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The impact of different communication modes on trust and satisfaction in international business negotiation

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Abstract

COVID-19 has brought several disruptions in international business negotiations where different parties across borders must reconsider how they communicate with their counterparts. Firms involved in international business practices have adapted to such disruption and engaged with different practices to develop trust and negotiation satisfaction. Though prior research has widely investigated the impact of culture on international business negotiations, there is no prior understanding of the role of communication modes in developing trust and negotiation satisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the varying roles of different communication modes i.e. face-to-face and video conferencing on mutual trust and negotiation satisfaction. Empirical data collected through the web survey of 124 respondents involved in international business negotiations confirm significant differences in the level of trust and negotiation satisfaction. More specifically, we find that the level of trust and satisfaction was higher in face-to-face negotiations than in video negotiations. These findings have important implications for managers involved in international business negotiations.

Keywords: communication modes, international business negotiations, Covid-19, face-to-face negotiation, video negotiation, trust, satisfaction

1. Introduction

Many firms form international cooperative alliances (ICAs) to grow and compete successfully on the global level (Shakeri & Radfar, 2017). They are inter-firm cooperative arrangements, whether based on equity or contract, that entail frequent interaction between independent firms based in different countries for exchanging and sharing resources for mutual economic gains (Oliveria, Lumineau, & Ariño, 2023). Forming ICAs requires negotiations between the participating firms (Richardson & Rammal, 2018). Prior research suggests that trust (Ali et al., 2021; Shahzad et al., 2018) and satisfaction during negotiations are necessary conditions for the eventual success of ICAs. They provide a sound basis for inter-partner cooperation and commitment between partners (Shahzad, 2018), both of which are critical to the eventual success of the ICAs (Cavusgil, Ghauri, & Akcal, 2012; Luo, 1999). However, opportunities for creating trust and satisfaction are best facilitated by an atmosphere of face-to-face (FTF) negotiations at the negotiation table (Cavusgil et al., 2012). COVID-19 has replaced FTF negotiations with video negotiations in the post-pandemic world (Standaert, Muylle, & Basu, 2022). The growing popularity of video negotiation is exemplified by Microsoft Teams, whose active users increased from 75 million in 2020 to 270 million in 2022 (Curry, 2021). As negotiators involved in forming ICAs are using new video technologies, their abilities to create trust and satisfaction during negotiations will inevitably be influenced due to video media limitations.

Though prior research has richly probed the impact of culture on negotiation strategies (Salacuse, 1998; Weiss & Stripp, 1998; Usunier, 2003, Metcalf et al., 2006) and notified of different negotiation strategies across cultures, more recent work posits of transition and transformation from FTF to video negotiations (Bento, Martinez & Martinez 2018; Viergge & Quick 2011). However, there is no prior understanding of the impact of communication mode on negotiators' abilities to create trust and satisfaction during the formation of ICAs. Hence this study aims to compare FTF negotiation with video negotiation to identify their impact on building trust and satisfaction of negotiators during the formation of ICAs. We ask the following question: *What is the difference between the impact of FTF and video negotiation on building trust and negotiation satisfaction in forming ICAs?*

We base our model on the media richness theory by Daft and Lengel (1986). This theory suggests that the FTF mode of communication is more effective than the video mode when building trust and satisfaction during meetings. FTF mode has a great ability to convey information that results in building trust and satisfaction during negotiations. Stein and Mehta (2020), using media richness theory, posit that mistrust and uncertainty during negotiations are best handled with FTF presence. Our empirical evidence, based on an investigation of 124 Finnish negotiators, recognizes that creating trust and satisfaction with negotiation was higher in FTF negotiations than in video negotiations. These results suggest that expecting the same level of trust and satisfaction in both FTF and Video modes of negotiation involves a greater risk of destroying the eventual success of ICAs. By identifying the limits of communication modes in building trust and satisfaction, we advance the prior negotiation research which has merely focused on FTF negotiations.

2. Literature and hypotheses

2.1. Conceptualizing international business negotiations

Negotiations are an integral part of everyday human existence. When it comes to business negotiations, they often involve significant amounts of financial resources, time, and effort. Consequently, business negotiations are regarded as more significant compared to our day-to-day interpersonal dealings, as emphasized by Ghauri (2003). International business negotiations (IBNs) represent a voluntary process in which two or more business entities from diverse countries collaborate to reach a consensus on matters marked by varying degrees of conflicting interests, as described by Ghauri (2003). In Luo's 1999 definition, IBNs are framed as problem-solving processes encompassing multiple stages, jointly undertaken by business entities hailing from different countries. IBNs are notable for their high stakes, demanding specific and focused attention, as Ghauri (2003) highlights. Stein and Mehta (2020) further distinguish between FTF IBNs, which entail meetings between parties from different countries occurring simultaneously and at the same location, and video IBNs, which involve meetings occurring simultaneously with televised images but with participants situated in different locations.

2.2. Media richness theory

Draft and Lengel (1986) have postulated that the richness of a communication medium is contingent upon its capacity to concurrently manage multiple information cues, facilitate feedback mechanisms, and enable communicators to project a personal presence transcending the fundamental content of the conveyed message. Among these mediums, FTF communication emerges as the most abundant in its richness, affording negotiators access to a diverse spectrum of auditory, visual, and nonverbal information. Accordingly, their theory posits that in circumstances where the cultivation of trust and the attainment of satisfaction hold paramount significance within intricate negotiations, FTF negotiations are deemed the optimal choice.

Conversely, video negotiations, as noted by Graf et al. (2010), suffer from the absence of essential non-verbal, para-verbal, and interpersonal cues. Deprived of these vital indicators to decode, the dynamics of communication and interaction in video negotiations are liable to diverge from those observed in FTF encounters. The physical separation that typifies video negotiations may induce negotiators to perceive a release from conventional social norms, potentially leading to behavior that is more confrontational or detrimental to trust. Consequently, video negotiations are commonly characterized as deficient in commitment and enthusiasm, resulting in diminished levels of trust and satisfaction in the negotiation process, as articulated by Harkiolakis et al. (2012).

2.3. Impact of communication mode

Previous research has indicated that trust and satisfaction play pivotal roles in the negotiation process, serving as essential prerequisites for the eventual success of International Cooperative Agreements (ICAs). These elements establish a robust foundation for fostering cooperation and commitment among partnering entities, attributes that are of utmost significance in ensuring the ultimate success of ICAs (Cavusgil et al., 2012; Luo, 1999). In the subsequent section, we will formulate hypotheses concerning the influence of different communication modes on negotiators' capacity to cultivate trust and satisfaction throughout ICA formation.

2.3.1 Communication mode and creation of trust during negotiations

The trust element has been a recurrent focus in numerous research studies exploring the implications of different communication modes (Citera et al., 2005; Kurstzberg & Naquin, 2010; Swaab et al., 2012). Generally, trust tends to be more pronounced and readily established in FTF meetings compared to various alternative communication modalities (Harkiolakis, 2012; Stein & Mehta, 2020), which has also been corroborated by empirical studies (Geiger, 2020). Further, Lewis (2005) noted that individuals who exhibit a reactive disposition, such as the Finns, place less trust in spoken words and instead rely on a holistic assessment that encompasses body language and non-verbal cues. Given that electronic media convey fewer non-verbal signals and cues in comparison to FTF interactions, the process of establishing trust becomes more challenging in the context of video negotiations, as there is a more limited basis for evaluation. This challenge is likely to be particularly pronounced for individuals from Finnish culture. However, it is worth noting that Finns tend to be skeptical of exaggerated body language (Lewis, 2005), so a medium that conveys fewer signals may actually facilitate the trust-building process. This dynamic, however, is contingent on interactions with cultures where exaggeration is considered the norm. In light of the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Finnish negotiators trust more on the counterpart in FTF-IBNs than in V-IBNs.

2.3.2 Communication mode and satisfaction with negotiation outcomes

The impact of various communication modes on negotiation satisfaction has yielded diverse findings in prior research. For instance, Carnevale et al. (1981) discovered that negotiator satisfaction tended to be elevated in situations where visual connections were lacking. Conversely, Barkhi et al. (1999) found that when compared to computer-mediated communication, negotiators engaging in FTF communication reported higher levels of satisfaction with the negotiation process, although this did not necessarily extend to satisfaction with the negotiation's final outcome. Wolfe and Murthy (2005) suggested that distinct pre-negotiation expectations exerted an influence on negotiators' satisfaction, encompassing both FTF interactions and software-based communication platforms. Notably, in cases where pre-negotiation expectations were inconsistent, FTF negotiations were associated with a higher frequency of deadlocks compared to negotiations conducted via electronic platforms. Wang and Doong (2014) offered insights into the factors influencing satisfaction among FTF and video negotiators. Their research indicated that negotiators tended to express satisfaction when dealing with negotiation processes involving less analytical tasks. Conversely, the results revealed that text-based negotiations were linked to satisfaction in scenarios involving more analytical assignments.

Building upon Naquin and Paulson's (2003) findings, it was observed that confidence and satisfaction with outcomes were generally higher in FTF negotiations as opposed to video-mediated negotiations. In contrast, Ivanovski and Gruevski (2014) postulated that negotiators might exhibit greater satisfaction with the outcomes of virtual negotiations. However, their research unveiled a mixed pattern, with 36% of participants expressing satisfaction, 30% remaining neutral, and the remaining participants expressing dissatisfaction with the outcomes of virtual negotiations. Furthermore, Lewis (2006) contended that the practices of Finnish team leaders create satisfaction among colleagues by fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are acknowledged and openly addressed. Metcalf et al. (2006) found that Finnish

negotiators seek a win-win rather than a win-lose negotiation solution. In light of this prior research, the following hypothesis is postulated:

Hypothesis 2: Negotiation satisfaction is higher among Finnish negotiators involved in FTF-IBNs than in V-IBNs.

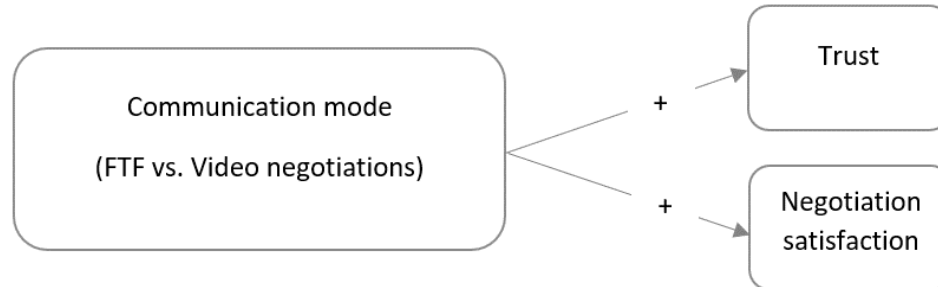


Figure 1 Conceptual model

In summary, the developed model considers that the level of trust and satisfaction with negotiation is higher in FTF negotiations than in video negotiations (see Figure 1).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

This research involves Finnish companies engaged in various forms of medium to long-term international alliances, including licensing, franchising, subcontracting, contract manufacturing, project operations, non-equity strategic alliances, equity joint ventures, and export-distributor cooperation. Given the absence of a publicly accessible database containing information on Finnish firms participating in international alliances (IAs), we compiled a list of 668 potential firms sourced from the Orbis database. While the Orbis database offers insights into aspects such as ownership, size, financial statements, industry classification, and acquisitions of these companies, it lacks data concerning the specific IAs of these firms and their negotiation strategies. Consequently, we initiated contact with all 668 potential firms through telephone inquiries, with the dual objectives of discovering whether these firms had established any type of IAs within the preceding five-year period and obtaining the names and email addresses of the negotiators responsible for shaping these alliances. Following this outreach, we were able to identify a total of 485 firms actively involved in IAs, while also acquiring the contact details of the individuals who participated in the negotiation process. In cases where a respondent possessed experience in both video and FTF negotiations about distinct alliances, we requested that they share insights into both sets of experiences.

Khalid and Ali (2017) highlighted that web surveys offer several advantages compared to postal surveys. They provide an efficient means to reach a large and geographically dispersed pool of respondents, offering speed and cost-effectiveness while minimizing distribution bias. Additionally, web surveys present data in real-time numerical formats. Therefore, in the winter of 2022, we opted to employ a web-based survey as our data collection method. Following the initial survey distribution and one follow-up, we identified and omitted 10 incomplete responses and 5

responses from individuals who were not Finnish nationals. This resulted in a total of 124 valid responses, yielding a response rate of 25.56%. Among these 124 respondents, 95 individuals reported involvement in both FTF and video negotiations for separate IAs, while the remaining 29 participants were exclusively engaged in FTF negotiations for IA formation. To assess the potential for non-response bias, we utilized an independent sample t-test, as recommended by Armstrong and Overton (1977). The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between early and late respondents concerning factors such as firm size ($p = 0.471$) and industry ($p = 0.427$). These results suggest the absence of non-response bias in our dataset.

To address and validate the potential common method bias stemming from relying on a single informant source, we implemented both ex-ante and ex-post strategies, following the recommendations outlined by Robson, Katsikeas, and Bello (2008). In the ex-ante stage of our research design, we adopted the following measures. Firstly, respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, fostering an environment conducive to honest and unbiased reporting. Secondly, in crafting the survey instrument, we organized most of the questions in a manner that did not group them by specific variables but instead grouped them under broader topical categories (e.g., negotiation behavior). Subsequently, after collecting the data, we conducted Harman's one-factor test as an ex-post assessment to ascertain whether common method bias had negatively influenced the data collected. The results of this analysis indicated that neither a single dominant factor nor a general factor emerged that could explain the majority of the variance in the data. Specifically, Factor 1 accounted for only 23.22% of the total variance. Consequently, we can conclude that common method variance did not pose a significant issue in our analysis.

3.2. The sample and respondent characteristics

Out of the 124 respondents, 95 (76.6%) reported information regarding two separate IAs, with one negotiated FTF and the other through video. The remaining 29 (23.4%) respondents provided details solely about an IA-negotiated FTF. These 124 FTF-negotiated IAs and 95 video-negotiated IAs encompassed a variety of alliance types, foreign partners, foreign partner countries, as well as the size and industries of Finnish firms, as depicted in Table 1. Additionally, the respondent roles were distributed as follows: 28 (22.6%) were CEOs and vice presidents, 32 (25.8%) held positions as directors and managing directors, 34 (27.4%) were sales managers, and 30 (24.2%) served as project, purchase, and export managers involved in the formation of these IAs.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

<p>Types of IAs negotiated FTF (n=124): Licensing (17), sub-contracting (28), contract manufacturing (7), project operations (12) non-equity joint venture (26), equity joint ventures (7), export-distributer cooperation (27)</p>	<p>Types of IAs negotiated via video (n=95): Licensing (9), sub-contracting (24), contract manufacturing (4), project operations (2) non-equity joint venture (19), equity joint ventures (1), export-distributer cooperation (36)</p>
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Types of foreign partners in IAs negotiated FTF (n=124): Licensee (17), supplier of parts/components (28), supplier of complete products (7), project buyer (12), non-equity joint venture partner (26), equity joint venture partner (7), distributor (27)	Types of foreign partners in IAs negotiated via video (n=95): Licensee (9), supplier of parts/components (24), supplier of complete products (4), project buyer (1), project supplier (1), non-equity joint venture partner (19), equity joint venture partner (1), distributor (36)
Foreign partner countries represented in IAs negotiated FTF (n=124): Asia (56), Europe (63), America (5)	Foreign partner countries represented in IAs negotiated via video (n=95): Asia (27), Europe (56), America (12)
Firm size (number of employees): Below 20 employees (16 cases), 21 to 50 employees (11 cases), 51 to 100 employees (16 cases), 101 – 250 employees (25 cases), 251 to 500 employees (9 cases), 501 to 1000 employees (28 cases), Above 1000 employees (19 cases).	
Industries represented in the sample: Manufacturing industry: 107 (86.29%) Service: 17 (13.71%)	

3.3. Measures

The items utilized to operationalize both constructs were adapted from prior research conducted by Punturaumporn (2001). These questions underwent a comprehensive evaluation process conducted by research group members. Revisions were implemented to enhance the measures' relevance, ensure clarity in instructions and questions, and optimize our questionnaire's overall flow and length. In our assessment of the dependent variables, namely 'trust,' we employed a 5-point scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree.' Meanwhile, for the assessment of the dependent variable 'negotiation satisfaction,' we utilized a scale spanning from 'very low' to 'very high.' Further details regarding the measurement of these variables can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Major variables and their measurement

Trust (Strongly Disagree 1-5 Strongly Agree) (Adopted and modified from Punturaumporn, 2001) A high level of trust in the opposite party was developed during the negotiations.
Negotiation satisfaction (Very low 1-5 Very high) (Adopted and modified from Punturaumporn, 2001) How satisfied were you with the outcomes of the negotiation?
Communication mode of international alliance negotiation: 1=Negotiated via video tools, 2= Negotiated FTF

4. Analysis and results

To assess whether variations in the dependent variables of trust and negotiation satisfaction were attributable to the utilization of distinct communication modes in negotiations, we conducted an independent sample t-test analysis. In summary, the outcomes confirmed both hypotheses. The

table below presents mean scores for each communication mode in negotiation, accompanied by corresponding t and p values (see Table 3).

Table 3. T-test results of hypotheses testing

Negotiation strategies	Means for Communication mode	T-value	P-value	Accept/Reject	Hypotheses
Trust (low vs. high)	Video = 3.79 F-t-F = 4.52	-8.33 (217)	.001 ***	Accept	H1
Negotiation satisfaction (Low vs. High)	Video = 3.47 F-t-F = 4.17	-7.852 (157.610)	.001 ***	Accept	H2

* $p \leq 0.1$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, *** $p \leq 0.01$.

The results of the analysis reveal that, while Finnish participants engaged in both FTF-IBNs and V-IBNs were able to establish trust with their negotiation partners, the trust-building process was notably more pronounced in FTF-IBNs ($M=4.52$) than in V-IBNs ($M=3.79$). This difference was statistically significant ($t= 4.52$, $df= 217$, $p = 0.001$), thus providing support for Hypothesis 1 (H1). Similarly, the findings indicate that, although Finnish negotiators participating in both FTF-IBNs and V-IBNs expressed satisfaction with the negotiation outcomes, the level of satisfaction was significantly higher in FTF-IBNs ($M=4.17$) compared to V-IBNs ($M=3.47$). This difference was statistically significant as well ($t= 4.17$, $df= 157.61$, $p = 0.001$), affirming the validity of Hypothesis 2 (H2).

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Result summary

We developed and empirically tested a combined model of communication modes such as FTF-IBNs and V-IBNs, which has a significant influence on developing inter-firm trust and negotiation satisfaction. Based on the investigation of 124 Finnish negotiators, this study has resulted in several noteworthy findings. We provide compelling evidence that FTF-IBNs are more effective in building inter-firm trust and negotiation satisfaction compared to V-IBNs. These results suggest that expecting the same level of trust and satisfaction in both FTF and video modes of negotiation involves a greater risk of destroying the eventual success of ICAs. By identifying the limits of communication modes in building trust and satisfaction, we advance the prior negotiation research which has merely focused on FTF negotiations. This discussion delves into the implications and significance of these key results in the context of international business negotiations.

5.2. Theoretical implications

The results of this study highlight that as a relationship evolves, so does general trust (Harkiolakis, 2012; Stein & Mehta, 2020), which is likely also to promote risk-taking. Finnish negotiators trust their negotiation partners, but trust builds up significantly more in FTF-IBNs than in V-IBNs, as hypothesized. Our study generally aligns with prior research that has consistently underscored the pronounced role of FTF interactions in building inter-firm trust (Harkiolakis, 2012; Stein & Mehta, 2020; McAllister, 1995; Kramer et al., 2006) and shedding light on its superior performance in bolstering negotiation satisfaction (Cavusgil et al., 2012; Luo, 1999). Building trust largely depends on how well the negotiator can read the situation and the counterpart, and therefore,

mutual trust and negotiation satisfaction are critical components of successful negotiations, particularly in the complex landscape of IBAs (Cavusgil et al., 2012; Luo, 1999; Reuer & Arino, 2002). The enriched communication environment and the ability to engage in nuanced, real-time interactions during FTF negotiations appear to contribute significantly to heightened negotiation satisfaction (Barkhi et al., 1999; Naquin & Paulson, 2003). Such an FTF-enabled environment enables negotiators to harness a multitude of non-verbal cues, body language, and interpersonal dynamics, thus contributing significantly to the formation of trust.

In contrast, our findings suggest that video negotiations, while facilitating communication across geographical distances, may not provide the same depth of cues and nuances, and deliver the same level of satisfaction as FTF interactions. The absence of crucial non-verbal and para-verbal cues in video negotiations seems to hinder the trust-building process. The inability to discern non-verbal expressions and subtle interpersonal signals in video negotiations (Lewis, 2005) appears to result in a diminished capacity to foster trust while hindering the negotiation satisfaction process. Thus, the choice of media can hinder this dimension as video tools convey fewer signals and gestures to interpret, which is aligned with Lewis's remark (2005) about the perceptive Finns. The significance of non-verbal communication in trust formation cannot be overstated and video negotiations may not fully bridge this gap compared to FTF interactions. Negotiators in video negotiations may not experience the same depth of rapport and satisfaction as their FTF counterparts. This limitation seems to extend to video negotiations, which similarly struggle to replicate the richness of in-person interactions.

5.3. Managerial implications

Examining shifts in negotiation strategies across different communication modes enhances understanding of their impact on negotiation outcomes. Consequently, decision-makers must possess an understanding of when to employ specific modes in negotiations. For international business negotiators, it is crucial to acknowledge the trust-building capabilities inherent in FTF negotiations. This communication mode is also highly regarded for its ability to enhance negotiation satisfaction. Our study underscores the importance of organizations carefully assessing the choice of negotiation mode when forging IAs. In situations where trust and satisfaction are pivotal objectives, as is often the case in complex IBNs, prioritizing FTF interactions can yield strategic advantages. The findings illustrate the strengths and weaknesses associated with both FTF and video communication modes in cultivating business relationships. Specifically, Finnish negotiators engaged in FTF negotiations prioritize elements such as trust, relationship cultivation, and the exchange of information. Consequently, when negotiations aim to establish long-term cooperation characterized by mutual information sharing and trust-building, FTF negotiation emerges as the preferred choice over video negotiations.

5.4. Limitations and future research

It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this research endeavor. Specifically, our investigation centered on Finnish negotiators, and it is worth noting that the dynamics of trust can be influenced by cultural factors that manifest differently within various cultural contexts. Subsequent studies may warrant an exploration of the intricate interplay between culture and negotiation mode concerning their influence on trust dynamics. Moreover, our study did not delve into a comprehensive analysis of the specific mechanisms underlying the cultivation of trust in varying negotiation modes. This represents a potential avenue for future research, as a more

nuanced exploration of these mechanisms could yield valuable insights. Therefore, this study underscores the pivotal roles played by both FTF and video negotiations in shaping mutual trust and negotiation satisfaction within the realm of IBNs. Acknowledging the substantial impact of non-verbal cues and interpersonal dynamics on the formation of trust and negotiation satisfaction can serve as a foundational basis for informed negotiation strategies, ultimately contributing to the success of IAs.

6. Conclusions

As global dynamics continue to evolve, understanding the dynamics of trust-building and satisfaction in negotiation processes becomes increasingly critical for organizations striving for success in the international arena. The recent pandemic such as COVID-19 has interrupted the realm of international business unprecedentedly, compelling firms to reconsider their communication strategies in cross-border interactions. In response to these challenges, firms engaged in international business practices have demonstrated adaptability by embracing alternative approaches to succeed in business transactions. While previous research has extensively explored the influence of culture on IBNs, there has been a noticeable gap in understanding the role of communication modes in shaping trust and negotiation satisfaction. This research was motivated by the need to address this gap and shed light on the distinct roles played by different communication modes, particularly FTF and video conferencing, in the development of mutual trust and negotiation satisfaction. Our empirical analysis, based on 124 respondents engaged in IBNs, has revealed the significant disparities in the levels of trust and negotiation satisfaction associated with these communication modes. In particular, FTF negotiations emerged as the preferred mode, showcasing higher levels of trust and satisfaction compared to video negotiations. These findings carry substantial implications for managers and decision-makers involved in the complexities of IBNs and can serve as valuable input, informing strategic decisions and fostering more fruitful engagements.

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