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Global Connection Chronicles: Building Bridges, Not Walls.

- Exploring Business Sweden's Dynamic International Relationships in The African Market in terms of Trust, Commitment, Communication, and Culture.

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As the world continues to globalize at a fast pace, the trust, commitment, and communication that are the foundations of successful business-to-business (B2B) relationships may change. Especially in today's world of competing worldviews and increasing intergroup tensions, how do businesses strike this fine balance? Globalization accelerates and changes commercial ties, overlapping linguistic and cultural barriers, social tradition, etc. This study explores *trust, commitment, communication, and culture* in international B2B interactions, focusing on Business Sweden and its Swedish clients in South Africa and Kenya. The goal of this study is to understand how these factors help *create, develop and dissolve* international B2B relationships. To address the subsequent inquiries, this research employs a qualitative approach and conducts a case study on Business Sweden. Seven semi-structured interviews and two critical incident techniques were used to collect data from Business Sweden employees in Kenya and South Africa and affiliated Swedish clients.

The findings have shown that business ties in South Africa and Kenya are deep and time-consuming, unlike Sweden's formal approach. In this research it is indicated that in South Africa and Kenya, personal relationships are more significant than professional ones, emphasizing the importance of emotions. Additionally, the research finds risk and time as important factors that determine trust, communication, and commitment. Moreover, the following study shows that communication is seen as crucial to successful collaborations. In addition, cultural awareness and understanding has shown to be more essential than trust. This thesis examines the delicate balance needed to succeed in cross-cultural contexts and encourages businesses to see culture as a support system.

List of Abbreviations

B2B = Business to Business, **RM** = Relationship Marketing, **SET** = Social Exchange Theory

Keywords; International business relationship, Trust, Commitment, Communication, Creating -, Developing -, and Dissolving B2B relationships, Multicultural Business, Business Sweden, South Africa, Kenya.

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This dissertation marks the end of our two-year master's program at the University of Gothenburg, and we look forward to utilizing our academic knowledge in practice.

Dalia Adawi & Diana Kebedom

Chapter 1 *Introduction*

"It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it..."

Background

Since childhood, we have been instructed that meaningful relationships are founded on trust and honesty. This virtue, like all good things in life, demands patience, time, and communication. Likewise, within the complex realm of marketing, these fundamental ideas continue to have significant importance. It is well acknowledged that the establishment of a foundation of trust and transparency plays a crucial role in fostering enduring relationships between firms and their consumers (Zhang & Du, 2020; Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). Similar to the process of fostering interpersonal connections, the establishment of loyalty demands deliberate dedication, the passage of time, and the implementation of successful communication tactics. Following core idea is also adaptive in the business world, where relationship-building has been valued for generations to get an advantage over competitors (Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023).

In the very recent past, the establishment and nurturing of relationships mainly relied on face-to-face contact. Particularly within the B2B landscape. Such face-to-face engagements hold considerable importance, as they depend significantly on the practical knowledge, revered reputation, and naturally gifted abilities to satisfy their client's needs (Dayan & Ndubisi, 2020; Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). Due to advancements in technology, the traditional power structure between businesses and their B2B customers has shifted significantly in recent decades. As a result, B2B customers are being able to research companies thoroughly before doing business with them, they are now in a far more influential position than ever before (Dayan and Ndubisi, 2020; Zafari, Biggemann & Garry, 2023).

In contemporary times, researchers Zhang and Du (2020) and Gummesson (2017) have underscored the significance of establishing robust relationships with customers and other pertinent stakeholders as a pivotal factor in determining the achievement of a business. Scholarly investigations (e.g., Hunt et al., 2006; Zafari et al., 2023) have put out the proposition that companies that place emphasis on cultivating relationships possess the ability to influence both short-term tactical and long-term promotional activities. Achieving mutual satisfaction between the involved parties is the cornerstone of the process of building B2B partnerships (Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). Moreover, authors such as Wright et al. (2007) implies that the establishment and growth of corporate relationships have been based on a solid foundation of *trust, communication and commitment*).

Within the intricate realm of international B2B interactions, the spotlight is now cast upon the burgeoning significance of culture (Rugman & Verbeke, 2004). The increasing complexity of the global market casts a brighter light on this issue, where it may profoundly affect company strategy and subtly reshape the patterns of interpersonal relationships (Rugman & Verbeke, 2004; Webster, 2015). As globalization continues to reshape our society, an abundance of cultural clashes emerges, touching on everything from linguistic complexity to social mores and personal tastes (Jiang et al., 2020). The phenomena may be explained by the logical explanation that when people with multiple belief systems and cultural backgrounds come together in a heterogeneous setting, conflicts of interest naturally emerge because of their unique and differing needs. As a result, this gives rise to circumstances in which the attainment of mutual understanding is not consistently realized (Webster, 2015; Jiang et al., 2020). The importance of this understanding becomes clear when we consider the role played by organizations like *Business Sweden*. Hence there is no doubt that this government agency plays a vital role in the international business scene, since it encourages Swedish enterprises to expand their operations abroad and to invest in foreign companies (Business Sweden, 2023a). Furthermore, the beneficial effects of the organization is evidenced by its substantial worldwide presence, as demonstrated by its notable operations for instance in South Africa and Kenya.

Drawing upon insights from Business Sweden (2023g) and the research conducted by Boshoff and Fourie (2020), it is apparent that South Africa has seen a significant transformation in recent times. Since 1993, Business Sweden has maintained a consistent presence in Johannesburg, assisting Swedish businesses to establish in the South African market (Business Sweden, 2022; Business Sweden, 2023g). Throughout history, the South African population has experienced a sequence of discriminatory practices and segregation, resulting in challenges to societal progress (Boshoff & Fourie, 2020). South Africa is renowned for its historical background of apartheid in the first half of the 20th century and colonization by the Netherlands and Great Britain during the late 16th century (Boshoff & Fourie, 2020). According to Boshoff and Fourie (2020), the emergence of South Africa as a more inclusive, democratic, and prosperous nation can be attributed to various factors, such as economic growth and political stability. Due to its favorable market prospects, abundant natural resources, and established infrastructure, foreign enterprises find it to be a desirable destination (Mbaidjol, 2018). Given these details, it is not surprising that South Africa has become a wealthy center in the southern part of Africa due to its rich supply of natural resources and a growing, youthful population (Business Sweden, 2022; Business Sweden, 2023g).

As we proceed towards the eastern direction, we encounter Kenya, a country that has been extensively involved in global trade since the 19th century European colonial period (Marris & Somerset, 1971). During this period, the country began exporting its tea and coffee, which have now become global commodities. Moreover, the government of Kenya has made it a priority to foster foreign trade ever since the country gained its independence in 1963, particularly in the field of transportation. Business Sweden's Nairobi office has been

operating in the Eastern African region since 2007, establishing a notable presence in the area. Companies looking to expand into East Africa often start in Kenya because of the country's large population and advanced infrastructure, especially in the fields of energy, infrastructure and computers. Due to these factors, Kenya is sometimes said to be the "beating heart" of East Africa. Subsequently, Business Sweden has recognized Kenya as a critical center for enterprises looking to access the East African area due to its large population, substantial experience and skill (Business Sweden, 2023e).

For a government agency such as Business Sweden, it demands plenty of time and effort to develop relationships in South Africa and Kenya, but it can also be demolished instantly. Hence, the question is how trust, commitment, and communication relate to the three phases of international business relationships: *creating, developing, and dissolving*? Against this dynamic backdrop, there is a compelling opportunity to investigate the relationship between these cultural influences and the cornerstones of trust, commitment, and communication. A study of this nature not only sheds light on the complexities of cross-cultural B2B interactions, but also provides a broad viewpoint from which to appreciate the greater importance of cultural dynamics at work in today's interconnected world. Given this background, we intend to understand the complexities of trust, commitment, and communication that emphasize B2B relationships and the differences within diverse cultures.

Problem discussion

In this academic investigation, the research problem is rooted in the ongoing debates in the academic realm of relationship marketing (RM). Many different meanings have been attached to the word RM in academic circles. However, it is noteworthy that a significant proportion of these definitions exhibit a consistent pattern, placing significant importance on the development of long-lasting connections with both business partners and consumers (Mishra & Li, 2008; Gröonos, 1997). As exemplified by scholars such as Mishra and Li (2008), the terminology "RM" refers to a comprehensive approach to marketing that involves the coordinated integration of many marketing tactics, all aimed at cultivating and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships. Alternatively, Mudie and Pirrie (2006) suggest organization-wide strategy focused on retaining and growing the company's current clientele, rather than actively seeking out potential ones. On the other hand, RM may be seen as a deft move to maximize profit from contacts with clients, and then ending the relationship at the right time and place for everybody involved (Grönroos, 2004). Hence, notable academics like Hunt et al. (2006) stress the importance of the balance between the expense of establishing a relationship and the anticipated rewards. Despite the fact that there are numerous interpretations of RM, this research employs the definition provided by Morgan & Hunt (1994), who define the term as:

" Relationship marketing — establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges... successful relationship marketing requires relationship commitment and trust" - Morgan & Hunt (1994, p 21)

In short, scholarly investigations have regarded the establishment of partnerships as a basic and essential activity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the present day, the academic discourse has experienced a notable change in emphasis, placing greater importance on the establishment of relationships as a vital competitive advantage that may result in increased market growth and improved reputation for firms (Gröonos, 1997; Thaichon et al., 2020; Zhang & Du, 2020). Furthermore, existing research on RM is now addressing customer retention issues in B2B settings, with studies highlighting trust and loyalty as critical in maintaining relationships (Thaichon et al., 2020; Zhang & Du, 2020; Payne & Frow, 2017). Considering this context, there are some discourses over the importance of cultivating a base of loyal clients as a means to enhance and expand one's market sector (Thaichon et al., 2020).

Similarly, Palmatier et al. (2006) elaborate on the importance of relationship marketing by outlining three different types of bonds that firms may establish with customers: *structural-, societal-, and financial ties*. To start, a structural strategy is what organizations use to offer customized and creative services that are carefully adjusted to their customers. Often, this strategy is achieved by the skillful use of customized, technology-driven strategies, carefully designed to establish a strong and close relationship, thus enhancing the connection with the organization's client (Palmatier et al., 2006; Wang, 2014). The focus now turns smoothly to the domain of social connections, which are formed through a range of situations such as events and different types of engagement. This dimension not only enhances competitive edge but also acts as a catalyst in strengthening the loyalty of the current consumer base (Palmatier et al., 2006). While in the context of RM, companies often employ financial bonds by rewarding loyal consumers monetarily. These rewards can take the form of discounts, freebies, and other promotions designed to encourage customers to stick with the company (Palmatier et al., 2006).

Furthermore, Andersen and Kumar (2006) have observed that, similar to interpersonal relationships, the longevity of business partnerships depends on the basic principles of trust, commitment, and communication. The importance of respecting one another is acknowledged as one of the guiding principles. This approach promotes an atmosphere of reasonable collaboration by taking into account the various skills, viewpoints, and contributions of each participant. Moreover, the importance of a shared vision cannot be overstated. As a result, everyone is better able to work together toward a common goal and experience more success in their activities (Andersen & Kumar, 2006). These elements (*trust, commitment, and communication*) are of the highest meaning, particularly in global business relationships, where they are essential to the establishment and growth of such relationships (Andersen & Kumar, 2006). High levels of *trust* facilitate *communication* and open the way for long-lasting relationships. *Commitment*, another crucial element, can be affected by a variety of contingencies and circumstances, which can either strengthen or weaken it (Gansser, Boßow-Thies, & Krol, 2021; Andersen & Kumar, 2006). As per the author's perspective (Gansser, et al., 2021; Andersen & Kumar, 2006), the concept of strengthening can be associated with the attainment of goals, success, and the sharing of resources. In contrast, weakening may manifest as a lack of transparent communication and mistrust. Additionally, a strong commitment indicates a solid drive to accomplish an achievement, which lowers the

chance of dissolution and raises the likelihood of successful relationships (Gansser et al., 2021). While communication on the other hand is seen as an extraordinarily effective factor, not only strengthens collaboration but also prevents conflicts (Tsai, 2011). By analyzing communication practices, firms can cultivate effective strategies, improve their communication skills, and devise solutions for overcoming associated obstacles.

Shifting focus to culture in RM and international B2B, Hofstede (1984) studied how a country's cultural traits differ between micro and macro views concerning B2B interactions. In separate research conducted by Caliguiri and Cascio (1998), the authors emphasized the impact of dealing with foreign relations on cultural adjustment, specifically in terms of the resulting discomfort and confusion. Koponen and Julkunen (2022) offered a more macro view, highlighting how cultural identity differences must be considered when forming B2B relationships across international borders. In this context, investing in a connection with someone from another nation can pose significant challenges for a company in terms of both time and risk since people in different countries perceive the world in different ways. To mitigate potential losses in such scenarios, Koponen and Julkunen (2022) propose that firms thoroughly examine the cultural framework of the market they aim to enter. For B2B to be successful in an international partnership, it is essential, according to Samah et al. (2014), for the business to have a knowledgeable understanding of the standards and principles that characterize the target culture. Foreign operations need a thorough familiarity with local cultures and values, as stressed by Samah et al. (2014). With this knowledge, one can make knowledgeable choices and successfully navigate the cultural complexities that have a major impact on company strategies. As a result, corporate activities are more likely to be carried out with respect and attention for the specific cultural environment, leading to improved relationships and more fruitful results.

The aim of this qualitative thesis is to investigate the intricate interplay of trust, commitment, communication, and culture within the context of international client relationships, with a focus on Business Sweden's and their clients' experiences. Through an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Business Sweden and their clients, the study intends to uncover how these elements come together in the process of building and maintaining successful international partnerships. To achieve the aim of this study, following questions have been formed:

(I) What are the perceptions of Business Sweden and its Swedish clients in South Africa and Kenya regarding trust, commitment, and communication in shaping their international relationships, and what challenges and opportunities do they face?

(II) How do Business Sweden and its Swedish clients in South Africa and Kenya handle the various cultural nuances that arise when doing business internationally, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

Our research employs two-dimensional questions since we want to examine the interplay between *trust, commitment, and communication* in corporate relationships, while simultaneously taking into account the cultural distinctions that shape these bonds.

Specifically, we analyze diverse communication styles, different strategies and the interaction with difficulties that may arise.

Case company description

Business Sweden, formed in 2013 by the merging of the Export Council and Invest Sweden, is committed to assisting Swedish firms in accessing global markets and increasing their global sales (Business Sweden, 2023a; Business Sweden, 2023b). Simply put, the organization is run by the Swedish government and the country's commercial sector, principally through;

- the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and
- the Swedish Foreign Trade Association (Business Sweden, 2023b;2023c).

Nevertheless, their scope of engagement is expansive, comprising a variety of clients including small and medium-sized businesses, entrepreneurs, and multinational corporations (Business Sweden 2023a; 2023b). As noted by Business Sweden (2023a; 2023c), the organization serves a dual purpose: it assists Swedish companies in their global expansion plans while simultaneously attracting international companies to invest and flourish in the Swedish market. Furthermore, Business Sweden (2023d) attempts to establish collaborative relationships with regional agencies worldwide, with the objective of meeting its diverse customer base.

Business Sweden, with a staff of around 550 professionals, has a 45-year track record of assisting both Swedish and foreign businesses in their worldwide growth efforts. The organization's headquarters are in Stockholm and Shanghai, and it collaborates strategically with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish embassies and consulates, the Team Sweden network, and chambers of business (Business Sweden, 2023a; 2023b). With a presence across 44 global locations, including Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region, they follow a comprehensive approach to provide direct support, strategic expertise, and exceptional relationship-building capabilities in challenging environments (Business Sweden, 2023a; 2023b).

Within the African continent, Business Sweden establishes its presence through four separate headquarters, each of which caters to the continent's diverse market. To exemplify the operations of Business Sweden in Africa, we will illustrate it with their recent collaboration with Scania. The establishment of a public transportation system by Scania in West Africa exemplifies the Swedish market's reaction to the demands of the African continent, facilitated by the collaborative efforts of “Team Sweden” and Business Sweden. This collaboration opened new business opportunities for Scania in West Africa, built long-term corporate connections, notably in the biofuel sector, and offered environmentally responsible transportation solutions (Business Sweden, 2023f). However, as stated previously, the primary focus of this investigation will be on South Africa and Kenya's main markets (Business Sweden, 2023e). The investigation of two markets geographically separated in the African market is a compelling proposition for our study since it is likely to introduce cross-cultural complications.

Delimitation

The focus of this examination will be on *Business Sweden's* efforts in the South African and Kenyan markets. The African market is, according to Business Sweden (2023f), one of the six world's fastest-growing countries, providing tremendous potential and investment prospects. Furthermore, the study's main emphasis is on B2B interactions, cultural aspects in terms of social norms in business contexts, trust, commitment, and communication, all of which are essential for global investors entering any African market. In particular we will ignore religious, political, and individual cultural considerations while discussing societal structural differences. Moreover, it should be noted that the whole research will ignore individual quality in favor of focusing entirely on the company's viewpoint and the variations and similarities in internal and external working procedures. Another limitation is the study's definition of quality, which excludes quality in the form of profitability and capital and proceeds solely from the relationship's performance in terms of trust, commitment, and communication. In addition, Business Sweden and their Swedish clients in South Africa and Kenya will determine the implications of this study, meaning it cannot be generalized to the entire African market.

Figure (1). Outline of the study

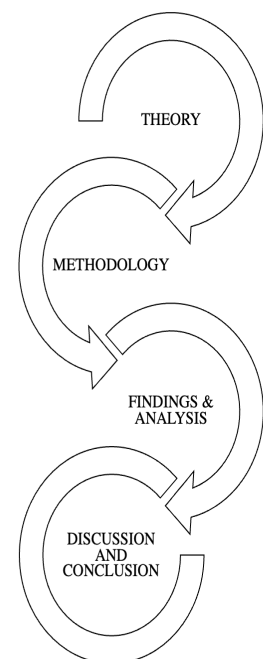
Outline of the thesis

The sections above outline the subject this thesis is exploring. Simply put, the opening chapter established the study's topic and purpose, offering a clear comprehension of the paper's major issues. Next chapter presents the *theoretical framework*, providing an overview of the central concepts and theories that will be employed to guide the study and answer the research question. The framework encompasses three essential areas:

1. *Relationship phases.*
2. *Relationship quality.*
3. *Cross-cultural B2B relationships.*

Chapter 3 details the study's actual execution, including methodology and reason for the chosen strategies.

While chapter 4 contains empirical data gathered through different approaches, including semi-structured interviews with 3 *Business Sweden* employees and 4 *Swedish clients* within the Energy and infrastructure sector. Furthermore, Chapter 4 will simultaneously examine the study's findings in light of its theoretical framework in order to address the research questions and objectives. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion and conclusion of the major results from the findings and analysis. Moreover, this chapter finishes by providing ideas for future research and outlining the limits observed throughout the study approach.



Chapter 2 *Theoretical Framework*

The following section divides the theoretical framework into three primary topics: *Relationship phases, Relationship quality, and Cross-cultural B2B relationships*. This chapter's theory assesses the phases of B2B partnerships, from formation to dissolution, evaluating the significance of trust, commitment, and communication. The final and concluding topic reflects on the cultural dynamics that influence international business relationships.

Relationship Phases

Businesses must tackle not just domestic rivals, but also foreign ones since globalization has brought the world's markets closer. This shifting environment highlights the importance of integrating an international viewpoint and strategy into corporate operations in how they create, develop and dissolve relationships (Jeong & Oh, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). A firm may decide to branch out internationally for a variety of reasons, especially in the modern period, such as expanding into new markets, growing their client base, or boosting their overall efficiency. However, regardless of the underlying factors behind this decision, it is imperative for the firm to not only select an appropriate partner for establishing a partnership, but also evaluate their qualifications and ascertain their ability to fulfill the requirements of all involved parties (Zhang et al., 2016). As Jeong and Oh (2017) point out, the nature of B2B relationships encompasses more than simply financial transactions, as it includes sophisticated social and emotional interactions. It is common practice for businesses to do in-depth research on potential business partners before forming alliances with them (Dayan and Ndubisi, 2020; Zafari et al., 2023; Sarmiento et al., 2015). This complexity grows exponentially when operating on a global scale, involving an appreciation for subtleties in language, culture, and organizational structure (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Tsai, 2011; Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016; Steinhoff & Palmetier, 2021). As a result of the interplay of multiple factors in today's world, the understanding of the underlying dynamics has been deepened and a more holistic perspective is now more important than ever (Zafari et al., 2023; Dayan & Ndbubisi, 2020).

Creating & Developing B2B Relationships

In scholarly discourse, the literature frequently interrelates the creation and development of relationships, acknowledging their interdependence. In simple terms, this initial step focuses on practical considerations to understand and allocate different types of opportunities and potential collaborative ventures (Vincent & Webster, 2013; Valtakoski, 2015). By laying this groundwork, further interaction and development within the business realm can take place. Typically, customized services and communication techniques are developed to foster beneficial corporate connections in the creation stage (Vincent & Webster, 2013). In light of Valtakoski (2015) forming relationships emphasizes the significance of emotional exchange,

particularly the expression and interpretation of emotions. To determine the outcome of relationship businesses, one needs to grasp its own interests and goals, which fosters mutual empathy, openness, and trust (Valtakoski, 2015).

Through the structure of Social Exchange Theory (SET), SET offers a thorough justification framework for understanding why connections form in the context of marketing (Lambe et al., 2001). As noted by Lambe et al. (2001) relationships develop through the mutual exchange of benefits with the intention of establishing and preserving specific bonds, based on meaning. According to SET (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Jeong & Oh, 2017), B2B interactions are founded on an assessment of the expected advantages of such affiliations. The important suggestion made by SET stresses the part “reward-cost comparisons” play in forging social bonds and helping people decide whether to keep a particular relationship going or dissolve. To be more specific, SET suggests that individuals conduct a review of the pros and cons of a potential relationship before jumping directly into it. If the perceived costs exceed the expected benefits, individuals are more likely to hold off from establishing the relationship. For a relationship to be chosen or avoided, one must ask oneself if the potential gains are worth the potential losses (Lambe et al., 2001).

In contrast to creation, development is characterized by the fact that an organization must ensure that a client receives transparent communication in the form of recurring meetings and feedback sessions to ensure that a relationship develops in the direction desired by all parties involved (Koponen & Julkunen, 2022). When an organization reaches this stage, it is also essential to remember that both development and trust are extremely time-bound and subject to change over time and space (Koponen & Julkunen, 2022; Gansser et al., 2021; Newton, 2022). In light of Bengtson et al. (2013) findings, it is fundamental to acknowledge that relationships are not fixed, rather, they are constantly shifting objects and therefore the development of relationships has different outcomes. It can be challenging to predict the future direction of any particular relationship due to the fact that human interactions and emotions, as well as the impact of external factors always change attributes (Bengtson et al., 2013; Ford et al., 1998). As a result of this, Bengtson et al. (2013) believed that continuous effort and adaptability are required to comprehend and manage relationship dynamics. Relationships between organizations and their B2B clients can evolve over time as a consequence of market conditions, rivalry, and improvements in technology, among additional factors (La Rocca et al., 2016; Ford et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2004). For example, if you spend a year nourishing a relationship, the end effect will most likely be the development of a connection that will stay for a long time. In contrast, if you spend two months, the relationship is more likely to be short-term because relationship development is less oriented and has a distinct beginning and conclusion (Newton, 2022). Investing a substantial amount of time, resources, and energy in relationships carries with it a high degree of risk. Companies that operate on the international market are typically aware that the *creation and development* of B2B relationships are time-consuming and resource-intensive (Newton, 2022).

Dissolving B2B Relationships

Numerous academic theories have been proposed to explain the factors that influence why B2B relationships end. For instance, Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000) suggested that the formation of a relationship may be attributable to personnel changes or the so-called conclusion of a project. In contrast to the perspective presented by Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000) and Bengtson, et al. (2013) proposes that a shift in management can lead to the end of a B2B relationship. In the aftermath of a managerial transition, a B2B partnership can break down due to a number of factors such as risk and transformations in organizational culture and reevaluation of established alliances. Thus, in a research study conducted by Gassenheimer et al. (1998), the authors believe that the dissolution of a B2B relationship may result from changes in the commercial landscape, particularly due to financial difficulties, or when a company acknowledges that its current partner no longer meets its needs. As businesses adapt to various influences, such as market dynamics and technological advancement, they may experience modifications to their product and service offerings, operational processes, and strategic approaches. These transformations can lead organizations to seek out new suppliers, collaborators, or service providers, resulting in the eventual dissolution of existing relationships (Tähtinen & Vaaland, 2006; Tähtinen & Havila, 2004). As mentioned by Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000), mutual agreement may lead to separation and that relationship breakup is not always bad, sometimes proving beneficial to both parties. Furthermore, much of the literature on dissolving (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Beloucif et al., 2006), stated that positive effects of B2B partnership ending may include useful lessons and success stories obtained from previous failures.

Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) provides an approach for preventing the end of a relationship that you can employ. To keep the relationship from dissolving, you must first create a foundation of trust, followed by the development of a strong and healthy bond through time. The same authors (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000), notes that such an approach is crucial since it might set the tone for how you wish to create future connections. From the viewpoint of Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000) direct communication may prohibit miscommunication or conflicts. A corporation may also use the "revocable exit" tactic, which consists of expressing the decision to dissolve but staying open to collaborative discussion, with hopes of modifying the initial choice. In contrast to the direct approach, there is also the indirect approach that makes extensive use of exit strategies and clues. These tactics were primarily employed to deflect attention from the main cause of the breakup of a relationship (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000). If businesses do not wish to entirely terminate a relationship, but rather to reform it, then they can modify the terms of an existing relationship without ending the connection. By thoroughly comprehending the array of available strategies, an organization can effectively choose the most suitable course of action to minimize potential negative consequences, such as emotional and breakup costs (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000).

Relationship Quality

The quality of international B2B relationships is based on the intricate dance between trust, commitment, and communication in a dynamic business environment. These three pillars

constitute a cohesive framework that not only maintains but also strengthens the ties between global organizations (Solberg & Nes, 2002; Gransser et al., 2021). The viability of international B2B relationships depends on the character of the connections between companies. This characteristic is intricately interwoven with trust, commitment, and communication. Partners can navigate the challenges of cross-cultural collaboration if they have built trust through transparent interactions (Fink et al., 2007). Commitment transcends geographic distances to unite organizations, fostering joint efforts and shared development.

Trust

Successful commercial partnerships are built on a foundation of trust. Its significance is highlighted by several elements, some of which include trusting one's collaborator's dependability and honesty (Houjeir, Roudaina, & Ross Brennan, 2017). Trust has a crucial role in fostering dependability, since it establishes a sense of confidence among partners, enabling them to have assurance in each other's capacity to fulfill their individual responsibilities. Moreover, it serves as a catalyst for fostering open communication and promoting transparency, allowing the smooth and efficient sharing of very important information (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Larentis, et al., 2018). This highlights the crucial need of trust in the context of partnering with enterprises in unfamiliar geographical areas (Larentis et al., 2018). Within this, the establishment of trust cultivates an atmosphere conducive to cooperation and collaboration, resulting in the development of joint resolutions to obstacles and facilitating the exchange of resources (Houjeir et al., 2017). In addition, it functions as a medium for efficient settlement of conflicts, promoting flexibility and facilitating constructive handling of differences. Within the context of interpersonal dynamics, Lindgreen (2003) study investigates many paradigms of trust and their nuances. Concrete mutual agreements established in the earliest stages of a relationship are the cornerstone of the 'confidence-based trust' on which those interactions rest. Personality-based trust, which emphasizes an individual's unique qualities, develops later and frequently takes precedence over simple words of assurance. As the study progresses, Lindgreen (2003) defines another aspect called "process-based trust," which is based on repeatable activities inside relationships. This multifaceted perspective offers the framework for delving into trust in more complex interpersonal settings (Lindgreen, 2003).

As an increasing number of organizations expand their operations to global markets, they see the potential for development and actively pursue opportunities in attractive areas (Maharajh & Heitmeyer, 2005). Significantly, trust has a crucial role in fostering long-term orientations, hence creating stability and commitment within relationships (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Larentis, et al., 2018). In the complex and varied realm of international B2B contacts, the importance of trust remains crucial in both the establishment and maintenance of high-quality partnerships (Houjeir et al., 2017).

Commitment

In international B2B contexts, it has been shown that commitment plays a crucial role in enhancing relationship quality (Chang et al., 2012). Commitment in international B2B

relationships fosters a sense of loyalty and devotion among partners. This dedication has numerous positive effects on the character of relationships while simultaneously encouraging a focus on the long term. Due to the time, effort, and resources that are invested in international B2B relationships, longevity is frequently desired (Rauyruen, & Miller, 2007; Ferro-Soto et al., 2023; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment enables participants to perceive the relationship as a strategic partnership, fostering mutual understanding and the pursuit of shared objectives (Chang et al., 2012). Long-term perspectives provide stability and foster ongoing collaboration, innovation, and cooperative problem-solving which therefore increases confidence. Indicating a propensity to invest in the relationship, commitment generates the expectation of reciprocal support and dependability. Committed partners are more likely to exhibit consistent behavior, keep their word, and maintain open and transparent communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This behavior fosters confidence and a favorable perception of the relationship's quality (Ferro-Soto et al., 2023). Cultural differences, regulatory shifts, and economic vicissitudes are a few of the obstacles that international B2B relationships may face. By staying committed, companions are more likely to demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of these challenges. They are willing to exert additional effort to surmount obstacles, come up with inventive solutions, and maintain the character of the relationship even during challenging times (Chang et al., 2012; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Communication

Without any form of communication, it is difficult to maintain any relationship, including B2B relationships (Finne & Grönroos, 2009). Communication is indispensable for establishing mutual comprehension and nurturing shared meaning among partners. Clear and accurate communication helps bridge cultural, linguistic, and contextual divides that may exist in international B2B relationships (Grönroos, 2004).

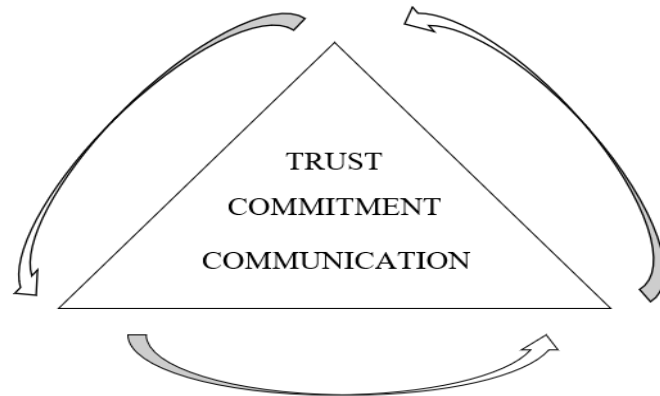
In international B2B relationships, communication is also crucial for resolving conflicts and addressing issues that may arise (Laurie & Mortimer, 2019). Misalignments, disagreements, and divergent points of view are natural occurrences, especially in complex business environments. Partners can prevent the escalation of issues and preserve a positive relationship climate by addressing conflicts immediately and openly (Finne & Grönroos, 2009). In international B2B relationships, counterparties frequently have specialized abilities, experiences, and industry knowledge. Collaborates can share these resources through clear and open communication, fostering mutual learning and innovation (Laurie & Mortimer, 2019). This will in turn increase their competitiveness, adapt to shifting market conditions, and foster continuous improvement by leveraging one another's strengths. This exchange of knowledge contributes to the character of the relationship by expanding the collective knowledge base and enabling partners to make informed decisions (Grönroos, 2004; Laurie & Mortimer, 2019).

Trust, Commitment, and Communication

Using the aforementioned theories as inspiration, the authors of this study developed a model

to illustrate the interdependence of *trust*, *commitment*, and *communication* in the context of business relationships (Figure 2). As demonstrated in Figure 2, *trust*, *commitment*, and *communication* create a circular outcome in which equal amounts of each pillar are required for stable business relationships.

Figure (2). The link between trust, commitment, and communication.



An alternative interpretation of the interconnection between *trust*, *commitment* and *communication* can be derived from Morgan and Hunt's (1994) conceptualization. Succinctly, the authors posit that these three pillars are intertwined through the partners' beliefs, attitudes, or expectations, all aimed at acting in the best interest of their existing relationship. According to the theoretical framework proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), to establish a collaborative relationship with another organization, a corporation must exhibit two key factors; trust and commitment. The role of trust and commitment has a major impact within this particular context, as emphasized by the works of Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Friman et al. (2002), in deciding the outcomes of B2B partnerships. Multiple factors play an essential part in shaping the dynamics within this setting such as encompassing costs, rewards, shared values, communication, and behaviors driven by self-interest.

In their seminal work, Morgan and Hunt (1994) expound upon the notion that the concept of "cost" within the framework of commitment and trust theory extends beyond material considerations. Although it has financial elements, it also extends to emotional investments, prospective monetary obligations, and the potential hazards to one's image. Conversely, within the framework of trust and commitment, the term "benefits" refers to the advantageous outcomes that are mutually obtained by the parties involved in the relationship. As the partners increasingly see and value these advantages, their level of commitment strengthens. This acknowledgment also enhances levels of trust. In addition, the significance of shared values in shaping B2B interactions is emphasized by Morris and Carter (2005), since they serve as a reflection of a company's core beliefs and viewpoint. Along this line, Morris and Carter (2005) argue that good communication is crucial in establishing and developing the relationship, as it increases the chances of cooperation and opportunity identification. Because of its foundational status, according to Gransser et al. (2021) communication links not only the elements of trust and commitment, but also these elements to one another. Establishing trust requires open and honest communication since it helps foster trustworthiness, honesty, and integrity (Graça & Kharé, 2020; Solberg & Nes, 2002).

As a result, partners within a relationship gain trust in each other's intentions and talents when they exchange information, perspectives, and ideas. In turn, trust enhances the character of the relationship as partners feel more at ease relying on and collaborating with one another

(Finne & Grönroos, 2009; Grönroos 2004). Consequently, this increases the level of commitment among the business stakeholders engaged in the relationship. In turn, establishing this commitment emphasizes the significance of functioning communication (Jeong & Oh 2017; Granser et al., 2021).

Cross-cultural B2B relationships

Before entering a domestic market, it is vital to be aware of the possible cultural differences and impacts since there are risks of misunderstandings and different communication styles (Fink et al., 2007). In international business, the extent to which social contexts, such as after-work events, holidays, etc., influence the significance and comprehension of social structures is crucial. By implementing a feeling of belonging and understanding within the same cultural environment, social structures have a significant positive impact on international commerce and entrepreneurship (Li et al., 2005). Enterprises in the same geographical region are better suited to negotiate local culture, enhancing engagement and cooperation (Cross et al., 2004). Social networks between businesses are essential because they provide numerous opportunities for businesses to grow and become more efficient, which is also based on their mutual trust (Rauch, 2001). As noted by Graça and Kharé (2020) and Hofstede (1984), shared cultural values help to create trust, commitment, and communication in global business interactions. Arguably, Wu (2006), on the other hand, believes that cultural qualities should vary throughout time to adapt to changing traditions, values and conceptions.

Given that different cultures hold various principles and beliefs, this may result in the individual misinterpreting certain situations and incorrectly considering a courteous gesture to be impolite, and vice versa (Hurn, 2007). Therefore, there is a greater level of comprehension when cultural beliefs are shared, hence communication has a head start (Brett, 2007). De Long and Fahey (2000) believes that social structures and their cultural and traditional content frequently cause conflict between businesses due to a lack of communication and business practice knowledge. Hence, it becomes more difficult for two companies that do not share the same cultural and traditional values to establish a profitable and long-lasting B2B relationship, since common social structures can assist the companies in navigating these obstacles (Barry et al., 2008). Gesteland (2002) claims that in comparison to the cultures and behaviors of other nations, African society and behavior places a greater emphasis on relationships.

This means that people from Africa are more likely to place a higher importance on the connection they have with a business partner than the transaction itself, and they are more inclined to exercise caution while conducting business with an unknown party. Because of this, they place a greater emphasis on establishing trust and maintaining healthy relationships prior to finalizing a commercial transaction (Gesteland, 2002; Graça and Kharé, 2020). This, in turn, leads to them cooperating with individuals who are already acquainted with them or who are part of their social network; the people they trust (Gesteland, 2002). However, to resolve the issue of cultural misunderstandings, Orlikowski (1992, December) believes that

organizations should provide platforms for cultural exchange and learning in which you are also willing to adopt new traditions and exchange your own. It is predicated on having an open, inquisitive, and optimistic attitude towards success, and not on sharing the same cultural values (Schwartz, 2012). As Gesteland (2002, p.15) put it: “*In international business contexts, the seller adopts to the buyer*”. That is to say, the more culture companies study and understand, the more commercial benefits they receive.

Societies across the world always have cultural tendencies toward individualism or collectivism, which helps to define the national culture (Samaha, Beck & Palmatier, 2014). These terms highlight whether members of a society exhibit integrated interconnections or are perceived as independent entities, placing an emphasis on autonomy over communal affiliation (Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016; Samaha et al., 2014; Houjei & Brennan, 2017). The ideology of collectivism promotes a societal structure that encourages individuals to exhibit a greater degree of sociability compared to individualistic societies. This is because of the importance they place on maintaining strong ties to one's extended family and other social groups (Lee et al., 2019; Terawatanavong & Quazi, 2006). Lee et al. (2019) posits that individualism is characterized by a focus on self-reliance and the prioritization of individual interests over collective objectives. Each societal orientation, in turn, generates unique interpretations of various cultural dimensions, such as gender roles and power distance, among others. This demonstrates the significant impact of these cultural paradigms on the larger social landscape (Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016; Houjeir & Brennan, 2017; Lee et al., 2019).

To comprehend cultural dimensions, it is necessary to compare their similarities and differences. These analyses can be used to obtain an understanding of fundamental aspects such as hierarchy, communication, and consumer behavior, among others (Ndubisi, 2003; Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016; Lee et al., 2019). The relationship between cultural dimensions and social norms, i.e., what is socially accepted and standardized within a culture, cannot be overstated. This can also be implemented in B2B contexts where, for example, in one culture it is socially acceptable to be late, whereas in another culture it is considered disrespectful (Houjeir & Brennan, 2017; Lee et al., 2019). By analyzing and comprehending these social and cultural norms, but most importantly by respecting them, the success of these multicultural business relationships can be determined (Ndubisi & Natarajan, 2016; Samaha et al., 2014).

Chapter 3 *Methodology*

Choice of methodology

Exploring the complexities of *trust, commitment, and communication within* the context of B2B relationships, this study employed a qualitative analytic method. In addition, *cultural aspects* have also been considered within the methodological choice. This methodology was chosen to highlight the perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of the participants within various social structures. As a research paradigm, qualitative methodology is ideally adapted for undertaking in-depth investigations into particular subject areas, thereby facilitating the generation of profound understanding (Bell et al., 2019). As noted by Bell et al. (2019), qualitative research allows academicians to obtain a nuanced understanding of the subject of study. This is largely due to the fact that we can now perform a thorough content analysis on the items as they were perceived by the participants. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study is better equipped to capture context-specific and culturally related factors that could potentially impact *trust, commitment, and communication* in terms of relationship steps (*creating, developing, and dissolving*).

Research design

In accordance with the objective of the research, the authors chose to conduct a descriptive study. Descriptive studies are valuable research methods that provide a foundational understanding of a topic, investigate uncommon or complex phenomena, without manipulating variables or delve into the causes of specific outcomes (Bell et al., 2019). Instead, descriptive research aims to give a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study. When little antecedent investigation has been conducted or when little information is available, they are particularly useful. Observing and documenting characteristics, behaviors, or relationships, descriptive studies assist researchers build a solid foundation of knowledge (Bell et al., 2019). This study will therefore examine trust, commitment, communication, and culture within international B2B relationships, as we wish to explore the characteristics and behaviors of Business Sweden and their clients that contribute to the formation of solid connections.

There are however deductive and inductive elements evident in this research. According to Bell et al. (2019), the inductive method is utilized by researchers who seek to derive generalizations, patterns, or theories from the analysis of specific observations or cases, thereby enhancing their comprehension and generating new insights during the data analysis. Considering the explication of the research philosophy (e.g., Bell et al., 2019; Humble & Radina, 2019), the current study employs an inductive methodology in order to gain a deeper comprehension of B2B on the African market and its underlying patterns, relationships, and structures that may not be readily apparent. The decision to conduct a descriptive study was influenced by our exposure to a completed masters course entitled "*Creating, Developing,*

and Dissolving Business Relationships". This course piqued our interest, and we quickly realized that we wanted to investigate trust, commitment, and communication, as well as the impact culture has on the African market. Moreover, the descriptive method was also chosen because of its capacity to facilitate the description of a phenomenon and permit the identification of similarities and differences within a field (Bell et al., 2019).

Case selection

To conduct a case with an abundance of information it can provide readers with valuable lessons (Perry, 1998; Bell et al., 2019; Eisenhardt, 1989). Researchers should select a case that emphasizes understanding for themselves and others, while ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and subject matter (Bell et al., 2019; Perry, 1998). In light of the antecedent discussion, the researchers chose a case study approach, incorporating five major guidelines to guarantee objectivity: relevance, cultural perspective, international scope, domain expertise, and diversity of relationships. The objective of the researchers was to examine a company that engages in;

- *B2B transactions,*
- *maintains a presence on the international market,*
- *and demonstrates diverse relationship-building strategies with its business partners.*

Within the domain of international B2B operations, organizations exhibit a variety of strategies for *trust, commitment, and communication* but also a variety of *cultures*. Due to the limitations of our study, it was vital to choose a company that was both valid and experienced, choosing to focus on a Swedish firm operating on the global market. This decision was also made on the authors' interest in investigating their own local market. Initially, case selection relied firstly on the authors' professional networks to facilitate access to a suitable organization for research.

A suggestion from one of the author's fathers, a former *Business Sweden* employee, prompted us to investigate the organization as a potential case study. Business Sweden was determined to be an appropriate candidate after a comprehensive evaluation, as it met the five criteria's enumerated in the case selection. Choosing a Swedish organization such as Business Sweden enables the research to disclose the distinct cultural characteristics of Swedish business practices on the international markets. Specifically, the international footprint of Business Sweden enables the research to investigate differences in *trust, commitment, and communication* dynamics across diverse geographical and *cultural* contexts, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of managing business relationships globally. Moreover, Business Sweden, with its expertise in assisting both Swedish and international companies globally, offers an ideal case for studying effective methods for business partnerships.

Interviews

The primary data for this research will be derived from semi-structured interviews. By adopting this interview methodology, as proposed by Bell et al. (2019), permits the researcher to ask participants follow-up inquiries at any point during the interviewing process.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow researchers to zero down on their particular areas of interest while still gathering a wealth of nuanced data, as stated by Bell et al. (2019). In essence, we conducted interviews with active participants at *Business Sweden* in both South Africa and Kenya consequently Swedish clients that have worked with *Business Sweden* in these regions. In addition, interviews were conducted with individuals holding a variety of positions and fulfilling a variety of roles in order to gain a multifaceted understanding of the topic.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were used well to document participant background information, including demographics, values, and perspectives. By using a semi structured interview format, it ensures an interview that is conversational and more informal in nature (Bell et al., 2019). Certain outlines of topics, issues or themes are decided upon before conducting the interviews. A difficulty with this format is that the empirical data may be tricky to analyze as different themes emerge from the respondents (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The interview questions are based upon the literature review and themes emerged from the literature evaluation. The structure of the interviews are attached as appendix 1 (Business Sweden) and Appendix 2 (Swedish clients). In order to establish a more neutral and relaxed environment in which respondents could communicate freely, we and the respondent began each interview by introducing ourselves. Each respondent who is familiar with the Swedish language was given the opportunity to speak Swedish or English depending on what they felt most confident with.

However, many various clients of *Business Sweden* wished to remain anonymous as a requirement of their press department to participate. To ensure that the clients felt comfortable and that they could speak freely we offered them all to remain anonymous. Despite the fact that the clients' asked us to refrain from publishing their identities and the name of their companies, we can state that they work in the Energy and Infrastructure industry. However, detailed exploration of the client's business operations or size is beyond the scope of this study, in respect of the verbal confidentiality agreement. The respondents from Business Sweden gave us the green light to use their company's name but asked if their individual identities to be left out. To safeguard the participants' privacy, the researchers masked their identities by omitting information such as name, gender, and age from the research. Instead, each respondent was given haphazard names that had no relation to their actual identity and/or gender.

Company (industry)	Designation	Interview Duration	Channel
Business Sweden South Africa	Linda	95 minutes	Zoom
Business Sweden Kenya	Clare	89 minutes	Microsoft Teams
Business Sweden Kenya	Kim	92 minutes	Microsoft Teams
Energy	Alex	85 minutes	Zoom
Energy	Sara	87 minutes	Zoom
Infrastructure	Mary	78 minutes	Zoom
Infrastructure	Simon	80 minutes	Microsoft Teams

Table 1. A table listing the respondents' industry, designation, duration of the interview, and which channel that was utilized.

The selection of clients for this study from Business Sweden is primarily predicated upon their active operations in Africa and their existing relationships with Business Sweden South Africa and Kenya. Further, these criteria were deemed non-essential for our study, as our primary interest centered on understanding the nature of the relationship between Business Sweden and their clients rather than specific attributes of the client organizations themselves. In this study, we have employed a technique known as purposive sampling, which is a method of strategic selection for identifying and interrogating respondents based on the research question (Bell et al., 2019). According to methodological academics Bell et al. (2019), this selection process is grounded in the study's research question, which serves as a governing principle for researchers to systematically select candidates based on two important criteria: requisite knowledge and research objectives. To accomplish this, we utilized the connections of one of our fathers, a former employee of the organization, in order to facilitate communication with the relevant experts. As a result, the father sought out Business Sweden South Africa, Kenya and their clients in the African market. By providing a summary of the study to the father, he then started by informing potential respondents that two master students from the University of Gothenburg would be contacting them. Additionally, this strategy facilitated the recruitment of respondents with the desired characteristics and requisite knowledge for the study. This resulted in us interviewing three participants from Business Sweden and two clients each from two different Swedish organizations, all of whom held positions that required them to operate on the South African or Kenya market.

Outline of the Interviews

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researchers created an interview guide that functioned as a structured instrument to facilitate the capture of relevant data during the interview

process within the methodological framework of this study. We employed a distinct set of questions for the interview guide, designed with care to achieve two primary objectives: minimizing potential ambiguities and maximizing data collection for answering the study's research questions and aim. Recognizing that the *dissolving* of relationships may be a touchy subject, the researchers devised two critical incident techniques for respondents to answer from the perspective of their organization in order to avoid any potential discomfort. These critical incident techniques investigated strategies for terminating a relationship when a client violates the organization's principles and values, as well as techniques for safeguarding a relationship that is in danger of dissolving. Furthermore, geographical distance prevented the authors from traveling to South Africa and Kenya, and the limited duration of the study necessitated an alternative method. As a result, we decided to utilize Microsoft Teams and Zoom for video conferencing, allowing all participants to engage visually and verbally. Bell et al. (2019) notes that conducting interviews through video calls can create a more relaxed environment for interviewees, closely resembling an in-person conversation.

Along this line the interview process ran between April and May 2023 with the researchers contacting the participants. All participants were provided with exhaustive information regarding the interview's scheduling, digital format, research context, and recording procedures by email to effectively prepare them and create a relaxed environment. In order to protect the participants' privacy, they were informed of their anonymity in both writing and during the interviews and were assured that any identifying information would be omitted from the study. In addition, the email stated unambiguously that the researchers intended to record the interviews and offered the option to sign a consent agreement regarding the recordings. However, consent was given verbally during the interviews. Furthermore, participants were informed that the recordings would be used for transcription, which would facilitate the collection of empirical data for the study, and that they would be deleted upon completion of the research.

Complementary Sources

Subsequently, we sought to utilize the institutional database to gain access to both articles and books, thereby enhancing our understanding of the subject matter of the study. We used Google Scholar, Primo, GUPEA, and other discipline-specific databases to acquire additional resources. Due to the fact that the scientific articles were originally collected for other purposes (the previously mentioned master's course), we carefully reviewed the abstracts and conclusions of each source to determine its applicability to this research topic. This was essential to do since this paper has adopted an international perspective in comparison to the master's course. In order to locate the most relevant scholarly articles, we used specific keywords such as "*Relationship marketing in B2B*", "*Creating relationships in international B2B*", "*Developing international relationships in B2B*", "*Dissolving international B2B relationships*", "*Trust in B2B relationships*", "*Commitment in B2B relationships*", "*Communication in B2B*", and "*Cultural complications in international B2B relationships*". Given the vast body of literature in the field, it was essential to establish limits by focusing on specific aspects such as RM in international B2B markets and cultural

aspects of international B2B relationships. In addition, we have gathered secondary data, primarily in the form of reports from Business Sweden about the South African and Kenyan markets. The collected information will be used to learn how these marketplaces run, how they work, and how the company sees their connections internally and externally. In addition, the purpose of this activity is to clarify the significance of these connections within the larger scope of their company activities, providing a more holistic knowledge of their relational business strategy in these niche industries.

Thematic Analysis

Like Ahrne et al. (2015) “*qualitative methods in the social sciences theory*”, we have chosen to underscore the significance of developing a comprehensive understanding of our basis by reading it multiple times. To ensure that the quality of the data used in this study is maintained, we decided to code the data with the objective of ensuring that contradictions and connections are accurately understood and applied. By incorporating sound effects and quotations, it enhances the study’s content and objectives are strengthened and elucidated, while also minimizing the potential for misleading content (Ahrne et al., 2015). In addition to the meticulous work performed during the transcription, during which we ensured that sound effects such as "ehm", "hmm" and “yeah” were included, we read the transcription multiple times to ensure that we did not overlook any essential or significant information.

Moreover, two analysis questions were developed to examine the processing of the data material with the intention of defining and systematizing *trust, commitment, and communication* in international business relationships, as well as identifying potential *cultural* advantages and disadvantages. The following two analysis queries served as the foundation for the coding:

1. *How important is knowledge when building business relationships to gain trust, commitment and to communicate effectively?*
2. *How does the comprehension of cultural differences affect international business relationships?*

By structuring analysis questions, reading the data material multiple times and color-coding the respondents' various expressions and sound effects, we were able to identify with high precision the most pertinent quotations in relation to the purpose and questions of the study. The color scheme consisted of green, orange, and red to distinguish the most beneficial and consistent statements. Regarding the purpose and objectives of the study, the green expressions had the highest relevance, orange medium relevance and red low relevance. The colors green and orange were then combined to form a first-order code, while reds were disregarded. The first order code was then divided into three themes; 1. *The importance of time, risk and knowledge in relationship creation, development and dissolution* 2. *Implication in terms of trust, commitment, and communication in international B2B* and 3. *Comprehending cultural complexities*. By interviewing *Business Sweden* employees in South Africa, Kenya and *Business Sweden's* clients in Africa, we were able to incorporate their international relations experiences and perceptions into their work roles. The cultural aspects

have also been successfully woven in by taking into consideration the various business relationships that can arise within the same and different markets. By coding the material, we were able to define the concepts and terms that emerge to ensure that the study's purpose and objectives are met to the greatest extent possible. The primary purpose of the classified material in our study is to develop an in-depth meaning and comprehension of the scientific content of the research (Ahrne et al., 2015).

Research Quality

Scholars like Bell et al. (2019) highlight the significance of adhering to high research quality standards for methodological robustness, ethical responsibility, and transparency, all of which are applied throughout the study process and employ a variety of methodological strategies. We agreed that maintaining research credibility is critical for ensuring the integrity of study results, in accordance with Bell et al. (2019). Data triangulation was accomplished in the present research by gathering information from a variety of sources, including interviews, papers, books, and internal data from the chosen case company (Bell et al., 2019) which is Business Sweden. This method helped to reduce possible biases and ensure the findings' reliability.

Furthermore, moving on to confirmability, as delineated by Bell et al. (2019), pertains to the objectivity of research results, ensuring that conclusions are derived from collected data rather than subjective interpretations. To achieve this objective, the authors carefully documented the research process, permitting external reviewers on a seminar held the 3rd of May 2023 to trace their methodology and authenticate findings. This study, executed by two authors, further facilitated objectivity by mitigating personal biases through critical self-reflection and collaboration. These measures collectively contributed to the study's verifiability and overall confirmability. Focusing on the final principle of dependability, which per Bell et al. (2019), explain that the realm of research, dependability is associated with the concept of an extensive and transparent research process. To ensure dependability, the researchers carefully transcribed and compiled numerous interviews into a single document. This document, which contains all interview transcripts, is only accessible to the authors to safeguard the information and integrity of the respondents and prevent unauthorized access, especially when the data contain sensitive details and to maintain the respondent's anonymity.

Chapter 4 *Findings & Analysis*

This chapter comprises three sections, wherein the initial segment will delve into the significance of time, risks, and knowledge in relationship phases (creating, developing, and dissolving). The second section involves the integration of relationship quality in terms of trust, commitment, and communication within the B2B context. This section will discuss its importance of application in comprehending the fundamental influence in relationship stages. In the final section, we will explore cross-culture by elucidating on the opportunities and obstacles involved in establishing international B2B relationships.

The importance of time, risk and knowledge in relationship phases

Creating and Developing

In addressing our initial interview questions, participants reached a consensus that first stages of establishing a relationship involve creating a platform for either a “face-to-face” or “virtual encounter”. In light of the ongoing processes of globalization and technological advancement, it is evident that interpersonal connections are now flourishing through both physical and online mediums (Jeong & Oh, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). However, it was not clear by the respondents which interaction type (face-to face or virtual) has the biggest impact on relationships building within the B2B international landscape.

Previous studies, such as those by Dayan and Ndubisi (2020) and Beitelspacher and Getchell (2023), confirm that in-person relationships are founded on shared experiences and a spotless reputation. Furthermore, the revolutionary potential of technology has reconfigured the conventional business-consumer relationship (Zafari, Biggemann, & Garry, 2023) which was not mentioned by the participants. Meaning that, the respondents did not emphasize the importance of gathering information of their potential customers using the advanced technology. This may result in an asymmetrical distribution of power, as it confers upon one of the involved parties the privilege to determine the initiation or abstention from entering into a B2B relationship. Because of this shift, companies need to adopt a more global perspective when forming, expanding, or severing partnerships (Jeong & Oh, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there was a noticeable misunderstanding that remained among the participants about the concept of “virtual encounters”. Therefore, it may be claimed that forming relationships in person is best suited to the local level. While it could be argued that the internet is better suited for international interactions due to its capacity to transcend national boundaries, such rationale has not been articulated by the participants. One plausible explanation for this is that they may be influenced by their individual contexts, potentially due to their heightened awareness of international dynamics.

Thus, the findings of the research indicate that the act of relationship phases (creating, developing, and dissolving) professional connections is an essential aspect of their routine duties and can manifest in various manners. For instance, *Mary* stated:

“Yeah.. We see connecting as an art form, not a duty [...]. As we adjust to the modern environment, it becomes clear that most employment today revolves around building relationships.”

To comprehend the influence of work dynamics and daily routines on the establishment of relationships, the framework of RM can be employed. The interpretation of this phenomenon is subjective, since it arises from the various viewpoints that individuals choose in response to elements of relationships. Mishra and Li (2008) identify RM to assemble a strategic puzzle aimed at long-term customer attraction and retention. On the other hand, Mudie and Pirrie (2006) gives an organization-wide responsibility that puts customer satisfaction and retention ahead of client acquisition and that spans the full customer lifecycle from initial contact to possible defection. Both concepts highlight the need of incorporating relationship-building into all aspects of business. This mindset should permeate all aspects of the team's work, as the key to success is finding ways to meet the individual needs of each consumer. A contention can be made that these individuals perceive their daily routines and responsibilities as a deliberate approach to fostering relationships. This approach aligns the entire organization towards a unified mode of operation and concerted efforts in regards to relationship establishment.

In the context of relationship-building, interviewees emphasized the criticality of evaluating the potential advantages in terms of *"knowledge," "time," and "skills"* when engaging with other parties. Some respondents believed that organizations that benefit their partnerships are more likely to create and maintain a relationship. *Simon's* assertion that engaging in a business relationship naturally entails a certain degree of risk in terms of establishing and sustaining it. However, there is a lack of clarity from *Simon* regarding the specific duration at which skill, knowledge, and time become relevant in the various stages of a relationship. The importance of the initial phases in relationship-building, which set the trajectory for future interactions, is emphasized in earlier studies (eg. Finne & Grönroos, 2009; Grönroos 2004) and could be argued as a way to minimize the risk. Effective corporate relationships demand tailored communication strategies, emphasizing emotional interactions, and a clear set of goals is pivotal in establishing a relationship (Vincent & Webster, 2013; Valtakoski, 2015). In undertaking this process, one not only ascertains the knowledge and skills available to offer potential partners but also discerns the potential risks inherent in establishing such relationships. Conversely, a unanimous viewpoint emerged among the participants through their recurrent statements, indicating a consensus that the process of creating and developing B2B relationships within the African market is characterized by significant time investment. This investment is substantial on both formal and informal fronts, encompassing work commitments as well as personal leisure time demands.

Moreover, Business Sweden clients (*Alex, Sara, Mary and Simon*) put a huge importance on professional expertise in establishing relationships. Expertise on display decreases discomfort and boosts confidence according to respondent *Sara* who said; *"Ehh knowledge is your queen"*

on the corporate world's mighty stage [...]. After you've established yourself Ehh as an expert, your business partners will listen intently while you speak.”

Alex made a similar point, arguing that evidence of your prior work experience will give you greater credibility and win you over with potential clients. Through the perspective of SET, it is clear that in the business world, especially with Business Sweden clientele, the value of expertise is high for the following reasons: knowledge is a critical currency. To further the understanding of SET, before committing to a new partnership, people and organizations routinely weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks in their heads (Chang et al., 2015; Jeong & Oh, 2017; Lambe et al., 2001). With this level of proficiency, business conversations are elevated to something more than superficial pleasantries. Drawing from the rationale presented by SET, it becomes plausible to assert that clients of Business Sweden would be disinclined to engage in relationships unless the counterpart demonstrates a specific expertise in a particular domain. Consequently, entities like Business Sweden, which are involved in fostering relationships, are obligated to substantiate their proficiency in international markets—a frequently sought-after attribute among their clientele. Due to this it could be argued that Business Sweden offering their expertise becomes their competitive advantage which sets them apart from their competitors.

Additionally, Alex, Sara, Mary and Simon emphasized the importance of “self-reflection” as a first step in forming partnerships. For example, Simon said: “*The fundamental foundation of any trustworthy, long-lasting connection is hmm thorough understanding of the client's needs.*”

While Alex commented the following: “*Ehh you won't be invited hmm to the party if you don't bring yeah something new to the table in the relationship marketplace [...]. So every minute counts haha[...], so if you're not contributing, don't take up too much of anyone else's.*” In the same vein, research by Vincent and Webster (2013) and Valtakoski (2015) shows that companies may learn a great deal about their operations by reflecting inside on their own actions and plans.

By possessing a thorough comprehension of their inherent capabilities and limitations, businesses may enhance their ability to adjust to external pressures, including the changing needs and expectations of their customers (Zhang & Du, 2020; Gummesson, 2017; Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). From this viewpoint, it is possible to build on the idea that businesses may cultivate relationships based on mutual respect and authenticity through the implementation of innovative solutions informed by introspective methods like adaptation. In the end, self-reflection is more than just an exercise in personal growth; it is a crucial strategic tool that strengthens relationships with customers and establishes a company's reputation for responsiveness and flexibility. Within the framework of B2B collaborations, it could be argued that comprehensive internal evaluations enable enterprises to recalibrate their core principles, objectives, and strategies to resonate with prospective business allies more suitable. Moreover, by acknowledging their assets and limitations, enterprises can articulate their distinct benefits and establish genuine benchmarks which also could facilitate dissolution.

Dissolving

The results of the study suggest that while the dissolving of a relationship is often perceived negatively, it can also signify the onset of a more promising and positive chapter for a company. In highlighting the importance of ending relationships, *Linda* emphasized the critical nature of dissolving relationships respectfully, noting that such an approach lays the groundwork for potential future reconciliations. *Linda* further elucidated that Business Sweden's overarching goal is to conclude collaborations on a positive note, which serves the dual purpose of upholding an admirable reputation and nurturing future business connections. It can therefore be assumed that reputation may influence the decision on how to end a relationship, especially in today's social media-driven society where a business's reputation is highly vulnerable. A firm may protect its good name by being honest and professional in all its business interactions, even breakups (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000; Grönroos, 2004; Thaichon et al., 2020; Zhang & Du, 2020). A probable explanation is that this type of strategy aims not just to prevent negative headlines, but to build a narrative that reinforces credibility, trust, and professionalism in global trade.

Furthermore, the respondents cited "*ethical concerns*" and "*communication disruptions*" as the most common reasons for the breakdown of a relationship. The unethical conduct according to the client *Sara* could be non-compliance with "legal regulations" or "lack of communication". This was also emphasized by a respondent from Business Sweden, who believed that unlawful acts could lead to the dissolving of a business relationship since they can harm the reputation of the organization. For example *Clare* put it like this; "*Hmm.. Trust, communication, and ethical conduct are the pillars of all relationships [...]. When these eh pieces are missing, a relationship is likely to dissolve.*".

Moreover, respondents *Linda* and *Kim* hypothesized that clients' inability to pay might constitute the end of a relationship. *Kim* said that there could be other, less major reasons for a relationship to end, like a failure to reach performance goals or a clash of interests.

Extensive research has been conducted on the discontinuation of B2B relationships, resulting in a wide range of answers. Several researchers ascribe its termination to internal factors such as transfers in people, completion of projects, or transitions in leadership (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2000; Bengtson, Ljung & Hadjikhani., 2013). On the other hand, other scholars emphasize the influence of external elements, such as financial constraints, incongruity with organizational goals, or the need to conform to evolving market and technology patterns, prompting enterprises to pursue novel collaborative alliances (Gassenheimer et al., 1998; Tähtinen & Vaaland, 2006; Tähtinen & Havila., 2004). Based on the explanations given above, it is apparent that the end of commercial associations is a complex procedure impacted by several internal and external factors. One overlooked aspect by the respondents is the interplay between culture and relationship termination. It could be argued that having cultural awareness may help reduce the potential for further harm or misunderstanding after a relationship ends. It seems that the respondents view business breakups more as a necessary evolution than a setback, likely because of the dynamic global economy. If businesses view

changes as essential for addressing customer needs and embracing new technologies, they can maintain goodwill even during challenging times like layoffs.

In order to investigate the ending of relationships, all of the participants analyzed two sets of critical incident techniques about ending relationships in order to demonstrate their comprehension of the underlying concepts and their ability to apply them in real-world scenarios. *Linda, Clare, and Kim* have proposed conducting evaluations after collaboration, which would involve gathering feedback and reviewing project documentation. The purpose of these evaluations would be to enhance future initiatives and adjust strategies to prevent potential challenges with ending relationships.

“It's important to reflect ehh on previous collaborations [...] in order to better prepare for future endeavors. Then, and only then, ehh can we adjust our practices to prevent a recurrence of the same problems.” - Kim.

Similarly, Business Sweden's clients (*Alex, Sara, Mary, and Simon*) understood the importance of investigating the reasons behind the dissolving of a relationship, regardless of how it ended. Respondents believed that maintaining market competitiveness requires ongoing evaluation and improvement of relationships. Therefore, depending on how Business Sweden keeps the connection throughout and after the transaction, it may be seen as a useful middleman by people or firms trying to establish a foothold in a certain market. *“If we want to preserve our clients' trust and remain competitive, ehh we need to continually evaluate our interactions with them [...].”* - Alex

Moreover, it was inquired of the Business Sweden clients (*Alex, Sara, Mary, and Simon*) how they would keep a relationship from breaking down. The subsequent text provides an overview of the strategies employed by the client's participants to address and resolve interpersonal conflicts;

- *rebuild confidence,*
- *talk about everything openly and honestly,*
- *an impartial third party,*
- *adjust our perspective,*
- *and identify the root of the issue.*

By examining the empirical data in conjunction with the theoretical framework proposed by Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000), understanding of relationship disintegration and maintenance is shown. The respondents highlight the importance of prioritizing post-collaborative reflection and proactive handling of interpersonal disagreements, which aligned with the argument put out by Halinen and Tähtinen (2002), regarding the essential nature of trust as a foundational element for the durability of relationships. In addition, the significance of direct communication, as emphasized by both *Alex's* statement and the research conducted by Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2000) acts as a safeguard against potential misconceptions that have the potential to undermine the fundamental aspects of relationships. The strategic connection between the notion of 'revocable departure' offered by Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2002) and the viewpoints of Business Sweden's customers is evident, as it highlights the significance of re-negotiation and strategic realignment. The combination

of actual observations and theoretical frameworks contributes to a comprehensive approach to managing relationships, with a focus on trust, clear communication, and strategic flexibility. In examining respondents' perspectives on relationship dissolving, it was observed that even if they provided insight into their approach, there was a notable reluctance among some to disclose full information. This hesitancy can be attributed to the sensitive nature of relationship endings, especially since it can impact potential business reputation. The way a relationship is concluded can, over time, influence subsequent relationships. Even if some respondents downplayed the negativity of ending a relationship, undertones of negativity can still be detected in their responses. Thus, it can be argued that while the act of dissolution might be perceived negatively, its description might be framed more optimistically, hinting at potential future opportunities.

Implication of Relationship qualities in terms of Trust, Commitment, and Communication in international B2B

Trust

The empirical findings of this study revealed a consensus among participants on the successful establishment and development of a relationship. It was observed that trust and mutual understanding are integral components of the partnership. According to most respondents, this is due to the fact that B2B relationship building is fundamentally too complex and that with trust and understanding, one can reduce uncertainty and risk, while also ensuring that everyone's requirements are met. This statement exemplifies the following argument.

“In order to create successful relationships, it is extremely important to have trust that can be tied together [...] with the help of good communication and mutual commitment. By getting these three different aspects to interact, growth emerges both internally and externally, but also in the form of results [...].” - Kim

The importance of trust in building productive business partnerships is revealed through a consideration of actual evidence within the context of theoretical perspectives. Houjeir et al. (2017) underscore the significance of a partner's reliability and integrity. The establishment of trust is of vital importance as it cultivates a sense of certainty among partners and enhances confidence in the fulfillment of mutual commitments. In the context of B2B partnerships, trust encompasses more than simple dependence, since it fosters a culture of openness and facilitates open communication (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). Trust is the foundation upon which all other aspects of a relationship rest; without it, bonds weaken and eventually break. One may say that communication is how trust is established and sustained, therefore facilitating comprehension. Furthermore, it may be stated that trust plays a multifaceted role in the international setting by serving as a pillar to maintain a relationship.

Within the context of Business Sweden, trust is described as *“privacy”, “trustworthiness”,* and *“skills”* in order to establish long-lasting win-win relationships with other parties. In accordance with the point of view made by *Linda*, it is of the highest priority for clients and partners to possess trust in a company's proficiency, knowledge, and capacity to effectively

meet its commitments. *Linda's* emphasis on competence appears to align with the perspectives expressed by Rauyruen and Miller (2007) as well as Larentis et al. (2018) about the significance of trust in cultivating enduring commitment and stability. The findings of Houjeir et al. (2017) provide more support for the significance of trust in establishing and sustaining high-quality B2B interactions. Lindgreen's (2003) study places significant emphasis on the importance of early mutual agreements, a concept that coincides harmoniously with the observed "golden thread" that serves as the binding force in Business Sweden's collaborative endeavors. It may be argued that the expansion of companies on a worldwide scale, as illustrated by Maharajh and Heitmeyer (2005), is driven by a fundamental form of trust known as "confidence-based trust". The encompassing of three fundamental pillars: 'privacy', 'trustworthiness', and 'skills' can be further expounded upon in several dimensions. Thus, it could be argued that the concept of 'privacy' is that it serves to protect the confidentiality of sensitive information exchanged among entities, hence creating a secure environment conducive to collaborative efforts. On the other side it could be stated that the concept of 'trustworthiness' encompasses the notion of maintaining a continuous level of reliability, thereby instilling confidence in partners that their agreements would be faithfully honored. Finally, the concept of 'skills' could underscore the importance of proficiency since enterprises must have assurance in the talents of their collaborators. By adhering to these three principles, corporations can establish enduring and robust partnerships that generate reciprocal advantages.

Thus, one interesting finding was from the point of view of *Sara*, who believed that trust is based on the principle of being able to blindly hand over your business strategies and secrets to an external company with the assurance that they will never disclose your confidential information. The subsequent findings indicate that "*confidentiality*" and "*mutual benefit*" are two fundamental concepts used to further comprehend B2B relationships and trust. This viewpoint aligns with the argument made by Houjeir et al. (2017), which proposes that the cultivation of trust facilitates increased levels of collaboration and cooperation. A possible explanation for this might be that by establishing a strong foundation of trust through the concepts of secrecy and mutual benefit, firms may strategically position themselves to participate in collaborative problem-solving and resource sharing. This highlights the mutually beneficial relationship between trust and successful B2B collaborations.

In addition, *Mary* stated the following: "Hmm...Trust is contingent upon the parties in a relationship not only acting in their own best interests, but also with your best interests in mind." In a similar vein, *Linda* implied that Business Sweden in South Africa is concerned about maintaining confidentiality by saying that "*In our kind of business what we are selling is ourselves and our knowledge. So, when you talk about trust it's very much about being able to communicate and convey the knowledge that you have within a specific industry or market in order to build that trust so I would say for us trust is fundamentally in what we are doing and how we done that managed to convince the clients that we are the right ones for them, so yeah.*". *Mary* argues that to build genuine trust in business relationships, it is necessary for all parties involved to prioritize each other's interests. This perspective is consistent with *Linda's* stance, which emphasized the need of leveraging individual skills as a strategy for cultivating

trust. This perspective is consistent with the framework proposed by Lindgreen (2003), which focuses on the role of personality-based trust. In turn it could be determined that when *Linda* places on communication styles and demonstrating knowledge as essential elements in gaining client trust may be compared to Lindgreen's (2003) concept of "process-based trust". It seems possible that these results are since trust is developed via the consistent and repeated acts exhibited throughout professional encounters. These insights elucidate the intricate characteristics of trust within B2B partnerships, intertwining human attributes, reliable behaviors, and communication.

Communication

A substantial number of participants expressed the belief that effective communication is a crucial element in the establishment and sustenance of enduring relationships with the intended clientele. After analyzing the material, it could be stated that participants believed communication to be multifaceted, encompassing both in-person interactions and digital platforms like email. *Kim* has noted that first communication in Africa frequently occurs by email. However, the response rate from governments and stakeholders tends to be low, indicating that direct interaction is typically a more successful approach. In addition, the majority of respondents emphasized that the environment plays a role in determining the appropriate mode of communication to use. For example, the participants in the study emphasized the utility of Microsoft Teams for spoken communication and Outlook for written communication in strengthening interpersonal connections and minimizing instances of miscommunication. However, *Clare* stated the following: *"Initially, we meet in person or through Teams, and later, email becomes the primary means of communication. PowerPoint and Excel are common programs we utilize for this purpose"*. Additionally, participants emphasized that communication isn't limited to verbal interactions but also includes visual cues, body language, and active listening, all of which complement spoken exchanges.

Recognizing the variety of channels through which information may be transmitted and received is indicative of the participants' awareness of this fact. This is consistent with the idea put out by Grönroos (2004), who argues that effective communication is key to overcoming barriers of language and culture. Effective communication emerges as crucial in the ever-changing world of multinational B2B engagements (Laurie & Mortimer, 2019), especially when overcoming language obstacles. It can be contended that facilitating clear communication serves as a cornerstone for building trust and commitment among linguistic differences. Therefore, it is important to have other means of communication at your disposal, such as visual aids and body language, while interacting with individuals who speak a different native language. This is echoed by Laurie & Mortimer (2019) and Finne and Grönroos (2009), who highlighted that clear communication is essential not just for everyday operations but also for resolving conflicts in international B2B relationships. When conflicts arise due to misalignments and disagreements, which are natural in complex environments, it could be argued that communication serves as the bridge to understanding and resolution. The importance of communication in establishing and maintaining relationships is shown by both the provided data and the allusion to Grönroos (2004). The goal of any good

communication strategy should be to promote mutual comprehension and agreement, not merely the exchange of information. This is especially important in the field of advertising your expertise as Business Sweden does, since the ultimate objective is to create a long-lasting relationship with the target consumer.

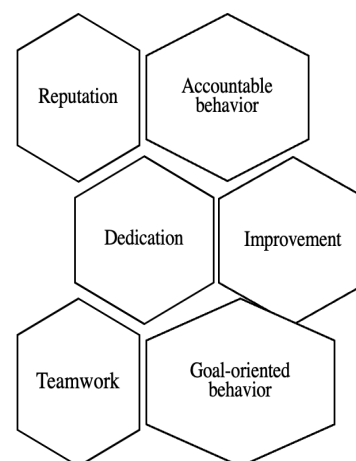
In conclusion, the convergence of these perspectives serves to strengthen the notion that although the fundamental nature of communication stays unchanged, which is to facilitate comprehension and establish confidence, the techniques and instruments employed in the process undergo transformation. Moreover, the ongoing evolution of international B2B engagement, driven by technical advancements and changing cultural norms, underscores the increasing importance of the interplay between theory and practice. This continuous dialogue will guarantee that the comprehension of communication stays both comprehensive and applicable, while simultaneously increasing commitment.

Commitment

The importance of commitment was assessed based on the variables depicted in *Figure 3*, as reported by the participants.

Figure (3) elements that influence the meaning of commitment according to respondents

Business Sweden's participants simply describe commitment in terms of B2B relationships by following characteristics: "goal orientation behavior," "teamwork," and "reputation." These elements might be interpreted as the practical expressions of the more encompassing notions of loyalty and commitment expounded in theoretical frameworks (Grönroos, 2004; Laurie & Mortimer, 2019). Most of the respondents have consistently stated that commitment and trust can be used in tandem to reduce relationship uncertainty and risk. In this instance, it can be argued that the environment of trust you cultivate reflects the commitment's strength. It is noteworthy to observe that the academic literature consistently highlights the fundamental characteristics of commitment, such as loyalty, strategic partnership, and mutual understanding (Chang et al., 2012; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, according to the respondents, it is not obvious whether commitment strengthens or weakens a relationship. Because of this, one can contend that putting all of one's effort into anything might also lead one to change their goals and lose sight of the bigger picture which could be determined as a risk and waste of time. Moreover, one potential risk that has not been highlighted in either the empirical data or the theories is that, over time, an individual may develop egotistical behavior that only serves their own interests. Instead, the focus has been on commitment in terms of loyalty and moral behavior.



Additionally, Business Sweden's clients (*Alex, Sara, Mary, and Simon*) described commitment by emphasizing "dedication," "accountable behavior," and "improvement" with the specific highlight on "accountability" being notably important. It could be argued that the importance of transparent communication and reciprocal support is emphasized in academic literature (Ferro-Soto et al., 2023; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). However, the primary focus on accountability in the actual B2B context suggests that partners place value not only on communication, but also on responsibility and taking ownership of their actions. In reflecting on both the empirical and theoretical perspectives, it seems clear that while academic theories (eg. Chang et al., 2012; Rauyrueen & Miller, 2007; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ferro-Soto et al., 2023) provide the overarching framework of understanding, it is the day-to-day business imperatives, as captured in the empirical data, that truly shape how commitment is perceived and acted upon.

Comprehending Cross-cultural B2B relationships

When addressing cultural factors, Business Sweden representatives from Kenya (*Clare and Kim*) emphasized the varied character of Africa's cultural environment, which includes a wide range of organizational forms, from start-ups to established corporations. This continent's business culture is distinguished by its varied, dynamic, and opportunity-oriented nature (Boshoff & Fourie, 2020; Marris & Somerset, 1971). From the findings, many respondents stressed the importance of understanding diverse cultural perspectives in international business. This might be because cultures differ in negotiation styles, interpersonal skills, and core values. However, Samah et al. (2014) argue that individuals from different nations have unique negotiation styles. For instance, while some cultures favor direct communication, others might lean towards vaguer language and prioritize relationship-building over mere transactions, which the African way of building relationships can be claimed to be. As noted by Fink et al. (2007), it is important to recognize and adapt to cultural variations in complex corporate settings, particularly in Africa, to enhance communication effectiveness and attain business prosperity.

Cultural diversity is described by many participants as a strength in Africa, leading to unique "dos and don'ts" across its nations. Such diversity explains the varied corporate cultural perspectives within a single organization spanning different African countries. Conversely, Business Sweden participants stressed the company's core principles of respecting both Swedish and local clientele. *Linda* further underscored the South African corporate culture's focus on human connections, consensus decision-making, flexibility, and entrepreneurship. Additionally, *Linda* highlighted that it is common for Africans to gifting during weddings or assisting with medical bills—a stark contrast to Swedish norms. Interesting to note, according to *Kim*, is that unlike a nation like Sweden, people in Africa like to socialize before getting down to work. This point of view may be explained by the fact that the concept of a relation varies from nation to nation and that in Africa informal networks have more importance than formal ones when forming ties. From a subjective standpoint, it could be argued that African potential partners may choose to end their relationship if they feel a lack of quality time in terms of getting to know one another. In order to break down barriers of both language and

culture, it may help to get to know each other on a more casual level first. Such practices underscore collectivism, fostering trust and loyalty, contrary to Lee et al. 's (2019) take on individualism and aligning with the broader idea of nurturing a sense of community.

Moreover, as *Clare* stated, the business culture is as follows: "*You know, the business environment in Africa is so unique and fascinating, given its rich and complex history. It's this amazing melting pot of cultures, languages, and traditions. To truly succeed here, you've got to be open, respectful, and sensitive to all these different cultural nuances. That's really the key to making it work in this dynamic place!*". Based on Li et al. (2005), Cross et al. (2004), and *Clare's* characterization of Africa as a "crucible of cultures, languages, and traditions," there is an indication that organizations that are tailored to a particular area are more effectively attuned to cultural nuances. This integration enhances teamwork and increases employee engagement while simultaneously attracting other nations to establish their business in the African continent.

In the same vein *Kim* also clarified the importance of knowledge about cultural differences and how crucial it is in international business by stating:

"We have gained an understanding of different cultures and traditions and know how to meet them. Ehh, for example, if we have a customer from the Middle East, we offer a cup of tea or shisha to you to build that relationship. Because that is how they do it so yeah in in that way you know if you want to learn about company and corporate culture, I would really recommend studying them because it's so diverse and it is an exciting place in that sense [...] that is also why we have both local and international employees at every office."

In this case it could be argued that *Kim* emphasizes its importance of cultural sensitivity, which aligns with the viewpoints presented by Hofstede (1984) and Graça & Kharé (2020) emphasizing the crucial role of shared values in fostering trust. Additionally, Wu (2006) contends that business must demonstrate adaptability to effectively respond to evolving cultural norms. The capacity to both maintain cultural traditions and demonstrate adaptation is a distinguishing feature of successful businesses in modern, dynamic economic environments (Rauch, 2001). A possible explanation for *Kim's* statement is when Business Sweden is enforcing a standardized negotiating approach, the organization promotes the concept of cultural adaptation. Another explanation for this could be that people focus their efforts on learning the different negotiation strategies, practices, and values that are unique to each culture they engage with. In the context of negotiating with a culture that places emphasis on relationships, the establishment of trust takes precedence over the discussion of financial matters, which seems to be favorable on the African market. But by trying to please many different cultures, it could also be claimed that a business's brand may lose its core identity since it adapts to other customers' preferences. As a result, customers may become confused because Business Sweden's image might no longer have a clear and familiar style. This can hurt the brand's general appeal and make people less likely to stick with it.

Furthermore, one client of Business Sweden, *Simon*, believed that cultural differences do not strengthen or weaken business relationships. *Simon* implied that it is more to be aware of

them and to not avoid them. “For instance, if someone is new to the African market and they send a lot of emails and they wonder why they never get any answers, maybe they haven't met the person and do not fully understand them. I have noticed that the African corporate culture prefers WhatsApp then email, that's why sometimes you receive answers faster on WhatsApp than Outlook.”

Simon did indicate, however, that there were some challenges in entering the African market for the first time, highlighting the need for adaptability and flexibility. In addition, it is essential to be able to change one's mentality, as *Simon* believed that email was the best method of communication and had trust issues if a customer scheduled a meeting without confirming it on outlook. Over time, it became apparent that the African market utilizes WhatsApp more frequently, and *Simon* initially believed they were not communicating effectively.

In analyzing the dynamics of international B2B partnerships, the African market encounters of *Simon* provide insightful empirical evidence. Cultural sensitivity is the foundation of success in such partnerships as supported by Samah et al. (2014), who stress the significance of understanding the ethos and norms of the intended culture. *Simon's* account reveals, upon examination, that the African business environment may place a premium on prompt communication channels and a substantial emphasis on establishing personal trust before concluding formal business transactions. This viewpoint is consistent with Gesteland's (2002) assertion that global businesses experience greater success when they are aligned with client preferences. To reconcile such cultural differences, Orlikowski (1992, December) proposes the establishment of platforms that emphasize cultural assimilation and information exchange. This exemplifies the substance of adaptability, which *Simon* gradually embraced. In contrast, Schwartz (2012) argues that the essence of successful international business ventures is not merely mutual cultural appreciation, but rather the cultivation of an environment characterized by curiosity, optimism, and a shared vision of collective success. This academic discussion is supported by *Simon's* experience in Africa and his ultimate adaptability, which demonstrates how businesses can benefit from truly understanding and reversing their partners' cultural origins.

A possible explanation for this might be that the necessity of flexibility in the field of international trade is highlighted by the fact that people of different cultures have varying communication preferences. It could further be stated that email and other forms of formalized communication may be more common in some countries than in others. Due to this it is therefore crucial to view these differences not as a scale of communication effectiveness but as openings for deeper B2B interaction. Along this line, companies that can recognize these cultural differences and adapt their business practices accordingly are more likely to create fruitful partnerships. It is possible that this flexibility is not limited to the use of alternative forms of communication; it also necessitates a thorough familiarity with local norms about things like business protocol and the structure of authority. Therefore, a willingness to learn, an open mind, and the acceptance of criticism are the bedrock of B2B cultural competence. Therefore, it could be claimed that successful international B2B interactions require not ignoring but rather embracing and adapting to cultural differences.

Chapter 5 *Concluding Discussion*

Relationships between businesses are like a dance where it takes two to tango – with trust, commitment, and open lines of communication as the rhythm and the steps. Due to this, businesses are far more selective in their choice of business partners today, but the question is in which terms they *create, develop and dissolve* a relationship. The purpose of this academic study has been to promote understanding about business partnerships by investigating the significance of *trust, commitment, communication, and culture* throughout the three phases of corporate affiliations at Business Sweden. To provide a compelling and engaging discussion and conclusion to this scholarly work, the following ending draws on the insights gained through careful consideration of the study's two research questions:

(I) What are the perceptions of Business Sweden and its Swedish clients in South Africa and Kenya regarding trust, commitment, and communication in shaping their international relationships, and what challenges and opportunities do they face?

(II) How do Business Sweden and its Swedish clients in South Africa and Kenya handle the various cultural nuances that arise when doing business internationally, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

Business Sweden's International Connections in South Africa and Kenya, exploring Opportunities and Challenges

In the heart of Africa, where centuries-old traditions and the drum of modern progress meet, South Africa and Kenya stand out as two shining examples of the continent's promise and diversity (Boshoff & Fourie, 2020; Business Sweden, 2023e). As these nations undergo contemporary development and progress in the global arena, numerous entities, for instance Business Sweden, endeavor to establish a network of alliances, economic exchanges, and shared advancement (Business Sweden, 2023g:e).

The authors of this study posit that in the context of African relationships, it is imperative to adopt a long-term perspective in order to foster the development of robust relationship quality classified as trust, commitment, and communication. As has been widely demonstrated in this study, the process of creating and developing relationships in South Africa and Kenya is characterized to be time-consuming and might be perceived to be challenging. For instance, when seeking new affiliations in Sweden, it is common practice to dive straight into discussion on how and why you want to connect with each other. Based on the analysis, we can argue that this way of building relationships reduces challenges since it is simple and straightforward, which makes it easier to find relationship opportunities right away. In essence, the establishment of relationships in Sweden can be characterized as highly formal and shallow too, as it does not afford individuals the opportunity to develop a profound

understanding of one another. Further, findings from this research indicate that the way countries like South Africa and Kenya set up businesses is very different from the formal environment such as Sweden, which has both challenges and opportunities.

However, it is clear that in the aforementioned African countries, a personal connection made before entering into a corporate collaboration is crucial. Therefore, one could claim that an individual's emotions play a significant role in the process of gaining in-depth knowledge about potential partners. This is because first impressions matter greatly in determining whether two people can develop a trusting, communicative, and committed relationship. To put it another way, people tend to take a more subjective stance than an objective one when dealing with relationships. Even though these factors may present challenges, they could make it hard to create good decisions or make foreign relationships more complicated. Additionally, the authors conclude that these findings refer to the inherent cultural significance of interpersonal relationships, which have the potential to foster trust and loyalty within organizational contexts. Therefore, the results of this study show that personal biases and experiences, which are subjective, can sometimes overpower the needs and goals of a business, which could be seen as an alternative challenge.

By paying attention to and successfully managing these emotional and subjective landscapes, the authors further believe that organizations can gain a deeper understanding of both South Africa and Kenya and make it easier for them to work together. Palmatier et al. (2006) conducted a study wherein they categorized relationship marketing into three unique classifications: *structural, social, and financial links*. A company can make emotional and structural links with its customers by tailoring its products and services to each person's needs. This practice bears resemblance to the African approach of fostering relationships, as discussed by Palmatier et al. (2006) and Wang (2014). The connections within society, established through various events and engagements, reflect the intricate structure of interpersonal relationships in African communities. In contrast, financial connections are not inherently associated with the African emphasis on B2B relationships, which Business Sweden seems to have implemented in their way of operating.

Additionally, risk and time are two fundamental concepts in this research that have accompanied each other in discussions of relationship phases and relationship quality. The analysis hinted that the risk is directly related to the difficulties and uncertainties associated with establishing trust and commitment. In contrast, time can be perceived as both a challenge and an opportunity in terms of trust, commitment and communication. Koponen and Julkunen (2022) show that time is a very important factor in how relationships and trust grow in workplace settings. It has been observed that trust and commitment can be nurtured via the passage of time, as partnerships tend to thrive when there is a sense of continuity and mutual understanding (Koponen & Julkunen, 2022). This is likely since time is a secure foundation in all phases of a relationship, allowing for the identification of dos and don'ts, what is desired from both parties, requirements, etc. On the other hand, it could be argued that time could lead to risks, as the time spent constructing this solid foundation could abruptly be wasted. Given this, one could argue that relationships are difficult because they

require investment of one's time and energy, and because, if one's goals and desires aren't met, one runs the risk of squandering both, which can have a negative impact on the relationship. But this investment of time can also be risky, especially if the results do not match what was hoped for, which could lead to lost resources (Newton, 2022). Also, connections, especially B2B ones, do not stay the same; they change with the market, competition, and technology (Bengtson et al., 2013; La Rocca et al., 2016). So, for a relationship to really grow and produce the desired results, one has to keep working at it, be flexible, and speak openly, while being aware of the risks and uncertainties that come with it (Ford et al., 1998; Newton, 2022). In contrast, communication plays a prominent function since it serves as the framework that initiates trust and dedication. Commitment is a fundamental element that serves as a cohesive force inside the previously mentioned triangle (*figure 2*), and research has consistently demonstrated its robust association with both temporal and risk-related factors.

Based on the received data collection, partnerships in South Africa and Kenya are informal, they require significant time and financial inputs to obtain desired results, which brings challenges. One reason could be that this kind of relationship involves getting to know each other better, by going out to eat or nagging in activities. Another interesting aspect of this is that, because of digitization, the risk in a relationship appears entirely different than it did in the past, as you can now acquire relevant information about potential partners/clients online. It is also conceivable to contend that without digitization, people in the past relied on rumors, first impressions, or local/domestic businesses. Before digitization, everything had to be conducted face-to-face or over the phone, which is now largely supplanted by digital tools such as Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp. As a result, we believe that people were more dependent on flattering the other party. The authors of this study conclude, based on this discussion, that informal relationships are more significant than formal ones. This is not only due to cultural factors, but also to the fact that digitization development in Africa has not occurred to the same extent as in Western nations like Sweden.

Having shown the link between relationship qualities and phases, one might wonder how the Swedish and African (South African and Kenyan) business groups view *trust*, *commitment*, and *communication*, which are the pillars of successful cross-cultural collaboration. In conclusion, upon investigating this question, the current study indicates that cultural symbiosis has an important role in how relationship quality is linked. For instance, this research has shown that some participants place great importance on the concept of trusting a partner and having faith handling information flows. Trust encompasses more than just dependence; it cultivates an environment conducive to open dialogue and culture of transparency.

However, *communication* provides a rhythm for these trusting outcomes. It is not just about words and writing; it is also about getting the main idea and feeling comfortable in the setting. In this instance, it can be argued that the environment of trust you cultivate reflects the commitment's reputation. Because when there is trust, partners in a relationship will feel secure discussing their strategies. In light of this, it could be argued to walk your talk,

meaning that actions speak louder than words and by doing, commitment is enhanced. The varying phases of the relationship, in which one can be in different stages of creating, developing, and dissolving, may contribute to a partner's perception that the relationship is sometimes precarious. Within each phase, communication may be required slightly more than in other phases in order to minimize obstacles and maximize opportunities. Morris and Carter (2005) argue that effective communication is crucial for maintaining relationships, encouraging collaboration, identifying possibilities, and reducing dissolution risks. An open line of communication is crucial to building trust (Graça & Kharé, 2020; Nes, 2002).

In turn, the relationship is affected by the knowledge that each country or society has its own way of negotiating. Several things, like history, social norms, schooling, and even religion, can affect this. Trust and good communication are of utmost importance in every relationship, whether it is informal or professional, as emphasized by the participants in our study. The results suggest that the integration of 'skills' and 'knowledge' plays a fundamental role in the establishment and development of relationships. When viewed through an academic perspective, a relationship that prioritizes specific abilities or knowledge has the potential to significantly boost the likelihood of establishing permanent and mutually advantageous connections. When a firm possesses specific skills or information that are highly valuable to a potential partner, the resulting partnership is frequently perceived as favorable and optimistic.

The third part of the trio is *commitment*. The results of this study show that commitment could be understood as the willingness and ability to maintain a relationship through both positive and negative circumstances, regardless of any obstacles. Also, according to the respondents, it has not been stated clearly whether commitment makes a relationship stronger or weaker. Because of this, one could argue that putting all of one's effort into something might also cause one to change their goals and lose sight of the bigger picture. But it is important to remember that this is not a straight line since behavior and image can change based on the needs of relationships. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment is an active interaction between trust and communication. Beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that match up are not just an unexpected accident; they are the result of intentional nurture. Organizations team up to achieve goals, but what keeps their partnership strong is the trust and commitment they share. However, this balance can be disrupted if someone makes a mistake or does not plan carefully.

Advantages and Disadvantages in Cross-Cultural Business Attempts by Swedish Companies in South Africa and Kenya.

Globalization is not just about the economy; it is a process with many different parts that involves merging and diversity. When countries like Sweden do business abroad through groups like Business Sweden, they face not only financial barriers but also a lot of cultural knowledge. This is especially true when they move into different markets like South Africa and Kenya. Upon conducting a more comprehensive examination and discourse in this study, it becomes apparent that cross-cultural factors have played a prominent role in the establishment and development of relationships. One explanation for this phenomenon is

rooted in the distinctive characteristics of Africa's business culture, which is known for its diversified, dynamic, and opportunity-oriented nature (Boshoff and Fourie, 2020; Marris & Somerset, 1971). This raises the question of whether trust truly serves as the foundational element in establishing relationships, or if culture plays a more significant role. Along this line, the authors conclude that comprehending culture should be prioritized as the primary pillar in relationships inside the relationship quality triangle (*figure 2*), followed by trust as the secondary pillar. Developing connections across countries like South Africa and Kenya is difficult without awareness of cultural traditions that affect relationship dynamics and quality, since it seems to be favorable with informal connections. Koponen and Julkunen (2022) took a broader view, emphasizing the importance of cultural identity in international B2B connections. Since people in various countries see the world differently, engaging in a business relationship with someone from another nation can be costly and difficult. In order to minimize potential losses in such situations, Koponen and Julkunen (2022) suggest that organizations do a comprehensive analysis of the cultural context of the target market they intend to enter.

The author's claims that businesses seeking to get an edge in African countries like South Africa and Kenya should try to learn as much as they can about the local cultures. Samah et al. (2014) stress the necessity of understanding target culture norms and values for B2B success. In locations characterized by cultural diversity, acquiring knowledge of regional traditions is not merely a superficial act, but rather a strategic necessity. This comprehension enhances authentic relationships, fosters trust, and harmonizes company plans with the expectations of the local community. Hence, it may be concluded that businesses who accept and incorporate cultural viewpoints can use diversity as an advantage to stimulate innovation and build lasting relationships. According to the study's participants, it is important to keep in mind that the company is Swedish even though it does business in South Africa and Kenya. Engaging with the principles of a foreign country and immersing oneself in its cultural context might provide several drawbacks, mostly due to the potential for generating both external and internal conflicts. Along this line, Sweden's equal treatment, consensus-based decision-making, and penchant for direct communication have few factors that impact its corporate landscape.

The establishment of culture-international relationships in diverse markets involves the utilization of collectivistic and individualistic strategies to differing extents (Samaha, Beck & Palmatier, 2014; Lee et al., 2019; Terawatanavong & Quazi, 2006). In the present context, it can be said that South Africa and Kenya exhibit a cultural proclivity towards collectivism, which can be partially attributed to their historical pattern of contributing more financial resources than they have received. Another possibility is that these countries put less value on individualism than countries like Sweden. Following study has highlighted that several African cultural practices include gift-giving at weddings, inquiring about the family's well-being, etc., which is linked to collectivistic attributes. This is a very interesting topic since Business Sweden is a Swedish business that hires both Swedes and people from the local country where every individual holds a distinct perspective on the notion of culture. It can be contended that the achievement of Business Sweden in the realm of international

relations can be predominantly ascribed to their adeptness in handling internal cultural disparities, hence enabling them to effectively implement their learned expertise in external contexts. Because of this, it could be said that when these different business cultures meet, they fight and work together at the same time.

Business Sweden has helped Swedish businesses try to bridge cultural gaps by giving them lots of training and advice. But the trip is not just about showing Swedes how to adapt. It is also about helping them understand and appreciate how South Africans and Kenyans function. Gaining trust in others through experiences like this is the silver lining of navigating complex cultural norms. Therefore, the authors believe that Swedish companies gain more credibility and authenticity in the eyes of their South African and Kenyan customers when they demonstrate an appreciation for regional traditions. This act of understanding is essential for the long-term success of any business collaboration. In this way, everything you do, say, or don't do says something.

When Swedish businesses try to fit in, they may end up watering down their unique value offerings. *So, what is the plan for Swedish businesses that want to do well in South Africa and Kenya?* The market in South Africa and Kenya can be classified based on four distinct attributes: geographic belonging, infrastructure, knowledge in terms of expertise, and natural resources (Boshoff & Fourie, 2020; Business Sweden, 2023e). The authors suggest that, in order to achieve success when entering the markets of South Africa and Kenya, it is necessary to take into account the cultural factors that may exert an influence. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the separate countries possess a wealth of traditions that must be duly considered. These traditions have important value, emphasizing the nurturing of relationships over the mere completion of business transactions. Secondly, it is highly recommended to involve local persons while entering these markets to gain a deeper understanding of the domestic traditions and social norms. This tendency can also be seen in real-life situations, as for example when people go to the homes of others, they know that they have to follow the rules of the house. In the same way, this societal context can be used to explain how adoption works in each of these markets. To establish a connection within these markets, it is imperative to demonstrate regard for the prevailing social structure, beliefs, and modes of integration. Another example could be the capacity to adjust to their everyday routines, such as demonstrating punctuality. This study has indicated that South Africans and Kenyans prefer informal relationships, which may potentially influence their approach to initial encounters with others. When one form of communication is informal and the other is formal, it has the potential to generate a clash in cultural norms and expectations. Hence, our second proposition is adopting a flexible approach towards accommodating cultural disparities. It lies in learning all the time, not just once, but repeatedly.

Embracing a foreign culture does not mean giving up your own, but it does take openness, curiosity, and optimism (Schwartz, 2012). The authors claim that in the context of international business, it is crucial for businesses to prioritize adaptability to the preferences and needs of clients. Because of this, it is important for Swedish businesses that want to grow into South Africa and Kenya to find a good balance between keeping their own style and

adapting to local tastes. This necessitates a perpetual process of acquiring knowledge and capitalizing on local collaborations to attain economic prosperity.

One of the disadvantages associated with cross-cultural business endeavors undertaken by Swedish companies in South Africa and Kenya is the potential for a significant number of cultural misunderstandings to emerge during communication, hence increasing the likelihood of business conflicts. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that diverse cultures place varying degrees of importance on distinct modes of communication that are nevertheless integral to B2B interactions. However, Orlikowski (1992, December) suggests setting up cultural exchange platforms to help firms learn about and maybe adopt new cultural norms and practices such as communication. Lack of knowledge on the communication system and culture in a certain country can potentially give rise to conflicts. This study has demonstrated that within African corporate culture, there is a tendency to choose communication tools such as WhatsApp above e-mail to achieve speedier communication. The aforementioned habits serve as an indicator that individuals lacking an understanding of such preferences may encounter challenges while entering unfamiliar marketplaces.

In summary – think of foreign B2B cross-cultural interactions as a big web. Each link, which represents a company from a different culture, adds levels of complexity because of its own values, beliefs, and ways of doing business. How well B2B interaction's function is heavily influenced by the structure of this intricate network, which reflects various business climates and long-standing relationships, according to the authors of this study. It could be claimed that in a highly competitive cross-cultural landscape, B2B companies might try to work together more closely, combining their strengths and forming strategic partnerships to create a more vibrant pattern in the market. When it comes to cultural dynamics, the bigger picture of society and its historical ties shape how cross-cultural bonds are forged. Due to this, in doing international relations diverse cultural perspectives impact negotiation styles, interpersonal skills, and core values.

As a conclusion this paper has examined the dynamics of trust, commitment, communication, and culture within global client connections, focusing specifically on Business Sweden's activities in South Africa and Kenya. Through a comprehensive analysis of the underlying principles of their business bonds we have intricate cultural dynamics to allocate the tactics and obstacles involved in establishing international connections. Using a qualitative approach, which involved conducting several interviews and doing detailed event analysis, this study identifies a notable emphasis on strong international B2B relations in African situations, contrasting with Sweden's more pragmatic business-oriented approach.

The bottom line that the authors would like to emphasize on:

- We have realized that time in contrast to relationship phases can take two distinct forms. First, it includes Business Sweden and client time, fostering long-term relationships. The second category involves time and changing environmental elements like technology and legislations. The study underscores Africa's

time-intensive character, making relationships creation and development riskier owing to time and resource investments. Initial emphasis on personal interaction into commercial partnerships may increase risk in the African market. With successful growth, comprehensive relationship-building activities can provide profit, but they also carry the danger of large loss owing to time and resource investment. Knowledge is crucial across relationship phases, allowing immediate identification of counterpart preferences and specialized expertise to satisfy their needs. The perception of dissolution among respondents is that it is positively charged, but it is not discussed openly rather only on a superficial level, indicating that it is viewed as sensitive. The critical incident techniques, on the other hand, indicated that the reasons for dissolution are risky since they involve delicate topics such as financial disagreements and divergent expectations.

- The mitigation of risk within a relationship phase can be achieved through the cultivation of trust, thereby reducing discomfort, and ensuring the fulfillment of commitments. In this study establishment of trust is influenced by three key factors: "*privacy*," "*trustworthiness*," and "*skills*". Each of these characteristics is defined as a means of upholding confidentiality, assuring reliability, and demonstrating proficiency within the relationship. When a business contributes unique skills or coveted knowledge, the resulting partnership is frequently deemed desirable. Such alliances not only inspire optimism, but also serve as a model for future partnerships. The concept of commitment in this study is commonly characterized by three primary components: "*goal orientation behavior*," "*teamwork*," and "*reputation*". These factors have been observed to have an important influence on trust dynamics within the international B2B in South Africa and Kenya. Each phase puts more stress on communication, which acts as a driving force, reducing problems and taking advantage of opportunities.
- It can also be deduced that relationships on the African market are difficult to interact with, i.e., it takes these individuals longer to trust an outsider because they place a higher value on personal contact. Long-term success in establishing and cultivating B2B relationships has been demonstrated to be significantly influenced by culture and personal contact. It has been shown that South Africa and Kenya have collectivistic tendencies, as their traditions and cultures are linked to giving and not adapted to individualism.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study that must be considered, but they also suggest intriguing new avenues for future research. Firstly, the adoption of a qualitative methodological approach restricts the incorporation of numerical data by its very nature, as the primary sources utilized do not pertain to statistical analyses. While this method enriches the study with nuanced insights, it imposes limitations on the incorporation of quantitative data, potentially limiting its scope.

Second, the study's narrow focus on Kenya and South Africa introduces a potential generalizability limitation. The contextual and cultural specificity of these regions may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized to other cultures and diverse business contexts. When endeavoring to apply these findings to broader global contexts, caution is warranted. The study was also limited in its definition and description of culture. If, for instance, culture had been described on an individual level or had involved religion, etc. The results of the study may have appeared drastically different. In light of this, it would have been fascinating for a future study to select a culture and discuss it based on two different time periods in order to examine the evolution of relationship trust, communication and commitment, and the factors that have influenced the formation of relationships during different time periods. Nevertheless, doing a more comprehensive analysis of distinct cultural aspects, such as power distance and individualism, among other relevant factors, may provide further clarity regarding their impact on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. An extensive examination of this subject matter may reveal complex levels of engagement that influence the establishment of global customer connections.

Thirdly, the scope of this study is limited by its focus on the perspective of Business Sweden and its interactions with Swedish clients. This focus allows for an in-depth examination of a specific aspect, but it also limits the generalizability of the study's findings. Since the participants were selectively chosen based on following main criteria; that you have worked with Business Sweden in South Africa and Kenya, or are currently doing so, this might introduce bias into the findings. Considering the possibility of bias or erroneous perceptions, the subjective experiences presented in the research may not always precisely reflect objective reality. In addition, it is essential to recognize that the findings of the study may predominantly benefit the industry in which Business Sweden operates, and that their applicability to other industries and sectors may not be seamless. The dynamics and specifics of Business Sweden's operations may affect the applicability of the research's findings to organizations operating under dissimilar conditions.

In conclusion, even though these limitations limit the scope of the present study, they also suggest enticing avenues for future research. Future studies can enhance the robustness, universality, and practical applicability of the insights gained from this initial investigation by addressing these limitations. Given this context, it is suggested that forthcoming studies adopt a quantitative approach to data collection to effectively capture the significance of these factors and their interrelationships. Conducting a quantitative research approach enables the inclusion of additional variables such as knowledge, reliability, expertise, reputation. Comparing two global organizations in the same industry may show how *trust, commitment, communication, and culture* affect customer relationships at different stages. For future research, a culture-specific strategy study evaluating cultural norms, attitudes, and behaviors in different nations could be valuable. An interesting future research could also for instance investigate how changes in trust, commitment, communication, and cultural negotiation techniques influence multinational corporate partnerships by conducting it as longitudinal studies. In forthcoming studies, the use of a stakeholder perspective has the potential to yield

substantial benefits. A more comprehensive comprehension of the underlying dynamics can be achieved by integrating the perspectives of other stakeholders, including local partners or intermediaries. This perspective has the potential to unveil intricate connections and concerns that may otherwise go overlooked in a more limited viewpoint.

...If you think about that, you'll do things differently."

- Warren Buffett

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Appendix 1

Interview template - Business Sweden

Opening questions

- How long have you been employed by Business Sweden?
- What are your current responsibilities and can you describe your position within Business Sweden?
- Do you, as an employee at Business Sweden, interact with businesses of various sizes, or do you work within a specific size range/market?
- Could you briefly describe Business Sweden customers?

Relationships steps: Creating, Developing and Dissolving in international business relationships

- How would you characterize the following stages of a business relationship: Creating, Developing, and Dissolving?
- According to Business Sweden, what are the most crucial steps in forming a successful B2B partnership?
What would you rather avoid?
- When forming partnerships with B2B clients, what do you think are the top three priorities for Business Sweden in your market
Do you take precautions to ensure that your business partnerships don't end in disaster?
- What are the customer's expectations when you first start working together? How do they change as the relationship progresses?
Have these standards evolved, and if so, could you give an illustration?
- Does the shift in conduct have any positive or negative effects on the decision to end a partnership?
How do you adopt this knowledge to your next relationship formation?
- When it becomes clear that a commercial partnership or collaboration is deteriorating and heading in a direction that is comparable to dissolving, what can be done to "save" it?
- Consider a partnership that you ended on your own terms.
What was the reason for the decision to end the relationship?
- The breakdown of a business partnership can occur when there is a breakdown in trust, communication, or commitment.
Please provide a previous instance in which this has occurred.

The link between trust, commitment, and communication in international B2B relationships

- What method did you utilize to get in touch with your present or potential partner(s), if any? *Can you provide an example?*
- From a professional point of view, how would you characterize trust?
- From a professional point of view, how would you characterize commitment?

- From a professional point of view, how would you characterize communication?
- To what extent do you think trust, commitment, and communication all play a role in the success of global B2B partnerships?
 - How do you believe that these three pillars evolve over time?*
 - What potential danger does these three pillars carry?*
- How would you prioritize trust, commitment, and communication on a pyramid, and why?
- Is there anything beyond the triangle of trust, dedication, and conversation that can protect it?
 - Negative and/or positive?*
- Consider that you wish to form a new relationship based on trust, commitment, and communication. Of these three, which do you believe is the most important?

Cultural Dimensions in International Business

- Give some background on the national business customs that have shaped the way your organization does business.
- In what ways do your core principles of trust, open dialogue, and firm dedication shape the way you conduct business?
- Do you think that differences in culture help or hurt professional connections?
- What is the most difficult part of collaborating with international businesses?
 - Follow-up question: Different organizational culture?*
- What cultural considerations should be made by corporations when forming B2B interactions across international borders?
- How have cultural differences affected commercial engagements or partnerships you've been a part of? How did you handle it?
- In business, how does your culture prioritize open lines of communication and mutual respect? Is there a set of rules, rituals, or etiquette that one should follow?
- How does your culture handle conflicts in the workplace? Do you have any go-to methods, approaches, or procedures?
- If a company from another culture or market wanted to work with yours, what suggestions would you give them?

Critical incident technique 1:

Company A: Business Sweden

Company B: A corporation of your choosing that can remain anonymous

Company A and Company B have been collaborating on a project to develop a new product in a new market. After several months of working together, it becomes clear that there are significant differences in their approaches to the project, as well as differing expectations about the outcome. Despite attempts to reconcile these differences, it becomes apparent that the collaboration is no longer feasible and Company A decides that it is in their best interests to terminate the collaboration.

Q1: How do you learn from your past mistakes?

Q2: What benefits does this have for your brand image?

Critical incident technique 2:

Company A has determined that Company B has violated their values and principles, which is unacceptable. Therefore, an internal decision has been made to terminate the relationship.

Q1: How can a relationship be terminated in such a way that all parties are satisfied?

Q2: How would Company A choose to dissolve this relationship?

Appendix 2

Interview template - Business Sweden's clients

Opening questions

- How long have you had your collaboration with Business Sweden?
- What are your current responsibilities and can you describe your position at your company?
- Could you briefly describe Business Sweden as a partner?

Relationship steps: Creating, Developing and Dissolving in international business relationships

- How would you characterize the following stages of a business relationship: Creating, Developing, and Dissolving?
- What are the most crucial steps in forming a successful B2B partnership?
What would you rather avoid?
- When forming a partnership with Business Sweden, what do you think are the top three priorities in your market? How do you express this towards Business Sweden?
Do you take precautions to ensure that your business partnerships don't end in disaster?
- What are the customer's expectations when you first start working together? How do they change as the relationship progresses?
Have these standards evolved, and if so, could you give an illustration?
- Does the shift in conduct have any positive or negative effects on the decision to end a partnership?
How do you adopt this knowledge to your next relationship formation?
- When it becomes clear that a commercial partnership or collaboration is deteriorating and heading in a direction that is comparable to dissolution, what can be done to "save" it?
- Consider a partnership that you ended on your own terms.
What was the reason for the decision to end the relationship?
- The breakdown of a business partnership can occur when there is a breakdown in trust, communication, or commitment.
Please provide a previous instance in which this has occurred.

The link between trust, commitment, and communication in international B2B relationships

- What method did you utilize to get in touch with Business Sweden?
Can you provide an example?
- From a professional point of view, how would you characterize trust?
- From a professional point of view, how would you characterize commitment?
- From a professional point of view, how would you characterize communication?
- To what extent do you think trust, commitment, and communication all play a role in the success of global B2B partnerships?

How do you believe that these three pillars evolve over time?

What potential danger does these three pillars carry?

- What do you think are the most common issues that prevent clear communication between you and your international business partners? How did you end up victorious against them?
- How would you prioritize trust, commitment, and communication on a pyramid, and why?
- Is there anything beyond the triangle of trust, dedication, and conversation that can protect it?

Negative and/or positive?

- Consider that you wish to form a new relationship based on trust, commitment, and communication. Of these three, which do you believe is the most important?
-

Cultural Dimensions in International Business

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