

Building bridges in B2B sales: The role of one-to-one digital channels in developing social capital

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology is transforming B2B relationships, shifting interactions toward one-to-one digital channels like instant messaging, emails, and video conferencing tools. This study investigates the role of these channels in developing social capital in buyer-seller relationships. We conducted a qualitative study involving 33 key informants among B2B salespeople and buyers. Study findings reveal that one-to-one digital channels foster social capital through a four-stage process: structural, cognitive, and relational capital develop sequentially and are later maintained over time. While these channels enhance interaction frequency, shared understanding, and trust, they also introduce risks—such as intrusiveness, channels overload, and path dependency—that may hinder relationship development. This processual framework advances social capital theory in digital B2B contexts and provides actionable guidance for managing one-to-one digital interactions.

1. Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) contexts display unprecedented levels of change largely driven by digitalization which has significantly reshaped buyer-seller relationships (Ahearne, Atefi, Lam, & Pourmasoudi, 2022; Corsaro & Maggioni, 2022; Diba, Vella, & Abratt, 2019; Rangarajan, Dugan, Rouziou, & Kunkle, 2020; Rangarajan, Sharma, Lyngdoh, & Paesbrugge, 2021). In sales literature, recent studies have devoted great attention to interactive digital tools that involve both the salesperson and the customer (e.g. social media) (Agnihotri, Chaker, Dugan, Galvan, & Nowlin, 2023). In this scenario where digitalization continues to reshape interactions in B2B contexts, recent literature acknowledges the potential of digital technologies in fostering social capital, a crucial asset in buyer-seller relationships (Alghababsheh & Gallea, 2020).

Social capital – defined as the value embedded in social connections, trust, and mutual collaboration – can be developed within both internal networks (among colleagues) and external networks (between buyers and sellers) (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Hence, social capital is highly relevant to the development of B2B relations (Agnihotri, 2020). In this regard, prior research suggests that digital communication and social media may facilitate interpersonal interactions that underpin social capital thus enhancing networking, trust-building, and knowledge exchange in professional environments (e.g. Cao, Guo, Liu, & Gu, 2015;

Filipovic & Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, 2023).

However, research in this topic is still emerging and presents important limitations. First, B2B sales studies highlighting the role of social media in fostering social capital are mostly conceptual (e.g. Agnihotri, 2020) and the few empirical studies available (e.g. Schmitt, Epler, Casenave, & Pallud, 2024) indicate a more pronounced effect on internal rather than external social capital. Second, although the definition of social media includes both public platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram) and private communication tools such as instant messaging applications (IM apps) (e.g. WhatsApp and WeChat) (Bartoloni & Ancillai, 2024; Guenzi & Nijssen, 2020; Itani, Badrinayanan, & Rangarajan, 2023), research has predominantly focused on their public-facing use. However, studies indicate that buyers and sellers tend to rely on public social networking sites mainly in the early phases of the relationship—for example, for prospecting or initial engagement—while preferring more private tools to manage ongoing interactions (Cheng, Plangger, Cai, Campbell, & Pitt, 2023; Luo, Toth, Liu, & Yuan, 2021; Paesbrugge, Vuori, & Kock, 2022). This suggests that one-to-one digital channels—IM apps, video conferencing, and email—may play a more central role in developing social capital, as they can be considered rich media to convey personalized messages and enable immediate feedback, allowing for personal interaction and the transmission of social and emotional cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986). These

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channels facilitate information exchange, speed up communication, and are perceived as more reliable (Ancillai, Bartoloni, & Pascucci, 2024). Therefore, we suggest that the role of one-to-one digital channels in shaping buyer-seller relationships and fostering social capital deserves further investigation.

Third, although social capital is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, most studies in buyer-supplier relationships examine a single dimension or their differential outcomes (e.g., Jääskeläinen, Schiele, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2020; Kohtamäki, Vesalainen, Henneberg, Naudé, & Ventresca, 2012). However, the three distinct dimensions of social capital (structural, relational and cognitive) may be interrelated in important and complex ways (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Roden & Lawson, 2014; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Recent research highlights the need for more integrated analyses of the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions and their interdependencies in shaping buyer-seller relationships (e.g. Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020).

In sum, the mechanism through which one-to-one digital channels foster social capital development remains largely underexplored in digital B2B settings.

Building on these gaps, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: How do one-to-one digital channels contribute to social capital development in buyer-seller relationships?

To answer the research question, we conducted an explorative qualitative study based on 33 in-depth interviews with salespeople and buyers across gender, job roles, industries, and firm sizes (cf. Lanzrath, Homburg, & Ruhnau, 2023). Following the Theory in Use approach (TIU) (Zeithaml et al., 2020), we grounded our insights in established social capital theory.

From our findings, we developed a conceptual model (Fig.2) illustrating how the three dimensions of social capital develop in buyer-seller relationships through one-to-one digital channels. Unlike previous research, we offer a processual view of social capital development: structural capital—stemming from prior ties and interaction frequency—forms the basis for cognitive capital, which enhances shared understanding and goal alignment; in turn, cognitive capital promotes relational capital by strengthening trust and commitment. We also identify potential risks of one-to-one tools that may hinder this process.

This study advances B2B research by tackling contemporary challenges in digital sales transformation. It highlights the critical role of personalized, one-to-one digital interactions—via IM apps, email, and video calls—in fostering social capital, responding to recent calls for more nuanced insights into digital relationship-building (Agnihotri, 2020; Ahearne et al., 2022).

Second, this research combines both seller and buyer perspectives, enhancing insights into the strategic deployment of digital sales technology in global B2B contexts (Paesbrugge, Rangarajan, Hochstein, & Sharma, 2020; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). By applying social capital theory to digital environments and investigating its multidimensional impacts, the study offers a comprehensive framework for steering digital transformation in modern B2B sales practices.

We also contribute to social capital theory by empirically examining its multidimensional development in digital B2B sales and proposing a process-oriented framework. While one-to-one tools enhance meaningful exchanges, they also entail risks that may constrain social capital formation, offering a more balanced view compared to literature emphasizing only positive outcomes (Agnihotri, Mani, Chaker, Daugherty, & Kothandaraman, 2022; Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020).

The article is organized as follows. First, we present the literature background and the general methodological approach. Then, we report the findings and discussion. Finally, the article concludes with theoretical and managerial contributions and lays the groundwork for future research.

2. Literature review

The present study is positioned at the intersection of two well-

established streams of research: social media and digital channels in B2B contexts, and social capital in buyer-seller relationships (Fig. 1). The first stream has helped us understand the crucial role that digital channels and social media play in shaping buyer-seller relationships, highlighting how these tools are transforming the dynamics between the two actors and introducing new challenges – challenges that a more personal approach and one-to-one interactions may help to overcome. We then draw on the literature emphasizing the importance of social capital and its recent application to B2B settings. In doing so, we identified gaps in the current understanding of how social media and digital channels foster the development of social capital in B2B contexts.

Our study is therefore among the few that attempt to contribute at the intersection of these two streams of research. Table 1 summarizes the relevant literature.

2.1. Social media and other digital channels in B2B relations

Extant research highly praises the advantages of using social media for both sellers and buyers. Studies predominantly emphasize how public social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, are helpful throughout the selling stages to perform various tasks (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012; Rangarajan et al., 2021). Notably, they are largely used to collect and communicate information, speed up prospecting and contacts making, and generate leads (Ancillai, Terho, Cardinali, & Pascucci, 2019; Cheng et al., 2023; Lacoste, 2016). Hence, social media enhances salespeople's behaviors, such as information exchange, competitive intelligence, adaptability, and empathy, among others (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016; Itani, Krush, Agnihotri, & Trainor, 2020; Ogilvie, Agnihotri, Rapp, & Trainor, 2018). Existing literature also emphasizes the use of such tools to establish professional thought leadership toward B2B customers (Lacoste, 2016; Terho, Giovannetti, & Cardinali, 2022). Overall, these platforms are shown to positively affect various facets of sales performance, including opportunity creation, customer acquisition, customer trust and satisfaction, and customer loyalty (Ancillai et al., 2019; Bill, Feurer, & Klarmann, 2020; Ogilvie et al., 2018; Terho et al., 2022). Social media also contributes to customer relationship management (Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012), especially when integrated with social CRM systems (Itani et al., 2020; Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014). Ultimately, salespeople's social media use may directly or indirectly affect outcome-based sales performance (Bowen, Lai-Bennejean, Haas, & Rangarajan, 2021; Guenzi & Nijssen, 2020; Kalra, Chaker, Singh, Itani, & Agnihotri, 2023; Terho et al., 2022).

Likewise, the availability of digital content reduces the B2B customer's reliance on salespeople throughout the purchasing process (Marvasti et al., 2021; Paesbrugge et al., 2022; Rangarajan et al., 2020). Social media appears particularly useful to search for suppliers and compare alternative offerings (Diba et al., 2019; Rangarajan et al., 2021). Information collected through these channels enables shorter transaction times by mitigating risks in the purchasing process, minimizing information overload, and enhancing decision-making (Gustafson, Pomirleanu, Mariadoss, & Johnson, 2021). Yet, the preference for digital content appears to be limited to the initial stages of the buying process and is more pronounced among buyers of non-critical products or services. In contrast, buyers of strategic and bottleneck products prioritize comprehensive information and prefer face-to-face meetings to gain deeper insights and mitigate perceived risks (Paesbrugge et al., 2022).

Notwithstanding their widely recognized benefits, recent studies still show low adoption rates and several limits in the perceived usefulness of public social media (Bill et al., 2020; Schmitt et al., 2024). Factors such as deficit in personalized contact requests, low engagement, and overall customers' preference for passive usage reduce their potential (Ancillai et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2021). Consequently, public social media is primarily utilized in the early stages of the relation (Cheng et al., 2023), but they are promptly replaced by other tools, such as video calls, IM

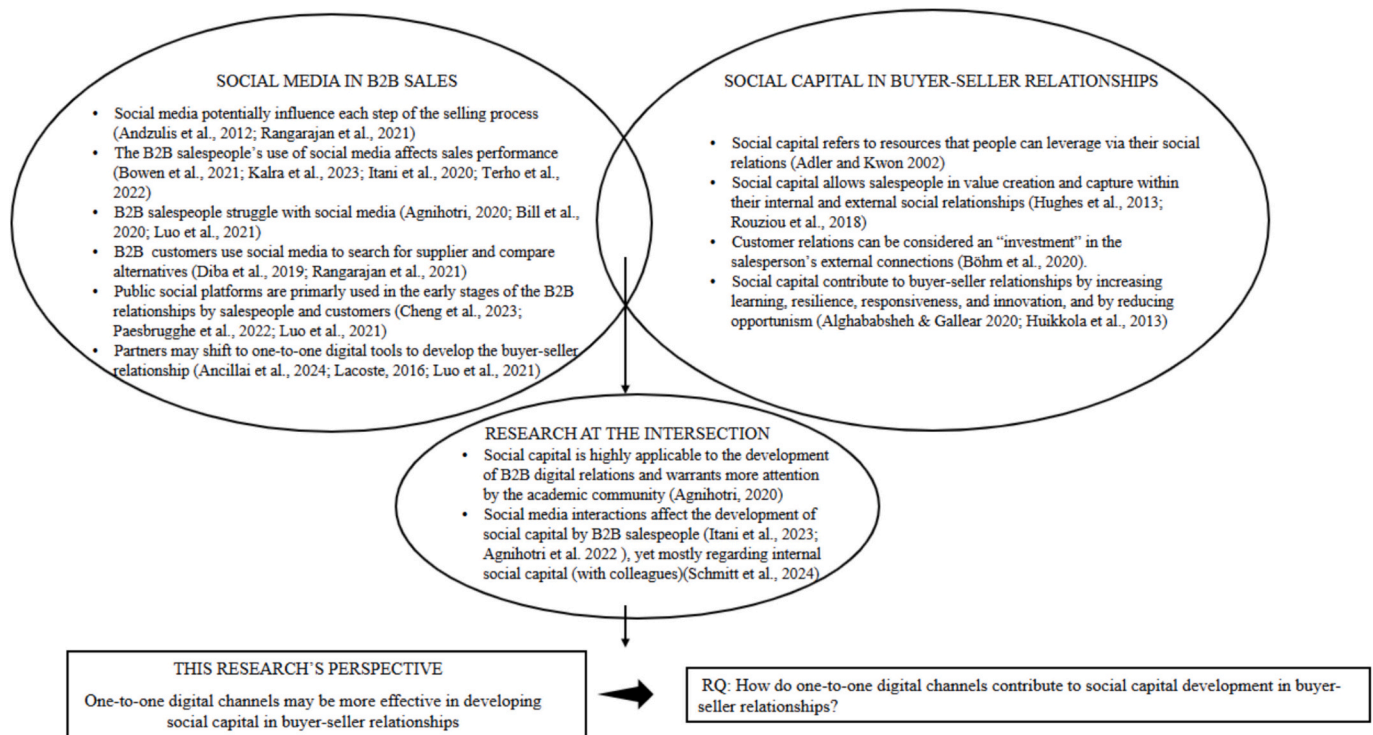


Fig. 1. Research gap and positioning.

apps, and emails, for later relationship management (Lacoste, 2016; Luo et al., 2021). By allowing for direct, personalized communication, easing the exchange of immediate and sensitive information, and encouraging trust between parties (Ancillai et al., 2024; Guenzi & Nijssen, 2020), one-to-one digital channels may offer superior efficacy in building buyer-seller relationships.

2.2. Social capital in buyer-seller relationships

Studies have turned to the social capital theory to study B2B contexts (e.g. Badawi & Battor, 2020; Jääskeläinen, Korhonen, & Amiri, 2023; Tóth, Nemkova, Hízsák, & Naudé, 2022). Social capital, conceptualized as a resource emerging from interpersonal relationships, facilitates cooperation by shaping the norms and expectations that guide individual interactions (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Additionally, in contrast to human capital which belongs to individual actors, social capital is rooted in a social relationship (Robison, Schmid, & Siles, 2002) and it is collectively owned by the actors involved (Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), with no single actor holding the exclusive ownership over it (Burt, 1992). Given its focus on the value embedded in social ties and its emphasis on interaction-based mechanisms, social capital theory has been increasingly adopted to examine buyer-seller relational exchanges, especially in digitally mediated environments (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Itani et al., 2023; Son, Kocabasoglu-Hillmer, & Roden, 2016).

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998, p. 243) define social capital as “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relations possessed by an individual or social unit.” The conceptualization encompasses three dimensions: structural capital, relational, and cognitive capital (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Meek, Ryan, Lambert, & Ogilvie, 2019; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Structural capital regards the pattern of connections among individuals, including the frequency, strength, and structural embedding of social interactions (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Nahapiet &

Ghoshal, 1998). Thus, structural capital grounds on the presence of network ties and their configurations within a social structure (Villena, Revilla, & Choi, 2011).

Relational capital refers to the goodwill and trust accumulated through consistent interactions between parties (Granovetter, 1992). It emphasizes the personal relationships formed over time (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Villena et al., 2011), encompassing dimensions such as trust, mutual respect, and friendship developed within partner relations (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Villena et al., 2011). As a key element of relational capital, trust plays an important role in reducing concerns about opportunism and fostering openness and reciprocity in the relationship (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

Cognitive capital concerns the shared cognitive resources, including common interpretations and languages among individuals (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). This shared cognitive framework is complemented by the alignment of goals and visions (Villena et al., 2011), reflecting a mutual understanding of expectations regarding how partners collaborate to accomplish common objectives (Son et al., 2016).

Additionally, the literature differentiates between internal social capital—developed among coworkers within an organization—and external social capital, which arises from relationships with actors beyond the focal group, such as customers (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Although distinct, the facets of social capital are interconnected in many ways (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). However, the majority of studies in B2B are either focused on a single dimension at a time (e.g., Kohtamäki et al., 2012) or examine the differential impact that each of the three dimensions has on specific outcomes (e.g., Jääskeläinen et al., 2020). In this regard, extant research suggests that the three dimensions can be antecedents to each other (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020). For example, scholars agree that structural capital drives the development of both relational and cognitive capital, while cognitive capital boosts relational capital (Roden & Lawson, 2014; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

In B2B contexts, social capital is proven to allow salespeople in value

Table 1
Overview of main literature.

Source	Method	Country*	Type of social media	Unit of analysis	Summary of key findings and contribution
Social media in B2B sales Andzulis et al. (2012)	Conceptual	N/A	Public and internal social media	Salespeople's perspective	Social media influence all the stages of the traditional sales process: understanding the customer, approaching the customer, needs discovery, presentation, close, service and follow-up.
Rodriguez et al. (2012)	Survey	Across Countries	Public social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	Salespeople's perspective	Social media positively impacts relationship sales performance.
Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, and Hughes (2013)	Survey	USA	Public social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	Salespeople and customer's perspective	Social media use positively influence supplier brand performance, retailer store performance, and consumer loyalty to the retailer.
Trainor et al. (2014)	Survey	USA	Public social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.)	Salespeople's perspective	Social media use improves customer relationship performance via social CRM capabilities, strengthened by customer-centric management systems.
Agnihotri et al. (2016)	Survey	NS	Public social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Chatter)	Salespeople's perspective	Salespeople's social media use enhances information exchange, boosting responsiveness and, in turn, customer satisfaction.
Guesalaga (2016)	Survey	USA	Public social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)	Salespeople's perspective	Both organizational and individual factors drive social media use, with a synergy between individual competence and commitment, and customer usage effects partially mediated by these factors.
Lacoste (2016)	Grounded theory	France	Public social media (LinkedIn and Viadeo)	Salespeople's perspective	KAMs use social media to build credibility and initiate contacts but rely on traditional methods for relationship nurturing, showing that social media acts as a gateway rather than a full relationship management tool
Agnihotri, Trainor, Itani, and Rodriguez (2017)	Survey	India	Public social media	Salespeople and customer's perspective	Sales-based CRM enhances post-sale service behaviors, with social media use strengthening its effects on inducements, empathy, and sportsmanship.
Ogilvie et al. (2018)	Survey	USA	Public social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	Salespeople's perspective	Salespeople's social media use boosts communication and adaptability, moderated by training, with only a partial link to sales performance.
Ancillai et al. (2019)	Semi-structured interviews	Across countries	Public social media and digital channels (e.g. social CRM, sales enablement software, marketing automation systems, etc.)	Salespeople's perspective	Social selling is defined as using digital channels to understand, connect, and engage customers throughout their journey, fostering valuable relationships and linking to broader sales approaches and outcomes.
Diba et al. (2019)	Conceptual	N/A	Public social media	Customer's perspective	The study maps social media functions to stages of the B2B buying process and identifies the roles of key actors such as buyers, users, influencers, and gatekeepers.
Bill et al. (2020)	Survey	Germany	Public social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) and industry specific forums and blogs	Salespeople and customer's perspective	Social media boosts loyalty mainly for high-status customers and small buying centers, with adoption driven by usefulness, ease of use, and support but limited by control concerns.
Guenzi and Nijssen (2020)	Survey	Europe	Public social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.), messaging (e.g. IM apps, Skype, etc.), web communities	Salespeople's perspective	Contextual and personal factors drive social media use in sales, with motivation and ability jointly enhancing usage and performance, especially when salespeople have autonomy.
Itani et al. (2020)	Survey	India	Public social media	Salespeople's and customer's perspective	Social media and CRM technologies enhance buyer–seller information exchange for different purposes, with their interaction boosting competitive intelligence and effects varying by salesperson experience.
Bowen et al. (2021)	Survey	NS	Public social media	Salespeople's perspective	Salespeople's social media use enhances proactive servicing and value-oriented prospecting, both linked to performance, with peer usage further strengthening these effects.
Gustafson et al. (2021)	Conceptual	N/A	Public social media	Customer's perspective	The study presents a framework showing how social media supports knowledge

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Table 1 (continued)

Source					
Luo et al. (2021)	In-depth interviews	China	Public social media and IM apps (e.g. Weibo, WeChat, etc.)	Supplier and customer's perspective	processes within B2B buying units, improving decision outcomes, with effects moderated by unit structure and purchasing context
Paesbrugge et al. (2022)	Semi-structured interviews	NS	Digital channels	Customer's perspective	Tensions in B2B social media use: active vs. passive engagement, transparency vs. invisibility, and local vs. global practices. Buyers' channel preferences depend on purchase risk: high-risk purchases favor personal selling for trust, while low-risk ones favor digital channels for efficiency, urging sellers to align strategies accordingly.
Terho et al. (2022)	Survey	Italy	Public social media	Salespeople's perspective	Social selling enhances thought leadership, which mediates performance outcomes, and is driven by social influence, technology orientation, and strong management support.
Cheng et al. (2023)	Semi-structured interviews	North America	Public social media	Salespeople's perspective	B2B salespeople adopt influencer-like tactics across sales stages, using Twitter to build expertise and trust, though it proves less useful for closing sales.
Kalra et al. (2023)	Survey	NS	Public social media	Salespeople's perspective	Ethical leadership fosters salesperson social media use, strengthened by activity/outcome controls, which boosts empathy and indirectly improves sales performance.
Ancillai et al. (2024)	Semi-structured interviews	NS	Public social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) and IM apps (e.g. WhatsApp, WeChat, etc.)	Salespeople's and customer's perspective	B2B customers view non-personalized social media outreach as spam, prefer corporate over personal profiles, value industry-relevant content, and favor private channels for one-to-one communication.
Social capital in buyer-seller relationship Krause, Handfield, and Tyler (2007)	Type of research Survey	Country USA	Investigated social capital (SC) dimensions Structural, relational, cognitive	Focus of investigation SC in supplier development and buyer performance	Summary of key findings and contribution Long-term supplier development and shared values enhance buyer performance, though the impact of SC investments varies by specific performance goals.
Villena et al. (2011)	Survey	Spain	Structural, relational, cognitive	The "dark side" of SC	Excessive relational capital in buyer-seller relationships can hinder objectivity and increase opportunism, despite its overall positive impact on performance.
Kohtamäki et al. (2012)	Survey	Finland	Relational	Relational capital and performance improvement	Relational capital and relationship-specific investments directly affect the relationship performance improvement and moderate structural links by creating enabling relationship structures.
Hughes et al. (2013)	Survey	NS	Structural, relational, cognitive	Competitive intelligence and salesperson performance	Competitive intelligence (CI) sharing by customers depends on salesperson orientation, behaviors, and relationship quality, yielding higher value only when paired with adaptive selling skills.
Huikkola et al. (2013)	Multiple case study	Finland	Relational defined as trust, open interaction, and shared goals	Relational capital in supplier-customer R&D collaborations	In R&D partnerships, relational capital and shared sense-making foster trust, knowledge sharing, and commitment, reducing opportunism and transaction costs.
Roden and Lawson (2014)	Survey	UK	Structural, relational, cognitive	SC relationship-specific adaptations	Relationship adaptations moderate how structural and cognitive SC influence relational capital, though excessive adaptation may erode trust.
Bolander et al. (2015)	Survey	USA	Structural (i.e. relational centrality and positional centrality)	Salesperson's SC and political skills on sales performance	Structural SC boosts performance through network centrality; political skill enhances relational centrality, particularly with longer tenure.
Lioliou and Zimmermann (2015)	Multiple case study	The Netherlands	Structural, relational, cognitive	SC and opportunistic behavior in outsourcing	The dimensions of SC, including frequent and close interactions, a shared understanding and vision, and trust and strong communication norms, reduced internal and behavioral uncertainty.
Son et al. (2016)	Survey	Korea	Structural, relational, cognitive	SC in retailer-supplier performance.	The paper provides insights into managing SC to enhance collaboration

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Table 1 (continued)

Source					
Rouziou et al. (2018)	Survey	USA	Relational	Antecedents and consequences of salespeople's SC	and performance in supply chain relationships. Salespeople's brand identification and perceived pay fairness foster trust and information sharing, enhancing SC, performance, and job satisfaction.
Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020	Literature review	N/A	Structural, relational, cognitive	SC in buyer-seller relationship	An integrative framework outlines antecedents, benefits, risks, and boundary conditions of SC in buyer-seller relationships.
Badawi and Battor (2020)	Survey	Saudi Arabia	Relational, cognitive	SC and key account management effectiveness	Relational trust and shared norms enhance relationship quality and supplier-key account effectiveness.
Böhm et al. (2020)	Survey	Finland	Customer relations, Internal relations	SC and value opportunity recognition.	Human and SC jointly drive value opportunity recognition in solution selling, where customer knowledge and networks outweigh technical expertise.
Jääskeläinen et al. (2020)	Survey	Europe	Relational, cognitive, structural	The impact of SC on solutions provision	Structural, relational, and cognitive capital play distinct roles in solution processes, though excessive SC may limit innovation and flexibility.
Mallapragada et al. (2022)	Transaction data	North America	Network embeddedness, density, and structural holes	SC in salesperson-network	A salesperson's network position shapes performance, but outcomes vary depending on transaction efficacy and customer focus.
Tóth et al. (2022)	Multiple case studies	Across Countries	Structural	SC role in fostering service innovation.	SC created outside sharing economy platforms is not readily transferred to these platforms.
Jääskeläinen et al., 2023	Survey	North Europe	Structural, relational, cognitive	SC as a facilitator of performance management	Supplier's preferred customer status depends on performance management and varies by supplier type, with structural and relational capital playing different roles.
Social media and digital channels fostering social capital in buyer-seller-relationship	Type of research	Country	Investigated social capital dimensions	Focus of investigation	Summary of key findings and contribution
Agnihotri (2020)	Conceptual	N/A	None	Social media and customer engagement in sales organizations	The paper calls for more research on how social media use fosters SC development and maintenance.
Agnihotri et al. (2023).	Survey	India	Social capital bridging and bonding	The role of online social networks (OSNs) in frontline employee (FLE) SC development and social capital maintenance	OSN use supports SC building and maintenance, strengthened by time management and firm-level fit, though it does not directly drive customer loyalty.
Itani et al. (2023)	Survey	USA	Salespeople market knowledge, reputation and networking abilities	The role of salespeople's social media use in generating SC	B2B salespeople's social media use boosts performance by fostering SC that enables value co-creation and improves cross-/upselling outcomes.
Schmitt et al. (2024)	Survey Semi-structured interviews	France Study 1 NS Study 2	Structural, relational, cognitive	Social media's role in strengthening salespeople's social capital internationally.	B2B salespeople use social media to build external ties and advocacy that improve performance, while public platforms foster internal collaboration in MNEs but are less effective for managing external relationships.

* Note: N/A = Not applicable; NS = Not specified.

creation and capture within internal and external social relationships (Böhm, Eggert, Terho, Ulaga, & Haas, 2020; Hughes, Le Bon, & Rapp, 2013; Rouziou, Dugan, Rouziès, & Iacobucci, 2018), by providing access to assets like knowledge and authority embedded within their network, thus having a direct impact on sales performance (Bolander, Saturnino, Hughes, & Ferris, 2015; Mallapragada, Gupta, & Josephson, 2022; Rouziou et al., 2018). Customer relations can be considered an “investment” in the salesperson's external social capital (Böhm et al., 2020). Social capital can contribute to effective buyer-seller relationships by increasing learning, opportunity recognition, resilience, responsiveness, innovation, and by reducing opportunism (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Böhm et al., 2020; Grawe, Daugherty, & Dant, 2012; Huikkola, Ylimäki, & Kohtamäki, 2013; Lioliou & Zimmermann, 2015).

2.3. Research at the intersection: Social media and digital channels fostering social capital in buyer-seller relationship

As digitalization continues to transform interactions in B2B contexts, scholars have increasingly emphasized the need for further research into the relationship between digital technologies and the development and maintenance of social capital in B2B relationships (Agnihotri, 2020; Agnihotri et al., 2022; Schmitt et al., 2024). Existing literature underscores the integral role of social capital within the social media-based network ties of salespeople, highlighting its mediating effect between social media usage and sales performance (Itani et al., 2023; Saxton & Guo, 2020). Sales professionals leverage social media to nurture relationships by aligning with the expectations of their network partners, fostering trust, and enhancing mutual understanding—critical factors that facilitate knowledge exchange (Agnihotri, 2020). However, research suggests that while public social media are particularly

effective for strengthening internal social capital within organizations, salespeople face challenges in utilizing these tools to cultivate external social capital with clients and business partners (Schmitt et al., 2024).

Building on these premises, the paper explores how one-to-one digital channels contribute to the development of social capital in buyer–seller relationships, highlighting both their enabling mechanisms and potential dark sides. (e.g. Agnihotri et al., 2022; Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020).

3. General methodological approach: Theories-in-use

The study employs a qualitative methodology due to the exploratory nature of the research questions, the limited prior empirical work on the role of one-to-one digital channels in buyer–seller relationships, and the necessity of assessing the nuances of social capital development in such interactions.

Specifically, we adopt a TIU approach (Zeithaml et al., 2020). This method is useful to develop novel marketing theory and knowledge about new and emerging phenomena which can benefit both marketing scholars and practitioners by interviewing or observing study participants which are identified as theory holders and active partners in theory development process (Zeithaml et al., 2020). This approach has proven to be particularly valuable in the sales field (Hartmann, Chaker, Lussier, Larocque, & Habel, 2024; Lanzrath et al., 2023). Conversations between researchers and individuals directly involved in phenomena are the starting point to create completely new theories or enrich well established ones (Zeithaml et al., 2020). While social capital as a construct is well recognized, its development through digital one-to-one relationships between buyers and sellers remains relatively uncharted. The interaction between the use of one-to-one digital tools and social capital development mechanisms in such a context, as well as its risks, is not yet sufficiently understood. For this reason, the TIU approach was considered particularly suitable for addressing the purpose and research questions of the study. To explore these dynamics, we conduct a qualitative field study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with both sellers and buyers, a technique which offers greater flexibility during data collection (Bryman, 2012). Several researchers have emphasized the relevance of such a method in B2B research to shed light on key informants' behaviors and thinking, especially in areas that are less explored (La Rocca, Hoholm, & Mørk, 2017; Lindgreen, Di Benedetto, Thornton, & Geersbro, 2021; Pedersen, Ellegaard, & Kragh, 2020), such as the context of digital one-to-one buyer–seller relationships. Such a data collection technique ensures covering the research themes and, at the same time, allows for the necessary flexibility to get study participants' descriptions as the interview unfolds. This approach is largely common among sales and purchasing scholars (e.g. Paesbrugghe, Rangarajan, Sharma, Syam, & Jha, 2017; Peters, Ivens, & Pardo, 2020; Sharma, Rangarajan, & Paesbrugghe, 2020).

In line with this practice, we offered to conduct interviews face-to-face via video conferencing according to individual preferences and convenience (Peters et al., 2020). We reached out to participants, clarified the purpose of the research, and assured anonymity for all informants, ensuring that no individual responses could be traced back to any specific person in the findings (Ancillai et al., 2024).

3.1. Data collection

To investigate the role of one-to-one digital channels in social capital development in B2B buyer–seller interactions, we purposefully selected knowledgeable informants in Europe (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We contacted individuals holding sales and buying roles in B2B contexts and then employed a snowballing technique to find additional participants that matched our purposeful sampling requirements and reach a suitable number (Johnson, 2015; Paesbrugghe et al., 2017). We sought to maximize diversity in job roles, gender, industries, and company sizes (Lanzrath et al., 2023) (see Table 2).

Table 2
Profile of study participants.

Participant	Salesperson	Gender	Industry	Company Size
S1		Male	Digital Marketing	Small
S2		Male	Digital Marketing	Small
S3		Male	ICT	Medium
S4		Male	Construction	Medium
S5		Male	HR Consulting	Large
S6		Male	Manufacturing	Medium
S7		Male	Electricity	Small
S8		Male	ICT	Medium
S9		Male	Mechanical engineering	Large
S10		Male	Manufacturing	Medium
S11		Male	ICT	Medium
S12		Male	Apparel	Small
S13		Female	Pharmaceutical	Large
S14		Female	Food	Large
S15		Male	Marketing services	Medium/Large
S16		Male	Sport	Small
Participant Buyer				
B1		Male	Food	Large
B2		Female	Food	Large
B3		Female	Apparel	Medium
B4		Female	Apparel	Medium
B5		Male	Healthcare	Medium
B6		Male	Healthcare	Medium
B7		Female	Food	Large
B8		Male	Pharmaceutical	Large
B9		Male	Apparel	Medium
B10		Male	Food	Large
B11		Female	Furniture	Large
B12		Female	Manufacturing	Medium
B13		Female	Food	Large
B14		Male	Food	Large
B15		Female	ICT	Large
B16		Female	Pharmaceutical	Large
B17		Female	Healthcare	Small

The interviews concluded once saturation was reached, as evidenced by the redundancy of information (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As a result, we conducted a total of 33 semi-structured interviews. The sample size matches the recommendation of TIU approach and exploratory research (McCracken, 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2020) and samples of comparable qualitative works (e.g. Good, Hughes, & Wang, 2022; Homburg, Wilczek, & Hahn, 2014). The interviews lasted between 40 min up to 1 h, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim.

Some questions (e.g. background information, general use of social media in their job, their opinion regarding the role of one-to-one digital channels in the job, the key benefits and pain points of such channels) were similar for both sellers and buyers. However, questions related to the social capital dimensions and their formation mechanism were slightly adapted to the specific role of the key informant. For instance, interviews with salespeople were focused on their relationship with buyers and how the use of one-to-one digital channels affect their networking activity, the frequency and nature of contacts, access to information, as well as how they approach buyers, the content they share with them, and how they describe relationships through such channels. Buyers were asked about the role of one-to-one digital channels in shaping networking activities with salespeople, their perceptions regarding salespeople's approach through such channels, what kind of content they receive from salespeople and what content they are willing to share, and how these channels affect the relationships in terms of trustworthiness, competencies, and reliability toward salespeople. Moreover, both buyers and sellers were asked to share critical episodes and discuss perceived risks related to one-to-one digital channels in managing relationship over time.

3.2. Data analysis

Aligned with previous studies that integrate the principles of deductive and inductive logic in TIU research (Good et al., 2022), two researchers independently analyzed data through thematic analysis with a priori codes, which were then complemented and enhanced by open coding (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015; Tóth et al., 2022). The main objective of this analysis was to connect theoretical insights with empirical data. The coding process proceeded manually; text chunks were marked through highlights and codes were indicated by written comments. Notably, a priori codes were theory-driven (cf. Alghababsheh & Galllear, 2020; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Such codes include ‘network ties’, ‘trust’, ‘friendship’, ‘shared goals’. Conversely, open codes emerged from the data, such as ‘intrusiveness’, ‘channel overload’, ‘path-dependency’. Then, the whole research team met to cross-check the analysis. Only a few disagreements emerged regarding the key insights identified during the data analysis. This open mind attitude to data analysis is in line with recent approaches to achieve breadth and depth anchored by the scholar’s knowledge (Golder et al., 2023).

4. Findings

4.1. Structural capital formation

In this section, we will show the formation of structural social capital, namely the network configuration and density of interpersonal connections that regard who you reach and how you reach them. This definition guides our analysis of how one-to-one digital channels shape the structure of buyer-seller relationships.

Specifically, these channels contribute in creating the overall pattern of connections between such actors and the mechanisms through which these connections are reinforced.

Findings show the importance of *pre-existing social capital* as these tools are primarily used with long-lasting partners with whom participants already established a trusted relationship. Specifically, many buyers express their openness to using one-to-one digital channels exclusively with “salespeople that I know well and trust” (B7 [food]), describing “outrageous and annoying” (B3, [apparel]) and “overly intrusive” (B17 [healthcare]) to be reached on WhatsApp by contacts they do not know. Buyers claim that salespeople who are contacting them for the first time “wouldn’t dare to send a WhatsApp message” (B6 [healthcare]). Sellers confirm this approach:

“We use such channels to reach partner clients. For example, there are foreign customers who send me messages with emojis — but they usually buy from me. They’re partners” (S6, [Manufacturing]).

“I only use them with people that I have already met” (S14, [food]).

These examples clearly illustrate structural social capital because the emphasis on the type of relationship (i.e. the existence and strength of pre-established ties) reveals the network’s configuration.

Specific channels enact different structural functions within the network.

For instance, private messages sent through LinkedIn contribute to creating the “bridging” function of structural social capital, as it enables to connect with unknown potential partners (Ancillai et al., 2024). Differently, WhatsApp, Skype, and Teams primarily serve the “bonding” function of social capital, which focuses on deepening existing relationships and strengthening connections (Tóth et al., 2022). This distinction between bridging and bonding demonstrates how different digital tools shape the architecture of social networks—core to structural capital.

One-to-one digital channels strengthen the presence of network ties between sellers and buyers through *frequency of interactions* (Alghababsheh & Galllear, 2020; Jääskeläinen et al., 2023). These channels, in fact, enable interactions for “maintaining daily relationships with distant contacts” (B9 [apparel]). Such repeated, structured

exchanges enhance tie density and communication flow, hallmarks of structural capital. The structured exchange of information and the recurring interactions translate into a timely response to the needs of business partners, with both suppliers and buyers appreciating such communication. In line with Lee and Ha (2018), the existence of structural capital facilitates the effective sharing of information between the two parties, making it possible to have the right information through personal contact sooner than people without that contact. As S1 [digital marketing] stated:

“I’m constantly on WhatsApp talking to customers or potential clients. It’s good because I manage to convert leads even on a Saturday night at 2 AM. Or those times when, after telling a bedtime story to my daughter as she fell asleep, I was answering client inquiries and making conversions through chat, of course.”

This increased responsiveness is seen as a key competitive asset, with buyers stating “When comparing companies of similar quality and pricing, I prefer those that respond promptly. Rapid communication not only saves time but also ensures efficient order processing and confirmation. Ultimately, my preference lies in efficiency and responsiveness” (B5 [healthcare]). Salespeople are also aware of the extent to which clients appreciate this support:

“The client calls you and wants to talk to you, meaning they appreciate it. It’s a support they value, and one that I also prefer to provide” (S9 [Mechanical engineering]).

This further underscores the structural nature of social capital, as frequent and direct contact enables real-time responsiveness, strengthening the network’s connectivity and coordination capacity. The frequency of interaction with long-term trusted partners through one-to-one digital channels seems to facilitate goal alignment, conflict reduction (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Villena et al., 2011), and effective collaboration (Erridge & Greer, 2002) which are at the basis of cognitive capital.

However, while participants widely acknowledge the efficiency of such channels in facilitating communication and fostering interpersonal relationships, there are some factors related to one-to-one digital channels that at this stage of the process may undermine the way patterns among buyers and sellers are created, weakening network ties instead of strengthening the relationship.

The intrusiveness of one-to-one digital channels emerged as a main issue that may prevent the formation of structural capital leading to *disengagement behaviors*. As B2 [food] reported:

“I receive WhatsApp messages from sellers, day and night, and this has been the reality for years. It is certainly a much bigger intrusion. If I open my WhatsApp chat, it’s filled with messages from colleagues and sellers. WhatsApp has become, more than any other communication method, a primary contact tool that can sometimes be a bit invasive, though its usefulness cannot be denied”.

Participants consistently underscored the inherent tension between sustaining effective business communication and safeguarding personal time when it comes to managing interactions in one-to-one digital channels, especially in IM applications. “Despite their degree of informality is a big pro” as S1 [digital marketing] said “my family doesn’t appreciate seeing me using the mobile phone during the weekend.”

Unrequested messages or contact during non-working hours can trigger annoying reactions and resistance to interacting. Persistent and pushy requests may reduce interaction frequency and weaken the tie strength between buyers and sellers, thus preventing the formation of structural capital at the very beginning of this relationship.

“Twenty years ago, if you sent a cold email to someone, they would usually reply—because they only received about five emails a day, and responding was seen as a polite gesture. Today, no one replies. People receive a thousand emails a day and immediately know you’re trying to sell them something.” (S8 [ICT]).

To avoid this happening, both sales and buyers agree on the need to establish boundaries based on urgency of communication (S13) or message quality and personalization (B12 e S7).

“Well, they contact me during working hours. But honestly, I think it also depends on how you train them. If someone messages me outside working hours and it’s not urgent, I don’t reply. If it is urgent, then I do. That said, I always carry my work phone with me, to be honest.” (S13 [Pharmaceutical]).

“I quickly read personalized messages, and if they are highly personalized, I respond. When the message isn’t personalized, I don’t respond” (B12 [manufacturing]).

“Whether it is LinkedIn, email, or WhatsApp it’s important to send consistent messages. You can’t use it to send messages about ten thousand products. My sales team and I try to send messages that are always relevant to the industry and how we help companies improve” (S7 [Electricity]).

These insights suggest that boundary-setting operates not just at the temporal level, but also at a content level. One-to-one channels, to be effective and non-invasive, must not only respect time but also offer relevance (Ancillai et al., 2024; Saxton & Guo, 2020).

4.2. Cognitive capital formation

In this section, we show how one-to-one digital communication channels contribute to the formation of cognitive social capital by creating frequent and reciprocal connections that enable efficient knowledge exchange. Findings reveal that repeated interactions through one-to-one digital channels (i.e., structural capital) facilitate the efficient transfer of content, thereby enhancing shared understanding as well as alignment around common visions and goals, which are understood as the foundational components of cognitive capital (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

First, such channels help partners achieve *shared understanding* by clarifying day-to-day issues (such as agreements, procedures, and contractual aspects) and by enabling dynamic, context-specific exchanges that address operational needs (e.g., situational inquiries, collaborative problem-solving, and arrangements).

As S3 [ICT] explained:

“With clients, I exchange links to material via WhatsApp or messages to receive feedback on activities we have done together or simply to prompt them to view certain materials.”

Similarly, B6 [healthcare] reported:

“I have to send a photo for a non-conformity; I do it via WhatsApp. I ask the supplier, ‘Look, I need this component,’ and I send a photo. It is much more effective than email, much more than a phone call, because often, even after a phone call, visual support is needed to clarify the request”.

These examples explicitly illustrate cognitive social capital because they show how digital interactions promote mutual comprehension and shared interpretation of information, allowing both parties to construct meaning together and reduce misunderstandings.

Additionally, findings illustrate how the immediacy and richness of digital exchanges enable partners to co-construct meaning and clarify interpretations central to the development of cognitive capital. As B13 [food] pointed out:

“They’re fantastic for obtaining technical explanations. They promptly sent me a picture on WeChat showing how to assemble the box, ensuring optimal responsiveness.”

Likewise, B6 [healthcare] highlighted how “videos or photos of the production process shared through WhatsApp help avoid issues during customs clearance or inspections.” Such instances demonstrate how digital interactions strengthen the cognitive dimension of relationships as rich, multimodal communication supports the development of shared cognitive frameworks, enabling both sides to ‘see’ and understand the same issue and reduce ambiguity, which is central to cognitive capital. In addition, one-to-one digital channels are used for networked collaboration, particularly when coordination is required across distributed teams. As B9 [apparel] stated:

“We use Teams for teamwork and networked collaboration, including task distribution among different actors even when there is geographical distance.”

These examples illustrate how such channels allow participants to rapidly co-construct meaning and navigate complexity in real time thus providing a shared interpretative space that supports both mutual understanding and task execution - key aspects of cognitive capital. This is particularly evident in situations where urgency demands immediate attention and clarification. As B16 [pharmaceutical] explained: “If it’s something particularly urgent, besides the email I might also send a sort of alert via WhatsApp.”

Also, in international contexts, the role of such tools in bridging language barriers is particularly noteworthy. As B6 [healthcare] highlighted:

“WeChat and WhatsApp, more so than video calls, facilitate relationships with foreign sellers who may have difficulty speaking fluent English and thus struggle to make themselves understood.”

This reflects the cognitive dimension of social capital by showing how shared meanings are co-created even across linguistic and cultural boundaries, allowing partners to establish a common interpretative ground despite differences.

Overall, this content sharing behavior reflects a form of “situational coding” of language, which allows partners to attain a deeper understanding of the purpose of the relationships and how they can contribute to achieving shared goals (Villena et al., 2011).

Hence, one-to-one digital channels support the exchange of knowledge that fosters the alignment of expectations around *shared vision and goals*. Sales participants emphasize that through these channels, it is possible to “understand each other’s needs and align on the objectives to be pursued” (S5 [HR consulting]). Another adds that he normally “use WhatsApp, Telegram, email to nurture one-to-one relationship and providing personalized solutions to meet client’s needs” (S2 [digital marketing]).

These statements illustrate cognitive social capital because they directly show the alignment of mental models and goal orientation between sellers and buyers—reflecting a shared cognitive framework that supports coordinated action.

The strategic use of content fosters a collaborative environment that often translates into value co-creation. As B13 [food] stated:

“The seller sends me videos on technical feasibility. Currently, we’ve created technical drawings for an object but decided to revise some parts to make them rounder and softer. The seller sent a video demonstrating the difficulty of printing with a cylinder on an object with a bulged surface.”

This approach positively influences buyers’ perceptions which value “the seller’s willingness to move forward with the proposal of a new product, its ability in the resolution of our problems, or the suggestion of an alternative solution to the current system” (B11 [furniture]). Therefore, the relationships formed through these channels have the potential to foster the exchange of valuable insights, build mutual understanding, and improve the quality of future interactions (Itani et al., 2023). Overall, these examples demonstrate that the cognitive dimension of social capital — shared meanings and shared visions and goals — is reinforced through digital one-to-one communication, which provides a foundation for more effective collaboration and value co-creation.

However, at this stage, a major risk in the formation process of cognitive social capital is *channel overload*, which is the simultaneous use of multiple one-to-one digital channels (e.g., WhatsApp, Teams, LinkedIn, Skype) that fragments communication flows and jeopardize both shared understandings and visions. As S2 [digital marketing] stated.

“Today we might talk via Skype, tomorrow we might write to each other on WhatsApp, the next day on Telegram, and then on LinkedIn and Facebook.”

This may lead to information overload, confusion, miscommunication and inefficiencies (Hunter, 2004; Lyngdoh, Chefor, Hochstein, Britton, & Amyx, 2021), making it difficult for buyers and sellers to develop a shared interpretative framework. As messages are dispersed across different platforms and formats, key information can be duplicated, lost, or misunderstood, reducing the efficiency and clarity of exchanges. Participants described “this constant switching between platforms as a source of confusion in the conversation” (S2 [digital marketing]) with

also the risk of missing important information. As B10 underlined:

“Although using WhatsApp or messaging on Teams is faster than email, relying on chat increases the number of things you need to keep track of. It’s no longer just Outlook. Something can be easily lost on WhatsApp”.

Additionally, the construction of a shared understanding can be undermined by the ambiguity that channel fragmentation can generate. About this a respondent (S6 [Manufacturing]) noted:

“There’s also the risk of delays, because while it may speed things up on one side, it can actually prolong the process if the client thinks that a ‘thumbs up’ emoji on WhatsApp is enough to close the deal”.

When communication is fragmented across multiple one-to-one digital platforms, messages lose not only coherence but also emotional tone, creating ambiguity in interpretation. As one participant insightfully noted (S13 [pharmaceutical]):

“Sometimes when you write something down, and someone reads it, they can’t perceive your tone, so it really has to be well written. Often, this creates misunderstandings where I feel like the other person is angry—but then we talk, and it turns out they’re not.”

In the case of IM application, the absence of non-verbal signals, combined with asynchronous messaging across different platforms, can distort intent and disrupt the process of building shared understanding. If not well managed, digital fragmentation undermines the construction of cognitive capital by weakening mutual sense-making and goal alignment.

4.3. Relational capital formation

In this section, we show how one-to-one digital communication channels contribute to the development of relational social capital. Findings highlight that the cognitive base established through shared meanings and aligned goals serves as a foundation for the reinforcement of trust, deeper personal relationships and emotional closeness. In this sense, the following examples illustrate how cognitive social capital—manifested in shared understanding and goals alignment—translates into concrete relational aspects, namely trust and friendship. Hence, in this processual logic, cognitive social capital acts as the foundation of relational social capital (Rodén & Lawson, 2014).

As interactions increase and shared meanings and goals become more entrenched, parties begin to perceive greater predictability in the counterpart’s behavior, reducing uncertainties and developing *mutual trust* (Lioliou & Zimmermann, 2015). This sense of trust manifests itself as the willingness to share, through one-to-one digital channels, *“sensitive information regarding for instance interesting candidates that we met”*, thus *“making other channels less suitable”* (S5 [HR consulting]). This reflects relational capital, as the act of exchanging confidential information demonstrates how digital intimacy reinforces relational ties and mutual reliance. Compared to other public social media such as LinkedIn or Facebook, participants praise the private nature of these tools as a key to relational bonding:

“Although users can copy, forward, or widely share messages, conversation on WhatsApp is often intended to be confidential, necessitating careful consideration of what is shared” (B1 [food]). This emphasis on confidentiality illustrates relational social capital by showing how private, protected communication spaces cultivate trust and strengthen relational bonds.

This perceived privacy fosters meaningful and personalized communication, enhancing the quality of interactions and strengthening the relationship between the parties involved (Hughes, Morgan, Ireland, & Hughes, 2014; Villena et al., 2011). Thus, one-to-one channels function as trust-enabling environments that deepen emotional connections and commitment, central to the relational dimension of social capital.

Moreover, one-to-one digital channels promote informality, which nurtures authentic interaction.

“These tools, WhatsApp more than others, are platforms where you can interact in a very informal way” (S1 [digital marketing]).

Informality represents another mechanism through which relational

social capital develops, as it reduces social distance, humanizes communication, and builds rapport that extends beyond transactional exchanges. In fact, informational exchanges through one-to-one digital channels create the baseline for socialization processes which are an important component in the development of relational capital (Agnihotri, 2020; Saxton & Guo, 2020). Such informality can be particularly valuable in overcoming cultural barriers – or generally when a party tend to be suspicious of interpersonal relationships - thus increasing trust both professionally and on a personal level. As B9 [apparel] noted:

“Connecting with a Chinese person, even as someone who considers themselves empathetic and approachable, like me, isn’t always easy. I must say that using personal touches, like emojis, has significantly boosted my confidence in both business and personal interactions.”

This quote vividly illustrates relational social capital, as the respondent’s use of affective symbols like emojis fosters emotional warmth and reduces psychological distance—key to the creation of relational closeness and mutual confidence.

Frequent exposure to informal and rapid interactions allows actors to express authenticity and closeness, thus promoting a sense of *friendship* marked by mutual care and understanding beyond mere business transactions (Alghababsheh & Galleary, 2020; Villena et al., 2011). Participants highlighted how, over time, these interactions can develop into close bonds characterized by reciprocal attachment. This is reflected in behaviors such as sending birthday wishes or engaging in conversations that go beyond business. As B6 [healthcare] explained, messages often include *“How are you? How is it going?”* and even questions about family life, *“and of course, you are free to share information as you like”*. These interactions can progress to the point where *“you begin sharing aspects of life beyond work. Staying in contact on WhatsApp allows for a deeper exchange that extends beyond the professional sphere.”* (S4 [construction]). These examples capture the affective dimension of relational social capital, where emotional investment, care, and reciprocal concern become embedded in everyday exchanges. Such expressions of personal regard and empathy signify the highest level of relational capital, transforming digital interactions into enduring social bonds.

However, findings show that the formation of relational capital may be undermined by specific threats related to the very nature of one-to-one digital channels and the consequences of its use. First, the continuous accessibility enabled by one-to-one digital channels may generate an accumulation of relational obligations, which—if not managed properly—can overwhelm individuals. This risk aligns with prior research on the constraining effects of strong social ties (Villena et al., 2011). The perception of being constantly accessible and available, even beyond formal working boundaries, seems to generate a sense of fatigue and emotional exhaustion deriving from digital interactions and too many expectations from clients who demand real-time responsiveness and constant support (Bright, Kleiser, & Grau, 2015; Dhir, Kaur, Chen and Pallesen, 2019).

“What matters to them is that they want to see our customer care and us responding to emails and messages within 10 minutes” (S8 [ICT]).

“Sometimes communication happens only through WhatsApp, merely as an information exchange. It becomes overused—a shortcut. The company requires us salespeople to use digital tools like WhatsApp, and in the sports industry, clients have adapted quickly. There’s heavy use of WhatsApp—sometimes even excessive—for everything, not only sending catalogue. But it doesn’t always work well” (S16 [sport]).

This will eventually erode authenticity, and hinder the development of trust, emotional closeness and friendship which are the basis of relational capital. For example, B15 [ICT] describes how WhatsApp sometimes *“feel too personal in certain phases of the negotiation process”* and *“when suppliers become friends, everything becomes a bit blurry. They start sending Christmas wishes and then there’s really no limit when and where they can reach you”*.

Additionally, although one-to-one digital channels are supposed to foster immediacy, personalization, and informal exchanges among

buyers and sellers, their effectiveness in fostering trust and emotional bonding can be undermined if internal departments—such as sales, marketing, customer service, or administration—are poorly coordinated. Regardless of the sense of friendship developed through these channels, if inconsistencies emerge, they can cause serious damage in terms of trust. As S9 [mechanical engineering] pointed out:

“The exchange of rich, timely, and relevant information within the organization, including customer feedback, the order status updates, product requirements, product availability and delivery documents that customer service deals with, enhances the consistency and responsiveness of customer-facing interactions”.

Without such integration, the seller’s message, even if friendly or well-intentioned—can appear unreliable or incomplete. Similarly, internal collaboration between buyers and marketing provides an important foundation for effective communication with external suppliers. As one buyer explained:

“We tend to avoid having our suppliers talk directly to marketing because it often becomes too complicated. Instead, I discuss about product requirements with marketing which is essential to establish a solid basis that I can then share with the supplier” (B13 [food]).

Hence, the internal misalignment may undermine the perceived consistency and reliability in buyer-seller relationships thus weakening the relational strength and the formation of mutual trust.

4.4. Social capital accumulation and maintenance over time

This section shows how social capital, once established, continues to shape buyer–seller interactions by fostering transparency, adaptability, and enduring connections.

Once trust, emotional bonding and friendship among buyers and sellers are formed, the social capital generated through one-to-one digital channels does not simply end with the transaction. On the contrary, relational capital creates a safe environment for buyers and suppliers in which they *“feel confident to share any doubts and thoughts about each aspect of the solution”* (B2 [food]). This enhanced transparency not only benefits buyers who feel free to ask for specific requirements and offers adaptation but helps sellers to better craft their solutions to their buyers’ needs by adapting prices, products and selling approach. About this, some sellers pointed out:

“I have all my clients’ mobile numbers and emails, and with many—all most all—there’s such familiarity and trust that just a quick WhatsApp is enough to communicate: ‘I won’t make it, can you send me this?’” (S15 [marketing services]).

“We are now directly connected with customers via WhatsApp, where they can send requests for new offers. This way, we receive the information needed to act accordingly and initiate a new transaction” (S7 [electricity]).

Hence, relational capital, as well as cognitive capital, makes it easier for parties to share, interpret, and incorporate new knowledge into relational memory (Chang & Gotcher, 2007; Huikkola et al., 2013).

Additionally, findings reveal that social capital can persist and evolve over time, even beyond formal business relationships.

“Off course the relationship has changed, but we check on each other every month asking how we are doing and talking about responsibilities and other staff” (S14 [food]).

As B9 [apparel] also noted: *“The creation of a friendship-based relationship ensures that these bonds persist even after the professional relationship has ended, such as when one party changes job.”*

In this sense, social capital becomes a sort of portable resource that actors carry with them across organizational boundaries, enabling new collaborations and ensuring continuity in professional exchanges. The maintenance of social capital over time is relevant for salespeople which frequently change their portfolio of social connections when they change company (Agnihotri, 2020). In this regard, S2 [digital marketing] said:

“Maintaining contact via WhatsApp or LinkedIn is essential to remind them I’m still around”.

Additionally, S15 [marketing services] pointed out *“Even if we haven’t worked together in a while, I still check in occasionally.”* This is also backed up by buyers:

“Even if that person changed company, if I had a good experience with them, I might recommend them to colleagues or get in touch again if I know they now work at a relevant firm” (B16 [pharmaceutical]).

This means that social capital is not something static, but it requires ongoing nurturing to remain strong and valuable over time.

“Nurturing these relationships is important, and these tools [one-to-one digital channels] facilitate this by enhancing the connection beyond just business. This mutual engagement can significantly enrich the relationship and foster stronger bonds over time” (S4 [construction]).

“If a prospect is busy, I send a LinkedIn message like: ‘Is this a good time to talk? You mentioned we’d reconnect around now—when works for you?’ If I don’t get a reply, I follow up via WhatsApp, which is more effective. It helps me stay in touch without being intrusive—people can read and respond when they’re ready.” (S3 [ICT]).

This intentional, respectful continuity helps keep relationships alive without compromising autonomy or comfort.

In a processual view, this may indicate that the accumulation of relational capital over time between buyers and sellers through one-to-one digital channels may facilitate the rapid rebuilding of structural ties and even accelerate the process of building trust with the same stakeholders in different jobs.

However, this continuity may also bring an important risk, which is path dependency. In this final stage, the accumulation of social capital and this tendency to rely excessively on past and known contacts, may generate a form of mental lock-in and cognitive inertia, thus inhibiting openness to alternative and more competitive solutions (Eklinder-Frick, Eriksson, & Hallén, 2014; Gargiulo & Benassi, 1999; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). One respondent articulated this dependency:

“When searching for a service to purchase, I rely on a structured consultancy network that I am already familiar with. Through this network, it is easy for us to seek out other professionals we need. This process is closely tied to the sector in which we operate, which places significant emphasis on trusted relationships” (B14 [food]).

Similarly, another buyer noted:

“The preferred route is always to work with suppliers already qualified within the company. Of course, new requests for meetings or presentations might be useful, but in reality, everything we should need is already covered by our internal register” (B15 [ICT]).

Such customer behavior may compromise the objectivity and rationality of decision-making processes (Chou, Chen, & Pan, 2006; Erridge & Greer, 2002; Gargiulo & Benassi, 1999). Hence, while social capital, characterized by network-based interactions, shared understanding, and trust typically enhances professional efficiency and collaboration, when customers show a high level of path-dependency in suppliers’ selection they may miss opportunities to enhance performance through supply chains optimization, access to new expertise, or negotiation of better contractual terms (Villena et al., 2011).

Moreover, this path dependency risk is linked to the initial stage of structural capital: individuals tend to use one-to-one digital channels primarily with trusted contacts, reinforcing a relational inertia that can be difficult to break. As B16 [pharmaceutical] highlights:

“If I only email a supplier once a year, I would never consider contacting them on WhatsApp — it just wouldn’t feel right.”

While such pre-existing social capital is the pre-requisite in the formation of structural capital through one-to-one digital channels, it can also slow down the creation of new structural ties—especially when actors prefer to “recycle” existing relationships rather than initiate new ones. In sum, while the sustained use of one-to-one digital channels offers unique opportunities for the continuity of social capital, it also requires conscious management to avoid narrowing the scope of interaction and escape the trap of over embeddedness (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000; Grabher, 2001).

Overall, these findings reveal that the development of social capital

through one-to-one digital channels follows a sequential and cumulative logic, where each form of capital enables the next and, once established, can be sustained over time through continuous relational maintenance.

5. Discussion

Fig. 2 displays the conceptual framework that merges our qualitative research findings with the theoretical underpinnings of social capital. The conceptual framework shows a processual view of the development of social capital in buyer-seller relationships in B2B contexts through one-to-one digital channels, and it is articulated in four stages. Drawing on foundational works (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), the three first stages capture how the three dimensions of social capital—structural, cognitive, and relational—unfold in a cumulative and sequential manner, where each form provides the foundation for the next. Specifically, one-to-one digital channels first enhance the creation of structural capital by increasing frequency of interactions within actors who are already part of pre-existing trusting relationships. Different from other social media and digital channels (such as LinkedIn), these tools reveal their potential with people they have already met, enhancing the bonding function of social capital rather than the bridging one (Tóth et al., 2022). This structural embedding provides the right infrastructure for people to efficiently communicate and transfer valuable content through one-to-one digital channels - such as images, videos, audio or real-time collaborative exchanges - which support the formation of cognitive capital. Hence, these platforms thanks to content richness and immediacy allow buyers and sellers to reach a shared understanding and foster the alignment of expectation around shared visions and goals (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The constant interaction enabled by one-to-one digital channels together with the establishment of shared meanings and common goals help individuals act on market knowledge and provide prompt services (Crosby & LeMay, 1998), thus enhancing responsiveness (Bernardes, 2010; Grawe et al., 2012; Li, Ye, & Sheu, 2014).

This cognitive alignment then paves the way for the third stage, which is the formation of relational capital, characterized by a deeper personal relationship and emotional closeness which translate into the development of mutual trust and friendship. Importantly, our findings also extend prior models by uncovering a fourth stage: the accumulation and maintenance of social capital over time. This phase reflects the continued nurturing of existing ties beyond transactional boundaries,

where relationships persist even across job changes or formal contract expiration. In this sense, social capital becomes a mobile resource that actors carry with them, reinforcing continuity and relational memory in evolving B2B networks memory (Chang & Gotcher, 2007; Huikkola et al., 2013). The concept of social capital maintenance in literature has been linked to the appropriation of prior relationships and reflects the individual’s ability and effort to preserve personal network ties, even after structural changes such as role shifts or organizational transitions (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2022). Through tools such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn, or email, participants reported staying in touch with former clients or trusted partners, occasionally exchanging messages, checking in, or reactivating dormant ties. In this sense, one-to-one digital channels not only sustain ongoing collaboration but also function as relational bridges across time, reinforcing the sequential dimension of social capital.

However, this processual view is not always linear nor risk-free. While one-to-one digital channels are praised for their immediacy, personalization, and informality, the conceptual model also introduces a series of critical risks that may disrupt the process through which social capital is developed. These risks occur at different stages of the process interfering with how connections are established (structural), meanings are shared (cognitive), and trust is built (relational).

At the structural level, intrusiveness of one-to-one digital channels (especially messaging apps) may undermine the way patterns among buyers and sellers are created, reducing the willingness of actors to engage in conversation and the frequency of interactions thus weakening tie formation. In order with past studies (Ancillai et al., 2024; Saxton & Guo, 2020), to avoid this, actors should set personal boundaries based on urgency of communication or content relevance.

At the cognitive level, the fragmented communication caused by the simultaneous use of multiple one-to-one digital platforms may hinder shared understanding by dispersing key messages, generating confusion, and reducing clarity. This channel overload can also disrupt mutual sense-making and alignment around goals (Hunter, 2004; Lyngdoh et al., 2021), ultimately weakening the formation of cognitive capital. Therefore, while having strong ties and multiple interactions is essential, it’s equally important that one-to-one digital channels are used in a consistent and focused manner to support clear communication and ongoing collaboration in B2B relationships.

At the relational level, two main risks associated with one-to-one digital channels may threaten the quality and stability of relational

SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN ONE-TO-ONE DIGITAL CHANNELS

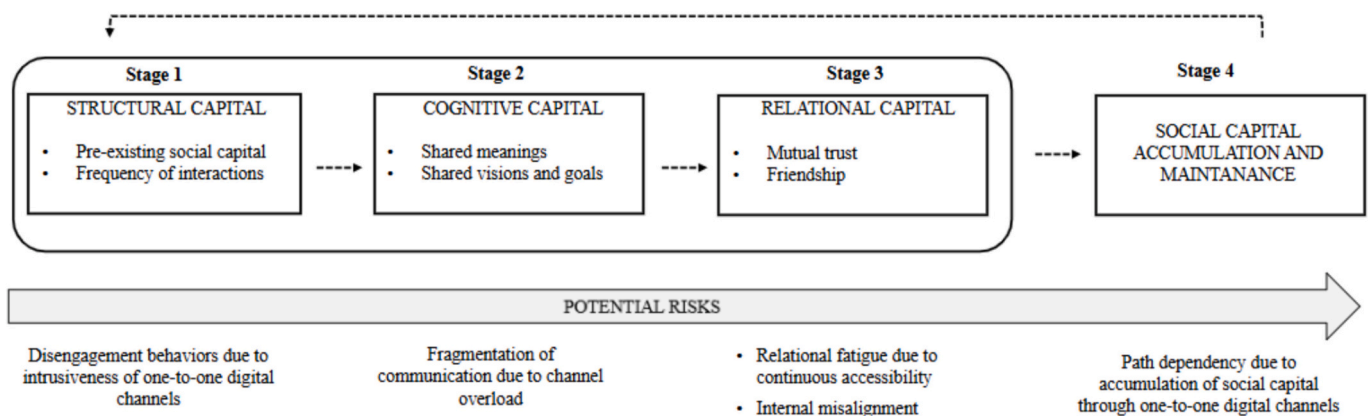


Fig. 2. The development of social capital in one-to-one digital channels.

Note. The framework depicts a cumulative and sequential process. Stage 1 – Structural capital formation: activation and strengthening of ties (e.g., LinkedIn private messages to bridge to prospects; WhatsApp/Teams primarily for bonding with trusted partners). Stage 2 – Cognitive capital formation: richer and faster way to co-construct meaning and shared understanding (e.g., exchanging photos/videos for specifics and non-conformities; live coordination on Teams; updates to align goals). Stage 3 – Relational capital formation: informal, personalized exchanges (e.g., WhatsApp/IM that nurture trust, reciprocity, and friendship beyond task execution). Stage 4 – Accumulation and maintenance: periodic check-ins, and reactivation of dormant ties trough IM applications.

ties, preventing the formation of trust, reciprocal attachment, and friendship. First, the constant accessibility enabled by one-to-one digital channels (strictly related to intrusiveness and the blurring of personal boundaries) can lead to a sense of what we have called relational fatigue, as salespeople feel pressured to respond instantly and maintain continuous availability (Bright et al., 2015; Dhir et al., 2019). This can erode the authenticity of interactions and the formation of emotional closeness, ultimately weakening the relational ties formation. Second, the effectiveness of these channels in building trust can be also undermined by internal misalignment. If the information exchanged is inconsistent across departments, even well-intentioned or friendly communication may appear unreliable, reducing perceived trustworthiness.

At the final stage, risks emerge from the accumulation of social capital over time. While maintaining long-term relationships through one-to-one digital channels can offer continuity and familiarity, it may also lead to path dependency thus creating relational lock-in, similarity in thinking and limiting openness to new, potentially more valuable connections (Eklinder-Frick et al., 2014; Gargiulo & Benassi, 1999; Jääskeläinen et al., 2020). As buyers continue to engage primarily with familiar suppliers, the potential for discovering better-performing or more cost-effective alternatives may be overlooked. The presence of an excessive level of social capital (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000) has been regarded as a potential threat in the literature on buyer seller relationship (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Chou et al., 2006; Villena et al., 2011). The conceptual framework shows how this applies also to relational ties which have been formed through one-to-one digital channels. In this sense, the maintenance of social capital—where enduring ties can later facilitate renewed structural interactions—closes the processual loop over time, showing how previously developed relationships can serve as a foundation for new structural connections. This continuity is beneficial when it supports responsiveness and efficiency, but disadvantageous when it limits network expansion and reinforces over-embeddedness (Grabher, 2001). This dynamic is captured in our framework by the return arrow from the final stage to the structural dimension, illustrating how accumulated social capital can either reinvigorate the structural base or constrain it within pre-existing boundaries. Thus, while relational capital builds trust and efficiency, it also needs to be managed carefully to minimize lock-in effects and keep flexibility in supplier relationships.

6. Theoretical contributions

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on digital B2B relationships and social capital theory.

First, it responds to recent calls for more empirical research on the role of digital channels in fostering social capital in B2B contexts (Agnihotri et al., 2022; Saxton & Guo, 2020). Specifically, existing literature suggests that digital channels play a crucial role in facilitating social capital formation within such relationships (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Itani et al., 2023). However, early empirical evidence suggests a more pronounced influence of social media on internal rather than external social capital (Schmitt et al., 2024). This difference may be determined by the predominant focus on how public social media influence B2B sales and buying behaviors (e.g., Bowen et al., 2021; Itani et al., 2023; Schmitt et al., 2021). Nonetheless, empirical findings consistently show that the use of public social media remains relatively limited among buyers and sellers (Agnihotri, 2020; Bill et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2021), suggesting the need to explore alternative digital channels better suited for relationship development. In this regard, scholars have put forward the idea that sales professionals and buyers may be more comfortable using one-to-one digital channels (Ancillai et al., 2024; Lacoste, 2016). Hence, we integrate the extant literature by shifting attention from public to private digital interactions, emphasizing the need to explore how one-to-one digital channels specifically contribute to social capital development.

Second, we contribute to social capital theory by proposing a

processual and integrative framework grounded in qualitative data, which illustrates how the three dimensions of social capital—structural, cognitive, and relational—unfold in an interdependent and sequential way in buyer-seller relationships. Rather than considering these dimensions as separate factors that affect outcomes (e.g., Jääskeläinen et al., 2020), the framework highlights their cumulative and integrated nature (Roden & Lawson, 2014; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998) explaining how structural capital (e.g., interaction frequency and existing ties) enables the creation of cognitive capital (e.g., shared understanding), which in turn supports the formation of relational capital (e.g., trust and friendship). The framework also introduces a fourth stage related to the accumulation and maintenance of social capital over time, thus framing social capital not only as a resource that is embedded in current relationships, but also as a relational path that can persist and be reactivated across organizational and role boundaries (Agnihotri et al., 2022). In doing so, this research offers a dynamic and processual perspective that advances theoretical understanding of social capital development in digitalized buyer-seller interactions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Roden & Lawson, 2014; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

Third, the study integrates the concept of risk into the process of social capital development, shedding light on the “dark side” of social capital offering a required nuanced and critical understanding of social capital development in digital environment (Agnihotri et al., 2022; Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2020; Villena et al., 2011). It identifies specific threats of social capital development through one-to-one digital channels such as intrusiveness, channel overload, relational fatigue, internal misalignment, and path dependency. In doing so, the research emphasizes the need to actively manage these risks to ensure relationship building, echoing recent research on the importance of managing digital disruptors in B2B relational processes (Schmitt, Klein, & Lussier, 2025).

Notably, these contributions are presented by incorporating both the seller's and buyer's perspectives. This approach is especially significant, as B2B sales literature has traditionally focused primarily on the seller's viewpoint (Paesbrugge et al., 2020; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). By including both perspectives, a more holistic understanding of contemporary business dynamics is achieved.

7. Managerial implications

Our study provides managerial insights to help B2B sales teams, buyers, and organizations, navigate digital transformation to build effective business relationships.

Firstly, B2B professionals should recognize the strategic value of one-to-one digital channels alongside the traditional technology stack, such as CRM and SFA systems. One-to-one digital channels offer additional opportunities to enhance buyer-seller relationships by fostering structural, relational, and cognitive social capital through more frequent, personalized, and responsive communication. However, their effectiveness depends on context-sensitive use. Managers should design interaction strategies aligned with the sequential development of social capital and train salespeople to adapt tone, frequency, and content to each relationship stage. On the buyer side, strategically integrating one-to-one channels into procurement processes can improve efficiency, responsiveness, and feedback management. Hence, managers should integrate one-to-one digital channels strategically into procurement and commercial processes, using them to reduce response times, streamline issue resolution, and support real-time feedback during negotiation and delivery stages.

Second, excessive communication, fragmented use of multiple platforms, and constant availability may lead to channel overload, miscommunication, and relational fatigue. To avoid this, managers should establish clear digital communication norms—defining appropriate times, content, and platforms for contact, and encouraging asynchronous messaging when suitable. Such digital discipline enhances productivity and protects employee well-being.

Third, maximizing the benefits of one-to-one digital tools in fostering

social capital requires strong internal coordination. Trust and reliability in buyer–seller interactions depend on consistent internal communication. Firms should therefore invest in integrated platforms and cross-functional mechanisms—such as CRM systems that enable real-time data sharing or structured interdepartmental meetings—to ensure alignment before engaging external stakeholders. In procurement settings, fostering closer inter-functional collaboration enables more coherent communication with suppliers, preventing inefficiencies and misalignments in product development and sourcing decisions.

Fourth, as interactions increasingly occur on channels outside company control, managers must balance trust building with governance and compliance. Since much relationship value emerges in private conversations, firms should implement communication policies, periodic audits, and training on ethical conduct to mitigate risks of non-compliance or opportunistic behavior.

Finally, managers should monitor the risk of path dependency in long-term digital exchanges. While continuity supports trust, over-embeddedness may limit innovation. Managers can prevent this through periodic business reviews, rotating responsibilities, and digital tools that identify new potential partners or suppliers.

Overall, managers should view one-to-one digital channels not merely as operational tools but as strategic assets for cultivating and sustaining social capital in the digital era.

8. Limitations and future research directions

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for both academics and managers, yet several limitations must be acknowledged, offering opportunities for future research. First, the paper is based on a qualitative study grounded in the TIU approach which is particularly suited for exploring novel marketing phenomena but has limited capacity for theory testing (Zeithaml et al., 2020). While this approach allowed us to inductively develop a conceptual framework from participants' narratives, its exploratory nature limits the generalizability of our findings. Future research could therefore build on this framework through quantitative studies aimed at testing the proposed relationships more systematically.

Specifically, future research may operationalize the processual view of social capital development proposed in our framework, by developing and validating new measurement scales for each stage (e.g., structural, cognitive, relational, and maintenance). These constructs can be empirically tested across sectors and national cultures to assess their generalizability. Researchers may also investigate the potential moderating role of contextual factors, such as the complexity of the solution (e.g., transactional vs. consultative selling), the nature of the offering (e.g., tangible vs. service-based), or the degree of internal coordination within organizations. For example, complex sales settings – which involve longer sales cycles, multiple stakeholders, and higher levels of uncertainty – might heighten the importance of shared understanding and trust, making these digital channels more or less effective depending on how they are managed. In addition, future work could examine how digital channel management practices (e.g., number of tools used, usage guidelines, internal coordination) affect the effectiveness and risks associated with one-to-one digital interactions. Given the observed threats—such as intrusiveness, overload, and relational fatigue—it would be valuable to explore what mechanisms or routines help mitigate these issues across different relationship phases.

Another limitation of our study relates to the sample composition, particularly the gender distribution among salespeople and buyers. While the buyer group is fairly balanced (10 women out of 17), the salespeople group is still predominantly male (2 women out of 16). Although our data did not reveal significant gender-based differences in the use of one-to-one digital channels, we acknowledge that gender dynamics may influence relationship-building styles and communication preferences. Future research could further investigate whether and how gender affects the formation and maintenance of social capital in

digital B2B interactions, especially in sales contexts where male dominance remains common.

Finally, while this study includes perspectives from both sellers and buyers, it does not adopt a dyadic research design. The data were collected from independent individuals rather than matched dyads. Future studies may address this limitation by considering a dyadic relationship within a sales organization and its own customers bases. The nature and strength of the relationship between salespeople and customers, as well as the social capital resulting from it, can vary greatly across different dyads (Hughes et al., 2013). Moreover, the use of dyadic and longitudinal data may reduce the opportunity for common method bias (see Itani et al., 2020), thus helping to better match social capital dimensions to its effective outcomes.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sara Bartoloni: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Chiara Ancillai:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Federica Pascucci:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gian Luca Gregori:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None

Data availability

Data is available in the manuscript. Anonymity has been guaranteed to key informants.

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