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Adapting to the New Normal: Establishing and Maintaining Trust in B2B Relationships in a Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract

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Key Words:	B2B, B2B Relationships, Trust, Trust-Building, COVID-19 pandemic, Post-pandemic, Remote Work, Hybrid Work, Interpersonal Trust, Interorganizational Trust, Calculative Trust, Affective Trust, Normative Trust
Purpose:	To understand how B2B companies may establish and maintain trust in their relationships with customers during and in the post-COVID digital business landscape.
Methodology:	The study carries a qualitative approach conducted with an exploratory nature. To establish a comprehensive perspective, broad analysis was conducted by holding seven semi-structured interviews with highly knowledgeable respondents with high insight who possess knowledge regarding external business relationships. The interviews were conducted with professionals from different technology companies active in the Swedish

market. The method follows ethical and critical guidelines to generate a credible analysis.

Theoretical Perspective: The study's analytical framework integrates key factors impacting trust, encompassing the levels of trust, calculative, affective, and normative, with the dimensions of trust, ability, benevolence, and integrity, combining them with the interpersonal and interorganizational levels of trust.

Results: The study finds that a digital remote work setting contributes to challenges affecting the trust such as less personal small-talk, establishing new relationships as well as a longer time frame to establish trust. To combat these issues some strategies are identified, these being building of tight partnership, the importance of individuals, dependable delivery, reliability and simplicity, as well as transparency. Based on these findings, a vision emerges for a future with a hybrid working solution.

Conclusion: The study's results contribute to increased knowledge about how B2B companies establish and maintain trust by responding to a weakened interpersonal trust by compensating with increased focus on other aspects of trust. The study also highlights the possible role of a hybrid work solution in the future as a solution to the challenges raised from remote work. Furthermore, the study heightens the uncertainty regarding the time frame in trust building in this new context, working as a springboard for future studies.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On the 30th of January 2020, COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (World Health Organization, 2020). This declaration had far-reaching implications by disrupting political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors on a global scale, fundamentally reshaping how businesses conduct their operations (Thakur, 2021). To combat the rapid spread of the disease, numerous actions were taken worldwide, including travel restrictions and mandatory quarantining (WHO, 2021). As a result of the restrictions, individuals and firms experienced challenges conducting business as usual (United Nations, 2022). Ultimately, global trade was significantly impacted, creating supply chain disruptions of unseen proportions (UN, 2022). The outbreak of COVID-19 also affected business relationships with the increased constraints of travel and face-to-face interactions (UN, 2022).

One of the most noticeable changes businesses made due to COVID-19 was the rapid shift towards remote, eventually evolving into hybrid work models (Pillai & Prasad, 2023). As a result of the digital shift, salespeople and business-to-business (B2B) clients were forced to change how they communicate with each other, leading to an increased adoption of technologically dependent sales (Rangarajan, Sharma, Lyngdoh, & Paesbrugghe, 2021). B2B is a type of transaction between firms, such as one between a manufacturer and a wholesaler or a wholesaler and a retailer (Chen, 2023). B2B refers to transactions between corporations rather than between a company and an individual consumer (Chen, 2023). B2B transactions differ from business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-government (B2G) transactions (Chen, 2023). The relationship between the B2B companies exchanging goods and or services is referred to as a B2B relationship (Neeb, 2023). In addition to reshaping the dynamics of communication between salespeople and B2B clients, this evolution in work models has also paved the way for innovative approaches to technologically driven sales approaches, increasing efficiency and adaptability in the digital business ecosystems (Arslan, Golgeci, Khan, Ahokangas & Haapanen, 2022).

During and in the post-COVID corporate climate, an understanding of B2B connections has become increasingly important as remote work solutions disrupt conventional forms of communication and engagement between businesses. According to a research report conducted by McKinsey & Company, 56% of executives said that being able to develop relationships with clients and consumers was severely impacted by working remotely (Bradley, Hirt, Hudson, Northcote, & Smit, 2021). As the face-to-face connection is essential for effective B2B relationships, it became more difficult for firms to establish and maintain trust (Bradley et al. 2021). Trust is a basic feature of human interactions that allows people to rely on one another and collaborate toward common goals (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Ganesan and Hess (1997, p.40) define trust as "the extent to which one believes that a partner will act in a way that benefits the relationship, rather than acting in their own self-interest". Trust has become emphasized as a crucial element of successful B2B relationships, particularly in the post-pandemic climate where face-to-face communication has become increasingly rare (Arslan et al., 2022). Furthermore, other research found that establishing and maintaining trust in business relationships is essential, demonstrating its status as the most esteemed aspect of highly valued relationships (Zak, 2017). Furthermore, it has also been demonstrated that trust has a significant impact on the commitment to a relationship (Zak, 2017).

1.2 Problematization

The shift to remote work has had a significant impact on how strong B2B relationships are established and maintained in various industries (Arslan et al., 2022). Companies have been forced to rely on digital channels and communication tools instead of face-to-face meetings and networking events to establish and maintain trust with their customers (Arslan et al., 2022). Digital communication tools refer to the programs, websites, applications, and other internet and computerized resources that assist, enhance, and execute digital processes and overall digitization initiatives (Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson & Pullins, 2020). The effectiveness of these strategies for fostering trust in a remote work environment and the additional efforts businesses might take to fortify their connections in the post-COVID business environment have yet to become clear (Arslan et al., 2022). Thus, comprehending these challenges and

recognizing successful solutions is vital for the long-term development of companies (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022).

Importantly, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on B2B relationships, it is crucial to understand how companies can establish and maintain trust with their clients in a remote environment (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022). Previous research has emphasized various factors that impact trust and commitment in B2B relationships, including meetings, and interpersonal and social interactions (Haas, Snehota, & Corsaro, 2012). The significance of satisfaction in terms of trust and commitment in business relationships has also been stressed (Høgevold, Svensson, & Otero-Neira, 2020). As a result, a relationship-selling strategy that emphasizes the establishment of long-term relationships has become increasingly common in recent years (Koponen, Julkunen & Asai, 2019). The growing use of a relationship-selling approach indicates that companies are aware of the importance of the factors that impact trust and are actively working to build long-term relationships with their clients (Dowell, Morrison, & Heffernan, 2015; Guan, Lee, Otero-Neira, Svensson, & Høgevold, 2021; Haas et al., 2012). Emphasizing long-term relationships is a strategy to develop commitment and trust, which can then result in more fulfillment and loyalty (Dowell et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Koponen et al. (2019) emphasize the relevance of future studies in examining how communication competence is used and necessary in digitally driven sales.

Communication competence refers to a salesperson's capacity to effectively interact with customers through digital channels (Koponen et al., 2019). This emphasizes the necessity for research on the most effective ways for companies to interact with clients digitally in order to develop relationships and succeed in their business (Corsaro, Maggioni & Olivieri, 2021).

Moreover, prior research has emphasized that personal trust has a substantial impact on improving performance in business interactions, highlighting the need for further exploration in this area (Mangus, Jones, Folse, & Sridhar, 2020). While previous investigations to a great extent have used quantitative techniques, qualitative research might offer additional insight, particularly for complex and subjective topics such as interpersonal relationships and trust (Mangus Bock, Folse & Jones, 2022). Using qualitative research, the subjective experiences

and views of people participating in business interactions, particularly how trust is established and maintained, can be explored further, including precise actions, viewpoints, and communication techniques (Dowell et al., 2015). By looking into these factors, a more thorough understanding of B2B relationships can be attained.

Although previous research has recognized trust as a vital factor for successful B2B relationships, the effect of remote work on the development of trust remains ambiguous (Arslan, et al., 2022). This necessitates a more thorough examination of trust in B2B relationships, especially in light of the rising use of digital communication tools (Arslan, et al., 2022). Given that travel limitations and restrictions to in-person interaction have caused a recent digital shift, there are few studies regarding the changes in B2B selling and relationship building during and post the COVID-19 pandemic (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022). While previous research has clarified how the COVID-19 pandemic affects trust-building in B2B relationships (Arslan et al., 2022), it is crucial to look at how businesses adeptly handle these difficulties to gain an in-depth understanding of their strategies. Moreover, prior studies have emphasized the necessity for in-depth analyses of how businesses are modifying their business strategies and fostering trust in the face of these difficulties (Rangarajan et al., 2021). Further research in this field may provide insightful information that may assist companies in responding to the shifting dynamics of B2B connections in a virtual environment.

Essentially, by addressing this research gap, the study can shed light on the function of commitment and communication in the digital age, ultimately contributing to further research agenda as well as practical implications in this field. The purpose of this study is to understand how B2B companies establish and maintain trust in their interactions with clients in a remote business landscape. By exploring the alterations in trust dynamics and relationship development brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its switch to digital solutions, this research seeks to conclude how company operations have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and discover strategies that have been effective in establishing and maintaining trust in this new context. The study will be exploratory in nature to assess how companies have managed the difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in order

to establish and maintain trust in their B2B relationships, especially with the increased dependence on digital communication during and post-COVID-19.

Subsequently, after introducing the topic, identifying the research gap, practical issue, and purpose, the study proceeds to formulate the following research question:

How do B2B companies establish and maintain trust in relationships with customers through digital interaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research question aims to explore initiatives taken by companies to strengthen their relationships with partners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding how companies are navigating the shifting landscape, from in-person to digital, and taking measures to establish and maintain trust with clients is essential as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies to adapt to new ways of operating (Thakur, 2021).

The problem statement illustrates the difficulties that businesses confront in establishing and maintaining trust in the remote work environment, as well as the uncertainty regarding the efficacy of these strategies in the business world during and post-COVID. In order to establish and maintain relationships of trust with clients while working remotely to a larger extent, B2B companies utilize various strategies, which seek to be examined with the help of the research question. The study's findings will shed important light on the challenges that B2B companies may encounter and intend to contribute to existing solutions for establishing and maintaining trust in remote and hybrid work models. Additionally, the findings may assist in the long-term development of these businesses and provide relevant insights.

1.3 Delimitations

To ensure a comprehensive analysis and academic contribution, several delimitations were done to the scope, including the research question, jurisdictional and geographical area, industry, and theoretical application. Additionally, the time frame of the writing of this thesis also acts as a scope delimitation.

The research question specifically focuses on B2B relationships, excluding Business-to-Customer (B2C) aspects. This decision was made to downscale the scope to a more realistic level that aligns with the purpose of this thesis. Additionally, the supply chain issues experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasize the potential impact on business relationships that heavily rely on each other, thereby increasing performance pressure. However, as most companies are involved in B2B relationships (La Rocca, 2020), the findings could be applicable to various types of industries and sectors.

Considering the broad research area, it was necessary to narrow down the industry of interest to one single industry. Furthermore, due to the large variety of jurisdictions regarding implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lockdowns, maximum people limits, and remote work recommendations, the research scope is delimited to one singular jurisdiction and thereby one geographical area.

To conduct an extensive analysis of the research question, this thesis applies a comprehensive framework that integrates various levels and dimensions of trust along with three theoretical approaches, which have been widely used by prior researchers in similar contexts, enhancing comparability and providing relevant insights (Dowell et al., 2015). These delimitations ensure a manageable scope, sufficient to bridge some of the present knowledge gaps and serve as a springboard for future research in the field.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The thesis comprises six chapters. The introductory chapter presents the contextual background of the research, addressing the problematization, the present knowledge gap, the research question to be answered, and the study's delimitations. Chapter 2 starts with a thorough review of previous literature on the topic of B2B relationships, trust, and the implications of COVID-19 on these aspects while presenting relevant theories. Chapter 2 is concluded with a presentation of an analytical framework that will be used to answer the research question. In Chapter 3 the methodology is presented. This chapter consists of a detailed description of the qualitative research and manages data design and limitations.

Chapter 4 handles the presentation and analysis of the empirical findings, which will be discussed in Chapter 5 in combination with the previous literature and the analytical framework. Lastly, our conclusions, including theoretical contributions and practical implications, will be presented, together with suggestions for potential future research.

2. Theoretical Background

The goal of this chapter is to understand the complex dynamics of B2B relationships, with a particular emphasis on establishing and maintaining trust in B2B relationships in remote work environments. The chapter will begin by reviewing the relevant literature and theories. The chapter will then arrive at an analytical framework that will be used to analyze and understand the collected data, discuss the findings, and eventually answer the research question.

2.1 Literature Review

The literature review will contain three themes, namely (1) B2B companies and their relationships, specifically concentrating on the impact of COVID-19 on these relationships, (2) trust in B2B relationships, investigating its importance and various trust-building methods, and (3) strategies employed in B2B relationships in remote work environments. Importantly, this review will incorporate the three key theories: social exchange theory, commitment-trust theory, and communication theory. By integrating these theories into the examination of the literature, this section aims to develop a comprehensive analysis of the literature. By reviewing various levels and dimensions of trust, this section further seeks to construct an applicable analytical framework that effectively employs the ideas and findings from the reviewed studies. This comprehensive approach will allow for an in-depth examination of the research topic and give rise to a better understanding of the dynamics at work in B2B relationships, particularly in the context of remote work environments.

2.1.1 B2B Companies, their Relationships and the Impact of COVID-19 on them

The realm of B2B companies is examined in this section, emphasizing their relationships and the effects of COVID-19 on them. Comprehending these relationships is imperative, considering the intricacy and interconnectivity of B2B interactions (Arslan et al., 2022). Additionally, trust is essential in B2B relationships, influencing the effectiveness of interactions and outcomes (Dowell et al., 2015). This section also presents social exchange

theory and explores how B2B companies prioritize knowing their customers, having effective communication, partnership, and establishing trust by aligning with this theory.

2.1.1.1 B2B Companies

A B2B company exchanges goods and services with other businesses, in contrast to a business-to-consumer company (B2C) which provides goods and services for the end consumer (Kenton 2023; Neeb, 2023). In a B2B supply chain, one company can act as both a supplier and a customer (Chen, 2023). Additionally, B2B transactions are more complex and complicated than B2C transactions, since they are further integrated as the actors have a high dependency on each other (La Rocca, 2020). There is an importance and presence of continuous business exchanges and each customer-supplier relationship often becomes singularly important for both parties (La Rocca, 2020). This is due to irregularity's effects on operations and therefore economic performance as well as the relative concentration in the market (La Rocca, 2020). The relationship between B2B companies is therefore of high relevance which necessitates a focused literature review on this subject matter.

2.1.1.2 Importance of Trust in B2B Relationships to Customers

Social exchange theory suggests that people participate in reciprocal interactions with others with the anticipation of receiving mutual benefits (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). In accordance with this idea, social interactions entail an exchange process where people balance the advantages and disadvantages of their choices and come to logical conclusions (Chen, 2023). In the context of B2B relationships, social exchange theory emphasizes the value of reciprocity, fairness, and balance in exchanges between organizations. B2B companies have continual interactions with their clients, and the effectiveness of these interactions can affect the degree of trust that forms between them (Jeong & Oh, 2017).

In B2B relationships the necessity to comprehend customer needs, effective communication and teamwork, developing trust, and assessing customer value, is of high importance to achieve successful results (Neeb, 2023). When forging long-lasting commercial connections, this thorough comprehension of consumer needs is essential (Neeb, 2023). B2B companies must take the time to get to know their clients, understand their problems and objectives, and

then customize their solutions to fit those needs (Neeb, 2023). This entails actively paying attention, posing pertinent questions, and checking in frequently to make sure the needs of the customer are being met (Neeb, 2023). This is consistent with the foundations of social exchange theory as understanding client demands, effective communication, teamwork, building trust, and evaluating customer value all play a role in B2B relationships in facilitating the exchange of resources and benefits that lead to successful outcomes (Neeb, 2023).

Successful B2B relationships also depend on effective communication and teamwork (Neeb, 2023). Additionally, effective communicators who can articulate the benefits of their solutions and foster consensus among stakeholders are essential for sales professionals (Mangus, Jones, Folse, & Sridhar, 2020). Collaboration is essential since salespeople must work closely with internal teams to meet the needs of the customer (Chen, 2023; Neeb, 2023). This entails dismantling silos and promoting a collaborative and team-oriented culture (Neeb, 2023). Another essential component of successful B2B relationships is developing trust. In highlighting the importance of trust in developing enduring relationships, Neeb (2023) points out that salespeople need to be trustworthy, open, and dependable, keeping their word and establishing a successful track record. Active listening and a willingness to modify solutions to fit the needs of the customer are other ways to establish trust (Neeb, 2023). Furthermore, creating trust, keeping open and dependable communication, actively listening, and adjusting solutions to meet client needs are processes through which social exchange theory functions, strengthening the foundation of long-term B2B interactions (Neeb, 2023). Ultimately, establishing long-lasting commercial connections requires gauging the value of the customer, wherein companies must adopt a comprehensive perspective of customer value, going beyond immediate financial gain to take into account elements like client satisfaction, loyalty, and lifetime worth (Neeb, 2023). To measure customer value and routinely assess the efficacy of solutions, solid measurements, and procedures must be established (Neeb, 2023).

2.1.2 Trust

In this section, we will review the dimensions and levels of trust mentioned by Ganesan and Hess (1997), as well as the distinction between interorganizational and interpersonal trust (Pavlou, 2002). Additionally, we will delve into the commitment-trust theory, which emphasizes the role that trust and commitment play in creating successful relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

It is essential to clarify that the concept of trust being addressed in this context refers to trust between corporate professionals and entities rather than trust within personal relationships. Trust serves as a fundamental element in human interactions, allowing people to rely on one another and collaborate toward common goals (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). By exploring trust-related dimensions and theories, the study aims to develop an extensive understanding of the dynamics at play in B2B relationships and their significance in generating mutually beneficial outcomes.

2.1.2.1 Dimensions and Levels of Trust

Ganesan and Hess (1997) suggest that trust is a critical factor in the establishment and maintenance of long-term business relationships. They discuss dimensions and various levels of trust in buyer/seller relationships and ultimately identify three key dimensions that affect trust in buyer/seller relationships: ability, benevolence, and integrity. The buyer's belief in the seller's ability to deliver the promised goods or services is referred to as ability (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). This trust dimension is based on the buyer's view of the seller's competence and trustworthiness (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). When a seller repeatedly meets or exceeds the customer's expectations, the buyer is more likely to believe in the seller's abilities (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Benevolence refers to the buyer's notion that the seller is looking out for his or her best interests (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). This trust dimension is based on the buyer's assessment of the seller's motivations and intentions (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). If the buyer believes that the seller is genuinely concerned about his or her well-being, the buyer is more likely to believe in the seller's goodwill (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Moreover, integrity is

referred to as the buyer's belief in the seller's honesty and ethics (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). The buyer's impression of the seller's values and ideals underpins this level of trust (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). The buyer is more inclined to trust the seller's integrity if the buyer believes the seller is honest and ethical (Ganesan & Hess, 1997).

Furthermore, Ganesan and Hess (1997) suggest that trust also has three levels: calculative, affective, and normative. The lowest level of trust is calculative trust, it is based on the economic rationality of the relationship and the buyer's perception of the seller's ability to meet contractual obligations (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). The next level of trust is affective trust, which is based on emotional bonds and interpersonal relationships between the buyer and seller as well as the buyer's belief that the seller is genuine and caring (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). The highest level of trust is normative trust, which is based on social norms and expectations, indicating that the buyers believe that the seller shares the same values and norms as they do (Ganesan & Hess, 1997).

Ganesan and Hess (1997), connect the levels of trust with the dimensions of trust by suggesting each level of trust is related to different dimensions of trust. In particular, the calculative level of trust is linked to the ability dimension of trust since it is predicated on the belief that a trusted person has the abilities, resources, and knowledge to carry out their commitments (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). The benevolence dimension of trust is linked to the affective level of trust since it is founded on an emotional bond or feeling of goodwill towards a trusted partner (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Lastly, the normative level of trust, which relies on a belief that a trusted person upholds ethical and moral principles and will act in accordance with those standards, is linked to the integrity dimension of trust (Ganesan & Hess, 1977; Hosmer, 1995). In this perspective, Ganesan and Hess (1997) suggest that different levels of trust are based on distinct dimensions of trust and that understanding these connections can help companies establish and maintain trust with their customers.

Additionally, the nature of the product or service being sold, the seller's reputation, the buyer's previous experience with the seller, the level of uncertainty in the transaction, and the level of

personal interaction between the buyer and seller also can affect the different dimensions and levels of trust (Ganesan & Hess, 1997).

2.1.2.2 Interorganizational Trust and Interpersonal Trust

Furthermore, Pavlou (2002) suggests that there are two different types of trust vital for building relationships: interpersonal and interorganizational trust. The two must be distinguished since they have different causes and effects (Pavlou, 2002). Interpersonal trust refers to trust between individuals inside an organization and is based on variables such as shared values and norms, as well as personal attributes such as honesty and integrity (Pavlou, 2002). Interpersonal trust is essential for developing solid working relationships within organizations and can help to generate interorganizational trust over time (Pavlou, 2002). Interorganizational trust, on the other hand, is the degree to which two or more organizations engaging in a business exchange feel that each will operate in the best interests of the exchange rather than their own (Pavlou, 2002). This form of trust is based on the capacity, generosity, and integrity of the organization, rather than the trustworthiness of individual people (Pavlou, 2002). Interorganizational trust is essential for effective organizational collaboration and exchange (Pavlou, 2002).

2.1.3 Trust-Building Methods and Strategies

Commitment-trust theory suggests that relationships and interactions between people or groups can lead to the social phenomena of the combination of commitment and trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It emphasizes the significance of vulnerability and taking risks in establishing commitment and trust as well as the function of communication, predictability, and integrity in maintaining it (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In short, when both commitment and trust—rather than just one or the other—are present, successful relational exchanges are more likely to occur that encourage effectiveness, productivity, and efficiency (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In other words, loyalty and trust are the direct causes of cooperative actions that support relationship success (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

The commitment-trust theory also recognizes how institutional frameworks and cultural norms, for example, have an impact on how commitment and trust develop through time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This theory, on the whole, gives a framework for comprehending the intricate dynamics of trust in many circumstances and provides insights into how it can be built and maintained through time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Ganesan and Hess (1997) build on the commitment-trust theory, essentially emphasizing that the levels and dimensions of trust are relevant in the context of commitment-trust theory. By providing a useful framework, the commitment-trust theory enhances comprehension of these complex dynamics (Ganesan & Hess, 1997).

2.1.3.1 Trust-Building Methods in B2B Relationships

Ferro-Soto, Padin, Svensson, and Høgevoid (2022) explore the role of trust as satisfaction in B2B relationships and they essentially stress that trust is crucial as it forms the basis for establishing and maintaining lasting business relationships. They also emphasize how building mutual understanding, cooperation, and collaboration between B2B companies requires trust. Trust allows companies to depend on one another, have faith in each other's objectives and operations and ultimately conduct transactions with each other with less ambiguity and risk (Ferro-Soto et al., 2022).

Moreover, Zaheer, McEvily & Perrone (1998), define trust as the expectation that another business can be relied upon to fulfill its commitment and to act and negotiate honestly, especially in circumstances where there is a chance for opportunism. In the context of B2B relationships, trust refers to the degree of trust a business has in its partner's accountability, integrity, and fairness (Ferro-Soto et al., 2022). It entails a conviction that the other party will behave honorably, uphold its word, and refrain from abusing information asymmetry or power disparities for personal gain (Ferro-Soto et al., 2022). The preceding discussion of the trust-building concept has been expanded upon by the commitment-trust theory. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment is a psychological feature that ties a partner to a course of action that is necessary for a relationship to last. This assumption suggests that greater levels of commitment within a relationship can result in higher levels of trust, which in turn strengthens the positive relationship between commitment and trust (Dowell et al., 2015). The

commitment-trust theory thus adds to the understanding of how important trust is in creating fruitful and long-lasting B2B relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Communication theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the significance of effective communication in establishing and maintaining relationships (Coombs, 2007). According to Littlejohn and Foss (2011), effective communication can promote collaboration, understanding, and cooperation which are crucial elements of trust in B2B relationships. This supports Ferro-Soto et al's (2022) assertion that key dimensions of trust in B2B relationships include communication, transparency, and reliability. These key dimensions of trust are further emphasized by Mangus, et al. (2022) as they stress the importance of communication between salespeople and customers in fostering positive relations by looking at emotions like gratitude and obligation.

Transparency is of great importance in B2B relationships, whether during negotiations or competition, for establishing and maintaining mutual trust (Delina & Olejarova, 2021). Moreover, transparency in a B2B partnership is the openness and sincerity of communication and behavior, entailing information sharing, the disclosure of pertinent information, and being open and honest about one's intentions, abilities, and limitations (Ferro-Soto et al., 2022). Reliability is also argued to be a cornerstone of successful B2B relationships (Guan et al., 2021). In particular, the importance of reliability in B2B relationships is stressed through findings and research implications (Guan et al., 2021). The value of coordination and cooperation in B2B interactions, both of which are essential elements of reliability is heavily emphasized (Guan et al., 2021).

Communication theory examines how communication impacts how relationships create themselves, are maintained, and are repaired (Coombs, 2007). In B2B partnerships, communication is crucial as it allows businesses to discuss expectations, exchange information, negotiate agreements, and settle disputes (Murphy & Sashi, 2017). Establishing trust requires effective communication as it emphasizes transparency, integrity, and understanding among businesses (Coombs, 2007). Effective communication, encompassing

verbal, non-verbal, and written forms, is essential for influencing the nature and outcomes of B2B partnerships (Murphy & Sashi, 2017).

2.1.3.2 Communication Strategies for Trust-Building in Remote Work Environments

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the prevalence of remote work, rendering it more difficult to establish trust in B2B relationships (Fready, Vet & Nyadzayo, 2022). Relational approaches in B2B relationships have been significantly impacted by the decline in face-to-face interaction and the shift to digital transformation, which emphasizes the importance of effective communication strategies to establish and maintain trust in remote work environments (Arslan et al., 2022).

The absence of in-person communication propels the barriers regarding trust in business relationships (Sanfridsson & Öhrn, 2022). Organizations must use various digital communication tools, such as video conferencing, email, and instant messaging, to keep in constant contact with their partners in order to solve this difficulty (Sanfridsson & Öhrn, 2022). These tools allow for more personal interactions which can ultimately contribute to establishing and maintaining trust in remote work environments (Sanfridsson & Öhrn, 2022). The use of digital communication tools during remote work, as suggested by Sanfridsson and Öhrn (2022), supports the social exchange theory in regards to enhancing the amount and quality of resources exchanged for managing effective trust-building. Furthermore, the significance of trust in knowledge sharing among employees working remotely is an essential concept in social exchange theory (Krzyzowska, 2022).

Moreover, firms can establish commitment and trust in remote work environments by maintaining consistent and transparent communication (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022). Corsaro and D'Amico (2022) allude to the commitment trust theory as they emphasize commitment and trust building through the adoption of mutual respect, devotion to partnerships, stability, and predictability. The use of digital communication tools can streamline the procedure of trust and commitment building by enabling real-time communication and cooperation, transparency, and efficiency (Jap & Mohr, 2002).

To further understand effective communication strategies in remote work contexts, knowledge of communication theory is useful. According to this theory, encoding and decoding messages in a way that reduces the possibility of misinterpretation is necessary for effective communication (Coombs, 2007). Organizations should pay extra attention to the clarity, frequency, and tone of their messages in remote work contexts where face-to-face contact is scarce (Coombs, 2007). It is suggested that firms set clear expectations and use consistency in their communication strategies, and by doing so they can lessen the possibility of misunderstandings and foster trust with their partners (Lundqvist, Strandberg & Ljungman, 2022).

2.1.3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on B2B Relationships

B2B relationships have been significantly impacted by the shift to increased remote work, notably in terms of communication, transactions, and collaboration (Arslan et al., 2022). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a huge increase in the use of digital channels for communication (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022). Despite physical distance restrictions, B2B companies have embraced digital communication tools and technologies like email, video conferencing, and chatbots to stay in touch with clients and suppliers (Corsaro et al., 2021). These channels have made it possible for businesses to keep in touch and carry on cooperating (Corsaro et al., 2021). E-commerce platforms and online marketplaces have also grown popular for B2B enterprises to promote and sell their products, allowing them to reach new markets and clients while decreasing costs and boosting efficiency (Antai & Eze, 2023). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged teamwork and collaboration on digital channels (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022).

Moreover, digital platforms are being used by B2B companies to collaborate with their partners on a range of projects, including supply chain management, customer support, and product creation (Arslan et al., 2022). These platforms have assisted companies in cutting costs while enhancing collaboration, efficiency, and production (Arslan et al., 2022). B2B companies have been able to adapt to the new reality and preserve their partnerships by implementing digital channels for communication, transactions, and collaboration (Corsaro & D'Amico, 2022). It is expected that digital platforms will likely be used for transactions and

collaboration even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, giving businesses that invest in digital technologies a competitive advantage (Antai & Eze, 2023).

2.1.3.4 Strategies for Strengthening Trust in B2B Relationships in the Post-COVID Business Environment

B2B connections have been harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and trust-building in the post-COVID business climate is a challenge (Antai & Eze, 2023). Various studies demonstrate that building trust in B2B interactions requires both digitalization and effective communication strategies (Corsaro, et al., 2021; Hofacker, Golgeci, Gopalakrishna Pillai & Gligor, 2020; Pereira, Temouri & Vaz, 2022; Strategic Direction, 2022). Social exchange theory and commitment-trust theory place a strong emphasis on giving priority to each party's needs and proving commitment through action and communication strategies in order to create trust and maintain long-lasting partnerships (Jeong & Oh, 2017; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Given the necessity of prioritizing the needs of all parties, it is critical to investigate how B2B companies handle the obstacles of digital contact in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic while adhering to the concepts of social exchange theory and commitment-trust theory.

The impact of digitalization and COVID-19 on B2B relationships emphasizes the significance of digitalization in fostering B2B connections. Businesses should use digital communication tools and platforms to enhance relationship transparency, collaboration, and communication, ultimately enabling businesses to adapt to the new reality of remote work and digital interactions (Strategic Direction, 2022). Furthermore, for businesses to put sustainability at the forefront of their B2B interactions is of great importance (Pereira et al., 2022). To establish long-lasting, sustainable partnerships, it is suggested that firms should give priority to the requirements of all parties involved, including clients, partners, and suppliers (Pereira et al., 2022).

Another interesting aspect is the suggestion that there is a presence of a close connection between digital marketing and business-to-business interactions (Hofacker et al., 2020).

Companies should have a customer-centric approach to their B2B relationships, which entails being aware of the needs and expectations of their clients and offering tailored solutions (Hofacker et al., 2020). By giving their customers pertinent and tailored content, businesses may increase communication and maintain trust with their customers (Hofacker et al., 2020). Moreover, sales and marketing automation are also crucial in the post-COVID business climate (Corsaro, et al., 2021). Consequently, businesses should prioritize automating their sales and marketing procedures to increase efficiency (Corsaro, et al., 2021). Essentially, automation enables businesses to reduce errors, speed up communication, and offer a smooth client experience, all of which can boost B2B relationships and contribute to the establishment and maintenance of trust (Corsaro, et al., 2021).

2.2 Analytical Framework

The image below (Figure 1) illustrates a comprehensive framework that integrates key factors impacting trust, encompassing the levels of trust by Ganesan and Hess (1997) with their dimensions and Pavlou's (2002) levels of trust. It is vital to acknowledge that while the diagram constitutes trust-building in general, it provides valuable insights for understanding trust dynamics in B2B relationships in a remote setting.

The dimensions of trust—ability, benevolence, and integrity—are vital factors that impact buyer-seller relationships, while the levels of trust—calculative, affective, and normative—illustrate how trust develops over time (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). The diagram emphasizes the significance of interpersonal trust in generating affective trust, which is required for the development of emotional connections and deeper relationships. Similarly, interorganizational trust is essential for generating normative trust, which is required for the establishment of shared values and beliefs. Furthermore, Figure 1 displays how it is essential to first reach interpersonal trust to move on to interorganizational trust. Moreover, in order to effectively build trust in B2B relationships, communication, and commitment lay the foundation for dependability, mutual understanding, and reliability between the parties.

In relation to the research question of this study, the diagram contributes to a more comprehensive understanding and holistic view of the establishment and maintenance of trust in B2B relationships. By focusing on the dimensions and levels of trust, and highlighting interpersonal and interorganizational trust, B2B companies can establish and maintain trust with customers, particularly throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic where digital interactions are more prevalent.

This approach facilitates the development of a normative level of trust, defined by shared values and norms, ultimately contributing to long-term relationships and mutual advantages for both sides. An in-depth analysis of this literature, as represented by this framework, can provide helpful insights into the many variables that affect trust, cooperation, and collaboration between businesses. By incorporating these perceptions into the analysis, the framework can help identify possible problems in B2B relationships and offer workable methods for enhancing and preserving these relationships.

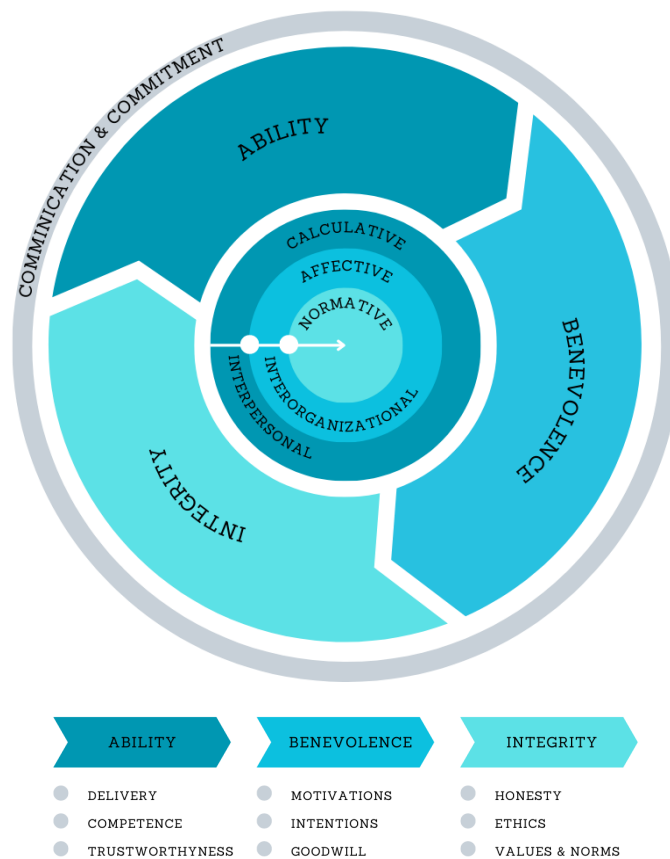


Figure 1 (Own creation, 2023)

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This paper aims to research how B2B companies establish and maintain trust with their clients in a post-pandemic society where in-person contact has decreased due to the restrictions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research strategy used is interpretive qualitative, which is motivated by the need to comprehend the underlying patterns and phenomena relating to trust and trust-building in B2B relationships. In order to direct the research process and understand the empirical results, the role of theory is vital.

The study carries a qualitative approach conducted with an exploratory nature. The qualitative design of the study was implemented to minimize the focus on numerical data analysis and rather focus on understanding the underlying phenomena, including trust and trust-building, as reflected in the collected data (Prasad, 2005). This will enable a distinction of more in-depth patterns and insights on the topic as well as an understanding of the underlying implications from the interviewees regarding how they can establish trust in their B2B relationships with their customers. The study focuses specifically on technology companies active in the Swedish market, considering the industry's adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic and its innovative and digital nature. Sweden was chosen due to its leadership in the technology industry and its emphasis on entrepreneurship in the educational system.

Due to this focus in the method, it is important to highlight the relevant time frame and its implications. On the 17th of March 2020, the Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten) highlighted that employers that have the opportunity would recommend their employees to work from home, as it could prevent the virus from spreading (Krisinformation.se, 2020). This recommendation was in place until 9 February 2022, with the suggestion to make the return systematically (Krisinformation.se, 2022). This time frame will serve as the definition of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the rest of this thesis. The outcome of this situation resulted in Swedish corporations being forced to find alternative

solutions to their previous in-person operations during the in-between period, consequently leading to a large adaptation to digital solutions (Tecklegiorgis, Hashi & Fagundez, 2021).

3.2 Research Design

The research was conducted using a cross-sectional design containing qualitative interviews with participants in managerial positions in technology companies active in the Swedish market. The decision to aim for an interviewing approach allowed for a nuanced and detailed data collection, hopefully providing complex insights into the topic at hand. Throughout the interviews, the research group was open to the possibility that not yet thought-of topics or insights could occur, which is why a semi-structured approach was assessed fitting to the research question to allow participants to highlight unexpected aspects of the research area (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The decision to focus on the technology industry was made with the following in mind. Few industries worldwide were spared when it came to the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). However, according to Ovide (2021), the technology industry showed remarkable resilience during COVID-19 as the demand for digital communication tools increased noticeably, the industry thereby viewing the COVID-19 pandemic as a springboard for success rather than an obstacle. The technology industry is the group of businesses involved in the creation, distribution, or study of products and services with a technological foundation (Frankenfield, 2022). The choice of the technology industry was done with the background of its innovative and digital nature, its dependency on relationships with partners, as well as its previously discussed distinguishing reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ovide, 2021). This possibly puts the technology industry in a first-adopter position, serving as a benchmark for other industries' digital journeys in the future.

To focus on the Swedish market, based on the jurisdictions, restrictions, and recommendations in place in the geographical area, was decided based on the country's prominent position within the technology industry (Fulton & Mukherjee, 2021; Global

Brands, 2022), as well as its entrepreneurial focus within the education system (Hoppe, 2015). The implementation of entrepreneurship education in the Swedish education system has affected the level of entrepreneurial success in the country (Hoppe, 2015). As personal growth, inventiveness, self-reliance, initiative, and action orientation are required for the implementation of entrepreneurship education, success depends on having the right entrepreneurial skills, and entrepreneurship education nurtures these abilities while guiding student business owners in using multi-party interaction to iteratively produce knowledge in the learning network (Hoppe, 2015). This makes Sweden an interesting market of choice. Further, according to statistics published by Statistics Sweden (SCB), the information and technology industry in Sweden was notably working from home to a larger extent than other industries in Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic (from Quarter 3 2020 to Quarter 2 2021) (SCB, 2021).

Moreover, Swedish technology companies such as Spotify, Klarna, and Trustly, among others, have drawn much attention from the media for being successful and innovative (Global Brands, 2022). In an article published in Reuters, it stated that Stockholm is second in startups valued at above \$1 billion/per capita, only surpassed by Silicon Valley (Fulton & Mukherjee, 2021). As Swedish businesses have become famous for being entrepreneurial and innovative in their operations, it is interesting to look into what strategies B2B companies in the Swedish technology industry can adopt in a digital environment to strengthen their trust and to survive and thrive during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand the various types of trust, the study will examine the empirical data through the lens of the analytical framework.

3.2.1 Data Collection

This section will discuss the method applied in the research to reach our results and conclusions. The chapter includes an in-depth description of the study design, including discussions on reliability, validity, and significant qualitative research elements (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability). It addresses the procedure for collecting data, including the methodologies and tools used, as well as aspects such as sample selection, generalizability, and ethical considerations.

The data collection was conducted via semi-structured interviews with 7 participants from different technology companies within the Swedish market. These interviews were attended by either all three researchers or two of them, one acting as a host with the most interaction with the participants and in charge of asking the predetermined interview questions (Appendix 1), while the others/other had the role of observer, with the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to the participant during and after the interview. This was done to minimize participation stress and external pressure from many interviewers while simultaneously ensuring the internal reliability of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The role of the host and observers were alternating among the researchers between the different interviews.

Each semi-structured interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions prepared in advance by the research group, with the opportunity for the researchers to ask follow-up questions during the interviews. The predetermined questions were the same during all interviews, designed to identify what participants view as important related to the topic. The creation of the interview questions in this study was guided by three theoretical viewpoints: social exchange theory, commitment-trust theory, and communication theory. These theories provided a strong foundation for understanding how business relationships, trust, and communication function in the context of the chosen industry and geographical area. By incorporating these theories into the design of the questions the researchers attempted to capture the crucial elements that participants considered as vital in their professional relations.

Social exchange theory was used to design the interview question by highlighting the reciprocal nature of relationships and the benefits individuals derive from them. In the context of business relationships, this theory sheds light on how participants view the exchange of resources, including information, cooperation, and support. The commitment-trust theory-based questions aimed to elicit participants' opinions regarding the degree of commitment and trust present in their relationships with fellow employees, clients, and partners. Further, communication theory played a vital role in forming the design of the interview questions. By drawing on communication theory, the researchers attempted to

reflect on the complex nature of communication in business relationships. In order to understand participants' preferences and experiences in diverse communication contexts, the researchers ensured that the questions covered a variety of communication channels and modes, such as virtual interactions and face-to-face interactions.

The interview questions were designed to be as neutral as possible to avoid leading questions with implicit assumptions affecting the interviewee's thoughts and responses (Mahama & Khalifa, 2020). The reliability of the research is further strengthened by the predetermined questions being written with the receiving participants in mind and a manner to minimize confusion and misunderstandings between researchers and interviewees, and vice versa (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, in one question, participants are asked to personally define a business relationship, and in another, they are given examples of virtual interactions (such as videoconferencing and emails). Further, no complex theoretical concepts were used in the questions asked, but rather used language adopted for the expected knowledge based on the professional position of participants such as business relationship, business to business, trust, remote work, and face-to-face/in-person, minimizing the risk of participants misunderstanding the question, (Mahama & Khalifa, 2020). The participants received the interview guide prior to the interview, increasing the participant's comfort within the interview setting, which in turn helped strengthen the dependability of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The interviews were conducted over the digital communication tool Teams. This was decided based on the preference of the interviewees as well as geographical distance. Even though the interviews conducted digitally make it harder for researchers to catch on to the body language and ensure that the interview environment has minimal distractions, it allows the research to incorporate, otherwise unavailable, valuable participants, due to distances or tight schedules. Further, it allows for interviewees to be more comfortable and freely, attending the interview from a location of their preference (Mahama & Khalifa, 2020).

Each interview had a duration of approximately 30-50 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. The recording and transcription during the interview were done by the Artificial

Intelligence tool Otter.ai. The choice of the interviews being recorded and transcribed allowed the researchers to stay present and attentive during the interview, allowing for a more natural and relaxed interview where the participants feel listened to and therefore comfortable sharing honest and elaborative answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Mahama & Khalifa, 2020).

Furthermore, the recording and transcription minimize the loss of information covered during the interview, and are therefore subject to thorough examination, allowing for repeated examination (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A backup recording was taken on an iPhone. This was done to minimize the risk of poor recording quality or falling out from the first recording.

Furthermore, this increases transparency, as it opens up the data for peer scrutiny for biases held by the research group (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The transcription was later checked and corrected by a member of the research group. More detailed information regarding each individual interview can be found in Appendix 2.

3.2.2 Participants

The sample in the data collection consists of 7 companies in the technology industry active in the Swedish market. The sample consists of companies of varying sizes and focuses. The broader range of companies was picked to capture a holistic view of the chosen industry, independent of variables such as company size, revenue, or specific focus. To ensure that the data collected was diverse and multifaceted, managers from various companies within the selected industry were interviewed. These managers had different types of positions and levels of seniority, allowing for a broader range of perspectives and insights to be gathered. Thus contributing to a more nuanced and well-developed basis for the analysis of the data (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Furthermore, these managers have thorough insights into the external relationships with other businesses of their company. This indicates high knowledge of the topic of investigation, strengthening the richness and depth of the collected data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). No interviewees were representing the same company, and the participants do not have knowledge of which companies the other participants represent. The sample of 7 participants interviewed was based on convenience as the research group had some connections within the chosen industry, making scheduling interviews more accessible. Since the chosen sample is largely based on convenience, generalizability might

be weak. However, this research can be helpful and act as a springboard for future research within the field.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

The data analytical process was initiated by timely evaluating the collected data, discussing the findings directly after each interview as well as going through the transcribed interviews. This led to identifying and establishing patterns in the collected data. The patterns were thereafter sorted into different broader themes based on their association with the research question. These themes were thereafter discussed and evaluated by the research group which led to a few main themes being identified and deemed relevant to enable answering the research question. The main themes identified were: Implications of trust challenges in B2B relationships in a remote setting, Establishing trust in B2B companies in a remote setting, and the emergence of a hybrid work style. These themes were thereafter sorted into more focused subthemes. Each member of the research group processed the data by reviewing the transcribed interviews, picking out relevant quotes, and categorizing them into different subthemes. These subheadings were all analyzed through the identification of commonalities and variations.

The analysis process was initiated by identifying the challenges related to remote work, as this knowledge is essential to be able to answer the research question. Three overarching areas were identified: the challenges to establishing new relationships, the lack of small talk, and establishing trust in a remote setting taking longer time. The analysis process then went on to identify highlighted measures to establish trust in a remote setting which brought up aspects of partnership and interpersonal trust in a B2B relationship as well as the importance of creating dependable delivery, reliability, and simplicity for the customers. It was distinguished that the identified challenges did not fully align with the suggested trust-establishing processes. With this in mind, in combination with the last theme identified during the data collection, the focus on a hybrid work style became increasingly interesting. The sub-themes identified highlight that a hybrid work style will likely be the future way to handle B2B relationships, with a large emphasis on the positive aspects of such a solution.

However, there were also tendencies indicating that face-to-face interaction will still play an important role in certain situations. These themes and subthemes can assist in answering the research question by bringing up relevant challenges, whether they are approached or if other aspects of trust become increasingly important. Furthermore, they contribute to the discussion on the emergence of a new approach adapted to a post-pandemic world.

Further, our qualitative research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will be assessed through Lincoln & Guba's (1985;1994, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011) four criteria. Firstly, the research's credibility was strengthened by the process of all researchers reviewing the empirical data individually, highlighting their findings and insights, which were later reviewed and discussed by the whole group to identify relevant themes (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The discussion in turn assessed the common findings theoretically to establish a clear connection between empirical findings and theory. By describing the research setting in detail, including the participant selection criteria, the industry emphasis, and the variety of managerial positions and seniority levels covered in the interviews, transferability is addressed. This information enables readers to assess if the research findings may apply to different contexts or settings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To strengthen the dependability, the records of different phases of the research process are kept and could be accessed if necessary (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This makes peer auditing possible if requested, and ensures that proper procedures are and have been followed. A high frequency in our reviews of our findings supported us in achieving as high confirmability and objectivity as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.2.4 Ethical Considerations

To ensure an ethical research process and avoid ethical issues such as harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception, several considerations have been made. Firstly, before the participation agreement, the interviewees were informed about the researchers as well as the supervisor's real names. Additionally, the interviewed participants of the study are participating voluntarily and have been informed about the true purpose of the research and its regards. These measures ensure informed consent is given by

the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, the participants are given the Interview Guide (Appendix 1) before the start of the interview, and they are informed about their opportunity to skip a question or stop their participation immediately at any time, ensuring participants are aware of their rights and privacy (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, to avoid deception and further strengthen ethical research, participants have been informed of and have given their consent to being recorded for the purpose of the interview, the research, and the reliability of the data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2011). They are further informed that this will not be shared with third parties, including other participants of the research, to maintain privacy and avoid harm to the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, the participants of the study are informed about their assured privacy and that their name, company name, and other relevant information that could connect a participant to the study will not be disclosed or identifiable in the report. As the study relies on participant self-reported data, which may be prone to social desirability bias or inaccurate recollection, precautions have been taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in the data collecting procedure in order to reduce these potential biases. This further mitigates risks and harm to participants, as well as leads to more honest and accurate empirical data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2011). All participants are offered to receive a copy of the finished rapport, to work towards reciprocity, where the participants can gain from the results (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

4. Results

To be able to answer the research question it becomes clear that challenges affecting B2B companies in a remote work setting need to be recognized. This resulted in these challenges being identified as the first overarching theme in the findings. Secondly, the highlighted trust-establishing actions in a remote setting are addressed. Lastly, a perspective of the possible future for trust building in B2B relationships is presented with a focus on a hybrid solution.

4.1 Implications of Trust Challenges in B2B Relationships in a Remote Work Setting

The first identified theme in the interviews was the challenges in building trust in B2B relationships in a remote setting. In this section, three sub-themes are presented to highlight the different issues pinpointed by the participants: Challenges in establishing new relationships, Challenges of lack of small talk, and Establishing trust takes a longer time in a remote setting.

4.1.1 Challenges in Establishing Trust: Establishing New B2B Relationships

The participants highlighted the difficulty to connect and establish relationships with new customers during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to maintaining their old ones. The following quotes stress the issues experienced by the participants.

If you are having a new relationship with a totally new customer, or if you should sell anything new [sic], it is always easier to have a face-to-face meeting with them. - Interview 1

If it is an old relationship, if it is an old customer, let us say [...] you have met them also before COVID. Maybe then I think the trust is still there. There is no difference.[...]. But if it is a quite new relationship so you do not exactly know each other, then it will have an impact on the trust. - Interview 1

So we can also say during the COVID [pandemic] that it is [sic] both positive and also negative for us for the existing relationship, it is positive because then we can keep our customers and relationship easier. But it is also hard to bring in new ones because they are not open to look for new partners and new relationships with us. That it is easier to prolong an existing one. - Interview 1

The quotes from Interview 1 emphasize the difficulties of establishing trust in new relationships or selling to new consumers in a digital environment, essentially highlighting that face-to-face meetings are easier. Delivery, reliability, and simplicity appear as significant in the early stages of a relationship, when personal encounters are crucial, thus highlighting the need for calculative trust and its relationship to the ability dimension. The individual also acknowledges that preserving current business relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic is easier because trust has already been established with previous clients.

Similar ideas were shared in Interview 2 where the participant highlighted the difficulty of establishing new clients and business relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview 5 also shared similar thoughts, emphasizing the challenges of establishing trust when there is no past experience with a company. Additionally, Interview 6 highlighted the issue of remote interactions possibly creating misunderstanding.

I could also see that during the [COVID-19] pandemic, it was normal that the business continued with our clients and the network that you had before. It was much harder to build new relationships and create new business with new clients. - Interview 2

If you have a relation, an already good relation, the virtual interaction is not a problem [...]but if you should build it from the start it is difficult. - Interview 5

It is very very difficult to feel that you come into[the customers] into the skin so to say [sic]. If you do not have a relationship with a company before then it is difficult. So even if it is the

first time or the second time, we have virtual meetings, still we want to work to come to them and meet them. - Interview 5

We see each other now, but I have no clue what you are thinking if we do not sit in the same room, [...]But if we would sit around the table it is a lot easier to feel the vibes - Interview 6

If you have a well established relationship. [Remote work is] fine. - Interview 6

Overall, the participants underlined the benefits of face-to-face meetings and personal rapport while highlighting the challenges of establishing trust in new connections. They also note how much easier it is to maintain existing relationships through digital interactions and communication tools. Having established business clients demonstrates a higher level of trust, indicating interorganizational trust, as it shows confidence not only between people but between businesses. These challenges in developing interpersonal trust may jeopardize benevolence and integrity and affect elements like goodwill, intention, and integrity, which could subsequently impact calculative and normative trust.

4.1.2 Challenges in Establishing Trust: Lack of Small Talk

The second challenge identified during the interviews was the lack of small talk in between meetings which was highlighted as being of great importance when creating a higher level of trust. Participants experience small talk as something natural in a face-to-face situation, but something more inaccessible in a remote setting.

What you are losing in a Teams meeting is [...] these coffee machine [sic] discussions between the meetings - Interview 1

The participant in Interview 1 highlighted the lack of coffee machine discussion in between meetings, alluding to the casual, off agenda, conversations that take place prior and in between meetings. By using the word losing the interviewee implies that the coffee machine talks are important in the business setting.

[In a remote setting] You do not have this interaction when you stand with a coffee machine. Sitting on the table [sic] taking a coffee with some of the clients and talk about other things, other challenge, other problems, other needs and you do not get that by a digital solution because then one might have an agenda - Interview 2

You will not have those casual discussions by the coffee machine or somewhere else [in a remote setting]. You will just be doing the main topics. - Interview 7

Similarly, in Interview 2 and 7, the participants highlight the importance of face-to-face interactions, notably citing chats at the coffee machine. These informal chats include issues other than current corporate concerns, such as difficulties, dilemmas, and personal interests. The participants compare these genuine, human dialogues to digital communication tools, which frequently favor agendas, making it difficult to reproduce the same level of connection and trust-building. This suggests the benevolence dimension of trust may be affected as motivations, intentions, and goodwill may not be clear. This dimension is important in order to reach the higher levels of trust, such as affective trust and normative trust.

Likewise, the participant in Interview 5 highlights the importance of in-person interactions for creating closer bonds in order to establish trust.

When you are [...] in a video meeting, it is difficult to get so close that you can when [sic] you are in a meeting. And when you take the hand and say hi, and go to the coffee machine and talk about [...] the hockey games last night. - Interview 5

[In a digital setting] you hold you [sic] to the agenda a little bit more than you do when you are in real life because sometimes: 'okay, okay, should we have a coffee break now?' And then when you get to another discussion, outside the meeting rooms, and all of that interaction with the coffee machine or whatever. I think it builds trust because we could, we could take [sic] other discussions that make the [customer] feel that we are easy to work with. We are interested. We are very humble. - Interview 5

The first quote from Interview 5 emphasizes the difficulties in creating a close relationship and trust in a video meeting compared to an in-person meeting. The participant emphasizes the importance of physical proximity in establishing a closer bond, such as shaking hands or engaging in casual talks at the coffee machine. The mention of things such as hockey games underlines the personal and informal nature of these conversations. According to the participant, such personal relationships help to create trust. As mentioned earlier, this is consistent with the idea of affective trust. Moreover, the aspect of interpersonal trust, in which personal rapport and shared experiences, also play an important role. The participant recognizes the challenge of simulating these interactions in a remote environment, as well as the possible impact on trust-building.

In the same interview, the participant discusses how sticking to the agenda in digital meetings can limit opportunities for spontaneous talks and small talk. The participant believes that casual chats outside of meeting rooms, such as interactions at the coffee machine, can help to create trust. According to the participant, these casual chats make the organization appear easy to deal with, interesting, and humble, encouraging mutual confidence. This lends credence to the idea that small chats and casual interactions contribute to the formation of trust, particularly affective trust. As suggested by the participant, establishing trust in a digital context, through digital communication tools, becomes more difficult without this form of engagement.

Moreover, the participant in Interview 6 highlighted the same issue regarding the lack of small talk and its possible consequences.

A number of people do not ever come to the office. And I think that is actually a very big disadvantage because they cannot be part of the talks around the coffee machine. They do not know what the latest and the greatest and [...] that will also impact the B2B relation because they don't have the latest information in many cases. - Interview 6

Personally, I felt extremely tired after a while, because there is no chit chat between meetings [in a digital setting]. There is no, [...] that you feel energy by others in the office, you just sit behind the computer from morning to evening. After a while, I mean, how productive are you?

- Interview 6

The absence of small talk, such as conversations around the coffee machine, is an issue according to the participant because the lack of communication between business individuals can affect the information flow. By not having these informal conversations, the interviewee implies that the individuals doing business are not always updated on news related to the business environment. Moreover, the participant highlights digital fatigue as another consequence of the lack of small talk affecting productivity and the execution of business. Consequently, delivery, competence, and trustworthiness may be affected as productivity can impact the level of delivery and competence, and subsequently, impact the trustworthiness if the company does not deliver what is promised. The lowest level of trust, calculative trust, can then be affected if the ability dimension of trust is jeopardized. This would be devastating for B2B relationships as the presence of trustworthiness is essential to be in business with one another.

4.1.3 Challenges in Establishing Trust: Establishing Trust in a Remote Work Setting takes a Longer Time

The third identified theme within the challenges of building trust in B2B relationships was the aspect of time. The participants emphasized that building trust takes time.

Trust, it takes two minutes to erase trust. But it takes a very very long time to build it

-Interview 5

It is more difficult to build that [deeper]trust. That fast trust, so to say, you could build trust over [digital communication tools] of course but the thinking is you need to work more and maybe longer to get that trust. - Interview 5

These quotes in Interview 5 shed light on how time-consuming it is to create trust in B2B relationships, particularly how trust is a critical component that demands significant time and effort to establish and maintain. The first quote highlights the vulnerability of trust, noting that it can be quickly undermined by a few adverse actions or judgments. Establishing trust, on the other hand, is a time-consuming and sophisticated process that necessitates significant effort, emphasizing how trust requires a long-term commitment to establishing positive encounters, consistent behavior, and dependable acts.

The second quote implies that trust cannot be created or achieved quickly. Instead, trust is viewed as being more difficult to create quickly. The interviewee admits that creating trust takes more effort and requires a longer time frame in a remote setting. This viewpoint emphasizes the gradual nature of trust development, highlighting the importance of continued interactions, consistent performance, and a track record of dependability in order to cultivate trust between parties when working through digital interactions.

Another point of view of establishing trust taking time in a remote setting is the cultural aspect mentioned in Interview 6.

I do believe that the hybrid way of working with different cultures is tougher. To build trust between different cultures, it is difficult, it's more time consuming. [...]. If you have a German together with an American, I mean, it can be extremely hard to get the message through so I think it is important [to] never underestimate the culture dimension [sic]. [...]. I do believe that the hybrid way of working with different cultures is tougher. - Interview 6

The participant in interview 6 highlights the aspect of difficulties in establishing trust between different cultures. Working with individuals from different cultures can make it more difficult and time-consuming to establish trust, even more so in a remote setting, according to the interviewee. This implies that the highest level of trust, normative trust, is affected as the level of integrity will be difficult to achieve as norms and values may differ between cultures. Without a culture-specific for the context or relationship, creating mutual goals and values could be challenging, hence affecting the trust within the relationship.

4.2 Establishing Trust in B2B Companies in a Remote Work Setting

The interviews revealed a second prominent theme focused on establishing trust in a remote work setting. Within this section, three distinct sub-themes are identified: collaboration and partnership, interpersonal trust, and reliability, delivery and simplicity.

4.2.1 Establishing Trust: Collaboration and Partnership in B2B Relationships

A common theme emphasizing how to establish trust, that several interviewees touched upon, was the importance of treating B2B relationships figuratively as partnerships, rather than mere supplier-customer relationships. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration to reach success for all parties involved in order to establish long-lasting business relationships between themselves and their customers.

It is more of a marriage you can say, so we need to cooperate very closely together to have success. And if someone fails, all fails in the ecosystem - Interview 1

...it is more a partnership. Because if we fail, they fail. If they fail, we fail. - Interview 1

The quotes from Interview 1 emphasize the significance of normative trust as words such as marriage and partnership indicate commitment. This also indicates a strong commitment to cooperation and mutual success by aligning expectations. In the second quote, the interviewee describes a B2B relationship as more of a partnership considering that if one fails the other will too. This can affect benevolence and integrity as one may question the motivation, intentions, goodwill, and ethics of the actions. Moreover, the second quote emphasizes the need for affective trust, which is defined by a sense of interconnectedness and emotional bonds, highlighting how vital it is for partners to develop strong relationships and an understanding of shared objectives.

In the Interview 2, the participant presents similar thoughts of partnership.

We are a partner to our clients. That is trying to give them complete support. - Interview 2

By highlighting the importance of being partners in the B2B relationship, the dimension of benevolence indicates that the seller's desire and intention is to genuinely support their customers. A sense of goodwill and real concern for the success of the customer must be established in order to build this type of trust, affective trust.

...it needs to be a partnership and it needs to be a win-win situation where we both feel that we benefit from working with each other. - Interview 3

Interviewee 3 implies that B2B companies have a high dependency on each other and highlights the importance of commitment in such relationships, emphasizing the importance of mutual dedication and reliability in establishing trust and ensuring the success of collaborations.

We fix [an issue] together. That is another thing that I also think is very important. We do it together. - Interview 5

It always comes down to what you deliver and how we work together. So I think that the best way to keep and strengthen the relationship is doing things together. - Interview 7

The quote from Interview 5 emphasizes the value of calculative trust in B2B relationships. This type of trust is based on keeping promises and meeting contractual obligations. It demonstrates how important it is for both parties to comprehend the worth and benefits of the partnership. Lastly, the quote highlights the value of interpersonal trust, which is built on honesty, integrity, and effective interpersonal communication. It also emphasizes the collaborative nature of problem-solving and working together toward solutions. Further, interviewee 7 also highlights the importance of delivery, which will be addressed in section 4.2.3.

4.2.2 Establishing Trust: The Importance of Interpersonal Trust

Another theme that emerged from the conducted interviews is the importance of individuals in a firm's success, as opposed to relying exclusively on the firm as a whole. It is highlighted how there is a need for solid personal relationships between individuals to reach a good business relationship.

Business is done between people. It is not done between companies. So if you have a bad feeling and you do not really like someone and you do not really know each other, then it is also easier to change the supplier-decision, to change us, if it is easier for [the customer].

-Interview 1

The first quote specifically emphasizes that clients are more likely to switch suppliers when there is a lack of familiarity or poor feelings between individuals, emphasizing the value of interpersonal trust. Moreover, interpersonal trust is a key component in building strong B2B relationships, evident in the emphasis on individuals in fostering business success and the necessity of good personal relationships.

It is normally not organizations that are doing business, it is people and if you do not have the connection and interaction, the physical one, you miss a lot. - Interview 2

[To establish trust] you have to have many interaction points with the client because that is how you build presence within them. - Interview 2

It is important to have not just one person at our company working with one person at that company we like to make many connections with the client because then you get stronger together. If someone quits at the client side, it should not ruin the whole operation.

- Interview 4

The most important thing is to communicate. Yeah. And that is where it comes back to. It needs to be more regular short communications when you work remote. -Interview 6

The participant in the second interview highlighted the importance of having physical interactions as well as multiple interaction points with the customer to build a presence in order to establish trust and have a strong relationship. This is again in line with interpersonal trust, essential to reach the higher levels of trust, affective and normative trust. By emphasizing that it is individuals that conduct the business rather than the organization the participant underlines the importance of face-to-face interaction. This further calls attention to the significance of interpersonal trust in establishing trust in B2B relationships. Additionally, the interviews underline that developing reliability, credibility, and mutual understanding requires frequent client engagement, numerous points of contact as well as the development of a sense of community among coworkers. The empirical findings further highlight the value of interpersonal trust in enhancing business performance, cultivating a positive work environment, and essentially facilitating effective collaboration.

Interviewee 6 shares similar thoughts regarding the need to have face-to-face interactions in B2B relationships.

At least quarterly or in worst case, every six months, you need to meet, even the ones that hate to meet in person needs to be in the office. You need to have a full day or [...] one evening [...] because there is always needs to meet. So do not underestimate the importance of meeting each other from time to time. Because otherwise the dynamics, it [sic] will be impacted. -

Interview 6

The quote accentuates the value of developing connections with clients and coworkers to forge successful and long-lasting B2B relationships. It highlights the importance of people in establishing fruitful business ties and the critical role that interpersonal relationships and physical contact can play in fostering these relationships. Additionally, the quote stresses the indispensability of frequent client interaction in developing a strong presence and a cohesive team capable of navigating unforeseen changes or challenges.

4.2.3 Establishing Trust: Dependable Delivery, Reliability, and Simplicity

Another frequent theme that appeared in the interview was that trust develops over time and can be strengthened by dependable, high-quality products and service delivery. Keeping commitments is also crucial for establishing trust as it shows dependability and reliability. Participants also emphasized the value of simplicity and directness in fostering trust. The findings revealed how honest and transparent communication can help set expectations and ensure that everyone is on the same page.

4.2.3.1 Dependable Delivery and Understanding Clients for Trust-Building

Throughout the interviews, it could be identified that B2B companies need to have an understanding of their customers and deliver what is promised. This is emphasized by the following quotes:

You have to invest a lot in understanding the client. You have to keep your promises, that is[...][the] number one thing. If you promise something to the client, you need to deliver.

- Interview 2

Number one is keep your promises. Number two.. [...]build your trust and understand your client, so the one that can actually describe something in a manner that the client can directly understand and feel it, trust it. Then you are very, very close to getting a new offer and a new business deal. So you have to know your client and be close to them because otherwise you cannot understand it. - Interview 2

The best way of keeping the network, keeping the trust, create new business opportunity is to deliver well in the deal that you already have in many, many companies - Interview 2

Without physical interaction and that, trust will be much lower, it will decrease over time. Without the physical interactions and discussions and all of that because it is one thing to sit here and promise something to you and say something to you we have a distance between each other. - Interview 2

Understanding the client, doing a lot of research to understand them and have [sic]the knowledge and expertise and be [sic]able to show it through dialogue. - Interview 7

These quotes by the participant in Interview 2 emphasize, to a great extent, the calculative level of trust by denoting the value of delivering on your promises and consistently providing quality. Moreover, relating to the calculative aspect of trust, the dimension concerning ability is also prominently underlined through a strong emphasis on delivery, competence, and trustworthiness. In addition, the findings further accentuate calculative trust by stressing the importance of doing well in existing negotiations for maintaining trust and developing new business prospects. Moreover, the quotes from Interview 2 and 7 underline the importance of developing affective trust by being aware of the client's needs. The quote from Interview 7 further highlights the significance of clients' needs by communicating in a manner that appeals to them and developing a connection that inspires confidence and dependability.

Interviewee 3 has similar ideas as displayed by the following statement:

[Trust is established and maintained] By delivering quality, [...] that is what the trust is based on, is that we actually deliver what we say we need, that we deliver quality. That is the most important part. Then also, being simple and easy and straightforward. Doing Business, being honest. - Interview 3

Moreover, the participant from Interview 3 used words like honest, simple, and straightforward, essentially suggesting the importance of the integrity aspect trust, based on honesty and ethical behavior. Overall, the statements strongly suggest that commitment and communication play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining trust in B2B relationships. The importance of honesty as highlighted by interviewee 3, leads to the next section on transparency.

4.2.3.2 Establishing Trust through Transparency

Lastly, the participants underlined the importance of showing transparency with their customers in order to establish and maintain honest and trusting relationships.

I believe in transparency and honesty, and the collaborative, honest, open, kind of way to both build trust and to do good business. Being simple, easy and straightforward. Doing Business by being honest. Then you get a win win. - Interview 3

Do not promise too much and deliver what you say. Always try to be honest. -Interview 4

Sometimes maybe you need to think a little bit of what you are saying but openness, to be very open is a very good strategy - Interview 5

[Establishing and maintaining trust] Do you want me to be open and transparent? Because that you can be in face-to-face when you have no devices in the room. - Interview 6

*Have [sic] good dialogue and being very transparent [create and maintain trust].
- Interview 7*

I think we we do a lot of winning in being honest, if we do not see that this is relevant or we will do the best job here. I think that is a typical example when the clients always come back very happy and grateful that we are [sic] honest. - Interview 7

The quotes above from the interviewees bring attention to how crucial it is to be open, honest, and transparent in order to establish and maintain trust in B2B partnerships. Additionally, they emphasize that building trust requires keeping your word and getting to know your customers. The participant's statements reflect the significance of integrity in trust. Additionally, they stress the importance of affective and normative trust, which is demonstrated by emotional bonds, transparent communications, and shared values. Underscoring the vitality of interpersonal trust, it is emphasized that comprehending each person's unique characteristics and needs is necessary for building trust. Interpersonal trust is further brought to light in the

quote by interviewee 6 as the participant suggests that without physical interaction, transparency can be compromised and affect the trust.

It is identified that the actions which the respondents emphasize as important aspects to establish and maintain trust with their customers are not fully corresponding to the identified challenges. None of these suggested methods eliminates the issue of establishing new relationships in a remote setting and the same is true for the issue of the lack of small talk and prolonged time frame to establish trust in a remote setting. This implies that some of these highlighted solutions are trying to compensate for the loss of face-to-face interaction, and thereby interpersonal trust, rather than work as a direct solution. This finding therefore paves the way for an interesting discussion and the final findings which highlights the benefits but also other implications of a hybrid work model.

4.3 A Hybrid Work Style Emerges

The last common theme that arose from the interviews was the suggestions of how the future of B2B connections in a post-pandemic world will feature a hybrid style of working that blends in-person interactions with remote work. Participants mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic has driven many companies to adopt remote work, and they have found that it can be a productive way of working because it can help to lower travel costs and enhance productivity by sticking to agendas.

4.3.1 Navigating a Post-Pandemic World: The Future is Hybrid

Even though remote work solutions, in many instances, were a newer working strategy for B2B companies before the COVID-19 pandemic, the empirical data suggests that in the future, they will continue to work remotely to at least some extent.

So I think the hybrid way of working will still exist. - Interview 1

...we are working more and more against a hybrid version [of working] - Interview 1

[Hybrid work] is also here to stay. - Interview 2

I believe it will be kind of a mix in the future [...] what we have learned from this is that we can make things much better in some ways but still try to have fun physical meetings. -

Interview 4

I think the remote work is here to stay. [...] we cannot fight it. And I do not think we should fight it. - Interview 6

In the long term, I think this type of hybrid and more partnership with the clients will be the way forward. - Interview 7

These quotes from the interviewees display a trend of openness towards a remote work environment, and to an even larger extent, towards the combination of digital interaction and face-to-face communication. The findings suggest that hybrid solutions will become the new normal in a business setting. This seems to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic period where people got used to the digital way of interacting and working, displaying the opportunities and possibilities connected to them. Remote work has shown the positive aspects and opportunities of digital interaction, which businesses are eager to proceed with. Participants in the research generally expressed positive views of a hybrid work solution, even though they were generally agreeing that there is a need for an in-person interaction to establish a trusting relationship.

4.3.2 Navigating a Post-Pandemic World: The Benefits of a Hybrid Work

The interviews discussed the positive aspects of a hybrid work setup, which are as follows:

Mostly benefits I would say [to a hybrid work solution]and also benefits for clients and because they do have access to a much larger talent pool when they do not require people to be on site all the time. - Interview 3

Now we believe in the online conference, it is a lot easier, faster to have meetings, more flexible. We believe, before COVID, it was a hassle to get to a meeting and a physical meeting and okay, we go to Stockholm next week and everyone should check their calendars and book flights, hotel rooms and things so we believe it is much easier to do quick meetings.

- Interview 4

Before the [COVID-19] pandemic basically, you did phone calls, or you [...] booked a meeting and visited them. So [...] we drove a lot more to the clients and were out there a lot more. And now we can have a lot of more [sic] meetings through Teams or Zoom, so it shifted a lot. - Interview 7

[Remote work] also makes it easier, and it saves time. - Interview 7

I think [a hybrid solution] is a must. I think it is positive. People can manage picking up kids from school [...] you can get more hours done. [...] I think it is going to be very important to keep talents but also to have a great work life balance. [...]. [Workers] will not be interested in just being in one place all the time, then I think we cannot keep competence if we are forcing people to be in one area the whole time. - Interview 7

The participants highlight the efficiency that comes with remote working solutions as travel times are cut, that it enables to fit more meetings, but also that digital communication tools enable the skilled workforce to take on tasks that would otherwise be impossible or require long, expensive travel. Such solutions where a B2B company can use their human assets more efficiently could be the difference between being able to deliver their promised product to their client or not, and as identified previously lead to a higher level of trust. Hence, they play a major part in the positive aspect of hybrid work. One of the participants also emphasized that the demand from the workforce has changed and that offering a hybrid work solution to their workers is essential to keep competence within the company, consequently strengthening the deliverance to customers, further strengthening the calculative trust.

4.3.3 Navigating a Post-Pandemic World: Face-to-Face Interactions Continued Role in Establishing Trust

Furthermore, when remote work is addressed as a part of a hybrid working solution, the empirical data suggests that face-to-face meetings and interpersonal trust will still play a major part in the trust-building process.

...maybe you can have a pre meeting, before a physical face-to-face meeting. To also crisp is down to having a more efficient face to face instead of maybe having a full day workshop. So if you have a pre meeting, everyone can prepare exactly the topics and milestones beforehand for the meeting so instead of eight hours you can maybe have two or three hours face to face-to-face meeting because everyone is prepared. - Interview 1

...if you have met them face to face, then it is much easier to do the follow up in zoom or in teams later on. - Interview 1

In the end, you will not get away from the physical meetings. I think that is where we [...] can do the workshops and do longer meetings, but [...] the quickest check ins or [...] getting the first information, it is easier to do through Teams. You can just [have], lighter, less formal meetings - Interview 7

It needs to stabilize somewhere in these different extremes between everything in one place and to being [sic] off site.[...] I do believe that somewhere in the middle would be the perfect way. - Interview 7

As displayed by these quotes, the interpersonal trust connections will still be built through in-person meetings, as it is essential to create the initial connection with new customers and build trust. However, pure information can be distributed in a remote setting. Interviewee 7 also highlights that a hybrid setting allows for less complex relationships with international customers. The findings suggest that the early negotiation meetings as well as important meetings where big deals or similar are discussed are still to be handled with an in-person

approach, while other less important meetings, with more “follow-up” characteristics, are streamlined by being held through digital communication tools. In this way, B2B companies would be able to maintain the same frequent communication with their customers as they are used to, which has been identified as a key aspect for the higher levels of trust, affective and normative. Interviewee 7 also emphasizes the importance of trying to find a balance between an in-person and a remote work setting. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a hybrid work setting could work as a great solution to both establish and maintain the trust, while leveraging the efficiency of digital communication tools.

4.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, the study’s findings provide insight into how B2B companies establish and maintain trust in relationships with customers through digital interaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the challenges and potential solutions raised by the participants, the research question, “*How do B2B companies establish and maintain trust in relationships with customers through digital interaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*” was addressed.

The first theme focused on the challenges of establishing trust in B2B relationships. The lack of small talk, the difficulty in forming new relationships, and the time frame needed to establish trust in a remote setting were all emphasized by participants. While maintaining current relationships was perceived as relatively simpler due to already established trust, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the challenges of connecting and building relationships with new clients. Since virtual meetings alone were found to be less effective in establishing interpersonal trust, it was emphasized how crucial in-person encounters and human connections are to establishing trust. The need for maintenance of interpersonal trust, even in already established relationships was also highlighted. Also brought up were the challenges of miscommunication resulting from remote interactions.

The second theme emphasized approaches to establishing trust in a B2B relationship in a remote setting. The importance of collaboration and partnership in establishing trust in B2B

relationships was emphasized. The significance of treating B2B relationships as partnerships rather than mere supplier-customer relationships were underlined, emphasizing the importance of a multidimensional trust framework. Further, it was significantly emphasized that business is conducted between people and a company's success depends on its employees, thus highlighting the necessity of interpersonal trust. The findings also stressed how important consistent delivery, reliability, simplicity, and transparency are in establishing trust. The findings showed that while the identified solutions address some challenges, they may not fully align with the complex nature of establishing trust in B2B relationships.

The last theme highlighted the view of a future where a hybrid with a combination of both in-person as well as digital interactions, would be considered the norm. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have sparked an insight into the efficiency that remote work could entail, minimizing travel times, sticking to agendas in meetings as well as adhering to a new demand from the workforce. These benefits are emphasized while simultaneously stressing the importance of in-person interactions in new business relationships as well as during important meetings and negotiations to establish the essential trust. The findings suggest that there needs to be a balance between the two extremes. Consequently, a hybrid work setting could target both the newfound efficiency as well as allow for a strong trust establishment and maintenance.

Overall, the results indicate that establishing and maintaining trust in B2B relationships through digital interaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic requires addressing the identified challenges and implementing potential solutions. This entails acknowledging the challenges of forming new relationships remotely, identifying strategies to promote interpersonal trust, ensuring dependable delivery, reliability, and encouraging transparency and simplicity in communication. These aspects could be solved through the newer approach of a hybrid work solution. This could allow for a balance between the newfound efficiency due to digital interactions, while simultaneously allowing for in-person interpersonal trust building. By considering these aspects, B2B companies may overcome the challenges to trust and establish strong, long-lasting relationships.

5. Discussion

There has been an identified knowledge gap in how to establish and maintain trust in B2B relationships in regard to the new context of remote work as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this research have therefore aimed to address this gap and consequently highlight patterns identified in this new context in order to answer the research question. Furthermore, in previous B2B literature trust has been taken for granted, frequently viewed as a single undifferentiated term while ignoring its complexity. In contrast, this study aims to contribute by adopting a comprehensive framework that combines two theoretical approaches of trust to the B2B relationship context. Thus, by taking into account the complexity and nuanced aspects of trust, this study offers a more thorough examination and deeper analysis of trust dynamics in B2B relationships.

5.1 Partnership and Collaboration in Establishing and Maintaining Trust

As seen in the empirical data, it is of high importance for B2B companies to create a partnership with their clients where the trust is high and collaboration is considered essential. This is further supported by the social exchange theory as well as Ganesan and Hess's (1997) ideas regarding trust which highlights the importance of creating long-lasting relationships where there is a mutual gain present for both parties. Supported by this, one could argue that the integration and the dependency on one another could be a reason for increased trust. The knowledge that customers are dependent on your success increases their willingness to help and support you since they are dependent on it as well. Businesses may then be forced to trust their suppliers and customers as the integration is high. This symbiotic relationship can be argued to create an upward going spiral where increased integration leads to higher trust and subsequently, higher trust, further increasing integration.

5.2 The Importance of Interpersonal Trust in Establishing and Maintaining Trust

Following the underlined importance of B2B relationships, the challenges of lost interpersonal trust can be used to understand the significance of face-to-face interaction. With little or no face-to-face interaction, it becomes hard for B2B relationships to establish and maintain the relationship as there is a consensus that an essential element is lacking in the relationship. The empirical data puts emphasis on the importance of interpersonal trust and how it adds to successful business, however, it does not present clear solutions or methods to compensate for these challenges that arise in a remote setting. This could be due to the fact that a face-to-face interaction is very difficult to substitute, as highlighted by Fready et al. (2022) who stress that remote interactions in B2B markets face challenges in fully replicating the value created through conventional face-to-face interactions. What is instead identified is an increased focus on other aspects of trust, such as the mentioned tight partnership along with delivery, reliability, and simplicity. Ferro-Soto et al. (2022) idea of satisfaction as important in B2B relationships can be connected to delivery as both parties in a B2B relationship may experience satisfaction when what is promised gets delivered. These aspects are connected to the benevolence and integrity dimensions of trust discussed by Ganesan and Hess (1997). The focus on these aspects could work as an effort to reach interorganizational trust as well as aim for affective or normative trust. Therefore, when interpersonal trust has already been established between a company and its customers, it is understandable to expect that efforts aimed at establishing affective and normative trust can be successful. However, as displayed in Figure 1 and as described by Pavlou (2002), the process of establishing trust necessitates the attainment of an interpersonal trust before you reach an interorganizational trust. This insight could explain the difficulties expressed by the interviewees to establish new business relationships during a remote work setting throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As the foundation of trust needs interpersonal trust which lies between the calculative level and affective level of trust, focusing on the benevolence and the integrity, related to the affective and normative levels of trust, will not suffice to establish new business relationships. Moreover, the extent to which various dimensions and levels of trust are affected could also be influenced by other factors, as highlighted by Ganesan and Hess (1977). Notably, the

buyer's previous experience with the seller serves to underline the significance of interpersonal trust in establishing and maintaining trust in B2B relationships.

The thesis's findings on the value of interpersonal trust in B2B interactions are consistent with Morgan and Hunt's (1994) research on the idea of relationship marketing. Their research highlights the essence of trust as a crucial component of sustainable business relationships. Furthermore, the findings of this study provide empirical evidence that reinforces the role of interpersonal trust in establishing effective and trusting business relationships, aligning with Morgan and Hunt's (1994) emphasis on affective and interpersonal trust. Concludingly, face-to-face interaction plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining trust, revealing the vital importance of interpersonal trust in establishing and maintaining successful B2B relationships.

5.3 The Role of Communication in Establishing and Maintaining Trust

Furthermore, the lack of in-person interaction also affects the already established relationship, as evidenced by the lack of small talk addressed in the findings. This lack of informal communication made companies feel not as close to their customers and understand them as well, which could potentially have long-run implications. This suggests that even though interpersonal trust is already established, it needs maintenance in order to sustain a trustful business relationship. When assuming that this maintenance is of great importance to have high levels of trust in a B2B relationship, the focus on a hybrid solution becomes more interesting to discuss.

As brought up in the analysis, communication through digital solutions can be difficult as it is hard to be wholly open and honest in a non-face-to-face setting. The findings suggest that this can lead to misunderstandings, which is supported by communication theory as it suggests that face-to-face communication is necessary for effective communication. Considering the potential of increased misinterpretation in a remote work context, communication theory suggests that businesses should pay special attention to their communication and ensure

clarity, frequency, and the appropriate tone in their messaging to combat the issue. Moreover, the analysis underlined that remote work can lead to digital fatigue as business is conducted remotely which in turn can lead to less efficient communication. However, regular check-ins were highlighted as highly important for both establishing and maintaining trust in a digital environment. This is in line with Corsaro and D'Amicos' (2022) idea of consistent communication as a key part of establishing and maintaining trust in remote work environments. Therefore, one can suggest that regular check-ins may be a key finding to combat the digital fatigue and inefficient communication.

5.4 The Importance of Transparency for Establishing and Maintaining Trust

In the interviews, multiple participants highlighted transparency as crucial in order to gain trust with their customers. The research of Delina and Olejarova (2021) supports the value of transparency in establishing and maintaining mutual trust in B2B partnerships, particularly during negotiations and competition. As transparency is an aspect of trust that entails open and honest communication, disclosing pertinent information, and taking responsibility for one's actions, it is tightly linked to communication in establishing and maintaining trust. Furthermore, transparency and communication can be argued to be crucial elements of establishing interpersonal trust, which eventually leads to interorganizational trust. These levels of trust are especially important in the early stages of a B2B relationship. Figure 1 shows that both calculative and affective trust can be obtained, paving the path for the formation of normative trust. However, even though transparency is underlined as a highly important aspect of establishing and maintaining trust (Mangus, et al., 2022) one can argue that it can be difficult to attain in the earlier stages of a relationship. This may be because transparency can be argued to be linked to honesty which is in turn linked to the integrity dimension mentioned by Ganesan and Hess (1997). This integrity dimension, in turn, is connected to normative trust.

5.5 The Hybrid Work Solution

A multitude of the participants reason that in the future, a hybrid solution will most likely be in place as a consequence of the digital evolution present in society, kick-started by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the findings, the increased efficiency due to digital communication tools is highlighted as a key argument for remote work. With the assumption that interpersonal trust can only be created in person, and considering the absence of potential solutions thus far, a promising strategy might include a hybrid model, combining the efficiency of digital interaction with the interpersonal trust-building potential of face-to-face interaction. Such a hybrid approach holds the potential to provide an effective solution to the problem at hand.

It is also interesting to address the contradicting perspectives that a hybrid work solution comes with exclusive benefits and the belief that in-person interaction is essential for trust building. As a consequence of a hybrid working solution post-pandemic, following the newfound efficiency that digital communication tools create, there is a risk of fewer in-person meetings. As established in the findings, less in-person interaction results in a longer time frame to establish trust. This viewpoint is congruent with Pavlou's (2002) emphasis on the gradual nature of trust development, emphasizing the importance of continued interactions, consistent performance, and a track record of dependability in order to cultivate trust between parties. Additionally, this sentiment is similar to Ganesan and Hess's (1997) belief that trust is not easily established, but rather takes a long-term commitment to establishing positive encounters, consistent behavior, and dependable acts. Fewer in-person meetings could therefore potentially lead to either more time invested into building trustful relationships or minimizing the trust on a long-term basis. Hence, there is a potential trade-off between a decreased level of trust between the B2B company and its customers and higher efficiency in work processes. It could therefore be argued whether a hybrid solution would create an increased long-term efficiency or if such a trade-off will neutralize the increased efficiency by compromising personal relationships and therefore interpersonal trust. This, in turn, increases the risk for businesses as their customers will be more inclined to sever their supplier due to the lack of personal commitment and interpersonal trust. This trade-off is discussed in Antai

and Eze's (2023) research as they also acknowledge that while using digital tools and working remotely can increase productivity, these practices can also make it difficult to build long-term relationships (Antai & Eze, 2023). The findings also support the fundamental principles of commitment trust theory by emphasizing the value of continual interactions in the establishment of trust. The theory's idea that trust creation is a progressive process is supported by the longer time frame needed to establish trust in the absence of in-person interactions. Furthermore, the theory's focus on the necessity for a long-term commitment to foster trustworthy connections is emphasized by the potential trade-off between lower trust and higher efficiency.

5.5.1 Possible Implications of Hybrid Work on Trust in B2B Relationships

Even though the interviewees do not seem worried about this trade-off, it might be too early to determine its real consequences. As B2B relationships with high levels of trust are built up over a long time, as supported by both empirical data as well as theoretical reasoning (Ganesan and Hess, 1997; Pavlou, 2022), a hybrid working solution could take long after the COVID-19 pandemic to show its real effects on the trust level in B2B relationships. One can question whether the positive aspects of digital B2B interactions can be truthfully assessed within the current environment. As there is clear evidence that trust between businesses is built over a long time, and that trust is difficult to maintain without in-person interaction, together with the insight that it is difficult to establish new relationships without in-person interaction, assessing the trust-building processes becomes difficult.

Furthermore, it seems that the overarching opinion that digital solutions are positive and create efficiency is only applicable to already existing relationships. As the participants of this study were well-established companies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with well-established relationships with many of their customers, it is also worth considering the different effects a generalization of a hybrid working style would have on a newly founded company. As both the previous theory, as well as our findings, suggest that face-to-face interaction is essential to create trust, a hybrid working style could have a large impact on

new companies as it would be more difficult to establish trusting, personal and long-lasting relationships with their customers.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Brief Study Recap

The purpose of this research was to understand how B2B companies establish and maintain trust in their interactions with customers in a remote setting during and in the post-COVID business landscape. By exploring the alterations in trust dynamics and relationship development brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its switch to digital solutions, this research seeks to conclude how company operations have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and discover strategies that have been effective in establishing and maintaining trust in this new context. With this aim in mind, the methodological decision was made to focus on technology companies active in the Swedish market, striving to understand their challenges in building trust as well as how they establish trust in a remote setting. The data collection approach involved a qualitative method executed through semi-structured interviews. The overall aim was to contribute to the theoretical literature and the practical implications related to establishing B2B relationship trust, driven by the new context of a remote work setting. This chapter will summarize the main findings, the limitations of the research, and potential future research on the topic.

6.2 Main Findings

This research has shown that trust in B2B relationships is affected by the digital interaction present in the post-pandemic world. While already established trustful relationships can survive and almost be unchanged by less in-person interaction, establishing new relationships in such a setting has shown to be more difficult. It has also been identified that the small talk present during in-person interaction is important in order to establish trust, which is significantly lacking in a remote setting. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that establishing trust takes longer in a remote setting. The research has highlighted that the measures to maintain and establish trust in a remote setting taken by companies have not fully aligned with the identified challenges. The solutions being, having an already established

tight relationship like a partnership, the important role of individuals in a B2B relationship as well as the importance of deliverance reliability and simplicity. With theoretical support, it has been suggested that these measures are shown successful where interpersonal trust has already been established but is not sufficient in a new B2B relationship. However, the aspect of missed small talk highlights the importance of maintenance of interpersonal trust even in already established relationships.

A hybrid working solution is highlighted as a great solution to combine the newfound efficiency in digital meetings and interactions, while still being able to establish and maintain trust in B2B relationships. A more holistic approach can be achieved by finding a balance between the use of digital communication tools and remote work, as well as stressing face-to-face interaction and personal relationships at the early stages of a relationship and essential meetings. More established relationships and follow-up meetings, on the other hand, can be effectively managed remotely. However, it is important to highlight that the potential long-term effects of a B2B relationship that is maintained through a hybrid solution have not yet been researched due to the short time that has passed since the intense period of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. These could potentially show results of weakened trust in the well-established relationships that are currently still strong.

6.3 Implications

6.3.1 Theoretical Implications

In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, this study explores how B2B businesses establish and maintain trust in relationships with their clients through digital interaction. A theoretical study gap was found by examining the body of literature on trust, B2B relationships, and the COVID-19 pandemic's implications on these aspects. While prior research concentrated on trust in B2B relationships, this thesis explicitly looks at how COVID-19 affects the establishment and maintenance of trust in B2B interactions among technology companies operating in the Swedish market, employing a multi-level approach relating to trust. It examines how these companies effectively managed the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, and,

importantly, explores what specific levels and dimensions of trust impact the establishment and maintenance of trust in B2B relationships within this context.

While past research has focused mostly on factors impacting the relationship-building process, this thesis identifies and examines aspects essential to establishing and maintaining trust in both pre-existing long-term relationships and newly formed partnerships. These factors have been highlighted as being essential for businesses looking to maintain long-term partnerships in this new remote context.

This research explores the use of a created analytical framework, encompassing various levels and dimensions of trust, as well as three theoretical concepts: social exchange theory, commitment-trust theory, and communication theory. Through the use of the analytical framework and these theories, the study seeks to analyze B2B relationships and trust, highlighting the effects faced by B2B companies as a result of constraints associated with a new remote environment. In the context of digital ecosystems and remote work, this study sheds light on the need for additionally conducted research regarding the interactions between social exchange theory, commitment-trust theory, and communication theory.

6.3.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this thesis demonstrate the value of establishing trust in business-to-business relationships for successfully handling the consequences of a new remote work environment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In spite of the limitations and difficulties posed by the pandemic, trust emerges as a critical aspect for B2B companies active in the technology industry in the Swedish market to not only maintain long-term relationships but also sustain efficiency. This study aims to provide valuable insights for companies seeking to establish and maintain trust in B2B relationships. It offers insight into how B2B companies have adapted to a new remote work environment in order to establish and maintain trust as well as to survive and thrive in their relationships. The authors of this thesis conclude that transparency, honesty, dependable delivery, and a hybrid work model consisting of a balance

of organizing face-to-face interaction with remote work are all crucial aspects in establishing and maintaining trust in B2B relationships.

In the light of these findings, it is imperative to provide practical implications. As demonstrated in the study, the importance of transparent and consistent communication in order to establish and maintain trust in B2B relationships, cannot be stressed enough. Practical implications related to facilitating ongoing interactions and building trust include encouraging regular virtual meetings, video conferences, and other forms of synchronous communication. Moreover, to bridge the gap created by the lack of in-person meetings, companies should prioritize face-to-face meetings or activities regularly to facilitate human interaction and further deepen relationships. This can help to counteract the potential negative impact on trust caused by fewer in-person interactions. Also portrayed in the findings is the significance of credibility. In practice, companies seeking to establish and maintain trust in B2B relationships should consider implementing methods for performance evaluation and feedback that offer unambiguous, transparent information about the dependability and reliability of the behavior of parties participating in B2B relationships. This can promote the development of trust-building procedures and establish a track record of trustworthiness.

6.4 Limitations

As with many qualitative types of research the reliability of the research can be questioned. One aspect of this is the convenience sample used which could have skewed the result of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The focus on convenience could have affected the representation of the population in the sample which possibly affected the result of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Further, we are recognizing that complete objectivity is impossible to reach (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This implies that our biases are likely, to some degree, to affect our result, as the authors of this study are the ones determining which empirical data to highlight in this research, even though the highest possible neutrality has been aimed for. Even with the intention of objectivity, the research group consists of a rather homogenous group of people that likely sits on similar biases and preferences which could have skewed the result more compared to a more diverse research group. The interviews were conducted over

digital tools which could also affect the result as there can be distractions present on the interviewee's side, unaware of the research group, such as other people present, or distractions in the form of emails, computer screens, and cell phone with other attention seeking features, such as chats or notifications (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Lastly, the interviews were held in English which is not the native language of either the researchers or the majority of the interviewees. This could have affected the interviewees' ability to express their insights in detail or as elaborately as needed to gain the highly qualitative data that distinguish qualitative research. It also presents a possible source of misunderstanding and room for miscommunication between researchers and interviewees.

Although the researchers considered a certain time frame in order to organize the timeline and ensure the completion of the research, it should be noted that research conducted under a different time frame may lead to a different outcome. Essentially, at the time of writing it is important to acknowledge that the full implications and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may not be completely outplayed, which could potentially impact the results of the study. Further, relevant to consider is also the participant or data access. Moreover, it's critical to recognize that the study relied on participants' self-reported data, which may be prone to social desirability bias or inaccurate recollection. The researchers took precautions to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in the data-collecting procedure and utilized a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions in the interviews to reduce these potential biases.

This thesis focuses on the effects generated from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way behavior connected to in-person versus digital contact has been affected. However, another aspect also has to be taken into consideration; the strong general development within the world of digitalization and the trend of fast-paced innovation as well as the ever-changing environment in the way we communicate. It is possible that the ways we currently use digital interaction are solely a result of the development and innovation of technical solutions, and that the COVID-19 pandemic had little or no impact on how these interactions have evolved. Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that the same digital interaction practices would have emerged even without the pandemic. Even though it is possible that society would have reached the same level of digital interaction as we can currently identify in a post-pandemic

society, it most likely would not have occurred as early without the pandemic. It's possible that the COVID-19 pandemic hastened the introduction of digital technology, making it more pervasive in daily life than it otherwise may have been. This abrupt shift could have led to people forming habits of high digital usage more quickly than they otherwise would have. Although it can be challenging to pinpoint a causality, there is unquestionably a strong correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased usage of digital tools. Considering this limitation, the study's conclusions may not be solely linked to the pandemic's particular circumstances but also the overall trajectory of digital progress. Therefore, even if the pandemic may have sped up the adoption of digital tools, it is difficult to pinpoint the pandemic's precise impact on the dynamics of trust in B2B relationships.

6.5 Future Research

There is uncertainty regarding the long-term effects of B2B relationships' usage of digital interaction, which therefore serves as an interesting topic for future research to examine the trade-off between the lost trust and the efficiency gained in a digital setting. Further, it would be interesting to test the digital usage and its effects in different industries where digital literacy is lower and not as integrated as in the technology industry, and if that would impact the result. Additionally, conducting similar research within different geographical settings would provide a more holistic perspective of the topic. Moreover, a focus on a smaller group in the technology industry, distinguished by either company size or annual revenue for example could provide a more nuanced perspective on the technology industry's different sections. Additional future research to consider is examining how industry-specific elements, such as the type of products or services, the level of competition, or the regulatory framework, may influence the dynamics of trust-building in digital B2B interaction. It would also be of interest to explore how cultural differences affect how individuals perceive and act on trust in digital B2B interactions in order to further comprehend how cultural values shape trust dynamics and compare trust-building strategies and preferences in various cultural contexts. Considering the prominent use of digital solutions in the modern world, examining the function of virtual-relationship-building activities would also be interesting. Particularly, analyzing how well virtual relationship-building activities such as online forums, virtual

networking events, or social media participation, function to establish and maintain trust in B2B relationships. One could also argue that there is a need for further investigation into the ways in which the three theories used to understand trust throughout the research, social-exchange theory, commitment-trust theory, and communication theory, might complement one another and advance the understanding of how trust develops in B2B relationships. Moreover, further analysis should be done on how perceived reciprocity, fairness, and mutual benefits affect social exchange in digital ecosystems. It is also recommended to examine the unique communication strategies and approaches that can successfully promote trust in digital B2B relationships. Additionally, analyzing the effects of various communication methods, including instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative platforms on trust-building processes is vital for a comprehensive understanding of trust dynamics. Lastly, of high interest for future research is the examination of the long-term effects of establishing digital trust. This would encompass analyzing the long-term viability of trust developed through digital interactions over time. Additionally, analyzing how trust evolves and fluctuates in long-term digital B2B relationships while exploring the factors contributing to its longevity.

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Appendix 1- Interview Guide

Initiating Questions

- Do you wish to be anonymous?
- Is it okay to record this meeting?

Business Operations

- Tell us a bit about yourself and your current position.
- Can you describe your company's size, workforce, and recent leadership or ownership changes?
- Which markets and areas of expertise is your company active in?
- How does your company's position compare to other companies that you compete with?

Business-to-Business Relationships

- How do you define a business relationship, and what types of business relationships does your firm have?
- Can you provide examples of successful or challenging business relationships, and what lessons have you learned from them?
- How have virtual interactions, such as videoconferencing and email, affected the dynamics of business-to-business relationships?
- In your experience, how important is face-to-face interaction in building and maintaining trust and rapport with customers or partners?

Trust

- How does your company create and maintain trust in its business relationships?
- Have you noticed any differences in how customers or partners respond to virtual and in-person interactions? How do you address these differences?
- How do you think the lack of in-person meetings jeopardizes trust in business relationships?

Business-to-Business Selling

- How does your company identify and reach out to potential customers, and what sales strategies and pitches do you use?

- Have these processes changed or adapted during the pandemic, and how successful have they been?
- How does your company utilize technology, such as data analytics, in identifying and approaching customers? Are there any plans to invest in new technologies for this purpose?
- How often do you revisit your sales approach process, and is it standardized or custom-made? Do you train staff for sales, and if so, is it a standard procedure?

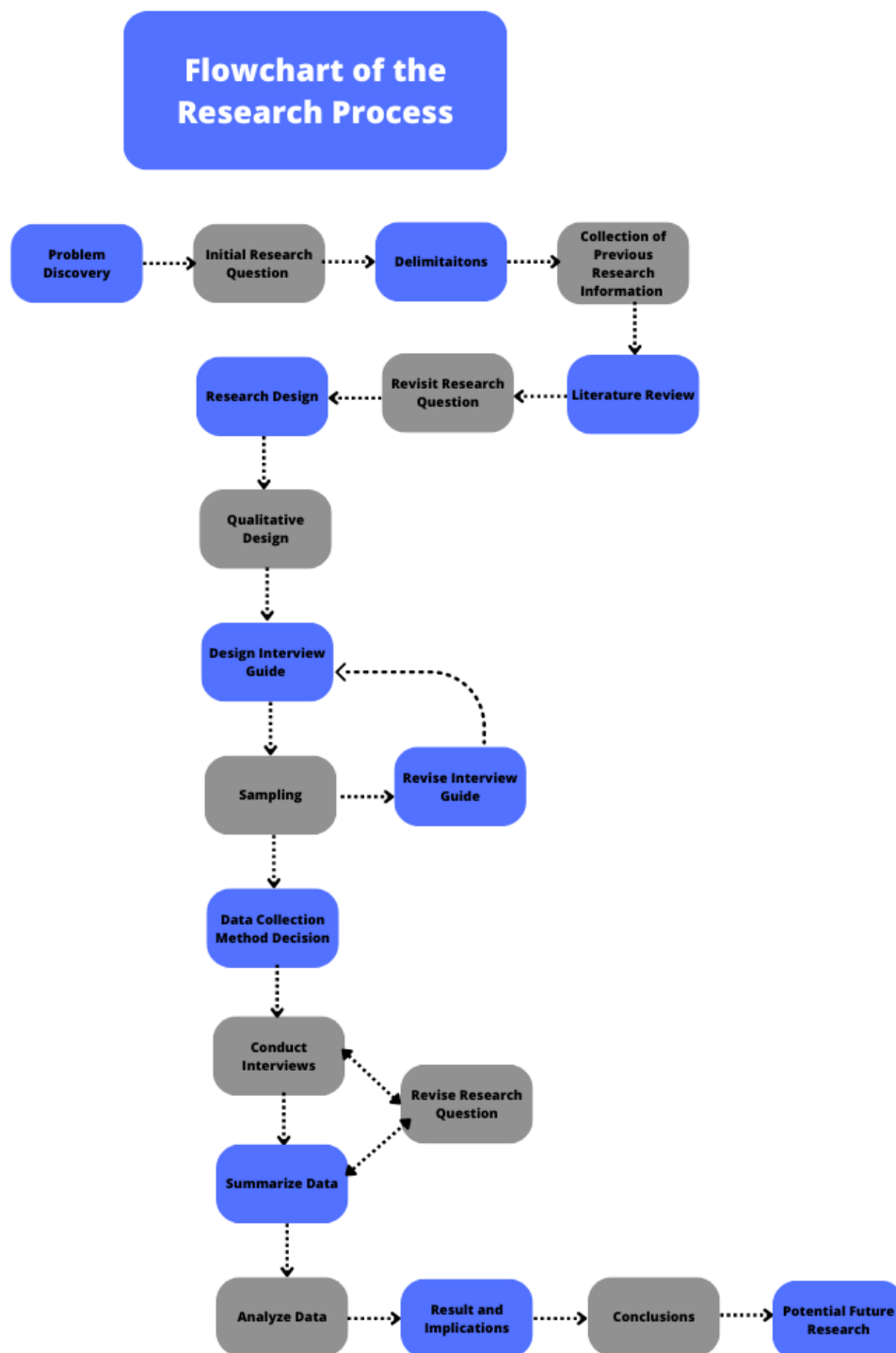
COVID-19 Implications

- How has your company adapted to remote work during the pandemic, and have you encountered any particular challenges or benefits?
- What changes have you made to your business model or strategy in response to the pandemic, and how have they worked out?
- How do you envision the future of business-to-business relationships in a post-pandemic world, and what role do you think remote work will play in it?
- Do you have any key takeaways for building trust in b2b relationships?

Appendix 2 - Interview Chart

Interview nr	Date	Length of Interview	Position of Interviewee	Participating Researchers (Interviewer)
Interview 1	5 April 2023	44 min	Head of Sales	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström
Interview 2	6 April 2023	46 min	Head of Healthcare	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström
Interview 3	13 April 2023	38 min	Vice President	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström
Interview 4	28 April 2023	39 min	CEO	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström
Interview 5	3 May 2023	48 min	CEO	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström
Interview 6	19 May 2023	47 min	CSO (Chief Security Officer)	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström
Interview 7	23 May 2023	30 min	Regional Manager	Alexandra Hildell Felicia Festin Ottilia Österström

Appendix 3 - Flowchart of Research Process



Appendix 4 - Key Definitions

B2B: Business-to-business (B2B), is a type of transaction between businesses, such as one between a manufacturer and a wholesaler or a wholesaler and a retailer (Chen, 2023). B2B refers to transactions between corporations rather than between a company and an individual consumer (Chen, 2023).

B2B Relationships: The relationship between the B2B companies exchanging goods and or services (Neeb, 2023).

Trust: Refers to trust between corporate professionals and entities rather than the definition of trust between personal relationships. Trust is a basic feature of human interactions that allows people to rely on one another and collaborate toward common goals (Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Trust is "the extent to which one believes that a partner will act in a way that benefits the relationship, rather than acting in their own self-interest."(Ganesan & Hess, 1997, p.40).

Technology industry: The technology industry is a group of companies that create, distribute, or research products and services with a technological underpinning (Frankenfield, 2022). Companies in this business specialize in the production of electronics, the development of software, the construction of computers, and the provision of information technology-related goods and services (Frankenfield, 2022).

Technology companies: Businesses working within the technology industry (Frankenfield, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic: From 17th of March 2020, when the Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten) highlighted that employers that have the opportunity would recommend their employees to work from home (Krisinformation.se, 2020), to the to the restrictions and recommendations affecting travel and in-office work were lifted by Swedish authorities 9th of February 2022 (Krisinformation.se, 2022).

Post-pandemic: On the 9th of February 2022, the Swedish restrictions and recommendations affecting travel and in-office work were lifted by Swedish authorities and have not been reintroduced (Krisinformation.se, 2022). This will be the measure used throughout this thesis, however, it is important to note that other countries might experience restrictions later than this. Important to mention, WHO officially declared the COVID-19 pandemic no longer a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) on May 5, 2023 (WHO, 2023).

Digital Communication Tools: Digital tools are the programs, websites, applications, and other internet and computerized resources that assist, enhance, and execute digital processes and overall digitization initiatives (Fraccastoro et al., 2020).

Appendix 5 - Abbreviations

B2B - Business-to-Business

UN - United Nations

WHO -World Health Organization