# Gordon Institute of Business Science
## University of Pretoria

## Virtual leadership effectiveness: A qualitative study of follower experiences and perceptions

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science,
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**ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid expansion of digitalisation have spurred a widespread transition to remote and hybrid work setups, highlighting the critical role of effective leadership in guiding virtual teams. This research aimed to explore virtual leadership practices from the perspective of followers, seeking to fill gaps in the existing literature by examining the lived experiences and perceptions of virtual team members. Grounded in the Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, the study utilised qualitative methods to uncover specific leadership practices and traits as perceived by virtual followers. By addressing the challenges inherent in remote and hybrid workspaces, the research offers valuable insights into effective virtual leadership, catering to both organisational and academic interests. The findings provide targeted recommendations for improving organisational performance, enhancing employee engagement, and fostering well-being in virtual work settings. Additionally, the study lays the groundwork for developing comprehensive virtual leader profiles and designing tailored leadership training programmes, equipping organisations and leaders with practical strategies to navigate the complexities of virtual team dynamics adeptly.

**KEYWORDS:**

**DECLARATION**

*I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (Change Leadership) at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.*

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# CHAPTER 1:  INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

This section provides an overview of the emergence of virtual leadership, as a consequence of the evolution of remote work, as a crucial factor in ensuring team effectiveness and satisfaction from the perceptions and lived experiences of virtual followers.

## 1.1  BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Prior to the pandemic in 2020, work from home was an occasional option primarily for employees in technology-driven sectors, allowing them to complete tasks remotely without being physically present at the workplace, often limited to a specific number of days per year (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). The sudden emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic affected numerous businesses, leaders, and teams, requiring them to quickly transition to remote work arrangements, leveraging various technologies and platforms in novel ways to ensure both work performance and business continuity (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Technological advancements in information and communication technologies have also enabled more organisations to permit remote work setups (Abarca et al., 2020). These can be categorised based on individual perspectives, such as home-based telework and mobile work, or group perspectives, like virtual teams (Pianese et al., 2023). Irrespective of the virtual work set-up, adjustments to the strategies used for monitoring employees' work and performance have been necessary (De Vincenzi et al., 2022).

Remote work is here to stay as concerns about future pandemics and cost savings on transportation are expected to further encourage the adoption of this technology in the coming years (Abarca et al., 2020). While investigations into the upcoming trends in work and the skills needed by the workforce are still in their early stages and developing, existing studies indicate that job tasks, skill demands, and the makeup of the labour force will undergo substantial changes due to ongoing societal shifts (Rotatori et al., 2021). Therefore, Chamakiotis et al. (2021) argue that virtual leaders should avoid replicating outdated practices and instead embrace alternative virtual leadership styles like emergent and shared leadership, which may be more suitable for the post-COVID-19 virtual team context.

Virtual leadership, as defined by Bell et al. (2023), involves leaders and their team members being physically apart and predominantly communicating through technologies like email, chat, or video calls, rather than through face-to-face interactions. It aligns with the framework proposed by Ben Sedrine et al. (2021), which describes virtual leadership as a global team structure founded on interpersonal connections among team members, originating from the collective understanding of each member and their collaboration in task execution. Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) add that the aim of a virtual team leader is to aid employees in

achieving productive work within a supportive atmosphere and to enhance the efficiency of their team remotely. The shift from conventional face-to-face leadership to virtual leadership presents challenges for both leaders and organisations, driving researchers to explore further the factors impacting virtual team effectiveness and highlighting the importance of pinpointing the essential traits of effective virtual leaders to optimise the efficiency of virtual teams (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). Therefore, the challenge of virtual leadership will be pertinent for companies striving for success and long-term viability, as it represents an enduring trend that cannot be ignored (Contreras et al., 2020).

In the context of a virtual work environment, effective leadership hinges not only on the capabilities of virtual leaders but also on the active engagement and support of virtual followers. Thus, the synergy between virtual leaders and followers is imperative for navigating the complexities of remote work and ensuring sustained productivity and cohesion within virtual teams (Liu et al., 2022; Oc et al., 2023). Khan et al. (2020) add that active followers play a significant role in enhancing leaders' performance. Virtual environments appear to heighten followers' requirements for coordination, goal establishment, and distinct role delineation, while concurrently intensifying their relational needs due to feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and absence of socio-emotional cues (Höddinghaus et al., 2023). Exploring followers' perspectives is therefore essential because, despite an increase in research focusing on followership, the emphasis remains on leadership, thereby overlooking the overwhelming evidence that in the 21$^{st}$ century, followers not only can but frequently do make substantial contributions and wield significant power and influence within organisations (Kellerman, 2019). Despite the extensive research on remote working, much of which may not have been conducted during periods of remote work on the scale seen during the pandemic, it is imperative to investigate how this unique context has shaped the experience of working remotely (Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, the growth of virtual teams has raised concerns about the limited research on virtual leadership and its impact on followers (Zeuge et al., 2020) which serves as the justification for this study.

For consistency, this report will uniformly use the term "virtual work" to refer to both "remote work" and "hybrid work." Virtual work is defined by Raghuram et al. (2019) as "geographic dispersion and dependence on technology in work-related interactions between employees" (p. 1).

## 1.2  THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The confluence of globalisation, heightened automation of business processes, and the integration of cognitive technologies in the workplace has collectively underscored the need for a comprehensive examination of the challenges confronted by workers as they adapt to

online collaboration (Waizenegger et al., 2020). This evolution prompts a re-evaluation of the existing scholarship on team leadership within the virtual realm.

Within the framework presented by Oc (2018), leadership unfolds across diverse layers and facets, involving considerations of when, where, and who is being led. Similarly, Kellerman (2019) posits that the leadership structure comprises three integral components—leaders, followers, and contexts—all holding equal significance. The study conducted by Höddinghaus et al. (2023) delves into leadership effectiveness in highly virtual work settings, revealing positive correlations between different leadership styles and follower reactions. However, limitations in study designs and information on virtuality levels raise questions about the adaptability of leadership to varying degrees of virtual work. For this study, effective virtual leadership is not defined by a scientific measure of effectiveness, but rather by its role in fostering interpersonal connections among team members and facilitating collaboration in task execution (Ben Sedrine et al., 2021). According to Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020), the primary goal of virtual team leaders is to support employees in achieving productive work while maintaining a supportive atmosphere and enhancing team efficiency remotely.

Furthermore, the study by Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) enhances the understanding of transformational leadership, confirming its positive effects on team viability, performance, and member satisfaction, while also providing valuable insights into enhancing virtual team effectiveness. It underscores the significance of maintaining cohesion and satisfaction alongside performance for organisations utilising virtual teams. However, the study conducted by Puni et al. (2021) highlights the varying impacts of transactional and transformational leadership styles on employee commitment. Transactional leadership positively predicts commitment, whereas transformational leadership does not enhance this prediction, with a negative interaction effect between the two styles. These contradictory findings necessitate further exploration to understand the concept of "virtual leadership effectiveness" and its impact on virtual team outcomes and individual virtual follower satisfaction as perceived by virtual followers themselves.

The significance of considering followers' perspectives is echoed in Einola and Alvesson's (2019) contention that leadership studies should earnestly consider the intricate subjective and intersubjective interpretations and meanings of individuals involved, their interactions, and their modes of relating to one another. Similarly, the evolving nature of leadership, as outlined by Kellerman (2019) and Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), emphasises the importance of considering followers in comprehending leadership.

The research question, "What are the practices of effective virtual leadership as perceived and experienced by virtual followers?" therefore guides this study's aim to elucidate the specific traits, behaviours, and approaches that virtual followers recognise as indicative of effective virtual leadership.

## 1.3  THE RESEARCH AIMS

The sudden and large-scale adoption of virtual work has posed challenges for organisations in effectively managing the transition to virtual work environments, necessitating adequate planning, innovation, and preparation for managers and employees (Pianese et al., 2023). Despite the early recognition of virtual leadership, specific theories and understanding of this form of leadership remain scarce, and studies investigating its effectiveness and impact on employees have produced inconclusive and varied results (Contreras et al., 2020).

Leadership's significance in virtual work environments is likely to escalate, driven not only by continuous technological progress and the rise of remote work setups but also by external factors like environmental concerns such as climate change, which necessitate reducing commute and in-person meeting frequency (Höddinghaus et al., 2023). This research, through a qualitative approach, uncovered vital insights, perspectives and the lived experience of virtual team followers on effective virtual leadership practices and their impact on follower satisfaction and team outcomes.

## 1.4  THE RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

The government-imposed lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual work arrangements, prompting a need to redefine effective leadership in the digital and dispersed workplace (Grobman & Joia-luiz, 2022).  Additionally, Höddinghaus et al. (2023) contend that a neglected perspective is the impact of virtuality on leadership types or behaviours, as external pressures like the shift to virtual work during the COVID-19 pandemic may have resulted in more passive or destructive leadership. This shift to remote work has altered work dynamics, underscoring the need for effective virtual leadership to unify and guide virtual teams towards shared organisational objectives crucial for business continuity and survival (Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Contreras et al., 2020).

By synthesising existing research and exploring the lived experience of virtual leaders as perceived by virtual followers, this study aimed to unveil the practices, traits and skills associated with effective virtual leadership. Leadership effectiveness pertains to either the leader's tangible performance or the perception of their effectiveness (Vergauwe et al., 2021). Newman et al. (2020) explain that incorporating the identified effective virtual leadership practices could enhance leadership effectiveness within organisations. Zada et al.

(2022) add that understanding how virtual followers perceive effective leadership allows leaders to adapt their strategies and behaviours to meet the specific needs and expectations of virtual teams, ultimately improving team performance and cultivating a positive work environment in virtual settings.

This research on virtual leadership effectiveness from the followers' perspectives may therefore offer several benefits for organisations and leaders navigating virtual team environments. Firstly, insights gained from the research may guide organisational development, change and human resource professionals in improving organisational performance and employees' well-being in virtual work settings (Aarthi & Sujatha, 2022). Additionally, the study contributes to the possible design of effective virtual leader profiles and training programmes for virtual leaders, offering practical implications for organisations, leaders, and followers in virtual team settings (Bellis et al., 2022). This perspective is consistent with the recommendations made by Höddinghaus et al. (2023) for validated training concepts to help leaders adapt to the changing demands and needs of their followers in virtual work settings.

According to Larson and DeChurch (2020), swift progress in technology and organisational structures signals a fresh category of leadership studies. The absence of a specific theoretical framework for virtual leadership raises doubts about the transferability of current leadership knowledge, while research findings on the effectiveness of virtual leadership and its impact on employees remain inconclusive (Contreras et al., 2020). Therefore, this research adds to the existing literature on virtual leadership through focusing on the followers' actual experiences and perspectives of effective virtual leadership (Hemshorn de Sanchez et al., 2022; Tuschner et al., 2022).

## 1.5    THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The research scope encompassed an in-depth investigation into the leadership practices that virtual team followers perceive and experience as effective leadership within a single global organisation. The in-depth review of literature carried out by Höddinghaus et al. (2023) on leadership in virtual work settings highlights the significance of leaders grasping the intricacies of virtual work. It considers various factors such as electronic communication, spatial and temporal dispersion, information richness, and reprocessing ability. However, it is worth noting that most of these studies were quantitative in nature, looking for relationships between constructs while the scope of this research was to explore followers' perceptions of their lived experiences of virtual leadership.

This research, therefore, through employing a qualitative approach, allowed for an exploration of a wider span and depth of virtual followers' lived experience of their virtual leaders. While the research was confined to one organisation, it considered diverse virtual team settings and geographical locations within its temporal and spatial scope.

Followership entails evaluating the possible social outcomes of different choices or behaviours, highlighting a requirement for "the same interactional and interpersonal skills typically attributed to leadership" (Larsson & Nielsen, 2021, p. 23). Therefore, followership should also be considered an outcome of the leader–follower interaction (Read III, 2021). Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, extensively elucidating this connection, reflects the degree of job satisfaction among employees and serves as a reliable predictor for both employee performance and workplace results (Zhao et al., 2019) and is the theory that grounded this study.

The research did not delve into specific technological advancements or tools used in virtual teams, as the primary objective was to understand effective virtual leadership practices from the standpoint of virtual followers. The study concentrated solely on virtual followers' perceptions of effective virtual leadership practices without exploring broader organisational dynamics or cultural nuances across geographies.

In summary, this research aimed firstly to identify discernible practices and competencies exhibited by effective virtual team leaders, as acknowledged by followers within virtual teams. Secondly, it sought to explore how virtual team followers perceive and experience virtual leadership practices, which in turn influence their satisfaction and the outcomes of the virtual team.

## 1.6    CONCLUSION

This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the research problem, emphasising the increasing prevalence of virtual teams due to globalisation, technological advancements, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus on virtual leadership, necessitated by the evolving landscape and digital transformation, underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of effective leadership practices in virtual work environments. The identified research problem revolved around the challenges posed by the abrupt shift to mandatory remote work and the limited research on followers' perceptions of effective virtual leadership.

The scope of the research was defined by the exploration of virtual followers' perceptions of effective virtual leadership within a single global organisation, utilising a qualitative approach to delve into the nuances of their lived experiences. The study's contribution lies in filling gaps in existing literature, offering practical implications for organisations, leaders, and

followers in virtual team settings. Leader–Member Exchange theory provided a theoretical foundation, focusing on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers.

The following chapters will cover the following content to expand further on this topic:

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 3: Research questions

Chapter 4: Research methodology

Chapters 5 & 6: Findings and discussion

Chapter 7: Conclusion

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a review of contemporary scholarly research on virtual leadership practices, delving into the realm of follower experiences and perspectives on the effectiveness of virtual leadership. By summarising existing literature, identifying both the established and uncharted territories, and synthesising various insights, this literature review lays the foundation for subsequent research endeavours (Boote & Beile, 2005).

This section initially provides an exploration of the virtual leader–follower relationship and interactions within the virtual work environment and then examines the virtual leader and virtual follower individually. It also provides an explanation of the rationale behind selecting the Leader–Member Exchange theory as the theory upon which this study is grounded.
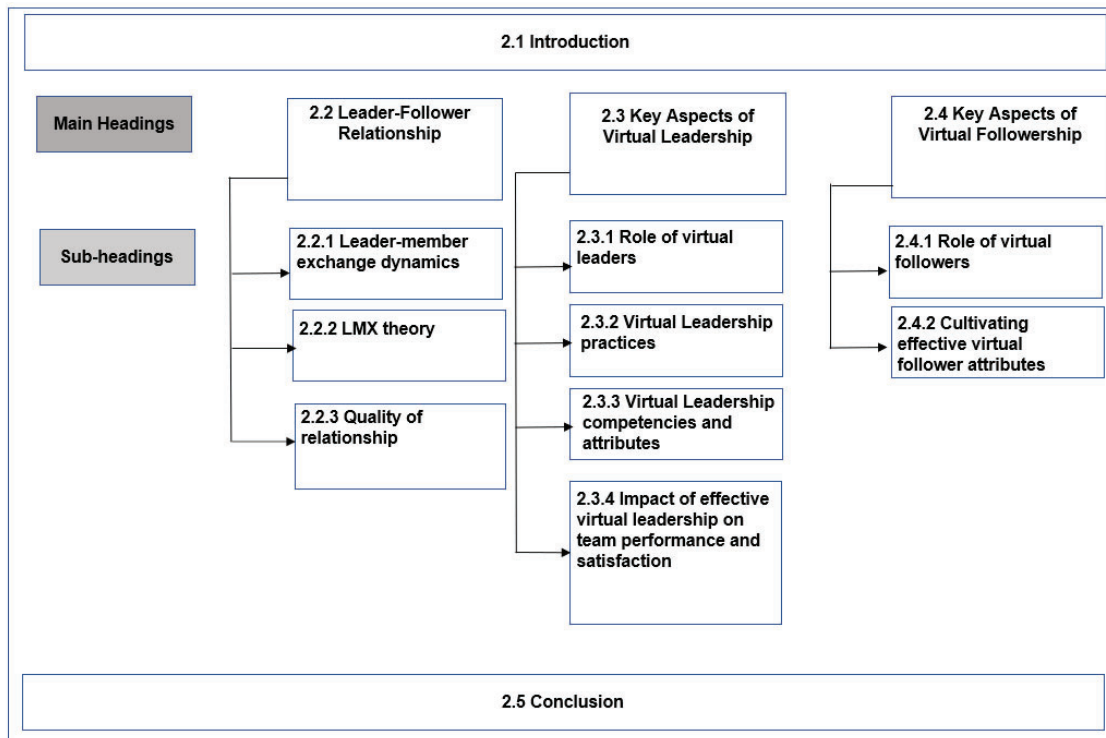


**Figure 1:** *The Literature Review Roadmap (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

## 2.2 LEADER–FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

Leadership and followership are intricate social phenomena, where leaders and followers interact to shape outcomes, as noted by Uhl-Bien (2021a). This perspective is echoed by Larsson and Nielsen (2021), who emphasise the complexity of followership, suggesting that

assuming the follower role involves navigating interpersonal risks and utilising situational resources effectively. Interestingly, they argue that followership requires interactional and interpersonal skills akin to those linked with leadership, challenging the established understanding. In addition, Batirlik et al. (2022) add that relationship-oriented leader behaviour prioritises member well-being and support, emphasises fostering strong leader–member relations, and addresses employees' social needs through genuine and respectful interactions, forming the foundation of this leadership approach. Various theoretical perspectives within the domain of leadership or leader–follower relationships offer diverse viewpoints on leader–follower dyadic phenomena, each emphasising different levels of analysis and focusing on either process or outcomes (Kim et al., 2020). The next section will explore the factors that either improve or harm the relationship between leaders and followers as discussed in the literature.

### 2.2.1  Leader–Member Exchange Dynamics

The concept of mutual trust, rooted in reciprocity, is crucial in leader–member relationships (Kleynhans et al., 2021). Trust influences both leaders and followers, indicating a reciprocal relationship between trust and behaviour. Abarca et al. (2020) concur and define leadership as the process of influencing others to achieve shared goals, emphasising the importance of trust, ethical conduct, and competency within virtual teams (Norman et al., 2020). Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) recommend leaders setting developmental objectives and involving employees in goal setting, promoting mutual responsibility for meeting these goals, which enhances both social and concrete support and mitigates burnout risk. Conversely, even though a leader may seem competent and the team successful, deeper analysis can reveal hidden problems like frustration and passive followership, which goes against the expectation that capable and likable leaders naturally inspire committed and active followers (Einola & Alvesson 2019).

Jiang et al. (2021) emphasise the significance of followers in shaping leadership self-identity, suggesting that ineffective followership may impede prospective leaders' self-perception. However, while Uhl-Bien (2021a) underscores the co-creation aspect of leadership, asserting that it involves both leaders and followers, caution is advised against overlooking followership, as dysfunctional followership can enable destructive leadership. This assertion prompts leadership scholars to consider the collective and relational dynamics of leadership and followership. Overall, these perspectives highlight the intertwined nature of leadership and followership, underscoring the need for a holistic understanding of leader–member relationship dynamics.

The focus here is on how people perceive their relationships, particularly in LMX studies, which show that better-quality relationships between leaders and followers lead to positive results. However, these studies often overlook the deeper, socially constructed aspects of these relationships, relying mainly on quantitative responses from subordinates, resulting in simplistic categorisations of relationships as either high or low LMX (Einola & Alvesson 2019). These perspectives pave the way for further examination of the LMX theory in the next section.

### 2.2.2 LMX Theory

LMX theory has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from its origins as Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) to its current focus on leader–follower relationships (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987). Initially, the theory emphasised dyadic exchanges between leaders and followers to achieve role clarity and task assignments (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987). However, recent scholarship by Schriesheim et al. (1999) and Gottfredson et al. (2020) suggests a shift towards a greater emphasis on followers' perceptions of relationship quality, reflecting a broader relational leadership perspective (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

While Gottfredson et al. (2020) and Uhl-Bien et al. (2022) highlight the transformative nature of LMX theory and its focus on cultivating individualised connections between leaders and followers, Chaudhry et al. (2021) offer a contrasting perspective. They suggest that while LMX theory emphasises dyadic relationships and resource exchange, it also involves leaders expecting reciprocal benefits from followers, which differs from the servant leadership approach (Chaudhry et al., 2021). However, Uhl-Bien et al. (2022) argue that understanding and adapting to the preferences and priorities of both leaders and followers fosters improved relationships, enhances employee performance, and cultivates more effective leadership within the organisation.

Varma et al. (2022) and Tremblay et al. (2021) emphasise the uniqueness of leader-subordinate relationships and the need for leaders to navigate and allocate resources uniquely within dyadic relationships. However, Goh and Wasko (2012) raise concerns about biases in leader–member relationships and the equitable distribution of resources, suggesting potential limitations in LMX theory's application in practice. Additionally, Yu et al. (2018) and Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) emphasise the significant impact of high-quality leader–follower relationships on various outcomes such as job satisfaction and performance.

While the positive associations between high-quality LMX and various outcomes underscore the importance of LMX in effective leadership (Goh & Wasko, 2012), Varma et al. (2022)

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caution that remote work environments pose unique challenges to relationship dynamics due to limited chances for interaction. Furthermore, Contreras et al. (2020) express concerns about the impact of virtual leadership practices on followers, signifying a notable gap in understanding in this area. Additionally, Schriesheim et al. (1999) observed a shift in LMX theory towards emphasising followers' perceptions of the relationship, grounded in the idea of leadership as a reciprocal engagement between leaders and followers.

Hahn and Semrau (2023) demonstrate the potential of strong team relationships and differentiation within teams to mitigate the drawbacks of virtual interactions, highlighting the importance of fostering high-quality relationships among team members. Similarly, Efimov et al. (2022) have found that LMX can reduce professional isolation among virtual workers, stressing the potential of LMX to address challenges in virtual settings. However, they caution that challenges such as blurred boundaries between personal and professional life need to be balanced. Efforts to improve LMX quality, as suggested by Mokgwane (2021) and Emirza and Katrinli (2022), involve a collaborative role-making process that encompasses various stages.

Martin et al. (2018) and Uhl-Bien et al. (2022) highlight the significant issue of LMX differentiation (LMXD), where leaders establish varying quality relationships with individual team members. Park et al. (2022) shed light on the political dynamics of LMXD, suggesting that differential treatment of team members by leaders can create political tension within groups, impacting task performance and behaviour. On the other hand, Xu et al. (2023) propose that LMXD can have both positive and negative impacts on team performance, depending on factors such as role clarity and relationship conflicts. However, Buengeler et al. (2021) criticise the lack of coherence in research on LMXD, noting conflicting results and oversimplification of its multifaceted nature.

In light of these challenges, Choi et al. (2020) advise leaders to carefully consider team members' perceptions of LMX qualities, stimulating further investigation into how LMXD is perceived, interpreted, and linked to individual and team outcomes. Similarly, scholars generally acknowledge the importance of LMX theory but recognise the need for a comprehensive reassessment and refinement to ensure methodological robustness and foster deeper insights into organisational dynamics (Gottfredson et al., 2020; Varma et al., 2022). This recommendation underscores the importance of considering the evolving nature of work environments and their implications for leader–member relationships.

### 2.2.3  Quality of Relationship

While the previous section delved into the dynamics of the leader–follower relationship and introduced the foundational LMX theory, this section scrutinises literature to comprehend the diverse factors shaping the quality of this relationship. The imperative for connection and trust between leaders and followers permeates the literature. Trust and connection are intertwined in virtual leader–follower dynamics, shaping team cohesion and performance (Norman et al., 2020). While Liu et al. (2021) characterise trust as an element of workplace interpersonal connections that is important in forecasting employees' success, Castellano et al. (2021) state that trust, established through integrity and openness, lays the groundwork for meaningful connections.

*Connection*

Chamakiotis et al. (2021) emphasise the difficulties linked with fostering relationships within virtual work settings because of the sporadic nature of engagement, thereby subjecting the dynamics of the leader–follower relationships to diverse perspectives regarding the challenges and opportunities inherent in remote collaboration. Gabriel and Aguinis (2022), however, recommend that leaders should cultivate authentic and meaningful connections with their employees by demonstrating empathy, employing perspective-taking to comprehend others' perspectives, and establishing a culture of trust. Although Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) highlight the pivotal role of leadership in shaping team dynamics within virtual teams, Liao (2017) alludes to a gap in understanding how leaders cultivate and sustain relationships with individual members in virtual settings. This gap suggests a need for further exploration into effective strategies for fostering connections in remote work environments.

Similarly, from the follower's perspective, effective communication, empathy, and ongoing interactions emerge as key factors in fostering trust and motivation within leader–follower dynamics. Bell et al. (2023) and Greimel et al. (2023) emphasise the critical competencies required for leaders and followers to establish and maintain trustworthy relationships through virtual communication platforms, highlighting open dialogue as a means to address personal needs and challenges and contribute to overall well-being in virtual work environments.

Furthermore, Norman et al. (2020) delve deeper into the dynamics of leader–follower relationships, suggesting that the quality of these relationships is shaped by ongoing interactions. Despite the complexities involved, participants in Norman et al.'s study suggest the possibility of maintaining positive relationships outside of work, underscoring the intricate nature of virtual team dynamics and the potential for meaningful connections to transcend

professional boundaries. Hemshorn de Sanchez et al. (2022) also maintain that future studies could increase relevance of these relationships by developing theories and gathering data that establish connections between perceptions of leader and follower actions and their tangible behaviours.

*Trust*

Trust in virtual teams is pivotal, enabling open communication and adherence to goals (Liu et al., 2021). Scholars emphasise its role in shaping team dynamics and outcomes (Abarca et al., 2020; Efimov et al., 2022; Grobman & Joia-luiz, 2022; Pianese et al., 2023). Key factors like integrity, honesty, and competence influence trust (Norman et al., 2020). Trust fosters shared identity and enhances team performance (Castellano et al., 2022). Effective leaders manage mistakes to build trust (Young et al., 2020). Technology usage and face-to-face interactions are vital for maintaining trust (Norman et al., 2020). Prioritising transformational leadership may improve collaboration and satisfaction (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020).

Supportive leadership initially boosts trust but diminishes over time (Höddinghaus et al., 2023). Leaders should demonstrate authenticity and encourage open expression (Jiang et al., 2021; Kleynhans et al., 2021). Trust is reciprocal, enhancing leaders' authority and employees' supervision ability (Liu et al., 2021). Future research should explore trust development, leaders' roles, and impacts on team dynamics (Bell et al., 2023; Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Hemshorn de Sanchez et al., 2022; Jarvenpaa et al., 2004). Insights from virtual followers' perspectives are lacking, urging further exploration (Efimov et al., 2022).

## 2.3    KEY ASPECTS OF VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

The section above examined the dynamics of the leader–follower relationship, introduced the theory that underpins this study and examined the key factors that impact the quality of the leader–follower relationship. This section provides a review of the literature that pertains to virtual leadership. Examining key aspects of virtual leadership is significant in understanding the essential practices and key attributes of a successful virtual leader (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). The analysis conducted by  Chamakiotis et al. (2021) outlines the essential behaviours and traits necessary for an effective virtual leader, emphasising the importance of building trust, demonstrating empathy, and being receptive to diverse groups, including accommodating different time zones. Additionally, it is crucial for the leader to foster a culture of inclusivity, supportiveness, active listening, and empathy, underscoring the significance of strong communication skills and emotional intelligence in this role. The main objective of this section is therefore to understand what the literature

states about key aspects of virtual leadership. To achieve a sound understanding of the literature on this subject, this section encompasses a review of literature pertaining to fundamental elements of virtual leadership, encompassing the responsibilities of virtual leaders, as well as the practices, competencies, and attributes essential for effective virtual leadership.

**2.3.1 Role of Virtual Leaders**

Zeuge et al. (2020) emphasise that a proficient leader guides their employees in transitioning from on-site work to a digital workspace, enhancing the likelihood of a successful transition by serving as a role model and consistently supporting team members. This includes transparent communication and ensuring continual engagement. However, Ben Sedrine et al. (2021) and Contreras et al. (2020) argue that in the dynamic landscape of virtual work environments, leaders actually confront a dual challenge: addressing both traditional team-related issues and those unique to virtual settings.

Regarding leadership roles and responsibilities, Gupta and Pathak (2018) note the perceived heightened responsibilities of virtual team leaders compared to team leaders of collocated teams. Additionally, Chamakiotis et al. (2021) reason that virtual leaders should not replicate traditional practices and leadership styles but should instead be open to adopting different styles and practices that are more relevant and effective. Similarly, Uhl-Bien (2021b) point out the inadequacies of traditional leadership models in addressing the intricate complexities of today's multifaceted world, a sentiment echoed by Darics (2020), who emphasises the need for managers in remote work settings to merge management and leadership roles. Regardless of leading fully virtual teams or hybrid teams, the objective of a virtual team leader is to promote productive and supportive work among employees, while also facilitating the effectiveness of the team in a remote setting (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020).

While Chamakiotis et al. (2021) emphasise the need for virtual leaders to adapt their practices to tackle the distinct challenges of virtual work, encompassing trust, engagement, and digital well-being, Larson and DeChurch (2020) and Savic (2020) focus on only the digital aspect by highlighting the need for a shift in leadership roles and enhanced adaptability to technological advancements. However, Brown et al. (2021) stress the importance of both relationship- and task-focused behaviours for effective virtual team leaders, a sentiment echoed by Bell et al. (2023), Willemark and Islind (2023), and Kozlowski et al. (2021). While Bell et al. (2023) advocate a diverse array of roles and responsibilities for virtual leaders, Tushner et al. (2022) emphasise the need for innovation, consideration of others' opinions, and technical decision-making skills.

Despite these varied perspectives, virtual leaders are acknowledged as indispensable for task accomplishment; however, they should be equipped with an understanding of the unique attributes and challenges of virtual teams (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). However, Azukas (2022) and Höddinghaus et al. (2023) state that further research is needed to fully understand the essential competencies for effective virtual leadership.

### 2.3.2   Virtual Leadership Practices

Building upon the examination of the role of virtual leaders outlined above, this section primarily delves into the behaviours and actions emphasised in the literature concerning virtual leadership practices. These practices encompass a range of behaviours, such as demonstrating support and guidance, the communication styles of virtual leaders, and the discourse around virtual leaders and the role of empowerment. While Bell et al. (2023) assert that specific leadership roles might have greater significance in enabling favourable results in virtual settings when contrasted with conventional environments, these three virtual leadership behaviours are discussed below.

### 2.3.2.1  Virtual Leadership Support and Guidance

Virtual leaders are recognised for their role in fostering teamwork through support, guidance, mentorship, and relationship-building, highlighting the importance of genuine concern for followers, particularly in virtual environments (Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Chaudhary et al., 2022; Liao, 2017). Liu et al. (2021) add that leaders demonstrate this support through attentiveness towards their followers, showing interest in various aspects such as work performance and personal growth, and are inclined to offer diverse resources to assist with employee tasks. However, in the literature there appears to be widespread call for factors such as enablement through the provision of tools, enabling platforms for social connections, adaptability and intentionality, which are discussed below.

*Enablement through the provision of tools*

The heavy reliance of virtual team members on communication technology, particularly during the pandemic when face-to-face interactions were limited, is highlighted by Wang et al. (2021). Furthermore, in instances where cross-border collaboration can foster creativity and innovation, Chamakiotis et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of virtual leaders leveraging technology and adopting a supportive approach to embrace diversity, thereby maximising their teams' creative potential. Similarly, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) advocate the use of tailored technology to enhance transparency and communication within virtual teams, enabling leaders to facilitate individual contributions and boost team visibility. Van Wart et al. (2019) claim that proficient virtual technological skills among leaders, such

as humanising technology, managing breakdowns, and offering technological expertise, contribute to reducing employees' stress related to technology. Therefore, in remote work, leaders must possess strong technological competencies and act as facilitators of technology adoption within the organisation (Chaudhary et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of effective communication tools and strategies in maintaining productivity and collaboration within virtual teams, aligning with the notion of technology-mediated engagement in virtual settings.

Bell et al. (2023) take a slightly divergent view by outlining pertinent behaviours for virtual leaders, which include not only the establishment of technology infrastructure but also the reinforcement of norms for technology usage such as acceptable response times and the adaptation of technology use by followers. They stress the importance of providing guidance on selecting suitable tools for various communication tasks and setting ground rules for their utilisation. In much the same way, Larson and De Church (2020) propose a new direction, emphasising the multifaceted influence of team leaders on technology practices, which involves their awareness of shaping team context and guiding the use of various technologies, termed team technology appropriation. Similarly, Adamovic et al. (2022) caution that creating a conducive virtual work environment requires more than just technological solutions. They emphasise the importance of establishing a supportive work culture and providing training and resources to help employees overcome resistance to virtual work.

*Virtual leader enabling platforms for social connections*

The literature has shown that virtual leaders enabling platforms for social connections among virtual followers is a critical aspect of leadership in contemporary work environments. In virtual work, social factors play a crucial role, as ineffective team socialisation leads to a lack of trust, cooperation, and support, resulting in diminished motivation due to employees feeling excluded, unaddressed and, consequently, less accountable (Zeuge et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2021) therefore highlight the positive impact of organisations offering online platforms to enhance social interactions among colleagues, leading to reduced levels of loneliness. Working virtually presents psychological challenges for employees accustomed to face-to-face interactions, suggesting the potential introduction of new roles such as a "happiness officer" within virtual teams to address these constraints (Vuchkovski et al., 2023). However, while Bell et al. (2023) agree that achieving social cohesion in virtual teams remains challenging due to geographical distance and diverse work contexts, they assert the necessity for virtual leaders to adapt their behaviours and utilise technology effectively to foster healthy team dynamics.

Contreras et al. (2020) add a further perspective to this by stressing the importance of virtual leaders in establishing a suitable social climate through sustained communication and exemplary interpersonal skills, facilitated by technology. They emphasise the need for leaders to prioritise fostering unity and preventing feelings of isolation among team members, reflecting a shift towards a collective mindset within virtual teams. Bell et al. (2023) posit that virtual leaders should not just enable platforms to enhance social cohesion in the virtual workplace but should be integrally involved in planned and spontaneous communication to enhance their leadership impact. They describe support for the social climate as a central leadership function focused on promoting positive interactions, addressing follower needs, and promoting well-being, all enabled by technological platforms. Despite offering these recommendations, they acknowledge that despite the growing recognition of the importance of leadership behaviours in enhancing follower well-being in virtual settings, research in this area remains limited, highlighting the need for further investigation into this aspect of virtual leadership support (Bell et al., 2023).

*Intentionality*

Bell et al. (2023) underscore the importance of fostering a supportive social climate through regular communication between leaders and followers. They highlight that aspects like the frequency and planning of communication are significant factors that can enhance the impact of leadership on individual and team outcomes. This suggests that virtual leaders should be intentional about creating opportunities for both planned and spontaneous communication to strengthen team dynamics and productivity.

Furthermore, Vuchkovski et al. (2023) stress the necessity for virtual leaders to acknowledge obstacles to creative work within their teams, advocating for deliberate efforts to address these barriers, including promoting more frequent face-to-face meetings when necessary to facilitate creative tasks. This highlights the key role of leaders in actively overcoming challenges and cultivating environments conducive to creativity and innovation within virtual teams. Similarly, Willox et al. (2023) highlight the increased importance of intentional collaboration and communication in virtual team endeavours, arguing that the absence of spontaneous interactions in virtual settings elevates the significance of deliberate communication and collaboration for team success. This reiterates the responsibility of virtual leaders in intentionally nurturing effective communication and collaboration practices to navigate the obstacles inherent in virtual work environments.

*Adaptability*

The literature highlights that the requirement for virtual leaders to be adaptable stems from various angles, including the need to accommodate the digital fluency of younger generations in virtual work (Thambusamy & Bekirogullari, 2020), the diverse needs and preferences of followers (Chaudhary et al., 2022), the amplified complexity of the virtual workplace, and the specific context of virtual team performance. The literature reviewed below on virtual leaders' adaptability as an effective practice in leading virtual teams underscores the necessity for leaders to adjust their behaviours to the unique demands of virtual work environments. While Willox et al. (2023) advocate for pre-emptive planning by virtual team leaders to ensure effective team performance, Höddinghaus et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of leaders adapting their behaviour to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of followers in virtual teams. This aligns with the views of Savic (2020) and Newman et al. (2020), who assert that leaders must adapt to the amplified complexity of the virtual workplace and revise communication and management strategies accordingly.

However, Efimov et al. (2022) found no clear link between various leadership styles and their impact on virtual team performance. Nonetheless, their findings stress the importance of leadership adjusting behaviours to the specific context of virtual work. In contrast, Höddinghaus et al. (2023) question the necessity for leaders to adapt their behaviour to thrive in virtual work settings, recommending further investigation into what constitutes effective virtual leadership.

*Accessibility, Availability and Approachability of virtual leaders*

When leaders demonstrate receptivity to input from members and establish accessibility both physically and psychologically, it fosters a sense of psychological safety for members to freely express their thoughts and opinions, encouraging them to voice concerns, engage in initiatives for change, even in the face of potential resistance (Hirak et al., 2012). Therefore, Dinh et al. (2021) argue that leaders should not only offer verbal support but also establish clear and measurable expectations, fostering structural psychological safety which, alongside verbal encouragement, contributes to team members perceiving their leader as approachable and their team as a supportive environment, ultimately mitigating harmful power dynamics and improving psychological safety. However, in the virtual work context, effective leaders are assessed by their teams based on their active presence in the virtual realm, as social presence enhances group unity and participation in virtual environments, which lack nonverbal communication cues (Avolio et al., 2014). Availability indicates the leader's perceived willingness and capability to interact with the team, while their presence

enables team members to ask questions and enhance their understanding through informal learning and mentorship opportunities (Park et al., 2022).

Adaptation markedly alters the dynamics between employees and organisations, necessitating novel leadership approaches, given that remote work can engender sensations of isolation, detachment, and declining motivation, adversely affecting productivity, particularly due to the limited accessibility of support from peers and supervisors compared to in-office interactions (Contreras et al., 2020). In their study, Pack et al. (2022) found that team leaders who actively encouraged questions and conducted debriefing sessions with humility and candour reinforced perceptions of approachability, which involved a broader openness to others' perspectives, contrasting with unapproachability marked by disruptive behaviour and lack of openness. Consequently, Zeuge et al. (2020) assert that a virtual leader should therefore remain consistently accessible, approachable, responsive, and open, setting the expectation for an open mindset by embodying these qualities as a positive example.

### 2.3.2.2 Communication Practices of Virtual Leaders

Communication abilities are essential for virtual leaders as they must effectively comprehend and interpret what is not visible (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Additionally, Abarca et al. (2020) suggest that the constraints in understanding virtual communication are compounded by the absence of gestures which impedes virtual teams' abilities to convey, exchange and interpret information. These authors emphasise that the virtual setting itself is an impediment to successful communication. However, Kozlowski et al. (2021) accentuate the virtual leader's skills to leverage available technologies for the purpose of effective communication, collaboration and coordination. Therefore, the communication skills of virtual leaders become even more essential in the virtual work setting as, in the absence of informal corridor talk, leaders need to take proactive steps in bridging communication gaps and enabling alternative communication channels to the traditional work-related channels (Newman et al., 2020). Savić (2020) concurs with this sentiment by stating that critical competencies for leaders in the digital era, such as forward-looking mindset, customer orientation, transparent communication, data-informed decision-making, technological expertise, and empowering employees is much needed.

This next section of the literature review highlights that virtual leadership communication effectiveness entails providing clear expectations, preventing and resolving conflict and creating platforms and opportunities for regular engagement.

*Clear expectations*

The literature on the importance of virtual leaders providing clear expectations is vast, therefore they are categorised below in terms of literature that is in support of virtual leaders communicating clear expectations, literature that provides recommendations on how virtual leaders should do this effectively, literature that provides a compelling argument for why clear expectations matter in the virtual work context and concludes with the gaps in the literature.

Darics (2020) emphasises the importance for leaders in remote work settings to define and communicate a vision, corporate values, and organisational objectives. Similarly, Bell et al. (2023) stress the importance of virtual leaders setting clear expectations and goals, emphasising the necessity of communicating a compelling vision and directives to their followers. Additionally, Chamakiotis et al. (2021) support virtual leadership characterised by clear guidance, constructive feedback, and motivating language to enhance employee commitment, especially in remote work scenarios. In virtual teams, providing clear guidance and setting easily understandable individual objectives helps facilitate accurate information exchange, improved monitoring of employee support, timely issue identification, transparent communication, prevention of unintended messages, and avoidance of data overload (Van Wart et al., 2019). The transformational leader effectively communicates a compelling vision of the future, establishes inspirational objectives, and addresses contentious issues, thereby inspiring followers to focus on collective goals through verbal and non-verbal communication (Puni et al., 2021). These assertions point to widespread consensus on the importance of virtual leaders providing clear expectations.

Contreras et al. (2020) and Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) offer recommendations for how leaders can do this. Virtual leaders should refine their communication skills by selecting appropriate channels, delivering culturally sensitive messages, providing constructive feedback, and recognising achievements (Contreras et al., 2020). Leaders should facilitate opportunities for colleagues to engage in discussions or self-reflection regarding their work, as burnout in one employee often extends to their teammates (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). However, Contreras et al. (2020) assert that irrespective of the leadership approach, virtual team leaders, akin to their counterparts in traditional settings, should passionately articulate and convey the organisational vision to cultivate a culture grounded in organisational values, though the precise method remains uncertain (Contreras et al., 2020). Thus, Batirlik et al. (2022) propose that leaders should promote the use of virtual communication tools in virtual teams to clarify task responsibilities, facilitate task coordination, and keep team members informed about each other's work status in order to prevent task conflicts.

Leader actions that clarify member roles and facilitate task coordination mitigate task disagreements and enhance team performance, while virtual meetings conducted by leaders can prevent misinterpretations resulting from communication gaps (Batirlik et al., 2022). Bell et al. (2023) propose that while articulating an inspiring vision to strengthen shared objectives among team members, leaders' efforts to define missions and set expectations and goals may yield varying results based on followers' motivations. This highlights the importance of investigating factors that differentiate team types, such as relationship history and hierarchical structure. Trust facilitates the transition from individual to collective leadership by aligning personal objectives with the team's common vision, fostering a conducive mindset and yielding enhanced outcomes within a virtual setting (Castellano et al., 2021).

Despite these insights, Contreras et al. (2020) also note a gap in the literature regarding the implementation of effective communication strategies in virtual leadership. Furthermore, Bell et al. (2023) suggest future research should explore critical leadership functions like providing guidance and direction, indicating a need for a more comprehensive understanding of virtual leadership communication beyond vision articulation.

*Conflict resolution*

Awareness of interpersonal differences among team members constitutes relationship conflict, while task conflict arises from divergent views regarding members' roles within the team, with process conflict emerging from differences in how team tasks are executed (Batirlik et al., 2022). Willox et al. (2023) add that conflict resolution emerges as a critical aspect in virtual settings, requiring effective communication for maintaining team effectiveness. Their suggestion to implement strategies promoting team engagement in conflict resolution underscores the interactive nature of conflict management, which necessitates active engagement and collaboration among team members. On the other hand, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) emphasise the importance of technology replicating the benefits of face-to-face interactions to quickly detect confusion, especially in asynchronous conversations where misunderstandings can occur. They recommend facilitating informal communication channels.

Batirlik et al. (2022) maintain that promoting effective communication can mitigate relationship tensions, and leaders can foster member interaction in virtual teams through initiatives like face-to-face gatherings, virtual social events, establishing communication schedules, and activating various virtual communication platforms as required. Additionally, they stress the necessity of supporting synchronous communication across language barriers for virtual teams. However, Oc et al. (2023) offer a divergent perspective by

stressing that in order to maximise the effectiveness of a leadership intervention, organisations should prioritise including followers in leadership development initiatives, which may encompass conflict management, team building, and fostering the group's self-awareness.

*Regular engagement*

Chamakiotis et al. (2021) underscore the continuous need for virtual leaders to nurture engagement among team members by prioritising trust and relationship development as an ongoing process, aligning with the notion of engagement as a dynamic and evolving practice. Similarly, Thambusamy and Bekirogullari (2020) add that virtual team leaders should play an active role in keeping communication lines open and regularly checking in on their team members to prevent them from feeling overlooked. Chaudhary et al. (2022) add a further dimension to the role of virtual leaders by suggesting that they should cultivate attentive listening skills and enhance their technological aptitude. Additionally, Davidaviciene and Al Majzoub (2022) assert that virtual leaders should not only bridge communication gaps in the virtual work environment but also monitor and reinforce communication mechanisms through performance appraisals, rewards, and recognition.

While the authors above focus on the virtual leaders' role in ensuring regular engagement, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) and Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) refer to active engagement among followers as being associated with various positive outcomes. These studies emphasise the value of engaged followers who actively participate in decision-making processes and challenge leaders when necessary, contributing to greater organisational value and performance. However passive followers demonstrated a contrasting relationship, indicating that frequent interactions with their leaders led to reduced effort and had a more detrimental effect on their performance, particularly accentuated among those with extensive leader interactions (Carsten et al., 2022).

A further perspective is offered by the following authors who refer to the dual role that leaders and followers play in ensuring regular engagement. Chamakiotis et al. (2021) stress the importance of employee engagement within virtual teams, emphasising the ongoing need for visible and supported efforts to foster engagement across different project phases. They highlight that perceived interaction frequency reflects follower'' perceptions of engagement with their leader, encompassing various forms such as information exchange, directives, social support, or feedback. Carsten et al. (2022) add that during periods of physical separation, leaders and followers may increase their interaction to compensate for the absence of proximity. Encouraging continuous communication boosts members'

confidence in the team's involvement, particularly in situations of low trust where it reaffirms the active participation of all members (Zeuge et al., 2020).

### 2.3.2.3 Empowering Leadership

The literature on virtual leadership presents a multifaceted perspective on the relationship between empowerment, support, and trust within virtual teams. Norman et al. (2020) and Garro-Abarca et al. (2021) highlight the significance of empowerment and support from leaders in fostering trust among team members. This sentiment is echoed by Abarca et al. (2020) and Tunk and Kumar (2023), who emphasise the critical role of leadership support in enabling effective collaboration and addressing work-related issues. However, Sanchez et al. (2023) diverge slightly, underscoring the importance of team support and coordination in team success, thus downplaying the direct impact of virtual leaders.

The evolving role of virtual leaders is emphasised by Varhelahti and Turnquist (2021), who discuss a transition from traditional directive roles to facilitators supporting self-organisation. Contreras et al. (2020) and Bell et al. (2023) propose a different form of empowerment by advocating for self-management in the face of virtual challenges, such as reduced face-to-face interactions. This aligns with the assertion by Höddinghaus et al. (2023) that empowering leaders encourages independence and self-management among followers.

Psychological empowerment emerges as a crucial factor in enhancing trust and confidence, as discussed by Rosen et al. (2007) and Malik et al. (2021). However, Malik et al. (2021) introduce a nuanced perspective by suggesting that psychological empowerment mediates innovative behaviour in agile teams, alongside factors like team autonomy and communication. Additionally, leaders are identified as key enablers of psychological safety and empowerment among team members. While various forms of positive leadership, including transformational, authentic, and empowering leadership, are associated with employees' flourishing in the workplace (Liu et al., 2021), Bell et al. (2023) propose that future research should broaden its scope to include diverse critical functions of virtual leadership, such as offering guidance and direction.

### 2.3.3 Virtual Leadership Competencies and Attributes

In this section, the literature that pertains to virtual leadership competencies and attributes is explored. To mitigate confusion or ambiguity, the preceding section examined the behaviours and actions emphasised in the literature concerning virtual leadership practices and this section explores the literature pertaining to virtual leadership competencies and attributes. Leadership competencies and attributes, in the context of this study, differ from leadership practices in that it pertains to the qualities, skills, and characteristics that leaders

possess rather than their specific behaviours or actions. Leadership competencies refer to the underlying abilities and proficiencies that enable effective leadership, while attributes encompass the personal qualities and traits that contribute to a leader's effectiveness. Unlike leadership practices, which focus on observable actions and behaviours, leadership competencies and attributes delve deeper into the innate qualities and capabilities that leaders possess. These may include traits such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, strategic thinking, and communication skills, as well as competencies like decision-making, problem-solving, and relationship-building abilities.

For this literature review the traits of the virtual leader in establishing and maintaining the human connection, being mindful and possessing high emotional intelligence (EQ) in effectively leading virtual teams emerged as recurring themes in the literature; therefore, they are explored further in this next section.

*Creating opportunities for connection*

The literature on virtual leadership and social support presents a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities for leaders in fostering connections and supporting employees in virtual settings. With various authors ascribing different definitions of what connection means in the virtual work context, for clarification, the types of connection explored in this section relate to opportunities for leaders to connect with team members and foster social support. They also present challenges such as feelings of isolation and the need for transparent communication. Effective virtual leadership requires navigating these complexities while fostering a supportive and connected work environment.

Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) emphasise the importance of social support as a valuable asset in the workplace, providing aid and comfort to employees facing various difficulties. This sentiment is echoed by Puni et al. (2021), who discuss the concept of idealised influence, where leaders cultivate respect, appreciation, and trust among followers through emotional connections and role modelling. However, Willermark and Islind (2023) challenge the notion of engagement limitations in virtual settings, suggesting that virtual platforms offer opportunities for leaders to actively connect with team members through technology. This contrasts with the challenges identified by Kozlowski et al. (2021), who note the difficulty for leaders in establishing social connections with followers in virtual environments.

Efimov et al. (2022) highlight the complex relationship between virtual leadership and employees' mental health, job satisfaction, and perceptions of isolation. While effective virtual leadership can contribute to followers feeling happier and more satisfied with their jobs, it can also lead to feelings of isolation, underscoring the need for leaders to navigate

these complexities effectively. Similarly, Höddinghaus et al. (2023) endorse the increased need for coordination, goal setting, and clear role assignments in virtual settings. They also note the amplified feelings of isolation and disconnectedness in virtual environments, emphasising the importance of leaders in addressing these relational-oriented needs. Contrastingly, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) emphasise transparency as a key challenge for virtual teams in establishing a sense of connectedness. They suggest that technology should be designed to provide transparency, allowing workers to feel aware of their teammates and fostering a sense of inclusion.

Finally, Liu et al. (2021) highlight the role of social support from supervisors and colleagues in fostering a sense of job security among employees. However, Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) caution that leaders must distinguish between fostering social support and promoting frequent social interaction, as the latter can inadvertently increase stress and job demands for employees.

*Mindful qualities displayed by the virtual leader*

The literature on mindful qualities displayed by virtual leaders presents a multifaceted view, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of mindfulness in remote work environments. Arendt et al. (2019) advocate mindfulness as a critical component of effective virtual leadership, emphasising its role in promoting attentiveness to the present moment with an open, non-judgmental attitude. However, Dinh et al. (2021) caution against overreliance on mindfulness as a solution for burnout among remote workers, pointing out systemic issues such as workload management and boundary setting that contribute to remote work stress. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) underscore the importance of effective workload management strategies to address the impact of workload on work-life balance, suggesting that while mindfulness can help leaders recognise and address workload-related issues, it may not be sufficient to alleviate underlying causes.

Mindful relationships among colleagues are deemed crucial by Liu et al. (2021) for understanding organisational functions and objectives, particularly in teamwork-driven environments. Puni et al. (2021) assert that sustained commitment is fostered through individual consideration, aligning with then proposition by Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) that mindfulness in leadership can extend to engaging employees in goal setting, thereby empowering them to influence their work and performance.

However, Efimov et al. (2022) highlight the challenges of social isolation and decreased morale in virtual work environments, emphasising the crucial role of leaders in providing support and fostering connection among team members. Yarberry and Sims (2021) further

underscore the importance of leaders in addressing these challenges, although they note that mindful communication alone may not fully address broader organisational and interpersonal dynamics influencing team cohesion and morale.

*High emotional intelligence (EQ)*

The literature on high EQ displayed by virtual leaders provides insights into its multifaceted role in enhancing team dynamics and overall performance. Roy (2012) emphasises the importance of emotional intelligence for virtual team leaders, encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, skilful communication, and relationship building, which fosters knowledge exchange, honest communication, and problem solving within the team.

Abdollahi et al. (2019) and Görgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021) delve deeper into the components of emotional intelligence, highlighting self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management as crucial skills for effective leadership. However, Chaudhary et al. (2022) and Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) suggest that emotional intelligence alone may not suffice in virtual teams, as there needs to be a combination of emotional intelligence and virtual competencies for positive impacts on employee well-being.

Furthermore, Bell et al. (2023) point out the gaps in existing research regarding the complex variations of virtual work setups and the diverse leadership roles required in such environments. They call for a deeper exploration of how emotional intelligence competencies intersect with transformational behaviours in leadership and how they influence followers' experiences in virtual teams.

In conclusion, while emotional intelligence plays a significant role in virtual leadership by facilitating effective communication, relationship building, and team cohesion, its impact may be enhanced when combined with other competencies tailored to the specific demands of virtual work environments. Further research is needed to fully understand the nuanced interactions between emotional intelligence, leadership behaviours, and team outcomes in virtual settings.

### 2.3.4  Impact of Effective Virtual Leadership on Team Performance and Satisfaction

Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) have found that exhibiting transformational leadership traits, such as inspiration and motivation, enhances team performance, viability, and member satisfaction, highlighting the pivotal role of transformational leadership in enhancing overall team effectiveness. The section below examines additional literature pertaining to the impact effective virtual leadership has on virtual team and follower performance, outcomes and satisfaction.

### 2.3.4.1 Impact on Team Performance

Team performance refers to the results achieved by the team (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). Virtual team performance hinges significantly on the effectiveness of virtual leaders, who must navigate the challenges of remote work to drive success. Bell et al. (2023) assert that inspirational leadership, characterised by articulating an inspiring vision and fostering shared objectives, positively impacts team dedication and trust, ultimately enhancing team performance, especially in dispersed teams. This underscores the critical role of virtual leaders in aligning team members towards common goals and motivating them to excel.

In addition to aligning team objectives, virtual leaders are instrumental in fostering creativity and innovation among remote teams, as emphasised by Chamakiotis et al. (2021). The dynamic nature of virtual work demands leaders adapt their strategies effectively to unlock the creative potential of their team members. Puni et al. (2021) add that leaders who exhibit idealised influence cultivate respect and trust among followers by establishing emotional connections and serving as role models, ultimately promoting ethical decision-making and a strong sense of duty. This highlights the importance of leadership agility and the ability to nurture a culture of innovation in virtual environments.

Effective performance management processes are essential for maintaining alignment with team objectives and ensuring stability amidst uncertain circumstances in virtual settings, according to Kilcullen et al. (2022). Consistent organisational performance management not only enhances employee stability but also instils confidence in team members, facilitating improved performance outcomes. Moreover, De Vincenzi et al. (2022) stress the need for adjustments in performance monitoring strategies for remote workers, particularly in chaotic environments. This sentiment is echoed by Wang et al. (2021), who highlight the benefits of monitoring for less-disciplined workers, citing examples such as daily reports, clocking in/out applications, and camera requirements during work hours. Interestingly, participants in the study conducted by Wang et al. (2021) reported positive experiences with monitoring, indicating its potential to mitigate procrastination and improve focus on core tasks.

While the literature underscores the multifaceted role of virtual leaders in driving team performance, Tramontano et al. (2021) state that while research has established the potential for remote work to enhance productivity, further exploration is needed to optimise its effects on work conditions, individual well-being, engagement, and team cohesion.

### 2.3.4.2 Impact on Team Outcomes

The literature review below underscores the critical role of effective leadership in virtual teams, particularly in shaping team outcomes. Efimov et al. (2022) highlight the significant

impact of adept leadership on team performance within virtual contexts, stressing the importance of adaptive leadership behaviours tailored to the unique challenges of virtual environments. This emphasises the need for leaders to navigate contextual factors effectively to optimise team outcomes, suggesting that effective leadership is essential for immediate performance and long-term sustainability in remote work settings.

Furthermore, Tramontano et al. (2021) anticipated a surge in remote work accessibility post-COVID, presenting opportunities for both employers and employees. However, they underscore the necessity for individuals to develop digital resilience competencies to fully leverage the benefits of remote work, ultimately leading to enhanced resilience, productivity, and sustainable practices for organisations. This highlights the broader implications of effective leadership within virtual teams, extending beyond immediate performance to long-term success in remote work environments.

In addition to performance metrics, Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) distinguish between team performance and team member satisfaction, emphasising the importance of both aspects in evaluating team outcomes. While team performance reflects tangible results, member satisfaction signifies attitudes towards the work group and willingness to sustain collaboration, indicating the multifaceted nature of team dynamics that leaders must address.

Abarca et al. (2020) highlight the importance of communication methods in shaping virtual team cohesion, emphasising the need for effective communication strategies to foster a unified sense within the team. Emirza and Katrinli (2022) further stress the importance of aligning role expectations to enhance leader–member relationships, also underlining clear communication and role synchronisation as crucial elements for effective collaboration. The results of the study conducted by Liu et al. (2021) indicate correlations between thriving at work and various factors such as unit context, work-generated resources, agentic work behaviours, and personality traits, significantly contributing to our comprehension of the antecedents influencing workplace thriving.

Additionally, trust-building among team members is essential for effective virtual team dynamics, with unfamiliarity hindering trust formation, as illustrated by Abarca et al. (2020) who define trust as individuals' willingness to rely on others' actions while anticipating their commitment, highlighting the need for team members to acquaint themselves to foster trust.

Transformational leadership, as highlighted by Puni et al. (2021), plays a crucial role in motivating followers by addressing individual growth needs and inspiring them to exceed their capabilities for a common goal. This emphasises the importance of visionary

communication and charisma in crafting compelling visions that encourage follower dedication. However, the study conducted by Görgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021) did not find support for the idea that perceived supervisor support directly correlates with increased commitment or more positive evaluations of job satisfaction.

Finally, Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) suggest that followers' engagement in followership is influenced by individual schemas and environmental factors, shaping their inclination towards passive compliance or active engagement. This highlights the complex interplay between follower characteristics and environmental factors in virtual team dynamics.

### 2.3.4.3  Impact of Trust on Team Dynamics

The literature on the impact of trust in virtual team dynamics points to its paramount importance for collaboration, cooperation, and innovation within these teams, with leadership playing a pivotal role in shaping trust-building processes and outcomes. Newman et al. (2020), Thambusamy and Bekirogullari (2020), and Feitosa and Salas (2021) recommend specific leadership strategies aimed at enhancing communication and feedback mechanisms within virtual teams. Their research suggests that leadership support, manifested through the use of communication platforms and regular feedback, fosters dialogue, sustains participation, and cultivates a sense of value among team members. However, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) caution against the over-reliance on distance communication technologies, highlighting their potential detrimental effects on trust-building due to the absence of non-verbal cues.

Abarca et al. (2020) assert the critical role of leadership support—particularly in enabling participation in decision-making—for empowering team members and driving innovation. Similarly, Willox et al. (2023) emphasise the necessity of intentional collaboration and communication in virtual team projects, underlining the importance of deliberate strategies to maintain productivity amidst the absence of face-to-face interactions. However, Gabriel and Aguinis et al. (2022) warn against excessive meetings and collaboration without clear purpose, suggesting that leaders should involve employees in decision-making but act upon their input to avoid exacerbating burnout.

Transformational leadership, as advocated by Puni et al. (2021), incorporates intellectual stimulation, wherein leaders introduce challenging new concepts to encourage followers to reconsider traditional approaches and foster creativity and innovation. This approach nurtures an environment conducive to experimentation and collective improvement.

In terms of innovation within virtual teams, Malik et al. (2021) propose that psychological empowerment, facilitated by team autonomy and effective communication, catalyses innovative behaviour. Conversely, Henderikx and Stoffers (2022) highlight the significance of collaborative leadership in addressing technological challenges and enhancing overall team performance. Their findings underscore the role of leaders in facilitating effective collaboration among team members to foster innovation.

Employees view abusive supervision as a detrimental emotional experience that erodes the atmosphere of trust and respect, essential for ensuring their safety and fostering risk-taking and exploration. Without it, employees may feel distrusted or disrespected, leading to a decline in their motivation and enthusiasm for learning in the workplace (Liu et al, 2021).

## 2.4    KEY ASPECTS OF VIRTUAL FOLLOWERSHIP

The previous sections explored the literature on the leader–follower relationship and elucidated key virtual leadership attributes outlined in existing studies. In contrast, this section shifts focus to follower perspectives of virtual leadership effectiveness, specifically examining the literature on followers' viewpoints of virtual leadership practices.

### 2.4.1  Role of Virtual Followers

The literature reviewed that pertains to the role of virtual followers presented some common themes alongside some very divergent views which are examined in this section. Firstly, research undertaken by Larsson and Nielsen (2021) underscores that successful followership necessitates adept social and interactional skills, challenging the conventional notion that leadership competence is solely attributed to leaders. In the same vein, Young et al. (2020) stress the growing significance of effective team contributions in remote work, emphasising the necessity for followers to adapt to new responsibilities and tasks, endorsing and aiding in the implementation of strategic plans across organisational levels, thus highlighting the collaborative essence of effective followership. However, Bell et al. (2023) discuss the role of followers in terms of their ability to self-manage, thereby ensuring their personal needs are met. Similarly, Young et al. (2020) argue that individuals proficient in followership may find themselves presented with leadership opportunities, highlighting the continued significance of developing both followership and leadership skills, as career progression often involves leveraging both skill sets within the organisational context, with competent followers effectively managing leaders' strengths and weaknesses.

Secondly, and in contrast, the following authors describe the role followers play in assisting organisations with regard to improving leadership capabilities. Oc et al. (2023) emphasise the significance of 360-degree feedback ratings in shaping leaders' self-perception and

encourage organisations to acknowledge that opinions from specific influential followers can impact a leader's personal growth and development. Liu et al. (2022) underscore the significance of followers in organisational dynamics, emphasising that their motivation, characteristics, and interactions with leaders profoundly influence organisational effectiveness. Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) suggest that follower-centric approaches reconceptualise followers as active contributors to leadership dynamics, highlighting their role as shapers of leadership, underscoring that an individual's leadership effectiveness and perception within an organisation are significantly shaped by followers' beliefs and characteristics.

Thirdly, on the one hand Oc et al. (2023) highlight the broad reach of leadership behaviours, emphasising that goal-directed influence is not confined to higher-ranking individuals but can be exhibited by individuals across all organisational levels, yet noting the minimal attention given to followers despite their pivotal role in leadership dynamics. On the other hand, Schmidt and Dellen (2022) offer a varied perspective by suggesting that in virtual settings, followers possess autonomy in deciding whether to follow leaders and can influence them, engaging in their own leadership, thereby highlighting the potential for followers to exert influence and participate in collaborative decision-making processes through reflection on leaders' authority.

Finally, Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) found in their analysis that followers can serve as defenders of the organisation against unethical leaders by adhering to the organisational mission and challenging those who deviate from it. Uhl-Bien (2021a), in contrast, argues that focusing solely on assessing leaders for narcissistic or toxic behaviours neglects the significance of followership. This emphasises the necessity of investigating the interaction between dysfunctional leaders and their followers to mitigate the emergence of destructive leadership dynamics.

### 2.4.2 Cultivating Effective Virtual Follower Attributes

Followers should be proactive about work-life boundary management by engaging in tactics designed to enact their preferred boundaries in the face of working from home and greater reliance on technological tools that can lead to blurred boundaries and overwork. Followers who work virtually should take an active role in communicating with their leader and coworkers to ensure they stay connected and that their needs and challenges related to virtual work are addressed.

*Accountability*

The following examination of the literature looks at follower accountability for team outcomes within the virtual work context. Jiang et al. (2021) propose that virtual leaders can cultivate effective followership by structuring projects to promote collaboration and teamwork, empowering team members to actively contribute to achieving project goals. This perspective emphasises that followers possess the capacity to make meaningful contributions to the organisational mission by engaging with leaders as partners rather than mere order takers.

Similarly, Young et al. (2020) stress the significance of individuals, both leaders and followers, taking responsibility for mistakes within organisations. They argue that effective leaders should support their followers in overcoming mistakes, fostering a trusting and supportive environment conducive to growth and development. This underscores the role of followers in acknowledging and addressing organisational challenges, contributing to a culture of accountability and continuous improvement.

However, navigating follower initiatives to address leadership deficiencies can be complex, as illustrated by the contrasting perspectives of Zoogah and Abugre (2020) and Uhl-Bien et al. (2014). Zoogah and Abugre introduce the concept of restorative behaviour as a means to rectify damage resulting from poor leadership, suggesting a pathway for followers to address issues arising from leadership shortcomings. Conversely, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) classify such behaviour as insubordination, highlighting potential tensions between restorative efforts and hierarchical expectations. This contradiction underscores the challenges in balancing follower accountability for organisational improvement with hierarchical norms and expectations.

The main finding from the study conducted by Görgens-Ekermans and Roux  (2021) revealed that there was a significant relationship between organisational commitment and job satisfaction, suggesting that higher self-reported feelings of commitment positively influence job satisfaction, potentially leading to improved employee retention rates.

Furthermore, the role of leader involvement in decision-making and communication behaviours emerges as a significant factor influencing follower dynamics. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) highlight the importance of aligning values and fostering inclusive decision-making processes to prevent conflicts stemming from divergent perspectives. This suggests that effective leadership entails creating opportunities for followers to express authentic opinions and actively engage in decision-making processes, fostering a culture of mutual trust and accountability. An adept subordinate can alleviate work pressure by allowing managers to delegate tasks, while a candid subordinate can provide valuable information for leaders to enhance their resources and cope with challenges (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022).

Moreover, Willox et al. (2023) emphasise the necessity of training in developing conflict management skills, particularly in virtual environments where face-to-face interaction is lacking. This underscores the importance of equipping followers with the necessary skills to navigate conflicts effectively and contribute to team success in virtual settings. Overall, the literature emphasises the complex role of followers in virtual team effectiveness, highlighting their accountability for project success, their role in addressing organisational challenges, and the importance of fostering a culture of mutual trust and collaboration between leaders and followers.

*Follower autonomy*

The analysis of literature places a significant emphasis on followers being relatively autonomous because of virtual work dynamics' limited exposure to their leader. The literature particularly refers to the followers' sense of commitment, self-leadership, self-motivation and taking ownership of deliverables. The key elements of commitment involve believing in the organisation's mission and vision, strongly identifying with its values, aims, and goals, and dedicating one's energy, intellect, and time to achieving these objectives (Puni et al., 2021). Similarly, Castellano et al. (2021) stress the pivotal role of commitment in addressing challenges within virtual teams, fostering team identification, engagement, and loyalty, emphasising the need for a strong sense of dedication among team members. Yarberry and Sims (2021) also highlight the importance of workers' self-efficacy in navigating virtual work environments, suggesting that high levels of self-efficacy enable individuals to overcome isolation and proactively pursue career success. In leaderless groups with proficient followers, potential leaders may ascribe effective followership to leadership qualities, leading them to develop an inherent leadership identity and distinguish themselves as leaders from the group, as suggested by Jiang et al. (2021).

However, for Puni et al. (2021) "normative commitment" refers to an individual's determination to stay with an organisation out of a sense of obligation. Castellano et al. (2021) found that commitment mediates the relationship between self-leadership and team performance, particularly in self-directed leadership styles, highlighting the impact of individual commitment on team success. Tunk and Kumar (2023) further emphasise the significance of strong self-efficacy for virtual work, indicating that individuals who believe in their ability to handle remote work challenges are better suited for virtual environments, necessitating supportive organisational environments. However, Oc et al. (2023) state that roles in the process are dynamic, swiftly shifting between leading and following, with changes in influence dynamics, where effective leaders are receptive to influence from those traditionally considered followers (Oc et al., 2023).

Tramontano et al. (2021) categorise remote workers into three groups: the "Distrustful self-shielding," typically younger and inexperienced in remote work; the "Unhealthily dedicated," known for their constant availability; and the "Well-adjusted," who prefer remote work. The distrustful group relies on self-protective strategies for work-life balance, while the unhealthily dedicated group faces challenges in setting boundaries despite their dedication. From assessing the sentiment presented above by various authors one could infer that the "well-adjusted" and perhaps even the "unhealthily dedicated" categories of workers could be more inclined to embrace autonomy in remote work settings; however, this remains to be tested.

Competent followers are poised to handle significant tasks autonomously, easing leaders' burden and enabling them to focus on other work areas, with managers likely to rate such followers higher in goal attainment contribution. Similarly, followers exhibiting candour are perceived as more prone to sharing vital information and suggesting improvements, thus also receiving favourable evaluations on goal attainment contribution, while those with shared goals are anticipated to receive positive assessments for their dedication to advancing goal achievement (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022).

While the discussion above examines the followers' inherent appetite for autonomy, Adamovic et al. (2022) highlights the critical role of a conducive virtual work environment in encouraging employees to embrace virtual work, particularly those with low virtual work self-efficacy, stressing the importance of technology training, tools, and supportive practices. In addition to this view, some authors emphasise the role the virtual leader plays in enabling this self-efficacy. Höddinghaus et al. (2023), for example, state that increased self-management demands participatory leadership behaviours that foster autonomy during virtual work, highlighting the need for leaders to initiate personalised interactions and support team members in setting goals. Batirlik et al. (2022) assert that leaders play a crucial role in enhancing team self-management skills and fostering shared leadership, emphasising the importance of task leadership and cultivating trusting relationships to improve overall team performance in virtual environments. However, Jiang et al. (2021) argue that organisations ought to incentivise and acknowledge effective followership in the workplace, encouraging a collective effort among employees to foster the development of new leaders. However, Puni et al. (2021) indicate the complexity of establishing a definitive relationship between leadership and employee commitment due to varying empirical findings influenced by environmental and cultural factors, thus necessitating further research.

*Feeling valued*

Virtual followers' need to feel valued emerges in some of the research which is examined further below.  Puni et al. (2021) highlight the significance of emotional commitment, emphasising that employees who feel appreciated become advocates for their organisation, underscoring their importance as valuable assets. Yarberry and Sims (2021) point out that virtual followers often seek increased interaction with their leaders to feel appreciated and supported, suggesting a need for leaders to initiate regular communication with their teams. However, Efimov et al. (2020) suggest that virtual followers feel supported when they can collaborate effectively within their teams, indicating that leadership support is not always the primary factor in fostering a sense of value among followers.

Cook et al. (2020) found that facilitating remote work and promoting collaboration within teams contributed to virtual workers feeling appreciated by their organisations and exhibiting a more positive attitude towards remote work. Additionally, these workers expressed feeling exceptionally supported through virtual communication with colleagues, leading to increased team cohesion and a sense of camaraderie despite physical separation. This suggests that creating opportunities for virtual interaction and providing support during challenging times can enhance followers' sense of worth within their teams.

Furthermore, participants in the study conducted by Yarberry and Sims (2021) expressed a desire for increased accessibility to their supervisors and mentors in order to feel appreciated and acknowledged, emphasising the importance of maintaining regular communication for both well-being monitoring and support for knowledge and career growth. Similarly, Young et al. (2020) highlight a discrepancy in recognising followers' contributions, with followers often undertaking leadership tasks and providing valuable input without receiving adequate credit. This tension between followers' contributions and their recognition within organisational hierarchies underscores the importance of acknowledging and valuing the contributions of virtual followers to foster their engagement and commitment.

*Relationship with peers*

Virtual followers building relationships with their peers emerged in the literature below as vital for effective collaboration and team dynamics in virtual work settings. Unlike in physically dispersed work environments, where tasks are conducted primarily in person, virtual collaboration relies heavily on online platforms, highlighting the importance of collective actions by team members to enhance communication among colleagues (Batirlik et al., 2022). Bell et al. (2023) emphasise the significance of open communication among followers, leaders, and coworkers in addressing personal needs and challenges, contributing to well-being in virtual work environments. This highlights followers' active participation in

shaping the social dynamics of virtual teams by fostering a supportive and inclusive work culture through open dialogue.

Yarberry and Sims (2021) reveal that participants preferred collaborating with colleagues or utilising on-site resources to strengthen their ideas, indicating that remote and independent work negatively impacted their feelings of teamwork and belongingness. To mitigate the "out of sight, out of mind" tendency, followers must actively maintain connections with both their leader and colleagues, while avoiding counterproductive behaviours (Bell et al., 2023).

Norman et al. (2020) delved into the dynamics of leader–follower relationships, suggesting that the quality of these relationships is influenced by ongoing interactions. They propose that repeated quality interactions can strengthen the trust dynamic over time, highlighting the importance of followers' consistent engagement with leaders and peers in building trust and rapport within virtual teams. Furthermore, Jiang et al. (2021) elaborate on the role of followers in influencing leader emergence and behaviours within groups. They suggest that organisations can design projects involving more joint effort and collaborative work to enable team members to enact effective followership throughout the team process, indicating that followers' active engagement and collaboration with peers can contribute to leader emergence and team effectiveness in virtual work contexts.

However, the literature also acknowledges the complexity of leader–follower relationships in virtual settings. Norman et al. (2020) note that these relationships encompass both personal and professional aspects, suggesting that maintaining positive relationships outside of work may be challenging despite expressing dissatisfaction with work-related arrangements. This highlights the nuanced nature of followership dynamics in virtual teams, where followers must navigate both personal and professional dimensions to foster effective relationships with leaders and peers.
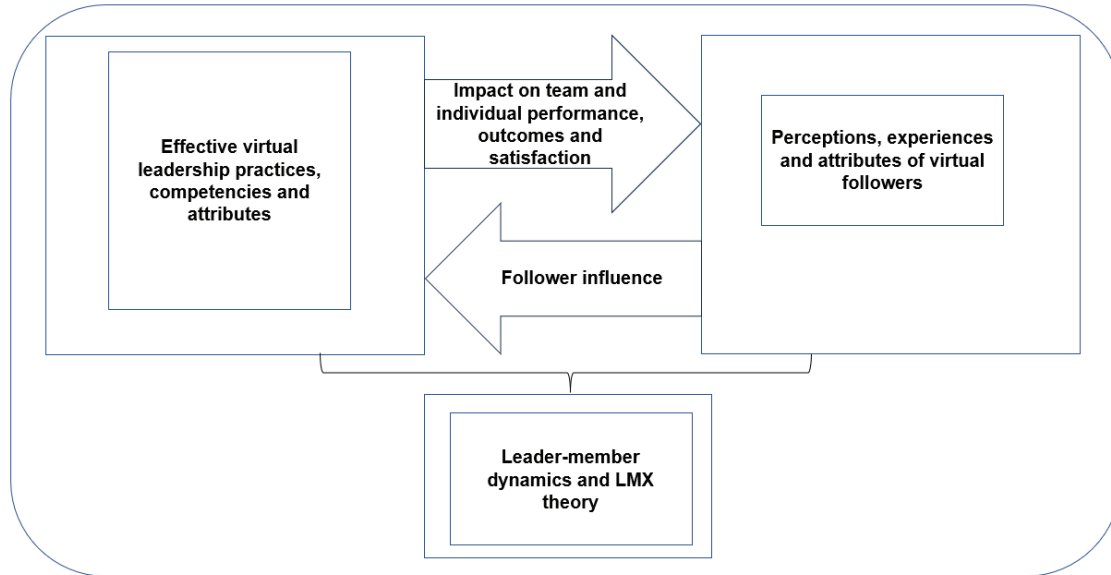
## 2.5    CONCLUSION



**Figure 2:** *Theoretical Framework of this Research (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

In conclusion, "to know where we are going with leadership research, we must know where we are, and where we have been—we must look backward and forward at the same time" (Hunt & Dodge, 2000 p. 453).  Figure 2 illustrates the framework of this research. While the literature on virtual leadership practices, competencies and attributes is vast, there is a gap in the understanding of the effectiveness of these practices, competencies and attributes from the lived experience and perceptions of virtual followers. Similarly, although the literature contains perspectives and findings in support of the followers' account of virtual leadership effectiveness, the content is scant. Furthermore, the role of virtual followers and their attributes were also examined in the literature review. The gap lies in fully understanding the perceptions, experiences and attributes of virtual followers and the impact thereof on the effectiveness of the virtual team leader. The reciprocal nature of the leader–follower relationship in virtual teams was therefore examined through the lens of the LMX theory to highlight the gaps that require further exploration.

# CHAPTER 3:  RESEARCH QUESTIONS

## 3.1    INTRODUCTION

In the process of systematic literature mapping, formulating well-crafted research questions that align with the study's primary objective and serve as a roadmap for the entire investigation is a critical initial phase, as clear and apt guidance is indispensable to prevent the research from deviating off course due to a poorly devised plan (Almaliki, 2023). This section highlights the research question and provides an explanation for the three sub-research questions that emerged from the literature review conducted in Chapter 2.

## 3.2    RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS

Existing studies have predominantly focused on leader attributes, overlooking the valuable perspective of followers (Oc et al., 2023). To fill this knowledge gap, this research study, titled "Virtual Leadership Effectiveness: A Qualitative Study of Follower Experiences and Perceptions," sought to conduct a review of virtual leadership and followership literature. Its primary objective was to gain insights into followers' perceptions and lived experience of effective virtual leaders. The research question, "What are the practices of effective virtual leadership as perceived and experienced by virtual followers?" guided the study's aim to elucidate the specific traits, behaviours, and approaches that virtual followers recognise as indicative of effective virtual leadership. The following research sub-questions emerged out of identifying the gaps in the literature from this review:

1. **What discernible practices, competencies and attributes do effective virtual team leaders demonstrate, as recognised by followers within virtual teams?**

The literature review underscores the need to explore the discernible practices, competencies, and attributes of effective virtual team leaders as recognised by followers (Ben Sedrine et al., 2021; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). Existing gaps highlight a lack of understanding regarding specific leadership behaviours and the variability in leadership approaches, both of which are critical for virtual contexts (Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2021b).

In this study, effective virtual leadership was not gauged by scientific criteria, but rather by its emphasis on nurturing interpersonal bonds among team members and promoting collaborative task execution (Ben Sedrine et al., 2021). Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) assert that the main objective of virtual team leaders is to assist employees in achieving productivity, fostering a supportive environment, and improving team efficiency in remote settings. Furthermore, there

is a dearth of research on how leadership practices are perceived by followers within virtual teams, impeding the evaluation of virtual leaders' effectiveness (Azukas, 2022; Höddinghaus et al., 2023). Moreover, the absence of empirical evidence on effective virtual leadership practices hinders the provision of practical guidance for virtual leaders and organisations (Contreras et al., 2020).  Lastly, the neglect of specific practices contributing to leader–follower relationships highlights the need to explore interpersonal dynamics in virtual contexts, drawing insights from the LMX theory (Bell et al., 2023; Larson & DeChurch, 2020; Zeuge et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing knowledge on effective virtual leadership and enhancing organisational outcomes.

2. **How do virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader– follower relationship?**

This research sub-question stemmed from identified literature gaps, emphasising the need to explore virtual followers' perceptions of the leader–follower relationship. Existing research primarily focuses on leadership behaviours, neglecting the crucial follower perspective (Azukas, 2022; Efimov et al., 2022; Höddinghaus et al., 2023).  Additionally, while trust is vital in virtual teams, specific practices for building and maintaining trust are underexplored, necessitating further empirical investigation (Bell et al., 2023; Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Hemshorn de Sanchez et al., 2022). Understanding the development and impact of trust in virtual teams requires deeper exploration, particularly from the followers' viewpoint, highlighting the importance of addressing this research gap (Efimov et al., 2022; Jarvenpaa et al., 2004).

3. **What are the inherent and developed attributes of followers in the virtual work environment, and how do these attributes contribute to achieving team goals, considering the influence of virtual leadership?**

This third and final research sub-question addresses the multifaceted role of followers in virtual team effectiveness. The literature emphasises the need for followers to possess social skills, adaptability, collaboration abilities, and self-management, all crucial for achieving team goals (Bell et al., 2023; Larsson & Nielsen, 2021; Oc et al., 2023; Young et al., 2020). Followers' motivation and interactions with leaders also influence organisational effectiveness and dynamics (Liu et al., 2022; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).  Additionally, followers serve as defenders of organisational values, fostering accountability and continuous improvement (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Young et al., 2020). Cultivated attributes such as accountability, autonomy, feeling valued, and peer relationships contribute to team success, influenced by effective virtual leadership (Bell et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2021; Puni et al., 2021; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

## 3.3    CONCLUSION

The identified research question and its sub-questions addressed in this chapter have stemmed from the literature review in Chapter 2, revealing gaps in understanding the dynamics of virtual leadership and follower perceptions.

The main research question and research sub-questions identified in this chapter aim to fill gaps in understanding virtual leadership and followership dynamics. They address the need to explore specific leadership practices recognised by followers, understand follower perceptions of leader–follower relationships, assess the impact of effective virtual leadership on follower satisfaction and team outcomes, and examine the attributes of virtual followers and their role in achieving team goals. Addressing these questions provide valuable insights for enhancing virtual team effectiveness and leadership practices.

Moving forward, Chapter 4 will focus on the research methodology employed to investigate these research questions, outlining the research design, data collection methods, and analytical approaches utilised to address the gaps identified in the literature.

# CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines and justifies the methodology and design employed in this study, including details on the population, level and unit of analysis, sampling method, sample size, research instrument, data collection process, and data analysis procedures, as well as measures taken to ensure research quality and rigour. Additionally, limitations of the research design and methods are addressed, with a focus on ethical considerations, including the ethical clearance process. The chapter also elaborates on the research's quality and rigour, particularly emphasising internal validity and the procedures incorporated into the design to enhance it, given the qualitative nature of the research. Furthermore, considerations regarding the transferability and credibility of the results will be discussed below.

## 4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design delineates how the research will be conducted (Polonsky & Waller, 2019). This section justifies the research philosophies, research approach, research strategy, time horizon of the research and the research methodology employed in this study.

### 4.2.1 Research Philosophies

Research philosophy, exploring fundamental inquiries about reality, knowledge, and values, provides the framework for conducting research (Bauer, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). It involves ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Billups, 2021).In this study, an interpretivist perspective was adopted to understand social phenomena deeply. Unlike natural sciences, interpretivism uncovers meaning from subjective viewpoints, emphasising diverse perspectives (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2019). It recognises individual interpretations shaped by social interactions (Rahi, 2017), aligning with the study's focus on virtual followers' experiences and perceptions of effective virtual leadership. Ontologically, interpretivists view organisations as dynamic processes, acknowledging multiple interpretations within social contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). This research explored how virtual followers construct realities within virtual teams. Epistemologically, interpretivists prioritise understanding individuals' interpretations and perspectives (Saunders et al., 2019). Through qualitative interviews, this study delved into subjective experiences, aiming to develop insights into effective virtual leadership. Axiologically, interpretivists recognise the value-laden nature of research and strive for empathy with subjects (Saunders et al., 2019). This study was mindful of researcher biases and values, prioritising understanding virtual followers' perspectives.

Methodologically, interpretivists prefer qualitative approaches for in-depth exploration (Saunders et al., 2019). The use of qualitative interviews aligns with this preference, allowing nuanced exploration of virtual followers' experiences and perceptions.

## 4.2.2  Research Approach

In this study, subjective evidence from participants' perceptions and experiences was analysed to understand how virtual leaders effectively lead their teams through employing a qualitative methodology, enabling the generation of fresh insights from established principles (Saunders et al., 2019). While existing literature suggests that effective virtual leadership yields positive outcomes and boosts follower satisfaction within virtual teams (Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020), there is a need for further research addressing the present study's objective of delving into followers' perceptions and lived experiences of effective virtual leadership.

A qualitative approach was chosen as it allowed the researcher to maintain proximity to the research participants and avoid being perceived as detached (Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, Efimov et al. (2022) and Höddinghaus et al. (2023) argue that leadership research has favoured quantitative methods and encourage scholars to explore leadership using a qualitative approach to gain deeper insights into the concept across various contexts.

The inductive approach to theory development involves deriving hypotheses from observations rather than starting with pre-existing theories. This method allows researchers to identify patterns from empirical data, leading to the development of hypotheses within the research process (Farmer & Farmer, 2021). Qualitative research is often associated with the inductive approach, as it allows researchers to approach their subject matter without preconceived ideas, letting the empirical world dictate which questions are worth exploring (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Given that qualitative research aims to comprehend participants' lived experiences from their viewpoint, employing methods like ethnographic research, grounded theory, and phenomenological studies characterised by an inductive approach where observations and data collection precede the formulation of specific hypotheses or theories (Farmer & Farmer, 2021), an interpretivist ontological inductive approach was thus adopted in this study.

## 4.2.3  Research Strategy

The research strategy involves the systematic collection and interpretation of data aligned with specific objectives (Rahi, 2017). As explained in the section above, the most appropriate research strategy for this study was a qualitative research strategy, specifically a phenomenological study. Getting qualitative data in this research allowed the researcher to answer the research question through the experiences of the participants.

Edmund Husserl, known as the father of phenomenology, described his philosophy as a study of pure experiences, urging a change from just accepting things as they seem to questioning and understanding them better (Beck, 2021). A phenomenological study therefore seeks to understand how people experience a particular phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019), which in this study was followers' lived experiences and perceptions of effective virtual leadership practices. Qualitative research is best suited for exploring complex phenomena (Bouncken et al., 2021) such as leadership practices in a virtual context, and phenomenology is particularly useful for studying the first-hand accounts of individuals' existence or encounters (Frechette et al., 2020).

Through a phenomenological study, data were collected through in-depth interviews with virtual followers to understand their experiences and perceptions of effective virtual leadership practices (Lester et al., 2020; Turesky et al., 2020). The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to identify patterns and themes in the data and develop a comprehensive understanding of followers' experiences and perceptions of effective virtual leadership practices (Brown, 2021).

### 4.2.4  Time Horizon

This study was cross-sectional, conducted from October 2023 to December 2023. A cross-sectional study examines a specific phenomenon within a defined timeframe (Saunders et al., 2019). As this research was conducted as part of the requirements for the Master of Philosophy (Change Leadership) degree, the timeframe was primarily determined by the duration of this degree programme. This allowed the researcher to get an understanding about a phenomenon, namely the perceptions of virtual followers, therefore the cross-sectional timeframe was appropriate.

The condensed timeframe influenced several critical aspects of the study. For example, the sample selection was driven by the need to identify and interview participants within this short window. The limited timeframe prompted consideration of participant availability, leading to the deliberate selection of individuals employed by the same organisation as the researcher, which notably fulfilled a key criterion by having embraced virtual work for over four years.

### 4.2.5  Research Methodology

Notably, the literature reviewed revealed a gap in research on virtual leadership from a follower-centric perspective, which qualitative research can address by providing valuable insights into the factors contributing to effective virtual leadership practices (Dumulescu & Muţiu, 2021). Consequently, qualitative research becomes a powerful tool in enabling a comprehensive exploration of effective virtual leadership practices from virtual followers'

perspectives, taking into consideration individual experiences within complex team dynamics and providing practical implications for optimising virtual team performance and trust in digital work environments (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Alam (2022) further supports the capability of qualitative research to encompass diverse viewpoints thereby allowing for the examination of unique individual characteristics and varied follower experiences through interviews with virtual followers.

## 4.3    POPULATION

The population, encompassing all individuals or items under study, includes those displaying specific behaviours and characteristics investigated by researchers (Rahi, 2017; Saunders et al., 2003). In this research, the population of interest comprised virtual followers within a global organisation that adopted remote work as part of its employee offerings, transitioning to a hybrid work model in 2022, accommodating various remote and office work arrangements. It is noteworthy that virtual teams, as described in existing literature, are intentionally structured for remote collaboration, often operating outside traditional office settings with limited face-to-face interactions (Larson & DeChurch, 2020).

The selected organisation, a global petrochemicals company in Johannesburg, South Africa, employs thousands of employees, many of whom must be physically present at company plants. However, office-based employees have been working remotely since the March 2020 pandemic lockdown, a practice the company has sustained. With exposure to diverse virtual leadership practices in an organisation with established virtual work norms and processes, virtual followers within this company were chosen as participants to provide insights into the effectiveness of virtual leadership based on their perceptions and experiences. This aligns with the trend highlighted by Tramontano et al. (2021), indicating organisations' increasing flexibility and reliance on remote technologies, particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were selected from this organisation to offer firsthand insights into virtual leadership, reflecting the deeply ingrained remote and hybrid work culture of the company. The research sample comprised employees who spent over 40% of their time working remotely, as per the organisation's criteria for remote work eligibility. Twenty individuals from these departments were randomly chosen and invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. Seventeen of them agreed to participate in the study.

## 4.4    SAMPLING

For this qualitative study on virtual follower perceptions and experiences of virtual leaders within an organisation with a longstanding virtual work culture, the researcher sought participants with a minimum of three years of virtual work experience, consistent with the

organisation's definition of virtual workers as those spending at least 40% of their workweek remotely. This criterion ensured that selected participants had sufficient tenure in virtual work to offer meaningful insights into virtual leadership within the organisational context.

The sampling strategy employed purposive sampling, intentionally selecting participants to maximise data relevance for addressing the research question (Johnson & Chauvin, 2020). Twenty individuals meeting the eligibility criteria were randomly chosen from various departments within the organisation and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Seventeen participants consented to join the study, providing diverse perspectives on virtual leadership across different geographical locations within the company.

This sampling approach aligns with the qualitative research philosophy and design, prioritising purposeful selection to deepen understanding rather than broadening it (Bell et al., 2019)). Additionally, Rahi (2017) underscores the importance of identifying a sampling frame from the target population which, in this study, consisted of virtual followers familiar with virtual work practices within the organisation.
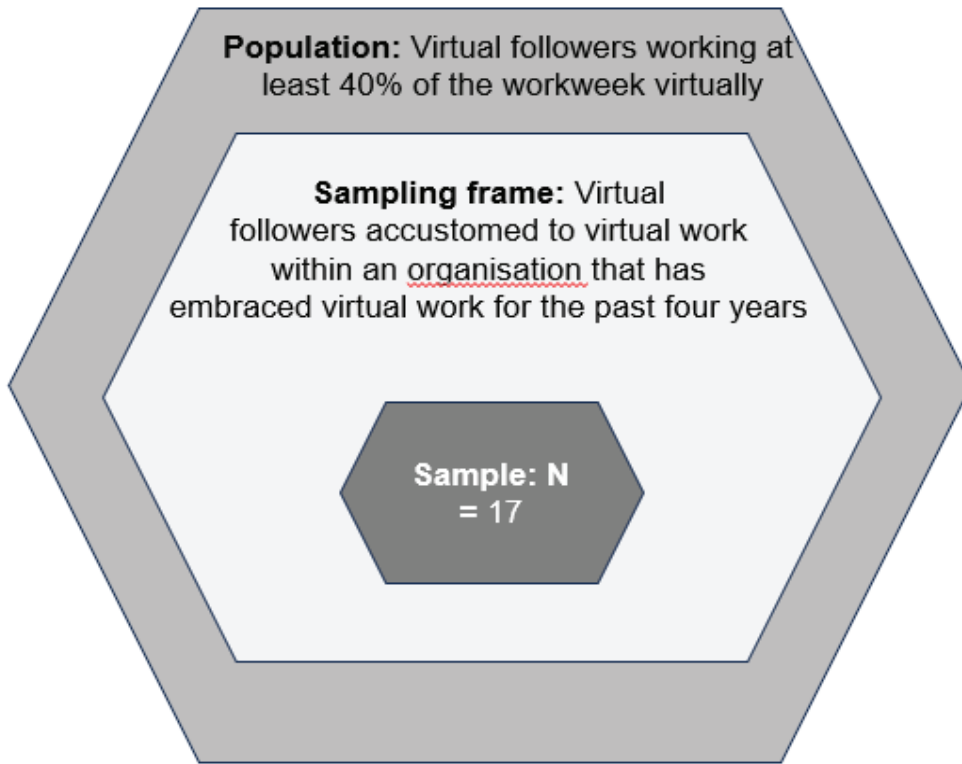
**Figure 3:** *The Sampling Process for the Study adapted from Rahi (2017)*

The sample frame (Rahi, 2017) for this study comprised virtual followers within an organisation that has embraced virtual work for the past four years. The sample frame was determined by identifying individuals within the organisation who had accumulated significant experience with virtual work. This criterion was applied based on the length of time participants had been engaged in virtual work, specifically requiring a minimum of three years of virtual work experience. This criterion is crucial for external parties to apply objectively, as it provides a clear and measurable benchmark for determining eligibility (Rahi, 2017). External parties can assess whether potential participants meet the minimum threshold of three years of virtual work experience, allowing for consistent and transparent selection criteria.

These criteria were significant for answering the research question because they ensured that selected participants possessed sufficient familiarity and exposure to virtual work

environments. By targeting individuals with a minimum of three years of virtual work experience, the study aimed to capture insights from participants who had encountered various virtual leadership practices and had adapted to the nuances of virtual teamwork over an extended period. This enables a deeper exploration of virtual followers' perceptions and experiences of effective virtual leadership, providing rich and meaningful data to address the research objectives comprehensively.

Employing a selective sampling approach, the researcher deliberately targeted virtual followers who possessed extensive experience within an organisation that had embraced virtual work for a minimum of four years. As a result, sample units were chosen non-randomly, with selection criteria established through informed judgment (Sharma, 2017). The researcher utilised their prior knowledge to identify employees who had been engaged in remote work for at least 40% of their time over the preceding three years or longer and approached them to participate in the study. While selective sampling may encounter criticism for potential bias, it can facilitate the generalisation of findings, particularly when sample units exhibit homogeneity or shared exposure to the same phenomenon (Sharma, 2017). This approach allowed for the inclusion of participants who had amassed substantial experience with virtual work, ensuring that the sample comprised individuals deeply immersed in virtual team dynamics and interactions, thereby enhancing the study's ability to capture comprehensive insights into virtual leadership effectiveness within the organisation.

Only employees who had worked at least 40% of the workweek for a period of three years or longer were considered for the study. Below is the breakdown of the percentage of the 20 participants who were invited to participate in the study, along with the percentage of time they worked remotely:

- Fifteen percent worked remotely 100% of the time.

- Fifteen percent worked remotely 80% of the time.

- Fifty-five percent worked remotely 60% of the time.

- Fifteen percent worked remotely 40% of the time.

Of the 20 employees that were invited to participate in the research, 17 accepted. In qualitative research, the number of interviews typically ranges from 15 to 25, influenced by both the available time and resources for the research and the principle of diminishing returns (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

This study employed a non-probability, purposive, heterogeneous sampling approach. Non-probability sampling techniques are often utilised in business and management research due

to the absence of a sample frame resulting from the large population size (Saunders et al., 2019). The purposive sampling method entails the researcher's judgment in selecting cases that effectively address the research questions (Saunders et al., 2019).

Durdella (2019) suggests that employing a deliberate participant selection method, such as criterion sampling based on predefined eligibility criteria, ensures alignment with research objectives and ethical considerations regarding the inclusion of consenting human subjects. The researcher specifically selected participants for the survey who had worked remotely for at least 40% of their workweek for three years or more. Judgmental sampling, also known as purposive sampling, involves the researcher's judgment in selecting individuals knowledgeable about the issue, providing a convenient and cost-effective method with a specific purpose (Rahi, 2017).

Choosing an appropriate sample size remains a significant hurdle for researchers as it requires careful consideration due to its substantial impact on statistical analyses (Rahi, 2017). Saunders et al. (2019) recommend that the researcher should exercise discretion in selecting cases that effectively address the research question and achieve their research goals. In organisational and workplace studies, there is no specific number of samples required for qualitative research, but to establish credibility according to evidence-based guidance, the researcher should aim to conduct 15 to 17 interviews (Saunders et al., 2019). The sample size of 20 potential participants was determined based on the recommendation made by Gill (2020) that the predetermined sample size may need adjustment during the research process. Seventeen of the 20 potential participants agreed to participate in the study. This sample size proved to be adequate to reach saturation, achieving depth of understanding rather than breadth, and ensuring no new information emerged from additional data collection (Boddy, 2016).

## 4.5    UNIT OF ANALYSIS

In qualitative research, selecting a unit of analysis is essential. According to Bell et al. (2019), the unit of analysis can encompass various entities such as individuals, organisations, groups, or data series. Moreover, defining the unit of analysis marks the initial stage in determining the data to be collected and from whom (Kumar, 2018).

The chosen unit of analysis was employed to enhance the research's credibility, as the selected group of participants could offer authentic perspectives based on their personal understanding of their experiences (Creswell et al., 2007). Therefore, to gain a deeper insight into the researched topic, the unit of analysis for this study was the perceptions and lived

experiences of followers currently engaged in virtual work at least 40% of the time for a period of three years or longer.

## 4.6    MEASUREMENT

Instruments should enable information access and guide interaction in the field, yet regulating human social behaviour is challenging, and there are limits to structuring social interaction (Durdella, 2019). Before proceeding with tool development, the qualitative researcher must define a research problem and purpose, specify collectible data, and refine research questions, which, stemming from the problem and purpose, guide the research design and selection of data collection tools, emphasising the significance of language choice in qualitative studies (Billups, 2021). The preceding sections satisfy these requirements.

Furthermore, in qualitative research, the researcher is considered an integral part of the measuring instrument and plays a vital role in interpreting conclusions from the gathered data, incorporating subjectivity into the process (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). According to Saunders et al. (2019), the interview guide is the plan for conducting semi-structured interviews and includes introductory remarks, a list of topics to cover, questions and cues to prompt discussion, and closing remarks. Therefore, in addition to the researcher as the measurement instrument, an interview guide was utilised to ensure consistency across all interviews being conducted.

The intention of the interviews was to gather more in-depth qualitative data about the followers' perceptions of effective virtual leadership practices. This allowed for understanding the essential practices, competencies, and attributes of successful virtual leaders, which Mysirlaki and Parakeva (2020) state has become increasingly significant for gaining insights into how virtual teams can operate more effectively. The interview guide used for the interviews is included as Appendix 1. The process through which the researcher collected and analysed the data gathered is explained in the next section of this report.

## 4.7    QUALITY CONTROLS

*Data collection*

A single data collection and analysis approach, known as mono-method, for data (Saunders et al., 2019) was used. After receiving ethical clearance from GIBS, permission was sought from the organisation chosen for participant recruitment to conduct the research within the organisation and during official work hours. Selecting the study site involved gaining preliminary knowledge about the location and individuals involved, typically through negotiations, discussing participation, scheduling data collection, building trust, familiarising

oneself with the research environment, and understanding local dynamics. Addressing these aspects during negotiations aids in resolving logistical concerns and informs participant selection strategy throughout the fieldwork process (Durdella, 2019). However, Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) highlight potential consent challenges in institutional interviews, where securing consent from a superior might subtly pressure employees to participate. However, the researcher leveraged organisational approval when seeking participants' agreement, enhancing the study's credibility. After obtaining authorisation from the organisation (refer to Appendix 3), the researcher, who was also an employee, identified eligible participants based on the criteria specified in section 4.4. Initially, an email was sent to 20 eligible employees, detailing the research's objectives, participant responsibilities, and interview procedures, and they were requested to respond indicating their interest in participating and providing availability options.

Before scheduling interviews, the informed consent form (see Appendix 2) was shared with them, and they were asked to sign and return it to the researcher. Participants were then scheduled for interviews. Prior to the interviews, they were provided with a list of interview themes to familiarise them with the topic, aiming to enhance credibility (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviews took place between October 2023 and December 2023.

Given an interpretivist approach and the objective of establishing causal relationships through descriptive statements and explanations derived from lived experiences, interviews were selected as the research instrument. During these interviews, the researcher aimed to comprehend the topic from the participants' viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives. Depending on the nature of the research, the type of interview can vary (Bell et al., 2019). In this interpretative and exploratory study, semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather data. The lack of specific guidelines for conducting interviews allows for flexibility in utilising the interviewer's expertise, understanding, and intuition, whereas interview investigations typically involve fewer standardised procedures compared to survey studies, where methodologies are often predetermined through standardised questionnaires and statistical analyses of responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview guide utilised for the interviews is included as Appendix 1.

A pilot interview was conducted to test the process ahead of conducting the interviews. When conducting a pilot interview, it is crucial to ensure that the sample closely resembles the ultimate target group and follows the same sampling and data collection methods to evaluate how the administration functions in the field (Eichhorn, 2021). Furthermore, at the construction of the research guide it is common to use pilot interviews to chart the main aspects of a topic and test how survey questions are understood (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interviews

were audio recorded, with detailed notes taken. Interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams owing to the respondents working virtually and the organisation's preference for Microsoft Teams for all virtual meetings. The respondents' and the researcher's cameras were turned off due to the instability of the network because of electricity loadshedding. Before commencing with the interviews, participants were informed that the interview was being recorded and they were once again reminded of the contents of the informed consent form that they had signed and returned ahead of the interviews. Informed consent involves briefing research subjects on the study's purpose, design, potential risks, and benefits, posing challenges in exploratory interview studies where investigators may have limited prior knowledge of interview dynamics, while also ensuring participants freely participate and understand their right to withdraw at any point (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

Although participants were deliberately chosen based on them meeting the two main criteria, namely, working remotely at least 40% of the workweek for a period of three years or longer, at the commencement of the interviews, participants were queried about their familiarity with working in virtual teams for the purpose of the recording. Durdella (2019) maintains that using alternative names safeguards the anonymity of participants involved in data collection. Therefore, pseudonyms were allocated to the participants for confidentiality and are used to label their quotations in Chapter 5. The aim of the interviews was to acquire a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and lived experiences of effective virtual leadership. Qualitative data collection involves gathering rich textual descriptions of people, places, events, processes, and emotions through engaging in conversations, listening to stories, and narratives shared by individuals (Durdella, 2019). To that end, perspectives were garnered through participants openly sharing their perceptions and experiences of virtual leadership. To facilitate a seamless and fruitful discussion, open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews were used, allowing participants to gather their thoughts and express their viewpoints coherently. Additionally, the researcher intermittently engaged in dialogue, posing follow-up questions to afford participants the chance to elaborate further and clarify their responses as necessary.

**Table 1**

*Participant Profile and Interview Details*

| # | Pseudonym | Level in organisation | Location | % of time working virtually | Duration of interview (mins) | Transcript pages |
|---|-----------|----------------------|----------|----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| 1 | Shanon | Middle Management | George | 100% | 30: 28 | 11 |
| 2 | Wendy | Middle Management | Secunda | 100% | 38:45 | 12 |
| 3 | Ally | Senior Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 110:30 | 27 |
| 4 | Nolita | Senior Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 61:42 | 18 |
| 5 | Mary Jane | Middle Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 76:87 | 20 |
| 6 | Dawie | Senior Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 68:28 | 20 |
| 7 | Mason | Junior Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 50:58 | 21 |
| 8 | Stanford | Middle Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 49:51 | 15 |
| 9 | Jason | Non-managerial | Johannesburg | 60% | 56:09 | 6 |
| 10 | Simphiwe | Junior Management | Knysna | 100% | 57:07 | 15 |
| 11 | Oratile | Non-managerial | Johannesburg | 60% | 58:19 | 18 |
| 12 | Nick | Non-managerial | Johannesburg | 60% | 56:11 | 20 |
| 13 | Carey | Junior Management | Johannesburg | 60% | 49:18 | 12 |
| 14 | Kate | Junior Management | USA | 60% | 41:47 | 13 |
| 15 | Viven | Non-managerial | Johannesburg | 60% | 24:20 | 9 |
| 16 | Thabo | Non-managerial | Johannesburg | 60% | 57:25 | 19 |
| 17 | Lisa | Non-managerial | Johannesburg | 60% | 42:30 | 14 |
| **Total number of interview minutes and transcription pages:** | | | | | **927.55** | **270** |

**Table 1:** *Participant Profile and Interview Details (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

The robustness of the qualitative data collection process is evident through the execution of 17 semi-structured interviews, encompassing nearly 16 hours of interview time and yielding a comprehensive corpus of 270 transcription pages. This extensive data collection effort

underscores the thoroughness and rigour with which the research was conducted, ultimately contributing to the robustness and validity of the study's findings. The depth and richness of insights gleaned from participants regarding their perceptions and experiences of virtual leadership within the organisation reinforces the credibility and reliability of the study's outcomes.

Moreover, the flexibility in interview duration, varying from 24 to 110 minutes, reflects the thoroughness and detail with which participants engaged in the discussions. This variability in interview lengths demonstrates the commitment of participants to share their perspectives openly and comprehensively, ensuring that no aspect of their experiences was overlooked or rushed.

The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Transcribing the interviews allowed for the researcher to add authenticity and depth to the data collection process. It demonstrates the researcher's commitment to accuracy and allows for a deeper understanding of participants' responses. This hands-on approach ensured quality and consistency in the transcripts, enhancing the credibility of the study's findings. The interview, initially a dynamic exchange between two individuals, is transformed into a written form through transcription, which then serves as the foundational empirical data of the project, representing a translation from oral to written narrative modes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Transcripts underwent a thorough review to identify and remove any inadvertent disclosure of confidential information by participants, with some sections redacted for this paper. The sanitised transcripts were subsequently uploaded to Atlas.ti software for the data analysis process detailed in the following section.

Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored without identifiers to protect the identity of participants as outlined in the interview guide and consent form in accordance with the ethical undertakings made to GIBS. This data will be stored for a minimum of 10 years on a cloud-based platform.

*Data analysis*

Qualitative data analysis involves processing, transcribing, de-identifying, storing, segmenting, and coding data, as well as identifying patterns and developing narrative themes, with data analysis occurring continuously throughout the study, culminating in an overall thematic structure towards the investigation's conclusion (Durdella, 2019). Data analysis clarifies the significance of the data, transforming it into valuable information that can address the research objectives and overarching problem, thereby meeting the research's requirements (Polonsky & Waller, 2019). Thematic data analysis is depicted as a three-stage process involving

preliminary analysis, thematic analysis, and interpretation, with subsequent stages incorporating insights from literature concepts and fieldwork memos to refine data collection instruments and continue data collection activities (Durdella, 2019).

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded to Atlas.ti and coded. To avoid the risk of misquoting interviewees, recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed as text data (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). The coding process yielded 230 codes. The codes were further analysed and categorised into 11 axial codes. The data were coded, categorised, and analysed using computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Coding involves assigning keywords to text segments for later identification, while categorisation involves a systematic conceptualisation enabling quantification. Although often used interchangeably, coding is fundamental in content analysis, grounded theory, and computer-assisted analysis of interview texts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Coded themes were created to find meaning, and the findings were organised thematically to identify and analyse themes and patterns in qualitative data. Throughout and following data collection, the emphasis lies on utilising concepts to guide the development of codes for organising data into meaningful segments, incorporating participant quotes into memos, while in the final analytical phase, conclusions are drawn by synthesising coded data into larger segments to explore relationships, followed by a detailed examination of patterns, themes, and contrasts to narrate the data story and prepare for discussing the interplay between theory and practice (Durdella, 2019). The codes were categorised further and resulted in four selective codes or themes. The findings and themes will be discussed in the next chapter and form the basis of the data triangulation.

Data saturation occurs when collecting additional data yields minimal to no new insights (Saunders et al., 2019). The number of codes generated for each interview was tracked progressively to create a saturation curve for the research findings. The data from the interview transcripts generated 230 codes for 17 interviews. The codes were then analysed and clustered into categories and themes, as elaborated in the previous sections of this chapter.

Table 2 below represents the cumulative number of codes and the new number of codes gene rated after each interview.

**Table 2**

*Cumulative Codes, Quotations and Number of New Codes Generated*

| Participant # | Cumulative # of codes | # of quotations | # of new codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 77 | 25 | 50 |
| 2 | 107 | 19 | 48 |
| 3 | 119 | 32 | 40 |
| 4 | 185 | 39 | 32 |
| 5 | 211 | 50 | 12 |
| 6 | 217 | 50 | 9 |
| 7 | 133 | 33 | 9 |
| 8 | 75 | 19 | 7 |
| 9 | 167 | 36 | 4 |
| 10 | 199 | 36 | 2 |
| 11 | 191 | 35 | 1 |
| 12 | 128 | 28 | 4 |
| 13 | 147 | 35 | 4 |
| 14 | 86 | 22 | 4 |
| 15 | 195 | 49 | 2 |
| 16 | 86 | 24 | 2 |
| 17 | 87 | 30 | 0 |

**Table 2:** *Cumulative Codes, Quotations and Number of New Codes Generated (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

Figure 4 below depicts the saturation curve derived from the research findings, indicating that minimal insights were obtained from Participant 10 onward.
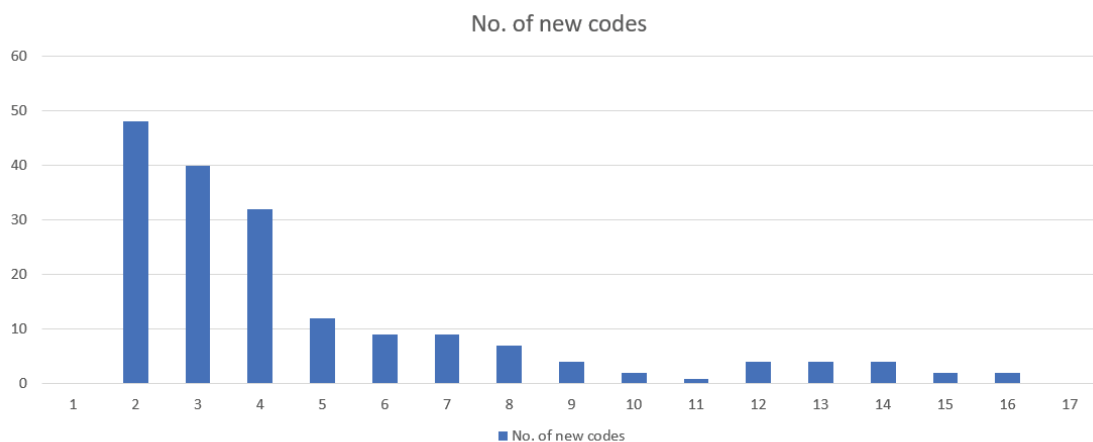


**Figure 4:** *Data Saturation Graph (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Data quality*

Qualitative researchers use credibility and trustworthiness to determine the quality of data used (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Researchers pursue excellence in their work, with some focusing on validity or rigour, while others stress trustworthiness, which includes credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Bailey, 2018). Rigour was assessed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bell et al., 2019); these four aspects of rigour are examined in this section. By transcribing the interviews, the words and meaning from the interviews were captured.

Internal validity was ensured through the varied questioning approach, as reflected in the convergence of codes and the validation process which will be discussed in Chapter 6. This aligns with the requirement for meticulous examination or measurement of the intended phenomenon within a specific context, a critical aspect for qualitative researchers. Credibility hinges on the thoroughness of research methods rather than achieving absolute accuracy, highlighting the importance of transparent methodological approaches for accurate assessment by others (Bailey, 2018). Furthermore, validity, which signifies the truth, correctness, and strength of a statement, encompasses various factors such as soundness, justifiability, and persuasiveness of an argument. In the social sciences, validity pertains to the effectiveness of a method in exploring its intended subject matter (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

To ensure credibility, the following steps were taken. A semi-structured interview guide, informed by literature, was utilised to prepare the researcher adequately, limit bias in question formulation, and ensure clarity. Pilot testing of the interview guide ensured question clarity and consistency across participants, facilitating easy data comparison during analysis. Regular assessment of participants' comprehension of interview questions ensured relevant and comprehensive responses. Verbatim transcription of audio recordings guaranteed accurate documentation, while interviews continued until data saturation to ensure reliability. As the researcher was an employee at the same organisation as the participants, they had prior knowledge of participants that fit the criteria and was therefore able to ensure diverse perspectives, enhancing credibility through alignment with research objectives and thematic scope. Finally, obtaining written permission from the organisation to conduct interviews with its employees during official work hours bolstered the study's credibility. Participants were provided with a letter of consent, emphasising the organisation's endorsement of the research and granting permission for the researcher to conduct interviews during working hours, thus enhancing the research's credibility.

Transferability is an evaluative criterion for field researchers, indicating the extent to which findings from a specific sample can be applied to the broader population from which the sample was derived, serving as a substitute goal for generalisability (Bailey, 2018). The purposeful sample for this research was selected to represent a specific target population of virtual followers meeting the same criteria. To ensure the transferability of the study, the sample size of N=17 was determined based on recommendations from scholars, aiming to reach data and thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020).

Confirmability necessitates demonstrating a close alignment between findings and data, acknowledging the researcher's subjective involvement without endorsing biased work. Instead, by transparently illustrating the congruence between data and conclusions and reflecting on potential influences, bias is minimised, emphasising the researcher's centrality while documenting personal biases, especially in critical paradigms, thus enabling others to assess confirmability more effectively through detailed research documentation (Bailey, 2018). Confirmability, emphasising objectivity, was maintained by valuing precision and accuracy, seeking input from other researchers, and refraining from influencing natural environments. To mitigate bias in this qualitative research, an interview guide with open-ended questions was utilised, having been piloted to eliminate any misleading inquiries. Additionally, the researcher validated transcriptions to rectify inaccuracies caused by mispronunciations or accents, ensuring the intended message was accurately conveyed.

Dependability, akin to reliability, refers to the consistency and trustworthiness of research findings, assessed by their reproducibility across time and researchers, including the stability of interviewee responses and the consistency of transcriptions and analyses among different individuals involved in the process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). To ascertain the reliability of participant sentiments, repetitive questioning yielded consistent responses, while the researcher, having conducted the interviews, triangulated information from memory, interview notes, and the transcribed text.

Triangulation enhances research validity and trustworthiness by employing multiple methods to ensure consistency and gain a comprehensive understanding of participants and the setting (Bailey, 2018). The study aimed to explore virtual followers' perceptions of effective virtual leadership, prioritising trustworthiness through detailed findings and triangulation with existing literature. Rigorous sampling criteria were applied to ensure only participants meeting specific criteria were included, facilitating a comprehensive grasp of virtual leadership experiences, and reducing bias. Additionally, some participants served as both virtual followers and leaders, allowing for triangulation of their perspectives by soliciting feedback on shared experiences from both roles.

## 4.8    ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics encompasses more than mere paperwork; it involves conducting research in a manner that prevents harm and extends to the communication and interpretation of results, ensuring accurate reflection of the literature, thus necessitating ethical considerations throughout all stages of a business research project (Polonsky & Waller, 2019). There are several ethical considerations that were considered in this study. Firstly, the privacy and confidentiality of participants were respected throughout the research process. This included obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring that their identities and personal information are kept confidential, and providing them with the option to leave the study without facing any consequences at any point (Saunders et al., 2019).

Secondly, the study ensured that there was no harm or potential to jeopardise the respondents' privacy (Saunders et al., 2019). Lastly, the study has acknowledged and cited any previous research that has been conducted in the field and has avoided any plagiarism or unethical practices in presenting the results of the study (Saunders et al., 2019). This included ensuring that all sources were properly cited, and any data or analysis presented in the study is accurate and representative of the findings.

## 4.9    LIMITATIONS

Limitations refer to weaknesses that could potentially be beyond one's control, such as insufficient resources, research design, or statistical constraints (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). While the proposed study on effective virtual leadership practices from the perspective of virtual followers addresses an important practical and academic problem, there are several limitations that need to be considered.

While the sample was carefully chosen based on two crucial criteria—working remotely for at least 40% of the workweek and for over three years—all participants were from the same organisation. It should be noted that the researcher is also employed at the same organisation as the participants. Although a pre-existing relationship as colleagues existed between some of the participants, this dynamic proved to be more beneficial than limiting as participants were more at ease to engage with the researcher openly. Furthermore, all participants were reminded of the anonymity of their participation and therefore felt comfortable being frank and transparent about their lived experience of virtual leaders.

The study's ability to gather data from a broad and varied sample size may have been restricted by time limitations. Consequently, this could impede the extent to which the findings can be applied to other virtual teams.

**CHAPTER 5:  FINDINGS**

**5.1     INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, the data, insightful perspectives, and insights collected from participants who work virtually are presented, exploring their perceptions and experiences of virtual leadership effectiveness. As revealed in Chapters 2 and 3, the literature review uncovered a gap in research probing follower perspectives and experiences of virtual leadership effectiveness. To address this gap, the research was conducted within an organisation with an established practice in embracing virtual work.

This chapter includes a description of the organisation within which the research was conducted and focuses on the outcomes of the interviews by providing detailed findings from the analysis of the collected data. The findings and interpretation presented in this chapter encompass the code groups, categories, and themes that emerged from the data.

**5.2     COMPANY BACKGROUND**

The interviews were conducted within a single organisation, a global petrochemicals company headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa, where all participants were employed. These participants, who were permanent employees assigned to roles not necessitating physical presence at any of the company's plants, worked remotely either part-time or full-time. The remote work arrangement was initiated during the March 2020 pandemic hard lockdown mandated by the South African government and has since persisted. While provisions were made for plant personnel or "essential workers" to commute to the plants during the lockdown, office-based employees were equipped with the necessary technology and data to work from home.

Despite the relaxation of lockdown measures, the company chose to continue supporting remote work as part of its employee value proposition strategy, prompting some employees to relocate while remaining employed by the company. In 2022, the company transitioned to a hybrid work model, mandating that employees spend a minimum of 40% of their workweek in the office. For employees who relocated away from the office, individualised arrangements were made, with contracts either permitting full-time remote work or stipulating a requirement to spend a full week per month in the office instead of commuting twice a week. Some employees were granted permission to work remotely 100% of the time.

Given the deeply ingrained nature of remote and hybrid work practices in this organisation's policies, culture, and operations, participants were intentionally selected from within this

organisation to participate in this research and provide insights into their first-hand experiences and perceptions of their virtual leader.

## 5.3   PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

In the previous section, a description of the thematic analysis process used for conducting content analysis was provided.  As introduced earlier, the analysis yielded 229 codes, 11 categories, and four themes. Figure 5 below provides an overview of these themes.

As detailed in Chapter 3, the main research question aimed to investigate the practices of effective virtual leadership as perceived and experienced by virtual followers. To achieve this, the interview was structured into three parts, aligned to the research sub-questions discussed in Chapter 3:

1. What discernible practices, competencies and attributes do effective virtual team leaders demonstrate, as recognised by followers within virtual teams?
2. How do virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship?
3. What are the inherent and developed attributes of followers in the virtual work environment, and how do these attributes contribute to achieving team goals, considering the influence of virtual leadership?

The findings relating to these research sub-questions are presented under the four themes illustrated in Figure 5
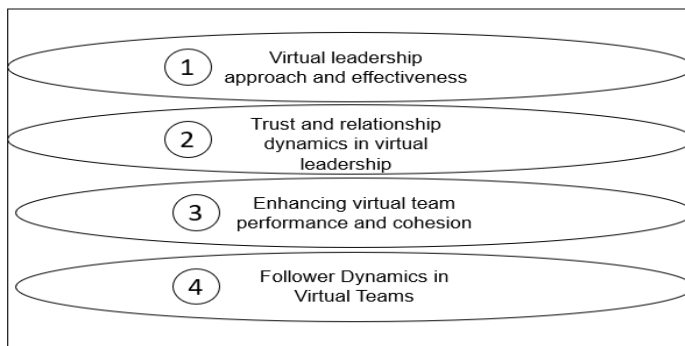


**Figure 5**: *This Study's Four Themes (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

**5.3.1 Research sub-question 1:** *What discernible practices, competencies and attributes do effective virtual team leaders demonstrate, as recognised by followers within virtual teams?* The findings pertaining to this research question are clustered under Theme 1 and Theme 2 below.

**5.3.1.1 Theme 1: Virtual Leadership Approaches and Effectiveness**

The efficacy of virtual leaders in supporting, guiding, and communicating with their teams was explored to understand the dynamics and outcomes from the perceptions and experiences of participants. This section explores key aspects of virtual leadership, including the leader's support and guidance, communication style, and practices. Insights gleaned from participant perspectives shed light on how leaders shape team cohesion, motivation, and overall effectiveness in virtual team settings.
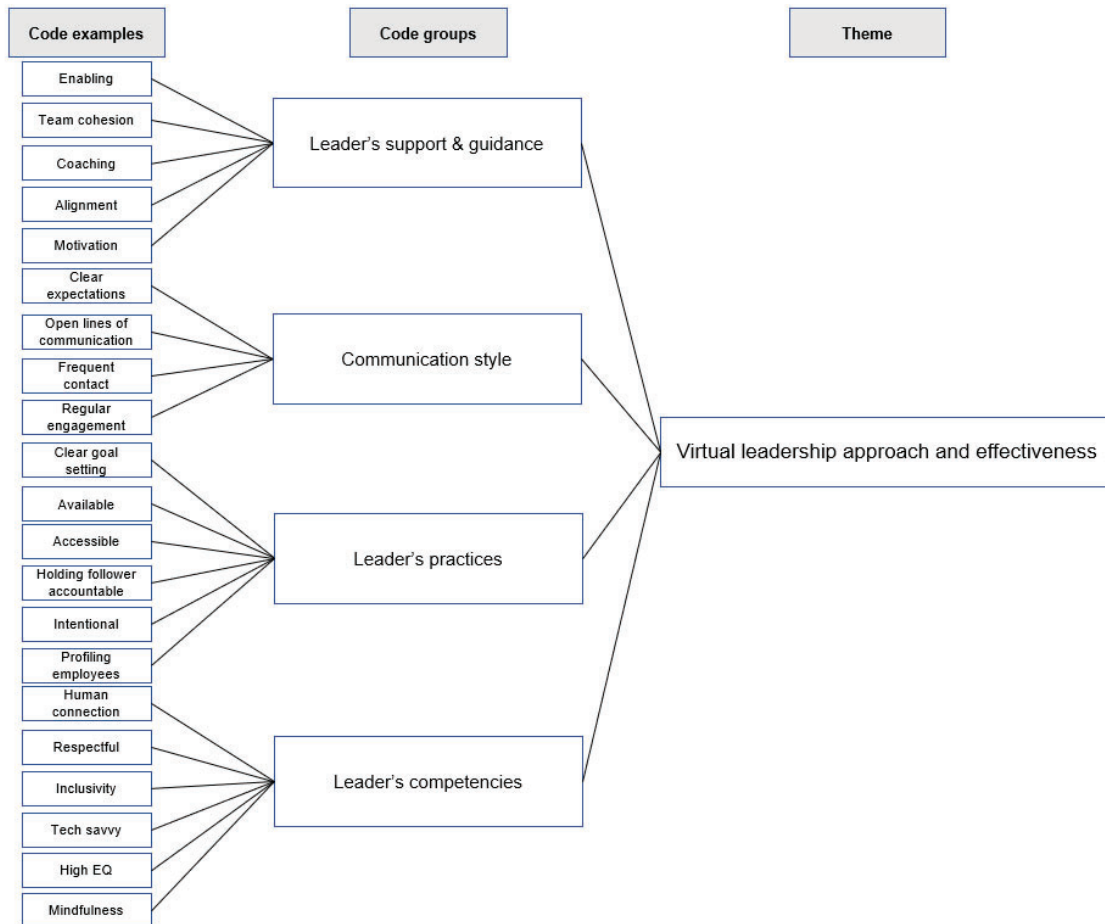


**Figure 6:** *How Theme 1 Emerged (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

Figure 6 illustrates the codes, categories, and eventual theme derived from the thematic analysis. Participants were queried about their perceptions and experiences regarding the quality of the leader-follower relationship in virtual teams, and its influence on team outcomes and their overall experience of virtual leadership. The subsequent discussion presents findings pertinent to this research sub-question, with relevant excerpts from the interviews and the researcher's interpretations thereof depicted in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6.

*Leaders' support and guidance*

Participants in the study dissected the impact of the leader's support and guidance on their motivation and commitment to the virtual team's goals into two primary actions: enablement and fostering team cohesion. Those who prioritised enablement highlighted the leader's provision of technological tools and their capability to facilitate connections within the organisation. Conversely, others emphasised the virtual leader's efforts to enhance team cohesion, particularly through social connections.

| Leaders enable their followers by providing necessary tools, or by connecting them to others in the organisation and to their vision: | |
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| ***Enablement:***<br><br>*"My leader excels at enabling me as well. So, the power, which pertains to the accountability side, is truly about ensuring that I have the necessary tools needed to perform tasks."* (Mary Jane)<br><br>*"I believe there's a significant level of flexibility in terms of how teams deliver and present their work. It's an opportunity to explore how we can improve our processes with the tools we've been provided, particularly with virtual work, where we now have access to resources we didn't have before."* (Thabo) | Importance of leaders providing necessary tools and resources for task performance. This tangible support, including access to technology and resources, was seen as pivotal in fostering motivation and commitment among team members. |
| ***Fostering team cohesion:***<br><br>*"He consistently connects me with others, often introducing me via email whenever I require it. So, I suppose that's where the reassurance stems from."* (Kate)<br><br>*"I believe a leader's role is to support and guide us as team members and followers. While they can certainly inspire and motivate us, their primary responsibility is to connect us to their vision so that we wholeheartedly buy into it."* (Nolita) | Leaders foster team cohesion by emphasising the importance of connecting team members to each other and to the broader organisational vision. Leaders who actively facilitate connections and foster a sense of belonging contribute to greater motivation and commitment. |

| |
|---|
| *"The team meeting format requires a different person each week to introduce a theme, ranging from discussing top five books to childhood favourite bands. Themes are communicated via email the day before the meeting. During the session, everyone shares their thoughts or experiences related to the theme. It encourages participation and fosters an enjoyable atmosphere. Despite initial skepticism, it has proven effective and entertaining for over two years, with new themes weekly. It's a productive and enjoyable hour, ensuring engagement and collaboration among team members."* (Nick) | |

**Table 3:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 1: Leaders' support and guidance (Source: Researcher's compilation*

*Communication Style*

Participants explained that effective communication lies at the heart of successful virtual leadership, with clear expectations serving as a cornerstone for guiding teams toward their goals. However, concerns arose among participants regarding the communication practices of some virtual leaders, with a number expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of effective communication hindering their ability to connect with their leader's vision and expectations. This section delves into the role of virtual leaders in ensuring regular engagement, highlighting the importance of connectivity and addressing challenges associated with absent or disengaged leadership in virtual environments.

| The leader's communication style significantly affects engagement and collaboration in virtual teams, with participants emphasising the importance of clear expectations, routine communication, and consistent engagement, while expressing concerns about ineffective communication hindering their ability to connect with the leader's vision and fulfil their roles effectively. | |
|---|---|
| Interview excerpts | Interpretation |
| ***Clear expectations:***<br><br>*"At the start, I emphasised the importance of establishing a clear vision for the team, whether it's a project team, a functional team, or any other group."* (Thabo)<br><br>*"Those weekly check-ins were important; you leave there having a clear sense of direction as to what it is that I need to focus on for the week ahead."* (Kate) | The importance of a virtual leader establishing a clear vision for the team, regardless of its nature, came across strongly while the others emphasised the value of weekly check-ins in providing a clear sense of direction for individual tasks and priorities. These insights shed light on the critical role of leadership in guiding teams toward their goals. Additionally, several participants expressed concerns about their virtual leaders' ineffective communication hindering their ability to fulfil their roles or feel connected to the leader's vision and expectations. |
| ***Regular engagement:***<br><br>*"that one-on-one engagement when you're virtual, because you don't get to have those* | The critical role of virtual leaders in maintaining ongoing engagement and connectivity within online teams was highlighted, particularly in the absence of face-to-face interaction. Participants pointed out the importance of routine connection |

| | |
|---|---|
| *random conversations with people and find out where they're at."* (Thabo) | opportunities like daily check-ins to prevent feelings of disconnection among team members. While consistent engagement, including spontaneous discussions, was emphasised by some, concerns were raised about leaders who were absent or avoided interaction, leaving team members to rely on themselves or their peers for validation and support. |

**Table 4:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 1: Communication Style (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Leaders' Practices*

The codes used within the category "Leader practice" primarily denote the observable behaviours and actions exhibited by leaders in their interactions with followers and in the execution of their leadership roles. These practices encompass a broad spectrum of behaviours, including communication style, decision-making approach, conflict resolution strategies, delegation methods, and attitude towards feedback and accountability. Each code represents a specific behaviour or practice that leaders engage in, such as being accessible, accountable, approachable, collaborative, empowering, and results oriented. These practices reflect how leaders engage with their teams, set expectations, handle challenges, and foster a positive work environment.

| The findings highlight the importance of setting clear goals, maintaining transparent communication, and leader accessibility, particularly in the context of virtual work, with participants emphasising the benefits of open-door policies, mutual accessibility, and regular check-ins for fostering effective collaboration and productivity, despite some concerns regarding negative leadership behaviours: ||
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| ***Setting clear goals and clear communication:***<br><br>*"I believe clear communication, setting expectations, aligning goals, accessibility for feedback, fostering trust, promoting motivation, and creating a positive work environment are all crucial."* (Wendy)<br><br>*"When the vision is clear and everyone is working towards a common goal, it serves as a guiding 'north star' for the team. Without it, there's a lack of direction."* (Nolita) | The results highlight the interconnectedness of setting clear goals, transparent communication, and maintaining a clear vision in effective leadership. Participants emphasised the importance of these elements for achieving team success, underscoring the need for goal alignment and cohesive direction to foster productivity and collaboration within teams. |
| ***Accessibility:***<br><br>*"The lessons from our virtual leader, such as the open-door policy and approachability, have been instrumental. We've adopted these* | The importance of leader accessibility in virtual work settings was stressed, with participants highlighting the positive impact of leaders who are constantly available and approachable. This accessibility fosters effective communication, |

| | |
|---|---|
| *principles across our teams, from leadership to lower-level members, creating consistency and unity in our approach.”* (Oratile)<br><br>*“My team leader is always accessible anytime of the day whenever, in meetings or not.”* (Wendy)<br><br>*“I mean there can be days, even a week, I won't even speak to him. Because stuff's going on. If he needs to get hold of me, I can get hold of him. He needs to get hold of me he can and vice versa, particularly if I need to sound something out.”* (Ally)<br><br>*“I believe what truly facilitates my productivity is the accessibility of my team leader. When I say accessible, I don't expect them to be available 24/7, understanding that they have various responsibilities. However, knowing that my messages or calls will be promptly returned is invaluable. ... In an office setting, constant interruptions can be challenging to avoid, but in a remote setup, this accessibility can be managed more efficiently.”* (Mary Jane) | prompt responses, and efficient time management, contributing to enhanced productivity within teams. Additionally, the concept of mutual accessibility was mentioned, emphasising the importance of both leaders and followers being accessible to each other. These practices, influenced by leaders' behaviours, have been implemented throughout teams, promoting consistency and unity across several departments within the organisation. |
| ***Intentional:***<br><br>*“And the action was that he did not display a sense that he knew the answers to everything that we needed to solve for. He was quite deliberate in sort of asking across the different discipline areas what had been done.”* (Ally)<br><br>*"I would literally diarise, and I will make time to have just a quick check-in with my team members, even if it is just sending a message or having a quick weekly check-in, even if it's for 15 minutes, but just to make that time.”* (Dawie)<br><br>*“The virtual leader must schedule sessions, make the sessions regular and try and commit to regular engagement.”* (Carey) | The findings indicate various approaches taken by virtual leaders to enhance team engagement and collaboration. Some leaders are intentional in creating opportunities for connection and engagement, while others prioritise seeking input from diverse perspectives to foster collaborative problem-solving. Additionally, scheduling regular check-ins with team members, even briefly, was highlighted as important for maintaining communication and connection in a virtual setting. However, concerns were raised about leaders who consistently display negative behaviours, such as distrusting followers and questioning productivity when team members are not visibly present, suggesting a need for more supportive and inclusive leadership approaches. |

**Table 5:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 1: Leaders' Practices (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Leader Competencies and Attributes*

In contrast to the codes used for "Leader practices," those for "Leader competencies and attributes" primarily delineate the underlying skills, traits, and qualities that contribute to leaders' effectiveness in guiding others. These competencies encompass a diverse array of abilities and characteristics, including communication skills, emotional intelligence, adaptability, empathy, integrity, resilience, and technological proficiency. Each code signifies

a specific skill or trait that enhances a leader's capacity to lead effectively, such as active listening skills, agility, authenticity, compassion, confidence, and relationship building. These competencies reflect a leader's ability to comprehend and connect with followers, navigate challenges, and achieve organisational goals.

| The research revealed the importance of nurturing genuine relationships, mindful behaviours, and emotional intelligence in virtual leadership, emphasising the need for human connection, careful communication, and inclusive leadership to foster trust, collaboration, and effectiveness within virtual teams: | |
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| **Human connection:** <br><br> *"Creating that human connection as well."* (Shanon) <br><br> *"Even if it's on Teams, to say, 'Hi, how are you?' ... Also, what works well for us is we have a team WhatsApp group where we never discuss work stuff."* (Simphiwe) <br><br> *"We have our regular check-in meetings once a week, but on one Wednesday every month, we prioritise catching up over lunch."* (Oratile) | The findings illustrate the significance of nurturing genuine relationships within virtual teams, with participants emphasising the importance of human connection beyond work-related tasks. They highlighted the role of simple gestures, such as regular check-ins and informal catch-ups, in building trust and rapport among team members, fostering a sense of camaraderie and support. |
| **Mindfulness:** <br><br> *"In a virtual setting, the leader needs to be adaptable. In the absence of being physically present, they also need to be mindful of their choice of words and tone of voice as these can easily be misinterpreted."* (Jason) <br><br> *"It's about being clear about what's urgent and what's not, as well as being mindful of what's important and what's not. It's about managing expectations consistently."* (Nolita) <br><br> *"I think she likes having me as the behind-the-scenes generator of deliverables because it takes the pressure off her, but she's always very cognisant that I've got a lot on my plate."* (Simphiwe) | Mindful behaviours seem to be essential for effective leadership in virtual environments, as participants emphasised the need for careful consideration of communication, expectations management, and task delegation. They highlighted how mindfulness can mitigate misunderstandings in virtual communication, help manage expectations, and ensure equitable workload distribution among team members. |
| **High EQ:** <br><br> *"It's essential not to take things personally and to approach challenging situations with curiosity rather than defensiveness."* (Nolita) <br><br> *"The line manager also needs to have a high level of empathy and emotional intelligence and be perceptive to what employees may be going through."* (Jason) <br><br> *"As a virtual team leader, you need emotional intelligence to understand where you need to* | The findings suggest that emotional intelligence (EQ) plays a crucial role in effective virtual leadership, as participants highlighted its importance in managing interpersonal dynamics and fostering strong connections within virtual teams. They highlighted the need for leaders to be open to feedback, perceptive of their followers' experiences, and adept at using technology platforms. Additionally, some participants noted the importance of respectful and inclusive leadership behaviour, while others expressed concerns about leaders lacking |

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| *contribute to the team's satisfaction and create a stronger sense of connection."* (Wendy) | necessary leadership skills in the virtual environment. |

**Table 6:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 1: Leader Competencies and Attributes (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Summary*

These findings illustrate that effective virtual leadership is multifaceted, encompassing various dimensions such as support, guidance and effective communication practices. As highlighted by participants, leaders who prioritise enablement through technological tools and foster team cohesion through social connections contribute to enhanced motivation and commitment within virtual teams. Clear communication, regular engagement, and adept leadership practices further bolster team effectiveness and cohesion.

### 5.3.1.2  Theme 2: Enhancing virtual team performance and cohesion

Enhancing performance and fostering cohesion are paramount for achieving collective goals and driving success. This thematic exploration delves into the multifaceted factors influencing team performance and outcomes within virtual teams. From fostering positive connections between leaders and team members to understanding the impact of leadership practices on team performance and outcomes, participants offered invaluable insights into the strategies, behaviours, and outcomes associated with virtual team dynamics.
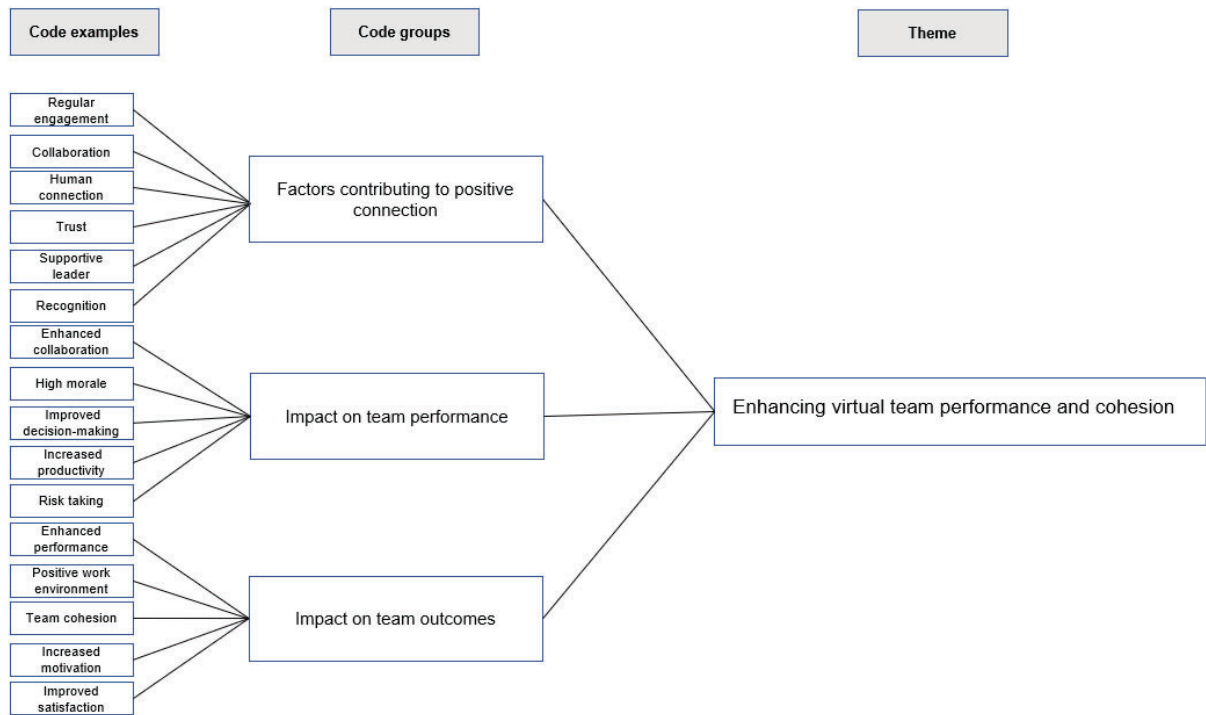
**Figure 7:** *How Theme 2 Emerged (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

Figure 7 illustrates the codes, categories, and eventual theme derived from the thematic analysis. Participants were asked about the specific actions and skills exhibited by effective virtual team leaders, as recognised by them as virtual followers, and how these behaviours influence team performance and satisfaction. The subsequent discussion delves into the findings related to this research question, presenting relevant excerpts from the interviews and the researcher's interpretations thereof depicted in Tables 7, 8 and 9.

*Factors Contributing to Positive Connections*

The findings on fostering a positive connection between virtual leaders and team members emphasise the importance of regular engagement, human connection, and collaboration. Participants stressed the leader's role in initiating interactions to keep the team informed and cohesive. Conversely, the lack of structured time for team interactions hindered positive connections. Additionally, genuine care beyond work-related matters was highlighted as crucial for fostering a strong human connection. However, sincerity in establishing this connection was deemed essential. Perspectives on collaboration varied, with some noting its positive impact, while others cited limited opportunities.

| Regular engagement with the virtual team leader is crucial for fostering a positive team connection, emphasising the importance of establishing a human connection and collaboration within the virtual team environment: | |
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| ***Regular engagement:***<br><br>*"My leader has regular, structured contact with us at our EXCO meeting for example, ensuring that everyone knows what's going on and he knows what's going on as best as possible."* (Ally)<br><br><br>*"I would say a virtual leader who invests in building and strong relationships with me or their followers are more likely to lead successfully in virtual teams."* (Wendy)<br><br><br>*"My virtual leader does not prioritise and allocate time for the team. For instance, conducting weekly check-ins will go a long way in contributing to a positive connection."* (Dawie) | Regular engagement with the virtual team leader was highlighted by participants as crucial for fostering a positive connection within the team. A few participants emphasised the leaders' use of structured meetings to keep everyone informed, including the leader themselves. Another participant explained that investing in strong relationships allows the virtual team leader to lead more successfully. Conversely, another participant noted that the leader's lack of prioritised time allocation for team interactions, such as conducting regular check-ins, hinders the development of a positive connection between the leader and the team. |
| ***Human connection:***<br><br>*"I think one of the key factors for me is that the team leader creates a human connection, not just a work connection."* (Shanon)<br><br><br>*"Another aspect of effective leadership is demonstrating care for team members, not only regarding work but also their well-being. Even in a virtual setting, leaders can* | A majority of participants emphasised the importance of establishing and maintaining a human connection for fostering a positive relationship between the virtual leader and followers. One participant highlighted the need for sincerity from the leader in establishing this connection. |

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| *foster positivity and connection by checking in with individuals through various means, showcasing genuine concern and support for their team's welfare."* (Dawie)<br><br>*"In online discussions, it's essential to genuinely inquire about how someone is doing outside of work. Otherwise, the interaction can feel superficial and insincere, leading to a lack of genuine connection."* (Carey) | |
| ***Collaboration:***<br><br>*"I think it has been quite positive, in that it allows for, like I said, this connection between the team members as well as a team leader, but also, it's, a good hour and a half in our calendars. And it's really an opportunity to share and collaborate and bring up any obstacles or issues that we're having, and also facilitates, I guess, urgent and critical tasks that need to be completed quickly and efficiently."* (Shanon)<br><br>*"There are limited opportunities for direct collaboration because my leader and I have different strengths and skill sets. While we may work in parallel, true co-creation is not the primary focus in our role."* (Mary Jane)<br><br>*"Teamwork makes the dream work."* (Kate) | The findings reflect varying perspectives on collaboration within the virtual team environment. While one participant praised their virtual team leader's frequent collaboration efforts, another participant stated that the nature of their job does not necessitate frequent collaboration with the virtual leader. However, the majority of the participants offered a different perspective, suggesting that collaboration contributes to a positive connection in the virtual work environment. |

**Table 7:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 2: Factors Contributing to Positive Connections (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Impact on Team Performance*

Discussions with participants highlighted the impact of virtual leadership practices on team performance and illustrated that it is multifaceted, encompassing enhanced collaboration, increased productivity, and high morale among team members. Participants shared diverse experiences that underscore the importance of effective leadership in driving positive outcomes within virtual teams.

| Effective collaboration in virtual teams thrives with inclusive meetings and positive leader-follower connections, bolstered by trust, transparency, and feedback, while ineffective leadership may lead to low morale and hindered performance: | |
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| ***Enhanced collaboration:***<br><br>*"So, essentially, when the leader couldn't provide clear instructions, the team members had to rely on each other to figure things out and get the job done."* (Mason)<br><br><br>*"After establishing our initial objectives, we regrouped with our direct leader to clarify the task and develop a strategy across different communication disciplines. We worked quickly, meeting frequently every second day to ensure alignment and progress, with an ultimate deadline at the end of the week. Overall, the experience with my immediate leader was positive; they were responsive, and communication flowed easily."* (Ally)<br><br><br>*"I think collaboration within a virtual team creates a safe environment for each member and we are obviously more willing to share our ideas or ask for help if needed.* | The findings suggest that effective collaboration within virtual teams can be facilitated by open-ended, inclusive meetings where voluntary participation is encouraged, and ongoing positive connections between the virtual leader and followers contribute to enhanced collaboration experiences. |

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| *We also feel more secure in taking risks and give more feedback and that can also lead to more innovative solutions. So, in my space we really collaborate constantly and I think that is also part of the virtual setup and success."* (Wendy) | |
| ***Increased productivity:*** <br><br> *"We conducted a post-transaction review, focusing on lessons learned. One of the key findings was the high level of trust within the team and between us and our leader. This trust allowed us to approach tasks with confidence, knowing that even if we made mistakes, we would receive support. We felt comfortable discussing and debating ideas, which ultimately fostered a culture of continuous improvement."* (Nick) <br><br><br> *"The transparency in our working relationship contributes significantly to our productivity. Even though there are times when our leader may seem absent, when communication is necessary, such as regarding priorities or deliverables, it's done effectively. This open communication ensures that we are kept informed and allows for a more productive working dynamic. If this transparency were lacking, it could hinder our workflow, but because our leader shares information openly, it fosters a sense of trust and enables us to work more efficiently together."* (Dawie) | The findings suggest that positive relationships between leaders and followers contribute to enhanced productivity in virtual teams, with trust playing a pivotal role in facilitating open discussions and continuous improvement. Transparency and effective communication channels, even amidst perceptions of leadership absence, were emphasised, alongside the significance of synergy and collaboration in achieving successful outcomes. |

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| *"We've been able to harness that synergy and effectively merge our efforts, resulting in successful outcomes. I want to emphasise that this isn't about boasting but rather acknowledging the collective achievements of our team. Our performance metrics reflect this success, with our department achieving the highest customer satisfaction scores in the service improvement domain. This highlights the effectiveness of our collaborative approach and underscores the impact of our combined efforts on overall performance."* (Carey) | |
| ***High morale:***<br><br>*"The achievement we secured as a team was undoubtedly a significant milestone for us, bolstering our confidence and reaffirming our capabilities. This success has propelled the team to new heights, instilling a sense of growth and empowerment among team members."* (Carey)<br><br><br>*"Providing regular feedback and recognising teams for their contributions can significantly contribute to maintaining morale and keeping people motivated."* (Nolita)<br><br><br>*"Another important aspect to consider is recognition and appreciation. These elements play a significant role in boosting* | The findings suggest that strategies aimed at improving virtual team performance and cohesion, such as celebrating achievements and providing regular feedback, can positively impact team morale and motivation. Recognition and appreciation are highlighted as important factors in fostering a positive work environment. However, ineffective virtual leadership practices may contribute to low morale and negatively impact team performance, as noted by some participants. |

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| *team morale and fostering a positive attitude towards work."* (Kate) | |

**Table 8:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 2: Impact on Team Performance (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Impact on Team Outcomes*

Participants shed light on the impact of effective virtual leadership on team outcomes and highlighted that it is multifaceted in that it encompasses team cohesion, increased motivation, and improved satisfaction among team members. Through insights shared by the following participants, valuable perspectives were gained on how various leadership practices contribute to positive team dynamics and overall success within virtual teams.

| These findings reveal the important role of team cohesion and effective leadership in driving outcomes within virtual teams, with emphasis on the positive impact of relationships, collaborative dynamics, and motivational practices on productivity and satisfaction: | |
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| ***Team cohesion:*** <br><br> *"The quality of the relationship I have with my virtual leader and the collaborative dynamic contributes significantly to enhancing team cohesion and productivity, particularly in decision-making processes. Personally, I find that this relationship has had a direct impact on my productivity and performance."* (Wendy) <br><br> *"Through open communication and setting goals collaboratively as a team, there is a sense of accountability that permeates our interactions. This shared accountability fosters a feeling of unity and cooperation among team members, as we all work* | The findings underline the importance of team cohesion in driving outcomes within virtual teams, emphasising the positive impact of relationships between team members and their leader on productivity and decision-making. Key elements such as open communication, collaborative goal-setting, and inclusive virtual meetings were highlighted as contributors to unity and accountability among team members, fostering a harmonious working environment. |

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| *towards a common objective. This, in turn, strengthens the bond within the team as a whole."* (Dawie)<br><br>*"Even team members who were not physically present in the room felt included and represented. Their voices and ideas were acknowledged, fostering a sense of cohesion within the team. There was no feeling of competition; instead, everyone worked together harmoniously. The leader selected the most appropriate individuals to participate in the meeting, ensuring that all perspectives were considered."* (Thabo) | |
| ***Increased motivation:***<br><br>*"But now I feel that with a new change in leadership that I'm more motivated, more engaged, and I've been in a better space than I think I was previously."* (Lisa)<br><br>*"He does try to play to his team's strength by leveraging the skills in the team and bringing in the different perspectives and being open to the different perspectives."* (Ally)<br><br>*"The leader's role is to support and guide team members, fostering motivation and alignment with their vision. While they may not always keep us motivated at 1000%, it's essential for them to connect us to their* | In exploring the influence of effective virtual leadership on team outcomes, a common theme emerged surrounding the boost in motivation among team members. Several participants shared their experiences of heightened motivation and engagement within their teams, crediting various leadership practices and approaches for this positive shift. |

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| *vision, enabling us to fully invest in it."* (Nolita) | |
| ***Improved satisfaction:*** <br><br> *"There is a specific process we follow from an internal communications perspective on a weekly basis, but my leader was flexible in adjusting the approach we initially suggested. Additionally, they took each member's ideas on board, which made a huge difference in contributing to team satisfaction at the end of the day." (Wendy)* <br><br> *"When they trust their leader, there's a very high level of job satisfaction, because we all know that trust in leadership contributes to a positive work environment and performance, among other factors." (Nolita)* <br><br> *"I believe my leader's problem-solving skills are quite astute, largely due to their extensive experience and tenure with the organisation. This enhances their ability to address issues efficiently, leading to more positive outcomes for the team's overall success. With their expertise, we can swiftly identify and resolve challenges, allowing us to progress effectively." (Dawie)* | In exploring virtual team dynamics, insights were provided on factors that contribute to enhanced satisfaction within these contexts. Adaptability and openness to input were emphasised, as leaders who flexibly adjusted processes and considered team members' ideas positively impacted team satisfaction. Trust in leadership was also underscored for its direct correlation with job satisfaction and overall positivity in the work environment. Additionally, leadership experience and problem-solving skills were highlighted as crucial for fostering satisfaction, as adept leaders addressed challenges leading to improved team success and contentment. |

**Table 9:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 2: Impact on Team Outcomes (Source: Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Summary*

As illuminated by participants, effective virtual leadership practices play a pivotal role in shaping team performance and outcomes. From fostering positive connections to driving collaboration, productivity, and morale, leadership practices significantly influence the success of virtual teams. By prioritising regular engagement, human connection, and collaboration, virtual leaders can enhance team performance and cohesion, thereby propelling teams towards achieving their goals in the digital realm. As virtual teams continue to evolve and adapt, understanding and leveraging the impact of leadership on team dynamics remain essential for achieving optimal outcomes and fostering a culture of success in virtual environments.

**5.3.2 Research sub-question 2:** *How do virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship?* The findings pertaining to this research question are clustered under Theme 3 below.

**5.3.2.1 Theme 3: Trust and Relationship Dynamics in Virtual Leadership**

The establishment and maintenance of trust stand as foundational pillars for success, resonating deeply with participants who generously shared their insights into the practices and dynamics shaping their virtual work environments. This section unveils a tapestry of perspectives on trust, delving into the strategies employed by virtual leaders to foster trust within their teams, the quality of relationships nurtured between leaders and followers, and the profound impact of trust on team dynamics.
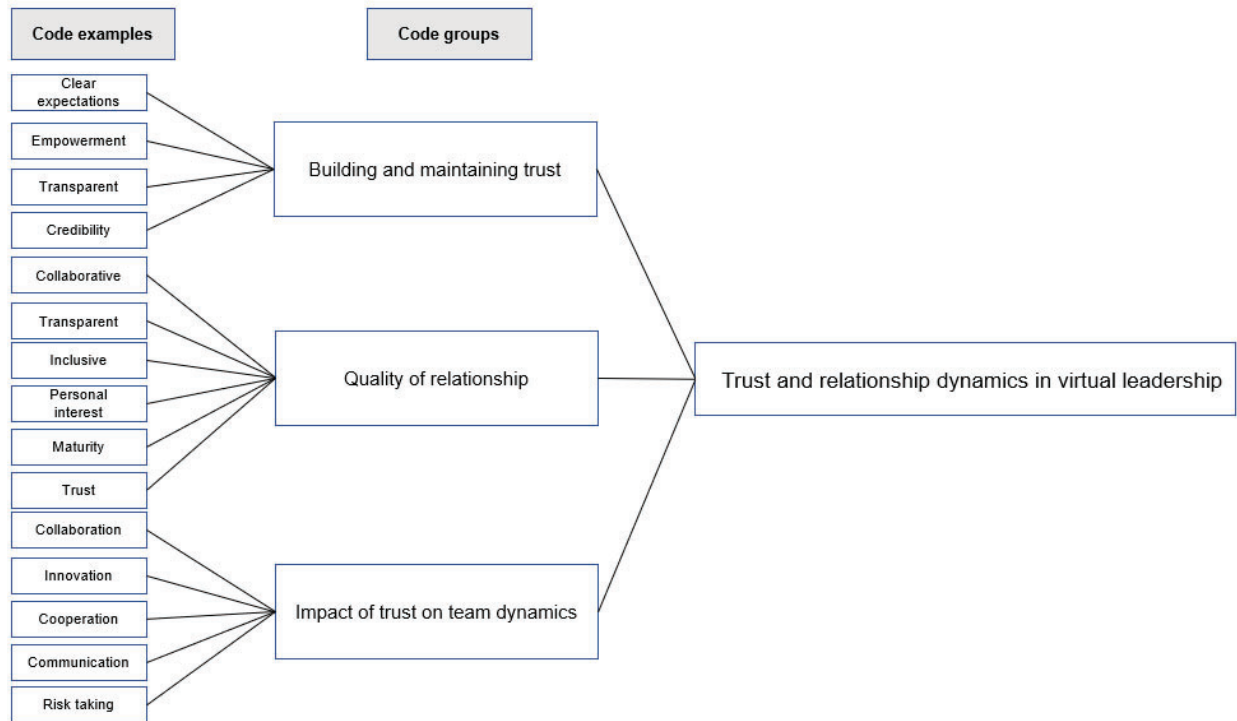
**Figure 8**: *How Theme 3 Emerged (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

Figure 8 illustrates the codes, categories, and eventual theme derived from the thematic analysis. Participants were probed about the methods utilised by adept virtual team leaders to establish and maintain trust among team members, as well as the impact of trust on team dynamics, collaboration, and overall performance, as perceived by virtual followers. The subsequent discussion delves into the findings pertinent to this research question, presenting relevant excerpts from the interviews and the researcher's interpretations depicted thereof in Tables 10, 11 and 12.

*Building and Maintaining Trust*

Establishing and nurturing trust is paramount for the success of virtual teams, as explained by participants that provided valuable insights into how their leaders achieve this. Through actions such as setting clear expectations, empowering team members, and fostering transparency, virtual leaders build and maintain trust within their teams. This section explores the strategies employed by virtual leaders to cultivate trust, highlighting the importance of transparency, empowerment, and consistency, as well as the role of recognition in fostering a trusting environment.

The critical role of clear expectations and empowerment in building trust within virtual teams emerged in the research, emphasising transparency from leaders, the value of autonomy among team members, and the importance of credibility and consistency in leadership, alongside recognition as a factor in fostering trust emerged:

| Interview excerpts | Interpretation |
|---|---|
| ***Clear expectations:***<br><br>*"And I think the team leader does build trust by being very transparent, around, firstly, the allocation of work as well as expectations, and what you need to do."* (Shanon)<br><br>*"I believe that a good leader needs to have a clear plan and a method for executing that plan."* (Mason)<br><br>*"She's clear about the scope of our work, enabling us to understand her expectations and the direction she envisions for the team."* (Carey) | The findings suggest that clear expectations play an essential role in fostering trust within virtual teams. Participants emphasised the importance of transparency from leaders regarding work distribution and expectations, as well as the value of well-defined plans and approaches in enhancing clarity and confidence among team members. Clear expectations were seen as instrumental in helping team members understand the scope of their work and align with the leader's vision for the team. |
| ***Empowerment:***<br><br>*"Once more, my leader's guidance in setting clear expectations and empowering us stands out. We're given the freedom to make decisions, knowing that our virtual leader trusts us, thanks to the clear processes established by them."* (Wendy)<br><br>*"My leader is excellent at empowering me. They ensure that when a task is assigned, I have the freedom to share my expertise, work on it independently, and figure things out."* (Mary Jane)<br><br>*"Transitioning from in-person to virtual leadership doesn't require micromanagement just because you can't physically see everyone. Maintaining a genuine empowerment leadership style, even in a virtual setting, was crucial for his role in the team's performance."* (Nick) | Empowerment emerged as highly regarded among participants as a fundamental aspect of effective leadership, particularly in virtual environments where physical presence is absent. The importance of clear expectations and empowerment from virtual leaders was highlighted, which according to participants, fostered trust and autonomy among team members. Empowerment was seen as enabling team members to leverage their expertise and work independently, ultimately contributing to trust and optimising team performance. |
| ***Transparency:***<br><br>*"The clarity and transparency in their leadership made everyone feel that their efforts and contributions were valued equally."* (Thabo)<br><br>*"In order to build and maintain trust, it involves keeping track, being transparent about what's in your space, honesty and trust."* (Viven)<br><br>*"When we do have team meetings, sharing with the team important information that the team needs to be aware of."* (Dawie) | Participants noted the challenge of building and maintaining trust in virtual environments, emphasising the significance of clarity, transparency, honesty, and sharing important information during meetings as key factors. They also highlighted the importance of their leader's credibility and consistency, with a minority stressing the relevance of recognition in fostering trust from their perspective. |

**Table 10:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 3: Building and Maintaining Trust (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Quality of Relationship*

In this section, participants' perceptions on the inclusivity, trust, and maturity demonstrated by their virtual leaders are examined, shedding light on the factors that contribute to a positive and productive relationship between leaders and followers in virtual teams.

| Participants emphasised the importance of inclusive leadership and mutual trust in fostering a supportive team environment, while also highlighting the role of maturity in effective leadership practices and expressing varying perspectives on leader attentiveness and care: | |
|---|---|
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| ***Inclusive:***<br><br>*"And so, I would describe the relationship as very open, very transparent, amicable, but also, you know, quite inclusive, collaborative."* (Shanon)<br><br>*"In our team, it's important that every voice is heard, and we actively practice inclusivity to ensure everyone contributes. We make a deliberate effort to ask each team member for their opinions and insights on projects, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued."* (Dawie)<br><br>*"My virtual leader established an engaging virtual platform for team interaction, which made us feel valued as individuals rather than just numbers behind a computer screen. It showed that our leaders care about us and want the best for our well-being."* (Kate) | Participants who perceived their leader as inclusive expressed feeling valued and respected, particularly when the leader actively sought input and insights from them. Additionally, some participants noted their leader's efforts to demonstrate care and concern for their well-being, highlighting the importance of fostering an environment where every member feels heard and appreciated. |
| ***Trust:***<br><br>*"Because we have established a strong sense of trust within the team, which was cultivated by our leader, even in a virtual setting, we maintain connection through video meetings. By consistently delivering on my promises, my leader has confidence in my reliability, fostering mutual trust. This relationship is not solely the responsibility of the virtual leader; team members also play a role in understanding and supporting the bigger picture."* (Wendy)<br><br>*"The relationship is built on trust. I trust that you can effectively use the time you have while working remotely to complete tasks and deliverables required for your role."* (Oratile)<br><br>*"It's important for virtual team leaders to trust their employees, but it's even more important for the team members to trust each other."* (Thabo) | Participants shared insights into the importance of trust in maintaining connection and reliability within the team, highlighting that trust is a shared responsibility between the leader and followers. Other participants emphasised the significance of trusting team members to fulfil their responsibilities effectively, underscoring how mutual trust forms the basis of successful collaboration towards shared objectives. Additionally, while some participants discussed mutual trust between leaders and followers, others emphasised the importance of trust among team members, suggesting it as even more critical than trust between leaders and employees. |

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| **Maturity:**<br><br>*"Especially in a virtual setting, the team I work with demonstrates a high level of maturity. This maturity is the result of various enabling factors. Clear communication and accessibility, both from my side and from my leader's side, have contributed to building trust and ensuring timely delivery of deliverables."* (Carey)<br><br>*"And you're able to get faster results versus if you were confined to an office where you would have to wait. There is mutual understanding in virtual work where if I receive a message and I'm available, I'll respond, but maturity works both ways."* (Viven)<br><br>*"As a leader, it's important to embrace the concept of equity, which doesn't always equate to equal treatment, but rather fair treatment. Understanding that individuals may have different workloads or responsibilities is crucial, and it requires maturity to recognise and address these differences effectively."* (Thabo) | Some participants highlighted the role of maturity in shaping the quality of leader-follower relationships within virtual teams, noting its contribution to effective collaboration through clear communication and accessibility. This underscores the importance of mutual understanding and respect in virtual work environments, as emphasised by others. Additionally, insights shared by participants highlighted the significance of maturity in leadership, particularly in addressing differences in workload or responsibilities equitably. While some participants appreciated their leader's personal interest in their well-being, others criticised their virtual leader for neglecting to show care, interest, or concern for them. |

**Table 11:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 3: Quality of Relationship (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Impact of Trust on Team Dynamics*

Trust emerged as a pivotal factor shaping collaboration, cooperation, and innovation amongst the participants. Many elucidated on how trust influences team dynamics, leading to streamlined collaboration, effective problem-solving initiatives, and enhanced communication channels within virtual teams. Furthermore, they added that trust acts as a bedrock for fostering cooperation, where open communication thrives, and team members confidently fulfil their responsibilities. Moreover, some participants spoke of how trust catalyses innovation by encouraging risk-taking, open feedback, and the exploration of alternative methods, ultimately driving continuous improvement within the virtual team environment. The next section delves into the multifaceted impact of trust on team dynamics, highlighting its role in shaping collaborative efforts, cooperative relationships, and innovative practices within virtual teams.

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| Participants emphasised trust as fundamental for collaboration in virtual teams, highlighting the leader's role in fostering a high-trust environment and its impact on promoting innovation and a supportive atmosphere, with trust enabling open communication and encouraging risk-taking for innovative solutions: | |
| **Interview excerpts** | **Interpretation** |
| **Collaboration:** | Streamlined collaboration in virtual work, inclusive problem-solving initiatives and the use of extensive communication channels within the |

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| *"We discovered more effective methods while transitioning to virtual work. Previously, we would hold meetings in the office to discuss matters. However, once we shifted to virtual work, we realised that we could streamline the process by filling in spreadsheets. This allowed for information to be readily available at all times, eliminating the need for frequent meetings to gather information from each team member."* (Nick)<br><br>*"For her, problem-solving involves rallying everyone to contribute solutions. She often initiates challenges, such as behaviour-based safety tasks, to engage the team in addressing various issues."* (Simphiwe)<br><br>*"There's extensive communication within the team, primarily through a team chat. This serves as the main channel for most discussions and collaboration. Additionally, team members often break off into separate conversations or group discussions based on specific needs or topics."* (Mary Jane) | virtual team were some of the points raised by participants in explaining collaboration as a consequence of heightened trust in the virtual work environment. |
| ***Cooperation:***<br><br>*"The leader plays an important role in creating a high-trust environment where team members feel comfortable communicating openly and honestly. This openness facilitates problem-solving and decision-making processes. Trust among team members allows for the free exchange of ideas and perspectives. Ultimately, the leader's trust in the team enhances the effectiveness of communication within the group."* (Wendy)<br><br>*"Trust serves as a foundational anchor for our team, enhancing dynamics and fostering a positive and supportive atmosphere. It creates a sense of reliability and assurance, allowing team members to confidently fulfil their responsibilities. With trust as the cornerstone of our team, we can delegate tasks knowing that they will be completed with integrity, reinforcing mutual reliance and cooperation."* (Nolita)<br><br>*"She's aware of my daily tasks and commitments, which builds trust in my work ethic and reliability. Additionally, she understands my deliverables, alleviating any concerns about my productivity. This mutual trust ensures that she doesn't feel the need to micromanage or check up on me, fostering a supportive and autonomous working relationship."* (Simphiwe) | Trust was highlighted by some participants as fundamental for fostering effective cooperation and collaboration within virtual teams. Participants emphasised the leader's crucial role in creating a high-trust environment conducive to open communication. Additionally, trust was described as a foundational anchor that promotes a positive and supportive atmosphere within the team. Other participants illustrated the importance of trust by noting how their leader's awareness of their daily tasks and commitments instils confidence in their work ethic and reliability. |
| ***Innovation:*** | Participants reflected on the importance of trust in the virtual team environment, noting its role |

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| *"Absolutely, one of the significant advantages is the leader's strong digital background. This expertise greatly benefits the team by streamlining our processes and improving our overall performance. Without such digital skills, our team's effectiveness could be compromised. These aspects not only contribute to our current success but also facilitate our growth and learning opportunities."* (Lisa)<br><br>*"I believe that collaboration within a virtual team fosters a safe environment where members feel comfortable sharing ideas and seeking assistance when needed. This sense of security encourages risk-taking and facilitates open feedback, ultimately leading to more innovative solutions. In my experience, continuous collaboration is integral to the success of the virtual setup."* (Wendy)<br><br>*"What I gather from that is that the shift in performance level wasn't so much about improvement but rather about discovering more efficient ways of doing things. While these changes might not have directly boosted performance or even had a negative impact, they did provide us with alternative methods for working smarter."* (Nick) | as a catalyst for innovation by encouraging the exploration of more efficient and effective ways of working. One participant highlighted the leader's strong digital background as invaluable for streamlining team processes and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and learning. Another participant emphasised how collaboration creates a safe space for sharing ideas and seeking assistance, fostering risk-taking and open feedback that lay the groundwork for innovative solutions. Additionally, trust was seen as enabling team members to explore alternative methods of working, reflecting a culture of innovation driven by mutual trust and collaboration within the virtual team environment. |

**Table 12:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 3: Impact of Trust on Team Dynamics (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Summary*

The findings from this section underscore the critical role of trust in virtual leadership and team dynamics. Participants emphasised how trust permeates every aspect of virtual team interactions, from fostering collaboration and cooperation to catalysing innovation. By prioritising transparency, empowerment, and consistency, virtual leaders lay the foundation for cohesive relationships and high-performing teams.

**5.3.3 Research sub-question 3:** *What are the inherent and developed attributes of followers in the virtual work environment, and how do these attributes contribute to achieving team goals, considering the influence of virtual leadership?* The findings pertaining to this research question are clustered under Theme 4 below.

**5.3.3.1 Theme 4: Follower Dynamics in Virtual Teams**

The focus of this research was on followers' perceptions and experiences of effective virtual leadership, yet this research unearthed an unexpected revelation: followers' personal traits significantly influence their satisfaction and team outcomes, alongside effective leadership.

As participants delved into their experiences, a new code, "Follower Dynamics in Virtual Teams" emerged, illuminating various facets of follower engagement, relationships, and attributes shaping team dynamics. This comprehensive framework sheds light on followers' contributions to team success alongside effective leadership practices.
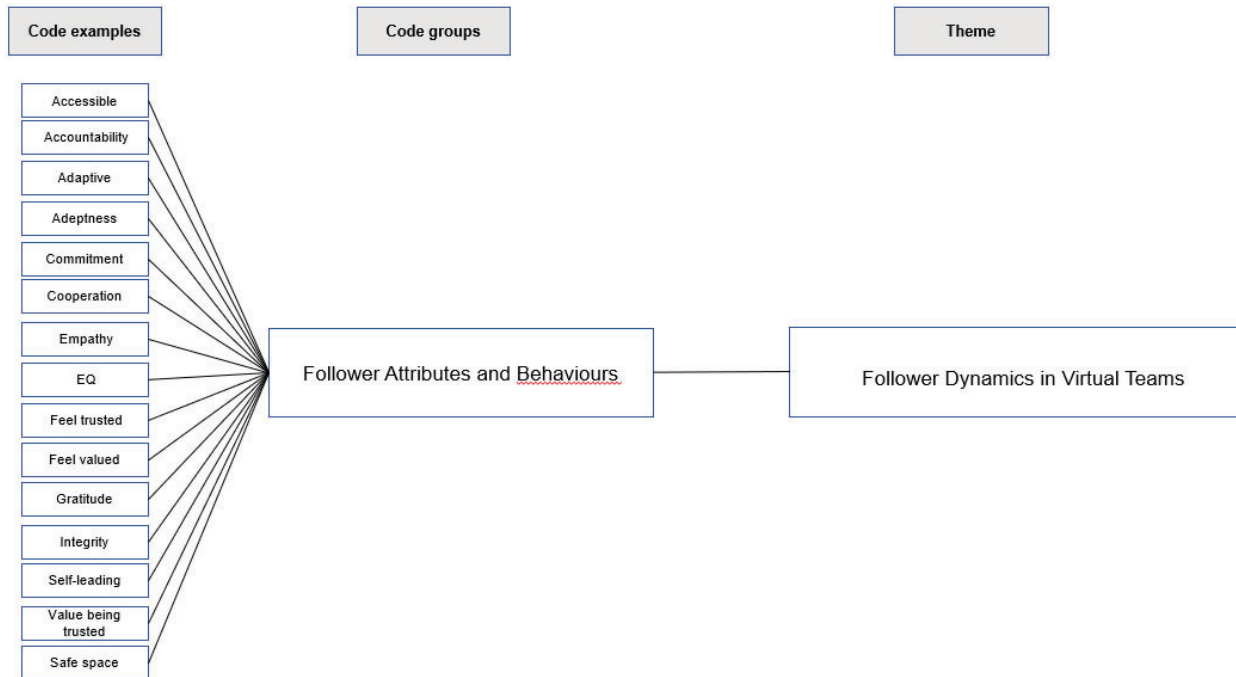


**Figure 9:** *How Theme 4 Emerged (Source: The researcher's compilation)*

Figure 9 visually represents the codes, categories, and eventual theme derived from the thematic analysis. Initially, participants were queried about the actions and skills of effective virtual team leaders and their influence on team performance and satisfaction. However, the focus unexpectedly shifted to the participants' own contributions to enhancing virtual team effectiveness. They underscored how their attributes and behaviours as virtual followers positively impact team outcomes. The subsequent discussion delves into the findings pertinent to this aspect of the research question, presenting relevant excerpts from the interviews and the researcher's interpretations thereof depicted in Table 13.

*Follower Attributes and Behaviours*

The role of accountability and its impact on productivity, diverse factors influencing job commitment, the significance of feeling valued within the team, various aspects of ownership, and the emphasis on peer dynamics alongside leadership in fostering relationships and collaboration within virtual teams emerged as key to virtual team effectiveness:

| Interview excerpts | Interpretation |
|---|---|
| *Accountability:*<br><br>*"I do not let this come in the way of my outlook or my delivery as an employee. I tend to be mindful of his wayward approaches; therefore, to keep the peace, I deliver to the best of my ability without rocking the boat unnecessarily."* (Jason)<br><br>*"You tend to personalise your approach to tasks because you don't want to disappoint this leader. Knowing that they trust your judgment and are open to anything enhances your motivation to deliver your best effort."* (Oratile)<br><br>*"So, I believe that when leaders take deliberate actions to promote accountability and hold people responsible, it tends to increase overall happiness among team members. They feel empowered by the sense of responsibility for decision-making."* (Dawie) | In the exploration of virtual leader attributes and behaviours, participants highlighted their own attributes. Accountability emerged as a significant factor impacting team dynamics and productivity. Insights from participants revealed how accountability shapes their task approach, relationship with leaders, and overall team atmosphere. While some participants emphasised their inherent sense of accountability, another perspective highlighted the role of leaders in promoting accountability within the team. |
| *Commitment:*<br><br>*"Everyone is significantly more engaged and committed to achieving our goals because they are clear and well-defined. They can easily connect their personal motivations with the objectives of the organisation."* (Nolita)<br><br>*"I can safely say that people are just delivering on what they need to deliver on as they need to protect their personal brand."* (Stanford)<br><br>*"I don't think it has much influence on my level of commitment and achieving the goal, to be honest. And I say that because I just know that if I have something to do, I should do it."* (Ally) | The findings demonstrate a range of factors influencing job commitment among participants. While some attribute commitment to effective leadership, emphasising the need for clear goals and organisational vision, others cite personal branding as a motivator. Conversely, positive experiences with virtual team leaders suggest minimal impact on commitment levels for some participants. |
| *Feeling valued:*<br><br>*"I think what each team member needs to feel is valued, and that they have a say, and they can contribute."* (Shanon)<br><br>*"This kind of treatment significantly impacts team performance because, ultimately, talent seems to count for nothing. You could work tirelessly, putting in long hours every day, and it wouldn't make a difference. So, when you're in such an environment, it's disheartening because* | Within the domain of virtual team dynamics, a key theme emerged regarding the sense of value within the team as expressed by participants. This sentiment underscores the significance of feeling valued enough to contribute perspectives and ideas, while also highlighting the adverse effects of feeling undervalued, which can profoundly impact team performance. Conversely, positive outcomes were observed in instances where individuals felt valued within the team, leading to a |

| | |
|---|---|
| *it feels like nothing you do will ever make a difference. It's just the way things are."* (Stanford)<br><br>*"So, even though you might be exhausted and have a lot of work, by the end of the week you feel somewhat replenished and ready to embrace the weekend with a mindset of rest. Then, on Monday, you return knowing that our check-in meeting is scheduled for 8 a.m. It's a routine that guides our work. Overall, I think this routine has helped me become a better person because it shows that we're cared for emotionally as well."* (Kate) | supportive atmosphere and routine establishment despite challenges and workload. |
| ***Ownership:***<br><br>*"It's about finding common ground and collaborating on the essentials, allowing me to focus on supporting those who are eager to do more. Rather than serving as a barrier, I aim to facilitate progress by asking, 'What's the minimum we need to do together?' This approach empowers individuals to take ownership of their tasks while also creating space for those who are motivated to excel."* (Mary Jane)<br><br>*"I believe that because we trusted each other, there was a significant ability to interact meaningfully. Consequently, within our team, we conducted our project meetings according to our preferred methods."* (Nick)<br><br>*"For example, we organise the EVP town hall, although it's not part of our mandate, leading to significant stress and frustration. Yet, our manager has convinced three additional team members, besides me (previously, it was just me), to participate in this unpleasant task. Despite it not being required, she's urged them, saying, 'Please, can you do it? There's no other option I can see, and we can't afford to let this slip.' As a result, these three individuals have shouldered this extra, nearly unnoticed workload."* (Simphiwe) | The findings highlight the diverse aspects of ownership within virtual teams, ranging from collaborative approaches to fostering trust and autonomy, to taking initiative amidst challenges. One perspective illustrates how followers amend their leadership approach to empower their team members to take ownership of their responsibilities. Another emphasises the role of trust in fostering ownership, while another sheds light on the challenges individuals may face in doing so. Despite facing stress and frustration, team members demonstrate a willingness to take ownership and support the team's goals, even in demanding circumstances. |
| ***Relationship with peers:***<br><br>*"It's left up to the followers to determine it for themselves, leading to varied experiences. In our space, those who are supposed followers are the ones steering the ship."* (Nolita)<br><br>*"In our team, communication is primarily facilitated through a team chat platform, which serves as a hub for most discussions and updates. While this platform is essential for collaboration, team members also engage in* | The findings reveal that, despite the study's focus on effective virtual leadership practices, many participants emphasised the significance of dynamics with peers over those with their virtual team leader. They highlighted the value of separate conversations and breakaway discussions among team members, underscoring the importance of individual responsibility in relationship building within the team. While acknowledging the central role of the leader, participants stressed that fostering connections and maintaining open |

| | communication primarily fall on the followers. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of interdependence among team members, particularly in situations where clear instructions from the leader are lacking. |
|---|---|
| *separate conversations and breakaway discussions as needed, allowing for more focused interactions depending on the specific requirements."* (Mary Jane) | |
| *"So, while the team members are aware of each other's presence, there's a shared understanding that relationship building falls primarily on the individual. Although the leader plays a central role, each team member is responsible for fostering connections and maintaining open communication with relevant counterparts within the team."* (Kate) | |
| *"So, essentially, when the leader couldn't provide clear instructions, the team members had to rely on each other to figure things out and get the job done."* (Mason) | |

**Table 13:** *Interview Excerpts and Researcher's Interpretations for Theme 4: Follower Attributes and Behaviours (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

*Summary*

Through exploring followers' perspectives, this research elucidates the multifaceted nature of virtual team dynamics. While effective leadership remains pivotal, followers' personal traits and interactions within the team ecosystem play a significant role in shaping satisfaction and outcomes. The emergence of the "Follower Dynamics in Virtual Teams" code provides a nuanced understanding of how followers' engagement, relationships, and attributes intersect with leadership practices to drive team success in the virtual landscape. Thus, this study underscores the interconnectedness of followership and leadership in fostering thriving virtual teams.

## 5.4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings from this study emphasise the multifaceted nature of effective virtual leadership, highlighting its pivotal role in shaping team dynamics and outcomes. Participants emphasised the importance of various dimensions of leadership, including support, guidance, communication, and practices, in driving motivation, commitment, and cohesion within virtual teams.

The significance of trust emerged as a linchpin in virtual leadership, profoundly influencing team dynamics and outcomes. Participants highlighted the transformative impact of trust in fostering collaboration, cooperation, and innovation within virtual teams. By prioritising transparency, empowerment, and consistency, virtual leaders can cultivate trust, laying the foundation for cohesive relationships and high-performing teams in the digital realm.

Moreover, effective virtual leadership practices were identified as key drivers of team performance and outcomes. Participants emphasised the importance of regular engagement, human connection, and collaboration in enhancing team productivity, morale, and cohesion. As virtual teams continue to evolve, understanding and leveraging the impact of leadership on team dynamics remain essential for achieving optimal outcomes and fostering a culture of success in virtual environments.

Additionally, this research sheds light on the interconnectedness of followership and leadership in virtual teams. While effective leadership is crucial, participants' personal traits and interactions within the team ecosystem also significantly shape satisfaction and outcomes. The emergence of the "Follower Dynamics in Virtual Teams" code provides a nuanced understanding of how followers' engagement, relationships, and attributes intersect with leadership practices to drive team success in the virtual landscape.

In essence, the findings emphasise the importance of holistic leadership approaches that consider both leaders' and followers' perspectives in fostering thriving virtual teams.

# CHAPTER 6:  DISCUSSION

## 6.1     INTRODUCTION

The research findings presented in Chapter 5 are revisited and analysed in this chapter by comparing the data from the 17 semi-structured interviews conducted with the literature review presented in Chapter 2. The findings, specifically the themes that emerged in Chapter 5, are discussed per research sub-question and the chapter concludes with an answer to the main research question: understanding what the practices of effective virtual leadership are as perceived and experienced by virtual followers.

## 6.2     DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION 1

*What discernible practices, competencies and attributes do effective virtual team leaders demonstrate, as recognised by followers within virtual teams?*

The research delved into the impact of the leader–follower relationship on team outcomes and virtual leadership experiences. Participants were asked to share experiences of leaders who positively influenced virtual team outcomes and discuss challenges affecting team dynamics and outcomes.

The literature review underscores several gaps in understanding effective virtual leadership. Firstly, there is a lack of clarity on specific behaviours associated with effective virtual leadership, necessitating further exploration into observable actions (Ben Sedrine et al., 2021; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). Additionally, there is limited focus on how leadership practices are perceived by followers, hindering the evaluation of virtual leadership effectiveness (Azukas, 2022; Höddinghaus et al., 2023). Empirical evidence on specific practices and attributes is lacking, impeding practical guidance for virtual leaders (Contreras et al., 2020). Further research is needed to identify contributing behaviours within support, guidance, and communication domains (Bell et al., 2023; Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Additionally, understanding "effectiveness" from the followers' perspective requires exploration of criteria or outcome measures considered indicative of successful virtual leadership. Lastly, while the importance of leader–follower relationships is acknowledged, there is a gap in understanding the specific practices fostering these relationships, indicating a need for further exploration of interpersonal dynamics in virtual contexts (Larson & DeChurch, 2020; Zeuge et al., 2020).

The findings that address research sub-question 1 are consolidated under **Theme 1: Virtual leadership approach and effectiveness** and **Theme 2: Enhancing virtual team performance and cohesion.**

### 6.2.1 Synopsis of Findings

The findings pertaining to Theme 1: Virtual Leadership Approaches and Effectiveness clarify the multifaceted nature of effective leadership in virtual team settings. The efficacy of virtual leaders in supporting, guiding, and communicating with their teams was explored, with a focus on understanding the dynamics and outcomes from participants' perspectives and experiences. Participants highlighted two primary actions through which virtual leaders support and guide their teams, namely, enablement and fostering team cohesion. Enablement entails providing necessary tools and technological resources to team members, facilitating connections within the organisation. On the other hand, fostering team cohesion involves efforts to connect team members with each other and with the leader's vision, often through social interactions and shared experiences. Effective communication emerged as a cornerstone of successful virtual leadership, with clear expectations serving as a guiding principle for virtual teams. Participants expressed concerns about leaders' ineffective communication hindering their ability to connect with the leader's vision and expectations. Regular engagement was emphasised as essential, especially in the absence of physical interactions, to maintain connectivity and address challenges associated with disengaged leadership.

Furthermore, the study delved into leaders' practices, highlighting the importance of setting clear goals, maintaining accessibility, and being intentional in fostering connections and engagement opportunities. Participants emphasised the significance of transparent communication, goal alignment, and accessibility for effective leadership in virtual settings. In terms of leader competencies and attributes, participants underscored the importance of human connection, mindfulness, EQ, and technological proficiency. These competencies enable leaders to establish genuine relationships, navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and adapt to the nuances of virtual communication effectively. However, some participants also expressed concerns about their leaders lacking essential leadership skills, such as trustworthiness and inclusivity.

Moving on to Theme 2: Enhancing Virtual Team Performance and Cohesion, the focus shifted to understanding the factors contributing to positive connections between virtual leaders and followers and their impact on team performance and outcomes. Participants highlighted the importance of regular engagement, human connection, and collaboration in fostering positive connections between virtual leaders and team members. Structured

interactions and genuine care beyond work-related matters were deemed essential for building trust and rapport within virtual teams. Collaboration, although varied in its impact, was recognised as essential for fostering a sense of unity and accountability among team members. Effective virtual leadership practices were found to enhance team performance by promoting enhanced collaboration, increased productivity, and high morale among team members. Transparent communication, goal clarity, and open channels for feedback were identified as critical factors in driving productivity and fostering trust within teams. Recognition, appreciation, and acknowledgment of team contributions were also highlighted as significant contributors to maintaining morale and motivation within virtual teams. Ultimately, effective virtual leadership was shown to positively impact team outcomes by enhancing team cohesion, increasing motivation, and improving satisfaction among team members. Through adaptability, receptiveness to input, and problem-solving skills, virtual leaders are able to navigate challenges and foster a positive work environment conducive to achieving collective goals and driving success.

### 6.2.2  Analysis of Findings in Relation to Literature
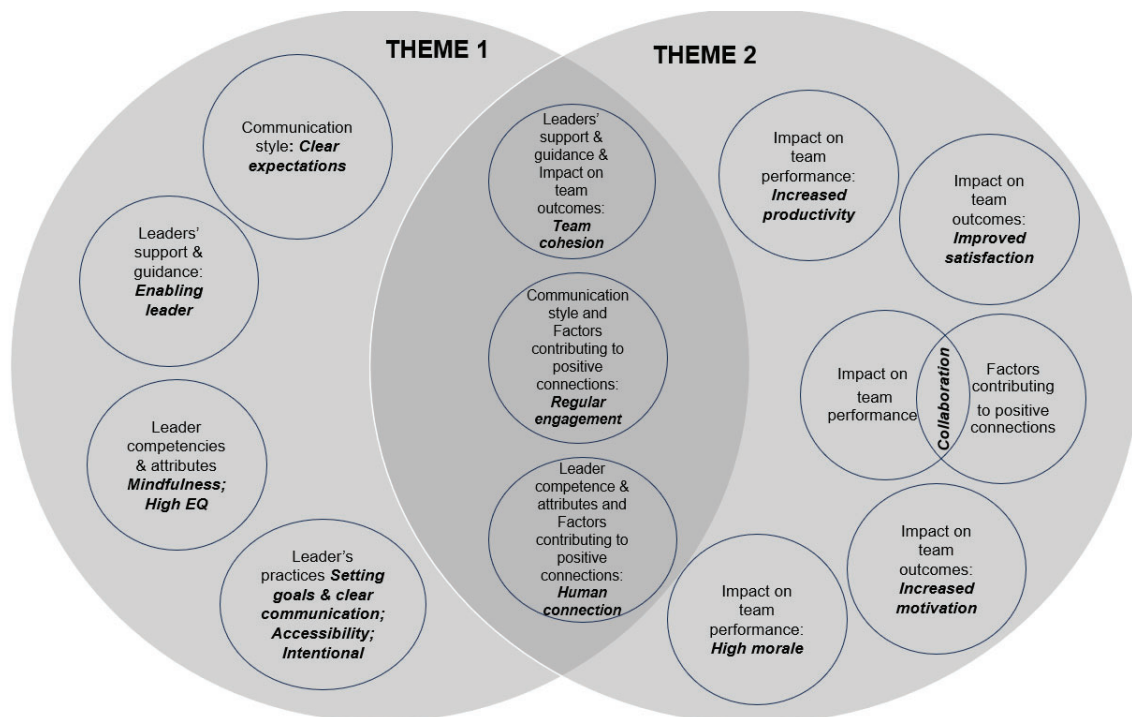


**Figure 10:**  *Findings for Discussion per Theme and Illustration of Overlapping Topics (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

Figure 10 depicts the elements to be discussed in this section. Given the nature of the topic, participants often provided similar interpretations or explanations across different questions. This similarity was especially noticeable between Theme 1 (Virtual leadership approach and effectiveness) and Theme 2 (Enhancing virtual team performance and cohesion). Moreover, "collaboration" emerged in two questions within Theme 2 and is therefore discussed to cover collaboration as both a team outcome and a factor contributing to positive connections.

### 6.2.2.1 Findings Pertaining to Theme 1:

*Establishing Clear Expectations*

Participants in the interviews highlighted the importance of virtual leaders establishing clear expectations, such as articulating a well-defined team vision and providing regular check-ins for guidance on individual tasks and priorities, echoing findings in existing literature. Darics (2020) emphasises remote leaders' role in defining and communicating clear visions, values, and objectives, while Bell et al. (2023) stress the importance of transparent expectations and goals. Similarly, Chamakiotis et al. (2021) advocate for clear guidance and motivating language to enhance employee commitment in remote work scenarios. However, some participants noted vague expectations from their virtual leaders, attributing this to a lack of general leadership competency rather than solely the absence of virtual leadership skills. Despite literature suggesting that leveraging available technologies can mitigate communication challenges in virtual settings (Abarca et al., 2020; Kozlowski et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020), the findings imply that addressing vague expectations may require more nuanced leadership skills beyond technological solutions.

*Virtual leaders' efforts to enable followers*

The study emphasises the importance of leader enablement, with participants highlighting differing interpretations of how virtual leaders enable them, including providing tools and fostering social connections within the team. This aligns with the recommendation by Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) for virtual leaders to increase team visibility and the assertion by Chamakiotis et al. (2021) that leaders leverage technology to enhance team creativity and diversity. However, while participants acknowledged leader enablement through the provision of virtual tools, they did not discuss the establishment of norms for effectively using these tools, as emphasised by scholars such as Bell et al. (2023) and Larson and De Church (2020). Participants' proficiency in technology due to their organisation's longstanding virtual work culture led them to overlook the need for leaders to

establish standards or provide training for effective technology usage, prompting further investigation into the role of virtual leaders in organisations less accustomed to virtual work.

*Mindful qualities of the virtual leader*

The study underscores the importance of mindful qualities as a critical leadership attribute in virtual settings, with participants emphasising its role in communication, expectation management, and workload distribution, aligning with Arendt et al. (2019). However, the findings diverge from Dinh et al. (2021) who caution against relying solely on mindfulness to address systemic stressors like workload management in virtual work settings. Nevertheless, recognising the importance of mindful leadership in workload acknowledgment resonates with the assertion by Wang et al.(2021) on effective workload management strategies for promoting work–life balance. Furthermore, the research findings echo the literature's focus on fostering mindful relationships among colleagues, acknowledging virtual leaders' mindfulness in enhancing understanding, engagement, and empowerment within teams (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022; Liu et al., 2021; Puni et al., 2021).

However, unlike literature highlighting challenges such as social isolation and decreased morale in virtual work environments (Efimov et al., 2022), and the limitations of mindful communication in addressing broader organisational and interpersonal dynamics (Yarberry & Sims, 2021), the findings do not explicitly address these issues. Nonetheless, participants' emphasis on virtual leaders' mindfulness for effective communication and relationship-building suggests an awareness of leaders' role in addressing such challenges within virtual teams. Thus, while mindfulness holds value in virtual leadership, it may not fully tackle all the complexities and challenges inherent in remote work environments.

*High EQ*

The study identifies EQ as a noteworthy attribute of virtual leaders, with participants attributing various meanings to its significance. The emphasis on leaders receiving honest feedback aligns with Roy (2012), highlighting self-awareness and self-regulation as key components of EQ. Similarly, references to empathy and perceptiveness resonate with Abdollahi et al. (2019) and Görgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021), underlining the importance of social awareness and relationship management in effective virtual leadership.

Furthermore, the recognition of EQ contributing to team satisfaction and stronger connections mirrors findings in the literature that EQ facilitates knowledge exchange, honest communication, and problem-solving within virtual teams (Roy, 2012). Additionally, participants' reflections on their leaders' respectful and inclusive behaviours align with

literature, emphasising the importance of emotional intelligence in fostering positive team dynamics and overall performance (Bell et al., 2023).

However, while both the research findings and literature underscore the importance of EQ in virtual leadership, Chaudhary et al. (2022) and Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) suggest that EQ alone may not suffice in virtual teams, advocating for a combination of emotional intelligence and virtual competencies to positively impact employee well-being. This stresses the complexity of the relationship between EQ and leadership outcomes in virtual settings, as highlighted by Bell et al. (2023), indicating the need for further research to explore how EQ competencies intersect with effective virtual leadership behaviours and their influence on followers' experiences in virtual teams.

*Setting goals and clear communication*

Participants emphasised the vital role of establishing goals and maintaining transparent communication in virtual leadership, attributing significant contributions to team success. They highlighted the importance of a cohesive vision shared by the virtual leader to guide the team effectively, with clear direction and specific individual goals facilitating various aspects of team functioning. While Bell et al. (2023) argue for the strengthening of shared objectives through articulating an inspiring vision, they acknowledge the varied outcomes based on follower motivations. This underscores the importance of understanding factors such as team relationships and hierarchical structure. Consistent with this, participants reporting ineffective goal setting and communication described strained relationships with their leaders, which supports research by Varma et al. (2022) and Tremblay et al. (2021). Concerns about biases in leader–member relationships and fair resource distribution, raised by Goh and Wasko (2012), are pertinent, alongside Martin et al. (2018) and Uhl-Bien et al. (2022) stressing LMXD. This suggests the need for heightened sensitivity to fairness and diversity in hybrid settings, with potential limitations in applying the LMX theory in virtual work contexts, given its emphasis on relationship differentiation.

*Accessibility*

Participants highlighted the importance of virtual leaders being accessible and available, which aligns with literature advocating leaders to establish physical and psychological accessibility to foster psychological safety (Hirak et al., 2012). They emphasised the productivity-enhancing effect of leader accessibility, supporting arguments that leader presence positively impacts team performance, especially in remote setups (Park et al., 2022). Additionally, participants stressed mutual accessibility, indicating a two-way street where followers also need to avail themselves to leaders, fostering a supportive environment

(Pack et al., 2022). However, while literature underscores leader adaptation to virtual dynamics, the findings do not directly address this aspect, suggesting leaders heed advice to remain consistently accessible, approachable, and responsive to meet evolving team needs (Zeuge et al., 2020).

*Intentional leadership efforts*

Participants stressed the importance of virtual leaders being intentional and purposeful in their interactions, including scheduling meaningful engagements, aligning with literature advocating regular communication to foster a supportive social environment (Bell et al., 2023). They highlighted the significance of virtual leaders scheduling regular check-ins with team members, echoing literature suggesting that intentional communication frequency and planning can enhance leadership effectiveness (Bell et al., 2023). Additionally, Willox et al. (2023) underscore the importance of intentional collaboration and communication in virtual teams, attributing it to the lack of spontaneous interactions in virtual environments. However, while literature addresses essential practices for managing work-life boundaries (Chamakiotis et al., 2021), the findings emphasise the need for both leaders and followers to establish boundaries during work hours, with participants expressing discomfort with spontaneous virtual leader contact. They highlighted the importance of sending notifications for urgent conversations or scheduling virtual meetings. Thus, while new practices are anticipated for managing work-life balance (Chamakiotis et al., 2021), the findings underscore the need for these practices to be implemented by both leaders and followers during work hours.

## 6.2.2.2 Findings Pertaining to Theme 2:

As outlined in section 6.2, in discussing the first research sub-question, there is a gap in understanding the concept of "effectiveness" from the perspective of followers. Since there is no established scientific definition or metric for effectiveness from the followers' viewpoint, participants were prompted to explore the criteria or outcome measures they believe signify successful or positive outcomes resulting from effective virtual leadership.

*Improved satisfaction*

The literature suggests that leaders who adapt processes and value followers' input enhance workplace satisfaction by promoting collaboration and innovation (Abarca et al., 2020). Similarly, the findings indicate that when virtual leaders are flexible and open to feedback, it leads to increased satisfaction, inspiration, and motivation within the team, echoing sentiments expressed by Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) regarding transformational leadership traits.

The emphasis on trust in improving follower satisfaction aligns with literature highlighting its role in fostering collaboration, cooperation, and innovation within virtual teams (Abarca et al., 2020). Trust in leadership correlates directly with job satisfaction and a positive work environment, fostering a supportive workplace culture (Liu et al., 2021).

Additionally, findings regarding leadership experience and problem-solving skills contributing to team satisfaction align with literature emphasising effective performance management and adaptive leadership in instilling confidence and stability among employees (De Vincenzi et al., 2022; Kilcullen et al., 2022). Participants noted how leaders' experience and proficiency in using virtual collaboration tools efficiently address challenges, enhancing team success and contentment. This finding prompts further investigation, particularly in organisations new to virtual work.

Overall, the findings and literature underscore the importance of effective virtual leadership practices, including adaptability, trust-building, and leadership experience, in fostering a positive virtual work environment.

*Increased motivation*

The findings indicate that effective virtual leadership practices positively influence followers' motivation and engagement levels, echoing literature highlighting the significance of supportive and respectful leadership in virtual teams (Liu et al., 2021). Participants noted increased motivation following changes in leadership, underscoring the impact of leadership transitions on team morale and the importance of leadership behaviours in shaping team dynamics. Aligning with existing research, emphasis on leaders leveraging team strengths and openness to diverse perspectives highlights the influence of follower characteristics on organisational effectiveness (Liu et al., 2022; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

However, cautionary notes from the literature highlight how detrimental leadership behaviours can diminish trust and respect, leading to decreased motivation and learning enthusiasm among team members (Liu et al., 2021). Participants also shared instances of toxic leadership behaviours causing demotivation, emphasising the need for a supportive work environment and clear guidance, as suggested by Chamakiotis et al. (2021).

In summary, effective virtual leadership characterised by clear guidance, motivating language, and constructive feedback positively impacts employee commitment, particularly in remote work scenarios, contributing to team motivation and morale.

*Increased productivity*

The findings highlight the importance of trust, transparency, and collaboration in boosting productivity within virtual teams, aligning with existing literature highlighting the role that trust plays in fostering collaboration and innovation (Norman et al., 2020). Participants' emphasis on trust to encourage open discussion and transparency contributing to workflow efficiency resonates with research, underscoring the significance of transparent communication in building trust and effective teamwork (Hirak et al., 2012).

Moreover, the findings highlighting synergy and the importance of collaboration in achieving successful outcomes correspond with literature emphasising the benefits of teamwork in organisational goal attainment (Jiang et al., 2021). Despite challenges such as isolation and declining motivation in remote work settings (Contreras et al., 2020), participants displayed comfort in leveraging virtual platforms to connect with colleagues and leaders, possibly driven by their familiarity with virtual work and proactive efforts to adapt. While some participants expressed feeling disconnected from virtual team leaders, they relied on their sense of organisational obligation to remain motivated, aligning with resource exchange concepts in the LMX theory, albeit with noted limitations in virtual contexts (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Further research is warranted to optimise the impact of remote work on various aspects, including work conditions, well-being, engagement, and team cohesion (Tramontano et al., 2021), despite the potential for increased productivity in remote environments.

The findings regarding high morale within virtual teams align with literature emphasising the role of effective leadership strategies in maintaining team cohesion and morale (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022; Höddinghaus et al., 2023). Participants stressed the significance of celebrating team achievements and providing regular feedback and recognition, which sustains morale and motivation while combating feelings of isolation and detachment (Efimov et al., 2022). Additionally, they underscored the importance of leaders fostering a positive work environment through recognition and appreciation, positively impacting team members' motivation and engagement (Liu et al., 2021).

However, ineffective virtual leadership practices can lead to low morale within the team, highlighting the importance of leaders adopting comprehensive strategies to address virtual team dynamics (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). Adaptability and receptiveness to input from followers were also emphasised, resonating with literature on transformational leadership traits contributing to a satisfying work environment (Abarca et al., 2020; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). Trust in leadership emerged as pivotal, correlating directly with job satisfaction and overall positivity in the work environment (Liu et al., 2021).

As outlined in section 6.2.2 and depicted in Figure 10, certain terms recurred throughout the study. Despite the researcher's intentional construction and phrasing of questions, there was an inevitable overlap of terminology in the findings due to the nature of the research topic. For instance, the concept of "collaboration" surfaced both when exploring factors contributing to positive connections during interviews and when discussing how effective virtual leadership influences team performance. Since collaboration was addressed in response to research sub-question 1, it is examined within the context of answering that particular research sub-question.

*Collaboration*

The findings highlight trust as pivotal in fostering effective collaboration within virtual teams, leading to streamlined processes, inclusive problem-solving, and extensive communication channels (Jiang et al., 2021; Kozlowski et al., 2021). Participants' experiences of utilising technology for communication resonate with literature emphasising virtual leaders' role in facilitating collaboration (Kozlowski et al., 2021). However, Sanchez et al. (2023) suggest that team support and coordination are equally crucial, potentially diminishing the direct impact of virtual leaders. Additionally, Schmidt and Dellen (2022) emphasise followers' autonomy in decision-making, indicating collaboration may depend on both leader actions and individual behaviours. These insights underscore the multifaceted nature of collaboration in virtual teams and highlight the need for further research into effective virtual leadership.

**6.2.2.3 Findings Pertaining to Theme 1 & Theme 2:**

*Team cohesion*

The findings align with literature, emphasising the critical role of trust and connection in virtual dynamics, shaping team cohesion and outcomes (Liu et al., 2021; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020; Norman et al., 2020). While Bell et al. (2023) suggest challenges in achieving social cohesion in virtual teams due to geographical distance, participants' experiences highlight the inclusivity of virtual meetings and the leader's intentionality in fostering engagement, challenging this notion. Effective virtual leaders can adapt behaviours and leverage technology to overcome such challenges, as observed in the study. However, instances where virtual leaders failed to foster cohesion were attributed to general leadership deficiencies rather than specific shortcomings in virtual leadership skills, echoing earlier findings.

*Regular engagement*

Regular engagement emerged as a critical requirement from the participants. Participants highlighted how structured meetings and strong relationships initiated by leaders contribute to effective communication and transparency. Conversely, they noted the negative impact of leader absence or lack of prioritised time allocation for team interactions on positive connections within the team. Scholars like Chamakiotis et al. (2021) stress the continuous need for leaders to nurture engagement among team members, prioritising trust and relationship development. Thambusamy and Bekirogullari (2020) emphasise the importance of leaders keeping communication lines open and regularly checking in on team members.

However, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) and Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) argue that engaged followers who actively participate in decision-making contribute to organisational value and performance. Participants shared instances where they were engaged but leaders did not solicit their input, leading them to collaborate with peers instead. Carsten et al. (2022) suggest that frequent interactions between passive followers and leaders may reduce effort and impact performance. Some participants established boundaries due to overbearing leaders, although they claimed it did not impact their performance negatively. This finding aligns with literature that encourages continuous communication to boost followers' confidence, particularly in low-trust situations. Participants stressed leaders' responsibility in facilitating regular engagement, especially in the absence of physical interaction. However, concerns were raised about disengaged leadership hindering effective communication. Participants noted instances where leaders were absent or avoided engagement, negatively impacting the leader–follower relationship.

*Human connection*

The findings highlight the importance of cultivating genuine relationships beyond work tasks in virtual leadership, echoing Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) and Puni et al. (2021) who stress social support and idealised influence. Despite the suggestion by Willermark and Islind (2023) that virtual platforms facilitate active leader-team member connections, challenges in establishing social bonds and combating isolation in virtual environments persist, supported by Höddinghaus et al. (2023). Nonetheless, participants noted instances where leaders persevered in organising virtual engagement opportunities, eventually overcoming resistance from some team members.

Furthermore, while Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) stress transparency's role in fostering team belongingness, participants prioritised personal connections with their virtual leader over team connections. This underscores the critical role of human connection in virtual leadership, aligned with literature advocating for empathy, perspective-taking, and trust-building (Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). However, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014)

caution about the challenges in virtual leadership, emphasising the importance of aligning values and inclusive decision-making processes to prevent conflicts and promote mutual trust. Participants expressed a preference for authentic personal connections with virtual leaders or opted to avoid such interactions altogether if authenticity was lacking. While acknowledging the value of human connection, the findings did not directly address the balance between social support and avoiding increased stress and job demands, as highlighted by Gabriel and Aguinis (2022). Nevertheless, the emphasis on fostering genuine relationships indicates an awareness of maintaining a supportive and balanced virtual work environment. Additionally, although most participants expressed the importance of having a human connection with their leader, the absence of these connections did not appear to adversely affect their effectiveness. This suggests that participants sought these connections primarily for validation and recognition from individuals responsible for evaluating their performance and influencing their compensation and other benefits.

### 6.2.3  Conclusion—Research Sub-Question 1

The analysis of the findings of Research Sub-Question 1 provides insights into the practices, competencies, and attributes of effective virtual team leaders as perceived by followers. Key themes emerged from participant insights, aligning with existing literature and highlighting the nuances of virtual leadership effectiveness. These findings underscore the role of clear communication, supportive guidance, mindful leadership qualities, emotional intelligence, and intentional leadership efforts in fostering effective virtual leadership. Participants emphasise the importance of virtual leaders establishing clear expectations, providing support and guidance, and embodying attributes like mindfulness and emotional intelligence to cultivate positive team dynamics and enhance overall performance.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals the complexities of virtual leadership, including challenges such as vague expectations, leader enablement through technology, and balancing accessibility with boundary setting. While participants stress the significance of intentional leadership efforts and regular communication, they also recognise the need for both leaders and followers to establish boundaries and manage work-life balance effectively in virtual settings.

Overall, the synthesis of participant perspectives and alignment with existing literature highlights the multifaceted nature of effective virtual leadership. Further research is needed to explore the intersection of virtual leadership competencies, follower perceptions, and organisational contexts, providing comprehensive guidance for virtual leaders navigating the complexities of remote work environments.

## 6.3    DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION 2

*How do virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship?*

In an era where virtual collaboration has become increasingly prevalent, the notion of trust within virtual teams has emerged as a focal point of exploration and inquiry from the findings which are summarised in the next section. This research sub-question set out to explore the complexities of remote work, understanding the dynamics of trust and its profound implications for team success. The inquiry aimed to illuminate the intricate interplay between trust, leadership, and team dynamics within virtual contexts to offer valuable insights into the strategies employed by virtual leaders to foster trust, the quality of relationships cultivated between leaders and followers, and the transformative impact of trust on team collaboration, cooperation, and innovation. The findings are presented under ***Theme 3: Trust and relationship dynamics in virtual leadership.***

### 6.3.1  Synopsis of Findings

The findings in Chapter 5 reveal that the establishment and maintenance of trust emerge as pivotal factors influencing team dynamics, collaboration, and overall performance. Through the insightful perspectives shared by participants, it becomes evident that trust serves as a linchpin, profoundly impacting various facets of virtual team interactions.

First and foremost, trust fosters streamlined collaboration within virtual teams. Participants highlighted how trust enables open communication, facilitates problem-solving initiatives, and promotes the use of extensive communication channels. By fostering an environment where team members feel empowered to share ideas and insights freely, trust lays the groundwork for effective collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Moreover, trust serves as a foundational anchor for cooperation within virtual teams. Participants emphasised how trust among team members enhances dynamics and fosters a positive and supportive atmosphere. When team members trust each other to effectively fulfil their responsibilities, it cultivates a sense of reliability and assurance, ultimately reinforcing mutual reliance and cooperation.

Furthermore, trust acts as a catalyst for innovation within virtual teams. Participants highlighted how trust encourages risk-taking, open feedback, and the exploration of alternative methods. By fostering a safe space where team members feel empowered to experiment and adapt, trust drives continuous improvement and facilitates the emergence of innovative solutions.

Overall, the insights gleaned from this exploration underscore the interconnectedness of trust, collaboration, cooperation, and innovation within virtual team environments.

**6.3.2 Analysis of Findings in Relation to the Literature**
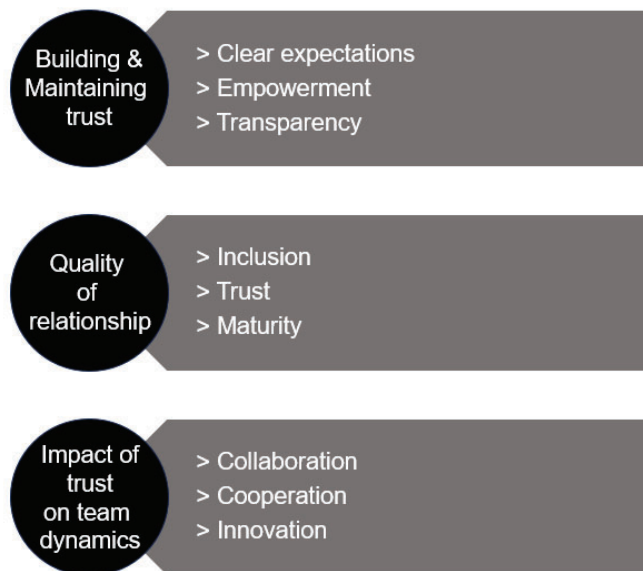


**Figure 11:** *Categories and Topics to be Discussed within Theme 3 (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

As was the case in section 6.2.2, participants often provided similar interpretations or explanations across different questions due to the nature of the topic. Several elements previously discussed will be revisited. Clear expectations, which emerged in Theme 1 through participants' descriptions of their virtual leaders' communication style, resurface in Theme 2, this time as participants explain the factors that establish and maintain trust in virtual teams. Likewise, collaboration is highlighted in Theme 3 both as an outcome of effective virtual leadership and as a factor contributing to positive connections between the virtual leader and follower.

**6.3.2.1 Findings Pertaining to Theme 3**

*Clear expectations*

The findings underscore the critical importance of clear expectations in fostering trust within virtual teams. Participants emphasised that transparent communication from team leaders regarding work distribution and expectations plays a pivotal role in building trust among team members. This aligns with Zada et al. (2022), who argue that understanding virtual followers'

perceptions of effective leadership enables leaders to adapt their strategies accordingly, enhancing team performance in virtual settings.

Contrasting perspectives from Castellano et al. (2021) suggest that trust may be the primary driver of leadership effectiveness and team performance in virtual environments. While the findings emphasise the significance of clear expectations, Castellano et al.'s perspective highlights a potential discrepancy in emphasis, suggesting that trust plays a more central role in facilitating leadership within virtual teams.

The results emphasise the importance of leaders being precise and transparent in articulating expectations. Some participants mentioned how their virtual leaders effectively use collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams' whiteboard feature to visually represent expectations, eliminating ambiguity and fostering trust within the team. This indicates that while trust is crucial, clear expectations serve as a foundation for building trust and ensuring effective communication within virtual teams.

*Empowerment*

The findings emphasise the critical importance of empowerment in virtual leadership, particularly in contexts where physical presence is limited. Participants highlighted how clear expectations and empowerment provided by virtual leaders contribute to fostering trust, autonomy and, ultimately, team performance, aligning with literature emphasising the significance of empowerment and support from leaders (Garro-Abarca et al., 2021; Norman et al., 2020). However, there is a divergence in the literature regarding the direct impact of virtual leaders on team success. While some studies underscore the importance of leadership support (Abarca et al., 2020; Tunk & Kumar, 2023), others highlight the role of team support and coordination (Sanchez et al., 2023), suggesting a more distributed responsibility for team outcomes.

Moreover, the evolving role of virtual leaders is highlighted, with literature suggesting a transition from traditional directive roles to facilitators supporting self-organisation (Varhelahti & Turnquist, 2021). However, the findings indicate participants' reliance on peers due to the absence or inability of virtual leaders to articulate expectations, rather than leaders actively facilitating self-organisation.

Additionally, while psychological empowerment is crucial for enhancing trust and confidence (Malik et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2007), the literature introduces a nuanced perspective by suggesting its mediation of innovative behaviour in agile teams, alongside factors like team autonomy and communication (Malik et al., 2021). However, the findings diverge from this viewpoint as participants expressed how the questionable behaviour of some of their virtual

leaders undermines trust but does not hinder their capacity to collaborate with colleagues for innovation. This prompts reflection on the role and significance of a leader in the virtual setting, as participants indicated their readiness to embrace autonomy and take the initiative without relying heavily on their leaders.

*Transparency*

Similar to participants' perception of clear expectations as a trust-building element, they also highlighted the role of transparency in maintaining, aligning with literature emphasising leaders' guidance through virtual work with transparent communication. For Zeuge et al. (2020), proficient leaders are role models in transparent communication, while Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) suggest tailored technology to enhance transparency within virtual teams. Similarly, Savić (2020) underscores transparent communication as crucial in the digital era. Participants described leaders demonstrating proficiency in technology, leveraging tools to improve transparency. Some highlighted benefits of collaborative documents stored in shared folders, minimising the need for meetings and increasing efficiency, thus promoting transparency and active participation. However, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) highlight transparency challenges for virtual teams in fostering connectedness, suggesting technology designs promoting awareness and inclusion. The findings challenge this, as participants noted leaders actively seeking and promoting customised tools and processes while leading by example in their usage. Upon probing, participants shared that leaders proficient in the usage of such tools were intentional about seeking out appropriate and relevant tools to enable transparency.

*Inclusion*

Participants' emphasis on virtual leaders actively soliciting opinions resonates with Bell et al. (2023), who highlight the importance of open communication in addressing personal needs and challenges. By shaping the team's culture through open dialogue, team members contribute to their well-being in virtual work environments (Bell et al., 2023). They also shared how their virtual leaders' openness and transparency provides them with a platform to share views, supporting inclusive leadership practices that enhance the leader–follower relationship (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

The findings echo literature suggesting inclusivity addresses virtual team members' feelings of neglect (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). However, Liu et al. (2021) caution against negative leadership behaviours that can compromise the effectiveness of inclusivity, leading to trust erosion and reduced motivation. Participants noted instances of favouritism from certain virtual leaders, attributing disconnection to biased behaviours rather than physical distance.

Analysing the findings through the LMX theory lens raises doubts about its applicability in virtual work settings, aligning with concerns regarding biases in leader–member relationships (Goh & Wasko, 2012). This highlights potential limitations in practically implementing LMX theory within virtual teams.

*Trust*

The findings, along with the literature review, highlight the pivotal role trust plays in virtual teams. Participants stressed leaders' role in nurturing trust through consistent actions, aligning with scholarly emphasis on integrity and openness (Norman et al., 2020). This reinforces mutual trust's significance for successful collaboration and team performance (Castellano et al., 2021).

Moreover, the findings on trust among team members resonate with the observation by Höddinghaus et al. (2023) regarding the evolving trust dynamics in virtual teams. However, Norman et al. (2020) caution that trust is also influenced by effective technology usage and occasional face-to-face interactions. Many participants found using cameras during virtual meetings fulfilled their desire for face-to-face communication. Additionally, one-on-one discussions with virtual leaders facilitated candid conversations without typical office distractions.

While the findings revealed that clear expectations, goals, and autonomy for effective work execution enabled trust in virtual teams, the literature stresses the need for further research on trust dynamics in virtual teams (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Efimov et al. (2022) highlight the lack of insights from virtual followers' perspectives, underscoring a gap in understanding team members' unique experiences.

*Maturity*

Participants stressed that maturity contributes to effective collaboration, facilitated by clear communication and accessibility. The definition participants gave to maturity aligns with Batirlik et al. (2022), who emphasise relationship-oriented leadership prioritising well-being and support, fostering strong leader–member relationships. There appears to be a lack of research exploring maturity in the literature; but it is a factor that emerged prominently in the findings. However, Puni et al. (2021) discuss idealised influence, where leaders cultivate trust through emotional connections, potentially supporting the idea that maturity in leadership fosters trust in virtual settings.

The other factor that emerged in the findings was participants emphasising mutual understanding in the virtual workplace. While this emphasis on mutual understanding and

respect in virtual work environments corresponds somewhat to Zeuge et al.'s (2020) stress on leaders being consistently accessible and approachable, research on this is lacking. However, it seemed obvious that maturity and mutual understanding would emerge as key findings given the nature and dynamics of virtual work.

Yet, the findings also note discrepancies in leaders' approaches to demonstrating care for team members' well-being. Participants brought in the concept of maturity to explain this by attributing this issue to variations in leadership maturity within virtual teams. The LMX theory highlights LMXD, wherein leaders cultivate relationships of varying quality with team members. This notion is further illuminated by Park et al. (2022), who highlight the political dynamics inherent in LMXD, suggesting its potential impact on team dynamics and effectiveness. Participants expect their virtual leaders to consistently demonstrate supportive behaviours to ensure a positive team dynamic and effective collaboration, which raises the question of the applicability of the LMX theory in virtual work.

*Collaboration*

The findings highlight the critical role of trust in fostering effective collaboration within virtual teams, facilitating streamlined processes, inclusive problem-solving, and extensive communication channels. Participants emphasised the importance of virtual leaders leveraging technology and structuring projects to promote collaboration, which aligns with literature emphasising leadership's impact on fostering collaborative environments (Jiang et al., 2021; Kozlowski et al., 2021). However, while virtual leaders play a role, team dynamics and support structures may also significantly influence collaboration outcomes, as suggested by Sanchez et al. (2023). Nonetheless, participants also noted how their leaders' inability to collaborate with them negatively impacts the trust dynamic in the team.

*Cooperation*

The findings, consistent with prior research, underscore the critical role of trust in virtual team dynamics, facilitating effective cooperation among members (Abarca et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021). Leadership's influence in shaping trust-building processes and fostering open communication aligns with existing literature (Liu et al., 2021). Participants emphasised the foundational role trust plays in nurturing a positive atmosphere and enhancing team dynamics, reinforcing its importance in promoting cooperation and cohesion within teams (Liu et al., 2021). Additionally, trust nurtures a supportive work environment, though participants noted other factors driving their willingness to cooperate, such as their commitment, obligation to the organisation and their personal work ethic.

*Innovation*

Participants highlighted how trust streamlines processes, fosters open communication, and encourages collaboration, nurturing a culture of innovation (Hirak et al., 2012). Moreover, collaboration within a trusting environment empowers team members to share ideas freely, leading to innovative solutions. While trust and leadership are crucial, literature also emphasises technology adoption, collaboration, and diversity in driving innovation (Bell et al., 2023; Tushner et al., 2022). Building trust among team members is crucial for fostering collaboration, cooperation, and innovation within virtual teams (Abarca et al., 2020).

However, the research findings challenge the literature's emphasis on the virtual leader's significant role in trust establishment and its impact on innovation. Participants expressed their desire to feel trusted by their leader, yet they added that the perceived lack of trust did not significantly affect team dynamics. This discrepancy once again elucidated the downplayed role of the virtual leader compared to literature, raising questions about their role and relevance to virtual team effectiveness.

### 6.3.3  Conclusion—Research Sub-Question 2

The findings of Research Sub-Question 2 delve into how virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship, particularly focusing on trust dynamics and their impact on team collaboration, cooperation, and innovation. Through an exploration of participant perspectives and insights, this section illuminates the intricate interplay between trust, leadership, and team dynamics within virtual contexts.

The findings underscore the pivotal role of trust in fostering streamlined collaboration, effective cooperation, and a culture of innovation within virtual teams. Clear expectations, empowerment, transparency, maturity, and mutual understanding emerged as key elements contributing to trust dynamics and the quality of the leader–follower relationship.

Moreover, the analysis of findings in relation to existing literature highlights discrepancies and challenges conventional notions regarding the virtual leader's role in trust establishment and its impact on team innovation. While literature emphasises the significance of leadership support and trust-building processes, participants' perspectives suggest a more nuanced understanding, wherein the perceived lack of trust from leaders does not significantly hinder team dynamics.

Overall, the insights gleaned from this exploration underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of trust dynamics within virtual teams, urging further research and reflection on the role and relevance of virtual leaders in fostering trust and enhancing team effectiveness in virtual work environments.

**6.4     DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION 3**

*What are the inherent and developed attributes of followers in the virtual work environment, and how do these attributes contribute to achieving team goals, considering the influence of virtual leadership?*

The third research sub-question addresses followers' attributes and their contribution to team goals in the virtual work environment, considering the influence of virtual leadership.

Literature highlights virtual followers' multifaceted roles, emphasising adept social skills, adaptation to new responsibilities, collaboration, and self-management (Bell et al., 2023; Larsson & Nielsen, 2021; Oc et al., 2023; Young et al., 2020). These attributes, inherent or developed, significantly impact achieving team goals and overcoming organisational challenges in virtual settings. Moreover, followers' motivation and interactions with leaders influence organisational effectiveness and leadership dynamics (Liu et al., 2022; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Yet, followers maintain autonomy in choosing whether to follow leaders, engaging in their leadership and decision-making processes (Schmidt & Dellen, 2022).

Furthermore, followers act as defenders of organisational values against unethical leadership behaviours, maintaining ethical standards within teams (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). They contribute to addressing challenges, fostering accountability, and continuous improvement (Young et al., 2020). In terms of cultivated attributes, accountability, autonomy, feeling valued, and peer relationships are vital for effective follower dynamics (Bell et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2021; Puni et al., 2021; Yarberry & Sims, 2021), promoting collaboration, trust, engagement, and loyalty.

Additionally, virtual leadership influences follower attributes, with effective leaders fostering accountability, autonomy, and value among followers (Jiang et al., 2021; Puni et al., 2021; Yarberry & Sims, 2021). Leadership behaviours, like encouraging opinions and inclusive decision-making, shape follower attributes and team dynamics (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Young et al., 2020). The findings are presented under ***Theme 4: Follower dynamics in virtual teams.***

**6.4.1  Synopsis of Findings**

The research reveals the intricate relationship between follower dynamics and effective virtual leadership, emphasising the crucial role of followers' traits and behaviours in team outcomes. While initially exploring followers' perceptions of leadership effectiveness, the emergence of the "Follower Dynamics in Virtual Teams" theme underscores followers'

indispensable contributions alongside effective leadership. Within this theme, key facets of follower attributes and behaviours are illuminated, including accountability, commitment, feeling valued, ownership, and relationships with peers. Accountability drives individual motivation and team productivity, while commitment varies based on leadership style and personal factors. Feeling valued within the team shapes individual satisfaction and performance, with ownership encompassing collaboration, trust-building, and initiative-taking. Relationships with peers highlight the importance of interpersonal connections and collaboration. Overall, the findings stress the symbiotic relationship between effective virtual leadership and follower dynamics, urging leaders to recognise and leverage followers' diverse attributes and behaviours.

### 6.4.2  Analysis of Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

### 6.4.2.1  Findings Pertaining to Theme 4

*Accountability*

The findings on accountability within virtual teams align with the literature, emphasising its significant influence on team dynamics, productivity, and satisfaction. Participants' reflections underscore the importance of individual accountability in driving task completion and maintaining professionalism, which resonates with the idea that followers play a crucial role in organisational effectiveness (Jiang et al., 2021).

Participants' perspective further supports this notion by highlighting how accountability—and not their virtual leader—motivates team members to deliver their best effort and maintain high standards of work quality, aligning with the literature's emphasis on followers' capacity to contribute meaningfully to organisational goals (Young et al., 2020). This discovery contradicts the literature that emphasises the responsibility of virtual leadership in promoting accountability by highlighting leaders' significance in shaping team accountability and nurturing a culture of responsibility (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The findings indicate that although a small number of participants believed the virtual leader should enforce accountability, the majority did not require their virtual leader to facilitate this sense of accountability by holding them responsible. They expressed confidence in their own ability to hold themselves accountable.

*Commitment*

The findings and literature review offer insights into the multifaceted nature of commitment within virtual teams, highlighting various factors that influence individual dedication to job roles. Once again, only a few participants' perspectives align with the literature, emphasising

the importance of effective leadership in driving commitment. Other participants' emphasis on clear goals and organisational vision reflects the notion that leadership practices promoting clarity and alignment with objectives can enhance follower commitment (Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021). Conversely, most participants mentioned that their commitment stemmed from a desire to safeguard their personal brand, which they view as separate from leadership influence.

The literature further highlights individual factors like self-leadership and self-motivation as drivers of commitment in virtual teams (Puni et al., 2021; Yarberry & Sims, 2021). However, Bell et al. (2023) and Contreras et al. (2020) propose another form of empowerment, advocating self-management amidst virtual challenges like limited face-to-face interactions. This aligns with the assertion by Höddinghaus et al. (2021 that empowering leaders foster independence and self-management among followers. While the findings indicate a strong inclination towards participants embracing self-leadership, self-management, and self-motivation, they also contradict the literature by suggesting that these traits are not influenced by virtual leaders' empowerment but rather arise as a response to compensating for the virtual leader's shortcomings.

Other findings add nuances by highlighting the role of internal motivation and personal accountability in driving commitment. This aligns with the literature's emphasis on the dynamic nature of leadership emergence, where individuals alternate between leading and following roles, suggesting that commitment can stem from intrinsic motivation regardless of leadership influence (Oc et al., 2023).

*Ownership*

The findings concerning ownership within virtual teams are in line with the literature, which highlights the multifaceted nature of ownership, including collaborative approaches, trust-building, and individual initiative. Insights from participants regarding collaborative leadership echo the literature's emphasis on followers' commitment and self-motivation in assuming ownership of their responsibilities. Many participants reflected on their own virtual leadership capabilities, sharing how their approach of finding common ground and empowering individuals aligns with the concept that delegating decision-making authority can enhance employee autonomy and motivation.

Similarly, some participants highlighted the importance of trust, reflecting the literature's recognition of trust as a critical factor in fostering ownership within virtual teams. They noted that trust facilitates meaningful interaction and allows team members to work according to their preferred methods, thereby promoting increased autonomy and motivation. However,

the overall findings present a challenge that may contradict certain aspects of the literature. Despite experiencing stress and frustration with disengaged virtual leaders, participants demonstrated a readiness to take ownership, indicating their commitment and self-motivation. While the literature acknowledges the role of a supportive virtual work environment in fostering autonomy, it may not fully address the stress and frustration individuals may encounter (Adamovic et al., 2022). Although participants asserted that their frustration with inept virtual leaders does not adversely affect their work output or engagement levels, many instead mentioned how toxic virtual leaders diminish their sense of self-worth. This finding once again highlights the role of virtual leaders and raises the question: if there is no clear correlation between virtual leaders and team effectiveness, and only a correlation between negative virtual leadership behaviours and follower well-being, what role does the leader play in virtual work?

*Relationship with peers*

The findings on the relationship with peers emphasises the significant role that peer dynamics play in shaping virtual team interactions and effectiveness. Perspectives shared by participants highlight the autonomy of followers in driving team direction, which resonates with the literature's emphasis on followers actively participating in shaping the social dynamics of virtual teams (Bell et al., 2023). Similarly, some participants' emphasis on separate conversations and breakaway discussions among team members reflect the literature's recognition of the importance of open communication among followers for fostering a supportive work culture (Bell et al., 2023).

Other viewpoints on individual responsibility in relationship building within the team also align with the literature, which suggests that followers play an active role in maintaining connections with both leaders and peers to mitigate feelings of isolation (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). Furthermore, insight into the interdependence among team members highlights the collaborative nature of virtual teams, where followers rely on each other to navigate tasks and achieve objectives, consistent with the literature's emphasis on followers' active engagement and collaboration contributing to team effectiveness (Jiang et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings and literature underscore the importance of open communication, consistent engagement, and collaboration among followers and peers for effective virtual team dynamics, highlighting the role of followers in shaping leader emergence and team effectiveness in virtual work contexts, once again shedding light on the relevance of leaders in virtual work.

### 6.4.3  Conclusion—Research Question 3

The discussion of Research Sub-Question 3 emphasises the intricate interplay between follower attributes, virtual leadership, and team outcomes in virtual work contexts. Key findings highlight the significance of attributes such as accountability, commitment, feeling valued, ownership, and relationships with peers. While effective leaders foster attributes among followers, such as accountability and autonomy, the findings suggest a nuanced perspective, with many followers expressing confidence in their own ability to hold themselves accountable. Additionally, the discussion underscores the importance of open communication and collaboration among followers and peers for effective virtual team dynamics.

The findings highlight the need for leaders to recognise and leverage followers' diverse attributes and behaviours to enhance team effectiveness and promote positive organisational outcomes in virtual settings.

### 6.5  DISCUSSION OF MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

The findings in this chapter are presented in response to the research sub-questions and have illuminated key themes and highlighted where there is alignment and incongruence with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. In addressing the primary research question of "What are the practices of effective virtual leadership as perceived and experienced by virtual followers?", the collective findings illuminate these practices. Participants emphasised the importance of clear communication, supportive guidance, mindful leadership qualities, emotional intelligence, and intentional leadership efforts in fostering positive team dynamics and performance. These insights underscore the significance of virtual leaders establishing clear expectations, providing support, and embodying attributes like mindfulness and emotional intelligence to cultivate positive team outcomes.

Furthermore, trust emerged as a pivotal factor in fostering streamlined collaboration, effective cooperation, and a culture of innovation within virtual teams. The findings highlight the complex nature of trust dynamics within virtual teams and the crucial role of virtual leaders in fostering trust to enhance team effectiveness. Moreover, the intricate interplay between follower attributes, virtual leadership, and team outcomes in virtual work contexts was evident. Effective leaders recognise and leverage followers' diverse attributes and behaviours to enhance team effectiveness and promote positive organisational outcomes in virtual settings.

In summary, the synthesis of findings from the three research sub-questions provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of effective virtual leadership practices as

perceived and experienced by virtual followers. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the practices that drive successful virtual teams and inform recommendations for virtual leaders navigating the complexities of remote work environments.

Figure 12 provides a graphical representation of the conceptual framework that emerged in answering the main research question.
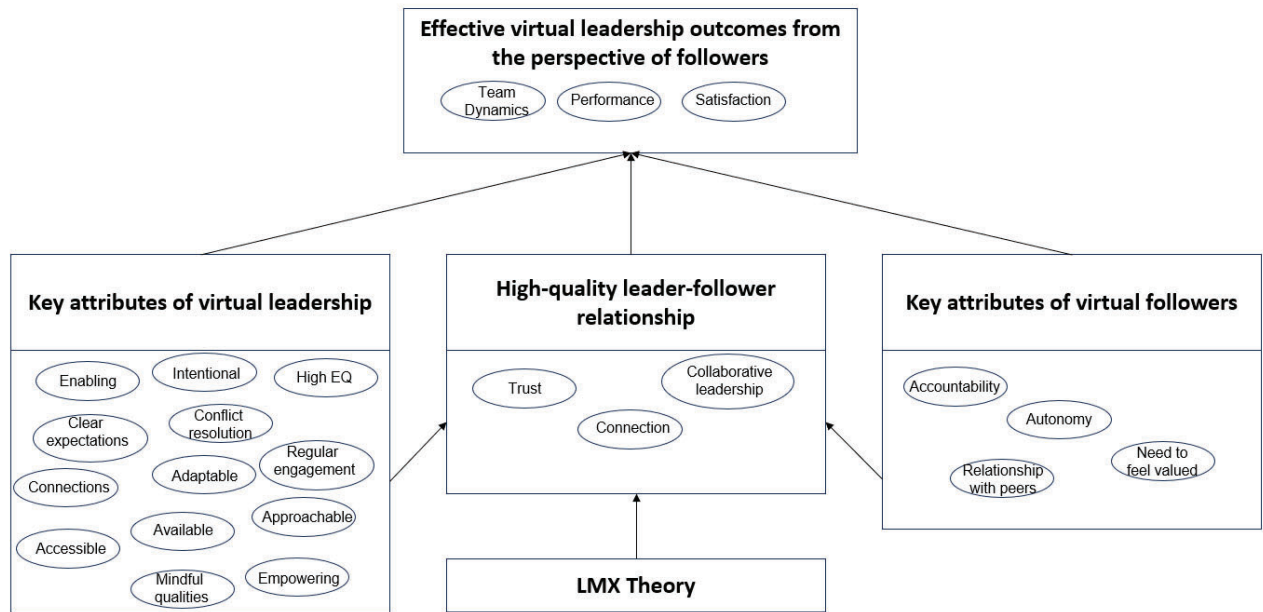


**Figure 12:** *Conceptual Framework on the Effectiveness of Virtual Leadership from the Perception of Followers (Source: Researcher's compilation)*

## 6.6    CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the research findings, analysed against existing literature, reveal essential insights into effective virtual leadership as perceived by followers. Key themes highlight the importance of leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and adaptability in virtual work settings. Effective leadership involves nurturing relationships, ensuring accessibility, and consistent engagement to navigate virtual team dynamics. Trust building, relationship management, and collaboration are crucial for team success, necessitating further exploration and adaptive leadership strategies. Overall, understanding follower attributes and peer interactions is essential for enhancing virtual team effectiveness and redefining the role of leadership in virtual work environments.

# CHAPTER 7:  CONCLUSION

## 7.1    INTRODUCTION

The research outcomes extend the literature in the field of virtual leadership effectiveness by exploring it from the lived experience and perceptions of virtual followers to understand and explain the key practices, competencies and attributes of these leaders. The research firstly investigated the concepts of the leader–member relationship and the quality thereof, key virtual leadership attributes and key virtual follower attributes through a theoretical analysis of previous research. After the theoretical review of the literature, data was collected from virtual followers and through thematic analysis four themes emerged. The research findings were then compared to the existing literature to highlight evidence consistent with an extension of, or contradiction of the literature.

This concluding chapter provides an overview of the research study by addressing the three research sub-questions that were investigated. The research conclusions that answer the research sub-questions are discussed under theoretical conclusions and recommendations for management. Lastly, the limitations of the research as well as suggestions where future research are discussed.

## 7.2    RESEARCH SUMMARY

This research explored the practices of effective virtual leadership as perceived and experienced by virtual followers, particularly in the context of the widespread adoption of remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid expansion of digitalisation. Prior to the pandemic, remote work was primarily occasional, but the sudden shift necessitated a deeper understanding of virtual leadership's nuances and its impact on team dynamics and outcomes. As organisations continue to embrace virtual work arrangements, effective leadership in such environments becomes increasingly critical for ensuring productivity, team cohesion, and satisfaction among virtual team followers.

The study thus explored the challenges and opportunities presented by virtual leadership, necessitating developing or leveraging certain skills required for leading in virtual spaces and recognising the importance of considering followers' perspectives. It delved into the intricacies of virtual leadership effectiveness, highlighting the key role of trust, communication, and supportive guidance in fostering positive team dynamics and performance. Additionally, the research examined the interplay between follower attributes, virtual leadership, and team outcomes, shedding light on the diverse factors influencing virtual team effectiveness.

By synthesising existing literature and gathering insights from virtual followers, the research conclusions offer valuable contributions to the understanding of effective virtual leadership practices. It emphasises the need for virtual leaders to adapt their strategies and behaviours to meet the specific needs and expectations of virtual teams, ultimately improving team performance and cultivating a positive work environment in virtual settings.

Overall, the research outcomes highlight the multifaceted nature of effective virtual leadership and offer actionable recommendations for organisations, leaders, and followers in virtual team settings. The research conclusions contribute to the ongoing discourse on virtual leadership effectiveness, emphasising the significance of not only considering followers' experiences and perspectives but also their roles and key attributes in shaping effective leadership practices in virtual work environments.

## 7.3   RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This section summarises the research outcomes per research sub-question and highlights the theoretical conclusions and recommendations for management.

### 7.3.1  Theoretical Conclusions

Research Sub-Question 1: *What discernible practices, competencies and attributes do effective virtual team leaders demonstrate, as recognised by followers within virtual teams?*

The research conclusions extend the literature on the discernible practices, competencies and attributes of effective virtual leaders as recognised by virtual followers.  Firstly, the research outcomes regarding effective virtual team leadership shed light on various theoretical implications, highlighting the complexities inherent in virtual leadership practices (Efimov et al., 2022). While the literature often focuses on leadership skills from the perspective of leaders, this study underscores the importance of understanding these aspects from the viewpoint of virtual followers (Azukas, 2022; Höddinghaus et al., 2023; Savić, 2020). Secondly, effective virtual leaders must understand team relationships and hierarchical structures to set goals effectively and facilitate transparent communication, addressing concerns raised by participants about biases in leader–member relationships (Goh & Wasko, 2012).

Thirdly, while the research conclusions highlighted the significance of establishing a human connection with their leader, the lack of such connections did not seem to adversely affect their performance, raising questions about the role of virtual team leaders in enhancing team effectiveness. Fourthly, there is a divergence in the literature regarding the direct impact of

virtual leaders on team success, with some studies emphasising leadership support while others highlight team support and coordination (Abarca et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2023).

Additionally, the evolving role of virtual leaders is evidenced by the findings elevating the leadership role followers play in virtual work, suggesting a transition from traditional directive roles to facilitators supporting self-organisation (Varhelahti & Turnquist, 2021). However, participants' reliance on peers due to the inability of virtual leaders to articulate expectations challenges this viewpoint.

Moreover, participants' readiness to embrace autonomy and take the initiative without relying heavily on their leaders prompts reflection on the role and significance of a leader in the virtual setting (Liu et al., 2021). Analysis through the lens LMX theory raises doubts about its applicability in virtual work settings, highlighting potential limitations in practically implementing LMX theory within virtual teams (Goh & Wasko, 2012). Finally, maturity and mutual understanding emerged as key findings, with participants attributing discrepancies in leaders' approaches to variations in leadership maturity within virtual teams (Puni et al., 2021; Zeuge et al., 2020).

Research Sub-Question 2: *How do virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship?*

The research findings regarding trust within virtual teams unveiled several theoretical implications that shed light on the intricate dynamics of trust-building processes (Efimov et al., 2022). Firstly, the research underscores the complex interplay between leadership behaviours and team dynamics in cultivating trust within virtual teams (Abarca et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Puni et al., 2021). Addressing the call for further investigation by Chamakiotis et al. (2021) and Efimov et al. (2022), this study emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding that considers factors such as communication styles, technology usage, and team structures to enhance the quality of the leader–follower relationship. Scholars can refine existing theoretical frameworks by recognising the complexity of trust dynamics (Liu et al., 2021).

Secondly, the divergence in perspectives on the role of virtual leaders in trust building necessitates a shift in leadership strategies to meet the specific needs of virtual teams (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). As virtual work becomes more prevalent, there is a growing urgency to reassess existing frameworks and integrate the evolving role of virtual leaders (Puni et al., 2021). Traditional leadership models may not adequately address the unique challenges faced by virtual leaders in fostering trust within teams (Abarca et al., 2020).

Lastly, the research conclusions highlight the significance of considering contextual factors such as technology adoption and collaboration structures in understanding trust development within virtual teams (Abarca et al., 2020). Trust is influenced not only by leadership behaviours but also by broader organisational contexts and team interactions. Scholars must adopt a holistic approach to study virtual team dynamics, exploring the interplay between trust, technology, and teamwork to develop effective leadership strategies tailored to virtual environments.

Additionally, participants' emphasis on separate conversations and breakaway discussions among team members aligns with the literature's recognition of the importance of open communication among followers for fostering a supportive work culture (Bell et al., 2023). Furthermore, insights into the interdependence among team members underscore the collaborative nature of virtual teams, where followers rely on each other to navigate tasks and achieve objectives, contributing to team effectiveness (Jiang et al., 2021).

Research Sub-Question 3: *What are the inherent and developed attributes of followers in the virtual work environment, and how do these attributes contribute to achieving team goals, considering the influence of virtual leadership?*

The research findings challenge traditional leadership paradigms by highlighting the significant role of followers in fostering accountability, commitment, and ownership within virtual teams (Bell et al., 2023). This necessitates a re-evaluation of leadership theories to incorporate the dynamic interaction between leaders and followers in virtual environments (Read III, 2021; Zhao et al., 2019). The focus on individual accountability and commitment underscores the importance of understanding follower attributes in shaping virtual team dynamics, suggesting a need for deeper exploration into cultivating follower characteristics such as self-motivation, accountability, and ownership (Puni et al., 2021; Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

Additionally, the discrepancy between participants' perceptions of leadership effectiveness and established literature calls for a redefinition of leadership effectiveness in virtual settings (Contreras et al., 2020). Future research should aim to develop a comprehensive framework that considers both leader and follower contributions to team dynamics and performance, enhancing the understanding of effective leadership in virtual contexts (Efimov et al., 2022).

The findings also contradict existing literature regarding the responsibility of virtual leadership in promoting accountability, as participants expressed confidence in their own ability to hold themselves accountable rather than relying on their virtual leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). This suggests a divergence from traditional notions of leadership influence on

follower behaviour, prompting further inquiry into the roles and responsibilities of virtual leaders in fostering accountability and ownership within teams.

Furthermore, while the literature acknowledges individual factors like self-leadership and self-motivation as drivers of commitment in virtual teams, the research findings suggest that these traits may not be directly influenced by virtual leaders' empowerment but rather arise to compensate for leadership shortcomings (Bell et al., 2023; Contreras et al., 2020). This underscores the complex interplay between leadership behaviours and follower attributes in virtual team dynamics, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of leadership and follower roles.

### 7.3.2 Recommendations for Management

Research Sub-Question 1: *What discernible practices, competencies and attributes do effective virtual team leaders demonstrate, as recognised by followers within virtual teams?*

When considering effective practices for virtual team leadership, it is essential for leaders to focus on clear communication of objectives, expectations, and the establishment of transparent channels to foster team cohesion and engagement (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). This includes prioritising the development of trust and authentic relationships among team members through inclusive approaches and transparent communication (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Leaders should also demonstrate adaptability and openness to input from followers to strengthen team cohesion and morale.

Regarding managing work-life boundaries, it is necessary for both leaders and followers to establish clear boundaries during work hours, with leaders respecting the need for scheduled virtual interactions rather than spontaneous contact (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). This emphasises the importance of implementing practices that support work–life balance while ensuring effective communication and collaboration within the virtual team.

The study highlights the impact of leader engagement on follower collaboration and performance, with passive leadership potentially leading to reduced effort and performance (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Additionally, continuous communication is essential to boost follower confidence, particularly in low-trust situations (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). Leaders must facilitate regular engagement, even in the absence of physical interaction, to maintain positive leader–follower relationships and prevent disengagement from negatively affecting team dynamics.

Research Sub-Question 2: *How do virtual team followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship?*

Derived from these research outcomes, practical managerial implications emerge, highlighting the need for adaptation in leadership strategies. Managers must acknowledge the dynamic nature of trust building within virtual teams and tailor their approaches, accordingly, emphasising clear communication, empowerment, and transparency to cultivate an environment conducive to trust, collaboration, and innovation. Furthermore, fostering collaboration and cooperation among followers is essential for enhancing team performance, necessitating the facilitation of open communication platforms, problem-solving initiatives, and knowledge sharing to foster a collaborative culture within virtual teams. Additionally, the effective utilisation of technology is paramount for driving innovation within virtual teams, prompting managers to invest in tools and platforms that facilitate seamless communication and idea-sharing among team members, thereby fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Additionally, participants emphasised the importance of mutual accessibility, highlighting a reciprocal relationship wherein virtual leaders must be available to followers, and followers must also ensure their availability to their virtual leaders. This fosters a supportive atmosphere characterised by mutual understanding and respect (Pack et al., 2022). However, while literature underscores leader adaptation to virtual dynamics, the findings do not directly address this aspect, suggesting leaders heed advice to remain consistently accessible, approachable, and responsive to meet evolving team needs (Zeuge et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, Norman et al. (2020) warn that trust is affected not only by effective technology utilisation but also by occasional face-to-face interactions. Several participants in this study discovered that using cameras during virtual meetings satisfied their need for face-to-face communication. Moreover, the research outcomes found that engaging in individual discussions through virtual platforms with virtual leaders enabled open conversations free from typical office distractions. Therefore, organisations and managers should encourage the practice of intentionally connecting individually with followers and utilise camera features to alleviate any sense of isolation or detachment from the virtual leader.

Research Sub-Question 3: *What are the inherent and developed attributes of followers in the virtual work environment, and how do these attributes contribute to achieving team goals, considering the influence of virtual leadership?*

Practical managerial implications stemming from the research suggest several key actions for managers to enhance team performance in virtual settings. Firstly, empowering followers emerges as a critical strategy, wherein managers should prioritise fostering a culture of accountability and ownership among team members. This entails providing autonomy, setting clear expectations, and offering opportunities for personal growth and development to

empower followers within virtual teams. Secondly, building peer relationships is highlighted as essential for fostering strong team cohesion and effectiveness. Managers should actively encourage open communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing among team members by facilitating platforms for regular interaction and collaboration. Lastly, leadership development programmes are recommended to focus on cultivating both leadership and follower attributes to promote effective team dynamics in virtual environments. This entails developing and nurturing leaders who can instil trust, facilitate communication, and empower followers, while also fostering virtual follower attributes such as proactivity, accountability, commitment, and ownership in achieving organisational goals. By adopting these strategies, managers can effectively bolster their virtual teams and improve overall team performance.

## 7.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's limitations primarily stemmed from researcher bias, as the researcher was also an employee of the same organisation as the participants. While the criteria for participant selection focused on employees with extensive experience in remote work within an organisation that has embraced virtual work for many years, the homogeneity of the participants posed a limitation.

Additionally, the study's scope was limited to a single organisation with well-established virtual work practices, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the study design was cross-sectional due to time constraints imposed by the researcher's master's degree programme. Conducting a longitudinal study in the future could provide a deeper understanding of effective virtual leadership practices, considering the lived experiences and evolving perceptions of virtual followers over time.

## 7.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research aimed at understanding factors contributing to virtual team effectiveness should encompass perspectives from both virtual leaders and followers. Longitudinal studies would be essential for tracking the implementation and impact of strategies over time, providing insights into their long-term effects on virtual team dynamics and performance. Leader and follower enablement and follower perceptions play essential roles in virtual team effectiveness. Exploring how organisations empower virtual leaders and virtual followers and testing interventions like training programmes or technological tools through experimental designs would shed light on their effectiveness. Longitudinal studies can also track changes in follower perceptions and team dynamics following these interventions.

Furthermore, research on examining the implications of different virtual leadership practices on team dynamics, performance, and satisfaction could be conducted. Comparative studies

could analyse how various leadership styles influence outcomes in virtual settings. Additionally, longitudinal studies focusing on trust and team dynamics should collect data at multiple time points, using statistical analyses to identify correlations and trends. However, thematic analysis can uncover underlying factors driving changes in trust and team dynamics.

Further research could also assess emotional intelligence and virtual competencies among virtual leaders and their relationship with follower experiences. Qualitative research can provide deeper insights into how these qualities manifest in virtual leadership behaviours and impact team effectiveness.

The research outcomes of this study also highlight the significance of virtual leaders in promoting the adoption of technology and their adeptness in technological matters. However, there is a need for additional investigation into the importance of virtual leaders in enhancing team effectiveness. This inquiry should consider factors such as more horizontal organisational structures and the prominence of follower self-leadership qualities, which may overshadow the necessity for virtual leaders.

Another area warranting further research is assessing LMX perceptions and their relationship with team outcomes in virtual work settings. Comparative studies can explore the applicability of LMX theory across different virtual teams or industries.

Finally, with maturity and mutual understanding emerging prominently in the research outcomes of this study, the role of maturity and mutual understanding in virtual team dynamics and their influence on team effectiveness necessitate further investigation. Longitudinal studies can track changes in maturity and mutual understanding over time, thereby assessing their impact on virtual team dynamics.

## 7.6    CONCLUSION

This research has contributed to the literature on virtual leadership effectiveness by examining it through the lens of virtual followers' lived experiences and perceptions. Through a review of literature and thematic data analysis, key practices, competencies, and attributes of effective virtual leaders were identified and compared with existing literature. While there was congruence between followers' perceptions and the literature in many aspects, a notable revelation emerged regarding the role of followers in virtual teams, contrasting with the literature's emphasis on virtual leaders playing a more pivotal role in virtual team effectiveness. The theoretical implications of the research outcomes highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of trust dynamics, the evolution of leadership strategies, and the consideration of contextual factors in virtual team dynamics. The practical managerial

implications suggest adapting leadership strategies to promote trust and collaboration, empowering followers, and investing in technology for effective communication. Despite its contributions, the study had limitations associated with researcher bias, sample homogeneity, and study design, indicating opportunities for future research to investigate strategies for enhancing virtual leadership skills, addressing communication challenges, and comprehending the long-term implications of virtual leadership practices. This includes identifying and differentiating the leadership roles adopted by both leaders and followers to facilitate effective virtual team dynamics and performance.

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**APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

| Research Sub-Questions | Draft Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **How do virtual followers perceive and experience the quality of the leader–follower relationship in virtual teams, and how does it impact team outcomes and their overall experience of virtual leadership?** | **Q1:** How would you describe your relationship with the virtual team leader?<br>**Q2:** In what ways does the leader's communication style impact your engagement and collaboration in the virtual team?<br>**Q3:** Can you share an example of a positive experience with the team leader that enhanced team outcomes or your overall experience in the virtual team?<br>**Q4:** Have you encountered any challenges or conflicts with the team leader in the virtual setting? How did they affect team dynamics and performance?<br>**Q5:** How do you feel the leader's support and guidance influence your motivation and commitment to the virtual team's goals?<br>**Q6:** What do you believe are the key factors that contribute to a positive leader–follower relationship in virtual teams? |
| **What are the specific practices and competencies exhibited by effective virtual team leaders, as identified by virtual followers, and how do these practices contribute to team performance and satisfaction?** | **Q7:** From your perspective, what specific qualities or behaviours do effective virtual team leaders possess?<br>**Q8:** Can you describe any instances where the leader's practices or competencies positively impacted team performance or satisfaction?<br>**Q9:** How does the leader facilitate effective communication and coordination within the virtual team?<br>**Q10:** In what ways does the leader foster a sense of collaboration and teamwork among virtual team members?<br>**Q11:** How do you feel the leader's decision-making and problem-solving abilities contribute to the team's overall success?<br>**Q12:** What practices or competencies of the leader do you think are most essential in a virtual team environment? |

| How do effective virtual team leaders build and maintain trust among team members, and how does trust impact team dynamics, collaboration, and overall performance from the perspective of virtual followers? | **Q13**: Can you describe the ways in which the leader establishes and nurtures trust within the virtual team?<br>**Q14:** How do you perceive the impact of trust on team dynamics and collaboration within the virtual team?<br>**Q15:** Have you experienced any instances where trust (or lack thereof) influenced team performance in the virtual setting? |
|---|---|

**APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWS**

**Gordon Institute of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

Informed consent for interviews

I am conducting research on virtual leadership and its impact on followers in the context of virtual teams. Our interview is expected to last approximately forty (40) minutes and will help us gain insights into how virtual followers experience and perceive effective virtual leadership. This research aims to shed light on the specific traits, behaviours, and approaches that virtual followers consider essential for successful virtual leadership. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without any penalty. By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

- The interview to be recorded.

- The recording to be transcribed by a third-party transcriber, who will be subject to a standard non-disclosure agreement.

- Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the research report, provided they are not identified with your name or any identifying information.

- The data to be used as part of a research report that will be made publicly available once the examination process has been completed.

- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns or questions, please feel free to contact me or my research supervisor using the details provided below.

Researcher Name: xxxxxxxxxxxxxx          Supervisor Name: Jabu Maphalala

Email: 23960745@mygibs.co.za            Email: maphalalaj@gibs.co.za

Phone: 0835644090                       Supervisor's Phone: 0716792770

Signature of Participant: _____    Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____    Date: _____

**APPENDIX 3: PERMISSION LETTER TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**



Date

To whom it may concern

**Permission letter to conduct research**

This letter serves to confirm that [ ████████████ , under supervision of **Jabu Maphalala** from **GIBS** University, may conduct research on the premises of ████ and may make use of company data, as specified below. Furthermore, the data generated during the research may be used to compile a dissertation for the fulfilment of the degree **MPhil (Change Leadership).**

████ hereby agrees to provide the necessary research support **in the form of granting permission for this research to explore and gain insights into effective virtual leadership practices from the perspective of virtual followers within the context of a global organisation.**

The researcher may make use of the following data:
- **Qualitative research, which gathers data through interviews, allowing for an in-depth understanding of virtual team members' experiences, perceptions, and opinions.**

The data may be used on the following conditions:
- Answers from the sample population to be treated as confidential
- Proprietary information will not be disclosed
- ████s name will not be published in the research finding, reference can be made to a Petrochemical Company.

The researcher may access applicable areas within the organisation, if deemed necessary to conduct a case study, while adhering to Sasol policies.

Yours sincerely

## APPENDIX 4: LIST OF CODES USED

| Code | Category | Theme |
|---|---|---|
| ○ Adaptive<br>○ Authoritative<br>○ Clear communication<br>○ Clear expectations<br>○ Connected<br>○ Consistency<br>○ Democratic<br>○ Direction setting<br>○ Empowering<br>○ Frequent contact<br>○ Hands-on<br>○ Inarticulate<br>○ Ineffective communication<br>○ Multiple connection platforms<br>○ Open lines of communication<br>○ Regular engagement<br>○ Rigid<br>○ Role clarity<br>○ Transparent<br>○ Trust<br>○ Vague | Communication style | Virtual leadership approaches and effectiveness |
| ○ Alignment<br>○ Coaching<br>○ Collaborative<br>○ Commitment<br>○ Communication<br>○ Demotivating<br>○ Enabling<br>○ Feedback<br>○ Mentorship<br>○ Motivation<br>○ Recognition<br>○ Roles and responsibilities<br>○ Supportive<br>○ Team cohesion | Leader support & guidance | |
| ○ Absent<br>○ Accessible<br>○ Accountability<br>○ Approachable<br>○ Authoritative<br>○ Available<br>○ Avoidance<br>○ Being caring<br>○ Building trust<br>○ Clear communication<br>○ Clear goal setting<br>○ Collaborative | Leader practice | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ○ Conflict averse | | |
| ○ Conflict resolution | | |
| ○ Consistency | | |
| ○ Consultative | | |
| ○ Controlling | | |
| ○ Delegation | | |
| ○ Detail-oriented | | |
| ○ Distrust | | |
| ○ Effective planning | | |
| ○ Empowering | | |
| ○ Enabling | | |
| ○ Encouraging | | |
| ○ Fast decision-making | | |
| ○ Growth mindset | | |
| ○ Hands-on | | |
| ○ Holding follower accountable | | |
| ○ Humility | | |
| ○ Humour | | |
| ○ Inaccessible | | |
| ○ Insecure | | |
| ○ Intentional | | |
| ○ Irresponsible | | |
| ○ Open communication | | |
| ○ Ownership | | |
| ○ Passive aggressive | | |
| ○ Patience | | |
| ○ Prioritisation | | |
| ○ Problem-solving | | |
| ○ Profiling followers | | |
| ○ Reassuring | | |
| ○ Recognition | | |
| ○ Regular feedback | | |
| ○ Reliability | | |
| ○ Responsive | | |
| ○ Results-oriented | | |
| ○ Self preservation | | |
| ○ Self promoting | | |
| ○ Sense-making | | |
| ○ Solutions-driven | | |
| ○ Tracking and monitoring | | |
| ○ Unavailable | | |
| ○ Understanding | | |
| ○ Unsupportive | | |
| ○ Vulnerability | | |
| ○ Welcomes feedback | | |
| ○ Active listening skills | Leader competence | |
| ○ Adaptable | | |
| ○ Agility | | |
| ○ Articulate | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ○ Authentic<br>○ Building trust<br>○ Calm<br>○ Collaborative<br>○ Compassionate<br>○ Confidence<br>○ Curious<br>○ Effective communicator<br>○ Empathy<br>○ Extrovert<br>○ Flexible<br>○ Foresight<br>○ Good natured<br>○ High EQ<br>○ Human connection<br>○ Inclusivity<br>○ Integrity<br>○ Intuitive<br>○ Lacking leadership skills<br>○ Mindfulness<br>○ Participative<br>○ Pragmatic<br>○ Rational<br>○ Relationship building<br>○ Resilience<br>○ Respectful<br>○ Secure<br>○ Self-awareness<br>○ Situational leadership<br>○ Supportive<br>○ Technological competence | | |
| ○ Accessibility<br>○ Authentic<br>○ Clear expectations<br>○ Compassionate<br>○ Consistency<br>○ Cooperation<br>○ Create safe space<br>○ Credibility<br>○ Effective communication<br>○ Empowerment<br>○ Enablement<br>○ Engaged<br>○ Fairness<br>○ Human connection<br>○ Integrity<br>○ Intentional<br>○ Recognition | Build & Maintain Trust | Trust and relationship dynamics in virtual leadership |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ○ Reliability<br>○ Transparent | | |
| ○ Accessible<br>○ Amicable<br>○ Collaborative<br>○ Consultative<br>○ Effective communication<br>○ Empathy<br>○ Enabling<br>○ Fair<br>○ Inarticulate<br>○ Inclusive<br>○ Lack of clarity<br>○ Maturity<br>○ Mutual trust<br>○ Negligent<br>○ Open<br>○ Personal interest<br>○ Positive<br>○ Professional<br>○ Support<br>○ Transactional<br>○ Transparent<br>○ Trust | Quality of relationship | |
| ○ Collaboration<br>○ Communication<br>○ Cooperation<br>○ Innovation<br>○ Risk-taking | Impact of trust on team dynamics | |
| ○ Accessible<br>○ Clarity<br>○ Collaboration<br>○ Consistency<br>○ Effective communication<br>○ Emotional support<br>○ Human connection<br>○ Intentional time<br>○ Maturity<br>○ Open communication<br>○ Professional support<br>○ Recognition<br>○ Regular engagement<br>○ Relationship building<br>○ Supportive<br>○ Trust | Factors contributing to positive connection | Enhancing virtual team performance and cohesion |
| ○ Enhanced collaboration<br>○ High morale<br>○ Improved decision-making<br>○ Increased productivity<br>○ Low morale<br>○ Risk-taking | Impact on team performance | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ○ Technical glitches | | |
| ○ Enhanced performance<br><br>○ Impact on team outcomes: Positive work    environment<br><br>○ Improved satisfaction<br><br>○ Increased motivation<br><br>○ Team cohesion | Impact on team outcomes | |
| ○ Accessible<br><br>○ Accountability<br><br>○ Adaptive<br><br>○ Adeptness<br><br>○ Commitment<br><br>○ Confidence in leaders judgment<br><br>○ Cooperation<br><br>○ Disengaged<br><br>○ Empathy<br><br>○ EQ<br><br>○ Feel trusted<br><br>○ Feel valued<br><br>○ Gratitude<br><br>○ Insecure<br><br>○ Integrity<br><br>○ Maturity<br><br>○ Need for connection<br><br>○ Ownership<br><br>○ Reliance on co-workers<br><br>○ Relationship with peers<br>○ Respectful<br>○ Responsible<br><br>○ Responsiveness to leader<br><br>○ Safe space<br><br>○ Self-leading<br><br>○ Self-motivated<br><br>○ Sense-making<br><br>○ Value being trusted | Follower | **Follower dynamics in virtual teams** |