An intercultural, interpersonal relationship development framework

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how business-to-business (B2B), intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships develop using the lens of identity management theory (IMT; Imahori and Cupach, 2005).

Design/methodology/approach – The research uses qualitative semi-structured interviews on 18 targeted relationships with customers from another culture conducted with business-to-business salespeople.

Findings – The findings indicate that our respondents' relationships moved from trial toward enmeshment and on occasion toward the renegotiation phase, as described in IMT. In the case of low cultural diversity between salesperson and customer, the relationships reached the trial and enmeshment phase. In the case of high cultural diversity between salesperson and customer, the relationships on occasion evolved toward the renegotiation phase. Salespeople's cultural intelligence (CQ) facilitates the development of interpersonal, intercultural salesperson–customer relationships.

Originality/value – The authors transfer IMT from the personal relationship development arena to B2B intercultural, interpersonal relationships, address a gap in the literature in the understanding of salesperson–customer interpersonal relationships in different contexts and develop a theoretical model to understand intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationship development across different levels of cultural diversity.

Keywords Relationship development, B2B salespeople, Customer relationships, Identity management theory, Cultural intelligence, Cultural diversity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

International salespeople and customers are embedded in different national cultures that almost inevitably affect their norms and communication behaviours (Voldnes *et al.*, 2012; Nes *et al.*, 2007). Today, sales relationships are changing rapidly (e.g. Arli *et al.*, 2018; Dixon and Tanner, 2012), and marketing research shows customer–seller relationship depth is more critical to success when selling is more complex (e.g. Elo *et al.*, 2015; Homburg *et al.*, 2008; Palmatier, 2008). Business-to-business (B2B) solution selling entails solving customers' problems through developing customer relationships (Möller, 2011; Spekman and Carraway, 2006; Tuli *et al.*, 2007). Firm-level research on solution selling (e.g. Tuli *et al.*, 2007) has moved

toward a desire to understand interpersonal ties and the interaction between individual customers and sellers during the solution-selling process, particularly when parties come from different national cultures. When partners have different cultural backgrounds, this situation can lead to misunderstandings during interpersonal communication (Zhang et al., 2003) or to unresolved conflict with customers (Kauser and Shaw, 2004). Therefore, it is important to investigate how salespeople navigate their way through different cultural settings and how salesperson–customer relationships evolve at the interpersonal level in a cross-cultural context.

Although extant international marketing research on cross-cultural relationships reveals that the development of beneficial, rewarding firm-level relationships varies across cultures (Asseraf et al., 2019; Griffith et al., 2006; Hewett and Krasnikov, 2016; Hoppner et al., 2015), few previous studies have paid attention to the intercultural, interpersonal customer–salesperson relationship development process. Therefore, this study aims to examine how intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve in culturally diverse settings in the context of B2B solution selling by leveraging IMT (Imahori and Cupach, 2005). Compared with other theories (Altman and Taylor, 1973) or models (Dwyer et al., 1987) detailing customer relationship development across different phases, IMT is unique in emphasising the effect of culture on the development of this relationship.

A concept also associated with IMT and relationship development is social disclosure, which is defined as the level of personal information communicated when completing a sales task (Jacobs et al., 2001a). Furthermore, because previous studies have acknowledged that a salesperson's cultural intelligence (CQ) is important in the selling context (see, Chua et al., 2012; Imai and Gelfand, 2010; Moon, 2013), this study investigates how CQ may facilitate the development of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships. The paper will introduce the following research questions:

RQ1. How do intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve in culturally diverse settings?

RQ2. How does a salesperson's self-described cultural intelligence (CQ) contribute to the development of their intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships?

In this study, a phenomenological approach has been adopted (Thompson et al., 1989; Riessman, 2004) to understand the richness of relationship development from the salesperson's perspective. The study makes the following contributions. First, it introduces IMT to the study of international marketing to enhance the theoretical understanding of intercultural, interpersonal relationship development. Secondly, this study is unique in focusing on the development of interpersonal B2B customer–salesperson relationships in culturally diverse settings. Despite interpersonal relationships being critical, research tends to focus on firm-level relationships (Homburg and Stock, 2004; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wuyts and Geyskens, 2005). Considering the many relationship development studies available (e.g. Palmatier et al., 2013), few focus on relationship development at the interpersonal level in cross-cultural settings. Third, focus is placed on salespeople's descriptions of their CQ, and to show how such a CQ facilitates the development of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships. Finally, a framework to advance the understanding of intercultural, interpersonal relationship development is introduced.

Literature review
In the following literature review, previous research in the field of international marketing is synthesised through three main themes. For the literature review, this study used a selected part of the earlier research in each area to illustrate comprehensive research related to this

phenomenon. First, the study focuses on previous studies on customer relationship development. Secondly, it looks at previous research concerning cultural diversity between partners. Third, focus is placed on communication in intercultural customer relationships. Then, this study introduces identity management theory (IMT), which is applied in this research. The underlying theoretical tenets, key concepts, underlying assumptions, and limitations of IMT are summarised in Table 1 which also shows how IMT is integrated within the previous research in the field of international marketing. Following this, the main concepts related to this study are connected with IMT. These are social disclosure, low-context, and high-context cultures, and cultural intelligence. At the end of the literature review, a visualisation of this study's framework is developed to show the reader how the theoretical concepts are connected with the methodology and data analysis of this study.

Previous research on customer relationship development
In the field of international marketing, researchers have recognised that the development of effective firm-level relationships is largely dependent on both interorganizational and interpersonal relationships (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Alteren and Tudoran, 2018; Leonidou *et al.*, 2017; Miocevic, 2016). Interorganizational and interpersonal relationships have been investigated in the context of international marketing networks with a focus on the factors driving a successful export network at the interorganizational and interpersonal levels (e.g. Ghauri *et al.*, 2003; Gummesson, 2008; Halinen *et al.*, 2013; Khakhar and Rammal, 2013; Rammal, 2005). In addition, interorganizational exchange has been examined through a combination of formal and informal proceedings, underlying a set of interpersonal interactions and social-psychological dynamics between boundary spanners in an attempt to explain why and how these interfirm processes develop (Barnes *et al.*, 2015).

Following Dwyer *et al.*'s (1987) description of the buyer–seller relationship as an ongoing process, relationship marketing research has gradually incorporated studies of relationship trust (Fang *et al.*, 2008; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), commitment (Bansal *et al.*, 2004; Homburg *et al.*, 2014; Palmatier *et al.*, 2013), and the human interaction required to build long-term customer relationships (Elo *et al.*, 2015). Focusing particularly on trust, Fang *et al.* (2008) state that managing and building trust at both the interorganizational and at the interpersonal level is central to successful interorganizational marketing collaboration. In addition, Zhang *et al.* (2003) investigated trust and showed the mediating role of trust when relational governance was investigated in cross-border relationships. Alteren and Tudoran (2018) show that for trust-building, communication is important, irrespective of cultural differences. In the most current marketing research, Zhou *et al.* (2020) state that a business relationship is mediated by interfirm trust and relationship-specific investment underlying both the roles of interorganizational relationships and interpersonal relationship-building. Business partners typically foster a personal relationship orientation to show their commitment and maintain close relationships (Esper *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, many firm-level characteristics, such as interfirm trust, are based on personal interactions between partners (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Fang *et al.*, 2008; Wuyts, 2007; Zhou *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, current international marketing research emphasises that business relationships are not static but dynamic and thus can move through several transitions during the relationship (e.g. Leonidou *et al.*, 2017). However, considering the many relationship development studies available (e.g. Palmatier *et al.*, 2013), little empirical research focuses on relationship development in interpersonal, intercultural relationships. Therefore, this study responds to the call of Zhou *et al.* (2020) for more research on the process of interfirm relationships that develop between individuals. The study focuses on obtaining a detailed understanding of how salesperson–customer

Table 1.
Identity management theory in relation to extant research in the field of international marketing

	Themes in extant international marketing research			
	Customer relationship development	Cultural diversity between partners	Communication in intercultural customer relationships	Perspective in identity management theory
Theoretical tenets	- Effective firm-level relationships are dependent on interorganizational and interpersonal relationships (Barnes et al., 2015; Alteren and Tudoran, 2018; Leonidou et al., 2017; Miocevic, 2016)	- National culture and organisational culture affect customer relationships (Pothukuchi et al., 2002; Rodriquez, 2005; Nes et al., 2007)	- When national and organisational cultures differ, it may cause barriers to fruitful communication (Griffith, 2002)	- Interpersonal relationships evolve through a competent identity management process, which is examined from a dyadic perspective (Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Imahori and Cupach, 2005)
- In an intercultural relationship, communication competence requires both appropriate and effective communication behaviour that is mutually satisfying to the participants in a relationship (Imahori and Cupach, 2005)
Key concepts	- Long-term customer relationships essential study object (Elo et al., 2015)
- Trust (interorganizational and interpersonal trust (Fang et al., 2008; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Zhou et al., 2020)) and commitment (Bansal et al., 2004; Esper et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2014; Palmatier et al., 2013) are important concepts	- Cultural diversity of relationships studied mainly using Hofstede's dimensions (e.g. individualism-collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; masculinity-femininity; power distance (Ha et al., 2004; Nes et al., 2007; Rodríguez, 2005; Zhang et al., 2003) and Hall's classification of low and high communication culture (Jean et al., 2010)	- Effective communication (Hung and Lin, 2013; Stanko et al., 2007; Weitz and Bradford, 1999) is dependent on communication competence examined through abilities of intercultural partners (Bush et al., 2001; Griffith, 2002)
- Relational capital (Kale et al., 2000; Miocevic, 2016) and intercultural competence (Elo et al., 2015) are important concepts	- Communication competence refers to people's ability to behave effectively and appropriately. Different cultures have different expectations for which communication behaviour is considered effective and appropriate. In addition, relational partners are able to negotiate their own idiosyncratic ways of behaving competently (Imahori and Cupach, 2005)
- Cultural identity (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), relational identity (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), and face and facework (Goffman, 1967) are important concepts

(continued)

	Themes in extant international marketing research			
	Customer relationship development	Cultural diversity between partners	Communication in intercultural customer relationships	Perspective in identity management theory
Underlying assumptions	- Networking is required to form long-term customer relationships (Fang *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2003) - The customer–seller relationship is an ongoing process including formal and informal practices/proceedings (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987); these are not static but dynamic (Leonidou *et al.*, 2017)	- Salespeople and customers from different national cultures are almost inevitably affected by their norms, behaviours (Voldnes *et al.*, 2012), and values (Nes *et al.*, 2007) - Cultural diversity often leads to misunderstandings (Kauser and Shaw, 2004) and may have negative consequences including reduced trust and commitment due to different values and practices between partners (Katsikeas *et al.*, 2009; Leonidou *et al.*, 2017)	- Effective communication is beneficial in customer relationships (Hung and Lin, 2013; Stanko *et al.*, 2007; Weitz and Bradford, 1999) - International business partners need communication competence to enjoy effective intercultural communication (Bush *et al.*, 2001; Griffith, 2002)	- Intercultural relationships evolve in three cyclical phases based on unique features of identity management in each phase (trial, enmeshment, renegotiation (Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Imahori and Cupach, 2005)) - Communication competence requires both appropriate and effective behaviour that is mutually satisfying to the participants in a relationship (Imahori and Cupach, 2005)
Limitations	- Does not address how salesperson–customer relationships develop at the interpersonal level when partners come from different cultures	- Does not focus on the mechanism of drivers in relationship development in interpersonal, intercultural relationships	- Does not address the importance of communication competence in developing interpersonal, intercultural customer relationships	- Does not address intergroup relations as the focus is on interpersonal relationships and is limited to dyads

Table 1.

relationships develop at the interpersonal level when a salesperson and customer are from different cultures.

Cultural diversity between partners

International salespeople are embedded in different national cultures that almost inevitably affect their norms, behaviours (Voldnes *et al.*, 2012), and values (Nes *et al.*, 2007), a situation that often leads to misunderstandings or even to unresolved conflict with their customers (Kauser and Shaw, 2004). In cross-cultural relationships, the uncertainty, complexity, and volatility of the international business environment can cause expectations to be breached (Katsikeas *et al.*, 2009; Leonidou *et al.*, 2017). Rodríguez (2005) suggests that if adequately balanced, individualism-collectivism is a source of intercultural fit while building shared leadership between international partners. However, the few studies that explore the influence of distinct cultures on buyer–seller relationships are of relatively limited scope (Cannon *et al.*, 2010; Voldnes *et al.*, 2012) but they do affirm that national cultures can affect repurchase intentions and also be reflected in corporate culture (Hewett *et al.*, 2006).

National and organisational cultures have an impact on the degree of organisational involvement and outcomes in international ventures (e.g. Pothukuchi *et al.*, 2002; Rodríquez, 2005). Nes *et al.* (2007) showed that national cultural differences in exporter–distributor relationships have a significant impact on trust and commitment. Furthermore, the same study showed that communication can influence trust and commitment in a different way than in domestic relationships, where the degree of commitment to the distributor from another culture was directly related to financial performance (Nes *et al.*, 2007).

This study agrees with those marketing scholars who confirm that culture matters in business relationships (e.g. Nes *et al.*, 2007). Often cultural diversity in interorganizational relationships has been investigated by applying Hall's classification of communication culture (Jean *et al.*, 2010) or Hofstede's dimensions (Ha *et al.*, 2004; Nes *et al.*, 2007; Rodríguez, 2005; Zhang *et al.*, 2003). Jean *et al.* (2010) investigated relationship learning in cross-border customer-supplier relationships and found that relationship learning was stronger and more significant when both supplier and buyer were from high-context cultures. Interestingly, research applying Hofstede's dimensions has often produced mixed results (see, e.g. Jean *et al.*, 2010). Zhang *et al.* (2003) and Ha *et al.* (2004) state that Hofstede's indexes do not significantly explain behavioural relationship variables in exporter–importer relationships. This might be because Hofstede's dimensions explain national culture level differences, and interorganizational relationships are individual or group level phenomena. Although prior marketing research has often identified cultural diversity as a problem that must be resolved in international business relationships, the mechanism of the drivers of relationship development remains unclear. Despite the extensive coverage of relationship marketing literature, there is, therefore, a lack of comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal, intercultural salesperson–customer relationships evolve.

Communication in intercultural customer relationships

Studies of interpersonal customer relationships in business settings highlight the benefits of effective interpersonal communication (Hung and Lin, 2013; Stanko *et al.*, 2007; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Effective communication is particularly important in intercultural business negotiations. Previous studies have, for example, focused on how negotiations are conducted by Arab managers (Khakhar and Rammal, 2013), or more specifically how negotiations are conducted in Pakistan (Rammal, 2005).

When national and organisational cultures are inconsistent, it is believed that this can result in culturally inconsistent communication because partners (e.g. from Japan and the USA) have different cultural orientations and different communication styles (Griffith, 2002).

This is seen as a barrier to fruitful communication. However, when partners come from similar national and organisational cultures, their mode of communication is culturally consistent, which reduces communication barriers (Griffith, 2002). To overcome cultural barriers in communication, researchers have suggested that international business partners require communication competence (Bush *et al.*, 2001; Griffith, 2002), relational capital (Kale *et al.*, 2000; Miocevic, 2016), or intercultural competencies (Elo *et al.*, 2015). According to Griffith (2002, p. 258) "communication competence is a set of abilities and knowledge related to communication that enables an individual to engage in appropriate/meaningful communications with international partners". In addition to being adaptive, Bush *et al.* (2001) showed that the intercultural disposition of a marketer is of key importance in developing intercultural communication competence. Kale *et al.* (2000) write that relational capital develops trust between partners, and encourages close personal interaction, respect, and even friendship. Relational capital in the context of business relationships is "the mutual trust, respect, reciprocity, close personal interaction, and friendship that emerge between constituencies in business relationships" (Miocevic, 2016, p. 197).

The literature review conducted as part of this study indicates that customer relationship development, cultural diversity between customer and seller, and communication competence in intercultural customer relationships have been extensively studied in previous international marketing literature. However, a theory is required to help one understand how salesperson–customer relationships develop in culturally diverse settings. To address this shortcoming, IMT is introduced to show how it can be leveraged to explore the development of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships in the context of B2B solution selling.

Identity management theory
Identity management theory (Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Imahori and Cupach, 2005) explicates how cultural identities are negotiated through the development of interpersonal relationships. The theory explains competent identity management across three cyclical developmental phases: trial, enmeshment, and renegotiation. The relationship development phases range from initial acquaintance to a relationship that features intimacy and commitment between partners (Imahori and Cupach, 2005). Identity management theory has its roots in interpersonal relations and focuses on dyads, person-to-person communication, and interpersonal relationship development through competent identity management (see Imahori and Cupach, 2005). The underlying theoretical tenets, key concepts, underlying assumptions, and limitations of IMT are summarised in Table 1, which also shows how IMT is integrated within the previous research in the field of international marketing.

Different cultures have different expectations of effective communication behaviours (e.g. those achieving goals) and appropriate communication behaviours (e.g. those emphasising politeness), which help explain relationship development between partners. In IMT, identity — as self-conception (Cupach and Imahori, 1993) — serves as a framework for understanding the self and the surrounding world. Imahori and Cupach (2005) hold that each person's identity comprises numerous overlapping aspects (e.g. nationality, occupation, and social groups), although IMT focuses specifically on cultural and relational forms of identity (Imahori and Cupach, 2005). **Cultural identity** is defined as "identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (Imahori and Cupach, 2005, p. 197). It refers to people's understanding of their cultural identity, and cultural identity encompasses all types of identities associated with cultural and social groups. In IMT, cultural identity is most evident at the beginning of the interpersonal relationship. In contrast, **relational identity** is "born out of shared relational culture, that is, 'a privately transacted system of understandings' that

helps people coordinate meanings and behaviours" (Imahori and Cupach, 2005, p. 197). Relational identity is more evident as the relationship evolves toward the enmeshment and renegotiation phases.

At the beginning of the relationship, known as the trial phase, partners are expected to be polite to initiate the connection, even though a tendency exists to stereotype a partner from a different cultural background (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010). The early, relatively superficial phase thus involves trial-and-error processes, as partners explore their cultural differences and try to find shared identities (Imahori and Cupach, 2005). However, the cultural differences do tend to be salient and may create barriers to the development of the relationship (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010).

Then, in the enmeshment phase, "intercultural partners begin to develop a mutually acceptable and convergent relational identity, in spite of the fact that their cultural identities are still divergent" (Cupach and Imahori, 1993, p. 125). Partners begin to sense their similarities, accept familiarity in their relationship, and adopt a future outlook (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010).

Finally, according to IMT, in the renegotiation phase, partners have strong relational identities that they can rely on (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010). Cultural differences become relatively easier to manage, partners accept that they have different personalities, come from distinct cultural environments (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), and that they can have different expectations and express disagreement in each other's presence. According to Cupach and Imahori (1993), these three phases are cyclical; partners may go through them as they form, maintain, and develop intercultural relationships, but the relationship deepens as it proceeds toward more advanced stages.

IMT is strongly influenced by the notion of facework, or "actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). The notion of face reflects the desired social image that a person creates through interactions with others (Cupach and Carson, 2002; Goffman, 1967). According to Lee (2008), when communicating with people with similar cultural backgrounds, it is easier to support others' face, owing to the shared cultural norms. However, intercultural communication creates a greater threat to the other person's face, because of a lack of knowledge of others' cultural rules and norms. Therefore, interpersonal relationship development requires a person to be able to perform facework, both to establish his or her face and to protect the relational partner's face (Imahori and Cupach, 2005).

IMT has largely been applied to investigate the development of personal intercultural friendships (Lee, 2008), the formation of intercultural friendship focusing, for example, on Japanese students at an Australian university (Kudo and Simkin, 2003), or work relationships to explain communication and business relationship development in creative projects (Stock, 2012). Nevertheless, as far as can be ascertained, IMT has not been applied in the international marketing field. Some studies explore the use of face-enhancing strategies to deal with rejected customer ideas (Fombelle *et al.*, 2016), but it is believed that the current study represents the first application of IMT to the development of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships.

Social disclosure in relation to IMT
Social disclosure may be required when developing interpersonal relationships through facework. In a sales context, there are a few studies investigating disclosure among salespeople, which might be either task-specific or social (e.g. Jacobs *et al.*, 2001a, b). Task-specific disclosure involves information related to business purposes (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001a), which must be disclosed for the transaction to occur. Social disclosure, in contrast, refers to personal information (e.g. personal interests) communicated during the execution of the sales task (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001a). Such disclosure is in line with social penetration theory (Altman and

Taylor, 1973), which explains how interpersonal relationships develop over time and deepen, involving more trust as people gradually and voluntarily reveal themselves (Baack *et al.*, 2000).

Social disclosure in sales contexts can be described with reference to three properties: duration (seconds), number (breadth), and intimacy (depth) (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001a). In this study, focus is placed on depth, operationalised as the highest level of intimacy evidenced in the data. This property offers the clearest explanation of how people move from the superficial to an intimate level in their relationships (Altman and Taylor, 1973; Baack *et al.*, 2000; Jacobs *et al.*, 2001a, b).

Social disclosure is associated with the relationship development depicted by IMT which also essentially includes facework, that is, how people manage the impressions others have of them. A central aspect of successful facework is how much personal information shared with others. As IMT explains, at the beginning of the relationship, politeness is essential (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), and therefore rather superficial disclosures could be expected to emerge between partners. As the relationship evolves toward the enmeshment phase, partners start to develop their relational identity (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), and therefore more intimate social disclosure could be expected to occur. Finally, as the relationship develops to the renegotiation phase, partners have a strong relational identity (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), and therefore the most intimate social disclosure could be expected to occur at this stage.

Low-context and high-context cultures in relation to IMT
In IMT, intercultural relationships are those that exist between two different cultures. Research has shown that cultural differences exist across countries (e.g. Hall, 1977; Hall and Hall, 1990). Hall (1977) specifically considers the impact of culture on communication known as cultural distance, that is, how people communicate with others through their range of communication abilities (Hall, 1977). Consistent with this focus on communication, Hall (1977) explains that to communicate effectively with someone from a different culture, a person must decode the message to make it consistent with his or her cultural norms (Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003). Hall's (1977) simple, two-category framework groups different countries into low-context (LC) and high-context (HC) communication cultures. In LC cultures (e.g. the United States or Germany), the information is contained mainly in the message itself; what is said is what is meant. The message must be detailed and explicit (Hall and Hall, 1990; Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003). In contrast, in HC cultures (e.g. China or Italy), the information conveyed in the message is less explicit and parties must rely on the context of the communication to understand the message. Personal relationships are more important in HC cultures because they help clarify the message (Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003). Cultural contexts are likely to have different impacts on the development of relationships when the relationship is marked by less diversity (LC-LC or HC-HC) rather than more (LC-HC). Accordingly, this study investigates how the extent of cultural diversity interacts with relationship development. Given the importance of interpersonal communication to the salesperson–customer relationship, Hall's (1977) framework is well-suited to the purpose of examining those relationships.

Cultural intelligence in relation to IMT
Customer–salesperson relationship development in B2B solution selling may involve navigating different cultural contexts. Therefore, another important consideration is whether a salesperson has the ability to navigate these differences. In intercultural marketing settings, salespeople need cultural intelligence (CQ), defined as the ability to function, effectively manage, and behave appropriately in culturally diverse settings (Earley and Ang, 2003; Hansen *et al.*, 2011). The CQ construct is multidimensional in that it has cognitive,

metacognitive, behavioural, and motivational components that may or may not correlate. Accordingly, a person might have a great deal of knowledge about a particular culture but lack the ability to act on that knowledge (Hansen *et al.*, 2011).

CQ is viewed as a communication competence that is an essential element of IMT [1]. This study has chosen to employ CQ as it explains competent communication behaviour in culturally diverse settings, and because direct evidence from psychology and management literature indicates that CQ is relevant to international marketing. For example, CQ has been applied when conceptualising the understanding of success/survival factors of rich-to-poor diaspora entrepreneurship (Harima *et al.*, 2016). In addition, CQ should be considered when selecting, providing support to, and training expatriates (see Wu and Ang, 2011). Drawing on social exchange theory, Paparoidamis *et al.* (2019) examined how frontline employees' CQ influences customer perceptions of service quality. Specifically, Paparoidamis *et al.* propose that the three components of CQ — the cognitive, emotional/motivational, and physical – have differential moderating effects on perceived service quality.

CQ is also relevant in B2B selling situations. Sales research emphasises how a salesperson's adaptability is a crucial factor in customer relationship development (Spiro and Weitz, 1990). By extension, an international salesperson's CQ should affect relationship development in a culturally diverse situation. The presence of CQ can improve multicultural team performance (Moon, 2013) and trust-building (Chua *et al.*, 2012). Imai and Gelfand (2010) demonstrate that CQ also increases the effectiveness of intercultural negotiation. Looking specifically at sales situations, Chen *et al.* (2012) show that the motivational dimension improved sales across culturally diverse populations in a real-estate setting. However, there is no knowledge of studies that explore the role of salespeople's CQ in facilitating intercultural, interpersonal relationship development in a B2B context.

Figure 1 illustrates the framework guiding the methodological choices and data analysis in this study, the context of which is B2B solution selling. The object of the study is intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationship development. According to IMT, intercultural relationships evolve in three phases including different types of identity and social disclosure. This study investigates salesperson–customer relationship development in culturally diverse settings: in combinations of low-low and low-high cultures. The factor that might influence the development of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships is the salesperson's self-reported CQ. Based on IMT and previous research in the field of international marketing, cultural diversity between partners may hinder salesperson–customer relationship development.

Methodological approach

To understand the development of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships from the perspective of the salesperson, a phenomenological approach (Thompson *et al.*, 1989; Riessman, 2004) was utilised. As Cope (2005, p. 168) stated, the "aim of
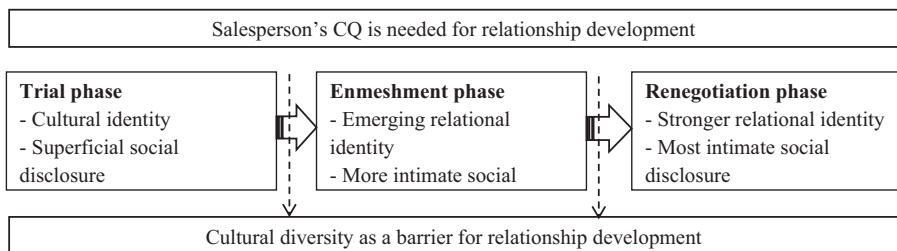
Figure 1.
Framework for intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationship development leveraging IMT

phenomenological inquiry is to understand the subjective nature of 'lived experience' from the perspective of those who experience it, by exploring the meanings and explanations that individuals attribute to their experiences". The methodological choice in this study was to use semi-structured interviews to collect data and to analyse those data via qualitative content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interviews conducted focused on the perceived experiences of the interviewees and aimed to allow salespeople to describe their *lived meanings* (Cope, 2005; Haytko, 2004).

Data sourcing
To create a clear sampling logic, specific criteria was defined (Miles and Huberman, 1994): all relationships had to occur in an international, B2B solution-selling context and be identified as long-term by the salespeople (Haytko, 2004); interviewees were also asked to focus on profitable relationships. The customer relationships were to be on-going, and still profitable over time. The sample was designed to include companies involved in solution selling (Terho and Halinen, 2012), which comprises "individualised offers for complex customer problems that are interactively designed and whose components offer an integrative added value by combining products and/or services so that the value is more than the sum of the components" (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2011, p. 657). Sharma *et al.* (2008) define solution selling as an approach adopted by leading companies where the salesperson has the role of problem-solver, and moreover, has responsibility for developing the relationship with the customer. Solution selling requires that salespeople understand the problems of their customers and actively seek solutions for the customer firm (Liu and Leach, 2001). In this sense, solution selling always involves both interorganizational and interpersonal levels of the relationship.

For the interviews, nine salespeople were selected, who between them had 10–45 years of employment experience, worked for three companies (see Table 2), and all came from an LC culture (Finland). The nine salespeople each identified two important long-term customer relationships, one from an LC culture and one from an HC culture (Hall, 1977) [2]. These customer relationships were with people from a variety of countries (see Table 2). Therefore it was possible to analyse 18 salesperson–customer relationship cases. The respondents provided a subjective perspective on the development of interpersonal relationships with customers in the two different contexts (both low and high levels of cultural diversity). To ensure external validity, two customers (one from an LC culture and another from an HC culture) were interviewed to verify and triangulate the data. The customers' perspectives confirmed the descriptions of the relationships acquired from the salespeople. Among the nine salespeople interviewed, three were interviewed four times (accounting for 12

Informant**	Age	Gender	Relationship with low cultural diversity	Relationship with high cultural diversity
Salesperson A, Construction industry	38	Male	Swedish customer	Russian customer
Salesperson B, construction industry	41	Male	Swedish customer	Russian customer
Salesperson C, construction industry	52	Male	Estonian customer	Russian customer
Salesperson D, paper industry	55	Female	German customer	Korean customer
Salesperson E, paper industry	52	Male	Danish customer*	Spanish customer
Salesperson F, paper industry	58	Male	German customer	Italian customer*
Salesperson G, Software industry	50	Female	Swedish customer	Chinese customer
Salesperson H, Software industry	43	Male	Swedish customer	Indian customer
Salesperson I, Software industry	47	Male	Swedish customer	Israeli customer

Note(s): * This customer was interviewed to confirm the salesperson's perspectives
**All salespeople were Finnish

interviews) and six were interviewed twice (accounting for a further 12 interviews). The two customer interviews brought the total to 26 interviews relating to the 18 relationships on which analysis could be based. Each of the 26 interviews lasted between 60 and 140 min, and the same structure and questions were used for all the salespeople and customers (see Table 2).

The interviews began with background questions, then gathered information by requesting a chronological account of the development of the customer relationship from initiation to the present. The resulting discussions focused on the cultural benefits and hindrances experienced in various phases of relationship development and how the parties tried to overcome the hindrances. In addition, descriptions were elicited of social disclosure during different relationship phases through questions such as; "How was the customer relationship formed, developed, and maintained?"; "How would you describe the nature of this particular relationship?"; "What effects did cultural differences between yourself and your customer have on business operations and customer relationship development?"; "What did you due to ensure you were acknowledging the customer's cultural identity (face)?"; "How would you describe communication with customers from different cultural environments?"; and "How would you describe your ability to behave appropriately in culturally diverse settings?"

Both a detailed and holistic understanding of the key phenomena was provided through the interviews (Graebner, 2009). The interviewer then later interviewed the respondents about the opposite context relationship; that is, if the salesperson had first identified an LC example, the researcher subsequently asked the salesperson to identify an HC relationship and vice versa. Finally, using interview data and the interviewers' observations, salesperson CQ was analysed. The researchers who had conducted the qualitative interviews analysed the salesperson's CQ based on questions that tapped into how capable each person felt in terms of the various dimensions of CQ.
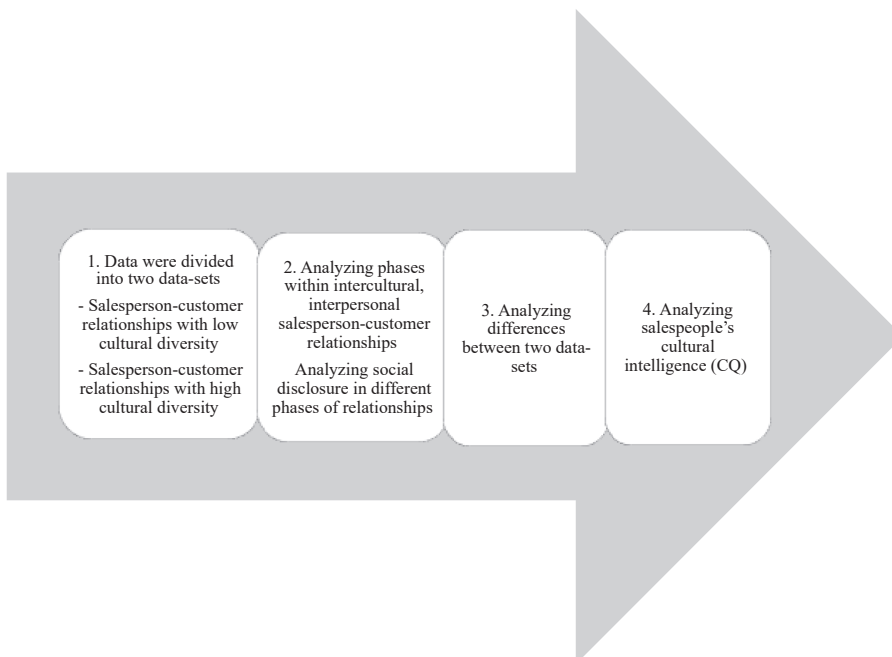
Analysis
Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Initially, three researchers systematically reviewed the transcribed interview data, following "a series of hermeneutic circles through a combination of data gathering, analysis, and reflection" (Viio and Grönroos, 2016, p. 39). Textual interpretations were clarified through new reflections, focusing on similarities and differences, which helped broaden and strengthen the thematic structure of the findings (Haytko, 2004). Each relationship was analysed separately, using qualitative content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), enabling the authors to formulate themes (Makkonen *et al.*, 2012) and meaning-based categories (Haytko, 2004). It is understood that creating meanings is always a process that is located in a person's experience.

The data was first divided into two datasets: the first dataset incorporated salesperson–customer relationships with low cultural diversity between partners and the second dataset incorporated salesperson–customer relationships with high cultural diversity between partners.

The second step of the analysis involved analysing how intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve and isolating three phases within those relationships (trial, enmeshment, and renegotiation). Moreover, social disclosure was analysed in different phases of the relationship. Social disclosure refers to personal information communicated during the development of the salesperson–customer relationship. In the data from this study, the depth of the social disclosure increased in conjunction with the following themes: (1) superficial social disclosure (e.g. small talk or talk of educational background); (2) more intimate social disclosure (e.g. hobbies, interests, family relations, children, common interests, personal values, personal life history, plans); (3) most intimate social disclosure (e.g. disabilities, shameful incidents, and failures).

Following this, the third step analysed how intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve in culturally diverse settings. Therefore an analysis was made on how salesperson–customer relationships evolve in three phases when cultural diversity between the partners is low (LC-LC cultural diversity) or high (LC-HC cultural diversity). Then, as the fourth step in this process, salespeople's cultural intelligence was analysed (CQ) based on their descriptions of it during the customer relationship development process (see Figure 2).

As a check on reliability and validity, follow-up questions were also posed by telephone if any clarification was required (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finally, summaries of the interviews reflecting the understanding of all the data were sent to the interviewed salespeople for review. This member checking stage (Miles and Huberman, 1994) can be considered an additional interview (Haytko, 2004), which provided pure feedback, focused on similarities and differences between the informants' understanding and researchers' analysis of the phenomena. Interviews were conducted and analysed by native Finnish speakers from the multinational research team, legitimising the interpretations made regarding Finnish solution sellers. To acquire as comprehensive an understanding as possible, salespeople were selected from diverse companies and industries. As with any interviews, bias may exist in what and how the participants choose to share data, but it is believed that the protocols and triangulation used in this research help mitigate any systemic bias. Nonetheless, there is always a possibility of bias as respondents may have presented their behaviour and the events with a positive slant that might not have been fully endorsed by other protagonists.

1. Data were divided into two data-sets

- Salesperson-customer relationships with low cultural diversity

- Salesperson-customer relationships with high cultural diversity

2. Analyzing phases within intercultural, interpersonal salesperson-customer relationships

Analyzing social disclosure in different phases of relationships

3. Analyzing differences between two data-sets

4. Analyzing salespeople's cultural intelligence (CQ)

Figure 2.
The analysis process of the study

Empirical findings

The analysis revealed the salesperson–customer relationships experienced and interpreted by the interviewed salespeople moved from the trial phase toward enmeshment and then renegotiation (Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Imahori and Cupach, 2005). The findings suggest that the relationship phases described by IMT theory do apply to intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships. The phases and main themes found related to social disclosure are summarised in Table 3.

Intercultural, interpersonal customer–salesperson relationship phases
In the initial trial phase, both salesperson and customer start to explore their cultural differences but will retain their own separate cultural identities. It is not a prerequisite for the relationship to advance that partners develop a relational identity during the trial phase. The following example from the data shows how salesperson H reflected on the trial phase of the relationships.

> I think the seller does not have to know the person [their cultural identity] at the beginning and the buyer does not have to know the seller. (Salesperson H)

Furthermore, as the salesperson and the customer do not know each other particularly well on a personal level, their conversations and social disclosure are at a fairly superficial level. The findings show that in the intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships in place during the trial phase, the content of superficial social disclosure included small talk, sharing information on each other's educational background, and perhaps talking about hobbies and interests. Examples of this type of discourse are provided in the following excerpts.

> **Small talk, educational background:** It depends on the time of year; I mean you can talk about the summer vacation and your plans for summer. (Salesperson H)

> **Hobbies, interests:** Hobbies come up in conversation such as "Do you want to see an ice hockey match?" (Salesperson I)

Once the interpersonal, intercultural salesperson–customer relationship reaches the enmeshment phase, the partners start to reveal who they are as people. This naturally

Relationship phase based on IMT (Imahori and Cupach, 2005)	Phases emerging in the data	Social disclosure themes emerging in the data
Trial	"I think the seller does not have to know the person [their cultural identity] at the beginning and the buyer does not have to know the seller" (Salesperson H)	*Superficial social disclosure* - Small talk, educational background - Hobbies, interests
Enmeshment	"For us, a small failure [understanding cultural differences] and investigating it deepened the relationship. There was no need for [face-to-face] meetings every single time. The content of the discussions included feedback and talking about even the most difficult things in a very natural way" (Salesperson H)	*More intimate social disclosure* - Family relations, kids, common interests - Personal values, personal life history, plans
Renegotiation	"Things go well when you know each other … that relationship has helped me understand what it means to be Italian and to work in Italy and to appreciate things there. The customer started to trust our way of working" (Salesperson F)	*Most intimate social disclosure* - Intimate subjects (e.g. disabilities, shame, failures)

Table 3.
Results on intercultural, interpersonal customer–salesperson relationship phases

takes time and occurs after the parties have worked together for a longer period. One salesperson described the enmeshment phase in the following way.

> For us, a small failure [in understanding cultural differences] and investigating it deepened the relationship. There was no need for [face-to-face] meetings every single time. The content of the discussions included feedback and talking about even the most difficult things in a very natural way. (Salesperson H)

The preceding excerpt also shows how partners were able to talk about the most difficult issues. The findings show that social disclosure moved toward more intimate sharing and came to include talking about family relations, children, common interests, personal values, personal life history, and plans. Examples of this type of social disclosure are shown below.

> **Family relations, kids, common interests:** I ask how it's going with the family. (Salesperson B)

> **Personal values, personal life history, plans:** We get to know each other more deeply, talk about what he has been doing previously in his career, what schools he went to, what kind of mentors he had, and what kind of ambitions he has for the future. (Salesperson H)

According to IMT, during the renegotiation phase cultural differences should be easier to manage, and partners come to accept that they are different personalities from distinct cultural environments (Imahori and Cupach, 2005). The partners are aware of cultural differences between them in the relationship. The following excerpt shows how Salesperson F and his customer describe the relationship during the renegotiation phase.

> Things go well when you know each other so well . . . this relationship has helped me understand what it means to be an Italian and to work in Italy and to appreciate things there. The customer started to trust our way of working, even though it is the Finnish way. (Salesperson F).

> It was really easy to share some common experiences and to speak about family problems. To identify with my life. (Italian customer of Salesperson F).

With regard to social disclosure, the findings reveal that the most intimate social disclosure occurred between partners when the salespeople felt that they were in the renegotiation phase of the relationship. The content of social disclosure included sharing extremely personal issues, such as talking about physical disabilities, talking about emotions such as shame, and disclosing personal failures in working life (bankruptcy) or personal life issues (divorce). During the renegotiation phase, partners were also involved in each other's private lives. For example, Salesperson I described being invited to a funeral in Israel and Salesperson H was invited to a wedding in India by the customer. In addition, Salesperson F described how he was involved in family parties in Italy. An example of highly intimate social disclosure is shown in the following excerpt.

> **Intimate topics (**e.g. **disabilities, shame, failures):** I open up myself quite a lot and speak about my mistakes and reveal my life experiences in that way. I reveal my human side. (Salesperson I)

During the renegotiation phase, some of the salespeople interviewed described how, having known each other for so long and collaborated on several projects that required spending a lot of time together, they felt that their customer from another culture had become something very close to a friend. The parties had discovered common interests and had become aware of similar personal characteristics. Therefore, in intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships, the renegotiation phase can provide an environment suitable for a friendship to emerge (see also Grayson, 2007; Haytko, 2004).

Intercultural, interpersonal customer–salesperson relationships in culturally diverse settings
With regard to cultural diversity, the findings reveal that in those salesperson–customer relationships in which cultural diversity is low, the parties' similar cultural backgrounds foster an understanding between them. However, as Table 4 shows, these relationships did not develop greater depth, unlike relationships in which cultural diversity was high. In Table 4, it was found that the low cultural diversity relationships remained at either the trial or enmeshment phase; no relationships advanced to the renegotiation phase. The salespeople and customers appear to understand each other well, in line with the characterization of LC cultures as featuring explicit messages that contain most of the necessary information (Hall, 1977; Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003). It appears then that low cultural diversity discourages the development of relationships so they enter the deepest phase because there is less need to renegotiate cultural identities.

In the trial phase, the parties noticed cultural differences, and neither the salespeople nor the customers had an interest in developing the relationships further:

> I would not want to be too good friends with my customers . . . the kind of very superficial friendship with the customer [is enough]. (Salesperson A)

But during the enmeshment phase, the partners started to recognise their similarities and deepened the relationship, reflecting common interests. Salesperson E, describing a relationship determined to be in the enmeshment phase, described being interested in the customer owing to shared hobbies but finding no reason to pursue the relationship further because their understanding seemed deep enough.

> So, no it's not a friendship but it's not only a pure business relationship either. Somewhere in between . . . if you say on a scale from one to 10, where 10 is a friend and one is strictly a business partner, and that's it, I would probably [say], between five and six. But having said that we are both from Scandinavia. (Danish customer of Salesperson E.)

In contrast, most of the salesperson–customer relationships in which cultural diversity was high reached either the enmeshment or renegotiation phases (see Table 4). Whilst IMT predicts that it is harder to form "a mutually acceptable and convergent relational identity"

Low cultural diversity between salesperson and customer (low-low)	Relationship phase	High cultural diversity between salesperson and customer (low-high)	Relationship phase	Salesperson's cultural intelligence
Salesperson A - Swedish customer	Trial	Salesperson A - Russian customer	Trial	Low
Salesperson B - Swedish customer	Trial	Salesperson B - Russian customer	Trial	Low
Salesperson C - Estonian customer	Enmeshment	Salesperson C - Russian customer	Trial	Low
Salesperson D - German customer	Trial	Salesperson D - Korean customer	Trial	Low
Salesperson E - Danish customer	Enmeshment	Salesperson E - Spanish customer	Enmeshment	Medium
Salesperson F - German customer	Enmeshment	Salesperson F - Italian customer	Renegotiation	High
Salesperson G - Swedish customer	Trial	Salesperson G - Chinese customer	Enmeshment	Medium
Salesperson H - Swedish customer	Enmeshment	Salesperson H - Indian customer	Renegotiation	High
Salesperson I - Swedish customer	Enmeshment	Salesperson I - Israeli customer	Renegotiation	High

Table 4.
Results of intercultural, interpersonal customer–salesperson relationships in the culturally diverse settings and salesperson's cultural intelligence level

([Cupach and Imahori, 1993](#), p. 125) with partners from different cultures, results show that both salespeople and customers were very interested in working with different cultures. They expressed a clear understanding of cultural diversity and sought to acquire cultural knowledge. The salespeople who had reached the renegotiation phase (F, H, and I) confirmed the IMT prediction that the relationship partners understand and accept their differences in the renegotiation phase and continue to be willing to develop and maintain the relationship. They also highlighted the importance of personal relationships, which helped them understand the more implicit messages in HC settings ([Hall, 1977](#); [Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003](#)). The partners noted strong levels of trust and commitment, and these deep relationships helped them arrive at complex solutions.

> Some Italians have . . . approvingly confirmed that the way I act when I am with them is like I am an Italian [friend]. (Salesperson F)

> So, it is easy for me to become familiar with a person like this because we have some common interests. We love the seaside and also winter sports, so we discovered we have a lot of hobbies in common . . . It was beautiful to have dinner together, to have a singing session, and so on. (Italian customer of Salesperson F)

Salespersons' cultural intelligence
The findings show how salespeople describe their cultural intelligence (CQ) as their intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve. Cultural intelligence (CQ) means a person's ability to adapt to new cultural settings and is a multidimensional construct with four dimensions ([Earley and Ang, 2003](#)). The findings are based on researchers' assessments of the salespeople's levels of CQ based on the qualitative interview data. The connection between CQ dimensions and the data as well as the assessment of CQ levels (as low, medium, or high) are explained in the [appendix](#).

The summary of salespeople's CQ is shown in [Table 4](#). The data indicate that the people interviewed had sufficient CQ to deal with less culturally diverse relationships. However, in high cultural diversity relationships, the need for heightened CQ requirements became evident.

Salespeople with low CQ (see [Table 4](#), salespeople A–D) limited their relationships to the trial phase. Only Salesperson C had an enmeshment phase with an Estonian customer (low cultural diversity) because they had a mutual willingness to deepen their relationship. However, most of the salespeople with low CQ did not need to develop the relationship further, as the following quote reveals.

> Business is business. I would not aim to develop a relationship [for business purposes]. (Salesperson D)

Salespeople with medium or high levels of CQ ([Table 4](#), Salespeople E–I) were able to develop their relationships through to the enmeshment or renegotiation levels. Only Salesperson G, with medium CQ, reported being in a trial phase with a customer from a similar cultural background (low cultural diversity). That salesperson explained that there was no need to deepen the relationship with the Swedish customer. The deepest relationships were those built by the salespeople with the highest levels of CQ: F, H, and I. According to these salespeople, they share a mutual respect with their customers, and they also demonstrated their ability to perform facework:

> Achieving personal trust is the starting point. And that can't be achieved in any other way than visiting the place often enough and being accepted as a person . . . Well, it is about trust and keeping your promises, is not it? (Salesperson F)

I feel, I can trust [Salesperson F] because I think that he is an honest person . . . it is a really successful approach and, not only in terms of a personal relationship but also in term of the business. I think that both are benefiting about our relationship. (Italian customer of Salesperson F).

Finally, IMT (Imahori and Cupach, 2005) is leveraged to introduce a theoretical model to explicate the intercultural, interpersonal development of the relationship between salesperson and customer (see Figure 3). Intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships can evolve from a trial phase toward enmeshment and renegotiation phases. Cultural diversity also plays a part in the relationship development process. Higher levels of cultural diversity seem to enhance relational identity formation between partners as well as more intimate social disclosure. A salesperson's CQ facilitates the relationship development process, as it was found that salespeople with higher levels of CQ were able to form the deepest relationships (and even move to the renegotiation phase).

Discussion
Theoretical contributions
Currently, we are living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and international marketing and sales have changed rapidly as travelling has become difficult and sales occur increasingly online (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020). Still, 86% of sales representatives reported that the global crisis increased the importance of long-term customer relationships, and over 80% believe in the increased importance of building trust between partners both before and after a sale (Salesforce, 2020). This indicates that building and maintaining long-term customer relationships will be highly important in the anticipated future.

This study is the first to show how relational identity is formed between a salesperson from one culture, and a customer from another culture. The findings show that meanings are attached to each of the relationship stages, as the interpersonal, intercultural relationship deepens through trial, enmeshment, and renegotiation phases. In international sales,
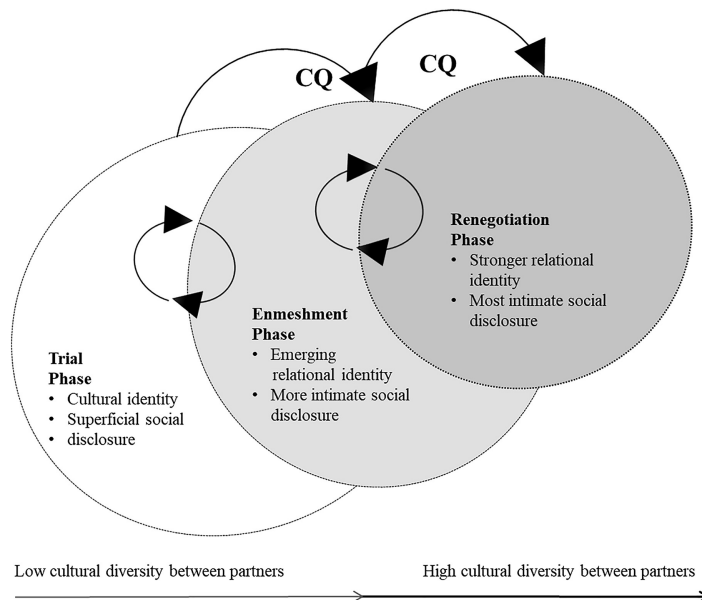
Figure 3.
Theoretical model on intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationship development leveraging IMT in the context of international B2B solution selling

customer relationships may have many forms, however, marketing research has shown how customer–seller relationship depth is more critical to success when selling is more complex (e.g. Elo *et al.*, 2015; Homburg *et al.*, 2008; Palmatier, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand how to develop the interpersonal, intercultural relationships towards deeper levels and how it brings value to the salesperson, their customer, and for their collaborative relationship (Terho *et al.*, 2015).

This study contributes to the extant literature in the following ways: first, despite international marketing literature recognising the value of focusing on the interpersonal level (Esper *et al.*, 2015; Fang *et al.*, 2008; Ghauri *et al.*, 2003; Kale *et al.*, 2000; Miocevic, 2016), it lacks a theoretical perspective on B2B salesperson–customer relationships in the intercultural context. This study is the first research to bring IMT (Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Imahori and Cupach, 2005) to the field of international marketing, and to explore how intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve in culturally diverse settings. The findings indicate that among the respondents, the relationships investigated moved from trial toward enmeshment and even toward the renegotiation phase. Furthermore, this study shows how social disclosure between partners moved from a rather superficial level toward highly intimate sharing as the intercultural, interpersonal relationship evolved. It finds that low cultural diversity between salesperson and customer restrains interpersonal, intercultural relationship depth. However, where relationships are marked by high cultural diversity, those relationships develop toward deeper phases. This finding appears paradoxical compared with previous international marketing research that underlines how national cultural distance may adversely affect relationships through heightened communication barriers (Griffith, 2002), reduced trust, and constrained communication (Nes *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, the findings of this study show that the strongest relational identity and most intimate social disclosure was found in customer relationships marked by high cultural distance, not in those featuring low cultural distance between partners.

Another contribution lies in identifying that a high level of CQ is an important requirement for international salespeople hoping to deepen their relationships, especially in contexts marked by high cultural diversity. Salesperson CQ can facilitate interpersonal relationship development in such a context. This constitutes a key contribution to previous international marketing research (Barnes *et al.*, 2015). To the best of the authors' knowledge, no study has explored the role of CQ in facilitating intercultural relationships, particularly from the perspective of the development of a process-based, interpersonal relationship.

The findings of this study show that the salesperson's cultural intelligence (CQ) may be a facilitator of interpersonal relationship development in a context marked by high cultural diversity. Having a stronger relational identity may also positively strengthen interorganizational level collaboration. This finding on CQ addresses the question posed by Nes *et al.* (2007) on whether a high level of cultural sensitivity can compensate for eventual relationship problems grounded in the cultural distance between the parties. The indication is that salespeople may possess (or develop) a competency to deal with people from other cultures that helps to facilitate deeper relationship development in contexts where there is a cultural difference between B2B partners. Overall, these findings indicate that IMT is beneficial for understanding how intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve.

Prior research has established that not all customers want deep interpersonal relationships and that some customers view having such a relationship as a burden (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2015). Salespeople need to be sensitive in this regard, as recent studies indicate that B2B buyers prefer searching information themselves and rely less on salespeople who they might consider to be biased related to the information they share (Rangajaran *et al.*, 2019). Some B2B buyers prefer purchasing online once they have decided what to buy (Arli *et al.*, 2018; Hoar, 2015). Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal

equally that not all salespeople want – or see the need to develop – a deep interpersonal relationship with their customers. Some salespeople interviewed felt that having a deeper relationship with the customer could be a burden as well. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that intercultural, interpersonal customer–salesperson relationships do not evolve toward deeper interpersonal levels without a reciprocal willingness and reciprocal needs influencing the partners.

Moreover, this study is unique in focusing on the development of interpersonal B2B customer–salesperson relationships in culturally diverse settings. Previous research tends to focus on firm-level relationships (Homburg and Stock, 2004; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wuyts and Geyskens, 2005). Considering the many relationship development studies available (e.g. Palmatier *et al.*, 2013), little empirical research focuses on relationship development in cross-cultural settings. Although prior research (e.g. Rodriquez, 2005; Chen *et al.*, 1998) suggests that cultural diversity affects the nature of relationships, the research in this study is the first to explore how intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationships evolve in culturally diverse settings and solution-selling contexts.

Although applying IMT (Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Imahori and Cupach, 2005) would suggest that low cultural diversity should improve understanding in the interaction between salespeople and customers, and encourage deeper relationships between them because it is easier for partners to form deep relationships when both parties are from similar cultures, the findings of this study indicate the opposite. This study finds that low cultural diversity between salesperson and customer limits the depth achieved by the interpersonal, intercultural relationship. However, when relationships are marked by high cultural diversity, those relationships develop toward the enmeshment and renegotiation phases. The sellers featured in this study underlined that they were familiar with the customers when operating in a LC-LC context and therefore did not see the value in deepening these LC-LC relationships. Prior research shows the presumption of similarity in psychically close countries fosters complexity in management operations: complexity/situation constraints offer one explanation of why organizations' executives can struggle to address critical differences with partners from psychically close countries (Fenwick *et al.*, 2003; O'Grady and Lane, 1996).

To conclude, the research of this study presents a theoretical model to aid understanding of intercultural, interpersonal salesperson–customer relationship development by leveraging IMT (Imahori and Cupach, 2005 (see Figure 3).

Managerial implications
International marketing ultimately entails some form of interaction and relationship-building between individuals, so international salespeople need to be able to form, maintain, and develop interpersonal customer relationships. Marketing researchers such as Rodriquez (2005) underscore that management practices should be congruent with a client's national culture. This study's findings also emphasise the importance of a seller's CQ in facilitating relationship development in B2B sales relationships across country borders.

The findings indicate that when cultural diversity is high, deep relationships become more important. It may be that the more diverse intercultural relationships add a degree of complexity and thus require deeper relationships (e.g. Elo *et al.*, 2015; Homburg *et al.*, 2008; Palmatier, 2008). Practically speaking then, sales managers should consider whether to hire salespeople who either are local and aware of the specific culture, who are experienced expatriates within that culture, or who have the passion and willingness to make personal contacts and allocate enough time and resources for salespeople to do so in a culturally intelligent way.

When cultural diversity is low, parties involved are familiar with each other's national cultures. In such situations, sales managers could coach their salespeople in how to allocate

the appropriate, more limited, amount of time to deepen relationships at the interpersonal level as there is less need to spend time on exploring each other's national culture and the deepest relationships do not seem to be as important. Albeit, having a stronger relational identity may positively strengthen interorganizational level collaboration, so salespersons may do better in spending the time to deepen other relationships.

When faced with certain combinations in the B2B sales environment, the international salesperson must learn to assess the factors in play. Salespeople should then make appropriate, effective, and ethical decisions on the communication tactics and effort required to unleash their sales communication skills (Koponen *et al.*, 2019) and deepen the salesperson–customer relationship further. When deeper relationships are required, CQ should be utilised. Accordingly, this study suggests that managers should be aware of their salespeople's existing CQ level and incorporate training to enhance that CQ when preparing salespeople to operate in global business markets (Reichard *et al.*, 2014).

Limitations and further research
One potential limitation is that existing relationships were studied at one point in time. Therefore, a longitudinal study would be beneficial in the future. In addition, interviewees' descriptions can never be complete; they rely on the informant's recall of the relationship, so an observational study could supplement the understanding of the topic. Finally, only HC-LC and LC-LC combinations were included to support the sample diversity aims of this study. While an LC-HC culturally diverse relationship should contain the same dynamics, the involvement of an HC salesperson could change the development of the relationship somewhat. Similarly, while this study anticipates how HC-HC low culturally diverse results would be similar to LC-LC, this assumption should be empirically tested. Furthermore, while it was anticipated that the findings would hold, there is a possibility that HC-HC relationships might be deeper than the more straightforward communication required in an LC-LC relationship.

Further research should continue to explore this topic. Additional research is therefore suggested on other contextual factors/elements/environments that might exert an influence, because other settings may produce different insights (Haytko, 2004; Griffith and Hoppner, 2013). For example, future studies could test the model used in this study in countries in different states of economic development (e.g. industrial vs. industrialising economies or developing/developed country settings), and in different models of international business relationships (e.g. licensors and licensees (Leonidou *et al.*, 2017)). In addition, even though the interviewees were asked to focus on long-term customer relationships that are on-going, still profitable over time, this could be measured in future studies. Researchers might examine other aspects of culture and the role of other organisational and strategic contingencies in the development and maintenance of high-quality intercultural, interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, future studies could advance our understanding on how and through which specific activities deeper customer relationships evolve. Researchers could also look at which activities capitalise on the salesperson's CQ in deepening relationships, and thus continued research incorporating friendship literature is encouraged as well. Moreover, it is also important to underline that future research should replicate this study by looking at relationship development and CQ from the customer perspective.

Since B2B sales increasingly occur online (Arli *et al.*, 2018; Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020), a more extensive understanding is required of how to manage B2B sales relationships in online and blended intercultural communication contexts. What are the roles of the customer and salesperson in digital B2B selling in the future? How are the parties able to form their relational identity when sales interaction is occurring mostly online? It might be that cultural differences are less obvious due to the fast-growing use of digital communication in sales and marketing globally (see also Jean *et al.*, 2010), or that cultural differences might become more

obvious as people have different tendencies in technology acceptance for example. To summarise, the current research helps to expose an important and potentially fruitful area of research that could contribute extensively to both the theory and managerial practice of international marketing.

Notes

1. In intercultural business settings, salespeople need **cultural intelligence** (CQ), defined as the ability to function, effectively manage, and behave appropriately in culturally diverse settings (Earley and Ang, 2003; Hansen *et al.*, 2011). Hence, CQ is a communication competence and adaptability essential to IMT.

2. Our focus was on culturally diverse relationships. To explore this, we focused on LC salespeople with both LC and HC customers. Given power differentials between transacting parties, this work should not be generalised to relationships where the roles are reversed. This presents a limitation of the current work and a future research opportunity with two HC respondents or an HC salesperson with LC customers.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Dimension of CQ		Quotation from the data	
(1)	Cognitive CQ involves knowledge of cultures	(1)	"In the end, Sweden is quite similar to Finland [re. Norms, practices, conventions] . . . In Western countries you pretty much have the same rules" (Salesperson B)
(2)	Metacognitive CQ reflects the person's cultural awareness during intercultural communication	(2)	"In Asia, the most important thing is to be aware of the environment and the hierarchical relationships [cultural bound thinking processes], because there it is very easy to unintentionally embarrass someone or make some stupid mistake that nobody even knew about" (Salesperson I)
(3)	Motivational CQ involves emotional aspects, such as a willingness to adapt to a new culture, enjoyment interacting with that new culture, and feeling confident about doing so	(3)	"I have been told I am just like an Italian. In Italy you have to be flexible and if you want something, you may have to give ground in something else. It is not like it is with the Germans" (Salesperson F)
(4)	Behavioural CQ deals with interactions, including verbal and nonverbal skills and the ability to perform facework	(4)	"I am trying to learn the language even just a little. It shows that you are making an effort and that shows respect." Facework: "As a woman in a culture such as Turkey, I had to make some concessions so that the CEO would not lose face" (Salesperson D)

Level of salesperson's CQ	Explanation
Low level of CQ	Salespeople described mostly motivational CQ and metacognitive CQ. They were conscious of the cultural knowledge required when interacting with customers with different cultural backgrounds
Medium level of CQ	Salespeople described motivational CQ, metacognitive CQ, and behavioural CQ. They were conscious of the cultural knowledge required in cross-cultural environments. They were also willing to communicate with customers from different cultures and learn about cultural diversity. Furthermore, they often paid attention to their communication behaviour when interacting with customers with different cultural backgrounds
High level of CQ	Salespeople described motivational CQ, cognitive CQ, metacognitive CQ, and behavioural CQ. The salespeople had a strong awareness of cultural diversity in their customer relationships. They were interested in understanding their customers' values, rules, and the economic systems of different cultures

Table A1.
Cultural intelligence
(CQ) dimensions and
quotes from the data,
as well as CQ levels and
explanations