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# **A B2B ENGAGEMENT EXPLORATION THROUGH THE LENS OF BUYER-SELLER RELATIONSHIP DIGITAL MATURITY**

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**Introduction** The B2B Buyer-Seller relationships are undeniably impacted by the "accelerated" digitalization, the combined effect of digitalization in response to the physical distancing linked to the pandemic and the pre-existing digitalization of the last twenty years. The result is changes in customer (B2B) behavior that are an acceleration of the digital transformation already underway before the pandemic (Mc Kinsey, 2020). **Our general issue** is part of this context and leads us to identify the intensity of the impact of "accelerated" digitalization on Buyer-Seller (B-S) synergies and interactions. To this end, according to Mc Kinsey's B2B Pulse 2021 survey, eight out of ten B2B decision makers believe that omnichannel selling is as or more effective than traditional relational methods (Mc Kinsey, 2021). In this context, **our research questions** are organized as follows. 1. What is the concrete translation of this intensity in the daily missions of sales decision makers and their Buyer-Seller teams? 2. How is B2B engagement, a fundamental act in the performance of the organization, influenced by this level of digitalization integration? Thus, **the objective of our study** is first to understand the level of integration of digitalization in Buyer-Seller relationships. To this end, we will seek to define

the digital maturity of these relationships. Second, we will focus on determining the salient aspects of B2B engagement from this holistic perspective. As a result, we aim at getting an integrative model of B2B engagement. **Theoretical background** Digital maturity (DM) is defined as the extent of acquired ability to adapt to ongoing digital changes and digital transformation efforts in an appropriate manner. It describes a desirable vision, which can never be fully achieved (Kane et al., 2017). Being a holistic concept with theoretical and managerial implications (Teichert, 2019), its specific exploring interest is that it is well established that the more digitally mature an organization is, the more commercially successful it is (Thordsen et al., 2020; Rossmann, 2019). The evaluation of DM can be made on an organization, a process, on “people (who) are the real catalysts and facilitators of change” (Jones et al, 2021). The construct of Digital Maturity concept is depending on its either general or domain specific type. It should always cover 3 core dimensions to be evaluated: digital strategy, digital technologies, people competence (Teichert, 2019). In addition, digital maturity assessment should also be adapted to the chosen topic, while remaining of a holistic approach (Jones et al., 2021), which, in our case, is linked to customers’ insight and experience. Regarding B2B engagement, the most recent academic literature developments rely on Actor Engagement multidimensional concept, including actions and emotions: it is "a dynamic and iterative process that reflects actors' dispositions to invest resources in interactions with other connected actors in a service ecosystem" (Brodie et al., 2019, p. 183). From trust being indivisible from commitment in B2B relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) to an individual engagement shifting to a collective dimension, (Kleinaltenkamp, 2019), B2B Engagement is now defined as a Business Actor engagement, with interactions contributing to value creation and commercial advantages and performance (Ekman et al, 2021). These effects being common to digital maturity, our exploratory study fully justifies trying to find out how the last developments are impacted by a holistic view on digital integration in B-S relationships. **Design and methodology** Given that

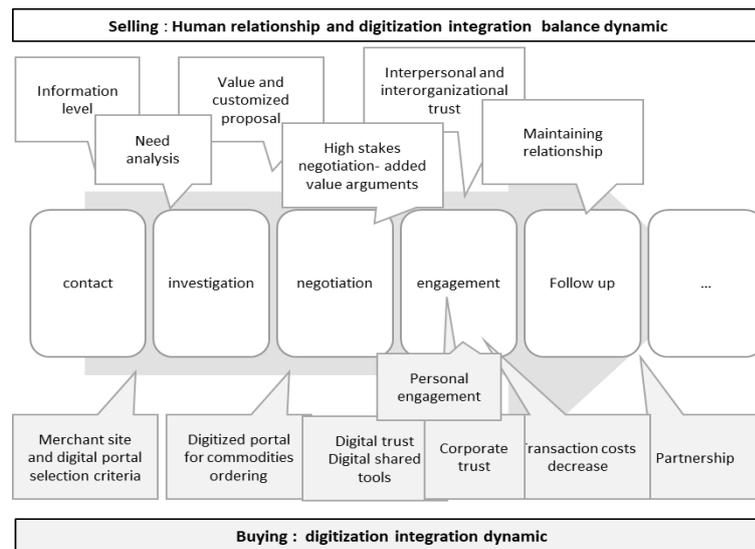
we are dealing with a process of interactions including different stakeholders facing an organizational change, we have been applying a process data analysis strategy for our ongoing exploratory study to account for its complexity. According to Langley (1999), the most suitable strategies for our topic could be the grounded theory, followed by alternate templates (crossing data) from the different concerned populations and a visual mapping. The objective is to find patterns and common themes to design a model to be further tested through an experimentation. **Data collection** has already been made with in-depth interviews of 30 to 45 minutes, reporting digital experience and impact in day- to- day mission of 28 sales leaders acting as buyers (distributors) and sellers (Manufacturers) and their teams of buyers' and sellers' stakeholders, including 5 different industries, (Security, Hygiene, Energy and engineering, agri-food, building), all stemming out from multinational companies acting either on national or international markets. **Preliminary findings**

**Table 1 synthesis of DM investigated topics, their results, sub-topics, impact and vision on B2B engagement.**

	Buyer leaders' perception (Distributors)	Benefits + -	Impact on B2B Engagement +- Final objective : end-customer satisfaction		Benefits + -	Seller leaders' perception (Manufacturer)
D Tech	Merchant site, digital portal Platform Automation in ordering	+ Selection criteria + competitiveness	+End-customer Autonomy +satisfaction management	+Investigation and +need analysis	+key customer information + extended involvement +Visibility	Data : CRM-ERP Communication : teams-email Social Network Website
People	KAM team competences Sales Team competences	Balance Human rel.- digit. Shift to + logistic, time-related, organization comp.	= High stake negotiation + Value proposal	=High stake negotiation Value and + customized proposal	+ Added value arguments + Customized arguments	KAM team competences Sales team competences
Customer Insight	Digital tools sharing Customized digital tools Automated ordering	Process sharing Customized offer Commodities : time savings	+ Digital trust + differentiation + performance	+Regular follow-up	+Responsiveness -Transparency + standard / - strategic information	Relational help Information sharing
Strategy	Value : added value criteria : if low or high added value vision	Digitization > human relational value or balance digitization-human relational value Automation is a dynamic	+ performance  + performance	-Interpersonal Trust - Value proposition	Balance between human relational value & digitization when high stakes Level of information : strategic or standard - Helpful tool	Value  Vision Performance
	Buyer's perception	Benefits + -	Impact on B2B Engagement +-		Benefits + -	Seller's perception
D Tech	Data : CRM- ERP Communication : teams - emails Automation: reminders	Proof and traceability Time savings Extended sharing Non-added -value task savings	+Transparency +Efficiency +Extended involvement	+ prospecting	+Contact increase +Internal use/ - customer use +Visibility - contact- lead generation +Lead generation	Data: CRM-ERP- phones App Communication: teams-email Social Network website
People	Competences Motivation Group work Management	Time analytical efficiency Internal position recognition Synergy and memory Autonomy increase	+Personal engagement	+Investigation	+ accuracy, efficiency + when mastering +Memory, information sharing - Hurdles- objectives -constraint	Competences Motivation Group work Management
Customer insight	Rationalization Digital tools sharing Common KPI follow-up	Costs decrease Process sharing Trustworthiness	+ Transaction costs + Digital trust + Partnership	+Inter -organizational Trust -level of information	+Responsiveness, trustworthiness -Transparency + standard / - strategic information	Relational help Information sharing
Strategy	Value Vision Performance	Essential, innovation Predictability Performance increase	+Corporate Trust + Satisfaction	-Negotiation -Interpersonal trust + Follow-up	Human relational value> digitization Helpful tools	Value performance

On the left side, Buyer stakeholders' perception, on the right side, Seller stakeholders' perception. In the middle, their crossed perception on impact and key determinants of B2B engagement.

**Table 2 visual mapping of all items linked to B2B engagement through the lens of B-S relationship DM**



**Preliminary findings and key contributions.** From a theoretical point of view, the complexity of B2B engagement is confirmed, including the process dimension, the key stakeholders’ different specific dynamics impacting actions and antecedents. We also observe the integration of both transaction cost theory and relational dimensions. In terms of steps of the buying journey, we observe an enlargement of actions leading to engagement and those leading to its support (follow-up). From a managerial and strategic point of view, we clearly see antagonistic dynamics. Buying stakeholders are driven by a digitization integration dynamic, whereas Seller stakeholders are driven by the search for balance between human relationships and digitization. This leads to different emphasis on buying journey’s steps, appearance of digital trust, partnership, notions that will be further analyzed in our ongoing exploratory study. **References**

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