The interplay between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships: a qualitative study

Master Thesis

Carmen Boekee

Master Business Administration – Strategic Marketing & Servitisation
Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences
University of Twente, Enschede

ABSTRACT

The advent of online touchpoints necessitates business-to-business (B2B) providers to implement well-balanced omnichannel marketing strategies to manage relationships. However, extant literature on touchpoint management and B2B relationships focuses on managing relationships through touchpoints in general. Little is known about the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. Hence, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the underlying micro-foundations that determine how on- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey shape B2B relationships. This study adopts a qualitative approach by conducting a case study of a B2B supplier in the food industry. Through semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable agents of the B2B supplier and its customers, this study elicits three dyadic micro-level insights. First, this research identifies six key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices. These show that each key practice integrates similar touchpoints, with touchpoints becoming more personal and less structured throughout the B2B customer journey. Second, this research reveals four dependencies including efficiency, relationship goal, personal preference, and risk level, that differ per B2B relationship and determine the touchpoint type and frequency. Finally, this study found that on- and offline touchpoints shape relationships through five mechanisms: multi-sensory feedback, familiarity, mutual understanding, personal bonding, and trust-building. Each on- and offline touchpoint provides inputs for these mechanisms, with personal touchpoints especially reinforcing the mechanisms. This study integrates the findings into a mechanistic framework which conceptualises the complex dynamics between on-and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. This study contributes to the combined body of literature on touchpoint management in B2B relationships, by providing a micro-foundational understanding of the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. Moreover, the framework functions as a practical guide for B2B suppliers to develop well-balanced omnichannel marketing strategies and customise these for each of their relationships.

Keywords: (On- and offline) Touchpoints, Omnichannel marketing, B2B relationships, Micro-foundations, Case study

Examination committee:
1st supervisor: dr. Yasin Sahhar
2nd supervisor: dr. Raymond Loohuis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the advent of new technologies, including social media, customer relationship management (CRM) software, and big data analytics, has led to a significant transformation of the business-to-business (B2B) landscape (Hofacker et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2023). Research from Gartner predicts that by 2025, 80 per cent of B2B interactions will occur through digital channels (Gupta, 2022). This necessitates new marketing practices like omnichannel and multichannel strategies that integrate on- and offline touchpoints throughout the customer journey (Bakhtieva, 2017; Hofacker et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2023; Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Consequently, business practices and academic literature increasingly emphasize the role of touchpoints for the management of customer experience and B2B relationships (Gao et al., 2022; Sahhar et al., 2021; Witell et al., 2020). It is a top research priority to investigate the long-term changes in customer-provider interactions (MSI, 2022) and multiple scholars call for further research on the implications of online touchpoints on relationships (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020).

Touchpoints refer to all verbal and nonverbal encounters between business providers and customers (Gao et al., 2022; Witell et al., 2020). As customers progress through the multiple stages of their journey, they encounter a series of touchpoints that form their experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Purmonen et al., 2023) and eventually shape their relationships (Holmlund, 2004; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). This illustrates the crucial role of touchpoints in shaping customer experience and relationships. However, managing the customer experience and relationships through touchpoints is complex as the cognitive responses of customers to the touchpoint interactions are situation and context-dependent (De Keyser et al., 2015; De Keyser et al., 2020). Furthermore, research shows that relationships are dynamic and evolving, making relationships difficult to study and understand (Holmlund, 2004). The advent of online touchpoints adds further complexity to the management of customer experience and relationships, as touchpoints are now encountered through various channels (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; Lundin & Kindström, 2023).

The vast amount of research on touchpoint management, as several scholars point out (Gao et al., 2022; Hofacker et al., 2020; Sahhar et al., 2021; Witell et al., 2020), focuses primarily on the business-to-consumer (B2C) context. However, while the B2C and B2B contexts share some similarities, the B2B context is inherently more complex (Sahhar et al., 2021; Witell et al., 2020). The first reason for this is that in the B2B context, multiple actors are involved as both the provider and the customer are organizational entities (Witell et al., 2020). Each of these actors plays a different role (Webster & Wind, 1972) and is involved in different touchpoints at various stages of the customer journey (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Witell et al., 2020). Secondly, B2B marketing focuses on building long-term relationships (Hofacker et al., 2020; Hollyoake, 2009) that build on trust and commitment (Gil-Saura et al., 2009; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Due to this greater complexity and relational focus, integrating on- and offline touchpoints in the B2B context is not as straightforward as in the B2C context. Consequently, the current knowledge on the management of touchpoints in singular customer journeys is too simplistic to provide an understanding of touchpoint management in the more complex B2B context (Purmonen et al., 2023; Witell et al., 2020; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Moreover, due to the lack of relational focus in the B2C context, the existing knowledge does not provide any insights into the role of touchpoints in shaping relationships. In addition to this, the few existing studies on the integration of on- and offline touchpoints in the B2B context focus on macro explanations and tend to adopt a broad perspective. Scholars have historically explained why and how touchpoints emerged (Steward et al., 2019), outlined the valence of online touchpoints (Hodge & Cagle, 2004; Lasrado et al., 2023; Shankar et al., 2002; Wang et al., 2000), identified key challenges for B2B customer experience (Witell et al., 2020), and explored the role of digitalization in B2B customer journeys (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Neither of these studies addressed the explicit role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. There is a lack of knowledge of the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships.

Research acknowledges that online touchpoints can complement or replace offline touchpoints (Lundin & Kindström, 2023), but it is unclear how this touchpoint shift changes customer-provider relationships in the long term (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020). This current lack of knowledge is concerning as the digitalization trend continues and businesses increasingly integrate online touchpoints into their customer journeys (Gupta, 2022). Not knowing the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and relationships, can result in businesses adopting an unbalanced touchpoint mix, that might harm relationships in the long-term (Shankar et al., 2002). To prevent this, several studies call for further research to get a deeper understanding of online touchpoints in B2B relationships (Hofacker et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2023; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2002; Witell et al., 2020)

Against this background, the goal of this research is to gain an understanding of the underlying micro-foundations that determine how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships (Coleman, 1990; Foss, 2010; Hofacker et al., 2020; Vromen, 2010). Investigating the micro-foundations contributes to identifying the 'deeper structure' that explains how the phenomena of on- and offline touchpoints relate to the phenomena of B2B relationships (Foss, 2010; Vromen, 2010). Meaning, this research aims to explore what patterns and mechanisms exist in on- and offline touchpoint interactions between individual actors at the provider and the customer and how these patterns and mechanisms shape the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships (Hofacker et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2023). Knowing these micro-foundations has the potential to explain the behaviours of B2B relationships and to predict future relationship behaviours (Coleman, 1990). According to this research goal, this research explores the following research question:

"How do on- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey shape B2B relationships?"

Given the explorative nature of this research, we deploy a qualitative approach. In doing so, this research conducts a case study of a provider firm in the B2B sector. A case study supports addressing the current lack of knowledge and theory by gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamics present within a single setting, to develop theories that can be applied to a broader setting (Berg & Lune, 2017; Creswell, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Gerring, 2004). We refer to the case company with "Plant Dairy Co." for confidentiality reasons. Plant Dairy Co. is a Dutch plant-based dairy manufacturer. As Plant Dairy Co. has been expanding its business to countries across Europe, it relies heavily on online and offline touchpoints in its marketing strategy. Furthermore, it aims to build and maintain long-term relationships. This fruitful context allows for rich data collection. This research performs a literature review and gathers empirical data through semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable agents. These interviews elicit retrospective insights (Gioia et al., 2012) from the supplier and its customers regarding their experiences with various on- and offline touchpoints. Through an abductive approach, this research systematically combines the literature and empirical insights to develop new theory in the form of an integrative framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

This study advances the current theory and practice regarding on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships in three ways. Firstly, while the existing literature concentrates on the B2C context, this study makes a valuable contribution to the advancement of empirical understanding of on- and offline touchpoints in the B2B context (Gao et al., 2022; Hofacker et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2023; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2002; Witell et al., 2020). By collecting dyadic empirical data, this research addresses the relational aspect present in the B2B context and sheds light on both the provider practices and customer experiences regarding on- and offline touchpoints. Secondly, this research contributes to a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the role of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships. By exploring the phenomenon from a micro-level perspective, this research reveals the patterns and mechanisms underlying the role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. The integrative framework displaying the uncovered integration practices, dependencies, and mechanisms may function as a foundation for further research on the long-term implications of online touchpoints for customer-firm interactions (MSI, 2022). Finally, this research contributes to practice by providing an improved understanding of the role of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships. The integrative framework explaining the exact role of online and offline touchpoints, may support B2B providers in determining whether, how and when to use online or offline touchpoints.

This report proceeds by discussing the current literature on on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. To guide this research, we merge the theory into a conceptual framework. Next, we explain our methodology, including the research design, research context, data collection and data analysis. We then present the findings and refine the conceptual framework. Finally, we conclude the research with a discussion of the key findings, theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and suggestions for future research.

2. THEORY

2.1 Touchpoints

The growth of omnichannel and multichannel marketing strategies has led to an increase in the complexity of touchpoints and customer journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Consequently, there is a growing emphasis on customer experience in academic literature (De Keyser et al., 2020; Homburg et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021; Witell et al., 2020). Scholars recognize that there is a close link between customer experience and long-term relationships (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). As a first step towards understanding touchpoints in the B2B context, this section explains touchpoints in the context of the customer journey and customer experience. Next, it defines on- and offline touchpoints and outlines a set of touchpoint typologies.

2.1.1 Touchpoints and the B2B customer journey

Touchpoints can be defined as all verbal and nonverbal interactions between a customer and a provider (Witell et al., 2020). Each distinct touchpoint serves a different purpose depending on the customer's needs at a particular point in the customer journey (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Hereby, a customer journey refers to a series of interactions between a customer and a firm encompassing multiple touchpoints and various stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Purmonen et al., 2023). Customer journeys and their evolving stages have been explored in several research contexts. In the B2C context scholars distinguish the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the B2B context, customer journeys can be considered as complex relational processes (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Witell et al., 2020). These relational processes are complex as they involve multiple actors (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Purmonen et al., 2023; Zolkiewski et al., 2017) with each having different roles (Webster & Wind, 1972), and different perceptions (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). In B2B customer journeys all involved actors are oriented toward establishing long-term relationships (Purmonen et al., 2023). In line with this, Purmonen et al. (2023) define the B2B customer journey as 'a combination of buying and usage center members' intertwined, goal-oriented paths to purchasing and using offerings along multiple direct and indirect touchpoints, which are affected by the context of business relationships'. The literature identifies four stages in the B2B customer journey including pre-bid engagement, negotiation, implementation, and operations (Witell et al., 2020). Moreover, the research of Sahhar et al. (2021) adds a trigger and analysis stage before the pre-bid engagement stage and an evaluation and follow-up stage after the operations stage. All these stages form an iterative and dynamic process, that unfolds across multiple touchpoints (Purmonen et al., 2023; Sahhar et al., 2021; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The literature highlights the dynamic nature of B2B customer journeys by acknowledging that touchpoints may trigger customers to terminate, continue, or initiate a customer journey (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Purmonen et al., 2023).

2.1.2 Touchpoints and customer experience

Some researchers use the terms "contact point" or "moment of truth" to refer to touchpoints (Aichner & Gruber, 2017). The latter synonym is interesting as it demonstrates the crucial role that touchpoints play in shaping the customer experience and the customer-provider relationship. Touchpoints can either be perceived as a positive customer experience or a negative customer experience (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; Gao et al., 2022). The accumulative sum of a customer's perceptions of all interactions encountered across the different touchpoints and stages constitutes the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021). The customer experience is thus formed by the customer's cognitive, emotional, social, and sensory responses to all touchpoint interactions (De Keyser et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2017). These responses are spontaneous and formed unconsciously and are therefore dependent on situational and contextual factors (De Keyser et al., 2020). For these reasons Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define the customer experience as the 'customer's journey with a firm over time during the purchase cycle'.

2.1.3 On- and offline touchpoints

A transformative trend in the B2B landscape is digitalization (Hofacker et al., 2020). Literature refers to this current digital revolution as Industry 4.0 (Purmonen et al., 2023). Digitalization can be defined as the adoption of digital technologies in all business aspects (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Key technologies that are driving the digital revolution include among others cloud computing, the Internet of Things, websites, social media, blockchain, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence (Lasrado et al., 2023). These technologies are transforming traditional B2B customer journeys by introducing new touchpoints (Purmonen et al., 2023). Where before customer journeys consisted of human touchpoints and spatial touchpoints, recent developments have driven the emergence of digital touchpoints (Gao et al., 2022). Lütjens et al. (2022) define online touchpoints as 'any contact point through which consumers engage with products or services or the firm itself on the internet, directly or indirectly'. We propose a broader perspective, by defining online touchpoints as any interaction between a customer and a provider that is directly or indirectly facilitated by digital technologies. In a similar vein, we define offline touchpoints as any interaction between a customer and a provider that is directly or indirectly facilitated by humans or spatial elements.

On- and offline touchpoints have several dimensions along which they can be further specified. This allows for the creation of typologies, which is useful for understanding and analysing on- and offline touchpoints. The literature identifies four dimensions of touchpoints along which touchpoints can be further specified. These include a touchpoint's purpose, control, facilitator, and interaction nature (De Keyser et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022; Kandil et al., 2024; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Vannucci & Pantano, 2019; Witell et al., 2020). The first dimension is the purpose of a touchpoint. As customer needs vary at different points in time, touchpoints serve different purposes (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Lundin and Kindström (2023) propose that touchpoints serve three main purposes: facilitating payments, providing information, and enabling usage. Similarly, Vannucci and Pantano (2019) categorize the purposes of touchpoints as transaction facilitation, information provision, and customer service. The second dimension is the control of a touchpoint. Especially in the B2B context, complexity arises from the involvement of multiple business entities and varying actors at each touchpoint (Witell et al., 2020). Touchpoint control is critical for effectively managing and monitoring how touchpoints shape the customer experience and the customer-provider relationship (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Witell et al., 2020). Consequently, some studies categorize touchpoints along the dimension of touchpoint control. De Keyser et al. (2020) differ between firm-controlled and non-firm-controlled. Witell et al. (2020) further specify this by differentiating between touchpoints controlled by the supplier, customer, partner, and actors from the wider ecosystem. Likewise, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) categorize touchpoints into brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external. Brand-owned touchpoints are touchpoints designed, managed, and monitored by the firm. Partner-owned touchpoints are touchpoints designed, managed, and monitored by the firm and its partners. Customer-owned touchpoints are touchpoints initiated by the customer and lie outside the control of the firm or its partners. Finally, social/external touchpoints represent external influences, such as word-of-mouth communication, that can impact the customer experience throughout their journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The third dimension is the facilitator. Touchpoints can be facilitated by different modalities. The literature identifies three types of touchpoints in terms of their facilitation: human touchpoints, digital touchpoints and spatial touchpoints (De Keyser et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022; Kandil et al., 2024). Human touchpoints refer to interactions facilitated solely by humans, such as face-to-face interactions. Digital touchpoints refer to interactions facilitated by digital technologies. Spatial touchpoints refer to touchpoints facilitated by tangible elements related to a product or service. These touchpoints include among others printed brochures, machinery and equipment (Gao et al., 2022). Finally, the fourth dimension is the interaction nature. Manser Payne et al. (2017) categorize touchpoints along the nature of interaction. Interactions can either be personal or non-personal. Personal touchpoints refer to direct interactions between the customer and the firm. These personal touchpoints may be either face-to-face or mediated by technology. In contrast, non-personal touchpoints refer to interactions between the customer and the firm that do not involve any personal contact (Manser Payne et al., 2017). They can be mediated either by digital technologies or spatial elements. Table 1 shows an overview of all touchpoint dimensions, categories, and corresponding literature.

Touchpoint dimension	Touchpoint categories	Research
Purpose	Transaction facilitation, information provision, and customer service	(Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Vannucci & Pantano, 2019)
Control	Brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external	(De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Witell et al., 2020)
Facilitator	Human, digital, and spatial	(De Keyser et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022; Kandil et al., 2024)
Interaction nature	Personal and non-personal	(Manser Payne et al., 2017)

Table 1 Overview of on- and offline touchpoint typologies

2.2 B2B relationships

The marketing literature highlights the central role of touchpoints in customer journeys and in shaping B2B relationships. The customer perceptions of touchpoint interactions shape the customer experience and eventually the B2B relationships (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). To understand how touchpoints shape B2B relationships, this section discusses the existing knowledge of B2B relationships. The study of B2B relationships is challenging due to its dynamic nature. B2B relationships consist of interactions that evolve and occur across different activities and actors. The dynamic nature of B2B relationships thus manifests in a 'temporal dimension' and 'complex structure' (Holmlund, 2004). Holmlund (2004) argues that conceptualisations of relationships often fail to adequately address these dimensions. Over time many studies have attempted to conceptualise relationships. This section discusses two approaches to studying relationships. First, we explain relationships as an interplay of variables (Grandinetti et al., 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002; Wilson, 1995). Second, we explain relationships as a developing process consisting of several stages (Dwyer et al., 1987; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Wilson, 1995).

2.2.1 Relationships as an interplay of variables

The phenomenon of B2B relationships has been a constant feature of the business landscape throughout its history (Wilson, 1995). There are several types of B2B relationships depending on the actors involved including provider relationships, lateral relationships, customer relationships, and internal relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This research focuses specifically on customer-provider relationships. B2B customer-provider relationships consist of relational exchanges, dyadic customer-provider touchpoint interactions that are based on previous agreements, long-term focused, and reflect an ongoing process (Dwyer et al., 1987; Wilson, 1995). Many studies conceptualise relationships as an interplay of variables. Several variables may contribute to the overall perception of a relationship, therefore many relationship models aim to represent the interplay between these variables (Grandinetti et al., 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) introduce the 'commitment-trust theory'. This theory emphasizes that although there are many contextual variables impacting B2B relationships, trust and commitment play the most central role in B2B relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Many relationship models agree with this and give a central role to trust and commitment (Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Verhoef et al., 2002). Morgan and Hunt (1994) define trust as 'existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity'. Wilson (1995) defines trust as 'a belief that one partner will act in the best interests of the other partner'. Based on these, we define trust as the confidence that one partner will act in a reliable and integer manner in the best interest of the other partner. Confidence in the reliability and integrity of the other partner results from a partner's perception of the other partner's consistency, competence, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and helpfulness (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Inherent to the confidence in a partner is the willingness to rely on a partner. This implies that if one trusts a partner, one is confident in that partner and willing to rely on them. Conversely, if one is not willing to rely on a partner, it can be inferred that one lacks confidence in that partner and that there is no trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust is therefore a significant factor influencing commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment can be defined as the desire to develop and maintain a relationship (Gil-Saura et al., 2009; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995). According to this, a committed partner should be willing to put maximum effort into continuing a relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Verhoef et al. (2002) distinguishes between affective and calculative commitment. Affective commitment refers to the emotional attachment to a partner, which results from one partner's perception of feeling connected, affiliated, and loyal to the other partner. On the contrary, calculative commitment refers to the commitment that results from the assessment of the costs and benefits involved in the relationship (Verhoef et al., 2002). Gil-Saura et al. (2009) point out that calculative commitment results from an evaluation of not only the current benefits and costs of a relationship but also the future benefits and costs of a relationship. This highlights that commitment orients for long-term relationships. Both trust and commitment are thus essential variables for B2B relationships.

In addition to these variables, many studies add other variables to their relationship models (Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002). These variables either form antecedents for trust and commitment or show outcomes of trust and commitment in a relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). While there is a consensus on the importance of trust and commitment, there is no consensus on the additional variables and how all variables interrelate (Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002). Most literature studies include the following antecedents of trust and commitment: satisfaction, mutual goals, communication, opportunistic behaviour, balanced power, adaptation, shared technology, termination costs, and social bonds (Grandinetti et al., 2020; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002; Wilson, 1995). Moreover, most literature studies identify the following outcomes of trust and commitment: cooperation, (functional) conflict, loyalty, and decision-making certainty (Grandinetti et al., 2020; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995).

2.2.2 Relationship as a developing process

Another approach to conceptualising B2B relationships is to take a process perspective. B2B relationships develop over time. Wilson (1995) notes how trust can differ per point in time and highlights the importance of considering time in conceptualisations of relationships. The first research that considers the importance of time and takes a process perspective is the research of Dwyer et al.

(1987). Dwyer et al. (1987) propose that relationships develop over five stages: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution.

Awareness is the first phase. In this phase, the initial firm becomes aware of the existence of the other firm and assesses whether that firm is feasible for a potential relationship. In this phase, the interactions are mostly unilateral and focused on 'positioning' and 'posturing' (Dwyer et al., 1987).

Exploration is the second phase. This phase usually starts once bilateral interactions start taking place (Dwyer et al., 1987). Dwyer et al. (1987) describe this phase as 'the trial phase'. During the exploration phase, one firm may test the other firm by doing some trial purchases. During the exploration phase, five sub-processes take place including attraction, communication and bargaining, power and justice, norm development, and expectation development (Dwyer et al., 1987). The exploration phase starts with the initial attraction, whereby the initial firm becomes confident in the potential rewards of a relationship. Next, it continues with communication and bargaining, whereby the parties negotiate the obligations, benefits and burdens of the potential relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987). During bargaining, the power and interdependence of both parties play a determining role. Dwyer et al. (1987) emphasizes that the outcomes of the negotiations are not fixed. The demands and desires of both parties may change over time, and parties can demonstrate mutual commitment by first communicating and discussing their demand changes with existing partners instead of seeking new relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987). After communication and bargaining, the exploration phase continues with the development of norms (Dwyer et al., 1987). Dwyer et al. (1987) states that 'by adopting norms and establishing standards of conduct, emerging exchange partners start setting the ground rules for future exchange'. Norms form the basis of relational contracts (Dwyer et al., 1987). Finally, during the exploration phase, expectations develop about cooperation and potential conflicts (Dwyer et al., 1987). Dwyer et al. (1987) stress the importance of trust in creating expectations.

Expansion is the third phase. During this phase the same five sub-processes as in the exploration phase take place. However, this phase distinguishes itself by the increasing interdependence and cooperation between the two parties. After some successful exchanges, trust and satisfaction increase. Consequently, both parties feel confident to take more risks and expand their relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987).

Commitment is the fourth phase. Dwyer et al. (1987) describes this phase as 'the most advanced phase of buyer-seller interdependence'. During this phase, both parties are satisfied and loyal to each other. Meaning that they prefer cooperation with each other over cooperation with similar alternative firms (Dwyer et al., 1987).

Dissolution is the fifth phase. This final phase refers to the phase in which one of the parties ends their engagement (Dwyer et al., 1987).

In response to this relationship process model of Dwyer et al. (1987), Wilson (1995) proposes an enhanced model which incorporates the significant role of relationship variables per relationship stage. Hereby, he distinguishes between active and latent variables. His model shows that at the beginning of a relationship trust and satisfaction play an active role, followed by bonds, power, mutual goals in the middle phases, and commitment, adaption, and cooperation in the later stages. After the variables pass their active phase they become latent until a critical incident occurs, which triggers them to become active again (Wilson, 1995).

2.3 Touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

While touchpoints play a significant role in shaping the relationship variables and their development, knowledge of the management of touchpoints and B2B relationships has mostly been discussed in separate vacuums. Several studies have investigated the management of touchpoints for improved customer experiences (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Sahhar et al., 2021; Witell et al., 2020), but limited studies have further extended this to the management of B2B relationships (Hofacker et al., 2020;

Koponen et al., 2024). This section presents an overview of the scarce knowledge regarding the role of touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. First, this section discusses how different touchpoints interaction levels shape B2B relationships. Second, this section discusses the role of critical touchpoints and relationship learning which explains how past touchpoint experiences shape current and future touchpoint experiences. Thereby shaping B2B relationships.

2.3.1 Relationship interaction levels

Relationships develop along a range of complex interactions (Holmlund, 2004). These interactions occur at various touchpoints, which is why we refer to them as 'touchpoint interactions'. Even though scholars recognize that relationships develop over time, most studies still evaluate touchpoint interactions by 'point-in-time' analysis resulting in a study of single-moment perceptions of 'relationship states', described as relationship variables in Section 2.2.1 (Schurr et al., 2008). It is important to understand that a change in relationship states, such as trust and commitment, are developed by a range of touchpoint interactions (Schurr et al., 2008). Therefore, to understand how touchpoint interactions shape relationships, an interaction-level perspective should be considered (Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008).

Most studies that apply an interaction-level perspective define an interaction-level model consisting of four levels. From lowest to highest, these include interactions, episodes, relationships, and networks (Ford, 1980; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008). Additionally, Holmlund (2004) adds a 'sequence' level between the episode and the relationship level. The interaction level, also called the action level, refers to all specific individual touchpoint interactions between the supplier and customers (Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008). These single touchpoints are short-term, dynamic, and may be interrelated to other single touchpoint interactions (Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007). The episode level consists of episodes, which refer to sets of interconnected actions that occurred in a relatively close period of time (Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008). These episodes are influenced by the relationship atmosphere, norms, and procedures (Ford, 1980). The episodes represent relationship subprocesses (Holmlund, 2004). Holmlund (2004) provides the example of a negotiation process as an episode, whereby the episode of negotiation is a subprocess consisting of several smaller actions, such as e-mail conversations, meetings, contracts, etc. (Holmlund, 2004). In a similar vein, multiple episodes can be grouped into sequences that form the next hierarchical level. Sequences represent the different projects of a firm. These projects may overlap or proceed simultaneously (Holmlund, 2004). The collection of all sequences between two parties forms a relationship (Ford, 1980; Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007). Moreover, all relationships of a firm form a network or partner base (Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008).

The differentiation of multiple interaction levels when analysing the role of touchpoints is of significant importance, as the hierarchical level determines the extent to which a touchpoint shapes the overall relationship experience and dynamics (Holmlund, 2004). The network and relationship level form a macro view from which the overall relationship state or change in the relationship state is perceived. The sequence-level, episode level, and action level provide a more micro-level perspective that explains the changes to the relationship states (Schurr et al., 2008). Actors perceive and evaluate touchpoint interactions on both the lower and higher hierarchical levels. All these touchpoint experiences interrelate. Logically, evaluations of the single actions in the lower hierarchical level contribute to the evaluation of episodes and sequences in the higher hierarchical levels, and eventually the evaluations of higher hierarchical interaction levels form the overall perception of a relationship and may lead to potential termination or continuance of a relationship (Holmlund, 2004). This highlights that each episode can significantly impact the relationship (Ford, 1980). Schurr (2007) even describes episodes as 'the engines of change'. For this reason, multiple researches highlight the necessity for scholars analysing the role of touchpoints in shaping B2B relationship dynamics to consider the totality of all interrelated touchpoint interactions in the context of the relationship, rather than focusing on a few individual touchpoint interactions (Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008). Not taking this interaction-level perspective results in an incomplete study of relationships (Ford, 1980).

2.3.2 Critical incidents and relationship learning

Within the literature, there is a limited number of studies that adopt an interaction-level perspective for investigating the dynamics between touchpoints and B2B relationships. However, the existing literature adopting this approach highlights the concept of critical incidents and relationship learning (Holmlund, 2004; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Nordin & Ravald, 2016; Shamsollahi et al., 2021).

These studies found that touchpoints do not only play a role in shaping the current relationship experience and dynamics, but current touchpoint interactions also play a role in shaping future touchpoint interactions, and in turn, future B2B relationships (Holmlund, 2004; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Nordin & Ravald, 2016; Shamsollahi et al., 2021). As the B2B landscape is a changing environment, customer needs and suppliers offerings may change over time (Nordin & Ravald, 2016). Consequently, companies are constantly re-evaluating and adapting their perceptions, beliefs and expectations of a relationship (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Relationship learning refers to the underlying mechanism explaining how relationship variables change over time and how and why touchpoint interactions relate to other touchpoint interactions (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Each actor starts with some prior knowledge about the other actor. Next, every single touchpoint interaction can alter a person's or a firm's feelings, beliefs, and perceptions about the other party involved. Through these experiences, a business can acquire new knowledge and understanding about the other entity, which may shape future expectations and touchpoint interaction behaviours. Within the relationship learning process Huang and Wilkinson (2013) recognize two types of feedback cycles. The first feedback cycle refers to short-term learning processes, that occur within one episode of touchpoint interactions. This includes how new knowledge about a current interaction immediately shapes current responses. The second feedback cycle refers to a longer-term learning process. This encompasses the process of how cumulative feedback on a series of touchpoint interactions over a longer period of time, continuously shapes deeper cognitive changes, future touchpoint interactions, and expectations. Ultimately, resulting in a change of the relationship dynamic. Learning thus acts as a mechanism that explains how touchpoint interactions shape B2B relationships (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013).

The iterative and time-dependent learning mechanism involves multiple micro mechanisms, including reputational effect, stereotyping, memory, cognitive dissonance, sensemaking, and selective perception, that form the process of relationship learning (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Shamsollahi et al., 2021). The micro-mechanisms that play a role in forming the initial perception in the initial relationship stages are 'reputational effect' and 'stereotyping'. Moreover, if there already is a prior history with the firm, then 'memory' may also contribute to the initial perception (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). The initial perception shapes the prior knowledge and future expectations, and eventually the future touchpoint interactions. Regarding relationship learning in the more developing stages of B2B relationships, many researchers differentiate between routine incidents and critical incidents (Holmlund, 2004; Shamsollahi et al., 2021). Routine incidents refer to recurring touchpoint interactions that occur without either party being aware of them. Contrastingly, critical incidents refer to touchpoint interactions that positively or negatively stand out from other touchpoint interactions (Holmlund, 2004; Shamsollahi et al., 2021). Especially critical incidents activate the learning mechanism and play a significant role in changing future expectations and touchpoint interactions. Critical incidents can either strengthen a relationship or result in the termination of a relationship (Shamsollahi et al., 2021). An important micro mechanism related to relationship learning from critical incidents is 'cognitive dissonance' (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Unexpected touchpoint interactions or touchpoint interaction outcomes may lead to dissonance between new perceptions and prior perceptions (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Nordin and Ravald (2016) refer to this as 'relationship gaps'. Critical incidents cause the emergence of relationship gaps, whereby the new perceptions do not match the old patterns of perceptions (Nordin & Ravald, 2016). In the rapidly transforming B2B environment, online touchpoints may form critical incidents as they change customer needs or provider offerings, causing relationship gaps between the customer and provider. As a result of this, both parties need to adapt. This involves the micro mechanisms of 'sensemaking' and 'selective perception'. Sensemaking refers to the process of both parties interpreting the reasons for a critical incident, reintegrating this knowledge, and adjusting their perceptions (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013). Furthermore, selective perception refers to the tendency of people and firms to selectively perceive and interpret information as a consequence of biases. Biases such as optimism, positive illusions, self-serving bias, and priming effects may influence how individuals and firms make sense of cognitive dissonances (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013).

2.4 Merging the theory: toward a micro-foundational understanding of on- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

2.4.1 The status quo in the current literature

The extant marketing literature highlights that touchpoints have a central role in B2B customer journeys. Throughout the B2B customer journey, customers encounter multiple touchpoints that form their experience (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; De Keyser et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2017) and eventually shape the B2B relationship (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The recent marketing literature discusses the emergence of online touchpoints. Highlighting that the emergence of online touchpoints has resulted in a more diverse range of touchpoint dimensions and categories, which increases the complexity of B2B customer journeys. Consequently, the management of customer experience and B2B relationships has become more complex (Hofacker et al., 2020; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Purmonen et al., 2023). Even though the marketing literature highlights the emergence of online touchpoints, the current literature still largely focuses on explaining how touchpoints in general can be managed to improve customer experiences. Purmonen et al. (2023) explain the different stages in B2B customer journeys, De Keyser et al. (2020) identify touchpoints, context, and qualities as building blocks of customer experience, and Witell et al. (2020) describe the challenges in customer experience management. None of these studies explain the exact role of online and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. It is unclear how on- and offline touchpoints can be integrated to manage B2B relationships. Furthermore, there is a lack of knowledge on how a shift in touchpoint mix changes the customer experience and B2B relationships in the long term (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020).

Moreover, despite the recognition that on- and offline touchpoints play a central role in shaping B2B relationships, the concepts of touchpoints and B2B relationships have, to some extent, been discussed in separate vacuums. Literature on B2B relationships highlights that B2B relationships are dynamic and change over time. B2B relationships develop through several stages during which the perception of relationship states, such as trust and commitment, change (Dwyer et al., 1987; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002; Wilson, 1995). There is a scarcity of literature combining this knowledge on B2B relationships with the knowledge of touchpoint management. The existing literature that combines touchpoint management with B2B relationships, stresses the importance of considering multiple touchpoint interaction levels (Ford, 1980; Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008). Knowledge of the touchpoint interactions in the micro-levels, the action, episode, and sequence levels, have the potential to explain the macro changes in the B2B relationships (Schurr et al., 2008). The scarce number of studies that adopt this micro-foundational perspective, explain that critical incidents and relationship learning form underlying patterns and mechanisms that determine how touchpoints shape B2B relationships. However, these studies do not investigate the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints. Leaving us with a lack of knowledge on the micro-foundations underlying the role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. It is unknown what patterns and mechanisms exist in on- and offline touchpoint interactions and how these patterns and mechanisms shape the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. What are the provider's practices for integrating on- and offline touchpoints? How do customers perceive the on- and offline touchpoints? And how do these perceptions change the B2B relationships?

2.4.2 A conceptual mechanistic framework of on- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

Building upon the literature, Figure 3 shows a conceptual mechanistic framework of on- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships. The framework summarises the literature review and forms the foundation for this research. It conceptualises this research into three core constructs: online touchpoints, offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. Customers encounter on- and offline touchpoints throughout several stages of the customer journey. This framework adopts the following customer journey stages: trigger and problem analysis, pre-bid engagement, negotiation, implementation, and operations (Sahhar et al., 2021; Witell et al., 2020). In this framework, online touchpoints refer to any interaction between a customer and a provider that is directly or indirectly facilitated by digital technologies. Offline touchpoints refer to any interaction between a customer and a provider that is directly or indirectly facilitated by human or spatial elements. Both touchpoints can be further specified based on their purpose, control, facilitator, and interaction nature (De Keyser et al., 2020; Kandil et al., 2024; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Vannucci & Pantano, 2019; Witell et al., 2020). All cognitive responses and perceptions of the on- and offline touchpoint interactions between the provider and customer shape the B2B relationship. The framework considers B2B relationships as dyadic exchanges between customers and providers that build on various variables and develop over time according to multiple relationship stages including awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution (Dwyer et al., 1987; Wilson, 1995). Recognizing the consensus in the literature on the central role of trust and commitment, the framework narrows its focus to these variables (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). By conceptualising B2B relationships as a construct of variables and an ongoing process, the framework aims to encapsulate the complex structure and temporal dimension of these relationships (Holmlund, 2004). With the dynamic arrows (see dark blue arrows), this framework highlights the crucial role of touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships and reflects the lack of understanding of the micro-foundations underlying the role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. In this way, the framework serves as the basis for this research and guides this research in further exploring the micro-foundations underlying the role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships.

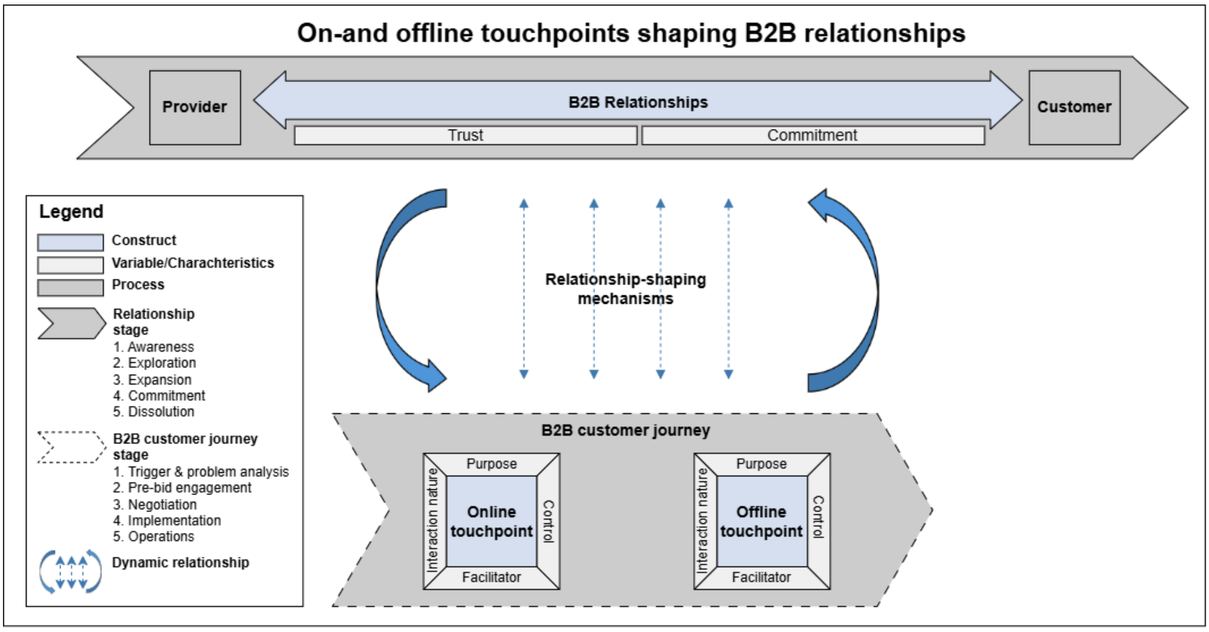

Figure 1 Conceptual mechanistic framework of on- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This research explores the phenomenon of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships. The objective of this study is to gain a micro-foundational understanding of the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships (Coleman, 1990; Foss, 2010; Vromen, 2010). A micro-level perspective was found suitable for this research as micro-foundational studies are particularly useful for gaining a fundamental understanding that can contribute to effective managerial interventions and making strategic decisions and predictions (Coleman, 1990; Foss, 2010). Macro phenomena, such as on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships, do not directly influence each other. They only indirectly influence each other through interactions between individual actors (Vromen, 2010). B2B relationships are thus in fact a result of all individual on- and offline touchpoint interactions (Coleman, 1990; Foss, 2010). Taking a micro-level perspective allowed us to investigate the underlying 'deeper structure' consisting of mechanisms and patterns that explain how on- and offline touchpoint interactions shape B2B relationships.

To this end, this research employs a qualitative approach in the form of an embedded case study. A case study is an appropriate method to explore a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Yin, 2003). It is particularly useful for gaining a deep understanding of the dynamics present within a single setting, to create theoretical insights into the phenomenon in a broader setting (Berg & Lune, 2017; Creswell, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Gerring, 2004). Given that the characteristics of a case study align with the objective of this research, it is a suitable methodology for this study.

For the selection of a case, this research follows a theoretical purposive sampling approach. The objective of this is to select a case that represents the research population of B2B companies (Berg & Lune, 2017), is the most appropriate for the research strategy (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), and is likely to extend the theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). This research defines five operational criteria (Yin, 2003), that are consistent with the criteria employed in a comparable case study on on- and offline touchpoints (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). First of all, the case company should operate in the B2B context. Secondly, the company should have a focus on building and maintaining long-term customer relationships. Thirdly, the company should engage with customers through both online and offline channels. Fourthly, the company should be willing to facilitate access to internal (employees) and external (customers) experts as a source of information. Finally, the company's long-term strategic objective is to pursue digitalization. These criteria enable a relevant and rich research context consisting of various on- and offline touchpoints in extensive relationships.

3.2 Research context

The carefully selected case company Plant Dairy Co. provides an appropriate context for this research. Plant Dairy Co. is a Dutch plant-based dairy manufacturer consisting of about 150 employees. The company was originally established as dairy manufacturer in 1974, but underwent a strategic shift in 2015 transitioning its focus towards the production of plant-based dairy products. Since then they have been expanding their businesses throughout Europe. Currently, Plant Dairy Co. delivers their products to a wide range of wholesalers and retailers across Europe, with whom they maintain close relationships. In building and maintaining these relationships they make increasing use of various online touchpoints in addition to their offline touchpoints. While their online touchpoints include online media (e.g. social media and electronic newsletters), online systems, mobile text messages, email, phone calls, and video calls, their offline touchpoints consist of trade magazines, personal physical meetings (e.g. customer visits), and trade fairs. The use of these various on- and offline touchpoints and the focus on establishing long-term relationships, makes Plant Dairy Co. an appropriate and interesting case company.

3.3 Data collection

The research context allows for an in-depth and rich data collection including internal organizational data and external customer data collection. To explore the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and relationships, we focus on three key relationships, analysing each from a dyadic perspective. We collected data from two sources of evidence, to establish data triangulation ensuring the quality of the research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). As a primary source, we conducted semi-structured interviews to capture a retrospective insight of knowledgeable agents experiencing various on- and offline touchpoints (Gioia et al., 2012). Additionally, we collected archival records including among others marketing strategy reports and records of digital marketing campaigns and selling presentations.

The knowledgeable agents at Plant Dairy Co. were selected according to purposive sampling (Berg & Lune, 2017). This led to a selection of nine internal interviewees with various roles in the sales and marketing department. All selected interviewees have a central role in maintaining contact with customers and are therefore considered to be knowledgeable agents (Gioia et al., 2012). For selecting knowledgeable agents at customer firms we were informed by Plant Dairy Co. Based on the input of Plant Dairy Co., relevant customer firms and knowledgeable agents were selected. Through snowballing additional knowledgeable agents were identified (Berg & Lune, 2017). This led to a selection of seven external interviewees with various functions in the procurement and quality departments of three customer firms. One of the external interviews was conducted with two interviewees at the same time for the convenience of that customer. Together we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 interviewees. The duration of each interview ranged between 20 to 45 minutes. Table 2 provides an overview of all types of firms, interviewees, roles of interviewees, and the interview durations. Because of confidentiality reasons pseudocodes are used to refer to the interviewees.

The semi-structured interviews allowed us to follow a line of inquiry according to an interview protocol, while also enabling us to ask additional probing or clarifying questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Yin, 2003). The research framework guided the creation of two interview protocols, one for the internal interviews and one for the external interviews (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Appendices A and B show the interview protocols. The line of inquiry in both interview protocols covered online touchpoints, offline touchpoints, and relationships. Even though we followed an interview protocol, we used the flexibility of semi-structured interviews to adapt the interview questions as the research progressed. This ensured that we could follow where the knowledgeable agents led us and deepen our understanding (Gioia et al., 2012). We conducted the internal interviews in person and the external interviews through Microsoft Teams. This approach was deemed the optimal solution as direct access to the customers was not possible, and video interviewing allowed the capturing of non-verbal communication. In conducting and processing the interviews we followed the guidelines proposed by Creswell (2007). Prior to conducting the interviews, the purpose of the research, the anticipated duration of the interview, and the methodology for data collection and analysis were explained to the participants, who were then asked to provide consent. The interviews were adequately recorded and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Teams and Amberscript. All transcripts were stored and further processed in ATLAS.ti.

The objective of this research is to build theory through an abductive approach. Consequently, data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, with a continual interchange between empirical data and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). To support the overlap between data collection and analysis, we kept a research journal containing field notes (Creswell, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989). The field notes included a logbook of the events that occurred during the research period accompanied by the researcher's impressions and thoughts. Additionally, it included a constant reflection on the question "What am I learning?" which is key to successful fieldnotes (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Type of firm	Interviewees	Role	Duration interview
		Internal interviewees	
Dutch supplier	Internal interviewee 1	Account manager	32 min
	Internal interviewee 2	Product- and category manager	35 min
	Internal interviewee 3	Sales director	34 min
	Internal interviewee 4	Product manager	22 min
	Internal interviewee 5	Product- and category manager	40 min
	Internal interviewee 6	Product manager	45 min
	Internal interviewee 7	Sales manager	31 min
	Internal interviewee 8	Product manager	29 min
	Internal interviewee 9	Account manager	35 min
		External interviewees	
German purchasing organisation	External interviewee 1	Sales manager	35 min
	External interviewee 2	Product brand manager	40 min
Dutch retailer	External interviewee 3	Category manager	32 min
	External interviewee 4	Quality manager	35 min
	External interviewee 5	Buyer	26 min
Dutch purchasing organisation	External interviewee 6	Buyer	33 min
	External interviewee 7	Procurement coordinator	

Table 2 Overview of internal and external interviewees

3.4 Data analysis

Following the abductive approach, the data analysis built on the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2.4 (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The conceptual framework was informed by existing literature on the role of touchpoints in B2B relationships, which introduced a certain degree of preconception that could have led to a confirmation bias (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Gioia et al., 2012). To avoid this, we used the framework not as an a priori assumption, but as "technical background knowledge", providing a starting point for exploring the micro-foundational role of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The five customer journey stages provided by the initial framework functioned as guidance in structuring on- and offline touchpoint practices. Furthermore, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the micro-foundational role of on- and offline touchpoints, the data analysis focused on nine specific on- and offline touchpoints rather than generalising them into two groups of online touchpoints and offline touchpoints.

The data collection resulted in a rich data set consisting of 259 pages of transcripts. These were analysed through two cycles of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Gioia et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2014). The first cycle involved open-coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this cycle, we assigned in-vivo codes, descriptive codes, and cognitive codes to summarize the participant's experiences and actions regarding online and offline touchpoints (Miles et al., 2014). This resulted in the derivation of 46 first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2012). Next, the second cycle involved axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This axial coding proceeded by identifying similarities and differences among the first-order concepts. This revealed various patterns, dependencies, and mechanisms of online and offline touchpoints in relationships, leading to 15 second-order themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Gioia et al., 2012). Finally, these higher-order themes were assigned to three overarching aggregate dimensions. Figure 2 summarizes the analysis by showing an overview of the coding structure.

The data analysis involved a non-linear process, referred to as systematic combining. Key to this process was a continuous iteration between the framework, empirical data, and analysis (Dubois &

Gadde, 2002). The analysis of empirical data resulted in new knowledge and insights, which were used to deepen understanding of the dynamics between online and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships.

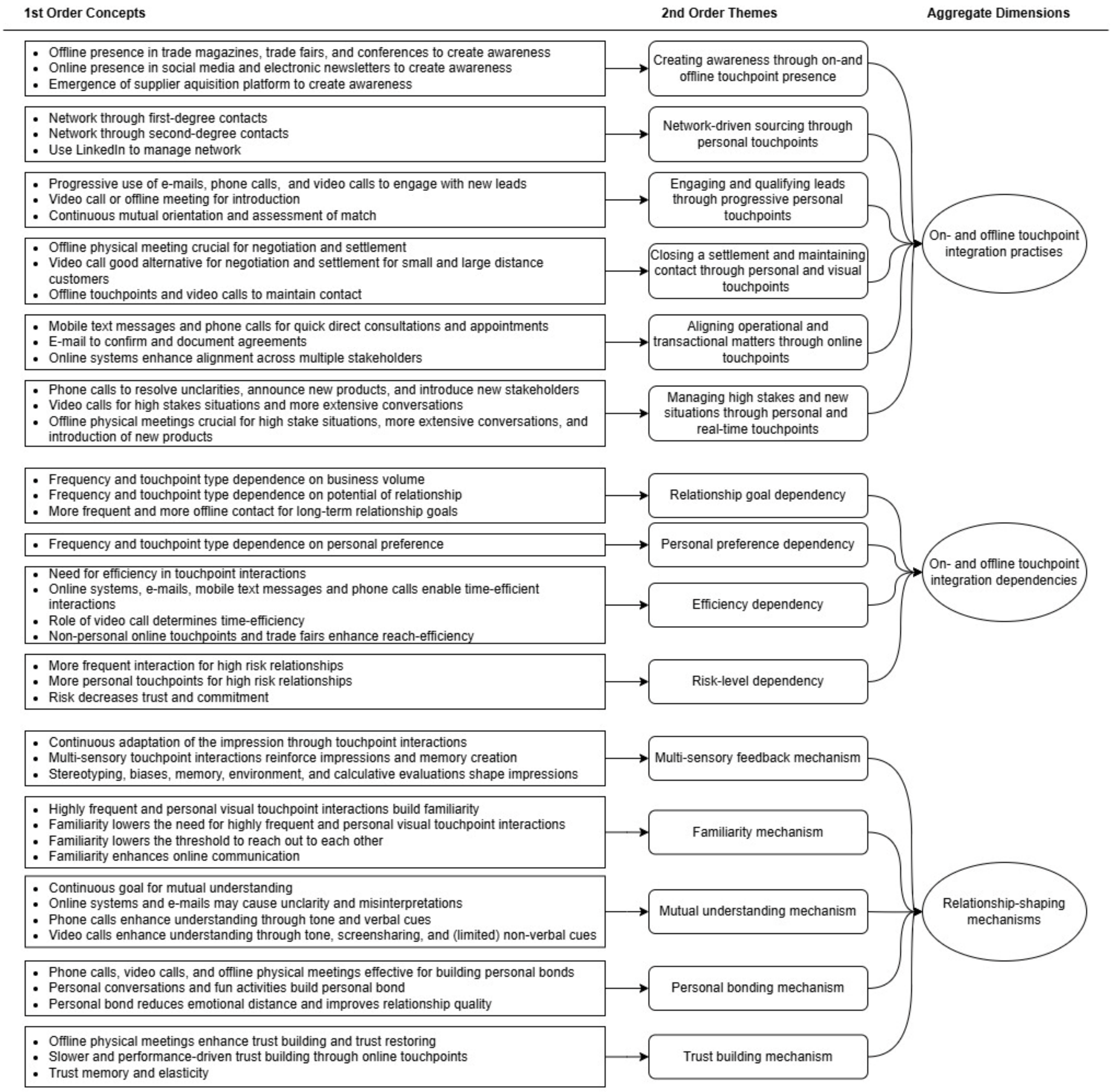

Figure 2 The coding structure

4. FINDINGS

This section explains the findings of the research. The research revealed three dimensions explaining how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships. Firstly, the research identified six key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices. These practices form key touchpoint sequences in a B2B supplier's customer journey that reveal patterns in on- and offline touchpoint integration. Secondly, the research revealed four underlying dependencies that collectively determine the frequency and type of touchpoint interactions. Finally, the research found five relationship-shaping mechanisms that explain the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in relationship building and maintenance. Figure 3 summarises the identified dimensions in an enhanced mechanistic framework visualizing how on- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey shape B2B relationships. The following sub-sections further explain the identified dimensions.

4.1 On- and offline touchpoint integration practices

4.1.1 Creating awareness through on- and offline touchpoint presence

The first integration practice occurs in the trigger and problem analysis stage. Multiple interviewees indicated that the initial step in building new B2B relationships is creating awareness. The objective of creating awareness is to establish an initial level of interest that forms the foundation for future interactions and lead generation. In doing so, the importance of being present throughout touchpoints in various channels was highlighted:

"It's very important for a party, so for a supplier, to be visible on those various channels.[...] That preliminary process, before you know each other, that's just visibility, making sure you're there." - External interviewee 6

The importance of being present in on- and offline touchpoints was also reflected by the supplier's practices in creating awareness. Common practices of Plant Dairy Co. to create awareness are to regularly post content on social media, send electronic newsletters, arrange articles in trade magazines, and go to trade fairs. Furthermore, customers find Plant Dairy Co. through Googling. One interviewee explained:

"Customers mostly come to us via trade fairs. Or through Googling, I think when they look for plant-based suppliers. We also send newsletters and post things on LinkedIn about new products." - Internal interviewee 2

Additionally, online platforms are emerging as a sourcing tool for customers. Such platforms enable suppliers to register their interest in becoming a supplier to a particular customer, thereby creating awareness of their existence among the customer.

4.1.2 Network-driven sourcing through personal touchpoints

The second integration practice in the trigger and problem analysis stage is network-driven sourcing. Mutual networking plays a central role in generating leads. Both the supplier and customers make use of networking to source new relations. From the interviews, it appeared that most networking is done through direct personal touchpoints such as phone calls, mobile text messages, physical meetings, and trade fairs. Moreover, both internal and external interviewees highlighted the usefulness of LinkedIn in managing their network. A distinction can be made in networking through first-degree and second-degree contacts. Quite a few customers came into contact with Plant Dairy Co. through first-degree contacts, which are direct connections from personal networks. As a result of Plant Dairy Co.'s strategic repositioning to become a fully plant-based dairy company, several of their existing current customers were already acquainted with them from their previous traditional dairy products and became interested after the strategic shift. This is illustrated by the following example:

"Plant Dairy Co is of course traditionally a dairy company so we have bought some dairy products there in the past, and then you already know each other and you follow each other. Then at some point, communication comes from their direction to all their customers that they are going to stop dairy and they are going to be completely plant-based. Well, then you know that. When you're with each other in a network, you know each other, and you can update each other." - External interviewee 6

Additionally, some other customers came into contact with Plant Dairy Co. through second-degree contacts, which are connections from first-degree contacts. For example through connections from partners:

"Through another Dutch supply partner [...] I know their export director very well. And he said: you should contact them. [...] and now it has become a real partnership." - External interviewee 1

4.1.3 Engaging and qualifying leads through progressive personal touchpoints

The third integration practice, "engaging and qualifying leads", occurs in the pre-bid engagement stage. Once a lead exists, it should be converted into a prospect. The interviews revealed that engaging and qualifying leads is done through direct personal touchpoints. Notably, there seems to be a clear guiding thread in the sequence of touchpoints. One interviewee mentioned:

"The first step is very often the first supplier's e-mail. The second step is a telephone call. The third step is an online meeting and then you meet personally and then it's the running business. And while you have a mix of all." - External interviewee 1

This process may thus be conceptualised as a stage gate process, starting with an e-mail, followed by a phone call, then a video call, and finally a physical meeting. The objective of the supplier during this practice is to arrange a physical meeting for introduction. At each stage of the lead engagement process, mutual qualification takes place. Both parties evaluate the compatibility of the relationship to determine whether it is worth proceeding to the next stage. It is for this reason that, in recent years, video calls have become a standard preliminary step in the process of establishing a new business relationship, allowing potential partners to assess the viability of the relationship before committing to a physical meeting. One interviewee explained this orienting role of video calling by mentioning it is:

"A kind of sensing at the beginning, to know, efficiency, to know whether we can work together. Is it initially all worth it? So, it's actually more about sensing the collaboration." - Internal interviewee 7

4.1.4 Closing a settlement and maintaining contact through personal and visual touchpoints

The fourth integration practice occurs in the negotiation, implementation, and operation stages. During the negotiation stage, a settlement is reached and from that point onwards the relationship should be maintained to facilitate a positive experience in the implementation and operations stages. Integration of on- and offline personal and visual touchpoints proved to be very important for this practice. Multiple interviewees stressed that physical one-to-one meetings are crucial before finalizing business agreements. One interviewee emphasized:

"If the stakes get a bit bigger, if we enter into a contract with someone, then you just want to be able to coordinate that physically with each other." - External interviewee 3

However, for smaller customers or customers at greater distances, video calls are considered a good alternative. Additionally, in the implementation and operation stages, a mix of video calls, physical one-to-one meetings, and trade fairs are used to maintain relationships. These personal and visual touchpoints allow for more informal activities and personal conversations, that strengthen and maintain relationships. As one interviewee explained:

"Just to meet each other and to drink a beer or a glass of wine.[...] then you have another discussion and it's more personal." - External interviewee 1

4.1.5 Aligning operational and transactional matters through online touchpoints

The fifth integration practice is aligning operational and transactional matters through online touchpoints. In the implementation and operations stages, most of the daily routine touchpoint interactions focus on facilitating operational and transactional alignment. Several practical matters need to be aligned, article numbers need to be generated, product data should be entered into online systems, package designs need to be aligned, supply schedules need to be aligned and monitored, etc. The interviews showed that daily operational alignments are mostly done through online touchpoints like online systems, e-mails, mobile text messages, and phone calls. One interviewee illustrated this integration practice by mentioning that operational and transactional alignment is:

"Mostly through e-mail. Then I just confirm what they get and when, with the specifications of the products. That just goes by mail. And I just phone more often if I really need a quick answer or if someone doesn't respond on the mail." - Internal interviewee 4

In addition to this, online systems are also used for operational and transactional alignments. Moreover, they are integrated more and more to enhance real-time alignment with multiple stakeholders. One interviewee illustrates the enhancement of alignment by explaining:

"That all the changes come through to everyone. [...] So, if anything than changes, then the system actually real-time changes with it. So then you can just indicate like well we put it in this and this, so you should find it here." - Internal interviewee 6

4.1.6 Managing high stakes and new situations through personal and real-time touchpoints

Finally, the sixth integration practice occurs when high stakes and new situations arise and need to be managed in the implementation and operations stages. In these situations, the integrated on- and offline touchpoints are characterized by a personal and direct nature. More specifically, phone calls, video calls, and physical one-to-one meetings are used for this practice. Phone calls and physical one-to-one meetings are often used to introduce new products and new stakeholders. Multiple interviewees provides responses similar to:

"So often I'll call when I have a new product, then I ask if they are excited about it." - Internal interviewee 9

Furthermore for resolving high stakes situations, video calls and physical one-to-one meetings are perceived as very effective. Especially, physical one-to-one meetings are considered crucial for this. One interviewee illustrated this with the following example:

"Last Wednesday we had a critical recall [...] well then you really have something to manage in terms of stakeholders. And then I don't think that with the supplier and the internal organization here you will be able to provide sufficient context, sufficient reassurance or escalation if needed, in the moment that you only do that online." - External interviewee 4

The interviews revealed a clear preference for the use of physical meetings to resolve conflicts, however for customers located at a large distance video calls provided a good alternative. Moreover, video calls were found to be very functional for more extensive discussions that don't necessarily need to be discussed in a physical meeting. One interviewee showcased this with the following example:

"When we were really in a soy negotiation, we participated in that tender and it was very exciting.[...] But then we got a complaint issue [...] we just had a really bad production batch, where really constant mold complaints came up, and that was just really devastating for the soy negotiations as well. So then it's really nice that you can schedule a meeting through Teams and that you can see each other's faces and the facial expressions with it, because then you get a better sense of what's going on with each other." - Internal interviewee 2

4.2 On- and offline touchpoint integration dependencies

4.2.1 Efficiency

Efficiency emerged as a significant underlying factor in determining the frequency and type of touchpoint interactions. There is a great need for efficiency in B2B relationships. Several interviewees stress that retail customers "don't always have time for you to pass by" and "actually you want to unburden the customers as much as possible". Therefore, if things are running well and there are no issues there is a preference for efficient touchpoints. The interviews revealed that the efficiency dependence consists of two micro-dependencies: time efficiency and reach efficiency.

Time efficient touchpoints include online systems, mobile text messages, and emails, followed by phone calls and video calls, which are comparatively less time-efficient. Interviewees emphasize that they especially use e-mails for efficient interactions as those enable them to work with minimal disruptions and to interact at their own pace. Furthermore, they highlighted that it provides the convenience "to confirm" and "to document agreements". Clear documentation contributes to easy recalling of agreements and easy resolution of conflicts. Furthermore, e-mails allow for some response time, which is especially useful for more complex questions that require critical thinking and internal alignment. One interviewee illustrated this by mentioning:

"But the easiest of course is to just send them an e-mail. I also find that nicer myself if people don't call me all day long about everything, because you're then in a meeting, or all busy with something else […] You can often think a little bit longer about how you want to respond. You can read it back." - Internal interviewee 4

Additionally, if consultation is necessary, phone calls are considered an efficient touchpoint for conducting direct consultations. Furthermore, according to the interviews video calls serve two distinct roles, they either replace a phone call or a physical meeting. The perceived time efficiency of video calls depends on the role they take. When replacing a phone call, they are perceived as rather inefficient. However, when replacing a physical meeting, especially with partners located at a large distance, they are perceived as highly efficient. One interviewee explained the experienced efficiency as follows:

"You now quicker tend to do a teams or phone call. It's also very easy. If I have an appointment, then I'm an hour and a half often on the road. […] then you have to drive back an hour and a half. […] So that costs you half a day, and for us it's important that we put that time in […] but if every retailer has to do that with every supplier, then they will not have any time left."- Internal interviewee 9

The second micro-dependency is reach efficiency. Non-personal online touchpoints and trade fairs are perceived as touchpoints with great reach. Multiple interviewees highlighted that these touchpoints "just have a large reach", "reach large audience faster" and provide "more access to suppliers", illustrating the reach-efficiency of these touchpoints.

The efficiency dependency is especially a strong underlying factor for integration practices 1 and 5. Integration practice 1, "Creating awareness through on- and offline touchpoint presence", focuses on creating awareness at a large audience. A large reach efficiency is crucial to efficiently create awareness. This explains why mainly non-personal online touchpoints and trade fairs are integrated. Moreover, in integration practice 5, "Aligning operational and transactional matters through online touchpoints", the purpose of the touchpoints is purely transactional and therefore focuses on time efficiency. This explains why e-mails, mobile text messages, phone calls and video calls are integrated into this practice.

4.2.2 Relationship goal

The second dependency that emerged is the relationship goal dependency. The frequency and type of touchpoints used by B2B partners vary depending on whether they have a short-term or long-term relationship goal. When B2B relationships have a long-term goal, both partners are willing to put more effort into the relationship, which aligns with more frequent touchpoint interactions and more personal touchpoint interactions. Two micro-dependencies were identified from the interviews: the volume of business and the potential of the relationship. Both micro-dependencies contribute to having a long-term relationship goal.

Firstly, it can be posited that the greater the volume of business conducted, the greater the necessity for more frequent touchpoint interactions. One interviewee explained:

"We are now working with a retailer on a very big project, so a lot of products. So then it's also very important to have contact, just a lot of contact about that." - Internal interviewee 9

Moreover, a higher business volume also encourages the choice for more personal touchpoints. One interviewee illustrates this through a common practice of Plant Dairy Co.:

"Look for large parties, for example during the days when there are matches of Twente, then the account managers take those customers there. And then they can get a tour through the factory, they see a little bit how the processes go, that are often bigger customers, and then based on actually those days out, they built a relationship." - Internal interviewee 6

Secondly, the interviews showed that the higher the potential of the relationship, the greater the willingness to invest in the relationship by having more frequent and personal contact. One interviewee explained:

"With Plant Dairy Co. we do a few small articles and then once in six months or once in a quarter we have one short call or a short contact moment. [...] Of course, plant-based is also another relatively new category and we do want to grow in that. So, we may already be investing a disproportionate amount of time in it compared to what it yields, but that's also because we focus on that for a while, because we want to grow in it and our members find that important. Then, of course, in a very small package, which is still very small, but with a lot of potential, you can consciously put more time in it, but these are all choices." - External interviewee 6

Through all integration practices the business volume and potential determine the relationship goal that is desired. In turn, the relationship goal forms a significant underlying factor that shapes the touchpoint frequency and selection of touchpoint type. As all touchpoint interactions occur in the context of B2B relationships, the relationship goal dependency plays a crucial role in all integration practices.

4.2.3 Personal preference

The third dependency that emerged is personal preference. All touchpoint interactions, direct and indirect, are ultimately a result of human efforts. From the interviews, it became apparent that personal preference is inherent to these human efforts. Several responses started with statements such as "my preference" or "I prefer", showing how personal preferences are intrinsic to touchpoint interactions. These personal preferences play a role in determining the frequency and type of touchpoint interactions. While some interviewees preferred more touchpoint interactions and more personal touchpoints, others preferred less touchpoint interactions and fewer personal touchpoints. One interviewee explained:

"I very much like a very close and intensive contact with a customer, because I think that that gives you a better end result, but my colleague sometimes thinks we shouldn't ask too much of the customer." - Internal interviewee 5

This shows how touchpoint type and frequency depend on personal preferences. Moreover, it also shows the importance of mitigating the differences in personal preferences to accommodate the customer. As all touchpoint interactions directly or indirectly involve human individuals, the personal preference dependency plays a significant role in all integration practices.

4.2.4 Risk level

The final dependency that emerged was the risk level dependency. In high-risk scenarios trust is at stake, one interviewee mentioned that in high-risk scenarios "you go all the way back with trust". Therefore typically more frequent touchpoint interactions and more personal touchpoint interactions are desired in these scenarios. One internal interviewee explained this with the following example:

"If there's a supplier that has caused a recall the last few years. Well, then you can say based on the recall I definitely visit there. Or well anyway, go visit, have temporarily increased awareness, so to speak, so that you have temporary frequent contact with them." - External interviewee 4

Personal meetings not only contribute to rebuilding trust in high-risk situations, but they also add a certain weight to the situation. One interviewee explained this according to an anecdote from the past:

"So, of course, we have been in talks with Plant Dairy Co. for a long time about extending the contract […]. And a few things didn't go well there. And then by dropping by, we visited them, especially when we go there, it also indicates a certain weight to the agreement. Then it is a bit less non-committal. Then people really have to prepare and that's how you use it as well. So that is also the advantage." - External interviewee 5

Conversely, in low-risk situations, a lower touchpoint interaction frequency and fewer personal meetings are preferred. One interviewee explained, "if it goes well, you hear each other pretty little". The risk level dependency plays a role in all integration practices. Situations that are perceived as high risk encompass critical issues, sensitive negotiations, and new situations, including touchpoint interactions with new stakeholders and new products. Therefore there generally is a higher-level risk in integration practice 4, "Closing a settlement and maintaining contact through personal and visual touchpoints", and 6, "Managing high stakes and new situations through personal and real-time touchpoints", which explains why more personal touchpoints are used in these practices. Low-risk situations are usually daily routine interactions such as in integration practice 5, "Aligning operational and transactional matters through online touchpoints". This explains why less personal interactions are used in this practice.

4.3 Relationship-shaping mechanisms

4.3.1 Multi-sensory feedback

The first relationship-shaping mechanism that was identified is the multi-sensory feedback mechanism. This mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints provide sensory input for the development and continuous adaptation of impressions that shape B2B relationships. New B2B relationships start with both parties creating an initial impression of each other through the first touchpoint interactions. The interviews revealed that through the first touchpoint interactions, initial impressions are created from the company, the stakeholders, and the products. These initial impressions shape the next touchpoint interactions. However, these next touchpoint interactions provide new sensory inputs, and based on these new sensory inputs, both parties adjust their impressions, which in turn shape future touchpoint interactions. This adjustment process of impressions continues throughout the entire relationship. The interviews revealed that within this process multi-sensory touchpoints provide more sensory-rich inputs, which have a reinforcing effect on the development of impressions. Together this forms a multi-sensory feedback mechanism that consists of five micro-mechanisms: stereotyping, bias, environment, memory, and calculative evaluation.

From the interviews, it appeared that within the feedback mechanism, the use of senses plays a significant role in shaping impressions. The more senses involved in a touchpoint interaction, the more accurate an impression becomes. The interviewees explained that trade magazines, non-personal online touchpoints, online systems, e-mail, and mobile-text messages mostly provide textual and static visual inputs that require only the sense of sight. These touchpoints are mainly integrated into practices 1 and 2 in the trigger and problem analysis stage. Therefore textual and static visual inputs play a significant role in shaping initial impressions. Interviewees explained that because of this, the initial impressions are limited as they are "very general" and "don't go into depth". One interviewee elaborated that after a Google search the customer "only has the name, but then he still has no image of the company". As a result of limited sensory inputs in the trigger and problem analysis stage, initial impressions tend to be shaped by stereotypes and biases.

Stereotypes may help an individual to place a new company or stakeholder in their cognitive schema. On the one side, it functions as a 'mental shortcut' to quickly understand a company or stakeholder. However, on the other side, it can also lead to prejudices. One interviewee illustrated how the stereotype of a family company contributed to creating an initial impression and understanding of Plant Dairy Co.:

"So if you see Plant Dairy Co., it's a family company. This means a lot of things are not organized. Everybody is doing what he thinks is the best for the company, but that not always goes together and this is normal. [...] and so you get a good feeling of the person and of the company." - External interviewee 1

Furthermore, biases may arise from misinterpretations of the first touchpoint interactions. These biases may lead to inaccurate initial impressions that may unconsciously shape future touchpoint interactions. One interviewee illustrated this with a personal experience:

"You do sometimes misunderstand each other through the mail. Then you think: what a blunt guy. If you only have contact by e-mail, than in your mind you can already develop an impression of someone, that maybe subconsciously plays a role in other things." - Internal interviewee 4

Another critical aspect of the multi-sensory feedback mechanism is memory. Each impression of a touchpoint interaction leaves a memory. Based on this memory, together with new sensory input, impressions are changed to shape the next touchpoint interactions. Sometimes it occurs that there exists an initial memory from a prior collaboration in the past. Then this initial memory also plays a role in shaping the initial impression.

Overall the initial impressions provide a good but limited starting point and therefore are further developed and adjusted as the relationship matures. Multiple interviewees experienced that multi-sensory touchpoint interactions leave a stronger and longer-lasting memory. Phone calls and video calls provide intonation inputs that enable the sense of hearing. Moreover, video calls provide emotional visual cues and environment inputs that enhance the sense of sight. Ultimately physical touchpoint interactions provide full multi-sensory inputs that enable the senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. The use of these multiple senses in touchpoint interactions helps individuals to create a strong memory which changes impressions more fundamentally. One interviewee explained:

"People just get a lot of information on a day. They get too much information. So personal contact is always more distinctive." - Internal interviewee 7

Another micro-mechanism that plays a role in changing impressions is the environment. Multiple interviewees highlighted that additional environment inputs from touchpoints such as video calls and physical meetings contribute to enhancing initial limited impressions. One interviewee explained how physical touchpoint interactions contributed to a change of impression:

"I also notice for example, when [Customer] had physically visited us with a few people, that the interactions in the week after that were very different as prior to the visit. [...] If people come here and they speak to us and they see the conviviality of us, our family business, and they go down and they see all that production capacity but they also see, for example, that we fill for other competitors of theirs. Then you just notice that they start to think very differently about us and that that is precisely what makes our growth potential only greater[..]. That they say, oh they are actually not a small farmer from the east of the country at all, but that is a really serious professional company." - Interviewee 8

Finally, the last micro-mechanism is calculative evaluation. In addition to cognitive mechanisms that change impressions, calculative evaluations also contribute to a change of impression. One interviewee illustrated this:

"*We carry out so-called supplier monitoring, so all our suppliers are assessed on a number of KPIs. […] All those parameters, we take them into account in a kind of sum deduction and that the supplier ends up with a certain score and that score tells me whether that supplier is a low, medium or high risk supplier and depending on that classification, I decide what to do with that supplier." - External supplier 4*

Overall, the multi-sensory feedback mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints provide various sensory inputs that shape B2B relationships. In the trigger and problem analysis stage the touchpoints integrated into practices 1 and 2, offer limited sensory experiences shaping the initial impressions. During the following stages more and more multi-sensory touchpoints are integrated in practices 3, 4, 5 and 6, which enhance the impressions, leave a stronger memory, and ultimately develop a more fundamental image of the company, stakeholders, and products.

4.3.2 Familiarity

The second mechanism that was identified is familiarity. This mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints build familiarity and how this familiarity shapes B2B relationships. The interviews indicated that through touchpoint interactions familiarity is developed. Meaning that both parties recognize the existence of each other and possess a certain level of knowledge about each other. In turn, the established familiarity facilitates easier and more efficient interactions in the subsequent touchpoints.

The interviewees highlighted that familiarity is established through intensive contact. In circumstances where there is minimal familiarity, such as in the context of a new company, new stakeholders, or new products, physical personal touchpoint interactions and a high frequency of touchpoint interactions contribute to building familiarity. The interviewees highlighted that particularly offline personal touchpoints are crucial in establishing familiarity. Offline personal touchpoints provide more visual context that creates the feeling of "knowing each other" as you "have a face with it". One interviewee emphasized:

"I think basically, it's good to have one kick-off once, something physical and whether that is at such a fair or that we invite them here. I think it's very nice to have a physical contact first, to really have an image of that and so on." - External interviewee 5

Another interviewee explained how a high e-mail frequency contributed to establishing familiarity with a new stakeholder:

"You send a lot through e-mail and at a certain point, you know a bit of each other. Like, well, I know who I'm dealing with." - Internal interviewee 6

The interviews revealed that once a certain level of familiarity is established a high frequency of touchpoint interactions is no longer needed, it becomes easier to reach out to each other, and subsequent touchpoint interactions become smoother and more efficient. One interviewee provided the following example of the change in frequency:

"For example we experienced that with [customer and another customer] we had a weekly contact, just online with Teams to go over things, to really keep a finger on the pulse. If you get to know each other a bit better, say as customer and supplier, then yes it will be a bit less contact and then you will see that things will run more smoothly […]. Then it is also a little less necessary to have very intensive contact." - Internal interviewee 2

Other interviewees explained that through familiarity it becomes easier to reach out to each other. Multiple interviewees provide similar explanations to:

"And now with [customer] we have very good contact. So yes then calling also goes easier. If I call, they answer the phone or call me back." - internal interviewee 9

Moreover, several interviewees stressed that through familiarity the subsequent touchpoint interactions became easier. Multiple responses described that the interactions became "less formal", "easier", "warmer", "light-hearted" and "more to the point". Furthermore, it was mentioned that particularly online touchpoint interactions became easier when a certain level of familiarity was established. One interviewee illustrated this by explaining his experience with video calls:

"I find Teams just less personal. I also find it strange if I don't know someone to sit immediately with such a camera between the two of us. That is a bit weird.[...] Look if you have met each other once physically, then you know, then you can say, shall we do such teams, it is more convenient." - Internal interviewee 3

Overall, the familiarity mechanism shows how on- and offline touchpoints build familiarity and how this shapes B2B relationships. Especially in the trigger and problem analysis and pre-bid engagement stages during integration practices 1, 2, and 3 there is minimal familiarity. This explains why there usually is a higher frequency of touchpoint interactions in these stages. Moreover, it explains the need for a physical meeting during practice 3. In the implementation and operations stages, there exists a certain familiarity level. This explains why touchpoint interactions occur less frequently and why practice 5 mainly integrates online touchpoints. Additionally, the familiarity level also explains why more frequent and more personal touchpoints are necessary in new situations such as in practice 6.

4.3.3 Mutual understanding

The third mechanism is the mutual understanding mechanism. This mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints help create a mutual understanding between two parties, fostering collaboration and improving the B2B relationship. The interviews revealed that both the supplier and the customer are continuously trying to align and understand each other through touchpoint interactions. Internal interviewees from the supplier side explained that understanding the latent customer needs helps them to identify new opportunities, unburden the customer, and enhance collaboration. They stressed that this is crucial for the development of loyalty and commitment. One interviewee explained that understanding is developed:

"By asking through, by listening carefully to what signals they are giving and to see how we can meet their needs." - Internal interviewee 8

The interviews revealed that on- and offline touchpoints contribute to developing a mutual understanding through providing textual, verbal, and non-verbal cues. Hereby, direct real-time touchpoints were perceived as particularly convenient as these touchpoints enable the possibility to quickly clarify cues or to act on perceived cues. Multiple interviewees explained that online touchpoints such as online systems, e-mails, and mobile text messages mainly provide textual cues. Therefore, they are specifically useful for transactional alignments. However, these touchpoints do not provide any verbal or non-verbal cues. Interviewees "miss certain intonation" which causes e-mails and text messages to come across differently than intended. Moreover, sometimes language translations fail to fully capture the original meaning. Consequently, interviewees sometimes experienced a lack of contextual understanding leading to misinterpretations and misunderstandings. One interviewee explained:

"Sometimes, it is just going in, in wording or in translation, sometimes just the essence then becomes just different." - Internal interviewee 5

Phone calls already enhance the ability to develop an understanding as these touchpoint interactions do provide verbal cues. Furthermore, they also allow for direct real-time interactions. The interviewees explained that this enables them to “ask through” to understand better “what is going on”. Moreover, the ability to use intonation helps them to convey involved emotions if necessary. One interviewee illustrated how intonation and asking through during a phone call can contribute to understanding customer needs and opening new doors:

“How you then deliver the message, and how you convince someone. […] they will probably come up with arguments like: yes, but we already have some plant-based cheese or we have this and that. It could then be a question, for example: how satisfied are you with your current supplier? and give a grade from one to ten? Yes, then they never give ten, they give eight, nine. I say, that’s a nice mark, but I say, then you’re not on a ten. What are you missing then? Well, then starts, then starts the conversation.” - Internal interviewee 3

Even though the verbal cues in phone calls already enhance the development of emotional understanding, they are still limited due to the lack of non-verbal cues. Video calls offer a visual aspect that does provide some non-verbal cues. Interviewees explained that through video calls they could see someone’s reaction and read “facial expressions”, which improved their emotional understanding. Furthermore, they emphasized that the capacity to share one’s screen and the ability to involve multiple stakeholders fostered easy alignment and understanding. One interviewee explained:

“You see the interaction with, and to see your face, and if someone smiles or look angry, that brings a lot of effect in. Especially when you don’t know people so much then then it could help to, yeah, understand better. Maybe the feelings or why they decided not to give you this prize or why they are not able to do it.” - External interviewee 2

On the other hand, some interviewees also stressed that it remained difficult to “grasp a person’s expression or reaction totally right.” Though video calls. Sometimes there are technical difficulties like delayed connections or low-resolution screens, causing loss of non-verbal cues. Moreover, video calls do not provide as many non-verbal cues as physical personal touchpoints do. One interviewee illustrated:

“And like this with a Teams, I only see you face, I don’t see whether you are fiddling with your hand. So, then you cannot sense as good what impact your words have on the other person. So you see less.” - External interviewee 5

Therefore the interviews revealed that physical personal touchpoints provide the most cues to develop mutual understanding. They not only provide non-verbal cues through a visual aspect but also through a physical aspect. Multiple interviewees mentioned similar statements as “that success is digitally just difficult” and “physically, that does work the best”.

The mutual understanding mechanism thus explains how on- and offline touchpoints provide textual, verbal and non-verbal cues that develop a mutual understanding between two parties. This mechanism plays a crucial role in all integration practices throughout the customer journey, as within B2B relationships both parties are continually striving to gain a deeper understanding of each other to foster and enhance collaboration.

4.3.4 Personal bonding

The fourth mechanism that the interviews revealed is personal bonding. The personal bonding mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints facilitate two parties to connect on a deeper emotional level, thereby strengthening the B2B relationships. Ultimately, B2B relationships remain a result of human efforts. The interviews highlighted that it is inherent to humans to search for deeper emotional connections through their interactions. Multiple interviewees stressed that developing a personal bond in addition to a professional bond strengthens B2B relationships by enhancing trust, commitment, loyalty, and goodwill. One interviewee explained:

"S*ometimes you can just only talk about work. But of course, there is more than just work and I think that if you find each other in that respect, in that aspect too, then I think that that strengthens the relationship and maybe that also makes them more likely to come to you because they trust you and they know: hey, this is someone who sees me as a company and as a person and has the best interests at heart with me." - Internal interviewee 5*

The interviews revealed three key activities that contribute to the development of personal bonds: having personal conversations, sharing confidential information, and engaging in enjoyable activities. From the interviews, it was found that direct real-time touchpoints such as phone calls, video calls, and physical personal touchpoints facilitate these personal bonding activities most effectively. The intonation and visual elements inherent to these touchpoints provide a more personal feeling. Phone calls and video calls enable the possibility of having more personal conversations. Multiple interviewees explained they often start a phone call and video call with a small personal conversation before proceeding with the business at hand. Furthermore, it allows for more personal or light-hearted conversations in between, like one interviewee explained:

"If you call, then you can maybe with your intonation make that just a little bit more personal or make a joke in between, what you would not do on the mail." - Internal interviewee 4

Even though phone calls and video calls enable more personal conversations, the interviewees did mention that they still experience an emotional distance in these touchpoints. This emotional distance may keep them from sharing more confidential information and forming an emotional connection on the deepest level. Moreover, the interviewees highlighted that the online environment of a video call does not feel fully confidential. One interviewee explained how emotional distance gradually gets smaller through more personal touchpoints:

"The moment you really sit together with each other, that's where you get closer to each other. Look with e-mail there is a distance, with phone calling that distance gets smaller, again, but if you sit together then that distance is not there anymore. Then you build a relationship more than through the phone, so I think that's just really important." - Internal interviewee 9

The interviews thus revealed that personal bonding is most effectively fostered through physical personal touchpoints, where there is no emotional distance. Furthermore, physical personal touchpoints allow for the possibility of doing an enjoyable activity, while also facilitating a trustworthy environment which encourages the parties to share confidential information. One interviewee explained:

"After all, it is when you see someone […] then you also have other topics of conversation[...] You go out to dinner for example with a customer. Then you also maybe get a little bit more into the private ambiance, or then, you might have a talk about hobbies [...] Then it all gets a bit more light-hearted too and it's just a bit less informal and then it just gets a bit more personal. [...] And I do think that can have a lot of impact on your contacts. [...] just the goodwill factor." - Internal interviewee 2

Overall, the personal bonding mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints contribute to the formation of personal bonds that strengthen B2B relationships. The mechanism is particularly active in integration practice 3 where the foundation of a personal bond is built through progressively personal touchpoints. Moreover, it is active in practice 4 where sustaining personal bonds through physical personal touchpoints plays a crucial role in maintaining relationships.

4.3.5 Trust building

Finally, the fifth mechanism is the trust building mechanism. This mechanism explains how on- and offline touchpoints build and restore trust, and how the established level of trust shapes subsequent touchpoint interactions. The interviews revealed that trust is actively built in the early relationship stages, with each touchpoint interaction contributing to building trust. Trust is built on three elements, the company as a whole, the stakeholders involved, and the products itself. As the relationship matures, a certain level of trust is established, providing stability in the relationship. However, this established trust can be harmed in high stakes situations or may diminish in new situations, as explained in Sub-section 4.2.4. Consequently, touchpoint interactions after such a situation actively contribute to rebuilding and restoring trust.

The interviews revealed that trust building and restoring is most effectively done through physical personal touchpoints. It became apparent that through online touchpoints trust builds slower and trust-building is rather driven by performance. One interviewee explained that to build trust through online touchpoints "You have to be tight and set and performing well". A common practice of Plant Dairy Co. to build trust through online touchpoints is to show commitment by sharing market analysis and market opportunities with the customers. This shows the willingness to help a customer, which builds trust. One external interviewee confirmed this, by explaining:

"Yes and indeed, coming up with good proposals like: hey, we see in the market data that product A, B, and C are very big in Belgium or in Germany, would this be something for the Dutch market as well? Just an occasional concrete proposal or idea, which gets us back on our toes. Like oh, I hadn't looked at it like that before. So, giving you new insights, not-daily please, but just once in a while you know. That also builds trust." - External interviewee 6

Through offline touchpoints, trust is also built through showing commitment. Multiple interviewees explained that physical personal touchpoints require more effort to organize and therefore function as a form of proof of a party's commitment. This commitment builds trust. One interviewee explained that Plant Dairy Co. uses physical personal touchpoints, such as personally delivering samples, to demonstrate their commitment and build trust. This interviewee mentioned that customers then:

"Come back to it later and say: I really appreciated the fact that you could bring it yourself, even though it was last minute that you made time for that. [...] I think that also builds trust." - Internal interviewee 2

Additionally, physical personal touchpoints build trust by providing an emotional weight. Physical personal touchpoints enable parties to speak directly face-to-face to each other. The interviews indicated that having real eye contact while making verbal commitments enhances trust. One interviewee illustrated this with a recent anecdote:

"Look, that Korean was here and said I will book 10 000 euros to you. Yes, if he hadn't been here, I wouldn't have trusted him. But now that I've seen him, he has said that in front of my eyes, I do trust him. Well, and if he had done it through teams, I would have thought, what a bullshit, then I wouldn't have believed him." - Internal interviewee 7

This shows the cruciality of physical personal touchpoints in building trust. The emotional weight is also the reason why physical personal touchpoints were found most effective in rebuilding trust in high stakes situations. Making apologies and reinforcing commitments in front of someone's eyes increases the perceived sincerity and contributes to restoring trust. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that as trust is built in the company as a whole, the stakeholders involved, and the products itself, it needs to be built again if new stakeholders arise or new products are implemented.

Overall, the trust-building mechanism explains how trust is built through on- and offline touchpoints and how this strengthens B2B relationships. The trust building mechanism explains that physical personal touchpoints are integrated in practices 3 and 4 to reinforce trust building in the early relationship stages. Moreover, the mechanism also explains why personal physical touchpoints are integrated in practice 6 to rebuild trust.

4.4 Integrating the findings

The findings of this research enhance the understanding of how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships and therefore enable a refinement of the conceptual mechanistic framework explained in in Subsection 2.4. Figure 3 shows the enhanced mechanistic framework. The top of the framework visualizes B2B relationships in a grey arrow. B2B relationships build on trust and commitment and develop over time through multiple relationship stages including awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution. The bottom of the framework visualizes the on- and offline touchpoints. To provide a more nuanced understanding of how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships, the touchpoints from the conceptual framework are expanded into nine specific touchpoints and categorised based on their interaction nature. Hereby, the non-personal offline touchpoints include trade magazines, the non-personal online touchpoints include online media and online systems, the personal online touchpoints include e-mails, phone calls, mobile text messages (SMS and WhatsApp), and video calls, and the personal offline touchpoints include physical meetings and trade fairs. The different shades of blue represent these different touchpoint categories. The middle of the framework visualizes the complex dynamic relationship between the on-and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. The dark blue curved arrows highlight the continuous back-and-forth interplay between on-and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. Between the curved arrows, the framework explains how the specific on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships by visualizing the identified on- and offline touchpoint integration practices, touchpoint integration dependencies, and relationship-shaping mechanisms.

Firstly, the research identified six key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices. These practices are represented by the white ovals in Figure 3. These integration practices reveal recurring patterns in on- and offline touchpoint integration, that show that for each key practice, a sequence of touchpoints with similar characteristics is integrated. Moreover, the integration practices reveal where in the B2B customer journey specific on- and offline touchpoints are integrated, enabling a more refined understanding of how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships. To the right of the on- and offline touchpoints in the framework, the different customer journey phases are shown. It became apparent that touchpoint integration in the trigger and problem analysis, pre-bid engagement, and negotiation stages is more structured than in the implementation and operations stages. In practice 1 and 2 in the trigger and problem analysis stage, mainly non-personal touchpoints and trade fairs are integrated. After that, in practice 3, the touchpoints gradually progress towards more personal touchpoints. Ultimately, in practice 4 a physical personal meeting is crucial to close a settlement. From that point on, the touchpoints become more mixed. The implementation and operations stages consist of the same practices. In both stages, the online personal and non-personal touchpoints are mainly used in practice 5, personal and visual touchpoints are mainly used in practice 4, and personal and real-time touchpoints are used in practice 6.

Secondly, the research identified four on- and offline touchpoint integration dependencies including efficiency, relationship goal, personal preference, and risk level. The framework represents these by the dark blue rectangles. These dependencies differ per B2B relationship and form the underlying factors that determine why and how suppliers and/or customers integrate certain touchpoints for certain practices.

Finally, the research identified five relationship-shaping mechanisms including the multi-sensory feedback mechanism, familiarity mechanism, mutual understanding mechanism, personal bonding mechanism, and trust building mechanism. These mechanisms reveal how touchpoints shape B2B relationships. Moreover, they explain the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. The framework visualizes how each on- and offline touchpoint provides inputs for the relationship-shaping mechanisms. This reveals that especially personal touchpoints reinforce the relationship-shaping mechanisms. Additionally, the framework demonstrates that while relationship-shaping mechanisms are present throughout the whole customer journey, they are more active in certain practices than in others. The coloured dots on the white ovals correspond with the colours of the mechanisms, thereby indicating which mechanisms are active in which practices.

In total, the mechanistic framework synthesises the research findings by visualising the micro-foundations that determine how on- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey shape B2B relationships.

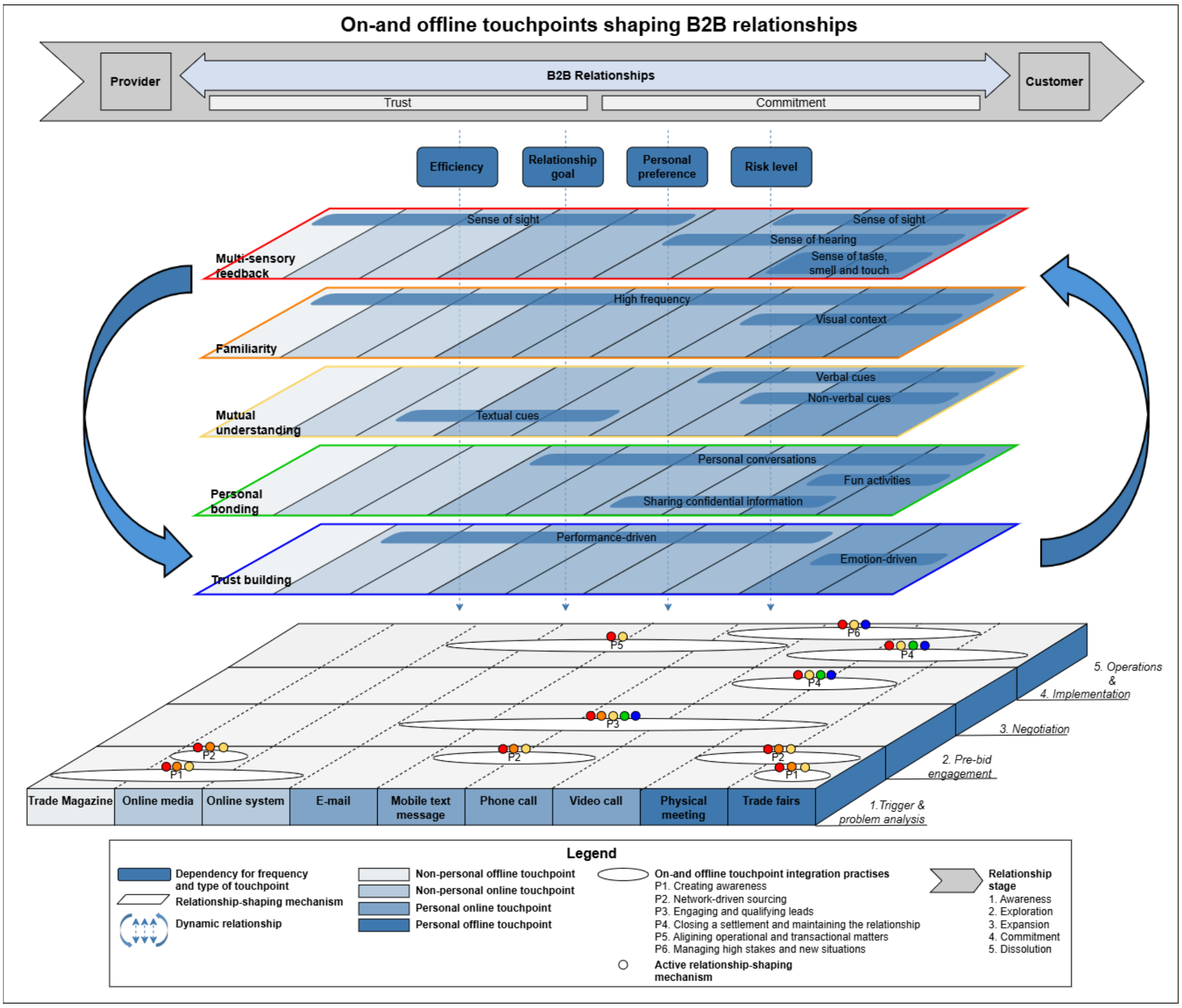

Figure 3 Mechanistic framework of on- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion of key findings

While the existing literature acknowledges that on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; De Keyser et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2017; Zolkiewski et al., 2017), literature on touchpoints and B2B relationships have been discussed in isolation. Whereas the existing touchpoint literature mainly focuses on explaining how touchpoints can be managed (De Keyser et al., 2020; Purmonen et al., 2023; Witell et al., 2020), the relationship literature largely focuses on understanding the complex dynamic and evolving nature of B2B relationships from a macro-level perspective (Dwyer et al., 1987; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002; Wilson, 1995). Both domains do not pay specific attention to the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships. Consequently, there is a limited understanding of the micro-foundations underlying the role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. Hence, this study aimed to explore what patterns and mechanisms exist in on- and offline touchpoint interactions between individual actors at the provider and the customer and how these patterns and mechanisms shape the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. Using a qualitative approach, this study conducted a case study to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. This revealed six key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices and four integration dependencies. Moreover, the research identified five relationship-shaping mechanisms that explain how specific on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships. Together these form the micro-foundations that explain how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships.

Firstly, the research identified six key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices in B2B customer journeys. These integration practices build on existing touchpoint and B2B relationship literature. The existing touchpoint literature highlighted that each distinct touchpoint serves a different purpose depending on the customer's need at a particular point in the customer journey (Lundin & Kindström, 2023). The touchpoint integration practices build on this knowledge by clustering the touchpoints and corresponding customer needs per key practice in the customer journey. This revealed patterns in on- and offline touchpoint integration showing that per key practice a sequence of on- and offline touchpoints with similar characteristics is integrated. Furthermore, it is notable that the identified integration practices evolve over time, which is in line with previous literature indicating specific stages in the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Purmonen et al., 2023; Sahhar et al., 2021; Voorhees et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020). Additionally, the integration practices seem highly related to the nature of interaction used to categorize touchpoints (Manser Payne et al., 2017).

Secondly, the research identified four on- and offline touchpoint integration dependencies. These dependencies indicate how the integration of on- and offline touchpoints depends on situational factors. This finding is consistent with the existing literature that highlights that managing relationships through touchpoints is complex as the cognitive responses of customers to the touchpoint interactions are situation and context-dependent (De Keyser et al., 2015; De Keyser et al., 2020; Holmlund, 2004).

Thirdly, the research identified five relationship-shaping mechanisms. These mechanisms show how on- and offline touchpoints in touchpoint sequences shape B2B relationships. This finding is consistent with the interaction-level theory explained in the existing B2B literature, which also highlighted that relationships are rather shaped by touchpoint sequences than by one single touchpoint (Ford, 1980; Holmlund, 2004; Schurr, 2007; Schurr et al., 2008). Furthermore, the mechanisms explain that relationships are shaped over time, which affirms prior conceptualisations of relationships as developing processes (Dwyer et al., 1987; Wilson, 1995). Additionally, some of the identified relationship-shaping mechanisms are also related to the existing literature. The multi-sensory feedback mechanism fits well with the relationship learning mechanism that demonstrates a continuous cycle of impression adjustment. Especially, the stereotyping and memory micro mechanism aligns well with the existing literature (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Shamsollahi et al., 2021). Moreover, the personal bonding mechanism confirms the importance of social bonds as an antecedent for relationship quality (Grandinetti et al., 2020; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002; Wilson, 1995). Finally, the trust building mechanism reinforces the central role of trust and commitment in relationships as indicated in the existing literature (Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002).

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study advances the literature by providing an enhanced understanding of how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships. This study contributes to the much-needed research on the implications of the emerged online touchpoints on relationships by adding to three existing literature domains (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020).

Firstly, this research contributes to the touchpoint management literature. By adopting a focus on the B2B context, this research contributes to the resolution of the disparity between B2B and B2C focus in the touchpoint management literature (Gao et al., 2022; Hofacker et al., 2020; Lasrado et al., 2023; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2002; Witell et al., 2020). The on- and offline touchpoint integration dependencies explain how the type and frequency of touchpoint interactions depend on relationship-specific factors. This empirical insight contributes to understanding the relational complexity involved in touchpoint management in the B2B context. Moreover, while the existing touchpoint management literature in the B2B context largely employs a macro-level perspective to explain touchpoint management, this research takes a micro-level perspective. Through a case study, this research revealed pragmatic micro-level insights in the form of six on- and offline touchpoint integration practices (De Keyser et al., 2020; Purmonen et al., 2023; Witell et al., 2020). These practices illustrate how contemporary B2B suppliers integrate on- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey. It became evident that whereas in the early customer journey phases touchpoints gradually transition from non-personal to more personal touchpoints, in the later customer journey phases on- and offline touchpoint integration is more mixed. Furthermore, the integration practices revealed patterns indicating that per key practice sequences of on- and offline touchpoints with similar characteristics were integrated. These pragmatic micro-level insights enhance the understanding of touchpoint management in the B2B context.

Secondly, this research contributes to the B2B relationship literature. The existing literature attempts to address the dynamic and evolving nature of B2B relationships by conceptualizing relationships as interplays of variables or as developing processes (Dwyer et al., 1987; Gil-Saura et al., 2009; Grandinetti et al., 2020; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Lacobucci & Hibbard, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Verhoef et al., 2002). In line with the research of Wilson (1995), this research expands these conceptualisations by placing relationship variables in the context of a developing process. The identified relationship-shaping mechanisms reveal what micro-processes shape B2B relationships and provide a more fundamental explanation of how relationship variables are developed over time, thereby advancing the conceptualisation of B2B relationships.

Thirdly, this research contributes to the combined body of literature on touchpoint management in B2B relationships. While most existing research in this literature domain views touchpoints as single interactions causing single changes of perceptions, this research broadens the understanding of the role of touchpoints in B2B relationships by adopting a multi-interaction level perspective (Schurr et al., 2008). Furthermore, while existing literature lacks a specific focus on the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints, this research specifically investigated the role of on- and offline touchpoints, thereby advancing the understanding of the implications of online touchpoints on B2B relationships (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Witell et al., 2020). The identified relationship-shaping mechanisms not only explain what micro-processes shape B2B relationships, they also explain the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in specific touchpoint sequences that shape B2B relationships.

Moreover, this research advances the understanding of additional situational and contextual dependencies that influence the use of on- and offline touchpoints. Even though the existing research stresses that managing relationships through touchpoints is difficult because the cognitive responses of customers to touchpoint interactions are situation and context-dependent, the literature does not explore these situation and context-dependent factors (De Keyser et al., 2015; De Keyser et al., 2020). This research enhanced the understanding of these underlying factors by identifying four on- and offline touchpoint integration dependencies. Finally, this research integrates the findings into a mechanistic framework that visualizes the complex dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. Thereby, the framework provides a foundational understanding, which contributes to the call for further research on the long-term implications of online touchpoints for customer-firm interactions (MSI, 2022).

5.3 Managerial implications

The emergence of online channels has transformed the B2B landscape and increased the complexity of managing B2B relationships through touchpoints (Aichner & Gruber, 2017; Lundin & Kindström, 2023). Consequently, well-balanced omnichannel and multichannel marketing strategies are crucial for contemporary B2B firms to build and maintain relationships. This research supports managers of B2B supplier firms to develop well-balanced omnichannel marketing strategies by providing a framework of the foundational dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships. The framework supports the development of an omnichannel marketing strategy in two ways.

Firstly, the framework may function as a practical guidance in developing an overall omnichannel marketing strategy. The framework shows six key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices that reveal patterns in on- and offline touchpoint integration. These patterns reveal that per key practice touchpoints with similar characteristics are integrated. Furthermore, they show that the integration practices evolve throughout the customer journey. Managers can use these insights to understand which touchpoint characteristics best serve certain practices at certain moments in the customer journey. This understanding may support them in developing an overall omnichannel marketing strategy. In doing so, the key on- and offline touchpoint integration practices may function as practical guidance.

Secondly, the framework supports and encourages managers to customise the omnichannel marketing strategy per B2B relationship. The framework highlights the complex dynamic relationship between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships, by conceptualising the dynamics as an interplay of dependencies and relationship-shaping mechanisms. To effectively manage all B2B relationships, managers should customise the overall omnichannel marketing strategy per relationship according to these dynamics. The dependencies in the framework support managers in understanding the underlying contextual factors that determine the cognitive responses to touchpoint interactions in a specific relationship. Each relationship has a different efficiency, a different goal, different stakeholders with diverse personal preferences, and a different risk level. We advise managers to identify and define how each relationship depends on these underlying factors and consider this in customising the omnichannel marketing strategy. Additionally, the relationship-shaping mechanisms reveal how touchpoint sequences shape B2B relationships through mechanisms. This provides managers with an understanding of how each on- and offline touchpoint within a touchpoint sequence can boost or hinder relationship building and maintaining. This understanding in combination with the defined dependencies supports managers in effectively integrating on- and offline touchpoints per B2B relationship, thereby customising the overall omnichannel marketing strategy.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This research explored the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in shaping B2B relationships. The findings of this research underscore the prevalence of the digitalization trend and emphasize the necessity to continue the study of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships to understand how the touchpoint shift changes B2B relationships in the long term. The findings of this research elicit future research directions.

Firstly, future research could further explore the phenomena of on-and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships in other business contexts. This research performed a case study on a single B2B firm in the food industry by conducting interviews with the firm's employees and customers. While this revealed in-depth empirical insights into on- and offline touchpoint integration practices and how these shape B2B relationships, it also forms limitations. Several B2B firms integrate on- and offline touchpoints in different ways. B2B firms of different sizes might be more or less advanced in digitalization and need to manage a different number of relationships. Furthermore, B2B firms in other industries and sectors might have different types of relationships that may fit other on- and offline touchpoint integrations better. Consequently, the touchpoint integration practices and the activity of the relationship-shaping mechanisms throughout the customer journey might be different in other B2B contexts. Hence, it would be interesting to deepen the understanding of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships by further exploring other B2B contexts.

Secondly, future research could deepen the understanding of the dependencies and mechanisms. It was noted that the identified dependencies and mechanisms are interconnected with each other, however, this was not further addressed in our study. It would be interesting for future research to further investigate the interconnectedness to deepen the understanding of how on- and offline touchpoints shape B2B relationships.

Thirdly, future research could further advance the dynamics visualized in the mechanistic framework by including the role of involved stakeholders. The research observed that various customers are involved in different touchpoints and different customer journey phases. As this research focused on the exact role of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships, it did not address the different stakeholders involved. It would be worthwhile to further investigate the role of involved stakeholders in the dynamics between on- and offline touchpoints and B2B relationships and include this in the mechanistic framework.

Fourthly, a future research topic that emerged is the role of on- and offline touchpoints in facilitating transitions between customer journey phases. The identified relationship-shaping mechanisms explain how current touchpoints shape future touchpoint interactions. Therefore, they have the potential to explain how on-and offline touchpoints in a specific customer journey phase contribute to transitioning to the next customer journey phase. As this study focused on the role of on- and offline touchpoints in B2B relationships, it has not paid attention to this potential of the relationship-shaping mechanisms. It would be interesting for future research to take the relationship-shaping mechanisms as a starting point to further investigate the role of on- and offline touchpoints in customer journey phase transitioning.

The last matter that came up for further research is the role of online systems. The on- and offline touchpoint integration practices already revealed that online systems take a central role in the customer journey. During the interviews, a small trend was detected that online systems might increasingly replace e-mails. As of too little evidence in the relatively small sample size this has not been further addressed in this study. It could be interesting for future research to further explore this trend and investigate how this changes B2B relationships in the long term.

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8. APPENDIX

Appendix A Interview guide internal interviews

Topic 1: Introduction

1. What exactly is your position?
    - How long have you been working here?
    - What do your daily activities/responsibilities look like?
2. What are your responsibilities in terms of customer relations?
    - For which customers are you responsible?
    - Which persons or functions do you often speak to?
    - What goal do you have with your contact with Plant Dairy Co?

Topic 2: On- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey

3. What types of on- and offline touchpoints do you have with your customers during the customer journey?
    - What on-and offline touchpoints do you use to create awareness?
    - How do you get in touch with potential customers?
    - What on-and offline interactions do you have before a settlement with a customer?
    - What on- and offline interactions do you have with your customers during the first purchases?
    - What on- and offline touchpoints do you use to maintain the relationship with your customers?
4. Why do these types of on- and offline touchpoints change per stage in the customer journey?
    - Do you have a different goal with your touchpoints depending on the stage in the customer journey?
5. Do the types of on- and offline touchpoints change as the relationships develop?
    - Do you use different types of on- and offline touchpoints in beginning relationships than in more developed ones?
    - In what ways does this change
    - Why is there a difference in that?

Topic 3: On- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

6. If you critically think about your touchpoints with customers, do you feel that there has been a shift in type of touchpoints in the past years?
    - Do you have more interactions through WhatsApp, phone, email, video calling, and social media or do you still have a lot of physical contact?
    - Has the corona pandemic affected how you interact with your customers now?
    - Can you describe a specific regular process that always used to go physically face-to-face, but is now done digitally?
        - o What was the reason for this? What factors were considered in making this choice?
    - How has this shift changed your relationship with your customers? What are the differences?
7. Do you have the feeling that perhaps subconsciously small things have changed in the way you interact?
    - Has the tone of your interactions changed?
    - Has the frequency and duration of your interactions changed?

- Has there been any change in your response time to questions of customer?
- Do you experience that customers nowadays have different preferences or expectations in the way they want to interact with you?

8. How have these changes in touchpoint interactions affected your relationship with your customers?
    - Do you feel that your relationships have become less personal? Or would you rather say they are more effective?
    - In what ways do these changes in touchpoint interactions affect your trust in your customers?
    - In what ways do these changes in touchpoint interactions affect your commitment to your customers? How has it changed your relationship goals?
    - Can you give an example of a situation (interactions after the changes) from which you noticed that a relationship had changed?
9. Can you describe a specific moment when you experienced that offline contact was crucial to solve a problem or strengthen the relationship?
    - Why wouldn't that have succeeded online?
    - In what ways did this strengthen the relationship?
    - Can you give an example of what changed in the relationship?
        - o How did your interactions with the customer change after you spoke to them face-to-face?
        - o How did your trust and commitment to the customer change after you spoke to them face-to-face?
10. Can you give a specific example of a situation where online contact worked more efficiently or better than offline contact?
    - Why did this work better online?
    - How did that affect the relationship?
    - Can you give an example of what changed in the relationship?
        - o How did your interactions with the customer change after you had a personal online interaction (e.g. email, phone call, video call)?
        - o How did your interactions with the customer change after you had a non-personal interaction (e.g. social media, electronic newsletter)?
        - o How did your trust and commitment to the customer change after you interacted with them online?

Topic 4: Wrap-up

11. What is the ideal balance between on- and offline touchpoint interactions for you?
12. In the long term, how do you think more online touchpoints will change the relationship between customers and suppliers?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share about the role of on-and-offline touchpoints in B2B relationships that we haven't discussed yet? Or anything else that might be relevant to this research?

Appendix B Interview guide external interviews

Topic 1: Introduction

1. What exactly is your position?
   - How long have you been working here?
   - What do your daily activities/responsibilities look like?
2. What are your responsibilities in terms of supplier relations?
   - Which persons or functions do you often speak to?
   - What goal do you have with your contact with Plant Dairy Co?
3. How would you describe your relationship with Plant Dairy Co?
   - What is your goal with this relationship?
   - How advanced do you think this relationship is?

Topic 2: On- and offline touchpoints in the customer journey

4. How does your procurement process look like?
   - How do you become aware of the existence of certain suppliers?
   - How do you work internally to evaluate a potential supplier and make the decision to contact them?
   - How do you decide to work with a particular supplier?
   - How does the negotiation process work?
   - How do you work internally to evaluate existing suppliers?
5. What types of online and offline touchpoints did you have with Plant Dairy Co. during your customer journey with them?
   - How did you become aware of the existence of Plant Dairy Co?
   - How did Plant Dairy Co. get in touch with you or how did you contact them?
   - What on- and offline interactions did you have with Plant Dairy Co. prior to selecting them as your supplier?
   - What on- and offline interactions did you have with Plant Dairy Co. during the first purchases?
   - What on- and offline interactions do you have with Plant Dairy Co. now to maintain the relationship?
6. What are your expectations and preferences in touchpoint interactions with suppliers?
   - Has your preference in type of contact changed in recent years? How and why?
   - Does the way in which Plant Dairy Co. communicates with you always fits your needs?
   - How does Plant Dairy Co. differ from other suppliers in the way they interact with you?
   - Do you have any specific examples where another company had a better or worse approach in their online or offline contact?
   - Are there any online or offline touchpoints that you miss or feel are redundant? Think of social media posts, newsletters, emails, etc.

Topic 3: On- and offline touchpoints shaping B2B relationships

7. If you critically think about your touchpoints with Plant Dairy Co., do you feel that there has been a shift in type of touchpoints in the past years?
   - Do you have more interactions through WhatsApp, phone, email, video calling, social media or do you still have a lot of physical contact?
   - Has the corona pandemic affected how you interact with Plant Dairy Co. now?
   - Can you describe a specific regular process that always used to go physically face-to-face, but is now done digitally?
     - What was the reason for this? What factors were considered in making this choice?

- How has this shift changed your relationship with Plant Dairy Co? What are the differences?

8. Do you have the feeling that perhaps subconsciously small things have changed in the way you interact?
    - Has the tone of your interactions changed?
    - Has the frequency and duration of your interactions changed?
    - Has there been any change in the response time to your questions? Does the response time affect your perception of the relationship?
9. How have these changes in touchpoint interactions affected your relationship with Plant Dairy Co?
    - Do you feel that your relationship has become less personal? Or would you rather say it is more effective?
    - In what ways do these changes in touchpoint interactions affect your trust in Plant Dairy Co?
    - In what ways do these changes in touchpoint interactions affect your commitment to Plant Dairy Co? How has it changed your relationship goal?
    - Can you give an example of a situation (interactions after the changes) from which you noticed that the relationship has changed?
10. Can you describe a specific moment when you experienced that an offline interaction was crucial to solve a problem or strengthen the relationship?
    - Why wouldn't that have succeeded online?
    - In what ways did this strengthen the relationship?
    - Can you give an example of what changed in the relationship?
        - How did your interactions with the Plant Dairy Co. change after you spoke to them face-to-face?
        - How did your trust and commitment to Plant Dairy Co. change after you spoke to them face-to-face?
11. Can you give a specific example of a situation where an online interaction worked more efficiently or better than offline interaction?
    - Why did this work better online?
    - How did that affect the relationship?
    - Can you give an example of what changed in the relationship?
        - How did your interactions with Plant Dairy Co. change after you had a personal online interaction (e.g. email, phone call, video call)?
        - How did your interactions with Plant Dairy Co. change after you had a non-personal online interaction (e.g. social media, electronic newsletter)?
        - How did your trust and commitment to Plant Dairy Co. change after you interacted with them online?

Topic 4: Wrap-up

12. What is the ideal balance between on- and offline touchpoint interactions for you?
13. In the long term, how do you think more online touchpoints will change the relationship between customers and suppliers?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about the role of on-and-offline touchpoints in B2B relationships that we haven't discussed yet? Or anything else that might be relevant to this research?