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**Digital small talk: a case study about the construction of
organizational identity through informal communication
during remote work**
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Abstract

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Organizations have gone through difficult times during the pandemic trying to adapt to new working conditions that restrict face-to-face encounters for their employees. The development of day-to-day tasks have been modified to cope with the virtual conditions of teleworking. Furthermore, the interactions between coworkers have been limited to virtual encounters, which has had a great impact on the activities and informal communication processes that are part of daily work life. Thus, this study has sought to investigate the informal practice of small talk during these circumstances of remote work and its impact on the construction of organizational identity. For this, the interviews with Malmö Stad employees provided relevant perceptions of identity construction based on digital small talk. The results showed that the dynamics of small talk in virtual contexts have been influenced by the characteristics of the media in which they are developed, and in turn, this has impacted the construction of identity of employees in relation to their work teams, their work unit, and the organization.

Keywords: strategic internal communication, informal communication, digital small talk, organizational identity, employees, digital media.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that for the proper functioning of organizations it is crucial to have adequate socialization routines and communication processes among its members (Conrad & Sollitto, 2017; Myers & Woo, 2017). Time and again the importance of spaces for participation and interaction between employees and their positive effects on increasing productivity and efficiency in job performance has been demonstrated. Thus, in the study of organizations, communication is key in managerial strategies that promote functional work environments (Cheney, 2011; Dahlman & Heide, 2021).

Several studies have focused on understanding the incidence of informal communication in the creation of trust and camaraderie among employees that, in turn, impact the processes of collaboration, articulation, and teamwork (Fay, 2011; Erhardt *et al.*, 2016). This has led to a change in the angle of view in research on the role of small talk. What was initially associated with negative connotations, such as gossip and misinformation, is now recognized as a key element of organizational identification and creating coworker bonds as well as developing a work identity (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2017). Informal interaction during small talk creates connections between employees, with the company (Moutoux & Porte, 1980), and a collective sense of belonging (Carramenha *et al.*, 2019).

For a long time, informal communication was identified with face-to-face socialization spaces, but with the emergence of telecommuting, the dynamics of social relationships changed due to the intervention of virtual media. Telecommuters -also called remote employees- work partially or fully outside office spaces, and their communication processes are mediated by technological tools (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). The shift from face-to-face communication to digital scenarios has changed the interaction that was once location-dependent. For example, processes of integration and labor coordination have shown great paradoxes for remote workers, who tend to be more effective but perceive damages in coworker relationships (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden, 2006; Leonardi *et*

al., 2010). Thus, the growing trend in companies implementing teleworking (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020) has prompted the technology and information industries to provide solutions to this paradox. Thereby, new technologies have been implemented to allow recreating in virtual environments the communication processes that were traditionally performed in person. Emails, instant messaging, and video calls have become essential tools for the daily operation of teleworking tasks and the maintenance of coworkers' communication (Gibbs *et al.*, 2017; Schinoff *et al.*, 2019).

However, before 2020 most traditional companies maintained face-to-face or hybrid workspaces. Hence, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in March 2020, companies globally had to quickly adapt their processes to transform their workspaces into digital environments (Carrillo *et al.*, 2020; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020; Methot *et al.*, 2021). A year has already passed, and employees have had to rearrange their homes to include workspaces for daily operations. During this time, processes have been adjusted to learn to interact, collaborate and innovate in the development of a new normal (Rysavy & Michalak, 2020). Furthermore, the socialization and communication processes have been adapted to purely digital interactions (Carrillo *et al.*, 2020; Hacker *et al.*, 2020). Informal social interactions between employees, so necessary for the construction of identity and the reproduction of organizations, have also been transferred to virtual environments and with them, regular routines such as lunch breaks, fika, or small talk. Some organizations are coordinating the digital versions of these social practices. Now we can find employee management initiatives such as digital after-hours or informal digital gatherings to simulate moments of interaction (Hacker *et al.*, 2020; Methot *et al.*, 2021). This has created the opportunity to transfer small talk interactions to virtual tools such as Zoom or WhatsApp, creating what can be called *digital small talk*.

Considering that the situation is very recent, the phenomenon of digital small talk little has been analyzed as well as its possible implications on the maintenance of organizational identity in traditional companies. Understanding the perceptions of employees in the transformation of their informal communication processes, particularly small talk, will give an insight into how they have adapted to virtual conditions and the impact on the connection and identification with the organization. Furthermore, it could allow identifying what strategies

workers have developed to meet the needs of informal interaction and recreate it through digital tools to maintain their organizational identity. Certainly, it is very important to analyze the worth of digital small talk, since it “may be more important than ever to help us seize daily opportunities to connect across the virtual divide” (Methot *et al.*, 2021).

To develop the corresponding analysis, an administrative department of the Malmö Stad -or Municipality of Malmö- has been selected as a case study. As it is a public entity, it has the particular dynamics of a bureaucratic public entity that make it more complex and relevant as an object of examination (Simonsson & Heide, 2020). According to Graber (2003), public sector organizations have major implications for society and are a constant focus of academic and general public attention. In the same way, public organizations have different purposes and focus their resources on the fulfillment of long-range goals, which can influence the perception of their workers’ roles. Furthermore, the duality of its coworkers as employees and at the same time users (while being citizens), presents an important outline to the treatment of their internal strategic communication (Hansen & Salskov-Iversen, 2017).

Like most of the companies worldwide, until a year ago the Municipality of Malmö carried out its activities offline and was forced to switch to remote work because of the pandemic. Although the organizational structure remained stable during the transformation process to remote work, the dynamics of teamwork and collaboration, as well as informal relationships among employees who can no longer use the office were altered. Therefore, the perceptions of Malmö Stad employees will be used to understand the phenomenon of digital small talk.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The transformation from small talk to *digital* small talk could be impacting the construction of identity and the employees' perceptions regarding their sense of belonging to the organization. Then, employee viewpoints concerning their digital informal communication practices are relevant to analyze their understanding of their own identity construction processes.

In order to have a clear picture of this situation, the perceptions of the employees of a public and traditional company, which has been forced to modify

their working conditions due to the pandemic, will be analyzed. The research will be based on understanding the new ways of interpretation of organizational identity from the perspective of coworkers with a previous connection to the organization. Their viewpoints will provide a before-and-after perspective that can lead to comprehending the changes in the dynamics of identity formation.

In conclusion, the aim of the research is to produce deeper academic knowledge about internal digital communication, focusing on employees' perceptions in a long-established public organization. Therefore, to understand the construction of organizational identity through digital small talk, this research will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How do employees of Malmö Stad perceive their organizational identity through digital small talk?
- What practices have the Malmö Stad employees developed to uphold their organizational identity by using digital small talk?

1.2 Relevance / Justification

Comprehending the strategic value of the employees in the organizations is fundamental for communication professionals. Employees are active agents in the construction of the organizations (Heide & Simonsson, 2011); therefore, organizations must identify, understand, and reflect upon their dynamics and processes. Thus, working from a strategic internal communication approach allows to consciously support and influence the development of organizations (Dahlman & Heide, 2021).

Moreover, there are three key elements in the development of this work that make it relevant in the field of strategic communication. One, face the current situation that has marked a milestone in the evolution and development of companies, as well as the management of their internal communication. During the present worldwide crisis, organizations have a responsibility to handle adaptation processes with particular care to minimize negative effects for both employees and companies (Carillo *et al.*, 2020). Possible implications for the future functioning of the organizations are being discussed (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020; Xifra, 2020) as well as new techniques to strategically address internal communication.

For instance, Xifra (2020) has claimed that workspaces will change forever, and scenarios arise where work teams will continue to work remotely indefinitely.

Second, the research approaches the problem through the richness and still underrated point of view of the employees. For the study of organizations, the formation of organizational identity, and the continuous processes of internal communication, employees are a key piece in understanding the actions that affect the organization (Simonsson & Heide, 2020). Furthermore, reflecting upon the employees' sensemaking processes offers vital insights for building good internal communication (Dahlman & Heide, 2021). Thus, understanding the real perceptions of workers provides essential information to develop and implement the next stages of organizational adaptation to remote work. Their interpretations are crucial to creating and establishing strategic plans that provide all the necessary support to mitigate the negative effects of full telecommuting, particularly in the construction of organizational identity.

And third, public organizations have complex structures and dynamics that require a careful and specialized study of their particular contexts and characteristics (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). Likewise, the democratic values that they defend and their principles of governance have implications in communication challenges (Hansen & Salskov-Iversen, 2017) and in the development of their internal culture (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020).

Thus, this work seeks to create a conceptual framework to understand the construction of organizational identity processes through digital small talk in remote team works in the public sphere, which is currently happening and also affecting organizations around the globe.

1.3 Delimitation

Understanding a phenomenon while it is occurring, can bring many biases to the analysis. Although it is likely to have a vision with preconceptions while the phenomenon to be analyzed is being experienced, it also provides more authentic perceptions. Likewise, it creates less risk of losing information due to loss of information over long periods of time.

It is also important to note that pandemic conditions have greatly impacted people's lives (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020) so that coworkers' perceptions could be

influenced by elements other than work-related. This means that current circumstances have deeply affected society and individuals, increasing levels of stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and burden (Carillo *et al.*, 2020; Hacker *et al.*, 2020; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). Which in turn could affect interpersonal work interactions, individual's feelings, and sense of vulnerability across all kinds of scenarios.

Regarding the data collection process, the interviews had to be carried out digitally rather than face-to-face, as is usually the case with conducting this methodology in qualitative research. Therefore, given the social distancing conditions imposed by the government, the conversations were conducted by video calls through Zoom, Google Meets, and Teams. This entails the limitations inherent to virtual media, such as dependence on the stability of the internet, which sometimes generated connection interruptions and delays for both voice and image. Likewise, the interactions between the interviewee and the interviewer were influenced by the digital medium, which limits the interpretation of physical signals typical of offline contexts.

Taking into account that the native language of the interviewer is Spanish and that of the interviewees is Swedish, the interviews were conducted in English. The communication was enacted in a second language for both interviewer and interviewee, a situation that could condition or limit in some way the expression of ideas or perceptions.

1.4 Disposition

This study is structured as follows. A detailed review of the academic contributions around informal communication and its implications in organizational identity will be carried out in section 2. The conceptualizations about organizational identity, small talk, and its development in virtual environments will also be considered. In section 3 the theories and concepts on which the study is based will be explained. Thus, the analysis will be based on the construction of identity according to Social Identity Theory. Likewise, it will be constructed on the Media Richness Theory to identify the effectiveness of digital small talk as a medium to construct organizational identity. Following, section 4 will detail the method, methodology, sampling, and tools used to collect the data. In section 5 the reflections

have been divided into thematic groups and detailed the analysis of the data and the findings. Lastly, in section 6 the conclusive remarks will be addressed, and further research approaches will be suggested.

2. Literature review

This section will take a tour of the existing literature that is relevant to delimit the study of the construction of organizational identity from informal communication processes -particularly small talk- in remote work contexts. With this objective in mind, first, the main characteristics of virtual work teams, their dynamics in communication processes, and the main challenges they face due to the purely virtual conditions of their interactions will be explored. In a second part, the theoretical approaches to the concept of organizational identity will be described and the perspective that best relates to the present study will be established. From this, the research in the field of internal communication and the informal communication processes that take place within it will be framed. There it will focus on the identification of small talk as a relevant practice for the construction of organizational identity. Later, a literary approach will be made to the conditions of small talk in virtual environments, as well as an approach to its characteristics and predominant channels.

2.1 Organizations in virtual environments

To understand and dig deeper into the communicative dynamics of virtually arranged companies, it is necessary to first understand the characteristics and complexities of organizations in virtual environments. Commonly known as teleworking, telecommuting or remote work, this type of job agreement allows a long scale of interpretations in which the conditions can vary in frequency, duration, and remuneration work (Fay, 2017; Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020). These factors in turn can impact various outcomes on employees, such as well-being, performance, work engagement, and job satisfaction (Fay, 2017; Golden & Elia, 2017; Palumbo, 2020).

Although scholars have different approaches to study remote workplaces, most definitions agree on certain determining factors that characterize telecommuting. It can be understood as a labor agreement in which the worker carries out

his/her regular activities in a space outside the perimeters of the usual office, and which is heavily intervened by the use of technology as a means of interaction between the employee and the employer, other collaborators and the organization (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020).

Its use has generated debates about the positive and negative effects it brings to organizations and their members. This situation has created the "paradox of telecommuting" (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, p. 1526) since so far there are no conclusive studies that determine its correct practice, and the consequences seem contradictory to each other. Some studies have reported positive effects regarding the ease it offers companies to reduce operating and infrastructure costs, the possibility of building a multinational team without geographical limitations, and the increase in job satisfaction among remote employees (Golden & Elia, 2017). Golden (2006), for example, found that the physical and psychological distance that telecommuting allows helps employees improve their performance since it reduces stress and energy consumption caused by commuting to the office and daily social interactions. These conditions, added to the flexibility of management in work and personal schedules, showed an increase in the perception of work commitment and even related it to positive results in the emotional and psychological health of employees (Golden, 2006).

However, other studies relate telecommuting with perceptions of work disconnection, concentration problems (Charalampous *et al.*, 2018), as well as a decrease in the quality of relationships and communication processes among company members (Fay, 2017; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In fact, certain elements have contradictory dualities that hinder a unified vision of the results of remote work. In the case of autonomy, for example, it has been related to positive feelings of empowerment and improvements in productivity (Palumbo, 2020) but in turn, it has led to the identification of fewer boundaries between professional and personal life, which leads to more hours of work and burnouts (Charalampous *et al.*, 2018).

2.1.1 Communication in virtual teams

One aspect that has interested researchers is the impact that remote work has on the communication processes of companies. Telecommuting implies substantial

changes in the form of relationships between managers and employees, in the coordination of tasks between employees, and in the development of routines as well as simple socialization processes. By removing employees from the conventional workspace, it alters the spaces for relationships, the frequency of interactions, and the messages implicit in them (Fiol & O'Connor, 2005; Shaik & Makhecha, 2019).

For this reason, selecting the right channel to properly develop tasks between employees is critical for the performance of work teams (Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). In addition, the effectiveness of communication is largely mediated by the appropriate choice, usage, deployment, and appropriation of telecommunication tools (Van Den Hooff, 2017). In particular, the characteristics of the objectives and the assignments of the teams must be considered since relevant factors, such as the interdependence of tasks, influence the choice of the methods, communicational channels, and collaborative technologies (Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020). Particularly on virtual teams “media must be considered in terms of the capabilities they provide since the communication processes needed for a task may require different media capabilities” (Dennis *et al.*, 2008, p.595).

Besides, mediating communication through technological tools allows for geographically and temporally dispersed work teams (Gibbs *et al.*, 2017). Thus, communication in virtual work teams must adapt to new timing and synchronization due to the possibility of working in different time zones (Akkirman & Harris, 2004; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In general terms, the pace of communication changes, and there are more frequent interactions through a wide variety of channels (Leonardi *et al.*, 2010; Schinoff *et al.*, 2020), replacing ad-hoc encounters that are traditionally carried out in offline work contexts (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). This change in communication processes also has an impact on the coordination of tasks, on the learning processes of new employees, and on access to formal and informal information (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). For this reason, Akkirman and Harris (2004) point out that virtual communication systems can represent a barrier to interaction and quality communication between employees as well as the relationship with the management. However, their study also showed that skills to develop effective communication can be developed over time and thus improve organizational integration. Likewise, Dennis *et al.* (2008) have pro-

posed that although communication contexts start out as a novelty, over time and constant use they become routines and the context becomes familiar.

Another important characteristic that researchers have found is that communicational dynamics are transformed and are becoming mainly purpose-driven (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). Spontaneous and casual encounters from face-to-face settings are eliminated, and therefore interactions, as well as communications between members, are established for clear and generally work-related purposes (Schinoff *et al.*, 2020; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). The above means that “they could be more selective in *who* they interacted with, more deliberate in *when* they interacted, and more purposeful in *how* they interacted” (Schinoff *et al.*, 2020, p. 1416). In this regard, and to maintain a positive communication flow, Akkirman and Harris (2004) have proposed that organizations should create strategies with informal activities and interaction spaces among work team members. In turn, this would increase the confidence, motivation, and productivity of coworkers.

2.1.2 Challenges of remote work

Due to the modification in the interaction contexts, Schinoff *et al.* (2020) identified that virtual teams face different challenges related to work synchronization, the multimodality of their communication, the creation of relationships at work, among others. According to the authors, organizational communication is affected in virtual workgroups because there is no immediacy in the response or feedback from the interlocutor. Therefore, it influences the rhythms of work among coworkers, framing a lack of synchronization in communication that can affect work coordination, processes of membership (Golden & Elia, 2017), teamwork, and sense-making processes (Dennis *et al.*, 2008).

Additionally, Schinoff *et al.* (2020) explain that, since communication is constrained to being mainly goal-oriented, it makes it more formal, limiting interpersonal interactions on non-work issues. This means that “(u)nlike in a collocated office where colleagues may spontaneously interact, virtual workers must actively initiate contact with each other” (Schinoff *et al.*, 2020, p. 1411). Therefore, creating bonds and obtaining personal information for social interactions, requires extra effort from virtual workers, and as a consequence, interpersonal disclosure is less often.

Related to the above, the authors note that remote work also challenges the creation of informal shared experiences. This means that, since employees lose face-to-face communication, it reduces interpersonal interaction, creating a diminish in social presence and camaraderie and increasing feelings of isolation (Fay, 2017). Cooper and Kurland (2002) identified that the phenomena of professional and social isolation should not be understood as separate issues, since the construction of social and work relationships are interconnected. Interviewees frequently expressed that they missed face-to-face interactions and that its absence limited the creation of camaraderie and trust among coworkers (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face contact with other members of the work team has shown an impact on the sense of identification with the organization (Golden & Elia, 2017).

2.2 Organizational identity

The construction of the concept of organizational identity has been present in the academic community for several decades and has been the subject of debate among various approaches within the social sciences. Based on the sociological theory of Social Identity, it was adapted to the context of corporations and businesses to understand the dynamics of organizations with the different stakeholders with whom companies interact. Depending on the framework of analysis, different study approaches can be identified.

For example, Gioia and Hamilton (2016) offer an examination of the concept from an epistemological approach between three fields that define organizational identity as a social actor, social construction, or an institutional vision. Thus, the first approach to the concept is compiled as a concept that proposed a connection between its members that should be central, distinguishable and enduring (Lin, 2004). This perspective focused on seeing the organizational identity as something static and is based on sense-giving processes (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). The authors link a second approach which transformed the concept into a social construction that sees organizational identity from the perspective of sense-making processes. For this reason, it is conceptualized as a collective interpretation that is in constant revision, since it depends on the interactions and negotiations between its members. A third approach rose to refer to organizational identi-

ty as the collective and social component of organizations but pointed out the dual construction of identity. This means that the organizational identity is determined by the internal members that compose it, but at the same time, it is influenced by the external context in which it is embedded.

A second comparative analysis is constructed by Cornelissen *et al.* (2016), who establish metaphors to associate meta-theories according to their conceptualization of organizational identity as a frame of reference, as a categorization, or as a personification. The first metaphor refers to organizational identity as a concept constructed and shared both individually and collectively, that serves as a mirror to guide sense-making processes. For the second metaphor, the authors identify the concept as a category of which the members of the organization are part, and from which they develop their perceptions and actions. The third metaphor approaches the concept as a social actor that personifies the organizational entity as a whole with personality and intentionality.

Taking into account that there is no academic consensus of a settled conceptualization, for the present study organizational identity is defined as the co-constructed set of values, norms, and beliefs that are continuously constructed by language (such as rhetoric and narratives) and symbolic behaviors (such as artifacts and rituals) (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2016). It is based on a collective and shared set of understandings, which influences member's interpretations of organizational goals (Dhalla, 2007; Gioia & Hamilton, 2016), and guides their behaviors and meaning construction processes (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2016; Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). During communication processes, both language and behaviors are involved, making communication a key piece to analyze organizational identity (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2016).

According to the above, internal communication is crucial to harmonize the strategic organizational vision and a consistent identity (Dhalla, 2007). For example, many informal communication practices (e.g., pre-meeting talks) combine the exchange of information and the dynamics of social interactions (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). Nevertheless, informal communication is not always perceived as positive, but it has shown beneficial outcomes for the construction of interpersonal relationships, development of learning processes, and the formation of identity within work environments (Heide, 2016). Informal communication has been strongly linked to the construction of collective meaning, development of social

support, the formation of group identity (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002; Tracy, 2009), the building of a sense of belonging, and strengthening of work commitment (Fay, 2011; Carramenha *et al.*, 2019). Through those informal communication spaces - including both verbal and non-verbal interactions- interpersonal relationships are consolidated by rising feelings of trust, loyalty, and attachment (Fay, 2011).

Social interactions have proven to be fundamental in the establishment of rituals and routines that, in turn, influence important processes of organizational synchronization (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002). For the development of daily tasks, employees interact and communicate frequently with other coworkers to achieve coordination and alignment of tasks, which makes their work efficient and effective. These routine interaction practices create connections between people, resulting in accurate information transfer activities and collective support (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002; Tracy, 2009). Rituals in work contexts -such as morning greetings, meetings, and small talks- have been established as crucial tools for the formation of bonds that facilitate learn and share understandings among employees, regarding organizational values, goals, and culture (Erhardt *et al.*, 2016; Holmes, 2005; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005).

2.2.1 Small talk in organizations

In particular, small talk has proven to be relevant for creating connections between people and for creating social cohesion (Coupland, 2003). Also coined by the academic community as ‘Phatic Communication’, small talk is a communicative process whose main function is not the exchange of information but rather to maintain social interaction (Vetere *et al.*, 2009). This means that its importance falls on the dynamics of socialization to motivate interpersonal relationships, instead of the information that is transmitted (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). Because it works in face-to-face communication, it also has the ability to communicate non-verbal signs which makes the interaction richer and more effective (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013).

Due to its informality, it is considered a relevant mechanism for bonding, forming interpersonal connections, strengthening positive relationships, and maintaining open communication channels with others (Holmes, 2003, 2005; Vetere *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, small talk in work environments presents an opportunity to

connect with coworkers and maintain relationships that help develop work culture (Yoerger *et al.*, 2015; Erhardt *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, it has been linked to the enhancement of attitudes among employees, which translates into the improvement in the work environment and increased productivity (Moutoux & Porte, 1980).

Small talks have demonstrated constructive effects for "oiling social wheels" by promoting warm and polite interpersonal relationships (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). The dynamic rituals where small talk takes place have on some occasions been presented as implicitly binding activities among the work teams, which has led to the perception of small talk as a condition essential to be considered a good coworker (Holmes, 2005). Moreover, small talk has been associated with employees' feelings of connection with the organization (Smith *et al.*, 2018), and Mirivel and Tracy have stated that by engaging in small talk, "their talk is simultaneously doing identity work" (2005, p. 20).

In this sense, small talk fulfills an important function in the construction of identity, because it is a communicative and behavioral act that is part of the construction of the identification as a group. As explained by Wieland (2017), organizational identity is a dynamic process of continuous social creation that is embedded in the context of organizational culture that, through ongoing interactions, enables coordination and maintenance of meanings and behaviors. Therefore, a work identity is created based on "membership" to the workplace and uses informal daily practices, such as social chat or small talks, for its structuring and establishment among its members (Fay & Kline, 2012). Hence, the construction of organizational identity is associated with social identity formation, where the self-identity (i.e., I) becomes a group identity (i.e., We) (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006).

2.2.2 Digital Small Talk

New work arrangements, such as telecommuting, have begun to transform informal interactions between employees. By eliminating spontaneous spaces for informal communication, such as water cooler talks, Wiesenfeld *et al.* (2001) have suggested that opportunities for social interaction are diminished. However, other academics have proposed that interaction spaces are not eliminated, but rather are transferred to digital environments that offer video calling platforms, instant mes-

saging, and even social media (Akkirman & Harris, 2004; Bielenia-Grajewska, 2017).

This would mean that under the conditions of remote work, it would be possible to identify a new phenomenon of digital small talk that might have specific characteristics which differentiate it from its traditional version. If the small talk process is adapted to digital tools -hence developing digital small talk- the impacts and limitations of its performance must be analyzed. Mainly, because it is a multimodal phenomenon that can develop in written, oral, visual or hybrid channels (Vetere *et al.*, 2009).

Particularly in sharing knowledge processes, mechanisms such as e-mails, and instant messages lose the natural signs in physical conversations which can lead to misinterpretations (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013; Darics, 2016; Schinoff *et al.*, 2020). Their effectiveness is considered limited to transmitting specific information that requires direct or instantaneous feedback (Smith *et al.*, 2018). Thus, its uses have been focused mainly on informal conversations and with a low cognitive load. Moreover, some instant message applications, such as WhatsApp or Slack, have progressed so users can utilize photos, videos, audios, or emoticons, to help them to replace the communication cues that are experienced in face-to-face communication (Carramenha *et al.*, 2019). Although, Schinoff *et al.* (2020) have suggested that the interpretation and understanding of social cues on these types of media tend to differ among employees.

In the case of video calls, such as Zoom or Meets, they have been portrayed as technological tools that allow the simulation of habitual face-to-face interactions and that have the potential to mitigate remote employees' perceptions of isolation and social detachment (Fay & Kline, 2011). According to Carramenha *et al.* (2019), these new communication channels allow the synchronization of work teams and promote informal dialogue, which helps to create social ties and form a sense of belonging among employees who work remotely. It has also been discussed the usage of video conferencing tools as effective for minimizing misunderstandings in remote employees and for the development of coherent collaborative tasks (Campbell, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2018). Hacker *et al.* (2020) found out that video calling systems allow participants to carry out formal and informal interaction activities with more common characteristics of physical interactions, providing similar verbal and non-verbal information. In general, these collabora-

tive technologies have been positively related to improving the quality of communication and the development of tasks, as well as increasing the sense of belonging to virtual work teams (Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020).

According to the researchers, although these tools do not allow the simulation of the spontaneity of real face-to-face encounters, they prove to be useful in reducing perceptions of social isolation (Hacker *et al.*, 2020), as well as relevant in maintaining personal connections with employees (Rysavy & Michalak, 2020). And it is precisely these informal interactions that support interpersonal bonding among members, by enhancing teamwork. According to Shaik and Makhecha (2019), virtual team employees who maintain an emotional connection through informal communication, help to overcome the challenges of work collaboration due to empathy and understanding of the personal situations of other members.

2.3 Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, a conceptual framework was developed on remote work, the characteristics of virtual teams, their communication dimensions, and the main challenges associated with this work modality. Later, this section has made an academic journey through the theoretical construction of organizational identity until the identification of the new phenomenon of digital small talk. Thus, the relevance of communication in employee identification processes and its impact on professional and corporate performance has been determined. From there, emphasis has been placed on informal communication, and more specifically on small talk, as fundamental elements of identity construction in work contexts. Taking into account that working conditions have been affected by the pandemic and remote work has been implemented, small talk has been analyzed in this new environment. Finally, a conceptual approach has been made to the phenomenon identified as digital small talk and its main characteristics have been described based on the existing literature.

3. Theories

To analyze the perceptual questions in identity formation by remote employees, two theories will be used mainly that will provide a conceptual framework. Thus, this section will explain the construction of organizational identity through Social Identity Theory, as well as the influence of digital communication on its development. In the same way, Media Richness Theory will be broken down to use as a reference and analytical framework for digital small talk, its characteristics, and its richness as a means of identity construction.

3.1 Social identity theory (SIT)

To understand social identity theory, it is important to explain first the concept of identity attached to the development of self-identification. In this regard, Burke and Stets (2009) state that the construction of identity is a process that involves the creation of both individual and collective meaning. This means that self-identity is based on one's understanding of the identity. And additionally, since it is also built through interactions with others, it becomes a shared set of meanings that construct the identity. From that perspective, Burke and Stets explain that individuals fit their identities according to certain roles linked in the social structures. The categorization of each role identity meets certain expectations, which are tied to and learned from society. Therefore, to achieve those expectations, the role identity shapes the behaviors of the individual (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Considering that those roles are embedded in society, the authors explain that individuals also develop their identity based on the social groups they interact with. Thus, Social Identity Theory frames the identity of a person created by their self-identification as part of a social category (Burke & Stets, 2009). This means that each person develops a sense of belonging with one or more social groups, hence becoming a member, and identifying him/herself as part of the group. This forms a bond that is created mainly by shared features. Particularly, it is constructed by perceived similarities in attitudes, behaviors, and values within the

members of the same group (Stets & Burke, 2000; Larson, 2017). These associations make it possible to create a sense of belonging based on common characteristics that play a central role in the development of interactions between group members (Wieland, 2017). And plays a key role in the shift from an “I” identity towards a “We” identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) creating collective identities that are sustained by social interactions (Ashforth *et al.*, 2011).

However, scholars have explained that the role identity and the social identity are intertwined. The role of identity emerges within a social group during collective interactions in shared situations (Burke & Stets, 2009) and its formation depends on the ongoing re-construction of interactions between the "I" and the "we" (Ashforth *et al.*, 2011). In consequence, “one is always and simultaneously in a role and in a group, so that role identities and social identities are frequently and at the same time relevant and influential in individuals’ perceptions and actions” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 124). Furthermore, Hogg and Terry established that the social identity is not static, but it is on ongoing changes. Therefore, it depends on the context and the interactions that are taking place among the members. As a result, “such changes affect contextual self-categorization and, therefore, people's internalized attitudes and behaviors” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 125).

3.1.1 Social Identity Theory in organizations

Ashforth and Mael (1989) explain that identification is the psychological connection with a group, and applying the concept in organizations, it is created through the incorporation of their values, attitudes, and behaviors. That psychological entanglement is creating a perception of organizational membership, and it is supported by the relatedness of values with other members as well as it is created by the sharing of symbols and rituals (Masterson & Stamper, 2003).

This implies that to connect with coworkers, communication and identification are key processes. In fact, Burke and Stets explain that the self “is embedded in society and developed through communication and interaction with others” (2009, p. 19). Thus, the co-construction of shared values is developed through experiences, like sharing activities and interacting on personal levels. Therefore, intimacy and open communication are fundamental in the involvement as a group (McClure & Brown, 2008). This means that the cognitive process that leads the

employees of an organization to develop feelings of affinity and belonging with their work team, depends largely on the constant interactions between its members and the cues involved in the process (Wieland, 2017).

Consequently, social relationship processes are fundamental in organizations. Collective processes of communication, interaction, and integration create a shared meaning of the organization and its individual role within the company, which in turn gives employees a sense of belonging and engagement. In that sense, organizational identity is the lens through which employees interpret a situation and, in turn, affects their behaviors and emotions (Lin, 2004). “Sensemaking then becomes a social process whereby coworkers communicate with each other to arrive at a shared understanding of a situation” (Madsen, 2016, p.203). Moreover, Ashforth *et al.* (2011) have found that employee identification in organizations can be enacted in different group work levels. Thus, collective identity can also be created based on categorizations of sub-departments or project teams. However, the authors point out that, although the identification is ideally nested in the form of a cascade, in reality not all identities are the same, and attributes may vary according to the level of the category or sub-division.

Identification as part of the team and individual connection as a member promotes processes of collective sensemaking and sharing understandings. For this reason, organizational identity guides the professional coordination of employees based on shared interpretations (Wieland, 2017). In environments of labor change or uncertainty, organizational identity could be affected, and Thatcher and Zhu even indicated that “some workers, such as telecommuters, may psychologically experience their employment as transient, despite their membership within an organization” (2006, p. 1083). That instability may be particularly present in the current pandemic situation and abrupt transformation of the type of work, i.e., telecommuting (Carillo *et al.*, 2020).

3.1.2 Social Identity Theory in virtual communities

It has been identified that teleworking employees could develop feelings of isolation due to the lack of physical interaction (Cooper & Kurland, 2002), but that this phenomenon does not affect the organizational identification processes. The above is due to the creation of a group identity in which remote employees have

the ability to create a common identity based on similar situations and experiences of virtual interaction and physical distancing (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Likewise, Fay & Kline (2011) argue that remote employees use technological tools for informal communication, and therefore they do not experience isolation or lack of engagement with the organization.

These results are also supported by Van Den Hooff (2017), who explained that during telecommuting, virtual communication and interactions tend to have group characteristics that accentuate social identification rather than the individual. Correspondingly, Fiol and O'Connor (2005) manifest that, due to the lack of individual cues that are possible in face-to-face interactions, fully virtual teams emerge collective adherence and team categorization is strengthened. Similarly, Millward *et al.* (2007) concluded that virtual communication does not decrease engagement and that the identification of remote employees shifted from individual to the group. This means that telecommuters overcome the physical distance with engaged participation to strengthen psychological identification and commitment.

However, constant interaction is not the same as a sense of belonging; just as technological connections differ from group cohesion (McClure & Brown, 2008). It is important to be cautious with the analysis and interpretations because the sense of belonging is a dynamic process that must be continuously co-constructed and maintained (McClure & Brown, 2008; Carillo *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, adjusting to teleworking conditions may also be affecting employees' relationships with both their daily tasks and their interpersonal connections with colleagues (Carillo *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, Fay and Kline (2012) found that the quality of interactions, relationships, and support between remote coworkers greatly influences the development of organizational identity. As concluded by Shaik and Makhecha (2019) virtual teams face challenges to bond as a team due to reduced interpersonal interactions among the team members, which lead them to experience less sense of belongingness.

3.2 Media Richness Theory

Measuring a communication channel by its effectiveness in transmitting the message is valuable to understand its usefulness and suitability as a medium. In work

environments, this conceptual framework becomes more relevant because, for the correct functioning of organizations, communication must hold the least amount of equivocality and misunderstandings (Ferber *et al.*, 2005). In many cases, communication errors go beyond the exchange of information and are instead related to the interpretation of verbal or non-verbal signals. Thus, the Media Richness Theory explains that the means that allow the transfer of these communication cues are the richest, while the leanest media should be limited to tasks that do not require communicative details for their effectiveness (Ferber *et al.*, 2005; Dennis, 2009). Therefore, face-to-face communication is the richest media because it provides nonverbal signs, allows immediate feedback, and reduces ambiguity and confusions (Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Ferber *et al.*, 2005; Dennis, 2009).

To fully understand the theory, it is necessary to clarify that for Daft and Lengel (1986), the information process in organizations is a broad concept. The authors explain that it incorporates both the social interaction of sharing, as well as the collective creation of interpretations and understandings. In this sense, organizations process information to develop and coordinate tasks. To this end, it is essential to reduce uncertainty, based on the conveying of information and data. Likewise, it is just as relevant to minimize ambiguities and confusion in the interpretations of situations (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Thus, the goal of Media Richness Theory is to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of a means to accomplish a task. This means that the richest medium is the one that makes it possible to reduce uncertainty and equivocality as much as possible (Han *et al.*, 2011).

Daft and Lengel (1986) explain that to analyze under which conditions a medium is most effective, it relies on four main characteristics to categorize the richness of each media. One, a rich medium has the ability to transmit multiple information signals, and this makes it ideal for reducing ambiguity in communication. Two, the facility to provide immediate feedback. Three, the personalization that the medium can offer. Four, the variety of language makes the medium richer (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Han *et al.*, 2011).

3.2.1 Media Richness Theory applied for Small Talk

Daft and Lengel (1986) also use Media Richness Theory to categorize diverse activities which are normally part of the organizations and help teams to carry out

tasks. They created a matrix with seven mechanisms ranked according to their characteristics to address equivocality and uncertainty. Richer media are related to personalized activities, such as group meetings, integration assignments, and direct contact among managers. The leanest media are associated with impersonal media to perform tasks like reports, formal information systems, and regulations (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Richer media (i.e., face-to-face) are preferred for persuasion and negotiation tasks, while leaner channels are better to share information (Ferber *et al.*, 2005; Fleischmann *et al.*, 2019).

If the same principles were applied to Small Talk, it can be located somewhere around “Direct contact”, due to the usage of personal dialogue and direct interaction. Since small talk is a face-to-face interaction based on subjective viewpoints and the creation of shared agreements, it helps to reduce equivocality. However, the exchange of data is almost non-existing, therefore it is not a medium to minimize uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the objective of small talk is not to transfer information but to create bonding and connections with others. Thus, the media is suitable since it achieves its final goal as a social integrator.

3.2.2 Media Richness Theory and digital environments

Communication has broadened its channels and as such new characteristics arise when communication is carried out in digital environments. Companies rely now on mobile and computerized communication bringing multiplicity and virtualization of relationships and processes. Digital solutions are an important part of current internal communication. The Internet allows interactivity and collaboration among teamwork disregarding geographical localization. In this sense, organizations are managing an external flow of communication, where ongoing dialogs are developed like in social media promoting quicker, easier, and more flexible interactions among employees (Martinelli, 2019).

Indeed, virtual teams now have a wide range of means to communicate and work with their coworkers, and the effectiveness of these work activities depends to a large extent on the means that are chosen (Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020). In fact, the choice of technology according to the purpose that the team wants to achieve is also essential to maintain the dynamics of the group relationship, re-

duce misinterpretations and maintain cohesion within the team (Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). Additionally, it has been suggested the understanding and the usage of the channels affects its capability (Fiol & O'Connor, 2005), being the richest technologies the most suitable for coordination, collaboration, and decision-making activities (Workman *et al.*, 2003; Shaik & Makhecha, 2019).

It could be considered that video calls would carry the same richness as face-to-face communication because it allows the transmission of tones, gestures, and signs (Fleischmann *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, compared to text-based communication, such as emails, video conferencing supports better decision-making processes in less time (Han *et al.*, 2011). However, “user aversion and discomfort during videoconferenced meetings have the potential to significantly impact on perceptions of task, processes, and performance” (Campbell, 2006, p.93). Furthermore, during video conferences body language is limited to invite participation and to gain people's attention, which could affect interactions to create shared meaning (Keating, 2016) as well as implications in the development of small talk.

Similarly, text messages have sought to replace the hints of face-to-face communication with emojis, but their interpretation is highly mediated by the cultural background of the recipient (Jailobaev *et al.*, 2021). In any case, according to Workman *et al.* (2003) to ensure proper telework development it is important to provide various rich media options for users to choose based on their cognitive needs.

3.3 Reflections

The literary and theoretical recap has developed a conceptual path to approach the construction of organizational identity through digital small talk, from the perspectives of the social construction of identity and the functionality of the media to fulfill its communication purposes. In this way, the employee has been positioned as a key element in the individual and collective interpretation of organizational realities and, in turn, of the re-productions of informal communicative practices that promote interaction, the bonding creation, and the construction of identity. Likewise, the particularities of these processes in virtual environments and their implications in the development of communication within organizations have been detailed.

Therefore, a literary and theoretical approach has been made which would allow to suggest that digital small talk, compared to its traditional physical version, is characterized by 1) a wide range of channels where it can be developed, and on which its effectiveness depends. 2) a reduction in its spontaneous development. 3) an increase in the probabilities of misinterpretations due to the decrease in non-verbal signals. 4) limitation in its process as a social dynamic.

As explained in the previous sections, analyzing digital workspaces and their communication dynamics is a strategic issue for organizations (Darics, 2016). This is especially relevant in a pandemic situation that suddenly moved all organizational communication to virtual environments. In this current scenario, it is pertinent to explore the real implications of the identified phenomenon, based on the case study of Malmö Stad, a large-scale, traditional, hierarchical government company. To understand this at a coworker level, qualitative research has been selected as detailed in the next section.

4. Methodology

For the purpose of this research, it has been chosen a qualitative method because it provides a detailed and interpretive approach to situations or phenomena identified in delimited contexts that frame the reflections (Tracy & Geist-Martin, 2014). As suggested by Seale *et al.* (2007), a qualitative angle seeks to reflect on the complexity of a certain circumstance, exploring intended meanings from the interpretation of data. Additionally, according to Berg (2001), qualitative research includes the examination of meanings from the study of understandings as well as the interpretation of perspectives. This also means that qualitative study guides in-depth studies of concepts, which in this case allows an analysis of the personal perceptions of employees and their sense-making processes of their organizational identity (Tracy & Geist-Martin, 2014). According to O'Rilley (2005), an in-depth understanding of personal perspectives in meaning-making processes will provide valuable information for interpreting and reflecting on the phenomenon, namely digital small talk. It was chosen over the quantitative approach since the main objective is to interpret and reflect upon their individual meanings instead of gathering a massive amount of data (O'Rilley, 2005).

4.1 Research paradigm

Taking into account that the central objective of the study is to understand the sense-making processes in employees, the Symbolic Interactionism paradigm has been selected. In this regard, Prasad (2018) claims that the paradigm's main objective is to describe and understand the sense-making processes of reality, based on the self and its interactions in social situations. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to analyze the meaning for each individual of the symbols that intervene in those interactions (Prasad, 2018).

Burke & Stets (2009) explain that the connotation of symbols is anything that can be used as a representation of an event. In the case of communication, for example, words are symbols to represent ideas. But each individual assigns differ-

ent meanings to the symbols according to their particular perception and experiences. This means that roles and social identities influence in the attribution of meanings (Prasad, 2018). Therefore, in society negotiation processes are carried out to agree upon the meaning of the symbols and to have common understandings. Hence, shared meanings are critical for symbolic interactionism (Burke & Stets, 2009).

According to Burke and Stets (2009), in order to understand social behaviors, symbolic interactionists dig inside people's interpretations of the situations. This means that to understand a social phenomenon it is important to comprehend people's perceptions and interpretations of reality. However, the authors explain that these interpretations are not fixed but are in a constant process of re-interpretation.

Symbolic interactionism is appropriately articulated with the Social Identity Theory as it emphasizes the construction of meanings through collective interactions (Prasad, 2018). Thus, it is a suitable lens to understand this type of problem since it seeks to identify individual perceptions based on social contexts. Additionally, this tradition provides tools to understand the interpretations of reality through symbols and behaviors (Prasad, 2018; Burke & Stets, 2009), which offers an ideal framework to analyze communication processes such as small talk.

The Symbolic Interactionism approach has been applied to work environments before because it allows the analysis of group activities through the collective process of meaning creation. McAuley *et al.* (2007) explain that for the development of coordinated and collaborative tasks, it is essential that the interpretation of the symbols is shared. Therefore, the interaction and communication between the parties must be an articulated process. Furthermore, joint work activities allow the creation of a definition of shared reality, which establishes group norms based on the perceptions experienced by the members. Thus, the negotiation and enactment of those organizational rules are shaping the self-image as an employee and, in turn, the organizational identity (McAuley *et al.*, 2007). Thus, according to the authors, this paradigm allows us to understand identity formation as part of the socialization processes that give meaning to the individual identification of roles as well as members of an organization.

4.2 Case study

Understanding a phenomenon with a focus on its context allows a meaningful exploration to comprehend the scene where the experiences take place (Tracy & Geist-Martin, 2014). Thus, for the present research, the municipality of Malmö was chosen as a case study. The Malmö Stad is a traditional and well-established organization in Sweden, carrying over 347.000 inhabitants (Malmö Stad, n.d.a) as the third biggest municipality in the country, after Stockholm and Gothenburg (SCB, 2021). It is a public entity that brings together about 26,000 workers of all kinds (Malmö Stad, n.d.b) who, due to their role in a public entity, are fundamental in the creation, implementation, and monitoring of significant public policies for citizens (Hansen & Salskov-Iversen, 2017). It is divided into 14 large administrations, categorized by work areas. In other words, they are segmented by the various issues that concern the municipal government, such as health, education, environment, planning, etc. (Malmö Stad, n.d.b).

Its structure is based on bureaucratic and democratic parameters, which in general terms implies rigidity, standardization, and systematization of its internal processes (Malmö Stad, n.d.b). In the development of daily tasks, this indicates the prioritization of norms and rules, which also means long deadlines for decision making (Cheney, 2011). In this particular case, the structure also implies arranging mostly office activities and low flexibility for remote work, leading the employees of the Municipality of Malmö to work mainly from the corporate building.

Among the 14 departments, the City Executive Department is characterized for being usually practiced in office environments, and currently has a work team of approximately 300 employees. They are in charge of supporting the management and coordination of the municipality's operations. To achieve this, they are divided into 6 sub-departments, or units, responsible for different areas, such as internal management, communications, and analysis (Malmö Stad, n.d.c). The largest percentage of workers in this department used to carry out their work in settled offices and engage in administrative tasks.

However, since the Covid-19 pandemic and the health restrictions imposed by the governmental authorities, teleworking had to be implemented in this working group (Malmö Stad, 2020). Therefore, for more than a year these em-

ployees have carried out their daily responsibilities by remote work. Thus, they have had to coordinate the tasks of their roles both individually and with other employees digitally.

According to the study conducted by Carillo *et al.* (2020), the adaptation process to remote work due to the pandemic was negatively associated with the team size. Hence, the City Executive Department of the Municipality of Malmö seems an ideal scenario to study informal communication among digital work teams. As well, it is optimal to analyze the employees' perceptions of organizational identity in the public sector and large team works during telecommuting. Additionally, the possibility to select only coworkers for the present study, and thus analyze their particular perspectives, allows stepping away from the management perspectives that are usually found in related research.

4.3 Data collection method

In qualitative studies, and especially in those that seek to interpret meanings, processes, or situations within the field of organizational communication, data collection serves as an approximation of social meanings. As explained by Tracy and Geist-Martin, “communicative data narrate how meaning evolves through social interaction and sensemaking processes” (2014, p. 253). Therefore, to get a qualitative approach that allows the understanding of employees' perceptions, it has been decided to collect data through interviews.

In total, during the months of March and April 10 interviews were conducted. The main objective of the interviews was to explore the subjective perceptions of each employee and find out their opinions based on the experiences they are living in their personal and professional realities. Therefore, the conversations that were held with the 10 participants were intended to generate an open atmosphere of dialogue that offered them the opportunity to reveal their authentic insights as well as respond with as much detail and depth as possible. According to Brinkmann (2008), interviews that meet these traits, where thoughts and feelings are clearly expressed, provide valuable data for the researcher.

With this purpose in mind, semi-structured interviews were planned. Consequently, the interviews were guided and supported by a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix A) prepared in advance, with fixed open-ended questions

but permitting follow-up interrogations. In accordance with O'Rilley (2005), these types of tools allow a similar structure in the interviews, but with the necessary flexibility to adapt to each conversation with the interviewees' responses. "These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress" (Berg, 2001, p. 70). Thus, the flow in the conversation was based on the participant's answers, to continue the pattern of their thoughts, but with similar structures among them.

Taking into account health restrictions, interviews were conducted on video calls and recorded on both audio and video, according to the prior authorization of each interviewee. The development of interviews in digital media could indicate an alteration in the communication between interviewer and interviewee, limiting the non-verbal information obtained in offline interviews. "Virtual listening cues, the insertion of probes, and additional questions need to be developed both to enhance the steering role of the interviewer and to replace visual nonverbal cues, such as nods and facial expressions, of the face-to-face interviewer" (Turney, 2008, p. 925). However, according to Seitz (2016), although the virtual context modifies some of the conditions of qualitative interviews, there is no reason to conclude that the data obtained under this modality lose validity or value for the research.

The questionnaire is constructed to follow a logical common thread that would cover all the research concepts. Thus, the first part contained general questions to find out the context and work circumstances of the participant. This section also sought to establish a foundation of trust so that the interviewee felt confident and open. In the second block, more specific questions were created aimed at detailing the daily activities and communication interactions that employees experience in their work. The intention was for the interviewee to describe the practices, routines, and actions to know in detail the interaction processes between coworkers. The third and last part was intended to explore the perceptions of the participants based on questions that serve as a method of self-reflection regarding identity processes as well as the development of feelings of belonging.

Besides, it is important to mention that the conversations were held in English. This means that neither the interviewer nor the interviewees spoke in their native language. However, the interviews were carried out normally since all those involved in the talks had full knowledge and proficiency of the English lan-

guage, which safeguards the quality of the information provided and the subsequent data interpretation processes. However, the wording used to formulate questions was commonly used and easily understood, in such a way that effective communication could be created and minimizing the risks of misinterpretation of words or concepts (Berg, 2001).

Although, the final duration of the interviews varied in each case, on average each conversation took about an hour. During this time, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee gave rise to a fluid dialogue, and emphasis was placed on inquiring the opinions of the employees about their current remote work situations, the explanation of the communication activities that they develop with their coworkers and the description of the anecdotes that they considered relevant to understand his/her reality. Overall, the interviews provided deep insights into the participants' own observations and interpretations of the phenomena (O'Rilley, 2005).

During and after the interviews, the researcher took personal notes to register relevant concepts, perceptions, or impressions that occurred through the discussion. In addition, once the interviews were finished, they were fully transcribed using a mixed-method: the Otter application, which uses artificial intelligence, was used to transcribe the audio, and it was complemented with a review by the interviewer for better accuracy in the final text. This material was compiled together with the additional notes to identify the concepts for the coding process and to provide a complete analysis of the collected data.

4.4 Sampling

Case studies have proven to be useful research resources to provide insightful information with academic value for further studies. It allows the analysis and understanding of situations or phenomena from a group of people with similar characteristics in a given context (Berg, 2001). "In fact, the case method is an extremely useful technique for researching relationships, behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and stressors in organizational settings" (Berg, 2001, p. 233).

Thus, in order to understand the dynamics of communication in a public entity in Sweden, it is pertinent to select one of the 290 municipalities in the country (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner, 2021). In general terms, all municipalities

fulfill the same functions and have similar ranges of performance, scope, responsibilities, and development of activities, corresponding to the number of inhabitants they hold. Therefore, a case study with the organization Malmö Stad, specifically the City Executive Department, was chosen since it gathers the most important criteria meant for this research. It is a traditional public organization with clear hierarchies and functions, that was used to develop offline work, located in physical offices, and relying on face-to-face interactions. Also, it is an organization that had to adapt its way of working to remote work due to health restrictions.

For the selection of participants in this study, purposeful sampling was used as a way to choose people who met similar conditions that are considered relevant for the present study (Palys, 2008). The selection was based on general criteria that helped to identify patterns of perception among the participants. In particular, this type of sampling helps to select a representation of a larger sample with the same characteristics among them (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, analyzing a population with mostly homogeneous characteristics helps to strengthen the quality of the collected data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Thus, individual perceptions led to finding patterns of behavior, as well as shared meanings and sense-making at a collective level. This, in turn, allows for the results that are identified in the selected case to get a deeper understanding of the topic. Likewise, the findings can provide insightful perceptions and new perspectives to analyze the phenomenon.

Therefore, the participants who were interviewed were chosen based on 4 fundamental criteria. First, the person had to be a Malmö Stad - City Executive Department permanent employee currently working from home, given the recent remote work guidelines. Second, it had to be a coworker who had experienced offline work in the municipality prior to the implementation of teleworking measures. Third, the participant had to have knowledge and proficiency of the English language so that they could express their perceptions and opinions without linguistic limitations, due to the interviews were conducted in this language. For the choice of the interviewees, other demographic parameters were not taken into accounts, such as age, socioeconomic level, gender, or nationality.

4.5 Participants

The first approach to the organization was made thanks to the prior knowledge of a member of the Communications Department of the City Office Department in Malmö Stad. This employee had participated in a previous academic activity with the students of the Master of Strategic Communication at Lund University. Taking into account her knowledge and relationship with the different areas of the Department, this person served as a starting point of contact with the other members within the organization. The chosen employees were part of the same department, but not exclusively of one administrative unit, which gave a choice range of 300 coworkers.

Thus, she gave a list of 16 possible participants who met the aforementioned parameters and their contact details so that the researcher could communicate directly with them. Each of the contacts was sent an email with general information about the study, the purpose of the interview, and the consent form so that they had full knowledge of the methodology applied and the treatment of their data. Initially, 6 people accepted voluntary participation in the study, and the schedules were coordinated to carry out the interviews in the following days. In the following weeks, two other employees responded to the call agreeing to be interviewed. To corroborate the data obtained by that moment, the researcher decided to send an invitation to 4 other employees, of which 2 responded accepting the request.

4.6 Coding and data analysis

The coding sheet was created through an abductive process, based on the theoretical background settled for the research. Using this process, the researcher created the first draft of relevant concepts based on the literature to later identify them in the collected data, which was later examined from the theory and reestablished key points of analysis. As explained by Myers “(t)he back-and-forth examination enables researchers to be thoughtful about the data gathered within one worldview but to analyze and interpret it with another perspective” (2014, p. 301). Thus, the answers obtained in the interviews were grouped giving the predefined concepts and categories to interpret the individual and collective perceptions. The analysis

in the following section is based on the interpretation of data according to said codes.

As has been proposed by Berg (2001), the process of construction of a qualitative investigation does not correspond to a linear process where each step is distinguishable and is clearly delineated in its beginning and end. These types of studies are built going back and forth between the different stages, resulting in a process more similar to a spiral. This means that the coding process is dynamic and, although it is based on the theories chosen for this research, it was also categorized based on the information collected and the information patterns that emerged in the data.

This qualitative approach was rigorous, structured, and consistent, to gather quality data and produce valid findings. Even though the interpretations of results are based on subjective analysis, basing the deduction process in academic sources allows to create an appropriate examination frame of the phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Thus, the information here presented to the academic community is transparent as well as open disclose regarding the researcher's reflections about the data, the processes, and the findings (Saumure & Given, 2008).

4.7 Ethical considerations

Following O'Reilly's (2005) ethnography guidance, this research has addressed disclosure, confidentiality, and consent issues before conducting the interviews. Therefore, the participants were informed in advance of the purpose of the interview and agreed beforehand to the conditions of the participation. The information provided to the participants was sufficient for them to have a clear context of the research, but at the same time, it was considered to avoid giving too much detail that could bias their answers (Ryen, 2004). In an email, a consent form was sent to each of the participants, where it was explained the content of the research, how their participation was required, how their data would be used, and the researcher's contact information (Berg, 2001; Israel & Hay, 2008).

Despite the fact that the interviews were conducted in virtual media, the ethical considerations and parameters must be kept under the same rigor, as well as allowing an open dialogue with the participants about the conditions of their contribution to the study (Ryen, 2004). Thus, it is important to clarify the agree-

ments that were established with the participants. First, the respondents agreed to voluntarily be part of the research as well as to be recorded both in audio and video for the recording and subsequent process of transcription of the conversations. As part of the agreement, under no circumstances any person other than the principal researcher will have access to the audios or videos recorded during the interviews.

Second, it was made clear that each participant would remain anonymous and that at no time would their names or personal data be disclosed, ensuring to preserve the principles of anonymity and confidentiality (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). According to Berg, these two concepts should not be considered synonyms since “*Confidentiality* is an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the subjects' identities. [And] In a literal sense, *anonymity* means that the subjects remain nameless” (2001, p. 57). Therefore, the opinions collected will be used and reflected in this work in a way that protects the identity of those who provided their personal insights during the interviews.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the researcher had no previous relationship, collaboration, or contact either with the organization or the participants. There was no previous knowledge about the corporate internal distribution among employees, which also reduced the prejudices and biases during the analysis. Likewise, maintaining professional codes of conduct, also acknowledges there are no conflicts of interest with the chosen case study.

5. Analysis

To answer the research questions, the analysis section has been divided into two parts that seek to investigate the perceptions of employees directly related to their informal communication processes -particularly digital small talk-, informal interaction practices, and how these have affected the formation of organizational identity. In the following sections, the results that are extracted from the data will be detailed. Likewise, they will be analyzed and contrasted with respect to the literature and theories to examine the practical findings articulated with the academia.

5.1 Informal digital communication

It is relevant to analyze how communication dynamics changed now that they have been transferred to exclusively virtual contexts. A general perception in the interviews suggests that interactions in online media have greatly modified the activities usually carried out by employees. A recurring perception in the interviews makes it clear that employees have identified a modification in the formal and informal communication processes among coworkers. The interactions that usually took place in person and must now be carried out virtually, have been perceived as highly different and have even had an impact on the common processes, activities, and practices related to the work environment. In particular, the informal interactions that usually emerge between collaborators were noted in all cases as unusual. One of the interviewees expressed it as follows:

“The dialogue that you have in the office when you're actually together in the same room or in adjacent rooms, is really a totally different thing. And I think it's better to be in the same room or easily accessible to only get a certain dynamic in the workplace that facilitates doing things.”

However, as Gajendran & Harrison (2007) have pointed out, this transformation in communication dynamics has not been understood as negative in all cases. It

was possible to identify a clear pattern in recognizing telework as an appropriate work style for the development of regular chores and individual tasks, and to maintain positive routines in the management and balance of work and personal time. Despite recognizing this modality as highly productive, the participants' appreciation shows an inclination to miss the presence, exchanges, and informal relationships with their work team, supporting the findings by Fay (2017) and Charalampous *et al.* (2018).

Virtual scenarios have the characteristic of being multimodal and offering a wide variety of channels for their development (Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020). Among the most used means of communication are video calls, instant messaging, calls, and emails for the interviewed coworkers. In general terms, participants indicated that these means were used frequently prior to remote work, but in the absence of opportunities for offline encounters, these tools have been assumed as the mediums to replace face-to-face interactions with different purposes and intentions (Martinelli, 2019). For complex tasks that require more collaboration between employees, video call meetings are preferred by Malmö Stad employees. This medium, which has been identified as the closest to face-to-face meetings, is preferred for activities that involve negotiation or personal bonding between those involved (Fleischmann *et al.*, 2019). This means that the activities that have been created to maintain interpersonal ties between employees, to enliven the work environment, and to build organizational identity have been carried out mainly by video calls. The participants have found in this medium the most similar way to offline life to develop complex activities, and yet it can be identified that interactions are not perceived in the same way. As one of the participants put it, video calls do not provide all the insights, intentions, and dynamics that can be obtained in physical communication:

“You can sort of add things into like a person's whole specter of gestures and facial expressions that make sense if people are getting it or not, what they mean and what they are trying to express and it's harder when you're looking at a blank screen with someone trying to make a presentation and write comments at the same time. There are nuances that we are missing in”.

This finding supports Keating's (2016) and Campbell's (2006) statements regarding the limitations in transmitting and perceiving details and information of body

language through video calls. However, it raises doubts when interpreted against the results presented by Smith *et al.* (2018) concerning the effectiveness of video calls to maintain collaborative tasks. Furthermore, the interpretations of the interviews raise concerns regarding Gibbs *et al.* (2017) study which reports that this channel helps to keep the sense of belonging in virtual teams. The current analysis suggests that the perceptions of the interviewees observe results similar to those identified by Hacker *et al.* (2020), presenting video calls as helpful to minimize feelings of isolation but not entirely replacing face-to-face interactions.

A characteristic that was perceived as an element that has made a difference now that communication interactions are only through digital media, is the spontaneity of the encounters (Hacker *et al.*, 2020). In the discussions with participants, it was recognized that collaborations between employees in a casual and unplanned way that led to informal conversations have been greatly limited. For those interviewed this has modified the cooperation synergies since previously it was possible to interrupt a colleague who was in the hallways or in the cafeteria to discuss collaborative work issues. But now they feel that it must be a more relevant topic to coordinate a video call, or some consider that it is not worthy to disturb other coworkers with the messages. Therefore, the loss of spontaneity has affected the development of informal interactions, as expressed by one interviewee: “Perhaps it was more spontaneous when you met in the corridors. And then you could meet people that you haven't expected to meet, and you could start the conversation with them. But you don't do a random call. When you went to the room where we had our lunch and you met someone from another department or something like that, then you start to speak about something new ‘Right now we're working with this’ and so on. But when you call, do you always aim something”.

The limitations in creating spaces for informal communication naturally and spontaneously are even impacting the development of formal assignments. Taking into account that several collaborative tasks began as informal talks where creative interactions, negotiation, and collaboration arose, employees perceive that their daily work has also been affected. Thus, the results support previous studies that have indicated that productivity in team works has been related to the coworkers' feasibility to openly communicate, bond, and connect with each other (Moutoux & Porte, 1980; Holmes, 2003, 2005; Vetere *et al.*, 2009; Yoerger *et al.*, 2015; Erhardt *et al.*, 2016).

Another important outcome to note is how the choice of channels is influencing the development of online communication. Although there is a clear trend to use video calls, it does not seem to be conclusive that it is the most appropriate medium or that the conditions of that media are best suited for informal communication in remote work. Thus, and corresponding with the Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Ferber *et al.*, 2005; Dennis, 2009), the interactions that have specific, simple purposes and with basic information management, have been mediated by emails, chats, or short calls. Some have preferred using instant messages and chat tools to exchange morning greetings, and others have preferred using calls to replace "drop-in" encounters. To exemplify this point, it can be highlighted what was expressed by an employee:

“I think it's good to speak in the telephone, because then you get this small chat. You know, in the email you just write what you want to ask the other person but here you can speak a bit more, as when you're at the workplace. When you go to work, you always meet people in the corridors or when you're having lunch and so you can small talk with them. But when you call them by the telephone you can do the small talks, and you can do it the Teams too but it's easy on the telephone, I think I've started to use the telephone quite a lot.”

It is also worth mentioning that employees have noticed a comparative difference between communication processes at the beginning of the pandemic and now after a year has passed. According to the interviewees, the most recurrent communication activities have been transformed, their use has been improved, and the interactions with them have been modified. These findings endorse the study of Akkirman and Harris (2004) since it would demonstrate that the skills to develop quality virtual communication can be acquired over time and can positively transform interactions between employees. Likewise, it illustrates how media appropriation and training can be determining factors in the creation of effective communication processes in digital contexts (Dennis *et al.*, 2008). As it was recognized in an interview:

“It took, you know, a few months and a few 100 meetings to make everyone comfortable and relaxed. So, it's interesting where we got to end up after this, because we're much more digitally mature now than

we've ever been probably on a global level, but definitely in Malmö Stad.”

5.1.1 Informal digital practices

Informal practices that have occurred in the last year among members of the department have been examined. In the first place, it is important to emphasize that the organization designed general protocols focused on the management of formal processes concerning the work performance of employees. The administration of informal communication and activities were not emphasized in these guidelines that would apply to the different departments and units of the organization. This means that each department has the autonomy to promote or disregard informal spaces for relationships among their work team. Thus, it can be recognized that routines and actions about non-work issues are not part of the strategic internal plan that could guide social behaviors and collective construction of meaning for all the employees within the organization (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005).

According to Feldman and Rafaeli (2002), acknowledging routines within the organizational management helps to create connections among team members, influencing their shared understandings, their job performance, and their adaptability skills in changing circumstances. Therefore, lacking to meet the needs for informal interaction between Malmö Stad employees could jeopardize their ability to work as a team (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002), their collective support (Tracy, 2009), and even their organizational culture (Yoerger *et al.*, 2015).

However, measures were implemented within the City Executive Department that covered the members of that administrative area. The Human Resources team created a project that sought to promote informal interaction among employees, maintain ties beyond work, and ensure both the physical and emotional well-being of coworkers. Thus, a challenge was designed consisting of a series of activities that can be developed individually and collectively to obtain points and finally choose a winning unit. In most cases, these are actions that were had prior to remote work, but that have been adapted to digital contexts. In other cases, practices were created particularly designed to fit the interaction needs in online media.

Nonetheless, the opinion of the interviewees is divided on the effectiveness of these activities in their work team. Although they consider that it is a good initiative and that it is recognized as a positive proposal to help maintain the organizational communication dynamics, as stated by Akkirman and Harris (2004), there is no unified perception regarding the results that these practices have in team cohesion. There is no clear consensus in the opinion of this type of activity. For some, it has been an idea that has fostered the connection between colleagues and has motivated them to take actions that relate themselves as a unit. But for others, the activities have not been embraced, the activities have been inadequately developed, and the outcomes have not reflected an increase in feelings of organizational identity. The findings are detailed below, differentiating the practices that have been adapted to virtual conditions from those that have arisen from remote work.

On the one hand, practices *adapted from offline to the online version* are considered. Included in the challenge explained above, the management has tried to promote constant follow-up meetings, where both work and personal issues are discussed. Some work teams established daily meetings at the beginning of the workday, to discuss informal topics, personal situations, and everyday matters among members. This has been an activity that aims to replace the interactions commonly known as morning fika, which is widespread in Swedish companies. There, people drink coffee while engaging in unplanned, uncoordinated, and casual conversations with each other for about 30 minutes. During interactions, it is regular to talk about personal issues, discuss ideas about work projects, and create bonds of collaboration and camaraderie. Some units have also established weekly formal meetings to coordinate work among employees, and also as a method to maintain the connection with the members of the work team (Rysavy & Michalak, 2020). Regarding these formal and informal meetings, that are handled by video calls, general features have been identified that impact the perceptions of the interviewees.

One, the number of participants is a characteristic that has a relevant impact on the opinions collected. This condition in digital media is complex to manage because when trying to involve all members of the area, a greater disconnect is identified than if it were meetings between fewer employees. This represents a dichotomy, especially for informal gatherings, since it seeks to form group unity

but the connection as a group is lost as more people get involved in the video call. Thus, smaller group meetings are perceived with greater familiarity, giving space to interact with each other, and creating the opportunity for small talk. The interviewees expressed that during small informal crowds their personal situations are communicated, and jokes are acceptable as well as maintain a more informal and close tone.

Additionally, the quantity of attendees is relevant in the perceptions of engagement and involvement in group discussions. Interviewees commented that by having more people assisting, it takes longer to go through all the topics, and this lengthens the digital meeting producing feelings of exhaustion for those involved. Besides, according to Campbell (2006), video calls could be identified as unfriendly and impersonal spaces as well as related to feelings of anxiety. This was exemplified by one of the coworkers:

“I think it can be harder to focus while you're in meetings with a lot of people, because if you don't feel like if it's just two people I feel like it's quite easy to focus because you're having a conversation and a dialogue, but if you're maybe in a digital meeting with 10 or 15 or 30 people, you're just there to maybe listen but then I feel like it's quite easy to fall into this multitasking.”

Two, the dynamics of participation in formal and informal video calls can be problematic, particularly when it comes to meetings with a large number of attendees. It could be determined that the involvement is diminished the more people there are in the video call for fear of interrupting coworkers. The dynamics of participation are different from offline meetings since as a rule the microphones are kept off and employees find it difficult to identify the right moments to intervene without being perceived as rude. Thus, instead of generating spontaneous interventions that articulate a fluid conversation, the interviewees feel that they must wait in the queue to add information that enriches the debate. For this same reason, when more people are involved in the video call, it raises more doubts if the participation is relevant enough to wait for their turn. Social interactions and the exchange of ideas in virtual environments has shown to have relevant limitations in the flow, quality, frequency, and development of communication between remote employees, according to studies by Cooper & Kurland (2002) and Akkirman & Harris (2004). So, it can be recognized in this response:

“It's quite easy to talk when there's only two people, I mean like this, because it's easier to focus on the people that you're talking to, but if you have a screen and there's like 10 people it's kind of hard to follow who have said what, and ‘wasn't my chance to speak?’ or ‘am I interrupting someone?’ or ‘was I rude?’.”

Three, in the interviews it was possible to distinguish an unfavorable appreciation of the interactions in video calls due to the changes that it implies concerning to non-verbal communication. Despite being one of the richest media in the transmission of information (Han *et al.*, 2011) and that most closely resembles face-to-face relationships (Fleischmann *et al.*, 2019), employees feel that it is not enough to communicate nuances and non-explicit details. Consequently, interviewees repeatedly noted that video conferencing is not fully effective in providing a social presence in informal interactions. These inadequate and inefficient conditions were emphasized when digital encounters were discussed with multiple attendees. According to them, the meeting moderator does not have a clear vision of the responses of the interlocutors, which does not allow dialogue and eventually it becomes a one-way communication medium. Thus, it is evident that under these conditions in this type of communication encouraging experiences prevail to engage in articulated discussions. Furthermore, it arose repeatedly that when employees initiate their presentations or interventions, they encounter barriers that prevent them from receiving effective feedback from their listeners. Following what was explained by Dennis *et al.* (2008), the employees expressed that performance can be affected by not fully understanding or getting thorough reactions from others. As one interviewee explains, during formal meetings it is harder to reply to peoples' reactions because there are lacking physical cues that provide information about their state of mind, feelings, or perception:

“It works, but you lose one dimension. To see people, see the body language, to see the eyes, to feel the atmosphere in the room, to know that the people understand, listen, disagree, agree, are tired or need a break. So, you lose something through it.”

Four, the shortage of dynamics of engaging in intimate conversations in smaller groups is also conditioning the development of informal activities. As explained above, group breakfasts and fikas are highly integrated into the culture of Swedish organizations, which is why attempts have been made to transfer these spaces for

interaction to digital environments. However, two characteristics have been identified that reduce the success of this adaptation for some of the coworkers. On the one hand, by being scheduled as one more meeting on the calendar, it loses its informal and relaxed natural attributes (Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). Instead, they perceived it as an additional digital meeting to the formal ones that will take place throughout the day and, if possible, could be avoided. And on the other hand, these activities usually create small conversation subgroups, which are not possible to imitate in video calls without appearing internal segmentation or division. As Waizenegger *et al.* (2020) observed, the functionality of breakout rooms that are possible in tools such as Zoom, are not considered appropriate to carry out informal practices of collective interaction due to these mitigating factors in the construction of socializations that attempt to imitate offline activities. As pinpointed by one participant:

“maybe it's harder to have small conversations. You know you could split up around the breakfast table and talk two and two. But now you sort of have to do everyone or no one, but I guess it works.”

On the other hand, practices that *only arose after remote work* are analyzed. Recognizing the characteristics of each medium in order to use its particularities and to maximize them is a fundamental part of the implementation of effective communication strategies (Dennis *et al.*, 2008; Van Den Hooff, 2017; Shaik & Makhecha, 2019). This is why it is of great relevance to analyze the practices that have emerged solely to respond to the needs of social interaction in digital media. However, very few activities emerged in conversations as practices that have been created by the Department that are not adaptations of the physical world. Among those, interviewees were encouraged to start conversations with individuals who are not directly related to their daily work, to create relationships especially with new employees in the work teams. Another one is "Walk and Talk", where employees are encouraged to have a call or video call with another coworker while they go for a walk for approximately 20 or 30 minutes. The purpose is to promote the creation of bonds by only discussing personal issues, maintaining interpersonal connections, and promoting physical activity as a team.

“we have tried to have some kind of interactive elements so like last time we had a whole day with the sub-department and it was digital. But then we had like two people during the day where we should go

for a walk and for 20 minutes and discuss a topic so they try the people responsible for organizing those theme days, they tried to sort of get us to come across the units as well.”

Participants expressed the importance to create new activities that are designed to meet the needs of virtual communication. They have identified that there is a clear difference between face-to-face and virtual communication interactions. However, they perceive that those activities are not responding to these new contexts because they seek to adapt from one environment to another without considering the particularities that each one has. In consequence, they suggest that management could provide activities that are designed solely to meet the particular dynamics of communication in virtual contexts (Dennis *et al.*, 2008; Garro-Abarca *et al.*, 2020).

5.1.2 Digital small talk

Previously, it has been mentioned that modifications have been identified in the creation of spaces for small talk in online media. The lack of spontaneity of the encounters and the insufficient fluidity in the interactions of large groups has limited the creation of informal activities among the employees. This has motivated the interactions between coworkers are perceived with a focus primarily on the development of specific tasks and strictly linked to labor issues. Therefore, communicative interactions have been understood more and more purposefully-oriented, and the dynamics among members have been increasingly directed toward fulfilling their informational purpose. This has made the communication processes shorter, more straightforward in their content, and has decreased small talk interactions, especially when it comes to teleconferenced meetings. Interviewees consider that there has been an increase in the number of short digital meetings, which stress the work exchanges and do not lead to interpersonal interactions:

“they're shorter now, the meetings are shorter in time. But it's perhaps the small talk. We have no small talk in that way so the meetings are more rational, it's about the topic we should discuss and nothing else.”

As Schinoff *et al.* (2020) and Waizenegger *et al.* (2020) showed when developing communication in virtual media, casual interactions are eliminated and therefore interactions are mainly focused on achieving a specific purpose, minimizing the possibilities of engaging in small talk. As mentioned by Schinoff *et al.* (2020) to maintain social interactions and interpersonal relationship processes, employees must make an extra effort to create informal social and bonding activities.

However, participants also indicated that it is becoming easier to include small talks in their meetings and formal activities. While people learn, feel confident, and appropriate to use online channels, they also experience it is easier to engage more in digital small talk. Scholars have indicated that it is important that employees create virtual informal interactions and small talk to maintain relevant processes related to the connection between coworkers and to avoid their identification with the organization being affected (Holmes, 2005; Smith *et al.*, 2018). For example, lean media like chats or instant messages, have been used mostly for practices with less cognitive load, such as simple talks or activities that can be carried out in parallel to work tasks (Han *et al.*, 2011; Carramenha *et al.*, 2019; Fleischmann *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, its usage was mentioned as a means of maintaining brief informal communication and small talk. Interviewees have seen it as a common practice that takes place in parallel when digital meetings are held with numerous participants. Employees have compared its use to the whispers that are usually identified in face-to-face meetings with large numbers of people. As stated by a coworker, sometimes this leads to chats with another member of the meeting, where personal perceptions of what is happening in the video call are exchanged:

“I’ve been in teams meeting where I was talking in a chat with another member in the meeting, mainly saying ‘oh my god this is crazy’. Especially when there are big, 40 people meeting. I mean, when you were more than 100 people, you would just whispered to the one next to you. I guess that’s the non-digital version of chatting.”

5.2 Organizational identity

During the individual processes of making sense of the transition to teleworking, it can be seen that the interviewees recognize the importance of going through it

together with the other members of the organization. As expressed by the employees, feeling that it is a situation that affects everyone, creates a sense of togetherness, solidarity, and support among coworkers. In the conversations, they expressed that they could relate to each other's feelings and create a bond according to that shared situation. The data seem to support the idea that sharing norms and circumstances encourage people to connect and prevail in the creation of collective identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Masterson & Stamper, 2003). Even though the norm changed, they share the same norm -in this case, working remotely in a pandemic- and that binds them. Hence, relating through similarities has been identified as an important element in maintaining group cooperation and collective connection in telework. As Thatcher & Zhu (2006) point out, the emotional and psychological bond that unites coworkers, as well as feeling identified with each other, helps to maintain employee engagement during remote work:

“I mean, none of us is alone in this pandemic situation here either. So, since we are all in the same boat here, so to speak, so that has made us I think a bit more humble. Some kind of more tolerance.”

In addition, having access to the private lives of colleagues has been an element that has promoted feelings of togetherness. For the employees, the impossibility of separating personal and workspaces has helped them feel more connected to each other. Taking into account that during video calls the private environments and family contexts are exposed, the interviewees perceived these situations as points in favor of getting to know their coworkers better and initiating conversations beyond work. Thus, working remotely has allowed them to get to know on a more personal level those with whom they interact on a daily basis upholding team bonding (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020).

However, it is important to note that remote employees perceive that a distance has been created between them and that relationship dynamics have been affected by telecommuting. These findings support the challenges of bonding in virtual teams addressed by Carillo *et al.* (2020). In accordance with what was explained by the authors, limiting the relationship between employees has affected the processes of adaptation to this type of work.

The following sections will detail the results that indicate that the feelings of connection with the different levels within the organization are not the same in all cases. The employees expressed feeling estranged from their collaborators who

are part of the same area but with whom they do not work directly. During the data analysis, it was identified that Malmö Stad coworkers have felt considerable changes in the interrelation processes, which are changing their sense of belonging regarding their team as a department, and concerning the organization.

5.2.1 Virtual identification as a department

“I feel distant from the content. I don't know how to put the content, the way of being part of a team. That's where I can feel a distance, but there is for sure no distance in between each of the colleagues”.

This quote condenses the general feeling extracted from the interviews. As noted above, those employees who have projects together or groups that must work in coordination on a daily basis have perceived that their sense of closeness between them has remained steady or even increased. But at the same time, the gap between employees in the same department but who do not have to communicate with work issues on a daily basis has risen. Repeatedly, employees commented that they perceive having lost contact with several members of the same department due to the lack of spaces for interaction. While the team members may meet in large job follow-up meetings, as noted in previous sections, these meetings have low interactions between employees. Thus, taking into account that the shared areas of the offices were the spaces for spontaneous integration between members of various teams in a department, a considerable separation of the sense of unity has been perceived (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden, 2006; Leonardi *et al.*, 2010). The employees pointed out that, since spontaneous meeting spaces have been eliminated, there are no longer social situations that make them interact. This also corresponds to the idea that identity can vary in changing environments which can also influence identity dynamics within sub-divisions, as explained by Ashforth *et al.* (2011) and highlighted in one interview:

“I think we all miss some kind of information that happened in the lunchroom or in the corridor or the little chitchats or brainstorming that creates new ideas or the little information. We need that. It is not that spontaneous on Teams or Zoom, to just call one with no agenda. Or meet for a cup of coffee, because there you are standing in the lunchroom by the coffee machine. So, I think you missed that. And I

think you miss that feeling of belonging to a group because of that. Not meeting every day and see the other one, see how they're feeling, having chit chat and all the things that happen when you're relating to another person.”

Therefore, the lack of casual and informal meeting spaces, which is only possible when sharing common physical spaces, has distanced and disconnected even more people from the same department, making it more difficult to maintain the bond as a group. Here it is important to stress that in most cases, Malmö Stad has departments with a large number of employees, which makes the coordination of group meetings in digital contexts even more complex (Carillo *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the findings contradict the studies by Fiol and O'Connor (2005) and Van Den Hooff (2017), since the categorization as a department has decreased caused by a reduction of informal interaction between employees. In this case, their identification as a group does not prevail in the absence of individual interactions and, on the contrary, the interviewees promoted more close interactions or with limited groups of people.

Despite this, for those participants who have had longer and more stable previous relationships with their work team members, the impact has been perceived as less. The participants who mentioned having developed activities and experiences outside of strictly work for long periods of time, felt a minor decrease in connection as a team. Having strengthened interpersonal relationships for several years seems to give them a solid foundation to continue linking them even without the same daily contact. Therefore, units or departments recently organized or without many previous shared experiences are having more trouble creating identification as a group. The groups that have had less time to interact and that have shared fewer experiences outside of work issues have perceived great challenges to create cohesion in the processes of integration and collective identity (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Charalampous *et al.*, 2018). As can be seen in this conversation:

“(interviewer) Do you feel more or less connected to your department or unit now that you're working from home?”

“(interviewee) Less I would say. I think it's mainly because I'm working from home because it's a new unit. But if we had been working at the workplace, you would have had a lot more daily informal interac-

tion which sort of binds people together, and now except for the morning fikas, you have a lot more formal discussions. And it makes the organization work, and you do what you're supposed to do, but you don't get the connection between people in the same way, especially when we're more or less new to each other.”

5.2.2 Virtual identification as an organization

The challenges of employees who have been interacting as a team for less time are also reflected in their impressions of their identity with the organization. Coworkers who have been in the organization for less time have not been able to go through all the traditional stages of adaptation, and therefore express a greater disconnection with the company. For recent colleagues, it has not been possible to relate informally with their work team effectively, which has diminished their emotional connection with the organization. The lack of informal interactions that allow them to learn the values and behaviors of the organizational culture of Malmö Stad, has diminished their identity formation with the organization, as explained by the Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; McClure & Brown, 2008; Burke & Stets, 2009).

Even employees who have been working for the organization for a longer time, but who have been restructured into new workgroups, do not feel the same connection with the organization because they perceive its unstable and hesitant role regarding the objectives of the organization. The fluctuation in the roles they play in the organization, in addition to the instability created by the general pandemic situation, emerges feelings of uncertainty regarding the maintenance of organizational identity. This is exacerbated when communication, relationship, and identity processes must be developed exclusively in digital environments.

“there’s potential for being closer and perhaps also moving common values in another way. And I hope we can go that way as well, otherwise I think also brings questions about the values and it’s hard at the moment since we are in this process of change where we really, we are really digging into this and a change like that go to different phases as well and sometimes you’re in this confusion phase and it’s frustrating, and who are we, what’s the identity, what do we want us to be.

I think all those things as well, being in this process digitally, on remote, in a distance, from home, it complicates it a bit.”

In contrast, some interviewees consider that they feel more identified with the organization, based on the purposes it serves as a public entity in times of international crisis. Thus, they expressed that they have experienced that it grows a bigger feeling that they are doing something good for the people during these difficult times. Their organizational identity in this case is based on the personal relationship they have with the objectives and functions of the organization.

5.3 Overall findings

A result that is relevant to point out is that people try to overcompensate the lack of physical contact with more, but shorter, interactions. The organization and the groups are trying to overcompensate the physical distance with digital communication, which means more meetings, more activities, pushing more interaction. This has a double effect on the interviewees. On the one hand, it increases work stress due to the increase in scheduled meetings. On the other hand, these frequent interactions can help them to connect even more with those who are working closely or frequently. Scholars have also established in previous studies that spontaneous encounters are replaced by more frequent communication in digital environments (Fiol & O’Connor, 2005; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020; Leonardi *et al.*, 2010).

“I feel like I have a lot more meetings actually. They tend to be a bit shorter but the frequency is so much more. I guess those small talks or small questions that you might have had before, you know you just went into the office of another colleague and you ask them for some input maybe we had a question. That's not really possible now so it's so easy that you said you took like 30 minutes of a team meeting. And then you use all the time, even if you maybe had just one question so definitely more meetings may be shorter but over a week I see a lot more time.”

In the same way, it is worth mentioning that the perceptions of the employees are clearly inclined to feel that the lack of face-to-face relationships has affected their connection processes as employees. People expressed that they need and want to

be close to others, get personal sometimes, which helps to create a sense of belonging as a work team. Despite having technological tools for team coordination and making use of rich virtual media, the notion of closeness and connection has changed. Furthermore, in most cases, although attempts to maintain activities remotely are appreciated, they are not perceived in the same way as their original versions, and they do not replace the presence of other people.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to gain deeper understandings of internal digital communication processes, particularly informal interactions such as small talk, in remote work teams. This study problematized the modification of small talk in virtual environments as a key element altering the construction of employees' organizational identity. Hence, employees' perspectives regarding their informal practices and relations were analyzed to comprehend the influence of digital small talk in the creation and maintenance of organizational identity. The results indicated that employees perceived a considerable change in the development of small talk during remote work and, in turn, they have experienced a variation in the perceptions of their organizational identity. Likewise, the transformation of their informal interactions through virtual channels suggested the necessity to reconsider the practices they are developing to adapt properly to digital communication processes.

6.1 Contributions of this study and to the case

The present study has found two main conclusions. Regarding small talk, it was identified that this type of informal practice has been greatly modified during remote work by the contexts and digital means that mediate its performance. Small talk has been recognized as an important part of the formation of organizational identity, but when the relations of its members are carried out in virtual environments, small talks are also transformed. Digital small talks are being perceived as altered because of their lack of spontaneity and because the channels to develop them are reducing the exchange of non-verbal information. Less ad-hoc meetings and encounters have minimized spontaneous relations transforming interactions mainly into purpose-driven. This has restricted the casual emergence of informal conversations, socialization spaces (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020, p.435), and small talk.

This means that digital small talk is happening in virtual contexts, and it is still accomplishing its purpose to connect colleagues and bond team members, but primarily in small groups. When moving it to digital environments, it can be seen that there is an alteration in the formation of identity in large groups, such as at the department or organization level. By greatly limiting the amount, frequency, and environment conducive to small talk, this informal communication activity does not appear to have the same impact on identity creation when engaging with large teams. Bearing in mind that identity is continuously formed from social processes, it is important to provide spaces for social relationships so that organizational identity is not lost and can be adapted to new virtual conditions. Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that over time people are getting digital mature, and it is getting easier to engage in informal practices naturally. With time and training, people seem to get confidence in the usage of digital media and, in turn, casual conversations are becoming increasingly practiced.

Regarding the informal practices in virtual teams, it could be determined that time makes a relevant difference in the outcomes of the digital communication processes. Both positive and negative experiences and the constant practice of digital activities have given the coworkers digital maturity, confidence, and knowledge in the handling of tools. However, understanding that these tools are designed with different communication objectives is essential to emphasize the need to create new work dynamics that adjust to these media. Modifying the activities to adjust them to the virtual media characteristics disregard the fact that each medium has its purpose and entails separated patterns of communications (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is considered appropriate to create new activities that have been conceived for this type of media. In this way, the activities will be designed to meet the virtual communication objectives and their development will be suitable for online channels. Since the tools, interactions and communication have changed in virtual teams, it is inaccurate to expect that the practices should remain unchanged in new settings.

Furthermore, as expressed by Dennis *et al.* (2008), the communication and learning processes of the use of media are dynamic, which requires a flexible and changing implementation based on the evolving needs of remote employees. Creating fluid strategies that respond to the needs of coworkers facilitates their adaptation to change and promotes effective interactions of formal and informal com-

munication. “Understanding the context provides insight as to the appropriate mix of media. It is also important to note that these needs are likely to change over time, as teams move from the novel to the familiar, so the ideal set of media for project initiation may not be ideal once the project is underway” (Dennis *et al.*, 2008, p. 595).

From a practical perspective, this study provides organizations with relevant insights to include in their strategic planning regarding the development of employees’ journey. According to Shaik and Makhecha’s (2019) study, informal communication plays a fundamental role in the success of organizational strategies that seek to maintain employee engagement and good performance. Therefore, comprehending the dynamics that lead to socialization and small talk practices during telecommuting, gives organizations tools to design strategic communication plans that promote employee identification. It is relevant not to take for granted the value that the development of informal communication has in the effective performance of work teams and organizations. Hence, acknowledging informal communication practices in the organizational tactics is vital to promote work environments that support the creation of a sense of belonging, both individually and collectively.

This work also provides valuable insights for companies that continue working remotely, as they should provide clear communication strategies for their employees, focusing on those recently hired. Considering that the creation of organizational identity is strongly influenced by informal social interactions, by altering its development in digital channels, new employees are lacking spaces that allow them to understand, experience, and internalize the organizational culture. This means that it is necessary to put more effort into communicating and provide guidelines about the organizational values and purpose, especially with employees that have been working mainly or solely in virtual teams. Organizations should recognize that embracing the identity of the organization requires further endeavors and time when the employees are not sharing physical spaces.

Lastly, this study provides relevant information to further develop internal digital communication strategies and how to integrate online communication channels to support informal interaction practices among remote employees.

6.2 Suggestions for future research

Given that the results of this research are based on one organization, it is important to extend the study to other organizations and consider expanding the research to analyze the perceptions of a larger sample of employees. To provide deeper understandings, the results should be compared with various organizations that have transformed their work arrangements to fully telecommute.

Besides, this study initiates the path for the construction of conceptual and theoretical approaches that delve into the characterization of digital informal communication, with a special focus on digital small talk. Although academics have investigated communication processes in virtual environments, it has been briefly explored regarding the development of informal communication practices. Moreover, the relevance of investigating the creation of digital small talk in fully remote work teams has been mainly disregarded. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand the long-term implications of entirely digital interactions among team members, concerning the impact on the construction and maintenance of their organizational identity.

Likewise, it is suggested to create new studies that explore digital channels in-depth to find the best practices that allow creating successful informal relationships and that promote the positive construction of organizational identity.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire for interviews

General information

- For how long have you been working in the organization?
- How do you usually communicate with your colleagues?
 - Which channels do you use?
- If you have something urgent to deal with another coworker, how do you contact that person?
- Have your daily routine been affected by remote work?
 - Regarding frequency and duration of tasks or meetings
 - Regarding coordination of tasks with coworkers
 - Regarding personal feelings
- How do you experience the situation (remote work) from a communication perspective?

Practices

- Please describe your teamwork or department
 - Did you share the same office / building?
- Did you have rutinary activities? (*e.g., birthday parties, weekly meetings, daily fikas, Fridays' gatherings*)
 - Do you still perform those activities?
- Have you added new rutinary activities?
- Did you have informal (non-work related) activities with you co-workers?
 - Were those arranged by the organization?
 - Did you usually participate in those activities?
 - Do you still have those activities?

- Have your organization developed digital informal activities for the employees?
 - Do you participate?
- Have your colleagues developed digital informal activities?
 - Do you participate?
 - What do you usually talk about during the activities?
- Let's say you have some gossip to share. How would you communicate?

Organizational identity

- If you could list main positive characteristics of your organization, what would them be? (*e.g., values, attitudes, behaviors, norms*)
 - Do you feel related to those characteristics? (*Do you share those characteristics?*)
- Now, list negative characteristics.
 - Are those characteristics affecting your job performance?
 - Are those characteristics influencing your feelings towards the organization?
- Have those characteristics (both, positive and negative) changed during remote work?
 - How did you notice that?
 - Do you talk about that with your colleagues?
- Can you identify values of the organization?
- Do you feel you belong to your organization, department or unit?
- Do you feel that you know your coworkers in a personal level?
 - Do you talk about things outside of the work-related topics?
 - Do you talk outside the office hours?
- Do you feel more or less connected to them now compared to offline work?
 - Why?
- Some people say that they usually text their coworkers while they are in a team meeting. Does it happen to you?
 - Did it happen with offline meetings?
 - What do you talk about?
- Additional remarks or comments.