Bachelor's Degree Project

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How do B2B use social media to build trust?

An exploratory study in what aspects create, maintain and destroy inter-organizational trust

Hur använder B2B-företag sociala medier för att bygga förtroende?

En explorativ studie i vilka aspekter som skapar, upprätthåller och förstör interorganisatoriskt förtroende

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How do Swedish B2B use social media to build trust?
- An exploratory study in what aspects create, maintain and destroy inter-organizational trust

Bachelor's degree Project handed in by Elin Adolfsson and Ida Kucera to the University of Skövde, for Bachelor Thesis (BSc) at the Department of Business Administration.

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It is hereby certified that all material in this report, which is not our own, has been clearly identified and that no material is included that was previously used for obtaining another degree.

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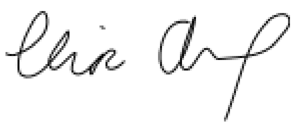 & 

Abstract

Keywords: B2B, inter-organizational, trust, business relationships, social media, transparency, trust creation, trust maintenance, trust destruction

Social media usage in the B2B sector is increasing at a slower rate than B2C and the research literature sends a unanimous message; B2B firms would benefit in multiple ways using social media as a tool when establishing and entertaining business relationships. The concept of trust is proved to be of great importance in the construction of these relationships. With guidance of this thesis' practical contribution, the model The Hourglass of Trust, displaying three categories of trust; creation, maintenance and destruction, this thesis will simultaneously highlight the theoretical contribution: aspects affecting trust, as well as the managerial contribution: aid B2B in social media strategy planning for improved opportunities to build better business relationships on social media.

A key finding and theoretical contribution, is the activity of switching channels from social media to other marketing channels such as email. Some B2B marketers use social media only as a storefront, a one-way promotion tool to create trust in order to reach an audience, create leads, stimulate interest or in the initial contact with another firm and then switch to the usage of other channels like email once the relationship has moved past the trust creation category. This finding is of particular interest since Sweden is a country built upon social trust and has a high social media penetration which may be viewed as counter intuitive when social media is used as a one-way-communication channel such as a storefront. B2B marketers in the empirical findings view social media in a more positive light than earlier research, stating it is a powerful tool for building long-term business relationships.

A second key finding is that personal values are associated with trust creation and trust maintenance in B2B, turning the spotlight from inter-organizational to interpersonal trust.

Future research is encouraged to explore the reason for the switching of channels in B2B SMEs in Sweden as well as further explore the concept of trust in a B2B social media context testing the proposed model, The Hourglass of Trust (Fig. 2).

Sammanfattning

Nyckelord: B2B, interorganisatorisk, förtroende, affärsrelationer, sociala medier, transparens, skapa förtroende, underhålla förtroende, förstöra förtroende.

Användande av sociala medier inom B2B-sektorn ökar i lägre takt än inom B2C och forskningslitteraturens bidrag är unisont; B2B-företag skulle gynnas av att använda sociala medier som verktyg på flera sätt när de etablerar och underhåller affärsrelationer. Konceptet förtroende visar sig ha stor betydelse för att bygga affärsrelationer. Med ledning av uppsatsens praktiska bidrag, modellen The Hourglass of Trust (Fig. 2), som illustrerar tre kategorier av förtroende; skapande, underhåll och förstörelse, belyses uppsatsens teoretiska bidrag; aspekter som påverkar förtroende. Aspekterna kan bidra till den strategiska planeringen av B2B-marknadsföring i sociala medier och öka möjligheten att bygga bättre affärsrelationer.

Ett huvudfynd och teoretiskt bidrag handlar om hur företag byter kanal från sociala medier till andra marknadsföringskanaler såsom mail. En del B2B-marknadsförare använder sociala medier enbart som ett skyltfönster, ett enkelriktat marknadsföringsverktyg för att skapa förtroende genom att nå ut, skapa leads, stimulera intresse eller endast i den inledande kontakten med ett annat företag för att sedan byta kanal och använda till exempel mail istället när relationen tagit sig förbi kategorin skapande av förtroende. Detta fynd är av särskilt intresse då Sverige som land bygger på socialt förtroende där sociala medier även har ett stort genomslag vilket gör att det kan betraktas som motsägelsefullt då sociala medier används som en kanal för envägskommunikation, likt ett skyltfönster. De empiriska resultaten visar att B2B-marknadsförares attityder är mer positiva till sociala medier än tidigare forskning visat och anser att det är ett kraftfullt kostnadseffektivt verktyg för att bygga långsiktiga i affärsrelationer.

Ett andra huvudfynd är att personliga värderingar associeras med att skapa och underhålla förtroende i företagsrelationer, vilket vänder strålkastarljuset från interorganisatoriskt förtroende till interpersonellt förtroende.

Vidare forskning uppmuntras att undersöka orsaken till att svenska B2B SMEs byter kanaler samt vidare undersöka B2B-förtroendet på sociala medier med hjälp av Hourglass of trust.

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1. Introduction

Trust is one of the most elusive and multi-faceted underlying psychological conditions that shapes business relationships (Ashnai et al., 2016). This complex phenomena brushes against every human being and according to scholars across disciplines trust needs two specific conditions to emerge; risk and interdependence. If every action would contain full certainty the concept of trust would never be needed and interdependence is necessary in order to achieve an interest of a party which cannot be achieved alone (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust is vital for succeeding in the business-to-business (B2B) marketing landscape (Ashnai et al., 2016) and social media has provided companies with the opportunity to build stronger relationships beneficial for long-term financial performance (Rose et al., 2021). This paper aims to investigate how B2B use social media to build trust and what aspects contribute to the creation, the maintenance and the destruction of trust between Swedish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) when using social media.

1.1. Problem background

The importance of trust in a B2B context has been explained over the last centuries by numerous researchers in the marketing field as; a key concept in developing long-term business relationships (Ashnai et al., 2016), relationship management (Lasrado et al., 2022), inter-organizational and interpersonal trust (Mouzas et al., 2007), relational selling (Jolson, 1997), relationship marketing (Mulki & Stock, 2003) and the interconnectedness of relational and financial performance (Ahamed & Noboa, 2022). Theories such as the social exchange theory, (SET), have explained how trust is created in relationships in marketing (Homans, 1958, referred to by Lambe et al., 2001). Traditionally, in a B2B context, it is considered trust building when business arrangements are held face-to-face (Sundström et al., 2020; Iankova et al., 2019).

However, with the emergence of digital technology and the Internet, the buying process (Steward et al., 2019) and business models in B2B have changed (Ritter & Pedersen, 2019) and firms have focused on digital transformation during the last few years as it has been proven to improve relationships through a personalized experience and information transference between business partners which is said to enhance trust (Lasrado et al., 2022).

The use of social media increases worldwide (Sundström et al., 2020) and this has opened up an opportunity for companies to interact in a faster and more effective way with customers and, consequently, deepened relationships (Rose et al., 2021). Focus has, over the recent years, been placed upon the relationship between companies and the buying end consumer, business-to-consumer (B2C) (Lashgari et al., 2018) which is confirmed by (Wang et al., 2017) also stating that B2B-marketing still has work to do when it comes to reaching the full potential of using social media.

1.2. Problem formulation

In B2B marketing, trust and commitment are interrelated, trust is accepted as an established key concept in developing long-term business relationships with a perpetuating effect on several positive outcomes, such as success and expectation of continuity (Ashnai et al., 2016). According to Ahamed & Noboa (2022) there is a positive connection between relationship performance and financial performance which gives implications that trust is linked to economic profit. Long-term B2B relationships are crucial as they provide cost-effectiveness and bring value to the organizations (Rose et al., 2021). Further, if the long-term economic exchange is highlighted, the ties between the involved parties become stronger (AlHussainan et al., 2022).

The complexity of B2B relations has made marketers perceive the use of social media as irrelevant (Eck & Johansson, 2020) with the assumption that it would need a different approach for B2B than B2C, concerns of leakage of confidential information (Iankova et al., 2019), that social media lack the ability to build and maintain long-term B2B relationships and that the ease of use is considered low (Lacka & Chong). Marketers also show signs of skepticism where the question of profitability arises in regards to social media as a trust building tool in B2B relationships (Lashgari et al., 2018). These perceptions result in negative attitudes towards social media usage and marketers in B2B discard it.

The negative attitudes toward social media could be interpreted as peculiar when there is research that supports the benefits of adopting social media as a strategy tool in B2B. Opportunities like building trust on social media would be lost if not adopted and used.

B2B could furthermore build and enhance relationships by using social media in several ways such as through personal communication, support and the providing of relevant content which in turn enables trust (Karampela et al., 2019). The correct use of social media can enhance business relationships and contribute to the building of trust (Sundström et al., 2020).

Due to the negative attitudes compared to the stated benefits of using social media in B2B-marketing to build trust displayed in the literature, there is a gap in the adoption of social media in B2B.

Lasting relationships is a core feature of a successful business and even though B2B state that they would rather do business face-to-face, firms could gain by adopting a cross-channel strategy, learning how to combine face-to-face and social media (Sundström et al., 2020; Karampela et al., 2020). In order to thrive in an ever more growing competition B2B needs to adapt to social media in order to compete (Eck & Johansson, 2020).

In summary, trust has been shown to be a key factor for successful long-term B2B relationships which can lead to enhanced financial performance (Ahamed & Noboa, 2022). Attitudes toward using social media as a marketing tool and to build trust are in general negative (Iankova et al., 2019; Lacka & Chong, 2016). There has been extensive research investigating the impact social media has on a B2C setting and limited empirical research of the same in the B2B context, providing limited understanding (Iankova et al., 2019; Karampela et al., 2020). A large portion of economic transactions is created by B2B (Karampela et al., 2020) providing incentives for further research. Moreover there is a need for providing marketers with information on whether social media could be used to build trust in B2B relationships and if this is the case, what aspects affect the creation, maintenance and destruction of trust in B2B relationships on social media (Zhang & Li, 2019; Lacka & Chong, 2016).

In order to provide better conditions for understanding trust in a social media environment in a B2B context a model is proposed; The Hourglass of Trust (Fig. 2). The model provides a holistic overview of what aspects could affect the creation, maintenance and destruction of trust with trust creation representing the upper part of the model, filling up the hourglass, trust maintenance the middle section and trust destruction representing the lower part of the model.

1.3. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore what aspects affect inter-organizational trust in B2B social media marketing. Following research questions will be used in order to support the purpose.

RQ 1 - What aspects create trust in B2B using social media?

RQ 2 - What aspects maintain trust in B2B using social media?

RQ 3 - What aspects destroy trust in B2B using social media?

1.4. Delimitation

The thesis will exclude B2C relationships and marketing, this concept will only be used in the description of the differences in social media usage. Focus will be on inter-organizational trust and less focus on interpersonal. Geographical distance as a variable - if geographical distance has an effect on social media importance for communication will not be discussed. No difference is made between supplier or customer in the empirical data. No particular social media platform will be emphasized. This thesis will look into attitudes and usage, however, the technology acceptance model (TAM) will not be used as a ground theory since this thesis focuses on trust. Enterprise social media will not be studied.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this research will focus on the three main concepts; trust, social media and B2B. It will start with trust and its definition followed by Social Exchange Theory (SET) as the ground theory, explaining inter-organizational relationships. Thereafter the three main categories derived from the literature and the base for the methodology are presented; trust creation, trust maintenance and trust destruction. Then chapters about B2B containing the concepts of inter-organizational trust and interpersonal trust are further examined. The third and final part of the theoretical framework presents social media in B2B context.

2.1. Trust

This chapter will introduce previous research containing SET, the definition of trust, interpersonal and inter-organizational trust, trust creation, maintenance and destruction-aspects found in literature. Trust is the core concept of this thesis purpose and is therefore explained with a main focus on inter-organizational trust since B2B is the objective.

Trust is a critical component in the building and maintenance of long-term business relationships (Ashnai et al., 2016; Sundström et al., 2020; Karampela et al., 2020) with the evidence of increased financial performance as an outcome (Ahamed & Noboa, 2022). Behavioral attributes of business relationships act as a link between the outcomes (Ashnai et al., 2016) which strengthens the relevance and the need for exploring what aspects affect trust between firms .

Researchers in different fields of economics, psychology and sociology define trust according to their perspectives. A broad definition of trust across fields is:

"Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another."

- Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395

For trust to exist two conditions are vital: risk and interdependence. There must be a risk involved in trusting the other part that makes the party vulnerable and a willingness to take said risk (Rousseau et al., 1998). From another perspective, SET, the perceived risk and interdependence could be seen as the exchange of intangible or tangible resources with the belief that it will be rewarding (Lambe, et al., 2001) where risk is described as a leap of faith (Zaheer et al., 1998). Mouzas et al. (2007) states that according to SET, long-term business relationships can exist without trust, that is, in business areas where the need for strict controls are necessary which is similar to what Rousseau et al., (1998) states, that if the same action or process could be done without any risk or uncertainty, trust is not required.

The interdependence between the two parties arises from the mutual interest in an action or process that can not be carried out without the other party. As the level of trust in a relationship evolves the interdependence and risk changes, often making the perceived risk smaller as the interdependence increases (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Zaheer et al. (1998) defines the trust concept as; "*expectation that an actor (1) can be relied on to fulfill obligations . . . , (2) will behave in a predictable manner, and (3) will act and negotiate fairly when the possibility for opportunism is present."* (p. 143). This definition provides space for the idea of betrayal occurring, which could also be considered risk, as a natural part of trust and includes the element of uncertainty.

Trust is considered a psychological state that researchers agree is inconstant, the level of trust varies with perceived risk, interdependence and time. Trust is often divided in three phases (Rousseau et al., 1998), this thesis aims to examine what aspects affect the different phases of trust by defining what creates trust, maintains trust and destroys trust. Other researchers' definitions on the three phases are defined in respective chapters (2.1.2. Trust creation; 2.1.3. Trust maintenance; 2.1.4. Trust destruction) to further examine what aspects affect trust and the building of a trustful business relationship in a B2B context; what creates, maintains and destroys trust will be investigated.

Risk is also used as a parameter when referring to the relationships between organizations (Mouzas et al., 2007). A key component in the construction of a successful business relationship is the concept of trust and Ashnai et al. (2016) constructed an attitude-behavior-outcome framework mainly built on the SET and transaction cost economics which would provide the opportunity to isolate and study specific aspects of business relationships, in this case the aspect of trust. Two operation levels were presented; interpersonal trust level and inter-organizational trust level and the study revealed how the operations were related as well as how they affect business relationships, each with their own unique role.

This thesis focuses on trust in B2B, hence the theoretical focus derives from economics but perspectives from other fields are still of relevance since trust is a multi-dimensional concept (Ashnai et al., 2016).

2.1.1. Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social exchange theory is used as ground theory in this research to provide understanding of the social exchange when exploring inter-organizational trust since the purpose of this thesis is to explore trust in relationships in a B2B context in social media. The use of SET aids this thesis by concentrating on the multifaceted concept of trust, zooming in on business relationships with social and economical exchanges (Lambe et al., 2001).

SET is well established and has been used diligently by researchers in the marketing field when trying to explain exchange in relationships in a B2B context (Lambe et al., 2001). This can also be explained and understood as "*social behavior as a series of transactions"* (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014, p. 403) but the difference from economic transactions is that "*social exchange is voluntary"* (p. 403) and furthermore it requires a human connection where both self interest and interdependence are involved.

SET focuses on social interaction between two parties who have established a goal of advantageous economic outcome (AlHussainan et al., 2022). However, SET assumes people do not always try to maximize rewards or minimize costs or that this will be done at the expense of other people hence fairness is part of SET (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014), the assumption that opportunistic behavior does not exist is a limitation with using SET to explain business relationships (Lambe et al., 2001). The interaction between individuals is considered the activity of resource exchange, tangible or intangible, and the general assumption is that the desire to enter and maintain a relationship is due to the belief that it will be rewarding (Ashnai et al., 2016; Lambe et al., 2001).

SET has its origin in sociology and psychology and the parties involved in a social exchange relationship judge both economic and social outcomes when deciding if it is satisfying which is also compared to some alternatives. In social exchanges trust is the most important component (Ashnai et al., 2016; Lambe et al., 2001) which originates in social obligations rather than in contracts and it is stated that "*Positive economic and social outcomes over time increase the partners' trust of each other and commitment to maintaining the exchange relationship"* (Lambe et al., 2001, p. 6).

In contrast with the above stated that SET allows for fairness some relationships are considered selfless and cannot be explained by SET, like altruism (Blau, 1956, referred to by Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014). People are also thought of as being more irrational in contrast to how SET portrays people for example in a relationship with high inequity where one party can go on for long periods of time without rewards (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014).

2.1.2. Trust creation

"(1) building (where trust is formed or reformed)"

Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 396

The first phase in the creation of trust, or the emergence of trust, Rousseau et al. (1998) use the term building for when trust is formed or reformed.

Commitment and trust as an interconnected unit is considered central to business relationships and is defined as the aspiration from a buyer to form a stable relationship with confidence in the supplier (Ashnai et al., 2016). Both trust and commitment can increase due to the immediacy and responsiveness provided by social media communication between parties (Cheng et al., 2022). Reciprocity is a cornerstone of B2B relationships and it is defined by parties helping each other and not harming those who show support (AlHussainan et al., 2022). Reciprocity and fairness are also prevalent in SET (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014).

One goal in B2B is to establish relationships with customers through incidental similarities which translates into the sharing of information that reveals no particular relevance like a shared birthday. This strategy can work in favor of sales and since B2B and influencers both work with the similarity concept it could mean B2B salespeople could create a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship and identification leading to a better rapport when acting like influencers by interacting on social media (Cheng et al., 2023). A study by Karampela et al. (2020) reveals that a business responsiveness on social media positively influences commitment. Based on these summarized findings trust creation categories have been extracted as follows:

- confidence and desire
- reciprocity
- immediacy and responsiveness
- similarity concept

2.1.3. Trust maintenance

"(2) stability (where trust already exists)"

- Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 396

Rousseau et al. (1998) further discusses that if researchers recognize that trust is not a static phenomena but a dynamic that changes over time.

A business partner is willing to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the business relationship (Ashnai et al., 2016). Lambe et al. (2001) states that interdependence is necessary for the continuance of a social exchange relationship and that parties will continue to stay in the relationship as long as satisfactory rewards continue, suggested by SET (Lambe et al., 2001). Based on these summarized findings, trust maintenance categories have been extracted as follows:

- short-term sacrifices
- interdependence
- continuance of satisfactory rewards

2.1.4. Trust destruction

"(3) dissolution (where trust declines)"

- Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 396

A power imbalance will bring instability to a relationship, prohibiting interdependence (Lambe et al., 2001). Strict controls are an obstacle for trust to be created and pass for a signal of disbelief in the other party, this as well as betrayal can destroy or decrease an already existing level of trust the other party had (Rousseau et al., 1998). Although high risk business where strict controls are mandatory, long-term business relationships can exist without trust (Mouzas et al., 2007). If the parties have highly divergent goals it can result in endless haggling and conflicts, wasting both economic and psychic resources (Lambe et al., 2001). Based on these summarized findings trust destruction categories have been extracted as follows:

- strict controls
- power imbalance in social exchange relationship
- highly divergent goals

2.2. Inter-organizational and interpersonal trust

Researchers propose that business relationships are constructed of and understood by applying both inter-organizational trust, based on rationality (Mouzas et al., 2007) and interpersonal trust, based on emotions (Ashnai et al., 2016; Mouzas et al., 2007) This thesis aims to explore trust as a component of business relationships which provides relevance to these two concepts of trust.

Mouzas et al. (2007) claims that both inter-organizational and interpersonal trust is necessary in order to understand the concept of business relationships. Trust in interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships has essential differences emerging from the different objectives on why trust is needed (Rousseau et al., 1998). According to Mouzas et al. (2007) interpersonal trust plays a role but is not adequate in the creation of business relationships because of its incapability in capturing organizations objectives and interests. Zaheer et al. (1998) supports that interpersonal trust must be considered when studying inter firm ties and that it is the organization members who trust and not the organizations themselves. A positive effect between inter-organizational trust and interpersonal trust has also been supported through the work of Ahamed & Noboa (2022).

Zaheer et al. (1998) defines interpersonal trust as "*the trust placed by the individual boundary spanner in her individual opposite member"* (p. 142). Interpersonal trust is derived from the people in the company, based on emotions (Ashnai et al., 2016).

Information can be interpreted differently depending on who the sender is: *"The source of a message (i.e. the salesperson) could be equally important as the message per se"* (Zhang & Li, 2019, p. 1421).

Researchers comprise inter-organizational trust of three components; predictability, fairness and reliability. It is constructed of *"confidence or predictability in one's expectations about another's behavior, and confidence in another's goodwill."* (Zaheer et al., 1998, p. 143). Inter-organizational trust is a pure cognitive concept due to the lack of emotions (Mouzas et al., 2007) and is further defined as trust derived from the company as a whole, based on rationality. However, studies have also shown that as a buyer, the trust is dependent on if the personal representative from the supplier is perceived as honest and benevolent, thus the level of inter-organizational trust is based on interpersonal trust (Ashnai et al., 2016). This is confirmed in a recent study conducted by Sundström et al. (2020) in a Swedish B2B in which customers almost only used emotional terms eg. friendliness and affection, connected to employees or owners, when asked to describe why they perceived their relationship with the case company as very good, few of them portraying the company as a whole or mentioning it by the company name.

"It's an amazing company in every way, it's a firm we cannot live without in our world."
- Sundström et al., 2020, Appendix Table A1.

Risk reduction is a benefit for enterprises derived from inter-organizational trust since there are beforehand ways of problem solving and the need for monitoring for safeguarding in the relationship is erased (Ashnai et al., 2016).

2.3. Social media

This section will present social media usage containing the definition of social media, attitudes and usage towards social media, differences in using social media B2B & B2C, social media strategies, social media presence and content categories. Social media is a core concept of this thesis due to the purpose which is to explore B2B trust on social media.

2.3.1. Definition of social media

In order to provide a structured view of social media as a phenomenon, this study will display two categories as presented by Wang et al. (2017); public social media and enterprise social media. Public social media can also be called social media sites (SMS) (Karampela et al., 2020).

Public social media is presented as three categories by Wang et al. (2017, p. 1128); social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin) web based community (e.g. brand community, chat rooms) and virtual world (e.g. World of warcraft). Enterprise social media is divided into three categories; enterprise-owned social media (e.g. firm website, firm blog, inter-organizational systems and intranet communication tools) enterprise social bookmarking systems and enterprise wikis.

Email is however not considered social media and is instead separated through its distribution mechanism as opposed to social media which is viewed as having a collective, collaborative mechanism. Email is considered a mass communication tool but does not have a collaborative mechanism (Bradley, 2010). It is also thought of as more personalized, directed explicitly to a person (Digmark, 2022).

2.3.2. Attitudes & social media usage

To understand whether marketers in B2B choose to use social media as a tool or not, the attitude towards social media usage is considered as the perceived ease of use and usefulness are important when predicting if a person would actually use a technology (Dixit & Prakash, 2018). Knowledge on how and why social media should be used is furthermore significant for owners and employees to adopt it as useful and to be able to create the right type of content (Sundström et al., 2020; Lacka & Chong, 2016).

Historically literature reveals slow adoption of social media in B2B settings (Lacka & Chong, 2016). The use of social media in B2B is traditionally neglected, prioritizing face-to-face encounters that are perceived as being a better option when building trust and long-term relations because of the complexity of B2B offers (Sundström et al., 2020). This is supported by Iankova et al. (2019) who states that face-to-face selling is still the major communication tool even if a small portion of communication actually takes place in person. Boyd and Spekman (2004, as cited by Sundström et al., 2020) went as far as stating that strong B2B relationships can not be built on the internet or social media. However, 20 years has passed since this statement was made and considering the wide use and advanced strategies used by big businesses (Lashgari et al., 2018) the statement might be outdated.

"Customers can now interact with a supplier's brand via a variety of online tools, which can mimic two-way supplier-customer communication."

- Karampela et al., 2020, p. 1284

Eck & Johansson (2020) states that B2B marketers display an overall positive attitude toward social media and reveal that a majority of the informants in the study expressed a very positive attitude toward social media as tools in a marketing context and that they expressed a wish for more usage in their firm. These overall positive attitudes are challenged by researchers (Cole et al., 2017; Lacka & Chong, 2016; Iankova et al., 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018) and some of them are stating that marketers perceive social media as irrelevant for B2B, that it has poor usability, low usefulness and utility, and comes with the concerns of the risk for confidential information leakage (Lacka & Chong, 2016; Iankova et al., 2019). The skeptic attitudes toward marketing and advertising are furthermore more common the more knowledge an individual has in marketing, both knowledge from higher education and from experience (Cole et al., 2017).

The negative attitudes toward social media prevents B2B marketers from adopting social media (Lacka & Chong, 2016; Iankova et al., 2019) due to the lack of trust in it as a marketing tool (Lashgari et al., 2018; Bocconcelli et al., 2017) since the social media design makes it hard to get through the noise and to create and maintain trust (Sundström et al., 2020). Although it is said that social media can improve business relationships, social media is seen as only a supportive tool since it is perceived as difficult to incorporate into the digital marketing mix (Iankova et al., 2019). Despite the marketers' perceptions leading to slow adoption, there is research acknowledging social media as a marketing tool in B2B (Sundström et al., 2020; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). However, using social media as a sell-only-channel is "*a sure way to slowly die on the network"* (Sundström et al., 2020, p. 461).

Research findings of the ease of use and usefulness of social media in B2B are describing several advantages with adoption such as offering opportunities for networking, connecting and working on relationships effectively (Sundström et al., 2020; Karampela et al., 2019; Odoom et al., 2017), relationship marketing to establish (Sundström et al., 2020), develop and maintain successful long-term business relationships at a low cost (Sundström et al., 2020; Karampela et al., 2020) compared to other marketing channels (Lashgari et al., 2018). Furthermore social media provides cost effective opportunities such as low cost advertising, fast communication and a wide reach of audience (Eck & Johansson, 2020).

The previously mentioned perceptions of difficulties in using (Lacka & Chong, 2016) and incorporating social media as other than a supporting tool (Iankova et al., 2019), are in contrast to other research findings that claim social media has low participation barriers that are enabled by the ease of use and mobility (Karampela et al., 2019; Odoom et al., 2017).

B2B use social media to build and develop relationships to enable trust such as to convey relevant content to their customers, give rise to new leads (Karampela et al., 2020), push traffic to homepage to create customer engagement (Iankova et al., 2019), offer customer support, create brand awareness and build and enhance business relationships through personal communication (Karampela et al., 2020). Eck and Johansson (2020), on the other hand, states that it is not considered relevant when communicating in B2B as these interactions are considered complex.

In conclusion, the research stating that marketers have a positive attitude toward using social media in B2B is limited. The results further show that the marketers with a positive attitude expressed skepticism towards the same subjects as those with negative attitude, thus, further research is needed to support Eck and Johansson's (2020) result. Meanwhile the negative attitudes toward using social media in B2B are common in marketing and marketers generally perceive social media as being of low importance and merely as a supportive tool that can enhance relationships. However, there is still a large gap between the potential and the actual use of channels (Iankova et al., 2019) and a dissonance in researchers' findings of the reason behind negative attitudes and findings on the arguments for adopting social media in B2B to build trust, enhance relationships and better financial performance.

2.3.3. Differences in using social media B2B & B2C

There is a gap between the adoption and the using of social media as a strategic marketing tool in B2C compared to B2B which gives relevance to the explanation of why that is. Social media has been extensively researched in a B2C context resulting in the development of constructs that have been applied to a consumer's way of life. This is *not the case in the B2B context even though relationship theories from this domain have entered the consumer context where it is encouraged to switch from a transactional to a relational model where trust and commitment are important parts (Iankova et al., 2019).*

B2C firms have adopted social media as a strategic tool faster than those of B2B and the reason for this is B2B firms often see a challenge with integrating social media into a digital marketing mix, claiming the B2B sector is in need of different theories due to differences in social media usage compared to B2C (Iankova et al., 2019). The complexity of B2B relations has made marketers perceive the use of social media as irrelevant with the assumption that it would need a different approach for B2B than B2C (Lacka & Chong, 2016).

It is argued that social media use differs between B2C and B2B in more than one way; B2B customers are producing and are not considered an end consumer and B2B customers typically make large purchases based on specific and multiple criteria made by a network of people instead of a single individual (Sombultawee & Wattantorn, 2022).

A study made by Andersson & Wikström (2017) revealed that B2B companies did not use social media primarily for conversation promotion but as a way *to present selected content for targeted stakeholders* (p. 1101). The differences in usage are also prevalent in a study by Rose et al. (2021) arguing that there are distinctive differences in the buying behavior in B2B customers which affects the way social media is used in this context compared to the consumer market. Some characteristics of the buying behavior in B2B markets include more people involved in purchases and purchase decisions, longer purchase cycles, complex products of high value that naturally comes with larger risk and a higher knowledge about the context in which the products are to be used. These characteristics result in an intensity and also in a more personal relationship in B2B markets (Rose et al., 2021).

2.3.4. Social media strategies

Strategies in social media present a relevance in this thesis due to the question on how to use social media in order to interlock face-to-face communication with the social media communication channel. This is to benefit from potential opportunities for *creating relationships and furthermore trust (Sundström et al., 2020; Lacka & Chong, 2016).*

A strategy can be used to standardize decision making, gain competitive advantages, find new opportunities, protect the position on the market and simplify workflow by setting objectives (Pentina & Koh., 2012).

A recent study from Cheng et al. (2022) shows that B2B adopt social media strategies similar to those of social media influencers to create value sales where they use curated content partly to capture the attention of prospects but mainly to understand the prospects' needs and preferences through observing their interaction with said curated content. The two-way communication between salesperson and customer provides a high level of responsiveness and immediacy which could lead to increase in trust (Cheng et al., 2022). However, if companies fail to reply or don't reply fast enough to comments on social media posts, it can lead to negative emotions even if the person who wrote the comments is aware that that particular post had a high number of comments from others (Sundström et al., 2020).

The correct use of social media can further enhance business relationships and contribute to building trust. Business people can become more invested in social media activities when content is designed with the intention to communicate shared values and authenticity, with authenticity being the most effective element for creating emotional involvement (Sundström et al., 2020). This signals that in order to build a strong social media strategy businesses need not only decide on what content to post but also be agile and ready to interact to avoid one-way communication and use the two-way communication to gather information and build trust.

Sundström et al., (2020) show significant differences in the performance of different content categories which implies that social media content categories are of importance for the purpose of this study since it can influence user engagement and inter-organizational trust if it is generated in ways that are perceived as informational, user-generated, interactive, entertaining and transparent. Being transparent is showing integrity by presenting information that is authentic which creates trust and provides validity (Borglund et al., 2021).

A post with a value-based message that communicates shared values is likely to be remembered and to generate shares from others', generating reach since the shared values are emotional cues. Sundström et al., (2020) investigated three social media content categories effect on trust, the category that was found to create the most engagement in all measured values was a video (Vinga, 2019[1], as cited in Sundström et al., 2020) with the aim to create a post that was authentic, based on honesty, empathy and transparency. Comments on social media and responses in the researchers survey praised their authenticity, said it made an impression, was engaging, created emotions and that they felt they got to know the company.

The results further revealed that to be present by just using a static social media profile with no specific goal is not enough. An active presence on social media is required in order to benefit from the creation and maintenance of trust and by reminding the other part of your existence and to increase reach, the firm can create and maintain business relationships (Sundström et al., 2020). If a buyer is frequently exposed to updated information this can furthermore be interpreted as a high willingness to maintain the business relationship (Zhang & Li, 2019). Ashnai et al., (2016); defines information sharing as "*the extent to which the buyer openly shares information with the supplier that may be useful to the relationship"* (p. 131).

Commenting on other companies' social media posts and providing support that is personal and customized creates interpersonal trust and loyalty that is further transmitted to inter-organizational trust which motivates continuous use of social media as a communication tool that should be in the marketing strategy (Zhang & Li, 2019). Encouraging an online participatory culture on social media by asking for suggestions or opinions is a way of creating engagement which can lead to an increased number of comments, likes and shares that increases reach. The weak spot of co-creation is the lack of control of who's participating (Sundström et al., 2020).

[1] https://www.linkedin.com/posts/vinga-sweden_vi-beh%C3%B6ver-din-hj%C3%A4lp-v%C3%A5r-produkt-vinga-activity-6572819604152954880-2Utn?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

3. Methodology

The methodology chapter begins with a description of the choices of research design and strategy. Thereafter, the methods for data collection, followed by the interview guide and selection. After that a walkthrough of the data analysis, a thematic analysis. Finally, the trustworthiness, ethical considerations and method criticism are introduced.

3.1. Research design

The method of gaining primary information was qualitative. Based on previous research, the emphasis in this thesis lies in gathering insights and understanding of how social media is used to create, maintain and destroy the complex concept of trust in Swedish B2B SMEs. This thesis is based upon previous research on trust, social media and B2B which have been researched extensively as separate subjects but not simultaneously as a holistic approach of the creation, maintenance and destruction of trust, which provides little reason for quantitative research examining propositions or hypotheses in a logical and structured process that ends up in rejection or acceptance of the hypotheses (Ghauri et al., 2020; Bell et al., 2021; Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014).

The workflow in this thesis was inductive reasoning through the gathering of empirical data in a subject with limited previous research to analyze similarities or differences in and between the results and theoretical framework. Induction means to "*draw general conclusions from our empirical observations*" (Ghauri et al., 2020, p. 18). This thesis aims to improve the theory of the phases from Rousseau et al. (1998) which also gives another reason for why the inductive process is chosen. Another type of process, which is a logical one, is called deductive reasoning which is a more suitable choice when something is considered true and a conclusion is to be made from this truth or in other words, "*the consequences of a theory*" (Ghauri et al., 2020, p. 20).

The research design of this study is exploratory. An exploratory viewpoint could be beneficial when the research is limited and the lack of understanding (Ghauri et al., 2020) creates a somewhat unstructured research process (Bell et al, 2021; Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014). It could also be useful when exploring basic information of a theme and when extracting concepts that could be used in further research with a more structured research design (Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014). Exploratory research design is good to look at the research questions and findings in a flexible way and the authors of this thesis claim to have gained the experience from life and work experience together with higher education (at University of Skövde or/and University of Borås) to possess what Ghauri et al. (2020) mentions as key skills for explorative research: *"the ability to observe, collect information and construct explanations, that is theorizing"* (p. 65). If the study was of a specific structure, procedure or a cause-and-effect, a descriptive or causal design would have been more adequate (Ghauri et al., 2020).

3.2. Research strategy

The research strategy was designed to answer the purpose and research questions. The exploratory design is suitable when studying a research problem that is less understood or there is limited previous research, which is also what makes a qualitative strategy, semi-structured interviews, suitable (Ghauri et al., 2020).

Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to be flexible in asking follow up questions and for example providing a more accurate understanding (Lind, 2017; Ghauri et al., 2022). The choice fell on semi-structured interviews with predetermined questions to provide flexibility to the interviews. This meant that interviewers as well as respondents could ask follow-up questions for clarification, ensured that the questions were understood by the respondents and created the opportunity to generate stories with given examples which gave a clearer picture of what aspects affects trust. Lind (2017), defines an interview as *"a conversation with a purpose"* (p. 127). The choice of method aims, as previously stated, to obtain detailed explanations and also an insight and understanding (Ghauri et al., 2020) of which aspects are important for the creation, maintenance and destruction of trust in B2B in social media. A quantitative research strategy, as structured survey, would have been a better choice if the research purpose and questions aimed to verify or test a hypothesis that could be measured or controlled, giving an objective result (Ghauri et al., 2020).

3.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with predetermined questions were used for this study where different themes are highlighted. With the theoretical foundation of secondary data, mainly based on research articles accessed through the University of Skövde, the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix C.) was formulated with valid questions to obtain stories from managers or marketers in B2B companies. Stories and descriptions on how and why are needed to create a greater understanding and gain insights (Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014; Bell et al., 2021). Another type of data collection technique is through observations which is suitable when the goal of the research is to interpret social behavior (Ghauri et al., 2020). This could have been a suitable tool for a less abstract concept than trust since trust can not be directly observed. Furthermore observations are used in a natural setting (Ghauri et al., 2020) which was not possible due to limited time hence video conference tool was used for time efficiency. It is also stated that it is hard to translate what is happening in an observation in order to provide useful scientific information (Ghauri et al., 2020) and since this thesis purpose is to explore what effects trust, this cannot be done without the verbal communication from respondents, like for example expressing honesty.

Literature search was conducted through the databases accessible through The University of Skövde[2] library and Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet (DiVA)[3] together with book search on Legimus[4] and physical books owned by the authors of this thesis. Furthermore some articles relevant to marketing and some definitions were searched online. Tools for translating was Google translate[5] and Thesaurus[6] for finding relevant synonyms. Secondary sources derived from research articles were used as well. To evaluate the trustworthiness of the sources, taking into consideration the contemporary requirement, bias and authenticity, more than one source were used for nuance and balance as advised by Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul (2014) and Ulrichsweb[7] was used for peer reviewing of the articles.

3.3.1. Interview guide

The interviews were prepared through operationalization which is adequate when studying a concept as trust that isn't a directly observable process (Ghauri et al., 2020).

[2] Högskolebiblioteket (2020). Högskolan i Skövde. https://www.his.se/biblioteket/
[3] DiVA (v. 2.39.0). http://diva-portal.org/
[4] Legimus (n.d.) https://www.legimus.se
[5] Google translate (n.a). https://translate.google.se/
[6] Synonyms and antonyms of words (2023). Dictionary.com, LLC. https://www.thesaurus.com/
[7] Ulrichsweb (2023) ProQuest LLC. https://ulrichsweb-serialssolutions-com.libraryproxy.his.se/

The operationalization is presented in Appendix A. Table 1 and the Interview guide in Appendix C.

Operationalization helps ensure that the interview guide is constructed with valid support from the theoretical framework, the problem background and problem formulation (Ghauri et al., 2020). To gather as much information as possible and to avoid misunderstandings, the interview guide was designed to include only valid questions that were meaningful and easy to understand. The questions about cooperation on social media are derived from the content category *Co-creation* in Sundström et al. (2020). Their empirical findings were interpreted by the authors to in fact have cooperation as a core subject since the researchers used co-creation with the notion that it was cooperation.

Furthermore, an introduction was written to avoid social desirability bias, emphasizing that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions and that the focus is on respondents' individual experiences to prevent the desire to answer according to what is seen as socially acceptable (Graeff, 2005). In addition, the first question in the interview, Part 1, explicitly mentions social media in an effort to get informants to focus on B2B relationships rather than face-to-face relationships. Words throughout the entire interview guide were chosen carefully trying to deplete bias. The interview guides were further discussed between the authors, testing them on each other and with the supervisor and being compared to other researchers' question formulations.

Informants received a copy of the interview guide in advance of the interview, so they could review the questions if they wanted (Bell et al., 2021).

3.3.2. Technology used

To provide efficiency and cost-effectiveness the interviews would be carried out through phone or preferably video calls on Zoom, which also followed recommendations by Ghauri et al. (2020) *"to create a situation where the respondent willingly offers time"* (p. 119), assuming it would be less time-consuming for informants to do the interviews on remote, saving time and money. Video calls were also used to provide better conditions for observations. There was an awareness of the possible technical issues that could arise such as fluctuations in Internet connection which could affect the transcriptions (Bell et al., 2021).

3.3.3. Selection

The selection of informants in this study consists of seven owners or marketers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in B2B from the middle of Sweden. The following subtitles SMEs, Swedish B2Bs and Informants describe what makes the selection an interesting research subject to the purpose and research questions.

3.3.3.1. SMEs

The European Commission’s definition of SMEs (Table 2. SME definition) is used to define SME. If defined by the number of employees, the companies are in the smaller range of SMEs, from micro to small companies. If defined by turnover, the companies are from micro to medium-sized.

Table 2. SME definition	Employees	Turnover
Micro-company	< 10	< €2 million
Small company	< 50	< €10 million
Medium-sized	< 250	< €50 million
(EU Commission Recommendation (EU) 2003/361)		

SMEs were chosen because of the important role they play in the Swedish labor market, with a large part of the Swedish GDP (Kotler et al., 2017) and 60% of revenue. Moreover, of the 1,2 million active companies in Sweden, 99,9% are SMEs (Tillväxtverket, 2023). Social media aids in the establishing of relationships via communication and since SMEs are businesses in a perpetual transformation process with the objective of growth which is reached through long-term relationships (Karampela et al., 2020), SMEs are furthermore selected according to that logic.

3.3.3.2. Swedish B2Bs

Sweden is a country with high internet penetration, 100% of Swedish SMEs have access to the internet (SCB, 2022) which leads to the assumption that the empirical findings could be representative for Swedish SMEs since all of them have the opportunity to use the internet and therefore social media. In the middle of Sweden, 76-81% SMEs use social media (SCB, 2021), the usage percentage could be viewed as surprising when the resistance in attitude towards using social media is evidently high in the B2B research, questioning its credibility and sustainability (Bocconcelli et al., 2017). This could be understood as Sweden being a country with a high level of interpersonal trust (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2020) paired with a high usage of digital technologies such as the Internet (SCB, 2022).

3.3.3.3. Informants

The selection of informants were made strategically to gain insights from people with experience (Lind, 2017) of inter-organizational trust work on social media as owners, managers or marketers of Swedish SME B2Bs, an equal gender distribution was the aim.

Since trust can be a delicate subject due to it having an emotional component (Zaheer et al., 1998), respondents that had some previous connection to the authors were chosen with the assumption of the respondents feeling more at ease talking openly about their experiences. Companies whose managers met the previously described selection criterias; Swedish B2B SME owners or marketers with experience from working with B2B social media, were contacted by the authors on social media with the invitation to participate in interviews.

Saturation is used as a guideline when deciding sample size with results across 16 tests showing 5-24 interviews as a recommended sample size. Theoretical saturation is defined as *"the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical construct reveals no new properties, nor yields any further theoretical insights"* (Hennink & Kaiser 2021, p. 1). The ambition for this thesis was therefore, in the light of the literature mentioned above, to collect data from 6-10 respondents as this number of interviews would provide sufficient data that captures diversity, nuances and depth to demonstrate validity of content, within the given timeframe.

3.4. Data analysis

Inductive reasoning is chosen to be able to form a general proposition based on the empirical data and theoretical framework (Ghauri et al., 2020).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed from an audio or video file to text, using Microsoft Word online software and then manually corrected whilst listening to the recording. The transliterations were sent to the informants who could add information or corrections if needed and approve of the transcription to add validity (Bell et al., 2021) and reliability. Afterwards data reduction was performed in order for the data to become systematically manageable manually to extract relevant key points to the conceptualization (Ghauri et al., 2020) core category trust and three labels of trust; creation, maintenance, destruction. Conceptualization is useful in this case, when the decision of the labels are made beforehand but wouldn't have worked with a quantitative method testing a hypothesis. The non-standardized reduced key points were to be placed under each label to be able to see patterns and deviations, with the understanding that more labels could emerge during the analysis process (Ghauri et al., 2022).

3.5. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as it is a common approach to data analysis in qualitative research and this thesis will treat a theme the same as a category. A theme is considered an identified category that is built upon transcripts or field notes which provides understanding of the collected data and the opportunity to look for patterns (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The thematic analysis approach was also chosen as it can use theory to provide opportunities to create relevant categories that supports the research questions which was the case of deciding on the three main categories: trust creation, trust maintenance and trust destruction and furthermore its original 11 sub categories, all inspired from the literature. Two of the categories, risk reduction and interdependence, were placed to show they worked in both trust creation and trust maintenance to support the idea of Rousseau et al. (1998) that trust needs both risk and interdependence to exist. The added categories, those outside the three main categories, were also derived from the literature and were added to provide a wider understanding to support the purpose as attitudes toward social media and usage affect the decision whether or not to use social media in a B2B marketing.

The empirical data was coded in three steps where step one involved summarizing and categorizing expressions by extracting relevant expressions from each separate respondent using the transliterations. These expressions were placed in one of 43 sub categories derived from the theoretical framework and interpreted as either trust creation, trust maintenance or trust destruction.

Step two included sorting out core concepts by summarizing the most prominent expressions which were placed in the same 43 sub categories and once again interpreted as either trust creation, trust maintenance or trust destruction. One of the categories, personal values, was added by the authors as the interpretation of the respondents answers called for this as many of the expressions were related to personal values. Some of the expressions were added to both trust creation and trust maintenance since this thesis views trust as a concept with overlapping tendencies and this was discussed in the light of the results to give better understanding to the respondents answers.

Finally, selective coding was performed where the most protruding aspects regarding the trust categories emerged (Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014). A spreadsheet and ultimately a flow chart was created where the added categories, those outside the 11, were divided into two themes; Tangible & intangible resources, derived from SET, and social media strategy. The two themes were placed in relation to the other 11 sub categories to extract potential effect on each of the trust categories pushing it to one or more of the three trust-categories. Finally a category named Inter-organizational & Interpersonal was added to place each factor into the right box to provide an easier understanding of what is most likely connected to which concept. The kept inter-organizational aspects were then placed inside the Hourglass of Trust in the correct field to display which aspects are to be considered when doing business in B2B.

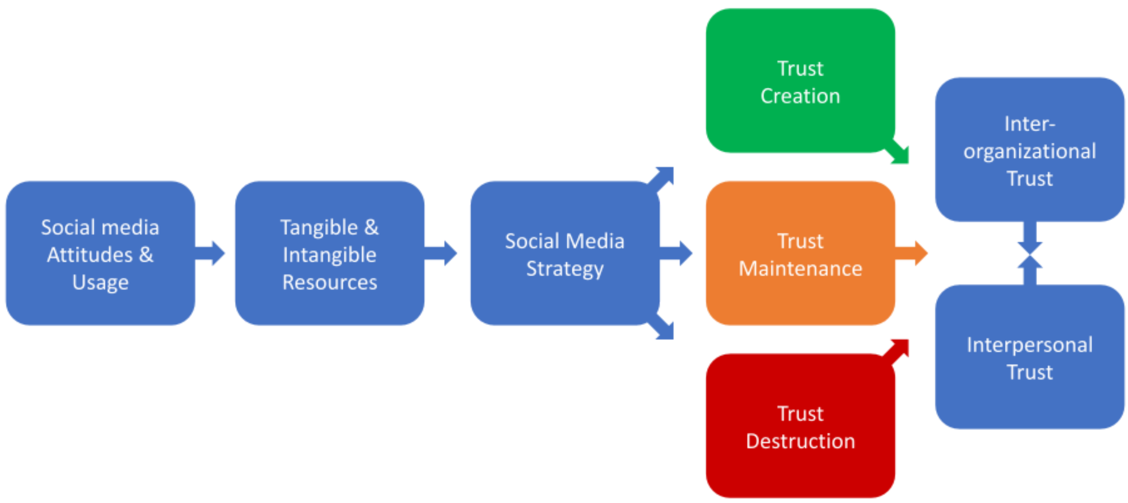

Fig. 1. Thematic analysis flowchart.

3.6. Trustworthiness

The authors were to respect good research practice by not using information to manipulate this research by remaining unbiased. The authors furthermore were to show a reflexive approach, providing information of both strengths, weaknesses and reliability in the research (Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014).

The operationalization table was the foundation for the interview guide which gave high validity since all of the questions except one supported the purpose and the questions in Part 2-4 addressed the research questions. To further ensure validity the informants who knew an interviewer was interviewed by the co-interviewer to prevent bias such as unconsciously asking leading questions or reducing the risk of respondents to give less explanatory answers, as an example referring to things or situations presupposing the interviewer they knew were aware of and could possibly be ethically problematic. To provide reliability the transliterations were emailed to each informant who had the opportunity to give their opinion on the transcribed data and make changes if needed (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Ghauri et al., 2020; Arvidsson, n.d.).

The respondents who were familiar to the authors might have censored themselves when answering the more delicate questions since we might have known the same people. This to reduce the risk of information leakage and slander which points to moral awareness and could have affected the validity (Bryman & Bell, 2015). On the other hand it could also have been easier to open up to interviewers you know personally, which made it a balancing act.

Due to the limited research in Swedish B2B SMEs and social media, research articles from other countries and larger companies have also been included in the theoretical framework which could generate deviations.

Question 10d. *"Do you have any specific goal with your posts?"* (Appendix C.) was added to the interview guide after interview number two since the two first respondents, Respondent A1 expressed having ambition for long-term cooperation whereas Respondent A2 expressed strategic long-term plans. These ambitions corresponded to the literature which after discussion between the authors led to adding the question in the remaining interviews.

The multiple choice question, *14c. "Do you have frequent contact through social media?"* (Appendix C.), was found to be irrelevant to the purpose, no connections to the trust categories could be derived from the informants answers. If the question of how frequent other channels were used had been included as well, it might have generated answers that would support the purpose since it could possibly have revealed connections in the use of channels.

Some of the support examples from question 16a *"How do you compare businesses to each other?"* (Appendix C.) were placed as independent sub categories in the coding sheet as they were mentioned in more places throughout the interview.

3.7. Ethical considerations

This author's intention was to follow good research practice and the basic principles it was based on; reliability, honesty, respect and accountability (Hermerén et al., 2017).

All informants were informed of the wish for using Zoom to record the interviews and that they were going to be transcribed and coded which all informants agreed to. They were further informed that we would protect the privacy of the informants and therefore the primary data would be treated confidentially (Ghauri et al., 2020) which meant it would only be shared between the two students, the informant, the supervisor and the examiner of this thesis. All parties were included in a formal agreement, GDPR, which required the authors to share what expectations and standards the work for this thesis required (Hermerén et al., 2017).

In accordance with the The European code of conduct for research integrity (Hermerén et al., 2017) and GDPR all our informants were informed that they could withdraw from participating in the interview at any time, both before and during the interview. Any collected personal data up until that point would in such cases be immediately destroyed. This principle would also be applied if the informant chooses to withdraw their consent from a completed interview.

This thesis had no obvious conflicts or visable risks.

3.8. Method criticism

Limitations with the method semi-structured interviews may mean difficulties in making suitable selection of people with the right knowledge and experience (Lind, 2017), the authors did not experience any difficulties in this.

The interpretation of the theory co-creation for the interview guide, which was a base for some of the interview questions, was insufficient and articles on cooperation would therefore have been a better choice for the theory such as the definition made by Lambe et al., (2001)

Semi-structured interviews can provide challenges like unexpected behavior from the informant like saying things that can't be anticipated as well as distractions and maintaining focus on the topic (Bell et al., 2021). One of the interviews got to be longer than the others due to sidetracking. This, the first interview, was conducted with follow up questions that led to side tracking without sufficient control for leading it back to the point. This, in turn, led to useless data and a longer transcription process.

All of the interviews should have been performed on video call to provide overall higher quality data which was lost over the phone interview. There were also noticeable distractions from this particular phone interview which is mentioned by Bryman and Bell (2015) as a possible challenge.

Data analysis from semi-structured interviews is time consuming to process (Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 2014) and for a Bachelors' thesis this limits the number of interviews possible to conduct and process within the set time frame. The coding could have been performed using a software coding tool such as MAXQDA instead of manual coding. In order to use a software coding tool one should have adequate knowledge to prevent errors.

4. Results

In this chapter the empirical findings from this study will be presented. Starting with a description on the interviews, advantages and disadvantages with performing interviews remotely, a short presentation of the employees followed by the empirical results in order of occurrence, suitable for when explaining a process (Ghauri et al., 2022).

The results are based on seven interviews with owners or employees of equal gender distribution who use social media in Swedish B2B SMEs. The businesses are located in different sized communities in the middle and south of Sweden. The number of employees are from 0 (self-employed) to 55 employees. One of the informants chose to be anonymous.

4.1. Interviews

The interviews with the seven informants lasted for 30-90 minutes which according to Ghauri et al. (2020) is an appropriate amount of time. One of the interviews was conducted on a phone call with only one of the interviewers, both interviewers were present the rest of the six interviews that were conducted on video calls, one with the informants' camera turned off. All interviews were recorded using Zoom.

Advantages with performing interviews on video calls are that it saves time, money and the environment since no one has to travel as it is possible to participate from the comfort of their workplace or home (Bell et al., 2021) and by using Zoom "on-prem" which the authors have access to through the University of Skövde, there is no time limit for the video call and the interviews could be recorded with high sound quality which facilitated and provided for high quality transliterations. The authors reflections were further that interviews performed by video call gave conversation dynamics very close to a physical interview, with the advantage that all parties could have the interview questions and notes on their screen, the co-interviewer could shut their microphone off and take notes without disturbing the conversation or making the respondent feel like they had to wait until the co-interviewer was done writing. This lead to providing the opportunity for the co-interviewer to easily note and ask follow up questions, in contrast to Ghauri et al. (2022), who states that it is harder to gather supplementary information.

If any of the informants would have been uncomfortable with being on video it could have led to them being distracted by not feeling comfortable enough to answer the interview questions with stories if they just wanted to exit from the interview as fast as possible. To avoid this scenario, the authors furthermore respected the mentioned informants' wishes of themselves not being on video call.

There was a significant difference in the amount of explanations and stories gathered from the video calls and the phone call, the authors assumption is that this at least partially was due to that the authors videos were on at all video calls, including the one call where the informants video was turned off. The fact that the informants could see who they were talking to were increasing the engagement, prohibiting distractions from their environment since it mimicked a physical interview to a greater extent (Bell et al.,, 2021). The factor of distraction was noticed as a disadvantage when performing an interview via phone call and the literature further states that a respondent can perceive the interview time being longer than it actually is and that the respondent could be less engaged with the interview (Bell et al., 2021). In conclusion an interview on video call is preferable considering saving resources and providing a higher quality data compared to an interview conducted by phone, in concurrence with the literature. No technical issues occurred (Bell et al., 2021).

Informant	Number of employees	Social media experience
A1	0	?
A2	0	16 years
A3	0	10 years
B	4	?
C	5	16 years
D	8-10	26 years
E	55	15 years

Table 3. Informants

4.1.1. Part 1 - Social media attitudes and usage

The first part of the interview addressed the respondents attitudes toward social media and using it as a marketing tool.

The attitudes toward whether or not social media is important in building good business relationships were mostly positive; *"Yes, definitely, I'd say it's a very underrated tool, particularly in B2B" - Respondent E.*

Recurring advantages in using social media mentioned were visibility, ease of use and ease of communication were used to describe why social media is important in creating good B2B relationships; *"Social media is my platform to be seen, it becomes a shop window for me, so it's very important." - Respondent A3.*

One informant described the advantages of low participation barriers;
"You consume social media all the time as an ordinary human or private person and then if you're faced with a company who uses social media you know how to read the content as you're so used to reading it in everyday life". - Respondent C.

The two informants who displayed more negative attitudes toward social media were skeptic in that it is time consuming and that there are no guarantees of it generating sales; *"After all, time is money and for a small one business owner it may be a rather poor risk-benefit spending so much time on something that may not even yield anything which might be hard to justify." - Respondent D*

Respondent D was also skeptical toward it as a marketing tool, once again making it clear that it requires work; *"Pretty hyped up, reality has catched up with the advertising format and it requires a greater effort to actually do any bigger measurable impact with presence".*

On the other hand, the five informants whom were positive toward social media as a marketing tool expressed their positivity without doubts describing how it's the only marketing they need, the cost-effectiveness and reach in comparison to traditional marketing in magazines and email;
"Fantastic, I think. . . . I reach my customers that I have in Umeå [north of Sweden] or in Skåne [south of Sweden] or in Stockholm . . . I don't think I would have done that at all if I hadn't had social media, so it is extremely positive for all businesses" - Respondent A3.

The interactions with these companies were essentially liking and sharing their content to increase their own reach or staying in the mind of the businesses for future opportunities; *"For example, this supplier who is so good at working with social media, that you were visible there a little automatically." - Respondent B.*

Whether or not posting on social media had a strategy varied, some had general goals for all content like increasing reach and getting new followers, showing they're an active, operating company, branding and to not be forgotten; *"My goals are always selling. Show my work, gain new followers, get recommendations. You have to stay active, otherwise you'll be forgotten. Continuity is good for reach, . . .not a lot of reposting but pretty much fresh all the time" - Respondent A3*

"The goal, or objective and where we're going, is very clear before we start creating. Is it to generate sales or create interest for a specific product group, create interest for our environment and CSR work or just tell the story of the firm enhancing a specific person? Yes, there's a clear goal before, at least most of the time" - Respondent E

Several respondents stated that what type of content to post depended on the business or the purpose with the post; *"it depends on the purpose of the post . . . . I'd say what it's really about is to start doing something" - Respondent E*

All informants but one used social media for cooperation in some way, and all of them said that reaching more people was the main benefit of it. Some informants found it hard to come up with disadvantages but the ones that did spoke about unmet reciprocity and the risk of others getting their brand connected with values that didn't correspond to their brand values.

Some described that their social media page was more like a storefront or web page and that as soon as a conversation was moving toward a sale they continued the conversation on the phone, by email or meeting in real life; *"Once we've established a business relationship, social media is not important at all, then we e-mail, call or chat, social media doesn't matter anymore, it's only a way for us to promote our services and get in contact with customers" - Respondent C.*

4.1.2. Part 2 - Trust creation

The second part of the interviews addressed the evaluation of trustworthiness on social media, the best business relationships the informants had, what aspects they thought were the reason and how social media were used in these relationships.

When evaluating the potential of a potential business partner, on social media or in real life, six of the informants are examining the company on social media with a majority evaluating from personal values; *"What's important is that the people behind the brand are nice people" - Respondent A2.*

"I look to see if there's someone who has the same philosophy of life" - Respondent A1.

Other aspects when evaluating were professionalism, working environment, number of followers and how actively they used their social media, this content was evaluated to get an idea of the need or desire from the potential buyer; *"Or I look for companies who are bad at social media, then I know I can at least help them in some way, to make them do better and to make it look better." - Respondent A2.*

Informants expressed that the communication differed in the beginning of a business relationship, from a more formal, cautious, polite way showing more excitement to a more relaxed approach, using spoken word in an established relationship, with an increasing team spirit.

Business relationships with the best experiences were described as reliable, long- term relationships, requiring low amounts of administrational work, containing an ongoing reciprocity and continuous workload coming from both the desire from the buyer and the confidence in the supplier; *"It's really that we are always there for each other, . . . above all, we trust each other" - Respondent A1.*

As seen in the quote above, the relationship was not described using terms traditionally associated to inter-organizational trust, that is a trend that could be seen in a majority of the answers; informants chose to describe an interpersonal relationship with a specific business owner or employee, expressing how it went from a pure business agreement to a personal friendship over the years;
"What's making this relationship very good is the communication, now this is a relationship I've had for a very, very long time. At least over 10 years, almost at the level on which we do not have to speak with whole sentences, we still understand each other, in that way it's like having a really, really good friend" - Respondent E.

Furthermore the value of reach in social media, reciprocity and benefits of cost-effectiveness, predictability and risk reduction in long-term business relationships were repeated; *"She is very appreciative, so it's fun that I can charge and she thinks* *what I do is good and she paints all the time. She needs help continuously" - Respondent A3.*

"These are relationships that are long-lasting and require little administration and that are reliable, for example we are procured by a University, it is our best customer then because there is a large number of hours in a year and we never have to haggle or negotiate or sell or something, they just contact us "We want this done." and the price is already determined through the procurement" - Respondent C.

Social media was mentioned by five informants when asked to describe the ideal business relationship, that the use of social media was what was lacking in the perceived best business relationship; *"what I feel is missing in that [the best] relationship is absolutely the social media" - Respondent D.*

Two of the informants expressed economic aspects, with a focus on reliability and long-term relationships; *"An institution that is unlikely to fail regardless of the economy. It will remain a state institution and a long-term relationship, a relationship cemented by agreement" - Respondent C.*

"that they need a lot of help, and want to pay a lot, and want to do it for a long time" - Respondent A3.

Immediacy and responsiveness were of importance when comparing companies on social media by four informants. The reason was knowledge of research on business economics and responsiveness;*"if you get a request for quotation and respond in 24 hours or one. Then those who responded within an hour had a 70% higher hit rate . . . So responding quickly is extremely important." - Respondent E.*

Immediacy and responsiveness was also seen as the opposite, unimportant, by two who put a higher value to the ability to pay, experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness; *"If you are slow to communicate, it can be annoying too but the most interesting is if you can't pay for yourself." - Respondent C.*

"I use the same scale that Google uses when they rank websites, E-E-A-T, the one where you look at experience, expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness. This is more valuable to me than cost efficiency or the like. Cheap is rarely good. Free is never good.

Quality, it costs money, and authority and competence should cost money." - Respondent D.

Other key components when evaluating were that the content posted on social media needed to be in line with the informants perception of what's appropriate for the company they evaluated and ideally match their personal values as well. Transparency in terms of straightforward communication, competence level, self consciousness and honesty, were seen as trust-inspiring aspects; *"Straightforward communication and just honesty are the most important things there are." - Respondent A2.*

"It can be very transparent and wonderful with just quick, completely unretouched works, that you just take a quick picture of the business or when you're out doing things, but without editing it at all. It can be very trust-inspiring in some cases for certain businesses" - Respondent C.

Emotions and genuineness was a significant theme for informants to experience a physical person as trustworthy on social media;
"There are a lot of emotions here that you go through. You judge based on different things. . . . But what is important to feel trust? I would say that it feels genuine then. That it feels real that you are not trying to be someone other than who you are, i.e. that it is a mirror image of the real person" - Respondent E.

Trustworthiness was evaluated with the desire for genuinity, openness, shared values, the ability to listen and humor. Not too hyped or salesy, but with a clear message providing trustworthiness with a profile picture, tidy appearance and the ability to use your words to give a serious impression;
"It kind of goes hand in hand with what we talked about when you go in and look at a [business] page. . . . That you want to feel that it feels like something you yourself can stand for, i.e. that it matches." - Respondent B.

4.1.3. Part 3 - Trust maintenance

The third part addressed aspects that were valuable in an existing business relationship.

Various forms of reliability were expressed as key aspects to maintain a business relationship. Informants included aspects as being a stable profitable business since that would be required to be able to pay and for a long-term relationship;

"That you get the impression that this is a long-term relationship that the other party will be for several years to come and they will continue to be interested in our services. They have a business that will always need us and they have a healthy business that is profitable and thus they can pay for themselves as well and they are pleasant in their contact." - Respondent C.

The majority mentioned some form of trust. That trust in tangible values would be met, keeping promises and not leaking information; *"Partly trust that the other gets things done quite simply, but also trust that you can trust that what you talk to each other about stays between us as well." - Respondent A1.*

And the more intangible aspects of trust, to be honest, daring to admit and stay accountable for mistakes;
"It crystallizes the human behind it . . . we are not perfect robots who just delivers without being personal, with humanity comes faults and flaws and a responsibility for them and also an insight about them. And I think that it's precisely that, humanity, that is the glue in relationships, even in business relationships." - Respondent D.

Long-term relationships were considered more valuable and cost-effective due to less communication and administration; *"Established expectations and the like . . . agree on what's a good result, what's a poor result. You have a consensus that has developed over time and that is worth a lot of money in the form of time." - Respondent D.*

and due to personal values like having more fun, team spirit, convenience; *"Then you keep track of each other and sort of know what the other stands and thinks and thinks about things so that I think so." - Respondent B.*

In long-term relationships, respondents were willing to make short-term sacrifices;
"And then I'm the one who gets to take the shit even though I didn't do anything. . . .I think it will be best toward the customer because we all make mistakes, there is no one who is infallible. Everyone makes mistakes so I believe that I can take it on myself" - Respondent A2.

Informants agreed that business relationships on social media could create win-win situations, expressed as cooperating, creating content that were relevant to both parties;
"if she comes to fika, she might film a bit here or take a picture and then she can post it on [social media] stories . . . 'check this out'. . . so it still fits her content, she can post

and then it can roll in some followers to me, so it's a win-win and I can do the same thing back. Those followers, you don't know if they will be but, hopefully they will be paying customers." - Respondent A3.

Another win was as a way of reducing the risks with being inactive when lacking engagement; *"If I have a down period where I can't get involved as much, you still have the others who support me at the same time and vice versa, so it's always a bit of a give and take I would say" - Respondent A1.*

4.1.4. Part 4 - Trust destruction

Informants were asked to describe business relations they were dissatisfied with to describe a situation where a cooperation went wrong and what would destroy their trust to another company.

The informants' stories behind what made them consider their worst business relationship *the worst* had one thing in common: changed conditions. The reason why the conditions changed was insignificant to the perception, but the perception that the changed conditions were poorly managed was significant to destroying trust. Poor management of changed conditions were expressed as follows: Nonexistent or not sufficient communication of the changed conditions;*"I received no follow up on what happened, did I give the company anything at all?" - Respondent A3.*

"It's the communication that's been wrong from the start when something goes wrong" - Respondent A2.

"Then when we have completed almost half of the assignment, then all of a sudden it changes and you have to have a lot of discussions about it and they don't understand, or have no understanding, for that it will cost more or the difference in the requests. And then no one will be happy." - Respondent C.

Being similar to each other and to have shared values was seen as a facilitating factor to handle changed conditions by using communication;*"because we are equal and have equal values there as well. Just the thing about answering quickly then even if they can't answer, that they say I need to think about it or whatever it might be." - Respondent A1.*

An incident where the supplier had said they would deliver on time for an event held by one of Respondent E's biggest customers but then, hours later, changed to not being able to deliver on time. *"it's a lesson learned, but I would say that I still have a high level of trust in them, but it took a beating, yes" - Respondent E.*

Business actions that the informants predict could destroy a business relationship completely were in five cases of monetary aspects alone or together with other aspects; *"It would've completely destroyed the trust and not just then and there, but I think it would have destroyed the trust for that person if they were to join another company that wants to do business again." - Respondent E.*

"If they would sort of smear my name or something like that or that you don't keep what you promise or don't pay, or that you aren't serious." - Respondent A3.

Other aspects that would destroy trust was posting slander and false accusations, not corresponding to their company or personal values, on social media; *"That they would write something negative about us as a company or something, that wouldn't be very fun" - Respondent B.*

4.1.5. Summary

Personal values expressed such as honesty, transparency, humanity, shared values, humor and accountability regarding mistakes were mentioned continuously throughout the interviews. The informants displayed a positive attitude towards using social media in B2B SMEs and expressed it as being an underestimated marketing tool, valuing the provided cost-effectiveness from visibility and reach as well as the low participation barriers, being easy to use when communicating and interacting as well as only using it as a storefront to create trust. Negative attitudes expressed that social media required a lot of work with no guaranteed result. Respondents' social media strategies varied but several expressed that the most important was to do something. To evaluate the trustworthiness of a business partner respondents used criterias like personal values, professionalism, expertise, liquidity, number of followers and the potential of a long-term relationship. A beneficial relationship should be long-term to provide cost efficiency, have reciprocity, be trustful and should have the potential to grow into a friendship with the opportunities to cooperate on social media. To maintain relationships there was a willingness to make short-term sacrifices. If changed conditions were perceived as poorly managed or if another party posted slander on social media it would damage or destroy interpersonal and inter-organizational trust.

5. Analysis and discussion

The analysis and discussion chapter will focus on the categories identified as most prominent of the trust aspects, creation, maintenance and destruction, to support this thesis purpose. The aspects will be tested against the theory with comments regarding connection, similarities and differences and will ultimately be placed in the model The Hourglass of Trust.

5.1. Social media attitudes and usage

The ease of use, low participation barriers and cost-effectiveness achieved in social media described by Karampela et al. (2019) and Odoom et al. (2017) were also mentioned as advantages by informats with positive attitudes as well as the fact that people use social media in their everyday life makes it easy to interpret and retrieve messages. According to SET, parties evaluate cost and benefit when entering a business relationship and that there also is a trust aspect with the belief that the relationship will be rewarding, like a “leap of faith” (Zaheer et al., 1998). Social media could be interpreted as that leap of faith since there is no guarantee working on social media will generate a beneficial partnership. This is expressed by Respondent D as the awareness of the poor risk-benefit which could yield nothing in return, further stating that social media as a marketing tool is *“Pretty hyped up”* and requires a great effort to create measurable results. An explanation to Respondent D having a more negative attitude could be that the respondent has worked professionally with search engine optimization (SEO) and social media marketing for other businesses for almost 20 years. Results might therefore be measured in a way other respondents do not, which has led to Respondent D's insights on the actual performance on social media probably being greater. This in turn could be a clue that the Cole et al. (2017) results that negative attitudes increase with higher knowledge, but since there is just one person's opinion in this thesis empirical findings, further research is needed to draw any conclusions. That the other respondents showed positive attitudes, even with long experience in using social media could on the other hand be interpreted as the statement by Cole et al., (2017) is outdated. The actual level of knowledge and education in social media are not measured or tested in this study since it is qualitative, the knowledge is based on the respondents' answers.

There is moreover a possibility that social media is used arbitrarily with a notion that "everyone else is using it" and that a social media presence is necessary for business, but why it is necessary seems to be unclear. Further reflection is that social media has been a "playground" for most people in private settings, hence there might be a preconceived notion that to be perceived as a serious business, agreements have to be conducted through email, fact-to-face or written agreements This and the perspective of social media as rogue, could limit the perception of usability, missing out on the opportunities of using a powerful channel that could generate benefits in trustful, long-term, cost-effective and profitable B2B relationships.

Another possible disadvantage with using social media in B2B could be cooperations, informants considered a possible risk due to putting their own brand in the hands of another company as mentioned by Respondent C. Although Sundström et al. (2020) presses on the benefits, the authors are also aware of the above stated risk, stating that the weak spot is the lack of control on who's participating. The authors' reflection is that this said risk does not primarily come from other B2B companies that you cooperate with, but could come from anyone else with malicious intent, such as spreading bad word of mouth.

None of the informants express worry about information leakage explicitly but there is some insinuation that this still could be of importance for trust creation as it is mentioned by Respondent A1, as talk being kept confidential between parties. The worry stated in the literature regarding information leakage is therefore of interest regarding this expression (Lacka & Chong., 2016).

Social media is viewed positively as an underestimated tool for marketing and building B2B relationships by informants. Social media was also an appreciated marketing tool according to the informants since it gave them a greater reach, for example Respondent A3, who said that her business reached customers all over Sweden that probably would never have been reached without marketing on social media. It is at the same time used as a place to be seen in the trust creation phase where it is used to create interest, sell services, reach clients and gain followers and only as a marketing tool that is a one-way communication, a store front or a web page. This could have connections to perceived ease of use or the knowledge about different social media sites, there can be a limitation on how to use different sites due to the lack of education about them and the competence of the technology.

Thereafter some of the respondents are clear about not using social media as a marketing tool once a relationship is established, they switch to channels such as email, telephone or face-to-face interaction. Respondent C expressed this as social media not being at all important after the establishment and that they only use it as a promotion tool for services and as a way to get in contact with customers. The view on promotion is shared in a similar way through respondent A3 who states that selling is always the main goal and to show their work, the respondent expressed: *"Social media is my platform to be seen, it becomes a shop window for me, so it's very important."*. According to Sundström et al. (2020), only selling through social media is a sure way to slowly die so the storefront approach could present a risky business. As SET points out, there has to be a human connection in a social exchange and which could be interpreted that for the storefront strategy to work as relationship building, the storefront needs to be good enough to make customers get in touch with the businesses for the human connection to take place and for trust to be created.

A more detailed social media strategy than storefront only, was used by Respondent E, who had set objectives and target groups for each post. This way of using social media is similar to the study by Andersson & Wikström (2017) where B2B use social media to target specific stakeholders and not for conversation. On the other hand it is a contradiction to what Cheng et al. (2022) states that B2B tries to imitate B2C in mainly trying to understand how the customers preferences and interaction with curated content and not primarily to capture attention but as noticed these two articles have six year between them which means the strategies could have changed over those years. One could argue that looking at B2C for leads on how to work with social media could be a too far of a leap from where B2B is right now regarding usage of social media in a B2B context both considering the negative attitudes and the suggestions of different strategies as stated by (Iankova et al., 2019). A third perspective on cross channel use is that social media is a resource that should be continuously used to provide customer care as a complement to face-to-face meetings (Sundström et al., 2020), which is similar to the managerial implications by Zhang and Li (2019), that providing personal support and comment on social media posts creates trust and such communication could be integrated in companies' marketing strategy. It appears to be a beneficial way of marketing, cross channels enabling the opportunity to communicate in a more flexible way in between physical meetings, maintaining trust increasing the presence in customers minds. Using social media as a storefront only is probably better than not using it at all, although, considering the low cost it could be considered a poor use of social media's trust building potential.

The switching of channels from social media to other channels such as email once the business relationship is established could eventually further be interpreted as a signal that there is a generational aspect that suggests older generations, who are not brought up with the internet and much less social media, will be found in senior positions included in B2B purchases. This generation could have a negative attitude when it comes to using social media as a marketing tool also because the tradition of face-to-face when doing business is still prevalent and therefore dictating the rules for communication.

Apart from the ease of use and cost-effectiveness, informants attitudes toward using social media were positive due to the benefits provided; repetition of social media presence was mentioned several times throughout the interviews as a way to remind companies that you have a desire to enter or maintain business relationships and that less presence could result in the risk of people forgetting about the company. Zhang and Li (2019) proposes that updated information from a salesperson could signal willingness to maintain the relationship which aligns with the empirical findings. However, one respondent stated that it was of importance to provide new content and not repost the same content too much.

5.2. Trust creation

Moving on to the actual trust creation and the beginning of a B2B relationship. Informants describe this as more formal; consisting of objectives, professional language in communications and activities such as written agreements not including emotions but rationality, as characteristic for inter-organizational trust (Ashnai et al., 2016).

When evaluating other companies on social media and the want or need for cooperation, informants tend to primarily evaluate interpersonal trustworthiness; the people behind a company's personalities and that they have shared personal values or are like-minded, as risk reduction factors, to know that they did not risk to be connected to something that did not correspond with their personal values or as Respondent B stated; ”*that it feels like something you yourself can stand for”.* According to SET cost and benefit are weighed against each other as well as trust which has emerged from social obligations. If the other party differs in personal values the risk could be that there are also dissonances in what social obligations are expected, and this in turn could be interpreted as the risk of trust not being created. Thereafter, secondary, is their potential competence and potential of a long-term relationship. Hence, the creation of trust, or pre-creation of trust, starts at an interpersonal level according to the definition of interpersonal trust by Zaheer et al. (1998). Since inter-organizational trust is said by the literature to be built upon rationality, the authors find personal values standing out in the empirical findings as a aspect that contains many expressions from the informants that can be interpreted as more emotional than rational, turning the focus away from inter-organizational trust in favor of interpersonal trust. This could also indicate a larger importance of interpersonal trust and it perhaps also presents a challenge to Mouzas et al. (2007) statement that interpersonal trust is inadequate when forming business relationships.

The more prominent features for trust creation were displayed in the sub category personal values where the most appreciated characteristics were honesty and genuineness which meant being real and using sales pitches in moderation. This is in line with the literature stating trust is dependent on perceived honesty and benevolence (Ashnai et al., 2016). Being real can also be interpreted as being authentic and as stated by Sundström et al., (2020) this could present an effective element when creating emotional involvement which can translate to interpersonal trust where emotions are a central part as stated by Ashnai et al., (2016). Socially skilled personnel, a nice personality, a feeling of consensus and the standing behind the business content were also expressed as important values for creating trust. Social skills were described as being a good listener, initiating ideas, openness, honesty and having a similar life philosophy and this leans toward the concept of interpersonal trust as described in the literature (Ashnai et al., 2016).

Personal values also highly affected the level of confidence and desire one party had entering a business relationship with another party and it was also connected to reciprocity and risk reduction providing a feeling of similarity and perceived friendship. Reciprocity, where the respondents expressed that sharing another’s business social media content and tagging each other was a trust building activity, was also related positively to cost-effectiveness. AlHussainan et al. (2022) states that reciprocity is defined by parties helping each other and not harming those who show support.

Cost-effectiveness was connected with having the confidence and the desire to enter a relationship with a business partner. Cost-effectiveness, using social media, as well as personal values such as sharing content for free and being honest and genuine were seen as aspects affecting risk reduction and interdependence positively in both the trust creation and trust maintenance category (Ashnai et al., 2016). Fairness, as a part of SET, without the goal of maximizing rewards and minimizing cost, could be argued as being a possible cornerstone of sharing content without charging the other company for the activity. This can furthermore be interpreted as the parties displaying a strong feeling of obligation towards one another, making way for trust to emerge. High liquidity, or being able to pay, was mentioned as a risk reduction factor that created trust.

Immediacy and responsiveness also showed connection to cost-effectiveness in trust creation and quick communication as well as the quality of the answers were deemed important for trust creation which supports the statement by Cheng et al. (2023). The statement by Sundström et al., (2020) that negative emotions can occur if the reply to comments made on social media is not fast enough presents a connection to the respondents' answers and this in turn can be seen as a social obligation in SET. However, some respondents did not seem to mind a slower response but prioritized other aspects like liquidity or receiving a quality answer.

Aspects interpreted as creating inter-organizational trust that was in line with the informants perception of what is appropriate company content, such as brand awareness, number of followers or looking for competence, professionalism, experience, authority and transparency affected every sub category of the trust creation category where the most prominent was to have the confidence and the desire to enter a relationship.

5.3. Trust maintenance

Similar to trust creation there were also signs from the respondents that sharing of each other’s content was a cost-effective activity to increase reach that created and maintained trust in the business relationship through reciprocity as stated in SET. These findings furthermore support Eck & Johansson, (2020), who states social media provides an opportunity for a wide reach of audience. Since social obligations as stated in SET are viewed by the authors as present when sharing content on social media and some expressions could be interpreted as opportunistic where some respondents said that they would like to be seen through sharing a business partner's social media content but put in less effort themselves. This could be argued as opportunistic behavior and not reciprocity or fairness and can explain why SET has its limitations when explaining business relationships in a social media context. In contrast to SET, Zaheer et al., (1998) however, acknowledge opportunism as a possibility when studying the concept of trust which can indicate that a broader perspective is needed since only analyzing inter-organizational relationships using SET could be romanticizing business relationships, and not acknowledging the divergent goals that are present could result in being used if the other party behaved opportunistic..

Informants followed and interacted with other companies' social media to stay on top of their minds, to increase their own social media reach which is supported by Zhang and Li (2019) findings that being frequently exposed to updated information can be interpreted as a high willingness to maintain a relationship and Sundström et al. (2020) that to increase reach on social media, you have to be present and post content. Several informants preferred content categories from what type of business and the purpose of the post was. Having a set goal with their own posts was seen as a factor that made social media marketing successful but posting something was more important than not posting anything, similar to what Sundström et al. (2020) deems and the benefits of social media strategies mentioned by Pentina and Koh (2012).

Personal values were expressed as an important part of the maintenance of trust as it were connected to risk reduction and interdependence, short-term sacrifices and the continuance of satisfactory rewards by using the word *always*, signaling maintenance, *being there for each other*, as mentioned by Respondent A1. Risk reduction factors connected to personal values were described in terms of being honest and accepting responsibility for mistakes, accountability, for mistakes, accountability, and personal values that were deemed important for trust maintenance were described as integrity and humanity, as expressed by Respondent D, "*humanity, that is the glue in relationships, even in business relationships."*

The long-term effect of a trustful business relationship in social media was described as cost effective, since social media is free of charge, and that long-term relationships further provided a risk reduction factor because the expectations were established early on and because there was a feeling of consensus between parties where the formalities disappeared. This is in line with the statement that the perceived risk becomes smaller and the interdependence becomes larger further into the relationship (Rousseau et al., 1998). What can be viewed as surprising is that marketers choose to switch to other channels such as email once the relationship is established; respondents do not agree with the previous research regarding general negative attitudes toward social media and its risks, but they still switch from social media as a channel, because it is seen as safer and more professional. This makes the author's question whether they really trust social media to the extent that they portray.

The continuous desire from a buyer with the confidence in the supplier to engage in a business relationship was furthermore interpreted as predictability and the predetermined price without the need to haggle was viewed as reliability. The components of inter-organizational trust; predictability, fairness and reliability (Zaheer et al. (1998) as well as the component social obligations in SET (Lambe et al. (2001), are all interacting the respondents view point. Moreover, in a long-term B2B relationship the total amount of administration per assigned project is smaller which is considered one of the contributing aspects, together with the previously mentioned set expectations and decreased risk of misunderstandings, that further contributed to cost-effectiveness generating a higher economic profit which is also stated by (Ahamed & Noboa, 2022). Misunderstandings are prohibited since the inter-organizational trust often includes beforehand ways of problem solving (Ashnai, 2016), some of the respondents expressed that they wanted to have a long-term economic exchange to maintain trust which is similar to what AlHussainan et al (2022) states, that ties between parties strengthen if economic exchange is emphasized.

Those who used social media with a cross-channel approach to maintain business relationships, highlighted the ease of use and cost-effectiveness from combining social media and face-to-face encounters which is supported by Zhang and Li (2019) and Sundström et al. (2020).

5.4. Trust destruction

Several respondents stated that it was of importance to remind others of their existence by posting regularly but there were also opinions regarding the repetition of the same content which was viewed as a trust destroying move.

If personal values were not in line with the respondent, that is, if the other party was perceived as dishonest, rude or racist for example or used slander on social media to smear a company name it affected trust negatively. However, the negative effect was also varying due to different circumstances surrounding the relationship.

Further personal values and objectives such as wanting to or acting malevolent like spreading false information about the company or by using power imbalance to create a higher risk and lower interdependence was viewed upon as activities that would destroy a business relationship. Ashnai et al. (2016) states that safeguarding in the relationship becomes irrelevant when there are beforehand ways of problem solving. Lambe et al. (2001) also mentions how a power imbalance can create instability to a relationship and also states highly divergent goals can leave the parties in conflict. When informants described their worst business relationship or situation one factor stood out as significant: changed conditions. Changed conditions can be viewed as an emergence of divergent goals if a party for example adds a workload after an agreement has been made which presents a possibility for conflict with haggling, wasting resources, according to SET. This scenario is described by Respondent C: *"Then when we have completed almost half of the assignment, then all of a sudden it changes".* This also disrupts the continuance of satisfactory rewards and a general assumption in SET is that the desire to continue a relationship remains as long as it is viewed as rewarding. It could also be the other way around, if a party is not transparent or has ulterior motives, divergent goals can lead to a party changing the conditions, taking advantage of the opportunity to lower its own risk, destroying the trust the other party had in them. The two views above are interpreted as changed conditions can emerge from the presence or absence of malicious intent. The destruction of trust seems to be dependent on the intent.

What made this perceived the worst was not the changed conditions per say, but that the perception of how the changes were handled did not correspond to the respondents expectations. Being similar was seen as a strength when handling changed conditions due to shared values when communicating but if there was a difference in goals and the understanding was poor, the problem solving was hindered. This confirms the importance of predictability as stated as one of the three components of inter-organizational trust (Zaheer et al., 1998).

Informants expressed that these actions would create negative emotions which damaged or destroyed trust on an interpersonal level. Damaged trust could be regained but once the interpersonal trust was destroyed it did not matter if the person who destroyed the trust would transfer to another company, even if the new company had a high level of inter-organizational trust, the interpersonal distrust would bleed onto it and the interpersonal distrust beats the inter-organizational trust.

The statement that inter-organizational trust is emotionless stated by (Mouzas et al. (2007) is questioned by researchers (Sundström et al., 2020; Ashnai et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2022), and the notion that inter-organizational trust is emotionless is also opposed by the empirical data, i.e as stated above.

5.5. The Hourglass of Trust

The proposed model, The Hourglass of Trust, separates each of the trust categories, creation, maintenance and destruction. The model derives from the idea that the upper part is the filling area, where trust is poured with the more prominent creation aspects. The middle part is constricted, where trust is kept or maintained and the lower area of the hourglass represents the emptying of trust where trust is destroyed.

The most prominent trust creation categories, where the more noticeable aspects for filling The Hourglass of Trust are presented as follows:

- ★ Personal values
- ★ Value
- ★ Reciprocity, cost-effectiveness, confidence/desire
- ★ Immediacy and responsiveness

The most prominent trust maintenance categories, where the more noticeable aspects for maintaining trust in The Hourglass of Trust are presented as follows:

- ★ Personal values
- ★ Value

★ Cost-effectiveness
★ Continuance of satisfactory rewards, risk reduction, interdependence

The most prominent trust destruction categories, where the more noticeable aspects for trust destruction in The Hourglass of Trust are presented as follows:

- Highly divergent goals
- Power imbalance in social exchange relationship

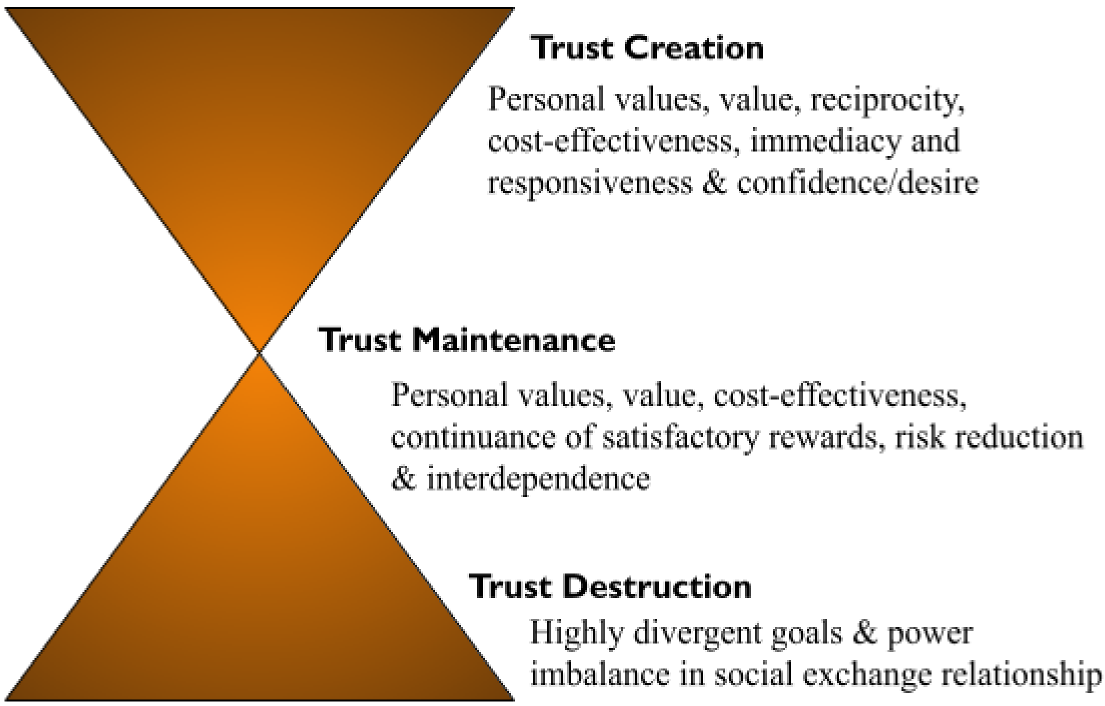

Fig. 2. The Hourglass of Trust

6. Conclusion

This thesis aim was to explore what aspects affect trust in Swedish B2B SMEs when using social media in relation to other companies by examining the following research questions:

RQ 1 - What aspects create trust in B2B using social media?

RQ 2 - What aspects maintain trust in B2B using social media?

RQ 3 - What aspects destroy trust in B2B using social media?

The purpose of the thesis and the three supportive research questions was answered through exploratory research, semi-structured interviews with seven respondents working with Swedish B2B SMEs and their opinions on trust in B2B using social media as well as their attitudes regarding social media usage. Inductive reasoning was used to form a proposition of categories based on the empirical data and theoretical framework to perform a thematic analysis which formed the aspects to each research question.

Aspects that create trust (RQ1):

★ Personal values
★ Value
★ Reciprocity, cost-effectiveness, confidence/desire
★ Immediacy and responsiveness

Aspects that maintains trust (RQ2)

★ Personal values
★ Value
★ Cost-effectiveness
★ Continuance of satisfactory rewards, risk reduction, interdependence

Aspects that destroys trust (RQ3)

- Highly divergent goals
- Power imbalance in social exchange relationship

6.1. Implications

6.1.1. Theoretical implications

Firstly, the research provides insights in attitudes regarding social media usage in Swedish B2B SMEs. Secondly it gives clarification to different aspects deemed important for trust building in Swedish B2B SMEs using social media, with personal values being one of the major aspects for trust.

6.1.2. Managerial implications

Through the model, The Hourglass of Trust (Fig. 2.), selected aspects placed in each of the three trust categories provides a managerial support tool which can be implemented as a part of a social media strategy in a B2B context. The model could serve as a compliment in social media marketing together with face-to-face interactions.

6.1.3. Social implications

This thesis could work as a counter weight against social media adoption inertia which seems to mark some of the attitudes in the B2B context (Lacka & Chong, 2016) by providing a more positive stance as social media usage is common. A large portion of economic transactions are made in the B2B sector (Karampela et al., 2020) and SMEs in Sweden stand for 99,9% of the country's active companies (Tillväxtverket, 2023) which makes it important to the country's future economy. Social media is a growing tool for doing business in the B2B sector as well.

6.2. Trustworthiness and limitations

The trustworthiness of the results are deemed somewhat high. By providing the informants with a copy of the interview guide the research gained dependability (Bell et al., 2021) and by re-sending the transliterations back to the respondents the reliability increased (Ghauri et al., 2020).

Limitations are noted as the majority of the theory describes research from other countries than Sweden. This study could be expanded and applied to larger firms and countries with approximately the same Internet penetration. There is an awareness of the differences between developing countries who do not have access to the Internet to the same extent as Sweden which limits this study's replicability. Replicability is further limited due to the limited structure and the lack of standard procedures to follow in qualitative research and that the interpretation will be influenced by the researcher's subjective view even if some potential biases were thought of when designing the interview guide, providing higher validity (Bell et al., 2021; Ghauri et al., 2020). The questions from the interview guide in semi-structured interviews are replicable, but the follow up questions to respondents' answers are not, furthermore the selection of respondents and their personal values affect their answers (Ghauri et al., 2020) and even if the same interview guide, respondents and interviewers were used to replicate the interviews it would probably generate a similar result, although is judged as highly unlikely that it would be the exact same.

The doubting in social media from B2B managers seems to have decreased from the point of view in the empirical finding, perhaps providing an unnecessary bleak picture of the attitudes provided in this thesis theory.

There were some preconceived notions that some questions would generate answers that could be placed in a different category. For example, the respondents' descriptions and keywords of the best business relationship, where the authors believed the expressions would fit the trust creation category, ended up with the decision that the empirical expressions were rather to be interpreted as descriptions of an existing business relationship containing trust, hence belonging to the category trust maintenance.

6.3. Further research

There are multiple studies that show the possibilities with using social media as a marketing tool in B2B and therefore further research is encouraged to provide structure and to provide managerial implications when building business relationships. Technology adoption model (TAM) can be one theory considered in this further research since this thesis does not focus on adoption but trust.

There could be generational differences affecting the adoption and the attitudes regarding using social media in B2B in relation to the tradition of doing business face-to-face, since age and gender are not studied in this report, further research of their impact on the subject is encouraged.

Testing the proposed model The Hourglass of Trust; in strategy development on how to use social media in B2B companies and in different industries.

To provide a result that is more generalizable, this study could be replicated among larger companies in different companies since the empirical data in this study is based on interviews with Swedish B2B SMEs.

Explore the reasons behind the switching of channels and not using social media channels when the relationship is established.

Examine if the geographical distance affects the social media use, for example companies on islands like Gotland, in Norrland or in other countries than the studied companies are located in.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix A. Tables

8.1.1. Table 1. Operationalization table

Core category	Concept	Part	Question	Subcategories	References
Social media usage and attitudes	Social media	Part 1	1-13	Attitudes toward social media	Cole et al., 2017
					Lashgari et al, 2018
				Social media usage	Iankova et al., 2019
					Karampela et al., 2019
				Ease of use, low participation barriers, mobility	Karampela et al., 2019
					Odoom et al., 2017
Trust	Trust creation	Part 2	14-17	Confidence in supplier	Ashnai et al., 2016
					Rousseau et al., 1998
				Desire from buyer	Ashnai et al., 2016
					Sundström et al., 2020
				Reciprocity	AlHussainan et al., 2022
				Immediacy and responsiveness	Cheng et al., 2022
				Similarity concept, intimacy, perceived friendship, identification	
	Trust maintenance	Part 3	18-21	Risk reduction	Ashnai et al., 2016
				Cost-effectiveness	Lashgari et al., 2018
					Rose et al., 2021
				Value	Ahamed & Noboa, 2022
					Rose et al., 2021
				Interpersonal & inter-organizational trust	Ashnai et al., 2016
					Mouzas et al., 2007
					Sundström et al., 2020
					Zaheer et al., 1998
				Social media presence	Zhang & Li, 2019
				Content category	Sundström et al., 2020
				Short-term sacrifices	Ashnai et al., 2016
				Interdependence	Lambe et al., 2001
				Continuance of satisfactory	

				rewards	
	Trust destruction	Part 4	22-24	Strict controls	Rousseau et al., 1998
				Power imbalance in social exchange relationship	Lambe et al., 2001
				Highly divergent goals	

8.1.2. Table 2. SME definition

Table 1. SME definition	Employees	Turnover
Micro-company	< 10	< €2 million
Small company	< 50	< €10 million
Medium-sized	< 250	< €50 million
(EU Commission Recommendation (EU) 2003/361)		

8.1.3. Table 3. Informants

Informant	**Number of employees**	**Social media experience**
A1	0	?
A2	0	16 years
A3	0	10 years
B	4	?
C	5	16 years
D	8-10	26 years
E	55	15 years

8.2. Appendix B. Figures

8.2.1. Figure 1. Thematic analysis flowchart

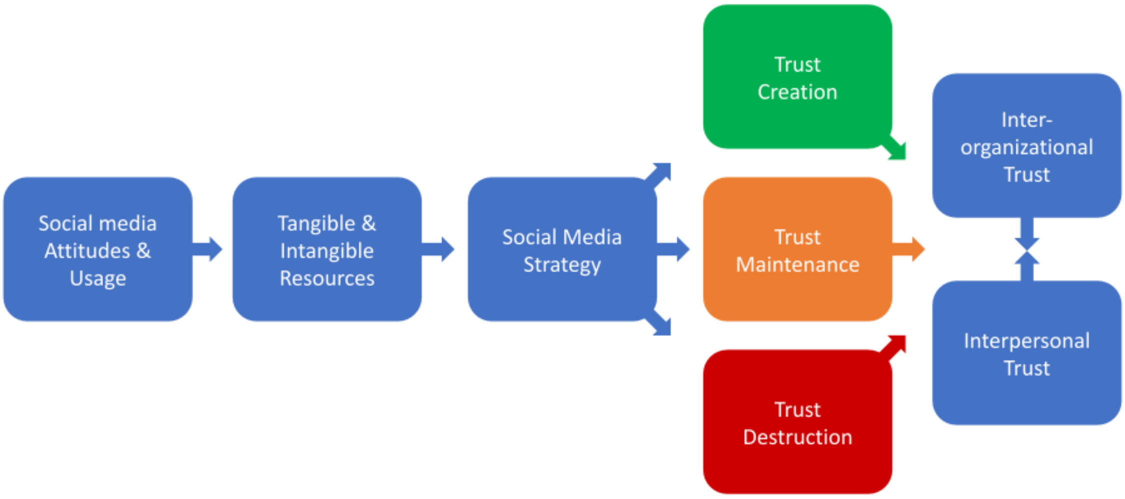
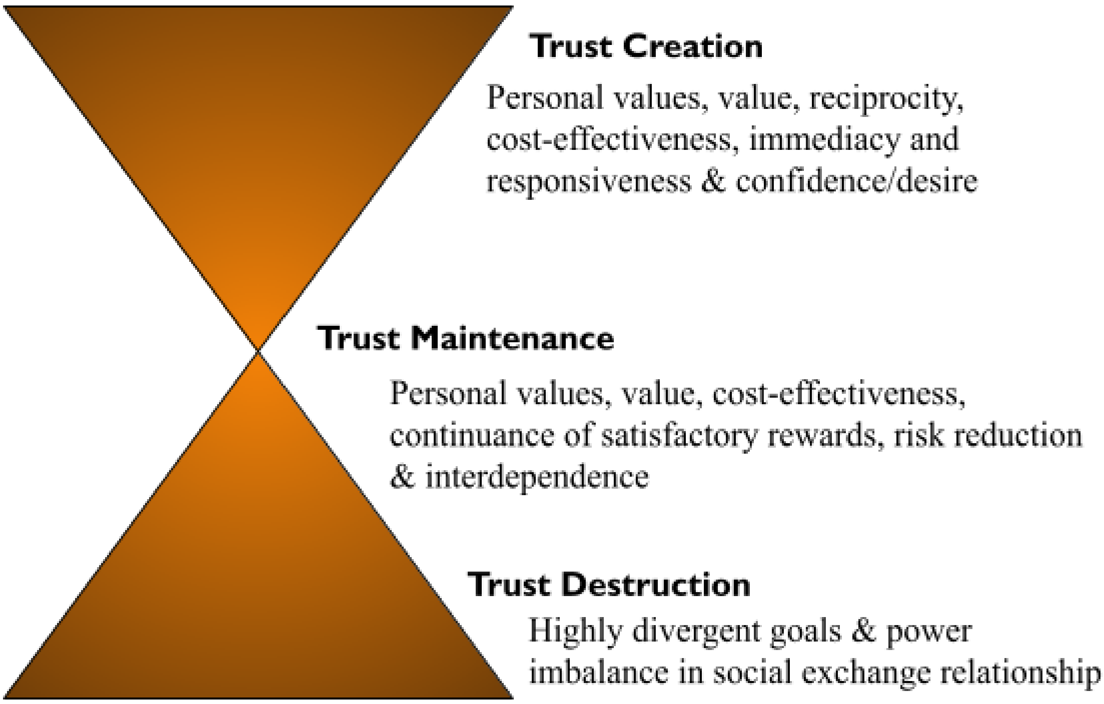


Fig. 1. Thematic analysis flowchart.

8.2.2. Figure 2. The Hourglass of Trust



8.3. Appendix C. Interview guide

Hej och välkommen och tack för att du vill vara med i den här intervjun! En tanke vi vill att du ska ha med dig när du svarar, detta är inget test så det finns inget svar som är rätt eller fel, vi *hoppas på att få just DIN bild av verkligheten. Vi letar efter olika faktorer som bidrar till skapande och underhållande av förtroende och just därför är din unika erfarenhet värd guld.*

Du kan när som helst välja att avbryta intervjun. Data från intervjun kommer att presenteras endast i ett komprimerat format med syfte att enbart användas i akademiska rapporter.

Genom att svara på dessa frågor samtycker du till att denna information sparas och används offentligt i enighet med Högskolan i Skövdes riktlinjer för GDPR för forskning gjord på Högskolan i Skövde.

DEL 1

1. Godkänner du att intervjun spelas in, sparas och används i enlighet med beskrivningen ovan?
2. Vill du vara anonym?
    a. Om nej - vad heter du?
3. Vad gör ditt företag?
4. Hur många anställda har du?
5. Vilka sociala medier använder ditt företag?
6. Har du någon utbildning i sociala medier?
    a. Hur lång erfarenhet har du av sociala medier?
7. Är sociala medier viktigt för att bygga bra B2B relationer?
    a. Varför/Varför inte?
8. Vilken typ av samarbeten gör ni med andra företag på sociala medier?
    a. Fördelar med samarbeten?
    b. Nackdelar med samarbeten?
9. Brukar du följa vad andra företag publicerar på sociala medier?
    a. Interagera med?
    b. Kolla på andra företags sociala medier innan du tar beslut om samarbete?
        i. Om ja; Vad letar du efter då?
        ii. Om nej; varför inte?
    c. Hur ser du på olika typer av content på sociala medier?
    a. Har du/ni något speciellt mål med dina/era inlägg? Olika typer av mål?
10. Skiljer sig kommunikationen på sociala medier åt i början av ett samarbete och vid ett redan etablerat samarbete?
11. Vad tycker du om sociala medier som ett verktyg för marknadsföring?
12. Vad på sociala medier skulle få dig att vilja inleda en ny affärsrelation?

DEL 2

13. Tänk på den bästa affärsrelationen du haft eller som du har i dagsläget och beskriv hur den fungerar.
    a. Vad gjorde/gör den relationen extra bra?
    b. Hur stort förtroende har du för den andra parten?
    På en skala 1-5 där 1 är inget alls och 5 är fullt förtroende.
    1 2 3 4 5
    c. Har ni regelbunden kontakt via sociala medier?
    <1 gång i månaden >1 gång i månaden varje vecka varje dag

   d. Hur ser ert samarbete ut på sociala medier?
14. Tycker du att det är nån skillnad på att kommunicera i yrkesrollen med andra företag på sociala medier jämfört med utanför arbetet och i så fall vilka skillnaderna?
15. Kan du beskriva hur en ideal affärsrelation ser ut för dig?
   a. Hur jämför du företag med varandra?
16. Vad är viktigt för att du ska känna förtroende vid första kommunikationen du har med en fysisk person via sociala medier?

DEL 3

17. Skulle du kunna urskilja några specifika delar som gör er relation hållbar i längden?
   a. Varför tror du just de sakerna påverkar att ni fortsätter göra business med varandra?
18. På många ställen på sociala medier är företag noga med att visa att de har stark supportfunktion mot sina kunder vid exempelvis förändrade förhållanden. Hur upplever du supporten mellan dig och dina affärskontakter och hur viktigt anser du att det är för att upprätthålla förtroendet?
19. Arbetar du helst med kortsiktiga eller långsiktiga relationer?
   a. Varför?
   b. Vad innebär en kortsiktig respektive långsiktig relation för dig?
20. Hur mycket win-win upplever du att dina företagsrelationer på sociala medier är?
   a. Räcker det för att du ska känna dig nöjd med relationen?
   b. Är ni lika aktiva?

DEL 4

21. Har du något exempel på någon affärsrelation som du är missnöjd med? Beskriv!
22. Hur stort förtroende har du för den andra parten?
   På en skala 1-5 där 1 är inget alls och 5 är fullt förtroende.
   1 2 3 4 5
23. Vill du dela med dig av någon situation där du upplevt att saker gått snett i försök till samarbete?
24. Vad är det värsta du skulle kunna tänka dig att ett annat företag skulle kunna göra som skulle förstöra ditt förtroende helt?

Så, det var sista frågan - Är det något du känner att du skulle vilja tillägga?

Har du några frågor till oss?

Är det okej att vi kontaktar dig om vi kommer på någon mer fråga?

Tusen tack för ditt deltagande! Det uppskattas mycket! 🙂

Om du har några frågor är du välkommen att kontakta oss på a20eliad@student.his.se, a20idaku@student.his.se eller Högskolan i Skövde 0500-448000.

Vänliga hälsningar
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