The Influence of Communication Mode on Decision-Makers' Trust Building in Business-to-Business Relationships in a "New Normal" Business Environment

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this research is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

In a world of unprecedented pandemic turbulence, the role of the digital interface is increasingly growing, with ubiquitous acceptance and integration into business processes and information exchange. This research is intended to evaluate the acceptance of videoconferencing as a form of virtual communication in the construction and construction-related industries by key decision-makers in Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, this work seeks to explore the influence videoconferencing has on industry collaboration effectiveness, communication openness, relationship advancement, and trust-building. This qualitative enquiry investigates the impact of on-line modes of interaction on communication openness between business decision-makers during face-to-face and on-line interactions. Through a series of 18 in-depth interviews with executive decision makers in Australia and New Zealand and subsequent thematic analysis, findings detail a comparison between **the quality** of shared knowledge, as operationalized by such parameters as accuracy, usefulness, and timeliness, and **the quantity** of shared knowledge, by investigating responses to questions such as “am I getting enough information?” from the perspective of business decision-makers. These characteristics directly influence trust-building and substantially contribute to developing long-term healthy relationships. This work features a key insight into the influence of relationship tenure, or whether a relationship is new or mature, as influencing the openness and effectiveness of on-line interactions.

1 Introduction

As a result of unprecedented economic volatility provoked by the highly contagious Covid-19 virus, the necessity of transformational change became obvious for many business segments. In order to maintain the same level of business performance, as well as strong collaborative and interactive information exchange (Grayson et al, 2008), a rapid deployment of technological interventions were employed by many businesses. This disruption was further complicated by pandemic-related variables such as health and safety threats, border closures, and regulatory changes (Obal & Gao, 2020) hampering the possibilities of the face-to-face interactions.

The consequent magnitude of digital communication tools adoption has been unprecedented; accelerating the acceptance of such tools at a pace otherwise realized over the previous five years in only three months (Baig, Hall, Jenkins, Lamarre, & McCarthy, 2020). The acceleration instantly swapped the rich context of physical communication for emotionally lean virtual engagement. Since the preferred method of interaction during the virus outbreak was videoconferencing, the growth of these tools has somewhat plateaued as restrictions are relaxed in many markets (Baig et al, 2020), however, the persistence of the continued use of these tools in lieu of face-to-face interactions presents a range of operational and communication challenges for business decision-makers to consider.

The focus of this work is to explore the influence of on-line interaction, as a partial or sometimes full replacement of face-to-face formats, on business relationship development in this “new normal” post-Covid environment in the Australia and New Zealand construction industry. This study particularly focuses on the well-established building block of business bonding – trust (Katsikeas et al, 2009; Moorman et al, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Prevailing research in the relationship marketing domain defines trust as a belief that there is an implicit, mutual, understanding between the parties involved; the actors are reliable and possess the sense of integrity; and both parties are convinced that they will act in each other's best interest (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt,1994).

The question of how best to design and deploy communication digitalisation strategies remains unclear for many business decision-makers who are in charge of the business strategy and have the responsibility of company's bottom line (Zafari et al., 2020). The focus is how to build and maintain new and existing relationships in this new communication paradigm in a highly uncertain pandemic-driven marketplace (Hambrick, 2007; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Additionally, business decision-makers are seeking to understand how best they can continue to invest-in and support this critical on-line communication activity. This work purposively focuses on the insights and sentiments of executive decision-makers due to their role in the building of business relationships and trust development (Markides, 2006). How to support and strengthen business resilience and how to adopt the best possible means to communicate openly and effectively is a priority of the executive team in the support of their wider operational teams (Sharma, Rangarajanb, & Paesbrugghec, 2020).

Communication is a precursor of the creation of quality relationships (Jiang et al., 2016) and viewed as one of the essential predictors of trust in business relationships (Franklin & Marshall, 2019). It is determined as "the formal and informal sharing of high quality, meaningful and timely information" (Franklin & Marshall, 2018, p. 171) between various stakeholders. This work focuses on two communication formats: face-to-face communication and videoconferencing as two major modes of information exchange. This research investigates the pros and cons of both modes of communication, comparing their respective perceived effectiveness and challenges. The outcome of interest is that of communication openness and whether it changes depending on the form of information sharing.

The extant research demonstrates that quality and quantity of shared information, or openness in communication, nurtures opportunities for decision-makers to develop trust and optimise work effectiveness through knowledge transfer (Andrews & Delahay, 2000; Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). This openness between the partners is predicated on the quality and quantity of shared information being vastly dependent on the level of social presence (Short et al. 1976; Walther 1992; Fulk et al, 1990) - whether it is face-to-face or via a digital format of communication.

This work also evaluates the moderating effect of relationship time span where it can be a new or mature relationship (Narayandas & Rangan, 2004). This focus is in an effort to identify how previous collaborative experiences impact the smoothness of transitioning into on-line format of communication; and how it influences the relationship development and trust building being initiated on-line.

Little research has addressed the productivity and effectiveness of on-line collaborations in a business-to-business (B2B) environment, and no work has currently examined the influence on virtual formats of communication on relationship and trust building in this "new normal" post-pandemic environment. Standaert et al. (2021) are among the few scholars who have explored the question of virtual meeting technology and its effectiveness in comparison to face-to-face format. The researchers looked at how to organise the meeting and what type of computer mediated collaborative technology should be integrated to meet participants' objectives and achieve maximum outcome efficiency. However, the current work is distinguished from prevailing insights in that relational qualities are investigated from the outset, as well as considering the more strictly rational (or economic) efficiencies enjoyed by online communication strategies.

Other contemporary work within the wider online communication domain includes that of Marhefka, Lockhart, & DeAnne Turner (2020), who explored videoconferencing and the smooth transitioning of in-person educational encounters and interventions to a synchronous videoconferencing platform, whilst evaluating advantages and disadvantages of this digital format. Moffett, Folse & Palmatier, 2020) examined the whole variety of digital tools for creating multiformat communication strategies, utilising virtual reality, artificial intelligence (AI) agents and even simulated cues in the effort to comprehend how on-line interaction can be enhanced for higher efficiency. However, none of these works have investigated on-line communication effectiveness from the perspective of information openness and how the extent of this outcome of interest may influence relationships development and trust building between B2B stakeholders. Similarly, closer attention on the time span of the relationship and its moderating influence on videoconferencing effectiveness, is markedly absent.

This work features a qualitative enquiry and thematic analysis in order to explore these research gaps, with executive construction industry decision-makers from Australia and New Zealand participating in in-depth interviews. This rich dataset offers robust representation and shapes vivid insights on the changes in relationship and trust building between B2B decision-makers as communication moves from being partially, or fully, on-line.

1.1 Research Question and Research Objectives.

The current work seeks to understand **the influence of communication mode on decision-makers' trust building in Business-to-Business relationships in a "new normal" business environment**.

Subsequently the research question is formulated as follows:

How does communication mode influence trust-building in B2B relationships in a “new normal” business environment within the Australia and New Zealand construction industry?

The **objectives** of the research are the following:

- To examine the impact of the pandemic on the construction industry of Australia and New Zealand in terms of operations and communications;
- To evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of videoconferencing;
- To define the influence of the communication mode on the level of decision-makers’ openness during the interaction;
- To investigate the way videoconferencing/teleconferencing has influenced the maintenance of mature/long-term relationships;
- To investigate the way videoconferencing/teleconferencing has influenced the initiation of new relationships.

1.2 Organisation of the Dissertation

The work consists of six chapters and is organised as follows. Chapter one presents an introduction to the research and formulates the research question and research objectives. Chapter two lays out the conceptual and theoretical foundation of the study through the discussion of the existing research work on relationship building, trust, and communication formats – face-to-face and videoconferencing. Chapter three presents the design of study highlighting its theoretical framework, methodology, method, and featuring the specifics on sample characteristics and the recruitment process. Chapter four presents the findings of the qualitative dataset obtained through thematic analysis. Chapter five discusses the interconnections of the obtained qualitative data. Chapter six draws conclusions on the research question and highlights the managerial implications of the study, limitations of the research, and areas for future research endeavours.

2 Literature Review

"I think that's a responsibility, not just
having a business relationship, but forming
a personal relationship as well,
so that you have some sort of bond".
B2B Customer

This chapter offers an overview of the research concepts relevant to the focus of this study – building relationships and trust, digitalisation of collaborative exchange and the wider acceptance of on-line interactions in a business-to-business (B2B) environment. This chapter commences with an elaboration on the definition of trust and its cognitive and affective dimensions. Secondly, this chapter highlights the notion of social exchange and its role in nurturing an entrepreneurial business spirit critical for resilience in times of high economic volatility. Thirdly, an overview and definition of "communication" and its role as a precursor of trust is detailed. Next, the focus moves to communication openness in relationship building with a focus on the advantages and disadvantages of both face-to-face and on-line interactions. Finally, this work looks at conceptualisations and characteristics of new and mature business relationships and the role of executives in developing and maintaining those relationships.

2.3 Definition of Trust

In a world disrupted by the unprecedented ramifications of the novel Covid-19 virus, the levels of business uncertainty is skyrocketing. It inhibits business decision-making; damages companies' business confidence making them vulnerable to the consequences of communication breaches which may steer the company in the direction of disastrous economic repercussions (Rapaccini et al., 2020). The volatility of the current marketplace especially highlights an acute need for mutual trust among business partners, buyers and sellers, or any other members of business collaborations. Trust serves to mitigate the adverse effect of relationship conflicts by playing the role of a mediating facilitator, simplifying the operational chain of command and, ultimately, enhancing relational performance outputs (De Clercq et al, 2009). Schultz (1999) emphasises the notion of trust from the perspective of the opportunistic nature of parties involved in any business interaction, positioning trust as a willingness to expose yourself to the opportunistic nature of sellers, business partners, and colleagues.

Prevailing research in the relationship marketing domain defines trust, or interorganisational trust, as a belief that there is an implicit, mutual, understanding between the parties involved; the actors are reliable and possess the sense of integrity; and both parties are convinced that they will act in each other's best interest (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt,1994). Some scholars, while defining trust from the business perspective, highlight such qualities as honesty, credibility, and benevolence (Geyskens et al, 1998; Grayson et al, 2008). Trust is recognised as a ubiquitously accepted social foundation for communication, enhanced performance (Katsikeas et al, 2009; Moorman et al, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), and a key facilitator of strong and loyal relationships formed between organisations and individual stakeholders during their business-oriented interactions.

This study also adopts the construct of trust formulated by Garbarino and Johnson (1999), Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003) which explains the phenomenon of trust in business relationships as a willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party in the market environment with high level of uncertainty. The vulnerability is positioned as a necessary trust ingredient which defines whether this intangible connection can be operationalised (Doney & Cannon, 1997) to simplify transactional regulation within business collaboration.

2.4 Trust-based or transaction based

Agarwal and Narayana (2020) emphasise that in a buyer-supplier trust-based relationship scenario, trust operationalisation plays a central role in creating better stakeholder collaboration outcomes. It is characterised by high level of confidence in a partner and, consequently, commitment where they work as a team investing together into achieving common goals (Dyer & Chue, 2003; Villena et al, 2011). Such a business approach yields higher level of operational efficiency, productivity, and mutual satisfaction (Paulraj, et al, 2012). It is reasoned by lower costs for safeguarding and developing complex governance mechanisms, performance bonds and legal expenses typical for transaction-oriented interaction (Zaheer et al., 1998a). The trust-based relationship model simplifies the coordination of the business arrangements whether contractual, logistical, or operational and transforms a mutual trustworthy reliance into a value-based relationship rather than a cost-oriented transactional relationship. The value of such an exchange includes relational benefits, which play a role beyond the product/service offering performance (Obal & Gao, 2020).

A vast body of research has acknowledged that some relational benefits are predicated on a greater trust reliance than others (Williamson, 1993). Consequently, scholars recognise the importance of understanding the pattern and stages of relationship building from the perspective of trust dimensions which, in turn, predict the relationship model: whether it will be trust-based or transaction-based; and the subsequent stability of the relationship (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Furthermore, trust is understood to be constituent of both cognitive and emotional dimensions. The dynamic of trust development through cognitive and emotional stages is described, as follows, with a pronounced focus on how different trust precursors can predict the strength and longevity of a relationship.

2.5 Trust dimensions

Current scholarly literature distinguishes cognitive affective, and behavioural dimensions of trust (Williamson, 1993; Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Sekhon et al, 2013; Franklin & Marshall, 2019). The researcher excluded the behavioural dimension to narrow the focus of the investigation putting interpersonal aspects under the spotlight of the research. This particular choice is reasoned by the fact that the cognitive dimension of trust is a key to investigate and reflect on the underlying trust prerequisites of the knowledge and technology intense construction industry (Uusitalo &Lavikka, 2021) where the experience record and competence are salient factors of the success. Whereas affective dimension is deemed to lead the way to the understanding of the emotional linkage between the participants of the collaborative effort critical for any relationship consummation (Johnson & Grayson, 2005).

A foundational premise of this work suggests productive and long-standing cooperation is an interplay of both trust dimensions. Cognitive trust, exclusively, neglects the support of emotional aspect to complete the relationship (Johnson & Grayson, 2005) whereas affective trust cannot exist without a cognitive foundation. To avoid emotional sterility is one of the main objectives and epitome of customer-oriented approach for business development managers, relationship marketers, executives, and business owners. They will be also named “key decision-makers” along the development of the research narrative.

2.5.1 Cognitive dimension of trust

Cognitive trust is a customer's willingness to confide at a service provider's expertise and credibility (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Moorman et al, 1992; Rempel et al, 1995). Cognitive predictors of trust are rooted into the process of mutual learning about each other's competence and capabilities (Castaldo, 2007; Sekhonb, Roy, Shergill, & Pritchard, 2013). A cognitively explorative stage of a relationship nurtures a thorough examination of possible risks, as, in essence, the performance of one partner/seller predicts the level of risk for another partner/buyer (Bradach & Eccles, 1989). If a buyer acknowledges his trust of a seller, he implicitly means that "the probability that the seller will perform an action that is beneficial, or at least not detrimental to seller, is high enough for seller to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him" (Gambetta, 1988, p.54). Kreps (1990) and Dasgupta (2000) posit trust as more transparent and operational where it is treated as a subset of cognitive risk.

Williamson (1993) argues that the trust between buyer and seller is to be named as "calculative trust" which he considers more appropriate interpretation. This work suggests that trust is formed by due diligence and a robust exploration of buyer's capacities/technical capabilities for the purpose of mitigating risk, reducing uncertainty, and in effort to avoid or at least to minimize opportunistic behaviours. Williamson's (1993) calculative dimension of trust lies on the principals of the transaction cost economics and resonates with transaction-based model of Agarwal & Narayana (2020), mentioned previously. This model implies a comprehensive risk assessment, exploration of partner's capabilities, and evaluation of the interdependency scale which is transferred into complex governing mechanism once the partners start to advance into their collaboration. For the purposes of this work, cognitive and calculative trust are considered synonymous and described as interchangeable terms.

Cognitive trust may often arise from the previous business experiences of involved parties and is sometimes referred to as an “earned trust”. The key element of this concept is guided by the fact that there is a possibility that the foundation of the relationship may be shifted from ascribed trustworthiness to an earned trust (Schmitz, 1999). In an alternative scenario, the process of trust building may be also supported be parties’ perceived business reputation (Einwiller, 2003). This prior knowledge allows the participants of the business negotiations or exchange to make a preliminary assessment of possible risks and exercise more confidence in a seller’s product or service performance. Rempel et al (1985) define this phenomenon as business “predictability” and Johnson-George and Swap (1982) describe this as “reliableness”. If seller’s reputation is associated with positive connotations and the business has a respected image among market actors, the parties’ relational progress transpires more easily and quickly in developing the foundation for cognitive trust (Sekhon et al, 2013). In this circumstance, the first scheduled meeting is a mere attempt to confirm or reject parties’ perceptions.

However, to approach the partnership from the calculative perspective only, and to understand the business solely as expertise-based and competency-oriented matter, is often detrimental to its longevity and prosperity (Williamson, 1993). If a seller’s expertise and technical capabilities are convincing enough, it propels the development of an emotion-driven connection between seller and buyer signalling a graduation to the next level of the relationship. That is the moment when the affective dimension of trust begins to develop (Franklin & Marshall, 2019).

2.5.2 Affective dimension of trust

Affective trust is defined as buyer’s confidence in a seller, shaped by feelings and emotions originated in care, concern, and reasoned by support the seller demonstrated during business interactions (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Rempel et al., 1985; Luccini, Marshall & Franklin, 2018). Such a bond between the actors is also distinguished by a feeling of security and perceived strength of relationship (Johnson & Grayson, 2005).

The beginning of a business partnership is often reasoned by stakeholders' perception of each other's business brand. Today, brand building, not only in business-to-consumer (B2C) context but also within a business-to-business (B2B) context, is one of the main drivers of shareholder value and returns (Uta & Merz, 2011). Brand building is considered a more intricate process for the participants of a B2B market in creating that emotional connection (Lu & Yan, 2016; Young, 2006), taking into account that business decision-making is undertaken on a typically more rational level where objective product or service properties are more readily considered. In other words, it is usually approached from more of a calculative perspective of business operations (Fauziah & Rohaizat, 2010). The emotional component of B2B relationship building has been largely neglected by marketing scholars (Dowell, Morrison, & Heffernan, 2015) in spited of the importance of these dimensions in a highly competitive B2B environment in seeking to develop relational bonds and, consequently, commercial success (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1997; Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2016).

The emotional aspect of trust formation is seen as a logical extension of the cognitive aspect where stakeholders' relationships evolve into a more intimately pronounced personal connection and where they can effectively reciprocate with the wants of each other (Deutsch et al., 2011). However, this emotional element of trust deepens the overall partners' reliance on each (Johnson & Grayson, 2005) and can increase the possibility of risk, or malfeasance, if one party were to take advantage of the other. There are several activities which strengthen the emotional aspect of trust and can buffer against this opportunistic behaviour as detailed in the prevailing trust literature. Examples of organisational activities that build trust include:

establishing a strategic partnership alliance; working together on co-creation of a new joint product or service; and conforming to common shared values (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). The longer actors interact as part of a mutually respected relationship, the less pronounced and more blurred the borders between calculative and emotional trust aspects become, increasing actors' trust propensity (Franklin & Marshall, 2019). Indeed, the affective dimension is viewed as a logical continuation of the cognitive trust by most scholars.

2.5.3 Cognitive and Affective dominant precursors of Trust

Scholars are still not at a consensus about the finer points of the delineation between cognitive- and affective-based precursors of trust. However, some research has sought to distinguish, conceptually and empirically, these relationships in an effort to further the wider body of trust literature and dialogue, as below (Franklin & Marshall, 2019):

Cognitive-dominant:

- Competence - technical, operational, and commercial capabilities perceived as supplier's technological and commercial expertise (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Sekhon et al., 2013);
- Satisfaction - a client's post-purchase evaluation of his/her decision based on product performance/service quality (Baxter, 2012);
- Communication formal and informal sharing of high quality, meaningful and timely information between industry stakeholders (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Saleh et al., 2012);
- Integrity is the perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable (Morgan & Hunt,1994; Schoorman et al., 2007; Moorman et al, 1993)

Affective-dominant:

- shared values are viewed as a set of beliefs which guide behaviours, goals and policies of the collaboration participants regardless their importance to the common work and the extent of their appropriateness (Morgan & Hunt, 1994);
- benevolence - the extent to which a trustee is understood to act kindly to the trustor, putting aside profit motives (Castaldo et al., 2007; Myer et al, 1995; Siguaw, Penny, & Thomas, 1998)
- co-creation is “defined as an active participation, interactions, dialogue and collaboration of the buyer and seller and other actors in the marketing exchange to develop a deeper understanding of the customer problem solving context” (Franklin & Marshall, 2019 p.179; Ballantyne &Varey, 2008; Lundkvist & Yakhlef, 2004)

There is consistent agreement in the literature that competence and communication are straightforward cognitive precursors of trust. Both competence and communication often produce a mutual “feel good” emotion linked to affective factor of trust, but being still solidly based on the cognitive evaluation (Sekhon et al, 2013)

A great many scholars assert that long-lasting committed relationships are based on trust (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt,1994; Parasuraman et al, 1991), and this interpersonal trust is primarily predicated on the effectiveness of the social exchange.

2.6 Social Exchange

Social exchange is a non-contractual mechanism which governs the exchange process between market players (Lambeet al, 2001; Kotler, 1972; Hunt, 1976; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987). The main idea of social exchange theory is that the parties, entering the relationship with the intention to maintain it, are expecting that such a collaboration will be rewarding (Blau, 1968). Non-contractual governance is sometimes critical to the success of the exchange because the formalities of collaborative partnership governance can, by rather complex and time-consuming efforts, hinder the progress of business interaction (Gundlach et al, 1993). Social exchange theory elevates the role of trust and the importance of trust-building activities.

A great deal of empirical work in this area has established that any economic action is deeply engrained into the network of social connections (Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Larson, 1992). These findings suggest that efficiency within the complex system of coordinated actions can be achieved if interdependent stakeholders are able to work collaboratively and effectively while pursuing common goals. Trust between involved actors, besides such factors as reputation, reciprocity norms and personal relationship, serve as a relational variable being prerequisite to a stable and timely social exchange (Pennings & Woiceshyn, 1987; Seabright, Leventhal & Fichman, 1992).

2.6.1 Social Exchange & Trust

Rotter (1967, p. 651) poses that “one of the most salient factors in the collaborative effectiveness of our present complex social exchange is the willingness of one or more individuals in a social unit to trust others. Similarly, Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993) suggest that such a behavioural intention as “willingness” is quite a critical ingredient in the mix. They argue that even if the buyer believes that the seller is trustworthy but is not willing to rely on him, the trust is limited. This work explores how the digitalisation trend in business communications may delay such buyer-supplier trust, and whether a partners’ willingness to enter into contractual obligations may be postponed, or even put on-hold, while they cannot meet face-to face.

Once an agreement is signed and operating processes have been established, the efficiency, adjustment, and even survival, of such contractual collaboration depends upon the presence of mutual trust. Furthermore, mutually valuable and sustainable social exchange in buyer-seller interactions is effectively shaped around trustworthiness (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Dwyer & LaGace, 1986; Rotter, 1971).

2.6.2 Staying Entrepreneurial

Larson (1992) addressed the social exchange parameter identified in his study as cooperative alliances, where he considered it as one of the main criteria in ensuring entrepreneurial success. Being entrepreneurial refers to the capabilities and relevant operational processes which enable a firm to be adaptive, innovative, pro-active, and risk-taking (Kreiser & Davis, 2010); all characteristics that are critical for striving (or surviving) in a post-Covid-19 environment. Kreiser and Davis (2010) conducted research to examine how firms can stay entrepreneurial throughout a year of intensive scaling (at least 20% of annual growth). Their findings acknowledge that long-term, trusting alliances between the participants enabled rapidly growing small and medium businesses (SMEs) to sustain the pace of innovation and adaptability through the years, thanks to the nurtured trusting bond developed between them that simplified their communication – one of the key precursors of cognitive trust.

2.7 Communication as a Key Precursor of Trust

Communication is described as "…a fundamental tool which underpins all areas of human interaction" (Teodorescu, 2013 p.259). Communication consists of verbal and non-verbal components where verbal communication is expressed in words, and non-verbal communication reflects the communication effected by means rather than words (Chue et al., 2005). Communication is considered as one of the essential predictors to trust, and described as "the formal and informal sharing of high quality, meaningful and timely information" (Franklin & Marshall, 2018, p. 171) between various stakeholders including firms, partners, buyers and sellers.

2.7.1 Information Processing

Grewal et al. (2018) describe the communication process as the message originated from the sender and interpreted by the means of words. These words encode the information and transmit it via a communication channel or a medium of communication which can be mobile device, e-mails, videoconferencing, TV, and other ways of information exchange. The receiver (recipient) is an individual who reads, hears or sees the information in words and decodes them accordingly.

Words are not only a way to transfer a certain message, but they are grounded in individual emotions and cues; they reflect people's attitude; risk propensity; and their relations to the participants of communication (Jucks et al., 2016). Therefore, people's words exist beyond the content they communicate, otherwise we may have demanded those involved into business negotiations to trust us and have no doubts whatsoever in our trustworthiness; a rather unlikely situation. Furthermore, words themselves offer ways to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the message they communicate and inspire a feeling of trust, creating a feel-good shared meaning during social exchange. For instance, if a seller – a sender of the message, eloquently and concisely elaborates on properties of the product or the service he promotes, this pitch demonstrates his competence and knowledge, where the buyer – a recipient of the message, assess the words as more trustful if compared to the scenario where the same message presented unstructured or inconsistently (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). A large part of oral communication relates to non-verbal signals, which significantly contribute to the richness of the information exchange (Subapriya, 2009).

2.7.2 Non-Verbal Communication

A major dimension of effective and meaningful communication is non-verbal signals within stakeholders' interaction (Argyle, Alkema & Gilmour, 1971; Vergis & Pell, 2019).

Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour (2017) suggest that if there is disagreement in understanding a verbal and non-verbal part of the message, communicators are inclined to pay more attention to the non-verbal message.

Non-verbal communication is shaped by three categories of signals: spatial and physical environment; communicators' physical appearance (lipstick, clothes, jewellery etc); and communicators' body movements and positions (Chue et al., 2005). The body movements and position may include facial expression, eye contact, gestures, posture, touching behaviour, and body language which are responsible for an emotional element of the social exchange (Nwabueze & Mileski, 2018; Poyatos, 1992; Knapp & Hall, 1997), generating a silent message concurrently with the conversation flow (Chue et al., 2005). Non-verbal cues may create safe and comfortable atmosphere enhancing the collaborative spirit of the interaction and vice versa (Subapriya, 2009). Attentive observations of changes in opponents' body language and facial expression may shape a realistic impression about their thoughts, seriousness of their intentions, and give away their feelings and emotions (Peleckis, & Peleckienė, 2015). Brisini (2016) evaluates non-verbal cues as "performance" which is hard to study justifying it by their "minute scale and convoluted histories, and their seemingly omnipresent and naturalised status as universal fundaments of human interaction" (Brisini, 2016 p.3).

Among non-verbal communication signals, scholars distinguish proxemics and kinesics. Proxemics is a study of the ways in which space arrangements are approached and handled (Chue et al., 2005). The word proxemics originates from the Latin word "Proximus", meaning nearest (Clark, Eschholz, & Rosa, 1972). Kinesics is a study of movement originated from the Greek word "kinesis" – movement (Clark et al., 1972). Kinesics explores all the forms of body movement, excluding touching behaviour (Burgoon & Saine, 1978).

Chue et al (2005) found out that physical surroundings greatly affect the outcome of the negotiations. Lewicki & Litterer (1985) assure that furniture and even the way the participants' seats are arranged may convey the position of power or highlight a disadvantaged position of one of the participants. Johnson (1993) suggests that the clues about business partner's intentions and strategy can be easily recognised during negotiations while observing how he/she uses the space, regardless whether it is done consciously or subconsciously. However, on-line negotiations exclude the proxemics variable from the mix concurrently excluding the richness of the data which physical space can communicate during negotiations.

Eye contact is often viewed as an indicator of interpersonal relationship strength (Jongerius et al, 2020; Farroni et al, 2002). Unfortunately, in videoconferencing eye contact is not always possible due to an upper placing of the camera which creates a feeling of disconnection and reduces the effectiveness of the interaction (Ho & Jang, 2014). Eye gaze disconnection is one of the major challenges inherent of a videoconferencing format of communication (Kuster et al, 2012).

Body language is another form of non-verbal communication which includes body posture, gesture, and physical expression (Teodorescu, 2013). Around 70% of every-day communication is transmitted via aspects of body language, for instance, through people's proximity to each other while talking or via the grip tightness of one's hands (Marshall, 2008). We speak out about our wishes and ideas using words and actions which we contemplate in our minds, but it is our body which puts the thoughts and plans into motion through words, body movement, gestures, and posture.

Upon close observation, body posture and gestures may communicate people's intent or state as much as their words. Scholars suggest that we move our body to ease mental strain when the communication is difficult (Chue et al., 2005). Additionally, the way we move our arms and hands is a way to add to the expression of the interpersonal data, or exchange. Many people involved in negotiations or discussions use gestures to reinforce the message they are trying to communicate (Marshall, 2008). Consequently, the prevailing literature in this area suggests the human body acts as a sensitive receiver of information from outside world, and a communicator of the richness of its inner self. Subsequently, the physical expression of our body may convey the state of boredom, excitement, anger, or great interest showing people's attitude and the level of involvement into the conversation (Marshall, 2008).

According to Fridlund et al (1990), facial expression is a major demonstration of people's emotions specific to intent and context (Tomkins, 1962). Furthermore, Buck (1994) argued with Fridlund that human beings are not totally controlled by their genes as simple creatures, but listen to their bodies and control the readouts of their facial displays to the participants of their interactions depending on underlying motivational-emotional states.

Finally, 20% of our everyday communication expressed in the tone of voice or as it is often called "music of the voice" (rhythm, volume, energy, pitch) (Marshall, 2008). Only 10% of the communication is unpacked in the surface meaning of the words. The intonation chosen to articulate a certain message defines person's attitude to this information and the way another participant of the discussion perceives it (Ho & Jang, 2014).

The development of the business relationship and trust-building, specifically, relates to verbal components as much as non-verbal components of the communication, which consciously or subconsciously transmits participants' emotional state and the personal attitude of the stakeholders. This exchange is what qualifies these components as essential elements of social bonding (Marshall, 2008).

2.7.3 Social Bonding

Social bonding is described as individuals' attachment to, and involvement in, society through formal and informal social interactions (Hirschi 1969). In his book "The Social Bond", Aslaksen (2018) states that individuals perceive various situations through the prism of their experiences acquired while interacting with nature, people and (increasingly) technology. However, the importance of every type of interaction is predominantly dependent on the local environment. The majority of people employ rich verbal and non-verbal elements within interactions that shape personal attitudes and relational judgements; within which face-to-face (or in-person) formats, specifically, enjoy higher social relations and social trust (Coleman, 1990).

2.7.4 Trust as a Continuum

Overall, the notion of trust and trustworthiness being expressed through partners' interactions are not "all-or-nothing" phenomenon, but rather a continuum where relational dynamics may move the bar along this continuum - whether up or down (Price & Smith, 2011; Thon & Jucks, 2016). Jucks et al (2016, p. 226) acknowledge that "many settings provide no more information than the actual words" which stipulate the fact that the words may be the best indicator of the individual or corporate body who market stakeholders may confide in or trust.

Trust is often explained as a tool of relationship building whether between social groups or between corporate bodies (Price & Smith, 2011). That is why the interorganisational interactions and partnerships are viewed as company resources embedded into an even wider network of interconnected and interrelated relationships where trust serves as a social glue (Leek et al., 2003; Blobaum, 2016). This network of connections facilitates business growth, development and diversification through constant communication which was predominantly face-to-face until the Covid-19 pandemic affected the world (Rapaccini et al., 2020), obliging the business community to reduce the level of social exchange dramatically and altered the business social setting forever.

2.8 Social Presence Theory

Social presence theory states that the formats of communication vary in their "ability to convey social presence, perceived intimacy and immediacy" (Moffet et al, 2021 p. 446; Short et al. 1976; Walther 1992; Fulk et al, 1990). If the communication is deemed to address a person-oriented task which requires a close interpersonal engagement or warm intimate exchange (Miranda & Saunders, 2003) it predicts the necessity for a face-to-face interaction and identified as a format with a high social presence. The need to complete a task-oriented activity does not necessarily demand a physical presence/high social presence and can be satisfied with computer-mediated or paper-based communication.

Dennis and Kinney (1998) argue that being able to understand the level of social presence required from the communication medium is critical to a successful completion of any social task. It may predict the effectiveness of negotiations between buyer and seller and ultimately the outcome of the interaction. Social presence theory suggests that when the median ability to convey social presence is matched to the social task the overall communication performance improves (Christie, 1985). Addressing the mode or setting where the communication takes place it is essential to evaluate the extent to which such setting or so-called "social setting" impacts the perceived meaning of the information exchange.

2.8.1 The Social Construction of Meaning

Schutz (1967), Garfinkel (1967), and Ricoeur (1981) explore the importance of information subjectivity, reasoned by the social setting; by the level of social presence; and finally, by the character and experience of involved individuals. All these aspects are closely interconnected and significantly contribute to the subjectivity of this interaction meaning for every participant of the social encounter. In other words, positioning the concept of social construction Schutz (1967) rejects the notion of information "objectivity", saying that any element of the social setting contributes to the meaning of the shared knowledge. He also introduces the definition of "intersubjectivity" which he explains as the result of shared interpretation emerged from the social encounter and affected by the median of communication. This theory was supported by an extensive research work (Garfinkel, 1967; Ricoeur, 1981) emphasising the importance of social interaction and the influence of the level of social presence on the information meaning specifically. Ultimately "shared information is not an agreement, but it is rather referencing linguistic events" (Maranda & Saunders, 2003 p.89), the words that were pronounced in a certain context and which makes the meaning a highly situational phenomenon. Shared information defines the level of openness between the participants of social exchange characterized by quality and quantity of this information.

2.9 The role of Openness in Communication

Thomas et al (2009) confirms prevailing work detailing that trust is based on the beliefs about another party engendered through shared information within a certain social setting. Prior research demonstrated that openly shared information, or openness in communication, gives an opportunity for buyers and sellers to develop trust and optimise the effectiveness of communication through knowledge transfer (Andrews & Delahay, 2000; Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). This openness between the partners is predicated on the quality and quantity of shared information being vastly dependent on the level of social presence: whether it is face-to-face or computer mediated communication. This is a well-established notion within foundational, and more contemporary, marketing research that acknowledges that high quality information predicts a high level of trust (Benton, Gelber, Kelley, & Liebling,1969; Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991; Sapienza & Korsgaard, 1996; Simons, 2002).

2.9.1 The Quality and Quantity of Information

The quality of information plays a key role in the B2B environment and is usually operationalised by the means of accuracy, usefulness, and timeliness (Thomas et al, 2009). The quantity of information, or its adequacy, is an information characterisitic which reflects whether buyers and sellers feel adequately informed – for example, "am I getting enough information?". The extant research suggests that there is a correlation between the quantity of shared information and trust (Beccera & Gupta, 2003; O'Reilly, 1977; Muchinsky, 1977). If a buyer (trustor) possesses enough information, he feels less vulnerable and perceives the seller (trustee) as a more trustworthy individual.

Conversely, information overload can have a negative effect. Described as a significant challenge to the quality of the communication (Herjanto et al, 2021; Gardikiotis et al, 2021) it is defined as a situation where due to the information abundance one of the parties stops to understand the sense of the exchange and loses the interest to pursue further conversation progress (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). Information overload may also compromise participant's cognitive resources directed to digest the incoming information flow. It is a frequent phenomenon in the digital environment of today's business interactions where people may have their working schedule time slots all booked with on-line meetings inducing the information fatigue and tiredness from all this time spent in front of the screen (Peper et al, 2021).

Conferences and industry tradeshows, even though quite loaded with the intensity of information exchange, are known for its communication and networking opportunities, where the quality and quantity of information is in abundance and where many long-lasting relationships have been launched.

2.10 Face-to-Face Communication

Face-to-face interaction is a typical way people relate to each other, form connections, and build trust; the foundations of which are in-person contact (Hicks, 2010). A great deal of research demonstrates the importance of face-to-face communication for B2B stakeholders; and reveals how face-to-face collaboration impacts trust building.

2.10.1 Conferences as a Format of Face-to-Face Interaction

Before 2020, face-to-face interaction formats, including conferences and tradeshows, were unquestionably dominant for sustaining and nurturing business relationships (Duffy & McEuen, 2010). Urry (2003) describes this face-to-face format as “network sociality”, emphasising the value of physical interaction and its great meaning to our existence as human beings. Other work also affirms that face-to-face networking is a key ingredient to proliferate society benefits pushing forward its development (Hamm et al, 2018).

In 2018, Hamm et al (2018) investigated the application possibilities of digital communication technologies (DCT) within the conventional face-to-face conference paradigm. The scholars explored the level of technology acceptance and evaluated how digitally mediated options were perceived by various market players. The findings of their research, relative to the virtual and hybrid conference formats, were quite negative. For instance, one interviewee mentioned that the percentage of virtual conferences was very low and compared it with “sitting through a boring webinar”. Another interviewee commented on hybrid virtual conference format as a something which require a generational change to be accepted. Most of the interviewees were overprotective toward the existing face-to face format; felt pessimistic about hybrid approach; and rejected virtual conferences. The notion of virtual conferencing becoming commonplace in the market created an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension among the conservative minds of conference organisers who were also represented in the research sample (Jago & Deery, 2010).

2.10.2 Advantages of Face-to-Face Communication Mode

The work of Avery (2009) presents a range of supporting evidence in favour of a face-to-face communication mode. Firstly, the author pointed out that human beings are driven by biological needs and are hardwired to engage with each other being physically present (Butters, 2019). Secondly, face-to-face formats allow participants to establish trust and create a feeling of transparency during the communication (Sekhon et al, 2013). Finally, the author emphasised the importance of side-line conversation within face-to-face meeting formats, whether at the conferences or before/during/after actual meetings, where the participants can exchange their experiences or mention relevant information into the negotiations. This interactive socialising contributes enormously to the bonding process and affective trust building as the relationship of exchange is being nurtured by the visual cues and richness of the physical presence (Walther 1992; Yadav & Varadarajan 2005). Being in pursuit of this rich social setting with a high level of social presence, whether for solving a problem or signing up a new business partner, individuals and corporate entities were willing to incur substantial additional cost investing into business travel in pre-Covid times (Haynes, 2010).

2.10.2.1 The definition of "meetingness"

The scale of corporate travelling as a form of face-to-face interaction was immense and constantly increasing prior the end of 2019. It was growing regardless of the proliferation of the digitally mediated communication and communication devices which Urry (2003) explained by the need for "meetingness" and describes corporate travel as "a new way a social life is networked"; as "a need to be physically co-present fulfilling social obligation" (Urry, 2003 p. 155). In this context social obligation implies the physical presence which is not formally prescribed but highly desirable due to normative expectations. Urry (2003) mentions the fact that the information revolution accelerated the scale of people' "meetingness", which he defines as different forms and modes of travel critical for social life and peoples' mobility in the world of dispersed networks and intermittent encounters. Occasional get-togethers maintain peoples' social connectivity, creating new social settings, linking people and expanding life and business opportunities. Furthermore, the work suggests moments of face-to-face interactions are essential for the patterns of social life that happen predominantly "at a distance", whether those are for business, family, pleasure, or friendship but exist because of "intermittent encounters".

2.10.2.2 "Small World" and the Importance of Intermittent Encounters

The overarching system of interconnections between people and business entities which constitute the notion of "a small world" exists predominantly because of intermittent encounters engendered through business trips**.** The "it is a small world" concept is interpreted as the complex interrelated structure of the connections (Watts, 1999). Watts (1999) argues that even if two people do not have common acquaintances they are probably connected anyways along a relatively short chain of acquaintanceship (Barabasi, 2002). This concept is also conveyed by the notion of "six-degrees-of-separation" (Milgram, 1967; Leonesi, 2005), which acknowledges the fact that every person on Earth is connected to each other within six links. Intermittent encounters maintain weak ties between individuals being crucial for preserving of the relational connection and contributing to "meetingness". In other words, such level of connectivity would be impossible without occasional face-to-face interactions (Urry, 2003).

The business environment is a dense web of very powerful network clusters or business hubs. Every hub is shaped by humans - nodes and by their links – connected by being friends, partners, colleagues or just acquaintances (Barabasi, 2002; Kelly, 1998). For instance, for the universe of finance, they are on the trading floors of London, New York and Tokyo which are supported and linked to other networks by weaker ties (Knorr Cetina & Bruegger, 2002). The diversity of business networks overlaps and intertwines allowing weaker ties connect people to the world outside their closest professional circle of people expanding the horizon of the opportunities and personal advancement.

2.10.3 Compulsory Face-to-Face Interactions

Some reasons for travelling can be less formally dictated but often imply a strong expectation of face-to-face presence where the parties may read each other's body language; observing what the participants of the negotiation are really thinking, hearing the words addressed directly to them, and sensing the emotional context of the interaction which creates a solid basis for emotional trust development, or its rejection (Franklin & Marshall, 2018).

In his work, Lee et al. (2003) define a range of business activities and roles that require compulsory bodily presence, the state of being immersed into a social setting of face-to-face encounter:

- Information exchange – often intended to reduce the perceived risk through face-to-face interaction where you can have a richer communication format.
- Assessment – evaluating seller's capabilities and business viability being physically at the facilities. It is an analogue to Urry's (2003) definition of object obligation as a part of the proximity obligation concept, where co-presence in a certain place is necessary to see various objects and technologies being in "elbow to elbow" working mode.

- Negotiation and adaptation – the format of face-to face negotiations through a personal trusted contact is important while discussing contracts details or refining it, adapting to the project variations (Lee et al, 2003; Urry, 2003).
- A crisis insurance role – there is a certain role in some organizations where a person is invited to be involved into the organizational activities exclusively in the crisis scenarios and his role is to solve the problem where it cannot be solved by usual executive decision-maker,
- Social role – the relationships which imply social activity, and
- Ego enhancing role - where people establish relationship which enhance their status.

These face-to-face communication roles can hardly be equally replaced by an impersonal format. A wide body of literature suggests that the social role of face-to-face communication is especially critical for forming long-lasting trustful relationships (Hakansson, 1982) where cognitive precursors of trust are nurtured by emotional element. Conditioned by this high level of trust the parties rarely question each other's actions and decisions, being reliant on established trust bond (Ford, 1980).

Though relational interactions are often influenced by various environmental factors and social settings (Lee et al., 2003), the unanticipated changes triggered by Covid-19 has disrupted previous behavioural patterns dramatically. At the very beginning of the pandemic, the most drastic changes happened in the communication space enforced by strict restrictions on freedom of movement: an obligation to stay within one's family bubble (Guardian Staff, 2021), travel restrictions (Wood, 2020) and borders restrictions. The inability to meet face-to-face accelerated the technology acceptance to otherwise unprecedented levels. This persistent trend has provoked an extensive replacement of face-to-face communication formats with digital interfaces, such as videoconferencing, and by more frequent usage of e-mails and telephones.

2.11 Computer-Mediated Communication.

The role of electronic communication media has been growing ever since a personal computer became a necessary commodity of any professional; well in advance of any pandemic. It has transformed interconnectedness and the way people approach relationships; whether on the personal level or from the business perspective. This technology allows us to connect, communicate and collaborate with colleagues and business partners all over the world without leaving the office, and sometimes, even home (Kurtzberg et al. 2009; Stuhlmacher and Citera, 2005). The importance of technology mediated communications in business, such as the selling function, is attracting increased attention in scholarly research and features as a key salesperson competency (Herjanto & Franklin, 2019).

2.11.1 Videoconferencing

The computer mediated communication (CMC) focus of this research is videoconferencing. It is especially valuable now as society and business are largely disrupted by the unprecedented consequences of Covid-19 and businesses searching for the most effective, efficient and secure way to maintain business continuity and relationships while working remotely (Weldin, 2020; Palmatier et al. 2018).

Marhefka et al (2020 p.1983) argue that "videoconferencing platforms can nearly replicate in-person interactions, activating both auditory and visual senses and potentially resulting in more substantial engagement". Their work equally emphasizes the advantages of videoconferencing saying that team members can proceed with meeting arrangement whether in groups or personal. The unique characteristics of this relatively rich communication channel allows the participants to see and hear each other in real time which does not deprive the collaboration of its cohesiveness and having the element of synchronicity intact (Steinhoff et al, 2019; van Doorn et al. 2017). This interaction mode completely mimics meetings with physical attendance and maintains the synchronicity embedded into face-to-face communication formats.

One of the biggest advantages of videoconferencing is an opportunity to adopt it as replacement to business trips, which positively affects business bottom lines due to operational cost reduction and diminished opportunities cost (Barabasi, 2002; Urry, 2003). However, this format of on-line interaction is often associated with a lower level of social presence as compared to face-to-face communication. It is also believed to inhibit the achievement of mutual negotiation benefits (Mazei & Hertel, 2016; Hilbert and Lopez 2011).

Even though trust, and specifically its emotional dimension, is highly likely to be affected by the videoconferencing format, this area of digital interaction has not been researched widely enough (Bos et al., 2002). Additionally, videoconferencing has been under increasing scrutiny due to its ubiquitous acceptance in business dealings, specifically due to the prevalence and persistence of Covid-19 in many (if not all) global marketplaces (Marhefka et al, 2020).

2.11.2 Videoconferencing Shortcomings

Kovaite et al. (2020) argue that digital change has the potential to have a significant effect on businesses, especially if it transforms or disrupts an existing business model. The changes triggered by the pandemic have dramatically influenced social life and social settings, workplace interactions and communication habits. Among risk areas within transformation processes such as this, are the levels of competency and acceptance of such technology by staff (Kovaitė & Stankevičienė, 2019). Sharma et al. (2020) present evidence that 20% of B2B sales teams have not adjusted to the digital shift, neglecting videoconferencing or phone selling post-Covid-19, even though buyers mostly prefer digitally enabled interaction in the context of the pandemic. Additionally, there are individuals who find themselves feeling uncomfortable looking at themselves on the computer screen which often tampers their ability to communicate openly and most importantly reduces their comfort level making the goal of establishing a trust-based relationship significantly more difficult (Marhefka et al, 2013).

Bos et al. (2002) claim that while people interact virtually, they still need to establish trust which requires rich computer-mediated communications (CMC) to collaborate effectively in the absence of face-to-face interactions. The empirical work by these researchers suggests that video and audio conferencing was not as effective as face-to-face communication, showing some evidence of delayed and fragile trust. Delayed trust is “a slower progress toward full cooperation” (Bos et al., 2002, p. 135). “Fragile trust” is a vulnerability to opportunistic behaviours (Bos et al., 2002, p. 135). The work of Bos et al. (2002) showed the text-chat interactions resulted in the lowest levels of interaction, whilst the audio and video conferencing were significantly better. However, it took time before the participants reached a high level of cooperation and, eventually, consensus with detectable signs of delayed and fragile trust.

Bordia (1997) suggests that communication mode is a determinant of effectiveness of communications. An on-line format limits the effectiveness of work, restricting the exploitation of opportunities and prompt business goal attainment (Rocco, 1998). The lack of trust requires all transactions to be contracted and thoroughly monitored. It additionally obliges companies to incorporate time-consuming procedures into the workflow, which may often result in lost momentum and consequently missed opportunity. That is why physical interaction is still a ‘gold standard’ for trust-building. Bos et al. (2002) support the hypothesis that face-to-face communication is the best for effective communication and creating healthy trust-based relationships with.

In the work conducted by Saleh et al (2012), one of the respondents acknowledged the importance of effective communication with the following statement:

> *Communication is one of the key factors for success of our business. Effective communication ensures initial transaction to take place which is then followed by a series of successful transactions towards building trust. The trust building process involves development of confidence, trustworthiness, truthfulness and sincerity. The final outcome of this process is commitment.*

Additionally, Sengpiel and Sönksen (2012) note that older generations are rather resistant to change and adapt to the technological advances, because they lack capabilities to use them. They often cannot understand the interactive technology, and it intensifies their stress and ability to work. This unwillingness of older generations to adopt the technology may influence the effectiveness of work, as well relationship development, in the circumstance of pandemic restrictions (Hsiche, Chen, & Chen, 2018).

Although an abundance of trust literature clearly illustrates that trust relationships have become more fragile in a digitised environment, there is evidence that acknowledges the opposite, conveying that the Internet phenomenon presents options to enhance trust building (Blobaum, 2016; Touray et al, 2015). With the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, computer mediated forms of communications represent an almost immediate primary (or exclusive) means of communication for many businesses (Moffett et al, 2020). This created many challenges for executives, business owners and relationship marketing specialists when seeking to establish new relationships or maintain their existing, mature relationships.

2.12 New and Mature Relationships

Narayandas and Rangan (2004) evaluate the relationship between buyers and sellers in their work emphasising the importance of its history: how it was initiated, build, and nurtured; and whether it is a new or mature relationship.

2.12.1 New Relationships

According to French and Raven (1968) the asymmetry in the positions of power within the B2B environment impacts the way a powerful partner/buyer dominates as compared to the less powerful actor/seller when entering a new relationship (McAlister, Bazerman, & Fader 1986). It may result in a dysfunctional relationship where a more powerful buyer (trustor) dictates his terms and conditions to a weaker seller (trustee) proportionally to his influence. Though, according to the social exchange concept (Blau, 1968; Homans, 1958), the parties entering such collaborations often willingly accept their roles from the power perspective, anticipating the benefits of collaboration in the long run and perceiving it as a fair game (Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp,1995). Typically, buyers and sellers enter initial negotiations with the sole aim of evaluating each other's potential, outlining the intentions, and gauging business opportunities (Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman 2001), and this is where constructive dialogue and high-quality communication plays a crucial role. Essentially, in the initiation of a new relationship, cognitive trust is critical where the demonstration of expertise and competence become prerequisites for mutual work and relational prospects (Sekhon et al, 2013).

2.12.2 Mature Relationships

Mature relationships are more about the value the parties bring into the collaboration, synergy of work, and stakeholders' governance of the relationship whether it is transaction-based or trust-based (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Narayandas & Rangan, 2004). Good intentions and performance achievements, along with open and concise communication flow, support the relationship development and its success, whether in times of stability or in turbulent times.

Uncertainty and disruption widen the scope and burden of executive teams' responsibilities (Managing through a crisis, 2020) where one of their main roles is steering the relational strategy together with creating and maintaining collaborative endeavours.

2.13 The Role of Executives in Relationship Building

The responsibility of steering an organisation through any tumultuous times typically belongs to company executives (Markides, 2006). According to the upper echelon theory (Hambrick, 2007; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hambrick & Mason, 1984) executives own all responsibility and act based on their interpretations of the strategic situations they encounter. The way executives approach any business scenario is based on their values, experiences, and attitudes. Essentially, if we want to try and understand why organisations make the choices and decisions they make, we need to consider the biases and dispositions of their most influential representatives – executive team members or the top management team (TMT) (Hambrick, 2007; Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001).

2.13.1 Uncertainty

While the Covid-19 pandemic is ravaging business ecosystems globally, the level of uncertainty is understandably high. According to prevailing research, uncertainty is "the degree to which firms' external environment is characterized by an absence of pattern, unpredictability, and unexpected change…" (Fynes et al., 2004) According to Lopez-Gomero et al (2011), the acknowledgment of the uncertainty and the way it is addressed is mostly dependent on how the executives or decision-makers evaluate it. The leadership style and decision-maker's level of adaptability predicts the outcome of transitioning and, consequently, adjusting to the new post-pandemic reality (Pedersen et al, 2020; Barnard, 1938). This crisis may be taken on by business leaders as an opportunity, however, if managed appropriately (Brockner & James, 2008)

Consequently, the proclivity of the executive team to innovate and adapt in a changing environment, and most importantly to be resilient or even “antifragile” (Taleb, 2012; Taleb, 2013), will be a significant predictor of organisational success in this “new normal” (Pedersen et al, 2020). The current work recognises the significance of the decision-makers role in driving the technological adaption (specifically in communications aspect of their operations) and the importance of their last word in finalising business contracts. Additionally, their roles are critical in collaborative initiatives within a purchasing centre (Sitar, 2012) and heavily influence the organisations’ wider B2B relationship management (Zafari et al, 2020).

2.13.2 The role of the Executives in Business Relationships and Selling

The wider B2B marketing literature suggests that while living through a tumultuous period of instability, executives must approach selling intelligently. For instance, instead of slashing budgets and cutting prices they can take over the sales enablement, driving positive sales or being selective with clients and opting for a higher value option (Managing through a crisis, 2020). The solution can involve the adaptation of the sales team to the needs of the key business relationships (Sharma, Rangarajan, & Paesbrugghe, 2020) and new selling strategies (Keränen, Salonen, & Terho, 2020).

According to McCann and Selsky (2012) business relationships are key to the company’s survival and resilience though, surprisingly, it is under-researched area within the wider relationship marketing body of knowledge. Zafari et al (2020) suggests that business connectivity and reliance on trusting business relationships may help navigate the major hurdles, foster communication effectiveness and cooperation during downward market movement if managed by experienced executives/decision-makers (Stevenson et al, 2014).

3 Research Design

Firstly, this chapter features the research design outlining the theoretical framework supported by a qualitative methodological approach as detailed below. Secondly, the researcher elaborates on the research method and provides the justifications for its adoption. Thirdly, the chapter explains sample characteristics and recruitment process. And finally, the researcher clarifies six stages of thematic analysis.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

To explore the impact of communication modes with different level of social presence and its influence on the relationship building, this work investigates differences inherent within the conventional face-to-face mode of communication and videoconferencing, weighing their advantages and disadvantages; and assessing the influence of these two different social settings on the shared meaning as an outcome of a business encounter.

This research work is designed to investigate whether trust development between business partners can be inhibited by less rich communication channel such as videoconferencing. The researcher endeavours to evaluate the scale of executives/decision-makers' openness while communicating face-to-face or on-line by the means of quality and quantity of the shared information. It has been also conveyed by the secondary data (Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman 2001) that the previous working experience between the parties impacts the collaboration dynamic, and it is of a high interest to learn how critical this time span influence can be in the context of the computer mediated environment.

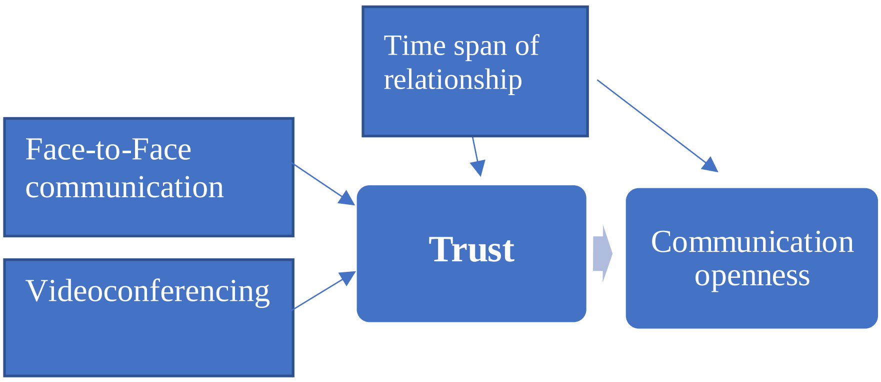
The overarching idea of this theoretical framework is the notion and the role of trust as a foundation of the social exchange (Gundlach et al, 1993), which drives the business relationship effectiveness, efficiency and enhances overall performance as dependent on the level of information exchange openness (Thomas & Zolin, 2009). Communication being one of the main cognitive precursors of trust plays a critical role whether initiating or nurturing a business relationship (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). The growing role of videoconferencing triggered the necessity to understand how this mode of communication influences the traditional process of relationship building, and whether it affects relationship trust.

Furthermore, this dynamic is investigated by considering the role of the relationship tenure, or time span (either new or mature), on relational outcomes.

3.1.1. Conceptual Framework

Figure One, below, depicts the theoretically derived conceptual framework for the current study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Past research suggests that different communication modes have an influence on the outcome of interest – trust or interpersonal trust which consists of two dimensions – cognitive and affective. The trust and the extent of its cognitive and affective dimensions predict decision-makers' openness during social exchange whether it is face-to-face or on-line (Garfinkel, 1967; Ricoeur, 1981). Moreover, the openness of the communication predicates on the quality and quantity of the shared information. and is substantially defined by a social setting and by the level of social presence together with the participants character and previous experiences (Schutz, 1967; Garfinkel, 1967; Ricoeur, 1981). Past research also suggests the moderating effect of the time span on the trust formation during different stages of the relationship development whether it is new or mature relationship.

3.2 Methodology

This section explains the reasons why a qualitative methodological approach was adopted for this research work. The researcher identified the semi-structured interview format as the best means to collect the data and explore a newly emerged but already ubiquitous trend: the communication shift from face-to-face format into an on-line space.

This qualitative inquiry is to be conducted to achieve several aims:

- To understand how ubiquitous acceptance of videoconferencing, as a preferrable or the only possible communication format in the circumstance of the pandemic, impacts the trust building between B2B decision-maker;
- And whether the prior relational liaising can influence the trust building/maintaining while happening on-line (new relationship versus mature relationship).

3.2.1 Qualitative Research: Justification of the Research Methodology

Qualitative research encompasses a wide range of approaches, beliefs, and methods found within a broad range of research disciplines and that is why it is quite hard to define it. Ormston, Spenser, Barnard, Snape (2014, p.2) describe it as "a naturalistic interpretive approach concerned with exploring phenomenon "from the interior"". Emphasizing the interpretive nature of the qualitative research Denzin and Lincoln (2011) define it as the way to learn what meaning people bring into various phenomena and the way through which researchers make the world visible.

The extant literature asserts that an individual perception of the environment is socially constructed (Díaz-Andrade, 2009), which implies that the interpretation of the phenomena may vary based on people' background, experiences and social setting (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). In case of this work, it is a perspective of decision-makers who are the main actors in strategic shaping of the relationships; in driving the change within their organisations; and leading force in adapting to a new normal (Markides, 2006).

In particular, a qualitative approach opens the possibility to aggregate rich, complex, and detailed data from a range of industry stakeholders, where the same phenomenon might have different meaning for different players. By the means of in-depth interviews for data collection, the relevant insights can be acquired to fill in the gaps generating a more robust analysis and investigating a certain business trend that quantitative research format would not be able to provide (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002).

A flexible research design of the qualitative approach presents the opportunity to explore individual experiences from different angles. Such design allows the openness to the emergent categories and concepts while conveying the answers to the questions "what", "why, and "how" rather than answering the question "how many" pertinent to the quantitative inquiry (Gibbs, 2018; Ritchie et al, 2014). Furthermore, Rubin and Rubin (2005, p.vii) characterise qualitative research as night goggles "'permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen".

The exploration of the videoconferencing mode of communication and face-to-face interaction in a post-pandemic era is under-researched and under-representative of its importance (Marhefka, 2020). Besides retrieving a wealth of rich insightful data, this work attempted to formulate the nuances of the core problem (Silverman, 2011) which can be investigated in future research endeavours.

A qualitative enquiry and thematic analysis has been recognised as an ideal avenue to pursue the objectives of this research work.

3.3 Method

It was determined that data collection through in-depth interview will provide a comprehensive understanding and contextual information for the purpose of this explorative study of communication formats and trust building in B2B environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The data acquired from the decision-makers will assist in delineating the role of communication modes and the scale of their openness in creating relational bond through the perceptions of these main business strategists and what they envision as a way to adapt to a new normal of post-Covid reality ("Managing through a crisis", 2020; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this scenario ontological idealism concept supports the format of this research method approach.

3.3.1 Ontological Perspective

Ontology is a study of being" (Crotty, 1998, p.10). Ontology answers the questions about the nature of the social world and distinguishes two philosophical ways of approaching reality: realism and idealism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005; Scotland, 2012). The realism perspective is grounded into the notion that there is an external reality which exists separately from people's beliefs and perceptions. Unlikely realism, idealism perspective asserts that the reality is fundamentally mind dependent (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Scholars are in a constant pursuit of objective reality nurtured by never-ending research work. This approach adheres to the realism perspective of the ontology with the sole purpose to overcome “basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Therefore, the researcher of this work defined the semi-structured, in-depth interview method as the one deemed to extract the variety of “perceived human understandings” and to apprehend a maximum objective perspective within the existing B2B context on the ongoing communication shift into on-line space and its possible consequences for trust building.

3.4 Data Collection and Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Qualitative interviews are the most important tool for data gathering in the qualitative research work (Myers & Newman, 2007). Depending on the goal and objectives of the research it can be structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are a data gathering method which implies that the researcher has several predetermined questions, but improvisation is still needed and welcomed (Myers & Newman, 2007). This qualitative method gives a certain degree of freedom in navigating the interview flow which allows an interviewer to capture some unexpected insights (Myers & Newman, 2006) so critical for the explorative process of this study objectives. Open-ended, probing and follow-up questions are used to maintain the information exchange smoothness; to clarify the statements given by an interviewee; and dive in for more details of unexpected turns during the dialogue (Silverman, 2011). It allows to ensure that all bits and pieces of relevant information have been addressed, recorded, and transcribed consistently opening the door to potentially surprising revelations and excitingly new themes.

The collected data is deemed to reveal the reasoning behind decision-makers’ communication strategies, challenges, and the scale of post-pandemic technology integration into the relational liaising they are to maintain with the buyers/partners. The data is meant to assist in understanding of the impact that videoconferencing has on a freshly formed collaboration (new relationship), and how it affects mature relationships. The research effort drives an overall goal of the work to highlight the level of acceptance of computer mediated tool – videoconferencing, and its impact on trust building in a post-pandemic time for business community bonding and buyer-seller interaction.

3.4.1 Shortcomings of an Interview as a Method for Data Collection

Besides numerous advantages and opportunities in capturing precious data the interview format has its disadvantages which the researcher was aware of and ready to minimize. For instance, an interview often happens in a quite artificial environment where an interviewee is interrogated sometimes under a time pressure (Myers & Newman, 2006). Additionally, if interviewer is a stranger to the interviewee, it might be difficult to establish trust during the interaction which sometimes can hinder the objectivity of data collection (Galletta & Cross, 2012).

Another pitfall which the research could have encountered during in-depth interview is a Hawthorne effect which may be defined as follows: the interview process is intrusive in nature where an interviewer can be viewed as an intruder (Willis, 2007). "Interviewer-intruder" can impact social setting of the process and interviewee's opinion, skewing the reality of interviewee's experience.

All mentioned drawbacks were considered, and it was researcher's responsibility to put maximum effort to avoid those pitfalls ensuring the adequacy of the collected data. Elaborating on the advantages and disadvantages of the interview format, it is still a preferred research method for this study as it is meant to contribute with establishing an operational framework for the research and to capture the rich and complex data for the analysis of this study. The analysis is expected to confirm or reject certain researcher's assumptions testing them on a broad variety of opinion angles (Swain, 2018).

3.5 Sample Characteristics and Recruiting

The study features a purposive sampling technique handpicked for the aims of this research. Such sampling method is often used in qualitative exploratory research when the scholar is trying to gain insights into a certain phenomenon (Emmel, 2013) while “digging deep through careful study” (Blumer, 1978, p.38).

The Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) granted approval for this work as detailed in the approved ethics application (No: 21-195) on 16th of July 202, allowing the researcher to proceed with the recruiting of participants for interviewing (Appendices 5 & 6).

The research sample will consist of decision-makers - executives or senior level managers, within the Australia and New Zealand construction industry. Such individuals should have significant authority in decision-making processes or to be directors (owners) in the business relevant to the construction segment. They are often responsible for creating new business opportunities, developing strategic relationships, being an active member on the committees for construction industry standards and policies and working on the improvement of industry regulation and compliance.

Executive level representatives and senior managers: CEO, Business Development Managers, Project Managers, Head of Department.

Business owners in construction segment: Directors.

This deliberate choice of high-level professionals for the sample of this work can be justified by their experience and by the holistic in-depth knowledge they possess about company communication policies and by the diversity of their liaising with other stakeholders of their industry (Obal & Gao, 2020). This non-random technique intended to locate the executives who will be willing to contribute to the study, and who are knowledgeable enough to articulate the insights in a reflective and expressive manner (Bernard, 2017).

There were some restrictions applied to the sampling frame. Firstly, the age of 35 is assigned to be the starting age point for the respondents' sample eligibility. Secondly, the research seeks to examine the cross-sectional insights acquired from the data shared by executives of various business sizes: starting with the representatives of B2B enterprises and finishing with small business owners. Consequently, a group of respondents of different business sizes was obtained to demonstrate the view and opinions of both small business and large corporate players (Patton, 2002). And thirdly, the sample includes the stakeholders of Australian and New Zealand construction markets only.

Being well acquainted with construction industry stakeholders, the researcher identified the set of the individuals suitable for the research purpose.

3.5.1 Recruiting Process

The purposive sample of 18 respondents were recruited to gather a necessary volume of data. The researcher ensured a wide construction-related businesses representation within the sample. Among the respondents there were interviewees from main contracting companies, building materials manufacturers, building materials distributors, architects, engineering consultancies, Government establishments and non-for-profit organisations. The range of business sizes considered for the research is small and medium-size enterprises (SME) and corporate business entities. SME is a prevalent business form in Australia and New Zealand, and the sample will predominantly include their representatives. The number of employees in small business is up to 20 professionals, however, small businesses with up to 5 employees have a majority of this size gradient in New Zealand (McGregor & Gomes, 1999) and

Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The medium size is up to 99 employees. The number of employees in the corporate entity starts from 100 employees.

The interviews were conducted with the key team member of Auckland Council Inspection Department, GIB, USG Boral branch in New Zealand, UL AU, Rayn Fire, Nexdor, Belcanto, TechCoatings, Framecad.

The sample includes the professionals of both genders – male and female with five or more years of working experience in the B2B construction segment (Dowell et al., 2015). The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Auckland, New Zealand and via videoconferencing with interviewees located in Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth, Australia. The Australian participants were notified in advance that the interview would be recorded for the purposes of transcription.

Most research participants were recruited through the combination of researcher's professional network and database and by the means of snowball sampling technique once the capacities of researcher's decision-making contacts were exhausted. An e-mail with a brief description of the research purpose and a request to participate in the study was sent to 20 potential interviewees. The text of the e-mail can be found in Appendix 1. The researcher attached an Information Sheet (see Appendix 3) to give more details on the research work for those who felt willing to contribute with their time and knowledge; and consent form (Appendix 4) to sign and send back to the researcher if they are intended to be enrolled into the research sample. An announcement about the research and request to participate was also posted in Fire Protection Association New Zealand (FPANZ) monthly newsletter (see the wording in the Appendix 1). Unfortunately, there were no volunteers who would express eagerness to participate in response to this newsletter announcement.

Those respondents who were willing to be interviewed sent an e-mail confirming their participation and advising a convenient day and time for an interview. Depending on the circumstance and where respondents live and work, interviews were scheduled either on-line via Zoom (for Australians) or in respondents' office, home, or café (for New Zealanders).

The interview questions served as a guide for the interviewer. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 5. Each interview took on average 30-45 minutes and was performed in the place of interviewee's choosing.

During the 18th interview no new information was acquired which meant the data collection reached theoretical saturation. (Bryman, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

The list of participants can be found below:

No/Country	**Designation**	**Construction-Related Business Type**
Participant 1 NZ	SME Executive	HVAC Design & Installation
Participant 2 AUS	SME, Executive	Consultant
Participant 3 NZ	Corporate, Executive	Technology and Manufacturing
Participant 4 NZ	Corporate, Technical Director	Manufacturing
Participant 5 AUS	SME, Executive	Building Materials manufacturer & Distributor
Participant 6 NZ	Government, Executive	Council
Participant 7 NZ	Corporate, Projects Director	Main Contracting
Participant 8 AUS	Business Development Manager	Non-for-profit Organisation
Participant 9 NZ	SME, Executive	Steel prefabrication
Participant 10 NZ	Corporate, Executive	Manufacturer
Participant 11 NZ	SME, Executive	Manufacturer
Participant 12 NZ	SME, Executive	Architects and Scientists
Participant 13 NZ	SME, Business Development Manager	Distributor
Participant 14 NZ	SME, Executive	Manufacturer & Distributor

Participant 15 AUS	SME, Executive	Manufacturer & Distributor
Participant 16 AUS	SME, Executive	Consultant
Participant 17 NZ	SME, Marketing Manager	Building Materials Distributor
Participant 18 NZ	SME Executive	Consultant

3.6 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a complex process. It is not only researcher's choice of the analysis type suitable for the accumulated data –for instance, opting for a thematic analysis (TA), but it is also a set of three key stages of the process which impact a final outcome (Grbich, 2013). Firstly, those are views and choices the author makes along the way and how it influences the result. Secondly, the design and method the researcher chooses and the data quality the author manages to acquire. And thirdly, the presentation of findings, interpretation and how the readers will access it (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

3.6.1 Thematic Analysis (TA)

A qualitative thematic analytic approach was employed as the most appropriate technique to evaluate the collected data. It is defined as a process of establishing structure, order and meaning to the mass of gathered data (Marshall & Rossman, 1990). It is also viewed as "a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.297; Aronson, 1994) offering accessible and theoretically flexible way of its analysis. It allows a wider, systematic engagement with a large volume of information which increases the accuracy and sensitivity of the data (Boyatzis, 1998).

According to Gibbs (2017) the word analysis means "transformation" where research starts with the data collection and being afterwards processed "into a clear, understandable, insightful, trustworthy and even original analysis" (Gibbs, 2017 p.2). The sorting of the data includes transcribing, extracting, indexing and managing of the qualitative data with a contemplating on how these processing stages deliver analytic ideas and producing meaningful insights (Myers, 2009; Morehouse, Maykut, Colvin, & Frauman, 2001; Maxwell et al., 2012; Ormston et al., 2014; Miles et al, 2013). The processes are designated to deal with a large volume of data created through a qualitative approach: interview transcripts (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018); video and audio recording (Rappley, 2018); and collected field notes.

Richards (2015) conveys that qualitative analysis assist in processing and interpretation of something which is imaginative and speculative, and the final analyses may explore the phenomena which the researcher never thought of at the beginning. With the qualitative approach the researcher does not need to wait until the moment the data has been collected in full, but he/she can start the analysis concurrently with data collection living through it, imagining and receiving the evidences to the research directions which may be of interest to investigate based on the already acquired information. Additionally, a researcher does not need to possess a specialised knowledge which is critical for grounded theory or language-based analysis such as narrative or conversation analysis (Howitt & Cramer, 2011; Marvasti, 2004).

Qualitative research conducted through interviews is associated with large volumes of data which is to be processed and condensed into a summary of findings. "The thematic analysis seeks to enhance the data, to increase its bulk, density and complexity" (Gibbs, 2018 p.4) and then deal with it using coding to manage and organise it accordingly.

3.6.2 Data Encoding

Data encoding is an underlying principal of thematic analysis (TA) where a “code” is the smallest element of the data, the so-called pattern of meaning, deemed to extract capturing pieces of information from the interview transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2006). The codes relevant to the same topic underpin a larger data segregation called “theme” which is a part of a wider core idea. Overall, themes build up a framework which helps a researcher to summarize the findings being guided by the objectives of the research and enables to report concisely analytic observations (Marshall & Rossman, 1990). Thematic analysis is a comparatively flexible method of data analysis and has a broad range of application.

The data analysis process of this research followed a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding in themes development. Such approach imposes a theory-driven structure and procedure robustness (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) on to an equally robust but more conventional approach of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It opens the possibilities for emerging theory-driven and data-driven insights which complement each other and adds additional rigour to the analysis process (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This hybrid approach is widely used in the academic community across a range of research questions acting as an interpreter in communication between “the qualitative and quantitative speaking scholar” (Nowell et al., 2017). The process of hybrid coding starts with the identifying the themes and categories within the theoretical framework of the target phenomenon and generate the themes which emerge out of the data along the way even if they are not within the theoretical framework (Vaismoradi et al, 2013). It helps to identify key coding concepts while initiating the analysis and assign operational definitions for each category (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A slight alteration in favour of hybrid approach does not influence the systematic character and transparency of the thematic analysis and does not deprive it from its academic rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Swain, 2018).

3.6.3 Six Steps Process of Data Analysis

The structure of the analysis process in this research followed a Braun & Clark (2006) six-steps process:

3.6.3.1 Step 1: Reading the data through to become more familiar with the content.

Getting familiar with the data is one of the most critical moment of the analysis (Riessman, 1993). This familiarity with the information serves to guide the researcher (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). At this stage, the researcher is already able to locate the most compelling information as contributing to the research questions. There is another decision to make at this stage and it is whether the researcher will analyse the transcripts independently, or initiate a cross case analysis working on all the transcripts simultaneously (Byrne, 2001). The researcher opted for a cross case analysis working on the data concurrently and marking the codes and themes which appeared to be the most salient to the research question. The analysis was launched after all 18 interviews were conducted and transcribed in full (Chamberlain, Camic, & Yardley, 2003).

3.6.3.2 Step 2: Identifying initial codes and comparing data relevant to each code.

To achieve the maximum accuracy of the analysis the researcher put a substantial effort to choose adequate codes for the gathered data (Owen,1994). The coding process was guided by the objectives of the work. Finding the basic elements of relevant information helped to segregate them into potential themes. The researcher scrutinised each interview script closely and identifiedthe ideas pertinent to the research question (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In this study the researcher started the coding manually using different colours for different codes. Coding continued till the moment there were no new ideas for codes left whether theory-driven or data-driven (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). After that the researcher uploaded the transcripts into NVivo for codes segregation. They were reviewed, rationalised, or collapsed if expressed the same meaning.

3.6.3.3 Step 3: Segregating codes into probable themes.

Boyatzis (1998, p. 161) defines the term "theme" as "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon." While going through the basic patterns of information the researcher found similarities among the codes and segregated them into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher went beyond the featuring of respondents' answers only but focused on the interpretation of information meanings (King & Horrocks, 2010). Similar and overlapping themes were merged or rearranged in a different way (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The researcher recognised that the work on codes structure is iterative and alterations are usual every time she returns to analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010). Once all the themes were identified and labelled, the researcher saw the outline of respondents' collective experience which provided a comprehensive meaningful pattern (Leininger, 1985).

3.6.3.4 Step 4: Reviewing initial themes.

The next step of the process was to refine the themes which reflect straight to the point idea; or the themes which were broad in meaning to summarise a set of ideas (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Most probably some of the themes were emerged and some of them were collapsed. Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that the overall goal of such an exercise is not to summarise the information but to build a concise narrative which addresses the research question.
The researcher appreciated the principals of hybrid approach in coding when applying the initial theories as a valid point for identifying variables or themes as well as their operationalisation (Hickey & Kipping, 1996; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Finally, the review of the themes and the guidance of the academic literature helped the researcher to ensure that all themes formed coherent patterns (Bryman, 2003) and reflect the set of data highly pertinent to her researcher question.

3.6.3.5 Step 5: Defining, naming, and reporting themes.

In the concluding stage of the analysis there were concepts emerged from the themes which were reportedaccordingly (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of themes reviewing, and refining was ongoing at every stage of the analysis. It was also compulsory for the researcher to ensure that the clustered themes were reflective of the initial data analysis and that the codes were assigned appropriately.

The researcher wrote down the findings of the thematic analysis specifying the list of identified codes and themes supported by the extracts from the transcripts in Appendix 6. The citations from the transcripts presented especially vivid examples of conceptual reality supporting a theoretical framework.

3.6.3.6 Step 6: Reliability and validity of the results

There were several procedures employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Firstly, the interviewer followed closely the interview guide (Appendix 5) while interrogating interviewees to achieve the consistency to the conversational engagement and data collection. The interviews were asked the same questions which avoided any leading or nudging into interviewer's opinion (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998a). Afterwards the researcher transcribed verbatim all interview recordings obtained during the face-to-face interviews and the videos recorded during Zoom sessions (Appendix 7). All relevant evidence and notes as to the nature of the research were kept in the researcher's notebook. The triangulation of sources was conducted by the means of uploading eighteen digital transcripts into NVivo software platform for further data analysis (Koch, 2006). This software has the history of coding, segregation of codes into themes, and the logic the researcher approached the analysis of the aggregated data with. This trail of evidences may be utilized as an audit of the activities performed during the work with data if required.

4 Findings

As detailed in Chapter 3, the researcher adopted a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding for data coding and analysis which prescribes to integrate a theory-driven coding into the data analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) together with emerging data-driven insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because of the theory-driven approach in the coding process, some of the research theoretical concepts and ideas will serve as initial coding for categories and subcategories (Hickey & Kipping, 1996). Operational terminology for each category is identified using dominant theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The outline of each theme coding will guide the data analysis accordingly.

The data collected as an outcome of 18 interviews with decision-makers of construction industry of Australia and New Zealand has been transcribed and coded in NVivo software. The researcher has collected rich insights from the owners, executives, business development managers of manufacturing companies, distributors, main contractors, representatives of not-for-profit organisations and Governmental establishments of Australia and New Zealand.

This chapter will detail the findings of the thematic analysis by reporting on the following themes: immediate pandemic impact; trust; face-to-face interaction and its advantages; on-line communication – its advantages and disadvantages; communication openness; and moderating effect of the relationship time span.

4.1 Pandemic Impact

The analysis starts with **"Pandemic impact"** theme which is consist of two subthemes - communicational and operational challenges: those are the ramifications of Covid-19 disruption and its immediate impact on the construction industry. This contextual introduction delineates the transitioning into a more computer mediated communication format and what exactly that initial pandemic-triggered process was like.

4.1.1 Communicational Challenges Sub Theme

The codes specified in the Table 1 below are aligned with "Communication Challenges" subtheme which demonstrates the changes and issues around communicational patterns. It also manifests a certain frustration the industry stakeholder faced during the first months of pandemic.

Table 1: Communicational Challenges

Subtheme	Code	Description
Communicational Challenges	Insecurity	On-line communication made it a challenge for those who were not technically savvy. Certain exposure to one's home also created an uncomfortable feeling of being exposed.
	Interpretation accuracy	Constant effort to make sure that the information has been interpreted correctly.
	Influx of on-line meetings	A substantial influx of on-line meetings

The researcher distinguishes three codes as representative of the communicational challenges subtheme, as detailed in Table 1:

4.1.1.1 Insecurities

On-line centric communication became new form of information exchange for some industry stakeholders triggering certain insecurities:

> *"…it's people that haven't necessarily used that form of communication before. So, what they do is they use a new tool and because it's more acceptable, they do it, but they still feel quite like a small kid on it. So, I think the evolvement inside that toll is quite down here. So, it was all those aspects about your personality that you would*

have in a direct communication, for instance, change completely because people are not sure yet how to behave in that setting..." (Participant 17, SME, Marketing Manager)

4.1.1.2 Interpretation Accuracy

There are several quotes highlighting some difficulties in regard to interpretation accuracy:

"Some people don't use a video; they just use voice. So, in a mixed group situation, we found interpretation was slower, definitely much slower and the uptake, not always 100%." (Participant 16, SME, Executive)

4.1.1.3 Influx of on-line meetings

The insight about a considerable influx of on-line meetings was quite prevailing among respondents engaged into consultancy and among those employed by Governmental establishments:

"I think what you find is that there are more people wanting to try and just organize on-line meetings because they can do it so easily, but to us, it's a pain …… because, what we ended up finding is you need to ask people about the agenda because people just organize a meeting for the meeting's sake." (Participant 6, Government, Executive)

4.1.2 Operational Challenges Subtheme

It was identified that business operations are often affected by the restrictions to contain the spread of the contagious virus. Those challenges may trigger serious ramifications disruptive to the company capabilities to generate profit as well as for its wellbeing.

The researcher distinguishes four codes as representative of the operational challenges subtheme, as detailed in Table 2*Table 2: Operational Challenges*

Subtheme	Code	Description

Operational Challenges	Business Losses	Being hit by the ramifications of Covid-19 pandemic many businesses lost the projects due to the restriction of physical attendance on site.
	Delays	Postponing of projects deadlines
	Increased cost of operations	With the pandemic restrictions in play the cost of business operations and projects has increased dramatically.
	New operational practices	The necessity of new practices to adapt to “new normal”

4.1.2.1 Business Losses

Many businesses engaged into construction projects were impacted financially due to limited physical site access and disruption in work coordination:

> *“…But if we're talking about our clients likes of Novotel or their Millennium group, or hospitality in general, they were obviously hit by pandemic. They lost lots of business. They cut the cost on our services as well…” (Participant 1, SME, Executive)*

4.1.2.2 Delays

Many projects were delayed because of the high level of uncertainty spurred by novel virus disturbance:

> *“What we're experiencing is that there is more delay in projects that have been in process. So, we've seen delays in orders that we've expected and that's, you know, slowed the demand on our factory…”(Participant 11, SME, Executive)*

4.1.2.3 Increased Cost of Operations

Logistical chain interruptions and a spike in cost of shipment services increased the cost and time of projects for suppliers and distributors of construction materials/systems:

> *“…I mean, yes, there's, there's been a significant impact, and whether that's has been unpredictable, certainly nothing has reduced in cost. Everything has increased or unforeseen circumstances with timing. So, we're expecting materials to arrive from*

overseas. Something by sea something by air. on certain dates. But, there were significant delays for a whole myriad of unforeseen reasons, and in nobody's fault as such, it was just the pandemic had changed the efficiency of shipping and cargo. So yeah, that had a domino effect with our plans. We could sample products within the timeframe that we had planned, and of course the cost impact of that was significant, but we had no option other than to carry on. And the initiative R&D investment has skyrocketed from what the initial budgets were…" (Participant 2, SME, Executive)

4.1.2.4 New Operational Practices

The Governmental establishments also had to adapt quickly to the on-line format of interaction to keep the work advancement on site:

> *"We were always looking to do that, but we've had, COVID really speed it up. I mean, for instance, we were doing video inspections the first week of lockdown, whereas we only started training our team about a month earlier, and we had a six-month plan to phase it in slowly. We did during the first lockdown 4,000 inspections via videoconferencing. So even though people see it everything's shut down, a lot of the central services construction carried on." (Participant, 6, Government, Executive).*

4.2 Trust

This study covers the conceptualization of trust presented in the extant literature and defined as follows:

- Trust as a belief that there is an implicit, mutual, understanding between the parties involved; the actors are reliable and possess the sense of integrity; and both parties are convinced that they will act in each other's best interest (Crosby et al., 1990; Morgan & Hunt,1994).

- Some scholars interpret the notion of trust through such qualities as honesty, credibility, and benevolence (Geyskens et al, 1998; Grayson et al, 2008).
- Trust is recognised as a ubiquitously accepted social foundation for communication, enhanced performance (Katsikeas et al, 2009; Moorman et al, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), and a key facilitator of strong and loyal relationships formed between organisations and individual stakeholders during their business-oriented interactions.

The codes under the category "Trust" are deemed to elaborate on two dimensions of trust: cognitive and affective.

- Cognitive trust is a customer's willingness to confide at a service provider's expertise and credibility (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Moorman et al, 1992; Rempel et al, 1995)
- Affective trust is defined as buyer's confidence in a seller, shaped by feelings and emotions originated in care, concern, and reasoned by support the seller demonstrated during business interactions (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Rempel et al., 1985).

Being guided by the research question the scholar has determined cognitive and affective precursors of trust within the collected data which decision-makers of the construction industry consider essential to the relationship building process.

4.2.1 Cognitive-Dominant Precursors of Trust Subtheme

Cognitive-dominant precursors of trust (theme) are arranged in the Table 3 below starting with the most prevalent one – integrity code and resuming with the least mentioned one – satisfaction.

Table 3: Trust: Cognitive-Dominant Precursors of Trust

Subtheme	Codes	Description	References
Cognitive-Dominant Precursors of Trust	Integrity	the perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable	(Morgan & Hunt,1994; Schoorman et al., 2007; Moorman et al, 1993)
	Competency	technical, operational, and commercial capabilities perceived as supplier's technological and commercial expertise	(Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Sekhon et al., 2013)
	Communication	formal and informal sharing of high quality, meaningful and timely information between industry stakeholders.	(Anderson & Narus, 1990; Saleh et al., 2012)
	Satisfaction	A client's post-purchase evaluation of his/her decision based on product performance/service quality.	(Baxter, 2012)

There were the following statements addressed by participants when considering cognitive-dominant precursors of trust.

4.2.1.1 Integrity

Integrity as a precursor of trust:

> *"Admittedly, you know there is a blind fight. So, when we order materials from, from overseas suppliers that we haven't dealt with before, or met that they supply the goods as intended as promised, and what arrives is we expect to see. So yes, there was a leap of confidence, a leap of faith that we had to take. Fortunately, everybody did what they said they were going to do without issues, but you couldn't be 100% sure until, it's okay. And this is itself forms a good bond and long-term trust, you know when you rely on somebody's word and you trust them with, I guess, purchases, you know, when they stick*

to their word, obviously you create a bond which is appreciated and nurtured." (Participant 2, SME, Executive)

4.2.1.2 Competency

Competency as a precursor of trust:

> *"..if I advise people or recommend them systems that, uh, um, most economical for the particular use and then work on my particular technical point of view, then that in itself will build trust and a relationship. And that's what I'm finding throughout the work that I do. That if you, if you give people what they need and you, you might outline why you make a particular recommendation, then they'll come back…" (Participant 4, Corporate, Executive)*

4.2.1.3 Communication

Communication as a precursor of trust:

> "*…On-line communication would be a very poor second to in person, and it always will be. So, I definitely think it's not as good, it doesn't build the relationship the way it should, in particular with customers, we communicate with architects on-line a lot more. The construction element is all face-to-face. Apart from the COVID shutdowns, we were taking COVID precautions, but we were on the construction sites. You cannot perhaps have a healthy relationship if you haven't had a lot of face-to-face time. It's more transactional relationship then…" (Participant 10, Corporate, Executive)*

4.2.1.4 Satisfaction

Satisfaction as a precursor of trust:

> *"...for our customers, for the contractors, it is a good relationship when there are no problems. So, and we've had, that good feedback from time to time from them, from*

some of the constructions companies who go back to their suppliers and rank them after a, contract…" (Participant 11, SME, Executive)

Especially when the contractor exceeds making the client to feel delight with a superb job

"And one of the people moves on and he's talking about this XXXXXX systems grab that they'll absolutely magic. They delivered on time. I gave this great product. They helped me solve problems. And then you've got three or four people in new office that say, Hey, that sounds better than the swearing matches I have with my current supplier. Let's try these guys…" (Participant 15, SME, Executive)

4.2.2 Affective-Dominant Precursors of Trust Subtheme

The researcher also identified affective-dominant precursor of trust which were substantially less prevalent in the interview transcripts if compared with cognitive-dominant ones. They are listed in the Table 4 below:

Table 4: Trust: Affective-Dominant Precursors of Trust.

Subtheme	Code	Description	References
Affective-Dominant Precursors of Trust	Shared values	viewed as a set of beliefs which guide behaviours, goals and policies of the collaboration participants regardless their importance to the common work and the extent of their appropriateness	(Morgan & Hunt, 1994)
	Benevolence	the extent of a trustee's kindness in his attitude to the trustor while putting aside profit motives	(Castaldo et al., 2007; Myer et al, 1995; Siguaw, Penny, & Thomas, 1998)
	Co-creation	defined as an active participation, interactions, dialogue and collaboration of the buyer and seller and other actors in the business exchange for the purpose of better understanding of the customer problem solving context.	Franklin & Marshall, 2019; Ballantyne &Varey, 2008; Lundkvist & Yakhlef, 2004

There are the following statements which emphasize the role of

4.2.2.1 Shared values

Shared values in relationship building and trust formation:

> *"...I wouldn't say that LinkedIn is our primary way to build confidence, but what it does? - it does weed out some of the new clients that may not be the right clients for you. Um, and then it attracts clients that are the right clients for us. So, it's a way of pre-marketing almost, it's a pre-screening some of those clients and, you know, making sure you don't get an inquiry from the wrong people. So, I think it's good to help establish our personality and our thoughts and our, you know, our way of thinking. And that's attracting a lot of people that think the same way that we are building is not the right way to build things and there's better ways to do it, but I have yet to transition online discussion directly into convincing someone to do the right, to do something different. That's the starting point of things." (Participant 12, SME, Executive)*

4.2.2.2 Benevolence

Benevolence as a significant facilitator for building deeper, more personal relationship:

> *"...But now that the business negotiation has reached a conclusion and we have the agreement, I was more than happy to share with him my situation and now, we probably have a stronger connection because of that non-business-related matter, with anything that we've developed so far in relation to the business experience. And it would mean that if XXXXXX calls me at 2:30 in the morning and says to me I need help with this, I will answer it, and I will do it because, I guess that emotional and personal relationship stuff is important…" (Participant 8, Non-for-Profit Organisation, Executive)*

4.2.2.3 Co-creation

Co-creation as a collaborative effort of the participants which nurtures the development of a strong personal bond among the contributors to the process:

Interviewee

"...and I think I was proud of the project management team that had about six key people working on this and, I'll let you know a little secret about it - those six people - we didn't have a project management plan.

Interviewer:

Really?

Interviewee:

We only had our trust and our relationship and a clear shared vision for what we wanted to do. And so that meant that if one of the team members rang me and said, XXXX, I need you to go and do this. Then I would just do it because they asked me to, and I trusted them that's what we needed to do. We had questions, and debate, and discussion about it, but, you know, it's, for me, it's really a triumph of relationships and trust that we built more than the technical solution." (Participant 1, SME, Executive).

4.3 Face-to-Face Interaction

Face-to-face interaction is a traditional mode of communication which is distinguished by the richness of non-verbal cues, high social presence, and a format of social bonding. Though the central role of in-person interaction for business collaborations has been diminished due to the communicational restrains caused by pandemic ramifications. In the next sections of the work the researcher will identify pros and cons of face-to-face interaction from the perspective of “a new normal” business practices.

4.3.1 Perceived Disadvantage of Face-to-Face Communication

The researcher has identified only one disadvantage under the theme “Perceived Disadvantages of Face-to-Face Communication” specified in the Table 5 below and it is “Inefficiency” while conducting eighteen interviews with construction industry stakeholders in Australia and New Zealand. It was mentioned very few times

Table 5: Perceived Disadvantages of Face-to-Face Communication

Subtheme	Code	Description
Perceived Disadvantages of Face-to-Face Communication	Inefficiency	Time-consuming aspect of the physical meeting arrangement including commuting and possible deviations from the meeting objectives

> *“...for example, if I have to go to XXXXX, I lose my time to go and check on a new train station project of ours. Say, to me it's much easier to come and communicate from the office via videoconferencing than losing time and coming back again...” (Participant 1, SME, Executive)*

> *“...people in a meeting room discussion tend to wander off a middle group start to wander off, but I'd find “Microsoft Teams” meetings more to the point and better chaired. So, I find it good...” (Participant 4, Corporate, Executive).*

4.3.2 Perceived Advantages of Face-to-Face Communication Subtheme

Though there has been an extensive coding structure generated for subtheme "Perceived Advantage of Face-to-Face Communication" under the Category of "Face-to-Face Interaction". All generated codes of face-to-face communication advantages are listed below in the Table 6.

Table 6: Perceived Advantages of Face-to-Face Communication

Subtheme	Code	Description
Perceived Advantages of Face-to-Face Communication	Effectiveness	During face-to-face meetings the professionals tend to be more concentrated and focused attention wise.
	Synergy of Collaboration	The time passes quickly if there is an ongoing creative process within a group of people. Face-to-face collaboration helps to co-create effectively and be more focused
	Problem Solving	If there is any problem, it is perceived to be effectively addressed once the parties meet face-to-face.
	High Social Presence	If the communication is deemed to address person-oriented task which requires a close interpersonal engagement or warm intimate exchange (Miranda & Saunders, 2003) it predicts the necessity for a face-to-face interaction and identified as a format with a high social presence.
	Non-Verbal cues	Non-verbal communication is shaped by three categories of signals: spatial and physical environment; communicators' physical appearance (lipstick, clothes, jewelry etc); and communicators' body movements and positions (Chue et al., 2005)
	Social Bonding	The development of the relationship and trust-building relate to the verbal component as much as to non-verbal component of the communication which consciously or subconsciously transmits participants' emotional state and personal attitude of the stakeholders and that is what makes it an essential element of social bonding (Marshall, 2008)
	Social Construction of Meaning	Any element of the social setting contributes to the meaning of the shared knowledge (Schutz,1967) shaped by the level of social presence and finally be the character and experience of involved individuals
	Rich insights	The possibilities of obtaining a more diverse information and exposure to the physical components of the space (factory, office, and etc)

4.3.2.1 Effectiveness

A significant number of respondents appreciate the effectiveness of face-to-face communication:

> *"...whereas face-to-face, you can see the level of focus. And I think it's really important when we did have very important topics, like a dangerous building or something, you know, that needed everyone's full focus because you've got a legal strategy that's going to affect, possibly, the lives of the people in the building. We need everyone on board. We need to have that face-to-face..."*
>
> *(Participant 6, Government, Executive)*

and specifically, its rigor during collaborative effort and creative process. The researcher named this code

4.3.2.2 Synergy of Collaboration

> *"...it can also mean that your need to wait to have somebody to say, whereas a lot of meetings are freer in their flow and better collaboration or sharing of ideas face to face..."*
>
> *"...but I'm a fan more of personal meetings because the flow of the meeting works better when people know when people are sitting there..."*
>
> *(Participant 5, SME, Executive).*

During the interviews a lot of interviewees acknowledged a critical role of face-to-face interaction in problem solving where a close interpersonal engagement is necessary (Miranda & Saunders, 2003). This communication format with the highest level of social presence is very effective in problematic situations.

4.3.2.3 Problem Solving

Interviewee

"…We had meeting online, you know, and sometimes, clients or consultants, they find any remark related to their work offensive, you know. For example, if you're saying: "Hey, this doesn't work, because if you do this it triggers high humidity and consequently a high condensation of the building." - Okay. And we've done that online. But after the last lockdown, we booked a meeting and go physically on site to meet them and explain once again, including the psychometric chart. He said: "I can't disagree with you guys." You have to explain him where you are coming from, educate him in a way: to come to that site physically and present a full picture.

Interviewer

Yeah. But when you were talking online was his reaction negative?

Interviewee

Yes." (Participant 1, SME, Executive)

4.3.2.4 High Social Presence

Subtheme "High Social Presence" under "Perceived Advantages of Face-to-Face Communication" theme describes the importance of physical presence in the operational management of construction industry stakeholders. This aspect of face-to-face interaction was prevalent and was referred to seven times:

"…if you go down to just doing presentations online versus the people, you know, you can, you can look around the room - the interactions far better in a room full of people…" (Participant 5, SME, Executive)

and

> *"...and I think people, they interact with people better than people will interact over a video. And I personally, maybe I'm a bit old school, but I, you know, like I say, there's nothing like, sort of talking to summarize. I was shaking a hand and having that interaction..."*
>
> *"...when you attend the meeting physically in a company you are dealing with you feel the company's soul and learn about their team with whom you are intended to collaborate and with whom you will be also facing problems and solving them...". (Participant 5, SME, Executive)*

Face-to-face interaction consists of verbal aspect of communication- words and non-verbal aspect. A success of effective and meaningful communication is majorly dependent on a non-verbal signal of stakeholders' interaction (Argyle, Alkema & Gilmour, 1971; Vergis & Pell, 2019).

4.3.2.5 Non-verbal cues

This element of face-to-face interaction format is dominant in the majority of respondents who endorse the importance of non-verbal signals while evaluating the benefits of face-to-face social exchange:

> *"...I think I find face*-to-*face when you're, you know, when you sat down with somebody, I think, it's easier to read, easier to read when you're in the room, the atmosphere, the reactions to things, you know, sometimes you can get a bit of latency online as we've just experienced, you know. I think things can sometimes get a bit more lost in translation online. And I think, you know, being able to sit down with someone, shake them by the hand, if we're allowed to ever do that again, you know, and just being able to feel, get a sense of feeling of the atmosphere in the room you don't get on, on online medium. And I think for me, reading people is probably my*

sort of… I don't mean this to sound arrogant, but I pride myself on how I read my audience to see how I go forward in the meeting. And I, I miss that opportunity a bit on-line…" (Participant 13, SME, Business Development Manager)

One of the interviewees emphasised the role of non-verbal communication for him while assessing the extent of his colleagues' risk aversion:

"…They don't like risk, which I didn't know about some of them. And there are people I've only met online... So, those are the nuances of non-verbal communication elements that you miss when you're online versus face-to-face, we've talked about this, you know. So the question is "Can we run a whole business visually and not spend anything on travel?" And the answer is "No"...

(Participant 10, Corporate, Executive)

4.3.2.6 Social Bonding

Relationship development on a more personal level majorly dependent on the process of social bonding (Marshall, 2008) which was conveyed by sixteen comments in the qualitative dataset:

"It's not just about the business, it's about the discussions outside of the business as well. The shooting of the breeze, you know, going for a coffee or a beer or a wine, and getting to know them on a different level" (Participant 5, SME, Executive)

4.3.2.7 Social Construction of Meaning

The setting of social bonding often contributes to the meaning of the information exchange adding a new sense to previously known facts (Garfinkel, 1967; Ricoeur, 1981). Moreover, the concept of social construction Schutz (1967) rejects the notion of information "objectivity", saying that any element of the social setting contributes to the meaning of the shared knowledge. It normally reasoned by the social setting, by the level of social presence, by the richness of given information and finally be the character and experience of involved individuals (Garfinkel, 1967; Ricoeur, 1981). Here are several comments made by the research participants with the reference to "Social Construction of Meaning" which is present "Rich insights "code:

> *"…one of the key things you go to customers' premises and it is you get chance to understand what their business model is and their capability across some parts of the business. Um, and you can't do that on a zoom call. You know, like some of the greatest insights to the customer comes from the free walk on the floor, uh, talking to different people in an organization and, uh, seeing, smelling how the operation works. So, a zoom call is usually got really limited audience, and you're not walking around the business to understand what their true capabilities are. So, you can't gauge their culture and their business so much. You can't gauge their actual physical capabilities. And you can't see the mode of operation. So, if you've got good people on the ground, they can help to do that. But you never have the same level of insight as to walk in your business and seeing and smelling what it's like, you can't, you can't smell a business like I was doing…" (Participant 3, Corporate, Executive).*

The interviewees referred seven times to the rich insights which are gained thanks to physical presence and linked to the notion of social construction by the researcher.

4.4 Conferences as a Format of Face-to-Face Interaction

The opportunity to meet face-to-face with likeminded professionals is one of the main reasons people choose to attend big scale industry events These events create a social setting with a high level of social presence, and they are filled with abundance of quality communication opportunities (Urry, 2003)

Table 7: Conferences and Tradeshows as a Format of Face-to-Face Interaction.

Subtheme	Code	Description
Conferences as a Format Face-to-Face Communication	Social bonding at the conference format	The development of the relationship and trust-building relate to the verbal component as much as to non-verbal component of the communication which consciously or subconsciously transmits participants' emotional state and personal attitude of the stakeholders and that is what makes it an essential element of social bonding (Marshall, 2008) . Social bonding is one of the conferences benefits
	Information exchange	While on a business trip many decision-makers have opportunities to learn new ways to approach business. They learn from their foreign peers directly which enriches an experiential aspect of business travelling
	Meetingness	The need for "meetingness" describes corporate travel as a new way a social life is networked and as a need to be physically co-present fulfilling social obligation (Urry, 2003).

There are a few codes under this subtheme of "Face-to-Face Interactions" theme which the interviews data particularly emphasized.

4.4.1 Social bonding at the conference format

Social bonding within the environment of conferences and tradeshows or the recreational part of the evenings quite often creates amazing business and professional opportunities for relationship building and a start for trust initiation:

> *"I've discovered that the conferences to me less about the technical presentations and more about bonding with people in-person. I've got great memories of going to piano bar in Chicago with the people who I'm now working for XXXXX who had taken us to dinner first. And then we went to this bar afterwards, and we were having a good time. And it was packed there. It was like 350 people in these club. And there was a band in the middle of the stage and I said, the guys: "You know, I play drums a bit. I wouldn't mind having a go with those drums and they said: "Oh really?". So, they*

paid the band some money or something. And before I know it, I'm playing drums on the stage… Suddenly, because of that bonding they felt and I felt, we're part of a team. Yeah. Because there's a guy from our group who's up. Yeah. And there's some sort of bonding or ownership over that. And, you know, I'm sure that with XXXXX it is one of the reasons why, when they thought about having someone in this region, they went: "Oh, we wouldn't mind having XXXXX on board."

(Participant 8, Non-for-Profit Corporate Organisation, Executive).

4.4.2 Information Exchange

The conferences and tradeshows encourage an intensive information exchange:

"…So, a little bit of comradery, and bonding talks about work, you know, particularly if traveling internationally, obviously there are cultural differences. And a lot of it is in Europe, you know, not only as a bit of a business trip that you were experiencing or not a sort of a, well there, a different way of doing things. So, this is something I miss personally not having that opportunity to travel…"(Participant 2, SME, Executive).

4.4.3 "Meetingness"

The scale of corporate travelling as a form of face-to-face interaction was immense pre-Covid and was constantly increasing prior the end of 2019. The travelling for the purpose of attending a conference or just for a face-to-face meeting with a business colleagues based in another country is an essential aspect of "a new way a social life is networked"; and described as "a need to be physically co-present fulfilling social obligation" (Urry, 2003 p. 155). So, the researcher identified a response within the data provided by a corporate executive which conforms to the statement:

"We've got new clients, but, um, but we've got people in region. So, they've got people in region means that business keeps growing, but if you shouldn't have people in region, obviously then you can become handicapped. But we've got mature people in market that have been with us 3, 5, 7 years, and they've got relationships with people out there. So, I've got new people coming on board. Yeah. For example, U S market, uh, the people in USA can still travel. And, and so the effects COVID between and bill control between New Zealand, USA, uh, hasn't inhibited our business because got people, people based in USA who can travel locally into the business."

(Participant 3, Corporate, Executive).

4.5 On-Line Communication Format

While examining on-line communication and specifically videoconferencing as a preferred form of business interaction post-pandemic (Marhefka, 2020) the researcher defined two subthemes for analysis within "On-Line Communication" theme which are:

Table 8: Perceived Advantages and Perceived Disadvantages of on-line Communication

Subtheme	Code	Description
Perceived Advantages of On-line Communication	Cost efficiency	With pandemic restrictions on international business trips executives were forced to cut the expenses on travelling.
	Effectiveness	Many business processes have been successfully optimised reducing the time and increasing the efficiency.
	Increased Connectivity	On-line communication, and videoconferencing in particular, makes the access to the people and projects possible even with the predicament of pandemic restrictions. People are able to develop and maintain the relationship staying connected even if they've never met previously.

Perceived Disadvantages of on-line communication	Being more words cautious	During on-line information exchange people are more cautious about what they say.
	Emotional scarcity	The emotional environment of on-line interactions is insufficient for creating the vibe of cordiality and heartfulness.
	Distractions	Online interaction is energy-consuming and it take an effort to stay focus while meeting on-line.
	Tiredness	The lack of emotional context in on-line interaction provokes the feeling of being worn out.
	Limitations	Lack of visual insights, limitations to information flow, age implications
	Lower social presence	Creates a hurdle on the way to open and honest information exchange. It may also provoke a misleading perception especially in the conversation with non-native speaker
	Questionable expediency	With the active implementation of on-line communication format, the number of meetings in the format of videoconferencing has increased dramatically forcing people to question their expediency
	Absence of social bonding	People perceive on-line communication as the way to exchange information rather than creating a trusting bond between each other. They are normally quite formal and stick to the agenda of the meeting.

4.5.1 Perceived Advantages of Videoconferencing Subtheme

On-line format of business interaction is often perceived as the most effective, efficient, and secure way to maintain business continuity and relationships (Weldin, 2020; Palmatier et al., 2018). Pandemic restrictions enforced a wider acceptance of videoconferencing nurturing new communicational patterns together with increased cost savings. A dramatic reduction of business trips pampered the bottom line of corporate market players who are now connected by the means of Zoom, Skype for Business, and Microsoft Teams (Barabasi, 2002; Urry, 2003).

4.5.1.1 Cost Efficiency

> *"The converse on that is it means that travel costs down dramatically because you're zooming - you're not traveling. So, you have a lot of companies probably saved…" (Participant 3, Corporate, Executive)*

The Executives with a developed network of branches all over the world were especially welcoming to this on-line shift, which often means they can postpone their flying regime internationally at least till the moment the borders are open.

> *"Sure. So, I work in a business that covers across different countries. So today, for instance, I'm talking to Australia, I'm talking to West Coast of America and I'm talking to Germany and it was yesterday as well. Uh, and Thailand actually. So for us as a business, what it's allowed us to do is book communication. At times that worked for everyone. This is traveling to a place. So our travel behaviors have changed. And I don't think they'll ever go back because we're finding that to keep to the point with a published agenda, we can do it electronically. So we use the normal programs that you've heard of zoom, Microsoft teams. And, um, there's one other program we don't use very much, but the reality is it works for us. It's probably the time and a place, whereas five years ago IT wasn't very good and it didn't work so five years ago when I worked for the business, I'd have to fly to all of those places and be there in person. And I would every month and now I don't at all at COVID stop travel, but now, I'm not going to fly to Australia every two weeks but every two months and that's the difference…. It gives us time back because I'm not going through airports. It also gives us a lot of cost reduction…"(Participant 10, Corporate, Executive).*

4.5.1.2 Effectiveness

Considering that “videoconferencing replicates in-person interaction activating both auditory and visual senses and potentially resulting in more substantial engagement” (Marhefka et al (2020 p.1983) its effectiveness in replacing face-to-face communication has been acknowledged by many industry stakeholders and referenced to it by the interviewees twenty-four times:

> *“...Firstly, you can see a person. Before we would talk via phone, now you can see him. With videoconferencing you can see his reaction to your questions. I believe he also needs to see the person as he needs to understand his partner’s state. A lot of information is comprehended through the visual cues. Visual information is about 60% of what we perceive where the hearing aspect is only 20-25%; the rest happens automatically. I think that the visual aspect in communication is very critical and the technology which was actively and widely integrated helps a lot...”*
>
> *(Participant 9, SME, Executive)*

The respondents confirmed that videoconferencing does not limit the cohesiveness of the collaboration because it has the element of synchronicity intact (Steinhoff et al, 2019; van Doorn et al. 2017); and it mimics meetings with physical attendance.

> *“... We conducted our test with XXXXXX over zoom, and I don't feel that also disadvantaged in any way. I was talking to XXXXX while we were doing it. He was showing me the ratings and we were discussing things as if I might as well have been in the room. So, to me, once you become used to it and you don't forget to unmute yourself and other things like that, there's a fluid conversation just like you had, if you were in the same room, but there's no sense that we're kind of two and a half thousand km apart. We are having a discussion about something we can still see each other as*

we normally would if we were having a conversation. But it's just a different reality, I guess...” (Participant 15, SME, Executive)

4.5.1.3 Increased Connectivity

Consequently, videoconferencing solved the problem of quick access to business partners or clients abroad whom business needs to stay in touch in the circumstance of border restrictions or just because it is more efficient and currently quite acceptable by the stakeholders to arrange a meeting on-line. This advantage of on-line format of communication was mentioned eight times:

> *“...I think Zoom gives you a quicker access to people. Um, they, they look at their diary and they know they don't have to leave the office and a travel time doesn't become an issue even for us. And, um, so yeah, you go, I can talk to you this afternoon. I can talk to you tomorrow at 10. Uh, so you just instantly send them a zoom link...” (Participant 16, SME, Executive)*

Talking about construction projects specifically where for each project there is a vast range of expertise expected to be on board, sometimes from different corners of the country or even located abroad, on-line get together allows relevant professionals to attend the meeting regardless the location:

> *“...You can get everybody who's involved so you can actually get a wider, broader range of people which is a team thing. And of course, that means that from a project standpoint, you know, it's not like a client is trying to get consultants that are purely basic. And if he's got an open project, he wants to have meetings with just open people so you can spread your work out. And so that accessibility is available from around the country. That's probably the only thing that I would say is positive...”*
>
> *(Participant 18, SME, Executive).*

4.5.2 Perceived Disadvantages of Videoconferencing Subtheme

Concurrently, with all benefits videoconferencing provides to the businesses in Australia and New Zealand there are shortcomings which may impact the effectiveness of the communication and limit the extent people are open to each other on-line (Thomas et al., 2019) The openness of the communication predicates on the quality and quantity of the shared information and is substantially defined by a social setting and by the level of social presence which is diminished in the on-line environment(Schutz, 1967; Garfinkel, 1967; Ricoeur, 1981)

4.5.2.1 Words Cautiousness

There are people who feel uncomfortable looking at themselves on the computer screen which often tampers their ability to communicate openly and making them more words cautious (Andrews & Delahay, 2000). Most importantly it reduces their comfort level making the goal of establishing a trust-based relationship significantly more difficult (Marhefka et al, 2013).

> *"And I was one of them and which also means, you know, slightly different style of engagement when you're dealing with online meetings. You've got to be a little bit more aware of what you're saying, how you're saying it and of your sense of humor sometimes." (Participant 13, SME, Business Development Manager).*

4.5.2.2 Emotional Scarcity

Emotional scarcity of on-line communication format often creates the effect of delayed or fragile trust. The empirical work supports the hypothesis that video and audio conferencing is not as effective as face-to-face communication for relationship development, showing some evidence for delayed and fragile trust (Bos et al., 2002):

“So, the personal bond, which you create in face-to-face mode and something for information exchange it's online, which is convenient, right... I emotionally it's not impossible to grow enough trust and enough confidence digitally, but certainly a lot easier in person…” (Participant 12, SME, Executive).

The lack of trust means that all transactions are to be thoroughly monitored. It often incurs time-consuming procedures into the operational workflow, which may often imply a lost momentum or a missed opportunity (Rocco, 1998).

“Just the other day we met on-line with the partner in our common project, but it feels like there is a strange feeling as if there were topics left unpacked. You didn’t really feel him through. I literally have the feeling as if I was talking to him through the screen, such communication is missing the emotional aspect.”

(Participant 9, SME, Executive).

4.5.2.3 Distractions

The efficiency of the on-line meetings may often be compromised by the distractions beyond the meeting proceedings. Among such distractions can be children, pets, interruptions in video streaming and parallel meetings, other tasks, or entertainment. Such distractions may impede the flow, cohesion, and efficiency of the collaboration and that is what the interviewees of this research work are talking about:

“… So, my former manager or boss in Australia is a great guy. He was doing the meeting and his wife would pass behind and in a towel. And we were like - "you might need to turn the camera off". We all laughed, and I know his wife. So, I said: "Hi Renee". It happens. And the other is Pete or children, get walking across keyboards, you get dogs backing, you get children asking: “Dad can you look at this?” and go, or “When’s mommy home?”;” Can I play a video game?” It's all normal. You know,

most of us have the same sort of lives. What I have noticed though that, it's so easy to be distracted in those meetings. Or most of us have got meeting screens and we're looking at another screen cause it was sort of not that interested in the meeting anyway." (Participant 10, Corporate, Executive).

or

"...I've attended numerous Zoom meetings. And you just kind of drift away because there is a video screen and there is no person. I wouldn't dare to do that in front of someone if I was talking to them, you know, because you want to be engaged. And that sometimes it can be, there are 20 people on the call. And I think the more people on a video conference, the harder it is to engage,

Yeah. And I'm sure, you know, and again, I've done it myself, you know, I sat there and if I can have the camera on, so it doesn't look rude, but I've turned the mic off and I'll be writing emails and totally not engaged. You know, yeah, I'm doing it something…" (Participant 7, Corporate, Director of Projects).

4.5.2.4 Tiredness

One of the most important aspect of the social interaction – non-verbal communication, is omitted from the on-line communication equation during the information exchange. For instance, body posture and gestures may communicate about people's intent or state as much as the words which is missing in videoconferencing.

The research contends that people move their bodies to ease mental strain when the communication is difficult (Chue et al., 2005). The way we move our arms and hands is a way to add to the expression and engage on a higher social level. Without those essential non-verbal signals, the participants of on-line interaction get tired much quicker if compared to in-person mode of interaction:

"You know, I think also you have to be mindful of the fact that if you're talking to someone on- line, chances are that they've just got off another bunch of meetings online are very high. And depending on what time of the day it is, he might be really tired from sitting online the whole day."

(Participant 8, Non-for-Profit Corporate, Executive)

An average on-line meeting takes maximum one hour whereas face-to-face may take up to twelve hours and here is a comment of one of the respondents on this phenomenon explaining why:

"I think usually online call is shorter than if you fly in to see someone as a key account manager, you're probably going to be with them; they do a tour; you have look around; go to lunch; go around again; and talk more than go to dinner. So, you know, your total engagement could be 12 hours a day, 14 hours a day. No one's going to sit down for 12-14 hours zoom call. Torture by zoom type of things. And that's also a concern that I just had another five zoom calls that day and they've zoomed out as well. So, yeah. And the hints. The next thing game engagement is going to be short, probably more focused, but you won't get the same insight at one hour on zoom versus 12 hours walking through the premises…" (Participant 3, Corporate, Executive).

4.5.2.5 Limitations

There are various limitations to the videoconferencing which inhibit the smoothness of the information exchange. Sharma et al. (2020) present the evidence that 20% of B2B sales teams have not adjusted to the digital shift, neglecting videoconferencing or phone selling post-Covid-19, even though buyers mostly prefer digitally enabled interaction in the context of the pandemic. According to Sengpiel and Sönksen (2012) older generations are resistant to the change and hardly adapt to the technological advances: the willingness to adapt diminishes with the age which was referred to four times:

> *"I always try, but unfortunately, there's an age barrier, you know? I don't say that's an old-fashioned way, but those guys they've been growing up with that kind of mentality, so they prefer that way. For the new generation, they prefer more online because that's saving their time. And I'm same, but some clients prefer face-to-face. Even you sent full report and explained everything on-line - like Fisher and Paykel designer's way: I present evth, send everything, but he still tells me - "I'd like you to come to my office". (Participant 1, SME, Executive).*

or for example

> *"Younger generations are more adaptable with technology. Yeah. It's not limited to that. Obviously, you know, everybody can be adaptable to technology, but I find that, you know, a lot of the younger generations will prefer to utilize that technology. Whereas some of the older generations prefer methods that they're more accustomed to." (Participant 2, SME, Executive).*

There are also limitations to the information flow:

> *"...whereas I've found presentations over zoom can sometimes become a bit more robotic. You just go through the presentation because it's sort of stock standard. And it just doesn't flow as much. And again, the more and the bigger the audience online, the more difficult it becomes, of course, because everybody wants to ask a question, the screens flick off, people interrupt, speak over, it can become a bit broken if you like." (Participant 6, Government, Executive).*

Another interviewee specifically stresses the individuality of meeting participants and their approach to the on-line interaction; the fact that people interact differently on-line. Digital mode is not adjustable enough to it:

> *"... I think there's more negatives in terms of that you can't easily see people, conversations get crossed over from one another. You can't tell what other people are, you know, and how many people, people interact differently when they're separated than within the space." (Participant 18, SME, Executive).*

4.5.2.6 Lower Social Presence

Social presence theory posits that when the median ability to convey social presence is matched to the social task the overall communication performance improves (Christie, 1985). Though pandemic restrictions quite often do not allow to choose whether the encounter will be face-to-face or in on-line mode. The mode or setting where the communication takes place is essential to evaluate the extent to which such setting or so-called "social setting" impacts the perceived meaning of the information exchange. Lower social presence was a referenced eight times while talking about certain negotiation obstacles or project advancement hurdles:

> *"...Initially we started with face-to-face to gain the relationships, to build the relationships, but we didn't have the ability to do that because of COVID and the lockdown. So, we were sort of forced online without having that established relationship. And like whilst I think have become more accepting of this method of communication. I still think it's not the same and nowhere near as what's the word I'm looking for now. It's nowhere near as effective of creating and establishing relationships as face-to-faces." (Participant 5, SME, Executive)*

Consequently, computer screen, while lowering the level of social presence, shields participants' vibes and emotions hindering the bonding process:

"...in terms of like open sharing, probably the same in both, but there's just things that just the physical distance of a screen can make a pretty big difference on relationship building..." (Participant 12, SME, Executive).

"...I think a new communication, you think you're closer to someone because you see them, but you're not. So, people hold back."

(Participant 17, SME, Marketing Manager)

4.5.2.7 Questioning Expediency

There were eight interviewees who questioned the expediency of on-line meetings saying that the simplicity of arranging on-line sessions made it easy to build up into meetings overload:

"...We were actually having a lot more meetings than we normally would online. And, um, I had to question the value. We were getting out of a lot of those meetings and cut a lot of them down..." (Participant 6, Government, Executive).

"...the only thing I would say is there's a tendency to over-communicate because it's so simple, you know..." (Participant 7, Corporate, Director of Projects).

If pre-Covid the meeting had not have been considered at first place, in new normal Covid adapted reality many just send the link for the meeting because it is that simple. Subsequently lots of experts started to question the efficiency of such meetings:

"...even now we end up going to a whole lot of online planning and meetings when we're not needed to be there, you sit there for an hour and it's a waste of time. So, you know, I don't know whether the clients feel better about that or not, but I certainly find that you end up, you know, with too many meeting... so, we don't put in part of our fees and meetings are normally excluded because I know people are just start having meetings, you know, every two weeks..." (Participant 18, SME, Executive).

4.5.2.8 The Absence of Social Bonding

The notion of trust expressed through partners' interactions are not "all-or-nothing" phenomenon, but rather a continuum where relational dynamic may move the bar along this continuum - whether up or down (Price & Smith, 2011; Thon & Jucks, 2016). Face-to-face format of interaction is viewed as the most effective way to move the continuum bar up and create that social bonding, whereas on-line format does not possess emotional feel and cannot be as effective for trust building (Rapaccini *et al.*, 2020).

The researcher identified four references which conform to the above statement. Here is one of them:

> *"I don't think you can build the full strength of a relationship or trust purely online. Often traditionally business and probably even still now, you can have a great, great depth of discussion relationship if you've broken bread with them - if you had a meal with them. You know, you go out for dinner and relax, let situation be informal, and that is when you can delve deeper into what their business about what their aspirations are taken. So yeah, you're not going to be having a, breaking bread by zoom." (Participant 1, SME, Executive).*

4.6 Information Openness

Prevailing research demonstrates that openly shared information or openness in communication gives an opportunity for buyer and sellers to develop trust and optimize the effectiveness of communication by the means of knowledge transfer (Andrews & Delahay, 2000; Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). The research also reveals that the openness between the partners is predicated on the quality and quantity of shared information dependent on the level of social presence which refers to the format of communication.

The researcher has tried to evaluate the openness of the communication between the parties while interacting face-to-face or via videoconferencing.

Table 9: Information Openness On-line and Face-to-Face

Subtheme	Code	Description
Information Openness face-to-face/on-line	Quality of the information	accuracy, usefulness, and timeliness of the information (Thomas et al, 2009)
	Quantity of the information	an information property which reflects whether buyers and sellers feel adequately informed (Beccera & Gupta, 2003; O'Reilly, 1977; Muchinsky, 1977)

4.6.1 Information Openness during Face-to-Face Communication Subtheme

Table 9 lists the codes which define the openness of the information exchange. There is a diversity of views on the openness of the parties during the interaction including the role of physical environment the buyer and the seller have this meeting and quantity and quality of the information which may be acquired during such face-to-face get together:

> *"…the length and breadth of the organization and the premises that are in, and how well organized it is: whether it is a well-oiled machine or is it someone's pretty sloppy and messy? You won't get all these insights over zoom call. I know you'll get some signals to it, but not the same as you've walked around your eyes wide open…" (Participant 3, Corporate, Executive).*

There are four comments which acknowledge the quality and quantity of the information exchange during face-to-face and on-line encounter are qual:

> *"…Personally, I think, it is the same, but from the client point of view, I see they are more comfortable with the face-to-face format, their response is better than on-line,*

because I don't know whether it is their perception of online communication, or, they just prefer the other way, because we will do same presentation regardless. You know, on-line, you would present the same design, the same drawings, everything as you're doing when you are physically with them, but what we learnt from the clients feedback they prefer face-to-face rather than go on-line…"

(Participant 1, SME, Executive).

4.6.2 Information Openness during Videoconferencing Subtheme

Sometimes the confidentiality element does not allow to the participants of the collaboration to be maximum open with each other and share that quantity of information which may be shared face-to-face. Consequently, confidentiality aspect often hinders the quality and quantity of the information the parties are willing to reveal on-line:

Interviewer

Comparing the extent of your openness – the amount of the information and its quality, with partners and clients while talking on-line or face-to-face – if it is the same or different?

Interviewee

No, it is not the same.

We all understand that there is information which is to be kept in confidence. And I hope you understand that you telephone is not really your phone. If you are happy with such answer?

Interviewer

So basically, it is a question of confidentiality.

Interviewee

Yes

(Participant 9, SME, Executive).

One of the interviewees though acknowledge that the screen sharing option provided by videoconferencing in fact streamlines the data flow and improves the information exchange within the team referring to the quantity and quality of shared information:

> *"So, we do have the worst of it, time zones and languages, but it has allowed us to do one major thing, which is share your screen. And that's been really good. We weren't very good at it before. We're all pretty poor-quality IT people at a more senior level. And we've all learned to be able to present to our colleagues via sharing your screen, whatever format teams, or zoom or whatever you want. And that is very useful to share exactly what you want to talk about. And that's been a very simple improvement and communication that's really worked well for us…"*
>
> *(Participant 10, Corporate, Executive).*

One of the interviewees mentions that the extent of his openness on-line dependent on how well he knows the person he talks to:

> *"I mean, the openness really depends on how well, you know, person you're talking to and online can be totally open." (Participant 4, Corporate, Technical Director).*

A more tech-savvy industry participant has a certain perception in terms of how the information is shared on-line in terms of accuracy, usefulness and timeliness and how differently now perceived face-to-face meeting in "a new normal environment":

> *"I tend to think of in-person thing as a chit chat, as a coffee, as a chance to grow a relationship to, you know, swap back and forth, literally learn the other person.*

Whereas online video conferencing has become an information sharing medium. You're not gonna, you know, become best friends online necessarily, but it's a way to keep in touch as we exchange information quickly. So, they're, they're very different for sure. Um, in terms of like open sharing, probably the same in both, but there's just things that just the physical distance of a screen can make a pretty big difference on, on that, um, relationship building…" (Participant 12, SME, Executive)

One of the Executives complains about the information uptake during the on-line session where the cameras of the participants are switched off:

"Some people don't use a video; they just use voice. So, in a mixed group situation, we found interpretation was slower, definitely much slower and the uptake, not always 100%." (Participant 16, SME, Executive)

Finally, the creative process which inspires ideas and engenders breakthroughs during the brainstorming is impossible on-line which limits the creative quality of the information exchange:

"…I've been dealing with MBIE and BRANZ and they're doing some research, which is heading towards regulation. And there is a limit to what you can do online. If you get to that sort of breaking point, that decisions need to be made, then yes, it might be better to actually sit in the room because there's no fixed agenda. You're actually trying to mend out an issue and you don't know where it's going to go into, might take a bit longer to talk through and I've found even emails and online meetings quite limited in that respect." (Participant 4, Corporate, Technical Director).

4.7 The Moderating Effect of the Relationship Time Span

Narayandas and Rangan (2004) put the effort to examine the strength of the relationship between buyer and seller emphasizing the importance of its background: how it started and how it was nurtured. Based on the length of the relationship they distinguish new relationship and mature relationship.

The researcher of this study assumed that the time span of the relationship as well as previously acquired experience of working together may moderate the effectiveness of relationship building and maintaining on-line. Here are interviewees' answers related to the time span and the elaboration on its moderating effect which are reflective of the participants majority.

4.7.1 New Relationship

> *"So, the interpersonal contact, even if it's infrequent is useful, introducing new people, but as it becomes more frequent, as you get to know the people that it's not so necessary…" (Participant 4, Corporate, Technical Director).*

or

> *"…We are still meeting our new clients face-to-face we would hardly do anything on-line to build a relationship. We'd still do it face-to-face I wouldn't be doing anything online necessarily. It'd be always meeting with somebody and discuss and stuff. So, they'd always be their personal thing up front." (Participant 18, SME, Executive).*

and

> *"…. the business I work for has recently "changed hands". It's now in hands of Germans instead of some Australians and Americans. And so, we actually need to sit down face to face to do some things. So, we're in April now, in July I'm booked to go*

to Sydney and then meant to be going to Singapore and then meant to be going on to Germany. So unclear whether that'll happen. But one thing we've noticed is if you've got a relationship with someone, you can carry it on via electronic media communication protocol. But if you don't know them, it's much harder when you've got a change of ownership. They don't know you have, some of them don't know you as a bit of were saying it. We do need to sit down and go through all the differences in each country and work through that…" (Participant 10, Corporate, Executive)

4.7.2 Mature Relationship

All research participants have expressed their attitude to the on-line interactions for nurturing a mature relationship conveying the following:

> *"I think when you've got an established relationship, you know, that you've established it through personal relationship before moving online, you trust them, people have already acknowledged each other's mannerisms to a certain extent and the way that you engage in things." (Participant 5, SME, Executive).*

or

> *"So, you are to interact with them, learn what they're about learn the mannerisms, build enough of relationship that when you go online and you're not complete stranger, that's been a real key. Really something that we've really found is that projects we're able to go and actually meet the client, talk to the architect, at least initially, and then once you have a better rapport started, then you can take it online. But when we get a project, and we go straight online - it's a bit more awkward..." (Participant 12, SME, Executive).*

and

"...I guess if you had a good relationship with clients and suppliers, and you've known them for a very long time, face-to-face meetings are probably not so important, because you understand one another and, you know, generally video conferencing or emails are usually fine. Face-to-face catch up would be something that you would do more so to get together as a friendship bond I'd say..."

(Participant 2, SME, Executive).

4.8 Findings Conclusion

Having analysed the qualitative dataset the researcher has ranged the quotes which demonstrate the influence of the communication mode on the relationship building and trust. The quotes and comments were handpicked to support previously established themes relevant to the research objectives. A robust work was executed to list advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face and virtual mode of communication to define potential pitfalls for the communicational and operational effectiveness. Besides the scholar examined and extracted experiential feedbacks on how the mode of communication impacts information openness and whether the time span of decision-makers relationship moderates its extent. In the next chapter of the study the researcher will interpret the connections and interdependencies of the data formulating them in the most thorough way while addressing the objective of the study.

5 Discussion

5.1 Immediate Impact of Covid-19 Restrictions and its Consequences

2020 became a year of severe disruption triggered by highly contagious virus which impacted people and businesses all over the world (Obal & Gao, 2020; Zafari et al., 2020). Unprecedented pandemic turbulence incited high level of uncertainty taking its toll on the Australia and New Zealand business environment. The pandemic hit the construction industry ramping through the traditional operations and communication patterns; imposing the restrictions on-the physical attendance of the meetings and projects; and triggering serious financial losses for many.

The ramifications of restrictions implemented by the New Zealand Governmental as a part of "elimination strategy" in the attempt to stamp out Covid-19, impacted the profile of on-going construction projects leaving frustrated those industry participants who used to supply for students' accommodations and hospitality on-site works. In the construction industry, especially, those stakeholders who are actively involved into on-site operations, are quite technologically-conservative based on interviewees' quotes, and pre-Covid videoconferencing was never considered as an alternative to in-person communication. The communication shift into the on-line space became an unwelcome necessity for main contracting companies and suppliers of construction materials, who were quite resistant to the process and quickly returned to pre-pandemic practices once the restrictions ceased to be mandated by the government.

However, there are other examples conveyed during the interviewing process where the pandemic-driven communication changes have been accepted and adjusted toward accelerating an on-line shift further into the business processes of the governmental establishments, such as on-line inspections.

Unfortunately, an active integration of videoconferencing into business communication practices had its hurdles and among them the age of the highly engaged and reputed experts who run engineering consultancy practices. Possessing years of experience in the industry these professionals are mostly within the age group of 45-65 years old – the age which has its limitations on how prepared they are to face the technology shift. Subsequently, the feelings of insecurity were quite prevalent as they initiated the adaptation to a new virtual format of communication – videoconferencing, but eventually **on-line communication acceptance has been achieved**.

One of the biggest changes to face-to-face interaction was triggered by the border closures which has put on-hold or **dramatically reduced otherwise prolific business travel practices**. This measure has dramatically reduced business travel, even once the restrictions have been lifted. It makes the return to the previous travel frequency in "a new normal" post-Covid world order unlikely.

Face-to-face communications (or interactions) were hit hard by the ramifications of Covid-19 restrictions. The format with high social presence and myriads of opportunities for social bonding, was replaced by videoconferencing: the communication mode used primarily for information exchange and with very few or no opportunities to form an emotional connection (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1997; Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2016). It appears to be a growing area of concern for relationship building, and according to this research, videoconferencing is perceived as a big risk factor by many decision-makers specifically for a newly forming relationship.

An unanticipated change of the communication landscape with its major shift into on-line platform has inhibited an informal aspect of interaction regarded as the time when business partners/buyers and sellers learn about each other's operational capacities, backgrounds, experiences, and the way they handle risk in an informal atmosphere of a restaurant. All representatives of the corporate construction industry have conveyed those fears to the researcher during interviewing process. In spite of the historical significance of face-to-face contact, the pandemic reality established videoconferencing as a preferred, or sometimes the only possible, medium of communication as the industry transitions into "a new normal order".

The hurdle of limited social bonding and opportunity to gain more nuanced customer or client insights has slowed the adjustment and cooperation progress within corporate structures of construction industry organisations represented in this work, resulting in challenges in adapting to each other's management styles and building trust-based relationships rather than transaction-based relationships (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Narayandas & Rangan, 2004).

5.2 Trust and How it is Understood in the Construction Industry

Considering the financial risks accumulated around construction projects and interdependency of the involved stakeholders (Kimiagari & Keivanpour, 2017), relationship building centered around trust is one of the main objectives along the way to speed up the building progress and improve the bottom line.

Once questioned about trust and relationship building the interviewees of this research shared their understanding of what it means for them to be a successful market participant; build trust-based relationship and to be trustworthy. Many interviewees' quotes have referred to knowledge; good quality of product/service; product reliability; on-time delivery; being able to assist the Client in dealing with the problems; communicate effectively; and being predictable. The components of a delivered product/service/work listed above are mostly cognitive dominant referring to such calculative precursors of trust as competence, integrity, communication, and satisfaction.

When asked about maintaining long lasting relationship every respondent emphasised the importance of in-person communication for creating the connection on a personal level; for acquiring rich insights into the business and team work; and for understanding what values guide the work of this particular team.

According to one of the respondents his company values quote

> *"…attract a lot of people that think the same way: the way we are building in New Zealand is not the right way to build things and there's better ways to do it…"*
>
> *(Participant 12, SME, Executive).*

Besides financial benefits, shared values cultivate long-term collaborations for developing the solutions so much needed to achieve healthy living standards in Australia and New Zealand.

Another affective-dominant precursor of trust – benevolence with its touch of heartfulness and kindness (Castaldo et al., 2007; Myer et al, 1995) emotionally supports an excellently completed project and help with building a deeper and more personal relationship. That is exactly what gave the leverage in the business relationship for another research participant. Being ready to help his business colleague in a heartbreaking moment strengthen the bond he built with one of the colleagues during the project they were working on.

Each professional collaboration in its core is a process of co-creation where parties actively participate and willingly contribute to the common work. The outcome of this collaboration is destined to provide a better solution or solve a problem (Franklin & Marshall, 2019; Ballantyne & Varey, 2008). According to one of the decision-makers the process of co-creation shaped a common feeling of trust among him and his partners during their project work. His team was able to achieve the results they had been working hard for several years at the end celebrating both – the piece of legislation for the industry they produced and quote

> *"the triumph of relationships and trust that we built more than the technical solution" (Participant 8, Not-for-Profit Organisation, Executive).*

It is notable, though, that this legislative collaboration was conducted pre-Covid and in a face-to-face format.

5.3 Face-to-Face Interaction: Advantages and Disadvantages

The accumulated insights acquired from participants defined "inefficiency" as a possible disadvantage of face-to-face interactions for some of the industry stakeholders. Several comments referred to the time people normally spend on driving to face-to-face meeting venues. One of the interviewees also mentioned that face-to-face format sometimes indulges the participants' propensity *"...to wander off from the meeting agenda whereas "Microsoft Teams meetings are more to the point and better chaired" (Participant 4, Corporate, Technical Director).*

In spite of a single disadvantage of face-to-face interactions being shared by participants, there were numerous advantages elicited for in-person encounters as detailed by participants. Identified codes are related to the effectiveness of face-to-face interaction, its higher social presence (Miranda & Saunders, 2003) and the richness of the physical environment where social construction of meaning transpire (Schutz, 1967).

This research data reflected findings from Lee et al. (2003), which details that adaptation activity demands the format of face-to face negotiations while refining the project variations (Lee et al, 2003; Urry, 2003). For instance, one of the interviewees confessed that only after her team had met the designer face-to-face on-site and explained to him what exactly was wrong with his team solution and why, preceded by a long informal social exchange on a variety of topics, the designer finally confessed the mistakes saying – "*I cannot disagree with you guys"*, even though all three previous attempts to explain that on-line had ended without any success but rather provoked a very negative outburst and problem avoidance.

High social presence of face-to-face interactions is a is a consistent advantage interviewees reference. Dennis and Kinney (1998) note that being able to understand the level of social presence required from the communication medium is critical to a successful completion of the task. The findings of this research echo these findings in certain decision-making scenarios and business interactions where the virtual format of videoconferencing does not suffice, as below:

- to establish a connection with the audience of listeners and feel the atmosphere;
- "to feel company's soul" and learn about the team you are going to collaborate with;
- does not provide any opportunity to assess the technical capabilities of the production facilities.

Such uncertainties substantially increase the perceived risk incurring a delayed trust effect which slows down the progress to a full cooperation (Bos et al., 2002).

The research findings also support prevailing work detailing that non-verbal signals of face-to-face interaction play a key role in achieving an effective and meaningful information exchange (Argyle, Alkema & Gilmour, 1971; Vergis & Pell, 2019) during business negotiations, as detailed by all interviewees of this study. One of the executives mentioned that he prides himself on how he reads his audience to see how to go forward in the meeting and that he is missing this opportunity on-line. Furthermore, the ability to see partners' body language, gestures, to gauge their reactions and hear the tone of the voices without the barriers of computer-mediated environment and occasional latency accelerates the trust building through social bonding process (Coleman, 1990).

In addition, social setting elements contribute to the meaning of the shared knowledge (Schutz, 1967) shaped by the level of social presence and by the character and experience of involved professionals. The physical environment of business partner's production facilities and office arrangements give away a lot of details quite critical for seller/buyer's evaluation process. Very often such visits shape further relational development and become the first grain in trust growing:

> "*…One of the key things when you go to customers' premises and it is you get chance to understand what their business model is and their capability across some parts of the business, and you can't do that on a zoom call. You know, like some of the greatest insights to the customer comes from the free walk on the floor, talking to different people in an organization and, seeing, smelling how the operations work. So, a zoom call is usually got really limited audience, and you are not walking around the business to understand what their true capabilities are. So, you cannot gauge their culture and their business so much. You cannot gauge their actual physical capabilities. And you cannot see the mode of operation. So, if you have got good people on the ground, they can help to do that. But you never have the same level of insight as to walk in your business and seeing and smelling what it is like, you cannot.*" *(Participant 3, Corporate, Executive)*

During conferences and industry tradeshows, manufacturers of construction materials and systems often practice the inclusion of the tour of grounds to their manufacturing facilities into the program of the event. A good example of such marketing stunt can be a Red Stag facility excursion in Rotorua as a part of Fire NZ 2021 Conference (Fire NZ 2021 conference announced, 2021).

Conferences and tradeshows are an amazing format of face-to-face interaction which was widespread in pre-Covid time. Industry conferences as a structural element of “meetingness” is viewed as a way of social connectivity, creating new social settings, linking people and expanding life and business opportunities (Urry et al., 2003) The intensity of expertise exchange and social bonding after official part of the program reaches its maximum concentration level on the floors of the conference venue and beyond (Duffy & McEuen, 2010). The conferences and tradeshows are an extremely nurturing environment for open communication where quality and quantity of the information is in abundance and where many long-lasting relationships have been initiated (Urry, 2003). Participants highlighted, and lamented, that pandemic restrictions substantially restricted the dominant role of this face-to-face interaction moving many industry events whether completely on-line or adopting a hybrid format (Jago & Deery, 2010).

5.4 On-Line Communication Format: Advantages and Disadvantages.

The ubiquitous presence of digital interfaces highlights the necessity for more insights to understand its influence on relationship building, detailed as follows.

5.4.1 Perceived Advantages of Videoconferencing

During the interviewing process, participants elaborated on the benefits of videoconferencing, as below:

- cost-efficiency which becomes possible with substantial trimming of the business travelling budgets;
- effectiveness which is shaped by the videoconferencing ability to replicate in-person interaction (Marhefka et al., 2020) which means that many meetings, previously conducted in face-to-face format, now can be arranged on-line saving time and simplifying the coordination process;
- Videoconferencing allows to increase the connectivity in a pandemic crippled world. Executives do not have to travel to meet business partners, and on-line negotiations are acceptable.

5.4.2 Perceived Disadvantages of Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing is one of the preferred digital formats of communication as detailed by participants. Videoconferencing enjoys ubiquitous acceptance by numerous construction industry stakeholders together, with a number of drawbacks considered by participatns which potentially may compromise dynamic relationship development and trust building:

- there are several decision-makers within the sample of this research who confess that they do not feel comfortable during communication via Zoom/Microsoft teams and have a different style of engagement while interacting on-line which influences the level of their openness - quality and quantity of information they share;
- the majority of decision-makers acknowledge emotional scarcity of videoconferencing which in some situations does not allow to solve the problem on-line or to convert the lead due to a delayed or fragile trust (Bos et al., 2002);

- on-line sessions may be intruded by pets, kids, and other family members distracting the participants from a core discussion;
- if on-line meeting is lengthy some participants may drift way, especially if there are many contributors to the process. As a result, people opt to start other tasks: typing e-mails or even engaging into a concurrent on-line meeting
- the absence of non-verbal cues accelerates the feeling of tiredness. Quite often decision-makers have several on-line meetings in a row and accumulated tiredness diminishes the chances of rigorous and open discussion. As mentioned by one of the participants

  "...a person might be really tied from sitting on-line the whole day…"
  (Participant, 8, Not-for-Profit Organisation, Executive);

- sometimes decision-makers' age may limit their willingness to embrace the technology advancement to its fullest potential. The older adults may feel insecure and exposed during videoconferencing session or may be suspicious about the confidentiality element of the discussion;
- finally, there is a dominance of interviewees' skepticism around on-line meetings expedience. This format of engagement is much easier to fit into the schedule if compared with in-person meeting, and consequently it has increased the number of irrelevant on-line meetings which often overwhelm the decision-makes provoking a high level of indignation.

5.5 Communication Openness

The research data demonstrates that openly shared information, or openness in communication, gives an opportunity for decision-makers to develop trust and optimise the effectiveness of communication by the means of the knowledge transfer (Andrews &

Delahay, 2000; Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). This communication parameter is predicted by quality and quantity of the shared information (Thomas et al., 2009; Beccera & Gupta, 2003)

Evaluating the communication openness during face-to-face and on-line encounters, the researcher extracted the following insights from the dataset:

- the length and breadth of information about certain organisation may be acquired exclusively through face-to-face communication while visiting the company office or at its production facilities. Being at the physical setting members of collaboration interact closely with the decision-makers of the business; feel through corporate culture; examine the level of team members' expertise; gauge the level of experts' risk aversion or in other words understand whether *"…it is a well-oiled machine, or it is something pretty sloppy and messy…" (Participant 3, Corporate, Executive).* These types of insights are impossible to obtain via Zoom call which makes it an inferior option to in-person format of a meeting and substantially worse option for relationship building;
- information openness, in this scenario the quality and quantity of the collaboratively generated plans, concepts, ideas and strategies, is often inspired by the creativity and synergy brought in by every participant which is possible only in a face-to-face communication format:

  "*…there is a limit to what you can do online. If you get to that sort of breaking point, that decisions need to be made, then yes, it might be better to actually sit in the room because there's no fixed agenda. You're actually trying to mend out an issue and you don't know where it's going to go into, might take a bit longer to talk through and I've found even emails and online meetings quite limited in that respect…"*

(Participant 4, Corporate, Technical Director)."

- During interviewing process three decision-makers highly endorsed the screensharing of videoconferencing format, evaluating this option as a great addition to expand the quality and quantity of information exchange;
- Tech-savvy decision-makers often perceive in-person meeting as "a chit-chat" and as a chance to grow the relationship on a more personal level whereas on-line format perceived as a more efficient information sharing medium. Videoconferencing here is *"a way to keep in touch while exchanging information quickly" (Participant 12, SME, Executive)* and viewed as an accurate, useful and timely way of data sharing (Thomas et al, 2009);
- The quality and quantity of the information exchange via Zoom or Microsoft Teams can be inhibited according to the construction industry decision-makers if the camera is off or to be more specific by the absence of visual cues which may impede the accuracy of the shared information (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017);
- Videoconferencing does not imply the opportunity of a follow up talk: a clarification "at the photocopier"; or a quick get-together "with a cup of coffee" after the meeting. The absence of such follow-up reduces the information uptake and deprives the stakeholders of the important element of social bonding - the chances to develop the relationship on a more personal level;
- Finally, there is a number of quotes confirming that the level of information openness on-line is often predicated on the time span of decision-makers' acquaintance and previous experiences of working together.

5.6 New and Mature Relationships

The strength of the relationship between buyer and seller is often affected by its background: how it started and how it is nurtured (Narayandas and Rangan, 2004). This work considers that the length of the professional collaboration and partners' previous joint experiences significantly moderate the effect of switching to an on-line medium of communication increasing the chances of maintaining equally meaningful conversations and open data exchange; supporting further relational development; and perhaps trust building.

5.6.1 Mature Relationships

Interviewees' feedbacks indeed partially support this assertion stating that a mature relationship is not really affected by the communicational shift into on-line space. To have a mature relationship for the interviewees of this research means that the involved parties know each other well and have a history of prior face-to-face meetings. They are generally familiar with each other's' mannerisms and personal traits. So, the maintaining of the mature relationship on-line does not compromise relational robustness if the parties have already managed to build the trust based on the previous experiences. One of the interviewees confessed that depending on how well he knows the person he talks to, he can be "totally open"

However, it was mentioned by other interviewees that at least seldom intermittent encounters are important: depending on the relationship maturity such encounters whether assist in growing a relationship; or refreshing the acquaintance; or keeping the momentum of the trust-shaping (Watts, 1999). It is desirable because to have that friendly conversation or as quoted by one of the sample decision-makers "a coffee chit-chat" reinforces a friendly tone of the relationship.

5.6.2 New Relationships

Participants shared a range of experiences regarding their attitude to starting new relationship on-line and how it impacts the relationship and trust building with these clients. Among them, decision-makers shared: “we still meeting our new clients face-to-face”; “it is hard to start building the trust on-line”; “emotionally it is impossible to grow enough trust and enough confidence”; or “going straight on-line is a bit awkward”.

One of the executives interviewed for this research noticed that his experience of trying to establish a relationship with a new partner on-line ended up with the feeling of “incompleteness”. He describes their on-line sessions as a diligent discussion of the terms and conditions; a thorough analysis of the road map to move further; and shipment delivery commitment, but that a trusting level of the relationship was not reached during those on-line sessions. He envisions though with time the understanding of conventional communication is likely to be adjusted to “a new normal” routine where videoconferencing will play a dominant role. He assumes at that point videoconferencing might be perceived from another angle.

Conversely, another interviewed decision-maker was one who welcomes the building of relationship on-line. He does not perceive it as an obstruct to his business development. He highlights that as follows

> *“…we put our money where business mouth is. We may not take you out to a pub, but we will give you all the reports, and we'll give you a good product. We will test the product and guarantee a good quality. And we know what we're talking about…”(Participant 14, SME, Executive)*

And indeed, with a booming construction market in Australia and New Zealand where demand for building materials exceeds the supply (Mitchell, 2021, June 23) many manufacturers and distributors can hardly keep up with the supply queries, thus the economy on-line communication offers can be of benefit.

In general, participants convey wide benefits of utilising videoconferencing for mature well-established relationships as a medium of information exchange and it poses no threats to the effectiveness of B2B executives. Though intermittent face-to-face encounters are highly desirable for the reinforcement of a trusting component.

However, the new relationship initiation via videoconferencing is not seen as a viable way to build trusting relationship because on-line interaction cannot be nurtured emotionally. Regardless it can be still utilised for the purpose of information exchange being widely accepted by the construction industry and is perceived as the most effective way to stay routinely connected, even outside of government-mandated responses to the pandemic.

6 Conclusion, Managerial Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

6.1 Conclusion

As early as the 1950s, scholars have examined the role of trust as one of the main prerequisites of managerial and operational effectiveness (Argyris, 1962; Deutsch, 1958; Likert, 1967; McGregor, 1967). Today trust is still posited as a key ingredient of relationship building and foundation of innovative and successful collaboration (De Clercq et al, 2009).

Firstly, this work addressed the way constriction industry stakeholders were coping with the uncertainty they faced at the first months of pandemic restrictions. With the rest of the world, construction industry decision-makers in Australia and New Zealand have been pushed out of their habitual purely physical communicational environment into the on-line space. Videoconferencing, which was never considered as a viable alternative to in-person communication format previously, started to be used as a preferred way of communication among various collaborative alliances - managerial and operational team members. Lockdown-imposed acceptance of the technology has not resulted in overwhelming adoption once the restrictions were waived in both countries. The phenomenon of a highly contagious virus also accelerated videoconferencing adoption by the Governmental establishments and not-for-profit organisations who led this technological implementation in the industry by example.

Operational and communicational challenges that the construction industry faced during the first phases of the pandemic intruded-on the plans and profit expectations of some engineering consultancies, construction materials distributors, and manufacturers but at the same time they have incited an entrepreneurial spirit and the will to stay resilient and even "antifragile" (Taleb, 2012) while adapting to "a new normal" in communication practices.

Rich, insightful and socially nurturing face-to-face communication formats have been how traditional construction industry stakeholders cooperated, built relationships, and created trusting bonds along the way. This interaction, with a high level of social presence filled with visual non-verbal cues, opens the door to many nuances and fine details which can reduce the perceived risk of the project for the collaboration participants (Lee et al., 2003). This work establishes that the inability to meet in person as a ramification of pandemic restrictions slowed down the lead conversion as a consequence of delayed trust.

In spite of the fact that the major precursors of trust for construction industry executives are considered cognitive-dominant, including integrity, competence, communication, and satisfaction, most of the interviewed decision-makers also recognise the importance of emotional-dominant prerequisites such as benevolence, shared-values and co-creation which are the key drivers to establish a long-lasting mutually beneficial trust-based relationship. "A chit-chat" with a coffee during quality social bonding or after conference dinner offers insights – verbal and non-verbal – which diminish the perception of risk and make the decision-making easier.

In "a new normal" market environment, on-line formats of communication are viewed as the most effective and efficient medium for data exchange. The efficiency is supported by the option of screensharing and by the benefit of focused discussion without frequent diversions from the topic which happens quite often in a face-to-face format of interaction. However, there are protocols to maintain the effectiveness of such meetings: switched on cameras, meeting size, and time. This work suggests that it is highly unlikely to become a trusted business partner communicating exclusively on-line, but while the alternatives are limited this is the least you can do to stay connected and ensure business continuity.

This work features insights on information openness while engaging face-to-face or on-line. The data analysis provided the evidences that face-to-face meeting at buyer or seller's office, or manufacturing facility is crucial to learn "the length and breadth of the organization" to gauge the way the business functions and whether it is "a well-oiled machine or it is pretty sloppy and messy". Such insightful information cannot be captured over a video-conferencing call. The extent of the uncertainty predicts the level of the perceived risk any missing information variable promotes doubt, increasing a perceived risk of the collaboration leading to a transaction-based relationship rather than trust-based (Williamson, 1993).

It is highlighted by participants that the creativity process and collaborative synergy that creates quality information for complex projects or for achieving a legislative breakthrough is predominantly possible in face-to-face interactions, whilst limited in the virtual format of information exchange.

Irrespective of some drawbacks to virtual formats of communication, it continues to enjoy phenomenal proliferation all over the world (Standaert, Muyller, & Basu, 2021). Communication openness during on-line meetings is described relatively high reasoned by its property of mimicking physical interaction and allowing to keep in touch while exchanging information quickly being a great facilitator in exchange as well as being accurate and timely. However, the effectiveness of virtual collaboration is often dependent on the common experience of meeting participants and how long they know each other, this format of data sharing is moderated by the time span of decision-makers' common working experience. Mature relationships, based on previously completed successful projects and prior trust building efforts, does not incur any harmful impact from on-line shift and may be maintained on-line equally effectively. Nevertheless, occasional intermittent face-to-face encounters are desirable to indulge the social bonding.

New relationships are harder to develop on-line and face-to-face formats are a favoured approach to begin building a trust-based B2B collaboration. For example, some decision-makers suggest starting a business discussion on-line with people you do not know feels awkward, incomplete, and emotionally scarce. This emotional void often hinders the level of interaction and information openness and directly influences relationship development and trust-building.

6.2 Managerial Implications

The disruption provoked by a pervasive negative impact of highly contagious virus has changed the communicational landscape of construction related players who have widely accepted videoconferencing as a preferred form of information exchange. The research question of this study “How does communication mode influence trust-building in B2B relationships in “a new normal” business environment?” was investigated to explore the pros and cons of face-to-face and videoconferencing formats of communication. Additionally, this research sought to evaluate the efficiency of on-line as compared to in-person modes of communication as in the business environment.

For managers, this work outlines how to balance the influence of face-to-face and on-line formats of communication to build dynamic and trust-based relationships. It provides rich insights into what influences communication openness in the construction industry, specifically, and what role it plays in advancing collaborative efforts. The views of executive participants on the quality and quantity of the information in exchange has been presented robustly and rigourously and reflects on the essential benefits of the physical environment during a face-to-face meeting and the role of face-to-face social bonding in the exchange relationship. These insights add depth to prevailing insights on how best to balance these two communicational formats efficiently in our “new normal” of business exchange.

Additionally, this work has consolidated the perspectives of construction industry decision-makers on how the time span of the relationship may impact the effectiveness of the social and informational exchange, allowing managers to develop nuanced relationship development communication strategies. Besides simply increasing a individual meetings’ effectiveness, these findings would serve to increase the effectiveness of the organisations at large, with the added economy of their efforts in exchange (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012)

This work echoes the findings of previous research work on virtual communication (Standaer et al., 2021), indicating that the on-line mode (with camera on/off), time, and number of participants can substantially affect the outcome of the meeting, so these parameters are recommended for managers to consider when seeking to achieve the objectives of on-line meetings as a part of the relationship and trust building strategy.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This research provides insights into the influence of communication mode on relationship building and trust development within collaborative alliances of construction industry stakeholders, and it is a subject to certain limitations and opportunities for future research.

The first limitation is around the fact that the sample of the research is limited to decision-makers within two countries – Australia and New Zealand. So, the findings are to be carefully generalised. The motivation behind choosing these countries was that of a convenience sample and access to construction industry executive decision-makers and the fact that Australia and New Zealand have enjoyed relative freedoms in business exchange and interactions relative to other countries. Additionally, if approached from the perspective of pandemic restrictions, these markets may also be viewed as the closest business environment state to so-called "new normal", however suspended these days the meaning of "normality" is (Varna & Oswell, 2021).

Additionally, the transferability of these research findings into culturally different construction industries of other countries can be a very sensitive aspect. Considering that Australia and New Zealand are industrialised countries (Baxter, 2012) the countries with developing economies may have significant differences not only culturally but in the way they see and build business communication (Klein et al., 2019; Malik, Ngo, & Kingshott, 2018). To extend the effort and examine the influence of the communication mode on relationship building and trust in other cultural contexts of emerging economies is seen a desirable path for a future research endeavour.

Secondly, data was acquired from single representative of each company. Consequently, all collaborative experiences and decision-making processes of each company were reflected on through a single source of information – an executive representative of this company. It means that the presence of single informant can carry a risk of subjective bias regarding the interpretation of the events.

Finally, the research sample includes only the representatives of executive level which means that only the professionals of decision-making level are likely to view the insights and outcomes of the research relevant to their communication practices.

Furthermore, future research may usefully concentrate on the contribution of social media in the relationship building as an on-line format of communication where professionals with shared values learn about each other and then organically start professional collaboration. Concurrently it will be possible to evaluate whether the relationship triggered by professional brand awareness on social media may accelerate trust building in expertise-based interaction.

One participant in the present research made the following comments, echoing this future research opportunity:

> "*I wouldn't say that LinkedIn is our primary way to build confidence, but what it does, it does weed out some of the new clients that may not be the right clients for us. And then it attracts clients that are the right clients. So, it's a way of pre-marketing almost, it', pre-screening some of those clients and, you know, making sure you don't get an inquiry from the wrong people. I think it's good to help establish our personality and our thoughts and, you know, our way of thinking. And that's attracting a lot of people that think the same way" (Participant 12, SME,* Executives)

There were also several participants who mentioned a hybrid meeting as a format which they often use to participate in the meetings with venue different from their office location. According to Standaert, Muylle, & Basu (2021) the lack of face-to-face interaction during this type of meeting may also impede the trust-building in the relationship. Future research may consider comparing the level of effectiveness between completely on-line interaction via videoconferencing and the scenario of a hybrid meeting.

Finally, the present research records many comments about the age and the ability of the older generation – not necessarily technically-savvy individuals, to adopt new technological advances. For instance:

> *"…lot of the younger generations will prefer to utilize that technology. Whereas some of the older generations prefer methods that they're more accustomed to…" (Participant 2, SME, Executive)*

Indeed, scholars have noted the difficulty for older adults, such as baby-boomers (1946-1964) and partly Generation X (1965-1980) (Hsiche, Chen, & Chen, 2018), to accept the challenge of integrating technological advances into work to facilitate business continuity and stay connected. Future research may seek to investigate the influence of digital interface on work effectiveness of older adults; how they perceive the on-line shift; and what are their views on communication openness during on-line information exchanges.

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Appendix 1 – E-mail / FPANZ Newsletter Exemplar

The text of the e-mail to the potential participants of the research/FPANZ Newsletter

To whom it may concern,

My name is Anastasia Kokorina, and I am a Master's student in the Department of Marketing, Advertising, Retailing and Sales at AUT University in Auckland, New Zealand. I am conducting research on the influence of communication mode on trust building between decision-makers in B2B environment in a post-pandemic marketplace as part of my master's dissertation. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. Data collected will be used for the purpose stated below. Participation in this research is voluntary, and all information collected will be kept confidential. You may withdraw your participation any time before the completion of the research project without any effect to your rights.

Please note, the inclusion criteria for this research includes the following:

- You are representative of executive level management or a business owner (above 35 years old) within the business-to-business environment of construction industry in Australia or in New Zealand

- Among your responsibilities are the following duties: interaction with other industry stakeholders for the purpose of creating new business opportunities; developing strategic relationships; being an active member on the committees for construction industry standards and policies; and working on the improvement of industry regulation and compliance.

If you are interested, please get in touch with me sending an e-mail on ana@akconsult.co.nz or give me a call on +642041820544

AUT

Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

Interview Guide:

This interview session is a part my dissertation research project where I'm trying to identify the changes in building trustworthy relationships among decision-makers of Australia and New Zealand if any.

During pandemic restrictions there was a major communication shift from face-to-face interactions into computer mediated space which provoked a research curiosity to understand the consequences of such change. In this study I'm trying to explore the consequences of an increased on-line interactions and to identify whether it had any impact on building trustworthy relationships among decision-makers of construction industry in Australia and New Zealand.

Questions:

1. If you compare your business management practices of pre-Covid and post-Covid – do you see the differences and what are these differences?
2. Could you please elaborate on advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face communication from your personal experience?
3. How open are you in a discussion while talking face-to-face?
4. Could you please elaborate on advantages and disadvantages of computer mediated communication from the perspective of your experience?
5. If there are any business topics where discussing it on-line you may hold back not saying everything you'd like to say?
6. How do you understand the meaning of Trust?
7. Which effect does have teleconferencing on creating trust bond in your relationship with partners and clients if any?
8. How does on-line communication format influence new relationship building and mature relationship maintaining?
9. Could you elaborate how does on-line format of communication influence the trust aspect in your relationship whether new or mature?
10. If there is anything you'd like to add about face-to-face and computer mediated formats of communication?

I'll be analysing the information which you have kindly shared with me. I'll be happy to send you a transcribed copy of the interview once it's prepared if you wish so.

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 3 – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

dd mmmm yyyy

Project Title

The influence of Communication Mode on Trust Building Among Decision-Makers in Business-to-Business Environment in a Post-Pandemic Marketplace.

An Invitation

My name is Anastasia Kokorina, and I am a Master's student in the Department of Marketing, Advertising, Retailing and Sales at AUT University in Auckland, New Zealand. I am conducting research on the influence of communication mode on trust building between decision-makers in B2B environment in a post-pandemic marketplace as part of my master's dissertation. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. Data collected will be used for the purpose stated below. Participation in this research is voluntary, and all information collected will be kept confidential. You may withdraw your participation any time before the completion of the research project without any effect to your rights.

What is the purpose of this research?

The pandemic reality made technology acceptance a necessary condition for maintaining the communication even in a traditionally conservative construction segment. Indeed, computer mediated communication practices have simplified communication logistic making business interactions easier to some extent and financially more viable.

But what if the dominance of the on-line mode might delay the signing of a critically important deal? What if the trust, which is sometimes so easily felt because of mutual liking during a face-to-face encounter, may not be reached, or reached quick enough during teleconferencing?

There are many questions around effectiveness of the communication which require answers and assurance for business stakeholders that they follow the most effective and efficient scenario to attain the goals of their teams and shareholders. This research will be a contribution to the enlightenment around trust-based relationship development in post-Covid era. It is destined to generate a certain guideline for the decision-maker around face-to-face and on-line communication modes and their right balance in running the business effectively.

The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You were identified as a representative of executive level management or a business owner (above 35 years old) within the business-to-business environment of construction industry in Australia or in New Zealand. Among your responsibilities there are the following duties: interaction with other industry stakeholders for the purpose of creating new business opportunities; developing strategic relationships; being an active member on the committees for construction industry standards and policies; and working on the improvement of industry regulation and compliance.

I would like to ask for your voluntary expression of interest to participate in the study.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You can agree to participate in this research by accepting my interview request over the phone or sending an e-mail confirming the participation. This acceptance will be followed by a Consent Form for you to review. I will also make sure that it is physically available for you to complete prior to the actual interview.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

How will my privacy be protected?

The primary researcher will strictly adhere to the privacy and confidentiality while recording collected data. You will be able to read the transcript of the interview before the researcher has started the analysis of the data.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

By completing a Consent Form, you may tick the box showing your interest in receiving feedback on the outcome of this research. The findings of the study will be emailed to you once it is completed.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor:

Drew Franklin, Drew Franklin@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 921 9999 ext. 7986

Researcher Contact Details:

Primary Researcher: Anastasia Kokorina, anastasia.kokorina@aut.ac.nz, +642041830544

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEC Reference number *type the reference number*.

Appendix 4 – Consent Form

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

Project title: The influence of Communication Mode on Trust Building Among Decision-Makers in Business-to-Business Post-Pandemic Environment.

Project Supervisor: Dr. Drew Franklin, Dr. Rouxelle de Villiers, Professor Roger Marshall

Researcher: Anastasia Kokorina

☐ I have read and understood all information about this research project in the *Information Sheet* dated dd/mm/yyyy.

☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and received the answers to those questions.

☐ I understand the interview will be audio-taped/video-taped and transcribed.

☐ I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

☐ If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts will be destroyed.

☐ I agree to participate in this research.

☐ I'd prefer to be e-mailed a copy of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No☐

Participant's signature: ....

Participant's name: ....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

....

....

....

....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on ***type the date on which the final approval was granted*** *AUTEC Reference number* ***type the AUTEC reference number***

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this for

April 2018 page 1 of 1 This version was last edited in April 2018

Appendix 5 – Letter from AUTEC

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

15 July 2021

Drew Franklin
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Drew

Ethics Application: 21/195 The influence of communication mode on decision-makers' trust building in business-to-business relationships in a post-pandemic marketplace.

Thank you for submitting your responses to Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)'s conditions. We advise that the approval is still subject to:

1. Provision of an assurance that data and Consent Forms will be stored separately;

   Many thanks, yes, consent forms and data will be stored separately.

2. Inclusion in the Consent Form of the verbatim withdrawal bullet points from the current exemplar which can be found on the Research Ethics website at http://aut.ac.nz/researchethics;

   Please find, attached, an amended consent form featuring the verbatim withdrawal bullet points from the current exemplar.

3. Amendment of the Information Sheet as follows:

   a. Remove the last sentence in the invitation section as participants can withdraw at any stage of the research;

   Thank you, this has been done, as attached.

   b. Inclusion in the 'how was I identified' section that participants are part of your professional networks or that they saw a notice in a monthly newsletter of Fire Protection Association of New Zealand;

   Thank you, this has been amended, as attached.

   c. Inclusion of a 'what will happen in this research' section;

   Thank you, this has been included, as attached.

   d. Inclusion of the entire concerns section from the current exemplar which can be found on the Research Ethics website at http://aut.ac.nz/researchethics.

   Thank you, this has been amended, as attached.

   e. Inclusion of advice about how consent will be evidenced in online interviews;

   Thank you, this has been amended, as attached.

4. Amendment of the advertisement as follows:

   a. Inclusion of the AUT logo; o Inclusion of the inclusion criteria so that potential participants understand the kind of participant you are looking for;

   Thank you, the logo and inclusion criteria have been added to the advertisement, as attached.

5. Justification for the video-recording of interviews and inclusion of advice about this in the Information Sheet. If recordings are being made to aid transcription, please say so in the Information Sheet and explain that the videos will be destroyed as soon as transcription has occurred.

Thank you, this has been added, as attached in the "what will happen in this research section".

Please provide us with a response to the points raised in these conditions, indicating either how you have satisfied these points or proposing an alternative approach. AUTEC also requires copies of any altered documents, such as Information Sheets, surveys etc. You are not required to resubmit the application form again. Any changes to responses in the form required by the committee in their conditions may be included in a supporting memorandum.

Please note that the Committee is always willing to discuss with applicants the points that have been made. There may be information that has not been made available to the Committee, or aspects of the research may not have been fully understood.

Once your response is received and confirmed as satisfying the Committee's points, you will be notified of the full approval of your ethics application. Full approval is not effective until all the conditions have been met. Data collection may not commence until full approval has been confirmed. If these conditions are not met within six months, your application may be closed and a new application will be required if you wish to continue with this research.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, we ask that you use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please do contact us at ethics@aut.ac.nz.

We look forward to hearing from you,

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: ana@akconsult.co.nz; rdevilli@aut.ac.nz; Roger Marshall

Appendix 6 – AUTEC Approval

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

16 July 2021

Drew Franklin
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Drew

Re Ethics Application: **21/195 The influence of communication mode on decision-makers' trust building in business-to-business relationships in a post-pandemic marketplace.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 16 July 2024.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: ana@akconsult.co.nz; rdevilli@aut.ac.nz; Roger Marshall

Appendix 7 – Participant 3 Interview Transcript

Participant 3, Corporate, Executive

Speaker 1: (00:00)

First of all. Thank you for accepting my request for interview, [redacted]. Really appreciate that. So, the first question is so pre COVID business dealings and the way you ran the business and deal with your business partners and post-Covid. I mean, it's still COVID, but we are more or less free here in Australia and New Zealand. So if there are any difference, and if there are differences, what are those,

Speaker 2: (00:24)

Uh, when care speaks is the ability to get in front of customers. You're offering engagement with customers is multilevel between business relevant managers, uh, sometimes owner, owner to owner. And so the challenge now is most of our senior management is based in Australasia and, and the big markets it's been possible to travel to them during the year. So there's, uh, a challenge that you have to try and develop insights of a lot of time on phone, zoom, Skype, uh, where you can actually get in front of the customers. So let's change the mode of business and, you know, that type of mode can probably run for a reasonable period, but then challenges, Hey, Hey, really get the customer insights, uh, when you had a hundred found the customers. Yeah. So we've, yeah, we've maintained market presence. And we've been probably probate off the mini companies because we had an market, uh, full-time market development people. But for those who haven't then, you know, often New Zealand based companies, uh, hidden in out of market and don't have the infrastructure market. So they'd be more adversely hit. Uh, so it comes to the depth that accompanies or established market when the Covid came along as how much their momentum can be sustained without the senior management came to market both to try and develop business, but also to gain market insights,

Speaker 1: (01:52)

Right? Because you would be going and to meet your potential clients face-to-face ?

Speaker 2: (02:01)

Well, partly trust and bond, but also actually inside of the business. Yeah. The, uh, one of the key things you go to customers' premises and it is you get chance to understand what their business model is and their capability across some parts of the business. Um, and you can't do that on a zoom call. You know, like some of the greatest insights to the customer comes from the free walk on the floor, uh, talking to different people in an organization and, uh, seeing, smelling how the operation works. So a zoom call is usually got really limited audience, and you're not walking around the business to understand what their true capabilities are. So you can't gauge their culture and their business so much. You can't gauge their actual physical capabilities. And you can't see the mode of operation. So if you've got good people on the ground, they can help do that. But you never have the same level of insight as to walk in your business and seeing and smelling what it's like, you can't, you can't smell a business like I was doing. Yeah.

Speaker 1: (03:11)

I can imagine that. Listen, what does it mean trust for you in business? So how can you, what kind of a definition you may give to trust to the word trust? Yeah.

Speaker 2: (03:23)

Yeah. I think, um, trust is usually as the foundation for people wanting to do decent scale business. And so in the past, you know, when developing international business, you got developed relationship and trust first, and the more you do that in the more in depth discussion about the business and maybe your work with them as a business advisor, I think I take you serious as a business advisor. It must be because you developed live firstly, understanding the business and the trust to communicate openly about where they want to go. And therefore How we can work together to get there.

Speaker 1: (04:02)

So basically it's in a way kind of a co-creation. So basically you are discussing, understanding their needs and requirements and offering some kind of solution, which means you're done perfectly. So co-create and that solution together. Right?.

Speaker 2: (04:15)

And to do that, um, need, have in-depth understanding where they're going, what they're trying to do, combined with, uh, your industry knowledge and insight to hopefully add value beyond what they've seen themselves. So that's, we understand their business mode, uh, what the strengths and weaknesses are. You know, if you're proposing a solution to another business, need to work at, we can add the most value because that's what they're paying for. So it's almost like doing a SWOT analysis on their business. To work out what they need to take the business forward. And then you're offering a commercial opportunity or technology solution to help advance their business. But you have to work at how to advance their business first, you need to analyze it and work out where there is a room for improvement or process improvement, or we can add value to what they're doing. So that requires the insight first. Um, and that's, the more open conversation had with someone about what their business is or could be or what its deficiencies are. Then you can work out more magnet and value to them. So, zoom can do some of that. Um, but you never get the same level of insight as if you can look at it, smell it,

Speaker 1: (05:43)

Taste, test ideas. Good. If you compare for example, mature relationship and new relationship and you initiate that online. So what's the difference, in terms of building relationships. What's happening.

Speaker 2: (06:00)

I don't think you can build the full strength of a relationship or trust purely online. Often traditionally business and probably even still now, uh, you can have a great, great depth of discussion relationship if you've broken bread with them. If you had a meal with them, um, yeah, a lot of businesses done in the past. You know, you go out for dinner and relax and let informal situation, um, uh, you can delve deeper into what their business about what their aspirations are taken. So yeah, you're not going to be having a, breaking bread by zoom. So in that sense, that's hugely dependent on the strength of people you got in the market as well. So if you've got people in the market, then that they're doing the relationship building and, uh, you know, we might have been coming more, a senior negotiation stage. Whereas if they don't have those people in the market, then that's more of a disadvantage. So it depends on also for level of salary, you're doing how much it's dependent on a multilevel relationship between the client and the vendor.

Speaker 1: (07:30)

Okay. Um, but have you started any kind of new relationships during COVID? Uh, if there were some problems or difficulties or it was all smooth and nice. If you can share, if you had an experience

Speaker 2: ([07:49]())

We've got new clients, but, um, but we've got people in region. So they've got people in region means that business keeps growing, but if you shouldn't have people in region, obviously then you can come and get more handicapped. But, we've got mature people in market that have been with us 3, 5, 7 years, and they've got relationships with people out there. So I've got new people coming on board. Yeah. For example, U S market, uh, the people in USA can still travel. And, and so the effects COVID between and bill control between New Zealand, USA, uh, hasn't inhibited our business because got people, people based in USA who can travel locally into the business. So you don't

Speaker 1: ([08:33]())

Have much of this problem so that you have people.

Speaker 2: ([08:36]())

Yeah. I mean, the challenge really is if a business is expanding, then you've got challenge of how you bring on new people, um, when you can't travel to market or train them and they can't travel here to be trained, or if you want to go and do follow-up interviews with people or that type of things would happen by zoom now. So the, yeah, the business can still grow if you've got the depth in the market. And it depends on the maturity of which each company, cause some people develop international markets as by flying in and out. Whereas we've sort of been, um, 10 years past the flying announced situation. So in most of our markets, yeah, we have local presence which ends up being that the people that drive the business through local presence and we get more involved in, uh, partly strategic deals or, uh, coming through and negotiation process that they won't have a, uh, a broader base with the team here as well.

But it's, if you were a small scale exporter and having to travel and then, you know, it's probably going to have greater impact. The converse on that is it means that, uh, travel costs down dramatically because you're zooming. So you're traveling. So you have a lot of companies probably saved.

Speaker 1: (00:01)

I've heard that, uh, someone was saying that you can really understand your client well, whether they're risk averse or they're risk takers and how you're supposed to approach them and how you feel, you know, on the tips of your fingers, how you're supposed to behave, you know, whether you shouldn't be pushy or you should be, you know, quite neutral, so it can be done only face to face. Um, do you agree with that or for you, for example, online would be okay and you are shrewd enough, you know, to understand the person online and understand what, what it is and how to approach that client.

Speaker 2: (00:36)

Uh, let's say like 80% of communication is non-verbal, so you can get some insight and probably the more experiential you have the right, the greater you can pull on that experience. But, um, you know, it's not impossible to do business remotely, but yeah, usually a greater insights, uh, through looking, seeing, smelling everything about their business and also potentially asking other people in the region, um, for insights as well. So yeah, often we try and triangulate, we get one fish from here, another vision over here, and you get three different versions of the truth, probably amongst those different versions of truth is somewhere where the real truth is.

Speaker 1: (01:26)

And if you were talking to someone online to a business partner or future client, whatever. So if you are the same open as you are talking to him or to her face to face, what's the level of openness and the information?

Speaker2: (01:50)

I think usually online call is shorter than if you fly in to see someone, um, as a key account, you're probably going to be with them. They do a tour. You have look around, go to lunch, go around and talk more than go to dinner. So, you know, your total engagement could be 12 hours a day, 14 hours a day. Uh, no one's going to sit down for 1240 hours, zoom call

Speaker 3: (02:19)

That you would stop to be a client or provider or supplier, you know,

Speaker 2: (02:26)

Torture by zoom type things. And that's also a concern that I just had another five zoom calls that day and they've zoomed out as well. So, so yeah. And the hints. Yeah. The next thing game engagement is going to be short, probably more focused, but you won't get the same insight at one hour on zoom versus 12 hours, uh, walking the premises talking to different people, being introduced to 12 different people and they could not have those 12 different people turned up to one zoom call for an hour. So

Speaker 1: (02:59)

You understand the hierarchy.

Speaker 2: (03:04)

So the length and n breadth of the organization and, and even just top of premises that are in, and, um, how well organized it is. Is it a, is it a well-oiled machine or is it someone's pretty sloppy and messy? Um, yeah, you won't get over zoom call. I know you'll get some signals to it, but not the same as you've walked around your eyes wide open. Yeah.

Speaker 1: (03:24)

It makes it all pretty clear. Why face to face and all of this experiential,

Speaker 2: (03:31)

I think it's probably face to face, but it's not only face to face. It's actually, um, looking across length and breadth of the organization and what the setup is. I mean, if you're, if you're having someone on business improvement and process improvement, automation, things like that, then actually look looking around, see what they got and what status and, uh, yeah. Cause your insight as to how well organized they are and where they're at in terms of their technology or their processes. Because if you're looking at a guy's nose on the zoom call, we gotta see his nose on a zoom call for an hour and you're not gonna see everything else about the organization

Speaker 1: (04:11)

Question. So I have this, um, gentlemen, he's the owner of one of the biggest, uh, passive fire protection systems supplier here in New Zealand. So he's saying that he would build, uh, his, uh, business on trust into his product. So he would test all the time because for services penetrations, for example, enforced fire, stripping, it's critical, the testing specifically. So he would test all the time and everyone know that if nothing is impossible for him, any kind of system, he would go and test it and to get the project. So he's saying I don't need to know to fuss around or, you know, um, take the clients to the restaurant or build any kind of trust because they trust me because of my amazing product, because you know, it works and I have all the evidences.

Speaker 2: (05:25)

I think it was the demonstrators naivety of decision-making process. Like, you know, often decision making processes and political. Um, so that, yeah, it's like saying the product Africa part of the product sell itself. Whereas in fact, the product doesn't make, any decisions, it's people make decisions. So yeah, if you don't understand the structure of the decision making organization and how the decision making process works, um, yeah. It's like saying, if you make a bit of mouse trap, the world's going to buy it. What's not true. So yeah, that's a very product centric mentality, which, um, usually comes out of technicians. Um, but not out of, uh, people who understand how the full decision making process can be made and it's people make decisions and choose products, not products,

Speaker 1: (06:19)

Right. So you still need to build a relationship to get your product sold. Yeah. You can be,

Speaker 2: (06:26)

It could be seen like this fantastic product information, the wrong person. And be against selecting it, right?

Speaker 1: (06:34)

Um, I know you are putting a lot of effort into the digital marketing. So what do you get? What do you get out of it you've been in the market for a long time. You're a big to big B to

B. So you don't get the sales through

Speaker 2: (07:00)

Well, most New Zealand companies will be unknown to 99% of the world. So even if you've been in a market for a while, um, you'll be lucky if you actually really known that broadly and the effect now you can't actually be in market as much, or the trade shows aren't happening. The answer question of, uh, also the other thing is for many products and even, more technical ones, often appeals start researching a topic. They go to Google and start research on Google. So if your profile is not there, you're going to be invisible or more particularly if someone else comes on the first page and you don't come to the first page, then you're behind the power curve in terms of winning the business.

Speaker 1: (07:46)

So it's about visibility of the business.

Speaker 2: (07:49)

It's pretty hard, pretty hard to sell a secret. Okay. So if they've been searching for a minute or two and him found you, then you're way behind the competition already,

Speaker 1: (08:06)

Right?

Speaker 2: (08:06)

So that's an each market and each country in each, each language.

Speaker 1: (08:12)

So you were talking to literally all the whole world,

Speaker 2: (08:14)

no, we're not targeting. You can't target the whole world.

Speaker 1: (08:17)

I want to be aware or you want to be visible in each and every country. Right.

Speaker 2: (08:24)

That's virtually impossible Because no one has the budget and resource do it. And all sudden markets aren't big enough to justify it separately saying, you know, what are our priority markets? And then if someone's trying to find us now, priority markets, um, I think our finalists diminished or not, and type of language type of phrases they use, what are they going to find 10 of our competitors? Um, and we're not gonna show on the radar, in which case you're starting a long behind those 10 convinced they had found.

Speaker 1: (08:57)

Imagine you, uh, you were selected as someone who would be, you know, considered in the tender for any kind of projects somewhere where you don't have, uh, um, your offers or you don't have people who represent your company. So, but they're still keen to involve you Africa, whatever. So how would you act, would you initiate that relationship online or you would send someone imagine you cannot send physically someone there. So what would you be your action? Yeah,

Speaker 2: (09:24)

I think first thing, if any, any a marketing qualified lead is you just need to talk to people qualifying for this. So really you need to hop online and have a very interactive, um, discussion came just by phone and their time zone, platters time. It suits them. So really that says you're just still in sales, discovery, mode and qualifying. So in that sense, um, it's no different from an all sales process. It's just the fact that you can have the slight handicap of doing it online. In-store.

Speaker 1: (00:00)

I'm just trying to understand how it all works and how you see, because you've managed to grow such a big business. You've scaled it and it's all successful and you're growing. Right. I think you're growing and you have more ambitious there. So how you see the world, how you approach the whole business making concept. So I'm just curious. I am asking sometimes silly questions, but I really want to see what would be your answers.

Speaker 2: (00:32)

That's all right. I guess sometimes it might be there's some stereotypes or yeah, a lot for saying, how are the best products going to kind of be self-selecting or that's, that's almost never true because people don't know about the product. They can't get it. It's not supported, um, at the best product actually invisible. So it won't self-select itself out because I didn't turn up the start line. Yeah. The company didn't have a seat at the table when they started talking about what the, what the customer wanted, sun Yun and that situation. I don't understand how to target the customers and be on their radar. Within two minutes of them doing a internet search is like, okay, are you even get a seat at the table to have a discussion? Or you're you're Mr. Invisible and you, um, you won't even know there was a deal and you lost it because you're never involved in the game at all.

Speaker 1: (01:39)

Right. It's been fascinating. I think I've covered all of my questions here and I understand I have all my data from my research so we can stop the recording.

Appendix 8 – Participant 10 Interview Transcript

Participant 10, Corporate, Executive

Speaker 1 (00:00):

[redacted] thank you for accepting my request for the interview. So, if you think about your business practices and dealing with clients pre-COVID and post-COVID, I mean, we're still in the COVID era, right. But anyways, if you see any differences and if yes, what are those differences?

Speaker 2 (00:23):

Sure. So I work in a business that covers across different countries. So today, for instance, I'm talking to Australia, I'm talking to West Coast of America and I'm talking to Germany and it was yesterday as well. Uh, and Thailand actually. So for us as a business, what it's allowed us to do is book communication. At times that worked for everyone. This is traveling to a place. So our travel behaviors have changed. And I don't think they'll ever go back because we're finding that to keep to the point with a published agenda, we can do it electronically. So we use the normal programs that you've heard of zoom, Microsoft teams. And, um, there's one other program we don't use very much, but the reality is it works for us. It's probably the time and a place, whereas five years ago IT wasn't very good and it didn't work so five years ago when I worked for the business, I'd have to fly to all of those places and be there in person. And I would every month and now I don't at all at COVID stop travel, but now, I'm not going to fly to Australia every two weeks but every two months and that's the difference.

Speaker 1 (01:35):

That's a big difference. Yeah, could you please elaborate on your communication practices with business partners in various collaborative alliances and surely plans during restrictive pandemic matters and after they were waived? So basically during the restrictive measures, there were some practices, something changed after all, and you got back to the, you didn't get back because you just told me. Right. But, um, is there is something that once it's all over and literally the borders are opened, so will you start traveling more?

Speaker 2 (02:13):

Yes. So the business I wait for is change hands. It's now in hands of Germans instead of some Australians and Americans. And so we actually need to sit down face to face to do some things. So July, so we're in April now. So July I'm booked to go to Sydney and then meant to be going on to Singapore and then meant to be going on to Germany. So unclear whether that'll happen. But one thing we've noticed is if you've got a relationship with someone, you can carry it on via electronic media communication protocol. But if you don't know them, it's much harder when you've got a change of ownership. They don't know you have, some of them don't know you as a bit of were saying it. And so we do need to sit down and go through all the differences in each country and work through that. But it's, it's all the things that you'll gain, not by actually having a discussion directly with someone, but perhaps catching up with them later on, might be over dinner. It might be the next morning breakfast because you see each other for 48, 72 hours before your travel away. So what we've noticed is if you have a relationship with someone, it's fine. If you've never met them before, it's unusual and not really working the way it should.

Speaker 1 (03:24):

Yeah. So there is a difference between, you know, uh, working on the relationships online when they are mature and they're new. So it's a big difference.

Speaker 2 (03:33):

Yeah. And especially if people don't speak English. So today we were talking about what we're doing here today. So I had a French person, Thai person, Chinese person, Filipino, Australian, and myself. So not all of us are English speakers. And so they don't know me very well. One has only ever meet me online, the French guy, and he's a good guy, but I need to sit down with them and talk about some nuances about the New Zealand market and his language skills are excellent, but it would be much better if we're face-to-face because there are many things to discuss rather than just the agenda that we're having a meeting about.

Speaker 1 (04:09):

Does it mean that this online mode in a way holds you back in terms of how open you are with your colleagues.

Speaker 2 (04:21):

Can do it can also mean that your need to wait to have somebody to say, whereas a lot of meetings are freer in their flow and better collaboration or sharing of ideas face to face. Whereas in an electronic media, you're watching the different boxes and you're sort of waiting for a time to speak and someone's on mute and you know, it's not as free flowing as it perhaps could be. And there's not the other side to it, whether you're really getting to know someone. So the French guy, there's a fantastic engineer, but I don't really know much more about him. And it would be easier if we actually spent some time together to actually work out how he likes to address risk. There's an engineer. I need to know if he's risk tolerant or risk averse. So we were having a conversation. I can work through what he's actually saying about when we do engineering and spend money on it, this how risky he likes to be.

Speaker 1 (05:13):

So that's, you can weigh and understand how adequate that risk is and it gets for that market.

Speaker 2 (05:21):

Did you take it in, in very, um, broad context today's activity was termed as high risk for us. And I said, do I still need to do it? I need to know. And in actual fact we have got to resolve it's far eclipsing where we need to be, but that tells me a lot about some of our engineers and their behavior. They don't like risk, which I didn't know about some of them. And there are people I've only met online if it's a bit, some time with them part of the week then out. So it's the nuances or non verbal communication elements that you miss when you're online versus face to face, we've talked about this, you know "Can we run a whole business visually and not spend anything on travel?" And the answer is "No". Can we communicate with our customers online? Only the answer is definitely No. Um, can we communicate with our suppliers? The answer is also yes, you can, but not all the time because your customers and suppliers, different hats, but the same process once buying one selling. So I think the communication through COVID taught us that you don't need to be everywhere in person, but you do need to know that person for that to be carried on in an efficient manner.

Speaker 1 (06:32):

Right. You know, um, I've interviewed several people already, like five or six. And they're saying sometimes that, because for example, if you're working from home and you are on zoom or Microsoft teams and that you actually open your, um, personal space to your colleagues, right. So it holds you back. Or for example, you wouldn't say whatever you would say in a situation where you're face to face. If there is something that you experience, or you don't have this.

Speaker 2 (07:04):

We do. We absolutely do. So. Um, my former manager or boss in Australia is a great guy. Um, he was doing the meeting and his wife would pass behind and a towel. And we were like - "you might need to turn the camera off". and we all laughed and I know his wife. So I said: "Hi Renee". It happens. And the other is Pete or children, get walking across keyboards, you get dogs backing, you get children asking: Dad can you look at this and go, hang on, hang on. So, so when's mommy home. Can I play a video game? It's all normal. You know, most of us have the same sort of lives. What I have noticed though, is that, um, it's so easily, um, done to be distracted in those meetings. We, most of us have got jewel screens and we're looking at another screen cause it was sort of not that interested in the meeting anyway.

Speaker 2 (07:56):

And that's a real problem is you don't get that face to face. You don't get someone looking at their phone when they should be part of a meeting, but you will get it online. Or you'll get people who dial in online who don't put their camera on because they actually want to do something else. And that happened the other day when I was working with London or you'll get people who want to hold a meeting in New Zealand at 8:00 PM or midnight in London, it's 7:00 AM and you go, okay, they worked for you, but not for me, but because it's online, they're trying to make it happen. And you go, okay, that's the type of meeting. We probably should do in person. And frankly, we're not going to go to London for that meeting. So price, we don't even need that meeting full stop. Um, so we've learned a lot as a business where multinational or across many countries, I think 22 countries for us.

Speaker 2 (08:42):

So we do have the worst of it, time zones and languages. And, um, but it has allowed us to do one major thing, which is share your screen. And that's been really good. We weren't very good at it before. We're all pretty poor quality IT people with at a more senior level. And we've all learned to be able to present to our colleagues via sharing your screen, whatever format teams, or zoom or whatever you want. And that is very useful to share exactly what you want to talk about. And that's been a very simple improvement and communication that's really worked well for us,

Speaker 1 (09:19):

But there is some kind of a tool where, for example, you have this amazing digital boards where you can connect your laptop or something. And then if there's some people from international office that they would plug in and they would be also participated like they are expensive, but there are some tools like that where you can actually integrate all of that, like

Speaker 2 (09:43):

A, like a, a work room or a

Speaker 1 (09:46):

Microsoft one, something really impressive.

Speaker 2 (09:50):

We typically don't use those.

Speaker 1 (00:00):

We typically don't use those forums. We find them all valuable. They're not actually adding quite what we want, so that phone should be quite, they're not quite adding to the communication. They're more about collaboration on documents, collaboration on difficult spreadsheets when we're building factories or whatever we're doing. Whereas, um, the better way that we've found to communicate and share ideas or collaborate is it's effectively sharing your screen. So we're talking about something we're editing live and that's quite simplistic, but it works well. And that might be a PowerPoint presentation, might be a letter, might be a spreadsheet with costs on it. And you, the whoever's hosting is able to update it in a live fashion. And it's very easy to do. We can all do it. So I think for us, we will never go back to what we had before, which is a lot of travel.

Speaker 1 (00:58):

It gives us time back because I'm not going through airports. It also gives us a lot of cost reduction. Um, but I also think there are some relationships that need to be renewed. For instance, we'd buy products from an internal business all over the world as far as Oman, or the East Coast of the United States. And I need to go over there and speak to them because some of the things that you receive as a long away market, or just as market is suboptimal for, they forget about you. So it's very easy to pop up on a computer, but you're normally asleep when they're away. Yeah.

Speaker 2 (01:32):

Good. And, uh, what about trust? So what trust means for you in business and, you know, when you walk with your partners, colleagues trust. Yeah. So what is it for you? What does it mean via

Speaker 1 (01:47):

Via electronic or just in general,

Speaker 2 (01:48):

Like in general, what does it for you?

Speaker 1 (01:51):

Um, so we have some core values in the business that we try to all live by sometimes difficult at times. Um, but the trust has nobody built up over time via someone's real actions when no one's watching. So examples would be when a production facility makes a product and they make it to a standard and we receive it in market, we sell it to a construction and we build something in Auckland, Christchurch, we have it and it doesn't perform. And so they need to trust us that we are investigating and understanding how the product should perform and how it should be installed. And then we need to trust them that they've actually fixed the issue. So it doesn't happen again. So trust is perhaps not given, but EARNED,

Speaker 2 (02:38):

Yeah, so, and, and this form of online format, especially if there's someone you like new relationship or new colleague, uh, and a new plant where you need to start the communication with executives. For example, if it's hard to start building that trust online, you know, if you compare it for starting building trust in the form of the face to face, you know interaction,

Speaker 1 (03:05):

Certainly much harder and not preferred. So I have a new boss and a new CFO. One's German, one's Australian. They both, well one's in Germany, one's in Thailand at the moment. I've never met them before. It's hard to build trust from an electronic platform and non-preferred, but there are things that can help with it. And most times it's perhaps the ability of electronic communication, to be sitted and work at a time that works for them. Versus having them interrupted in what they're doing as well. So the example would be you could send them a minor update and they can probably ring bank on Microsoft teams. Again, that was really interesting. Can you just tell me a bit more about that? So, um, most communication is either about an opportunity or a problem. Very rarely is the communication wide enough to actually encompass. I just want to talk to you about a few ideas. No one really has a time for that. You don't really do this. And so that's what you miss. So you don't get there without electronic media, but you'd do generally in person, especially when there's breaks and meetings or coffee, or, um, sitting down to semi a quick five minute chat. That's not scripted, not based on an agenda and not actually part of the meeting anyway, is the most valuable part of it. If you have a meeting in an electronic fashion anytime. Yeah.

Speaker 2 (04:34):

But when you build a relationship because there are pure business relationship, right. But sometimes you are building that bond with the person you become friends and hang out together, you go for a dinner, for a glass of wine or beer, or maybe even visit your kid's birthday, their weddings. So, and with this reality, so obviously it can not happen for example, if you're in different countries. So do you think it's somehow compromising the whole relationship and the bond you've managed to create or, you know, not having those personal meetings or you're still online, more, this works for you? Well, in this regard,

Speaker 1 (05:20):

On-line would be a very poor second to in person and it always will be. So I definitely think it's not as good. Definitely think it doesn't build the relationship the way it should. Um, in particular with customers, we, we communicate with architects online a lot more. Yeah. The construction element is all face-to-face. Apart from the COVID shutdowns, we were taking COVID precautions, but we were on site in the construction sites. Um, you cannot perhaps have a healthy relationship if you haven't had a lot of face-to-face time. It's more transactional relationship. Right.

Speaker 2 (06:02):

Good. Thank you so much. I think I've got a lot of insights from you. Perfect. I think, yeah, I think we can finish here and thank you so much for your contribution - really appreciate that.