Strategic Partnerships in the Automotive Industry
Defining Collaboration Approaches in Volvo Cars' Parts Supply and Logistics

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Abstract

The nature of the automotive industry continues to get more complex. Ensuring access to parts and components both for the production of new cars and servicing existing cars is critical. This thesis explores what strategic partnerships are and how to incorporate them into the automotive spare parts sector. In collaboration with Volvo Cars Part Supply & Logistics and their Supplier Relationship Management team, the current approaches and supplier dynamics are investigated, with input from various other stakeholders. Furthermore, the thesis delves into what the future of partnerships should develop towards. Findings from the empirical data show the importance of transparency, give and take dynamics, trust, and lastly, long-term planning. Moreover, some of the common challenges are also brought to light. These are a lack of communication, information sharing, and a missing internal strategy. Based on this a conceptual model was created to visualize the key findings as a recommendation for a future strategic direction. Although this thesis was written in collaboration with Volvo Cars it contributes to the understanding of partnerships in the automotive sector, especially in regards to spare parts.

Keywords: Strategic partnerships, Collaboration, Automotive Industry, Supplier relationships, Spare parts
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AHP</td>
<td>Analytical Hierarchy Process</td>
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<td>AI</td>
<td>Artificial Intelligence</td>
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<td>CPFR</td>
<td>Collaborative Planning, Forecasting, and Replenishment</td>
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<td>CRP</td>
<td>Continuous Replenishment Policy</td>
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<td>DDGS</td>
<td>Direct Delivery Global Supply</td>
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<td>JV</td>
<td>Joint Ventures</td>
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<td>KPI</td>
<td>Key Performance Indicators</td>
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<td>MCDM</td>
<td>Multi-Criteria Decision Making</td>
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<td>MNE</td>
<td>Multinational Enterprises</td>
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<td>PS&amp;L</td>
<td>Parts Supply and Logistics</td>
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<td>SPM</td>
<td>Supplier Performance Manager</td>
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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The success of companies today, relies not solely on technological advancements and product innovations but equally on the effective management of strategic partnerships and alliances (Jacobides et al., 2016, p. 1952; Latunreng & Nasirin, 2019, p. 409). Strategic alliances refer to collaborative agreements between two or more independent companies to achieve mutually beneficial goals, enhance competitive advantages, and create value that might be difficult to achieve individually (Gulati, 1998, p. 293; Elmuti & Kathawala, 2001, p. 205). These kinds of collaborative partnerships are formed for various reasons, such as leveraging complementary strengths, sharing resources, reducing risks, entering new markets, or capitalizing on emerging opportunities (Gulati, 1998, pp. 298-299; Elmuti & Kathawala, 2001, pp. 205-207). Collaborative partnerships usually begin as buyer-supplier relationships and gradually evolve into more comprehensive partnerships (Buckley et al., 2018, p. 378). Buyer-supplier relationships are a simpler form of a relationship that requires less commitment than a partnership. Since a partnership requires more investment both time and capital-wise than a traditional buyer-supplier relationship, however, they lay the foundation of trust building, understanding, and mutual reliance between firms (ibid). For manufacturing multinational enterprises (MNEs), partnerships with suppliers are a vital part of the business and it is important to maintain a good relationship to meet market demands and create advantages for the company (Brandes et al., 2013, p. 6; Wong, 2002, p. 569; Gall et al., 2023, p. 29).

Additionally, it is relevant to further investigate the dynamic nature of manufacturing MNEs especially within the automotive industry and how factors such as market and new technological changes may influence the effectiveness of partnerships (Münch et al., 2022, p. 2). According to Dicken (2015, p. 603), the landscape and the relationship between automobile assemblers and component manufacturers is changing, as a result of automobile assemblers demanding faster deliveries, lower costs, and higher-quality components consistently. These demands can create challenges between automotive companies and their suppliers as their partnership could become more
complex. Other trends seen in the automotive industry in the past decade focus on sustainability often through the electrification process and autonomous vehicles (Kuhnert et al., 2017, p. 6; McKinsey & Company, 2016, p. 16; Deloitte, 2023, p. 6; Brown et al., 2021, pp. 25-26). This has led to automotive manufacturers not being the top priority for their suppliers since the required parts are used in other sectors as well (Deloitte, 2017, p. 33). Moreover, as a result of major global events such as the Suez Canal disruption the vulnerability of having a global value chain has been exposed (UNCTAD, 2024; Yee & Glanz, July 19, 2021). According to the World Economic Forum (2024, p. 12), the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war present challenges to the global system, potentially influencing both short and long-term outcomes. In today's dynamic business environment, characterized by market changes, and other trade disruptions there is a need for better collaboration and active partnerships (Galer, February 6, 2023). This thesis highlights the prevailing uncertainty and the potential for significant shocks in the global landscape (ibid). Concepts such as Just-in-case have been added as an important factor to Just-in-time to prevent disruptions (Brown et al., 2021, p. 17). Since automotive MNEs are moving towards more Just-in-case, regionalization, and dual sourcing have become the new norm (Brown et al., 2021, p. 16).

1.2. Problem discussion

Previous research on the topic has explored the strategic importances of partnerships and what aspects that are crucial for its success in the automotive industry, as it is an assembly-based industry relying on a broad network of suppliers, and they pose complex challenges in finding and developing relationships with suppliers tailored to specific business needs (Jacobides et al., 2016, p. 1952; Latunreng & Nasirin, 2019, p. 409). Additionally, past research has investigated MNEs in the automotive industry and has identified that international automotive companies relies on robust supplier relationships to meet market demands and gain competitive advantages (Brandes et al., 2013, p. 6; Wong, 2002, p. 569; Gall et al., 2023, p. 29). Other theories have investigated how future trends within the automotive industry can pose challenges and how partnerships could be beneficial to solve future challenges, as this requires changes to current supply chains and better organizational planning with current and future suppliers (Kuhnert et al., 2017, p. 6). Collaboration and planning with
suppliers strengthen a company's resilience against disruptions, positioning it well for future challenges in the supply chain. However, previous literature has had a focus on the manufacturing side of a MNE and currently does not explore the aftermarket sector of an MNE. This gap shows that there is a need to explore how partnerships with suppliers should be handled at the aftermarket side of an MNE and what, if any, differences there are compared to the manufacturing side.

Current literature extensively covers the process of identifying and selecting suitable partners and suppliers who align with the company's goals and visions. However, the literature reveals gaps in understanding how to develop existing relationships and how you can evolve the collaboration you currently have. Only a few contributions cover this part of the collaboration stage, for example, Kale and Singh (2009, p. 48) elaborate on the critical aspects of successfully navigating an alliance journey, emphasizing a three-stage approach for securing a beneficial collaboration with a single partner. The process of forming alliances involves three stages: 1) alliance formation and partner selection, where firms establish criteria for partnering; 2) alliance governance and design, which covers equity sharing and contractual provisions; and 3) post-formation management, focusing on maintaining the alliance, resolving conflicts, and continuous evaluation for improvements (Kale & Singh, 2009, pp. 48-51). In previous years, factors such as technological advancements, shifts in market dynamics, and global events may have influenced the complexity of alliance management (Brown et al., 2021, p. 17; pp. 26-27). Reflecting on the insights provided by Kale & Singh (2009) prompts consideration of the need for ongoing research and exploration in alliance management practices. This ongoing exploration is crucial for maintaining the relevance and applicability of alliance management frameworks in today's rapidly changing business landscape.

1.3. Purpose & research questions

Based on the gaps identified in the current literature, the purpose of this thesis is to explore how an MNE manages its partnerships with its suppliers in the aftermarket sector. The goal of the thesis is to identify patterns, key players, and collaborative frameworks, and uncover gaps or challenges in existing collaborations. The focal point of this thesis lies in not only understanding the current state of
these partnerships but also envisioning how an MNE within the automotive industry could evolve to become more robust, adaptive, and resilient in the future. The research also investigates internal variations in partnership approaches across divisions, shedding light on intra-organizational dynamics.

- How does a multinational automotive manufacturer manage partnerships in the spare parts supply chain?

- How can the partnership interaction be improved in the future?

To address these research questions a single case study of an automotive MNE will be conducted. By analyzing how their current partnerships with their suppliers could evolve and become better and more resilient in the future. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the current ongoing discussion on effective partnership strategies with a focus on the aftermarket sector, guiding MNEs within the automotive industry towards more adaptive and resilient partnership frameworks.

1.4. Delimitations

This thesis will focus on how partnerships in the automotive sector can be developed and what parts of a partnership are most important to focus on, in this sector. As the thesis is done together with a single case company it is limited to only analyzing and interviewing suppliers and relevant people at the case company. Even though this thesis has a focus on the aftermarket side of the MNE it will explore how the manufacturing side works with partnerships to investigate if there are internal variations in strategic approaches. The purpose is not to provide recommendations specifically for the manufacturing side, however, the findings might be applicable there as well. Furthermore, how other automotive manufacturers work with their suppliers from their point of view will not be analyzed. Even though respondents from the empirical chapter can provide specific details about how other automotive manufacturers work, these will not be investigated further beyond what the respondents share.
1.5. Disposition

To provide clarity on the scope of this thesis the introduction concludes by outlining the remaining sections. Chapter two extends the theoretical foundations that underpin the dynamics of strategic alliances and collaborative partnerships in the context of supply chain management. A more detailed description of both the benefits and challenges of strategic alliances is additionally discussed. The chapter additionally discusses different types of supply chain collaboration initiatives and future trends within the automotive industry. Chapter three presents the methodology and outlines the research strategy and design used in the research process for this thesis. It encompasses the planning phase such as interview guide, and data collection, all aimed at discovering novel knowledge and insights. Chapter four presents the empirical findings and covers aspects of partnerships, encompassing contemporary best practices, challenges, and pre- and post-implementation of the Supplier Relationship Management (SRM) team. Additionally, it offers recommendations for future enhancements. The empirical foundation of this thesis is done through extensive interviews conducted with both the MNE’s employees and their suppliers. Chapter five discusses the empirical findings from the interviews will be discussed and connected with the literature from the theoretical chapter. The discussion ends with a conceptual model that will visualize how an automotive MNE should approach partnership strategies in the future. Lastly, in chapter six, the key findings and final recommendations are presented to give a clear conclusion, and suggestions for future research.
2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Supply chain collaboration initiatives

Buckley et al. (2018, p. 585) defines the global factory as “A network structure designed to orchestrate global value chain activities through linked international flows of intermediate products and services produced both in-house and externally”. Being a global firm entails significant costs and risks, particularly when multiple tiers of suppliers or sources are involved within the global factory (Buckley et al., 2018, p. 377). For instance, managing supply chains poses substantial logistical challenges, alongside the difficulty of ensuring product quality from distant suppliers (Dicken, 2015, p. 214).

Furthermore, Buckley et al. (2018, p. 380) mentions that the relational aspect of the supply chain is critical to facilitating effective integration, coordination, and responsiveness throughout the global factory. The conventional view in international business suggests that MNEs benefit more from having greater ownership stakes in their global supply chain. However, the global factory perspective offers a more nuanced understanding. It indicates that if MNEs can establish strong relationships and strategic partnerships with dependable and high-quality contract manufacturers, there may not be a necessity for maintaining high levels of ownership (Buckley et al., 2018, p. 393).

Hollmann et al. (2015, pp. 976-977) distinguish between different supply chain collaboration initiatives. These collaborative initiatives help to strengthen the relational aspects within the global supply chain. Furthermore, the authors mention Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI), Continuous Replenishment Policy (CRP), Collaborative Planning, Forecasting, and Replenishment (CPFR), and others as initiatives that could help multinational firms create better strategic partnerships within their supply chain (ibid). These three initiatives will be further developed and explained in continuation.
2.1.1. Vendor managed inventory

Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI) is a supply chain collaboration initiative that plays a crucial role in ensuring the efficient and effective flow of goods and services and additionally can create better strategic partnerships with suppliers (Mishra & Raghunathan, 2004, p. 445; Chakraborty et al., 2015, p. 13). VMI represents a logistical arrangement in which the supplier or producer takes charge of overseeing stock levels (Choudhary et al., 2016, p. 3978). Under this system, the retailer provides up-to-date inventory data to the manufacturer, who then assumes responsibility for determining the frequency and quantity of stock replenishment (Mishra & Raghunathan, 2004, pp. 445-446). Fundamentally, VMI transforms the retailer's role from actively managing inventory to simply providing retail space (ibid). Embedded within broader supply chain management trends, VMI underscores the significance of collaboration and information exchange among trading partners (ibid). Chakraborty et al. (2015, p. 13) suggests that sharing information within VMI frameworks mitigates the "bullwhip" effect, referring to the amplification of variability in demand as you move up the supply chain (Reiff, 2023). That is experienced by manufacturers, thereby enhancing inventory management efficiency, and increasing predictability within the supply chain (Chakraborty et al., 2015, p. 13). While manufacturers typically are the ones that have the primary benefits of this efficiency, some scholars argue that VMI can also yield advantages for retailers by reducing inventory monitoring and ordering expenses (ibid).

In numerous instances, manufacturers are incentivized to embrace VMI by offering to reciprocally share demand information. This mutual exchange cultivates deeper collaboration between the involved parties and fosters more streamlined and economical supply chain operations, however, these advantages could be challenging to reach depending on how the specific situation looks for a company's supply chain (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 987).
2.1.2. Continuous replenishment policy and collaborative planning, forecasting, and replenishment

Two other supply chain collaboration initiatives covered in this thesis are the Continuous Replenishment Policy (CRP) and Collaborative Planning, Forecasting, and Replenishment (CPFR). Both these initiatives share similarities with the previously discussed Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI) approach. However, the difference is CRP goes a step further by placing the responsibility of managing the replenishment process on the supplier, leveraging inventory and demand data provided by the MNE (Parsa et al., 2017, p. 229; Raghunathan & Yeh, 2001, p. 406). Consequently, CRP functions similarly to a centralized inventory control system and it is widely embraced across various industries, CRP remains a leading best practice for enhancing supply chain performance (Parsa et al., 2017, p. 229). Supply chain collaboration initiatives such as VMI and CRP are mainly based on monitoring inventories by the suppliers (Hudnurkar & Rathod, 2012, p. 126). In contrast to VMI, CRP takes a further stride by relying on real-time demand data from retailer sales and inventory policies (ibid). Within the supply chain, stakeholders develop inventory policies based on sales forecasts derived from past demand, often without accounting for fluctuations in stock levels at customers’ primary stocking units or warehouses (ibid). Compared to CRP, CPFR is a more advanced initiative (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 972). It is an evolution from the previous supply chain collaborative initiatives which combines both VMI and CRP (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 977). CPFR aims to integrate inter-organizational cooperation, joint work, and information sharing to optimize supply chain performance (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 971). Panahifar et al. (2015, pp. 850-855) discuss four focus areas during the implementation of CPFR, namely, enablers, inhibitors, partner selection, and incentive alignment. Compared to other supply chain collaboration initiatives, CPFR creates collaborative plans, forecasts, and replenishments, driven by shared information and synchronized decision-making among two or more parties (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 979).

In summary, VMI, CRP, and CPFR are strategies in supply chain management aimed at making inventory management more efficient and reducing instances of stockouts (Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 839; Singhry & Rahman, 2019, p. 625). In VMI, the supplier takes on the responsibility of
managing inventory levels, often holding ownership of the inventory until it is sold (Chopra & Meindl, 2016, p. 273). This setup requires the retailer to share demand information with the supplier to ensure timely replenishment decisions. On the other hand, CRP involves regularly restocking retailer inventory based on Point of Sale (POS) data or withdrawals from the warehouse. This process is overseen by the wholesaler, manufacturer, or a third party, with the retailer retaining ownership of the inventory (ibid). CPFR takes this a step further where decisions are driven by shared information, however, CPFR introduces synchronized decision-making among the parties (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 979). Hence CPFR's effectiveness is significantly influenced by several factors including trust, technological investment, and the alignment of incentives among partners (Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 856; Hudnurkar & Rathod, 2012, p. 125). Trust is identified as the most crucial enabler, creating an environment where sharing proprietary information and collaborating closely on planning and execution strives (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 980; Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 850). Through a thorough partner selection process inhibitors such as lack of trust and culture conflicts can be mitigated before the partnership starts (Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 853). However, since CPFR is the most advanced initiative it faces challenges such as integration complexities, geographical dispersion of partners, and varying demand patterns (Hudnurkar & Rathod, 2012, p. 129). According to Hollmann et al. (2015, p. 988), CPFR is the most costly of these initiatives, but if implemented successfully it is the most effective in generating new capabilities, knowledge, and supply chain efficiency (Singhry & Rahman, 2019, p. 639; Hudnurkar & Rathod, 2012, p. 143; Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 987).

CRP is one of the most common practices within supply chain collaboration initiatives as it involves the continuous sharing of information through IT systems (Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 848). One of the main reasons why it is the most frequently used collaborative initiative is because linking CRP systems to warehouse withdrawals is simpler to put into practice, and MNEs tend to be more at ease with sharing data at this level (Chopra and Meindl, 2016, p. 273). The usage of CRP as a supply chain collaborative initiative offers the benefit of increased replenishment frequency between manufacturers and retailers, resulting in significant inventory cost reductions for the retailers (Yao & Dresner, 2008, p. 369). Furthermore, through the implementation of CRP, buyers, and suppliers
collaborate by exchanging inventory status information, thereby enhancing replenishment frequencies and reducing inventory levels for both entities (Yao & Dresner, 2008, p. 362; Raghunathan & Yeh, 2001, p. 406).

2.2. Strategic partnerships

Mergers and Acquisitions, Joint Ventures (JV), and strategic alliances as a few of them (Liu et al., 2017, p. 152). One thing they all have in common is cooperation across organizational boundaries (ibid). They differ in terms of ownership, JVs for example are created for legal reasons, to have co-ownership, when it comes to jointly-created intellectual property (Albers et al., 2016, p. 587). Kardova et al. (2021, p. 4) points out that partnerships exist on the premise that the parties collaborate to create a “win-win” situation. To create this “win-win” situation the parties in the collaboration need to have common strategic goals, trust, and knowledge sharing (Kukkamalla et al., 2021, p. 573; Wood et al., 2016, p. 2407; Drewbiak & Karaszewski, 2020, p. 390).

According to Buckley et al. (2018, p. 379), the relationship between buyer and supplier evolves through experiential learning. This means that both firms in the partnership will generate and develop new capabilities and knowledge through working with the other party. As seen in Figure 1 below experiential learning is one of four parts for developing an effective buyer-supplier relationship. Moreover, similarities in industry and technology are discussed. If both the buyer and supplier are in related industries they are more likely to have similar processes, thus collaborating easier. Since having a similar background facilitates communication (Neffke & Henning, 2013, p. 313). Then prior experience with change is important because there is a higher probability that employees are adaptable. This leads to a streamlined process instead of time and resources being wasted due to inadaptability. Lastly, as previously mentioned, effective communication and information sharing are incredibly important for a buyer-supplier relationship to perform well (Kardova et al., 2021, p. 4). This is built on mutual trust between the two parties. If these four points are implemented and followed a buyer-supplier relationship can move from a transactional relationship to a strategic partnership (Buckley et al., 2018, p. 379).
The figure presented by Buckley et al. (2018, p. 380) represents the buyer-supplier relationship in general. Leverick and Cooper (1998, p. 74) explore the dynamics of the automotive industry, revealing extensive long-term relationships and interdependency between manufacturers, with significant supplier engagement in product development. Despite the benefits, the study highlights potential disadvantages in close collaborations, such as the risk of information misuse, and over-dependence on specific suppliers. Effective relationship management is crucial to mitigate these risks, however, this demands time and resources (Leverick & Cooper, 1998, p. 79; Brandes et al., 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, it is critical to work with supplier relationship management, thus creating synergies benefiting both parties (ibid).

Collaborative partnerships and strategic alliances are often used interchangeably, however, they exhibit nuanced differences in terms of their scope, formality, duration, level of integration, and strategic intent (Liu et al., 2017, p. 152; Johnston & Staughton, 2009, pp. 567-568). Collaborative partnerships, as a concept, encompasses various forms of cooperation, coordination, or joint efforts.
between parties (Kardova et al., 2021, p. 4). These partnerships can be informal and may not necessarily involve a long-term commitment or a formal agreement. The structure and terms of collaboration can be fluid, depending on the nature of the collaboration. Collaborative partnerships can be short-term or project-specific, adapting to the immediate needs of the collaborators. While they aim for mutual benefit, the strategic focus may not be as pronounced, and partners may maintain a higher degree of independence (Johnston & Staughton, 2009, pp. 567-568).

On the other hand, strategic alliances are characterized by more formal and structured agreements between two or more parties (Wood et al., 2016, p. 2399). Strategic alliances often imply a purposeful alignment of objectives, with a focus on achieving specific, often long-term, strategic goals (Kale and Singh, 2009, pp. 59-60). This can allow them to access resources, capabilities, and expertise that they may not possess internally. This can include technology, distribution networks, and specialized skills, enabling partners to complement each other's strengths (Gulati, 1998, p. 298; Dicken, 2015, p. 221). Through pooling resources and expertise, companies can navigate uncertainties and mitigate potential financial or operational challenges (Lavie, 2007, p. 1206). Furthermore, Dicken (2015, p. 221) emphasizes that strategic alliances can be separated into three different types of alliances. These are research-oriented, technology-oriented, and market-oriented, and all three offer advantages such as breaking through market access barriers, assisting in entering new markets, splitting costs, and risks associated with Research and Development and new product development, gaining access to technologies, creating synergies and scaling economies by pooling resources and optimizing production processes (ibid). Strategic alliances often involve formal contracts or agreements outlining the terms, responsibilities, and expectations of the parties involved (ibid). The structure is typically more rigid and comprehensive, reflecting a commitment to a strategic, goal-oriented relationship (Todeva & Knoke, 2005, pp. 132-133). These alliances are generally characterized by longer-term commitments, and while they may not be permanent, they are intended to endure for a significant period (ibid).
Moreover, according to Cullen et al. (2000, pp. 223-224), strategic alliances entail a higher level of integration, with partners working closely on multiple levels, such as shared resources, or coordinated business activities. There is a more significant blending of operations and strategies in strategic alliances. These alliances are strategically focused, emphasizing a deliberate alignment of long-term goals and a more intentional approach to achieving a competitive advantage or addressing specific market challenges (Kale & Singh, 2009, pp. 48-51). Furthermore, collaborative partnerships are a broader concept that encompasses various forms of cooperation, while strategic alliances are a specific subset of partnerships characterized by formality, longer-term commitment, higher integration, and a pronounced strategic focus. The distinctions lie in the formality, duration, level of integration, and strategic intent of the collaboration. However, working closely with other companies allows for knowledge transfer and learning opportunities, as partners can exchange insights, and skills, which fosters continuous learning and improvement within the alliance (Drewbiak & Karaszewski, 2020, p. 388).

Previous studies have also shown that information sharing in supply chains can reduce stock levels and improve organizational flexibility which allows firms to meet customer needs and gain a competitive advantage (Latunreng & Nasirin, 2019, p. 404; Wong, 2002, p. 577). Moreover, as emphasized in Wong's (2002, p. 569) study, collaboration with suppliers is crucial for mutual success. He argues that when companies assist suppliers in achieving their goals, reciprocation occurs, leading to better alignment and commitment from suppliers. Wong (2002, p. 570) highlights that without such commitment, suppliers may tend to ignore meeting companies’ needs. Furthermore, Sahay and Maini (2002, p. 74) discuss different types of buyer-supplier relationships in supply chain management. They explore different approaches to supplier collaboration, including long-term partnerships, information exchange, and lean supply networks. This type of collaboration builds on trust which contributes to long-term stability and reduces uncertainty (Sahay & Maini, 2002, p. 75; Philippart et al., 2005, p. 195). Trust acts as an extra way to monitor contracts, thus it lowers the cost of monitoring (Philippart et al., 2005, p. 200). Through collaboration partnerships are formed and are shown to
improve customer commitment and resulting benefits (Philippart, et al., 2005, p. 197). However, there are still differences in how partnerships are implemented between different regions.

According to Cullen et al. (2000, p. 226) and Liu et al. (2017, p. 153), trust and commitment can help establish strong partnerships and enhance a company's reputation or help open doors to future collaborations and business opportunities. Trustworthiness is a key aspect, as it is also highlighted by Lui and Ngo (2012, p. 82) as they argue that as a business relationship grows longer, the firm becomes more familiar with its partner, leading to increased trust and a reduction in opportunism risks. The more a firm gains experience with a partner, it develops a better understanding of the partner's capabilities and credibility (ibid). This history of positive interactions lowers uncertainty, enabling early cooperation and supporting long-term collaboration, additionally, a satisfactory history strengthens trust in a partner, fostering a long-term orientation (ibid). When a buyer has a satisfying relationship with suppliers over an extended period, there is a greater likelihood of continuing the collaboration (ibid). Despite the many benefits of collaboration either through a strategic alliance or other form of partnership. Furthermore, trust can be built through transparency and honesty (Saputro et al., 2022, p. 10). Cullen et al. (2000, p. 226) mentions conflicting interests or goals could lead to conflict that affects collaboration. Moreover, according to Pothukuchi et al. (2002, pp. 245-246), cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and communication challenges. Different management styles, decision-making processes, and business practices may create friction within the partnership (ibid). Poor coordination and integration may hinder the effective functioning of the alliance, impacting its ability to achieve common objectives (ibid). Moreover, mismanagement of interpersonal dynamics or a lack of trust among partners can lead to breakdowns in communication and collaboration (Kale & Singh, 2009, pp. 59-60). To mitigate these challenges they further argue that companies need to invest in careful partner selection, establish clear communication channels, define roles and responsibilities, and regularly assess and adjust the alliance strategy to ensure its continued relevance and success (ibid). Buckley et al. (2018, p. 379) further mention trust is one important factor in making sure that efficient two-way communication proceeds.
The Kraljic Portfolio Matrix aids in categorizing procurement items into four categories based on their profit impact and supply risk, thereby guiding the selection of suppliers and the formulation of corresponding strategies (Kraljic, 1983, p. 111). Through this lens, suppliers are evaluated on cost-effectiveness and their strategic importance to the company, fostering long-term partnerships and risk mitigation.

**Figure 2: Kraljic Portfolio Matrix**

*Source: Authors own visualization based on Kraljic (1983, p. 111) (2024)*

The different categories require varying approaches, Strategic Items are required due to their high impact and risk through market analysis, close supplier relationships, and often long-term supply security measures (ibid). Bottleneck items involve ensuring supply continuity, possibly through multiple sourcing or stockpiling. For leverage items, the focus is on cost reduction and value maximization which often is done through bidding or negotiation. Lastly, the procurement strategy for noncritical items is usually to simplify processes and reduce administrative costs, often through standardization, automation, or outsourcing of the procurement process (Kraljic, 1983, p. 112).
2.3. Future trends in the automotive industry

Regarding research about future partnerships within the automotive industry, many new trends are being identified that could impact actors in this industry. Firstly, collaboration between traditional automakers and technology companies for the development of electric and autonomous vehicles has increased over the last couple of years (Türy, 2018, pp. 84-85; Gall et al., 2023, p. 34). These kinds of cooperation include partnerships to integrate advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), sensor systems, and connectivity solutions (He et al., 2020, p. 590). Collaboration between automakers and tech companies is also increasing to enhance in-car connectivity and create more sustainable products. This could involve integrating advanced software platforms and cloud-based services. Building on the technical aspect, collaboration with tech companies and car manufacturers is also important due to the increased technical advancements that new cars provide today (Gall et al., 2023, p. 10). Many cars that are produced today have a significant amount of technical features that need to be considered as cars that are produced nowadays are more similar to computers on wheels. This results in collaborative efforts between traditional automakers, tech companies, and research institutions to accelerate research and development in areas such as artificial intelligence, advanced materials, and energy storage (ibid). Additionally, many car manufacturers partner with companies to explore the use of blockchain technology in the automotive industry, aiming to enhance transparency in supply chains, streamline transactions, and improve data security and sustainability (Shah et al., 2023, pp. 429-430).

Another trend is that car manufacturers have been starting to collaborate more with other logistical companies to create a more efficient supply chain (Gall et al., 2023, p. 10). This is because the competitive supply networks have reshaped relationships, collaborations, and production networks. The new approach for the future involves supply network members as shareholders working together to improve overall performance and customer satisfaction (Rezaei & Behnamian, 2021, p. 23). An explanation to why these kinds of partnerships have increased could be because of the COVID-19 pandemic as it resulted in many disruptions for companies' supply chains and overall business (Meier & Pinto, 2024, pp. 14-15). The increased collaboration among automotive companies
and suppliers is necessary because it creates better and more resilient supply chains when conflicts or other pandemics happen in the future (Hofstätter et al., 2020, p. 7). Other advantages of the increased partnerships with suppliers are to optimize supply chain management, reduce costs, and improve efficiency (ibid).
3. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy

When conducting a thesis it was important to consider factors such as research strategy which meant the plan or approach researchers followed when conducting a research project. The research strategy was relevant because it explained how the project was set up and how the research question was going to be answered. This thesis adopted a qualitative single case study approach, aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the case company's strategic partnerships approach within the automotive industry. This design was particularly suited for exploring the intricacies of supply chain management and partner relationships in the automotive industry. Because it allowed for a detailed examination of the processes, challenges, and successes of forming and maintaining strategic partnerships, offering rich, contextual insights into the operational and strategic aspects of the department's functions (Bell et al., 2019, pp. 63-66). Through this approach, the research was able to capture the complexities of decision-making, collaboration, and strategy implementation in a real-world setting, contributing valuable perspectives to the field of supply chain management.

Additionally, for this thesis, an abductive approach was used since it seemed like the best fit as this approach combined elements of both the inductive and deductive approaches, allowing the researchers to go back and forth between theory and real-world data (Bell et al., 2019, pp. 24-25). The abductive approach allowed both exploration and was great for delving into new or unknown areas. In short, abductive research was flexible and exploratory, using both deductive and inductive reasoning to come up with new theories or refine existing ones based on real data (ibid). A single case study was most applicable due to the complex nature and specificity of the question: How does a multinational automotive manufacturer manage partnerships in the aftermarket supply chain? (Bell et al., 2019, p. 63; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 140).
3.2. Information about the case company

The reason why the specific case company was chosen was because it is an international firm with presences in different countries across the world. Additionally, the case company's global supplier relationships made it an ideal fit for addressing the thesis research questions. The chosen company was an ideal candidate as it is foundationally Swedish. The traditional Swedish belief of openness is one of the many reasons why Sweden is globally known for their business climate, competitiveness and productivity (Business Sweden, n.d.). This led the case company to give access to information regarding their partnerships strategies and providing respondents for the interviews. Moreover, with both their headquarters and aftermarket operations located locally this additionally influenced the reason why the case company was chosen.

The chosen case company for this thesis was Volvo Cars, and more specifically its Parts Supply and Logistics (PS&L) department. The study was structured as a single case study, examining various partnerships within Volvo Cars' PS&L department to identify patterns, challenges, and best practices in supplier collaboration and collaborative partnership management. Moreover, the study sought to envision the future of partnership strategies as the landscape of automotive partnerships is dynamic, and specific challenges may arise in maintaining robust relationships. To gather relevant empirical data for the thesis research questions, interviews were conducted with both stakeholders at Volvo Cars and suppliers connected to Volvo Cars PS&L.

The PS&L department handles everything related to the aftermarket for all Volvo Cars' products. This involves planning, ordering, stocking, and distributing parts to all global Volvo Cars retailers. The PS&L organization works with alerts, these are deviation alerts and are created when for example the stock is too low or a deviation of a delivery is detected, among others. These alerts are manually handled and have steadily been increasing. This trend was expected to worsen with the launch of new car models, which will introduce more spare parts and subsequently more alerts. The first effects of these developments have already been observed in 2021 which led to the reorganization of new roles, outsourcing of non-business critical parts, and digital transformation in the first months.
of 2023. As a result, the new organization developed three long-term strategic teams along with the daily operations from the past organization, Supplier Relationship Manager (SRM), Product Lifecycle Optimization Management, and Forecasting Data Scientist. The plan is to continue to grow and evolve the latter two teams whilst slowly, as the alerts decrease, reducing the size of the daily operations that mainly handle alerts. The purpose and objective of the reorganization are depicted in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: Volvo Cars PS&L Reorganization](source: Authors own compilation (2024))

This study focused on the SRM team entirely and how they could develop their strategic approach when moving from the buyer-supplier relationships they currently have with their suppliers towards strong partnerships and supplier integration. The objective of this reorganization was to focus on business-critical parts that were responsible for close to 70 percent of all customer order lines, moving towards partnerships with suppliers, and automated, data-driven forecasting.
3.3. Data collection

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Volvo Cars' strategic partnership mechanisms within its Parts Supply and Logistics Department, the study employed a multi-faceted data collection approach. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews which were designed to extract detailed insights from key stakeholders, including suppliers, managers, and employees directly involved in the supply chain and partnership processes. The interviews were aimed to capture the essence of strategic decision-making, challenges, and the evolution of partnerships over time. The goal was to do as many interviews as possible face-to-face. Although some of the interviews had to be conducted through video calls. However, doing a video call still allowed the observation of body language and the formation of a greater personal connection with the interviewee (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 188; Bell et al., 2019, p. 453).

Before the start of each interview, the purpose of the interview and thesis was made clear to each respondent (Patel & Davidson, 2011, p. 74). The interviews were semi-structured, meaning a list of questions was prepared before the interview to be used as a guide throughout the interview (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Although, this does not mean the questions were in order nor that all questions would be asked. This allowed the interview to flow more easily and move towards what the respondent was most knowledgeable about and most importantly from their point of view (Bell et al., 2019, p. 435). This resulted in the respondent explaining how the topic worked and might have resulted in the interview leading into areas that were not considered before (Saunders et al., 2007, pp. 315-316; Gioia et al., 2012, p. 26). From this gained insight the interview guide could have been updated and backtracking to former interviews to acquire information on the topic (Gioia et al., 2012, p. 26). However, the semi-structured structure still allowed a few questions to gain desired specific information from all the respondents (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). To motivate the respondents to give their honest opinions and as developed answers as possible they were allowed to be anonymous in the thesis (Patel & Davidson, 2011, p. 74). Furthermore, the questions were sent out a couple of days before the interview. This was done after the first interview where the respondent had a hard time answering some of the more complex questions and after the interview recommended to send the
questions before the interview to allow future respondents to prepare. Additionally, the interviews were recorded with the respondents' permission, offering the opportunity for future review and ensuring the quality and accuracy of the transcriptions, as noted by Bell et al. (2019, p. 440). Moreover, this opened the possibility for the interviewers to take notes of thoughts and observations during the interview. At the end of each interview, the respondents got the chance to comment and develop topics that they thought were overlooked or missed during the interview (Bell et al., 2019, p. 443). Moreover, by conducting semi-structured interviews it was possible to gain current insight but also retrospective information, which was crucial to understanding the change (Gioia et al., 2012, p. 19).

Simultaneously, secondary data were used to do a comparative analysis. This was done by thoroughly reviewing the literature and Volvo Cars' internal documents (Bell et al., 2019, p. 68). This dual approach ensured a rich dataset, enabling a nuanced exploration of the strategic partnerships' operational and managerial dimensions (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 164). The combination of direct stakeholder insights and documentary evidence provided a robust foundation for analyzing the effectiveness and dynamics of strategic alliances in Volvo Cars' PS&L context. The literature that was explored included topics such as Strategic Alliances, Collaborative Partnerships, Supplier Selection Criteria, and the future trends of the automotive industry. These topics were analyzed both from academic research and reports from the industry and consulting firms.

3.4. Respondent selection & interview guide

The supervisors at Volvo Cars put together a list of relevant people throughout the supply from both the production and the aftermarket side. This list was then used to contact internal employees, through email, who might have had insight into the topic and would have been interested to be a part of the study. Furthermore, the suppliers that were chosen collaboratively with the SRM team at Volvo Cars PS&L. In the beginning, there was a list of 46 different suppliers to choose from that the SRM team was already working with. However, to interview 46 different suppliers would have been exceedingly time-consuming. Therefore, a selection had to be made to pick out a few suppliers that would have
been interesting to interview. Both parties had specific criteria for selecting which suppliers to interview. The criteria were; different product segments, company sizes, Volvo Cars' dependence on a specific supplier, and the potential for partnership evolution identified by the SRM team. After careful consideration and discussion together with the SRM team, eight suppliers were selected for the interviews that fit the criteria. However, two of the suppliers declined to participate in the interviews.

Before approaching the suppliers about an interview the corresponding Supplier Relationship Manager informed each supplier about the possibility to be a part of the project and that an interview would be conducted with them. This decreased the chances that the invitation to participate in the interview was ignored or marked as spam. This approach aimed to capture in-depth insights into the nature of these partnerships (Merriam, 2009, p. 40), the strategies employed to manage and evolve these relationships, and the perceived impact on operational efficiency and competitive advantage. Furthermore, this also aimed to investigate how the suppliers perceived the change in Volvo Cars' PS&L way of working with suppliers before and after the reorganization and what the collaboration should evolve towards in the future.

The tables below showcase the interviewees conducted for this thesis and information about the respondents such as their position, the length of the interview, what language was spoken during the interview, and lastly, if the interview was conducted through a digital tool such as Microsoft Teams or in-person. The tables are divided into two groups where the first table shows the interviews made with the suppliers and the second table shows the Volvo Cars employees who were interviewed. The questions used for the supplier respondent are located in Appendix A. Correspondingly, the questions for the Volvo Cars employees are found in Appendix B. There were of course supplementary questions asked based on the respondent's answers and other thoughts that appeared during the interview. For Table 2 as all the respondents were Volvo Cars employees their market orientations were indicated, however, in Table 1 the supplier company was included instead of market orientation.

Since a majority of all the respondents wanted to be anonymized, the choice was made to anonymize everyone to have a more coherent way to refer to the respondents in the empirical findings
presentation. The Volvo Cars employees were named IR (Internal Respondent) and a number corresponding to the chronological order they were interviewed. For the suppliers, the method was similar where they were given the initialism SR (Supplier Respondent), and then the number was assigned based on the supplier name anonymization. In combination with the anonymized name the respondents were also categorized by their position at their company, in addition to this, the supplier company names were also anonymized. Instead of using the company name, suppliers were called S1 to S6, and for internal employees at Volvo Cars, the process was similar as they were referred to as their position at Volvo Cars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SR1</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Logistics Manager</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR2</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Key Account Manager</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR3</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Key Account Manager</td>
<td>35 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR4</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Key Account Manager</td>
<td>1 hour 10 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR5</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Market Sales Manager</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR6</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Team Leader Customer Service</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR7</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Key Account Manager</td>
<td>55 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR8</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Key Account Manager</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SR9</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Plant manager</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Interview respondents from suppliers
Source: Authors own compilation (2024)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Market orientation</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IR1</td>
<td>Global Category Manager</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR2</td>
<td>Purchaser</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR3</td>
<td>Supplier Performance Manager</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR4</td>
<td>Supplier Relationship Manager</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR5</td>
<td>Supplier Relationship Manager</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>55 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR6</td>
<td>Supply Chain Coordinator</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR7</td>
<td>Supplier Relationship Manager</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR8</td>
<td>Supply Chain Coordinator</td>
<td>Aftermarket</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>In-person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR9</td>
<td>Supply Chain Coordinator</td>
<td>Production</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR10</td>
<td>Product Owner</td>
<td>Production</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR11</td>
<td>Supplier Account Manager</td>
<td>Production</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Microsoft Teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Interview respondents from Volvo Cars

Source: Authors own compilation (2024)
The supplier companies S1-S6 are all companies that deliver different kinds of products to Volvo Cars PS&L and they are located in various countries in Europe, these suppliers play pivotal roles in providing essential components. Supplier S1 is a company from the Netherlands that has approximately 5 000 employees and 14 production sites worldwide and they deliver body parts to Volvo Cars. Supplier S2 originates from Germany has around 400 000 employees and manufactures a variety of products, however, for Volvo Cars PS&L, they manufacture wiper blades. S3 is a smaller company compared to the other suppliers and they are from Sweden and have around 150 employees and manufacture boot mats. S4 is originally from Poland but has offices located in Sweden, they currently have around 2 500 employees worldwide and they deliver products such as load retainers and bicycle carriers to the PS&L location. The supplier S5 is located in Sweden and currently has 160 employees and they manufacture windscreens. Lastly, the supplier S6, which originates from Norway, has approximately 6 000 employees and they specialize in crafting bumpers.

To guide these interviews, a meticulously prepared interview guide was developed, based on a review of relevant literature and the theoretical framework underlying this study. The guide was designed to cover how Volvo Cars PS&L’s partnerships are formed, maintained, and evolved. Furthermore, they were built upon the existing theory in the field of Strategic Alliances and Collaborative Partnerships. Approximately 20 questions were formulated, for each target group, to specifically address these themes, ensuring relevance to the overarching topic of organizational change and the specific research question at hand (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 321). This preparation included consideration of what needed to be known to effectively answer the research question, thereby highlighting the significance of each topic area. Additionally, with the help of the SRM team, there were several iterations of the interview questions. The interview guide was also tested on individuals outside the study to verify its suitability and relevance to the research question, ensuring that the questions were well-crafted and meaningful (Bell et al., 2019, p. 439). Since the questions were based on academic literature the language used needed to be comprehensive and used in the industry as well, to make the questions as intuitive as possible for the respondents (Bell et al., 2019, p. 440; Gioia et al., 2012, p. 17). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview format also allowed for
the inclusion of supplementary questions, fostering a deeper understanding of the competencies outlined in the theoretical framework and their practical implications for innovation leadership.

Lastly, all interviews were transcribed to easily analyze the data afterward (Merriam, 2009, p. 110; Bell et al., 2019, pp. 445-447). The textual representation of the conversations opened the door to in-depth analysis. This enabled the possibility to read through the transcripts to identify patterns, themes, and subtle nuances in the participants' responses. This in hand further enhanced the integrity, depth, and credibility of the study. By capturing participants' responses, the exact words spoken during the interview were available, eliminating the risks associated with relying on memory or incomplete notes (Bell et al., 2019, p. 441). Moreover, the transparency and replicability of the research were greatly enhanced by the practice of recording and transcribing interviews (Bell et al., 2019, pp. 445-447).

3.5. Data analysis

When conducting interviews it was discussed in method theory that there is no right way to analyze data from qualitative interviews, as this results in a large amount of text from both notes during the interview and additional transcriptions (Bell et al., 2019, p. 518; Patel & Davidson, 2011, p. 120). It was vital to have a systematic structure when analyzing data from qualitative interviews, otherwise, it could be challenging to analyze the data in the right way (Riger & Sigurvinssdottir, 2016, pp. 34-35; Bell et al., 2019, p. 518). Furthermore, to evaluate and enhance the overall quality of the interviews and the working process of the thesis a systematic ongoing analysis was conducted after each interview (Bell et al., 2019, p. 441). This ongoing analysis meant that after each interview a short discussion was held between the interviewers to discuss specific thoughts that may have arisen during the interview. The reason why the discussions were held directly after the interviews was that the thoughts and impressions were fresh in memory, thus made it easier to make correct notes without misremembering anything (ibid). This ongoing analysis helped to further change or rewrite certain questions so that the coming interviews were of better quality (Patel & Davidsson, 2011, p. 121).
The transcripts helped analyze similarities and differences between the respondents' answers and it additionally helped with referencing and documentation as the transcription provided an easy way of revisiting and citing specific parts of an interview. Transcribing the interviews was a valuable procedure that increased the accessibility, accuracy, and usability of the interview data.

Based on the collected data from interviews and theories a comparison of the answers and information was conducted in order to find similarities, differences, and additional thoughts about the future of partnerships. To identify relevant patterns and themes from the empirical data this thesis followed the six-step process by Riger and Sigurvinsdottir (2016, pp. 34-35). The first step was to familiarize oneself with the data by transcribing the interviews. This created the possibility to go back and thoroughly analyze what was said during the session. All of the interview transcriptions were stored in separate documents to create a clear structure and made it easy to find the specific data from each respondent. Bell et al. (2019, p. 440) argued, transcribing and applying a clear structure is a helpful preparation for the analysis. The second step of Riger and Sigurvinsdottir's (2016, pp. 34-35) process was to code the data. This was done by highlighting important parts of the interview and recurring terms and concepts (Bell et al., 2019, p. 519; 531). After all interviews were transcribed and organized into separate documents the process of finding keywords, similarities and differences began. Quotes generated the keywords for each transcription, when keywords had been identified in all interviews, themes started to emerge. Some keywords that emerged from the interviews were “Trust”, “Honesty”, and “Transparency” and these keywords were generalized into a trust theme.

This then led into step three, where the foundation created in step two was strung together into themes that could be linked together to broader themes. Two themes identified in step two were “trust” and “cooperation” which both were created from keywords. Together these two themes formed an aggregated theme called “partnership essentials”. Step number four in this process involved reviewing the themes (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, pp. 34-35). In this part, the research questions and interview questions were compared with the themes found in the previous steps of the analysis to further analyze the empirical findings to investigate whether the empirical findings were coherent to the purpose of this thesis. This then merged with step five; refine and rename the themes to make sure
to capture the intent of the research in the themes. This was an iterative procedure throughout the analysis; in the end, five sections for the empirical findings chapter were created; Thoughts about partnership, Effective practices and challenges connected to partnerships, Comparison before and after SRM, Future improvements, and Internal variations. Then each section was divided into two subsections; one for the findings from supplier interviews and one for the findings from the interviews with Volvo Cars personnel. This created a clear separation between the two for the discussion chapter which allowed for an easier and unambiguous comparison between internal and external points of view. The last step was to write the thesis and present the data in a trustworthy way (ibid). This was done through the usage of citations and linking what multiple respondents answered to each section.

Based on the empirical findings in combination with the theoretical framework a conceptual model was developed to visualize and, hence, create a clear overview of the findings in the discussion. This model acts as a visual tool to clarify findings and enhance understanding of the complex dynamics that influence supplier partnerships within Volvo Cars' PS&L department. The model will further acted as our final recommendation to Volvo Cars PS&L which they could use as a foundation for their future strategy development.

3.6. Research quality

The quality of research was an important aspect to consider when conducting academic studies, two common themes that were often discussed within this topic are reliability and validity of a study. The terms reliability and validity are often used in quantitative studies, however these two aspects were not reliable when conducting qualitative studies (Patel & Davidson, 2011, pp. 105-106; Bell et al., 2019, p. 363; Merriam, 2009, p. 209). Hence, this thesis did not cover the concepts of reliability and validity, instead the terms Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability were used as indicators for increasing the quality of the study (Bell et al., 2019, p. 363).

The concept of credibility refers to how accurately the authors had understood the social context of reality (Bell et al., 2019, p. 363). To increase the credibility of this thesis the concept of Triangulation was done, more specifically through the use of multiple sources of data (Merriam, 2009,
This was done through interviewing multiple people at the same or similar positions and by getting similar answers from more than one person for the same questions, which increased the credibility of the person's statements. Moreover, this was also done through comparing the answers from the interviews to what past research had been discussing, which further increased the credibility. Bell et al. (2019, p. 365) argued transferability is difficult to apply on qualitative studies as these types of research often are contextually unique. Instead it was recommended to describe with rich detail the culture of the context or in this case the case company (ibid). This thesis provided a detailed and clear context of the research, relevant descriptions of the research setting and the case company to enable other researchers to determine how applicable the findings are to their own research.

Dependability is a measure to try and prove that the result of the study was consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). During the process of conducting this thesis the authors have gained feedback from representatives from the case company, supervisors at the university and fellow peers, which further increased the dependability and consistency of the results based on the data collected. As complete objectivity was close to impossible to attain (Bell et al., 2019, p. 365). The confirmability measure was used to show if the author had acted in good faith (ibid). As previously mentioned, multiple representatives from the case company read through the thesis which not only increased the dependability but also the confirmability of the study. This procedure ensured that the text was valid and accurate for both the topic and the case company.

### 3.7. Ethical considerations

When conducting qualitative research, ensuring ethical integrity was a fundamental aspect that significantly influenced the credibility, reliability, and overall value of the research findings (Bell et al., 2019, p. 112). Ensuring ethical integrity was a priority taken into consideration when writing this thesis. Further, Bell et al. (2019, pp. 116-118) emphasized the importance of ethical considerations, such as informed consent, privacy protection, and the respectful treatment of participants. These ethical practices not only safeguarded participants' rights but also enhanced the quality of the research by fostering a transparent and trustful relationship between researchers and participants. A key ethical
practice is obtaining informed consent, which involved providing participants with comprehensive information about the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits (Bell et al., 2019, pp. 118-119). This process empowers participants by giving them the knowledge necessary to make an informed decision about their involvement in the research. The ethical protocol extended to maintaining participants' privacy and confidentiality throughout the research process (Bell et al., 2019, p. 123). This involved measures such as anonymizing participants' identities and ensuring the secure handling and storage of sensitive data. Such practices were crucial for protecting participants' personal information and maintaining trust (ibid).

During data collection, especially in interview-based research, ethical practices played a critical role in ensuring the integrity and validity of the data gathered. For instance, before initiating interviews, researchers were advised to communicate the purpose, duration, and use of the data collected to the participants (Patel & Davidson, 2011, pp. 62-65). This clarity helped mitigate any potential biases and misunderstandings. By offering participants anonymity and allowing them to review and confirm their statements after interviews the thesis ensured research trustworthiness (ibid). Since the main data came from the interviews and many of the respondents were close to the business. This could result in what Saunders et al. (2007, p. 152) called “good news” syndrome. Hence, it was important to compare what stakeholders at Volvo Cars said to the included suppliers to ensure the data was representative.

3.8. Criticism of the method

When analyzing the method employed in this thesis one could argue that some criticisms could be employed, particularly in terms of its trustworthiness and the efficiency of data collection strategies. One concern was the pre-selection of suppliers by Volvo Cars PS&L, which potentially biased the sample and limited the diversity of perspectives obtained. By focusing primarily on suppliers chosen by Volvo Cars PS&L, valuable insights from other suppliers might have been overlooked, thereby skewing the findings and failing to capture a comprehensive view of the industry landscape.
The decision to send out questions in advance before conducting interviews raised questions about the integrity of the process. At the same time, this approach may have facilitated smoother interviews. The respondents had a chance to prepare their answers and also examples, resulting in a greater richness of the information provided. It also introduced the risk of participants tailoring their responses or rehearsing answers, thereby compromising the authenticity of the data collected. As Bell et al. (2019, p. 435) suggested that one of the benefits of qualitative interviewing was when the respondent was allowed to talk about what they saw as most important. This methodological choice could have led to a lack of spontaneity in the interviews and could have potentially obscured insights that emerged in more organic conversations. Then there was the possibility, since they had the chance to prepare for the questions in the interview guide, that the respondent would not be as primed to answer follow-up questions.

Furthermore, the number of suppliers that were available for selection (46 in total) presented a challenge in ensuring a representative sample. The influence of Volvo Cars to select specific types of suppliers might have inadvertently biased the thesis's choices and skewed the results toward particular perspectives. This raised concerns about the validity and generalizability of the findings, as they might not have reflected the broader supplier landscape. However, there was constant communication with the people at Volvo Cars PS&L with suggestions on the preferred amount of suppliers and having a representative selection of the suppliers. This influence might as formerly said have affected the quality of the study, although, the experience the people at Volvo Cars PS&L had with their suppliers most probably led to interviews with suppliers that had input and wanted to be a part of the change.

While the research methodology facilitated data collection and analysis, it was not without its limitations. Addressing these concerns was essential for ensuring the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the findings in this thesis. Moving forward, future research should strive for greater methodological rigor and diversity in sampling to mitigate bias and enhance the robustness of conclusions drawn. Furthermore, qualitative analytic tools such as NVivo for computerized coding of the transcriptions would have resulted in ensuring that the same quality of coding was used for all transcriptions (Bell et al., 2019, p. 539). Even though there was a system in place for codifying the
transcriptions in place, since the work was divided between two people, there was always a chance of slight variation.
4. Empirical findings

4.1. Thoughts about partnership

4.1.1. Suppliers

In the interviews with the suppliers, the word partnership was highlighted as a crucial aspect of business relations, characterized by mutual support, transparency, and the shared objective of achieving certain goals. The importance of mutual support was very common as one of the suppliers mentioned, “I think for purchasing mostly the feeling of mutual interest or the feeling that it goes both ways if the partnership is good, then I'm able to get just a little extra out of my partnership and vice versa” (SR2). Additionally, many of the suppliers underscored the importance of long-term cooperation, trust, and a clear communication channel as foundational elements of a successful partnership. For instance, the emphasis on stability, consistent contact points, and knowledge exchange were marked as essential parts of fostering strong business relationships. As one supplier explained; “Long-term collaboration where you can trust each other and have a shared plan for the next 5 to 10 years, that's what partnership means to me” (SR3).

Some common themes were that all suppliers emphasized the significance of long-term cooperation, mutual trust, transparency, and the importance of having a shared vision or plans that extend into the future. According to SR8, these themes are reached by having a consistent contact person with the right expertise and experience and a robust dialogue at appropriate levels. Having a consistent contact person also creates an easy way of reaching certain information and additionally creates a better overall relationship where both parties are ready to help each other when problems arise.
“If I'm very well known to the purchaser on the other side, I'm also more likely to try my best internally to scrape off a little to help him or her and that feeling of helping each other in both our interests will create a good partnership” - SR2.

SR5 emphasizes the concept of shared responsibility and a mutual business venture, where both parties engage on equal terms. SR6 echoes this sentiment, highlighting the importance of fairness and flexibility in the partnership, contrasting it with the dominance often seen in the automotive industry. SR3 also shares both SR5 and SR6 views about partnerships regarding long-term collaboration and mutual trust, however, SR3 adds the importance of stability and having consistent contacts with the right expertise on both sides. SR3 valued continuity in relationships, which leads to smoother interactions and more productive dialogues.

The main differences that were noticed were that specific views on partnership leaned towards the operational aspects, such as working together to solve immediate challenges, and the strategic importance of partnerships in facilitating innovation and addressing future industry shifts, particularly towards sustainability and electrification. One supplier highlighted the importance of data systems as an important enabler of having a strong partnership (SR1). The significance of communication and system reliability were both equally important when fostering a strong partnership, as regular interaction helps to ensure the timely delivery of goods (SR1).

4.1.2. Volvo Cars

For many of the Volvo Cars employees, a partnership was consistently described as a close relationship built on communication, trust, mutual goals, and transparency. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of communication, meeting each other physically, and having a shared understanding, and objectives. Another theme that was discussed was that a partnership is often a
give-and-take relationship where the two parties need to see the bigger picture and be ready to compromise with their suppliers to reach a strong relationship. When analyzing the interviews with the Volvo Cars employees six out of the eleven respondents mentioned the words “Give and take” when explaining what partnerships mean to them personally. For example, IR4 specified that “For me, it means working together and simply giving and taking”. This shows that give and take are two fundamental words when it comes to creating successful partnerships with suppliers at Volvo Cars PS&L. The interviews also revealed that partnerships indicate a give-and-take situation at the production site. As IR9 also explains partnerships “It means having a professional relationship with the other party. It also means both giving and taking. You have to stay within the boundaries, but at the same time, you can't be rigid”. On the contrary, IR11 had a unique definition of the term partnership where the respondent described it as the following.

“Partnership, for me, is about a unique way of working with the supplier. It may not follow our standardized setups; it’s a close collaboration tailored to the relationship one has with that supplier for that specific purpose. It’s not something we offer everyone, but rather something we offer very selectively to suppliers who have what I would say is strategic significance.” - SR11

Lastly, there were some differences noted between the Volvo Cars employees' answers that are worth mentioning. It was described that it is important to create an understanding of each other and be helpful. However, this could lead to problems according to IR8 as being too personal and helpful can create problems when conducting new contracts or if you want to end the partnership in the future. IR8 reflected on the practical aspects of partnerships, like the efficiency of communication and the potential pitfalls of becoming too personal with suppliers. This was something that was not discussed in the other interviews with Volvo Cars employees or their respective suppliers.
4.2. Effective practices and challenges connected to partnerships

4.2.1. Suppliers

The importance of having good and open communication and cooperation was seen as vital practices when it comes to creating strong partnerships. Many of the suppliers argued that this is reached through an open dialogue and proactive engagement and many of them also cited that this is something that is shown in their current partnerships with Volvo Cars PS&L. For example, SR1 argued that Volvo Cars PS&L is at the forefront when it comes to direct communication and transparency. Interviewees additionally appreciated Volvo Cars’ long-term planning and clarity in expectations, which is seen as a strength compared to other automotive companies. According to SR5, the employees at PS&L are one of the best when it comes to planning, forecasting, and communicating problems early. However, SR5 also acknowledged that some things could be improved, for instance, some of the daily logistics operations recently were outsourced to India, and this has created challenges in the relationship.

SR5 indicates that despite both parties speaking English, communication challenges arise due to potential misunderstandings as they communicate in a non-native language. This is more difficult to overcome since they are not able to meet physically. Similar to SR5, the supplier SR3 mentioned that even though you speak the same language (English) one meaning or word can differ in terms of meaning in other cultures, which the supplier has experienced since the outsourcing to India. SR1 and SR6 further supports this as they talked about when technical problems arise in the daily operations with Volvo Cars, they have to create a ticket in their system and after explaining the problem through text the supplier often gets a response from a help desk located in India. SR1 shares the argument made by SR5 arguing that sometimes it is hard to understand and that the response time is long and complicated. As it has become harder to understand each other and work proactively since it is a big cultural difference and that they don't have the opportunity to meet each other physically. Similar to SR5 the supplier SR3 also commented on the importance of physical meetings.
“Teams has improved things, but it's not even close to meeting face-to-face because you get the chance to read body language. You don’t just see a face, and there's so much more than just what you say and how you express it. So, this thing with teams and global connections is all well and good, but it doesn't beat that (Face-to-face meetings). Digital meetings definitely make work easier, but you need to meet in person to achieve that optimal collaboration and to create the feeling that, here we have a partner we can work well with” - SR3

According to SR7 physical meetings are valuable to maintain and further build trust and an understanding of each other and this is helpful when problems arise. SR7 additionally argues that this does not mean that you should meet each other physically every time but once in a while it is important to have meetings physically. According to some of the suppliers Volvo Cars has improved the possibility of meeting physically which has been appreciated since it enables various advantages. However, suppliers such as SR8 would appreciate more chances to meet physically in the future either at their location or at Volvo Cars PS&L’s location.

Transparency and openness were also highlighted as critical for building trust and facilitating smooth operations and this is something that employees at PS&L are good at according to SR1. The supplier continues by saying that sharing expectations and needs openly helps in aligning goals and strategies which is positive in the long run. Being transparent and open to help when problems arise, was also something that SR6 thought that Volvo Cars Employees at PS&L were good at. The supplier further explains that what works well with Volvo Cars is that they are easy to reach out to and that you often get help fast.

When asked about specific challenges connected to their partnership with Volvo Cars PS&L, both SR1 and SR6 highlighted that they often experience the need to navigate through help desks and other types of digital services to get assistance with relatively simple matters. This results in a significant amount of time before the issue is registered, and the problem is rarely resolved
immediately. Moreover, it creates frustration as progress with the problem is hindered. Other challenges identified were the difficulty in building strong relationships and trust, especially when interactions are limited to virtual meetings without face-to-face engagements. As mentioned earlier physical meetings are something that many suppliers see as something important to build strong relationships and create a wider understanding of each other. However, the complexity increases with global teams, for example with contacts in different countries, where cultural and language barriers can complicate communication.

Both SR4 and SR8 commented that the PS&L department often changes their buyers or contact persons and this can be challenging sometimes. Building trust becomes more difficult when the contact person at Volvo Cars changes and the supplier needs to build up the relationship again and try to teach how the relationship worked before. Additionally, SR4 explained that it requires investing much time to try and educate a new buyer and integrate them into the business. There are a lot of contracts, papers, and information about products that need to be learned. This creates challenges to build up the trust and the strong partnership that you had before.

Another challenge discussed by the suppliers was that it is hard to navigate and get accessibility to certain data such as delivery precision, warehouse stock, and other relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). SR1 compared Volvo Cars systems to other automotive companies such as Mercedes and Volkswagen, arguing that Volvo Cars could learn from other automotive companies such as Mercedes as their system is easier for a supplier to use as you have all of the relevant data in one place. Compared to Mercedes, SR1 mentions that the system at Volvo Cars is divided into separate systems with different logins which take time to learn and navigate through. In line with this, SR2 also talked about the need for a system change when it comes to the accessibility of specific data and information. According to SR2 they often have to ask for much of the data which takes longer time to access, instead SR2 suggests that having a shared system together with Volvo Cars PS&L would make this process faster.
4.2.2. **Volvo Cars**

Much like the suppliers, the Volvo Cars employees emphasized key factors such as investing in relationship building, clear communication, mutual understanding, trust, and proactive engagement. They highlighted the importance of commitment and understanding towards suppliers, which fosters mutual respect and cooperation. Transparent communication was also emphasized, as this is crucial for collaborative problem-solving and helps strengthen relationships with suppliers. To reach transparency and honesty in communication, IR3 discussed the importance of sharing production data and methodologies to build trust and avoid misunderstandings. IR3 additionally mentioned the use of segmentation and joint ventures as strategies to strengthen partnerships with key suppliers. This is similar to IR1 and IR2 as they also discuss strategies such as JVs enable strong partnerships.

Regular face-to-face interactions were also something that was pointed out by many of the Volvo Cars employees as it plays a crucial role in building trust and creating deeper understanding. According to IR7 face-to-face meetings create emotional engagement which facilitates quicker resolutions to issues, ultimately saving time and money. Additionally, IR4 highlights the significance of face-to-face meetings as something that works as an effective partnership strategy today as it helps in deepening relationships and creates an understanding of each other's perspectives. IR4 believes that being proactive in contacting suppliers and showing commitment to their work can improve collaboration.

To create effective partnerships with suppliers Volvo Cars PS&L works with something that is called Direct Delivery Global Supply (DDGS). According to IR4 and IR5, this strategy means that some of their suppliers transport their products directly to Volvo Cars retailers or end customers instead of transporting it to the central warehouse in Gothenburg before redistributing it to local warehouses closer to the end customer. DDGS creates the possibility to create more flexibility when it comes to lead times according to IR5 and it also makes the communication between DDGS suppliers and PS&L more integrated.
When asked about specific challenges with partnerships things such as supplier performance, volume management, and differing perceptions of the partnership were evident across the responses from the Volvo Cars employees. An example of this was given by IR4 and IR6 as both discussed challenges related to supplier performance, such as delays in deliveries and communication issues. IR6 emphasizes the need for suppliers to understand the consequences of their actions on the customer and the importance of addressing root causes. Another challenge connected to this was that some of the suppliers that Volvo Cars works with are located in different parts of the world which can create problems with response time. According to IR9, this is evident daily as some of the supplier contacts are located in China which creates longer response time to problems that may accrue within the supply chain. Moreover, IR3 and IR11 both mentions how after the COVID-19 pandemic Volvo Cars has started mapping their tier-X suppliers. Tier-X refers to a supplier upstream in the supply chain, which means Volvo Cars is mapping their suppliers' suppliers. As IR3 explains “... previously there has been a lot of focus on tier-1 and its logistics flow...”. They also say this has become more important since semiconductor issues that arose during the pandemic. According to IR5 there is no difference in acquiring parts for traditional cars to electrical vehicles. There has been an increase in usage of components such as semiconductors in other parts, since these components are used in other industries as well, thus there has been an increase in the overall demand.

Another challenge that was highlighted by IR1, IR2, IR4, and IR8 is that the aftermarket at Volvo Cars PS&L sometimes gets less attention at an organizational level. This is common when problems such as delayed orders, fluctuating volumes, and minimum order quantities are happening on the supplier's side as Volvo Cars PS&L sometimes is seen as a less important customer. IR8 discusses how the perception of Volvo Cars as a smaller player compared to larger manufacturers like Volkswagen can affect the prioritization and attention received from suppliers which can have negative effects on the partnership.
Furthermore, challenges connected to detailed strategies and guidelines within Volvo Cars PS&L about partnerships were also discussed during the interviews with IR5. The employee further continues by saying Volvo Cars currently doesn't have specified and clear guidelines or strategies when it comes to partnerships.

“Looking at Volvo's partnership strategy, I would say it's not very clear to me. I feel like we talk a lot about partnership and relationships, but we haven't really defined what partnership is and how we should work with it”- IR5

This results in that many of the employees who work with partnership and supplier relationships questions do not have a clear structure when it comes to strengthening relationships. IR5 continues by mentioning that much of the work with improving supplier relationships is built on previous experiences from employees and this creates different types of partnership approaches internally. IR5 concludes that to help develop better partnerships in the future, a more strategic rather than reactive approach to guidelines would be helpful. Similarly, IR10 commented that the company often changes their Head of Procurement and this results in unclear strategies when it comes to directives and work methods.

4.3. Comparison before and after SRM

4.3.1. Suppliers

According to many of the suppliers, the implementation of SRM seems to have strengthened the collaboration by formalizing the processes and improving communication channels. Before SRM, the relationship might have lacked structured engagement, making it harder to address issues and innovate together. After the establishment of the SRM team, there's a noticeable shift towards more strategic partnerships, where both parties work closely to enhance efficiency and quality. Some of the suppliers
pointed out that long-term problems within the supply chain have been solved faster thanks to the SRM team as they now have a direct contact person at SRM that they can turn to to solve problems faster. SR2 acknowledged that problems such as backlogs and other production disruptions are easier to communicate compared to before. Many of the suppliers have witnessed an improvement in the communication between them and Volvo Cars PS&L as the creation of SRM has resulted in better dialogue and cooperation, thanks to regular meetings that address issues and how the two parties should work on continuous improvements. This structured approach has helped in navigating challenges, fostering a positive partnership atmosphere, and a more coordinated effort in tackling challenges according to SR8. As the supplier said: “The effect I have experienced is that SRM becomes a sort of project manager for the issues, which results in faster problem resolution”.

Another example when it comes to tackling challenges was brought up by SR5 and SR7 as they both said that they have had problems with Volvo Cars’ transport packaging that Volvo Cars requires all suppliers to use. However, since the introduction of the SRM team both respondents share the opinion that this problem has been addressed and is now being improved to further help suppliers with the transportation. This has resulted in improved delivery precision for both SR5 and SR7 as they have been approved to use alternative packaging when necessary.

The SRM team is also something that is a unique thing for Volvo Cars, as supplier SR2 argued that Volvo Cars is the only automotive company that has this kind of team that works closely and is more proactive compared to other automotive companies. SR2 sees this as something positive and a competitive advantage that other automotive companies do not try to find root causes of supply chain problems as Volvo Cars PS&L does.

4.3.2. Volvo Cars

Many Volvo Cars employees argued that since the introduction of SRM, it has led to more proactive and preventive work approaches, which have reduced reactive measures. Both IR5 and IR6 discussed how SRM has allowed for better forecasting, fewer alarms, and improved relationships with suppliers. Overall PS&L works more proactively, before the implementation of SRM the PS&L department
worked more reactively and was dealing more with putting out fires than working to prevent problems before they occur. This was evident in the interview with IR5 as the Volvo Cars employee argued that they now have more time to focus on their suppliers as SRM now can train and communicate to suppliers about Volvo Cars systems and additionally discuss problems before they become critical. Many of the SRM employees also argued that they now have a better understanding of different suppliers' problems and it creates a clearer solution to solve them. Since the introduction of SRM, the way of working for the Supply Chain Coordinators (SCC) has changed for the better. Both IR6 and IR8 argued common problems have decreased since the implementation of SRM.

“Working together with a dedicated SRM (Supplier Relationship Manager) has made a difference, and that's good. Because it provides some help and brings in a new voice that can also demand accountability at the same time.” - IR6

“I feel that there is a better and larger structure to the problems since the implementation of SRM, at least when it comes to transportation packaging issues, for example. Before, maybe one would sit and solve it on a case-by-case basis, but now it feels like there is a structured approach to how to proceed.” - IR8

4.4. Future improvements

4.4.1. Suppliers

Despite the improvements that the SRM team has given the suppliers, there are still areas that require attention in the future. When analyzing the interviews with the suppliers there are both similarities and differences when it comes to future improvements that Volvo Cars can do, to further develop the partnerships with them. A better integrated and more interactive digital platform to streamline communication and to show visible KPIs to the suppliers. This was for example mentioned in the
interviews with both SR1 and SR8 as these suppliers talked about the need for a smoother experience when it comes to finding important data without having to ask someone at Volvo Cars. SR1 disclosed that Mercedes has a smoother system where everything is located in the same place and suppliers are not required to log in on different platforms. SR1 and SR6 discussed the need to improve contact availability as for now many of the problems that arise are dealt with by an outsourced helpdesk in India. Involving a third party when problems arise that are placed outside of the European market are something they both feel do not help. As these help desks often have poor solutions to the problems and this takes longer time than needed. This is supported by SR5 alluding to the difficulties in communication with the outsourced operations to India. “It becomes much more difficult to build good relationships when automotive companies such as Volvo Cars outsource certain parts of their organization to a different country”. SR5 specifically talked about taking back the outsourced operations closer to the market to create better problem-solving and additionally better cooperation possibilities. Additionally, bringing back the outsourced daily operations closer to the suppliers would enhance communication and relationship building according to both SR1 and SR5. There's an emphasis on the need for Volvo Cars PS&L to adapt and improve their systems for better integration with suppliers, as this could foster more efficient and responsive supply chain management.

Moreover, SR1, SR5, and SR8 were not the only respondents talking about the need for a better system, a similar suggestion was brought up by SR2. The suggestion made by SR2 was for Volvo Cars to implement an AI-chatbot within their portal which suppliers have access to and can ask relevant questions about specific topics. According to SR2, having an AI chatbot would solve problems faster and would not require as much communication through email as a supplier will have easier access to information such as product dimensions, weight, registered cost, and other relevant data.

Building more personal connections was another important factor that was suggested by the suppliers. Despite the advancements in digital communication tools, the value of face-to-face interactions in building trust and understanding can not be overstated according to a majority of the suppliers such as SR6, SR7 and SR8. Occasional in-person meetings could complement the regular
digital interactions, such as the two-day supplier meeting that was held at Volvo Cars PS&L's location in the fall of 2023. According to both SR6 and SR7, the in-person supplier meeting was very appreciated and overall a positive experience. An interesting reflection was also provided by SR8: "As suppliers, we were given the opportunity to openly ask questions and discuss with each other and Volvo. Many of us had the same concerns and problems, which made us feel less alone with our issues, and this was educational”. Having these kinds of meetings more regularly should be something that Volvo Cars PS&L should consider to further maintain and build stronger partnerships according to SR6, SR7 and SR8.

During the interviews with the suppliers, a question regarding Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI) was asked to the suppliers and what the possibility looks like to implement this kind of strategy in the future together with Volvo Cars PS&L. The implementation of a VMI-based supply chain where the supplier has access to certain parts of Volvo's systems was seen as something that could work in the future by many of the suppliers. For example, supplier SR3 discussed a previous experience with Volvo Cars and explained that this kind of supply chain strategy was used together with Volvo Cars a couple of years ago. According to SR3 they had a former German colleague that excelled with VMI together with Volvo Cars, this colleague maintained a 99-100% delivery precision and earned praise from Volvo Cars for inventory reduction. SR3 continues by recounting that the colleague found it optimal as he could anticipate fluctuations by understanding both parts and that they successfully implemented this system with other clients and found it advantageous. According to SR3 a system like VMI doesn't overly burden the staff, as it creates insight into both inventory levels and consumption and as a result it reduces the need for excess inventory. Even though this system was a success in many ways, SR3 pointed out that it had to be drawn back as Volvo Cars during that time had to make cost reductions. However, SR3 proclaimed that this could be seen as a good strategy to have again in the future as it made the planning and managing of demand fluctuations better. A similar argument was made by SR4 as this supplier mentioned that VMI creates better planning and understanding of one partner's demand. SR4 continues by talking about how VMI offers better control
over delivery precisions as the suppliers have more knowledge about their product delivery and lead times and this results in better planning and supply chain management.

SR8 acknowledged that a strategy like VMI or similar could be interesting to implement as the supplier argued that many of the processes and work methods are old and in need of an update. When asked about the possibilities to implement a VMI strategy between them and Volvo Cars PS&L suppliers such as SR2, SR7 and SR8 argued that it could be complicated to implement. However, they did talk about the need to become more sustainable when it comes to emissions connected to transportation. Regarding Direct Delivery Global Supply (DDGS), SR9 commented that it requires a lot of commitment and flexibility, making it hard to combine serial production and DDGS in one factory. All three of them argue that direct transports from the manufacturing plant to the end consumer could contribute to reducing transportation emissions and promoting sustainability within the supply chain. Further, SR2, SR7, and SR8 emphasized the importance of minimizing unnecessary transport and inefficient logistics, which is particularly relevant given the current need to reduce emissions to combat climate change.

SR2 emphasizes the need to adapt systems to handle VMI effectively and that it requires changes in how products are handled and distributed. SR2 advocates for the introduction of separate stations for picking and packing based on orders to reduce unnecessary transportation and warehousing. SR7 suggested taking responsibility for deliveries directly to Volvo Cars PS&L’s retailers and end consumers instead of first sending the products to the central warehouse in Gothenburg. SR7 sees this as a way to reduce the extensive transport between different warehouses and distributors, which would contribute to improving sustainability from an environmental perspective. SR7 emphasizes that such restructuring would be particularly advantageous for reducing the transport distance for products manufactured in central Europe and then distributed back to the same region. Similar to SR7, supplier SR8 pointed out that it is absurd to continue sending products back and forth over long distances around the world, as it results in increased emissions.
4.4.2. Volvo Cars

Looking internally, there are similarities between Volvo Cars employees and their suppliers. The need for a system where suppliers could access relevant data and information is something that could be improved in the future. For example, both IR5 and IR7 mentioned that the SRM team is working with a system that will be available to the suppliers so that they can find relevant information and important KPIs without having to ask a specific person at Volvo Cars. "We are also working on making our data more visible to, for example, procurement and suppliers. There's a platform called VSIM that allows purchasers to find relevant information about a supplier instead of emailing/contacting SCC or us at SRM"- (IR5). However, these kinds of systems take time to create and launch but they will probably be released in the future according to IR7. The need for a shared portal with suppliers in the future was additionally something that IR8 highlighted as it would create a positive outcome and IR8 argued that this is something that Volvo Cars can work to introduce in the future. IR4 also comments on the importance of providing aftermarket suppliers with a portal to track their performance and the need for streamlined direct deliveries as something that could be improved in the future.

Another future improvement that was highlighted by IR5 was for Volvo Cars to create a better internal alignment when it comes to how the company should work with partnership strategies in the future. As mentioned earlier there is no clear definition of how employees within SRM should work with partnerships according to IR5, and this results in a lot of improvisation when it comes to strengthening relationships between the PS&L department and their respective suppliers. Looking into the future IR5 suggests that Volvo Cars as a company needs more direct and clear guidelines as to how the SRM team should work with their suppliers to align with company goals and visions. According to IR5, creating more internal alignment and standardized measurement methods is needed as it would create smoother integrations with suppliers. This is also relevant for the production side of Volvo Cars. As IR11 also discussed the need for more clearer strategies internally: “I think some form of definition would have been helpful so that one feels a bit more comfortable with what it actually entails and how to work with partnerships”. However creating clearer definitions internally when it
comes to partnership strategies are difficult according to IR10 as the employee argued that directives and directions change when new managers are appointed.

"Traditionally, we change the Head of Procurement every 18 months, so we often get new directions or directives to align with until we change managers again, making it difficult for the supplier to know what will happen next. So, it's probably difficult to establish overarching decisions and directions that should apply regardless of who the manager is." - IR10

Similar to what many of the suppliers were mentioning about more physical meetings in the future, IR6 shares the suppliers' views and appreciates the value of physical meetings for building relationships with suppliers. However, IR6 is not the only one that shares this view as many of the respondents during the Volvo Cars employee interviews were talking about this. According to IR4, IR5, and IR7, the two-day supplier meeting event at the PS&L office was a success for the employees as well, as it resulted in getting to know the suppliers better which created a wider understanding of each other. According to IR5, the supplier meetings showed that Volvo Cars PS&L should focus on improving this in the future as it creates a good opportunity to be able to work more proactively with their suppliers and that it also creates a better chemistry between PS&L and their suppliers.

When discussing future improvement strategies with Volvo Cars employees working on the purchasing side of the company there were some different answers compared to the employees at SRM and SCC. This was evident in the interviews with IR1, IR2, and IR3 as they all addressed the concept of JVs as a potential strategy for future improvements within Volvo Cars partnership strategies. Both IR1 and IR2 expressed a positive outlook on joint ventures, highlighting them as a strategic approach to collaboration with critical suppliers. IR3 points out that Volvo Cars already have some JVs for example when it comes to batteries and electric engines. They indicated that JVs could lead to deeper partnerships and facilitate direct involvement in areas such as research and development, technology integration, and product innovation. IR1 argues that this perspective
suggests a forward-looking approach to leveraging partnerships for mutual benefit and technological advancement. Similarly, IR3 discussed the importance of collaboration and strategic sourcing. IR3 emphasizes the focus on sourcing heavy components regionally and optimizing logistics, which aligns with the idea of strategic partnerships like joint ventures. By sourcing components closer to manufacturing facilities, IR3 argued that Volvo Cars can potentially reduce costs and improve efficiency while maintaining quality standards.

In general, all three respondents (IR1, IR2, and IR3) recognize the value of strategic collaboration and partnerships in driving future improvements within the Volvo Cars supply chain. They see JVs as a key to deepening relationships with critical suppliers, enhancing technological capabilities, and optimizing operational processes. This shared perspective between the three of them underscores the importance of strategic partnerships as a key element of Volvo Cars' future growth.

4.5 Internal variations

The interviews brought up internal similarities and differences between the production and the aftermarket side. Firstly, both sides have similar structures with an SCC and a purchasing side with supporting organizations. However, there are more supporting organizations on the production side, at PS&L's side just the SRM team's role encompasses parts of multiple roles from the production. Naturally, both production and the aftermarket often have the same suppliers, this means that when problems with a supplier arise it often affects both of them. However, supply chain problems affecting the production side are considered more of a priority than the aftermarket side. The production side is more reactive since production is faster and more costly if products are not delivered according to IR7. On the other hand, the aftermarket departments have longer lead times and much longer product life cycles which means that products are sometimes not considered a priority compared to the production side according to IR6.

When it comes to the supporting organizations, it is evident that there is no one-to-one match of the SRM organization outside of PS&L. IR4, IR5, and IR6 all explain different groups that have similar tasks as they have, but these are located at different departments. The SRM role consists of
parts of these roles but does not fully encompass any of them. For example, there is a role Supplier Logistics Assurance for implementation of new suppliers which focuses on the first year of the process. Then you have another role, Supplier Performance Manager (SPM) who operates at a more detailed level with quality processes and exact delivery times according to IR4.

"SPM is somewhat similar to us, and I believe they work similar to what we do at SRM. However, they are more involved in the quality process and operate at a more detailed level than we do from our side. Sure, we are also at a detailed level, but not to the extent of SPM in production." - IR4

IR4 continues by explaining that the SPM role also involves work with spareparts that still is being used in the production line. IR5 explained that the production team has a more established structure and tools compared to the SRM organization, which they have learned from when they were formed.

According to IR9 who is working at the production side of Volvo Cars explains that their working methods are different in many ways. IR9 argued that the SCC's role on the production side works more on solving acute problems and that there is less time for them to work on improving partnerships in the long run. IR9 further explains that the reason why the production side works more with urgent problems is because interruptions in the production are way more costly compared to interruptions in the aftermarket hence why problems need to be solved immediately when they happen.

Through previous experience, IR9 has noticed that there are differences in their ways of working as SCC at Volvo Cars and explains it as “We were at the aftermarket for a visit a while ago, and then I experienced that our jobs are two completely separate tasks”. IR11, who works with supplier relationships, says that from their personal experience, there should be more cooperation with PS&L. The focus is on improving the supplier relationship, however, there is a higher priority on
production parts. If IR11 and the SRM had more contact with each other, IR11 believes that synergies could be created and both groups could learn from each other, as both groups are relatively new. IR3 further tells that there is generally a higher focus on the production than the aftermarket. The similarities between production and aftermarket include the need to manage supplier performance and solve delivery-related problems. Both departments also depend on a well-structured supply chain to ensure efficiency and quality. Moreover, IR10 explains how they test new strategies or concepts on a few suppliers towards production plants. If the tests are successful, implementation on a wider scale is done. However, this is only on the production side according to IR10.
5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of empirical findings

Below is an overview of the main findings from the empirical chapter, serving as a convenient tool to access and navigate the key takeaways from interviews with both suppliers and Volvo Cars employees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Main findings Suppliers</th>
<th>Main findings Volvo Cars Employees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Thoughts about Partnership</td>
<td>Suppliers emphasized the importance of long-term cooperation, mutual support, and transparency as essential for successful partnerships. Key elements identified include having a consistent contact person, sharing a vision for future cooperation, and mutual benefits, which are seen as vital in creating strong relationships and handling challenges effectively.</td>
<td>Volvo Cars employees view partnerships as close relationships built on mutual goals, trust, and transparency, requiring communication and physical meetings. They highlighted a give-and-take dynamic as crucial, stressing the importance of compromise and understanding in maintaining effective supplier relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. Effective Practices and Challenges Connected to Partnerships</td>
<td>Suppliers discussed effective practices such as regular communication and cooperation to address issues promptly, praising Volvo Cars for clear expectations and long-term planning. Challenges include difficulties in building trust, especially with outsourced operations and digital communication barriers, stressing the importance of face-to-face interactions.</td>
<td>Volvo Cars employees noted that investing in relationship building and maintaining open communication is crucial for successful partnerships. Challenges include managing supplier performance and understanding the impact of logistical issues, with the need for more structured approaches and internal alignment on partnership strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3. Comparison Before and After SRM</td>
<td>Post-SRM, suppliers have seen improved communication and structured engagement, which have enhanced problem-solving in partnerships with Volvo Cars. They value the direct contact with SRM personnel, which facilitates faster and more effective resolution of supply chain issues.</td>
<td>Volvo Cars employees appreciate the proactive and preventative focus brought by the SRM, highlighting its role in reducing issues and fostering better relationships with suppliers through more structured and responsive practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4. Future Improvements

Suppliers suggest improvements such as integrating more interactive digital platforms and enhancing system accessibility. They argue for more physical meetings to build trust and understanding. They are also open to testing other supply chain initiatives to optimize supply chain efficiency and sustainability.

Volvo Cars employees see the need for better system integration for suppliers, clearer partnership strategies, and more physical meetings to strengthen relationships. Further, they are open to testing other supply chain initiatives to deepen collaboration and enhance operational efficiency.

<table>
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<th>4.5 Internal variation</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Volvo Cars' production and aftermarket operations share structural similarities, yet their methods vary significantly. Support organizations within Volvo Cars prioritize production because its time-sensitive nature makes optimizing it more critical.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Summary of empirical findings

Source: Authors own compilation (2024)

5.2. Partnership strategies currently used by Volvo Cars PS&L

In the empirical findings it was shown that a majority of the respondents had similar views about partnership strategies. One important strategy is to have a give-and-take relationship where all the involved parties gain from cooperating, creating a so-called “win-win” situation. This corresponds to what Kardova et al. (2021, p. 4) argue is the key to a relationship. In order to create a “win-win” situation the parties must establish trust, clear communication, and transparency which are the key factors for a successful partnership (Kukkamalla et al., 2021, p. 573; Wood et al., 2016, p. 2407; Drewbiak and Karaszewski, 2020, p. 390). This corresponds to the empirical finding where it was shown that many of the respondents highlighted the same factors as the literature, however, they further discussed mutual support, flexibility, and proactiveness.

Trust was something that the respondents identified as a key factor for partnerships, noting that it is built through physical meetings, transparency, and information sharing according to the respondents. The increased trust resulting from these actions can further promote transparency, and
information sharing in the partnership. This corresponds to what Lui and Ngo (2012, p. 82) emphasizes about how trust is the key aspect to partnerships. Similarly to the empirical findings, trust is identified as the key to enable other factors of successful partnerships such as information sharing, effective communication, and transparency in a partnership (Kardova et al., 2021, p. 4; Buckley et al., 2018, p. 379). Building trust takes time and creating familiarity with the other party reduces uncertainty and supports long-term collaboration through positive interactions (Sahay & Maini, 2002, p. 75; Philippart et al., 2005, p. 195). The empirical findings support the literature regarding the importance of trust and the time commitment it takes to build trust. Contrasting to the literature, interviewees from both sides allude to that trust can disappear in the blink of an eye if it is not handled in the right way.

A novel finding previously not explicitly discussed in the literature is the importance of in person meetings. However, Kale and Singh (2009, p. 50) discuss the importance of post-formation of a strategic alliance through coordinating with the partner. However, they do not specifically mention how this coordination is done whether it is in-person meetings or similar (ibid). In other theories such as Cullen et al. (2000, p. 239) it is mentioned that in-person meetings are more effective when it comes to dealing with issues, however there is no continued evaluation on this topic. The respondents mentioned that during the COVID-19 pandemic people got used to keeping the contact via e-mails and through online meetings. However, this does not equal in-person meetings where you can read body language and create the feeling of a partner. For this reason, this shows the importance of arranging physical meetings at both the MNE and its suppliers location, as this leads to an increased understanding of each other's processes. Similarly, the SRM team created their two-day supplier workshop. This was appreciated by both sides, as issues could be discussed, the people could connect, and the consensus was that it strengthened the partnership. Since it showed the suppliers of Volvo Cars' commitment to the partnership to invite them to the workshop.

During the interviews, the significance of long-term collaboration was emphasized. For instance, suppliers acknowledged that they would be more inclined to invest further in a partnership if Volvo Cars provided a guarantee of long-term commitment. Even though, Volvo Cars employees
implied the importance of long-term collaboration, none of them explicitly said it. This supports the findings of Cullen et al. (2000, p. 226) and Liu et al. (2017, p. 153) who argue commitment is another crucial tool to build partnerships as it creates an environment where information sharing becomes smoother. The empirical findings further describe Volvo Cars as straightforward and honest, which is seen as a positive attribute. Since trust can be built through transparency and honesty (Saputro et al., 2022, p. 10), these two trust-building factors are crucial when it comes to long-term collaboration within a partnership. However, one notable issue, particularly highlighted by the interviewed Key Account Managers, was the challenge of establishing long-term contacts with purchasers at Volvo Cars, as they tend to change positions once or twice per year. This continuous change of purchasers is described as mismanagement of interpersonal dynamics or trust and can lead to decreased trust and communication (Kale & Singh, 2009, pp. 59-60).

According to Figure 2, long-term relationships should be formed with suppliers that provide strategic items (Kraljics, 1983, p. 112). For this reason Volvo Cars's change of focus on business-critical parts and the outsourcing of non-business-critical parts is a good strategic choice. However, when Volvo Cars aim to focus on their so-called business-critical and high frequent parts, the supplier feeling neglected or pushed aside. In the empirical findings the outsourcing of the daily logistics operations to India was pointed out as a problem as it hinders a long-term, proactive partnership, because of cultural differences and the limited possibility of having in-person meetings. This corresponds with Pothukuchi et al. (2002, pp. 245-246) who explains cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and communication challenges. The outsourcing of parts of the daily logistics operation can create a conflict of interest between Volvo Cars and the supplier. Effective relationship management is crucial for mitigating risks such as information misuse, and overdependence on specific suppliers (Leverick & Cooper, 1998, p. 79; Brandes et al., 2013, p. 3). Since the creation of the SRM team the empirical findings shows that both suppliers and internal personnel at PS&L perceive problem solving has become easier. It was explained how the employees from the SRM team acts sort of like a project manager for the issue and makes sure that everyone that
needs to be involved will be present at the meetings and this has made improvements in the daily work for the suppliers. It was further shown that the SRM team brings structure to the problems.

After analyzing the empirical data further it became apparent that the overall structure of both the production and the aftermarket is similar. They both have support from both purchasing and the SPMs, then also further support from local support such as SRM for the aftermarket. However, there is a divide between the aftermarket and the rest of Volvo Cars. It became evident during the interviews with the Internal Respondents as it was described as “discrete walls” between PS&L and especially purchasing. In this regard there is no literature on if it is positive or negative with this internal divide. Although, the internal respondent suggests it might be positive to cooperate more internally and close this gap. The SRM team at PS&L commented that they have been visiting other similar groups to learn from them. This can be, for example, their working methods and tools they use. Some Volvo Cars employees stated that both groups would benefit from working together more. Even though, it was mentioned in the empirical section that there is no standard way of developing supplier relationships at Volvo Cars, as it is highly dependable on the situation, thus there must be a different approach for each supplier. However, having a similar structure within Volvo Cars on the approach to supplier partnerships could lead to experiential learning presented by Buckley et al. (2018, p. 380) in Figure 1. This could create material to develop new ways of working and lead to more knowledgeable staff. Moreover, this cooperation within Volvo Cars allows them to jointly develop effective communication and information-sharing practices, which according to Buckley et al. (2018, p. 379) one of the four most important aspects to move from a transactional relationship to a strategic partnership. Lastly, it was mentioned that the directive changes every time a new Head of Procurement is appointed, thus also implementing different management styles and strategies. Some Volvo Cars employees think better internal alignment would improve how they work with partnerships. The changing management is something that Pothukuchi et al. (2002, pp. 245-246) argue hinders effective partnerships as it leads to poor internal coordination.

To summarize, the partnership strategies that Volvo Cars PS&L currently uses is the creation of the SRM team. This creation has proven to be a key aspect to solve issues in the supply chain faster.
and more efficiently according to the empirical findings. It is also shown that Volvo Cars PS&L are honest and clear in their communication which is much appreciated by the suppliers as this creates better trust between them. Another positive strategy is that they have segmented their assortment of products, however, this has created issues regarding communication as a result of cultural differences. Additionally, there is a challenge connected to the mobility of staff, hence this hinders long-term personal connection with suppliers and results in decreased trust and collaboration. Lastly, Volvo Cars could benefit from more internal collaboration between aftermarket and production.

5.3. Future development of partnership strategies

One common improvement that was suggested in the empirical findings was for Volvo Cars to evolve their current system and create a more enhanced digital platform for the communication of relevant data. According to supplier respondents, this would benefit them as it would provide them with easier access to important data without requiring them to navigate through multiple platforms or contact employees at Volvo Cars. Providing easier access to important data can lead to a reduction in stock levels and improved organizational flexibility, as suggested by Latunreng and Nasirin (2019, p. 404). To transition from a buyer-supplier relationship to a more interactive partnership, it is important to improve digital platforms and enhance information sharing (Latunreng and Nasirin, 2019, p. 404; Wong, 2002, p. 577). This issue was also identified by the Volvo Cars employees as they have noted that there are differences in how data is measured between production and aftermarket, resulting in two separate systems of data such as delivery precision, etc. However, they are working on solving this issue and having PS&L's data together with the production. This could act as a foundation before the move from buyer-supplier relationships as trust and communication are interconnected key factors to partnerships (Kale and Singh, 2009, pp. 59-60).

Regularly assessing and adjusting the alliance strategy to ensure its continued relevance and success is vital for MNEs such as Volvo Cars (Kale and Singh, 2009, pp. 59-60). Considering the suggested improvement of evolving their system and data accessibility for the suppliers it would send out a signal that they care about suppliers' feedback and this creates stronger trust and commitment
between them (Wood et al., 2016, p. 2407; Rezaei & Behnamian, 2021, p. 23). Moreover, by offering a better digital portal to suppliers it could lead to better supply chain collaboration at Volvo Cars (Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 848). Assisting suppliers with their goals and tasks creates better commitment and alignment from suppliers against their partners (Wong, 2002, p. 569). According to both theory and the empirical findings, Volvo Cars PS&L can help their suppliers achieve their tasks better and be more effective, by providing this improved portal. As explained by Kardova et al. (2021, p. 4) this could create what's called a “win-win” situation as it will help suppliers perform better and in return it will result in a positive effect for the MNE. Providing suppliers with an improved portal with more sharing of data will increase the knowledge sharing which is one of the key factors to reach a win-win situation (Drewbiak & Karaszewski, 2020, p. 390). The increase of communication shows commitment and trust from Volvo Cars' side.

Another future improvement introduced in the empirical chapter was to implement an AI tool that could present relevant data to suppliers. As this improvement would result in facilitating faster problem-solving and providing easier access to relevant information such as product dimensions. This suggestion could be challenging for Volvo Cars PS&L to implement as it requires investments and digital knowledge for it to succeed. However, according to He et al. (2020, p. 590), the collaboration between automotive and tech companies is increasing to further develop the industry and introduce new technologies to the market. This could be implemented between Volvo Cars PS&L and its suppliers as it would help strengthen the partnerships in the future. By collaborating more with technological companies within the aftermarket the suggestion to develop an AI tool would be easier to implement and would also further develop the partnership alliance for the future.

Despite digital advancements in communication tools, personal connections remain crucial. During the interviews with both suppliers and Volvo Cars employees, a majority of the respondents highlighted that the two-day supplier meeting at Volvo Cars PS&L was something that they all appreciated as it created a better understanding and additionally increased the commitment and trust between them. According to Cullen et al. (2000, p. 226) and Liu et al. (2017, p. 153) increasing the trust and commitment with your partners can further help to maintain and establish stronger
partnerships and create possibilities for future business opportunities. Trust is also seen as the most
crucial enabler when it comes to partnerships as it creates a good overall environment between the
MNE and its suppliers (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 980; Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 850). The
recommendation to increase the frequency of such meetings additionally aligns with the broader
imperative discussed by both the World Economic Forum (2024, p. 12) and Galer (February 6, 2023).
Embracing regular in-person engagements can serve as a strategic response to the uncertainties of the
modern business landscape, strengthen partnerships, and enhance resilience against disruptive issues
in the future. In the empirical findings it was mentioned that the two-day supplier meeting also helped
suppliers get more familiar with processes and understand problems at Volvo Cars' side. This is
similar to what Lui and Ngo (2012, p. 82) point out as the authors discuss that the more a company
becomes familiar with its partner the likelihood of trust increases. Familiarizing more with partners
additionally increases the understanding of the partner's capabilities and credibility which further can
foster a long-term collaboration (ibid). Having these kinds of meetings with physical interaction more
regularly is something that it is important for MNEs to have with its partners.

The openness to try out new partnership strategies within the supply chain was also something
that was highlighted in the interviews. When asked about supply chain collaboration initiatives such
as Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI) or similar strategies, many of the supplier respondents were
positive to these suggestions, and it was shown that some suppliers had been working with similar
collaboration initiatives before, indicating a readiness to embrace shared supply chain methods.
Looking for new strategic collaborations with suppliers could be relevant for Volvo Cars PS&L in the
future. As mentioned by Gall et al. (2023, p. 34) the automotive industry is going through a shift to
electric vehicles which means that partnerships will be more important as electrical components are
used in various industries. Resulting from these changes, it becomes relevant to consider evolving
partnership strategies and supply chain practices. Arguably, integrating a collaboration initiative like
VMI would create problems. However, as mentioned in the empirical findings, the delivery precision
and the ability to handle fluctuations in demand became better with VMI as it created a wider
overview of both parties' possibilities and limitations. It does require more data sharing and this is
something that can hinder the transition as increasing sharing of specific data could be sensitive for a MNE. Moreover, Panahifar et al. (2015, p. 848) highlights that continuous sharing of information through IT systems is a key enabler for using the supply chain collaboration initiative called CRP. Implementing a system like VMI together with suppliers would result in more responsibilities and increased collaborations with suppliers from Volvo Cars’ side (Choudhary et al., 2016, p. 3978). However, Hofstätter et al. (2020, p. 7) argue that increased collaboration among automotive companies and suppliers is vital as it can create better and more proactive supply chains when certain conflicts or other disruptions happen. Meier and Pinto (2024, pp. 14-15) highlights that the reason why the increased collaboration of proactive partnerships has happened is because of previous supply chain disruptions. Arguably the transition to VMI or a similar supply chain collaboration initiative such as CRP or CPFR could lead to better risk management if other supply chain disruptions occur in the future (Parsa et al., 2017, p. 229).

During the interviews with Volvo Cars employees, it was mentioned that they are working with a strategy that is called Direct Delivery Global Supply (DDGS). Which is a system where some suppliers have an arrangement with Volvo Cars PS&L to send their products directly to end customers instead of transporting them through Volvo Cars PS&L’s central location in Gothenburg. This is something that Volvo Cars PS&L should try to implement more in their partnership strategy as it would result in less transportation within their supply chain, as this was something that was emphasized during interviews with suppliers. According to Chakraborty et al. (2015, p. 13), VMI can offer benefits in the supply chain, by reducing inventory monitoring and ordering expenses. This aligns with the sentiments expressed by some of the suppliers who emphasize the need for reshaping logistics processes to minimize unnecessary transport and mitigate environmental impact. By implementing new strategies or more DDGS suppliers, Volvo Cars PS&L could improve its supply chain, and potentially reduce transportation emissions, as argued in the empirical findings.

The supplier emphasized the necessity of adapting systems to effectively handle VMI, advocating for changes in how products are handled and distributed. The supplier proposed the introduction of separate stations for picking and packing based on orders to reduce unnecessary
transportation and warehousing. Similarly, a proposal was also discussed that involved direct deliveries to Volvo Cars PS&L's retailers and end consumers, bypassing the central warehouse in Gothenburg. This restructuring would reduce transport distances, particularly for products manufactured in central Europe and distributed back to the same region. Another factor which was discussed in the empirical section was the concern to send products back and forth over long distances globally. Latunreng and Nasirin (2019, p. 404) and Wong (2002, p. 577) argue that increased information sharing in supply chains can lead to reduced stock levels and improved organizational flexibility. This aligns with the proposals made by the suppliers, who advocate for changes in how products are handled and distributed, such as introducing separate stations for picking and packing based on orders to minimize unnecessary transportation and warehousing. Moreover, as proposed in the empirical chapter, bypassing central warehouses and focusing more on direct deliveries to retailers and end consumers could reduce transport distances and improve organizational agility.

To summarize, the suppliers underscored the need for reshaping logistics processes to minimize unnecessary transport and mitigate environmental impact. Implementing a system like VMI could lead to better risk management and improved collaboration for an MNE with its suppliers, as argued by Choudhary et al. (2016, p. 3978). However, it is important to note that implementing a strategy like VMI could be a challenge depending on the specific situation of one firm's supply chain (Hollmann et al., 2015, p. 987). Despite potential concerns about VMI, the results from the empirical findings indicate that VMI can enhance delivery precision and the ability to handle fluctuations in demand. It was also shown that previous experiences from the respondents proves that suppliers could work with a VMI-based strategy with Volvo Cars as it worked out well in that specific case.

Based on these examples, experiences and previous research, the strategic recommendations for the future of Volvo Cars PS&L involves implementing a more enhanced digital platform that connects aftermarket and production, giving the suppliers an overview of their deliveries. Additionally the enhanced platform will help suppliers to access data without having to navigate through different platforms or contacting Volvo Cars employees. Another recommendation for the future is for Volvo Cars PS&L to increase the amount of physical meetings with their suppliers, as this is something that
can further foster long-term collaboration. The two-days supplier meeting was especially something that was pointed out as a good option in the empirical findings. The final recommendation is to either implement more DDGS suppliers or investigate the possibilities of introducing other supply chain collaboration initiatives such as VMI, CRP, and CPFR to specific suppliers to further deepen the collaboration and move from a buyer-supplier relationship towards partnerships in the future.

5.4. Conceptual model

**Figure 4: Conceptual model**

*Source: Authors own compilation (2024)*

Based on the theoretical framework, empirical findings, and previous discussion sections a conceptual model has been conducted to visualize the main findings from the thesis. The model is based on the empirical findings and theories, as stated in chapter 3.6, case studies are contextually unique and it is not guaranteed that it is directly applicable in another case. However, this conceptual model could be used as a guide for other MNEs working within the automotive aftermarket. Since this study also gathered data from suppliers collaborating with the case company. They have perspectives from working with other MNEs which could further increase the transferability of the findings. The model is based around the word Partnerships and the three most central aspects from the findings. The three
aspects are Collaboration, Technology, and Internal Dynamics. These aspects additionally have some connecting factors, identified in the findings, that are essential to consider when evaluating and improving partnerships. Overall, Collaboration, Technology, and Internal Dynamics are interconnected and it is important to consider all three aspects when working with partnerships with your suppliers. Furthermore, in this part of the discussion, a more detailed explanation will be conducted to further explain the thoughts behind the model and why these aspects and factors were used.

The aspect “Collaboration” was added at the top of the model as it was continuously repeated as something that is important when it comes to succeeding with partnerships. This section of the model is also the one with the most linking factors as it is considered the most important and this means that it is important to consider a variety of factors for it to function effectively. Based on the empirical findings this part of the model is used to explain how the operation and daily collaboration should work between an MNE and their supplier. According to Dicken (2015, p. 214) managing supply chains poses substantial logistical challenges, alongside the difficulty of ensuring product quality from distant suppliers. Having effective communication and information sharing is vital for a buyer-supplier relationship to work effectively (Kardova et al., 2021, p. 4). In the empirical chapter, the factors Transparency, Trust, Flexible, and Give and Take were frequently mentioned by respondents when describing partnerships. Therefore, these factors are included in the model as they reflect common themes discussed during the research. According to the respondents, these factors are reached through clear communication channels and physical meetings as it creates the opportunity to further get to know each other better and increase trust. The importance of communication, especially face-to-face interaction was another thing that was mentioned many times as an important factor. To be able to have face-to-face meetings many of the suppliers talked about the two-day supplier meeting that was held at the PS&L department. This kind of meeting gave multiple stakeholders valuable experiences and further created better collaboration. Working closely with other companies such as suppliers, by offering more physical meetings will allow for better knowledge transfer and learning opportunities as both sides can exchange insights and suggestions, and this could lead to
improvements for supplier alliances (Drewbiak & Karaszewski, 2020, p. 388). To be able to share specialized skills between the MNE and its suppliers through more physical meetings also enables the partners to complement each other's strengths (Gulati, 1998, p. 298; Dicken, 2015, p. 221).

The second aspect of the model is “Technology” as this was a prominent aspect which was recurring throughout the interviews. Many of the respondents highlighted that having the right digital tools and access to vital portals is considered critical for a successful partnership. Moreover, the empirical data shows the need for an improved digital platform between MNEs and their suppliers, for easier information sharing for accessing KPIs and other relevant data. Hence, why the factors “Shared data” and “Increased data sharing” are connected to the aspect “Technology”. This goes in line with the theories regarding supply chain collaboration initiatives. Where Chakraborty et al. (2015, p. 13) state that information sharing helps mitigate the bullwhip effect. Hollmann et al (2015, p. 987) further explain this deepens the collaboration between the parties. Moreover, this connects to “Collaboration” as the increased information sharing leads to more trust and alignment of incentives (Panahifar et al., 2015, p. 856; Hudnurkar & Rathod, 2012, p. 125). The factor “AI-chatbot” was also added to the model as it was an interesting suggestion that was discussed in the empirical findings and could be relevant to consider in the future. AI and the technology around it are improving, and it could be used as an enabler to reach certain goals in the future and also enhance supply chain efficiency (Shah et al., 2023, pp. 429-430).

According to the empirical findings and theories such as Hofstätter et al. (2020, p. 7), the factor “Proactive planning” is important to consider when choosing long-term partners, thus it was also decided to be included in the model. For future partnership selection, it is also important to consider “Openness to new strategies” as this was something that was discussed with many of the suppliers during the interviews. As seen in the model “Openness to new strategies” is connected to both Collaboration and Technology, the reason for this is that the findings suggest that new strategies require both parts in order for it to work effectively. An MNE needs to have good collaboration in order to be able to implement new technologies together with the supplier, especially when it comes to implementing supply chain collaboration initiatives such as VMI, CRP, and CPFR (Meier & Pinto,
2024, pp. 14-15). In the empirical findings, it was also mentioned that many of the supply chain strategies between suppliers and Volvo Cars PS&L are considered old and could be updated to further improve the partnership. This proves the need of selecting suppliers that are open to try other strategies to continuously improve and update supply chain strategies. The focus should be put on post-formation management, focusing on maintaining the alliance, resolving conflicts, and continuous evaluation for improvements (Kale & Singh, 2009, pp. 48-51).

The last aspect of the model is “Internal” as the findings indicate that there are internal differences at Volvo Cars between the aftermarket and the production site regarding partnership strategies and collaboration. There is also limited communication about partnership strategies between aftermarket and production at Volvo Cars. As a result of this limited communication the factors “Increased learning”, “Internal alignment” and “Defined partnership strategies” are mentioned in this part. An explanation for why these factors are added here is that communication and information sharing are vital for a buyer-supplier relationship to work effectively (Kardova et al., 2021, p. 4). The empirical data shows that having different approaches within an MNE for production and aftermarket results in confusion for the suppliers working with both parts. Hence, one could argue that this is also important when it comes to internal communication. Through increased internal communication better cooperation internally could be created, and the possibility to conduct a commonly defined partnership strategy within the MNE. Lastly, “Cultural differences” is mentioned as another factor as it was something that was found to be problematic in the empirical findings. Outsourcing is a common strategy for MNEs to segmentate their portfolio in order to focus the company's resources on the main business (Kraljic, 1983, p. 112). However, Pothukuchi et al. (2002, pp. 245-246) describes the need to evaluate cultural differences when using this strategy, as cultural differences can create issues within the collaboration between the MNE and the supplier.
6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the partnership strategies in the aftermarket of the automotive industry. This is done through a case study of Volvo Cars' Parts Supply and Logistics (PS&L) department and their newly established Supplier Relationship Management team. Additionally it investigates how multinational automotive companies could work in the future when it comes to their partnership strategies. Strategic relationships and partnerships are shown to significantly influence organizational efficiency and competitiveness within the automotive industry. Below a more detailed conclusion will be presented as each of the research questions from this thesis will be answered separately, to give clear answers to the reader.

RQ 1: How does a multinational automotive manufacturer manage partnerships in the spare parts supply chain?

Based on the thesis's findings it is shown that multinational automotive manufacturers focus on building long-term relationships, and they facilitate building these relationships through the three identified aspects Collaboration, Technology, and Internal Dynamics. Within the aspect Collaboration the findings indicate that trust is central when managing partnerships as a multinational automotive manufacturer. Additionally, the thesis found that trust is in continuous need of improvements since it is not in a static state. Multinational automotive manufacturers put continuous effort into trust by using in-person meetings as a tool to strengthen the relationship. However, major global events have shown the fragility of in-person communication which led MNEs to steer away from them. This has proved the need for an effective digital supplementation to in-person meetings to mitigate the risks with these external shocks. However, the study also found that there needs to be a mix between digital and in-person meetings in order to both build trust yet also protect oneself from external shocks. Moreover, it is shown in the findings that trust is further increased by committing to greater transparency in the communication with partners which is done through high levels of information sharing. The findings indicate that trust among the parties can be strengthened, which in turn can facilitate long-term relationships. Embracing regular in-person engagements and creating mutually
beneficial relationships based on cooperation and win-win scenarios are things that multinational automotive manufacturers manage well as this is shown to serve as relevant strategic responses to the uncertainties of the modern business landscape, strengthen partnerships, and enhance resilience against disruptive issues. Moreover, the thesis found that the technological tools used today are not up to the standards needed from either the MNE or the supplier. As the information flow in these systems are not currently giving direct and up to date feedback and may cause a decrease in trust. The findings indicate that there is a need for increasing data sharing between partners, which is something that multinational automotive manufacturers currently manage poorly in the spare parts supply chain.

A challenge that currently hinders long-term partnerships is the mobility of staff within an MNE, as this results in difficulties establishing and maintaining long-term personal connections with suppliers. This mobility may impede trust and collaboration, highlighting the importance of stability in personal relationships for the partnership to succeed. Moreover, the findings show internal misalignments when it comes to partnership strategies as it creates barriers for effective management of partnerships specifically in the spare parts supply chain. This is a consequence of having similar structure within sections of the company whilst having various actual working methods. Another internal challenge connected with current management of partnerships is the use of outsourcing as this results in cultural differences and geographical distance inhibiting in-person meetings which have a negative effect on trust building.

In conclusion, the study on multinational automotive manufacturers' management of spare parts supply chain partnerships reveals a priority on long-term relationships, facilitated by collaboration, technology, and internal dynamics. Trust, nurtured through in-person meetings and transparent communication, is central. Balancing digital and in-person interactions is crucial for resilience. However, current technological tools and information sharing practices fall short, reducing trust. Internal challenges, like staff mobility and outsourcing, hinder personal connections. The findings highlight the need for better technological solutions and consistent internal strategies to manage partnerships effectively in the spare parts supply chain.
RQ 2: How can the partnership interaction be improved in the future?

The thesis shows that there are areas that can be evolved to enhance the partnership process further in the future. One improvement is to implement a specialized partnership group that focuses on maintaining and improving relationships with partners. The study has found that this is a beneficial strategy for an automotive MNE to further evolve and maintain supplier relationships. Since, this strategy proves to resolve supply chain issues efficiently as the findings show this improves communication, transparency and clarity. Moreover, this results in a more proactive approach which reduces issues and fosters better relationships with suppliers through more structured and responsive practices. Another improvement is to increase in-person meetings as they are still critical for partnerships despite the increased use of online communication in today's business world.

The findings in this thesis, shows the importance of technological integration between the MNE and the supplier to increase information sharing such as KPIs, deviations, and other relevant data. A way to increase technological integration is through offering an all-encompassing digital platform that will create better internal alignment and additionally enable suppliers to access data without having to navigate through different platforms. This will result in the interaction being more responsive and interactive for the supplier. Furthermore, MNEs within the automotive sector could benefit from transitioning from traditional buyer-supplier relationships to more integrated partnerships. One way to do this in the future is through implementing new supply chain collaboration initiatives. Implementing or investigating the possibilities of introducing other supply chain collaboration initiatives to specific suppliers could be an option for the future. This could further deepen the collaboration and move from a buyer-supplier relationship towards partnerships in the future.

Managing partnerships within spare parts show tendencies to differ compared to partnerships within production as it is not as time-sensitive and thus may not be prioritized in the same prompt manner. Meaning that support organization might not assist both parts equally and rather focuses on production. This situation could be improved in the future by enhancing internal communication
which is crucial for fostering better cooperation and enabling the development of a unified partnership strategy. By addressing these internal communication gaps, automotive companies can strengthen their buyer-supplier relationships and improve overall operational efficiency. When implementing outsourcing, an MNE should be aware of the specific risks connected with this strategy. The most prominent risks with outsourcing were found to be cultural differences, as this risk can lead to communication barriers, decreased trust and willingness to cooperate. The problem with cultural differences, shows areas for improvement in cross-cultural communication practices. Lastly, by considering these improvements for the future it could further deepen the collaboration between an MNE and its suppliers, and enable the move from a buyer-supplier relationship towards deeper partnerships in the future.

6.1. Theoretical & managerial contributions

The main contribution of this thesis is the development of literature regarding partnership between an MNE and its supplier on collaboration as a long-term supply chain strategy. A majority of prior studies has had a focus on implementing partnerships as a tool for knowledge sharing and innovation of new technology (Drewbiak & Karaszewski, 2020; Kukkamalla et al., 2021). Moreover, past literature has not researched the spare parts sector of the automotive industry (Kardova et al., 2021; Túry, 2018). This thesis has found that even though the aftermarket and production of new cars have similar structure they have vastly different working methods and support systems.

This thesis addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the partnership dynamics within the automotive spare parts sector. The study has identified aspects and factors that influence the effectiveness of buyer-supplier collaborations in this sector. It highlights trust, transparency, give and take dynamics as factors which the industry believes can enhance partnership processes in the future, and this contributes to the broader understanding of partnership and strategic alliance theories (Liu et al., 2017; Kale & Singh, 2009).
Additionally, one strength of this thesis is that it has investigated both sides of a partnership as the case company and its connected suppliers were interviewed during the data collection. During the interview stages different types of persons from various positions were interviewed and it further helped to broaden the vital parts of a partnership and what future improvements needed to be done. By interviewing both suppliers and case company employees it indicates that different thoughts and opinions from various individuals have been lifted in the thesis and has further helped to show what is required for a partnership to work long-term. Hence, this study provides an unique perspective of the buyer-supplier relationship as it examines both sides' view of the same relationship, through interviewing both the MNE and the supplier. This allowed for a wider perspective and provided understanding of the impact of strategy changes beyond the organizational boundaries of the MNE. Previous literature have focused solely on the buyer-supplier relationship from the MNE's perspective and less so on the supplier's (Buckley et al, 2018; Latunreng & Nasrin, 2019). Finally, the thesis helps MNEs to understand how they are working with partnerships at the moment and how they could evolve the process in the future. The conceptual model conducted, helps with summarizing the important factors for the future and what is needed to consider to develop a potential partnership with a supplier.

When analyzing the thesis's managerial implications there are some factors that are important to mention. First, this thesis has increased the understanding of what a partnership is, as this was something that was discovered to have unclear definitions and clear alignment in the early stages of this thesis. This shows the importance of a clear definition of what a partnership is and what it entails. By providing this definition it can help managers and individuals working with partnerships to further understand important aspects and what areas to focus on. It also highlights important factors to consider when forming and evolving partnerships as the thesis discusses recommendations for continuous collaborations. Here factors such as trust, information sharing, clear communication, and transparency were mentioned as vital for a partnership to work effectively. Moreover, this thesis has looked into other types of supply chain collaboration initiatives and what is required for it to work between a supplier and an international automotive company. The findings show that updating the
supply chain initiatives could lead to higher collaboration, resulting in moving from a buyer-supplier relationship towards partnerships. However, this kind of transition requires a high level of collaboration and technical readiness, which managers should take into account.

6.2. Limitations & future research

This thesis has taken a first step to enhance our understanding of partnerships in the automotive spare parts sector. The focus of this thesis addressed how partnerships are managed and how they can be improved in the future. However, a limitation of the study is the focus on one MNE. The findings show variation in approach between different departments inside this MNE, thus it is reasonable to assume a similar difference between MNEs. This is consistent with Bell et al. (2019, pp. 374-375) as the responses in qualitative studies are difficult to generalize from a specific case to another setting. Future research could examine if this is a common phenomenon within other MNEs in the automotive sector or similar assembly based sectors.

The potential challenges and effects of maintaining long-term partnerships in the automotive spare parts sector would be interesting topics for future studies involving a broader range of stakeholders. Furthermore, the aftermarket in the automotive sector comes with unique challenges such as customer relationship management, inventory management, and supply chain optimization. Additionally, how automotive actors select partners and what criteria are important in that selection. Conducting research regarding these topics and their impacts could yield valuable insights.

Furthermore, with the ever-changing technology, there are new transformative ways regarding communication that could affect how collaboration is done. One such shift was seen during the pandemic when more digital tools were implemented in our daily lives. Future research could explore how these tools can be implemented to enable more effective collaboration and information sharing.
7. References


https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/industries/automotive%20and%20assembly/our%20insights/disruptive%20trends%20that%20will%20transform%20the%20auto%20industry/auto%202030%20report%20jan%202016.pdf


Appendix A: Interview questions for suppliers

Firstly we are students at a Swedish university so the final report from us will be available to the public? Is it okay to use your name in this report or do you want to be anonymous? Is it okay with you that we record the interview?

Who are you and what is your main role within the company?

How long have you worked in this position/how many years have you worked for the company in total?

Can you describe the company, Size, product range, customers. etc.? Is Volvo a major customer?

What are the main products you sell to Volvo Spare Parts? How does your contact look like with Volvo?

What does the concept of "partnership with suppliers" mean to you personally?

What are your expectations for an ideal partnership? What goals and values should be shared to achieve this?

Can you mention some examples of a successful partnership with a supplier that you have experienced before? What made it a successful partnership?

What challenges do you typically see in collaboration with suppliers, and how do you think we can overcome them?

What are the major differences that you have noticed since the implementation of the SRM team?

Has the collaboration changed since SRM was implemented? If so, how?

How effective do you find the communication between your company and Volvo Cars, especially in terms of forecasting, planning, and addressing supply chain challenges?
What are the most significant challenges faced in your relationship with Volvo Cars, and how have these been addressed or resolved?

Do you work with any other car manufacturers? If so, how does the relationship look compared to Volvo? Any differences in their approach? Communication?

How do you perceive Volvo Cars' approach to partnership and supply chain collaboration? Can you provide examples of how these priorities align with your company's strategic goals?

Can you share instances where collaboration with Volvo Cars led to innovative solutions or significant improvements in product quality, delivery times, or sustainability initiatives?

Given the evolving automotive landscape, particularly with electric vehicles (EVs) and sustainability, how is your company preparing to meet Volvo Cars' future needs?

How has your company adapted its operations or product offerings to align with Volvo Cars' goals and requirements?

Can you provide examples of how feedback from Volvo Cars has led to tangible improvements or innovations in your products or services?

What does the current information-sharing process with Volvo entail, and are you open to sharing additional information to further strengthen our partnership?

Can you mention something that Volvo can improve in the future (in 5 years) of your relationship? Communication?, ordering? etc.?

Vendor Managed Inventory (VMI) is a supply chain management strategy where the supplier takes responsibility for managing the inventory of its products at the customer's premises. Essentially, the vendor monitors the customer's inventory levels and makes decisions about when to replenish products and how much to replenish. This strategy aims to optimize inventory levels and reduce stockouts, ensuring that the customer always has the right amount of stock on hand without having to manage it directly.
Is a concept such as Vendor Managed Inventory something interesting?

How do you and Volvo Cars collaboratively manage risks, especially those related to supply chain disruptions or geopolitical tensions?

Has technology played a role in enhancing the collaboration between your company and Volvo Cars?

Are there specific technological tools or platforms you use to facilitate communication and project management?

Is there anything else you would like to add that we have missed?

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions!

Appendix B: Interview questions for Volvo Cars employees

Questions for SRM

Firstly we are students at a Swedish university so the final report from us will be available to the public? Is it okay to use your name in this report or do you want to be anonymous? Is it okay with you that we record the interview?

Who are you? What is your main role within the company?

How long have you worked in this position/ how many years have you worked for Volvo in total?

Have you worked with other car manufacturers than Volvo Cars?

What does the concept of "partnership with suppliers" mean to you personally?

What are your expectations for an ideal partnership with our suppliers? What goals and values should we share to achieve this?

What are the main reasons for organizational change?

What factors do you consider most important for building and maintaining strong partnerships with the suppliers?
What challenges do you typically see in collaboration with suppliers, and how do you think they can be overcome?

Can you share a success story or a particularly effective partnership that has been strengthened through the SRM approach? What made it a successful partnership?

What is Volvo Cars' long-term vision for its partnerships with suppliers, particularly in light of the automotive industry's shift towards electric vehicles and autonomous driving technologies?

How does Volvo Cars provide feedback to suppliers, and how is this process designed to foster continuous improvement and innovation?

Do you have a different approach to suppliers depending on Volvo's significance to them?

Can you discuss a specific challenge Volvo Cars faced in its partnership with suppliers and the strategies employed to overcome it?

How has the SRM team impacted the company's ability to maintain and enhance supplier relationships since its implementation?

What does the process look like if a supplier fails to deliver on time or fails to deliver the right amount several times?

How have recent global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions, influenced Volvo Cars' approach to supplier collaboration?

How much do you know about the strategy for partnerships at your counterpart productions/ spare parts?

Looking towards the future, how is Volvo Cars planning to evolve its partnership strategies to stay ahead in the rapidly changing automotive industry? For example with the advent of new technologies and sustainability demands
Can you mention something that Volvo can improve in the future of your relationship? Communication? ordering? etc.?

Is there anything else you would like to add that we have missed?

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions!

**Questions for purchasing**

Firstly we are students at a Swedish university so the final report from us will be available to the public? Is it okay to use your name in this report or do you want to be anonymous? Is it okay with you that we record the interview?

Who are you? What is your main role within the company?

How long have you worked in this position/ how many years have you worked for Volvo in total?

Have you worked with other car manufacturers than Volvo Cars?

What does the concept of "partnership with suppliers" mean to you personally?

What are your expectations for an ideal partnership with our suppliers? What goals and values should we share to achieve this?

Can you mention some examples of a successful partnership with a supplier that you have experienced before? What made it a successful partnership?

What factors do you consider most important for building and maintaining strong partnerships with our suppliers?

How does the communication with a supplier look like before contract negotiation and how does it evolve after agreements are reached?

What does the process look like when new suppliers are selected?
What criteria does Volvo Cars use to evaluate and select suppliers, especially considering the shift towards electric vehicles and sustainability? How do these criteria align with the company's long-term strategic goals?

What does the communication look like with the SCC and SRM regarding new suppliers?

How much input does SRM/SCC have on the selection of new suppliers? Does delivery precision or other factors matter?

What are the most significant challenges faced when negotiating and finding new suppliers, and how have these been addressed or resolved?

How have recent global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions, influenced your approach to supply chain management and supplier selection?

Do you have the ambition to go from a buyer-seller relation to a partnership relation with the suppliers?

In the future, how is Volvo Cars planning to evolve its partnership strategies to stay ahead in the rapidly changing automotive industry, particularly with the advent of new technologies and sustainability demands?

Is there anything else you would like to add that we have missed?

Questions for SCC

Firstly we are students at a Swedish university so the final report from us will be available to the public? Is it okay to use your name in this report or do you want to be anonymous? Is it okay with you that we record the interview?

Who are you? What is your main role within the company?

How long have you worked in this position/ how many years have you worked for Volvo in total?

Have you worked with other car manufacturers than Volvo Cars?
What does the concept of "partnership with suppliers" mean to you personally?

What are your expectations for an ideal partnership with our suppliers? What goals and values should we share to achieve this?

Can you mention some examples of a successful partnership with a supplier that you have experienced before? What made it a successful partnership?

What factors do you consider most important for building and maintaining strong partnerships with our suppliers?

What challenges do you typically see in collaboration with suppliers, and how do you think we can overcome them?

What are your thoughts about the organizational change?

What does the process look like if a supplier fails to deliver on time or fails to deliver the right amount several times?

What does the communication look like with Purchasing regarding new suppliers?

How has the SRM team impacted the company's ability to maintain and enhance supplier relationships since its implementation?

Do you have a different approach to suppliers depending on Volvo's significance to them?

Can you mention something that Volvo can improve in the future of your relationship? Communication? ordering? etc.?

Is there anything else you would like to add that we have missed?