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# The Seven Forces That Shape Trust in Virtual Negotiation: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

This study examines trust in firms and explores strategies to enhance virtual negotiations. The focus is not just on crises but also on reducing time and expenses associated with travel and in-person meetings. We examined the factors influencing trust in online business-to-business (B2B) negotiations. It focused on complex negotiating situations, involving n = 35 qualitative interviews with experts from 17 distinct business sectors. Research indicates that the mode of communication (synchronous, asynchronous, visual or non-visual), the frequency and convenience of communication, the analysis of behavior (honesty, loyalty, objectivity, dress code, anchoring), and the technology employed influence the perception of trust during virtual negotiations. Hence, we provide a novel framework incorporating the many aspects that influence trust in online negotiation. We refer to this concept as "The Seven Forces that Shape Trust in Virtual Business Negotiations."

## Keywords

Trust, Virtual Business Negotiations, Online, Brazil

## 1. Introduction

Virtual business negotiations have become a regular part of our daily lives, especially since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Dias & Lopes, 2020). The high infection rates have led to widespread panic and severe economic impacts, resulting in business bankruptcies and increased unemployment. As a result, market participants have had to adapt to the situation and change their business approach (Nicola et al., 2020). Nonetheless, on May 11 2023, WHO officially declared the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE). In total, 647,560,719 confirmed cases, with 6,647,095 deaths, making Brazil the second country with the most deaths from COVID-19 in the world, just behind the USA (WHO, 2024).

The economic impact on companies led to a shift in communication, with face-to-face negotiations becoming virtual. This change presented challenges in establishing trust in a culture that values face-to-face relationships. The pandemic has accelerated remote work, and many companies will continue to do so (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). This research aims to provide knowledge on trust for companies to improve virtual negotiations, maintain themselves during crises, and reduce travel and costs associated with face-to-face negotiations. These events were motivating factors for this study of trust in virtual trading. However, a subject very little explored in the literature is highly relevant to several companies from different segments.

This study is about more than just identifying the factors, practices, and tools that impact trust in virtual negotiations. It goes further by incorporating insights from interviews and observations in the field to generate a new model that is closer to reality. This model is not just theoretical; it is a practical tool that companies and academia can use to develop new strategies for virtual negotiations.

Finally, the novelty of the present work regards managerial insights into the corporate segment. These insights include understanding the role of trust in virtual negotiation processes and its importance in negotiations. Additionally, it clarifies the factors that influence trust in Brazilian virtual business negotiations in the B2B segment. The study also provides practical examples of how these factors positively and negatively influence trust during virtual negotiations. These examples are based on the experiences of renowned negotiators in the Brazilian market who were interviewed. Finally, the study offers best practice suggestions for generating trust in Brazilian B2B virtual business negotiations. This guide is based on a case study of over 2000 observed negotiations.

## 2. Background

The subject of negotiation was widespread in antiquity by diplomats, members of royalty, and clergy (Dias, 2016). It is a widespread and studied subject by several schools, companies, and prominent researchers, given the importance of this subject for the current model of society. Different streams of thought have been spread over the years. Spector (1977), for example, focused on the introspective issue. He claims that negotiators are influenced by internal peculiarities such as personality, emotions, and the relationship between the parties.

Nevertheless, negotiation discipline is extensive, and we cannot limit ourselves to seeing the influences of the introspective process alone. Some scholars (Neale & Northcraft, 1991; Pruitt, 1983) have delved into the fundamentals of trading and concluded that, regardless of the particularities of each individual, negotiation is a process of social exchange. He starts from the principle that negotiators will define where they will allocate their resources, i.e., in other words, it is a decision-making process between the parties involved. Other scholars (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) have defined the social exchange process.

In addition, there are different streams of thought regarding business negotiation. Some scholars, Olekalns & Adair (2013), organized it by dividing the negotiation studies into four different topics, the first being the individual process, where he focuses on what is related to the core of the individual, analogous to what was considered by Spector (1977). The second is the social psychologic process, focusing on the interaction between negotiators, analogous to what was discussed by Neale & Northcraft (1991) and Pruitt (1983). Third, he focuses on the communication between the parties (frequency, sequence, turning points, and environment). Furthermore, in the fourth point, he defined the complexity of the negotiation as a factor to be studied.

Although Olekalns & Adair (2013) have focused on these four points, there is one more line of thought that, different from those presented, has been discussed nowadays, in academia and in the corporate world, which is the concepts of bargaining and power (Duzert & Zerunyan, 2015). Those aspects are based on concepts such as the degree of preparation the negotiator has when entering a negotiation and how it interferes with the development of the decision-making process (Fisher et al., 1981). Also, the negotiator's status, autonomy, and role in the negotiation and how they interfere with the process development (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006). Blau (1964) also related social ties with trust and how it could affect negotiations. In the next topic, we will discuss the schools of thought concerning trust and then link it with negotiation.

## 2.1. Supporting Theories

Trust has been extensively studied across various fields and is divided into specific currents. When combined, they form a complementary foundation for interview questions. Different schools of thought have different definitions of trust concepts, as shown in **Table 1**.

Authors have developed methodologies to measure trust between parties, such as Rotter's Interpersonal Trust Scale (1967) and Yamagishi's General Trust Scale (1988, 1994). Rotter's model focuses on participants' beliefs in social relationships and optimism towards society. Yamagishi's General Trust Scale (Yamagishi et al., 2005) segregates groups and defines cooperation and competition, determining the reciprocity between trust and cooperation. These methods have evolved.

## 2.2. Virtual Work Theory

The rapid process of globalization, aligned with the need for velocity in the transmission of information over the years, has been increasingly enabling the possibility of remote work in geographically dispersed teams, with a significant increase in the pandemic of COVID-19, due to the imposition of restrictive measures (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). It is possible to define teamwork in geographically distributed teams as similar to presential teams; it refers to group

Table 1. Supporting theories.

| | | Psychological | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Key Question** | **Behavioral** | **Unidimensional** | **Two-Dimensional** | **Transformational** |
| How is trust defined and measured? | Through rational choices derived from confidence and measured by behavioral experiments | Derived from expectations and willingness to be vulnerable and measured by scales from distrust to high trust. Usually conducted in a face-to-face context | Trust is defined as positive expectations, and distrust as negative expectations. It is measured from high to low | Defined according to cost and benefits expected and measured by qualitative indicators |
| At what level does trust begin? | Initiate from zero shared information or from cooperative acts. | Initiate from zero | Trust and distrust start from a low level (no shared information) | Initiate from some level of reputation |
| What generates the level of trust (distrust) to change over time? | The level increase when there is cooperative reciprocate behavior and decline toward competitive behavior | The level of trust increase with positive interactions and declines with negative expectations | Increase and decline according to the accumulated number of positive and negative interactions | Increases as the relationship improve and decline with negative expectations |

**Note:** Adapted from Lewicki et al. (2006); Lewicki & Polin (2013).

interactions and tasks seeking to achieve common objectives, although some authors argue that geographically dispersed teams have more difficulty collaborating (Dubé & Robey, 2009; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Other authors are more optimistic, arguing that without having centralized employees in the same place, the organization can optimize its work team, selecting professionals from any location (Kirkman et al., 2004). Some authors studied the challenges and difficulties of virtual work teams, as follows:

*Distance Factor*: The factor of distance, not necessarily geographic, but the amount of work an employee has to physically meet the other (Agerfalk et al., 2005), is a challenging factor in conducting remote work since this dispersion affects personal motivation by the lack of informal interaction and the visual difficulty of being evaluated (Kraut et al., 2002). The lack of visual perception and reduced bonding between employees tends to reduce collaboration between them and affect trust between parties (McDonough III et al., 2001; Olson & Olson, 2014; Sarker et al., 2011; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Eisenberg & Krishnan, 2018; Herbsleb & Mockus, 2003; Armstrong & Cole, 1995).

*Temporal Factor*: The time factor refers to employees' difficulty establishing contact with each other due to scheduling conflicts and time zones (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009).

*Perceived Distance*: It refers to the collaborators' relational and emotional ties. For example, in virtual teams, the lack of face-to-face contact and informal conversations creates incredible difficulty in tightening ties between the team (Robert, 2016; Raymond, 1999).

*Culture*: Organizational culture is also a challenging factor in virtual work teams since the organization can influence competition or collaboration among employees; in virtual environments, due to reduced informal contact, it is possible to enhance competition and reduce collaboration (Olson & Olson, 2000). Another important point related to culture is the language used since the individual perception regarding the level of language used can interfere with the relationship between employees (Agerfalk et al., 2005).

*Technology*: Technology is also a crucial factor in getting virtual work done, as it must meet the needs of an employee to do his or her job. Another issue is that synchronous (call, video call) or asynchronous (e-mail, text messaging) communication are challenging factors in this work model (Boland & Fitzgerald, 2004; Damian & Zowghi, 2002; O'Leary et al., 2012).

## 3. Methodology

We managed to conduct N = 35 interviews. The interviewees were from 17 different business segments, such as companies in the areas of 1) technology, 2) renewable energies, 3) retail business, 4) overall services, 5) telecommunications, for instance.

*Research Design*

Considering this research's interpretive approach (Myers, 1999), we decided to collect the data through the Qualitative Interviews method (Myers & Newman, 2007). The Semi-Structured Interview was selected since the Structured Interview could limit the development of the interview responses and the interviewer's freedom to develop other questions (if necessary) and adapt to the interview answers. The interviewees were contacted primarily by phone or in person. Phone calls and personal invitations had a 100 percent response rate.

*Data Collection*

Our research methodology was unique in several ways. We conducted 35 interviews from September 2020 to February 2021, each lasting 20 to 40 minutes. Initially, the interviews were conducted in person, but due to the pandemic, we seamlessly transitioned to using Google Meetings software for video conferences. This fact allowed us to continue our research without interruption. Another unique aspect was using voice recordings and images to capture the interviews, depending on the format. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the native language, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

This study utilized qualitative, in-depth interviews supported by Myers and Newman's (2007) semi-structured interview method. A total of 35 interviewees were selected using the same sampling strategy to ensure rigor and allow for an analysis of respondents' perspectives, behaviors, and experiences. Open-ended queries were used to acquire data.

To avoid social dissonance, several measures were implemented to mitigate potential social dissonance. Warm-up questions created a comfortable environment for interviewees to express themselves openly. Interviewees' availability was considered, and strict confidentiality measures were implemented to safeguard participants' real identities and company names. Data and real identities would be used solely for academic purposes and not for commercial endeavors.

Additionally, strategies were implemented to mitigate cognitive biases, such as elite bias, Hawthorne effect, and Social Desirability Bias. These strategies included conducting interviews with individuals occupying diverse ranks and positions, conducting interviews with persons not affiliated with the workplace, and ensuring interviews were conducted anonymously.

However, interviews have drawbacks, including the potential for interviewees to intentionally overlook or exclude information, portray events not as they unfolded but as they believe they should have, and engage in deliberate deception when recounting described events. To mitigate these issues, all interviews were conducted in a pleasant, welcoming environment, and participants were presented with a disclaimer outlining important points such as the data collected being used for educational purposes, the research not being used for commercial purposes, voluntary participation, confidentiality of participant identities and company names, the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, and permission for direct citations and image use.

At the end of each interview, we allowed the interviewees to share their thoughts and comments about the study. This feedback was invaluable in enriching our understanding and validating our findings. Each interviewee also received a copy of their interview to review and confirm the accuracy of the information. This thorough validation process, combined with the saturation point reached in the eighteenth interview, where no new insights were gained, ensured the reliability of our results. The study was conducted within a cross-sectional time framework, focusing solely on the period of the coronavirus pandemic.

*Purposive Sampling*

The sampling strategy chosen was purposive sampling, choosing specifically negotiators from the business environment (CEO, Directors, employees, sellers, clients, and suppliers), as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1** showed the interviewees' profile. In addition, the average age of the respondents was 45 years old and 19 years of average experience. We also gathered interviewees from six business segments, including sales and technical departments, as illustrated in **Table 2**.

*Data Preparation*

Transcriptions were performed manually and checked to avoid possible errors. To ensure the legitimacy of the information provided, we sent each interviewee a copy of the transcribed document so that they could reevaluate and approve it. Notes and self-memos of the interview were made only in cases where the interview had no video recorder. We used NVIVO 1.3 (535), a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to organize the data and do the coding. We also used Microsoft Excel 2016 to generate the tables, Microsoft Word 2016 to write the report.

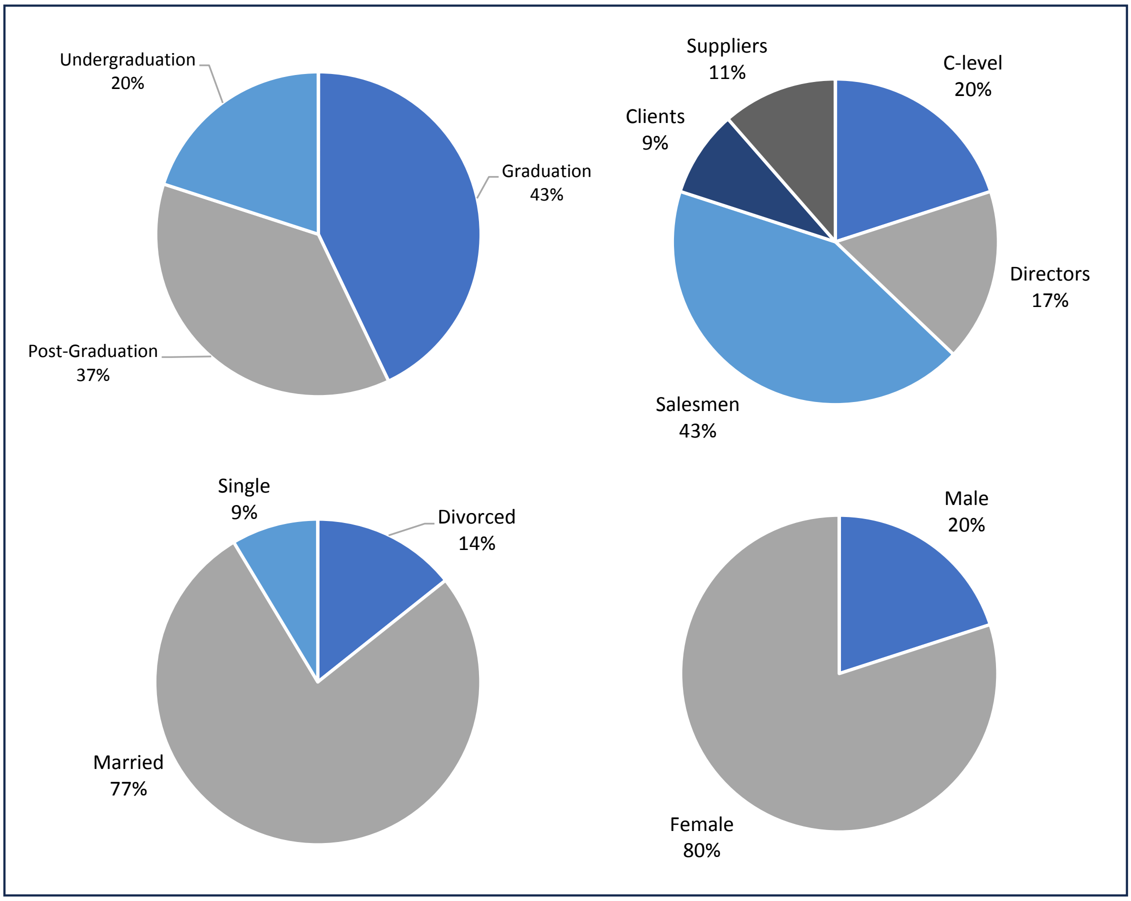


**Figure 1.** Interviewees ethnographic summary.

**Table 2.** Business segments and departments.

| Business Segment | Number of Interviewees | Sales Department | Technical Department |
|---|---|---|---|
| Technology | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Renewable energies | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Salt Industry | 10 | 10 | 0 |
| Retail business | 9 | 9 | 0 |
| Overall services | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| Telecommunications | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 35 | 30 | 5 |

*Coding*

We followed the steps to coding provided by Saldaña (2015) to extract the information we needed from the interview's transcription. Considering "code" as a unit of data (Saunders et al., 2015), the plan is to have a mix of codes to enhance the process of meaning extraction. Following this reasoning, we have not limited the codes to "*In Vivo*" codes but choose the codes that best fit extracting information from the text sections. Also, to improve the data extraction, we have made a pre-cycle followed by two rounds of cycling.

## 4. Answer to the Research Question

It was discovered that there are seven factors that answer the research question and support the findings. The answers provided were grouped into seven themes called "forces," including 1) *Behavioral Analysis*, which consists of loyalty, honesty, objectivity, dress code, and anchoring; 2) *Culture*, which involves regionalism, language, and company culture; 3) *Communication Establishment*, which includes the type of communication, ease of contact, and frequency; 4) *Available Technology*, which includes connection options, quality, and background; 5) *Perceived Distance*, which considers visual cues, rapport, and body language; 6) *Status*, which refers to the negotiator's position within the organization; and 7) *Reputation*, which is based on historical events.

## 5. Discussion

During the process of data collection, we found that the literature review provided us with useful guidance. However, we also noticed that there were some differences between what we found in the field and what we had anticipated. Some items were excluded, and we added new ones accordingly. As a result, we combined the seven factors mentioned earlier into a conceptual framework, which is illustrated in Figure 2.

Furthermore, it is possible to explain this model simplistically, starting at the end of the process:

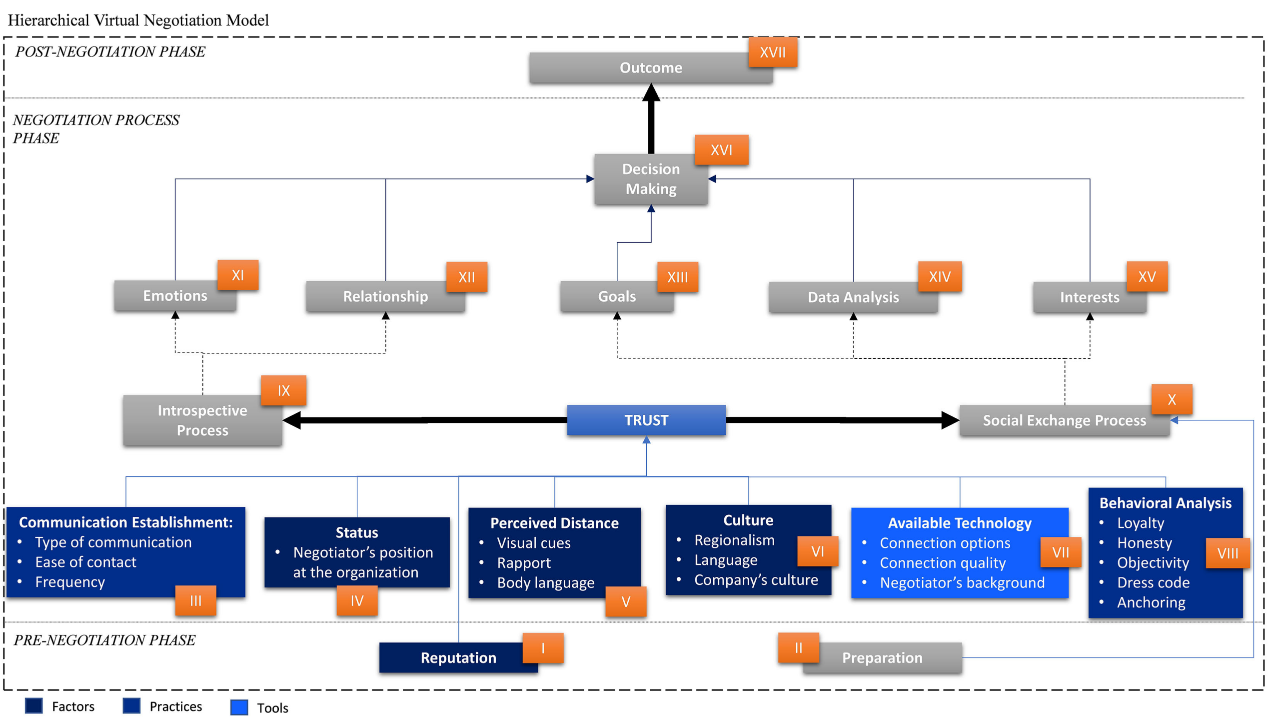


Figure 2. Conceptual model.

*Outcome* (*xvii*): Every negotiation has an outcome, either positive or negative. The outcome is a result of a decision-making process between the parties involved in the negotiation.

*Decision Making* (*xvi*): The decision-making process is influenced by emotions, relationships, Goals, Data Analysis, and personal interests.

*Emotions* (*xi*) *And Relationship* (*xii*): Emotions and relationships can be categorized as an introspective process, two attributes related to individual perception.

*Goals* (*xiii*), *Data Analysis* (*xiv*), *And Interests* (*xv*): Three attributes related to the individual that is shared or not with the other negotiator. It can be categorized as a social exchange process among negotiators.

*Introspective Process* (*ix*) *And Social Exchange Process* (*x*): Two categories are influenced directly by trust among individuals. This means that trust influences the emotions at the negotiation table and the relationship among the individuals (introspective process). Also, the degree of confidence influences the degree of information trade between the parties as goals, data analysis, and particular interests (social exchange process).

*Trust*: Now that we know that trust is a powerful attribute in the negotiation and influences the process and the outcome, we must have to understand what are the elements that affect trust (positive and negative) in the virtual environment:

*Behavioral Analysis* (viii): Loyalty, honesty, objectivity, dress code, anchoring; Culture (vi): Regionalism, language, company's culture; Communication Establishment (iii): Type of communication, ease of contact, frequency; Available Technology (vii): Connection options, quality, and background; Perceived Distance (v): Visual cues, rapport, body language; Status (iv): Negotiator's position at the organization; Reputation (vi): Historical events.

*Preparation*: We found no evidence to support that preparation influences trust between parties. However, it was evident that preparation is fundamental in virtual negotiation during the social exchange process, so we inserted it as an extra point of relevance.

During the interviews, we understood that organizations in B2B market usually have multiple virtual negotiations. The findings suggested that when negotiations are recurrent, even if they are independent of each other, they are not independent regarding trust and reputation. The outcome of a previous negotiation can affect the reputation of the parties, which affects the perception of trust and may affect the outcome of the next negotiation. We encourage future research to study the relationship between these variables in multiple negotiations.

## 6. Implications

An important implication of the seven forces application is that it helps to identify the elements, behaviors, and tools that have a positive or negative impact on trust during virtual business negotiations in Brazil. By using this information, both academics and businesses can work to improve negotiators' performance and increase the chances of achieving a satisfactory agreement. These observations have several implications for research into different fields of research, such as 1) negotiations with governmental agents (Dias et al., 2023; Araujo & Dias, 2022; Teles & de Oliveira Dias, 2022; Dias & Navarro, 2020); 2) business mediation (Dias, 2018); 3) retail business negotiations (Dias, 2018, Dias et al., 2022a); 4) industrial negotiations (Dias, Navarro, & Valle, 2013); 5) debt collection negotiations (Dias & Navarro, 2020; Dias & Lopes, 2019); 6) interbank negotiations (Dias et al., 2022b), amongst other fields of research.

## 7. Conclusion

This study explores the factors affecting trust in virtual negotiations in B2B scenarios, using theories of negotiation, trust, and virtual work. Using observations and interviews, the study identifies the Seven Forces Model as a valuable tool for companies to improve virtual negotiations. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted various sectors, including tourism, automobile, aeronautical, logistics, and food service. The shift to virtual negotiations has raised challenges in generating trust during crises. However, improving virtual negotiations can help companies achieve objectives, increase sales, and reduce costs. Factors such as perceived distance, status, culture, reputation, communication establishment, behavioral analysis, and available technology can indirectly affect trust perception and negotiation results. This study offers new options for companies in the negotiation field during times of crisis.

Finally, the analysis reveals seven factors that shape trust in virtual business negotiations: behavioral analysis, culture, communication establishment, available technology, perceived distance, status, and reputation. These factors include loyalty, honesty, objectivity, dress code, anchoring, regionalism, language, company culture, communication establishment, available technology, perceived distance, rapport, body language, status, and reputation. These factors contribute to the overall trust and success of virtual business negotiations.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

This research is valuable, but it has some limitations. It only covers the occurrences up to the date of its composition and the dataset used. It is crucial to understand these limitations, as they lay the groundwork for future research. Our research focuses only on trust in business negotiations, which has been previously explored by Lewicki and Polin (2013) and Olekalns and Adair (2013). Therefore, our study does not encompass other types of trust, such as trust between institutions and markets (Fukuyama, 1995), trust between intergroup interactions (Serva et al., 2005), trust as a process (Khodyakov, 2007; Barber, 1983), institutional trust (Khodyakov, 2007), trust and game theory (Evans & Krueger, 2014; Malhotra, 2004), trust in nations (Labonne & Chase, 2010), risk-taking and trust (Evans & Krueger, 2011), trust and honesty (Lewicki &

Hanke, 2012), and trust violation (Dias, 2016, 2020; Dias et al., 2022a), among others.

Future studies should explore the correlation between trust and other factors over an extended period, rather than focusing on a single time period. Although this study only focuses on Brazilian enterprises, it presents an opportunity for future research to broaden the sample. By including organizations from many nations, a more comprehensive model can be established, potentially leading to groundbreaking insights in the field of virtual negotiation. Additionally, we encourage the exploration of other variables in virtual negotiation, along with trust. This broader approach can significantly enhance our understanding of the issue and provide innovative solutions for firms facing a crisis, instilling a sense of optimism for the future of virtual negotiation.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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