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Decoding the "We"

A qualitative study about employees perception of an organizational culture that emphasizes friendship

By

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Abstract

Title:	Decoding the "We" - A qualitative study about employees perception of an organizational culture that emphasizes friendship
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Authors:	Olivia Berglund and Stina Ekelius
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Purpose:	The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of a robust organizational culture on employees' perceptions and affiliation with the company, particularly focusing on organizational identification. Additionally, the study aims to investigate the concept of friendship culture within organizations, seeking to uncover its mechanisms and how it shapes employees' experiences.
Theoretical Perspective:	The theoretical frameworks contain organizational identification, organizational culture including friendship culture and family culture.
Methodology:	This qualitative study adopts an interpretivist tradition with an abductive approach. It focuses on a single case study where the empirical data consists of 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews
Contribution:	The study contributes with a better understanding of organizational identification and organizational culture, specifically a culture of friendship. Its theoretical contributions include reaffirmation of the friendship culture and its characteristics.
Key words:	Organizational identification, Culture management, Normative control, Family culture, Friendship culture.

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We hope you enjoy reading our Master thesis!

Olivia Berglund & Stina Ekelius
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1. Introduction

This is a study about how employees experience and perceive a strong organizational culture, especially one fostered by close relationships. We focus on how employees perceive their company and their sense of organizational identification. By examining the mechanisms of friendship culture, we aim to understand how these dynamics shape employee experiences within the organization.

1.1 Background

Today's competitive business landscape demands a highly motivated and productive workforce for companies to thrive (Cardador & Pratt, 2006). In this environment, fostering a strong sense of organizational identification among employees has become a strategic imperative. This concept captures the degree to which individuals identify with their workplace, experiencing a connection to its goals and values (Dutton et al., 1994). Furthermore, organizational identification refers to the profound sense of unity and belonging an individual feels towards the organization in question (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A strong organizational identification among employees thus appears desirable from a business perspective, and research consistently shows a positive correlation between it and beneficial employee behaviors (Dutton et al., 1994). Employees who identify more readily with their company exhibit higher levels of satisfaction, improved performance (Ashforth et. al., 2008), and the employees are more likely to stay with the organization, demonstrating higher retention rates (Cardador & Pratt, 2006). In addition, employees with strong organizational identification are more willing to go the extra mile, contributing discretionary effort that benefits the organization (Kim et al., 2010). Hence, understanding how to cultivate this identification has become a key area of focus within the management literature (Cardador & Pratt, 2006).

The demonstrably positive impact of organizational identification on various organizational outcomes explains its profound and extensive role in the research field of organizational studies. A potential explanation for these positive behaviors is that organizational identification serves as a mechanism through which employees can be persuaded to

internalize organizational goals as their own (Cheney, 1983). This results in employees with strong organizational identification tending to interpret ambiguous situations in a way that aligns with the organization's goals (Pratt, 1998). This tendency fosters a sense of collective purpose (Tremblay et al., 2019), which connects organizational identification to the concept of organizational culture (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Organizational identification and culture are closely interrelated and Albert and Whetten (1985) claim that they are hard to conceptualize separately. Hatch and Schultz (2002) tries to separate organizational culture and identify by asserting that culture acts as the setting where interpretations of organizational identification take shape. The authors further explain that identity expresses cultural understandings and that employee reflecting embeds identity in the organizational culture.

Furthermore, organizational culture is socially shaped and arises within groups through historical events (Dunger, 2023), and it acts as an invisible glue that binds a company together (Kunda 1992). The organizational culture not only unifies organizational members but also facilitates adaptation to external forces (Schein, 1988; cited in Orozco Arias & Anzola Morales, 2022). Organizational culture comprises the shared values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors of employees that define a workplace (Goffee & Jones, 2016). These elements shape how employees interact, perceive their work environment, and ultimately, approach their daily tasks (Goffee & Jones, 2016). In addition, these shared aspects shape how employees think, feel and behave (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Hence, organizational culture is seen as a "powerful and invisible force" that guides both individual and collective behavior within an organization (Savović et al., 2021, p.27). Moreover, a strong and positive culture can be a significant competitive advantage, attracting and retaining top talent, fostering innovation, and driving performance (Denison, 1990; Schein, 2010). It also enables organizational strategies, processes, structures and interactions to function effectively (Orozco Arias & Anzola Morales, 2022).

Management plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing organizational culture. While some argue that culture is an organic phenomenon that evolves naturally (Smircich, 1983), others suggest that deliberate interventions can be used to cultivate a desired culture (Denison, 1990; Schein, 2010). The latter aligns with the idea that culture can be influenced through strategic initiatives. One such approach utilizes the concept of normative control. Normative control refers to the management practices that aim to influence employee

behavior by promoting specific social interactions and shared values (Costas, 2012). Organizations can leverage a variety of strategies to exert normative control. These include establishing clear expectations regarding desired behaviors, fostering communication and collaboration among employees, and recognizing and rewarding behaviors that align with the organization's values (Denison, 1990). By strategically utilizing normative control, management can shape the informal rules and social norms that guide employee behavior within the organization (Costas, 2012).

Returning to the discussion of organizational culture, metaphors like "family" are frequently used to describe organizational cultures. This metaphor emphasizes the cultivation of strong interpersonal ties and unity among its members, and implies an inherent connection between employees and their social group within the organization (Kunda, 1992). In addition, Costas (2012) suggests a newer metaphor to describe organizational culture, namely the metaphor "friendship" which emphasizes informal and intimate relationships among employees. An organizational culture that draws on friendship also prioritizes collaboration, mutual support, and a sense of belonging among employees (Costas, 2012). In addition, while the friendship culture forsters individualism and egalitarianism, it may evoke feelings of uncertainty among employees, leading to increased engagement in cultural activities to navigate this ambiguity (Costas, 2012). This might reinforce the culture and establish a strong foundation of trust and shared values.

Additionally, Costas (2012) acknowledges the occurrence of normative control in a friendship culture. She underscores particular parallels concerning the emphasis on personal and informal relationships within a culture of friendship, resulting in the establishment of normative control. A friendship culture can thus be leveraged through normative control to reinforce desired behaviors and ultimately cultivate a strong sense of organizational identification. Building on Costas's (2012) work on normative control within friendship cultures, there are indications of potential contradictions in such cultures. While it might foster a strong sense of belonging and identification, it can also lead to unintended consequences. These consequences warrant further investigation to attain a more profound understanding.

1.2 Problematization

While research demonstrates a positive correlation between organizational identification and desirable employee behaviors, the specific factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of this identification remain a topic of ongoing investigation (Kim et al., 2010). Existing literature explores various strategies, such as promoting organizational purpose and values (Dutton et al., 1994). However, these approaches often focus solely on shaping employee perceptions without considering the social dynamics within an organization. This gap highlights a crucial limitation; a lack of focus on the interplay between organizational culture and management practices that can influence employee behavior and ultimately, identification.

Organizational culture, the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that characterize a workplace (Goffee & Jones, 2016), has been recognized as a key factor influencing employee attitudes (Denison, 1990). Linn (2008) further highlights the cruciality of study and understanding organization's cultures and underscores its effect on behaviors and everyday work practices. However, how to deliberately cultivate a specific type of culture to foster identification remains, to our knowledge, under-explored. Furthermore, traditional management approaches often rely on top-down directives or extrinsic rewards, which may not effectively cultivate a genuine sense of connection to the organization (Ogbonna & Harris, 1998). This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how management practices can interact with organizational culture to cultivate a sense of belonging and shared purpose among employees.

As previously discussed, Costas (2012) proposed the metaphor of "friends" to characterize a novel organizational culture identified in her case study, termed a culture of friendship. While the concept of workplace friendships has garnered increasing attention in organizational research in recent years (David et al., 2023), the concept of culture of friendship remains relatively unexplored. To the best of our knowledge, Costas's (2012) case study stands as the sole explicit examination of a friendship culture. Therefore, we posit that this cultural phenomenon is uncharted and needs to be investigated further in additional case study contexts to gain a deeper comprehension of the concept of friendship culture. Through exploring the concept in additional contexts, we contend that the characterizations of

friendship culture proposed by Costas (2012) will be subject to rejection, support, and/or further development.

This lack of exploration presents a significant gap in our understanding of how social dynamics, like friendships within the workplace, influence the development and maintenance of organizational identification. By delving deeper into the interplay between organizational culture, specifically a friendship culture, and management practices, we can gain valuable insights into how to cultivate a strong sense of organizational identification among employees. This understanding will allow us to move beyond shaping mere perceptions and investigate the social aspects of the organization. Thereby, this study addresses the mentioned gap by investigating the complex interplay between a friendship culture, organizational culture, and employee identification.

1.3 Purpose and research question

This study aims to investigate how a strong organizational culture affects employees' experiences and sense of belonging to the company, and hence their organizational identification. It will further investigate the unexplored concept of friendship culture by delving deeper into the mechanisms through which friendship cultures influence employees' experiences within organizations. Through this examination, the study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

- How do employees at a company with a strong organizational culture perceive that it affects their organizational identification?

- How do employees perceive and experience an organizational culture that emphasizes friendship?

By looking into the stated questions, the study aspires to delve into the mechanisms by which a friendship culture influences organizational identification. It entails an exploration of how informal relationships and collaborative endeavors contribute to shaping employees' sense of affiliation with the organization and its objectives. Furthermore, the research aims to enhance the current understanding of friendship culture. While Costas's (2012) initial conceptualization offered valuable insights, its precise influence on employee identification

lacks clarity. Through a targeted investigation, this study seeks to deepen comprehension of this distinctive phenomenon.

1.4 Research outline

To address the research questions outlined previously, this study is divided into six main chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Empirical findings and Analysis, Discussion, and Conclusion. The *Introduction* has established the significance and relevance of this research topic and has laid the groundwork for the specific aims and purposes that will be explored in the following chapters. The second chapter, *Literature Review*, explores the theoretical underpinnings of this research. In the *Methodology* section, details of the research approach will be presented, including the case organization, data collection methods, and data analysis technique. The Chapter *Empirical findings and Analysis* then delves into the themes identified from the data collected within the case organization. Building upon these findings, the *Discussion* explores how they connect to existing theories and research. Furthermore, it discusses new perspectives and theoretical connections suggested by the data. Finally, the *Conclusion* summarizes the study's theoretical contributions and practical implications, while offering suggestions for future research directions.

2. Literature review

In the following section we will present theoretical concepts and frameworks, as well as relevant research in the field. The literature review starts by looking into organizational identification and the correlating concepts of commitment and pride. We then present organizational culture, and culture management with a focus on normative control. Thereafter the concepts of family and friendship within organizations are presented. Lastly, research regarding cultures of friendships and its potential consequences are explored.

2.1 Organizational identification

Organizational identification, long recognized as a critical construct in organizational behavior research, impacts both individual satisfaction and organizational effectiveness. (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). One of the prevailing approaches for understanding organizational identification, widely acknowledged in the literature, stems from the Social Identity Theory initially proposed by Tajfel (1978) and further developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social Identity Theory suggests that people naturally categorize themselves and others into social groups, such as organizational membership, religion and shared demographics (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, cited in Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Moreover, social identity encompasses the awareness of belonging to a social group or groups, along with the value and emotional significance associated with that membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The authors explain that group membership then becomes a source of how an individual makes sense of who they are, which fosters self-esteem and a sense of pride. An additional aspect is that identification with a social group, that the individual finds prestigious, can cast the individual into a positive light which also fosters their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

According to Ashforth and Mael (1989) the organization serves as a significant social category through which individuals can form their sense of identification. For the purpose of this study the social group for identification will be limited to the organization. Organizational identification appears when an individual feels a sense of oneness and belonging with the organization in question (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Thus, organizational identification concerns the extent to which an individual defines him/herself with reference to

his/hers organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Similar sentiments are expressed by Pratt (1998), who utilizes the terms self-referential and self-defining to elucidate the dynamic between employees and their organization. Moreover, Dutton et al. (1994) argue that organizational members form attachments to their organization by integrating the characteristics they associate with the organization into their self-concepts. Hence, the level of organizational identification indicates the degree to which individuals perceive the organization as a part of themself (Dutton et al., 1994). Previous research further argues that member behavior is primarily driven by their strong identification with the company (Kunda, 1992). This identification, in turn, is fostered through the internalization of the organization's culture, leading to a blurring of boundaries between the individual self and the company (Kunda, 1992).

Furthermore, a strong organizational identification can result in a range of positive outcomes for both employees and the organizational as a whole, such as organizational citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction and well-being, employee performance and effectiveness of the organization (Ashforth et. al., 2008). In addition to this, employees with a strong organizational identification are more inclined to internalize its values, align with its goals, and develop attitudes that support corporate objectives (Dutton et al., 1994, Riketta, 2005; Vough, 2012). Furthermore, Cheney (1983) argues that organizational identification can be understood as a persuasion mechanism since identification influences the employees buying into the organizational activities. Hence, the goals of the organization become the individual's goals, and a strong identification will likely result in increased motivation among the employees to achieve the goals of the organization (Cheney, 1983). In line with this, Rousseau (1998) argues that individuals who have a strong organizational identification are inclined to exert additional effort on behalf of the organization, and can enhance the firm's success by participating in coordinated corporate initiatives.

A strong organizational identification transcends mere loyalty (Blader et al., 2017). The authors explain that it fosters context-dependent motivational orientations, such as prioritizing colleague connection or organizational well-being. When feeling connected is most important, employees focus on behaviors that solidify their place within the organization, following established practices and norms. However, if the organization's success takes center stage, employees might break those norms to achieve the best results (Blader et al., 2017). Furthermore, Ashforth and Mael (1989), and Kunda (1992), argue that

organizational commitment and loyalty should be viewed either as precursors or consequences of organizational identification. In addition, the authors further argue that there is a connection between the employee's work attitudes and their employer's reputation. When employees identify with reputable work organizations, they cultivate a sense of pride (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and Dutton et al. (1994) suggest that this positively influences the employee's work attitude, enhancing their overall satisfaction and engagement. Organizational identification thus links to both the concepts of commitment and pride which is why the following two subsections will deep dive into these concepts.

2.1.1 Organizational commitment

A critical challenge in defining organizational identification lies in its conceptual overlap with other individual-organizational constructs, particularly organizational commitment (Edwards, 2005). Porter et al. (1974) defines organizational commitment as the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a specific organization. In line with this, Reichers (1985, p.468) explains that "commitment occurs when individuals identify with and extend effort towards organizational goals and values". This commitment transcends mere employment and examines a deeper dedication, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose aligned with the organization's mission (Porter et al., 1974).

To provide a comprehensive understanding, Meyer and Allen (1992) proposed a three-component model of organizational commitment; a desire (affective commitment), a need (continuance commitment) and an obligation (normative commitment). The authors explain that affective commitment reflects a deep emotional attachment and identification with the organization's goals, fostering a strong desire to remain and contribute. Continuance commitment, conversely, arises from a pragmatic assessment where employees feel commitment due to a lack of better alternatives or the perceived difficulty of starting over elsewhere (Meyer & Allen, 1992). Finally, normative commitment captures the sense of obligation some employees feel towards the organization, often due to feelings of loyalty or reciprocity for the organization's investment in them (Meyer & Allen, 1992).

2.1.2 Organizational pride

According to Dutton et al. (1994) a strong sense of identification can lead to people taking personal pride in belonging to a specific organization, this is especially the case when the

organization is seen in a positive light from those outside of it. When an organization possesses socially valued characteristics, organizational members might feel proud of belonging to that organization (Dutton et al., 1994). According to Jones (2010, p. 859) the concept of organizational pride can be defined as "the extent to which individuals experience a sense of pleasure and self-respect arising from their organizational membership". It further refers to members' tendency to favor their organization when they believe that the perceived performance or achievement of their organization exceeds expectations or standards (Sturm et al., 2022). Furthermore, while organizational pride originates from employees' interpretations of their organization's action, shaped by their subjective experiences and connection to their work, its foundation lies in comparing these actions to wider social norms (Scheff, 1988). Hence, organizational pride involves understanding what adds value within a social context (Scheff, 1988).

Organizational pride stands apart from self-esteem and self-worth by acting as an emotional mechanism, aligning individuals' self-concept with their membership in the organization (Riketta, 2005). The level of organizational identification then serves as an indicator of the extent to which individuals integrate the organization into their self-concept (Dutton et al., 1994). Hence, when individuals are proud of their organization, their membership is likely to have a positive contribution on their self-concept (Blader & Tyler, 2009). In addition, employees who then experience pride in their organizational membership are driven to identify closely with their organization in order to elevate their self-concept (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Moreover, according to Sturm et al. (2022) previous research on the topic has stated that pride leads to more committed, satisfied and engaged employees. The authors explain that when employees are proud or enhanced by the organization, they will be motivated to behave in ways that will continue to elevate the organization.

2.2 Organizational culture

Connected to the concept of organizational identification is the well-studied subject of organizational culture. Hatch and Schultz (2002) emphasize the link between organizational culture and identity by stating that culture serves as the scenery in which interpretations about the organizational identity are formed. According to Kunda (1992) corporate culture serves as a comprehensive definition of membership within the organization. There are multiple definitions of organizational culture in previous literature, and researchers have generally

agreed that there is no single correct definition (Bellot, 2011; cited in Dunger, 2023). Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that organizational culture is socially constructed and emerges in groups based on historical events (Dunger, 2023). Furthermore, the definitions usually involve seeing culture as beliefs, values, ideals, norms and basic assumptions shared by organizational members (Gaus et al., 2017). In addition, Kunda (1992) states that the corporate culture also encompasses a set of expectations and even emotional responses, collectively constituting a well-defined and widely understood role of the organization. These elements reflect a common perception of everyday practices and will often determine the way things are done within an organization (Weber, 1996; cited in Savović et al., 2021). Moreover, these shared ideas, meanings, and beliefs further shape how employees think, feel, value, and behave (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The shared elements can be manifested by how the organizational members interact and communicate (Orozco Arias & Anzola Morales, 2022), as well as by symbolic devices such as myths, rituals, stories and specialized language (Smircich, 1983).

Furthermore, organizational culture can be seen to serve two main functions; keeping the organizational members united and allowing the organization to adapt to external forces (Schein, 1988; cited in Orozco Arias & Anzola Morales, 2022). Schein (1996; cited in Savović et al., 2021, p.24) provides a generally accepted definition connected to the previously stated functions; "a pattern of basic assumptions by a certain group, which is invented, discovered and developed in the learning process, in order to solve the problem of external adaptations and internal integration". Based on this, organizational culture is seen as an important group characteristic since it is the result of prevalent experiences among organizational members through solving everyday problems (Savović et al., 2021). The importance of organizational culture is further emphasized since it can be seen as a "powerful and invisible force" that gives direction to individual and collective behavior in an organization (Savović et al., 2021, p.27). Similarly, Gaus et al. (2017) mean that organizational culture can be interpreted as the organization's soul.

The organizational culture not only links goals with deeper significance, but also influences both individual and collective behaviors, perceptions, thought patterns and values (McAleese & Hargie, 2004). This results in organizational members often having the same or similar interpretation of their surrounding reality and thus behave in a resembling way, which also reflects in the goals and practices of the organization (Savović et al., 2021). In addition,

within organizational culture lie meanings of events that relate to how the organization works, and can thereby influence the decision making processes (Zlatanovic, 2020; cited in Savović et al., 2021).

Kunda (1992) explains that the ideal employees are those who have fully integrated the organization's goals, values, and overall culture into their cognitive and emotional processes. Coupled with the shared understanding of reality, managers formulate strategies, construct organizational structure and adjust leadership styles that aligns with the shared norms and values of the organizational culture (Savović et al., 2021). Organizational culture thus enables organizational strategies, processes, structures and interactions to function effectively, and it also allows its operation to distinguish itself from other organizations (Orozco Arias & Anzola Morales, 2022). If organizations succeed in reaching a state where employees fully internalized the organizational culture, they eliminate the need for rigid external controls (Kunda, 1992). To cultivate this desired state, managers often employ various techniques, including the explicit formulation of a clear 'corporate philosophy' such as a corporate slogan (Kunda, 1992).

2.2.1 Culture management

Managing organizational culture is a complex and crucial aspect of modern management (Ogbonna & Harris, 1998). There are however discrepancies in previous literature regarding whether managing culture is possible (Ogbonna & Harris, 1989). According to Smircich (1983) research into culture management can be divided into three different divisions; studies that argue that culture can be managed, studies that argue that culture can be manipulated and studies that argue that culture cannot consciously be changed. The first school of thought posits culture as an independent variable, subject to direct control through interventions and established models (Bate, 1994). Conversely, a second viewpoint emphasizes the inherent difficulty of direct manipulation, suggesting cultural change is only achievable under specific contingencies like crisis or leadership transitions (Smircich, 1983). Finally, a contrasting perspective argues against the possibility of conscious cultural manipulation altogether (Ogbonna & Harris, 1989). Proponents of this view assert that cultural evolution is an organic process, and management efforts often lead to unintended consequences or superficial behavioral shifts without impacting core cultural values (Smircich, 1983).

Despite ongoing theoretical debate, a core assumption underlies the vast body of research on managing organizational culture: aligning an organization's practices with its stated values leads to better performance (Ogbonna & Harris, 1998). This assumption fuels the desire to exert control over an organization's culture (Ogbonna & Harris, 1998), with a focus on influencing and shaping employee behavior and values (Costas, 2012). Unlike traditional management control that directly targets resources and actions, culture management takes a more indirect approach (Costas, 2012). The approach is twofold and takes form by proactively guiding the attitudes and behaviors of new organizational members (Brannan & Hawkins, 2007), or by aiming to shape existing employees' behavior through the cultivation of shared values, beliefs, and norms within the organization (Costas, 2012). The aim is to capture employees' hearts and minds, shaping their sense of purpose by influencing their thoughts and feelings, not just dictating their actions (Willmott, 1993; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Moreover, the employees' acceptance of the culture is often fostered by the sense of identity, security, and self-determination that adherence to company values promises (Willmott, 1993).

Building a strong culture, meaning organizational members who are cohesive and focus collectively as one in pursuing organizational goals, can be perceived as every management's goal (McAleese & Hargie, 2004). However, achieving this ideal state becomes more complex as companies experience growth. Hambrick and Crozier (1985) emphasizes the crucial role of leadership in navigating this growth-culture tightrope. Leaders must prioritize maintaining the core values and positive aspects of the culture while implementing structures and processes necessary to manage a larger workforce (Hambrick & Gozier, 1985). According to the author, effectively managing culture through growth requires a proactive approach, balancing the pursuit of expansion with safeguarding the cultural identity that has contributed to the organization's success. McAleese and Hargie (2004) outline a set of five guiding principles essential for successful culture management in organizations. The principles are; formulating an overall culture strategy, developing cultural leaders, sharing the culture by communicating effectively with the organizational members, measuring the cultural performance, and communicating the culture in all dealings with stakeholders (McAleese & Hargie, 2004). In addition, research suggests that effective culture management strategies, such as those utilizing normative control, are crucial (Costas, 2012).

2.2.1.1 Normative control

Within organizational research, the concept of normative control boasts a well-established theoretical foundation (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Normative control was initially defined by Etzioni (1961, p.5; cited in Colling & Ceulemans, 2023, p.278) as "a type of control encompassing the allocation of symbolic rewards, esteem and prestige symbols, and the use of rituals and norms to facilitate positive response". Building on this, Kunda (1992) states that normative control aims to influence members' underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings to direct their actions towards desired organizational efforts. Hence, normative control shapes employee behavior towards desired outcomes by fostering a shared culture, characterized by homogenous attitudes, beliefs, and values (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

According to Colling and Ceulemans (2023) the culture is translated into social norms which ultimately align employees' actions and behaviors with the organization's objectives. Control through corporate culture shapes behavior through a sense of shared identity and purpose by capitalizing on individuals' emotional and symbolic needs for belonging (Ray, 1989). Through this type of control, the members will act in the best interest of the company, not because they are coerced, but because they are intrinsically fulfilled with their work and are driven by internal commitment and strong identification with the company goals (Kunda, 1992). According to Kunda (1992) normative control wins employees hearts and minds rather than forcing them into specific behaviors.

Organizations achieve normative control through the emphasis on interactions and social ties among organizational members (Chu, 2024). According to Kunda (1992) social gathering, which can be understood as rituals, functions as subtle instruments of normative control. These rituals serve to actively enact the organization's ideology, fostering a process of cultural internalization among members (Kunda, 1992). Through this ongoing process, employees develop the desired mindset and instinctive reactions that seamlessly align with the organization's core values (Kunda, 1992). Whilst other forms of control stems from leaders, normative control is thereby often a shared achievement of both leaders and employees (Chu, 2024). Management often establishes the foundation for normative control, but the system is ultimately maintained through subtle group pressure exerted by members themselves, ensuring adherence to expected behaviors (Kunda, 1992). In essence, this creates a powerful cultural force which ultimately shapes employee behavior towards the desired

outcome (Costas, 2012). Normative control thereby represents a shift from externalized control methods, like coercion, to an internalized form of control where employees self-regulate their behavior based on the organization's values and norms (Ray, 1986).

2.2.2 Family culture

Within organizational contexts, cultures characterized by a "family" metaphor emphasize strong emotional bonds and unity among members (Costas, 2012). According to Kunda (1992) the use of the term "family" suggests a deeply ingrained set of values and practices. It further indicates a strong sense of community and belonging where the members take care of each other, while still demonstrating high levels of autonomy and self-motivation (Shein, 1985; cited in Kunda 1992). According to Kunda (1992), the usage of "family" metaphors when describing organizational culture suggests an inseparable link between employees and their social group within the organization. This bond prioritizes the collective good over individual desires, while strong emotional connections serve as the glue that binds this "family" together (Kunda, 1992).

A culture derived from the "family" metaphor, in other words a family culture, emphasizes informality, closeness and intimacy in the relationships between the organizational members (Costas, 2012). The author explains that such cultures often exhibit paternalistic management styles, where leaders assume a protective and nurturing role. Managerial paternalism involves organizing the manager-employee relationship dynamic to resemble a relationship similar to a parent and child, master and servant, or teacher and student, where authority is centralized (Fleming, 2005). In the case of a family culture, the group forms a unity on the basis that specifically aligns with the authority of a parent and child relationship (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; cited in Costas, 2012). This paternalistic management style fosters a sense of security and protection within the organization, with employees perceiving management as a source of support and stability in an uncertain environment (Ouchi, 1980). This further creates a setting of warmth and care that secure employees' loyalty that promote identification with the organization (Kondo, 1990; cited in Costas, 2012).

Furthermore, the family metaphor can serve to suppress and obscure conflicts and tensions as they contradict the notion of a harmonious happy family (Casey 1999). The author elucidates that numerous studies support the belief that introducing the family-style structure leads to

consistent enhancements in employee engagement, commitment, motivation, empowerment and organizational productivity. However, a family culture might conflict with the individuals' notions of selfhood, such as independence and autonomy (Fleming, 2005; O'Leary, 2003). This can result in the employees assuming a position of childlike dependency and requires them to conform to standardized group norms, values, and attitudes (Fleming, 2005; O'Leary, 2003). The organizational culture as family might therefore no longer be apposite or accepted in today's society (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) due to the increasing emphasis on individuality, freedom of choice and autonomy (Vernon, 2007; cited in Costas, 2012). Therefore, Costas (2012) suggest moving beyond the family culture towards a friendship culture.

2.2.3 Friendship culture

The concept of family and friendship share similarities but carry distinct connotations (French, 2007). One notable distinction is that friendships are based on voluntary selection, whereas familial ties are predetermined, which leads to substantial differences in the dynamics of bonding and interaction (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; cited in Costas, 2012). Workplace friendships arise when colleagues become friends and are defined as an informal and voluntary relationship (Berman et al., 2002; Ingram & Zou, 2008). The authors further state that the relationship is based on mutual liking and bilateral interest in each other as individuals. Such friendships incorporate a holistic and personalistic approach, wherein employees' interest in and concern for their friends extend beyond utilitarian motives by acknowledging them as individuals with distinct qualities (Sias et al., 2020). This leads to the employees supporting one another based on individual needs and showing each other understanding and empathy (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018).

According to David et al. (2023) there is research that points out that having workplace friendships are beneficial for both individual employees and their organization. When employees have friends at work it helps them to achieve fundamental needs of belongingness and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Maslow, 1943 cited in David et. al., 2023). In addition, other positive outcomes are enhanced employee well-being, job satisfaction and improved organizational performance (David et. al., 2023). Another aspect that is seen to improve organizational performance, connected to workplace friendship, is psychological safety. Psychological safety, as defined by Edmondson (1999), entails a collective perception within

the team that it is safe to take interpersonal risks. According to Schein and Bennis (1965; cited in Lee et al., 2021) this fosters a workplace atmosphere conducive to experimentation and accommodates mistakes without retribution, abandonment, or guilt. Consequently, psychological safety nurtures an atmosphere wherein employees can freely express new ideas for enhancement, share information, and consequently, learn from other members of the organization, without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). However, potential negative consequences of workplace friendship have also been acknowledged. These are such as divergent and conflicting norms that govern work and personal relationships which may increase perceived tensions for employees (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018).

The prevalence of workplace friendship has garnered growing attention in recent decades within the research field of organization (David et. al., 2023), which is why Costas (2012) suggests moving away from a family culture towards a friendship culture. Compared to a family culture, a friendship culture is more open and fluid, but less protective and stable (Costas, 2012). While both friendship and family cultures emphasize relationships characterized by informality, closeness, and intimacy, the friendship culture prioritizes individualism and egalitarianism over the focus on unity and parental authority (Costas, 2012). According to the author the friendship culture downplays hierarchy, and coupled with informal relationships it fosters an atmosphere that is equal, open, friendly and sociable. This expresses itself by being able to talk and get help from anyone, and the management being humble and unpretentious (Costas, 2012).

Another significant aspect within a friendship culture that Costas (2012) found in her study is the prevalence of social activities. The author explains that the activities take place both at the workplace as well as outside the firm's walls, and include both team building events, exercising, drinking and engaging in arranged activities based on interests. It is seen that the non-work activities and mutual common interests between the individuals leads to the employees identifying with the organization (Costas, 2012). The author further states that the workforce in a friendship culture often are quite homogeneous. In her study this was seen by sharing similar interests, being around the same age, and coming from the same university.

Moreover, the author states that despite the friendship culture suggesting individuality and choice, it is also seen that this fosters increased dependence due to placing individuals in a state of uncertainty. This uncertainty is also seen to appear as a result of less hierarchies

(Costas, 2012). Consequently, individuals may actively pursue recognition, engage in cultural activities, and cultivate friendship as a means of navigating this uncertain environment (Costas, 2012). Thus, the interplay between uncertainty and friendship reinforces one another; employees seek for security and stability through friendship relations, yet the emphasis on choice, autonomy and individuality means these relationships are never static, necessitating continual reaffirmation (Costas, 2012). She concludes that prioritizing individuality and choice might breed dependency, openness can lead to social exclusion, egalitarianism may inadvertently reinforce hierarchy, and friendship can evolve into competition.

2.2.3.1 Friendship culture and potential consequences

At a first sight, normative control might seem less prevalent in a culture of friendship as it values individuality, choice and egalitarianism (Costas, 2012). However, research has demonstrated that normative control is frequently occuring in cultures that draw on various metaphors, including those associated with teams or family (Casey, 1999) as well as friends (Costas, 2012). Moreover, knowledge workers, such as those in consultancy firms, are afforded a significant degree of autonomy (Alvesson, 2004; cited in Costas, 2012). The author further states that this autonomy necessitates a certain level of influence on cultural orientation and identity to encourage individuals to voluntarily choose to do what is right, even in the absence of monitoring. This infer that normative control is highly relevant in a context of consultancy firms (Costas, 2012).

In Costas's (2012) study she highlights the common occurrence of normative control within a culture of friendship, though not every friendship is inevitably entangled with this type of control. As Gabriel (1995) states, there are spaces for friendship residing in the "unmanaged" organizational context. Costas (2012) further highlights specific parallels regarding the focus on intimate, private, and informal relationships within a culture of friendship, which consequently leads to the presence of normative control. There is a managerial effort, in this kind of culture, to shape members' identities based on organizationally endorsed norms, attitudes, and behaviors (Costas, 2012). This normative control can elicit various employee reactions, including alignment, ambiguity, and inauthenticity (Costas, 2012).

Moreover, based on the author's study, informal workplace friendships can create a strong dependence among colleagues, blurring the lines between work and personal life. Despite

promoting individualism, these relationships may lead to a situation where employees adapt their behavior to fit in with the group, as their status depends on these connections (Costas, 2012). In addition, Costas (2012) found that the preferred self in the organizational setting is not solely shaped by company values, but also by personal traits from the nonwork domain, in the form of being fun, sociable and approachable. The study reveals that individuals feel compelled to exhibit an identity aligned with the preferred self and the corporate culture, such as being outgoing rather than introverted, in order to be a part of the community. This alignment results in a homogenous group of individuals, which in turn might lead to groupthink. Groupthink can, according to Janis (1982; cited in McCauley, 1989) be defined as a specific mode of thinking that arises in highly cohesive groups. The author describes that it occurs when the desire for consensus and harmony overrides a realistic evaluation of alternative options.

In Costas's (2012) empirical analysis she uncovers the complexity of normative control within a friendship culture, which proves to be elusive, ambiguous, and opaque due to its apparent absence. Despite celebrating individuality, openness, choice, and egalitarianism, a friendship culture can paradoxically entail dependency, hierarchy, exclusion, homogeneity and identity regulation (Costas, 2012). However, the normative control occurs in an unspoken and invisible way (Costas, 2012). Moreover, she explains that in a friendship culture, uncertainty is both diminished and heightened, leading to an amplification of normative control since individuals, when uncertain, are more likely to conform to the corporate culture.

In addition, Costas (2012) suggests that the characteristics of a friendship culture, such as openness, egalitarianism and individuality, makes it difficult for the organizational members to voice critique regarding these. This can assumably lead to what Alvesson and Spicer (2016) refer to as functional stupidity. Functional stupidity involves a situation in an organization where people mindlessly follow rules and procedures, even if these are counterproductive (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). In the context of friendship culture, it might be seen as employees mindlessly following the prescribed norms of openness, egalitarianism and individuality. The consequences of functional stupidity include stifling creativity which leads to less innovation and problem-solving, employees becoming too automatons due to not questioning the ways of doing things, as well as the organization being less adaptable to changing external circumstances (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016).

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines our research design, delving into the overall approach, philosophical underpinnings, research context, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. It further addresses any limitations inherent to this design.

3.1 Philosophical grounding

The purpose of the study is to investigate how a strong organizational culture affects employees' experiences and sense of belonging to the company, and hence their organizational identification. To understand this the study delves into the employees' personal interpretations of a strong culture and its effects on their identification. The nature of organizational identification and culture is complex and highly dependent on how individuals interpret and make sense of the organizational contexts, including its values and guiding principles. Thus, in order to examine these interpretations an interpretive approach proved most suitable. In the interpretative tradition, the reality within the social world is assumed to be socially constructed through acts of interpretations and sensemaking (Prasad, 2018). Hence, it emphasizes the role of subjective meanings. A concept central to the interpretivism is *verstehen* which emphasizes meaning and intention over causal explanations (Weber, 1949, cited in Prasad, 2018). An interpretive approach further acknowledges that there is no single universally true answer, but rather a variety of interpretations formed subjectively through personal experience and contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Through applying an interpretive tradition, we acknowledge that the descriptions are based on the individual's own perceived reality, which is constantly shaped and reshaped through interactions with others (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, it is important to recognize that the process of interpretation unfolds in two distinct stages. Initially, the employees descriptions and interpretation of their perceived social context. Subsequently, we undertake a secondary interpretation of the employee's accounts of their experiences.

As the study focuses on individual experiences, it further aligns with the concept of symbolic interactionism which emphasizes the individual sense-making process (Prasad, 2018). Symbolic interactionism proposes that all social phenomena are symbolic and that events,

objects and actions will carry a meaning through which individuals derive understanding grounded in their own perceptions (Prasad, 2018). According to Blumer (1996, in Prasad, 2018) there are three core assumptions within the tradition: 1) Individuals act based on their interpretations of things, 2) these interpretations are formed through social interactions, and 3) they are constantly evolving. Another important assumption within symbolic interactionism is that a person's self-image is shaped through the social roles they play (Prasad, 2018). The author further states that an additional fundamental assumption within the symbolic interactionism is that individuals' behaviors shift in social contexts depending on which identity holds the most salience. However, it is critical to recognize the dynamic nature of identities within this perspective, suggesting that individuals' interpretations are multifaceted and subject to continual change (Prasad, 2018). We thereby acknowledge that the interpretations of the employee's may evolve throughout the interview process. This includes the possibility of their meanings shifting between the initial interview and the follow-up discussions.

3.2 Research approach

The study is qualitative by its nature since it aims to understand the meaning of a social phenomenon in a specific context (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In line with the study's tradition of symbolic interactionism and the focus on understanding how people make sense of their experiences, interviews are a crucial tool (Prasad, 2018). While explanation plays a crucial role in the interpretive understanding of social action (Weber, 1947; in Bell et al., 2019), our research employs a *verstehen* approach that transcends mere explanation. The authors state that this approach emphasizes apprehending the social world from the employees' perspective, specifically focusing on the meanings they ascribe to the company culture and how those meanings contribute to their identification with the organization.

The study further assumes an abductive approach, which is a combination between inductive and deductive approaches (Prasad, 2018). Rather than formulate hypotheses, as in a deductive approach, or try to fit the empirical data into theory, as in an inductive approach (Prasad, 2018), the study took into account existing theories and knowledge but let the empirical findings contribute with new insights and turn-ups. We were thereby open for surprises and emerging issues within the empirical material. Hence, while interpreting and analyzing empirical findings, we were able to modify, expand or dismiss theories in order to develop

our own interpretive principles (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). In order to enable the possibility of freer and more elaborate interpretation of the empirical data, we further conducted the study through an iterative process between theory and empiricism. According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) this can result in the identification of unexpected perspectives and insights.

A strategic decision was made to focus on a single, representative case study within the allotted time frame. The basic form of a case study design involves conducting an in-depth examination of a single case, such as a particular community or organization (Bryman & Bell, 2017), in our case an organization within the industry of digital communications. This approach offered a two-fold advantage. Firstly, it ensured the feasibility of the research within the constraints of the given time frame. Secondly, it facilitated a more in-depth exploration of the case organization, allowing us to closely examine the perspectives of a wider range of participants (Bell et al., 2019).

3.2.1 Research context: case organization

In order to answer our research question, we gained access to Communicatum where all the empirical material is collected and the analysis is built upon. To ensure anatomy, we will henceforth use the pseudonym Communicatum through this study when referring to the company. The information below is summarized from the company's website together with insights from interviews and conversations with our contact person at Communicatum.

Communication is a leading digital communications agency with its head office located in a city of southern Sweden. The company boasts a team of roughly 150 specialists and offers a comprehensive range of services including strategy, design, content creation, and development. Communicatum has a flat organizational structure consisting of only a few layers of leadership. Their collaborative approach prioritizes building strong relationships with clients, fostering a shared vision for success in the digital landscape. Communicatum further emphasizes a culture of mutual respect and enjoyment, believing that positive working relationships lead to the best results. Founded by a group of colleagues who recognized the growing importance of digital marketing, the agency has continuously evolved its expertise to meet client needs. This client-centric approach has fueled the agency's growth, allowing them to expand their service offerings and establish strategic partnerships. A strong

sense of camaraderie, both internally and with clients, is another key ingredient in their recipe for success.

Our interest in studying an organization with an emphasis on cultivating a strong organizational culture led us to select the particular company as they have a pronounced focus on their organizational culture. Moreover, the appeal of examining a consultancy firm was amplified by our speculation that the necessity to deliver outstanding service to clients could intersect with and potentially influence the internal cultural dynamics of the organization. Based on this, we approached Communicatum to introduce our interest in doing a case study at their company. The contact with Communicatum was established through one of the researcher acquaintances with an individual within the company. Leveraging this interpersonal connection, we obtained contact information to another employee at the company who later on became our contact person.

An initial introduction was made to our contact person through email where we then scheduled a first meeting together that was held at Teams. During this meeting we made a more thorough introduction about ourselves and our master thesis. This meeting also included a presentation about our initial thoughts and a conversation about how the collaboration should look like. The meeting also provided us with more information about the company and its culture which helped us guide us into a more clear research field. We further went through the importance of anonymity and together discussed how to ensure both company anonymity and interview object anonymity. After our prior meeting we did some more research to formulate a clearer research idea, which we later discussed with our contact person.

3.3 Data collection

This section presents the data collection process of the study, which is conducted through the use of 12 semi-structured interviews. Following these, we did two follow-up interviews with a more focused character to get deeper understanding and insights based on the findings from the initial interviews. As Styhre (2013) suggests, the data collected for the study is the foundational raw material upon which the research is built. However, as the author states, interview data can be inherently subjective, influenced by the beliefs of both the interviewer

and interviewee. Therefore, we acknowledge the importance to transparently present the methods used in collecting the data.

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Drawing on the research approach of symbolic interactionism, our study aligns with the interpretivist tradition. This tradition emphasizes the value of in-depth interviews as means to collect rich data suitable for understanding the subjective meanings participants ascribe to their experiences and their social world (Prasad, 2018). Kvale (2007; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2008) argue that interviews are deemed the most suitable method for gaining insights into individual perceptions, lived experiences, and the meanings employees ascribe to the company culture. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with employees at Communicatum, we could thereby explore the individual interpretations and viewpoints of employees (Charmaz, 2006; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Aligned with symbolic interactionism, our interviews adopted an in-depth approach, prioritizing the exploration of *how* participants make sense of situations, rather than solely focusing on the objective details of *what* transpired (Prasad, 2018).

Geographical constraints precluded the possibility of conducting face-to-face meetings. However, we acknowledge the advantages of in-person interactions in facilitating the understanding of emotions and spontaneous non-verbal cues, which are known to foster trust and encourage participants to share experiences more freely (Vogl, 2013). Additionally, face-to-face interactions allow for the clarification of misunderstandings and a more nuanced understanding of the subtext conveyed during the interview (Vogl, 2013). To mitigate the limitations of remote communication, we employed the video conferencing platform Teams. By using video calls, we were able to observe and respond to participants' facial expressions and gestures, thereby creating a more interactive and engaging environment comparable to a face-to-face setting (Bell et al., 2019). With participant consent, each interview was recorded which enabled post-transcription, allowing us to fully focus on listening during the interview. Additionally, it facilitated in-depth material analysis since it allowed us to go back and listen to the interviews again, thereby reviving the interviews once more (Bell et al., 2019). While time-consuming, according to Bell et al. (2019), recording and transcribing proved beneficial for revisiting interviews and identifying new perspectives and nuances.

Each interview session spanned a duration of 45 to 60 minutes and involved the active participation of both authors where we employed a dynamic approach. One author assumed the primary role, guiding the conversation through a specific theme. Following the completion of that theme, the roles would then shift, allowing the other author to take the lead on a subsequent theme. This dynamic exchange not only ensured a thorough examination of all pre-determined topics but also fostered a more conversational atmosphere. While not actively leading the discussion, the other author remained actively engaged, strategically inserting follow-up questions to delve deeper into emerging topics and probe for a nuanced understanding of the participant's experiences. Furthermore, the presence of both authors facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the interviewee's perspective. By minimizing the potential for misinterpretations inherent in single-interviewer settings, the dual presence approach enhanced the likelihood of faithfully portraying the participants' narratives, including the subtle cues and underlying meanings that may not be readily apparent in the spoken word alone (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Although we endeavored to maintain a conversational atmosphere, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent power asymmetry within the interviewer-interviewee dynamic. The interviewer's role in shaping the interview through question selection inevitably influences the resulting data (Kvale, 2007).

To further ensure rich data collection the interviewees were assured anonymity, therefore the real names of the interviewees are replaced with pseudonyms and the position each of the interviewees possesses are left out. The anonymity was important partly for confidential reasons but also to allow the interviewees to speak more freely. Furthermore, all the interviewees' native language was Swedish and therefore we made the decision to carry out all of the interviews in Swedish. The reason for this was to ensure that everyone could express themselves in a correct and nuanced way (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The quotes that we picked out were later translated with the help of the AI tool ChatGPT and the use of prompts like "translate this quote from Swedish to English". We then reviewed the translated quote and made minor adjustments in the translation in order for it to fit the context that the interviewee said it. In situations where the meaning of certain quotes were unclear to us, we contacted the affected interviewees to ask them if our interpretations and translations were correct. If they were not, adjustments were made in accordance with the interviewees instructions in order to make sure that the findings reflected a correct interpretation.

3.3.2 Sample

The interview sample consisted of a selection of employees at Communicatum with varied roles. In line with the study's purpose and research question, the only criteria was that the sample did not consist of people holding a managerial position, other than that we asked our contact person to choose interviewees randomly. With help from our contact person we got in touch with 12 employees who wanted to be a part of our case study with whom we scheduled a digital interview. Although the anonymity decreased to some extent due to our contact person choosing the interviewees, we did not receive the information regarding their position in the company nor the length of their employment. Moreover, to ensure anonymity we do not mention the concrete position of the interviewees in the List of interviewees (See appendix A). To further ensure anonymity we have chosen to use pseudonyms for their names that are gender-neutral.

3.3.3 Interview guide

We opted for semi-structured interviews to leverage the strengths of both a structured and an unstructured approach. This method provides a fundamental framework with a focus on predetermined themes, while also allowing for flexibility to explore unanticipated topics that emerge during the conversation (Bell et al., 2019; Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018). To guide our interviews, we developed a comprehensive interview guide (see Appendix B) outlining key themes and questions of interest. The questions were of open-ended nature in order to enable the respondent to answer freely and based on their own interpretations and experiences. This further allowed for follow-up questions (Bell et al., 2019), and enabled the collection of rich data.

The interview guide incorporated a variety of question types, including introductions, follow-ups, and probes, specifically designed to elicit open-ended responses from participants (Kvale, 1996). Main questions were further elaborated with detailed sub-questions to further investigate specific aspects. In line with our theoretical grounding in symbolic interactionism (Prasad, 2018), the guide heavily utilized *how*-questions to encourage participants to share their unique sensemaking processes. To establish and create a comfortable environment, the interview began with introductions, including a brief self-introduction by the interviewer and the participant, followed by some formal information. This initial exchange was strategically

followed by questions about the participant's personal background, a natural segue that provided valuable context for subsequent questions.

While still wanting to keep the essence of the interview guide similar, we did minor modifications to the interview guide as we went along with the interviews. Insights from earlier interviews informed the reformulation of challenging questions and a thematic focus on unexpected findings. This adaptation, characterized by the addition of new follow-up questions, yielded diverse perspectives on these surprising themes. Our approach aligns with the concept of the interviewer as a "traveler" guided by discoveries rather than solely seeking pre-determined understandings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), reflecting the abductive nature of our research.

3.4 Data analysis

The analysis of the data was conducted in accordance with recommendations from Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). This included an analysis in three steps; sorting, reducing and arguing. These steps were meticulously executed, involving iterative examination and integration of empirical findings with theoretical frameworks, to ensure a thorough and well-developed analysis.

3.4.1 Sorting

Since the sorting process is highlighted as a crucial step of how the study is going to turn out, we made sure to "spend time" with the material and go back and forth to continuously reflect upon it with fresh eyes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The sorting of the material began in the final stage of the data collection process. The transcribed interviews were read in its entirety with the aim of finding recurring and significant patterns within the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The initial sorting was made by labeling the data using comments and colors in order to create a comprehensive grasp and facilitate the further process. We sorted the data based on identifying recurring themes, comparing and contrasting viewpoints, examining divergent perspectives, and interpreting metaphors and analogies (Bell et al., 2019). We chose to connect the initial themes to how we structured the interview guide to get a better overview of what was recurring, these were; organizational culture, motivation and identification. The themes were then divided into 17 subcategories to create more order in the material. Moreover, this process, which can be seen as an initial coding (Charmaz, 2002;

cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) was characterized by a high degree of openness to avoid missing relevant themes. This further helped us address what Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) describes as the problem of chaos since it reduced the disorder in the material.

The first sorting involved a less detailed examination, focusing on the most frequently occurring words and expressions. Subsequently, the transcripts were reviewed again with a more analytical and interpretive lens. By then we looked deeper into both the *whats* and *hows* to gain a more comprehensive understanding. This goes in line with recommendations from Gubrium and Holstein (1997; cited in Rennstam & Wästefors, 2018) who suggest switching between the two in order to find the answers of *why*. This multi-stage process allowed us to examine the data from various perspectives, ultimately leading to the emergence of interesting findings. Additionally, ongoing discussions between the two researchers facilitated consensus in interpreting and understanding the material. Based on recommendations from Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) we further aimed to not make the categories overly separated, but instead trying to critically reflect upon how things could be connected.

Concurrently with data processing, we sought appropriate theoretical concepts to explain our observations and identify patterns. This decision to prioritize data analysis before introducing theoretical frameworks aimed to minimize the potential for preconceived notions to limit our interpretations. While the interview guide was informed by themes derived from prior research and established theoretical frameworks, these did not limit the data analysis entirely. Our sorting process also considered the emergence of new themes within the interview data itself. Once initial patterns emerged and theoretical concepts were considered, we revisited the data with the question: "What could this be an example of?". This process of actively questioning the data also led to the identification of contrasting patterns. Consequently, the coding approach shifted towards a more focused and selective sorting strategy (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) informed by the chosen theoretical vocabulary.

3.4.2 Reducing

After sorting, a reduction of the empirical material to a more manageable amount began. As sorting creates several interesting patterns, it is important to reduce the material with the purpose of the study in mind (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). When sorting the empirical

material, several interesting patterns and categories were found. The first reduction thus aimed to reduce these in accordance with a categorical reduction (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The reduction was based on the interesting patterns discovered and intended to relate these to each other. This process was guided by our overall impressions, prior knowledge of the field and our methodological approach.

Upon reviewing the initial main themes and their corresponding subcategories, a decision was made to exclude the theme associated with motivation since the findings were neither unique nor astonishing based on our prior knowledge in the academic field. As a consequence, we were left with 14 subcategories that were linked to the overarching themes of organizational culture and identification. These were later reduced one more time into five categories; *organizational identification*, *normative control*, *organizational culture*, *friendship culture* and *family culture*, which we found most appropriate to the purpose of the study and to answer our research question. From these categories that were considered prominent and interesting, relevant quotes that exemplified patterns were lifted in line with an illustrative reduction (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The aim was to find quotes and make interpretations that reflected the material in a fair and representative way. This was followed by a more focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) where we moved beyond the pure descriptions and defined what was going on and what the material ment. During this process we had continuous discussions in order to make sure that our interpretation matched and that we understood the material in the same way.

3.4.3 Arguing

Lastly, in accordance with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), we argued for the findings and created independent interpretations in relation to exciting theories. In contrast to other steps that focus primarily on clarifying and structuring interviewee statements, interpretation delves deeper to uncover "structures and relations of meanings not immediately apparent in a text" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p.235). This process involves engaging in critical discussions to discern the underlying significance of the data. Based on theoretical concepts, discussions explored the material and shaped findings within the existing framework. By doing so we acknowledged the importance of theoretical grounding for sound arguments (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Furthermore, as the authors explain, it is important that the writers have the ambition to both contribute to the research area but also that the existing

literature should contribute to the study. With this in mind, we started a broad search for theories and concepts that could be used to explain our empirical findings but also to discern what our findings could contribute to the existing field of research. Hence, we aimed to argue both with and against previous knowledge and theories (Rustam & Wästerfors, 2015).

To provide a comprehensible discussion, we follow the model of excerpt-commentary unit consisting of a standardized four-element-structure; analytical point, orientation, excerpt(s) and analytical comment (Emerson et al., 1995; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This approach facilitated the simultaneous process of uncovering specific phenomena within the data and interpreting their underlying meanings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We carefully examined the selected excerpts, focusing on what was implied "between the lines" and the nuances of how information was conveyed. Furthermore, our analysis actively sought to identify contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes within the data itself, as well as in comparison to existing research. By employing this rigorous approach, we aimed to achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the employees' experiences and interpretations.

3.5 Reflexivity and limitations

While the chosen methodology yielded valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. The interpretive nature of this study demanded high reflexivity, which according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) consist of two characteristics - interpretation and reflection. Careful data interpretation necessitates an awareness of how external factors, such as theoretical assumptions, preconceptions, and the nuances of language, can influence interpretations of the empirical data. The second characteristic, reflection, can be understood as a process of interpreting the interpretations themselves which involves critically questioning how researchers make sense of the data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). As stated by the authors, working in pairs facilitated such interpretations since we continuously could challenge and reflect upon the other's interpretations.

A key limitation inherent to qualitative research is its subjective nature (Styhre, 2013). This subjectivity can restrict the generalizability of the findings, making it challenging to draw broad conclusions applicable to other contexts. Furthermore, the subjective nature of respondent answers can introduce the risk of misleading information (Bell et al., 2019). To

mitigate this risk and encourage candid responses, we ensured complete anonymity for all participants. This approach minimizes the incentive for dishonest answers, thereby enhancing the study's validity (Bell et al., 2019).

Our decision to conduct the interviews in Swedish necessitates careful consideration of the potential for semantic slippage and the attenuation of subtle nuances within participant quotations during the translation process. To minimize this risk, we undertook a rigorous review of the translated quotes. This review extended beyond achieving a verbatim translation of the spoken words and aimed to capture the deeper meaning and emotional undercurrents conveyed by the participants. As previously stated, we further made sure that in times of uncertainty in translation and interpretation, the interviewees were contacted so that they could explain and elaborate their thoughts. However, translation is, by its very nature, a sense-making process informed by the translator's knowledge, background, and experience (Xian, 2008 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2017). Therefore, despite our meticulous efforts, we acknowledge the possibility that some degree of misinterpretation may persist.

3.5.1 The use of generative AI

It should further be reflected upon the use of generative AI in the thesis writing. While trying to avoid it, there have been times where different AI tools have been utilized. Generative AI has, has previously stated, mostly been used to translate our empirical material. It has also facilitated the translation of the interview guide from Swedish to English. In addition, Generative AI has also been utilized to check grammar and help rephrase different sentences, in order for the grammar to be correct. Prompts that have been used are "provide synonyms for", "in this sentence, which word could instead be used". For a more detailed list of prompts see Appendix C. While we acknowledged the risks, and ethical considerations, in relation to the use of AI tools, it was considered an effective helping hand during the thesis work. Thus, in order to keep the thesis authenticity, we have avoided using it for full sentences or sections. Generative AI has thereby been used more as a way to challenge our own ways of writing and give inspiration on how to elaborate it.

4. Empirical findings and analysis

In the following section we will present the empirical findings and analysis. Firstly, the section will start with a description of the company from the employee's perspective followed by employees' perception of being a part of the company. It is followed by a description of the emphasis on being friends, how this expresses itself in the company and how it affects the employees.

4.1 This is Communicatum

As described in the previous chapter, Communicatum is a leading digital communications agency consisting of around 150 employees. Communicatum's flat structure fosters collaboration and strong relationships, built on mutual respect and a passion for what they do. This part that follows will delve deeper into the company from the eyes of the employees. Specifically, the organizational structure and its implications will be reflected upon, as well as two principles that according to the employees steer the company and employee behavior.

4.1.1 Lack of hierarchies

The company has strategically chosen to have a flat organizational structure with few layers of leadership positions which was highly emphasized during the interviews. For instance Lewis expressed "it's been made clear that we don't have many hierarchies [...] it's a fairly flat organization" and Harris exemplified the lack of hierarchies by explaining that "we don't have any official titles like junior and senior". This flat structure not only empowers employees in their respective roles but also significantly influences the overall organizational environment and the interactions between the employees. Brown states that the lack of hierarchies is affecting the atmosphere and is visible through "how people treat each other, how they work in teams". This implies that the absence of rigid hierarchies is palpable in the company's atmosphere, impacting the manner in which individuals interact and collaborate within teams. It thus seems like the flat structure positively affects the relationships among the employees.

Moreover, the emphasis on the lack of hierarchies among the interviewees further indicate that this is something that is appreciated by the employees. However, even if it is stated by the interviewees that this results in a good workplace environment, it is also expressed that this structure sometimes can be interpreted as too fluid. This because the lack of hierarchies leads to the impression that the company has inadequate guidelines and direction in how to execute work tasks in a desirable manner. It thus results in confusion among the employees who express that they would prefer more guidance.

> "I feel like we lack clear objectives for what a truly great [company name] delivery entails, what should characterize it. [...] And therefore, it is obviously very difficult to measure people's performance, beyond whether they met deadlines and stayed within budget. [...] And I believe a lot is about setting clear goals that are not solely tied to results and money". - Irving

The quote highlights that the company lacks clear guidelines of how one should accomplish a desirable delivery and what this should contain. It appears like the success is solely measured by meeting deadlines and staying within the budget which might be challenging as it leaves the employees uncertain regarding the specific parameters defining a satisfactory performance. To implement more guidelines of what a "great delivery" is can presumably lead to more clarity among the employees as well as ensuring that everyone strives towards the same direction. This is something Evans reflects upon.

> "I would like to see a bit more leadership. [...] Everyone is running in different directions, because people are clueless about what is going on. [...] You do not know what is good, so you have to figure it out yourself". - Evans

The quote underscores that the current state at the company, with lacking objectives, results in a fragmented workforce that is not working aligned. This puts pressure on the individual to conclude what a desirable performance is which leaves the employees in a state of uncertainty. Thus, the high level of individualism seems to be perceived as a negative aspect according to the employees. The described uncoordinated state and the request of more leadership indicate that the interviewees demand more managerial direction and guidance.

"Of course, there are times when I wish I had a manager who would have paid a bit more attention, been more coaching-oriented, and been more involved and engaged in what I do". - Green

The quote underscores, in line with the previous quotes, the need for more guidance and direction. It further implies that there is an absence of support and recognition from the management which can be interpreted as demotivating. As mentioned earlier there is some appreciation of the company's lack of hierarchies, however, Evans and Green's statement imply that this results in a perception of a too fluid structure. While there is a lack of clear direction and guidelines from the management in how one should execute the work tasks, there are notably two main guiding principles that affect the employees' behavior, which will be elaborated upon in the following section.

4.1.2 Two guiding principles

It can be understood by the material that the organizational ethos is established by two fundamental guiding principles. These principles exert significant influence over employee behavior and conduct, both in interpersonal interactions and in the fulfillment of their responsibilities. The principles that are highlighted by the interviewees are the culture and the profitability. During interviews at Communicatum, the concept of culture was not just mentioned; it was woven into the conversation, painting a picture of an environment where individuals thrive. The culture was emphasized as the foundation of the organization. As expressed by Lewis "the culture is almost the company" and Green explains that "everyone is the culture, and the culture is what everyone who works here conveys to each other". This underscores the importance and presence of the culture in the company, and it indicates that there are shared behaviors and attitudes among the employees. Based on the quotes above, the employees' descriptions about the company often correlated with their description of the culture, which strengthened the statement that the company is its culture. Moreover, words like "good" were used repeatedly to describe the culture, but Lewis offered a more evocative description:

"It feels like if you were to describe [company name] as a person, it would feel like a very outgoing, family-like, warm person". - Lewis

This quote goes beyond a simple statement; it is a personification of the company culture. Lewis envisions Communicatum not as a rigid entity, but as a welcoming and friendly individual. The description of family-like indicates a very supportive and caring environment, and the warmth evokes friendliness. In line with this, Harris explains that the "family-like and warm atmosphere is one of the best things" at the company. S/he explained that it leads to a workplace "where it is easy to make friends". The strong sense of community, support and caringness is also explained to be consistent throughout the company.

> "There is also a sense of caring and looking after each other, in my opinion. It is like you always feel welcome, and everyone is really nice. [...] It is familial, in the way we talk to each other and how we see each other, and I think it is consistent. [...] It is very genuine and pleasant and there is a sense of humility. And there's always someone to chat with if you want". - Fisher

In line with previous quotes, Fisher's words indicate a very close and supportive environment. It also includes a sense of being seen, which relates to the importance of solidarity. In addition, it appears that the workplace has become more than a place to work, but a haven of comfort and support. Other words that were recurrent when explaining the culture were "community, openness and team spirit", described by Brown, as well as "lack of prestige", stated by Jacobs. It suggests a culture which prioritizes collaboration and mutual respect over individual hierarchical power struggles. The description also delves into the concept of approachability and respect for all employees. Overall, it is stipulated that the company culture is highly important in how the company operates, how people behave and interact. However, as previously stated, there is also another principle that the employees feel steer their behavior, namely profitability. It is described as the company has a two-sided focus; culture on one side and profitability on the other.

> "There is this balance, like a scale. In one basket, we have this extreme focus on cost-consciousness, profitability, and billing. It is like a production machine that is constantly running, which gives us a stable financial position. But in the other basket, to balance it out, [the company] also invests a lot in our culture and activities to reinforce it". - Green

Green's quote indicates a strategic approach of maintaining financial stability while still prioritizing employee engagement and a positive work culture. In that sense the two sides balance each other up. However, others do not see it as a balance, instead they see a clear focus on the profitability part. It is perceived that the culture has a lower status in regard to profits and that, according to Irving, expressed goals are "solely linked to profitability". Evans further exemplifies how cultural aspects are downplayed by the focus on profitability and making money by stating; "people will not spontaneously sit down and hang out and talk to each other, or attend an after work at 3 pm, but instead want to bill that hour". This suggests that the pressure to maximize billable hours and make money discourage socialization and interactions. Hence, it counteracts the fostering of the culture described previously. This was something Kelly also reflected upon:

> "If we were not so profit-driven, it would absolutely have been an even better culture. And of course, there is ambition, but [...] we are pulling in different directions". - Kelly

The statement reveals a potential tension within the company. While there is an aspiration for a very open and social culture, the strong emphasis on profitability creates a countervailing force against this aspiration. Evans exemplifies this by describing that the strong focus on profit and billing hours, make people "compete for the projects and only focus on themselves which creates an unpleasant atmosphere". This clearly conveys a contrast to the above descriptions of the culture. It is stipulated that the emphasis on profitability overshadows the importance of fostering a positive and collaborative work environment. In turn, this creates a sense of misalignment where efforts to cultivate a positive culture are undermined by the pressure to generate revenue.

> "Given that we are a consulting firm, it is no surprise that much revolves around hours and billable time. Us employees are encouraged to enjoy our work, but it is clear that it should not be at the expense of profitability. [...] It [a good company culture] is a vision that management strives for, but as soon as it conflicts with profit demands it falters". - Harris

In line with Kelly's statement, Harris acknowledges the strong focus on profitability and its cruciality within the industry. While the attempts to balance profitability with employee

enjoyment are acknowledged, the quote emphasizes the prioritization of profitability. This further strengthens the argument that the company's focus on profit might be hindering efforts to create a truly open and social culture. Together with the quotes above, it can be assumed that there is a struggle for employees to know how to keep fostering a very social, outgoing culture when, at the end of the day, the most important aspect is to make money. According to Evans, this can be solved through more clear communication.

> "Of course, profitability is important [...] and I think everyone understands that. But they [the profitability focus and the culture] counteract each other because it is not communicated in a good and pleasant way how they should be balanced". - Evans

While acknowledging the importance of profitability, the quote highlights a conflict between the emphasis on profit and the desired positive work environment. It is stipulated that the lack of clear and positive communication about balancing these goals is the root cause of the tension between the culture and the profit. Without a well-defined and communicated strategy explaining how to achieve this balance, employees might perceive the company's cultural aspirations as disingenuous, fostering frustration and confusion. Altogether, it appears that the company has two strong guiding principles. However, the principle of profitability is seen to clearly overweight the culture.

4.2. To be a part of Communicatum

As seen in the previous part, the culture is a prominent aspect of the organization. Throughout the interviews, employees at Communicatum consistently described and exemplified their experiences as part of the company culture in a very positive manner. The following parts explore how the employees experience being a part of Communicatum and its organizational culture. Three common themes among the interviewees' descriptions emerged: a strong sense of "we", a sense of belongingness and a sense of openness.

4.2.1 A sense of "we"

There is a recurrent theme of talking about the company as a "we". This indicates that the employees feel a strong sense of identification with the company, and that they are committed to their organization and colleagues. The emphasis on "we" signifies a clear shift away from

individual achievements towards collective ones. This fosters a sense of shared responsibility and mutual support. Adams expresses that "we share failures, but also successes together" when talking about his/her colleagues. As articulated by Evans, there is also a mindset of "we are doing it together and it will be fine" which creates a sense of community and shared responsibility. S/he further explains that this feeling of "team effort creates kind of a benefit to work [at the company]". When challenges arise, the team tackles them together, fostering resilience and strengthening team bonds. This is further reflected upon by Clark:

> "The biggest satisfaction comes from succeeding as a group. [...] Everyone is
> seen as important and we work together. It is more like a feeling of team sport
> rather than individual achievement". - Clark

Clark emphasizes the importance of teamwork in collective success. It is further stipulated that the "we" comes before the "I" and that employees gain greater satisfaction from team achievements rather than individual ones. In line with this, Jacobs states that there is also a feeling of waiting to "perform well together with your colleagues [...] so that together we can be good, we look good". This emphasizes the "we" and a feeling of "we are in this together". Moreover, this is stressed even deeper through Kelly's statement of being motivated by "bringing something to the team". Hence, the "we" is also about performing *for* your colleagues rather than just *with* them. In line with this, it is expressed that there is a sense of pride in collective accomplishments. Jacobs explains that s/he feels proud "when my colleagues do a good job. It makes me feel extremely proud". This does not only relate to your own team, but the company as a whole, as expressed by Irving:

> "If I feel that this team over there has done something really good, something
> that you see that they are proud of, then you feel proud of it yourself. [...]
> That we have created these things together". - Irving

The quote indicates a sense of pride that extends beyond one's own contributions. This suggests a strong sense of team spirit and shared purpose, where individual success is intertwined with the collective achievements in the company. Moreover, the pride also seems to be deeply connected to the company's values and overall culture. Jacobs states that "I am very proud of the company's success" and Davis stresses that "I am very proud and glad to

work here". It is further stated that employees take pride towards the company values, and are happy to be a part of the "we".

> "I feel that I represent the values we work for, that I really feel proud when I
> sit in customer meetings, that I am a part of [the company]". - Adams

The quote transcends mere pride, suggesting a deeper connection. It hints at a strong alignment between employees' personal values and the company's core values. This suggests that the employees believe in the company's values and feel comfortable representing them in their everyday work. Furthermore, the strong "we" shows and is reinforced by talking about an "us" and "them". The interviewees are quick to distinguish the company from the rest of the industry and emphasize that they have succeeded in creating a business model that is unique and different from the traditional view of doing things. According to Clark, s/he perceives it as "it is not that important for [the company] to be part of the traditional view of agencies and hierarchy". Adding to this, Brown states that "the efficiency and the profitability that [the company] has, is quite unique" in the industry they operate in. Irving further exemplifies how this distance to other companies appears:

> "The industry is quite tough in many ways, with cutthroat competition, and
> [company name] has stood out from the crowd by being the opposite". -
> Irving

The emphasis on how others operate in relation to Communicatum, truly reinforces the "us" versus "them" mentality. It is further highlighted that while competitiveness is a natural thing in the industry, Communicatum has managed to move away from this and instead created a friendly work culture. This culture, along with the shared purpose, implies to contribute to a feeling of deep belongingness among employees. They do not just work for the company; they feel like an integral part of the "we."

4.2.2 A sense of belongingness

The employees express that they experience an oneness and belongingness towards both the company and their colleagues. The environment is described as welcoming and inclusive and Jacobs explains that "I feel a sense of belongingness here all the time. When I walk through

the doors, I belong". S/he further explains that "I believe that everyone feels like they are part of the community". In line with this Davis also states that "I think there's a pretty good sense of community". These statements emphasize the sense of camaraderie and shared values within the company. It is stipulated that this belongingness correlates with a strong identification towards the company, and especially its culture. This is something that is also articulated by Green:

> "I feel that I identify with our values and, like the professionalism and lack of prestige as well as the kindness and genuinity [...] and I think if it hadn't been like that, I probably wouldn't have been here for so long. [...] People enjoy the culture and want to work here, they want to stay and do their best, everyday". - Green

The sense of belongingness can be assumed to have a positive impact on the dynamic among the employees when performing work tasks. Moreover, the quote indicates that there is a strong connection between the individuals and the company's values, suggesting a culture that resonates with the employees own beliefs. There is further a correlation between the identification and employee retention and Clark explains that the culture makes "people want to stay with the company for a long period of time". This loyalty and willingness to stay within the company is something Harris also talks about but adds an interesting layer.

> "We are [the company] and I've worked with most of them for several years and I know them so I identify strongly with them, of course". - Harris

According to Harris, the fact that there is a high employee retention leads to stronger identification *within* the company, and not just *to* the company. This circles back to the "we" and marks the strong sense of belongingness and identification. It is further indicated that there is an overlap between company values and personal values results in a consensus on how to appropriately behave. According to Evans, the strong identification leads to a desire to act in benefit of the organization and the other colleagues.

> "I can be what I think is good, but I also want to automatically know how to behave in a way that is positive for [the company]". - Evans

The quote indicates a willingness to align personal goals with company's goals, and hence truly adopt the values as your own. In line with this, Harris marks that "you want to do a good job for the company". These statements of wanting to do good for the company inticats a loyalty and a strong sense of devotion to the company. The material overwhelmingly suggests that employees at Communicatum derive significant satisfaction from their workplace experience. This sentiment is particularly pronounced in the context of the company culture, which fosters a strong sense of belonging and positive employee engagement.

4.2.3 A sense of openness

As previously seen, recurrent words used by the interviewees when describing the culture at the organization are open and open-minded. In addition, the employees express that these aspects positively affect their experience of being part of Communicatum. This prevailing sense of openness is seen to significantly influence the overall atmosphere within the company and affects the interactions among employees. Additionally it also impacts the communication between the employees to be more open-minded to each other. It is stipulated that the emphasis on openness and an open-mindedness stems from the top management.

> "I think it's an incredibly percipient organization. They're eager to listen to what we who work here think about various things, and they're trying to understand and incorporate that in their efforts to improve". - Clark

The quote highlights that the management at the company are receptive to opinions from the employees and that these are taken into consideration when making efforts to improve. Having the top management acting in an open-minded way affects the atmosphere and the overall attitudes among the employees towards also being open to one another. When asking if the interviewees could elaborate what they mean by an open environment Evans describes it as; "open-minded, perhaps one could say. It feels like you can say whatever you want". In line with Evans's description Adams explains the openness as "we have really good and open conversations, and I feel that there is a great sense of security in the group". It thus seems like the openness is about being able to say what you want without being judged by it.

"To be able to say stupid things without getting hung out to dry for it. And that is probably part of the open culture that actually exists here, there is not a lot of 'hush-hush', but if you have an opinion, you can actually express it". - Irving

The quotes indicate that the sense of openness, from the top management, creates a spillover effect on the employees who also embrace a similar attitude of open-mindedness. The quotes emphasize that openness enables employees to freely voice opinions and foster open-minded conversations, encouraging diverse viewpoints without fear of repercussions. In addition, the openness also creates a nice atmosphere and a sense of safety among the employees. Fisher exemplifies this by stating that "the openness and inclusiveness leads to the feeling of safety". The feeling of safety does not only encourage them to share their thoughts but also to feel comfortable expressing if they are having a tough day. Jacobs expresses it as; "you can come as you are, and if you're having a bad day, it's okay. It's a very nice atmosphere". The quotes implies that the openness also in some sense blurs the boundary between the employees working self and private self, based on the fact that the employees are encouraged to come to work "as you are". In line with Jacobs's quote, Kelly describes the safety as a result of the open environment as:

"But I think it is because we are open and we try to see each other [...] and we care about having a good atmosphere and that it's okay if you're not at your best". - Kelly

The quotes point out the acceptant and tolerant approach among the employees towards coworkers having bad days, and that one is not expected to always perform at their best and that is okay. As stated by Kelly it is emphasized that the employees "see each other" which indicates that the employees feel that they can be themselves. Green elaborates on this by saying "I believe that people can be themselves, and you don't have to put on a facade when you go to work and become someone else". This emphasizes the importance of employees being able to be their genuine selves at work, rather than feeling pressured to conform to a particular way of being. Altogether, the openness and the open-mindedness fosters an atmosphere at the organization that encourages voicing one's viewpoints and being receptive to others perspectives, which combined creates a sense of safety that advocates people to uncover their personal self.

4.3 An emphasis on being friends

As previously discussed, the culture is described as the company's strongest asset. Clark describes that s/he believes that the culture "actually is one of the biggest success factors" for the company. In line with this, Adams emphasizes that the culture is "a big part of this successful business model that we [the company] have". One word that is recurrent in the material when it comes to descriptions about the company culture is the word friendship. However, this word goes beyond solely being a metaphor of how things *are*, it also becomes an injunction of how things *should* be.

4.3.1 Working with friends

The company has a clear slogan, "working with friends", which works as a philosophy describing how employees should work and act towards each other. The interviewees express that this slogan steer their behaviors and affect their everyday work, and in a way "pervades almost everything" according to Evans. The employee further explains that the slogan is very visible since people, as expressed by Irving, really "live as they preach", and integrate the slogan into their interactions with other colleagues. This is further expressed by Lewis:

> "I think it [working with friends] is something that permeates a bit of how we are and should be towards each other. You ask how the weekend was and you take the time to talk to each other. Everyone is very nice and sweet". - Lewis

It is indicated that "working with friends" is both a description of how things are but also a guide towards that ideal way of treating the people around. Hence, there is a clear connection between the word friendship and general workplace behavior. Lewis's statement further indicates that interactions should demonstrate genuine interest and contribute to a sense of community to truly reinforce the slogan. Aligned with Lewis, Green explains that the slogan acts as a guidance of how you should behave towards the people you work with.

> "We have this whole 'working with friends' thing [...] you should think that people are not just your colleagues, they are people you actually like as friends. So how would you treat someone if they were your friend?". - Green

The quote questions the traditional view of colleagues as solely professional connections and highlights the importance of building positive and friendly relationships with them. It further underscores that actions and behaviors should be modified towards how you would act in a friend relationship. However, this relies on the fact that there is a collective understanding in how a friend acts, a consensus which appears to be lacking among the interviewees. This becomes evident by Evans's statement; "there is no deeper explanation from management of what friendship or 'working with friends' means, so it is more up to us [employees] to fill it with things". The quote indicates that what friendship or the slogan actually include is up to the employee's individual interpretations. According to Jacobs it is about "honesty and transparency" which results in the feeling that one can "talk and have a coffee with anyone". In line with this, Adams explains that friendship includes an anticipation that people are honest and transparent:

> "If you're friends with someone, you can also say things like 'that wasn't very good' or 'that was really good,' and I expect people to say that to me". - Adams

Adams's quote indicates a desire for genuine and supportive friendships where honesty paves the way for mutual growth and stronger connections. In that sense, friendship thereby adds the possibility for improvements and learning. On a contrary note, Lewis instead state that being too close friends has its downsides:

> "I can sometimes find it challenging to work with my friends, as I feel a bit torn between my personal life and the need to deliver results. [...] I find it a bit challenging to work with friends and give feedback that is not positive, or to express that something is not working. It can be a bit tough at times". - Lewis

This quote shed light to the limitations of the slogan "working with friends". While it is often described in a positive manner, it can also create confusion among employees and lead to what Lewis experiences; "a torness between being a 'friend' and being a 'professional'". It thus seems like the employees experience a clash between working together and being friends at the same time. It is further indicated that being too good friends might result in a lacking focus on results. This is a concern that Evans also expresses.

"I believe I should be able to express my opinions, set expectations, and have expectations placed upon me. I should also be able to establish that while we may be friends, we also need to deliver results and maintain a professional demeanor. However, the atmosphere at [company name] leans more towards camaraderie than professionalism, which is pleasant in many ways, but sometimes we need to tighten up. [...] because it can come across as naive or amateurish". - Evans

The quote underscores that while it creates a nice atmosphere, being friends sometimes outweighs professionalism. It further emphasizes the importance of balancing friendship and a focus on delivering results, since it could come out as too amateure-like to have too much camaraderie. Based on the quotes, it can be assumed that it might be hard to find the perfect line between play and professionalism. However, this has not always been the case. It is indicated that the employees experience a shift in how well "working with friends" accurately describes the company culture.

4.3.1.1 From natural state to articulated strategy

The slogan of "working with friends" is not solely a guiding principle of how people should act, it is a description of how the company was founded. As described by Kelly "the company was actually founded by friends, and it shows". The mindset of behaving and acting in a certain way thereby goes back towards the natural state of the founders. However, the employees have experienced that when the company has grown and expanded, it has become hard to keep this natural friendship.

"I think it is difficult to maintain such a culture during growth. And what can I say, we are probably too big now for it to be a truly inclusive culture". - Kelly

It is indicated that cultures that thrive on a strong sense of community face challenges when scaling up, since maintaining inclusivity and ensuring everyone feels valued can become more difficult. However, as acknowledged by Harris this might not be a big issue and there are natural limitations and s/he explains that "socially, it is fine, you can not really have 120 friends and hang out with them all equally, it does not work". Harris points out that due the

current size of the company, it is not possible to literally work with friends. It is further indicated that "working with friends" has shifted from being a natural state to becoming a deliberate strategy due to the constraints imposed by growth.

> "When I started working here, it felt like the culture was very much set by everyone who worked here, like it just existed among all the employees. [...] And now maybe it feels a bit more like management has an idea of a culture they want and then everything is sort of driven by that, in a way. [...] But before it felt like maybe things happened a bit more spontaneously, and now it feels like it is a bit more structured and a bit more planned". - Lewis

The quote implies a perceived change in the company culture, highlighting a potential shift from an organic, employee-driven culture to a more top-down, management-defined one. Before, the culture came more naturally and things happened impulsively and unplanned. In line with Lewis's quote, Brown explains that it is very clear that the organization "works very hard and distinctly" with the culture. This further emphasizes the perception that the culture has moved from a natural thing to an articulated strategy. Additionally, with this shift, the employees perceive inauthenticity when it comes to the culture and "working with friends". Harris explained that "it feels like the slogan is used as a facade" and Evans stated that "'working with friends' is more of a PR stunt for customers rather than an accurate description of the company culture". The statement from Harris and Evans reveal that there is a perception that "working with friends" might not be an accurate description of the culture, but rather a slogan to make the company look good. Another aspect of the emphasis on "working with friends", as well as the constant encouragement of friendship-building, is that it contributes to established norms of behavior within the company.

4.3.2 Friendliness as a norm

The material implies that the constant emphasis on friendship and friendliness can create pressure on employees to conform to a specific way of being. As Evans puts it, it becomes more than a guidance of how one should act correctly, it also constitutes "an unspoken way of behaving, or an unspoken way of being". This shows that there is a desirable way of behaving, which indicates that there is a normative pressure to fit into a predetermined frame.

Whilst it is not explicitly stated by management, the employees experience that it feels like a subtle expectation to behave or be in a specific way.

> "Management really values this 'working with friends' thing. But it is not really like that, it is more like they want it to be a bit party-like [...] and it ends up being more like the extroverts who participate in everything. But not everyone is that type of person, I mean, it is not that anyone says it is not good [to not be an extrovert], but they kind of want everyone to be that type of person". - Davis

It is emphasized that the culture and the slogan promotes an extroverted, "party-like" culture. The quote also underscores that not everyone fits this description, yet there is an expectation to be extroverted and outgoing. In addition, while the slogan suggests an environment fostering camaraderie and collaboration, Davis unveils a more complex reality where the implementation of this slogan and culture may inadvertently exclude certain personality types, such as introverts. In contrast to the previous positive portrayal of the culture and slogan, the quotes thus sheds light on the potential shortcomings associated with it. This is further reflected upon by Lewis:

> "I can imagine that if you are not like that [extroverted] and maybe a bit more reserved and introverted, it might be more difficult to be a part of this very outgoing culture. [...] If you are not, it could feel like pressure". - Lewis

While a positive and friendly work environment is important, it can backfire and exclude people when it becomes a norm. The expectation, or norm, of constant friendliness and outgoing behavior can unintentionally create a pressure to conform. This pressure can be particularly challenging for introverts or those who are naturally more reserved. According to Brown it creates a feeling that "you really have to fight to stay engaged all the time and not drag down the energy in any way". Adding to this, Kelly stresses that it has been people "who have had a hard time fitting in, and in a tolerant culture, everyone should be able to fit in". Thus, it is seen that the emphasis on friendship and "working with friends" has its negative implications such as creating a norm of how one should be. In addition, there is a perception among the employees that there is not really room to oppose the way things usually are or question things, which thereby contradict the above discussion regarding openness According

to Kelly there have been situations where the company "has been getting rid of people who have had a lot of opinions or different viewpoints". This is something that is further exemplified by Evans who state that:

"People do not try to improve, they just try to make things less difficult. […] If someone comes up with suggestions on how to do things differently, it is just considered annoying. [...] People are used to surrounding themselves with YES-sayers and if someone says otherwise, it becomes a hassle. And then in the end those people who have different ideas tend to 'disappear'". - Evans

Evans and Kelly both shared their experiences of how employees who challenge the status quo often end up leaving the company. Further questions on this matter revealed that, according to the interviewees, the departure was instigated by both the employee in question and also the company. Based on previous analysis regarding openness in conversations, it thus seems like this has its constraints. It appears that there are limitations to what extent the viewpoints and opinions among the employees actually can differ. It seems like one is allowed to express opinions as long as they are within the accepted frames. Additionally, it is indicated that the culture has created a norm of conforming and not questioning things. In line with this, Clark stresses that "it is not a culture of focusing specifically on that [negativity], but rather of trying to adapt". This indicates that the culture creates an atmosphere where people believe that they are expected to behave or be in certain ways. Although this positivity can be beneficial for the organizational atmosphere, one can not always be on their A game. This in turn also creates a work-force which, according to Kelly, is "quite similar [...] and I would say we try to be flexible. We try to understand the importance of being flexible in a collaboration". The importance of being flexible is also reflected upon by Brown:

"This thing of being adaptable or flexible is so important. Like, I can take a step forward, but then I can step back a bit, let go of my ego. I do not have to push my opinion through, maybe it is not the only or the right one, so we can discuss it". - Brown

The quote indicates that flexibility is about being able to take on different roles in the team, on the one hand a more leading role by taking a step forward, and on the other hand being

more of a follower that takes a step back. It is indicated that flexibility and openness goes hand in hand by alternating between being more or less driving in discussions but also being open to listen to other opinions. Whilst the aspects of being flexible and adaptable stated above are all good, there are potential pitfalls. It is reflected upon by the interviewees that there are certain risks of acting too smoothly and constantly adapting to what is expected of you, since it might prevent critical discussions that can be beneficial for performance. It thus implies that one wants to conform to make the work as smooth as possible and avoid friction between the colleagues. Jacobs stresses the need to diversify and vary who people work with in order to "increase the dynamics and everything, so that things get better". This is further reflected upon by Lewis:

> "You need to have a mix of personalities for there to be good dynamics in the organization too [...] and sometimes you may need people who are different to also challenge things and so on". - Lewis

The value of having "different" people is stressed as a way to challenge and avoid groupthink. Too similar or homogenous teams might lead to people agreeing without considering alternative viewpoints. As stressed above by both Clark and Kelly, there are however tendencies of groupthink in the organization. People are "adapting" or "being flexible" to fit into the specific context in order for the work to be smooth, rather than actually leverage the positive aspects of diverse opinions. According to Evans, if "you are not flexible or adaptable you will not get booked on projects". This highlights the importance, and pressure, of acting in accordance with the norms within the company. This tendency will be further explored in the following part.

4.3.3 The pressure to make friends

The concern raised above about employee homogeneity appears to be compounded by the fact that teams often consist of the same individuals. This means that employees may not only work with similar personalities on occasion, but rather the same people concurrently. This lack of diversity in team composition is explained by the fact that the account managers (AM) and project leaders (PL) determine who should be in their teams, and that they tend to pick the same people. Davis explained that "AMs or PLs may often select the same types of people for all their projects, so I have not worked with many others but just the same group".

In addition to this leading to the same people working together, it is also expressed that this creates a feeling that it is hard to be included.

> "And it's sometimes pointed out that the same group tends to work on the same thing. So if you're not part of such a group [...] it can be hard to break in". - Harris

This further goes in line with another experienced pressure; that you have to become friends with people in order to be included in a social context. Making friends with the account managers and project leaders are seen to be crucial since they determine who should be in the projects. It thus implies that making friends with one's colleagues is not only a corporate slogan that wants workplace friendship to thrive, but also that it becomes a norm to have friends in order to get picked into teams. As Davis states it "you might not get booked if you do not know all the PLs and AMs that way". This indicates that it is beneficial to adopt friendliness more deeply to establish relationships.

> "I think it also affects the fact that you want to be friends and you want to get more projects [...] it is all about being capable and forward-thinking and people knowing who you are. People need to get to know you before you can get projects". - Adams

The quote indicates almost a must when it comes to friendships, that you will not get assigned any projects if you do not embrace this extroverted culture and personality. It is further highlighted that this includes actively putting yourself out there, in order to get recognized and secure opportunities.

> "If you do not have a good relationship with a project leader, you might not get [the project]. Or if you are not that, like 'that person.' So you try to participate in things outside of work, like after-work drinks and so on". - Davis

According to the quote, there is an experienced pressure to be a part of social activities in order to build valuable relationships. This reinforces the norm of behaving in a certain way and adds to the expectation of being very extroverted. Altogether, it appears that even though

being friends is an appreciated aspect in the culture, it can also create an underlying pressure to make friends. This pressure further highlights the perceived importance of strong relationships and social activities in fostering the desired culture.

4.3.4 Building a culture fostered by friendship

As emphasized previously, the organizational culture holds significant value within the company. It is thereby underscored that the company heavily prioritizes fostering this culture. According to the employees, this is done by strategically arranging different social activities that allows the employees to get to know each other. According to Brown, these activities include "breakfast on Mondays and Wednesdays, fika on Thursdays, and beer on Fridays" and Davis describes "after works and arranged workout sessions". The recurrent mentioning of these activities indicate that the employees value and appreciate them. These gatherings likely contribute to a sense of community and belonging, which can be a major factor in employee satisfaction and thriving in the workplace.

> "We also do a lot of things together. The idea is to get to know each other, and it is an explicit strategy to create this atmosphere we have, and where people feel good about coming to the office. That is why we organize after-work events and other activities". - Harris

It is stipulated that use of these activities and events is a chosen strategy by the company to build an enjoyable atmosphere and culture. In addition to this Clark explains that "the social activities are like ingredients in [creating the desired culture]". This indicates that the social events are not perceived to come naturally due to the culture, they are instead tools intended to create a desired culture. Consequently, they are seen more as means to ends rather than outcomes of something natural. However, even though social gatherings are used strategically, they have still resulted in the employees getting to know each other on a deeper level. It is expressed that they add something extra and leads to a more enjoyable workplace.

> "These social activities also create a kind of dimension that is not necessarily always present in workplaces. Where you have the opportunity to talk about other things and get to know each other, and of course that becomes valuable later for the work context". - Clark

As highlighted in the quote, having social activities allows the employees to get to know each other beyond work which creates stronger connections and relationships that can positively contribute to the working context. It can be assumed that these aspects improve teamwork and the overall work performance. Building stronger connections among the employees might also result in fostering a better understanding of your coworkers that presumably affects the atmosphere at the company. It is further indicated that social activities make it more enjoyable to come to work, which Harris highlights by stating "I think that has a huge impact. It would not be nearly as much fun to come to work if we did not have this culture". Furthermore, the social activities and close relationships that have been formed have led to the employees taking their own initiatives to do things outside of work.

> "Sometimes we even party together, and we do things that feel almost personal. And then we might take the initiative to do more of these things, because they are so much fun. So we take more initiative to meet up after work and do such things". - Lewis

The quote underscores that the social activities arranged outside the workplace takes the working relationships to an additional level that becomes more private and personal. Taking the social gatherings beyond the workplace thus reinforce the previously stated aspects of community and belongingness. As a result of these personal relationships the employees are also finding common interests that they engage in outside of work.

> "You can 'geek out' with people or nerd out with people about things and find common hobbies. [...] So it is not just work, but you can be human, and you can talk to each other and not just about work-related stuff". - Fisher

The quote exemplifies how the employees take their relationships beyond the actual work and indicates that it adds an informal dimension to the relationships. Another example of these activities, that exceed the working boundary, are given by Harris; "there is also our roleplaying club, actually several of them, where we meet up". In line with what Fisher stated, this quote exemplifies how getting to know your coworkers results in forming closer relationships. This is an aspect that Evans highlights by saying "I have a few colleagues who I don't really see as colleagues, but rather as close friends who I met through working at

[company name]". Adams agrees with this and elaborates on the effects on such relationships.

> "I guess the feeling is that you have really formed some close friendships with people, people become real friends. [...] And you feel a great sense of belonging and know a lot about them as individuals because you talk a lot with each other". - Adams

The quote highlights that forming close relationships at work contributes to the feeling of belongingness, as touched upon previously. In addition, the quotes indicate that the atmosphere at the company fosters intimate relationships between the employees. Thus, having a culture that allows the previously mentioned aspect of informality contributes to forming deeper connections and relationships with one's coworkers that is more than just mere working relationships. It can thus be assumed that the culture is affecting the dynamic of the relationships, but also that the relationships among the employees reinforce the culture.

4.4 Chapter summary

The analysis of Communicatum's organizational culture reveals a multifaceted dynamic centered around themes of belongingness, openness, and friendship. Employees express a strong sense of camaraderie and shared values, fostering a feeling of belongingness towards both the company and their colleagues. This sense of belonging correlates with a deep identification with the company's culture and values, leading to high levels of employee retention and loyalty. However, there are nuances to this culture, as employees also highlight the pressure to conform to a specific outgoing and extroverted demeanor. While the company promotes an open and inclusive environment, there are concerns about the homogeneity of teams and the expectation to participate in social activities to build valuable relationships. In addition, the limitations regarding the openness also concerns not being free to express exactly what you want due to norms of compliance.

The company strategically organizes social events to foster a sense of community and belonging, contributing to stronger connections among employees. However, this emphasis on friendship can create a pressure to make friends, in particular, with project leaders and account managers. In addition, the emphasis on friendship leads to the pressure to conform to

social norms, potentially excluding those who do not naturally align with the extroverted culture. Despite these challenges, employees value the informal relationships formed at work, which contribute to a positive atmosphere and a sense of mutual support. Altogether, it is seen that the culture at Communicatum is a complex interplay between friendship, professionalism, and organizational dynamics.

5. Discussion

In the following section we will integrate theoretical frameworks with empirical data to address our research questions. Our empirical findings will be discussed in relation to previous research in order to conceptualize the findings and answer the research questions.

5.1 A strong organizational identification

The empirical findings suggest that the employees experience a strong sense of oneness and belonging to the organization, which in accordance with Ashforth and Mael (1989) showcases a strong organizational identification. Employees transcend mere employment; they perceive themselves as integral parts of the company and the company as part of themselve. This phenomenon is evident in their tendency to describe the company's qualities in terms of themselves, reflecting Dutton et al.'s (1994) work. The boundaries between the individual and the company thereby seem less rigid and the employees are defining themselves in terms of the organization. This strong identification further exerts influence on the employees behavior, in accordance with Kunda (1992). The employees express a willingness to act according to what is best for the company and modify their behavior towards what is best for the collective. Hence, there are indications that the company values and appropriate behaviors almost come before the individual ones.

It is further worth noting that there are very limited times when the employees talk about the company as "them", or even as "the company". There is a constant emphasis on a "we" which signifies a powerful shared identity among employees. This aligns with Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, such as organizations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). At Communicatum this shared identity fosters a shift from individual achievements towards collective success. The emphasis on "we" further translates into several positive outcomes connected to the ones presented by Ashforth et al. (2008); positive employee behaviors, employee morale and well-being, high performance and organizational success. The employees at Communicatum express a sense of mutual support and shared responsibility, where challenges are tackled together. This

prioritization of team effort over individual achievements, is expressed to lead to greater satisfaction, and fosters a pride in collective accomplishments.

Related to the emphasis on "we", the interviewees express a strong emphasis on feeling connected with the company as well as the colleagues. This could, according to Blader et al. (2017) explain why they follow the established norms and act in benefit of the company. As the authors suggest, there are also indications of some employees breaking away from these norms. The emphasis on organizational success and profitability can, based on the Blader et al.'s (2017) study, lead to the employees departing from other norms within the company. This can be seen in the empirical findings in how the employees express the feeling that billing hours is more important than building relationships, hence there is a focus on organizational well-being over connections with colleagues. The employees express that there is no time to behave according to the norms of extroversion and socialization due to the emphasis on profitability and money. This creates a situation where employees experience a split focus about commiting to the very outgoing, friendly culture versus commiting to the money focused culture that simultaneously coexist.

5.1.1 Committed to the "we"

The interviewees highlight the sense of "we" as a prominent aspect, and coupled with the strong emphasis on the collective achievements and success it indicates that there is strong organizational commitment among the employees, in line with Reicher's (1985, p.468) definition. There is a joint perception that one wants to perform at their best for the sake of the colleagues but also for the company's success, which also is in accordance with Reicher's (1985, p.468) description of organizational commitment. The desire to perform beyond the basic premise to do your job implies a deeper dedication among the employees towards the organization's goals and mission. According to Porter et al. (1974) this dedication fosters a sense of belongingness and purpose towards the organization's mission, which is apparent in the empirical findings.

Organizational commitment among employees can be distinguished using Meyer and Allen's (1992) three-component model. The affective commitment is evident by the emotional attachment of belongingness with the company and the sense of camaraderie, and also by alignment with the company's goals. This is seen to affect the employees desire to contribute

to the team's and company's success, in accordance with Meyer and Allen's (1992) description of affective commitment. However, our empirical findings suggest that employee attachment and identification extend beyond organizational goals, as suggested by Meyer and Allen (1992), to include attachment and identification with values and culture. The connection between the company's values and the individual's values is seen to be the prominent factor for remaining at the company, which adds to Meyer and Allen's (1992) idea.

The empirical findings does not explicitly show Meyer and Allen's (1992) second component, continuance commitment. However, some connection to the continuance commitment can be drawn from the stated distinction between the company and other companies in the industry. The interviewees underscore that the company has distinguished itself from the rest of the industry by how they operate combined with the friendly and warm atmosphere. Since they emphasize these aspects it indicates that is appreciated among the employees. This may indicate employees' perception of limited alternative workplaces and the challenge of starting anew elsewhere, fostering commitment in accordance with Meyer and Allen's (1992) description of continuance commitment.

The final component proposed by Meyer and Allen (1992) is normative commitment which reflects employees' feelings of obligation to the organization, often stemming from loyalty or reciprocity for the company's investment in them. The findings indicate willingness to adapt behaviors for the organization's benefit and a strong desire to excel, reflecting a sense of obligation to the organization aligned with the author's description of normative commitment. Moreover, the employee's identification does not seem to stem from the organization's investment in them, as suggested by Meyer and Allen (1992). Instead the findings underscore that prolonged employment at the company strengthens employees' identification with both the organization and their colleagues.

5.1.2 Proud of the "we"

The interviewees expressed that they are proud of belonging to the organization, which goes in line with Jones's (2010, p.859) definition of organizational pride. The interviewees also state that the pride in their organizational membership arises during customer meetings, indicating that the company is seen in a positive light from an outside perspective, in accordance with Dutton's et al. (1994) suggestion. In addition, the empirical findings show

that the employees are proud not only of their own work but also of the company's achievements. It appears that the employees share both successes and failures which implies a sense of "we are in this together". This advocates a sense of belongingness in accordance with Jones's (2010) description of organizational pride. Furthermore, even though the interviewees do not explicitly express that the identification with the organization has affected their self-concept, in line with Dutton et al.'s (1994), there are signs that indicate that this is the case. It is occurring in the empirical findings that the employees want to succeed *for* their colleagues, implying that team performance affects their self-concept. In addition, as seen above, the interviewees express that they are proud of their organization in several instances, which according to Blader and Tyler (2009) positively affect the employees self-concept.

5.2 A strong organizational culture

It is evident in the empirical findings that the organization has a strong organizational culture. When explaining and talking about the organizational culture the interviewees describe it similarly with recurring descriptive words such as "community", "openness", "unpretentious" and "family-like". Describing the culture in similar ways indicates that the organizational members share organizational values and norms in line with Gaus's et al. (2017) definition of organizational culture. Moreover, the description of the culture as "family-like" can be connected to Kunda's (1992) suggestion of describing an organizational culture with the metaphor family. Kunda (1992) proposed that there is an inseparable link between employees and their social group within the organization where employees prioritizes the collective good over individual desires. As previously presented, this is evident in the empirical findings where the interviewees express that they act in the benefit of the company and have a desire to contribute to the team's success.

Another distinct aspect of the organizational culture is the slogan "working with friends", which initially was a description of how the company was founded. The slogan also evolved into the natural state within the company regarding how individuals interacted with each other, that is acting and seeing one's coworkers as friends. However, as the company has grown in size it has become more of a set strategy in order to make the employees internalize the organizational culture, in accordance with Kunda's (1992) suggestion. Based on the empirical findings it is apparent that the slogan currently is used to guide how the employees

should behave to one another. The slogan coupled with the above descriptive words of the culture is thus seen to shape how the employees think, value and behave, in accordance to Alvesson and Willmott (2002).

5.2.1 Managing culture - does size matter?

Communicatum prides itself on a culture characterized by strong community, openness, and belonging. This focus on building a positive work environment aligns with Ogbanna and Harris (1998) who found a strong culture fosters employee engagement and satisfaction. Additionally, the company's success in aligning practices with values likely contributed to their performance, indicating effective culture management in accordance with Obgbanna and Harris (1998). This is shown in how the culture is deeply ingrained in the everyday practices and guides the behaviors of the employees. The empirical findings further suggest that Communicatum's culture have originated organically, aligning with Smircich (1983) ideas on organic cultural development. However, the company's later shift towards a more strategic approach to culture management, with the use of slogans and social gatherings, reflects the ideas of authors like Brannan and Hawkins (2007) and Costas (2012) who believe culture can be influenced.

Communicatum's shift towards a strategic approach to culture management, with its use of slogans and social gatherings, exemplifies the complexity highlighted by Ogbanna and Harris (1998). The slogan, and the culture it represents, functions as a tool for management to subtly influence employees, in accordance with Fleming and Sturdy (2009). However, as a more articulated strategy has emerged the employees feel a stronger sense of control being exerted, showcasing the challenges of culture management. While social activities and friendly bonds may have been organically present, employees now perceive them as tools for management to build the desired culture, rather than inherent ingredients. It thus appears that there is a perception of disingenuousness and that "working with friends" is seen as just a facade. This disconnect highlights the potential downsides of a strategic approach, where organic elements can lose their authenticity in accordance with Hambrick and Crozier (1985).

The empirical findings further suggest that the shift towards a more explicit cultural strategy is necessitated by Communicatum's rapid growth, as the previously organic approach may limit cohesion and desired behaviors in a larger organization. The growth thereby presents a

common challenge for companies; maintaining a strong and inclusive culture amidst significant expansion, aligning with Hambrick and Crozier (1985). Research suggests that fostering a cohesive and goal-oriented organizational culture is a key management objective (McAleese & Hargie, 2004). However, achieving this ideal becomes increasingly complex as companies scale (Hambrick & Crozier, 1985), which is exemplified at Communicatum. The shift towards a straightforward culture management strategy, as highlighted above, aligns with Hambrick and Grozier's (1985) observation that growth compels the implementation of structures to manage a larger workforce. However, this can unintentionally create a sense of control and inauthenticity, eroding the organic elements that contributed to past success.

The material further indicates that the growth the company is facing requires a new approach towards culture management. This underscores the delicate balance between strategic control and cultural authenticity (Hambrick & Crozier, 1985). Communicatum's management must prioritize maintaining the core values that fostered its early success while adapting to the demands of a growing organization. McAleese & Hargie's (2004) five guiding principles - formulating a culture strategy, developing cultural leaders, fostering communication, measuring cultural performance, and integrating culture into stakeholder interactions - could act as a roadmap for Communicatum. The empirical findings indicate that Communicatum has a clear goal of how they want their culture to be, however they lack in communicating how this should be combined with the profitability focus. By clearly articulating and communicating this, the company can ensure that its growth is not at the expense of the culture that has fueled its success.

5.3 Being a friend

The empirical findings indicate that the employees at the company have formed workplace friendships where the colleagues have a genuine interest in one another. The interviewees explain that the openness entails demonstrating concern for the well-being of one's colleagues, as well as providing support and understanding during periods of adversity. This goes in line with Pillemer and Rothbard's (2018) description of workplace friendship; supporting one's colleagues based on their needs and showing them understanding and empathy. Moreover, the findings show that the interviewees feel a sense of belongingness and oneness with their colleagues. This might be a result of having workplace friendship, in accordance with Ryan and Deci (2000), and Maslow (1943, cited in David et. al., 2023) who

state that friendship at work results in relatedness and belongingness. This belongingness is also seen by a sense of togetherness in achievements. The findings show that collective performance is important and that the employees want to perform *for* their colleagues. This mindset indicates an increased job performance in accordance with David et al. (2023). Our empirical findings do not align with Pillemer's and Rothbard's (2018) presented negative consequences, however it suggests additional potential drawbacks. The findings suggest that the friendship relationship can impede employees from effectively communicating issues or providing constructive feedback, indicating that they do not want to "step on anyone's toes".

Drawing from the empirical data, it is important to highlight that there is an expectation for employees to foster friendships with their colleagues, or at the very least, to treat them with the same camaraderie as they would with their friends. Even though many employees appear to have formed friendships, the slogan and managerial aspirations for coworker camaraderie may be perceived as imposing such relationships onto employees. This opposes Ingram and Zou's (2008), and Berman et al.'s (2002) definition of workplace friendship as a voluntary relationship. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of consensus among the interviewees regarding what friendship, or being friends actually infer. The employees are told to "work with friends", but it is not stated what it entails. While some emphasize honesty and transparency as key aspects of friendship, others underscore the ability to engage in casual conversations and share a coffee with anyone. This discrepancy raises questions about whether the employees actually are friends or if they simply just are being friendly. Utilizing friendship as a guidance for employee behavior thus becomes challenging due to the varying interpretations of the concept among individuals.

5.4 A culture of friendship

The organizational culture at Communicatum bears significant resemblance to what Costas (2012) refers to as friendship culture. The interviewees explain the culture with words such as "friendly", "open" and "inclusive", which goes in line with the prominent atmosphere that Costas (2012) describes as egalitarianism, open, friendly and sociable. In a culture of friendship hierarchies are downplayed (Costas, 2012), which is seen at Communicatum by having a fairly flat organizational structure. In the empirical findings the interviewees state that there is a lack of hierarchies which impact how people act and work in teams. It can assumably be a contributing factor for the prevailing unpretentiousness the employees

experience. The equal and open atmosphere in a friendship culture is according to Costas (2012), among other things, due to the management being humble and unpretentious. However, in our empirical findings it is evident that it is not only the management that possesses this mindset, but rather all of the employees, which indicates fostering a sense of egalitarianism. This combined with the fact that there are no official ladder to climb further displays egalitarianism.

Furthermore, another prominent aspect of the organizational culture at Communicatum is the social activities that are arranged at and outside the workplace, which aligns with Costas (2012) description of a friendship culture. The social events at the organization include diverse activities that are similar to the ones Costas (2012) provide, such as breakfasts, fikas, after works and exercise programs. The findings also indicate that activities outside work are not exclusively organized by the company but also stem from initiatives taken by employees themselves. These socialization occasions have led to employees finding common interests, in accordance with Costas (2012), and in turn has resulted in arranging gatherings and events based on mutual interests.

Additionally, Costas (2012) emphasizes that relationships within a friendship culture is characterized by informality, intimacy and closeness. Although she does not explicitly identify social activities as a facilitator of these aspects, our empirical findings suggest that it is. The findings underscore the significance of interpersonal relationships among colleagues, highlighting the role of socialization outside formal work tasks as a facilitator of deeper connections. The informal and intimate relationships include, according to Costas (2012), being able to talk and get help from anyone. In addition to this, our findings suggest that this kind of relationships also involve viewing colleagues not merely as coworkers but as friends, coupled with supporting each other on a personal level.

Moreover, Costas (2012) underscores that individuality, choice and lack of hierarchies can lead to a state of uncertainty. Based on the empirical findings the latter, lack of hierarchies, is a prominent factor that causes uncertainty among the employees at Communicatum. According to Costas (2012) the ambiguity leads to employees seeking for security and stability through friendship relations, however our findings suggest otherwise. The uncertainty at Communicatum revolves around lack of clear guidelines and directions, from the management, in how to execute work tasks in a desirable manner which results in an

uncoordinated workforce. While the findings underscore the significance of culture and profitability as guiding principles for employee behavior, it is evident that these guidelines are not sufficiently formulated to navigate the uncertain environment. This suggests that the experienced uncertainty is about *too* much individuality between the management and the employees. The interviewees request more direction and guidelines, proposing that they desire a sense of unity with the management and more parental authority in navigating the unstable state, in line with Ouchi's (1980) description of paternalistic management style. The empirical findings thus indicate that instead of emphasizing individuality, in line with Costas (2012), the employees request some more focus on the collective. The latter is in accordance with Kunda's (1992) description of a culture characterized by the metaphor "family". The focus on the collective is seen, in the empirical findings, both in terms of the emphasis on collective success, but also by the demand for more direction.

As indicated in the above discussion, our findings implies that the culture at the Communicatum is not a unmitigated friendship culture, as presented by Costas (2012), it shows indicators of a family culture as well. By combining aspects from both a family culture and a friendship culture it results in what we have chosen to call *family-like friendship culture*. This culture undertakes aspects of both the concepts of a family culture and a friendship culture. In line with Costas's (2012) observations regarding shared components of a family culture and a friendship culture, the relationships within a *family-like friendship culture* are characterized by informality, closeness, and intimacy. In addition, the *family-like friendship culture* encompasses aspects of openness, egalitarianism, friendliness, individualism and/or collectivism, and an emphasis on social activities, derived from a culture of friendship. The *family-like friendship culture* further derives characteristic from a family culture as it involves the feature of unity, emphasizing the team in front of the self. Additionally, it incorporates the element of parental authority, where the management provides direction and guidelines in order to mitigate the sense of uncertainty. The empirical findings regarding the culture at Communicatum thus implies a *family-like friendship culture.*

5.4.2 The presence of normative control

As identified by Costas (2012), there is a strong connection between friendship cultures and normative control, where desired behaviors are reinforced through socialization and communication. According to Fleming and Sturdy's (2009) description of normative control,

employee behaviors are shaped towards a desired state by fostering a shared culture, characterized by homogenous attitudes, beliefs, and values. Based on this description, normative control is apparent in several instances in our empirical findings. For instance, there is a strong emphasis on friendship and social activities in the material, which according to Chu (2024) can be seen as a way to achieve normative control. This further aligns with Kunda (1992) statements that social gatherings can be understood as rituals and instruments of exercising normative control. It appears in the material that social events frequently occur, both at the company office but also outside the corporate walls, and even though these are appreciated it also implies to act as normative control. The findings show that employees experience the pressure to attend social events to make friends and to "fit in".

An additional aspect suggesting normative control at Communicatum is the significant emphasis placed on corporate culture, possibly aimed at shaping employees' behaviors in line with Fleming and Sturdy (2009) description. The slogan "working with friends" is seen to create an unspoken expectation to conform to a specific way of being. As the material suggests, it becomes more than a guidance; it is also an unspoken way of behaving. Hence, the slogan, which is widely accepted among the personnel, acts as a corporate value that steer the employee's behaviors, also aligning with Fleming and Strudy's (2009) description. Moreover, steering employees' behaviors and attitudes in a desirable way is seen in the empirical findings by the statements about unacceptance of people who have different viewpoints. It appears that if employees do not act and express oneself within determined frames these individuals depart from Communicatum, either instigated by the employee or the company. Hence, by utilizing normative control, the organization ensures that employees conform to its frameworks.

Moreover, the pressure to conform into a specific way can also be particularly challenging for introverts, as highlighted in the empirical findings. The emphasis on extroverted behavior, "party-like" atmosphere, and constant positivity creates a culture that may unintentionally exclude those who are naturally more introverted. This aligns with Costas's (2012) finding that a preferred self emerges within a friendship culture, favoring outgoingness and sociability. Consequently, individuals feel compelled to exhibit this identity to be part of the community. In addition, there is also an unspoken expectation to constantly maintain a good and positive energy. This expectation reflects a group pressure in accordance with Kunda's (1992) characterization, enforcing the desired conduct of active engagement and positivity.

The group pressure and normative control further expresses itself by employees are expected to demonstrate flexibility and adaptability when working together.

Furthermore, in accordance with Ray (1989), empirical evidence demonstrates normative control through a strong sense of belonging and a "we-ness" among employees, influencing their identification to both the organization and their colleagues. It is evident that this sentiment fosters a desire for collective success, motivating employees to perform in a manner beneficial to the company, aligning with Kunda's (1992) work. It is further stipulated that the normative control expresses itself in a pressure to befriend project leaders and account managers. The employees experience that their position, and the likelihood to get projects, depend on it aligning with Costas (2012) findings of dependency among employees.

5.5 Contradictions

As the empirical findings suggest there are some tensions and contradictions within the company. The material indicates that one these tensions relates to the struggle of balancing friendship and professionalism. This struggle can lead to a lack of critical thinking and questioning, as employees prioritize maintaining positive relationships over voicing concerns. This can be connected to the phenomenon of functional stupidity, which occurs when people mindlessly follow rules and procedures, even if they are counterproductive (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). In the context of a strong culture, employees might conform to norms of constant positivity and adaptability, stifling critical thinking. This is evidenced in the material by the tendency to adapt to perceived colleague expectations rather than leveraging on diverse opinions, due to the norms. This lack of critical evaluation can lead to decisions based on consensus rather than the best course of action, and hence lead to what Janis (1982; cited in McCauley 1989) describes as groupthink. There is thereby a risk that people's desire for harmony or conformity overrides their critical thinking.

In addition, the material indicates contractions in how the employees experience the atmosphere at the company, especially in relation to openness. According to the empirical findings there is, on one hand, the perception that the culture has resulted in a positive, supportive work environment where it is safe to express opinions without being judged for it. This aligns with Edmondson's (1999) definition of psychological safety; a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks. The findings show that the employees at Communicatum

experience the workplace as a safe place, constituted by an open atmosphere, where they are empowered to share their ideas and voice their opinions. However, on the other hand, it is also expressed that people who do voice their opinions and contradict the status quo, end up leaving the company. Even if the employees express that the company has a very open and inclusive culture, they also express that this is not the case. It can be understood that there is a preference, and pressure, that people are being adaptable and buying into norms that exist.

As seen in the material, Communicatum further seems to operate on a foundation of two seemingly contrasting principles: their culture and the focus on profitability. While specific job tasks lack detailed guidance, a strong emphasis is placed on the company's culture and its influence on employee behavior. The empirical findings reveal a potential conflict between the company's stated values and slogan, and its operational reality. Employees struggle to reconcile the emphasis on a social, friendly culture with the pressure to maximize profits. On one hand, they are encouraged to be outgoing and participate in activities, fostering a sense of community. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on strict adherence to working hours, which can lead to a competitive "elbowing your way" mentality. The tension, or contradiction, relates to Blader et al.'s (2017) discussion about the prioritization regarding which aspects of the company one should identify with, as touched upon previously. However, instead of having to prioritize it is here more a question of how to find a balance between the two-sides, without them counteracting each other. The material states that there it is clear that profitability should be prioritized, but not how to prevent it from happening on the expense of fostering the appreciated culture.

Moreover, it can be seen that the experienced contrast between culture and profitability leads to confusion regarding a common perception of everyday practices, and hence to some extent the culture. According to Weber (1996; cited in Savović et al., 2021, p.27) the culture reflects a common perception of everyday practices and will often determine "the way things are done within an organization". However, since there is a conflict between the culture and the profit there is an uncertainty resulting in a misalignment in how to approach the everyday practices. As indicated in the material, this could be mitigated with better communication and a more clearly stated strategy. This circles back to McAleese and Hargie's (2004) five guiding principles for successful culture management, especially the formulation of an overall culture strategy and more clear communication. Lastly, by following these principles, the contradictions described above within the company can presumably be minimized.

6. Conclusion

The following section provides a comprehensive summery of the empirical findings from our research. Subsequently, we will delineate the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the research conducted. Finally, we will discuss the study's limitations and propose potential directions for future research.

6.1 Main findings

This study aimed to investigate how a strong organizational culture affects employees' experiences and sense of belonging to the company, and hence their organizational identification. It further investigated the unexplored concept of friendship culture by delving deeper into the mechanisms through which friendship cultures influenced employees' experiences within organizations. We examined this by focusing on a Swedish communication agency renowned for its strong culture. The emphasis was to explore how employees perceived that this culture influenced their identification with the company and their overall experience within the organization. The following research questions guided our investigation:

- How do employees at a company with a strong organizational culture perceive that it affects their organizational identification?

- How do employees perceive and experience an organizational culture that emphasizes friendship?

The study revealed a positive correlation: a strong culture emphasizing shared values and a collective "we" mentality that fosters commitment and a willingness to prioritize organizational goals. Inclusive language and a focus on collective success reinforce this shared identity. This study confirms the importance of affective commitment driven by emotional attachment and value alignment. The ability of the company to distinguish itself from others in the industry suggests continuance commitment as well. Our findings extend

Meyer and Allen's (1992) model by highlighting the role of long-term employment in strengthening identification with both the organization and colleagues.

Furthermore, the findings show that a reciprocal relationship exists between pride, commitment, and identification. Employees who feel proud of their company's achievements are more likely to identify with its values. The emphasis on relationships within the organizational culture further strengthens identification. The sense of belonging and "we are all in this together" fosters a shared identity among colleagues, which in turn influences workplace expectations and behaviors. Those who strongly identify with the culture are more likely to remain, while those who do not may struggle to fit in. However, this strong cultural influence can also lead to exclusion for those who do not fully conform, potentially hindering diversity and inclusion efforts.

While close, informal relationships can strengthen identification with both the organization and colleagues, the study also highlights challenges. A delicate balance exists between camaraderie and professionalism. Excessive informality can hinder productivity and focus. Additionally, the expectation to cultivate friendships for professional gain can undermine genuine connections and create inauthenticity. This perception of inauthenticity is further compounded by the lack of clarity surrounding the metaphor "friendship" and what term truly entails within the company. While it fosters a sense of belonging it still creates ambiguity regarding professional boundaries. The emphasis on camaraderie can also create tensions with the inherent competitive nature of a business environment. This pressure to prioritize social connections alongside performance targets creates cognitive dissonance for employees. Furthermore, the pressure to conform to a specific form of culture may inadvertently stifle critical thinking and dissenting opinions. Employees may hesitate to voice concerns or challenge the status quo for fear of disrupting positive relationships, potentially leading to a lack of diverse thought and decision-making.

The findings suggest that a culture with an emphasis on friendship presents complex challenges for employees. While social cohesion has its benefits, it can also create tensions and dilemmas. Employees may feel pressure to prioritize social connections over personal boundaries or hesitate to voice critical opinions for fear of disrupting the positive atmosphere. The organization subtly reinforces its desired norms and values through social gatherings and slogans, guiding employee behavior. However, this emphasis on conformity can inadvertently

marginalize individuals who do not fully align with these norms, potentially hindering creativity and innovation. Striking a balance between fostering a cohesive culture and preserving space for individual expression and critical thinking is crucial for a truly thriving work environment. Furthermore, clear and open communication seems to be the key to fostering a strong culture that leverages its strengths while minimizing unintended consequences. By clearly forming and communicating a culture strategy, the company can mitigate the risks of employees experiencing contradictions and ambiguities.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

As presented in the introduction, workplace friendship and the use of the metaphor friendship when describing organizational culture is a rather new trend in the existing literature on organizational culture. In addition, there is limited research on the concept of culture of friendship, where the study by Costas (2012) is, to our knowledge, the only one. Our research extends the understanding of friendship culture by corroborating its existence beyond the scope of Costas's (2012) singular case study. Our investigation reaffirms the prevalence of informal and close relationships within organizational contexts, bolstering key characteristics such as informality, intimacy, egalitarianism, and individualism. Moreover, our findings support Costas's (2012) assertions regarding the prominence of social activities that reinforce egalitarianism and intimacy, leading to a flattened organizational hierarchy at Communicatum. Consistent with Costas's (2012) observations, our study underscores that hierarchies are downplayed in a friendship culture, resulting in a flat organizational structure at Communicatum.

Furthermore, while affirming Costas's (2012) observation regarding the openness of friendship culture, our investigation delves deeper into its implications. By scrutinizing the concept of openness, we unveil its correlation with psychological safety. Consequently, our research introduces a novel dimension to the understanding of friendship culture, emphasizing the crucial component of psychological safety within it. Moreover, normative control inherent within a culture of friendship is reinforced by our study in several instances. In addition, our study sheds light on other potential negative consequences associated with such a culture, namely functional stupidity and groupthink. We find that within a friendship culture, employees may conform to norms emphasizing constant positivity and adaptability, potentially impeding critical thinking and thus functional stupidity. This conformity is evident

in individuals aligning their beliefs with perceived colleague expectations, rather than capitalizing on the advantages of diverse opinions, leading to groupthink where consensus-driven decisions might be made at the expense of optimal ones. Consequently, our research contributes to the existing knowledge by highlighting that friendship culture may engender functional stupidity and groupthink.

Lastly, our research does not only reinforce the notion of individualism within friendship culture; it highlights the presence of collectivist elements as well where the employees emphasize the team in front of the self, which suggests a feature of unity. It is also evident in the recurring emphasis on collective success and the use of inclusive language such as "the we". Thus, our study enriches the discourse by recognizing that friendship culture can emphasize individualism and/or collectivism. In addition, the study highlights the existence of uncertainty in a culture emphasized by friendship, and suggests that to navigate this uncertainty the employees require more direction and guidelines in the form of parental authority. The aspects of unity and paternal authority, coupled with the above described supporting aspect of a friendship culture results in our proposal of an additional type of organizational culture; *family-like friendship culture*. This form undertakes aspects of both the family culture and a friendship culture, thus showcasing an organizational culture that is an intermediate between the two.

6.3 Practical implications

We contend that our study extends beyond theoretical contributions to offer practical implications. The primary beneficiaries of these implications are the case study company and its management. Our investigation provides the management with a comprehensive exploration of employee perspectives regarding the company's culture and their identification with it. This insight enables management to discern employees' perceptions of both positive and negative aspects of the culture, as well as their desire for increased direction and guidelines.

Moreover, we assert that the implications of our study transcend the case company. Other organizations utilizing metaphors to describe their organizational culture can benefit from our findings as well. Our study underscores the importance of providing explicit clarification of the metaphor that is being used, as explanation or guidance in the organizational culture. The

responsibility to convey the explanation lies with management to ensure alignment and understanding among organizational members. Additionally, organizations with strong cultures that have undergone significant growth in size stand to gain deeper insights from our study as well. Lastly, given the relatively emergence of the concept of friendship culture, our study contributes to its understanding by examining it within a practical context, offering valuable insights for both academia and practitioners alike.

6.3 Limitations and future research

While the study yields valuable insights into organizational culture dynamics, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Primarily, the reliance on a single case company imposes constraints. The findings are inherently bounded by their focus on a singular organization, thus limiting the extent to which they can be applied to other workplace contexts. Although the research offers noteworthy observations, further exploration across diverse organizational settings is imperative for a broader understanding. Moreover, the sample size, relative to the company's workforce, might not fully encapsulate the spectrum of employee experiences. A larger sample would afford a more comprehensive depiction of cultural norms and their implications. Furthermore, the study's timeframe may have limited the depth of investigation, potentially constraining its outcomes. Thus, a more extensive research duration could provide a richer understanding of organizational culture dynamics and their nuanced effects.

To further validate our findings, it is essential for future research to strengthen the applicability of our conclusions. Specifically, there is a need to further investigate how organizations can uphold an authentic culture as they undergo expansion. This exploration should prioritize the development of strategies that foster transparent communication while navigating organizational growth. Moreover, our study has unveiled the presence of what we term as a *family-like friendship culture*. It is imperative for subsequent research to conduct a more comprehensive investigation into this phenomenon. This by scrutinizing its prevalence across different organizational contexts and its implications for employee dynamics and organizational outcomes. Lastly, broadening the scope of inquiry to include companies from diverse industries will provide valuable insights into the manifestation and impact of cultures with an emphasis on friendship.

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Appendix

Appendix A: List of interviewees

This list is anonymized, where pseudonyms are used instead of the interviewees own names. Positions are also removed in order to make it even more anonymous.

Pseudonym	*Length of interview*
Adams	52 minutes
Brown	45 minutes
Clark	56 minutes
Davis	46 minutes
Evans	66 minutes
Fisher	53 minutes
Green	57 minutes
Harris	63 minutes
Irving	47 minutes
Jacobs	55 minutes
Kelly	54 minutes
Lewis	48 minutes

Appendix B: Interview guide

Introduction

- Can you start by introducing yourself and your position at the company?
- How long have you been working at the company and in this specific position?
- What attracted you to start working there?
- What do you feel influences you the most in how you perform your work?
    - Rules, guidelines, common norms, shared values?
- What does a typical workday look like for you?
    - Do you work individually? In teams?

Organizational culture

- How would you describe the company culture?
    - How does the organizational culture affect your workday and your interactions with colleagues and superiors?
    - Do you see any pros/cons of the culture?
- What values and norms do you think are most prominent in the organizational culture?
    - How do these affect your behavior during the workday?
    - How do you notice them in your daily work and interactions with your colleagues?
- Is there anything in the culture you feel is missing?
- Are there any guiding aspects that are overarching for the entire organization that affect everyday work?
- In your own words: how would you describe the atmosphere and community at the company?
    - Do you ever feel like there is pressure to be a specific way, or to fit in with this atmosphere/community?
- How would you describe the relationship you have with your colleagues?

Motivation

- What motivates you as an individual to do your best work?
    - Do you get motivated by someone in the company, and if so, how?

- Can you mention some specific factors or situations that have increased your motivation at work?
- Are there any challenges or obstacles when it comes to feeling motivated in your work?
- Are there any reward systems in the organization?
- How do you experience the collective motivation? In other words, the motivation in teams?
  - What motivates the team to do the best work?
- How does the motivation of other team members affect your own motivation?
- Do you feel any pressure from above to deliver? If so, how?

Identification
- Do you feel that you identify with the company?
  - In what way and why? If not: what is missing?
- Do you feel that you identify with the culture?
- Do you feel that you identify with your other colleagues?
- Would you say that this identification (or lack thereof) affects your motivation?
- Can you describe a specific situation/situations where you feel a strong sense of belonging to the company? To your colleagues? Your team?

Appendix C: Prompts

Prompts used in AI	Potential comments
Translate this quote from Swedish to English	
Provide synonyms for X	
Rewrite this sentence with more academic English	Worth noting: While using this prompt, we have not copied the examples provided, but rather used them as inspiration.
In this sentence, which word could instead be used	
What is a more formal word for X	
What is another way to express X	