



THE IMPLICATIONS OF REMOTE WORK ON BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS (B2B) CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AT A SOUTH AFRICAN TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

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Abstract

Suddenly shifting from in-person to remote customer engagement because of COVID-19, posed significant threats to Business-to-Business (B2B) companies' sales and marketing processes. This is because value models for B2B companies are dependent on in-person customer engagements for sustainability and competitiveness. This study sought to discover the implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement using a qualitative methodology. The target population for the study was thirty-one employees within Company X's marketing and sales divisions. Judgmental sampling technique was used to sample eight participants from the defined target population. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect primary data from participants. The findings of the study revealed that, the absence of in-person contact has implications for remote work on B2B customer engagement. Participants expressed that it is difficult to sell technical products or turnkey solutions, build rapport, trust, and manage sustainable relationships with customers remotely. Furthermore, customer engagement strategies must be customer centric or driven by customer preferences. Thus, sales and marketing personnel should understand whether the customer prefers remote or in-person engagement. The study recommends that B2B companies standardize hybrid customer engagement strategies to establish a balance between remote and in-person contact for the sustainability of their operations.

Keywords: *customer engagement, Business to Business, remote work, retention.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented circumstances presented by COVID-19 resulted in an accelerated shift to digital remote work practices by businesses across the world (Accenture, 2020). Although the adoption of remote work processes was important in mitigating the spread of the virus and allowing business continuity, this transformation has multiple implications for Business-to-Business (B2B) companies accustomed to traditional face to face customer engagement (Gigauri, 2020; Parker, Bingley, & Burgess, 2023). Depending on the product or service offering, B2B companies predominantly rely on in-person interactions to present value propositions, manage sales cycles and maintain valuable relationships (Toufaily, & Zalan, 2023). Within the B2B context, customer connections are cultivated with face-to-face conversations during meetings, networking events, trade fairs, product demo sessions, and conferences (Ketola, 2023). These engagement activities have been the driving forces for profitable growth and sustainability, thus the sudden shift to remote work due to COVID-19 is a critical concern for B2B companies (Hollebeek et al. 2019; Cortez, Johnston, & Gopalakrishna, 2022).

Theoretically, customer engagement tends to be examined primarily within the Business-to-Customer (B2C) context (e.g. Lim, Rasul, Kumar, & Ala, 2022; Lim, Kumar, Pandey, Rasul, & Gaur, 2022) but customer engagement is highly relevant in the B2B context (Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Youssef et al. 2018). Furthermore, several studies on customer engagement such as Rajan, Salunkhe, & Kumar (2023) and, Gao, de Haan, Melero-Polo, & Sese, (2023) focus on how the concept translates to business outcomes like customer loyalty, customer retention and customer relationship management. Although these three attributes are pivotal to B2B companies, the extent to which they can be achieved using remote platforms only is not yet fully explored and

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experienced. Most studies before COVID-19 addressed customer engagement under normal business conditions or environments characterized by relatively plentiful resources and free choice (Hollebeek et al., 2019). Therefore, the extent to which remote work would impact customer engagement beyond normal phenomenon was not investigated. It is after the emergence of COVID-19 that the detriments of remote work started to surface specifically within the B2B context where sales and marketing personnel leverage in-person customer engagements to build and maintain sustainable relationships throughout the sales process (Fready, Vel, & Nyadzayo, 2022; Chatterjee, Chaudhuri, Ferraris, Sakka, & Chaudhuri, 2023).

Theoretical understanding of customer engagement under less unprecedented conditions remains limited (Karpen & Conduit, 2020; Sako, 2021; Lou, Zhou, Huang, Qiu, & Yuan, 2023). Thus, there are notable gaps in research around the implications of remote work on customer engagement specifically for B2B companies. It is crucial for the impact caused by the transition from face to face to remote customer engagement to be explored to fully grasp whether B2B companies can standardize on remote work post COVID-19, leverage on both remote and in-person customer engagement or revert to traditional in-person customer engagement. This study aimed to gain more insight on the implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement from the views and experiences of the organization under study - Company X's sales and marketing personnel who engage with customers daily. The study has three research questions as follows:

1. What are the implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement?
2. How does remote work impact B2B customer loyalty, customer retention and customer relationship management?
3. How can online customer engagement strategies be effective for the sustainability of B2B operations post COVID-19?

The findings of this study will directly help B2B companies to identify areas where their customer engagement strategies are being significantly impacted by the transition from in-person to remote work practices. The results will further assist the sales and marketing divisions to make decisions on viable ways to engage with customers remotely and experience the same or improved results as engaging face to face.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Implications of Remote Work on B2B Customer Engagement.

According to Karpen and Conduit (2020:2), "the common multilateral model of cognitive, emotional and behavioral customer engagement, typically informed by independent paradigmatic lenses, is insufficient to comprehend why customers seek to engage with businesses during and after COVID-19." Karpen and Conduit (2020:2) further claim that the current COVID-19 phenomenon challenges existing theoretical assumptions of customer engagement. Many B2B companies were forced by the pandemic to work remotely (Sako, 2021). The accelerated adoption of remote work practices by B2B companies has several implications for customer engagement strategies (Accenture, 2020). To understand and explore these implications, an analysis of the customer engagement construct must first be established as below.

Customer Engagement Framework

Pansari and Kumar (2017) define customer engagement as the process of customer value added to the firm through direct or indirect contributions. Ng, et al. (2020:237) express that "customer engagement has mainly been examined from four broad perspectives: as a behavioural manifestation, as a psychological state, as a disposition to act and as a process including several stages of the customer decision making process". Customer engagement is experienced differently based on business contexts like business-to-business and business-to-customer (Kumar, 2024). Karpen and Conduit (2020) investigated a differentiated perspective of engagement, accounting for



a broader spectrum of human experience which relates to the unexplored implications of remote work due to the absence of the human connection element attributed to traditional in-person engagements. Youssef et al. (2018) studied the conceptual relationship between customer engagement and equity by exploring the role of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Youssef et al. findings correspond with those of Panasri and Kumar, (2017), which reinforces the importance of understanding the antecedents and outcomes of customer engagement for the successful execution of marketing strategies within the B2B context. Thus, customer engagement is a clear source of competitive advantage, and a customer emotional connection with the company is a crucial factor in achieving this advantage (Beckers, Van Doorn, & Verhoef, 2018).

Effects of customer engagement on customer loyalty.

Within the customer engagement literature, multiple studies have positioned loyalty as a focal outcome of engagement which also results in customer retention and valuable customer relationships. Bansal and Chaudhary (2016b) confirm a positive relationship between customer engagement and loyalty and customer engagement and customer retention. Thus, “engaged customers are more likely to be loyal customers” (Bansal and Chaudhary, 2016b:4). Agyei et al. (2020:3) maintain that “customer engagement enhances customer loyalty and further mediates the relationship between the various trust dimensions and customer loyalty”. Existing studies have also proven that, in-person interactions are the basis for many excellent customer relationships, and it is often challenging to build or sustain relationships without them, (Hsieh and Chang, 2016). Parihar et.al, (2018:12) conclude that “the interactive, co-creative nature of engagement provides customers with the sought-after values, which subsequently translate into loyalty due to the development of a positive customer and brand interactive relationship”. The contribution of the studies in terms of loyalty as a dependent variable of customer engagement is relevant within the B2B context, however types of customer engagement favorable for this outcome were not discussed or further investigated.

Remote Customer Engagement Versus Traditional Face to Face Interactions.

According to Hollebeek, et.al (2020) COVID-19 has raised consumer awareness of the dangers inherent in traditional face-to-face interactions. It is highly likely that some customers will remain cautious post the pandemic leading them to choose remote interactions in the long run. Ng et al. (2020:237) assert that, in the online or remote context, customers can engage with various focal objects at different touchpoints of the sales process using various digital platforms. In the offline setting or traditional face-to-face interactions, customers can physically engage with the business via products, sales, and marketing personnel or through product trials (Bednall et al., 2018). Thus, online, and offline engagement can occur simultaneously and B2B companies can standardize hybrid processes post COVID-19. Parihar et al. (2018) argue that online firms offer varied experiences to their customers on several touchpoints, however they find it difficult to develop sustainable relationships with customers. Bansal and Chaudhary (2016a) expressed a similar view that customer engagement can be executed both offline and online however it has been a challenging task for B2B companies to measure customer behaviors towards customer engagement strategies.

Bar-Gil and Reichman (2021:755) suggest that “while online engagement serve as a means for both product information provision and consumer persuasion, it may fall short in achieving the latter goal, as compared to the offline channels for some B2B companies”. Thus, increasing online engagement may not be a feasible strategy if it has the potential to affect progression down the sales funnel and reduce offline engagement (Bar-Gil and Reichman, 2021). A balance between remote and physical interactions in B2B companies is pivotal for competitive advantage to sustain customer relationships. Bansal and Chaudhary (2016) stipulated the same view that a blend of both online and offline customer engagement is crucial for effective engagement strategies that will result in sustainable competitive advantages. Although the reviewed studies do not explore the

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general negative implications of online or remote customer engagement, the results provide a substantial rationale that B2B companies can standardize on both remote and traditional in-person customer engagement post Covid-19.

2. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

The study adopted an inductive approach, and the nature of the study followed a phenomenological research philosophy to approach the investigation with the intention of discovering the insider’s perspective. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed as the research strategy to collect primary data. This strategy allowed for rich qualitative data to be derived through probing, and it afforded participants the opportunity to broadly elaborate and reflect on their experiences of remote working relative to customer engagement. The target population for the study was constituted of thirty-one employees within the marketing and sales divisions of Company X, whose roles involve day-to-day direct engagement with customers.

A purposive or judgmental sampling technique was applied to select a sample from the marketing and sales divisions of Company X as they were able to provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation based on experience. Eight participants were recruited from the defined target population and were chosen because the study was qualitative research and oriented towards the exploratory paradigm which makes use of small samples. The study ensured participants gave their consent by signing an ethics letter of information and consent prior to the interview. Confidentiality was ensured by conducting remote one on one interviews where no third party was involved, and participants’ names or personal details were not asked. The interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and recorded and transcribed automatically on Microsoft Teams due to the pandemic. For every research question of the study, three interview questions were generated. The interview guide had nine open-ended questions which enabled probing where participants were required to explain or build on their responses.

Thematic data analysis is a systematic approach utilized to discern, arrange, and provide understanding of recurring patterns of significance or overarching themes within a given dataset. A theme, which informs the research question, is a recurring response or interpretation of the data. The rationale for implementing this methodology was based on its principal aim, which is to comprehend concepts, perspectives, and experiences across datasets. Data was organized to code responses from participants that represented common opinions and perspectives. Recognizable inductive concepts were coded, and the open coding analysis generated multiple codes and three key themes. The established codes allowed for a more condensed overview of the main points and common meanings that recurred throughout the data. The generated codes were arranged into themes that accurately represented the data. The codes were collated into one initial theme called “hybrid customer engagement strategy”. Established themes were reviewed, modified and preliminary themes that were identified in step three were developed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All participants had more than five years of experience within their roles and had been working remotely with customers since the emergence of COVID-19.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Participant	Designation	Experience (yrs)
1	Salesperson	8
2	Online Marketing	6
3	Product Manager	15
4	Sales Representative	10
5	Product Manager	7
6	Sales Representative	6



7	Sales Representative	11
8	Product Manager	6

Qualitative analysis

Core themes emerged from the analysed data and were viewed as critical in understanding participants' experiences and perspectives on the implications of remote work on B2B. Furthermore, the overall understanding of the generated themes provided insight into possible answers for the study's primary research questions.

Theme 1: Remote work limitations

This theme emerged from eleven codes that are tabulated below in Table 2 and the collated codes reflected a common view expressed by participants.

Table 2: Theme 1

THEME 1	CODES
Remote work limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical challenges. • Remote work prolongs the customer engagement process. • Sales and marketing engagement initiatives are limited when engaging remotely. • New business development has decreased. • Remote engagement is agenda driven. • Not all customers are technically savvy. • Customers cannot feel, touch, or test the product during remote demo and sample training. • Difficult to identify cross-selling opportunities remotely. • Difficult to explore customer needs remotely. • Customers are still adapting and developing their digital systems. • Not familiar with all engagement platforms

Seven participants expressed how remote work limits their customer engagement capabilities in terms of their sales and marketing responsibilities. Thus, Company X's product portfolio is solution oriented and requires sales and marketing personnel to sell and market solutions that address customers' needs and problems. To achieve this, Accenture (2020) explains that "sales and marketing representatives, product managers and customers are required to integrate many of their resources and processes and calls for in-person close interaction with each other throughout the solution design, deployment, and post-deployment process". The efficiency of this process is limited by remote work as sales and marketing can only engage the customer to a certain extent when working remotely. Participants explained how their capabilities are limited by remote work in the views below.

"I was on site last week with a client in, we had done all the design work remotely and only after being on-site and asking the client physically what the structure is going to look like, we actually realized the shortfalls from the design work that the engineer needs to readdress, if I had not arranged to meet the customer in-person on-site, we would have not known this shortfall by engaging remotely only", explained **Participant 8**.

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Opportunities to explore and identify other needs of the customer are limited because sales personnel are not physically onsite with the customer as explained by Participant 1, *“but because there's less physical engagement, our capabilities are limited and we lose the opportunity to cross-sell, or up-sell the product”*.

Technical challenges were highlighted as one of the key implications and capability limitations of remote work CE. **Participant 4** expressed the following, *“For me, it's the technical challenges. I mean, remotely the customer cannot obviously touch, feel, or play around with our products before making their purchasing decisions. So that's the biggest challenge currently, so our potential to effectively sell solutions is limited now”*.

All participants were of the view that, not all their customers are familiar with all remote engagement platforms and some of the platforms they prefer are not viable for formal product demonstrations and training. Therefore, this has been affecting customer development programs and prospecting. Participant 6 shared that, *“80% of my customers are very old school and they didn't like any new technologies, so that is why a lot of my communications is happening currently over the telephone”, I can't use other platforms to demonstrate products with these types of customers, so I am limited in that regard”*.

Results also indicated that opportunities for informal conversations to strengthen customer relationships are also limited when engaging with customers on platforms like Microsoft Teams. Thus, meetings on these platforms are agenda driven and once a meeting is over everyone just logs off, unlike in-person where you can network and get to know the customer better. Participant 1 commented that *“But yeah, currently it's more agenda focused type of engagement and you cannot discover more opportunities, network and understand the customer better compared to when you meet the customer in person,”*.

Only **Participant 2** from the marketing division expressed a contrary view on how remote work has enhanced her customer engagement capabilities however this view was expressed from an online marketing perspective that has limited requirements for in-person customer engagements. **Participant 2** stated, *“I would actually say the strategies when it comes to the engagement is something that is improving and coming from my side, it's also teaching me new ways of how best I can have the customers engaged with our content and our campaigns”*.

Theme 2: Absence of in-person contact.

Based on their experiences, all participants acknowledged that the absence of in-person interactions due to remote work affects B2B customer engagement. “Existing studies have also proven that, in-person interactions are the basis for many excellent customer relationships, and it is often challenging to build or sustain relationships without them”, (Hsieh and Chang, 2016). Hence, the emergence of this theme confirms the findings of Hsiet et al. (2016) and is evidence that in-person contact is critical for B2B companies like Company X's customer engagement strategies. This theme emerged from codes illustrated in Table 3 below and answered the second research question of the study: How does remote work impact B2B customer loyalty, customer retention and customer relationship management?

Table 3. Theme 2

THEME	CODES
Absence of in-person contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No human physical interactions. • No entire body language experience. • Limited networking opportunities after meetings. • Difficult to build relationships with new customers remotely. • Eaton product portfolio is face-face oriented due to its technicalities.



- Difficult to establish rapport remotely.
- Difficult to build trust remotely.
- Cannot replicate the human connection effect while engaging remotely.
- Cannot build sustainable relationships without in-person engagement.

Participant 8 expressed that, *“I prefer traditional in-person engagement because you get to know your customers more. You get to strengthen the relationship. Like I said earlier on as well, you’re able to talk about other things”*. Another participant explained that *“it’s easy for me to build rapport with customers in person rather than remotely over Microsoft Teams”*. Almost all participant further indicated that the benefits of in-person connection with customers cannot be replicated remotely. For example, **Participant 7** expressed that, *“So I think it’s not something that can be replicated at all. I mean, yes, you can have your initial conversations remotely, but conversations do not go beyond the scheduled time as compared to in-person meetings and that’s when trust is built as well”*.

Another key point that was repeated is that of body language, participants hence revealed that, *“when you meet a customer in person you can read their whole-body language, you can see and tell whether they are interested or not”*. *“There’s no opportunity to observe customer’s body language on Microsoft Teams or Zoom meetings as customers seldom go switch on their cameras”*, said **Participant 5**. Likewise, **Participant 3** mentioned that *“The main challenge is the lack of personal touch compared to in-person engagement. You don’t get to see the body language, I guess, these things will never be replicated with any technology.”*

Theme 3: Hybrid customer engagement.

This theme captured participants’ preferences, recommendations, and perspectives around what customer engagement strategy to implement post COVID-19. The theme emerged from seven codes as tabulated in Table 4 below and participants’ views here correspond with multiple studies reviewed in chapter 2 literature review. Furthermore, the theme provided the basis for answers to Research Question 3 which is *“How can the newly adopted online customer engagement strategies be effective enough for the sustainability of B2B operations post COVID-19”*? All participants expressed the importance of a hybrid customer engagement strategy post COVID-19 as reflected in the statements below.

Table 4: Theme 3

THEME	CODES
Hybrid customer engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility. • Balance between remote and in person customer engagement. • Unlimited resources to engage online. • Cost-effective to use both remote and in-person customer engagement. • Carter to different customer preferences. • Effective time management. • Opportunity for more technologically advanced customer engagement platforms.

Participant 8 explained, *“I think, like it’s also the quality of engagement. No, like remote work gives you a lot of volume but lower quality of engagement”*. *“And in person gives you a smaller volume, but a very high quality of engagement”*. *“So, a balance between the two strategies*

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has to be established". This further confirms that remote customer engagement can be effective if in-person engagement is incorporated. Participant 6 from the sales division expressed a similar view that *"A hybrid strategy is going to most probably be the best way forward in my opinion, Yeah, we need a fair balance between remote and in-person engagement"*.

Some views here were more customer-oriented, thus all participants mentioned that customer preferences must be determined first to know which engagement strategy to go with, *"And that is also a lot going to be customer-driven, so some customers still want to see you in person, and others want to engage remotely, so a balance has to be established"* expressed participant 4. Based on participants' experiences, it was clear that to achieve a balance based on customer preferences of engagement a hybrid strategy will be the most feasible. **Participant 6** stated that *"And like I said again, my customer in Malawi, our engagement route is over WhatsApp and emails. However, our engagement only got to a high level of quality because I had met with one of them here in South Africa"*.

Other participants' answers were based on the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of a hybrid strategy as explained here. For instance, **Participant 7** indicated that *"a hybrid strategy will be cost-effective; I don't have to travel all the way to Cape Town to only engage with one or two customers. I can engage with them remotely and visit those close by"*. **Participant 1** was also of the opinion that, *"I can just engage with customers based on their preferences because some really don't like online engagement but for those who are okay with remote, then I can just do that. It's the flexibility for me, a hybrid strategy will be flexible, cost-effective, and convenient"*.

The findings of the study are discussed and interpreted below.

Research question I: What are the implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement?

The findings of this study indicate that there are multiple negative implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement that had not been addressed by previous studies. Participants pointed out that the abrupt shift from in-person to remote customer engagement is the root cause for most of the expressed implications. A study recently conducted by Accenture, (2020) also expressed a similar view that *"the accelerated adoption of remote work practices by B2B companies has posed several implications on customer engagement strategies"*. A key implication of remote work on B2B customer engagement that was mentioned by participants was that *"remote work limits customer engagement capabilities for sales and marketing personnel"*. This implication was also discussed by Bond et al. (2020) who stated that *"customer solutions selling require an alignment of goals and interests among providers and customers and remote work has limited the capabilities of sales and marketing personnel to achieve this"*.

Moreover, Company X's product portfolio is solution-oriented and requires sales and marketing personnel to market solutions that address customers' needs and problems through in-person close interaction (Macdonald, 2016). The efficiency of this process is hence limited by remote work as sales and marketing can only engage the customer to a certain extent when working remotely (Bond et al. 2020). Furthermore, participants articulated that their capabilities to remotely engage effectively are also limited or affected by factors like technical glitches, absence of in-person contact for customers to touch and feel the products, agenda-driven meetings, and long turnaround time to close deals. This validated a study by Raja (2020), who asserts that *"although the use of remote technologies can lead to greater customer value creation, this process is prone to technical limitations that will require digitally agile systems to mitigate problems"*.

Research question II: How does remote work impact B2B customer loyalty, customer retention and customer relationship management?

It is evident in the findings that, the extent to which remote work impacts B2B customer loyalty, customer retention, and customer relationship management is highly dependent on in-



person customer engagements. Participants validated Hsieh and Chang (2016) who that indicated that “in-person interactions are the basis for many excellent customer relationships, and it is often challenging to build or sustain relationships without them”.

Findings in Bansal and Chaudhary (2016b) study further confirm a positive relationship between in-person customer engagement and loyalty as well as customer retention and customer relationship management. Thus, the findings of this study affirmed that maintaining customer loyalty, customer retention, and customer relationship management is difficult without in-person interactions (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). In support of this, Li (2012) adds that the essence of B2B sales and marketing is to build long-term relationships with customers which are nurtured with face-to-face interactions.

One participant expressed that customer loyalty and retention are factors influenced more by customer satisfaction from using a product than in-person engagement (Alamäki and Kask, 2015). However, most of the participants disagreed by expressing that *personal relationships with customers through in-person meetings are crucial to building trust, loyalty, and retention. This concurred with study findings by Accenture (2020) which highlights that if in-person events are not incorporated into B2B marketing strategies, opportunities to reap benefits that cannot be obtained remotely will be missed.* In support of this, Wirtz et al. (2018) state that, conducting a product demo on digital platforms does not compare to the benefits of a live or in-person demonstration.

Findings of this study also reflect that the benefits of in-person customer engagement cannot be replicated remotely hence customer, loyalty, retention, and customer relationship management is affected. This finding is supported by Raja (2020) who points out that authentic in-person customer engagements cannot be replicated remotely or by competitors through automation, design, or content creation. Therefore, sales personnel must take advantage of the opportunity by utilising the benefits of in-person interactions.

Research question III: How can the newly adopted online customer engagement strategies be effective for the sustainability of B2B operations post COVID-19?

The theme that guided the findings for this research question was “Hybrid customer engagement”. Findings from the results of the study revealed that the newly adopted online customer engagement strategies are effective to a certain extent and can only be sustainable if a balance is maintained between remote and in-person engagement. This was concluded by Bansal and Chaudhary (2016a) that a blend of both online and offline customer engagement is crucial for effective engagement strategies that will result in sustainable competitive advantages. Parihar et al. (2018) also argued that online firms offer varied experiences to their customers on several touchpoints however they find it difficult to develop sustainable relationships with customers hence a balance must be established.

Based on their experience, participants further explained that customer engagement strategies must be driven by customer preferences to be sustainable. A study by Ng et al. (2020) supports this view and elaborates that a balance between remote and in-person customer engagement enhances customer experience and caters to all customer engagement preferences. In support of this, participants articulated that Company X has the capabilities and resources to implement a hybrid customer engagement strategy to ensure the sustainability of its business operations. Participants further alluded to the cost-effective benefits of using a hybrid customer engagement strategy (Accenture, 2020).

Overall findings of the study for Research Question 3 reflect that standardising remote work post COVID-19, will have significant impacts on customer engagement Bar-Gil and Reichman (2021) reported the same view that “increasing online engagement may not be a feasible strategy if it has the potential to halt progression down the sales funnel due to the absence of in-person interactions”.

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4. CONCLUSION

The findings from the study effectively answered the research questions which sought to discover answers about the implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement to achieve the overall research objectives. The results and findings, therefore, revealed the exact problems and implications associated with the sudden shift from in-person to remote customer engagement. Participants expressed their experiences and perspectives which further substantiated and reinforced the extent to which in-person customer engagement is critical for the sustainability of B2B companies. The existence of B2B companies like Company X is hence highly dependent on in-person customer engagement and to ensure business continuity during and post COVID-19 a balanced strategy that accommodates both will have to be implemented.

Post COVID-19, methods of engagements should be based on customer preferences, thus the sales and marketing personnel should understand whether the customer prefers, remote or in-person engagement. The study recommends B2B companies to standardize hybrid customer engagement strategies to establish a balance between remote and in-person contact for the sustainability of their operations. Recommendations for future research include further investigation on how remote customer engagement can be technologically enhanced to replicate the benefits of the human connection effect experienced when engaging in-person.

Limitations of the study: The study is limited by its smaller sample size which may restrict the generalizability of its findings.

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF REMOTE WORK ON BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS (B2B) CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AT A SOUTH AFRICAN TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What are the implications of remote work on B2B customer engagement?

- Based on your current job function and the ongoing pandemic, how are you currently engaging your customers?
- What do you think are the implications of remote work on your customer engagement strategies?
- What do you prefer, remote work engagement or traditional in-person customer engagement? Please provide reasons.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What is the extent to which remote work impacts B2B customer retention, customer loyalty, and customer relationship management?

- How has the shift from in-person sales meetings or marketing initiatives to remote engagement affected customer retention?
- How are customers responding to your current remote engagement strategies?
- How are you managing customer relationships remotely? Is it easy to establish and maintain sustainable relationships without in-person engagement?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How can the newly adopted online customer engagement strategies be effective for the sustainability of B2B operations post COVID-19?

- What do you think is the key benefit of in-person customer engagement?
- How can this advantage be experienced using remote customer engagement?
- What do you think will be the best customer engagement strategy for your company post COVID-19?