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Co-Creating The Future: an Empirical Test of Relational Antecedents to Long-Term Orientation in Nigeria's Agri-Food B2B Relationships

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ABSTRACT

In emerging economies characterized by institutional voids and market volatility, fostering resilient business-to-business (B2B) relationships is essential for sustainable sectoral development. This study examines the antecedents of long-term orientation (LTO) in the agri-food sector of Northern Nigeria, focusing on relational communication quality, perceived value co-creation, and integrative conflict resolution.

A quantitative survey was conducted involving 312 client-side managers and business owners, including aggregators, food processors, and wholesale distributors, engaged in key supplier relationships across Kaduna, Kano, and Plateau states. The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses.

The results indicate that all three constructs positively and significantly influence LTO. Perceived value co-creation emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), followed by relational communication quality ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) and integrative conflict resolution ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, relational communication quality has a significant indirect effect on LTO through perceived value co-creation, indicating partial mediation.

This study advances understanding of B2B relationships by integrating three relational constructs into a unified framework for explaining LTO in an under-researched economic context. The findings highlight the central role of collaborative value creation in sustaining long-term partnerships, particularly where formal contractual mechanisms are weak. Specifically, proactive value co-creation appears to be a stronger driver of long-term partnership intentions than transactional reliability alone.

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INTRODUCTION

In emerging economies, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, strong business-to-business (B2B) relationships are essential for market access, supply chain continuity, and economic resilience (Meredith, 2022; Adekunle & Fatoki, 2023). Northern Nigeria's agri-food sector, a major hub for grains, legumes, and livestock, faces institutional voids, infrastructural deficiencies, and climatic volatility (Shehu & Sidique, 2020). In this context, long-term orientation (LTO), defined as the intention to sustain relationships through shared planning and reciprocal investments, serves as a critical risk-mitigation mechanism (Ganesan, 1994; Adegbola & Bamishaiye, 2021). Strong LTO enhances trust, adaptability, resource access, and cost efficiency (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

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Despite its importance, the relational antecedents of LTO in Northern Nigeria remain underexplored. Business relationships are shaped by communal values, kinship ties (dangantaka), and religious ethics embedded in Hausa business practices (kasuwanci) (Yusuf et al., 2021). Without context-specific evidence, firms and development initiatives risk adopting relational strategies that are ineffective in this cultural and institutional environment (Umar & Gbandi, 2022).

Although existing literature emphasizes relational communication as a means of reducing uncertainty (Mohr & Nevin, 1990), its role in Northern Nigeria may be particularly significant because verbal assurances, proverbial wisdom (karin magana), and social embeddedness can carry considerable relational weight (Muhammad et al., 2023). Similarly, value co-creation, grounded in Service-Dominant Logic, may encompass not only economic benefits but also social capital, risk-sharing, and communal reputation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; Adeola & Evans, 2020). Integrative conflict resolution, involving mediation (sulhu), patience (hakuri), and collaborative solutions, may also help preserve long-term partnerships (Faleti & Olaoye, 2021).

However, research integrating these three constructs into a unified framework for explaining LTO in Northern Nigeria remains limited (Ogbadu & Oyeniyi, 2022). Their relative influence and the potential mediating role of perceived value co-creation are also unclear. This study addresses these gaps by examining the effects of relational communication quality, perceived value co-creation, and integrative conflict resolution on LTO in Northern Nigeria's agri-food sector.

To address these significant gaps, this study poses the following research questions within the Northern Nigerian agri-food sector:
RQ1: What are the direct effects of (a) quality of relational communication, (b) perceived value co-creation, and (c) integrative conflict resolution tactics on a client's long-term orientation?

RQ2: Does perceived value co-creation mediate the relationship between the quality of relational communication and a client's long-term orientation?
To answer these questions, we develop and empirically test a conceptual model positioning the client's Long-Term Orientation as the dependent variable, directly influenced by: Quality of Relational Communication, Perceived Value Co-Creation, and Integrative Conflict Resolution Tactics, with co-creation hypothesized as a mediator.

This research makes several important contributions. Theoretically, it responds to urgent calls for context-sensitive research in emerging economies (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006) by testing and potentially refining established relational theories within the distinctive institutional and cultural matrix of Northern Nigeria. It explores whether the hierarchy of relational drivers observed in the West holds in a context where informal institutions are strong. Practically, it provides actionable intelligence for local entrepreneurs, large agri-businesses, and policy initiatives (the Anchor Borrowers' Programme) seeking to strengthen supply chain linkages. It offers an evidence-based blueprint for investing in the specific relational practices be they communication rituals, co-creation forums, or conflict mediation mechanisms that are most likely to forge the durable, trusting partnerships necessary for sectoral transformation and resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

This study is grounded in the relational view of strategy, which posits that critical, difficult-to-imitate resources and capabilities are embedded in inter-firm relationships (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Within the institutional context of Northern Nigeria where formal contracting systems are often weak and enforcement is unreliable the governance of B2B relationships increasingly shifts from legalistic safeguards to relational norms (Meredith, 2022). Long-Term Orientation (LTO) is a central such norm, acting as an informal governance mechanism that promotes cooperation and reduces transaction costs. To develop a contextually relevant model, this review synthesizes core relational constructs with emerging insights from literature on African and specifically Nigerian business practices.

Long-Term Orientation (LTO) in Nigeria's B2B Context

Long-Term Orientation (LTO) is a cornerstone of relationship marketing, defined as the mutual expectation of continuity and the willingness to invest resources with a long-term payback period (Ganesan, 1994). It transcends short-term, calculative exchanges, embodying a future-directed mindset characterized by joint planning, shared goal alignment, and relationship-specific investments.

In the Northern Nigerian agri-food sector, LTO takes on added dimensions. Given systemic risks climate volatility, price fluctuations, infrastructural breakdowns, and intermittent security challenges a long-term partnership functions as a critical risk-pooling and resilience-building mechanism (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Investments are not merely financial but often social and reputational, such as providing input credit during lean seasons, standing as a guarantor (jami'i), or integrating a partner into one's kinship-based network (dangantaka) (Yusuf et al., 2021). This embedding creates high exit barriers that are less about contractual penalties and more about the potential loss of social capital and communal standing. Consequently, LTO here is not just a strategic preference but often a necessity for operational stability and market access. We conceptualize it from the client's perspective, focusing on the cognitive belief in a shared future and the behavioral intent to maintain and invest in the relationship.

Quality of Relational Communication and LTO

Relational communication refers to the patterned, symbolic interactions that define and maintain the relationship itself, beyond the mere exchange of commercial information (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Its quality is typically assessed through dimensions like openness, frequency, bi-directionality, and transparency.

In Northern Nigeria's business culture, communication is deeply influenced by high-context, face-to-face norms. Openness/Transparency is demonstrated not just through data sharing but through verbal assurances (alkawari) and the reciprocal sharing of personal and market challenges, signaling trustworthiness (amana) (Muhammad et al., 2023). Frequency/Regularity is crucial; consistent check-ins via phone calls or visits (zaman dangi) maintain the social warmth of the relationship, preventing it from becoming purely transactional. Bi-directionality/Mutuality is essential in a culture that values respect (mutunci) and reciprocal obligation; communication must flow both ways, allowing the client to voice needs and the supplier to explain constraints.

Informal/Strategic Content is blended; discussions of business are seamlessly interwoven with inquiries about family (iyali) and community, building a multi-layered bond (Adebola & Bamishaiye, 2021).

High-quality communication in this setting reduces the profound environmental and behavioral uncertainty firms face. It builds trust (amana) by demonstrating reliability and goodwill (kyautata), and it establishes shared norms, which form the bedrock of relational governance when formal contracts are insufficient (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). When clients experience this rich, culturally-attuned communication, their confidence in the supplier's commitment solidifies, making them more willing to envision and invest in a long-term future. Therefore, we posit:

H1: The quality of relational communication has a positive direct effect on the client's Long-Term Orientation.

Perceived Value Co-Creation and LTO

Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) asserts that value is not embedded in goods but is always co-created through the integration of resources and interactions between parties in specific contexts (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Perceived Value Co-Creation captures the client's subjective assessment of the extent to which they and the supplier are actively collaborating to generate unique value.
In the resource-constrained, high-risk agri-food sector, co-creation often extends beyond economic value to encompass vital forms of social and operational value (Adeola & Evans, 2020). This may include: jointly developing adaptive farming techniques to cope with erratic rainfall; co-investing in local storage facilities to reduce post-harvest losses; or collaboratively navigating complex licensing and transport regulations. The client's perception of being a genuine co-creator transforms the supplier from a mere input provider into a strategic partner in navigating a challenging business ecosystem (Kohtamäki & Rajala, 2016).

This perception creates powerful, context-specific switching costs. The co-created solutions whether a unique seed variety suited to local conditions or a shared logistics arrangement are often idiosyncratic and deeply embedded in the local context, making the partnership uniquely valuable and difficult to replace (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Furthermore, successful co-creation builds a sense of shared fate (hadin kai) and interdependence, directly strengthening the commitment to a long-term future. Given the tangible survival benefits of such collaboration in this environment, we hypothesize that perceived co-creation is a primary driver of LTO.

H2: Perceived value co-creation has a positive direct effect on the client's Long-Term Orientation.

Integrative Conflict Resolution and LTO

Conflict arising from delayed deliveries, quality disputes, or payment issues is inevitable in the volatile agri-food sector. The critical factor is its management. Conflict resolution tactics range from distributive (competitive, win-lose) to integrative (collaborative, problem-solving).

In Northern Nigeria's cultural context, which emphasizes community harmony (jama'a), patience (hakuri), and face-saving (mutunci), Integrative Conflict Resolution Tactics are strongly preferred and culturally resonant (Faleti & Olaoye, 2021). These tactics involve open dialogue, a focus on underlying interests rather than positions, and a search for mutually acceptable solutions, often involving respected third-party mediators (masu sulhu). Employing such approaches signals respect for the partner, a commitment to fairness (adalci), and a prioritization of the long-term relationship over short-term gain.

Conversely, aggressive, litigious, or avoidant tactics are culturally dissonant. They can be perceived as disrespectful, damaging not only the business relationship but also the social reputation of the individuals involved. Research in similar contexts shows that integrative conflict management preserves relational equity the perceived fairness of outcomes which is vital for sustaining cooperation when formal legal recourse is costly or ineffective (Jap & Anderson, 2007; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, we argue that the consistent use of culturally-aligned, integrative tactics demonstrates a partner's suitability for a durable relationship, directly reinforcing LTO.

H3: The use of integrative conflict resolution tactics has a positive direct effect on the client's Long-Term Orientation.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Value Co-Creation: A Culturally-Embedded Pathway

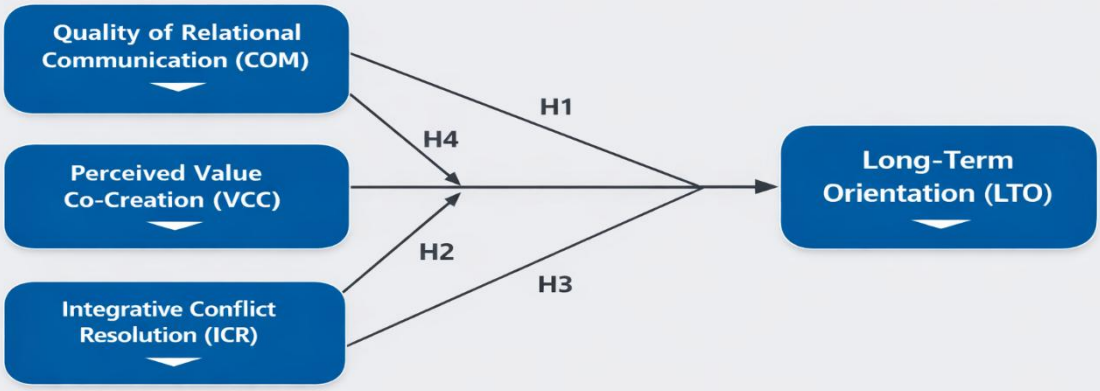
While H1-H3 posit direct effects, we propose a key indirect pathway that is particularly salient in this context: Perceived Value Co-Creation mediates the relationship between Relational Communication Quality and LTO.

High-quality, culturally-attuned relational communication provides the essential social and informational infrastructure for co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Openness and transparency allow for the sharing of not just commercial needs but also local knowledge, constraints, and risks. Bi-directionality ensures that both the supplier's technical expertise and the client's deep contextual knowledge are integrated. The frequent, often informal, communication builds the strong interpersonal trust and shared understanding necessary for collaborative problem-solving in an uncertain environment (Adebola & Bamishaiye, 2021). In essence, without the robust, trust-laden communication channels that characterize effective relationships here, the deep collaboration required for meaningful value co-creation is unlikely to occur.

We theorize that in this setting, relational communication is a necessary enabler. Its primary function is to create the conditions trust, openness, shared understanding that allow the client to perceive and engage in joint value creation. This perception of being a co-creator of value (economic and social), once established, becomes the more proximal and powerful cognitive driver of a long-term commitment. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H4: The quality of relational communication has a positive indirect effect on Long-Term Orientation, mediated by perceived value co-creation.

Figure 1: Conceptual Research Model



METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Context

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to test the hypothesized model. The research was conducted within the agri-food B2B sector in Northern Nigeria, specifically focusing on the states of Kano, Kaduna, and Plateau. This region represents a critical hub for grain cultivation, livestock, and agro-processing, characterized by complex supply chains that blend modern market structures with traditional trading networks (kasuwa) (Shehu & Sidique, 2020). The choice of this context is strategic, as it embodies the institutional voids, reliance on relational governance, and socio-cultural dynamics central to our investigation.

Sample and Data Collection

The target population consisted of client-side decision-makers in agri-food businesses, including proprietors of small and medium-scale processing plants, managers of wholesale distribution firms, and heads of procurement for larger agro-allied companies. A multi-stage sampling technique was used. First, a purposive sampling of registered agri-food associations (e.g., the Kano State Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture; the Maize Association of Nigeria) provided an initial sampling frame. Second, a snowballing technique was employed, leveraging the region's strong network-based business culture, to reach eligible participants who manage a strategic relationship with a key supplier of inputs (seeds, fertilizer) or outputs (raw grains, livestock).

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire, administered in a hybrid mode to accommodate logistical challenges and low internet penetration in some rural areas. Trained research assistants conducted face-to-face interviews using tablet devices in major urban markets (Kasuwan Dawanau in Kano, Mile 3 Market in Kaduna), while an online version (via Google Forms) was distributed to email lists of formal agri-businesses. A key informant approach was used, ensuring respondents were owners or

senior managers directly responsible for the supplier relationship in question (Cycyota & Harrison, 2006). Participants were screened to confirm they had maintained an active business relationship with the specified supplier for at least one full agricultural cycle. Out of 650 questionnaires distributed, 338 were returned. After rigorous data cleaning removing responses with excessive missing data, straight-lining patterns, or failing embedded attention checks (e.g., "Please select 'Agree' for this item") a final sample of 312 usable responses was retained, yielding an effective response rate of 48%. This rate is considered robust for B2B survey research in challenging African contexts (Adeola & Evans, 2020). To assess non-response bias, we compared early respondents (first 75%) with late respondents (last 25%) on key demographic variables (firm age, annual turnover) and core construct means. Independent samples t-tests revealed no significant differences ($p > 0.05$), suggesting non-response bias was not a major concern (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 312)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
State of Operation	Kano	134	42.9%
	Kaduna	108	34.6%
	Plateau	70	22.4%
Firm Type	Agro-processors (Milling, Oil Extraction)	145	46.5%
	Wholesalers/Distributors	98	31.4%
	Livestock Feeders/Producers	69	22.1%
Firm Size (Employees)	1–10 (Micro/Small)	127	40.7%
	11–50 (Medium)	153	49.0%
	51 and above (Large)	32	10.3%
Length of Business Relationship	1–3 years	89	28.5%
	4–7 years	142	45.5%
	8 years and above	81	26.0%

Measures and Scale Adaptation

All constructs were measured using reflective multi-item scales adapted from established literature. Given the cultural context, a rigorous translation and back-translation process was undertaken by bilingual experts to ensure conceptual equivalence from English to Hausa, the predominant language of business in the region. All items used a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). The specific adaptations are detailed below:

Long-Term Orientation (LTO): Measured using a five-item scale adapted from Ganesan (1994). Items were contextualized to reflect non-contractual, relational investments ("We are willing to make sacrifices to help this supplier from time to time because we expect a long-term relationship," "Maintaining a long-term relationship with this supplier is important to our business stability").

Quality of Relational Communication (COM): A six-item scale was adapted from Mohr and Nevin (1990) and Plötz et al. (2023). Adaptations emphasized culturally salient aspects: frequency of face-to-face contact, openness in sharing both good and bad news, and the use of proverbial language (karin magana) to build understanding

("Our communication with this supplier is open and transparent, even when the news is bad," "We have regular, two-way discussions that help us plan together").

Perceived Value Co-Creation (VCC): A four-item scale was adapted from Ranjan and Read (2016). Items were framed to capture the joint creation of both economic and adaptive value crucial in this setting (e.g., "We work jointly with this supplier to find solutions to challenges like price fluctuations or transport issues," "Together, we create more value than we could alone").

Integrative Conflict Resolution (ICR): A five-item scale was adapted from the collaborative dimension of conflict management (Wang et al., 2020; Thomas-Kilmann). Items were refined to align with indigenous mediation concepts (sulhu) and a focus on preserving the relationship (e.g., "When we have a disagreement, we focus on finding a solution that is fair and preserves our relationship," "We try to understand each other's constraints to resolve conflicts").

Control Variables: Based on the literature (Adekunle & Fatoki, 2023), we controlled for Relationship Length (years), Firm Size (logarithm of number of employees), and Trust (a three-item scale measuring generalized trust in the partner). Trust was included as a control because it is a pervasive and potent factor in Nigerian business relationships that could confound the effects of our focal constructs.

Table 2
Overview of Construct Measurement

Construct	Adapted Source(s)	Sample Measurement Item (Contextualized)	No. of Items
Long-Term Orientation (LTO)	Ganesan (1994)	"We expect to continue doing business with this supplier over the next five years."	5
Quality of Relational Communication (COM)	Mohr and Nevin (1990); Plötz et al. (2023)	"This supplier keeps us adequately informed about issues that may affect our business."	6
Perceived Value Co-Creation (VCC)	Ranjan and Read (2016)	"This supplier and our firm integrate knowledge to develop improved ways of working."	4
Integrative Conflict Resolution (ICR)	Wang et al. (2020)	"We collaborate as partners to resolve problems that arise in our relationship."	5
Control Variable: Trust	Morgan and Hunt (1994)	"This supplier can be relied upon to keep its promises."	3

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted in two sequential stages using SmartPLS 4.0, which is robust for complex models with smaller sample sizes and makes fewer distributional assumptions a suitable choice for our data (Hair et al., 2021).
Stage 1: Assessment of the Measurement Model. We evaluated the reliability and validity of the reflective constructs. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR), with a threshold > 0.70. Convergent validity was evaluated using indicator loadings (> 0.708) and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50). Discriminant validity was tested using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, with a conservative threshold of < 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). Given the

single-informant design, we employed procedural remedies (assuring anonymity, separating scale items) and statistical tests for common method bias (CMB). We used the full collinearity test (Kock, 2015), where variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all constructs in a full collinearity model should be ≤ 3.3.

Stage 2: Assessment of the Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing. After establishing a valid measurement model, we evaluated the structural model. We examined the coefficient of determination (R^2) for the endogenous construct (LTO) and used the blindfolding procedure to calculate the Stone-Geisser Q^2 value (> 0) to assess predictive relevance. The significance of the path coefficients (β) was tested using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples to generate t-statistics and bias-corrected confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Direct effects (H1, H2, H3) were assessed via their respective paths. The mediation hypothesis (H4) was tested by examining the significance of the specific indirect effect (COM → VCC → LTO) using the same bootstrapping procedure. Mediation is supported if the indirect effect's confidence interval does not include zero.

RESULTS

Assessment of the Measurement Model

The reflective measurement model was evaluated for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.708 and were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating adequate item reliability (see Table 3). Internal consistency reliability was established, as all constructs had Composite Reliability (CR) values above 0.85, exceeding the 0.70 benchmark. Convergent validity was supported as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was above 0.60, surpassing the 0.50 threshold (Hair et al., 2021).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. As presented in Table 4, all HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming that each construct is distinct from the others.

To assess common method bias (CMB), we employed the full collinearity test (Kock, 2015). The variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all constructs in a full collinearity model were below the stringent threshold of 3.3 (ranging from 1.42 to 2.78), suggesting that CMB is not a pervasive issue in the data.

Table 3
Measurement Model Results: Factor Loadings, Composite Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct and Measurement Items (Abbreviated)	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Long-Term Orientation (LTO)		0.917	0.691
LTO1: Emphasis on long-term goals	0.832		
LTO2: Relationship stability is important	0.856		
LTO3: Willingness to make short-term sacrifices	0.824		
LTO4: Expectation of a lasting relationship	0.841		

Construct and Measurement Items (Abbreviated)	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
LTO5: Commitment to long-term investments	0.809		
Quality of Relational Communication (COM)		0.929	0.687
COM1: Open and transparent communication	0.868		
COM2: Regular two-way strategic discussions	0.843		
COM3: Proactive sharing of relevant information	0.829		
COM4: Communication supports joint planning	0.812		
COM5: Open discussion of challenges	0.798		
COM6: Smooth communication across multiple levels	0.823		
Perceived Value Co-Creation (VCC)		0.906	0.707
VCC1: Joint efforts to create business value	0.854		
VCC2: Integration of resources for unique solutions	0.874		
VCC3: Active participation in value creation	0.843		
VCC4: Superior outcomes from collaboration	0.801		
Integrative Conflict Resolution (ICR)		0.882	0.602
ICR1: Fair solutions that preserve the relationship	0.831		
ICR2: Collaborative problem-solving approach	0.852		
ICR3: Integration of viewpoints for mutual benefit	0.795		
ICR4: Focus on shared interests rather than positions	0.763		
ICR5: Conflict treated as a joint problem	0.718		
Control Variable: Trust (TRUST)		0.889	0.728
TRUST1: Supplier is trustworthy	0.881		
TRUST2: Supplier keeps its promises	0.854		
TRUST3: Supplier demonstrates honesty	0.823		

Table 4
Discriminant Validity Assessment Using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio

Construct	COM	VCC	ICR	LTO	TRUST
COM	—				
VCC	0.724	—			
ICR	0.637	0.538	—		
LTO	0.681	0.788	0.593	—	
TRUST	0.702	0.653	0.485	0.618	—

Note. All HTMT values are below the recommended threshold of 0.90, indicating adequate discriminant validity among the constructs.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated for predictive accuracy and relevance. The model explained 58.2% ($R^2 = 0.582$) of the variance in Long-Term Orientation (LTO), indicating substantial explanatory power. The Stone-Geisser Q^2 value for LTO was 0.341 (> 0), confirming the model's predictive relevance.

The results of the hypothesis tests are presented in Table 5 and illustrated in Figure 2. H1 was supported, as the Quality of Relational Communication (COM) had a

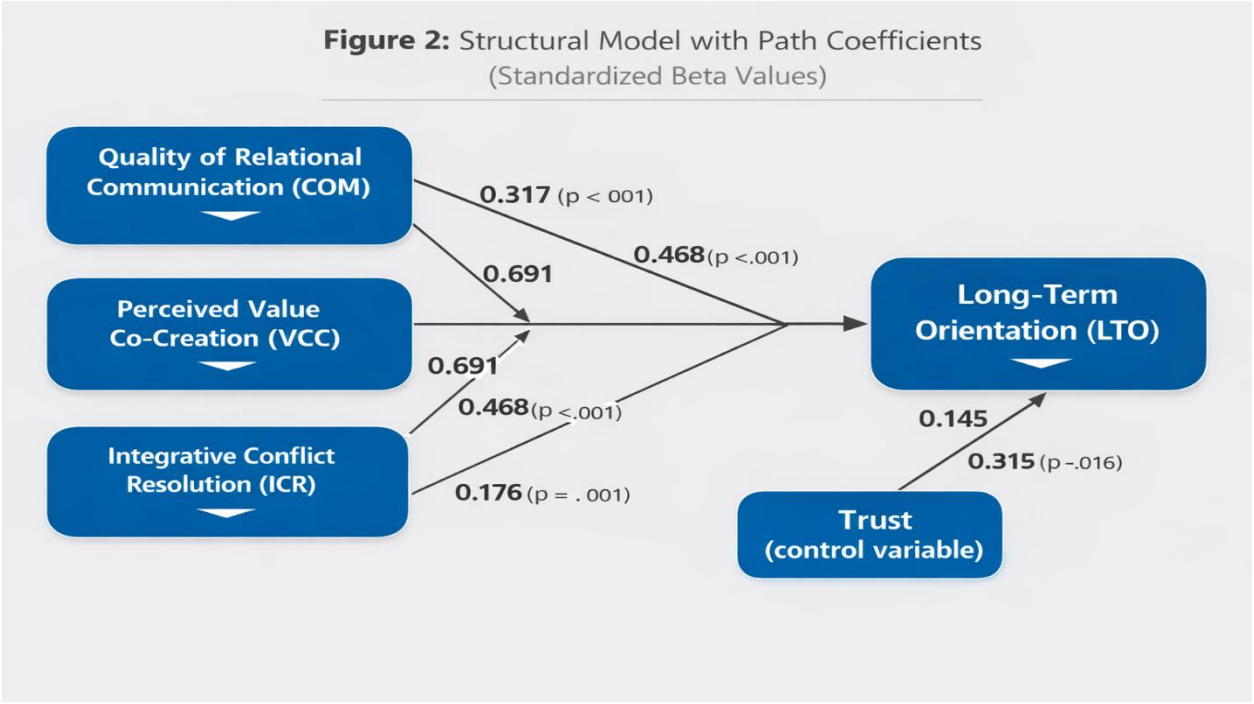
significant positive direct effect on LTO (β = 0.317, p < 0.001). H2 was strongly supported, with Perceived Value Co-Creation (VCC) demonstrating the strongest direct effect on LTO (β = 0.468, p < 0.001). H3 was also supported, as Integrative Conflict Resolution (ICR) had a significant, albeit smaller, positive direct effect on LTO (β = 0.176, p < 0.01). Among the control variables, Trust was a significant predictor of LTO (β = 0.145, p < 0.05), while Relationship Length and Firm Size were non-significant.

To test H4, the mediation hypothesis, we examined the specific indirect effect of COM on LTO via VCC. The bootstrapping analysis revealed a significant positive indirect effect (β = 0.152, p < 0.001, 95% CI: [0.087, 0.224]). Since the direct effect of COM on LTO remained significant in the presence of the mediator (β = 0.317), Perceived Value Co-Creation acts as a partial mediator. This finding supports H4, indicating that a meaningful portion of communication's positive influence on LTO operates through enhancing the client's perception of being a value co-creator.

Table 5
Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing
(Bootstrapping with 5,000 Resamples)

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Standardized β	*t*-value	*p*-value	95% Bias-Corrected CI	Decision
Direct Effects						
H1	COM → LTO	0.317	5.842	< .001	[0.211, 0.414]	Supported
H2	VCC → LTO	0.468	8.991	< .001	[0.369, 0.563]	Supported
H3	ICR → LTO	0.176	3.204	.001	[0.068, 0.278]	Supported
Indirect Effect						
H4	COM → VCC → LTO	0.152	4.577	< .001	[0.087, 0.224]	Supported
Control Paths						
—	TRUST → LTO	0.145	2.412	.016	[0.028, 0.262]	—
—	Relationship Length → LTO	0.062	1.112	.266	[−0.045, 0.169]	—
—	Firm Size → LTO	−0.041	0.743	.458	[−0.148, 0.066]	—

Note. The model explains a substantial proportion of variance in long-term orientation ($R^2 = 0.582$). Predictive relevance is confirmed by $Q^2 = 0.341$.



DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate the drivers of Long-Term Orientation (LTO) within the distinctive and challenging context of Northern Nigeria's agri-food B2B sector. The findings provide robust empirical support for the proposed integrated model, explaining a substantial 58.2% of the variance in LTO. The results not only validate established relational theories but also reveal important contextual nuances that deepen our understanding of partnership sustainability in emerging economies.

Key Findings and Contextual Interpretation

The findings reveal a hierarchy of relational factors influencing long-term orientation (LTO) in Northern Nigeria's agri-food sector. Perceived Value Co-Creation (H2). Perceived value co-creation emerged as the strongest predictor of LTO (β = 0.468), reinforcing Service-Dominant Logic, which emphasizes the joint creation of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Under institutional, infrastructural, and climatic constraints, collaboration enables suppliers and clients to develop adaptive solutions, share risks, and overcome operational challenges (Adeola & Evans, 2020). Thus, collaborative value creation strengthens long-term commitment beyond the provision of quality products at competitive prices.

Relational Communication (H1 and H4). Relational communication quality significantly influences LTO directly (β = 0.317) and indirectly through perceived value co-creation (β = 0.152), indicating partial mediation. Culturally attuned communication fosters trust (amana) and shared understanding, facilitating collaborative problem-solving (Muhammad et al., 2023). This finding highlights how effective dialogue supports cooperation (hadin kai) and strengthens long-term partnerships when translated into joint value creation.

Integrative Conflict Resolution (H3). Integrative conflict resolution positively influences LTO, although its effect is comparatively smaller (β = 0.176). Collaborative, non-confrontational approaches align with cultural values emphasizing communal harmony (jama'a) and mutual respect (mutunci) (Faleti & Olaoye, 2021). Such practices preserve trust and relational stability, providing a foundation for effective communication and value co-creation. However, conflict resolution alone may be insufficient to maximize LTO without broader collaborative efforts.

Table 6
Summary of Key Findings and Contextual Implications

Key Finding	Standardized β	Contextual Interpretation
H2: Perceived Value Co-Creation → LTO	0.468	In environments characterized by high uncertainty, the sustainability of interfirm relationships depends primarily on collaborative, context-specific value creation rather than purely transactional efficiency.
H1: Relational Communication → LTO (Direct Effect)	0.317	Culturally embedded communication practices open, frequent, and relationship-oriented serve as a direct foundation for developing the trust and commitment required for a long-term orientation.
H4: COM → VCC → LTO (Indirect/Mediated Effect)	0.152	The influence of relational communication is largely realized through its role in enabling joint problem-solving and knowledge integration, thereby positioning exchange partners as active co-creators of value.
H3: Integrative Conflict Resolution → LTO	0.176	Conflict management approaches aligned with prevailing cultural norms (*sulhu* and *hakuri*) act as important relational safeguards, though they exert a weaker influence on long-term orientation than proactive value co-creation.
Control Variable: Trust → LTO	0.145	While trust remains a significant baseline condition for sustained relationships, its explanatory power is outweighed by more dynamic, process-oriented mechanisms such as communication quality and value co-creation.

Note. Statistical significance levels are denoted as follows: $^{**}p < .001$, $^{*}p < .01$, $p < .05$.

Theoretical Implications

i. Contextualizing Relational Models: This study answers the call for context-sensitive research in emerging economies (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). It demonstrates that while global relational constructs are applicable, their relative importance and operative pathways can differ. The primacy of value co-creation in this setting highlights how relational outcomes are shaped by environmental exigencies.

ii. Elucidating a Process in Informal Economies: The validated mediation (H4) provides a process-oriented model for how relationships solidify in institutionally weak settings. It moves from Communication (building social and informational capital) → Perceived Co-Creation (leveraging that capital for joint problem-solving) → LTO (commitment based on demonstrated collaborative value). This refines our understanding of relationship development beyond linear trust-commitment paradigms.

iii. Integrating Cultural and Institutional Logic: The study bridges institutional theory with relationship marketing. It shows how informal institutions cultural norms around communication (kasuwanci) and conflict resolution (sulhu) directly shape the effectiveness of formal relational governance strategies, providing a micro-level view of how businesses navigate institutional voids.

Managerial and Policy Implications

For Agri-Business Managers (Suppliers): Shift focus from being a reliable vendor to becoming a demonstrable co-creation partner. Institute formal joint planning sessions and innovation workshops with key clients. Train frontline staff not just in product knowledge, but in the communication and conflict resolution styles that build trust and enable collaboration in this specific cultural context.
For Agri-Business Managers (Clients): Proactively seek out and reward suppliers who engage in joint value creation. Move procurement criteria beyond price to include assessments of a supplier's collaborative capability and conflict resolution ethos.

For Development Agencies & Policy Makers: Programs aimed at strengthening agricultural value chains (the Anchor Borrowers' Programme) should move beyond facilitating transactional linkages. Interventions should foster relational infrastructures, such as: 1) Creating platforms for regular buyer-supplier forums to improve communication; 2) Training in collaborative negotiation and integrative conflict resolution; 3) Providing grants or support specifically for joint investment projects (in shared processing or storage facilities) that catalyze co-creation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a contextually-grounded model for building enduring partnerships within Northern Nigeria's agri-food sector, an environment where institutional voids elevate the importance of relational capital. The findings demonstrate that Long-Term Orientation (LTO) is best cultivated through a synergistic hierarchy of relational processes. While trust and integrative conflict resolution provide a necessary foundation, the most powerful driver of sustained commitment is the active co-creation of value. This positions collaborative adaptation not merely as a strategic advantage but as a fundamental pillar for relational sustainability in volatile emerging markets.

The results offer clear theoretical and practical guidance. Theoretically, they refine relationship marketing frameworks by showing how high-quality, culturally-attuned communication enables partners to become joint architects of value, which in turn solidifies a shared future orientation. For practitioners, this necessitates a paradigm shift from transactional exchanges to a partner-centric, collaborative mindset. Key recommendations include formalizing co-creation mechanisms, investing in relational communication training aligned with local norms, and adopting conflict resolution protocols that preserve relational harmony.

Acknowledging its cross-sectional design and focus on the client perspective within a specific sector, this study charts a course for future research. Subsequent work should employ longitudinal or dyadic designs to strengthen causal claims and capture both sides of the partnership. Further investigation is needed into the potential downsides of deep collaboration, the moderating role of digital technologies, and how the model

varies across different cultural and institutional settings within Nigeria and broader Africa.

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