Although the relationship between trust and information sharing has been studied, the nature of their relationship remains unclear. On the one hand, some studies propose that information sharing has a positive effect on trust (Kwon & Suh, 2004; On *et al.*, 2013; Panahifar *et al.*, 2018). For instance, On *et al.* (2013) studied the international joint venture context and discovered that collaborative integration, such as sharing information, resources, and goals, increases trust. On the other hand, some studies suggest that a buyer's trust in a supplier itself positively relates to information sharing (Cai *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2014). Nonetheless, we believe that there is an opportunity to increase our understanding of trust by conceptualising it further (Fawcett *et al.*, 2017). In this study, we set out to examine the antecedents of trust and its role in the supply chain relationships of SMEs in an emerging economy. This attempts to fill the research gap raised by Graca *et al.* (2015), who suggested testing the relationships between trust and the exchange climate of exporters in different countries. We have focused on the agribusiness supply chains in Thailand due to a lack of empirical evidence supporting the development of

buyer's trust in this context (Routroy & Behera, 2017). Perishable supply chains also have specific characteristics, including seasonality, long supply lead times, and short product life cycles, which create complexities, potentially affecting supply chain performances. Hence, forming collaboration is critical to coping with such uncertainties. Moreover, shared information can be viewed as a unique capability, which is critical for establishing stable and competitive supply chains (Wang *et al.*, 2023). In the context of emerging markets, Ho *et al.* (2023) reported a lack of collaboration in the agricultural supply chain and called for more trust within the supply network. Furthermore, many studies in the agri-product sector relied either on case studies (Matopoulos *et al.*, 2007; Uddin, 2017) or conceptual work (Luo *et al.*, 2018). Scholars have advocated for the use of quantitative research, such as surveys, to be complementary to the current body of knowledge. They also noted that researchers should employ different theories beyond the resource-based view and transaction cost economies. Finally, several previous studies recommended conducting research in other contexts (Fawcett *et al.*, 2017; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). These key factors have motivated us in the pursuit of this study from a social exchange perspective. We believe the aforementioned provides the newness and relevance of this study. In this paper, we argue that the perishable product supply chain in an emerging market is an important context to study trust building, and therefore, we posit the following questions: (i) How does perceived supplier performance from buyers increase buyer's trust and information sharing? And (ii) What is the role of trust in the relationship between perceived supplier performance from buyers and information sharing?

Thailand is the world's top exporter of tropical orchid flowers. Thai orchid flower growers are key supply chain members contributing to healthy export performance. However, these growers face several challenges, including a failure to develop and introduce new species into the market continuously, the inability to produce the volume required to meet market demand, as well as experiencing export issues and trade barriers imposed by trading partner countries (Phinaitrup, 2014). Perishable products, such as tropical orchid flowers, are sensitive to quality deterioration over time and are susceptible to contamination, disease, and damage (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Lusiantoro *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, the uncertainty of demand and the variability of short shelf lives of perishable products can adversely affect the quality and safety of perishable products without proper storage facilities. Researchers have suggested implementing supply chain integration to cope with these problems. We argue that working together, such as sharing information between exporters (buyer firms) and growers (supplier firms), requires supply chain governance, such as a high level of trust.

In summary, this study examines the effects of the perceived value of supplier performance on trust in suppliers and how this leads to information sharing from the buyer's perspective. We are interested in exploring the role of the buyer in building trust to increase collaborative relationships with their suppliers. Buyer trust in their supplier increases buyer confidence, which helps to reduce short-term inequities, lower transaction costs, and enhance longer-term benefits (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Zhou, 2022). Due to the growth of agribusiness in developing countries, farmers and growers are required to coordinate their production and marketing activities cost-effectively and meet the quality, volume, and timing required by agribusiness buyers (Vroegindewey *et al.*, 2018). In general, farmers are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have a low level of use of information and communication technologies (Matopoulos *et al.*, 2007). As part of our research, we explore how the buyer's perceived value of supplier performance leads to increased trust in the supplier and, as a result, improves information sharing.

The contribution of this study is threefold. Firstly, our study provides empirical evidence of the linkage between the buyer's perception of supplier performance, trust, and information sharing. This builds on Graca *et al.* (2015) work, which analysed behavioural attributes in buyer-supplier relationships in the B2B context. Secondly, we confirm how trust can be a critical enabler for information sharing between firms. This is in line with Müller *et al.* (2020) who found positive linkages between trust and information sharing in SMEs. One of the core elements of supply chain integration is information sharing, and the agricultural, perishable product supply chain provides a relevant context to study this phenomenon. Finally, this research contributes to the literature on the antecedent of trust, which several prior studies have called to explore further (Bianchi & Abu Saleh, 2020). This study provides empirical evidence that the buyer's perception of supplier performance, particularly in terms of price and delivery performance, can improve their trust in the supplier, which in turn leads to information sharing.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Theoretical background

We employ social exchange theory as the framework for our research hypotheses. According to Blau (1964), social exchange theory refers to the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the expected returns and typical outcomes they receive from others. The theory assumes that these actions are voluntary and operate under uncertainty, with no guarantee of reciprocal benefits (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022; Das & Teng, 2002). Additionally, trust is considered an integral part of any social exchange process (Blau, 1964; Hald *et al.*, 2009). This theory views people's social behaviour in terms of exchanging resources, and this exchange process occurs when two parties directly exchange favours with each other (Das & Teng, 2002).

The social exchange theory offers a useful framework for analysing buyer-supplier relationships as it integrates relationship value, trust, and power/dependence perspectives. According to Hald *et al.* (2009), the perceived expected value is a key factor in establishing and maintaining relationships between actors A and B. The authors explain that to attract actor B, actor A must provide the expected value. When an exchange leads to a reward, it is expected to continue. In contrast, when the exchange fails, firms tend to avoid entering into such relationships in the future (Wang *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, the literature suggests that the primary motivation for two actors to come together is to reduce risk and transaction costs (Hald *et al.*, 2009). Other scholars have documented the role of social exchange processes and value creation within strategic buyer-supplier relationships (Carey *et al.*, 2011). Buyers can gain a competitive advantage through their social networks. Social capital, which includes the relational dimension of trust and obligation, is defined as the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, accessible through, and derived from an individual's or social unit's network of relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Carey *et al.* (2011) suggest that the relational dimension of social exchange theory can refer to trust in the personal relationship between people.

Trust is an important component of social exchange because it facilitates informal cooperation and leads to better information sharing between organisations (Dyer & Chu, 2003; Hald *et al.*, 2009). In addition, trust can be considered a function of both the past performance of the exchange and their expectations of the future (Ahamed & Noboa, 2023).

In this study, we define trust as 'one party's confidence in the other party' (Barney & Hansen, 1994). According to the social exchange theory, trust is developed through the regular discharge of obligations and the gradual expansion of exchange over time (Hald *et al.*, 2009). In our study, the orchid growers or suppliers should be rewarded for the social exchange with their buyers, and vice versa, creating a mutual dependency. The literature also suggests that, with a high level of buyer's perceived trust, the exchange is more likely to be maintained. Conversely, a low level of buyer's perceived trust indicates a risky relationship, and the buyer may seek alternative means of supply (Hald *et al.*, 2009).

2.2. The antecedents and consequences of trust in supply chain relationships

In the existing literature on trust in supply chain relationships, two key streams emerge when examining the antecedents of trust (see Table 1): relational factors and structural factors. The relational factors stream focuses on the interpersonal and interorganisational characteristics that help to build trust. This encompasses overall satisfaction (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010), management relationships (Wang *et al.*, 2014), role autonomy, clan culture, functional impact, and organisational tenure (Perrone *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, satisfaction, competence, and communication (Selnes, 1998), as well as B2B sustainability positioning (Casidy & Yan, 2022), communication (Bianchi & Abu Saleh, 2020), knowledge sharing (Charterina *et al.*, 2018), and perceived order fulfilment capability, reputation, and perceived website quality (Qureshi *et al.*, 2009), have been identified as relational antecedents of trust.

The structural factors stream, on the other hand, highlights the importance of power dynamics, contractual agreements, and institutional support in developing trust. This includes power (Ke *et al.*, 2009), supplier development (Rajput *et al.*, 2019), buyer dependency and contracts (Handfield & Bechtel, 2002), legal protection, government assistance, the importance of Guanxi (Cai *et al.*, 2010), and contracts (Charterina *et al.*, 2018).

Table 1. Antecedents and consequences of trust in supply chain relationships.

Author(s)	Antecedent(s) to trust	Consequence(s) of trust
Aurier and N'Goala (2010) Wang <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Overall satisfaction Managerial Ties	Relationship Commitment Extent of information sharing, Quality of information shared
Ke <i>et al.</i> (2009) Rajput <i>et al.</i> (2019) Perrone <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Power Supplier development Role autonomy clan culture, functional influence, organisational tenure	eSCMS adoption intention Supplier performance improvement Trust in purchasing manager
Paparoidamis <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Product quality, sales service quality, technical repair service support, complaint handling service	Customer loyalty
Handfield and Bechtel (2002)	Buyer dependence, contracts	Responsiveness (lead times, time delivery record, customisation)
Selnes (1998)	Satisfaction, competence, communication	Enhancement
Casidy and Yan (2022)	B2B sustainability positioning	Buyer performance (financial, relational)
Cai <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Legal protection, government support, importance of Guanxi	Information sharing, collaborative planning
Ferro <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Economic satisfaction	Non-economic satisfaction
Bianchi and Abu Saleh (2020)	Communication	Relationship commitment
Charterina <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Knowledge sharing, contracts	Product innovation performance
Yang <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Perception differences of supplier performance	Retailer performance
Qureshi <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Perceived capability of order fulfilment, reputation, perceived website quality	Repurchasing intention

Regarding the consequences of trust in supply chain relationships, the literature reveals two main streams: relationship outcomes and performance outcomes. The relationship outcomes stream emphasises the importance of trust in the quality and strength of relationships between supply chain participants. This includes relationship commitment (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010; Bianchi & Abu Saleh, 2020), the extent and quality of information sharing (Wang *et al.*, 2014), customer loyalty (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019), enhancement (Selnes, 1998), non-economic satisfaction (Ferro *et al.*, 2016), and information sharing and collaborative planning (Cai *et al.*, 2010).

The performance outcomes stream emphasises the actual benefits that trust provides to supply chain partners. This includes eSCMS adoption intention (Ke *et al.*, 2009), supplier performance improvement (Rajput *et al.*, 2019), trust in purchasing managers (Perrone *et al.*, 2003), responsiveness in terms of lead times, time delivery record, and customisation (Handfield & Bechtel, 2002), buyer performance in financial and relational aspects (Casidy & Yan, 2022), product innovation performance (Charterina *et al.*, 2018), retailer performance (Yang *et al.*, 2014), and repurchasing intention (Qureshi *et al.*, 2009).

The research framework presented in this study, which identifies perceptions of the efficiency of supplier quality and service quality, as well as perceptions of supplier price and delivery efficiency, as antecedents of trust, and information sharing as a result of trust, is consistent with both the relational factors stream of antecedents and the relationship outcomes stream of consequences found in the existing literature. This study's trust antecedents, which include judgments of supplier quality, service quality, price efficiency, and delivery efficiency, are consistent with the relational factors stream because they focus on interorganisational components that lead to the building of trust. This is consistent with prior research, which has highlighted contentment, competence, and communication (Selnes, 1998), as well as perceived order fulfilment capabilities, reputation, and perceived website quality (Qureshi *et al.*, 2009) as relational antecedents of trust. In this study, the outcome of trust, information sharing, is part of the relationship outcomes stream, which emphasises the impact of trust on the quality and strength of supply chain partner relationships. This finding is congruent with the findings of Wang *et al.* (2014), who recognised the extent and quality of information sharing as a result of trust, and Cai *et al.* (2010), who discovered that trust promotes information sharing and collaborative planning. By connecting the relational factors stream of antecedents and the relationship outcomes stream of consequences, this research framework adds to the existing literature by focusing on the specific antecedents and consequences of trust in the context of supplier-buyer relationships.

2.3. The relationship between the buyer's perceived value of supplier performance and buyer trust

The perceived expected value is defined as the perceived trade-off values between multiple benefits and sacrifices gained through a relationship (Hald *et al.*, 2009). In this study, we focus on the buyer's perceptions of their supplier's abilities, which are considered important by the buyers. Previous research

suggests that perceived satisfaction can enhance the level of trust if the supply chain partners can produce mutually satisfactory outcomes (Kwon & Suh, 2004). Trust in a supplier can reduce transaction costs in an exchange relationship and increase channel members' coordinated joint efforts (Bhattarai *et al.*, 2013; Doney & Cannon, 1997).

However, we still have a poor understanding of how the buyer's perception of supplier performance leads to increased trust. Wagner and Krause (2009) suggest that short-term supplier performance indicators should be measured by the buying firm based on their relationship with a given supplier. They propose measuring the buying firm's supplier development effort from the supplier's outputs, which are measurable at the buying firm. Buyers expect suppliers to perform in terms of quality, cost, delivery, and service improvement in the short term, as well as in terms of long-term capabilities (Wagner & Krause, 2009). According to the authors, buying firms perform supplier development to enhance supplier performance. To realise supplier performance and the benefits of increased supplier capabilities, both buying and supplier firms should engage in relationship-specific investments. The cooperative relationship can take the form of information sharing, and both firms are required to contribute resources to the development effort. However, we argue that before entering into cooperative information sharing, trust is a required antecedent.

Wagner and Krause (2009) suggest that the nature and quality of supplier inputs are crucial in developing a cooperative relationship with buying firms. These authors also investigate the relationship between a buying firm's goals of improving a supplier's product and delivery performance and their efforts to transfer tacit knowledge, discovering a positive relationship between the two. However, we aim to extend this investigation by examining how a buyer's perception of supplier performance leads to an increase in trust in the supplier. While previous studies have shown associations between supplier performance, such as quality and service, and a buying firm's competitive capabilities, little is known about the relationship between the perceived expected value of supplier performance and buyer's trust. We seek to explore whether a high level of perceived value in supplier performance can enhance a buyer's trust in their supplier.

We also review the literature related to supplier selection. Satisfaction with supplier performance is associated with the attributes of supplier performance or the evaluation of supplier performance. Although quality is typically regarded as the most important criterion for supplier selection, cost and delivery are preferred criteria when selecting the actual supplier (Krause *et al.*, 2007; Poole & Donovan, 2014). Some researchers argue that unit price and quality are equally important criteria (Famiyeh & Kwarteng, 2018). However, some argue that quality is a prerequisite for a firm to continue to be in business rather than a means of achieving a competitive advantage. Firms that can provide reliable delivery can also offer lower prices (Cannon *et al.*, 2010; Famiyeh & Kwarteng, 2018). From the buyer's perspective, supplier performance influences their interest in continuing the supply relationship (Krause *et al.*, 2007). Three aspects of supplier performance, namely (1) relative price/cost, (2) product/service performance, and (3) delivery performance, have a significant impact on the buying firm's overall evaluation of the supplier (Cannon *et al.*, 2010). These authors also contend that the supplier's performance in terms of the purchase price, total cost, and terms of sale facilitates the buyer's entry into a relationship with the supplier. Price, product performance, and delivery performance are all important factors in the buyer-supplier relationship (Cannon *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, quality, service, and delivery are important drivers of supplier relationship value (Ulaga, 2003).

Moreover, the components of expected value that buyers perceive as critical (i.e. cost reduction, time compression, and innovation) are driven by close supplier relationships (Hald *et al.*, 2009). A qualitative study found that price reductions are the most important factor in buyer-supplier relationships. Additionally, Ulaga (2003) reveals that the ability of the supplier to reduce the buyer's time to market is critical in terms of product development. The literature also suggests that if a supplier wants to remain competitive in the marketplace, delivery performance improvement is needed (Rashid, 2014). Firms seek to make a profit, and the cost of materials is the most important factor for supplier selection (Mwikali & Kavale, 2012). Doney and Cannon (1997) found that the selected supplier firms had higher levels of trust because the aspects of the marketing mix, such as price and reliable delivery, usually lead to sales. Their findings show that cost and delivery performance are related to professional buyers' objective priorities.

Our study proposes that a buyer's expectations of supplier performance can drive the collaborative relationship towards trust. Buyers rely on suppliers to reap the benefits of their offerings, resulting in a

mutually beneficial relationship that falls under the social exchange theory. Welker *et al.* (2008) suggested that order winner features of a business condition (e.g. costs, speed, reliability, and quality) are achieved through information sharing. For example, information sharing with supply chain partners regarding product information, price, timing, forecasts, product specifications, and capacities will enable them to gain efficiencies and efficacies. According to Kannan and Tan (2006), buyers seek to establish close relationships with key suppliers to improve quality and delivery service or reduce costs. When purchasing products or services in today's marketplace, buyers consider multiple attributes of suppliers. For example, in the orchid flower export market, the majority of sales take place at the destination via a bidding system in which exporters pay 30% of the sale price per flower bundle and receive 70% of the sale price. Exporters use a cost-plus pricing strategy to determine how much to pay orchid growers, taking into account bidding prices at the destination. Non-price competition is a factor in the export of orchid flowers, as air freight is used to transport the flowers, and delivery time is critical. Due to limited airfreight space, exporters face high freight rates during various festivals in Japan. Quality control is also important in orchid trading because flowers must be free of insects and disasters before being exported. Large exporters typically maintain quality control from the initial stages of production to post-harvest packing (Department of Agriculture, 2011).

Drawing upon the social exchange theory, we argue that when buyers receive expected value contributions through exchange behaviour with the suppliers, it creates an obligation and a sense of reciprocity that positively influences the level of trust in the supplier. Based on this argument, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: A high level of the buyer's perception of the supplier's product quality and service performance will positively lead to an increase in buyer's trust.

H2: A high level of the buyer's perception of the supplier's price and delivery performance will positively lead to an increase in buyer's trust.

2.4. The relationship between trust and information sharing

Trust is essential for facilitating informal cooperation, reducing transaction and negotiation costs, and enhancing superior information sharing between participating firms (Dyer & Chu, 2003; Hald *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, trust plays a critical role in establishing interorganisational relationships. According to a social exchange perspective, trust is a fundamental element in presenting oneself as an attractive partner (Hald *et al.*, 2009). Ireland and Webb (2007) argued that a certain level of trust should exist between firms before engaging in any relationship.

Prior studies have emphasised the importance of information sharing in managing perishable inventory and improving supply chain performance (Lusiantoro *et al.*, 2018). Collaboration creates value for both suppliers and buyers, who are co-producers of value (Cheung *et al.*, 2011). Information sharing is defined as the extent to which firms share various related, accurate, complete plans and procedures with main suppliers promptly (Cao *et al.*, 2010). The benefits of sharing information include inventory reduction, waste reduction, increased freshness, improved service levels, and greater customer satisfaction (Lusiantoro *et al.*, 2018). The authors also assert that the uncertainty in demand and supply would be reduced. Moreover, decision-making and cost reduction across the supply chain would be improved (Lusiantoro *et al.*, 2018).

Ireland and Webb (2007) argued that trust is a necessary precondition for engaging in any business relationship. This is in line with Müller *et al.* (2020), who demonstrated that trust has a positive relationship with digital information sharing in the context of SMEs. These authors viewed trust as social capital, a prerequisite for information sharing. In our study, we define trust as a supplier's managerial and technical capabilities to perform a given set of tasks. According to Zaheer *et al.* (1998), interfirm trust is defined as one party's expectation that the other party will fulfil obligations, behave predictably, and act and negotiate fairly, even if opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities arise (Cai *et al.*, 2010). We follow prior studies in defining buyer trust as the expectation of desired actions performed by other parties (Das & Teng, 1998). Trust is essential for successful collaboration among market chain actors (Ho *et al.*, 2023). Cai *et al.* (2010) looked into the effects of trust on information integration and discovered a link between interfirm trust and information sharing. This

demonstrates the importance of interfirm trust in the successful implementation of interfirm information sharing. Graca *et al.* (2015) and Müller *et al.* (2020) viewed trust as relational capital that facilitates collaborative behaviour. As a result, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: A high level of interfirm trust between buyers and suppliers will positively lead to increased information sharing.

2.5. The mediating role of trust

Because agricultural and perishable product supply chains involve multiple actors at each stage of the supply chain, supply chain coordination and integration are critical for their success (Krishna & Gopal, 2017). However, the coordination process can become challenging when there are numerous companies involved, making information exchange more difficult (Matopoulos *et al.*, 2007). Despite this challenge, the benefits of information sharing between trade partners are well documented, and trust plays a crucial role in facilitating such collaboration (Dadzie *et al.*, 2018; Wu, 2008). In agricultural and perishable product supply chains, trust is also critical for the sustainability of buyer-seller relationships (Akrouf *et al.*, 2016; Dadzie *et al.*, 2018).

The role of trust in supply chain relationships has received increasing attention and has become a major research issue in SCM literature (Ha *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2014). However, there is limited evidence focusing on the importance of buyer trust in the supply chain as measured by their perceptions of suppliers or mutual trust from the buyer's standpoint. Moreover, the extant empirical research supporting the widely held perception that trust is crucial for information sharing is thin, especially in the agricultural and perishable product supply chains. Kwon and Suh (2004) hypothesised that information sharing is positively related to trust, while others (Cai *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2014) have reported that the buyer's trust in the supplier has a direct effect on information sharing. Furthermore, trust might mediate the relationship between perceived supplier performance and information sharing.

As previously illustrated in Section 2.2, extant research on the antecedents of trust in supply chain relationships can be categorised into two main streams: supplier performance factors (e.g. product quality, service support) and structural factors (e.g. power dynamics, contractual agreements, institutional support). Regarding the consequences of trust, the literature reveals two main streams: relationship outcomes (e.g. relationship commitment, information sharing, customer loyalty) and performance outcomes (e.g. eSCMS adoption intention, supplier performance improvement, product innovation performance). Nevertheless, based on Table 1 in Section 2.2, there is a dearth of empirical evidence of the role of trust in mediating the relationship between supplier performance perception and information sharing.

The examination of the impact of trust on information sharing may offer better insights for supply chain coordination (Ha *et al.*, 2011). While some studies have found that trust in competency (i.e. business capability and satisfaction with know-how or specialties with partners) has no direct impact on information sharing (Ha *et al.*, 2011; Selnes, 1998), trust is still considered a key antecedent of motivation to expand the scope of the relationship (Selnes, 1998). In other words, while the buyer's perception of the supplier's technological and commercial competence may not have a direct impact on trust, if the buyer is satisfied with the supplier's performance, they are more willing to cooperate and share information with the supplier.

Trust is a crucial element in promoting information sharing between organisations, as it creates value in the exchange relationship (Dyer & Chu, 2003). Trust, according to the social exchange theory, is an important component in the social exchange process (Wu *et al.*, 2014), and it improves coordination between supply chain partners (Handfield & Bechtel, 2002). Building a high level of trust, on the other hand, can be costly and difficult (Day *et al.*, 2013). We contend that buyer trust is a mechanism that influences buyers' and suppliers' decisions to share information. Based on previous research, we hypothesise:

H4: Trust mediates the relationship between the perceived value of supplier performance and information sharing.

Figure 1 presents our conceptual model, which is based on the social exchange theory and related literature. The model demonstrates that the perceived value of a supplier's performance can predict trust, which can subsequently promote information sharing.

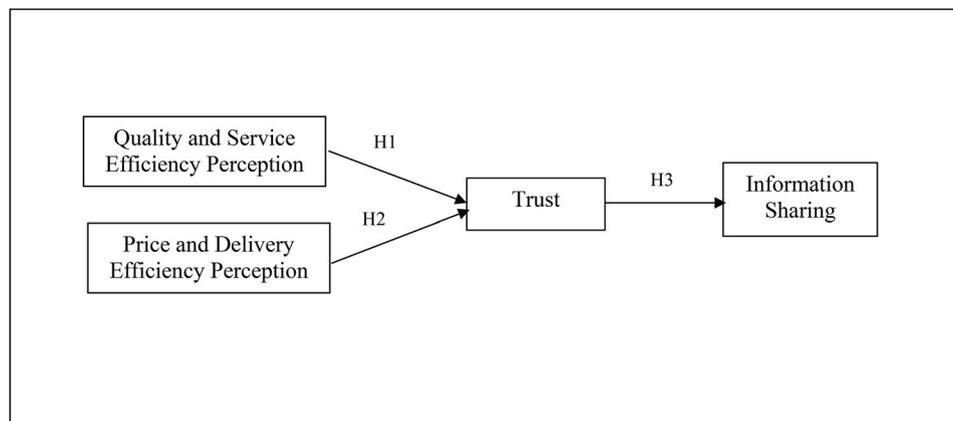


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

3. Research methodology

3.1. The sample and data collection

This study focuses on purchasing firms registered as exporters with Thailand's Division of Plant Standard and Certification. Out of 402 licensed firms, 74 were inactive and could not be contacted, leaving 328 firms as a potential sample. The study focused on companies that buy orchid flowers from growers/suppliers in Thailand, which is the world's largest exporter of tropical orchid flowers and plants, with an estimated production volume of 48,960 tons in 2018. 88% of this was exported (mostly to the United States, Japan, China, Italy, and Vietnam), while 12% was consumed domestically (Department of International Trade Promotion, 2019).

The unit of analysis for this study is the firm level, with a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in emerging markets. These SMEs face unique challenges in supply chain relationships due to their limited resources and capabilities, particularly in terms of information sharing with their supply chain partners. Unlike their counterparts in developed economies, SMEs in emerging markets often lack advanced IT capabilities, hindering their ability to effectively communicate and collaborate with their partners (Sabel, 1993). Furthermore, these SMEs operate in a macroenvironmental environment characterised by volatility and uncertainty, which exacerbates the challenges they face in building trust with their supply chain partners. In such an environment, partners' lack of trust is notable as suspicion increases, contrary to what happens in developed markets where the concept of building natural trust is more commonplace (Sabel, 1993). The classification of businesses as small and medium-sized businesses was based on the commonly accepted criteria of the number of employees, sales volume, and capital (Office of Small & Medium Enterprises Promotion, 2024). By focusing on SMEs in a specific industry within an emerging market context, this study aims to provide insights that are particularly relevant to this sector and contribute to the understanding of trust in supply chain relationships under the unique constraints faced by small businesses in developing economies.

To ensure relevant experiences with the research constructs, understand the question items, and provide usable responses, we contacted orchid farm owners, managers, and key informants to participate in the survey. Out of 270 survey questionnaires sent, 83 usable questionnaires were returned, accounting for a 30.74% response rate. The 30% response rate is within the accepted range in the field of organisational research, which typically exhibits an average response rate of around 35% with a standard deviation of 18.8% (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

3.2. Instruments and validation

The survey instrument used in this study was developed based on prior literature. Appendix I provides details on the constructs and measurement items used in the survey. The perceived value of supplier performance was measured using items adapted from Ulaga (2003), Corsten and Felde (2005), and

Wagner and Krause (2009). Based on our factor analysis, we grouped product quality and service into product and service performance and cost and delivery performance, with reliability coefficients of 0.85 and 0.93, respectively (see Appendix II for the results of our factor analysis using varimax rotation, including factor loadings for each measurement item). Appendix II contains the results of our factor analysis, including factor loadings for each measurement item. With a reliability coefficient of 0.86, trust was measured as the buyer firm's confidence in the supplier's ability, as adapted from Whipple *et al.* (2010), Wang *et al.* (2014), and Wu *et al.* (2014). With a reliability coefficient of 0.92, information sharing was measured using items adapted from Kannan and Tan (2006), Cao *et al.* (2010), and Cheung *et al.* (2011).

The questionnaire instrument employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Respondents were asked to select a key supplier with whom their firm had an exchange relationship for at least three years. To ensure that the most knowledgeable person answered the questionnaires, we contacted procurement and supply chain managers and executives. The questionnaires were pilot-tested and validated using semi-structured interviews with five buyers and two academic staff. To ensure construct validity, all measured items were validated through factor analysis with varimax rotation. The item loading values exceeded the cut-off value of 0.4 and were kept for further analysis (Hair *et al.*, 1998).

The reliability analysis indicates that all constructs have acceptable levels of internal consistency, as indicated by the Cronbach's alpha values being greater than 0.7, as recommended by Hair *et al.* (1998). Furthermore, the correlation matrix reveals that there are no highly correlated variables ($r > 0.90$), implying that multicollinearity is not an issue (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1991). The correlation matrix, mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha values for each construct are shown in Table 2. All Cronbach's alpha values, as shown in Table 2, exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7 for high reliability. The statistics for model fit are shown in Table 2.

To ensure the robustness of the findings, we assessed the potential for non-response bias in our study. Non-response bias occurs when the characteristics of the respondents differ significantly from those of the non-respondents, potentially leading to biased results. To address this concern, we compared the characteristics of the respondents and non-respondents in terms of their number of employees, sales volume, and amount of capital. The results of this comparison revealed no significant differences between the two groups, suggesting that non-response bias is not a significant concern in this study.

4. Empirical results

4.1. Results of H1-H3

Due to the small sample size, a path analysis was used to test the hypotheses in this study. According to Westland (2010), a structural equation model may have low discriminatory power and produce biased parameter estimates, resulting in low precision with small sample sizes. To assess the fit of the model, we followed the suggested fit index values (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hair *et al.*, 1998). The various indices indicate that the model is an adequate fit, with a $\chi^2/d.f.$ the ratio of 2.88, NNFI of 0.97, CFI of 0.99, GFI of 0.98, and RMSEA of 0.04 (see Table 3).

All hypotheses were supported and found to be statistically significant. The results of the path analysis showed that the perceived value of supplier performance is positively and significantly related to trust (see Table 4). The direction of the relationship indicates that higher levels of the perceived value of supplier performance resulted in a higher level of trust. Specifically, H1, which examined the relationship between the perceived value of product quality and service of supplier performance and trust, had a

Table 2. Correlation matrix, mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's α of all constructs.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Mean	S.D	Cronbach's α
(1) Quality/Service Perception	1.00				19.96	5.19	0.85
(2) Price/ Delivery Perception	0.47**	1.00			30.96	4.92	0.93
(3) Trust	0.53**	0.76**	1.00		15.04	2.63	0.86
(4) Information Sharing	0.10	0.44	0.21	1.00	17.42	4.11	0.92

**Significant at $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Model's fit statistics.

Goodness-of-fit	Value
χ^2	2.88 (p = 0.24)
RMSEA	0.07
NNFI	0.97
CFI	0.99
GFI	0.98
TLI	0.97
SRMR	0.04

Note: χ^2 =Chi square; RMSEA=Root mean square error of approximation; NNFI=Non-normed fit index; CFI=Comparative fit index; and GFI=Goodness-of-fit index.

Table 4. Results of path analysis.

Path to	Path from	β	SE (B)	p
Trust	Quality/Service Perception	0.12	0.04	0.003 [†]
Trust	Price/ Delivery Perception	0.35	0.04	0.000 [†]
Information Sharing	Trust	0.33	0.17	0.049 [†]

Note.

[†]= significant at p < 0.05.

[‡]= significant at p < 0.01; R² of Trust = 0.643.

Table 5. Mediation test results for trust on the relationship between quality/service efficiency perception and information sharing.

Relationship	β	SE (B)	p
Direct Model			
Quality/Service Efficiency Perception → Information Sharing	0.10	0.09	0.359
Mediation Model			
Quality/Service Efficiency Perception → Information Sharing	-0.01	0.10	0.897
Quality/Service Efficiency Perception → Trust	0.27	0.05	0.000 [†]
Trust → Information Sharing	0.35	0.20	0.081 [*]

Note: β = standardised regression weight; SE (B) = standard error of estimate; p = significance value.

^{*} = significant at p < .10.

[†] = significant at p < 0.05.

[‡] = significant at p < 0.01.

strong standardised coefficient of 0.12 (p < 0.01). H2, which tested the relationship between the perceived value of cost and delivery of supplier performance and trust, had a strong standardised coefficient of 0.35 (p < 0.01). H3, which posited that trust positively relates to enhanced information sharing, was also supported with a path coefficient of 0.33 (p < 0.05). Our model had a significantly positive effect with an R² of trust of 0.643, indicating that both constructs together can explain 64.3% of the variance of trust.

4.2. Hypothesis testing for mediating effect

Tables 5 and 6 display the results of the direct and indirect effects, providing insights into the mediating role of trust between the perceived value of supplier performance and information sharing. The results show that the perceived value of quality/service has a direct effect on trust (β = 0.027, p < 0.01). Additionally, trust has a direct effect on information sharing (β = 0.35, p < 0.05). However, quality and service perception has no significant direct effect on information sharing. Following the suggestion of Zhao *et al.* (2010), we use bootstrapping based on 1,000 bootstrap resamples to investigate the significance of indirect effects and test whether trust mediates the relationship between quality and service perception and information sharing. The analysis demonstrates the significance of the indirect effect, establishing partial mediation in Table 5. The results show that trust has both significant direct and indirect effects on information sharing in terms of quality and service perception, supporting H4. The total effect in the first model is 0.09, while the total effect in the second model is 0.28.

Table 6. Mediation test results for trust on the relationship between price/delivery efficiency.

Relationship	β	SE (B)	p
Direct Model			
Price/Delivery Efficiency Perception \rightarrow Information Sharing	0.04	0.09	0.691
Mediation Model			
Price/Delivery Efficiency Perception \rightarrow Information Sharing	-0.20	0.14	0.090*
Price/Delivery Efficiency Perception \rightarrow Trust	0.41	0.04	0.000 [†]
Trust \rightarrow Information Sharing	0.66	0.25	0.009 [‡]

Note: β = standardised regression weight; SE (B) = standard error of estimate; p = significance value.

* = significant at $p < .10$.

[†] = significant at $p < 0.05$.

[‡] = significant at $p < 0.01$.

5. Discussion

Our motivation for conducting this study was to address prior studies' ambiguity and disperse findings regarding trust in supply networks. This addresses the research gap discussed by several researchers (e.g. Bianchi & Abu Saleh, 2020), who called for exploring the evolving nature of trust from different perspectives and contexts. In this study, we focus on the suppliers' competence and define it as a salient antecedent of trust. It provides a different perspective from current research (e.g. Franklin & Marshall, 2019), which has focused mainly on co-creation and integrity as the main predictors of trust. We wanted to find out how the perceived value of supplier performance influences buyer trust and how much building trust influences information sharing in buyer-supplier relationships in developing economies' SME context. Furthermore, we investigated the role of trust in mediating the buyer's perception of supplier value and information sharing. Importantly, our research focuses on the buyer's perspective, which has received little attention in agribusiness supply chains.

Our study of orchid flower buyers in Thailand found that there is a positive relationship between buyer perceptions of supplier performance and trust in suppliers. This study emphasises the importance of trust in facilitating the exchange of information between buyers and suppliers, such as market information, demand, price, and customer preferences. Unlike previous research on supplier selection in the operations and marketing literature, our findings support a positive relationship between trust and information sharing. This finding implies that buyers should prioritise establishing high levels of trust in their relationships with growers to facilitate social exchanges and share more information. Furthermore, this study suggests that trust can benefit both parties by allowing them to share critical information that benefits their respective interests.

We highlight the crucial role of trust in improving information sharing in buyer-supplier relationships. Trust serves as a key relational element that affects business relationships. Our findings contradict Ha *et al.* (2011), who reported a non-significant relationship between trust in competency and information sharing. Our findings support the idea that the buyer's perception of the value of supplier performance is important in building trust for long-term relationships. This also reinforces trust as relationship capital or social capital (Graca *et al.*, 2015; Müller *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, the results of H2 suggest that the buyer's perception of cost and delivery performance is more important in building trust than the perception of product and service performance. This finding is consistent with prior findings that emphasise the importance of delivery performance and cost in supplier selection. Moreover, H3 suggests that an increase in trust in the supplier can lead to an increase in the level of information sharing. In other words, our research shows that a high level of trust can facilitate improved information sharing. When buyers have more trust in the supplier, they are more likely to share information with them. Our findings are consistent with those of Fishcher (2013).

We conducted a mediation analysis to examine the relationship between quality and service perception, trust, and information sharing. Our findings show that there is no statistically significant relationship between quality and service perception and information sharing. However, we discovered that trust has

a positive relationship with quality and service perception, and trust has a positive relationship with information sharing. Our model demonstrated that trust mediated the relationship between the perceived value of product quality and service and information sharing. Although the indirect effect was not strong, it still showed how information sharing could be improved through buyers' trust. The lower level of trust perceived by the buyer may be due to the growers having some product quality and service problems. However, trust plays a crucial role in the supplier-buyer relationship, including information sharing, as demonstrated in prior research (Cai *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2014; Wu *et al.*, 2014). We also investigated the mediating role of trust between price and delivery performance perception and information sharing. Our findings revealed that there was no statistically significant relationship between price and delivery perception and information sharing. However, we discovered a negative relationship between price and delivery perception and information sharing in the mediation model. The negative sign indicates that when buyers evaluate suppliers solely on price and delivery efficiency, this can have a negative impact on information sharing. This could be because the supplier does not want to share information if the benefits received are insufficient or if they lack the necessary resources or time to meet the buyer's requirements. Our findings are consistent with those of Odongo *et al.* (2017), who discovered that the use of coercive power discourages agribusiness SMEs from continuing to do business. Surprisingly, the total effect in this model (0.28) was greater than the total effect in the first model (perception of product quality and service efficiency). We believe that price and delivery perception can lead to high trust, which leads to improved information sharing. As a result, we recommend concentrating on this route to increase information sharing between buyer-supplier firms. Our findings also confirm that perceptions of price and delivery efficiency are important in building trust.

Our research emphasises the significance of buyer trust and its role as a bridge between the perceived value of the supplier and information sharing. Our findings add to the body of knowledge by showing that (1) perceived supplier efficiency, whether related to product quality/service or cost and delivery performance, has a positive relationship with buyer trust; (2) trust has a positive relationship with information sharing; and (3) trust acts as a mediator in the perceived supplier value-trust relationship.

Our results confirm the positive association between trust and positive outcomes, which is consistent with previous studies (Bokrantz & Dul, 2023; Brookbanks & Parry, 2022; Poppo *et al.*, 2016; Timsina *et al.*, 2016). However, our findings suggest that building trust through perceived cost and delivery efficiency has a stronger effect on information sharing than building trust through product and service quality (with standardised estimates of 0.35 and 0.12, respectively), as shown in Table 4. This implies that cost and delivery may be a priority for exporters (buyer firms) to maintain their competitive advantage in the global market. The relationship between quality and service performance and trust is less strong than that of price and delivery performance. However, this does not mean that quality and service are not important for supplier selection and trust building. The buyers may prioritise cost and delivery to compete in the market, but close collaboration and integration with suppliers can help reduce quality problems. Alternatively, the lower perception of value for quality and service performance in our sample may have contributed to the weaker relationship with trust.

It is important to note that cost and delivery performance can help reduce the likelihood of buyers switching to another supplier, leading to an increase in buyer trust in the supplier's performance. As a result, trust can facilitate the exchange of information between the buyer and supplier. Based on the mediating model between cost and delivery performance and trust, trust has a strong direct effect on information sharing. Therefore, we suggest that buyers and suppliers prioritise the second mediating model over the first mediating model.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Contributions and managerial implications

This study addresses a significant research gap by examining the impact of the perceived supplier value on buyer's trust and the subsequent effect on information sharing in the agriculture supply network. It provides empirical evidence of the importance of trust in influencing desired outcomes, such as

information sharing, in the context of orchid flower exports in Thailand. The findings validate that trust plays a crucial role in information sharing. This may appear rather underwhelming initially, but it is worth noting that cost and delivery performance of suppliers are more critical in building buyer's trust than product quality and service. Therefore, this research has managerial implications for buying firm executives regarding the strategies that can be employed to develop trust-based relationships with their suppliers in the agribusiness sector, in emerging markets.

In terms of theoretical contribution, we establish the antecedent of trust in buyer-supplier relationships and demonstrate the mediating role of trust between perceived supplier performance and information sharing. We argue it contributes to the social exchange theory by demonstrating that sharing information requires buyer's trust. A high level of perceived supplier performance from the buyers stimulates trust-building and information sharing. This is in line with Ho *et al.* (2023) and Wang *et al.* (2023), who suggest that trust ties the relationship between supplier performance and information sharing. Trust is directly associated with the reciprocity of relationship capital, which corroborates the social exchange theory.

Our findings also highlight the significance of the perceived value of cost and delivery performance of suppliers in building buyer trust, which in turn positively relates to information sharing. The results suggest that exporting firms in this industry have adopted a long-term approach and built collaborative relationships with their suppliers. Such collaborative efforts, including information sharing, can be facilitated through trust.

The study suggests that the exporting firms in the orchid flower industry prioritise building trust with key growers to secure valuable resources and capabilities from their suppliers. Information sharing between the two parties can benefit both in various ways, such as helping buyers plan their exports and marketing strategies. Furthermore, this study sheds light on how buyers select their growers to strengthen their competitive advantage in the market, emphasising the importance of trust as a key factor in supplier selection and relationship management. By cultivating trust-based relationships with their growers, exporters can not only gain access to valuable resources and capabilities but also enhance their ability to compete effectively in the global marketplace. We believe that our findings will be of interest to SMEs' managers of agri-products in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, foreign importers, and government policymakers as they develop and promote supplier collaborations and supply chain integrations.

6.2. Limitations and further research

While our study offers important insights into the role of trust as a mediator between buyer perceptions of supplier performance and information sharing, it is not without limitations. First, we need to acknowledge that we agree with Graca *et al.* (2015) about the two-way relationship between trust and information sharing, and we accept that in this study, only one way was fully analysed. We would urge future research to capture the bi-directional nature of this relationship. Second, the survey was distributed to only orchid exporters in Thailand, which may limit the generalisability of the results. To address this limitation, future research should include the supplier perspective and collect data from other industries and countries to compare the findings. Third, our study does not account for any specific cultural characteristics; however, we believe that trust is a culturally contingent construct and would be dependent on its context and the respondent's set of beliefs and behaviours. Hence, future studies could investigate the level of individualism or collectivism, the power distance, and/or the uncertainty avoidance of the buyer firms to enhance our understanding of buyer-supplier trust building. Additionally, longitudinal analysis and in-depth case studies could provide more comprehensive insights into the ongoing relationship elements beyond what a cross-sectional research design can capture. Longitudinal and dyadic data collection would provide a better understanding of the development of trust in buyer-supplier relationships. Finally, we agree with Papadopoulos *et al.* (2022), who explained that under the high volatility and uncertainty observed in emerging economies, SMEs will rapidly deploy digital technologies to increase their performance and efficiency. Big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and blockchain are reshaping supply chains and facilitating information sharing, which will enable SMEs to rapidly develop new types of trust (Brookbanks & Parry, 2022; Müller *et al.*, 2020). We would encourage researchers to study this promising area further in the context of trust and information sharing.

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Authors' contribution

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: Study initiation: Suntichai Kotcharin, Benjamin Dehe, Pattana Boonchoo. Study conception and design: Suntichai Kotcharin, Benjamin Dehe, Pattana Boonchoo. Data analysis and interpretation: Suntichai Kotcharin, Benjamin Dehe, Pattana Boonchoo. Draft manuscript: Suntichai Kotcharin, Benjamin Dehe. Manuscript preparation: Suntichai Kotcharin, Benjamin Dehe, Pattana Boonchoo. All authors have reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscripts. Furthermore, all authors are accountable for all aspects of the work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Thammasat University (Social Sciences), as evidenced by the issuance of Certificate of Approval No. 131/2566.

Statement of informed consent

The Human Research Ethics Committee has granted a waiver of written informed consent for this research, as the study participants do not belong to a vulnerable group, the research involves no more than minimal risk, and the questionnaire is designed to be anonymous. Informed consent was obtained verbally from the respondents when they were invited to participate in the study.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not provide written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available for public access.

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