

Article

The Role of Relational Stakeholder Management, Trust, and Leadership in the Success of Sustainable Construction Projects

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the role of Relational Stakeholder Management (RSM) on the success of sustainable construction projects in urban areas of Pakistan. The study also examines the mediating role of trust (competence trust, integrity trust, and intuitive trust) and the moderating role of project managers' leadership skills. Data were collected from 303 professionals working on sustainable construction projects in Pakistan and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results show that RSM has a positive and significant direct impact on the success of sustainable construction projects, while competence trust and integrity trust mediate this relationship. However, Intuitive Trust did not mediate the relationship between RSM and project success. Furthermore, the project manager's leadership competencies strengthen relationships with relational stakeholders and foster trust, thereby improving overall project success. This research highlights that, in addition to technical factors, human and relational aspects are crucial to the success of energy-efficient and low-carbon construction projects in urban areas of Pakistan. The study provides integrated empirical evidence on the interplay between stakeholder relationships, trust, and leadership, specifically in the context of sustainable construction projects in urban areas of Pakistan. The findings of the study provide practical insights to improve RSM, develop trust, and strengthen leadership competencies to enhance success in sustainable construction projects.

Keywords: stakeholder management; success of construction projects; leadership skills; sustainable urban construction; energy efficient buildings



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1. Introduction

Project success is defined differently depending on the nature of the project, as the concept remains subjective, ambiguous, and multidimensional [1,2]. Traditionally, project success has been defined as completing the project within Iron Triangle, i.e., time, cost, scope, and quality. The prior literature on project success has uncovered various success factors beyond the iron triangle, including stakeholder management, effective leadership, and organizational practices, which contribute to achieving project success [3]. However,

research in recent decades has shown that relying solely on these technical factors does not fully reflect project success. Despite numerous studies identifying various success factors, project failure rates remain high, especially in developing regions [4]. One important reason for this situation is the neglect of the human aspects in project organizations, especially relationships and interactions with stakeholders [5]. In this context, it is important to understand that every project consists of different stakeholders, and their involvement, interests, and expectations directly affect project outcomes. Numerous research studies confirm that effective stakeholder management plays a key role in achieving project goals [3,6,7]. However, traditional or instrumental approaches, which are mostly based on procedures, tools, and controls, have failed to deliver the desired results in practice [8,9]. In contrast, modern research emphasizes that building trusting relationships with stakeholders is crucial for project success. This is why RSM is being presented as an effective alternative approach, which is based on mutual trust, effective communication, and active involvement.

Due to large-scale urbanization and industrialization, the construction industry has shown massive growth in recent years, which has also led to significant greenhouse gas emissions, high energy consumption, and serious environmental problems [4]. To address these issues and reduce the negative impact on the environment, society, and the economy, sustainable construction has garnered increasing interest in recent years. In this context, construction projects must not only meet traditional performance standards but also integrate sustainability considerations, such as resource efficiency, environmental responsibility, and long-term value creation [10]. Therefore, effective stakeholder management, trust, and strong leadership have become very important for construction firms.

In the context of the construction industry, project success has always been an important topic for researchers and policymakers [11]. The industry not only plays a significant role in the economic development of any country but is also a major source of employment [12]. However, compared to other industries, the construction sector performs relatively poorly in terms of stakeholder management. Construction projects consist of complex activities and a network of multiple stakeholders, whose interests and investment nature vary [13]. Due to this complexity, project success largely depends on the perceptions of stakeholders and the project manager's ability to effectively manage these relationships. Poor stakeholder management leads to problems such as project conflicts, delays, and cost overruns [14].

The prior literature advocates two main approaches to stakeholder management. At first, there is an instrumental approach, which mainly focuses on technical tools and formal control mechanisms. The second approach is the relational approach, which emphasizes developing relationships, trust, and collaborations with the stakeholders [6,14–16]. Though previous studies have argued for the advantages of both of these approaches, the effectiveness of these approaches may vary depending on the nature of the project. Furthermore, drawing on contingency theory [17], there is no single universally effective managerial approach; rather, the suitability of management approaches depends on various factors. In the context of construction projects, these factors include project complexity, uncertainty, and the nature of stakeholders involved in the project [16].

Trust is an essential part of relational governance and is recognized as a fundamental element in stakeholder relationships, helping to reduce conflict, improve information exchange, and foster collaboration [18,19]. Therefore, due to the relational nature of stakeholder interactions and the complex environment of construction projects, trust has become a critical mechanism through which construction firms manage stakeholders effectively and achieve project success. Hence, this study examines three main types of trust—competence trust, integrity trust, and intuitive trust—that affect project outcomes in different ways.

Despite the growing emphasis on relational stakeholder management, existing studies have largely examined stakeholder practices and project success in isolation, with limited attention to the underlying mechanisms through which these relationships influence outcomes. In particular, the mediating role of trust and the moderating influence of leadership competencies remain underexplored, especially in the context of construction projects in developing economies. Therefore, to address this gap, this study examines how RSM influences the success of a sustainable construction project, directly and through the mediation of trust, whereas the project leadership competencies play a moderating role in this relationship. In addition to adding to the project management literature, the study offers practical insights into improving stakeholder engagement in construction projects by extending relational perspectives into a sustainability context.

2. Literature Review

Project success has been defined in recent studies as a multidimensional concept, not limited to time, cost, and quality, but also includes stakeholder satisfaction, organizational benefits, and long-term project impacts. Project success becomes more complex in the context of sustainable construction projects because environmental performance, energy efficiency, and sustainability-oriented goals are also considered important in such projects. However, existing research mainly focuses on general project performance and stakeholder-related aspects of success, while environmental sustainability indicators have not been directly measured. In the context of sustainable construction projects, success is widely recognized as a multidimensional criterion that extends beyond traditional success criteria. Sustainable construction projects are considered different from traditional construction projects in many ways because they are not only concerned with cost, time, and quality but also include factors such as energy efficiency, carbon emission reduction, compliance with environmental regulations, efficient use of resources, and long-term environmental performance. Recent studies have shown that the number of stakeholders and their expectations in projects related to net zero, green retrofit, and energy-efficient buildings are relatively more complex [13,20,21]. In particular, government agencies, environmental regulators, local communities, clients, and building users have a greater influence in such projects. Therefore, effective stakeholder management in sustainable construction projects is considered a fundamental element for the success of the project. In the field of sustainable construction, success is often associated with sustainability-oriented outcomes, particularly environmental performance, including factors like energy efficiency and carbon emission reduction [10]. In the context of sustainable construction, relational and human aspects play a significant role and are very important to achieve the project goals successfully. Comprehensive frameworks such as the Project Excellence Model (Westerveld 2003) offer a holistic perspective by linking project management processes with outcomes such as stakeholder satisfaction and long-term value creation [7]. Therefore, this study utilizes the context of sustainable construction projects to study project success. Particular attention is paid to stakeholder outcomes, as these are closely linked to stakeholder relationship management and trust, both essential elements for achieving sustainability goals in complex project environments [10].

The concept of stakeholder management has evolved significantly over time. Initially, decision-making in organizations was centered around the stakeholders, with every decision made in their best interests. However, Freeman and Reed expanded this concept to include all parties who are affected by or influence an organization or project. This concept opened a new dimension in planning and organizational research [22].

The formal beginning of stakeholder management was in the 1980s, when a study introduced it to the planning literature [23]. Research emphasized the factors related to

stakeholders, such as communication and client acceptance, and highlighted their role in achieving project success [24]. Later, a study presented the stakeholder salience model, which categorized stakeholders based on power, legitimacy, and urgency [25]. However, this model has been criticized for not fully describing the complex project environment. In this regard, Mendelow (1991) introduced the power/interest matrix, which was later formalized by Johnson and Scholes (1999), while Olander and Landin (2005) further refined it in a project context [26–28]. Furthermore, Rajablu et al. (2015) presented a comprehensive framework to measure the effect of influential stakeholder factors on project success, where the authors use a stakeholder management framework, including factors such as identification, communication, involvement, and risk management as mediators [9]. This framework reflects the interconnected and iterative nature of stakeholder management activities in complex project environments rather than a linear process.

In project management literature, managing healthy relations with stakeholders has long been debated as a key contributor to project success. The process of effective stakeholder management, which involves proactive identification, engagement, and alignment of stakeholder expectations with project goals, helps to achieve project objectives by developing trust, minimizing risks, and reducing conflicts [29]. Though the previous literature identifies two approaches in this regard (relational vs. instrumental stakeholder management), selecting an accurate approach to manage the stakeholders depends on the nature and context of the project. This is also aligned with the perspective of contingency theory [17], which emphasizes that the effectiveness of management approaches depends on situational factors. Keeping in view the importance and role of stakeholders in projects, the relationships between construction firms and their stakeholders are dynamic and evolve, usually influenced by situational and contextual factors. The focus of the current study is on RSM to understand how construction firms use this approach to develop trust and achieve project goals [30]. Through the above discussion, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between RSM and project success, whereas effective communication and stakeholder engagement also play a significant role in achieving project success. Effective management of stakeholder relationships is a fundamental component of project success.

In the domain of sustainable construction projects, effective stakeholder management is a key factor in success, particularly as sustainable construction requires stakeholders to address sustainability factors in addition to completing projects within defined time, scope, budget, and quality requirements. The existing literature suggests that embedding sustainability into project management can significantly impact project success, specifically when the goal is to integrate sustainability across all phases of the project life cycle. This approach demands extra care, which can be achieved by fostering healthy relations with project stakeholders [10]. Hence, the study utilizes relational stakeholder management as sustainable construction projects demand continuous engagement with projects' internal and external stakeholders, such as clients, contractors, regulatory bodies, suppliers, and local communities. Prior researchers argue that project-based organizations follow RSM practices to develop trust, including competence, integrity, and intuitive trust (de Oliveira and Rabechini 2019) among the stakeholders, which influences the overall success of sustainable construction projects [31]. Therefore, drawing upon the above literature, the study hypothesized that:

H1. *RSM influences Project Success in the context of sustainable construction projects.*

As aforementioned, RSM is primarily based on establishing effective relationships with stakeholders, promoting dialog, and ensuring active participation. Stakeholder engagement is an essential part of organizational strategy, as stakeholders play a central role in the success of projects [25]. In this regard, trust provides key intervening mechanisms to

enhance stakeholder engagement and develop strong collaborations with the key stakeholders, and is considered a fundamental element of stakeholder relationships [32]. While trust has been widely examined in organizational research, Müller and Turner contextualized its importance within project environments by demonstrating how leadership competencies shape relational dynamics, including trust, and influence project outcomes [33]. Trust helps to achieve project objectives by promoting cooperation among internal and external stakeholders, curtailing opportunistic behaviors, and preventing toxic blame cultures, which eventually lead to disputes and project breakdowns [18].

Trust can be divided into three types: competence trust, integrity trust, and intuitive trust [21]. Competence trust is concerned with whether a party can effectively perform its responsibilities; integrity trust is based on ethical principles and honesty; while intuitive trust is based on personal feelings and experiences. Due to the technical nature of sustainable construction projects, these types of trust are particularly important and play a significant role in translating healthy relations with stakeholders into project success. For example, competence trust is essential because sustainable construction demands a deep technical understanding. Stakeholders must rely on each other's technical abilities to deliver energy-efficient, low-carbon, and environmentally friendly projects. Similarly, integrity trust is crucial because sustainable development projects require transparency, ethical behavior, and trust in stakeholders' compliance with environmental and social commitments. Intuitive trust is equally important, as project stakeholders often make decisions under uncertainty, based on their past experiences, and through their interpersonal judgment. This is consistent with the prior literature on trust, which distinguishes between competence, integrity, and intuitive trust in project relationships [24,31].

Since RSMs do not automatically lead to project success. Their effect depends on whether stakeholders perceive other project stakeholders as capable, honest, and reliable [34]. Therefore, it can be argued that trust is a mechanism through which construction firms build healthy relationships with stakeholders, which are ultimately translated into improved collaborations, meaningful communication, and reduced opportunism [27,34]. Research has shown that trust not only strengthens relationships but also improves information exchange, collaboration, and performance [8,19,27]. Therefore, it has been hypothesized that competence, integrity, and intuitive trust mediate the relationship between relational stakeholder management and project success in the context of sustainable construction projects:

H2. *Intuitive Trust mediates the relationship between RSM and project success.*

H3. *Competence Trust mediates the relationship between RSM and project success.*

H4. *Integrity Trust mediates the relationship between RSM and project success.*

The role of leadership and human capabilities is also crucial to project success. Project challenges are mostly related to human factors and not just technical issues. Effective leadership styles play a key role in the successful completion of a construction project and extend beyond the technical coordination [33]. The rapidly changing dynamics of the project environment have exemplified the role of leadership [35]. Though the selection of an appropriate leadership style and role of leadership depends on the context of the project, the project managers' competencies have been studied as a moderating variable in this research and are operationalized through intellectual, managerial, and emotional competencies (IQ, MQ, EQ) [28], which collectively capture the behavioral and relational capabilities of project managers. Successful project managers draw on intellectual, management, and emotional intelligence Müller and Turner (2007) [33]. Leadership qualities vary depending

on the project type. In sustainable construction projects, intellectual skills help project managers interpret the complex requirements of sustainable development; management skills facilitate coordination, planning, and resource integration; and emotional and social skills contribute to managing conflicts and expectations and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. A project manager's leadership capabilities not only improve stakeholder relationships but also foster trust. Effective leadership improves both stakeholder satisfaction and project success. Therefore, it can be determined that leadership competencies influence how stakeholder relationships are managed and how trust is developed, suggesting that leadership competencies may strengthen or weaken the relationship between RSM and trust. Therefore, the study presents the following hypotheses as shown in Figure 1:

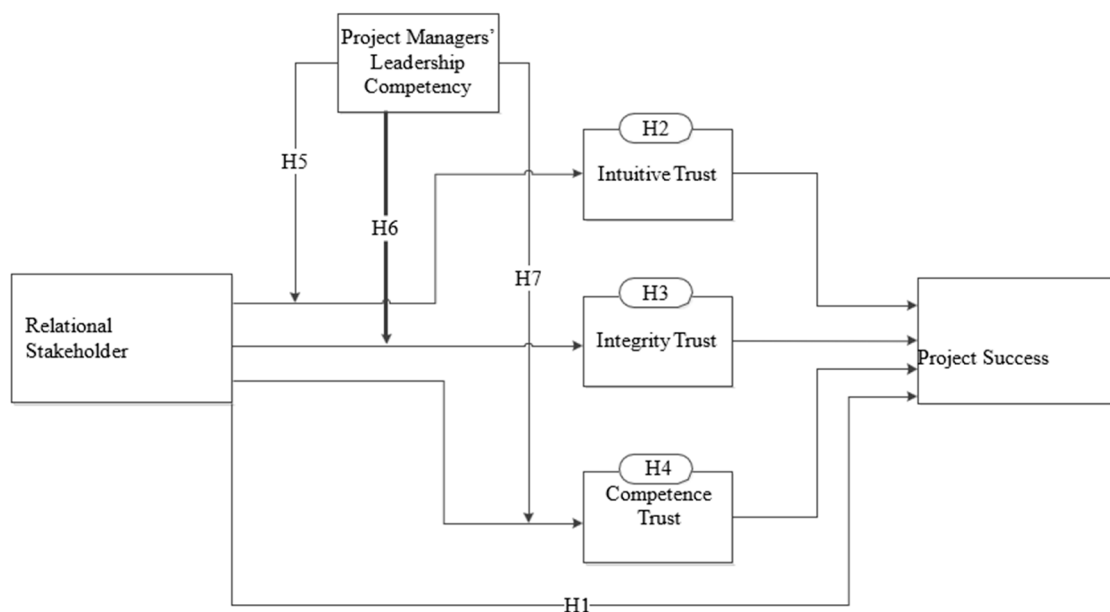


Figure 1. Conceptual model of research.

H5. *Project managers' leadership competencies moderate the relationship between RSM and Integrity Trust.*

H6. *Project managers' leadership competencies moderate the relationship between RSM and Competence Trust.*

H7. *Project managers' leadership competencies moderate the relationship between RSM and Intuitive Trust.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Process

This study is an empirical study conducted using a quantitative methodology. The unit of analysis for this study was professionals working on sustainable construction projects in Pakistan. Data were collected in a non-contrived environment to ensure that the results were more reliable and representative of the real-world situation. A structured questionnaire was developed for data collection and distributed to the participants through Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed through digital channels such as email, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, and participants were asked to participate voluntarily. Keeping in mind ethical considerations, all participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential and that the information provided would be used for research purposes only.

3.2. Data Collection and Sample

The main objective of this study was to analyze the success of sustainable construction projects, so the target population consisted of individuals who were involved in project activities at construction firms undertaking construction projects following sustainable practices. The list of construction firms was obtained from the database of the Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC), a government agency that registers and regulates private, government, and semi-government construction firms (PEC 2024) [36].

At the firm level, 53 construction companies located in 6 major urban cities were selected to obtain a representation of different geographical and professional perspectives. These cities included Lahore, Karachi, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, and Multan. These firms were selected as they were engaged in projects incorporating sustainability practices. The sample size was determined following the formula of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), resulting in a sample of 322 [37].

Since the goal of the study was to investigate the success of sustainable construction projects, the study followed purposive sampling to target only those respondents involved in sustainable construction. To ensure alignment with the context of the study, a screening question was asked of the respondents, where they were required to confirm whether they were involved in sustainable construction projects. Only the respondents with a ‘Yes’ response were allowed to fill out the questionnaire. Respondents were selected based on their direct involvement in projects that incorporate sustainability practices, such as energy efficiency and carbon reduction initiatives. Due to the specific nature of sustainable construction projects, a non-probability sampling approach was considered appropriate to ensure that participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience. Although purposive sampling is useful when respondents must meet specific criteria; however, some researchers argue that the purposive-sampling technique limits the generalizability of the study, as it may not provide respondents with the same chances of representativeness. Data were collected through professional networks and industry contacts, which facilitated access to practitioners actively engaged in such projects. A total of 303 out of 322 complete responses were received, resulting in a final sample ($n = 303$) for analysis. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first part contained questions related to the research variables, while the second part was based on the socio-professional information (demographics) of the participants. Demographics of the population are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of the population.

	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Below 30	199	65.7
	31 to 40	77	25.4
	41 to 50	18	5.9
	51 and above	9	3.0
Gender	Male	255	84.2
	Female	42	13.9
	Prefer not to say	5	1.7
	Others	1	0.3
Qualification	Intermediate	5	1.7
	Graduate	153	50.5
	Postgraduate	136	44.9
	Doctorate	5	1.7
	Others	4	1.3

Table 1. Cont.

	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Designation	Assistant Engineer	41	13.5
	Engineer	137	45.2
	Manager	71	23.4
	Departmental Head	30	9.9
	Others	24	7.9
Years of Experience	1 to 5	149	49.2
	6 to 10	102	33.7
	11 to 15	20	6.6
	16 to 20	13	4.3
	Above 20	19	6.3
Type of Employer	Government	54	17.8
	Semi-Government	72	23.8
	Private	170	56.1
	Others	7	2.3
No. of Projects	Less than 5	141	46.5
	5 to 10	85	28.1
	10 and above	77	25.4
Project Management Certification	Yes	79	26.1
	No	222	73.3
	Others	2	0.7

Formal permission was obtained from the relevant senior manager or head of each organization before data collection. Participants were then informed about the objectives and significance of the study so that they could participate in an informed manner. Two to three weeks were given to complete the questionnaire, taking into account the professional commitments of the participants.

3.3. Measurement Instruments

All measurement scales used in this study were adapted from previous studies while ensuring content validity. A five-item scale was used to measure RSM [38–40]. These items were intended to measure the overall RSM, including adaptive stakeholder planning, effective engagement, communication, and relationship-building practices. The sample item is as follows: “There were actions to strengthen relationships with stakeholders throughout the life of the project”. The internal consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha) of this scale was 0.897. Scales containing 3, 11, and 6 items were used for different types of trust, namely Intuitive Trust, Integrity Trust, and Competence Trust, respectively, which were derived from [24]. Intuitive trust was measured through the respondents’ general comfort, caution, and interpersonal confidence; the integrity trust was measured through perceived honesty, fairness, ethical conduct, reliability, and absence of hidden agendas; whereas competence trust was measured through perceived technical ability, professionalism, productivity, and capacity to resolve project-related problems. The sample item to measure Intuitive Trust is as follows: “I feel I have been able to trust the stakeholders throughout the life of the project”. To measure Integrity Trust, the sample item is as follows: “I feel confident that the stakeholders had high levels of integrity”. The sample item to measure Competence Trust is as follows: “I am sure that the stakeholders could work productively over the life of the project”. The Cronbach’s Alpha values of these scales were 0.930, 0.961, and 0.940, respectively.

This study evaluated the construct of project success in the context of general project performance and stakeholder success. It included aspects such as overall project performance, stakeholder satisfaction, and perceived project effectiveness. Although the

research was conducted in the context of sustainable construction projects, environmental performance or sustainability-specific indicators were not included as separate empirical dimensions. The project success scale was also adapted from [24] and consists of 9 items. However, the items were modified to ensure contextual alignment of respondents' perception with the success of sustainable construction projects. For example, the sample statement is as follows: *"In the context of a sustainable construction project, the project results, or deliverables, are in line with client objectives"*.

Project manager leadership competencies were measured through three basic dimensions—Intellectual (IQ), Managerial (MQ), and Emotional and Social (EQ)—for which 3, 5, and 7 items were used, respectively [38]. The sample item is as follows: *"the leader organizes resources and coordinates them efficiently and effectively. He or she establishes clear objectives and converts long-term goals into action plans"*. Overall, the internal consistency of all measurement scales was greater than 0.7, which is acceptable according to Nunnally's (1978) criteria [41]. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure all variables, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

The measures used in this study are based on professional opinion and perception of the professionals involved in sustainable construction projects and do not represent the objective project-level data. Since the constructs involved in the study are subjective, the use of perception-based data is appropriate to draw conclusions on managing stakeholder relations, developing trust, and achieving project results.

3.4. Data Analysis

Two different software packages were used for data analysis. SPSS (Version 20) was used for preliminary analysis, which included data cleaning, descriptive statistics, and initial screening. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the research hypotheses, which were implemented using SmartPLS (Version 3.3). This method is considered effective and reliable for analyzing complex relationships, mediation, and moderation effects, especially when the research aims to test a theoretical model.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Validation of the Measurement Model

The measurement model was validated by examining the PLS-SEM results in detail. For this purpose, the outer loading of the indicators was first analyzed. Indicators with an outer loading of 0.70 or higher were considered acceptable and included in the model, as this threshold indicates a reliable representation of the variables. Table 2 presents the outer loadings of all indicators that were selected for further analysis.

Three main measures were used to test the internal consistency reliability of the variables, including Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha, and rho_A. A CR value between 0.60 and 0.70 is considered acceptable for preliminary research, while values between 0.70 and 0.90 are considered satisfactory to good. In the present study, CR values of all variables were between 0.88 and 0.955. Table 2 reveals the values of CR and Cronbach's alpha for project success and project managers' competencies are more than 0.90, which may indicate concerns about redundancy. However, the collective results of factor loadings, AVEs, and discriminant validity values collectively suggest that the measurement items are conceptually appropriate and capture distinct dimensions of the constructs.

Table 2. Validation of the measurement model.

Variable	Indicator/Item	Outer Loading	VIF	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Competence Trust (CT)	CT_1	0.875	2.695	0.884	0.886	0.92	0.742
	CT_2	0.896	2.903				
	CT_3	0.858	2.248				
	CT_4	0.815	1.98				
Integrity Trust (IGT)	IGT_1	0.759	2.422	0.898	0.906	0.916	0.524
	IGT_2	0.672	1.703				
	IGT_3	0.725	1.887				
	IGT_4	0.784	2.348				
	IGT_5	0.734	1.839				
	IGT_6	0.721	1.805				
	IGT_7	0.702	1.715				
	IGT_8	0.562	1.5				
	IGT_9	0.773	2.166				
	IGT_10	0.78	2.176				
Intuitive Trust (IT)	IT_1	0.826	1.701	0.785	0.786	0.874	0.699
	IT_2	0.862	1.838				
	IT_3	0.819	1.497				
Project Managers' Leadership Competencies (PEQ)	PEQ_1	0.816	2.301	0.873	0.877	0.907	0.662
	PEQ_2	0.795	2.05				
	PEQ_3	0.842	2.786				
	PEQ_4	0.776	1.869				
	PEQ_5	0.839	2.814				
	PIQ_1	0.891	2.082	0.813	0.785	0.859	0.675
	PIQ_2	0.625	1.698				
	PIQ_3	0.918	1.755				
	PMQ_1	0.842	1.963	0.806	0.809	0.873	0.633
	PMQ_2	0.787	1.836				
	PMQ_3	0.806	1.688				
	PMQ_4	0.745	1.467				
Project Success (PS)	PS_1	0.825	2.498	0.889	0.899	0.913	0.6
	PS_2	0.808	2.441				
	PS_3	0.844	2.671				
	PS_4	0.739	1.751				
	PS_5	0.73	2.053				
	PS_6	0.778	2.255				
	PS_7	0.685	1.676				
Relational Stakeholder Management (RSM)	RSM_1	0.642	1.316	0.843	0.848	0.89	0.621
	RSM_2	0.812	1.899				
	RSM_3	0.884	3.073				
	RSM_4	0.783	2.187				
	RSM_5	0.798	1.92				

Similarly, Cronbach's Alpha, which has a value between 0 and 1, is an important measure of internal consistency. According to Gliem and Gliem (2003), a value of 0.80 or higher is considered acceptable [42]. All variables in this study met this criterion, indicating that the measurement scales used are reliable. Furthermore, since Composite Reliability is considered a relatively liberal measure and Cronbach's Alpha is considered relatively conservative, Dijkstra and Henseler (2015) have considered rho_A to be a balanced measure [43]. In this study, the values of rho_A were also found to be within acceptable limits, confirming the strong internal consistency of the model as a whole [43].

Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which is the average of the squared external loadings of the indicators of each variable, was used to test convergent validity. The AVE value should be 0.50 or higher to indicate that the variable is adequately

representing its indicators. In this study, the AVE values for RSM and Project Success were 0.699 and 0.658, respectively, which meet the required criteria. The AVE values for all other variables were also found to be within acceptable limits, as shown in the table.

Overall, all these results indicate that the measurement model is not only reliable but also meets the criteria of validity, providing a strong basis for further analysis.

4.1.2. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was tested to ensure that constructs are distinct and different from each other empirically. According to the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the square root of AVE should be greater than the correlation between them. All the variables met the criterion. The results of discriminant validity are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion).

Variables	IGT_	CT_	IT_	PEQ_	PIQ_	PMQ_	PS_	RSM_
IGT_	0.724							
CT_	0.645	0.861						
IT_	0.637	0.703	0.836					
PEQ_	0.619	0.755	0.749	0.814				
PIQ_	0.073	0.088	0.094	0.093	0.822			
PMQ_	0.535	0.739	0.706	0.72	0.111	0.796		
PS_	0.533	0.642	0.539	0.549	0.081	0.551	0.774	
RSM_	0.592	0.451	0.473	0.489	0.101	0.364	0.359	0.788

Table 4. Discriminant validity (HTMT ratios).

Variables	IGT_	CT_	IT_	PEQ_	PIQ_	PMQ_	PS_	RSM_
IGT_								
CT_	0.716							
IT_	0.751	0.843						
PEQ_	0.691	0.852	0.896					
PIQ_	0.093	0.083	0.093	0.082				
PMQ_	0.627	0.874	0.886	0.853	0.127			
PS_	0.591	0.71	0.645	0.62	0.105	0.646		
RSM_	0.67	0.52	0.575	0.569	0.118	0.441	0.41	

4.1.3. Validation of the Structural Model

As the measurement model assessment appears satisfactory, the next step was to evaluate the PLS-SEM results to assess the Structural Equation Model.

The model fit is used for the hypothesis testing beginning step. Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is used to check the model fitting. SRMR is the difference between the observed correlation and the model-implied correlation matrix. A value less than 0.1 is considered a good fit. The results of Model fit are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Model fit.

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.072	0.075
d_ULS	4.491	4.87
d_G	1.956	1.989

The next step is to check the value of the R-squared as shown in Table 6. It tells us the predictive power of the model. The value of R should be between 0 and 1. The value

of R-squared is contextual and depends on the type of study. The values of R-squared 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 mean substantial, moderate, and weak prediction, respectively. All the dependent/exogenous variables satisfy the criteria.

Table 6. R-squares.

	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
IGT_	0.35	0.348
CT_	0.204	0.201
IT_	0.633	0.628
PS_	0.43	0.424

The next section presents the results of the structural model, which was conducted in three steps. In the first step, the direct link between RSM and project success was tested (Table 7). The results indicate that RSM influences the success of sustainable construction projects in Pakistan. After the direct link, the mediation and moderation analysis were performed through bootstrapping.

Table 7. Results of direct effect hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
H1	RSM $\rightarrow$ PS	0.405	18.421	<0.001	Supported

The results of the mediation analysis (Table 8) showed that competence trust and integrity trust (H3 and H4) play a significant mediating role between the relationship of RSM and project success. However, the results revealed that intuitive trust (H2) does not play any mediating role between RSM and project success. Moving forward, Table 9 provides the results of the moderation hypotheses (H5–H7). The results indicate that project managers' leadership competencies positively moderate the relationship between RSM and Integrity Trust (H5) as well as the relationship between RSM and Intuitive trust (H6). However, the results reveal that project managers' leadership competencies do not moderate the relationship between RSM and Competence trust (H7).

Table 8. Results of mediation hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	β	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
H2	RSM $\rightarrow$ IT $\rightarrow$ PS	0.053	1.67	0.095	Not Supported
H3	RSM $\rightarrow$ CT $\rightarrow$ PS	0.202	5.597	<0.001	Supported
H4	RSM $\rightarrow$ IGT $\rightarrow$ PS	0.103	2.912	0.004	Supported

Table 9. Results of moderation hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Moderating Relationship	β	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
H5	PMLC $\times$ RSM $\rightarrow$ IGT	0.128	3.42	0.001	Supported
H6	PMLC $\times$ RSM $\rightarrow$ CT	−0.035	1.392	0.164	Not Supported
H7	PMLC $\times$ RSM $\rightarrow$ IT	0.148	4.676	<0.001	Supported

Note: PMLC $\times$ RSM $\rightarrow$ IGT represents the moderating effect of the Project Manager's Leadership competences on the relationship between RSM and Integrity Trust. PMLC $\times$ RSM $\rightarrow$ CT represents the moderating effect of the Project Manager's Leadership competences on the relationship of RSM and Competence Trust. PMLC $\times$ RSM $\rightarrow$ IT represents the moderating effect of the Project Manager's Leadership competences on the relationship of RSM and Intuitive Trust.

4.2. Discussion

The results of the current study indicate that effective stakeholder management plays a significant role in improving overall project performance and stakeholder-related success in sustainable construction projects. However, when interpreting these results, it is important to keep in mind that this study did not directly measure sustainability-specific outcomes, such as carbon emission reductions, actual energy efficiency, or environmental impacts. Instead, the study focused on the managerial and stakeholder-oriented success dimensions of sustainable construction projects. Therefore, the current findings should be understood in the context of managerial and stakeholder-related project success rather than broader sustainability performance. In light of the results of the current research, it is clear that project success is a multidimensional concept. Furthermore, Martens and Carvalho (2017) clarified that in addition to traditional success in sustainable projects, sustainability-oriented outcomes must also be taken into account [10]. The results of all these studies are consistent with this research and indicate that significant results can be achieved in the context of sustainable construction projects, even by focusing on stakeholder-oriented and managerial success in the current research.

A total of seven (7) hypotheses were tested in this study, of which five (5) were accepted based on the empirical results. The first hypothesis, namely the positive effect of RSM on the project success of sustainable projects, was supported. This result reflects that professionals in the current era consider the development of relationships throughout the entire project life cycle as indispensable for success. Effective relationships create an environment that promotes cooperation, coordination, and improved performance, ultimately leading to project success.

In the context of construction projects, contracts clarify the roles, responsibilities, and levels of trust of different parties [44]. However, contractual rigidity in this field often limits the building of relationships. A rigid contractual system can affect project performance [45]. Therefore, it is important to promote relational governance, which is based on communication, information exchange, and trust, alongside traditional contractual systems. Promoting relational contracting is crucial in this regard, as it leads to collaboration, transparency, and conflict reduction [46]. The results show that there is a coherent relationship between RSM, different types of trust, and leadership capabilities, which affect project success.

The research findings also showed that elements related to stakeholder relations remained mostly within the neutral range, indicating that relational management in the construction sector of Pakistan is not yet fully developed, and there is room for improvement. This indicates that there is a dire need for training and awareness for effective management of stakeholder relations. Previous studies have identified the positive effects of prescriptive stakeholder management [47]; however, the current research highlights a more advanced approach, namely RSM, which plays a key role in building trust.

The results of mediation analysis revealed that the indirect effects of RSM on project success through competence trust and integrity trust are statistically significant, and therefore H3 and H4 were supported. However, the indirect effect of RSM on project success through intuitive trust was not supported, as the *p*-value is greater than 0.05. These results indicate that competence trust and integrity trust act as significant mediating mechanisms between RSM and project success, whereas intuitive trust does not play a significant mediating role in the relationship between RSM and project success. Competence trust and integrity trust, in particular, were found to play a significant role. In the context of sustainable construction projects in Pakistan, the project assignments are largely based on technical competence, which creates the perception that a competent party will also be trustworthy. In this context, construction firms prioritize experience, financial status, and

technical expertise in selecting contractors [48], which further highlights the importance of competence trust.

Similarly, integrity, competence trust, and integrity trust also emerged as key mediators of project success. Construction projects rely on the past performance of contractors and the accuracy of the information provided, which establishes a foundation for trust. However, the results also show that in practice, competence is given more attention while integrity is given relatively less importance, although research has shown that integrity-based trust can provide better long-term outcomes [49].

Findings regarding intuitive trust show that it does not play a significant mediating role in the relationship between RSM and project success. Intuitive trust is based on personal experiences, observations, and feelings, and therefore difficult to predict. However, positive intuitive trust can be fostered through positive relationships and ongoing interactions, which help in decision-making [50]. Based on the findings of the current study, we can argue that competence trust and integrity trust are significant mechanisms to translate stakeholder relations into project success in the context of a sustainable construction firm. Moreover, the results regarding leadership competencies revealed that project managers' leadership competencies play a moderating role in the relationship between RSM and integrity and intuitive trust (H5 and H7); however, this relationship was not found to be significant for the relationship between RSM and competence trust (H6 was rejected). This indicates that technical and ethical trust can be fostered through leadership, while intuitive trust is mostly formed at the personal level. It can be concluded that effective leadership not only improves relationships but also strengthens trust, which is essential for project success.

4.2.1. Theoretical Implications

This research represents an important addition to the existing academic literature, as it presents the interrelationships of RSM, trust, and leadership competencies in a coherent theoretical framework. This study further strengthens Strahorn et al. (2017) trust model and proves it to be effective in the context of construction projects [51]. Furthermore, this study clarified that trust is not only an outcome but also an active mechanism that acts as a bridge between relationships and success.

This study also highlights that leadership skills are not just managerial but also include emotional and social aspects, which play a key role in improving stakeholder relationships. Thus, this study provides a new theoretical perspective that provides a foundation for future research.

4.2.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study are also of great importance in the practical field. Most importantly, it has been revealed that effective relationship management is fundamental to project success. Therefore, stakeholder management in the construction sector should be adopted not only as a technical process but also as a relational process.

Project managers need to build positive relationships through effective communication, transparency, and inclusion. Furthermore, it is also necessary to develop leadership skills, especially emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, in order to improve trust.

It is also important that policymakers and institutions make stakeholder management part of the decision-making process and introduce frameworks that promote relationships, trust, and leadership. In addition, instead of relying solely on technical expertise, leadership and social skills should also be given importance, as these are the elements that ensure long-term project success.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study was successful in achieving its stated objectives, it also has some limitations that can be taken into account in future research. The first limitation is that this study was limited to construction projects, while different sectors, such as information technology, health, and social projects, have different natures and requirements. Therefore, these results cannot be directly applied to other sectors.

The second important limitation is related to the geographical context, as this study included only large urban centers. There are different socio-cultural factors in big cities, small towns, or rural areas, which can affect the formation of trust and the style of relationships. Therefore, future research should include different cultural and geographical contexts to make the results more comprehensive.

In addition, the majority of respondents are young and have less experience; there might be concerns regarding their ability to assess project success comprehensively. Therefore, the findings primarily reflect the perception of early and mid-career professionals. Future studies may use a sample targeting the top management in projects.

Furthermore, this study used a classification of trust based on Strahorn et al. (2017) and Pinto et al. (2009), while other researchers have proposed different types of trust, such as sincerity, benevolence, and involvement [24,51]. Future research could include these alternative concepts to conduct a more comprehensive analysis.

6. Conclusions

Previous studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between RSM and different types of trust. The present study extends this academic discussion by systematically examining the relationship between RSM and project success and analyzing whether different types of trust play a mediating role in this relationship. For this purpose, data were obtained from construction professionals associated with major urban centers in South Asia, which further strengthened the findings with geographical diversity.

The research findings demonstrated that RSM has a significant and positive impact on the success of construction projects. Furthermore, it was also revealed that RSM is positively associated with competence trust and intuitive trust, while its direct relationship with integrity trust was not found to be significant. However, when the mediating role was analyzed, it was clear that all three types of trust—competence, integrity, and intuitive trust—positively affect the relationship between RSM and project success.

Furthermore, the results regarding leadership skills show that project managers' leadership skills play a moderating role in strengthening the relationship between RSM and competence trust and integrity trust. However, this effect was not found to be significant for intuitive trust, indicating that its nature is more psychological and based on personal experiences. Overall, this study concludes that the three elements of trust, relationships, and leadership together play a key role in the success of construction projects.

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