



PROFESSIONAL INTERNSHIP REPORT

CO-CREATING IN THE B2B CONTEXT: THE HOW'S OF SHAPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CUSTOMERS AT E-GOI

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between customers and brands has undergone a significant change over the years, shifting toward a more collaborative dynamic and steering away from a traditional, post-market interaction. In contrast to the passive role once assigned to clients, today's business environment demands that they be heard and engaged in co-creative processes. This shift is especially relevant in B2B industries, where relationships between service providers and clients are characterized by a partnership perspective, requiring a deep alignment of business objectives and mutual trust. The present study explores how co-creation in new product development shapes relationships, through trust, commitment, and satisfaction within the B2B context, with a specific focus on the SaaS industry through a case study of E-goi. Employing a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with E-goi's corporate clients to uncover the clients perspectives towards co-creation and its impact on the dynamics of these relationships. The findings corroborate previous research showing that co-creation enhances trust, commitment, and satisfaction, extending these results to the B2B context and to the SaaS industry. The study identifies communication, transparency, responsiveness, and flexibility as critical factors present in co-creation initiatives, fostering deeper client-provider relationships. Similarly, it uncovers new risks associated with co-creation, such as misaligned expectations and conflicts of interest, highlighting the importance of communication and goal alignment. Additionally, it provided E-goi with insights that co-creation initiatives are perceived as a strategic differentiation factor, while simultaneously enhancing customer relationships. The findings further enabled E-goi to identify the initial phases of new product development as the ones with highest priority for customers, where they can directly shape the product according to their needs. Another relevant contribution was the discovery of discounts as incentives to encourage participation in these initiatives.

Keywords: co-creation; B2B relationships; quality relationship; trust; commitment; satisfaction risks.

RESUMO

A relação entre clientes e marcas tem vindo a sofrer mudanças significativa ao longo dos anos, evoluindo para uma dinâmica demarcada pela colaboração, afastando-se de uma interação tradicional de pós-venda. Em contraste com o papel passivo outrora atribuído a clientes, o ambiente empresarial atual, exige que estes sejam ouvidos e envolvidos em processos de co-criação. Esta mudança é especialmente relevante nas indústrias B2B, na qual as relações entre prestadores de serviços e clientes são caracterizadas por uma perspetiva de parceria, requerendo um alinhamento profundo dos objetivos de negócio e a existência de confiança mútua. O presente estudo pretende assim, explorar de que forma a co-criação, no desenvolvimento de novos produtos, molda relações através da confiança, compromisso e satisfação no contexto B2B, tendo como especial enfoque a indústria SaaS, através da aplicação de um estudo de caso da E-goi. Assim sendo, a metodologia adotada, em prole de compreender a perceção dos clientes face à co-criação e ao seu impacto nas dinâmicas relacionais, foi qualitativa, utilizando entrevistas semiestruturadas com os clientes corporativos da E-goi. Os resultados corroboram pesquisas anteriores, demonstrando que a co-criação impulsiona confiança, compromisso e satisfação, estendendo esses mesmos resultados ao contexto B2B e à indústria SaaS. Igualmente o estudo identifica a comunicação, transparência, capacidade de resposta e flexibilidade como fatores críticos presentes nas iniciativas de co-criação, promovendo relações mais profundas entre clientes e prestadores de serviços. Da mesma forma, revela novos riscos associados à co-criação, como expectativas desalinhas e conflitos de interesse, sublinhando a importância da comunicação e do alinhamento de objetivos. Adicionalmente, o estudo permitiu contribuições valiosas para E-goi, tais como a identificação de iniciativas de co-criação como um ponto de diferenciação, bem como a sua contribuição para a fortificação de relações. Os resultados permitiram igualmente, identificar as fases iniciais do desenvolvimento de novos produtos como a principal prioridade para os clientes da E-goi e a importância dos descontos como incentivos para fomentar a participação nestas iniciativas.

Palavras-chave: co-criação; relações no setor B2B; qualidade da relação; confiança; compromisso, satisfação; riscos.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SaaS- Software as a Service

B2B – Business to Business

PDP - Product Development Process

NPD – New Product Development

PLC- Product Life Cycle

SMEs – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

RM - Relationship Marketing

NP – New Product

CE – Customer Engagement

VCC – Value in Co-creation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. INTERNSHIP HOST COMPANY

The present investigation is conducted in collaboration with *E-goï*, a Portuguese SaaS company based in Matosinhos, which owns a software dedicated to managing digital communications through various channels, such as Voice; SMS; Email; Mobile Push; and others. The platform also offers the opportunity to automatize communications according to behavior, enabling their clients to communicate more effectively and personally, fostering a closer relationship between the companies (*E-goï's* clients) and their customers.

The company primarily caters to the Portuguese; Brazilian and Latin markets, dividing their clients into two segments: SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and Corporate (larger enterprises with specific needs and customizations). This distinction is also reflected throughout *E-goï's* monetization model, which follows a subscription-based structure with four plans, granting access to different products within the platform, according to subscription. Additionally, for corporate clients, *E-goï* offers a personalized service with a range of products priced differently that form part of a contractual agreement with a specified duration. This service also includes a dedicated Account Manager to assist the client and ensure personalized attention to every detail.

By being a part of the tech realm, *E-goï* is compelled to align with the rapid-paced dynamics of this industry, which is characterized by its innovative component, and high competitiveness, implying a constant update of products and the release of new ones. This underscores the imperative of having a meticulous defined New Product Development (NPD) process and a strategic market vision, focusing on crafting products that resonate well with the market, ensuring a favorable return on investment and efficient product maintenance costs. Having this in mind, *E-goï* recognizes the need to improve the product development process, ensuring that

products are meticulously tailored to meet clients' specific needs and requirements and do not end up being misplaced on the market.

Dwelling on *E-goi's* New Product Development Process, the company follows a comprehensive set of stages, from ideation to product market introduction. Beginning with the ideation phase, *E-goi* disposes of an internal workflow “*SGI – Gestão de Ideias IDI*”, which acts to facilitate employees in submitting ideas for internal process enhancements, new product development, or ongoing improvements to existing products. Similarly, this workflow intends to function as a bridge between the customer and the company, where teams that are directly engaged with the market (*Account Managers; New Business* team, and the *Partner Program* team) can submit client requests.

Subsequently, the submitted ideas undergo an evaluation process directed by the head of the department, which entails a stage-gate methodology, meaning that the product idea will only move into a stage of broader research and viability analyses if the responsible person, recognizes an opportunity. If approved, the product idealization will be attributed to the Product Manager, where the dedicated team will be entrusted with analyzing the investment required, defining product viability, producing studies according to the product's implementation; end to end function analysis, and finally definition of a potential target. Lastly there is a stage that determines whether the product proceeds into production, or if the concept of the product is abandoned. This stage involves a collaborative analysis, and a conclusive decision made by the Product manager and the head of the Product Department.

Additional co-creation mechanisms, like the mentioned workflow, are actively employed by the brand. Internal events like “*Goickaton*” exemplify this approach, where teams are formed with employees from different departments, in order to develop a collaborative project that holds potential to be implemented by the brand. These projects vary from a range of initiatives, from the creation of new products to the development of innovative solutions and HR processes, which are subsequently evaluated by the CEO and the heads of department. Initiatives of this

nature embolden employees to co-create, share knowledge and encourage a collaborative inter-department environment.

In a similar vein, *E-goi* provides a community where users can contribute with suggestions, regarding new products; features; and overall expressing their necessities. Users also have the option to comment on each other's suggestions, fostering an interactive environment, however, these proposals require approval from the administrator to be available on the platform, which is also responsible for categorizing the submitted ideas, indicating whether they are under analysis, planned for implementation, already implemented, or, if not approved, disposed. This community is exclusively accessible to *E-goi* account holders and can be reached through the platform by clicking on a floating widget. Nonetheless the community presents a very simple layout, leaving room for potential enhancements, not having the desired engagement.

As observed earlier, two co-creation mechanism are already in place, enabling customers to engage with the brand, even if in a tech-touch manner. Other ongoing mechanism, that has been a key integrated component of my internship, involves the implementation of a pilot stage prior to the product's market launch, which aims to gather direct feedback from customers and incorporate any necessary adjustments and refinements to the product.

The implementation of this pilot stage, which corresponds to a beta testing program, allowed the company to rethink the current structure of their Product Development Process, called Product Discovery. Recognizing the need to integrate stages into this process, where the concept of the product is assessed among the clients, before it enters production/development, preventing inefficiently placed investments in products, that may not find acceptance in the market, or need to be fully reconsidered to respond to customers current needs.

In order to enhance the relationship with current customers, *E-goi* intends to understand how it can improve their service and offer, while forging a closer connection. This intention, alongside the necessity of diminishing wrongly elocuted investments when it comes to new products and current ones, entails the realization of an investigation, that allows the company

to understand how customers would respond to having a more active role, and what consequences that may entail for their relation. This role, would permit giving suggestions and ideas for new products in a more direct manner, while working alongside with the company, and testing out products, giving a final opinion before they enter the market.

Similarly, *E-goi* intends to palpate which of the stages of involvement would stand out as a priority to customers, an initial stage where input is given about potential products and its idealization or in a latest stage, where the clients would test directly the product, once it has been already developed, being ready to receive refinements.

The intention of assessing clients interest, is reasoned by *E-goi*'s necessity to direct their allocation of investment (time, resources), according to the appeal attributed by their customers to distinct stages, allowing a more conscious decision. Additionally, an investigation would allow to understand if the involvement of clients in primary stages of their Product Discovery, is perceived by them as an attractive initiative.

Even so, the brand also recognizes the importance of studying and understanding how customers perceive co-creation initiatives, and how they believe they should operate.

1.2. INVESTIGATION CONTEXT

In the dynamic landscape of contemporary marketing, the collaborative relationship between consumers and brands has evolved significantly, representing a shift, with brands evolving from a command-and-control approach to one that fosters an exchange of knowledge, between stakeholders (Siano et al., 2022).

Recognizing this shift in customers and brands relationship, multiple scholars have dedicated time in the attempt of defining co-creation and discovering potential consequences of implementing this strategy (Alves et al., 2016; Galvagno & Dalli, 2014a, 2014b; Grönroos & Voima, 2013a; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b, 2004a; Prastiwi et al., 2019a; Ranjan & Read, 2016).

Therefore, studies conducted in this field have shown that co-creation initiatives enhance customer satisfaction and contribute to loyalty, positioning itself as a core element of a successful company's strategy (Prastiwi et al., 2019b). Equally co-creation has been studied as a contributor to raising the perceived brand value of customers (France et al., 2018), and moderating customer experience and relationship quality towards the brand (Cossío-Silva et al., 2016; Mustafa et al., 2022). Extending beyond the emotional sphere of co-creation, the implementation of mechanisms that allow customers to be a part of the New Product Development process has also been demonstrated to have a positive impact on innovation (Zaborek & Mazur, 2017), product performance, and ultimately firms performance (Ngo & O'Cass, 2013).

The primary aim of this study is to explore how co-creation applied to new product development shapes relationships through trust, commitment, and satisfaction within the B2B sector, using the *E-goi's* case study, with corporate clients as a reference. The following specific objectives have been defined to guide the development of the present investigation:

1. Explore the effects and underlying reasons of co-creation initiatives on the level of trust, commitment, and satisfaction in B2B relationships.
2. Understand how co-creation initiatives shape pre-established relationships in the B2B sector.
3. Identify customer's perceived risks associated with participating in co-creation initiatives, in the B2B sector.
4. Identify among the different co-creation initiatives implemented by *E-goi*, the ones that customers seem more prone to engage.

This research is expected to contribute to the co-creation literature in B2B industries regarding consumer-brand relationships and produce insights to guide *E-goi*'s investment and resources towards the most valued co-creation initiatives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. CO-CREATION

As referred by Hofacker et al. “the essence of B2B marketing is embedded in the notion that suppliers and customers work together to create superior value” (2020, p. 7), appealing to co-creation as a fundamental aspect of relationship building, since this initiatives imply dialogue and engagement, to create value in multiple stages, such as creation, designing or prototyping, and even after the product or service is completed (Payne et al., 2007).

As viewed in research conducted on value creation, nowadays intangible attributes, directly that link to relational and emotional concepts, assume a predominant position, outgrowing the tangible ones, becoming more relevant and implying an ongoing shift, marked as a more participative one (Vargo et al., 2008).

The following chapter will be dedicated to understanding, in depth, the definition of co-creation, while similarly diving into how co-creation strategies can be operationalized.

2.1.1. Understanding Co-creation

As mentioned previously, co-creation implies customer involvement alongside companies, extending beyond the traditional roles of merely expressing preferences and assessing products in the stage of post-market release.

Initially popularized by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) the concept of co-creation assumes an interaction among actors, where businesses and the customer come together to create a singular co-creation experience, entailing tailored exchanges that generate mutual value. Hence, emphasizing the exchange of knowledge and skills, in order to create value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), leading up to a unique experience built conjointly (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b).

As pointed out by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004b) consumers required further proximity with firms, showcasing an occurring transition in the market, which evolved into a space for dialogue and exchanges between companies, consumer communities, and individuals. As portrayed by SD logic (Service-Dominant Logic) approach, there's a shift in the traditional exchange, in which firms operated as the main entities that add value during the production of goods and services, while consumers played the passive function of obtaining value from the exchange of commodities or services, transcending into a joint sphere, where firms take on the role of value facilitators, and customers actively create value during the consumption process (Shamim et al., 2017) - the value in use concept (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

For firms, co-creation allows to lower the barrier of identifying true needs, providing a better understanding of their customers (Hippel, 2001), bridging the gap between the inside and the outside, encouraging a closer consumer-brand relationship and generating an overall value for the organization (Ind et al., 2013). For the customers, co-creation can have a wide range of benefits, such as pragmatic ones - relating to tailored solution; hedonic - regarding enjoyment (more present within the B2C context); cognitive - highly connected to exchange of knowledge; social - as form of building relations and even economic, especially if rewards are present or, in a B2B setting, through consequential improvements to the business (Verleye, 2015). The aforementioned outcomes, concurrently serve as motivational factors for involving customers in collaborative initiatives, a topic that will be further explored in the subsequent subsection.

Since the first conceptualization of co-creation, multiple other authors have developed definitions for the concept. Galvagno & Dalli (2014) have defined it as a collaborative, real-time, simulated process to produce value in both tangible and intangible ways; on a wider note, Delpechitre et al. (2018) defined it as value jointly created by the client and the firm. Along the lines of production, Kirah (2009) defined co-creation as a collaborative alliance with all stakeholders, along the process of designing, developing and implementing services or goods, while Gustafsson et al. (2012) emphasize the outcomes of this collaborative interaction towards innovation and a better understanding of customer future needs. Similarly, Sugathan et al.

(2017) highlighted the involvement of customers across various stages, allowing a collaborative process, where there is an exchange of knowledge and expertise.

Compassing all the previous definitions, the framework proposed by Ranjan & Read (2016), identifies two main distinct components of co-creation: (1) co-production and (2) value in usage, while also recognizing sub-dimensions for both components. Co-production refers to initial steps, among which the product/service is being developed, where the following sub-dimensions are present: Equity - degree to which external stakeholders might experience a sense of ownership in the process; Knowledge - Sharing of information and expertise and information; and finally, Interaction - Reciprocal knowledge sharing, participation and exchange of ideas. On the other hand, value in usage encapsulates the moment the consumer uses the product, attributing value to it, relying on personalization, experience and relationships. Given the aim of the present research it is important to highlight the sub-dimension correspondent to relationships, which represents the emotional bond that consumers form during the co-creation process. This combination enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how customers collaborate directly and indirectly with the company at all phases of production and consumption.

After establishing the definition of co-creation, it is imperative to dive into the mechanisms that flourish co-creation and encourage interactions between brands and customers. It has been recognized that companies must set up a support network that allows them to communicate with their customers and other stakeholders (Yu et al., 2019). As determined by Grönroos & Voima (2013), firms should find opportunities to engage in the customers value creation process, incorporating interacting touchpoints that serve this purpose, that act as facilitators (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), through continuous interaction, where the customer is involved in all stages of service development, from the problem definition to the problem-solving proposal, and so forth (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b).

According to Grönroos & Voima (2013) consumer-firm interactions can happen across multiple touchpoints as referenced previously, either through service encounters that can

happen over face-to-face interactions, online chats, customer support lines; or joint development processes in which the consumer is asked to take part as a co-producer. In recent years, studies have also identified crowdsourcing communities as co-creation platforms in which users connect and collaborate on new projects and concepts (Liu et al., 2018), these platforms serve as information systems, supporting organizations in engaging with consumers, collecting knowledge, solutions, and suggestions, and even allowing interaction between customers themselves.

Real examples of co-creation initiatives are companies like Ikea that have integrated into their offer the possibility of co-designing spaces, like living rooms or kitchens, likewise they have also invested in integrating co-creation within, incorporating thinking activities among employees, and creating bootcamps that partner alongside with start-ups, focusing in solving Ikea's three main challenges: "affordability for the many people, connecting with and being accessible for people across the world, and enabling a positive impact on the planet, people and society" (IKEA newsroom, 2019). Other brands like LEGO (2023) provide communities where customers can suggest ideas for new products and respond to challenges. Taking advantage of social media, Doritos (2020) launched a campaign dedicated to the production of superbowl ads by customers, offering the possibility of being featured on national TV (Doritos, 2020). In the SaaS industry, companies like Canva, a drag-and-drop design platform, have also implemented co-creation actions. Mainly using their community, Canva encourages their members to share tips and tricks about design and the platform itself, allowing content to be co-created, but also, allowing those who belong to this community, to have early access to new features and select groups of participants, from the community, to engage in their beta testing programs, integrating them in the product development process (Canva, 2024).

Following a comprehensive delineation of the concept of co-creation, it becomes imperative to reference the multitude of investigations conducted in this field, relating co-creation to a vast number of key viewpoints and areas, such as its role in business innovation; in the development of new products and services; and its impact in pre-established relationships, including the

relation between co-creation experiences and loyalty, as disclosed in Alves et al. (2016) bibliometric analysis.

2.1.2. Motivations

To fully understand the essence of co-creation and its operationalization, it is imperative to investigate the motivational factors that drive customers to engage in this collaborative process while analyzing the type of profile that tends to be more prone to co-create. Allowing businesses to focus resources and investments on the most valuable incentives, communicate the benefits that are more enticing to customers, and undertake truly engaging co-creation efforts, all at the same time.

Based on investigations conducted within this domain, willingness to participate in co-creation is highly intertwined with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivations can be viewed as related to personal behavior benefits, such as enjoyment; fun; opportunity to self-express, and altruistic inclinations. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation incorporates tangible benefits, such as financial remuneration and social benefits - straightening reputation; expertise recognition, and cultivation of strategic alliances (Fernandes & Remelhe, 2015; Ind et al., 2019; Leclercq et al., 2016).

Within this theoretical chain, the research conducted by Fernandes & Remelhe (2015), uncovered those motives related to knowledge, both shared and acquired, were the most predominant type of motives, followed by intrinsic incentives embedding aspects such as curiosity, enjoyment, and sense of contribution. For the authors, knowledge was established as an internalized extrinsic motive, being viewed as a part of both types of motivations, therefore reinforcing that extrinsic and intrinsic motives play a role in engaging customers in collaborative initiatives. Nonetheless it is important to note that financial inducements, including monetary remuneration or access to exclusive offers, showed to have the least impact, an important discovery to firms wanting to invest in developing co-creation initiatives. Accordingly, Ind et al. (2019) have also established that self-expression, contribution towards

a considered valuable outcome, and knowledge augmentation are the main motives for engaging in collaborative action, reinforcing that financial rewards can be viewed as complements of intrinsic motivators.

Supporting the same pieces of evidence, other studies have also highlighted this dual relation, as Leclercq et al. (2016) have recognized, while also considering the existence of altruistic and non-altruistic motives and social and personal motives. More precisely the authors have recognized that altruistic motives foster a sense of fulfillment from assisting others, and non-altruistic motives entail pursuing personal benefits. Social and personal motives intertwine to cultivate a sense of community and individual satisfaction, as participants pursue personal growth and social connections. Equally relevant is the identified moderating role of trust, that, according to the previously mentioned study, is viewed as a facilitator for commitment - participants are more inclined to engage in the co-creation process when they have trust that others will keep their commitments and make valuable contributions; and a mitigator of risk – when participants have a high relation of trust, they are more prone to sharing ideas, feedback, and experimenting new concepts.

Recognizing the significance of the customer-brand relationship as a determining factor in customer's willingness to engage in co-creation, Merz et al. (2018) identified the following drives: trust, commitment, and passion. Delimitating that passion fosters active engagement in brand-centric activities, in which co-creation can be included; trust indicates an existent positive relation between the brand and the customer, making them more comfortable and confident in engaging with the brand on a deeper level, while similarly allowing customers to share their ideas suggestions and feedback; and lastly, commitment, that refers to the willingness of consumers to consistently choose and advocate for a brand, implies a higher predisposition from customers to collaborate directly with the brand. This research emphasizes the importance of relations established between the brand and their customers, indicating that customers with positive and stronger relationships towards brands, will be more prone to engage in collaborative programs.

2.2. RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN THE B2B INDUSTRY

As portrayed by Gummesson (2017) relationship marketing has suffered a shift over the course of several decades, being initially rooted in a transactional orientation, underlined by mass production and standardized communication, where little to no emphasis was placed on cultivating customer relationships. The evolution of this paradigm witnessed the emergence of customer success management, allowing the development and introduction of pivotal concepts such as value and satisfaction, and initiating personalized, one-to-one interactions with customers. Presently, we find ourselves among a new era, characterized by a stakeholder-centric approach. This current paradigm transcends the previously placed conventional strategies, sifting into collaborative relationships, and recognizing stakeholders not as passive entities but as active participants. To grasp the mechanisms underlying the founding of long-lasting relationships and how they operate nowadays, it becomes imperative to delineate the intricacies of relationship management, which naturally entails a comprehensive understanding of Relationship Marketing (RM) and its pivotal dimensions.

The primary definitions of this concept, characterized RM as an ongoing process marked by reciprocal interaction, establishing, maintaining, and nurturing relationships (Gordon et al., 1998). Since then, various authors have introduced new terms to describe it, generally gravitating to a similar concept: a strategy for fostering lasting and ongoing relationships with customers; or an involving effort and effective communication (Gupta & Sahu, 2012). In light of the ongoing shift towards service-based economies and fierce global competition, precipitated by the introduction of the digital era, there is an accentuated imperative for companies to cultivate and sustain customer loyalty, in order to thrive, showcasing the importance of establishing enduring relationships (Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019).

To assess the status of relationships, theoretical literature has established the concept of Relationship Quality (RQ). Which has been defined in multiple ways, from the extent to which parties are actively involved, resolving conflicts and cooperation (Song et al., 2012), to an

Indicator of relationship health, based on the customer's perception (W. Kim & Cha, 2002). A general conceptualization, adopted by Woo & Ennew (2004), that is still considered in current research (Badawi & Battor, 2020; Jiang et al., 2016; G. Li, 2021; Y. Li et al., 2020), defines RQ as a comprehensive assessment of the strength and depth of the buyer-seller relationship.

Subsequently, to the identification of relationship quality, and prior to the examination of its composing dimensions, it is key to clarify the disparities between relationships established within the Business-to-Consumer (B2C) and Business-to-Business (B2B) settings. Starting off, relationships established within the B2B realm prioritize long-term partnerships over short-term transactions. Similarly, these relationships are structured to seek mutual benefit, which compels collaboration. Consequently, they are characterized by interdependence, wherein the success of the service provider correlates with the success of the customer, and vice versa (Y. A. Kim, 2009) Another distinguishing feature, lies in the emotional dimension of relationships, specifically concerning purchases. In B2C markets, decisions are often driven by emotions, leading to more impulsive behavior, while in B2B contexts, the decisions tend to be made, prioritizing the product or service itself and its features, evaluating aspects in a rational, deliberate manner (Milichovský, 2013).

Exploring, now, the dimensions of relationship quality, several authors like Rauyrueen & Miller (2007); Lai (2014), and Sarmiento et al. (2015) have identified trust, commitment, and satisfaction, a vision that has been widely accepted within the literature, as portrayed by Lasrado et al. (2023). Nonetheless, the authors point out that the construct of RQ encompasses other dimensions beyond the traditional ones (previously mentioned), like service quality. Similarly (Jiang et al., 2016), propose as constructs: communication; long-term orientation, and economic and social satisfaction. Particularly interesting is the mention of long-term orientation, which comprehends the desire to maintain the relationship, perceiving an existent interdependence.

Diving deeper into the research conducted regarding the B2B industry, studies have shown the role of trust in nurturing long-term relationships, through facilitating open communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, while also fostering mutual respect and reliability (Ghzaiel

& Akrouf, 2012). Commitment reflects mutual dedication, indicating a willingness to continue collaborating, therefore indicating a tendency to maintain a relationship. Correspondingly satisfaction indicates content, translating into a positive perception of the existent relationship, contributing to continuance and loyalty (Jeong & Oh, 2017). Intending to fully understand the referred dimensions and their underlying relations, the following section will be dedicated to exploring which one of them, in detail.

To contribute to the existing body of research, a comprehensive table has been crafted to summarize the most pertinent concepts in the literature, while also briefly offering a foundation to develop the empirical research basis.

Table 1- Underlying concepts of Relationship Quality and composing dimensions

Concept	Literature contribution	Authors	Dimensions
Relationship Quality	Defined as an indicator of relationship health, based on the customer’s perception.	(W. Kim & Cha, 2002)	Overall assessment of the Relationship
	Defined as a comprehensive assessment of the buyer-seller relationship.	(Woo & Ennew, 2004)	Overall assessment of the Relationship
	Identified long-term orientation – intent to maintain a long relationship - as one of the dimensions of relationship quality.	(Jiang et al., 2016)	Long-term orientation
	Identified trust, commitment, and satisfaction as the composing dimensions of relationship quality.	(Rauyruen & Miller, 2007)	Trust
(Lai, 2014)		Commitment	
(Sarmiento et al., 2015)		Satisfaction	

Note: Own Work

2.2.1. Trust

Over the years, trust has been defined in several ways across different disciplines. However, this research will primarily focus on the conceptualization proposed by marketing literature, with a particular emphasis on B2B relationships. Before looking into the proposed meaning of trust, its determinants, and outcomes, it is relevant to acknowledge that trust manifests itself in two distinct targets, that co-exist: inter-organizational trust, concerning the level of trust invested in the partner organization, and interpersonal trust, linked to the extent of trust existing among the customer and a representative of the company, typically a salesperson in the B2B context (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Zaheer et al., 1998). In the specific context of this study, this distinction will not be considered, since the relationships established between E-goi and its customers, especially corporate ones, are highly dependent on accounts – dedicated professionals that guide, assist, and assure that the needs of the clients are met, working as a bridge between both parties, therefore, blending into one, the interpersonal and inter-organizational trust.

Business-to-business relationships frequently entail a complex network of interpersonal trust among employees of collaborating organizations (Mouzas et al., 2007). Similarly, these relationships are founded on mutual interests and evaluations of risk, which involve a deeper understanding when referring to intangible products (Coulter & Coulter, 2002).

According to marketing literature, trust has been established as confidence, willingness or a belief in a partner's competence - regarding the service provided (Chowdhury, 2012; Galli & Nardin, 2003); integrity – according to values being shared (Chowdhury, 2012; Macintosh, 2009; R. Morgan & Hunt, 1994); reliability- standing by its word, fulfills promises established (Chowdhury, 2012; Macintosh, 2009; R. Morgan & Hunt, 1994); and benevolence – having the partner's best interest in mind (Chowdhury, 2012; Clark et al., 2010; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mayer et al., 1995). The concept of trust is still being discussed in recent literature, authors such as Graça & Barry (2019), adopted a multifaceted view of the concept suggesting that trust is built upon accumulated information, fostering confidence in a partner's competence and

reliability, as the relationship expands, the cognitive trust thus formed, leads to behavioral trust, demonstrating itself through actions like willingness to be vulnerable, openly sharing information, intentions, and goals.

A recent study that aimed to establish the drivers for trust in organizations and in the salesperson, provided interesting insights mainly recognizing the role of perceived service quality as an antecedent of inter-organizational trust, as well as reputation (Gansser et al., 2021). Similarly, the authors of this study found a relationship between flexibility and trust, even if significantly weaker than the previous ones. Considering the mentioned definition of trust, it's feasible to draw a connection with the listed elements: service quality can be linked with competence; while in turn reputation - which relates to the company's credibility in dealing with multiple stakeholders, can be integrated with reliability and even competence; and finally flexibility - that entails an organization inclination to adjust or tailor a decision to individual customers can be related to competence, benevolence and even partially to integrity.

Another pertinent investigation was conducted by Akrouit & Diallo (2017), revealing the significance of communication in fostering trust, specifically cognitive, referring to a deeper sense of belief in the partner's competence and intentions, believing that the trustee will act according to the trustor's best interest; and affective trust, representing the highest level of trust, rooted in emotional bonds established by previous positive experiences and mutual understanding. Exploring further the impact of communication on trust, the authors discovered that through the exchange of information, mainly clear and consistent communication prevents misunderstandings or helps resolve them. Similarly, it ensures alignment between intentions and actions and shapes expectations. On an emotional level, communication also fosters interpersonal connections, through active dialogue, supported by constant mutual sharing of experiences; opinions, and so on, which spikes proximity and connection, while at the same time demonstrating concern. Transparency, honesty, and authenticity, especially in scenarios that are not advantageous for the trustor, also ensure trust, allowing the trustor to be aware of the current state, and allowing him to adjust expectations. This discovery is particularly interesting, once the intent of the current investigation is to understand how co-creation shapes

relationships in B2B settings, which entails collaborative attitudes and therefore direct and proximate communication between both parties.

Table 2 - Trust composing dimensions and antecedents

Concept	Literature contribution	Authors	Dimensions
Trust	Trust is built upon accumulated information, fostering confidence in a partner’s competence and reliability.	(Graça & Barry, 2019)	Competence
			Reliability
Antecedents of trust	Recognizing the role of perceived service quality as an antecedent of inter-organizational trust.	(Gansser et al., 2021)	Service-quality
	Recognizing the role of perceived flexibility as an antecedent of inter-organizational trust.		Flexibility
	Significance of communication in fostering trust. Communication impacts cognitive trust, once clear and consistent communication prevents and helps to resolve misunderstandings; ensures alignment between intentions and actions and shapes expectations. Communication spikes proximity and connection, through active dialogue: sharing of experiences, opinions, etc.	(Akrouf & Diallo 2017)	Communication

Note: Own Work

2.2.2. Commitment

Commitment remains a cornerstone in business-to-business relationships, as defined by Dwyer et al. (1987) and similarly by Morgan & Hunt (1994), commitment emphasizes a deep partnership where both parties put in active effort to sustain the emotional connection. Recent research continues to draw from Morgan & Hunt's conceptualization, affirming the enduring relevance and validation of the definition in contemporary investigations of commitment in B2B relationships (Y. Chang et al., 2021; Padgett et al., 2020).

Diving deeper into the construct of commitment, two relevant dimensions are identified: affective and calculative. As shown by Voss et al. (2019), affective commitment revolves around emotional bonds, and trust, fostering a genuine desire to maintain the connection despite challenges. In contrast, calculative commitment is grounded in a rational assessment of costs versus benefits, where firms weigh various factors. Nonetheless, these two dimensions are interconnected, meaning that when a customer has a positive evaluation of what he gains from the relationship, he tends to be more open to connect emotionally, simultaneously the reverse situation can also happen.

Exploring other underlying constructs of commitment, multiple authors identify trust as a driver for commitment (Bricci et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2019; Dowell et al., 2015), as early on portrayed by Morgan & Hunt (1994, p. 24) *“Relationship commitment entails vulnerability” and therefore “parties will seek only trustworthy partners”*. Trust strengthens commitment, by nurturing emotional attachment and installing confidence in the relationship's viability. Similarly, trust encompasses benevolence, which entails that the partner will act in the buyer's best interest, being faithful to contractual obligations, and therefore allowing a perception of diminished risk, translating into a desire to continue the relationship (Ashnai et al., 2016). Another relevant mention was

An equally relevant study is the one conducted by Graça et al. (2016), in which the authors recognized the role of communication, showcasing that high-quality communication can

establish deeper connection and familiarity. This discovery further supports the notion that trust plays a significant role in fostering commitment. It emphasizes the correlation between communication and creating emotional bonds, which, as previously mentioned in this literature review, is a crucial driver for trust.

Table 3 - Commitment composing dimensions and antecedents

Concept	Literature contribution	Authors	Dimensions
Commitment	Defined as a deep partnership where both parties put in an active effort to sustain the emotional connection.	(Morgan & Hunt, 1994)	Effort
			Emotional Connection
Commitment Dimensions	Affective commitment revolves around emotional bonds , and trust, fostering a genuine desire to maintain the connection despite challenges.	(Voss et al., 2019)	Affective commitment
	Calculative commitment is grounded in a rational assessment of costs versus benefits.		Calculative commitment
Antecedents of Commitment	Trust is identified as an antecedent of commitment.	(Bricci et al., 2016) (Brown et al., 2019) (Dowell et al., 2015)	Trust as an antecedent of commitment

Note: Own Work

2.2.3. Satisfaction

Satisfaction has been defined, in the business-to-business realm, as an overall assessment of the relationship with the company, based on performance (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). Authors typically associate satisfaction with a cognitive aspect, as it involves evaluation, suggesting a mental process where comparisons are established and assessments of expectations are made (Davis-Sramek et al., 2008). According to Huang et al. (2017), service quality, mainly the aspects regarding responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, play a significant role in customer satisfaction, highlighting the rational process that is conducted.

As portrayed in the earlier-mentioned study, empathy has been identified as a significant contributor to overall satisfaction. As a result, it is possible to pinpoint an emotional dimension of satisfaction, prompting the distinction between economic satisfaction and social satisfaction. Economic satisfaction originates from the positive assessment of financial outcomes, like meeting goals or becoming more efficient. On the other hand, social satisfaction encompasses the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that compose a relationship, regarding the enjoyment of collaboration, mutual respect, and perceived care. This intricate composition of satisfaction enables a deeper insight and comprehension of the concept (Berenguer-Contrí et al., 2023; Geyskens & Steenkamp, 2000; Ha, Janda, et al., 2016; Ha, et al., 2016; Sales-Vivó, Gil-Saura, et al., 2021).

Analyzing the potential relationship between trust and satisfaction, Ferro-Soto et al. (2023), found that trust has a circular relation with economic and non-economic satisfaction in business-to-business relationships. Explaining further, the authors uncovered that in the initial stage, economic satisfaction positively impacts trust within the relationship, while also impacting commitment. As the relationship evolves, trust fosters feelings of security and reliability, cultivating emotional connections and nurturing open communication between partners, thereby elevating non-economic satisfaction levels, like social satisfaction. Commitment presents a similar mediating role, since the strong sense of partnership, and naturally the emotional attachment led to a higher overall level of satisfaction, including

superior economic satisfaction. These findings support the conclusions earlier reached by other authors (Rodríguez et al., 2006), elucidating the dual and intertwined nature of economic and social satisfaction (non-economic satisfaction), impacting each other at different stages along the course of a relationship.

Table 4 - Satisfaction composing dimensions and underlying relations

Concept	Literature contribution	Authors	Dimensions
Satisfaction	An overall assessment of the relationship with the company, based on performance .	(Murphy & Sashi, 2018)	Satisfaction
	Distinguishes two types of satisfaction: economic and social Economic satisfaction: is a positive assessment of financial outcomes. Social satisfaction: emotional and psychological enjoyment, associated with relationships.	(Geyskens & Steenkamp, 2000)	Economic
		(Ha, et al., 2016)	Social
	Service quality elements such as responsiveness, assurance, and empathy , have a significant impact on overall satisfaction in the SaaS industry.	(Huang et al., 2017)	Responsiveness
			Assurance
			Empathy
Initially, economic satisfaction positively impacts trust and commitment, nurturing emotional connections, leading later on to non-economic (social) satisfaction levels .	(Ferro-Soto et al., 2023)	Intertwined relation between economic and social satisfaction	

Note: Own Work

2.2.4. Co-creation Impact on Relationship Quality

Based on insights gathered from literature, relationship quality serves as an assessment, shaping the overall perception that a customer holds of the entirety of their relationship with the company, having as key drivers for a positive evaluation: trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Similarly, collaboration, which entails that both parties work together – brand and customer, is also referred to, even if less than the three previously mentioned. Nonetheless, it becomes relevant for this investigation, once co-creation is also anchored in collaboration and interaction, relaying on involving and introducing the client in the company's processes, through a direct manner, working together to solve problems and find solutions, once again relying on particular characteristics of B2B relationships: the expectance mutual benefits and interdependence. As such, it becomes essential to analyze research that explore the impact of co-creation initiatives, on customer relationships, to establish if these strategies have a positive impact.

A relevant study to point out, revealed co-creation as a mediating factor that enhances relationship quality (Sales-Vivó, Saura, et al., 2021). Supporting that co-creation fosters trust among partners through collaboration, transparency, and mutual understanding. Similarly, through joint creation and effort, partners strengthen the relationship, increasing commitment. Moreover, the authors also showed that providing tailored solutions, addressing unique needs, and fostering positive experiences that happen during co-creation, results in enhanced satisfaction. Likewise, Berenguer-Contri et al. (2024), discovered that co-creation facilitates the growth of trust and commitment, these factors, in turn, influence social satisfaction, which ultimately contributes to an overall higher economic satisfaction.

Furthermore, several authors have attained results that support this theory through various approaches, some focused on a single element, while others tested the outcome towards more than one, and some even appointed a connection between co-creation and the driving forces behind the aforementioned elements.

Regarding trust, Iglesias et al. (2018), showed that co-creation activities positively influence the development of trust in relationships. As explained by the authors, collaboration inevitably forces brands to listen to their customers, fostering openness and transparency, leading to stronger partnerships, simultaneously as customers perceive that brands take an interest in their input and needs, a greater sense of trust is generated. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that the results from this study represent strictly relationships established in the B2C industry. Another discovery that contributes to co-creation outcomes was established by Massey & Kyriazis (2007), showcasing that the communication established during B2B joint product development, enhances perceived competence and the perception of good intentions, which can relate to the benevolence aspect, indicating an increase in trust.

Along the same lines, Carmeli et al. (2021) referred that when parties engage in activities such as coordinating actions, sharing information, problem-solving, and decision-making, long-term trust is cultivated, leading to enduring and reciprocal commitment. The investigation also concluded that organizations should adopt a collaborative approach, allowing, therefore, parties to address challenges effectively and develop a deeper understanding of each other's needs, anchored on a commitment-based relationship.

Concerning satisfaction, Dewarani & Alversia (2023) research conducted regarding SaaS application services, identified that the co-creation of services positively impacts customer satisfaction, once the collaborative effort and the customization of at least some of the service, according to the given inputs, raises the overall appreciation that the customer holds of the company.

It's clear that co-creation can have a positive impact on relationships, whether by building trust, that spikes stronger partnerships and therefore commitment or increasing satisfaction. However, there's a gap in the literature, justified by the fact that most studies only focus on quantitative methods, which limits the understanding of the underlying dynamics and drivers of these relationships. It is imperative to delve deeper into the impact of communication, collaboration, transparency, shared efforts, customization, and direct participation on

customers' perceptions of their relationship with a brand. By understanding the intricate dynamics of these components, businesses can improve their customer relationships and develop strategies to enhance brand loyalty. Consequently, a thorough analysis of the factors that shape customer perception is necessary to create a more comprehensive understanding of customer-brand relationships and to develop effective business practices.

Table 5 - Established relations of influence between co-creation and B2B relationships

Concept	Literature contribution	Authors	Dimensions
Co-creation Influence towards Relationship Quality Dimensions	<p>Co-creation activities positively influence the development of trust in relationships, through: Transparency, listening to customer’s input.</p> <p>Perceived competence and benevolence.</p>	<p>(Berenguer-Contrí et al., 2024)</p> <p>(Iglesias et al., 2018)</p> <p>(Massey & Kyriazis 2007)</p>	Co-creation straightens trust
	<p>Co-creation activities positively influence the development of commitment, moderated by trust.</p>	<p>(Sales-Vivó et al., 2021)</p> <p>(Carmeli et al., 2021)</p>	Co-creation straightens Commitment
	<p>Co-creation activities positively influence the development of satisfaction.</p>	<p>(Dewarani & Alversia, 2023)</p>	Co-creation straightens Satisfaction
	<p>The positive influence of co-creation in satisfaction is moderated by trust and commitment.</p>	<p>(Berenguer-Contrí et al., 2024)</p>	

Note: Own Work

2.3. NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

2.3.1. New Product Development Process

The Product Development Process is embedded in the purpose of conceiving, developing, and introducing new products or services (Kruachottikul et al., 2023). The sequence of actions that compose the process of New Product Development (NPD) have been conceptualized in various theoretical models. One with particular emphasis in literature regarding this theme, is the model defined by Robert Cooper (1990, 2019; Cooper & Sommer, 2016) which is composed of multiple phases separated by gates that act as a verification system, in order to guarantee that the requirements in the previous phase were met.

The model (Cooper, 1990; Cooper & Sommer, 2016), separates the concept-to-launch process, considering the idea as the starting point, and diving it in five stages: (1) Ideation or Preliminary Assessment of the project – dedicated to assessing the viability of the development and manufacturing of the product, as well as the establishment of potential expenses and timeframes; (2) Concept definition – in this stage market research studies are conducted to ascertain the needs, desires, and preferences of the clients, ascertaining the scope of the new product; (3) Business Case – focused on defining target, positioning strategy and the product value proposal; (4) Development – concerning the development of the product; and lastly (5) Testing or Validation - which assesses the overall viability of the project, considering the product itself, customer acceptance, and taking into account the overall investments. In later publications the author reviewed the model, merging the first two stages into the (1) scoping stage, and adding a last stage regarding the launch of the product to the market (Cooper, 2019).

Other approaches to the NPD were also developed (Cooper, 1983; Vargas et al., 2020), considering a macro-phase perspective instead, divided by three main stages: (1) pre-development, (2) development and (3) post-development. The first stage (1) is dedicated to the generation of ideas, the definition of the product's concept, and identifying potential markets; the following stage (2) regards technical development and product testing; (3) the post-

development stage encompasses both the activities related to product launching as well as the other product-related activities along the product life span.

2.3.2. Customer Involvement in New Product Development

Research concerning this topic has also been conducted to explore the importance of involving stakeholders in the NPD process, particularly customers, which multiple studies have shown a positive relation between the involvement of customers in the NPD process and product performance and innovation (Chatterji & Fabrizio, 2014; Cui & Wu, 2016; T. Morgan et al., 2018a).

An insightful study was conducted by Chen et al. (2021), emphasizing the benefits of consumer involvement in NPD, through the enhancement of companies' marketing and technological expertise, serving as moderating factors for the performance of new products. Acknowledging the pivotal role of cross-functional collaboration within teams, particularly in interactions between businesses and customers, the authors recognized the numerous benefits associated with integrating customers into the realm of new product development, extending beyond product performance. These advantages involve increased customer value achieved by crafting products that are more precisely aligned with needs and preferences; augmented customer engagement fostered through active participation in the developmental process, stimulating a sense of involvement, acknowledgment, and overall investment. Moreover, the authors note that a stronger understanding of consumer behavior and industry trends leads to an increased appreciation of the role that customer involvement plays in strengthening a company's position in the market.

Other scholars have also investigated the outcomes of integrating co-creation initiatives into New Product Development (NPD). Notably, the study conducted by Zhang & Zhu (2019) demonstrates that customer participation significantly enhances product innovation and market fit by incorporating insights regarding clients' specific needs. Moreover, this research highlights

the moderating effect of an established, strong customer relationship and the level of commitment on the success of product innovation efforts.

Similarly, a study conducted by Melander (2019) found that co-creation initiatives within the context of New Product Development (NPD) not only strengthen the relationship between customers and service providers but also enable companies to strategically target their products to better meet client requirements. Additionally, these initiatives facilitate the collection of valuable information about competitors, further enhancing the company's market positioning.

Nevertheless, certain scholars, like Chang & Taylor (2016) have found contrary outcomes, indicating that customer involvement does not consistently translate into positive product performance. Their investigation examines the capacity of firms to process internal and external information, revealing that more favorable outcomes typically arise when consumers are engaged during the ideation and launch phases, in contrast to the development phase. This distinction is attributed to the potential challenges faced by companies in managing both external and internal knowledge and implementing it to the product, thereby slowing the efficiency of the overall process. Subsequent studies (T. Morgan et al., 2018b) focusing on a company's capacity to assimilate information, have revealed a notable correlation between an organization's absorptive capacity (ACAP) and the efficacy of new product development. Specifically, researchers have perceived that intricate tasks occurring in the advanced stages of product development necessitate a heightened ability to sift through information and integrate it into the NPD process. Consequently, the absorptive capacity of firms emerges as a pivotal factor in moderating the impact of customer involvement on both product performance and innovation.

In recent years, research on co-creation has largely focused on the risks and challenges companies face when adopting collaborative models, with limited attention was given to the concerns and perceived risks from the clients' perspective. A 2022 study (Anshu et al., 2022) that delves into this underexplored area, examining the factors that influence customer participation in value co-creation (VCC) activities such as certain personality traits, like

extraversion and openness to experience, and the role of endorsement in enhancing participation, has appointed the necessity for further research into understanding and mitigating risks associated with co-creation, particularly concerning concerns over contribution value, data privacy, and product quality.

Even though literature is scarce regarding this topic, relevant research was conducted by Mandolfo et al. (2020), supporting this focus by identifying key barriers that may deter consumers from engaging in co-creation initiatives. These barriers fall into two primary categories: economic and noneconomic. Economic barriers are related to opportunity costs, particularly the time and effort required to participate in co-creation, which according to the authors, may lead to client hesitation if they perceive the cost of involvement as outweighing the potential benefits. On the other hand, noneconomic barriers are more complex, often revolving around issues of intellectual property and privacy, such as fear that their ideas or data could be misused by the company or by other participants, or they may worry about reputational risks if the co-created product fails in the market.

This study (Mandolfo et al., 2020) underscores key elements that companies must carefully consider and address when designing and implementing co-creation initiatives. By proactively mitigating these potential barriers, firms can reduce existing obstacles and offer a more tailored and seamless experience for the customer.

Table 6 - Client’s perceived risks towards engaging in co-creation initiatives

Concept	Literature contribution	Authors	Dimensions
Clients perceived barriers towards engaging in co-creation initiatives	<p>1. Economic Barriers: associated with resources like, human resources or disposable time.</p> <p>2. Non-Economic Barriers: Concerns related to intellectual property.</p>	(Mandolfo et al., 2020)	Risks associated with co-creation

Note: Own Work

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. METHODOLOGY APPROACH

Considering the four established specific objectives of this investigation, which stem from the primary aim of exploring how co-creation in new product development influences relationships through trust, commitment, and satisfaction within the B2B sector, a qualitative approach was adopted. This choice is justified by the fact that this type of methodology allows one to have a deeper understanding of the phenomena, through the participants' views, opinions and experiences. Additionally, the qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring complex themes such as attitudes, perceptions, and human behavior (Oliveira & Ferreira, 2014).

Since the occurring research intends to understand the customer's perspectives and how they feel towards co-creation initiatives, the employing of in-depth interviews, with semi-structured scripts to clients of a B2B company, more precisely E-goi's corporate clients, is established as the winning option. Allowing to establish a dialogue with the interviewee that focuses on providing freedom of speech without losing the common goal of the investigation, while also enabling the researcher to make follow-up questions, that can lead to a deeper understanding of the clarification of specific information (Oliveira & Ferreira, 2014).

Similarly, it is important to note that the literature reviewed in this study has predominantly employed quantitative methodologies. This highlights the necessity of incorporating a qualitative approach, which offers a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. Such an approach not only enables the confirmation or refutation of pre-existing notions but also facilitates the exploration of underlying reasons and mechanisms associated with the effects of co-creation in established relationships.

3.2. INTERVIEW GUIDE

The current interview guide was conducted to ensure a comprehensive coverage of the main categories and subcategories identified during the extensive literature review. The script serves as a semi-structured framework, designed to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of relationships established in the B2B industry and the role of co-creation in shaping those pre-existing relations. Each question strategically aligns with the thematic clusters elucidated in Tables 1 through 6, intending to capture a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation, as visible in the following Table 7.

The script (Table 10) has been segmented into three primary sections in order to attain the study's established objectives. The first section focuses on evaluating the current relationship between the client and E-goi, as well as exploring the client's intention to maintain the commercial relationship in the coming years. This evaluation will allow for the characterization of the relationship based on the overall assessment, which will serve as a basis for comparison.

The second section of the script examines co-creation. More precisely It explores participants' perceptions of and willingness to engage in such initiatives, as well as the changes they might anticipate in their relationship as a result. Additionally, it seeks to identify potential risks associated with co-creation and gathers information on the ideal implementation of these initiatives, as well as preferences, responding directly to objective number four and objective number five.

The third and most extensive part of the script is devoted to the three identified dimensions of relationship quality: trust, commitment, and satisfaction, along with their associated antecedents. In this section, it is important to note that questions related to satisfaction were deliberately left open-ended. This approach allows participants to identify the main factors they consider when assessing their level of satisfaction, enabling a more tailored analysis specific to the context of E-goi and the services it provides. Similarly, the questions designed to analyze the commitment dimension were structured to present scenarios to the interviewees,

encouraging them to explore both their cognitive—rational perspective—and affective—more emotional perspective.

The interviews were conducted in Portuguese to facilitate clear communication and ensure that participants fully comprehended the questions. Conducting the interviews in their native language allowed participants to express their thoughts, opinions, and experiences more naturally and accurately. Once the interviews were completed, the responses were meticulously translated into English to proceed with the data analysis. The integrity and authenticity of the data were maintained throughout the analysis stage given the detailed handling of this translation process, which preserved all the finer points and nuances of the participants' original responses.

The data collection process was carried out entirely online, using virtual meeting platforms. All participants who were previously contacted consented to both their participation and the recording of the sessions. To ensure confidentiality and create a secure environment for open expression, participants' identifying information was anonymized, particularly given the usage of E-goi as a case study, creating a sense of involvement of the company in the investigation. The interviews lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes on average, providing sufficient time for an in-depth discussion and a thorough exploration of the various dimensions under investigation. A total of eight interviews were conducted, aligned with the profile criteria established for the investigation, that is reviewed in the following section.

Table 7 - Identified dimensions and Sub-dimensions of literature.

Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Questions	Objectives
Relationship	Assessment of the current relationship	Q1, Q2	Number 2
	Long-term orientation	Q3	
Co-creation	Willingness to participate	Q4	
	Motivations to engage	Q5	
	Changes within relationships	Q6	

	Risks towards co-creation	Q15	Number 3
	Initiatives operationalization	Q16, 17	Number 4
Effects of co-creation on the level of trust	Antecedents of trust	Q7	Number 1
	Communication	Q8	
	Flexibility	Q9	
	Competence	Q10	
Effects of co-creation on the level commitment	Cognitive commitment	Q13	
	Affective commitment	Q14	
Effects of co-creation on the level of satisfaction	Antecedents of satisfaction	Q11, Q12	

Note: Own Work

3.3. PARTICIPANTS’ PROFILE

Considering the realm of E-goi’s customers, this research recognizes two distinct existing groups within company's customer base: Small and Medium Enterprises and Corporate enterprises. However, once the corporate enterprises assume a more predominant role, reasoned by E-goi ‘s current ICP the – ideal customer profile – and the revenue that this type of customer brings in, the present investigation will focus only on the previously referred typology, bearing in mind E.-goi’s strategic positioning.

This distinction is based on consumption levels and the corresponding subscription type, allowing for the identification of clients classified under the corporate category. This typology is associated with a higher monthly fee and provides the client with full access to all the products and features available on the platform, as well as a dedicated account manager, who serves as the primary point of communication between the client and the company.

Therefore, in order to ensure the alignment with the primary objective of the investigation, it was an essential requirement that the participants interviewed regularly interacted with the platform as part of their daily responsibilities. This criterion guaranteed that participants had a

solid understanding of E-goi's product and had previously engaged with their assigned account manager, offering a knowledgeable foundation for their insights.

To secure a comprehensive characterization of the relationship between the participants and E-goi, a set of initial questions was designed to focus on several key aspects. These questions addressed the duration of the relationship, aiming to facilitate comparisons between participants with longer-term associations and those with more recent engagements. Additionally, participants were asked to provide information about the industry in which their organization operates, as well as details regarding their position and tenure in that role. This information was sought to assess their level of familiarity with the software and their extent of contact with E-goi, thereby providing a well-rounded view of their relationship with the platform. This characterization is detailed in table 8 which includes, the data from all participants.

Table 8 - Clients detailed characterization

Participant	Duration of the Relationship with E-goi	Current position	Years in the position held	Business Industry	Business size
Client A	3 years	Performance Marketing Specialist	5 years	Tech (Marketplace)	45-60 employees
Client B	3 years	Ecommerce and Digital Marketing Specialist	3 years	Apparel	100+ employees
Client C	2 years	Digital Platforms Manager	2 years	Truism	15 -30 employees
Client D	7 years	Marketing Manager	4 years	Tech (Marketplace)	100+ employees
Client E	6 years	Digital Channel Specialist	1 year	Banking	100+ employees

Client F	1 year	Marketing and Sales Representative	1 year	Apparel	1-15 employees
Client G	1 year	Digital marketing Specialist	1 year	Health and Beauty	1-15 employees
Client H	3 years	Digital Marketing	2 years	Retail	60+ employees

Note: Own Work

3.4. ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES

The present chapter is dedicated to the categorization and in-depth analysis of the data collected. This process implicates the application of analytical techniques that promote a reflective approach to understanding the data, allowing the understatement of insights provided by the participants, focusing on uncovering underlying meanings and patterns present in their narratives. Therefore, the content analysis technique will be employed in this investigation.

According to Bardin (2016) content analysis consists of three primary stages: (1) the pre-analysis phase, (2) the exploration and categorization of the collected content, and (3) the treatment and interpretation of the data. Each of these stages plays a critical role in systematically organizing, examining, and deriving meaning from the data, ensuring a rigorous and coherent analysis process.

3.5. PRE-ANALYSIS

The pre-analysis phase commences with an initial examination of the material, where the main objective is to draft a preliminary overview of the data. This preliminary analysis, as referenced by Bardin (2016) enables the identification of significant contributions as well as the establishment of assumptions.

During this primary phase, a set of assumptions were formulated, in accordance with the research objectives and informed by the preliminary reading of the material. These assumptions were exclusively developed for dimensions that had been previously identified in the literature (Table 7).

Assumption 1. Communication is perceived as an enhancer of trust.

Assumption 2. Flexibility is perceived as an enhancer of trust.

Assumption 3: The implementation of co-creation initiatives is not perceived as a sign of lack of competence.

Assumption 4: Co-creation is perceived as a positive initiative and a weighting factor when it comes to choosing and maintaining a service provider.

Assumption 5. Co-creation positively influences the main contributors of satisfaction.

Assumption 6. Co-creation enhances relationship quality, moderated by its impact on trust, commitment and satisfaction.

Assumption 7. The initial stage of co-creation initiatives in New Product Development, is the most valued among clients

Assumptions one and two, lay emphasis on the role of communication and flexibility as enhancers of trust, which supports a constituent part of the first delimited objective of the investigation, aiming to explore how co-creation impacts the levels of trust, commitment and satisfaction. Fourth more assumptions number three, four and five also contribute directly to the mentioned objective. Similarly, these assumptions also contribute to objective number two, which entails to understand how co-creations shapes pre-established relationships.

Assumption number six encompassed an overall view of the multiple elements under analysis in relation with relationship quality. This assumption, which derives from the identification of trust, communication and satisfaction as integrators of relationship quality, as recognized during the process of literature review, and from the explored elements during the interviews, allows a direct correlation in response to objective number one.

The last termed assumption, correlates to objective number four, serving as a response to the intended purpose of identifying the most engaging stage of co-creation, for E-goi’s clients.

Regarding objective number three, that aimed to identify customers perceived risks with participating in co-creation initiatives, no assumptions were delimited, once the first data preview showed reference to multiple factors.

3.6. CATEGORIZATION AND DATA EXPLORATION

In accordance with the second stage of the content analysis methodology a categorization process was conducted, with relevant quotations being transcribed into the pre-established sub-dimensions (Table 7 and Table 9), additionally, a new potential category emerged during this stage (Table 9). This new category, along with the others, will be examined in the following chapter, which will also correspond to the final phase of the study— the data interpretation and analysis (Bardin, 2016; Valle & Ferreira, 2024).

Table 9 - Categories of interest in content analysis

Categories				
Assessment of the current relationship	Communication as an antecedent of trust	Co-creation’s impact on cognitive commitment	Antecedents of satisfaction	Willingness to participate

Long-term orientation	Co-creation impact on communication	Co-creation impact on affective commitment	Co-creation impact on satisfaction	Motivation to engage
	Flexibility as an antecedent of trust			Changes within the relationship
	Co-creation impact on flexibility			Risks towards co-creation
	Competence			Discounts as an incentive for participating in co-creation
				Initiatives operationalization

Note: Own Work

4. DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter is devoted, as previously indicated, to the interpretation and treatment of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. To elucidate the analytical process, the data presentation will be structured according to each category, representing sub-dimensions previously identified in the literature review, as well as additional categories that emerged during the categorization phase. This approach allowed a detailed understanding of each element, with connections drawn to the pre-established assumptions. It is important to note that the categories regarding the antecedents of trust: communication and flexibility, were reviewed jointly, in the same section. Similarly, an additional section was added regarding the potential correlations between client’s characteristics and their perspectives.

This individual analysis of each category will be based on the eight interviews conducted. However, the data presented will feature only selected excerpts from some of the interviews, rather than responses from every participant.

4.1. ASSESSMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The initial sub-dimension and corresponding category pertain to the evaluation of the existing relationship between the interviewees and E-goi. This assessment aims to capture the participants' overall perception of the service provider and establish a contextual understanding of their satisfaction levels.

Overall, the evaluation yielded a positive assessment, reflecting a general satisfaction with the services provided by E-goi. Key aspects highlighted include the promptness of their responses, the effectiveness of their customer support for technical issues, and the attentiveness of their account managers.

(Client B) "From a relationship standpoint, I think I'd give them a score of: 10, because they are very quick and pay attention to detail. (...) From the beginning, such as the follow-up through emails to the final stage of evaluating the service provided, it's incredible."

(Client C) "I evaluate it positively; I think we've never had any issues. Any questions I have, they respond right away, the support is excellent."

(Client E) "I evaluate it as a positive relationship for the reasons I mentioned earlier, namely easy communication, quick responses, and ease in solving problems."

(Client F) "We have a very positive relationship, we are satisfied."

(Client G) "It is very positive and satisfactory. We have no negative aspects to highlight. All the needs that have arisen were promptly addressed."

(Client H) "We don't have any negative points to mention at the moment. All the needs we had were addressed relatively quickly. We have a manager who also provides us with quick support."

Nonetheless two participants (**clients A and D**) also noted areas for improvement, particularly the decline in strategic advice.

(Client A) "Currently, the relationship is stable; we continue to receive assistance and contact the support team. However, it is now more focused on support rather than consultancy."

(Client D) "In the past, the support provided by the account manager was more prevalent, but this has diminished somewhat. However, for now, we are still satisfied, although there is room for improvement."

Similarly, when questioned, later on, about their current perception towards E-goi's willingness to adapt products to their needs and preferences, seven of the participants indicated that they did not feel that there was an existing environment that encouraged product suggestions, share of needs, or either implemented mechanics for this type of actions.

(Client A) "Currently, and recently, they are not as flexible or prompt in implementing suggestions or changes. I would say that at one point, their responses were much more agile, and they were more accommodating with the suggestions we provided. Nowadays, however, only criticisms are addressed. Therefore, if there is a critical suggestion, they respond swiftly. However, if it is a suggestion based on need but not a priority, I do not see as much openness on their part."

(Client B) "But, in terms of... a direct channel. In terms of our direct input, so far there hasn't been anything we've noticed."

(Client C) "I don't feel there's much openness; one thing is when something doesn't work, but that's not really about seeking to explore our input."

(Client D) "In the case of E-goi, ongoing support is expected, which is currently lacking."

(Client E) "There is support, and we share our concerns, but there isn't a proactive approach in showcasing new products or asking for feedback in that regard. Therefore, I also don't feel that there is an active effort to map out our needs."

(Client F) "We haven't had much contact with E-goi to make suggestions at this time; and feel like there is no such mechanism in place."

(Client G) "Honestly, E-goi does not proactively seek suggestions; I do not feel that this concern exists."

(Client H) "Proactively, I do not see E-goi asking for feedback. However, I believe that if we were to voluntarily provide such, they would be willing to review it."

It is crucial to highlight that the type of client interviewed is provided with an allocated account manager as part of their monthly service package, which the own clients appointed with a positive association. This offering is particularly noteworthy in the context of the investigation, as it underscores a significant observation: there appears to be a lack of a systematic or habitual mechanism for soliciting feedback regarding the products utilized by the clients. Despite the presence of dedicated account management, there seems to be an absence of proactive efforts to gather client feedback towards product suggestions and potential necessities in order to improve the usage experience, as well as suggesting features that align with the client's necessities and business objectives, which could be indicative of needing to review the practice within the organization.

However, this does not seem to directly impact the existing relationship, since a positive association toward E-goi was viewed. Therefore, there are other factors that contribute to the evaluation of a relationship, as indicated by **client C**, when asked about the motives that lead him to choose E-goi as their service provider "*(...) above all, I believe that the focus was on the budget, the customer support which is made in Portuguese and that's rare when it comes to this type of platforms, and of course, the service itself, meaning the tool, which fulfilled our primary objective: email marketing.*"

This aligns with the concept of economic satisfaction, as highlighted in the literature review, which arises from favorable evaluations of financial results, such as achieving goals or improving efficiency (Berenguer-Contró et al., 2023). This aspect figures itself as notably

significant in the type of relationships under analysis, the B2B relationships, emerging as the type of satisfaction that is most considered. This discovery will also be discussed, in other categories.

4.2. LONG TERM RELATIONSHIP ORIENTATION

Regarding the intention to sustain the existing commercial relationship, all participants expressed a desire to maintain this ongoing association. However, it is crucial to highlight certain nuances, particularly the observation that the individual handling daily interactions with the platform does not hold full decision-making authority. This dynamic is indicative of the typical characteristics of B2B relationships, as noted by **clients C, D, and E**:

(Client C) “For me, as an employee, yes, I do not want to change, but since the contract is ending and E-goi has already mentioned a price increase, I am providing my needs and sharing my feedback to the company as an employee, but the final decision is theirs.”

(Client D) “Yes, we have the intention to continue, but we also recognize that we are part of a group spanning several countries, particularly here in Europe where we have many synergies. We are working towards having all marketing departments in each country use the same platforms, and I believe that E-goi may not be well-positioned for this”

(Client E) “I think so, unless there are contrary indications from management, I believe so.”

Another particularly insightful observation was provided by **client B**, who noted that “(...) because the integrations themselves are custom-made in our case. The website was developed through programming, and replicating this setup with another partner is highly time-consuming.” This comment underscores the business mindset that emphasizes the practical challenges of operational implementation.

4.3. ANTECEDENTS OF TRUST

This section of the data interpretation addresses two previously identified categories: communication as a driver of trust and flexibility as a driver of trust. Participants were asked to reflect on these categories through the following question: *"To what extent do you consider open and transparent communication, as well as flexibility in adapting products to your preferences, important for establishing trust with your service provider?"(Q7)*

As discussed in the literature review, authors like Gansser et al. (2021) and Akrouf & Diallo (2021), have identified communication and flexibility as key antecedents of trust in business relationships. Building on this established framework, the data collected in the present study further supports these findings, reinforcing the significance of both transparent communication and adaptive flexibility as critical factors in fostering and maintaining trust between service providers and clients. The participants emphasized the importance of clear, open communication and a willingness to accommodate their evolving needs, which as the prior studies highlighted, reinforces the continued relevance of communication and flexibility in shaping strong, trust-based partnerships.

(Client B) "I believe it is quite possibly the most important aspect of both business and relationships. When discussing transparency, where both sides acknowledge and establish their limitations and what they are capable of doing (...) it allows for better management of expectations."

(Client D) "Indeed, communication, and above all, transparency significantly contribute to building trust. For instance, if someone effectively manages expectations by clearly communicating that a particular task cannot be completed within specified deadlines, or if they acknowledge their own mistakes or shortcomings, it greatly enhances trust."

(Client E) "For me, when there is a conducive environment where we can openly communicate with the partner—bringing forward our needs, our goals, potential obstacles, and even possible actions we aim to achieve—it fosters a greater sense of trust and enhances the partner's credibility."

(Client G) "Without honesty, trust cannot be established. It is impossible to create an affinity or a solid business relationship if trust is compromised. Communication between individuals or companies must be honest for things to move forward effectively."

Communication, particularly when characterized by transparency, is identified as crucial for establishing trustworthy relationships between business partners. As highlighted by **clients A** and **D**, transparent communication facilitates the management of expectations, thereby minimizing frustration and fostering an awareness of the business's limitations regarding its offerings. Additionally, client G emphasized that honest communication is instrumental in ensuring efficient operationalization.

Regarding flexibility, the data collected, as previously discussed, also demonstrated its role as a significant driver of trust, justified by the feeling of recognition, closeness and proximity in the relationship.

Also noteworthy is the observation made by the interviewee, **client C** *"Yes, I believe that, like communication, flexibility is inherently linked to it, as effective communication is necessary for flexibility to exist. This recognition and openness are likely to enhance both the relationship and the trust"*. Who emphasized the interrelation between communication and flexibility. This perspective underscores that flexibility can only be effectively achieved when there is a foundational level of open communication in place. In other words, the existence of flexibility is contingent upon the prior establishment of transparent and ongoing dialogue.

However, the interviews revealed an awareness that the capacity for implementing changes based on clients' suggestions and needs may be constrained by the service provider's ability to execute such alterations and the limitations imposed by the provider's predefined strategy.

(Client A) “Flexibility is not fixed and is highly variable; however, when we talk about flexibility in terms of negotiation, contact, access, and sharing ideas, I would say that it is indeed present. Nevertheless, I believe that flexibility is limited by the company's own strategy.”

(Client F) “Yes, knowing that there is such concern increases our satisfaction. It naturally fosters a greater sense of closeness and helps establish a relationship of trust.”

(Client H) “All companies have their shortcomings or occasional issues, and often they are reluctant to receive criticism. However, it is the clients or users who can identify areas for improvement. If there is openness to listening to client feedback, the company stands to gain significantly. Such receptiveness allows for process enhancements and fosters greater proximity and trust with the client.”

The analyzed findings corroborate the validity of the initial two assumptions proposed during the pre-analysis phase. Furthermore, they offer a detailed elucidation of the “how’s and whys” by which communication and flexibility serve as direct contributors to the establishment of trust. This comprehensive understanding highlights how these factors interact to foster and sustain trust within business-to-business relationships.

4.4. CO-CREATION IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION

To evaluate the potential impact of co-creation on communication, participants were provided with a conceptual framework outlining what a collaborative role might entail at E-goi, despite the fact that such a process has not yet been implemented. This approach aimed to gauge how the introduction of co-creation could influence communication dynamics, offering insights into its prospective effects on business-to-business interactions.

As exploited in the attachment, this framework encompassed three main stages of involvement: (1^o stage) mapping out suggestions; (2^o stage) approval of product fit and lastly (3^o stage) testing and refinement of the product. For each one for appointed stages, and explication of the actions involved was provided.

The after mentioned framework, was given to the participants during the realization of the interviews, this example was also asked to be considered in the following questions that revolved around co-creation.

Reflecting on the findings that identify communication as a significant enhancer of trust, as documented in both the literature and the previous category under review, this study further explores the potential influence of co-creation on this antecedent. The importance of this relationship is supported by existing research on the impact of co-creation in enhancing trust within B2B relationships, as evidenced by studies such as Berenguer-Contri et al. (2024) and Sales-Vivó, Saura, et al. (2021).

(Client A) "If we were part of a development or beta program, I believe our suggestions and feedback would be considered differently. They would be taken into account in a more inclusive manner. From this perspective, yes. (...) This close relationship can also stem from being honest with them, being transparent and saying, 'Look, we are thinking about this, but you do not have these needs.' Therefore, we can build something together to continue being partners."

(Client C) "This initiative could help build or deepen the relationship. If I were to make a suggestion and receive either a positive or negative response to that suggestion, I would know that my input is being acknowledged and that someone is listening to me. I believe that this kind of feedback is very important. It's not just a matter of transparency but also of fostering a closer connection."

(Client D) "I believe that communication would improve, as I mentioned earlier. For effective sharing and to provide the most suitable product, this exchange must occur. Additionally, it involves managing expectations and gaining a better understanding, which ultimately translates into greater transparency."

(Client F) "A more active role would likely strengthen communication with E-goi, leading to increased contact and sharing. This would keep us better informed and closer to the processes."

(Client H) “Certainly, positive changes would likely arise from such an initiative. It would be beneficial for both parties: we would find solutions for our business, and E-goi would develop and make these solutions available to all businesses. There are many common needs among similar businesses, and feedback would facilitate finding better solutions. Moreover, it would undoubtedly strengthen existing communication, making it more intimate. This seems to me both a prerequisite for the success of these initiatives and a consequence of their implementation.”

The data provided an understatement that participants find that they would likely experience their input being integrated more effectively into, and a sense of a proximity to the service provider, by taking on a more active and collaborative role in the product development process. Furthermore, there is a recognition that there is a potential for the establishment of a close partnership that is facilitated through transparent and honest communication. By openly discussing current considerations and acknowledging client’s needs and the proposed solutions, clients view these types of initiatives as beneficial for both parties, resulting in a feeling of mutually beneficial outcomes, fosters a more robust and enduring partnership.

Therefore, there is identified a positive existing relation and impact of co-creation on communication, that as verified previously, acts as a promoter of trust, confirming assumption number one.

Equally significant is the emphasis on expectation management and a clear understanding of business limitations, which is also recognized by the participants of the current investigation, in the data interpretation regarding the category of communication as a driver of trust.

4.5. CO-CREATION IMPACT ON FLEXIBILITY

In alignment with the prior analysis regarding the influence of co-creation on communication, the potential impact of co-creation on flexibility was also examined. Given that assumption two—emphasizing flexibility as a fundamental driver of trust in B2B relationships—has been substantiated, and simultaneously quantitative studies have proven that co-creation enhances trust between business partners through collaboration, transparency, and

mutual understanding (Sales-Vivó, Saura, et al., 2021), a similar analytical framework was employed. To evaluate how co-creation contributes to trust, a thorough analysis of the role of collaborative initiatives was undertaken, specifically addressing the previously identified antecedents of trust, more precisely the role it can play out on flexibility.

(Client B) "This perception of flexibility becomes much stronger because there are mechanisms in place to ensure its presence. The selection of business partners, in our case, always involves considering factors such as the potential for openness and flexibility in the partnership."

(Client E) "Yes, I believe we would perceive a greater intention to consider our needs. I also think it would impact our efficiency as clients and could potentially enhance the software itself."

(Client F) "I believe the first change would be the emergence of this openness—a recognition that is always positive and ultimately leads to greater satisfaction, particularly in how we are treated. There would be a clear concern for the client."

(Client G) "The implementation of co-creation initiatives would certainly benefit E-goi. This process would allow for the development of solutions aligned with the goals we have based on the services we use, further distinguishing the company from its competitors. Additionally, the fact that E-goi is a Portuguese company would facilitate communication as well as the implementation of these solutions, making collaboration more effective and tailored to our specific needs. In the end, I believe it would result in a closer relationship."

These insights reveal that clients view co-creation as a concrete mechanism that could significantly improve perceptions of flexibility by ensuring that client needs are recognized and addressed in product development. The relational aspect—how clients feel they are treated and the degree of openness—is equally important, suggesting that flexibility not only enhances the product but also strengthens the overall partnership through increased transparency and engagement. Consequently, it can be concluded that the introduction of a collaborative role would be perceived positively by clients. Such an initiative is likely to enhance the perception

of the service provider's willingness and ability to exhibit flexibility in meeting clients' needs regarding the products offered.

4.6. COMPETENCE

In the current section, an analysis will be undertaken to evaluate how clients perceive a company's competence in the context of co-creation initiatives. These initiatives, which involve a more collaborative role from the client in product development, will be assessed for their impact on perceptions of the company's capability and technical knowledge.

(Client A) "On the contrary, when we are talking about companies that do not look outward but only inward, they may miss out on valuable feedback, leading to a disconnect between companies. Thus, it is more problematic for a company that does not provide solutions quickly, such as new features, compared to those that offer such opportunities."

(Client B) "First and foremost, it is innovative because it deviates from the traditional model where there is a barrier between one side and the other; it effectively creates a bridge. I also think it generates curiosity—how we form an image of our partners is closely related to what we know about them. (...) No, no. No, because as I mentioned at the beginning, I believe that recognizing our areas for improvement, where we can improve—is a sign of transparency. It indicates that, although there is a journey ahead, I value my clients enough to want to understand how I can continue to enhance my service for them."

(Client D) "No, not at all. I do not view this as a lack of competence or something negative; it is extremely positive. Feedback from those who are already familiar with the platform and use it daily, in one way or another, is very valuable and healthy. It represents the path forward and aligns with the modernity of technology."

(Client E) "Many companies have very good solutions, but they often need input from their clients to enhance their offerings. Therefore, I view this as an efficient form of collaboration."

(Client H) "I believe this is the right path to take. As mentioned earlier, the most valuable feedback comes from clients and users. If we want to innovate, we must listen. I do not see this as a sign of incompetence."

The findings underscore the significant benefits of co-creation initiatives for enhancing a company's competence and technical knowledge. Clients perceive a company that engages in co-creation as better equipped to address their needs and innovate by actively seeking and incorporating feedback, thus avoiding the pitfalls of inward-looking practices that can lead to a disconnect with customers.

In summary, this approach is not seen as indicative of a lack of competence; rather, it is perceived as a positive sign of transparency and a commitment to continuous improvement, validating assumption number three. Similarly, as appointed by **client D**, feedback from clients who regularly interact with the platform is a sign for technological advancement. Overall, co-creation is recognized as a valuable strategy for refining solutions and maintaining competitiveness.

Additionally, the current findings provide partial support for assumption number six, as competence is also recognized in the literature as a fundamental component of trust (Chowdhury, 2012). This association underscores the integral role that perceived competence plays in fostering trust within business relationships.

4.7. CO-CREATION IMPACT ON COGNITIVE COMMITMENT

For the data collection related to the current category under analysis, the following scenario was presented to the participants: *"Picture yourself in a scenario, where you must select between one of the two service providers within the same category. To what extent would the opportunity to actively participate in the development of new products influence your choice regarding the service provider?"(Q13)*

The main intention of the aforementioned setting was to assess the cognitive reasoning associated with the participant's decision-making process, specifically to understand the weight attributed to co-creation when evaluating the benefits such initiatives might bring to their business.

(Client C) "I believe it would be a point to consider, certainly, as it could offer additional facilitation in the future. So, yes, even though it may not be the most critical factor, it would serve as a distinguishing feature."

(Client E) "It would depend on various factors, but I believe we always gain more advantages by choosing a service provider that offers the benefit of co-creation, as it provides a point of differentiation."

(Client F) "It would be highly influential and carry significant weight in the selection of service providers. This is because it would allow for the adaptation of the product to specific needs, ensuring greater alignment with objectives."

(Client G) "I would consider this possibility as a differentiating factor. The ability to collaborate in product development reflects a more flexible and customer-focused approach, which can lead to more innovative and relevant solutions. Furthermore, this close relationship with the provider would strengthen my confidence and assurance that the service would be continuously improved and adapted to my needs over time, making me more likely to choose this provider over others."

As indicated by the interviewees, there is a recognition of this type of initiative as a positive aspect, with some participants identifying it as a distinguishing factor. Nonetheless, they also observed that other elements would have a more substantial impact on their decision-making process. Specifically, participants such as **clients A** and **D** have explicitly noted that factors such as pricing, availability, and support would be prioritized over considering such initiatives.

This type of cost-benefit analysis is characteristic of a B2B environment, where companies typically adopt a rational approach to decision-making, which relates directly with cognitive commitment (Voss et al., 2019).

(Client A) "It is not necessarily a decisive factor. While it is a positive aspect, it is not a determining one. I would say that it adds value to the service, especially if the offerings are similar in terms of price and customer support."

(Client D) "My primary considerations are the price, the associated service, and the speed at which I can begin collaborating with the provider. While it may be secondary, in my subconscious, I do feel a greater involvement with the brand and an increased exposure over time. However, I am not overly concerned if, for instance, during a final commercial meeting, someone mentions: By the way, if you're still uncertain, remember that at E-goi, we conduct tests and beta tests every three months and request feedback on new products."

4.8. CO-CREATION IMPACT ON AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT

In order to explore the affective dimension of commitment, that according to Voss et al., (2019), is related to the establishment of an emotional bond and the existence of trust, that translates into a willingness to maintain the existing relationship, the present enquiry was implemented: "If you had to point out what type of initiatives would make you feel more connected towards your service provider, would you mention the opportunity of being more participative as one of them, why?"(Q14).

(Client B) "Yes. Yes, it's about feeling that this supplier is committed and that we are important to them. Therefore, it would be an initiative I would consider and that would also make me want to extend the relationship."

(Client E) "Yes, I believe it would be something I would view as a facilitator of closer engagement, especially if the initiative involves more direct contact with our account manager and our pain points are taken into account."

(Client F) "Yes, because active collaboration enhances the sense of partnership rather than a mere commercial transaction. It fosters a closer environment, which I believe contributes to the longevity and success of a relationship."

(Client H) "Yes, I believe that the opportunity for a more collaborative role would be one of the initiatives that would make us feel more connected. By actively participating in the development of products or services, I would feel that my needs and suggestions are valued, which fosters a closer and more trusting relationship. This collaborative effort to continually improve the service provided would, in turn, positively impact my willingness to maintain a commercial relationship with the partner."

The data collected reveals a consensus among participants regarding the importance of enhanced participatory opportunities in deepening the connection with service providers. For instance, **client E** highlighted that initiatives involving direct contact with the account manager and addressing specific pain points would significantly foster a closer relationship.

Similarly, **client H** emphasized that active involvement in product or service development, where their needs and feedback are genuinely valued, would not only enhance trust but also strengthen the overall relationship. These insights suggest that co-creation initiatives are a significant factor in building a more connected and enduring partnership with service providers.

Comparing these findings with the ones providing from the previous category, an insightful perspective on commitment emerges, indicating that while collaborative initiatives may not be a decisive factor in selecting a service provider, they are perceived as a valuable addition once the relationship is established, which invalidates assumption number four. Similarly, the data collected allows us to conclude that collaborative initiatives contribute to a closer relationship by enhancing affective and emotional bonds, which are rooted in trust and proximity.

4.9. ANTECEDENTS OF SATISFACTION

The current category of the content analysis aims to identify the primary contributors of customer satisfaction. To facilitate this, the question was left open-ended, allowing clients to reflect on their experiences with service providers, particularly within a SaaS context, with E-goi serving as the case study.

(Client A) "Tool reliability, transparency, and compliance."

(Client B) "Customer service and response time to existing problems."

(Client C) "Transparency, user-friendliness, customer service, and productivity, if it allows me to optimize my work."

(Client D) "Existing proximity with the partner, functional product, responsiveness in problem resolution, and good usability."

(Client E) "Effective communication, ease of response/problem resolution, and overall product efficacy."

(Client F) "Service quality, communication and support provided, and consistency in the quality of the offering."

(Client G) "Quality of service provided, adaptability, innovation, and proactivity."

(Client H) "Speed of response and resolution, provision of customized solutions, and direct contact, such as an account manager who supports decision-making, conducts assessments, and serves as the primary point of contact."

The data collected from the interviews highlight several key factors that influence satisfaction levels. Consistently, clients emphasized service quality, effective communication,

and responsiveness as critical components. **Client B**, **client E**, and **H** particularly noted the importance of customer service, response time, and ease of problem resolution in determining their satisfaction. **Clients C** and **D** also emphasized transparency and user-friendliness, reflecting the need for services that align with operational needs and preferences. These findings indicate that clients prioritize how well a service provider meets their practical needs, supports operational efficiency, and maintains consistent quality.

4.10. CO-CREATION IMPACT ON SATISFACTION

Following the request for participants to identify the factors they typically consider when assessing their level of satisfaction, a subsequent question was posed: *“Out of the aspects you pointed out, which ones do you believe to be impacted by the opportunity to have a more collaborative role, and how?” (Q12)*

This section of the script aimed to either validate or refute the previously established relationship between co-creation and customer satisfaction, as identified in the literature review. The literature suggests that co-creation initiatives positively impact the enhancement of satisfaction (Dewarani & Alversia, 2023).

(Client C) "Honestly, I believe there is an overall improvement. The more the company assists us and enhances the product we use, the more we will always find the initiative, and the partner, attractive. There is this contact; we are not isolated, and if we can make suggestions, we expect there to be at least a better understanding of what we, as clients, need or what we, as users, find more functional."

(Client E) “Proximity, I believe, increases when the account manager engages in questioning and understands our needs. Regarding a functional product, this is influenced by the feedback process, as this is also the purpose of beta testing and suggesting potential changes or improvements. Was the other factor response time? Isn’t that what I mentioned? (...) Well, I think we can feel that there is indeed more proximity and greater care, in this case, an implemented process, but I do not consider that it necessarily means that problem resolution will improve. There may be some issues addressed through

these initiatives. Usability is also a key factor, as it is closely linked to the feedback provided by the client."

(Client H) "Finding a balance where implementations work for us and other businesses contributes to the aspect of personalization. I would also argue that it impacts the relationship with account managers, who facilitate the entire process, ultimately leading to more frequent and closer communication."

Overall, the interviewees indicated that co-creation initiatives positively impacted one or more of the previously mentioned factors. Consequently, it can be concluded that there is a positive association between having a more active role in product development and customer satisfaction, supporting assumption number 5. The improvement of products was also emphasized, with clients believing that their input could significantly enhance product performance and better align it with their needs and usage experience. Similarly, communication was identified as a crucial factor, as it is directly related to fostering a closer relationship.

However, it is important to note client E's response, which suggests that while co-creation initiatives may not directly influence the resolution of existing problems, which was also appointed by **client B**, that stated that *"Regarding the speed of response in problem resolution, our needs would be more considered; however, I do not believe it would 100% solve this matter."*

4.11. WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN CO-CREATION INITIATIVES

Regarding the assessment of clients' willingness to participate in co-creation initiatives, the majority of the interviewees expressed a clear interest in assuming a more collaborative role when it comes to product development at E-goi.

(Client A) "We would be, and are, available. Since the beginning of our relationship, we have already suggested several improvements to the current product, but so far, I haven't noticed that they have been

implemented. There has been some improvement in certain areas, but not as many as we would like or deem necessary."

(Client C) "Yes, we would be very interested, especially because it could help unlock some improvements that we consider necessary."

(Client D) "Yes, we would be available (...) I believe that without proper follow-up, the provider is completely blind to what the client needs. Yes, there is definitely a gap in that regard."

(Client F) "Yes, I think it would be advantageous for us. In our industry, it's important that we can communicate our needs in order to better meet the expectations of our target audience. Therefore, collaboration and sharing would be helpful in that regard, making it beneficial for our company."

In coherence with the previous analysis, it was observed that a more active client participation is closely associated with both positive contributions to the development of the product and enhanced benefits for the existing relationship between the service provider and the client. This increased involvement not only improves the quality and relevance of the product but also strengthens the partnership dynamic between the two parties.

Shifting from general responses, two participants expressed that, while they would be interested in engaging in collaborative initiatives at E-goi, they currently do not have an adequately sized team that could be fully dedicated to such efforts. This observation highlights a broader implication regarding the potential investment that clients may need to allocate, in terms of resources, including personnel and time, to fully commit to such initiatives.

This limitation raises a key consideration for organizations like E-goi when designing collaborative programs. It indicates that, while interest in participation may be high, the availability of resources among clients is a critical factor that could impact their ability to engage meaningfully. Therefore, addressing this resource gap - by offering simpler, and reduced time consuming, processes - might be necessary for successful and sustained collaboration.

(Client G) "Given the current size of our team, I would say no. This is not related to lack of interest or willingness, but rather because it would depend on how the initiative is structured. We do not have a high number of human resources available, so if participation requires ongoing follow-up or a significant amount of time, we wouldn't be able to accommodate."

(Client H) "Yes, we would be interested in participating and providing our feedback, as well as contributing. However, at the moment, we have a relatively small team regarding the use of the program, which limits our availability. As a result, we can only address a few quick questions; for more complex issues, we would not be able to assist."

4.12. CO-CREATION PERCEIVED BENEFITS

In order to fully understand the benefits that clients perceive while engaging in the development of new products, the following question was posed: "What kind of advantages or benefits do you perceive in actively participating in the development of new products?" (Q5).

This inquiry aimed to elucidate not only possible outcomes that clients appoint to exist, but simultaneously shine a light at the underlying reasons and incentives that drive them to participate in collaborative development efforts.

(Client B) "Direct contact and real-time feedback are crucial. As clients, it is important for us to provide practical feedback based on our daily experiences. Often, platforms are developed from the perspective of a design and programming team, which may not fully align with practical requirements. This adjustment would facilitate more practical contact and likely involve adapting the platform to better meet our specific needs."

(Client D) "It would be curious and interesting, even in the sense of giving us that visibility, bringing us insights, and highlighting things that are happening because we are not paying attention, as we are not experts in email marketing or marketing automation. We are focused on other things every day. Therefore, having them, as specialists, bring us insights and inform us about, for example, product X, I

believe that this too constitutes a form of collaboration. And of course, we feel that there is an added level of attention."

(Client E) "In the financial sector, we have very specific requirements. To see a platform that understands us, that wants to study our requirements and needs, and is willing to develop based on that, is, I believe, much more personalized."

(Client H) "The greatest advantage would be providing our feedback and communicating the needs or difficulties we currently face. This would allow these issues to be at least analyzed, and potentially even implemented."

In a unified way, clients pointed out benefits such as the ability to provide real-time feedback, the personalization of solutions to meet specific needs, and the opportunity to address operational challenges directly with the service provider. However, **Client D** offered a distinct perspective, emphasizing the value of gaining insights and visibility into areas outside their expertise, getting to know the product in an in-depth manner. This underscores an additional benefit of co-creation, where collaboration with industry specialists not only addresses immediate needs but also introduces new knowledge and opportunities for growth, thus generating value for the client itself, learning how to better use the service provided, as well as for their partner.

4.13. CHANGES WITHIN THE RELATIONSHIP

This category aims to explore potential changes that clients perceive in pre-existing B2B relationships when collaborative initiatives are introduced. Unlike previous sections, which focused on specific dimensions such as communication and flexibility, this inquiry was left open-ended to allow participants to freely reflect on how co-creation might influence their ongoing relationships with service providers. This approach intended a deeper understanding of the impact of collaborative actions beyond predefined parameters, offering insights into clients' broader experiences and expectations.

(Client A) "We can have a closer relationship, one so close that they see us not just as a client, but from a broader perspective, helping us in a different way. (...) Also, in terms of accounts and pricing, we could benefit from this closer relationship and have stronger negotiation power. (...) Yes, so being added to a partner or beta program they might have, I think would be more beneficial, and we would be closer to them and, well, have a stronger voice."

(Client D) "Obviously, if they come to ask for my opinion on a product they are thinking of launching, or that is almost ready to be launched, subconsciously, I feel a bit closer to that company. But that doesn't fully resolve the issue of proximity for me because, personally, I separate things. For me, solving a problem is like, there's a suggestion where I say, 'Look, I really need or would love to have this little button here, it would help a lot. Is that possible?' The account manager takes it internally, goes to the product team, and says, 'Yes, it's possible,' or 'No, it's not possible,' and gives feedback. And that's fine—yes or no, it's okay. This is a very customizable issue. Another thing is when the product as a whole needs beta testers, needs general feedback, and that's another story. I don't think that fosters proximity as much, so I feel there are two separate blocks here."

(Client F) "In terms of consumption, I don't think so, because we have a very specific focus on sending newsletters. Perhaps there would be an increase in usage with the improvements that come from that collaboration. On another point, I believe we would have more direct contact, or at least the perception that there is that level of care."

(Client G) "More frequent and closer contact between both parties would help strengthen proximity and mutual trust."

The insights gathered generally reveal that collaborative initiatives are viewed as a way to enhance the relationship between clients and service providers, particularly by fostering proximity and increasing trust. Clients perceive these initiatives as beneficial, offering opportunities for closer contact, more tailored solutions, which align with the descriptions given by participants in previous explored dimensions.

Even though there is a positive association towards possible changes in the relationships, **Client D** provides a significant insight by acknowledging that while offering specific feedback on product adjustments can enhance relational closeness, it does not necessarily address or resolve existing proximity issues. This distinction underscores that while co-creation can positively impact relationships and foster a sense of proximity, it may not be fully effective in mending existing ruptures within the relationship.

4.14. RISKS TOWARDS CO-CREATION

This category of analysis focuses on the identification and interpretation of potential risks associated with co-creation. By considering the perspectives of clients, it aims to map out potential factors that should be mitigated in the design and implementation of such initiatives.

(Client A) "The less favorable aspect would be the need to allocate more time to this process. There is also always the risk that, if things don't go well, our credibility could be at stake. This is especially true if the collaboration is done in a more public way, right? If it's kept hidden, no one knows."

(Client C) "I would say there's a small potential for frustration if a significant amount of our time was invested and none of our suggestions or feedback were taken into account."

(Client F) "I would say that conflicts of interest could arise, as suggestions may not always be implemented as we envision. (...) "There is also the potential, perhaps in the long term, for excessive dependency, where we continuously allocate resources to products that are not directly applicable to us, in order to maintain participation in such initiatives."

(Client H) "Misaligned expectations, when the responses do not meet our needs. Similarly, conflicts and increased costs/time, in the sense that we would have to allocate time for that collaborative role, which, in our case, is not feasible."

Upon the interpretation of client responses, the data revealed that: resource allocation and unmet expectations that lead to conflicts of interest are the main risks identified by participants.

These aforementioned risks are particularly interesting, for the context of the investigation, once it allows for a deeper understanding of the implications of active roles, as well as it provides E-goi with the knowledge towards what aspects need to be taken in consideration and mitigated.

4.15. INITIATIVES OPERATIONALIZATION

The present section of aims to examine client preferences regarding the structure and execution of collaborative initiatives in product development. To gather insights on this subject, two key questions (*Q16; Q17*) were posed during interviews, to access the following topic:

(1) Do clients perceive greater benefits from participating in the initial stages of product development, where ideas and concepts are still being defined, or during the product refinement phase, where they can engage in testing?

(2) What essential factors or conditions would encourage clients to actively participate in these initiatives, contributing suggestions, feedback, and testing new products?

These inquiries seek to understand client expectations and preferences for the successful implementation of co-creation initiatives.

(Client A) "Ideally, we would engage from the beginning to the end of the process. It should be a more structured and planned approach, rather than relying solely on informal verbal feedback. The process would benefit from being organized and systematic. We would like to be partners, not just participants in a single act. Receiving updates on the development of our suggestions is crucial. Often, we provide feedback without knowing whether it has been implemented, if it will be, or if it has been disregarded."

(Client B) "I Believe that going beyond this would involve transitioning to a physical component, such as hosting an event—almost like a "meeting day"—where we could visit the facilities, understand the entire planning vision, and have the opportunity to test, discuss, and establish a closer connection."

(Client D) "I believe the initial stage would be of greater personal interest. When I make a suggestion, it is because I have a concern or need. It is different to proactively propose a change and ask, 'I need this—could it be implemented?' as opposed to merely testing or validating in the final stage. Proactive involvement offers a higher level of engagement and influence.

(Client E) "I would suggest being involved from the outset, during the phase when we have the freedom to make suggestions and are consulted in that regard. Operationally, with other software we use, we often connect and communicate directly via channels such as Teams, which facilitates a more integrated process. A closer collaboration with the technical team, including marketing, is necessary. I am providing examples of practices we employ that could potentially enhance the structure of co-creation initiatives. Additionally, maintaining contact with our account manager, both for suggesting and exploring needs and for receiving optimization recommendations, is crucial. It would be important to have this ongoing contact, including during testing phases, and to receive training on new features. Without such training, it is challenging to ensure that we are testing features correctly."

(Client F) "Both phases are important, but participating in the early stages of product development can be more beneficial. At this stage, there is an opportunity to influence the direction of the product and shape the features according to our needs and expectations. I believe this leads to a more aligned final product. On the other hand, the refinement phase is also crucial for adjustments and improvements, especially in terms of usability."

(Client G) "I would argue that participating in the early stages of product development is more beneficial, as it allows for influencing ideas and concepts from the outset, identifying and addressing issues early on, and making a more significant impact on the final product. This ensures that the product is better aligned with our needs and expectations.

A prevailing theme across participants is detectable, showing a strong preference for early-stage involvement in the product development process, as this enables them to exert meaningful influence over the product's direction and features. **Both Client D and Client G** underscored the value of engaging at the conceptual stage, where they can proactively contribute to shaping the product to align with their specific needs, rather than being limited to testing or validating features in the final phases.

Furthermore, **Client A** and **Client E** emphasized the necessity of a structured and transparent collaboration process. **Client A** pointed out the importance of maintaining continuous feedback loops, where clients are regularly updated on the status of their suggestions. **Client E**, also reinforced this perspective by advocating for consistent communication with account managers and technical teams, suggesting that operational tools such as direct communication channels could enhance collaboration.

In conclusion, the insights suggest that early client engagement, coupled with a well-structured and transparent process, is critical for fostering effective co-creation, supporting assumption number seven.

4.16. DISCOUNTS AS AN INCENTIVE FOR PARTICIPATING IN CO-CREATION

This final category, which emerged during the subsequent stage of categorization, aims to explore the role of discounts or free access to product, as incentives for participating in collaborative initiatives, specifically in the context of product development. This inquiry was introduced as a follow-up question after the initial interview with **Client A**, to fully assess its significance.

(Client A) "I believe that any of these programs must offer some commercial advantage. Even if it's just allowing us to use the service being tested completely free of charge for a period of time."

(Client B) "Ideally, we would have discounts on the product usage since we contribute to the process, but I wouldn't say it's an essential or mandatory factor that must be included."

(Client C) "If there were commercial advantages, they would serve as an additional benefit and would always act as a motivator to participate."

(Client D) "In a B2B context, we are actively engaged in work and collaboration, which constitutes a partnership between the client and the supplier. Not everything needs to be monetized or incentivized."

(Client E) "As we are involved in testing and suggesting new functionalities, it raises questions about the implications for our plan. Specifically, if these functionalities are relevant to us, will our plan change, and will there be an increase in costs, or will the pricing remain the same? It's crucial to understand how the costs will be affected by these new features and whether the expenses are justifiable within our budget. The potential for significant cost increases could impact our decision to proceed, so having clear information on this matter is essential. Additionally, if there were any discounts offered, it would enhance our willingness to engage further."

(Client F) "It is undoubtedly an important factor, but not necessarily essential for us to participate in such initiatives. I believe that, in general, they serve as a way to offset initial participation costs, such as the time invested."

(Client G) "It is essential that clients perceive real value in their contributions, which should include direct benefits such as early access to products or discounts."

(Client H) "I do believe that commercial benefits would serve as an incentive for participation and would encourage us to engage in co-creation."

The interview data indicate a general consensus among clients that commercial incentives, such as discounts or free access to test products, can act as motivators for participation in co-creation initiatives. **Client A**, for example, highlights the importance of offering some form of commercial advantage, even if it is temporary, such as complimentary access to services during the testing phase. Likewise, **client C** observes that commercial benefits serve as an additional incentive, potentially enhancing engagement in these initiatives.

Despite the common appeal of discounts, some clients, like **clients B** and **F**, believe that while discounts are desirable, they are not essential for participation. This sentiment is echoed by **client D**, who stresses that in a B2B environment, the collaboration between client and supplier is more about partnership, and not everything should require monetary incentives. This

reflects a more relationship-driven approach, where trust and collaboration are valued over financial rewards.

While discounts and commercial benefits are seen as valuable by some clients, they are not universally regarded as a requirement for participating in co-creation initiatives, as pre-seen. This could indicate that the overall relationship and the perceived value of collaboration itself may be more significant factors in driving participation. Nonetheless further investigation is needed, to fully uncover potential motivations that lead clients to engage in co-creation. It would be advisable to conduct further research regarding this topic.

4.17. POTENTIAL CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE CLIENT'S CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS CO-CREATION

Upon examining potential correlations between clients' characteristics—such as the duration of their relationship with E-goi, their professional roles, industry, and company size—and their perspectives on co-creation initiatives, no significant distinctions emerged. The dataset, while varied in some respects, lacked the necessary diversity to reveal clear patterns. Despite differences in sectors, positions, and years of relationship with the service provider, the responses from clients demonstrated a notable consistency in their attitudes toward co-creation. This suggests that client perspectives on co-creation were not significantly influenced by individual factors, but rather stemmed from shared experiences with E-goi's service offerings. As a result, the data does not present sufficient differentiation to draw substantive correlations between client profiles and their views on co-creation.

5. RESULTS DISCUSSION

Post data analysis, a discussion of the results will be address, in relation to the existing literature previously identified, with the aim of critically examining the data collected. This discussion seeks to establish a meaningful discourse between the findings of this investigation and the theoretical frameworks outlined in the field of co-creation, particularly regarding its impact on the relationship dynamics between clients and companies. By engaging in this dialogue, the aim is to either support or challenge the established academic perspectives within this domain, providing new insights or validating existing knowledge.

The discussion will be organized into sub-sections, each corresponding to a specific objective of the current investigation. These objectives serve as a framework for evaluating the research. Each sub-section will systematically address the core objectives, offering a detailed synthesis of the findings considering both the empirical data and the theoretical constructs explored in the literature review.

By adopting this structure, the discussion not only provides clarity in responding to the research objectives but also facilitates a comprehensive evaluation of how the study contributes to the broader academic discourse. The discussion will illuminate the extent to which the current findings align with, expand upon, or contradict existing literature on co-creation and its influence on business-client relationships.

The explained approach ensures that the conversation is not only reflective of the empirical findings, ultimately allowing for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between theory and practice, contributing valuable insights.

5.1. EXPLORE THE EFFECTS AND UNDERLYING REASONS OF CO-CREATION INITIATIVES ON THE LEVEL OF TRUST, COMMITMENT, AND SATISFACTION IN B2B RELATIONSHIPS

Theoretical literature in the field of co-creation has consistently demonstrated that collaborative actions between businesses and clients positively influence the development of trust. This trust is often fostered through factors such as transparent communication, the incorporation of customer input, and a clear display of competence by the provider implementing the initiative (Akrouit & Diallo 2017; Gansser et al., 2021). As noted by scholars like Berenguer-Contri et al. (2024) and Iglesias et al. (2018) co-creation activities enhance trust in B2B relationships, particularly when partners engage in information sharing and joint problem-solving. These collaborative efforts cultivate a deeper sense of trust, which is crucial for long-term partnerships.

Aligned with these prior findings, the present study corroborates that trust-building in co-creation initiatives is significantly moderated by communication, transparency and the perceived responsiveness of the service provider. Clients who feel that their suggestions are valued and that there is an open, honest exchange of information are more likely to develop a stronger trust in their partners. This investigation also highlights the importance of flexibility in fostering trust, suggesting that service providers who demonstrate adaptability and attentiveness to client needs can further strengthen the relationship.

Commitment, which has also been shown in literature to be a direct consequence of trust, also emerges as a key outcome of co-creation initiatives. Prior research by Carmeli et al. (2021), and Sales-Vivó et al. (2021) has indicated that co-creation activities deepen commitment in business relationships, particularly when trust is established. This study supports those conclusions, finding that co-creation fosters a greater sense of partnership and proximity between clients and providers. The sense of shared effort and open collaboration enhances the perception of commitment, as clients view themselves as integral participants in the product

development process. This heightened proximity and involvement, eventually lead to stronger relational bonds, further securing client loyalty and engagement.

Regarding satisfaction, the current research aligns with previous studies that show co-creation can lead to higher satisfaction levels (Berenguer-Contri et al., 2024; Dewarani & Alversia, 2023), by delivering more tailored, functional products that meet clients' specific needs. Additionally, the enhanced communication and closer partnership resulting from these initiatives contribute to greater social satisfaction, as clients feel more connected to the provider. Economic satisfaction, which includes financial outcomes (Ha, et al., 2016) such as efficiency and cost-effectiveness, was also frequently cited by clients, mainly by the reference to product efficiency, as a key indicator of satisfaction in the B2B SaaS context. Therefore, this study adds to the growing body of literature by confirming that co-creation initiatives positively influence both relational and performance-based aspects of client satisfaction.

In summary, this research substantiates existing theoretical contributions regarding the impact of co-creation on trust, commitment, and satisfaction in B2B relationships. Moreover, it introduces new insights by highlighting the role of flexibility and perceived care from service providers in enhancing these outcomes. While co-creation may not be the primary factor influencing the choice of a service provider, it clearly strengthens the overall relationship, offering both relational and economic benefits that are crucial in the highly rational and performance-driven context of B2B interactions.

5.2. UNDERSTAND HOW CO-CREATION INITIATIVES SHAPE PRE-ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS IN THE B2B SECTOR

As established in the preceding section, the present study confirms the pre-established notions of literature, that co-creation initiatives positively affect key relational elements in B2B contexts, including trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Berenguer-Contri et al., 2024; Dewarani & Alversia, 2023; Sales-Vivó et al., 2021). These theoretical foundations, drawn from numerous studies, aligned with the previously listed findings, emphasize the role of open

communication, transparent feedback processes, and alignment with client needs in strengthening relationships between service providers and clients, fostering a deeper sense of partnership and engagement. Clients consistently perceive that their participation in collaborative initiatives signifies a heightened interest from the provider in their business objectives, thereby reinforcing the relational quality.

The findings of this study further elaborate on how co-creation shapes pre-established relationships in B2B settings. Participants reported that the sense of engaging in co-creation leads to enhanced proximity and a stronger sense of mutual recognition between them and the service provider. This dynamic arises from the active involvement of clients in early and later stages of product development, where their feedback is incorporated not only in shaping product features but also in refining usability and performance. Consequently, clients perceived the final product as being more likely to aligned with their operational needs, leading to more effective outcomes and enhanced satisfaction. This reflects the dual impact of co-creation on both social and economic satisfaction, where clients feel acknowledged on a relational level while also benefiting from a product more closely tailored to their requirements.

Additionally, the investigation highlights that co-creation facilitates a more transparent and flexible interaction between clients and service providers. The iterative communication required during co-creation initiatives inherently fosters an environment of trust, where clients feel their needs are continuously being addressed. Flexibility, a key moderating factor in this process, emerges as a critical aspect of how clients view the relationship with their provider, as they perceive the provider to be responsive and adaptive to their evolving needs. This perception of flexibility reinforces the overall commitment to the relationship, solidifying co-creation as a process that not only enhances existing bonds but also strengthens the long-term engagement between parties.

While the positive influence of co-creation on pre-established relationships is clear, some participants noted that these initiatives, while beneficial, cannot entirely reverse a pre-existing negative relationship. Co-creation may strengthen an already favorable relationship by fostering

greater trust and commitment, but its ability to transform a deteriorating relationship remains limited. This underscores the importance of pre-existing relational conditions in determining the extent to which co-creation can reshape interactions between clients and service providers. In conclusion, while co-creation significantly enhances pre-established relationships, further research is required to explore its capacity to alter negatively perceived relationships.

5.3. IDENTIFY CUSTOMERS PERCEIVED RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPATING IN CO-CREATION INITIATIVES, IN THE B2B SECTOR

This study expands on existing literature by identifying specific risks associated with co-creation in the B2B sector, complementing previous research on barriers to customer participation. The research aligns with the work of Mandolfo et al. (2020) who identified two key barriers to co-creation: economic and non-economic. In the present study, economic risks primarily manifest through concerns over resource allocation, particularly time. Companies may be hesitant to participate if the time and effort invested do not generate tangible outcomes, echoing the opportunity costs discussed in prior research. This highlights a need for careful management of resources and outcomes to justify the investment in co-creation initiatives.

Additionally, the findings of this study reveal significant risks tied to conflicts of interest and misaligned expectations. These non-economic concerns extend the existing literature, which has focused on issues such as privacy and intellectual property. In the B2B context, misaligned expectations between firms and clients often lead to dissatisfaction, particularly when collaborative contributions are not fully reflected in the final product. This divergence in expectations creates barriers that companies must address by fostering clearer communication and aligning goals to ensure that both parties derive value from the co-creation process. Reputational risk, another non-economic concern, did not emerge as a primordial issue, like Mandolfo et al. (2020) discussed the risk of public embarrassment or failure.

Lastly, the risk of long-term dependency expands on the economic barriers identified in previous studies. Firms may feel pressured to continually allocate resources to co-creation

initiatives that do not directly benefit their core business. This creates an opportunity cost, as firms might forgo more critical projects to maintain participation. Addressing this risk requires companies to design more flexible co-creation models that allow for strategic involvement without overcommitting resources, thus minimizing the perceived economic and non-economic barriers.

5.4. IDENTIFY AMONG THE DIFFERENT CO-CREATION INITIATIVES IMPLEMENTED BY *E-GOI*, THE ONES THAT CUSTOMERS SEEM MORE PRONE TO ENGAGE

The findings of the present study indicate a pronounced client preference for early-stage involvement in co-creation initiatives. Clients favor engagement during the initial phases of product development, as this allows them to significantly influence the direction and features of the product. This initiative-taking involvement at the conceptual stage is perceived as more valuable than participating solely in the later stages of testing and validation. Such early engagement provides clients with the opportunity to shape the product according to their specific requirements, rather than merely assessing the final output.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of a well-organized and systematic approach to co-creation. Clients appreciate a structured process that facilitates continuous updates and feedback regarding their contributions. Maintaining transparent communication and providing regular updates on the status of client suggestions are essential for keeping clients engaged throughout the development process. This emphasis on structured collaboration reflects the clients' need for a clear and systematic method of interaction.

In terms of incentives, the data reveal that while commercial advantages, such as discounts or complimentary access to products are viewed as beneficial, they are not universally considered essential. While a number of clients regard these incentives as valuable enhancements that can increase their willingness to participate, other place greater importance

on the collaborative relationship and the perceived value of the engagement itself. This suggests that while financial incentives can be advantageous, they are not the primary motivators for all clients. Nonetheless this type of incentives should be taken into consideration, by companies that intent to implement collaborative initiatives, regarding product development.

In conclusion, the study recommends that E-goi prioritize early-stage involvement in co-creation initiatives and adopt a structured, transparent process to enhance client engagement. Although commercial incentives may play a role in motivating participation, the focus should also be on cultivating a collaborative partnership that values ongoing communication and mutual benefit. Further investigation into the balance between financial incentives and the intrinsic value of co-creation would provide additional insights to refine and optimize these initiatives.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The present study contributes significantly to the existing literature on co-creation, specifically within the B2B sector, by exploring the effects of co-creation on pre-established business relationships.

As viewed during the literature review, previous research has demonstrated that co-creation enhances trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Akrouit & Diallo, 2017; Gansser et al., 2021), in alignment, the present investigation corroborates those findings while extending them to the SaaS industry, showing that co-creation initiatives foster a deeper client-provider relationships, through improved communication, transparency, and responsiveness. Further providing evidence of co-creation's relational benefits in a highly competitive, rational decision-making environment.

The study also highlights the role of flexibility, attentiveness and again communication as enhancers of trust, validating the pre-established notion that these elements are founding parts of trust. (Akrouit & Diallo 2017; Gansser et al., 2021)

Furthermore, the study confirms that co-creation plays a pivotal role in strengthening pre-existing relationships in B2B contexts. Consistent with prior findings by Carmeli et al. (2021) and Sales-Vivó et al. (2021), the research demonstrates that co-creation initiatives deepen commitment by engaging clients in product development and aligning solutions with their specific needs, building a stronger sense of trust and partnership, which enhances both relational and economic satisfaction (Berenguer-Contri et al., 2024).

Additionally, this research makes a key contribution by identifying the specific risks associated with co-creation in the B2B sector, extending the findings of Mandolfo et al. (2020). While economic risks, such as resource allocation, remain a concern, this study also uncovers non-economic risks like misaligned expectations and conflicts of interest, which can undermine the benefits of co-creation if not properly managed. The findings emphasize the need for clear communication and goal alignment between providers and clients, especially in industries like SaaS, where the potential for divergence in product expectations is high.

Moreover, this investigation also highlighted the role of person-to-person contact, once the relationship with the account manager was mentioned multiple times, being viewed as a direct point of contact and as the enabler for the establishment of a trust worthy relationship.

In conclusion, this study enhances the theoretical understanding of co-creation's impact on B2B relationships, particularly within the SaaS industry. It validates and builds upon existing literature while introducing new insights, regarding a deeper and more broader comprehension of the intertwined elements that co-creation impacts, resulting in a stronger, closer relationship between client and service provider, in the B2B sector.

6.2. PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS FOR E-GOI

The current chapter presents a detailed analysis of the practical contributions of the research, particularly in relation to understanding the dynamics between corporate clients and their service provider, using E-goi as a case study.

A key contribution of this study is the confirmation that co-creation initiatives positively influence client satisfaction, commitment, and trust, thereby strengthening pre-existing relationships. These insights provide E-goi with crucial evidence that a collaborative new product development (NPD) process is a viable strategy. The findings indicate that clients are not only willing to participate in such initiatives but also associate positive outcomes with them, both in terms of relationship enhancement and product performance. This alleviates potential concerns E-goi may have had regarding the implementation of these processes.

Moreover, the research reveals that clients view co-creation as a significant differentiating factor, one that could be strategically leveraged to enhance E-goi's market position. By addressing client needs more effectively than competitors, E-goi could gain a competitive advantage.

This study further identifies clients' preferred stages of involvement in product development, as mentioned in section 5.4, particularly emphasizing their interest in contributing during the early stages, where they can offer input on needs and objectives. When it comes to the final stages of product testing, clients appoint the possibility of adapting the product to their experience using needles.

Similarly, it was possible to determine that active engagement in key phases allows for a more comprehensive understanding of client requirements and ensures that products are better aligned with their expectations. Additionally, the research also highlights potential risks and concerns associated with client participation in co-creation initiatives, including issues related to resource allocation and the management of expectations regarding final product outcomes.

These insights are pivotal for E-goi in designing co-creation processes that are not overly demanding in terms of time and client involvement.

On top of that, the findings underscore the importance of clear and transparent communication to align expectations and thoroughly explain the co-creation process and its possible outcomes. As well as the importance of introducing incentives, such as discounts, to mitigate the perceived risks linked to resource investment and time commitment. This approach would not only address client concerns but also foster a more engaging and productive collaborative environment.

Furthermore, it identified the need for a more proactive approach to account management. Clients expressed dissatisfaction with the infrequency and lack of constructive interactions with account managers, which are critical for addressing evolving needs and fostering stronger client relationships. The study recommends redefining the role of account managers to implement a proactive engagement strategy, which would include regular client check-ins, ongoing assessment of their experience with the software, and aligning the product with their changing business objectives. This improved engagement and proactive attitude, from the account management approach, is essential for strengthening client relationships and enhancing overall satisfaction.

Finally, the evidence collected, also provides valuable observations into corporate clients' overall satisfaction levels and their intent to maintain long-term relationships with E-goi. Clients place a high value on having their specific needs recognized, which significantly impacts both their satisfaction with the product and their trust in the service provider. When clients perceive that their feedback is acknowledged and integrated into the product development process, their commitment to the relationship is strengthened. Moreover, the importance of clear and consistent communication in establishing trust was emphasized, underscoring the role of effective collaboration.

From an operational standpoint, the study demonstrates that involving clients in co-creation processes can lead to improved product efficiency and better alignment with user requirements. Which in return, recognizes that incorporating client feedback during both the development and beta testing phases contributes to a more user-friendly and effective product, thereby enhancing overall performance.

In conclusion, this research provides critical practical contributions that can guide E-goi in refining its client engagement and product development strategies. By adopting a more proactive approach to account management, systematically integrating client feedback, and enhancing co-creation initiatives, E-goi can substantially improve client satisfaction, optimize product performance, and cultivate stronger, more productive relationships with its corporate clients.

6.3.LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Every research endeavor presents certain limitations that may affect the generalizability and scope of its findings. In this study, two main limitations have been identified.

Firstly, the study focused exclusively on corporate clients of E-goi, thereby excluding perspectives from small and medium-sized enterprises (PME). The decision to omit SME clients derived from the fact that this segment exhibits at E-goi a "self-tech" user profile, having minimal interaction with the company, relying primarily on customer support and general communications, such as newsletters or pricing updates. By not including SME clients, the study's findings may lack comprehensive insights into how different client segments view co-creation initiatives and how it would shape their relationship with E-goi as a service provider.

Secondly, the study's sample size is limited to eight participants, which restricts the range of perspectives gathered. While the interviews offered valuable insights, the small sample size did not provide enough diversity in client characteristics to explore potential correlations effectively. For instance, factors such as the duration of the client relationship, company size,

or industry type might influence how co-creation initiatives are perceived, yet the limited number of participants prevented a robust analysis of such variables. A larger and more varied sample would be necessary to establish more meaningful correlations and draw more generalizable conclusions.

Regarding recommendation for future research, it is suggested to include clients from multiple service providers across various industries, which would enable comparisons and help strengthen the findings. Allowing a broader understanding of the potential impact of co-creation on B2B relationships.

Additionally, since the study was conducted in the context of a SaaS company operating in the omni-channel marketing industry, future research should include clients' perceptions from other sectors of the SaaS industry. Granting diversity and providing a deeper comprehensive view and exploration of potential existing differences towards co-creation, and its impact and role in SaaS client-provider relationships.

In line with the objective of this study, which aimed to explore the impact of co-creation on existing client-provider relationships, future research should also investigate the role of co-creation in influencing clients' decision-making processes regarding their choice of service providers. Additionally, an intriguing avenue for future research would involve interviewing former clients to assess whether co-creation initiatives could have played a role in preserving those relationships, potentially preventing their dissolution. This would provide valuable insights into the potential of co-creation as a strategy for client retention.

In conclusion, while this study contributes to the understanding of co-creation in B2B relationships, its findings should be interpreted within the context of these limitations. Future research should aim to address these constraints by expanding the participant base, including a wider range of service providers and client segments, and increasing the sample size to allow for more nuanced analyses.

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APPENDIX

Table 10 - Interview Script

Dimensions	Questions
Relationship	<p>Q1: What led you to choose E-goi as your service provider?</p>
	<p>Q2: How do you assess your overall relationship with the E-goi?</p>
	<p>Q3: To what extent do you intend to maintain a long-term relationship with E-goi?</p>
Co-creation	<p>Q4: How open would you be towards taking on a more participative role in the development of new products?</p>
	<p>Q5: What kind of advantages or benefits do you perceive in actively participating in the development of new products?</p>
	<p>Q6: If given the chance to play a more active and participative role, what kind of changes do you believe your relationship with E-goi would undergo?</p>
Effects of co-creation on the level of trust	<p>Q7: To what extent do you consider open and transparent communication, as well as flexibility in adapting products to your preferences, important for establishing trust with your service provider?</p>
	<p>Q8: In which way do you think that having a more active and participative role, would impact communication between ____ (name of the company) and E-goi?</p>

	<p>Q9: What is your current perception towards E-goi's willingness to adapt products product to your needs and preferences? Would you believe that by giving you a more active and participative role, your perception would change? If so, how?</p>
	<p>Q10: What would you think of a company that allows clients to actively participate in development? Would you somehow relate that attitude to lack of competence?</p>
Effect of co-creation on the level of Satisfaction	<p>Q11: What aspects do you consider when evaluating your level of satisfaction?</p>
	<p>Q12: Out of the aspects you pointed out, which ones do you believe to be impacted by the opportunity to have a more collaborative role, and how?</p>
Effect of co-creation on the level of Commitment	<p>Q13: Picture yourself in a scenario, where you must select between one of the two service providers within the same category. To what extent would the opportunity to actively participate in the development of new products influence your choice regarding the service provider?</p>
	<p>Q14: If you had to point out what type of initiatives would make you feel more connected towards your service provider, would you mention the opportunity of being more participative as one of them, why?</p>
Co-creation	<p>Q15: What kind of risks, you would say, exist when it comes to having a participative role in new product development?</p> <p>Q16: What do you believe to be essential in order for you to be interested in participating in this type of initiatives, meaning collaborating by giving suggestions, feedback and testing products?</p> <p>Q17: In your opinion, what option sounds more beneficial: participating during the initial stages of product development: where ideas are being defined or during the refinement phase of the product, where you can test it? Or do you find both equally beneficial?</p>

Note: Own Work

Table 11 - Co-creation framework

Co-creation framework given during the interview	
<p>Before we proceed to the next question, I would like to provide a brief overview of what a co-creation initiative entails and how it could be implemented. The primary goal of this initiative is to actively involve the client in the product development process, including new products, enhancements to existing features, or improvements to specific channels within the platform. Here is a succinct outline of the stages involved:</p>	
1.	<p>Mapping Out Suggestions: This initial phase focuses on collecting your ideas regarding potential products, new features, and improvements. It helps understand your needs and objectives, providing a broad view of client feedback and aspirations related to the platform.</p>
2.	<p>Approval Stage: In this stage, early-stage concepts or prototypes are presented. Your role would be to evaluate these ideas and provide feedback to ensure they align with your requirements and enhance your experience with the platform, so appointing if you consider the product interesting, or relevant, if it would suit your needs and if the way it would operate, makes sense according to the platform ecosystem that you know</p>
3.	<p>Product testing and refinement: Lastly, you will have the opportunity to test the product before its official release. This allows you to offer insights on usability and provide final adjustments.</p>
<p>It is important to note that this initiative is distinct from personalization. While the value of the client’s input is recognized, the final product may not be tailored exclusively to your specifications.</p> <p>Additionally, participation in each stage is optional; you are not required to be involved in every phase, or any phase at all. Throughout all process, it is an assumption that you will receive updates on the development progress, including how your suggestions have been incorporated. These updates will be communicated either via email or through your assigned account manager.</p>	

Note: Own Work