Trust in Buyer-Supplier Relationships in International Manufacturing: A Case Study

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Abstract

Trust plays a critical role in supporting long-term buyer–supplier cooperation, particularly within international manufacturing environments characterized by operational complexity, uncertainty, and organizational interdependence. This dissertation examines how trust is developed, maintained, and experienced within international buyer–supplier relationships operating in a manufacturing context.

The study adopts a qualitative single-case study approach focusing on an international lighting manufacturing network operating across Poland and Germany. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with both buyers and suppliers and supplemented by internal organizational documentation, operational records, and communication materials. The objective of the research was to explore the mechanisms shaping trust development and to examine how operational practices, communication processes, and international conditions influence trust within buyer–supplier cooperation.

The findings demonstrate that trust develops gradually through operational reliability, communication quality, responsiveness, and accumulated relational experience rather than through formal agreements alone. Communication transparency and collaborative problem-solving emerged as central mechanisms supporting trust maintenance, while operational consistency strengthened long-term cooperation. The findings additionally indicate that operational factors influenced trust more strongly than cultural differences within the examined international context.

The dissertation contributes to existing literature by providing an in-depth qualitative perspective on trust embedded within international manufacturing cooperation and highlights the managerial importance of relational mechanisms in sustaining international buyer–supplier relationships.

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Resumo

A confiança desempenha um papel importante no apoio à cooperação de longo prazo entre compradores e fornecedores, particularmente em contextos de manufatura internacional caracterizados por complexidade operacional, incerteza e interdependência organizacional. Esta dissertação analisa como a confiança é desenvolvida, mantida e experienciada em relações internacionais entre compradores e fornecedores num contexto industrial.

O estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa de estudo de caso único centrada numa rede internacional de fabrico de iluminação que opera entre a Polónia e a Alemanha. Os dados foram recolhidos através de entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com compradores e fornecedores, complementadas por documentação organizacional interna, registos operacionais e materiais de comunicação. O objetivo da investigação consistiu em explorar os mecanismos que influenciam o desenvolvimento da confiança e analisar de que forma práticas operacionais, processos de comunicação e condições internacionais influenciam a confiança na cooperação entre compradores e fornecedores.

Os resultados demonstram que a confiança se desenvolve gradualmente através da fiabilidade operacional, qualidade da comunicação, capacidade de resposta e experiência acumulada, mais do que através de acordos formais. A transparência na comunicação e a resolução colaborativa de problemas surgiram como mecanismos centrais para a manutenção da confiança, enquanto a consistência operacional fortaleceu a cooperação de longo prazo. Os resultados indicam ainda que fatores operacionais influenciaram a confiança mais do que diferenças culturais.

A dissertação contribui para a literatura ao fornecer uma perspetiva qualitativa sobre a confiança na cooperação internacional no setor da manufatura.

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Palavras-chave: relação comprador-fornecedor, confiança, manufatura internacional, estudo de caso qualitativo

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1. Introduction

Buyer-supplier relationships have become a central element of contemporary manufacturing systems due to the increasing complexity and interdependence of global supply chains (Christopher, 2016; Flynn et al., 2010). Manufacturing firms rarely operate as fully self-sufficient organizations and instead rely on extensive networks of external suppliers that provide components, materials, and specialized production processes (Dyer & Singh, 1998). As production systems become more integrated and operationally demanding, effective coordination between buyers and suppliers becomes essential for maintaining quality, delivery reliability, and production continuity (Nyaga et al., 2010). This is particularly visible in international manufacturing environments, where firms cooperate across borders under conditions of logistical complexity and increasing performance pressure (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). In such contexts, buyer-supplier relationships extend beyond simple transactional exchange and increasingly involve long-term cooperation, ongoing communication, and mutual adjustment between organizations (Dyer & Singh, 1998).

Within these relationships, trust is widely recognized as an important mechanism supporting cooperation and reducing relational uncertainty (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zaheer et al., 1998). Existing literature suggests that trust facilitates communication, improves coordination, and enables partners to respond more effectively to operational disruptions and changing conditions (Nyaga et al., 2010). Despite the growing recognition of trust in buyer-supplier relationships, much of the existing research remains conceptual or quantitative in nature, often focusing on general correlations between trust and performance rather than examining how trust is experienced and maintained in everyday organizational practice.

The topic was selected due to increasing complexity of international manufacturing supply chains and the growing managerial importance of trust in cross-border cooperation. The purpose of this study is to examine how trust is developed, maintained, and experienced within international buyer-supplier relationships operating in an international manufacturing context. The objective of the study is to explore the mechanisms through which trust is formed and sustained within buyer-supplier relationships and to examine how operational practices, communication processes, and international conditions shape trust within an international manufacturing environment. To address this objective, the study adopts a qualitative single-case study research design focusing on a European lighting manufacturing company operating within a cross-border supply network involving cooperation between Poland and Germany. The case study approach enables an in-depth exploration of trust dynamics within a real organizational setting and allows examination of relational processes from both buyer and supplier perspectives. The study addresses the following **main research question:**

How is trust developed, maintained, and experienced within international buyer-supplier relationships in an international manufacturing context?

To explore this question in greater depth, the study also considers the following sub-research questions:

RQ1: How does trust emerge during the early stages of buyer-supplier relationships?

RQ2: How do communication and problem-solving practices influence trust development between buyers and suppliers?

RQ3: How do international conditions influence trust in cross-border buyer-supplier relationships?

Case study research was selected because trust represents a context-dependent phenomenon that requires examination within its real organizational environment, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context remain difficult to distinguish (Yin, 2018). The qualitative single-case study design enables in-depth investigation of trust dynamics while preserving the complexity of relational and operational processes embedded within international manufacturing cooperation. By combining qualitative interviews with organizational documentation and operational materials, the study aims to contribute both theoretical insight into trust development and practical implications for managing international buyer-supplier cooperation.

The thesis is structured into six chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter Two presents the literature review concerning buyer-supplier relationships, trust, and international manufacturing cooperation. Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach, including the research philosophy, case study strategy, data collection process, and analytical procedures. Chapter Four presents the empirical findings related to trust formation, communication, problem-solving, trust breakdown, and international cooperation. Chapter Five discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework. Chapter Six concludes the thesis by summarizing the main findings, outlining practical and theoretical implications, and identifying limitations and directions for future research.

Artificial intelligence tools were used to support language refinement, improve wording clarity, and assist in structuring selected sections of the thesis. AI systems were not used to generate empirical findings, conduct analysis, or formulate research conclusions. Final interpretations and analytical decisions remained the sole responsibility of the author.

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the existing literature relevant to buyer-supplier relationships and trust in international manufacturing contexts. It begins by discussing the concept of buyer-supplier relationships, including their evolution from transactional to relational forms and their importance within manufacturing industries. The chapter then examines the concept of trust in interorganizational relationships, focusing on trust formation, communication, problem-solving, and the relationship between trust and organizational performance. Finally, the review addresses trust in international buyer-supplier relationships, with particular attention to uncertainty, cultural and institutional differences, and the challenges of managing cooperation across borders. The chapter concludes by identifying the research gap that provides the foundation for the present study.

2.1. Buyer-Supplier Relationships in Management Studies

2.1.1 Definition and Relevance of Buyer-Supplier Relationships

Buyer-supplier relationships refer to the structured and ongoing interactions through which firms exchange goods, services, and information to support production and value creation (Dwyer et al.,1987). In management studies, these relationships are not understood as isolated market transactions but as interorganizational exchanges that often involve repeated interaction, coordination, and mutual dependence. As firms increasingly outsource activities and rely on external partners for critical resources and capabilities, buyer-supplier relationships have become a central phenomenon in research on supply chains and interorganizational relations (Dyer & Singh, 1998). This shift reflects the recognition that competitive advantage is not created purely within firm boundaries but also through relationships with external partners.

The relevance of buyer-supplier relationships lies in their direct influence on operational and strategic performance. Suppliers play a key role in determining cost efficiency, product quality, delivery reliability, and the ability to respond to changing customer demands, while buyers influence suppliers' planning stability, investment decisions, and long-term development (Walter et al., 2003). This corresponding dependence increases firms' exposure to relational risk, as disruptions or conflicts within supplier relationships can quickly translate into production delays or quality failures. Consequently, management research emphasizes that the effectiveness of buyer-supplier relationships is critical for ensuring operational continuity, particularly in manufacturing environments characterized by tight schedules, limited inventories, and complex coordination requirements (Palmatier et al., 2007).

Beyond their operational importance, buyer-supplier relationships are increasingly viewed as strategic assets that support long-term competitiveness. Stable and well-managed relationships enable firms to adapt to uncertainty, resolve operational problems more efficiently, and engage in joint value-creating activities such as process improvement or innovation (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Moreover, buyer-supplier relationships are typically embedded within broader supply networks, meaning that their quality can influence not only these two-sided outcomes but also the performance of the wider supply chain. Understanding buyer-supplier relationships is therefore essential for explaining how firms manage interdependence and sustain performance in contemporary business environments.

2.1.2 Economic and Relational Perspectives on Buyer-Supplier Relationships

Research on buyer-supplier relationships has traditionally been shaped by two broad perspectives: economic approaches and relational approaches, each offering a distinct explanation of how interorganizational exchanges are structured and managed. Economic perspectives view buyer-supplier relationships primarily as mechanisms for achieving efficiency and minimizing costs, emphasizing rational decision-making and formal control. Within this view, exchanges are governed through contracts, pricing mechanisms, and monitoring systems designed to safeguard firms against uncertainty and opportunistic behavior (Williamson, 1979). Buyer-supplier relationships are therefore evaluated largely in terms of their ability to reduce transaction costs and ensure predictable outcomes.

While economic perspectives provide valuable insight into the role of formal agreements and safeguards, scholars have increasingly recognized their limitations in explaining long-term and complex buyer-supplier relationships. As relationships become more interdependent and involve relationship-specific investments, reliance on detailed contracts alone may prove insufficient or costly. This recognition has led to the development of relational perspectives, which emphasize social mechanisms such as trust, commitment, and shared norms as key drivers of cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). From a relational standpoint, buyer-supplier relationships are sustained not only by formal controls but also by mutual expectations of reliability and fairness that develop through repeated interaction.

Relational perspectives argue that trust-based coordination enables firms to adapt more effectively to uncertainty and resolve problems without resorting to constant renegotiation or enforcement. Trust reduces the perceived risk of opportunistic behavior and encourages open communication, information sharing, and joint problem-solving between buyers and suppliers

(Zaheer et al., 1998). These mechanisms are particularly relevant in environments where operational conditions change frequently and where flexibility is required to maintain performance. Consequently, relational approaches highlight the importance of relationship quality in shaping both short-term operational outcomes and long-term collaboration.

Rather than representing competing explanations, economic and relational perspectives are increasingly viewed as complementary in the study of buyer-supplier relationships. Empirical research suggests that formal contracts and relational mechanisms often coexist, with contracts providing structural clarity while relational norms support cooperation and flexibility (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). As supply chains have become more interconnected, buyer-supplier relationships increasingly involve collaboration beyond simple exchange, including joint planning, problem-solving, and process alignment. In such contexts, excessive reliance on formal control may hinder cooperation by signaling distrust or limiting adaptability. Relational mechanisms, particularly trust, allow firms to coordinate behavior in situations where contracts are incomplete or where ongoing adjustment is required (Cao & Lumineau, 2015). This integrated perspective shifts attention toward understanding how trust operates alongside formal arrangements, positioning it as a central element in sustaining effective buyer-supplier relationships and providing a foundation for the subsequent analysis.

2.1.3 Buyer-Supplier Relationships in Manufacturing

Buyer-supplier relationships are particularly salient in manufacturing industries, where production processes depend on the continuous and reliable flow of components, materials, and semi-finished goods. Manufacturing firms typically operate under conditions of high asset specificity, tightly synchronized production schedules, and limited inventory buffers, which increases their exposure to supplier-related risks. As a result, supplier performance directly influences production continuity, quality consistency, and delivery reliability. Research on industrial buyer-supplier relationships emphasizes that, in such settings, disruptions in supplier relationships can quickly translate into operational breakdowns, making relationship management a critical managerial concern (Walter et al., 2003; Schmidt et al., 2023).

The complexity of manufacturing supply chains further reinforces the importance of close coordination between buyers and suppliers. Manufacturing firms often rely on networks of specialized suppliers that contribute distinct components or processes, requiring alignment of technical specifications, quality standards, and delivery schedules across organizational boundaries. High levels of interdependence increase the need for cooperation, information sharing, and mutual adjustment to ensure effective coordination across production stages (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Empirical studies demonstrate that close buyer-supplier collaboration supports smoother information flows, faster issue resolution, and more effective coordination of interrelated production activities (Flynn et al., 2010). In manufacturing environments, where even minor deviations can disrupt entire production systems, the stability of buyer-supplier relationships becomes a key mechanism for managing complexity.

Manufacturing buyer-supplier relationships are also shaped by increasing pressures for efficiency, customization, and responsiveness. Global competition and volatile demand require manufacturers to adapt quickly to changes in order volumes, product specifications, and delivery requirements. These pressures place additional demands on suppliers' flexibility and problem-solving capabilities. Prior research indicates that strong relational ties facilitate cooperative responses to operational challenges, enabling firms to manage delays, quality issues, and unexpected disruptions more effectively (Palmatier et al., 2007). In this context, relationship quality influences not only cost and delivery outcomes but also the firm's ability to maintain operational stability under uncertainty.

Beyond their operational implications, buyer-supplier relationships in manufacturing have important strategic consequences. Suppliers often possess specialized technical knowledge and process expertise that can contribute to continuous improvement and innovation. Studies on supplier involvement in manufacturing highlight that close relationships enable firms to leverage supplier capabilities more effectively, particularly in environments characterized by technological change and increasing product complexity (Petersen et al., 2005). When buyer-supplier relationships are stable and cooperative, firms are better positioned to engage in joint problem-solving and incremental innovation, reinforcing the strategic value of long-term collaboration.

Taken together, the manufacturing context intensifies both the risk, and the potential benefits associated with buyer-supplier relationships. High interdependence, operational complexity, and performance pressures create conditions in which purely transactional approaches are often insufficient. Instead, manufacturing firms increasingly rely on relational mechanisms to support coordination, flexibility, and resilience (Cao & Lumineau, 2015). These characteristics make manufacturing an especially relevant context for examining relational dimensions of buyer-supplier relationships and provide a strong foundation for focusing on trust as a central mechanism shaping collaboration and performance in subsequent sections.

2.1.4 Evolution from Transactional to Relational Exchange

The study of buyer-supplier relationships has increasingly recognized a shift from transactional exchange toward more relational forms of interaction. Early conceptualizations treated exchanges as discrete transactions governed primarily by price and short-term efficiency considerations, with limited expectations of continuity beyond individual contracts. Such transactional arrangements were typically characterized by arm's-length interaction, standardized products, and minimal information sharing. While this approach may be effective in stable environments with low interdependence, it has proven insufficient in contexts where uncertainty, complexity, and repeated interaction are frequent (Dwyer et al., 1987; Cannon & Perreault, 1999).

As supply chains have become more integrated and manufacturing processes more interdependent, buyer-supplier relationships have increasingly evolved into ongoing relational exchanges. Repeated interaction, relationship-specific investments, and shared operational responsibilities have created conditions in which firms rely less on purely transactional mechanisms and more on relational coordination. This evolution reflects the growing recognition that long-term relationships can reduce coordination costs, improve responsiveness, and support adaptation to changing conditions (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Rather than viewing exchanges as isolated events, firms increasingly treat buyer-supplier relationships as dynamic processes that develop over time.

The transition toward relational exchange is particularly evident in manufacturing contexts, where close coordination is required to manage production schedules, quality requirements, and technical compatibility. As relationships mature, firms often move beyond formal contractual compliance toward cooperative behaviors such as joint planning, informal problem-solving, and mutual adjustment. Empirical research suggests that these relational practices enable firms to address unforeseen disruptions more effectively and to sustain performance under conditions of uncertainty (Jap & Anderson, 2003). This shift does not imply the abandonment of formal mechanisms but rather their integration with relational elements that support flexibility and cooperation.

Importantly, the evolution from transactional to relational exchange also reflects changes in how firms perceive the strategic value of buyer-supplier relationships. Long-term relationships allow firms to accumulate relational knowledge, develop routines for collaboration, and build confidence in partners' reliability. These processes contribute to stronger relationship quality and create opportunities for joint value creation, including process improvements, learning, and innovation (Lavie, 2006). As a result, buyer-supplier relationships increasingly function as strategic assets rather than interchangeable market exchanges.

Taken together, the evolution from transactional to relational exchange highlights the growing importance of relational mechanisms in buyer-supplier relationships. As firms operate in environments characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence, purely transactional approaches become less effective. Instead, relational exchange provides a framework for understanding how cooperation is sustained over time and how firms manage ongoing interorganizational interaction (Palmatier et al., 2007). This evolution provides the conceptual bridge to the following section, which examines trust as a central relational mechanism shaping buyer-supplier relationships.

2.2 Trust in Buyer-Supplier Relationships

2.2.1 Conceptualizing Trust in Interorganizational Relationships

Trust is widely regarded as a foundational mechanism that enables cooperation and stability in interorganizational relationships, particularly in buyer-supplier contexts characterized by uncertainty and interdependence. In management research, trust is commonly defined as the expectation that an exchange partner will act in a reliable, fair, and non-opportunistic manner, even when formal safeguards are incomplete or absent (Zaheer et al.,1998). This expectation reduces perceived relational risk and allows firms to engage in cooperation beyond what can be contractually specified. Within buyer-supplier relationships, trust therefore functions as a governance mechanism that supports coordination, continuity, and mutual adjustment across organizational boundaries (Lumineau & Oliveira, 2020). By reducing concerns about opportunism, trust facilitates smoother interaction and enables firms to focus on joint value creation rather than defensive control.

The literature conceptualizes trust as a multidimensional construct that encompasses both cognitive and affective elements, each playing a distinct role in interorganizational exchange. Cognitive trust is grounded in rational assessments of a partner's competence, reliability, and consistency, often based on observable performance outcomes such as delivery reliability and quality compliance (McAllister, 1995). Affective trust, in contrast, develops through social interaction and reflects emotional bonds, mutual care, and relational attachment formed over time. In buyer-supplier relationships, cognitive trust typically dominates in the early stages, while affective trust may emerge as partners accumulate relational experience. This distinction highlights that trust is not a singular or static phenomenon, but a layered construct shaped by both performance-based evaluation and relational interaction (Saleem et al., 2020).

Trust is particularly salient in interorganizational relationships because contracts are inherently incomplete and cannot anticipate all future contingencies. Complex production environments, changing market conditions, and unforeseen disruptions limit the effectiveness of purely formal governance mechanisms. In such contexts, trust complements contractual arrangements by enabling flexible adaptation and cooperative problem-solving without the need for constant monitoring or renegotiation (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Empirical studies demonstrate that higher levels of trust are associated with reduced transaction costs, greater willingness to share sensitive information, and more collaborative behavior between buyers and suppliers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust therefore operates not as a substitute for formal control but as a relational mechanism that enhances the effectiveness of interorganizational coordination.

Beyond its functional role, trust also shapes how partners interpret each other's actions and intentions within buyer-supplier relationships (Vaez-Alaei et al., 2024). When trust is present, firms are more likely to attribute problems to situational factors rather than opportunistic intent, which reduces the likelihood of conflict escalation and relationship breakdown (Jap & Anderson, 2003). This interpretive function contributes to relational stability by fostering tolerance, patience, and a willingness to resolve issues cooperatively. As a result, trust influences not only how relationships are governed but also how they are experienced and sustained over time. Conceptualizing trust in this way provides a robust foundation for understanding buyer-supplier relationships and sets the stage for examining how trust develops, operates, and affects outcomes in subsequent sections.

2.2.2 Trust Formation and Development over Time

Trust in buyer-supplier relationships develops gradually through repeated interaction rather than emerging instantaneously at the outset of exchange (Nilsson, 2019). In the early stages of a relationship, partners typically face high levels of uncertainty due to limited information about each other's capabilities, reliability, and intentions. During this phase, trust is largely calculative and based on rational assessments of expected benefits and risks, with firms closely monitoring performance indicators such as delivery reliability, quality compliance, and responsiveness (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). Initial trust is therefore fragile and contingent upon early experiences, making consistent performance a critical factor in shaping the trajectory of the relationship (Gulati, 1995).

As buyer-supplier relationships evolve, trust increasingly becomes embedded in relational experience rather than solely in calculative evaluation. Repeated successful interactions allow partners to form stable expectations regarding each other's behavior, reducing perceived uncertainty and the need for intensive monitoring. Research indicates that reliability, predictability, and behavioral consistency are key drivers of trust development, as they signal a partner's commitment to the relationship and willingness to cooperate beyond contractual obligations (Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). Over time, trust becomes less dependent on immediate outcomes and more rooted in the history of interaction between the parties.

Trust development is also shaped by how buyer-supplier relationships respond to critical incidents and unforeseen disruptions. Events such as delivery delays, quality failures, or sudden changes in demand represent pivotal moments in which trust may either be strengthened or undermined (Nursalim et al., 2025). Cooperative responses characterized by transparency, problem-solving orientation, and fair treatment tend to reinforce trust, as they demonstrate relational commitment under pressure (Mayer et al., 1995). In contrast, opportunistic behavior or blame-shifting can rapidly erode trust, even in relationships with a history of positive exchange.

Importantly, trust should be understood as a dynamic and reversible process rather than a linear accumulation. Changes in organizational structures, personnel turnover, or shifts in strategic priorities may disrupt established trust and require deliberate efforts to rebuild relational confidence. Studies emphasize that sustaining trust over time requires continuous reinforcement through communication, alignment of expectations, and consistent behavior (Lewicki et al., 2006). Viewing trust as an evolving process provides insight into why some buyer-supplier relationships deepen into long-term partnerships while others stagnate or dissolve despite initial cooperation.

Conceptualizing trust formation as a temporal process helps explain how buyer-supplier relationships transition from cautious coordination to more embedded collaboration. As trust develops, relational uncertainty decreases, enabling partners to coordinate more effectively, adapt to changing conditions, and manage interdependence with greater flexibility. This perspective underscores the central role of trust in sustaining buyer-supplier relationships over time and provides a foundation for examining how trust interacts with communication and problem-solving processes in the following section.

2.2.3 Trust, Communication, and Problem-Solving

Trust and communication are deeply interconnected in buyer-supplier relationships, as communication processes both reflect existing levels of trust and contribute to its further development. In interorganizational exchange, communication encompasses not only the frequency of contact but also the quality of information shared, including openness, accuracy, timeliness, and completeness (Lee et al., 2021). Higher levels of trust reduce concerns that shared information will be exploited opportunistically, thereby encouraging more open and proactive communication between partners (Doney & Cannon, 1997). In buyer-supplier relationships, such communication supports alignment of expectations, coordination of interdependent activities, and early identification of operational risks.

Trust also plays a critical role in shaping how communication is interpreted within buyer-supplier relationships. When trust is present, partners are more likely to perceive communicated information as credible and intentions as benevolent, reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation or suspicion. Research indicates that trusted partners are more willing to disclose sensitive or negative information, such as delivery delays or quality problems, which is essential for effective coordination in complex supply chains (Cannon et al., 2010). This interpretive function of trust is particularly important in manufacturing contexts, where timely and accurate information exchange is critical for maintaining production continuity and minimizing disruptions.

Problem-solving represents a key domain in which the interaction between trust and communication becomes especially salient. Buyer-supplier relationships inevitably encounter unexpected disruptions, including technical failures, demand fluctuations, or logistical challenges. In trust-based relationships, such problems are more likely to be addressed through collaborative problem-solving rather than just negative responses. Empirical evidence suggests that trust facilitates joint problem-solving by fostering openness, flexibility, and a shared orientation toward long-term relationship preservation (Pimentel Claro & Oliveira Claro, 2010). These cooperative behaviors reduce conflict escalation and enable faster and more effective resolution of operational issues.

The presence of trust further influences whether problem-solving efforts focus on short-term remedies or long-term improvements. When buyer and supplier trust each other, they are more inclined to engage in root-cause analysis, process improvements, and preventive actions that address underlying issues rather than symptoms. Such proactive problem-solving strengthens relationship quality and reinforces trust over time, creating a self-reinforcing cycle between communication, cooperation, and relational stability (Nyaga et al., 2010). In contrast, low-trust relationships tend to rely on defensive communication and reactive problem-solving, which may temporarily resolve issues but often undermine long-term collaboration.

Overall, trust functions as a central enabler of effective communication and cooperative problem-solving in buyer-supplier relationships. By shaping how information is shared, interpreted, and acted upon, trust supports coordination under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. This role helps explain why trust is consistently associated with more resilient and adaptive buyer-supplier relationships, particularly in environments where operational challenges are frequent. Understanding the interplay between trust, communication, and problem-solving therefore provides essential insight into how buyer-supplier relationships are sustained and prepares the ground for examining the implications of trust for performance and satisfaction in the following section.

2.2.4 Trust, Performance, and Satisfaction

Trust is widely recognized as a critical determinant of performance outcomes in buyer-supplier relationships, influencing both operational effectiveness and long-term relational success. In interorganizational exchange, trust reduces perceived relational risk and encourages cooperative behaviors that enhance coordination and efficiency. Higher levels of trust are associated with improved information sharing, stronger commitment, and greater willingness to invest in relationship-specific assets, all of which contribute to improved supplier performance and overall supply chain effectiveness (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In manufacturing environments, where production continuity depends heavily on supplier reliability, trust plays a central role in ensuring consistent quality, delivery accuracy, and responsiveness (Walter et al., 2003).

Trust also affects performance by enabling greater flexibility and adaptability in buyer-supplier relationships. In high-trust relationships, partners are more willing to adjust production schedules, modify order specifications, and collaborate on problem resolution without relying solely on rigid contractual enforcement. This flexibility supports faster responses to market changes and operational disruptions, thereby enhancing supply chain resilience and reducing coordination costs (Cao & Lumineau, 2015). Empirical research further suggests that trust fosters collaborative innovation and continuous improvement by encouraging knowledge exchange and joint learning between buyers and suppliers, which strengthens competitive performance over time (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Petersen et al., 2005).

Trust also plays a decisive role in shaping relational satisfaction, which reflects partners' overall evaluation of the relationship and their willingness to continue cooperation. Satisfaction emerges when exchange partners perceive interactions as fair, mutually beneficial, and aligned with long-term expectations. Trust contributes to satisfaction by fostering positive relational experiences, reducing conflict intensity, and strengthening perceptions of partner reliability and integrity (Doney & Cannon, 1997). In buyer-supplier relationships, higher levels of satisfaction increase relationship stability and reduce switching intentions, thereby supporting continuity and long-term collaboration. Moreover, trust and satisfaction are closely interrelated, as successful cooperation reinforces positive relational perceptions, while repeated satisfaction strengthens confidence in partners' future behavior (Geyskens et al., 1999). This interaction highlights that satisfaction is not merely an outcome of performance but also a mechanism that reinforces relational commitment and cooperative behavior over time.

Trust, performance, and satisfaction form a mutually reinforcing cycle that contributes to the sustainability of buyer-supplier relationships. Improved performance outcomes enhance confidence in partners, which strengthens trust, while higher satisfaction encourages continued cooperation, greater investment in relational processes and increased willingness to engage in joint problem-solving. This dynamic interaction fosters long-term partnerships characterized by mutual commitment, collaborative orientation, and shared value creation (Nyaga et al., 2010). In contrast, performance failures or dissatisfaction can undermine trust, potentially leading to conflict escalation and relationship dissolution. Overall, trust functions as a key mechanism linking relational processes to both operational and relational outcomes in buyer-supplier relationships, providing a theoretical foundation for understanding how trust contributes to sustained collaboration and competitive advantage.

2.3 Trust in International Buyer-Supplier Relationships

2.3.1 International Buyer-Supplier Relationships and Uncertainty

International buyer-supplier relationships are characterized by intensified uncertainty compared to domestic exchanges because cross-border collaboration increases complexity in coordination, information processing, and control. Geographic separation, time-zone differences, and language barriers can reduce the speed and accuracy of information exchange, while operational interdependence remains high, particularly in manufacturing supply chains.

These conditions increase information asymmetry and the likelihood of misunderstandings, creating greater exposure to relational risk. International business research also shows that uncertainty rises when firms operate across unfamiliar markets, as partners have less shared experience and fewer established routines for coordination (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Consequently, international buyer-supplier relationships require additional mechanisms that help partners manage ambiguity and sustain cooperation.

Institutional differences further intensify uncertainty in international buyer-supplier relationships by shaping how firms interpret obligations, enforce agreements, and evaluate acceptable behavior. Cross-border transactions may involve divergent legal frameworks, regulatory standards, dispute-resolution procedures, and informal business norms, which can reduce predictability and complicate monitoring. Institutional theory highlights that such differences create pressures and constraints that vary across environments, requiring firms to adapt relationship management practices to local contexts (North, 1990). In addition, the "liability of foreignness" suggests that firms face additional costs and risks when operating abroad because they lack embeddedness in local institutional environments (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). These institutional challenges can increase perceived vulnerability and make cooperation more dependent on relational mechanisms that support stability under uncertainty.

Uncertainty in international buyer-supplier relationships is also amplified by cultural and distance-related factors that affect coordination and mutual understanding. Cultural differences may influence communication styles, expectations of responsiveness, conflict-handling norms, and interpretations of fairness (Issa Kawar, 2012). Distance research suggests that differences are multidimensional and include cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic components, each contributing to coordination difficulties and relational friction (Berry et al., 2010). Similarly, cultural distance has been shown to shape managerial perceptions and interaction patterns in cross-border relationships, increasing the likelihood of misalignment and distrust when norms and expectations diverge (Kogut & Singh, 1988). These forms of distance can therefore increase uncertainty by reducing partners' ability to predict each other's actions and interpret signals accurately.

Cross-border supply chains are additionally exposed to external disruptions that can undermine predictability and performance, including transportation bottlenecks, regulatory changes, geopolitical shocks, and demand volatility. Supply chain risk research emphasizes that global supply networks are vulnerable to a broad range of disruptions that require rapid coordination and adaptive responses across partners (Christopher & Peck, 2004). These risks are not purely operational, but they also affect relational dynamics by testing the reliability of partners' behavior during disruptions. In contexts where formal safeguards cannot anticipate every contingency, relational mechanisms that support cooperation and flexibility become increasingly relevant. International business research also highlights that "institutional voids", and uneven market-supporting institutions can increase transaction uncertainty in cross-border relationships, particularly when enforcement and transparency vary across countries (Khanna & Palepu, 2010).

Overall, international buyer-supplier relationships intensify uncertainty through institutional differences, distance-related barriers, and exposure to external disruptions, making coordination more challenging and relational risk more salient. These conditions help explain why trust becomes particularly important in cross-border exchanges, as it supports cooperative adaptation and reduces perceived vulnerability when partners face ambiguity and incomplete information (Gulati, 1995). The following section builds on this argument by examining how cultural and institutional distance shape trust formation and maintenance in international buyer-supplier relationships.

2.3.2 Cultural and Institutional Distance and Trust

Cultural and institutional distance represent key contextual factors that shape trust development in international buyer-supplier relationships. Cultural distance refers to differences in values, behavioral norms, and communication styles across national environments, while institutional distance reflects variation in regulatory systems, legal enforcement, and governance frameworks (Hofstede, 2001). Both forms of distance influence how firms interpret partner behavior, evaluate reliability, and structure cooperation. Greater distance often increases uncertainty by reducing shared understanding and predictability in cross-border exchanges, making trust formation more complex and requiring additional relational effort from both partners (Kogut & Singh, 1988).

Cultural differences influence trust primarily through their effects on communication practices, relational expectations, and interpretations of cooperative behavior, often creating challenges that extend beyond simple language barriers. Variations in dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and long-term orientation influence how partners perceive authority structures, decision-making processes, negotiation styles, and conflict resolution approaches (Stahl & Voigt, 2008). These differences can lead to divergent expectations regarding responsiveness, transparency, and acceptable business conduct, increasing the likelihood of misunderstanding and relational friction when partners rely on culturally specific assumptions. Research indicates that cultural misalignment can slow trust development by reducing partners' ability to accurately interpret intentions and behavioral signals, particularly in early relationship stages when familiarity is limited (Hofstede, 2001). In addition, cultural distance may influence how firms express commitment, communicate dissatisfaction, or manage conflict, which can significantly shape the perceived reliability and goodwill of exchange partners. However, repeated interaction and relational learning can gradually reduce these barriers, as partners develop shared communication routines, adapt interaction styles, and gain deeper insight into each other's cultural expectations. Over time, such adaptations can transform cultural diversity from a source of relational risk into a foundation for stronger cooperation and knowledge exchange, particularly when firms actively invest in cross-cultural competence and relationship management practices (Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995).

Institutional distance also plays a significant role in shaping trust dynamics by influencing the perceived effectiveness of formal governance mechanisms. Differences in legal enforcement, contract protection, regulatory transparency, and market-supporting institutions may increase perceived vulnerability in cross-border transactions, as firms may be uncertain about how agreements will be interpreted or enforced. Institutional theory suggests that organizations operating across heterogeneous regulatory environments often rely more heavily on relational governance mechanisms to compensate for limited familiarity with foreign institutional frameworks (North, 1990). In international buyer-supplier relationships, trust therefore functions as a complementary mechanism that supports cooperation when formal safeguards are insufficient or difficult to enforce. Empirical research also suggests that firms operating in institutionally distant environments frequently invest more resources in relationship monitoring, partner selection, and communication processes to support trust formation and reduce relational risk (Luo, 2002).

Overall, cultural and institutional distance significantly influence how trust is formed, maintained, and experienced in international buyer-supplier relationships. By shaping communication practices, governance choices, and relational expectations, these contextual factors determine the complexity of trust development across borders. Understanding the impact of distance provides critical insight into how firms manage cross-border partnerships and highlights the importance of relational capabilities in sustaining cooperation.

2.3.3 Managing Trust Across Borders in Manufacturing

Managing trust in international manufacturing supply chains requires deliberate organizational practices that address the complexity of cross-border coordination and relational risk. Manufacturing firms operating internationally often rely on geographically dispersed suppliers, which increases the importance of structured relationship management and consistent communication. Effective trust management involves establishing clear expectations, maintaining transparency, and ensuring reliable performance across multiple production stages. Research indicates that structured collaboration mechanisms, including regular meetings, joint planning processes, and standardized communication channels, support trust development by reducing uncertainty and strengthening relational predictability (Flynn et al., 2010; Cannon et al., 2010). In cross-border manufacturing relationships, such mechanisms provide partners with opportunities to align operational objectives and reinforce mutual confidence.

Communication plays a central role in maintaining trust across international manufacturing networks, particularly when partners operate under different cultural and institutional conditions. Firms that invest in frequent, transparent, and multi-channel communication are better positioned to detect early signs of operational disruption and address relational tensions before they escalate. Cross-border communication often requires adaptation to language differences, time-zone challenges, and varying communication norms, which increases the need for relational sensitivity and flexibility. Empirical studies demonstrate that effective communication strengthens relational commitment and enhances coordination efficiency in global supply chains, thereby reinforcing trust over time (Jean et al., 2012).

Another critical aspect of managing trust across borders involves partner selection and long-term relationship orientation. Manufacturing firms often prioritize supplier reliability, reputation, and relational compatibility when selecting international partners, recognizing that trust development is strongly influenced by early relational experiences. Strategic partner selection reduces the likelihood of opportunistic behavior and supports the development of stable collaboration. Research suggests that firms engaging in long-term partnerships invest more heavily in supplier development, joint training initiatives, and performance feedback mechanisms, all of which contribute to stronger relational trust and improved supply chain performance (Krause et al., 2007). These practices reinforce the perception of mutual commitment and strengthen relational embeddedness.

Managing trust in international manufacturing relationships also requires balancing formal governance mechanisms with relational coordination. While contracts provide structural clarity and establish baseline expectations of behavior, they are often insufficient to manage dynamic, cross-border uncertainty without support from trust-based relational governance. Research on supply chain governance indicates that successful coordination often emerges from a combination of contractual and relational governance mechanisms, where formal contracts reduce opportunism and provide a foundation for cooperation, but relational elements such as shared norms, information sharing, and trust facilitate flexibility and adaptation to unforeseen challenges (Burkert et al., 2012). Both formal and informal governance methods have been shown to be important in resolving supply chain disruptions and enhancing coordination effectiveness; relational governance helps mitigate the limitations of formal contracts by enabling partners to collaborate and adjust in response to emerging risks (Jamaluddin & Saibani, 2021). This balance is particularly crucial in cross-border manufacturing contexts, where environmental volatility and institutional diversity often limit the effectiveness of purely contractual controls and increase the need for trust-based adaptation and cooperative problem-solving (Yang et al., 2022).

Overall, managing trust across borders in manufacturing involves a combination of communication practices, partner selection strategies, collaborative routines, and governance mechanisms that support relational stability. These managerial practices enable firms to sustain cooperation despite geographic distance, institutional variation, and operational complexity. By strengthening relational trust, manufacturing firms can enhance coordination efficiency, improve supply chain resilience, and support long-term collaborative performance. Understanding these management practices provides a direct link between theoretical perspectives on trust and the empirical investigation of buyer-supplier relationships in international manufacturing settings.

2.4 Summary and Research Gap

The literature on buyer-supplier relationships demonstrates that interorganizational exchange plays a critical role in supporting operational performance, coordination efficiency, and long-term competitiveness. Research has shown that buyer-supplier relationships extend beyond transactional exchanges and increasingly involve ongoing collaboration, interdependence, and joint value creation. In manufacturing contexts, these relationships are particularly important due to the high level of coordination required to manage production processes, quality standards, and delivery reliability (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Walter et al., 2003). Existing studies consistently emphasize that relational mechanisms significantly influence how firms manage interorganizational cooperation and sustain performance in complex supply networks.

Within this body of research, trust has emerged as a central explanatory mechanism shaping buyer-supplier relationships. Trust reduces perceived relational risk, supports cooperative behavior, and enables partners to coordinate activities under conditions of uncertainty and incomplete contractual safeguards. Prior studies demonstrate that trust facilitates information sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and relationship stability, which in turn contribute to improved operational performance and relational satisfaction (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, trust development has been shown to occur gradually through repeated interaction, relational learning, and successful management of disruptions, highlighting its dynamic and evolving nature within interorganizational relationships.

Research focusing on international buyer-supplier relationships further suggests that trust becomes increasingly important when firms operate across borders. Cross-border supply chains introduce additional challenges related to cultural differences, institutional variation, geographic distance, and environmental uncertainty. These contextual factors complicate coordination and increase relational risk, making trust an essential mechanism for sustaining cooperation and enabling flexible adaptation (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Studies also indicate that managing trust across international manufacturing supply chains requires deliberate communication strategies, partner selection practices, and governance structures that balance formal controls with relational coordination (Flynn et al., 2010; Nyaga et al., 2010).

Despite the extensive literature on trust and buyer-supplier relationships, several research gaps remain. First, much of the existing research examines trust at a general or theoretical level, with limited attention to how trust is experienced and managed in specific organizational contexts. While quantitative studies provide valuable insights into trust-performance relationships, they often overlook the relational processes through which trust is developed and maintained in practice. Second, prior research frequently focuses on large-scale or multinational supply networks, with comparatively less emphasis on medium-sized manufacturing firms, which face unique relational challenges due to resource constraints and closer interpersonal interaction. Third, although international supply chains have been widely studied, there remains limited qualitative research exploring how trust is perceived and operationalized within specific cross-border buyer-supplier relationships, particularly in European manufacturing contexts.

This study therefore adopts trust as the central theoretical lens for examining buyer-supplier relationships and investigates how trust is developed and maintained in international manufacturing supply chains. To explore these dynamics in depth, the research employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on buyer-supplier interactions within a European manufacturing context. By examining trust formation, communication practices, and cooperation processes from both buyer and supplier perspectives, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of relational mechanisms that sustain international buyer-supplier relationships.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological approach adopted in the study and outlines the research process used to examine trust in buyer-supplier relationships within an international manufacturing context. It first discusses the research philosophy and overall research approach, followed by the case study strategy and research context. The chapter then describes the data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and the use of internal organizational documents. Finally, it explains the procedures used for data analysis and addresses issues related to research quality, ethical considerations, and methodological limitations. Together, these elements provide the methodological foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the following chapter.

3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2009) to examine trust as a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon within buyer-supplier relationships. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is constructed through interaction and that meaning is created through the perceptions and experiences of individuals rather than existing as an objective, measurable entity (Creswell, 2007). In the context of interorganizational relationships, trust does not exist independently of actors but is formed, maintained, and interpreted through ongoing communication, shared experiences, and relational practices. Consequently, understanding trust requires access to participants' perspectives and interpretations, which aligns with the interpretivist emphasis on socially constructed reality. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining complex organizational phenomena within their natural contexts, as it enables a deeper understanding of meanings, experiences, and interpretations from the perspectives of participants (Flick, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

From an ontological perspective, the study assumes that trust in buyer-supplier relationships is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic and evolving process shaped by interaction over time. Trust is experienced differently by various organizational actors and may vary depending on context, prior experience, and relational history. This position rejects a purely positivist assumption that trust can be fully captured through standardized measurement alone and instead emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive understanding (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). By recognizing trust as relational and embedded in social processes, the research seeks to explore how actors perceive and interpret trust within international manufacturing supply chains.

Methodologically, the study follows an interpretive logic that prioritizes rich, qualitative data to generate in-depth understanding of relational processes. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the research adopts an exploratory approach aimed at uncovering how trust is developed, maintained, and operationalized in practice. Inductive reasoning is employed to allow patterns and themes to emerge from empirical data while remaining informed by existing theoretical perspectives on trust and buyer-supplier relationships (Saunders et al., 2009). This approach enables the integration of theory and empirical insight, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in participants' lived experiences while contributing to broader theoretical discussions.

The interpretivist and inductive orientation of the study aligns closely with the use of a qualitative case study methodology. Case study research is particularly suitable for investigating complex contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are intertwined (Yin, 2018). Trust in international buyer-supplier relationships is inherently context-dependent, influenced by organizational structures, cultural environments, and operational dynamics. A qualitative case study therefore provides the necessary depth and contextual sensitivity to examine how trust operates within a specific cross-border manufacturing setting. Through this philosophical and methodological alignment, the study aims to provide nuanced insight into the relational dynamics that shape trust in international buyer-supplier relationships.

3.2 Research Design and Case Study Research

Case study research constituted the central methodological strategy applied in this study, as it provides an appropriate approach for investigating complex organizational phenomena embedded within real-life contexts. Trust in buyer-supplier relationships is strongly influenced by organizational structures, operational practices, and international business environments, making it difficult to separate the phenomenon from its contextual conditions. Case study research is particularly suitable when researchers seek to understand contemporary organizational processes while maintaining sensitivity to contextual influences (Yin, 2018). It allows researchers to investigate phenomena in depth, capture process complexity, and explore relational dynamics that may be difficult to isolate using alternative methodological approaches (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995). The present study therefore adopts a qualitative single-case study design to investigate how trust is developed, maintained, and experienced within international buyer-supplier relationships operating in a manufacturing context. The selected strategy aligns with the interpretivist philosophy guiding this research by enabling a context-sensitive understanding of trust as a relational and operational phenomenon. Given the complexity of buyer-supplier cooperation within manufacturing environments, case study research provides an appropriate framework for examining trust within its natural organizational setting.

The selection of a single case is justified by both the exploratory objective of the study and the contextual significance of the selected organization. Single-case studies are considered particularly valuable when the case provides access to a phenomenon that can generate rich insight into complex organizational processes or contributes to broader theoretical understanding (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The focal company operates within an international manufacturing supply chain characterized by cross-border collaboration, operational interdependence, and long-term buyer-supplier cooperation, creating a suitable setting for examining trust dynamics. Importantly, the study provides access to both buyer and supplier perspectives, allowing relational processes to be explored from multiple viewpoints. This supports a more comprehensive understanding of how trust functions within international manufacturing relationships and strengthens the analytical depth of the case. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study seeks analytical generalization by connecting empirical findings to broader theoretical discussions concerning trust and interorganizational relationships (Yin, 2018). Case study research is particularly appropriate when the boundaries between organizational phenomena and contextual conditions remain difficult to distinguish and when researchers seek to understand processes occurring within their real-life environment (Yin, 2018; Cassell et al., 2018).

The selected organization was additionally considered appropriate due to its active engagement in international buyer-supplier cooperation and reliance on cross-border manufacturing collaboration. The organization maintains ongoing partnerships with suppliers operating across different national contexts, creating an environment in which trust plays a central role in coordinating production processes, managing disruptions, and sustaining long-term cooperation. The Germany-Poland cross-border element introduces additional complexity related to institutional differences, operational coordination, and international collaboration within manufacturing networks. These characteristics strengthen the relevance of the selected case and support its suitability for examining trust under international business conditions. Previous methodological literature additionally emphasizes that case study research is particularly valuable when investigating organizational processes influenced by multiple interacting factors and contextual dimensions (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The selected case therefore provides an opportunity to investigate trust dynamics within a context characterized by both relational complexity and operational interdependence.

The research design remains closely aligned with the study's central research question, which focuses on understanding how trust is developed, maintained, and experienced within international buyer-supplier relationships operating in a manufacturing context. Qualitative case study research enables detailed exploration of participant perspectives, relational practices, and organizational mechanisms that would be difficult to capture using survey-based or purely quantitative approaches (Gerring, 2006). While quantitative methods may identify relationships between trust and performance outcomes, they often provide limited understanding of how trust operates within everyday organizational activities and managerial practices. Case study research allows researchers to investigate these relational processes directly within their organizational context while preserving the complexity of operational realities (Yin, 2018). Through analytical generalization and in-depth contextual understanding, the selected research design supports broader theoretical discussions concerning trust and buyer-supplier relationships while remaining grounded in the realities of international manufacturing collaboration.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they enable in-depth exploration of relational dynamics and subjective perceptions, which are central to understanding trust in buyer-supplier relationships. Trust is not directly observable but is experienced and interpreted by organizational actors through interaction, communication, and cooperation over time. Qualitative interviews therefore provide access to participants' interpretations, experiences, and reflections, allowing the researcher to capture the relational processes underlying buyer-supplier cooperation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable when the researcher seeks to balance theoretical guidance with openness to emergent insights. Unlike structured interviews, which rely on standardized questions and limited flexibility, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to follow a predefined thematic guide while adapting questions to the respondent's role, experience, and organizational context (Bryman, 2016). This flexibility was essential in the present study because participants represented different organizational positions, including purchasing, management, and supplier roles. While all interviews addressed common themes related to cooperation, communication, reliability, and performance, the conversational format enabled deeper probing of trust-related experiences and cross-border coordination challenges. Semi-structured interviews provide both structure and flexibility, allowing participants to describe their experiences and perspectives in detail while also enabling the exploration of emerging themes during the conversation (Silverman, 2016).

The interview guides were developed based on the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2, particularly the literature on trust formation, relational governance, and buyer-supplier cooperation. Two separate but conceptually aligned interview guides were designed: one for representatives of XYZ (the chosen company) and one for supplier representatives. This distinction allowed for the capture of both buyer and supplier perspectives on relational dynamics. The guides included open-ended questions regarding relationship development, communication practices, problem-solving processes, and perceived cooperation quality. By structuring the interviews around relational themes rather than predefined hypotheses, the study maintained consistency with its interpretivist and exploratory orientation.

The use of semi-structured interviews also allowed respondents to provide concrete examples of interactions, disruptions, and coordination practices, thereby enhancing contextual richness. Participants were encouraged to describe specific situations that illustrated cooperation successes or challenges. Such narrative data are particularly valuable in trust research, as they reveal how relational expectations are formed and how cooperation is enacted in practice. Through this method, the study generated detailed qualitative material suitable for thematic analysis and interpretation.

3.3.2 Sampling and Participants

The selection of interview participants followed a purposive sampling strategy designed to capture informed perspectives on buyer-supplier relationships within the focal organization and its supply network. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when the objective is not statistical representation but the selection of participants who possess relevant experience and knowledge related to the research topic (Bryman, 2016). Because this study aims to understand how trust operates in international buyer-supplier relationships, participants were selected based on their direct involvement in purchasing, supplier coordination, or interorganizational cooperation. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when participants are selected based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research problem (Patton, 2015).

The sample included representatives from both XYZ and selected suppliers to obtain perspectives from both sides of the relationship. Including buyer and supplier viewpoints strengthens the depth of relational analysis and reduces single-source bias, which is particularly important when examining subjective constructs such as trust. Interviewees within XYZ included individuals involved in procurement, operational coordination, and managerial oversight of supplier relationships. On the supplier side, participants held roles related to account management, sales coordination, or production planning in relation to XYZ as a customer. These roles ensured that respondents had direct exposure to communication practices, delivery coordination, and performance evaluation processes.

The final sample consisted of 6 interviews conducted across buyer and supplier organizations. While the sample size is limited, it aligns with qualitative case study methodology, where depth of insight is prioritized over breadth of coverage (Yin, 2018). The objective was to achieve informational richness rather than statistical generalization. Each participant possessed substantial experience within the company and familiarity with cross-border cooperation processes, thereby contributing contextually grounded insights into relational dynamics. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

Table 1. Participant overview

Participant Code	Role	Organization Side	Country	Language
B1	Procurement	Buyer	Poland	Polish
B2	Procurement	Buyer	Poland	Polish
S1	Sales & Partnership	Supplier	Germany	English
S2	Account Management	Supplier	Germany	English
S3	CEO	Supplier	Poland	Polish
S4	Sales	Supplier	Poland	Polish

The interview sample was intentionally designed to capture perspectives from both sides of the buyer-supplier relationship while triangulating interview evidence with organizational documentation and operational communication materials. Access to participants was facilitated through the focal organization, which agreed to participate in the study and enabled contact with relevant employees and selected supplier representatives. This facilitated access allowed the researcher to engage directly with individuals responsible for managing and experiencing buyer-supplier interactions. While organizational access may introduce certain sensitivities, efforts were made to ensure that participation was voluntary and that responses reflected individual perspectives rather than organizational positioning. Moreover, the purposive selection of participants ensured that interview data were directly aligned with the research objective. By including multiple roles and perspectives across the buyer-supplier interface, the study obtained a nuanced understanding of how relational dynamics are experienced and managed within the international manufacturing context.

3.3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026, during which semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives of XYZ and selected supplier organizations. Interviews were scheduled individually and arranged directly with participants following initial organizational consent. The timing of the interviews was coordinated to minimize operational disruption while ensuring that respondents were able to provide focused and reflective responses.

Interviews were conducted either in-person or online via MS Teams, depending on geographical location and participant availability. The cross-border nature of the case, involving actors located in both Poland and Germany, made remote interviewing a practical and efficient solution for certain respondents. Online interviews were conducted using secure video-conferencing platforms, which allowed for face-to-face interaction while accommodating international coordination. Conducting interviews in a conversational setting supported open discussion and enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences.

With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy of data capture. Recording allowed the researcher to focus on the interaction rather than extensive notetaking and ensured that responses could later be transcribed verbatim. All recordings were transcribed shortly after each interview to maintain familiarity with the material and preserve contextual nuances. Transcriptions were prepared by the researcher to enhance immersion in the data and to support subsequent coding and analysis. The interviews were conducted in Polish or English. All collected data were stored securely in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. Audio recordings and transcripts were anonymized to protect participant identities and organizational confidentiality. Identifying details were removed from transcripts, and respondents were assigned coded identifiers (e.g., "Buyer 1 - B1," "Supplier 1 - S1") to ensure confidentiality in subsequent analysis and reporting.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the study also incorporates selected internal organizational documents and operational materials to provide contextual understanding of buyer-supplier cooperation processes. These materials include internal reports, operational procedures, supplier-related documentation, and examples of claims or issue-resolution records related to supplier performance. The use of such documentary data supports a more comprehensive understanding of how buyer-supplier relationships function in practice, particularly in relation to communication practices, coordination routines, and problem resolution processes. Documentary sources were used primarily to contextualize and complement interview insights rather than as independent analytical units. Integrating interview data with documentary material contributes to methodological triangulation, which enhances the robustness and credibility of qualitative research by allowing findings to be supported by multiple forms of evidence (Yin, 2018).

3.4 Research Context and Case Description

This section presents the industrial, regional, and organizational context within which the empirical investigation was conducted. Its purpose is to provide a structured overview of the manufacturing environment, explain the structural dynamics shaping buyer-supplier relationships, and contextualize the cross-border supply network in which the focal company operates. The section does not present empirical findings but instead outlines the economic, technological, and operational characteristics of the industry and the organization under study. By situating the case within its broader economic and production setting, the research establishes the contextual foundation necessary for examining trust in international buyer-supplier relationships.

3.4.1 Polish Manufacturing Industry

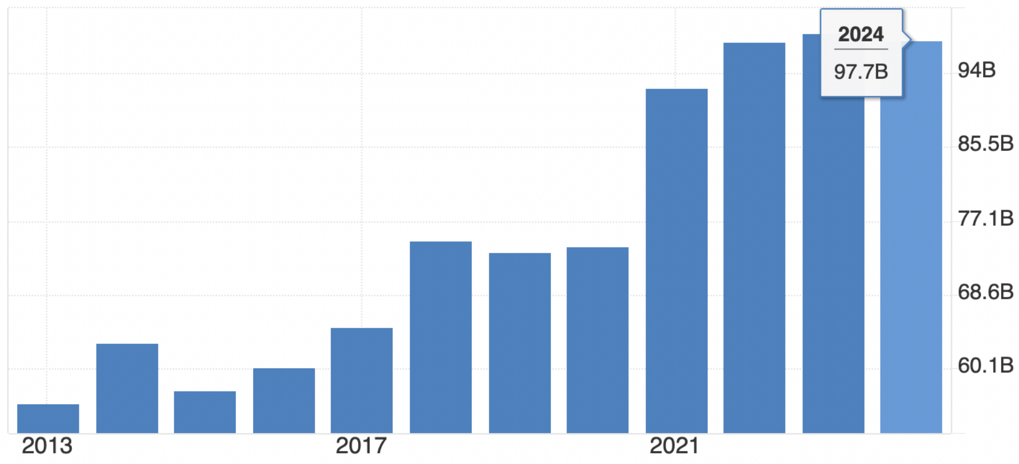
Manufacturing represents one of the central pillars of the Polish economy and plays an important role in the country's integration into European industrial networks. Manufacturing accounted for approximately 16% of Poland's gross value added in 2024, making it one of the key sectors supporting national economic output and employment (Trade.gov.pl, 2025). Poland also remains highly export-oriented, with manufacturing products constituting a substantial share of exports, particularly machinery, vehicles, and electrical equipment (OECD, 2025). As a result, Poland occupies an important position within European industrial value chains. Figure 1 illustrates the long-term importance of manufacturing within the Polish economy.

Figure 1. Manufacturing, value added (% of GDP) - Last 20 years

(World Bank, 2026)

Poland’s manufacturing sector is strongly integrated into transnational supply chains, particularly within the European Union. Germany represents one of Poland’s most important trade partners, with close industrial connections supporting cross-border production systems and operational interdependence between firms (Trading Economics, 2026). Polish manufacturers frequently operate as suppliers, subcontractors, or production partners within broader European manufacturing networks. Such integration creates an environment in which coordination, reliability, and effective buyer-supplier cooperation become operationally important. Figure 2 presents the scale of trade relations between Germany and Poland.

Figure 2. Germany Exports to Poland



(Trading Economics, 2026)

Recent developments including technological modernization, automation, and increasing operational complexity have further strengthened the importance of coordination between buyers and suppliers (Trade.gov.pl, 2025). Manufacturing firms increasingly operate under conditions requiring technical compatibility, quality consistency, and reliable delivery performance. At the same time, external pressures including supply chain disruptions, regulatory requirements, and economic uncertainty increase dependence on stable buyer-supplier cooperation. These characteristics create an environment in which trust, coordination, and relational stability become particularly important, providing a relevant context for examining buyer-supplier relationships within international manufacturing systems.

3.4.2 The European Lighting Manufacturing Sector and Buyer-Supplier Structures

The European lighting manufacturing sector represents an important industrial segment characterized by technological development, increasing LED adoption, and growing operational complexity. Across Europe, regulatory requirements, sustainability objectives, and demand for energy-efficient solutions have accelerated the transition toward LED technologies, contributing to continued market growth (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). Alongside technological development, the sector has become increasingly dependent on coordinated supply networks involving manufacturers and specialized component suppliers.

Manufacturers within the lighting industry commonly operate as system integrators rather than producing all components internally. Final products are typically assembled from externally sourced modules, drivers, housings, optics, and electronic components supplied by multiple specialized partners. This creates supply networks characterized by strong operational interdependence, where component quality, technical compatibility, and delivery reliability directly influence production continuity and final product performance. As a result, coordination between buyers and suppliers becomes operationally important within everyday manufacturing activities.

Procurement processes within lighting manufacturing frequently combine centralized sourcing strategies with decentralized operational coordination. While supplier agreements and quality requirements are often established at the organizational level, operational cooperation involving delivery schedules, technical adjustments, and production coordination typically occurs directly between manufacturing sites and supplier representatives. This increases interaction frequency and reinforces dependence between organizations operating across different locations and national contexts.

The sector additionally operates within highly integrated European supply networks supported by regulatory harmonization and cross-border manufacturing collaboration. Production systems frequently rely on externally sourced components combined into final products, creating supply chains characterized by high operational interdependence and coordination requirements. Regulatory obligations related to efficiency standards, product certification, and technical compliance further increase the importance of reliable supplier cooperation (Europa EU, 2026).

Overall, the European lighting manufacturing sector represents an industrial environment characterized by technological complexity, supply chain interdependence, and strong buyer-supplier coordination requirements. These characteristics create a relevant context for examining trust within international manufacturing relationships, particularly where cooperation depends on operational reliability, coordination quality, and long-term supplier collaboration.

3.4.3 Organizational Background: XYZ Group and the Polish Branch

XYZ Group is a European lighting manufacturer headquartered in Jungingen, Germany, with operations across several countries including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, France, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland. The group specializes in the production and distribution of lighting systems, with a particular focus on LED luminaires used in industrial, commercial, and retail spaces. The company serves institutional clients, including retail chains and logistics operators, providing lighting solutions for industrial and commercial applications. This customer profile places XYZ within the high-specification B2B segment of the lighting industry, where customization, reliability, and project-based delivery models are common.

The Polish branch of XYZ, located in the outskirts of Łódź, represents both a commercial and production presence within the group's organizational structure. The site consists of two formal entities: XYZ Polska z.o.o., responsible for office functions and sales activities, and XYZ Polska spółka jawna, responsible for production. Despite its relatively small size, the Polish site fulfills an important role within the group's manufacturing network, as some products are exclusively assembled or completed in Poland before distribution to customers or to the German headquarters.

Operations at the Łódź facility are centered on assembly rather than full-scale component manufacturing. Semi-finished products such as structural frames, lighting modules, wiring elements, and housings are sourced either from external suppliers or from the parent company in Germany. The company does not maintain inventory of finished goods. Instead, it holds only the necessary components required for ongoing production. Customer orders originate from two main channels: large corporate clients with long-term supply agreements and smaller individual orders. Additionally, some demand comes from the German headquarters when specific product lines are designated for production in Poland. The company leverages a centralized procurement model shared across the group, enabling aggregated purchasing volumes and coordinated material distribution among branches. This structure aims to reduce costs and streamline supply management but also reinforces dependence on supplier performance and cross-branch coordination.

Production scheduling is based on the order queue, with the production director assigning work to assembly stations. Workloads may be combined to enhance efficiency when multiple orders require similar configurations. The assembly process begins with the preparation of semi-components, including wire cutting, sub-element integration, and material labeling. Once all necessary components are staged, assembly proceeds, followed by packaging and preparation for shipment. Standard products typically follow a two-week production cycle from order confirmation to delivery. More complex products requiring external finishing, such as varnishing, may extend production time to two or three months.

These operational characteristics highlight why buyer-supplier relationships are strategically important for XYZ Polska. With no finished-goods inventory, short production cycles, and reliance on semi-finished components, supplier reliability directly affects delivery performance and customer satisfaction. The presence of centralized procurement further introduces both efficiency benefits and coordination challenges, making the company a relevant and insightful case through which to examine supply dependencies, communication mechanisms, and relationship management within the manufacturing industry. These operational characteristics make XYZ Polska an appropriate case for examining how trust shapes buyer-supplier cooperation in an international manufacturing supply chain, particularly in situations where production continuity depends on reliable coordination with external suppliers.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of interview data followed a qualitative thematic analysis approach aimed at identifying patterns and relational processes related to trust in buyer-supplier relationships. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research as a flexible method for systematically organizing and interpreting textual data to identify meaningful themes across participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). In the context of this study, thematic analysis was appropriate because the research focuses on understanding subjective perceptions, relational practices, and interaction processes rather than measuring predefined variables. The analysis combined inductive and theory-informed reasoning. While themes were allowed to emerge from the interview material, the coding process was also guided by concepts identified in the literature review, particularly trust formation, communication practices, problem-solving behavior, and relational performance outcomes in buyer-supplier relationships (Guest et al., 2014). In addition to interview data, selected organizational documents were reviewed to support contextual interpretation of buyer-supplier coordination processes and to complement interview insights. These materials provided additional information regarding operational procedures, supplier performance evaluation, and issue-resolution processes within the focal organization. The analytical process was informed by principles of thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data through coding and thematic categorization (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analytical process was conducted in several stages. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview to ensure familiarity with the empirical material. The researcher then conducted an initial reading of the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the content and identify preliminary patterns. During the first stage of coding, segments of text that reflected relevant experiences, perceptions, or examples of buyer-supplier interaction were assigned descriptive codes. These codes captured key elements of the interview data such as communication practices, supplier reliability, coordination challenges, and responses to operational disruptions. In the second stage, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories that reflected recurring relational patterns across interviews. Particular attention was given to themes associated with the development of trust, including early-stage relationship formation, communication transparency, problem-solving behavior, and perceived cooperation quality. To enhance analytical consistency, the coding process was conducted iteratively, with earlier transcripts revisited and codes refined as new insights emerged during subsequent stages of analysis.

In the final stage of analysis, the identified themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework presented in the literature review. This stage involved comparing empirical observations with existing research on trust and buyer-supplier relationships to understand how the case reflects, extends, or challenges established theoretical perspectives. The use of direct interview quotations in the findings chapter further supports transparency by illustrating how analytical interpretations are grounded in participants' accounts. Through this coding and interpretation process, qualitative interview data were transformed into structured empirical insights informing the findings presented in the following chapter.

3.6 Research Quality and Trustworthiness

Ensuring research quality in qualitative studies requires criteria different from those applied in quantitative research. Rather than focusing on statistical validity and reliability, qualitative research emphasizes trustworthiness as a means of evaluating rigor and credibility (Lincoln et al., 1985; Lumineau & Oliveira, 2020). Research quality in qualitative studies is commonly evaluated through criteria such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability rather than statistical validity (Silverman, 2016). This study adopts the given framework.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' perspectives and the studied phenomenon. In this study, credibility was enhanced through the inclusion of multiple perspectives within the buyer-supplier interface. Interviews were conducted with representatives from both XYZ and its suppliers, allowing the researcher to compare viewpoints across organizational boundaries. This cross-perspective approach reduces the risk of single-source bias and strengthens interpretive depth. Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews enabled participants to elaborate on experiences and provide detailed examples, supporting richer contextual understanding.

Dependability

Dependability concerns the consistency and transparency of the research process. To enhance dependability, the study followed a clearly documented research design, including structured interview guides, systematic data recording, and transparent transcription procedures. Each stage of data collection was documented, allowing the research process to be traceable and replicable in principle. By outlining methodological decisions in detail, the study provides a clear account of how empirical material was generated and analyzed.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the data rather than influenced by researcher bias. To support confirmability, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded systematically. Interpretations were derived directly from participants' statements, and analytical conclusions were linked to empirical evidence. The use of direct quotations in the findings chapter further strengthens confirmability by allowing readers to assess the connection between data and interpretation.

Transferability

Transferability addresses the degree to which findings may be applicable to other contexts. While this study focuses on a single case, detailed contextual description of the industry, supply network, and organizational structure enables readers to evaluate the relevance of findings to comparable international manufacturing environments. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study seeks analytical generalization by linking empirical insights to existing literature on buyer-supplier relationships and trust.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully considered throughout the research process, particularly given that the study involved organizational representatives discussing internal cooperation and supplier relationships. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the academic purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the intended use of the data. Informed consent was obtained before conducting and recording interviews, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Transparency regarding the research objectives aimed to foster openness and ensure that respondents felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Ethical considerations are particularly important in qualitative research due to the close interaction between the researcher, participants, and organizational context, requiring careful attention to confidentiality, informed consent, and responsible data handling (Wiles, 2013).

Confidentiality and data protection were treated as central safeguards. While the organization consented to participation in the study, individual respondents were anonymized during transcription and reporting. Identifying details were removed and replaced with coded labels to protect personal identities. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. By ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and secure data handling, the study adheres to established ethical standards for qualitative research.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure methodological rigor, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a single-case design, which inherently restricts the scope of empirical observation. While the case provides in-depth insight into buyer-supplier relationships within a specific international manufacturing context, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all manufacturing firms or supply networks. Single-case studies prioritize contextual depth over breadth, which strengthens analytical richness but limits representativeness. The specific characteristics of the lighting industry, the Germany-Poland production corridor, and the organizational structure of XYZ may shape relational dynamics in ways that differ from other sectors or geographic settings. Consequently, the study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalization, contributing to theoretical understanding rather than universal prediction.

A second limitation relates to the qualitative nature of the data and the reliance on interview-based accounts. Interviews capture participants' perceptions, interpretations, and retrospective reflections, which may be influenced by personal experiences, memory biases, or organizational positioning. Although the inclusion of both buyer and supplier perspectives reduces the risk of single-source bias, the findings remain dependent on subjective accounts rather than direct behavioral observation. Furthermore, participants may consciously or unconsciously present their organization in a favorable light, particularly when discussing cooperation quality or relational challenges. While measures such as anonymization and open-ended questioning were used to encourage candid responses, interpretive analysis inevitably involves a degree of researcher judgment.

Finally, the researcher's position and prior access to the organization may also influence data interpretation. In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, which means that interpretation is shaped by theoretical sensitivity, analytical framing, and contextual understanding. Although systematic coding procedures and transparent documentation were applied to enhance confirmability, complete objectivity is neither achievable nor consistent with the interpretivist orientation mitigate potential bias. Recognizing these limitations does not undermine the study's contribution but rather clarifies its scope and contextual boundaries, thereby strengthening the credibility of its findings.

4. Findings

4.1 Trust Formation in Buyer-Supplier Relationships

Trust formation in buyer-supplier relationships emerged as a gradual and experience-based process rather than an immediate condition present at the beginning of cooperation. Both buyers and suppliers described the early stages of cooperation as a period characterized by uncertainty, during which trust had to be built through observable actions, communication, and operational consistency. The findings indicate that trust was not automatically granted but developed progressively through repeated interaction and the evaluation of reliability in practice. One buyer explained that the beginning of cooperation is strongly focused on verifying whether the supplier fulfills expectations and reacts appropriately to operational issues:

"At the beginning, trust depends mostly on whether the supplier meets the initial agreements and how quickly they react if quality problems appear. If someone responds immediately and tries to solve the issue, it creates confidence very quickly." (Buyer 1)

This suggests that trust was strongly performance-based in its initial stage, where responsiveness and operational reliability functioned as early indicators of competence and commitment. In manufacturing environments, where even relatively small disruptions may affect production continuity, the ability to react quickly reduced uncertainty and strengthened confidence in the supplier's capabilities. Buyers therefore evaluated trust primarily through observable operational behavior rather than through assumptions or relational familiarity. Trust formation was consequently closely linked to operational execution and problem-solving ability. Within the analyzed company, operational execution was closely connected to component availability, delivery reliability, and responsiveness to quality-related issues affecting production continuity. Given the assembly-based production model and dependence on externally sourced semi-finished components, supplier responsiveness directly influenced operational stability and order fulfillment processes.

Communication quality also played a significant role in shaping initial trust and was repeatedly identified as one of the key indicators of reliable cooperation. Respondents emphasized that communication practices at the early stages of the relationship strongly influenced perceptions of transparency, professionalism, and future cooperation quality. One interviewee described the importance of communication in the following way:

"Good communication, quick responses and honesty are probably the most important things at the beginning. Even if there is a problem, it is easier to work together if everything is communicated openly." (Buyer 2)

A similar perspective was visible from the supplier side, where communication was also associated with stability and predictability in cooperation:

"Everything is clear, orders and confirmations are always clearly specified, so from the beginning we know what is expected from us." (Supplier 1)

These observations indicate that communication functioned not only as a coordination mechanism but also as an important relational signal. Communication frequently concerned operational matters including delivery timing, technical specifications, material availability, and quality-related adjustments necessary to maintain production flow. Within the analyzed manufacturing environment, communication quality therefore influenced not only relationship quality but also operational continuity. Clear and timely communication reduced ambiguity and enabled both parties to align expectations more effectively. Poor or delayed communication, in contrast, was perceived as capable of weakening trust even if operational performance itself remained acceptable. Trust formation therefore depended not only on technical performance but also on the quality and transparency of interaction between partners.

Interestingly, the findings also revealed that trust was not always consciously perceived as a central aspect of cooperation. One supplier explicitly questioned whether trust played an important role within the relationship:

"There's not really a question of trust. Everything is already defined through the process, specifications, and normal cooperation. We just know what has to be done." (Supplier 2)

This perspective contrasts with the stronger emphasis placed on trust by buyers and suggests that in highly standardized manufacturing environments, formal structures and operational routines may partially substitute for relational considerations. In such contexts, cooperation appears to function through clearly defined expectations, technical specifications, and repeated procedures rather than through consciously developed interpersonal trust. The operational environment analyzed within the study involved repeated coordination concerning production requirements, component specifications, and delivery execution, potentially reinforcing process-based predictability within cooperation. Nevertheless, even respondents who minimized the importance of trust still emphasized factors such as reliability, communication, and responsiveness when describing successful cooperation. This may suggest that trust was embedded implicitly within operational routines and everyday practices, even if it was not directly recognized as such by participants. The findings therefore indicate that the meaning and visibility of trust may differ depending on the degree of formalization and predictability within the relationship.

Reputation further emerged as an important factor influencing trust formation before direct cooperation had fully developed. Several suppliers indicated that the perceived credibility and market position of the buyer organization reduced uncertainty at the beginning of cooperation and created a sense of initial confidence. As one supplier explained:

"It is a well-known brand, so from the beginning there was less concern about cooperation. You assume that such a company has certain standards and stability." (Supplier 3)

This suggests that trust may initially be transferred through organizational reputation rather than built exclusively through direct interaction. Reputation therefore functioned as an external signal reducing perceived risk during the early stages of cooperation. However, respondents also emphasized that such initial trust still needed to be confirmed through subsequent operational experience, communication quality, and ongoing reliability. Trust formation was therefore influenced by both external perceptions and direct interaction between partners.

In addition to communication and reputation, formal organizational mechanisms also supported the development of trust within the analyzed relationships. Internal documentation demonstrated that cooperation was structured through predefined procedures related to error reporting, corrective actions, and quality management. According to internal procedures, identified errors had to be reported, classified, and followed by corrective and preventive measures monitored by quality management. The existence of such procedures increased predictability and created a structured framework for handling operational problems. At the same time, the findings suggest that trust was not based solely on interpersonal interaction but was also embedded within organizational systems and operational processes. Buyers and suppliers therefore relied simultaneously on relational interaction, observable performance, and formalized structures when evaluating trustworthiness.

The findings further indicate that buyers and suppliers approached trust formation from slightly different perspectives. Buyers adopted a more evaluative and risk-oriented approach focused on quality, responsiveness, and operational reliability, while suppliers emphasized predictability, clarity, and process stability. Despite these differences, both sides associated trust with the ability to maintain smooth and reliable cooperation over time. Within the analyzed manufacturing setting, reliable cooperation additionally depended on maintaining continuity across procurement activities, supplier coordination, and production execution processes. Trust formation therefore emerged as a multi-dimensional process combining operational, relational, and structural elements rather than relying exclusively on interpersonal familiarity or formal governance alone.

4.2 Trust Development Over Time

Trust development in buyer-supplier relationships emerged as a gradual and cumulative process shaped by repeated operational interaction, consistency, and the ability to adapt over time. Unlike trust formation, which was strongly connected to first impressions and early signals of reliability, trust development depended more heavily on accumulated experience and established patterns of cooperation. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that trust strengthened progressively as both sides gained familiarity with each other's working styles, communication practices, and operational expectations. One buyer described this process in the following way:

> *"With time, you simply know what to expect from the supplier. If cooperation works well for a longer period, there is less uncertainty and less need to constantly check everything." (Buyer 1)*

A similar perspective was expressed by suppliers, who associated long-term cooperation with increased predictability and smoother coordination:

> *"After a few years, you already understand how the customer works, what is important for them, and how to react in different situations. Cooperation becomes much easier because both sides already know each other." (Supplier 1)*

These observations suggest that trust developed through accumulated operational experience rather than through isolated interactions. As cooperation continued over time, repeated positive experiences reduced uncertainty and enabled more stable coordination between partners. Trust therefore became increasingly embedded within routine interaction and operational familiarity. Within the analyzed manufacturing environment, routine interaction developed through recurring coordination concerning delivery schedules, material availability, production planning, and operational adjustments necessary for maintaining continuity within assembly processes.

Reliability and consistency in operational performance further emerged as central mechanisms reinforcing trust over time. Buyers repeatedly emphasized that long-term trust depended primarily on whether suppliers consistently delivered products according to agreed quality and timing expectations. One respondent explained:

> *"If the supplier consistently delivers on time and with good quality, trust naturally increases because you stop worrying about everyday operational issues." (Buyer 2)*

This indicates that trust became more stable as positive operational experiences accumulated. Consistent performance reduced the need for monitoring and increased confidence in the supplier's capabilities. This was particularly relevant within the analyzed company due to reliance on external suppliers and limited inventory buffers supporting production activities. These observations were also reflected in internal organizational documents, including supplier evaluation forms and quality-related records, where recurring performance indicators such as delivery timeliness, defect occurrence, and responsiveness were systematically monitored. The existence of these evaluation mechanisms suggests that trust development was closely connected to observable operational outcomes rather than solely to interpersonal perception. Internal documentation demonstrated particular attention to delivery reliability, defect occurrence, and supplier responsiveness, reflecting the operational priorities characteristic of assembly-based manufacturing environments dependent on externally sourced components. Suppliers similarly emphasized that stable and disruption-free cooperation strengthened relationships gradually over time:

> *"If cooperation runs smoothly for a long period and there are no serious problems, trust becomes something natural in the relationship." (Supplier 2)*

The findings therefore suggest that trust development was strongly connected to predictability, routine, and operational stability.

Learning and mutual adaptation also played an important role in strengthening trust within long-term relationships. Respondents described trust development as a process in which both sides gradually adjusted to each other's expectations, communication styles, and operational requirements. One supplier emphasized that long-term cooperation enabled better understanding between partners:

> *"Over time, both sides understand each other better. We know their expectations more precisely and they also understand our production limitations better." (Supplier 3)*

Buyers similarly noted that familiarity with suppliers' operational realities contributed to more flexible and cooperative approaches, particularly in complex situations. The findings therefore indicate that trust development depended not only on maintaining consistency but also on developing shared routines and operational understanding through ongoing interaction. Such understanding appeared particularly important within production settings characterized by short lead times, centralized procurement coordination, and dependence on supplier performance affecting production continuity. This process was also visible in internal communication and corrective-action procedures, where recurring operational issues were gradually addressed through improved coordination and adaptation of processes. As cooperation evolved, both sides appeared to develop more efficient ways of responding to operational challenges, which further reinforced trust over time.

The ability to effectively manage disruptions and operational problems further influenced the development of trust in long-term cooperation. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that trust was tested most visibly during difficult situations involving delays, quality issues, or technical challenges. One buyer explained:

"Problems always happen in production, but what matters most is how the supplier reacts. If they communicate quickly and actually try to solve the issue, trust can still remain strong." (Buyer 1)

Suppliers similarly highlighted the importance of corrective actions and responsiveness in maintaining trust:

"Sometimes mistakes happen, but if both sides cooperate and try to solve the issue together, the relationship can continue without major problems." (Supplier 1)

These observations were additionally supported by internal quality management procedures, which outlined structured approaches to error reporting, corrective actions, and preventive measures. The documentation demonstrates that operational problems were not treated as isolated incidents but as issues requiring systematic analysis and response. This suggests that trust development was supported not only by interpersonal interaction but also by formal mechanisms aimed at ensuring accountability and continuous improvement. At the same time, respondents emphasized that repeated problems without visible improvement could gradually weaken trust, even in long-standing relationships. Trust therefore remained dynamic and continuously evaluated through operational experience rather than permanently secured once cooperation had been established. Within the analyzed case, operational problems frequently concerned delivery timing, quality deviations, or material-related challenges capable of influencing production schedules and assembly continuity, reinforcing the practical importance of reliable supplier cooperation.

4.3 Trust, Communication and Problem-Solving

Communication and problem-solving practices emerged as central mechanisms through which trust was maintained, evaluated, and reinforced in buyer-supplier relationships. The findings indicate that communication was not only a tool for operational coordination but also an important indicator of reliability and commitment between partners. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that communication quality strongly influenced their perception of cooperation, particularly in situations involving production issues or delivery risks. One buyer explained:

"Even if a problem appears, the most important thing is that the supplier informs us quickly and does not avoid responsibility. Then we can react together and solve the situation faster." (Buyer 1)

A similar perspective was expressed by suppliers, who associated effective communication with smoother operational coordination and reduced misunderstandings:

"Communication is the basis because if information comes too late, then production problems become much bigger later." (Supplier 2)

These observations suggest that communication functioned not only as a coordination mechanism but also as an important signal of transparency and responsiveness. In manufacturing environments characterized by time pressure and operational interdependence, timely communication reduced uncertainty and enabled faster reactions to disruptions. Communication practices therefore played a significant role in maintaining trust during everyday cooperation.

The findings further demonstrate that communication within the analyzed relationships was highly operational and problem-oriented in nature. Respondents described communication as predominantly formal, direct, and focused on solving technical or production-related issues rather than on maintaining interpersonal relationships. One supplier described communication practices in the following way:

"It is mainly email communication, simple and efficient. Usually, we focus directly on the issue that needs to be solved." (Supplier 1)

This operational focus was also strongly visible in the analyzed email correspondence. Internal communication records showed that interactions between buyers and suppliers were typically highly technical and action oriented. For example, in one exchange concerning defective components, the supplier informed the buyer:

"We reworked them, and we are sending 126 pcs back to you tomorrow." (Email Communication)

Similarly, other emails included detailed descriptions of coating defects, dimensional inaccuracies, fitting issues, and requests regarding rework decisions or technical clarification. The correspondence frequently contained precise operational information such as quantities, measurements, deadlines, and technical limitations. This suggests that communication within the analyzed relationships was closely embedded in production coordination and operational problem-solving rather than relational exchange. The ability to exchange clear and detailed information therefore became an important mechanism supporting trust during ongoing cooperation.

Transparency and timely information sharing additionally emerged as important factors influencing trust maintenance during operational cooperation. Buyers repeatedly emphasized that delayed communication often created more difficulties than the operational issue itself. One respondent explained:

"Sometimes the issue itself is not even the biggest problem. The worst situation is when information comes too late because then we cannot react properly." (Buyer 2)

This highlights the importance of openness and responsiveness in maintaining confidence between partners. Similar patterns were visible in email exchanges, where suppliers often informed buyers about delays, technical constraints, or quality issues while simultaneously proposing corrective actions or alternative solutions. In one case, a supplier openly described production limitations related to coating thickness and explained the possible technical causes of the issue before discussing potential next steps with the buyer. Such communication practices suggest that transparency regarding operational problems helped maintain cooperation even during difficult situations. Trust therefore depended not only on avoiding mistakes but also on the willingness to communicate problems openly and engage in finding solutions.

Problem-solving practices further illustrate how trust was maintained through concrete operational actions rather than declarations alone. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that the reaction to operational problems often mattered more than the existence of the problem itself. Buyers particularly valued suppliers who responded quickly, proposed corrective measures, and remained actively engaged until the issue was resolved. One buyer stated:

"Problems always happen in production, but what matters most is how the supplier reacts. If they communicate quickly and actually try to solve the issue, trust can still remain strong." (Buyer 1)

Suppliers similarly emphasized the importance of joint problem-solving and flexibility in maintaining long-term cooperation:

"Sometimes mistakes happen, but if both sides cooperate and try to solve the issue together, the relationship can continue without major problems." (Supplier 1)

These observations were reinforced by internal documentation related to quality management and corrective-action procedures. Internal records demonstrated that operational problems were formally monitored through procedures requiring error reporting, classification, and implementation of corrective and preventive measures. Such procedures created a structured framework for managing disruptions and maintaining accountability during cooperation. At the same time, the findings suggest that the practical effectiveness of these mechanisms depended heavily on ongoing communication and coordination between employees and suppliers.

The findings also revealed that communication and problem-solving processes frequently involved negotiation and disagreement rather than smooth consensus. In several cases suppliers did not immediately accept responsibility for reported defects and instead questioned the origin or cause of the issue. This dynamic was particularly visible in one complaint-related email exchange, where the supplier stated:

> *"We cannot accept this complaint because the information regarding the coating thickness was not clearly specified before production." (Email Communication)*

Despite rejecting full responsibility, the supplier simultaneously proposed a compromise solution involving partial cost reduction and additional production adjustments. Similar negotiation dynamics appeared in interviews, where respondents emphasized that operational tensions and disagreements are a normal aspect of manufacturing cooperation. One supplier explained:

> *"In production there will always be problems from time to time. The important thing is whether both sides actually want to solve them together." (Supplier 2)*

These observations suggest that trust was not based on the absence of conflict but rather on the ability to manage disagreements constructively and remain engaged in resolving operational issues. The findings therefore indicate that communication and problem-solving were closely interconnected processes through which trust was continuously maintained and evaluated during everyday cooperation.

4.4 Trust Breakdown and Repair

Trust breakdown in buyer-supplier relationships emerged from the data as a process primarily triggered by operational failures, particularly those related to quality issues, delivery delays, and communication gaps. The findings indicate that trust is highly sensitive to repeated problems that directly affect production continuity and performance outcomes. From the buyer perspective, the most critical factors undermining trust include inconsistent quality, lack of reliability, and insufficient transparency regarding emerging issues. Interview data show that recurring defects and delays are perceived as the most significant threats to cooperation. These issues not only disrupt operations but also increase uncertainty and require additional monitoring and control. At the same time, single incidents do not necessarily lead to immediate trust breakdown if they are addressed effectively. This suggests that trust erosion is often gradual and linked to patterns of repeated failure rather than isolated events. The findings therefore highlight that trust breakdown is closely connected to operational performance and its consistency over time. As a result, trust can be understood as highly dependent on reliability in a production context.

Quality-related problems represent the most prominent source of trust breakdown in the analyzed relationships. The findings indicate that defects in materials, production errors, and technical inconsistencies frequently lead to tensions between buyers and suppliers. These issues are particularly critical in manufacturing environments, where even small deviations may result in incompatibility of components or delays in project execution. Email correspondence provides detailed evidence of such situations, including cases where delivered components did not meet specifications or required rework. In some instances, defects were linked to technical factors such as coating thickness or dimensional inaccuracies, highlighting the complexity of production processes. Buyers emphasized that recurring problems, particularly those related to quality or delivery, can significantly weaken trust, even in long-term relationships. As one respondent explained:

"If the same problems keep repeating, then naturally trust starts decreasing because you can no longer be sure whether the supplier will deliver correctly." (Buyer 2)

At the same time, suppliers often pointed to the technical nature of these problems, suggesting that not all issues can be fully controlled. This indicates that trust breakdown is not always caused by negligence but may result from the inherent complexity of production. Nevertheless, the impact on trust remains significant. Therefore, quality performance is a central determinant of trust stability.

Communication gaps and lack of transparency also emerged as important factors contributing to trust erosion. The findings indicate that failure to communicate problems in a timely manner is perceived as a major issue, often more critical than the problem itself. Buyers emphasized that delayed or incomplete information increases uncertainty and complicates decision-making processes.

"The biggest issue is usually when information comes too late because then everything becomes more stressful and difficult to coordinate." (Buyer 1)

This highlights that transparency is a key condition for maintaining trust in ongoing cooperation. Email exchanges further illustrate situations where additional clarification was required to fully understand the nature of a problem, leading to extended communication and delays in resolution. In such cases, the absence of clear and early communication contributes to frustration and reduces confidence in the partner. At the same time, suppliers may perceive certain expectations regarding communication as demanding or unrealistic, particularly in complex technical situations. This indicates that communication breakdown may result from misalignment of expectations rather than intentional withholding of information. Nevertheless, such situations may significantly weaken trust between partners.

The allocation of responsibility for problems represents another key source of tension that may lead to trust breakdown. The findings indicate that responsibility is not always clearly defined and may become contested, particularly in situations involving technical complexity or incomplete specifications. Email evidence shows that suppliers do not always accept responsibility for defects and may explicitly reject complaints. In one exchange, the supplier stated:

"We cannot accept this complaint because the information regarding the coating thickness was not clearly specified before production." (Email Communication)

This illustrates that disagreements regarding responsibility are a common element of cooperation. At the same time, such situations often lead to negotiation rather than escalation. Suppliers may propose alternative solutions, such as partial cost sharing or discounted rework, reflecting a pragmatic approach to maintaining the relationship.

"We can offer rework with reduced costs in order to solve the situation as quickly as possible." (Email Communication)

This suggests that trust is not necessarily undermined by disagreement itself but by the inability to resolve it effectively. The negotiation of responsibility therefore becomes a critical aspect of trust dynamics. The data further show that trust breakdown is closely linked to how conflicts are managed rather than to their mere occurrence.

Trust repair processes are primarily based on corrective actions, responsiveness, and continued engagement in cooperation. The findings indicate that when problems occur, both buyers and suppliers focus on practical solutions aimed at restoring operational stability. Suppliers frequently undertake corrective measures such as reworking defective products, replacing components, or adjusting production processes to meet requirements. In one case, the supplier confirmed corrective actions by stating:

"We reworked them and we are sending 126 pcs back to you tomorrow." (Email Communication)

These actions demonstrate commitment and willingness to resolve issues, which are essential for rebuilding trust. From the buyer perspective, the speed and effectiveness of response play a crucial role in determining whether trust can be maintained. Interview data suggest that even significant problems can be tolerated if the supplier reacts quickly and takes responsibility.

"Even after a serious issue, trust can still be rebuilt if the supplier reacts quickly and actually shows commitment to solving the problem." (Buyer 1)

This indicates that trust repair is less about avoiding failure and more about demonstrating reliability in response to failure. In addition, ongoing communication during the resolution process helps to maintain transparency and reduce uncertainty. As a result, trust repair is closely tied to both action and communication. These findings emphasize that trust can be restored through consistent and effective problem-solving.

Formal organizational procedures also play a critical role in supporting trust repair by providing structured mechanisms for handling errors and implementing corrective actions. Internal documentation shows that errors must be reported, classified, and addressed through predefined processes, ensuring consistency and accountability in problem resolution. This structured approach facilitates coordination between parties and reduces ambiguity in handling complex issues. The classification of errors allows for more precise identification of root causes and appropriate corrective measures. In addition, monitoring the effectiveness of implemented actions contributes to continuous improvement and prevents recurrence of similar problems. These procedures therefore provide a stable framework that supports trust repair beyond individual interactions. However, the findings also suggest that the effectiveness of such systems depends on their consistent application in practice. In cases where documentation or reporting is incomplete, the ability to manage problems systematically may be limited. This highlights the importance of aligning formal procedures with everyday operational practices.

Despite the presence of repair mechanisms, the findings indicate that trust remains vulnerable to repeated failures and lack of improvement over time. Buyers emphasized that recurring issues, particularly those related to quality or delivery, may eventually lead to reduced cooperation or reconsideration of the relationship. As one supplier explained:

"One mistake is usually acceptable, but when the problems become repetitive, trust slowly decreases because there is less predictability." (Supplier 4)

This suggests that trust repair has limits and cannot fully compensate for persistent performance problems. At the same time, suppliers noted that long-term cooperation often involves compromise and mutual understanding, particularly in complex or challenging situations. This indicates that the threshold for trust breakdown may vary depending on the strength of the relationship and prior experience. However, the accumulation of negative experiences may outweigh previous positive interactions, leading to gradual erosion of trust. These findings highlight that trust is continuously evaluated and cannot be fully restored if underlying issues remain unresolved. Therefore, trust repair must be accompanied by sustained improvement in performance. This reinforces the dynamic nature of trust in buyer-supplier relationships.

Overall, trust breakdown and repair can be understood as interconnected processes that are closely linked to operational performance, communication practices, and the ability to manage conflict. The findings demonstrate that trust breakdown is primarily triggered by quality issues, delays, and communication gaps, while repair is achieved through corrective actions, responsiveness, and continued cooperation. The presence of negotiation and disagreement indicates that conflict is a natural element of the relationship and does not necessarily undermine trust if managed effectively. At the same time, formal procedures provide a framework that supports consistency and accountability in handling problems. However, repeated failures may exceed the capacity for repair, leading to gradual erosion of trust over time. These findings highlight that trust is not a stable condition but a continuously evolving element of buyer-supplier relationships. Repeated failures may gradually weaken cooperation, while effective communication and corrective actions can support trust repair over time.

4.5 Trust in International Context

Trust in international buyer-supplier relationships emerged from the data as being shaped primarily by operational complexity rather than by cultural or relational differences. The findings indicate that cross-border cooperation introduces additional challenges related to logistics, coordination, and communication, which influence how trust is maintained in practice. In contrast to theoretical expectations emphasizing cultural distance, respondents focused more strongly on practical aspects of international cooperation. This suggests that in the analyzed context, trust is less affected by national or cultural differences and more by the ability to manage operational uncertainty. The international dimension is therefore primarily experienced through increased complexity rather than through relational barriers. One supplier similarly emphasized that international cooperation is mainly operational in nature:

"In the end, most issues are related to deadlines, transport, and coordination rather than cultural differences." (Supplier 2)

Both buyers and suppliers emphasized that working across borders requires more structured coordination and careful planning. As one buyer explained:

"With international suppliers, everything has to be planned earlier because even small delays can affect the whole production process." (Buyer 1)

At the same time, these challenges do not fundamentally alter the nature of the relationship but rather intensify existing requirements. As a result, trust in international contexts is closely linked to the ability to handle complexity effectively. These findings highlight that operational factors play a central role in shaping trust in cross-border relationships.

Logistical complexity represents one of the main challenges influencing trust in international cooperation. The findings indicate that longer lead times, transportation risks, and coordination across multiple locations increase the level of uncertainty in the relationship. Buyers emphasized that international deliveries require more planning and monitoring, as delays may have significant consequences for production schedules. Similarly, suppliers noted that delivery times often depend on project-specific factors and logistical constraints, which may be less predictable than in domestic cooperation. One supplier emphasized:

"International deliveries always involve more uncertainty because transportation, customs, or project timing may suddenly change." (Supplier 4)

This increased uncertainty places greater importance on reliability and communication. Respondents additionally emphasized that supplier selection frequently extends beyond domestic markets, particularly when specific technical requirements, component availability, or cost considerations influence purchasing decisions. In practice, procurement activities often require identifying suppliers independently across international markets, where price competitiveness and technical capabilities play an important role in supplier selection. As a result, international cooperation becomes embedded within everyday operational activities rather than representing an exceptional aspect of business operations. Buyers similarly emphasized that trust becomes especially important when operational risks increase:

"When the supplier is abroad, communication and reliability become even more important because solving problems takes more time." (Buyer 2)

Any disruption in the supply chain may lead to immediate operational challenges, reinforcing the importance of trust in ensuring continuity. At the same time, the need for coordination across different locations adds complexity to communication processes. These factors highlight that trust in international relationships is closely tied to the management of logistical risks. As a result, operational reliability becomes even more critical in cross-border contexts. This reinforces the idea that trust is closely linked to performance. Internal communication records additionally showed that delivery coordination often required frequent updates regarding transportation schedules, production timing, and technical adjustments. The analyzed case additionally demonstrated that sourcing activities frequently extended across national markets, reflecting both cost considerations and the need to secure technically suitable suppliers capable of meeting operational requirements. This increased coordination demands and reinforced the importance of reliable supplier relationships within everyday manufacturing operations.

Language and communication also play an important role in shaping trust in international relationships, particularly in the context of technical coordination. The findings indicate that communication is primarily conducted in English, and in some cases also in German, depending on the partner. While this generally allows for effective interaction, respondents noted that language barriers may create challenges, especially when discussing complex technical details. Buyers emphasized that misunderstandings may occur when precise specifications are not clearly communicated which may lead to errors or delays. As one respondent explained:

"Sometimes technical details are difficult to explain perfectly in another language, especially when discussing production specifications." (Buyer 1)

This highlights the importance of clarity and precision in international communication. At the same time, suppliers indicated that they are accustomed to working in international environments and do not perceive language differences as a major barrier. One supplier noted:

"We work internationally quite often, so language differences are usually manageable for us." (Supplier 3)

This suggests that language challenges are manageable but still require attention in specific situations. The findings therefore indicate that communication quality remains critical in international contexts. Effective communication helps to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and supports coordination. As a result, language plays a role in shaping trust but primarily through its impact on operational accuracy.

Interestingly, cultural differences were not identified as a significant factor influencing trust in the analyzed relationships. The findings indicate that suppliers perceive cooperation with international partners as largely similar to working with domestic or other European customers. For example, one respondent noted that there are "no significant differences compared to German customers" suggesting that cultural distance is not perceived as a major challenge. Another supplier similarly emphasized:

"In practice, cooperation looks very similar regardless of the country because the expectations and technical standards are mostly the same." (Supplier 1)

Another respondent explained that shared technical standards and industry requirements create similar expectations regardless of national context:

"Everyone works according to similar specifications and quality expectations, so cooperation does not really feel very different internationally." (Supplier 3)

This contrasts with much of the existing literature, which emphasizes the role of cultural differences in shaping trust. In this case, the standardized nature of industrial cooperation and shared professional practices may reduce the impact of cultural factors. The focus on technical specifications and operational performance creates a common framework that transcends cultural differences. As a result, trust is built on shared processes rather than on cultural understanding. This suggests that the importance of cultural factors may be context dependent. In highly structured manufacturing environments, their role may be less pronounced. These findings highlight the need to consider industry-specific characteristics when analyzing trust in international relationships.

Despite the limited role of cultural differences, the international context increases the importance of coordination, communication, and reliability in maintaining trust. The data indicate that the challenges associated with distance and complexity require more structured and consistent interaction between partners. Buyers emphasized the need for careful planning and proactive communication to avoid disruptions.

"In international cooperation, everything depends more on coordination because solving unexpected issues is simply more complicated at a distance." (Buyer 2)

Suppliers similarly noted that maintaining smooth cooperation requires attention to detail and responsiveness. This suggests that international relationships amplify the importance of factors already identified in previous sections, such as communication quality and problem-solving capability. At the same time, the absence of significant cultural barriers indicates that trust is primarily shaped by operational rather than relational factors. These findings reinforce the idea that trust in buyer-supplier relationships is strongly embedded in practical cooperation. The international context does not fundamentally change this dynamic but increases its intensity. Therefore, maintaining trust in international cooperation depends primarily on the ability to manage operational complexity effectively. This highlights the importance of managing complexity in cross-border cooperation.

Trust in international buyer-supplier relationships is shaped primarily by operational complexity, communication quality, and logistical coordination rather than by cultural differences. Cross-border cooperation introduces additional challenges that require careful management but do not fundamentally alter the nature of trust. Instead, they reinforce the importance of reliability, transparency, and responsiveness identified in previous sections. While language may create occasional barriers, it does not prevent effective communication when properly managed. At the same time, cultural differences appear to play a limited role in this specific context. These observations indicate that trust in international manufacturing relationships remains strongly performance-driven and process-oriented. Even in cross-border settings, trust is closely tied to the ability to manage operational complexity and maintain consistent coordination.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter in relation to the existing literature on buyer-supplier relationships and interorganizational trust. The aim is not only to summarize the results but also to interpret their broader meaning and examine how they support or differ from previous research. Particular attention is given to the operational nature of trust within manufacturing relationships, the dynamic process through which trust develops over time, and the role of organizational systems in supporting cooperation. The chapter also reflects on several unexpected observations, including the limited role of cultural differences and the strong dependence of cooperation on informal practices and individual employees.

5.1 Trust as a Dynamic and Operational Mechanism

The findings of this study suggest that trust in buyer-supplier relationships within the analyzed manufacturing context is shaped primarily through operational interaction rather than through strongly relational mechanisms. Existing literature frequently presents trust as a relational construct associated with openness, commitment, and interpersonal cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). While such elements were partially visible in the analyzed relationships, the findings indicate that trust was more strongly connected to operational reliability, responsiveness, and the ability to solve problems effectively. Buyers and suppliers repeatedly referred to delivery consistency, communication quality, and reactions to technical issues as the main indicators of trustworthiness. This suggests that trust in manufacturing environments may be experienced less as an emotional bond and more as confidence in the partner's operational competence. Such observations align with studies emphasizing competence-based trust within industrial supply chains, where operational reliability and continuity play a critical role in sustaining cooperation (Christopher, 2016). This finding partially extends existing literature by suggesting that within manufacturing environments trust may become operationalized through performance consistency and responsiveness to disruptions to a greater extent than relational literature traditionally emphasizes.

One particularly interesting finding concerns the perception that trust does not always need to be consciously considered within buyer-supplier relationships. One supplier explicitly stated that "there's not really a question of trust," which contrasts with much of the existing literature positioning trust as a central prerequisite for effective cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A possible explanation for this difference may lie in the highly standardized and routine-based nature of manufacturing operations, where technical specifications and repeated procedures reduce relational uncertainty and strengthen predictability within cooperation, which corresponds with institutional perspectives emphasizing the role of formal structures in reducing uncertainty (North, 1990). In such contexts, trust may become embedded in operational systems and everyday practices rather than being consciously recognized by organizational actors. Interestingly, despite questioning the importance of trust directly, the same respondent still emphasized reliability and communication as important aspects of cooperation. This may suggest that trust was present implicitly, even if it was not actively identified as such. The finding therefore contributes to a more nuanced understanding of trust by indicating that its role may vary depending on the level of operational formalization within the relationship. This observation additionally suggests that trust may become embedded within organizational routines rather than existing exclusively as a consciously recognized relational mechanism.

The findings further reinforce the argument that trust develops gradually through repeated interaction over time. Respondents consistently emphasized that trust cannot be established immediately and instead requires ongoing cooperation and accumulated experience. This strongly aligns with literature conceptualizing trust as a process shaped through repeated exchanges, accumulated experience, and interaction history (Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). At the same time, the findings demonstrate that trust remains fragile despite long-term cooperation. Repeated quality issues, communication failures, or lack of responsiveness were described as factors capable of weakening trust even in established relationships. This reflects the dynamic nature of trust frequently discussed within interorganizational literature, where trust remains continuously evaluated and adjusted through ongoing interaction and performance experience (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Another important aspect emerging from the study concerns the close connection between trust, communication, and problem-solving processes. Existing literature often identifies communication as one of the foundations of trust development, particularly within environments characterized by uncertainty and interdependence (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The findings strongly support this perspective, as respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of transparency, responsiveness, and openness regarding operational problems. However, the findings also extend existing discussions by showing that communication in manufacturing relationships is often highly technical and problem-oriented rather than relational in nature. Interestingly, conflict and disagreement did not automatically undermine trust within the analyzed relationships. This observation aligns with relational perspectives suggesting that trust is not necessarily built through the absence of conflict but through the ability of organizations to manage tensions constructively and sustain cooperation despite challenges (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). Instead, trust appeared to depend more strongly on the willingness of both parties to remain engaged in solving problems despite disagreement. Within the analyzed manufacturing environment, this ability appeared strongly connected to technical coordination, responsiveness, and operational problem-solving rather than interpersonal closeness alone.

5.2 Trust Beyond Formal Systems

An important theme emerging from the findings concerns the relationship between trust and formal organizational systems within the analyzed company. Existing literature often presents formal governance mechanisms, procedures, and documentation systems as important tools supporting coordination and reducing uncertainty in buyer-supplier relationships (North, 1990; Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). To some extent, the findings support this perspective, as the organization possessed procedures related to quality management, corrective actions, and error reporting. However, the study also revealed a visible gap between the formal existence of such procedures and their consistent application in everyday practice. While documentation systems and forms were formally present, many processes appeared to rely more strongly on informal communication, individual experience, and routine interaction than on structured organizational systems. This observation partially contrasts institutional perspectives emphasizing formal structures while simultaneously reinforcing relational perspectives highlighting the importance of accumulated interaction and operational experience (North, 1990; Dyer & Chu, 2003). In practice, communication was conducted primarily through emails and phone calls, while documentation and archiving practices appeared relatively limited. Although this approach may function effectively in smaller organizational settings, it may also create certain organizational risks as the company grows and relationships become more complex. Such challenges may become increasingly visible in manufacturing environments characterized by operational interdependence and supply chain complexity (Christopher, 2016).

One particularly important issue concerns the strong dependence of cooperation on individual employees and their personal knowledge. The findings suggest that many buyer-supplier relationships were built largely around specific individuals who possessed practical experience, operational understanding, and established communication routines with suppliers. While this facilitated fast decision-making and flexible cooperation, it also created vulnerability related to knowledge continuity and organizational stability. In situations involving employee turnover, the lack of systematically organized documentation or standardized communication procedures may make it difficult for new employees to fully understand the history and dynamics of supplier relationships. This observation raises an important question regarding whether trust in the analyzed context is located primarily within the organization itself or within the individuals representing it. Existing literature frequently conceptualizes trust as an interorganizational phenomenon influencing cooperation between organizations rather than individual actors alone (Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). However, the findings of this study suggest that trust may sometimes operate at a more personal and experience-based level. In this sense, trust becomes closely tied to individual employees rather than fully embedded in organizational systems. This observation extends previous discussions by suggesting that trust within smaller manufacturing environments may remain partially personalized and experience-based rather than fully institutionalized. This may be particularly characteristic of smaller manufacturing organizations, where operational knowledge is often informal and accumulated through everyday practice.

The findings therefore suggest that trust may sometimes compensate for the absence of highly formalized organizational systems. Existing relationships appeared stable largely because partners had developed familiarity through repeated interaction and long-term cooperation. However, this also raises concerns regarding the long-term scalability and sustainability of such arrangements. As organizations expand and supply chains become more complex, dependence on informal communication and individual knowledge may become increasingly difficult to manage effectively. Interestingly, the analyzed case demonstrates that the presence of procedures alone does not necessarily guarantee organizational formalization if such procedures are not consistently maintained or actively integrated into operational practice. This highlights the difference between formal structures existing "on paper" and systems that are genuinely embedded in organizational routines. The findings therefore extend existing discussions on trust and governance by suggesting that trust and formalization should not be treated as direct substitutes (North, 1990; Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). Instead, sustainable buyer-supplier relationships may require a balance between interpersonal trust, operational flexibility, and organizational systems capable of supporting continuity and scalability over time.

5.3 Trust in the International Manufacturing Context

One of the more unexpected findings of this study concerns the relatively limited role of cultural differences in shaping trust within the analyzed buyer-supplier relationships. Existing literature on international business relationships frequently emphasizes cultural distance, institutional differences, and communication barriers as major challenges affecting trust development in cross-border cooperation (North, 1990). Based on this literature, stronger cultural differences and misunderstandings were initially expected to emerge within the findings. This expectation was additionally shaped by literature emphasizing uncertainty and coordination challenges within international supply chain environments (Christopher, 2016). However, respondents rarely identified culture as a major issue influencing everyday cooperation. Instead, the findings suggest that operational factors such as delivery reliability, responsiveness, communication quality, and technical coordination played a much more significant role in shaping trust. A possible explanation may lie in the highly standardized and technical nature of manufacturing cooperation, where operational processes reduce uncertainty through established routines and coordination mechanisms (North, 1990). In such contexts, operational competence may become more important than cultural similarity in determining whether cooperation is perceived as trustworthy. This observation partially extends existing discussions by suggesting that operational capability may outweigh cultural dimensions within highly integrated manufacturing environments.

The findings also indicate that international cooperation primarily increased logistical and coordination complexity rather than relational distance between partners. Respondents focused more strongly on transportation issues, lead times, and production planning than on cultural misunderstandings or communication difficulties. Although language occasionally created minor challenges in technical discussions, it did not appear to significantly disrupt cooperation or trust development. This contrasts with literature positioning institutional differences and relational uncertainty as important challenges influencing interorganizational cooperation and trust development within international business relationships (North, 1990; Zaheer & Venkatraman, 1995). A possible explanation is that companies operating within international manufacturing networks become accustomed to standardized communication practices and professional routines that reduce the practical impact of cultural differences over time. The analyzed case therefore suggests that trust in international manufacturing relationships may be shaped more strongly by operational integration and coordination capability than by national or cultural factors alone. The findings therefore suggest that the importance of cultural factors may vary depending on industry context and operational conditions rather than influencing trust development uniformly across all international relationships.

6. Conclusions

Trust represents one of the key mechanisms supporting long-term buyer-supplier cooperation, particularly within international manufacturing environments characterized by operational complexity and interdependence between organizations. The purpose of this study was to examine how trust is developed and maintained within international buyer-supplier relationships operating in a manufacturing context. Using a qualitative single-case study approach, the research explored trust from both buyer and supplier perspectives within an international lighting manufacturing network operating across Poland and Germany. By combining interview data with internal organizational documentation and operational materials, the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of trust as a phenomenon embedded within everyday organizational cooperation.

The findings demonstrate that trust develops gradually through repeated interaction, operational consistency, and accumulated experience between business partners. Trust formation depended primarily on operational reliability, communication quality, responsiveness, and early cooperation experiences, while long-term trust development emerged as a cumulative process reinforced through repeated interaction and mutual adaptation over time. Communication and problem-solving additionally appeared central for maintaining trust, particularly during operational disruptions and technical challenges. The findings indicate that trust within manufacturing environments remains strongly connected to operational realities and everyday organizational activities.

The study additionally highlights the importance of organizational mechanisms supporting cooperation. While formal procedures contributed to accountability and operational stability, practical observations revealed challenges related to documentation consistency, process formalization, and knowledge continuity. Sustainable buyer-supplier cooperation therefore appears to require both relational trust and organizational systems supporting continuity beyond individual employees.

Another important observation concerns the relatively limited role of cultural differences within the analyzed international relationships. While existing literature frequently emphasizes cultural distance within international cooperation, respondents rarely identified cultural factors as major barriers affecting trust development. Instead, reliability, communication quality, logistics coordination, and operational performance appeared substantially more important in shaping trust perceptions.

The study contributes to existing literature by providing an in-depth qualitative perspective on trust within international manufacturing relationships while additionally offering practical implications for organizations operating in comparable business environments. Organizations may strengthen buyer-supplier cooperation by improving communication transparency, strengthening knowledge management practices, and supporting operational consistency. Several limitations should also be acknowledged, including the single case study design and limited number of interview participants. Future research may extend analysis toward different industries, organizational settings, or comparative international contexts.

Overall, the paper demonstrates that trust remains a critical operational mechanism supporting effective buyer-supplier cooperation within international manufacturing environments. Trust develops through reliability, communication quality, responsiveness, and accumulated operational experience rather than formal agreements alone. Understanding how trust evolves in practice remains essential for organizations seeking to build resilient and sustainable international business relationships over time.

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List of Tables and Figures

Appendices

Appendix A. Coding Framework and Interview Data Analysis

Respondents were coded according to their organizational role, where B denotes Buyer representatives and S denotes Supplier representatives.

Theme	Code	Respon-dent	Original Quote	English Translation / Note
Trust Formation	Initial expectations	B1	dotrzymywanie ustaleń początkowych i szybka reakcja na problemy jakościowe	Meeting initial agreements and quickly responding to quality issues
Trust Formation	Communication & honesty	B2	dobra komunikacja, szybka odpowiedź i szczerość	Good communication, quick responses and honesty
Trust Formation	Reputation	S2	It is a well-known brand, so it was trusted from the beginning	Original in English
Trust Formation	Clear expectations	S3	Firma XYZ od początku określiła jasne wymagania jakościowe	XYZ clearly defined quality expectations from the beginning
Trust Formation	Defined structure	S1	Everything is clear, orders and confirmations are always clear	Original in English
Trust Formation	Formalization	S4	terminy realizacji są jasno określone w zamówieniach	Delivery times are clearly specified in orders
Trust Formation	Trust as non-essential	S2	“So there's not really a question of trust.”	Original in English
Trust Development	Reliability	B2	regularne dostawy na czas i dobra jakość budują zaufanie	Consistent on-time delivery builds trust
Trust Development	Consistency	S2	Everything stays as it has been, nothing changes in the process	Original in English
Trust Development	Stability	S1	Everything works very well, no claims, everything is smooth	Original in English
Trust Development	Long-term relationship	S3	wieloletnia współpraca pozwoliła lepiej się zrozumieć	Long-term cooperation improved mutual understanding

Trust Development	Mutual learning	S3	poznanie sposobów działania obu stron	Understanding each other's ways of working
Trust Development	Flexibility	S4	musieliśmy dostosować procesy i produkt do wymagań	We had to adapt processes and product
Trust Development	Commitment	S4	obie strony angażują się w rozwój współpracy	Both sides are committed to development
Communication	Email communication	S2	It's just email communication, simple and efficient	Original in English
Communication	Structured flow	S1	I make the offers and they send the orders afterwards	Original in English
Communication	Multi-channel	S4	mailowo i telefonicznie w zależności od sytuacji	Email and phone depending on situation
Communication	Monitoring	S3	partner dokładnie monitoruje zamówienia	The partner closely monitors orders
Communication	Responsiveness	S3	wymagana jest szybka reakcja na zapytania	Fast response is required
Communication	Clarity	S4	jasne informacje ograniczają nieporozumienia	Clear information reduces misunderstandings
Communication	Language	S2	Communication is mostly in English, sometimes German	Original in English
Problem-Solving	Corrective actions	S2	We send correct products and ask to return wrong ones	Original in English
Problem-Solving	Joint adaptation	S4	kompromis był po obu stronach	Compromise on both sides
Problem-Solving	Technical challenges	S4	problemy były głównie techniczne	Problems were mainly technical
Problem-Solving	Flexibility	S3	pandemia wymagała elastyczności i szybkich decyzji	Pandemic required flexibility
Problem-Solving	Risk management	S3	analiza ryzyka była kluczowa	Risk analysis was crucial
Problem-Solving	Rework	S4	w przypadku błędów wykonujemy produkt ponownie	We reproduce products in case of errors
Problem-Solving	Crisis handling	S4	w sytuacjach pilnych reagujemy natychmiast	Immediate reaction in urgent situations

Trust Breakdown	Quality issues	B2	problemy z jakością są najczęstsze	Quality issues are most common
Trust Breakdown	Delays	B2	problemy z terminowością dostaw	Delivery delays
Trust Breakdown	Repetition	B1	powtarzające się błędy niszczą zaufanie	Repeated errors destroy trust
Trust Breakdown	Transparency issues	B2	brak wcześniejszej informacji o problemach	Lack of early communication
Trust Breakdown	Major failure	B1	konieczność wymiany całej partii i duże koszty	Full replacement and high costs
International	Language barrier	B2	bariera językowa przy kwestiach technicznych	Language barrier in technical issues
International	Logistics complexity	B1	współpraca zagraniczna jest bardziej złożona	International cooperation is more complex
International	Delivery time	S1	delivery times depend on project complexity	Original in English
International	No cultural difference	S2	No differences compared to German customers	Original in English
Trust Outcome	Satisfaction	S3	satysfakcja ze współpracy jest bardzo wysoka	Very high satisfaction
Trust Outcome	Continuation	S4	będziemy kontynuować współpracę	We will continue cooperation
Trust Outcome	Positive evaluation	S1	Everything is fine and cooperation is good	Original in English
Trust Outcome	Growth expectation	S2	Maybe more orders in the future	Original in English
Trust Outcome	Mutual benefit	S3	współpraca przynosi korzyści obu stronom	Mutual benefits