



**UNIVERSITÀ
DI PAVIA**

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

**MASTER PROGRAMME IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND
ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

**BUILDING TRUST IN THE DIGITAL ERA:
HOW E-MENTORING PLATFORMS SUPPORT ENTREPRENEURS
ACROSS CULTURES**

Supervisor:

Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Diala Kabbara

Pantea Palahang

Matr. n. 530705

Academic Year 2025-2026

List of Figures

Figure 1- Types of Mentoring	16
Figure 2- Entrepreneurial Barriers (cited in OECD, 2025).....	50
Figure 3- Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (cited in OECD, 2025)	51
Figure 4- Level of Connectivity (Datahub, 2025)	52
Figure 5- Individual usage of Internet (ITU, 2025)	52
Figure 6- Percentage of Fortune 500 Companies with Mentoring Programs (Lopata et al., 2024, Cook, 2024).....	54
Figure 7- Mentoring Software Market, Metastat	55
Figure 8- Conceptual Model Based On Scoping Review	74

List of Tables

Table 1- Advantages and disadvantages of digital mentoring	21
Table 2- Comparison of Traditional and Digital Mentoring	31
Table 3- Definition of Culture (cited in Erez & Earley 1993, p. 41)	40
Table 4- Comparison of Platform Features Across Trust Building Categories.....	60
Table 5- Mentoring Platforms	62

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	6
Abstract (English).....	7
Abstract (Italiano).....	8
Introduction.....	10
1. Historical and Conceptual Evolution of Mentoring.....	12
1.1 Entrepreneurial Mentoring.....	12
1.2 Types of Mentoring.....	15
1.3 Digital Transformation of Mentoring.....	17
1.3.1. Benefits of online mentoring.....	18
1.3.2. The challenges of online mentoring.....	19
1.4 Challenges of Trust in Digital Mentoring.....	22
1.5 The Role of Culture in Online Mentoring.....	24
1.6 Research Gap and Problem Statement.....	25
2. Theoretical Framework.....	27
2.1 Mentoring: Theoretical Foundation and Functions.....	27
2.1.1. The Functions of Mentoring.....	28
2.2. Traditional vs Digital Mentoring: A Comparative Perspective.....	29
2.3. Trust in Mentoring Relationship.....	32
2.4. Trust in Digital Environments.....	34
2.5. Mechanisms of Trust Formation in E-mentoring.....	35
2.6. The Role of Platform Features in Trust Formation.....	37
2.7. Culture as a Moderator of Trust.....	39
2.7.1 Hofstede model.....	41
2.7.2 Culture and digital Behavior.....	42
2.7.3 Culture and online trust.....	43
2.8. Conceptual Framework and Research Direction.....	43
2.9 Development of Propositions.....	45
Chapter 3 – The Digital Mentoring Industry: Context, Trends, and Platforms.....	48
3.1 Entrepreneurship Ecosystem and the Need for Mentoring.....	48

3.2 Digitalization and the Growth of Online Mentoring.....	51
3.3 The Digital Mentoring Platform Industry.....	53
3.4 Key Entrepreneurial E-Mentoring Platforms.....	55
4. Methodology and Research Design.....	59
4.1 Research Design.....	59
4.2 Case Selection.....	61
4.3. Data Collection.....	63
4.4. Data Analysis.....	63
Chapter 5- Findings.....	64
5.1 Trust in E-Mentoring Platforms.....	64
5.1.1 Mechanisms of trust formation in digital mentoring.....	66
5.1.2 Platform Features as Enablers of Trust.....	68
5.1.3 Culture’s Influence on Trust Building.....	70
5.1.4 Conceptual model.....	72
5.2 Platform Analysis.....	74
5.2.1 Matching and Personalization.....	75
5.2.2 Communication Modalities.....	77
5.2.3 Anonymity and Privacy.....	79
5.2.4 Structured Program Design.....	81
5.2.5 Community and Feedback Features.....	83
5.3 Discussion.....	86
5.4 Limitations.....	88
5.5 Implications and Future Research.....	89
Conclusion.....	90
References.....	93
Appendix.....	99
Appendix A- Summary of Articles Included in the Scoping Review.....	99

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family and friends, who have always supported me and believed in me, even on the days when I did not believe in myself. Although I have not been able to see them for more than two years, the distance has not changed anything; it has only strengthened the love I have for them.

Pantea

Abstract (English)

This thesis examines how trust can be built in online mentoring platforms focused on providing services for entrepreneurs from different cultural backgrounds. Mentoring is one of the key support mechanisms in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, as entrepreneurs face many challenges on their paths, and it is one of the most recognized solutions for overcoming these challenges. The shift from traditional mentoring to online mentoring reduces barriers that once existed and increases accessibility, but also brings challenges in terms of establishing relationships, especially trust creation, as it is important for entrepreneurs to accept mentors' opinions and disclose the information they have.

To answer this question, this study adopted a qualitative research design in two phases: the first was a scoping review of existing literature to identify the main factors that affect and facilitate trust in online mentoring and a conceptual framework was created based on it; the second was a comparative case analysis of four e-mentoring platforms for entrepreneurs, namely MentorCruise, MicroMentor, GrowthMentor, and Mentorship Center, to examine how these factors are implemented at the practical level.

The findings show that trust in digital mentoring is a multidimensional construct shaped by platform features and user interactions. Current platforms mainly support cognition-based trust, such as competence and credibility, but are less effective in fostering deeper trust based on emotional connection. The results also highlight the role of culture in shaping how trust develops in online interactions, while showing that it is largely overlooked in platform design. Overall, the study reveals a gap between theory and practice and proposes a conceptual model linking platform features, trust formation, and culture in digital mentoring for entrepreneurs.

Abstract (Italiano)

Questa tesi esamina come è possibile costruire la fiducia nelle piattaforme di mentoring online rivolte a imprenditori provenienti da diversi contesti culturali. Il mentoring rappresenta uno dei principali meccanismi di supporto all'interno dell'ecosistema imprenditoriale, poiché gli imprenditori affrontano numerose sfide nel loro percorso, ed è riconosciuto come una delle soluzioni più efficaci per superarle. Il passaggio dal mentoring tradizionale a quello online riduce le barriere precedentemente esistenti e aumenta l'accessibilità, ma introduce anche nuove difficoltà nella costruzione delle relazioni, in particolare per quanto riguarda la fiducia, che è fondamentale affinché gli imprenditori possano accettare i consigli dei mentor e condividere informazioni rilevanti.

Per rispondere a questa domanda, lo studio adotta un disegno di ricerca qualitativo articolato in due fasi: la prima consiste in una scoping review della letteratura esistente, finalizzata a identificare i principali fattori che influenzano e facilitano la fiducia nel mentoring online e a sviluppare un quadro concettuale; la seconda prevede un'analisi comparativa di quattro piattaforme di e-mentoring per imprenditori, MentorCruise, MicroMentor, GrowthMentor e Mentorship Center, al fine di esaminare come tali fattori vengano implementati nella pratica.

I risultati mostrano che la fiducia nel mentoring digitale è un costrutto multidimensionale, influenzato sia dalle caratteristiche delle piattaforme sia dalle interazioni tra gli utenti. Le piattaforme attuali supportano principalmente una fiducia di tipo cognitivo, basata su competenza e credibilità, ma risultano meno efficaci nel favorire una fiducia più profonda, legata alla connessione emotiva. I risultati evidenziano inoltre il ruolo della cultura nel plasmare lo sviluppo della fiducia nelle interazioni online, mostrando al contempo come essa sia ancora poco considerata nella progettazione delle piattaforme. Nel complesso, lo studio mette in luce un divario tra teoria e pratica e

propone un modello concettuale che collega le caratteristiche delle piattaforme, la formazione della fiducia e la cultura nel contesto del mentoring digitale per imprenditori.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is one of the significant drivers of economic growth, job creation, and innovation in society. Besides the advantages that come with entrepreneurship, the challenges are also very significant on this path. These challenges can be related to limited resources, regulatory hurdles, and the risk of failure, which make entrepreneurship a challenging path. Solitary decision-making also becomes important here due to limited resources.

Based on reports, only one-third of new businesses survive their first ten years, and nearly 50% of individuals who recognize an opportunity do not start a business due to fear of failure. Here, the importance of mentoring becomes significant as a supporting mechanism in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Mentoring, which means a relationship in which experienced individuals provide feedback, support, and guidance to less experienced individuals, the traditional definition of mentoring, can improve opportunity recognition, self-efficacy, and learning for entrepreneurs. Another important factor is that entrepreneurs often work in isolation as they are responsible for the whole business, but mentoring can provide support, knowledge, and experiences.

Due to advances in technology and digitalization transformations implemented in different sectors in recent years, mentoring has also changed, and this relationship can now be conducted through computer-mediated communications (CMC). Platforms such as Micro Mentor, Mentor Growth, and Mentor Cruise have emerged that connect individuals with mentors world widely and remove barriers that once existed, such as geographical barriers. This digitalization in mentoring promises to increase accessibility to mentors worldwide. The global online mentoring software market is estimated to reach \$4.4 billion USD by 2033, with an annual growth rate of 13%.

Despite the advances that e-mentoring provides and the challenges it removes, the shift from face-to-face interaction between mentor and mentee to online interaction can create new challenges,

one of which is related to establishing a meaningful relationship in terms of trust. Trust is essential for relationship establishment because it relates to self-disclosure, feedback, and emotional support. In the online environment, there is a lack of nonverbal cues and informal interactions that take place in face-to-face relationships, as well as no body language, so trust develops more slowly compared to the traditional environment.

This factor becomes even more important for entrepreneurs as mentees, who need to rely on mentors' opinions for company decisions and share sensitive information, making trust crucial in the mentoring relationship. Another factor is that mentorship relationships which provide global opportunities in online mentoring is culture as individuals come from different backgrounds and cultures. Culture plays an important role in this context, as it shapes individuals' perceptions, expectations, communication styles, and have effect on trust.

While some studies on mentoring consider the importance of similarity between mentor and mentee, they rarely examine how features of online mentoring platforms can be designed to address trust and cultural differences. This study addresses the gap in the literature regarding how trust can be created in online mentoring platforms and how culture affects this relationship. To achieve this aim, the study tried to answers to these questions: What factors has the literature identified for creating trust in digital mentoring for entrepreneurs? How do current mentoring platforms implement features to support trust? What are the potential cultural implications of these platforms?

This study fills the gap in the literature on mentoring in terms of culture and trust by integrating existing literature with actual platforms. It provides practical contributions for platform designers and operators to enhance platforms, making them more effective and leading to more successful programs for entrepreneurs. For entrepreneurs themselves, it raises awareness of platform

advantages and aligns designs with their preferences for more effective usage and success. It also helps accelerators, incubators, and other entrepreneurial organizations use these mentoring software more effectively.

This thesis had been structured in 5 chapters: In Chapter 1, the historical framework and concept of mentoring are discussed, including the definition of mentoring, different types, entrepreneurial mentoring, and the evolution from traditional to digital mentoring. In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework is discussed in terms of trust and culture. In Chapter 3, mentoring and e-mentoring have been discussed in terms of the industry and contexts in which they are implemented, and numbers are provided regarding mentoring platforms, market size, and predictions for its future. In Chapter 4, the methodology used for this research is discussed, consisting of two phases: first, a scoping review of existing literature to identify trust-building factors; second, a qualitative case comparison of four existing online mentoring platforms. In Chapter 5, the findings are presented: first, thematic findings from the scoping review to provide the base for phase 2; then, a detailed analysis of each platform based on categories from phase 1. The final part of the thesis includes the discussion and conclusion, providing limitations, implications of the study, and directions for future research.

1. Historical and Conceptual Evolution of Mentoring

1.1 Entrepreneurial Mentoring

The basic definition of mentoring is a developmental relationship between an experienced individual and a less experienced person, in which the mentor provides different functions, namely career-related, psychological, and role model functions, to guide the mentee in their path, which

can be personal or professional. Mentoring is not considered a separate sector or industry by itself. (Kram & Isabella, 1985; St-Jean, 2011)

As studies indicate, there is a variety of contexts and sectors in which mentoring can be applied, since the functions it provides are useful for individuals across different fields. However, the contexts in which mentoring has been applied can be categorized into three major areas: education, business, and psychology (Garcia, 2012).

Within the studies related to mentoring, it has been applied in areas such as higher education student support, the IT industry, manufacturing, different corporate and organizational settings, and entrepreneurship, which is the focus of this thesis. (citation)

Entrepreneurial mentoring, which is a relationship between an experienced entrepreneur or a business professional and a less experienced entrepreneur, is a tool for self-employment development and a supportive mechanism in the entrepreneurial journey, which can provide guidance on strategies, the development of business models, and how to respond to changes. Mentoring for entrepreneurs also provides support in terms of emotions, confidence, opportunity recognition, and the capacity to overcome uncertainty (D. Leck & M. Wood, 2013; St-Jean, 2012, p. 201).

The role of a mentor for entrepreneurs is mainly focused on sharing the experience of expert individuals with novice entrepreneurs in order to help them overcome problems by providing assistance through the developmental life cycle, which is based on experiential learning. For entrepreneurs, learning shaped by experiences through continuous time makes the existence of the mentor alongside the entrepreneur important and significant, especially in those times for strategic decision making which are called “critical incidents” (Sullivan, 2000).

In entrepreneurial mentoring, outcomes can be categorized into four groups, namely skills transfer, knowledge transfer, entrepreneurial resilience, and business outcomes. Skill transfer refers to gaining the fundamental competencies that are required for an entrepreneur, such as financial capabilities, marketing, and operational management (Kunaka & Moos, 2019).

Knowledge transfer refers to sharing information related to industry, regulatory aspects, and processes, in order to increase the cognitive resources of the mentee (St-Jean & Audet, 2013).

The entrepreneurial resilience outcome refers to increasing psychological durability, the ability to recover from setbacks, and self-efficacy. The last outcome is related to business and refers to improvement in the performance of the business by measurable indicators such as higher revenue, longer survival rate of the firm, and job creation (Kunaka & Moos, 2019).

These outcomes are an indication of the importance of entrepreneurial mentoring, as they are aligned with the challenges that entrepreneurs face during their journey.

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a driver of economic development, job creation, and innovation. Starting a business is mostly accompanied by problems and challenges that entrepreneurs must resolve in order to prevent the failure of their business and make it grow and remain stable (St-Jean, 2012). As the workplace context for entrepreneurship is different from other traditional workplaces, the challenges that they face are also different which are:

Based on the report published by the GEM, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, only one third of new businesses survive after ten years of start. The high rate of the closure of new businesses can be an indication of the challenges and problems which are fatal for entrepreneurs. (GEM, 2025)

Unlike employees in organizations who have colleagues, supervisors, and institutional support, entrepreneurs often work in isolation. St-Jean & Jacquemin (2013) found that mentors clearly

reduce doubt among novice entrepreneurs, doubt that might otherwise lead them to abandon their ventures entirely. Sullivan (2000), in a widely cited paper, emphasized the importance of learning from critical incidents and argued that "just-in-time" targeted support from a mentor may be more cost-effective than traditional upfront training.

Self-efficacy, which is defined as the belief in one's ability to succeed, is critical for entrepreneurs, and mentoring directly develops it. St-Jean & Mathieu (2015) found that mentoring has a direct effect on entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which in turn mediates career satisfaction and intention to stay in the profession.

One of the most distinctive aspects of entrepreneurship is the need to identify business opportunities. St-Jean (2011) demonstrated that learning through a mentoring relationship helps novice entrepreneurs develop their ability to recognize business opportunities, a cognitive skill that is harder to teach through formal training.

Overall, entrepreneurial mentoring can be seen as a relational and developmental process that helps entrepreneurs not only in practical aspects of their work but also in dealing with psychological challenges. These outcomes show why mentoring is important as a support mechanism throughout the entrepreneurial journey, especially in situations where uncertainty is high and resources are limited.

1.2 Types of Mentoring

Mullen (2019) provides a classification for the different types of mentoring identified in the literature review she conducted. In this classification, mentoring is categorized into nine distinct types.

Formal mentoring is defined as structured programs designed to solve specific problems and target gaps, with intentional planning.

By contrast, informal mentoring occurs when the relationship initiates without intentional planning and develops spontaneously. This type often surpasses formal mentoring in terms of satisfaction, retention, and morale.

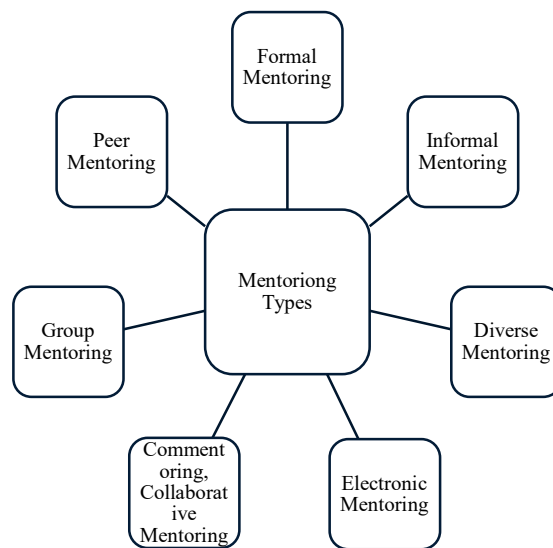


Figure 1- Types of Mentoring

Diverse mentoring refers to relationships between individuals from different demographic, cultural, or social backgrounds, such as differences in gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or professional experience. It aims to increase equity and inclusion, enabling participants to learn from diverse perspectives.

Group mentoring is a form where one mentor works with multiple mentees, or several participants support each other within the same structure. Unlike the traditional one-to-one model, it fosters sharing experiences, collaborative learning, and broader professional networks.

Peer mentoring involves developmental relationships between individuals at similar levels of experience, status, or age, where both parties support each other's learning. Here, hierarchical differences are minimized, and the focus is on reciprocity, collaboration, and mutual support.

Electronic mentoring refers to relationships conducted through digital technologies like email, online platforms, video calls, or social media. This type enables interaction at a distance, making mentoring accessible regardless of geographical limitations.

While this classification helps us better understand the available types of mentoring and their benefits, these categories are not entirely distinct, they often overlap and cannot be neatly separated into silos.

In this dissertation, the focus is on e-mentoring, which can encompass various forms such as group mentoring, peer mentoring, diverse mentoring, one-on-one mentoring, and more.

1.3 Digital Transformation of Mentoring

In recent years, mentoring has been influenced by digitalization and advances in technology, which have changed the way individuals connect and interact with each other.

With internet adoption in the early 2000s, using electronic communications to connect and establish relationships between mentors and protégés became possible, removing barriers that once existed and limited protégés' access to mentors and aligning with new job market needs due to the growth of remote working and digitalization (International Telecommunication Union, 2025; Heaton-Shrestha et al., 2009; Wilbanks, 2014). Andersen and Thomas (2023) describe online mentoring as "a computer mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protege which provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling that is often

boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different than traditional face-to-face mentoring" (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, as cited in Andersen & Thomas, 2023). The digitalization of mentoring comes with its own benefits and challenges.

1.3.1. Benefits of online mentoring

The most important benefit that online mentoring provides is increased accessibility to information and mentors. This is especially beneficial for women and minorities, as establishing a mentor-mentee relationship often requires similarity in background and minorities typically face difficulties finding mentors who understand their challenges, since they are less likely to hold positions of power (Ragins, 1997; Ragins, 1989). Indeed, online mentoring allows mentees from remote areas or with problems of mobility to access mentors with the expertise they seek, provided they have internet access (Oosthuizen & Perks, 2019).

The advantage of increased accessibility that e-mentoring provides is not limited to minorities. Information on the internet is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and mentees can access it whenever they need. Even staying in contact with mentors is easier through computer-mediated communication (CMC), like emails or messages. Plus, e-mentoring is worldwide and not tied to a specific geographical location, which boosts accessibility in another key way (Wah, 2000; Ensher et al., 2003).

Another benefit that online mentoring offers entrepreneurs is cost-effectiveness, which is especially important since they often have limited resources like financial capital and time. Online mentoring lets them use these resources more efficiently: experienced individuals provide guidance, so entrepreneurs do not have to learn everything through trial and error (Knouse, 2001; Lall

et al., 2022). Compared with conventional mentoring, online mentoring offers reduced costs and greater access as key advantages (Leck & Wood, 2013)

A third advantage is the reduced emphasis on demographics that online mentoring can provide. Mentoring requires the protégé to feel comfortable sharing information and emotions with the mentor, which is a key criterion for impactful relationships. Since online mentoring is faceless, it reduces potential negative stereotyping and discrimination (Oosthuizen & Perks, 2019). Cross-gender mentoring relationships are also less likely to be misinterpreted with the physical separation of mentor and mentee (Leck et al., 2014). In some digital formats, protégés may also have the option to share less personal information initially, creating a sense of privacy that can encourage honest sharing (Knouse, 2001).

E-mentoring can develop entrepreneurial competencies. E-mentoring positively influenced mentees' knowledge and skills, while their attitudes toward uncertainty, flexibility, and innovation were strongly influenced in both the short and long run (Kyrgidou and Petridou, 2013).

Alongside the benefits that have been mentioned, which are provided by online mentoring and the barriers that have been removed, online mentoring also creates new challenges.

1.3.2. The challenges of online mentoring

The effectiveness of mentoring is tied to the relationship between mentor and protégé, and building this online is more complicated compared to traditional face-to-face (F2F) mentoring, as this relationship is established based on trust, personal connection, and informal interactions. While traditional mentoring happens F2F, digital mentoring relies on computer-mediated communication (CMC), which lacks non-verbal cues like body language (Knouse, 2001; Lall et al., 2022). Headlam-Wells (2004) found that the quality of the mentoring relationship remained the most important

factor in the success of e-mentoring, with challenges including encouraging participants to use all the resources of an e-mentoring system and to develop fluency in online communication.

Another challenge of online mentoring is that its effects might only be short-term and may not carry over long-term. Based on a study conducted, it indicated that the development of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, in terms of recognizing new opportunities, was affected only short-term and decreased over time. This shows there is a time limitation for e-mentoring, and it needs other mechanisms designed to sustain the support provided and preserve the developments from online mentoring relationships.(St-Jean & Tremblay, 2020)

The outcomes and effectiveness of mentoring can be established when there is mutual trust between the mentor and mentee, yet it remains unclear how online trust is established and sustained between mentors and mentees (Leck and Wood, 2013).

Establishing trust in the mentoring relationship gets significantly more complicated when face-to-face communication decreases or is limited, and there is a lack of nonverbal cues, tone of voice, and body language, these elements reduce the chance of building a meaningful, trustful relationship by increasing misunderstandings. (Buche, 2007). This issue is especially important for entrepreneurs, as they usually need to share sensitive information about themselves and the business they have or want to run, and use the mentor's opinion on it.

Unequal competencies and infrastructures show that while e-mentoring decreases barriers that once existed, such as geographical barriers, and increases the availability of mentors globally, it also can create new forms of barriers. In order to effectively use online mentoring, it is necessary for the mentee to have access to internet infrastructure, connection, and devices, as well as digital literacy and confidence about communications, because communication in digital platforms is

more complicated to establish compared to face-to-face. Social capital resources are also not equally distributed among mentees which can create new barriers and inequalities for entrepreneurs in establishing good relationships with mentor (Knouse, 2001; Lall et al., 2022).

To summarize the benefits and challenges of online mentoring for entrepreneurs, the table is provided below:

Table 1- Advantages and disadvantages of digital mentoring

Advantages	Disadvantages
Increased accessibility (geography, time, wider mentor pool)	Difficulty in building strong relationships (lack of non-verbal cues)
Cost-effectiveness (efficient use of limited resources)	Ephemeral effects (benefits may fade when mentoring ends)
Reduced bias and equalization of status	Digital divide and unequal access
Enhanced learning outcomes	Trust creation challenges

In summary, while e-mentoring can reduce barriers that once existed, it also creates new challenges inherent to digital platforms, particularly in developing the relational depth needed for effective mentoring. As trust is one of the main factors for establishing meaningful and sustaining productive relationships between mentor and mentee, and as its formation in online settings remains insufficiently understood, this concept needs to be discussed in more depth, which is the aim of this study (Buche, 2008; D. Leck & M. Wood, 2013; Evans, 2018).

1.4 Challenges of Trust in Digital Mentoring

Trust can be regarded as a key component in mentoring relationships since it facilitates free communication, information exchange, and the creation of a valuable connection between the mentor and mentee (Leck & Orser, 2013; Evans, 2018). In turn, without trust, mentees would probably be afraid to voice their concerns, ask questions, and listen to feedback provided by the mentor. As a result, the quality of mentoring would inevitably suffer from this deficiency (Mukhtar et al., 2024). It should be pointed out that trust is not just the aim of mentoring but also a necessary condition for its proper functioning (Leck & Wood, 2013).

Nevertheless, developing trust becomes significantly harder in digital mentoring programs. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) implies that traditional means of communication, such as body language, tonality, and other non-verbal elements, are largely unavailable to mentors and mentees (Buche, 2007). These factors facilitate rapport building and are very helpful during communication, but their lack raises chances of misunderstanding and makes it harder to establish an emotional connection between people (Buche, 2007; Leck & Wood, 2013). For example, Jordan et al. (2021) suggested that trust, authenticity, and work ethic were one of the four main dilemmas

associated with virtual mentoring experiences. Besides problems related to informal communication, communication strategies, and cross-cultural barriers, the researchers also noted that mutual trust was one of the major factors influencing virtual mentoring.

The problem of trust is especially pertinent to the topic of entrepreneurship since entrepreneurs should share quite sensitive information about their ideas, plans, and personal challenges with mentors. In the empirical study conducted by El Hallam and St-Jean (2016), it was proven that entrepreneurs' perceptions of mutual trust between themselves and mentors predicted learning among 314 participants involved in a business mentoring program. Similarly, Kar and Sarangi (2020) pointed out that trust was one of the six critical mentoring outcome factors for entrepreneurs. Specifically, according to these authors, the problem of trust is caused by the inherent independence and innovativeness of entrepreneurs who do not want to disclose confidential information to a third party. In other words, lack of trust might make entrepreneurs unwilling to participate actively in mentoring sessions, thus reducing the expected benefit from them.

Even though digital mentoring requires trust, little information is currently available about how it is developed and maintained in such conditions. Specifically, Leck and Wood (2013) noted that *"it is not entirely clear how trust is established and sustained in the mentoring context of online settings"* and suggested the corresponding research agenda. Previously, much attention was devoted to trust in mentoring relations (Leck & Orser, 2013; Evans, 2018). However, little research was conducted concerning specific aspects of digital platforms and the way their features contribute to trust building and maintenance in relation to entrepreneurship.

In addition, digital mentoring increasingly takes place through platform-based environments, where interactions are structured and mediated through technological features such as matching systems, communication tools, and feedback mechanisms. These features not only facilitate

connections between mentors and mentees but may also influence how relationships are initiated and developed, particularly in relation to trust formation (Adewoyin & Vassileva, 2012; Leck & Wood, 2013; Störmann et al., 2010).

1.5 The Role of Culture in Online Mentoring

The cultural background has a profound impact on interpersonal communication, relationships, and behavior interpretation. In mentoring relationships, cultural disparities can determine expectations, ways of communicating, and forming a trustworthy connection between mentor and mentee. For instance, people from high power distance cultures tend to obey their mentors and do not question their suggestions while low power distance people expect equal communication from their mentors (Scandura & Mezias, 2010). Moreover, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2002) claim that cross-cultural mentoring can be characterized by conflicts caused by discrepancies in values, norms, and power distribution.

It is even more complicated to work with someone from another culture when the mentoring process takes place by e-mail or other forms of online communication since lack of non-verbal information makes interpreting intentions of interlocutors more challenging (Buche, 2007). Differences in communication style across cultures (direct and indirect, high-context and low-context, etc.) add to the complexity of online communication by making misunderstanding more likely (Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitraşcu, 2019; Krawczyk-Brylka, 2016). A statement that can be clear and appropriate in one country may appear to be rude and irrelevant in another. In this regard, it is essential to examine the role of cultural differences in digital mentoring. The entrepreneurial aspect of mentoring becomes especially important in this context due to the fact that national culture significantly affects people's perceptions and approaches to business (Dubina

& Ramos, 2016; Rarick & Han, 2015). However, cross-cultural mentoring, even if conducted in person, can be characterized by miscommunication and misunderstanding of intentions. In particular, Steel et al. (2019) suggest that the absence of cultural sensitivity in case of mentoring may make mentorship relationship destructive for the mentee. Digital environment exacerbates the problem since fewer hints about the culture of communication exist in the context of computer-mediated communications.

To date, very little attention is paid to analyzing the effects of culture on digital mentoring. Among the numerous unresolved issues raised by Scandura and Mezias (2010), the following question stands out: "Whether culture makes electronic mentoring more difficult". Consequently, it is crucial to investigate cultural effects on building trust in digital mentoring to analyze this phenomenon adequately. It will be the primary objective of this project.

1.6 Research Gap and Problem Statement

As discussed in the above sections, mentoring has played an integral role in helping entrepreneurs succeed in business and has been enhanced due to the digital transformation process. Nevertheless, digital transformation, although beneficial, poses its own set of challenges associated with communication, relationship formation, and interaction quality.

While there are numerous studies concerning the effect of mentoring on entrepreneur success, the processes of trust formation and maintenance within digital mentoring remain underexplored despite the recognition of their significance by other scholars (Leck & Orser, 2013; Evans, 2018). This gap is even more prominent in the field of entrepreneurship because establishing trust is crucial in order to provide sensitive information, obtain advice, and make proper decisions.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that today, digital mentoring usually involves the use of specific platform environments with particular communication means such as matching systems, online messaging services, and various feedback channels (Adewoyin & Vassileva, 2012; Leck & Wood, 2013; Störmann et al., 2010). It is important to recognize that apart from enabling contact between mentor and mentee, they can influence the establishment and the further development of trust (or distrust).

Finally, it cannot be denied that culture is influential in communication and relationships development; however, limited research has explored its role in digital mentoring. It is necessary to consider the effects of the interconnection between culture and communication as well as the processes of trust building.

Thus, this study focuses on the processes of trust building among entrepreneurs in digital mentoring environments that involve platform-mediated communication mechanisms.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Mentoring: Theoretical Foundation and Functions

The word "mentor" originates from Homer's *Odyssey*, where it refers to someone who helps Odysseus's son enter the adult world, up to the Greek methodological concept that indicates this term as a guide for the young. This can be considered a symbolic metaphor for the definition of mentoring, which forms the conceptual basis of mentoring across different settings (St-Jean, 2012).

The core definition of mentoring that scholars converge on is a developmental relationship between an experienced individual and a less experienced one, to providing developmental functions (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Kram & Isabella, 1985; St-Jean, 2011). Early studies in mentoring defined it as a one-way relationship, where the mentor provides psychological support, career-related knowledge sharing, and support to the mentee. In the earliest definitions, the mentor was an experienced person, and it was only one mentor for one mentee in a one-to-one relationship. While this definition has changed over time, recent studies view mentoring as a reciprocal relationship in which both sides exchange resources and benefits; the mentor can also be equal to the mentee, and the relationship is not necessarily one-on-one; as mentees may have multiple mentors at the same time for different needs (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kram & Isabella, 1985; St-Jean, 2012).

Mentoring consists of multiple functions, which St-Jean (2011) categorizes the functions of mentoring into three groups, namely career-related functions, psychological functions, and role model functions.

2.1.1. The Functions of Mentoring

Career-related functions are those mentoring functions which provide support for career development and consist of assisting the mentee to build networks in the entrepreneurial environment, which is called "integration"; providing informative support, which is called "information support"; improving critical thinking and expanding mentee's horizon, which is called "confrontation"; and advising on "critical incidents," which is called "guide."

Psychological functions focus on emotional support for the mentee and consist of four roles: offering emotional support to the mentee and guiding them to control their emotions, which is called "reassurance"; providing feedback and helping the mentee recognize their capability, which is called "reflector"; an inspiring role, which is called "motivation"; and gaining the trust of the mentee so that they feel comfortable in sharing their feelings and information and having trust in the mentor to seek advice, which is called "confidant."

Role-model functions indicate the role of the mentor that can be considered as an example of overcoming challenges and problems for the mentee, where learning by observing and imitation becomes important. (St-Jean, 2011, 2012; Sullivan, 2000)

Entrepreneurial mentoring cannot be considered a mere instrumental exchange but is primarily a relational activity, where interaction quality becomes crucial to success rather than the quantity of information shared (Leck & Wood, 2013). Successful mentoring activities require open and effective communication as well as strong interpersonal relationship skills, creating the basis for a positive environment (St-Jean, 2012). In the context of entrepreneurship characterized by high uncertainty and risk as well as scarcity of resources, the mentee relies on the mentor not only for informational purposes but also for emotional support (St-Jean & Audet, 2012). Thus, entrepreneurial

mentoring requires openness and disclosure of personal experiences for meaningful learning, sense-making, and decision-making (St-Jean & Tremblay, 2020).

It is necessary to acknowledge that trust lies at the heart of all these activities. When trust is present in the relationship, mentees will be more open and willing to provide sensitive information, accept honest feedback, and engage effectively in a mentoring dialogue (McAllister, 1995; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). The inability to develop trust in the relationship will impede the psychological and developmental aspects of mentoring such as confidence-building, resilience, and identity construction (Leck & Wood, 2013). This is particularly significant in online mentoring, where face-to-face interaction is absent and cannot support the trust development process through interpersonal cues (Leck & Wood, 2013; Evans, 2018). Thus, it is crucial to understand how trust is built online.

2.2. Traditional vs Digital Mentoring: A Comparative Perspective

The traditional mentoring approach is described as an individually focused process involving F2F interaction, whereby an experienced senior acts as a source of career and psychosocial support for a less experienced protégé (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Rowland, 2012). In this arrangement, the communication process includes many subtle aspects, such as non-verbal cues like gestures, intonation, and informality of the exchange, which help create a positive climate and build strong interpersonal relations between partners (McAllister, 1995). These factors promote the formation of trust and emotional bonding, as well as the provision of quality feedback. Furthermore, the common environment enables the formation of organic relations through informal contacts and social learning (St-Jean, 2012).

On the contrary, the digital mentoring framework involves computer-mediated communication (CMC) and may include several formats, such as CMC-only, CMC-primary, and CMC-supplemental (Ensher et al., 2003). The use of technological means enables overcoming geographic boundaries, enhances access to mentors, and lowers expenses, thus expanding mentoring opportunities (Knouse, 2001; Lall, Chen, & Mason, 2023). However, the lack of non-verbal cues complicates the interpretation of intentions, emotional state, and attitudes. This change in interaction leads to greater task orientation, reduced relational focus, slower trust building, and increased chances for misinterpretations (Leck & Wood, 2013; Evans, 2018).

While both approaches have comparable instrumental benefits, including the development of skills, acquisition of knowledge, improvement of business performance, and others (Kunaka & Moos, 2019), they produce different relational outcomes. Traditional mentoring creates strong emotional ties and builds affective trust, whereas digital mentoring uses cognitive trust based on the perception of competence, credibility, and knowledge about the mentor (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

Consequently, trust-building processes in each context are different, as traditional mentoring depends on the presence of both the person and informal communication channels. Thus, a digital mentoring environment needs additional mechanisms for developing relationships and ensuring trust. For example, some platforms have profiles where participants can see each other's achievements and characteristics. Communication tools enable effective interaction between partners and allow exchanging feedback (Leck & Wood, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to explore trust formation in digital mentoring.

Table 2- Comparison of Traditional and Digital Mentoring

Dimension	Traditional Mentoring	Digital Mentoring
Interaction Mode	Face-to-face (F2F)	Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)
Communication	Rich (Verbal and non-verbal cues)	Limited non-verbal cues
Development of Relationship	Informal and spontaneous	More structured
Access	Limited to geographic and temporal factors	Global
Cost	Expensive	Cost-effective
Development of Trust	Faster and based on emotions	Slower and more cognition-based
Type of trust	Affective trust	Cognitive trust
Misinterpretation risk	Lower	Higher
Type of relationship	Relational and social	Task-oriented
Facilitating factors	Informal interactions	Platform functionalities

2.3. Trust in Mentoring Relationship

Trust has been identified as one of the key components of successful mentoring because trust ensures effective communication, knowledge exchange, and creates a relationship between mentor and mentee. Without trust, mentees can feel insecure and hesitate to share private issues or to receive advice from mentors (Leck & Orser, 2013; Evans, 2018).

In the research on mentoring, trust can be described as a complex concept consisting of different elements. The significance of trust is especially pronounced in entrepreneurial mentoring due to its specific nature. Entrepreneurial mentoring usually implies personal guidance and assistance in a rather challenging context; thus, entrepreneurs need to trust their mentors not only as providers of useful information but also as sources of emotional support and sound advice.

It is important to note that trust-building becomes a much more complicated process when mentoring takes place in virtual environments. Virtual setting implies that mentors and mentees do not meet in person, and many of them are unknown to each other at the initial stage of the process. At the same time, recent research shows that there are opportunities to form trustful relations between mentors and mentees online through a multi-layered approach.

According to Evans (2018), there are four layers of trust in mentoring. First of all, trust can be formed because of the organizational context within which mentoring occurs. In particular, when mentors have connections to well-known organizations, mentors' credibility is higher.

Secondly, trust can be developed based on the perception of similarity. When mentors and mentees share values, interests, and/or life experience, communication can become much easier and more effective.

Thirdly, trust in mentors can be fostered by the positive assessment of their personality and behavior. Mentors' traits, such as respect, honesty, empathy, and active listening, may contribute significantly to fostering mutual trust.

Fourthly, trust can be supported through organized interaction that occurs in the process of mentoring. The more systematic and formal mentoring process is, the greater opportunities to build trust arise.

It should be added that all four layers of trust mentioned above are consistent with the ideas presented by Leck & Wood (2013). These authors emphasize that trust arises step by step during mentoring because of repeated interaction and mutual expectations confirmation.

McAllister (1995) identifies two types of trust, such as cognition-based trust and affect-based trust. As per the author, cognition-based trust is based on logical evaluations of the mentor's ability, knowledge, and professionalism, while affect-based trust is associated with personal connections between people, their interpersonal relationships, and respect for each other. These two types of trust are critical in any mentoring process because they cover the task- and relationship-oriented sides of it.

Similar views were offered by Mayer et al. (1995), who proposed considering three basic determinants of trust: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability stands for the competency and professional skills of the mentor; benevolence describes the attitude of the mentor towards the person they work with; integrity represents trustworthiness of the mentor.

Additional empirical research shows how trust plays an important role in various mentoring outcomes like learning, self-efficacy, and decision-making. In particular, mentoring can help decrease entrepreneurial doubts and increase motivation in entrepreneurs who share trusting relationships

with their mentors (St-Jean & Jacquemin, 2022). It is especially important for entrepreneurs because they are under a great deal of uncertainty and risks, which means they need support from mentors emotionally and informationally.

2.4. Trust in Digital Environments

As a core component of mentoring, trust should be considered in more detail, paying attention to the fact that its development under conditions of interaction through technology becomes more complicated than in the case of F2F mentoring. Individuals usually use numerous nonverbal cues, including body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions to interpret intentions and evaluate reliability and competence of another person (McAllister, 1995). It facilitates the development of affect-based trust that is established through emotional involvement and interpersonal rapport (St-Jean, 2012).

Digital mentoring presupposes computer-mediated communication (CMC), which occurs in email, messaging, and videoconferencing applications (Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003). Such a shift alters the content and process of communication substantially. First of all, it leads to the scarcity of nonverbal information which helps establish an interpersonal bond and create trust within relationships (Buche, 2007; Leck & Wood, 2013). Thus, due to the lack of relevant cues, people find it hard to evaluate their intentions and make judgments about credibility and trustworthiness.

Another aspect that should be noted is a high degree of structure of interactions typical of digital environments (Evans, 2018). Communication is often task-based and planned since mentoring sessions may take place within scheduled meetings or prearranged activities, which are characteristic of digital mentoring. Consequently, opportunities for informal interactions and spontaneous

discussions are scarce, which prevents the creation of affect-based trust because of a lack of repeated informal contact.

In digital environments, people do not have the opportunity to benefit from nonverbal interaction, and thus, communication lacks rich interpersonal cues. That is why the development of trust depends on cognitive evaluation. Mentees tend to rely on credible information related to the background and characteristics of mentors, such as professional competence, years of experience, reputation, and consistent interactions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Leck & Wood, 2013). Hence, in comparison with face-to-face communication, the type of trust becomes cognitive rather than affect-based. It is characterized by perception of competence, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995).

There is a set of features of digital mentoring environments that help overcome limitations associated with the lack of nonverbal information. They include matching functions, user profiles, multimodal communication tools, and feedback. Such technologies are aimed at providing opportunities for evaluating the characteristics of mentors, establishing social connection, receiving reliable information, and reducing uncertainties (Leck & Wood, 2013; Evans, 2018). Digital mentoring increases accessibility and scalability of mentoring programs, facilitating access for entrepreneurs who operate remotely or in resource-constrained environments (Choudhary et al., 2024).

2.5. Mechanisms of Trust Formation in E-mentoring

The creation of a trusting atmosphere in mentoring is not achieved automatically but involves several relational mechanisms. These include perceived similarity, communication quality, psychological safety, mentor characteristics, among other mechanisms. However, in the digital mentoring environment, which lacks some of the traditional interpersonal cues that create a trusting

atmosphere, these mechanisms become more important in establishing trust in mentoring relationships. Importantly, all these mechanisms are not isolated but are affected by the features of the digital mentoring platform that enables the process of creating trust.

First, perceived similarity refers to the presence of common attributes or characteristics between a mentor and a mentee, such as having similar background or experiences, which increases understanding. It has been associated with increased levels of empathy and identification, both of which reduce uncertainty and increase similarity, hence increasing the initial stage of trust creation. Platform-based matching and personalization of the digital environment are some of the means of fostering similarity by facilitating connection between individuals sharing common features (St-Jean, 2012; Ensher et al., 2003).

Second, communication plays a significant role in mentoring because trust in communication is fundamental in any mentoring relationships. Digital mentoring requires that communication takes place between two individuals, hence making it necessary for clear, consistent, and responsive communication in order to create trust between the two individuals. Features in the platform, such as communication modes, have been found to positively influence this aspect of trust creation (Ensher et al., 2003; Leck & Wood, 2013).

Psychological safety involves the extent to which mentees are comfortable sharing their thoughts, beliefs, and other information in the mentoring relationship. Psychological safety is important for successful mentoring because it allows the mentor to understand the mentee well. Platform-based features, such as anonymity and privacy settings that reduce the risks associated with sharing sensitive information, facilitate this aspect of trust creation in digital mentoring relationships (Knouse, 2001; Evans, 2018).

Mentor characteristics such as ability, benevolence, and integrity have been shown to affect the level of trust between a mentor and mentee. However, in a digital environment, this trust is influenced by the mentor characteristics as expressed by the mentor's profile in the mentoring platform. Features in the digital mentoring platform make it easy for mentees to assess these characteristics (Mayer et al., 1995; Leck & Wood, 2013).

Furthermore, mentoring structures refer to features that determine how the mentoring relationship is established and sustained in the platform. The features create structure in the interaction processes that enable the participants to have expectations and define their roles. Such structural arrangements foster trust creation (Evans, 2018; Lall et al., 2023).

From the above discussion, it is evident that trust formation in digital mentoring involves relational processes that depend on various features of the digital mentoring platform. Trust in mentoring influences several aspects including knowledge acquisition, relationship quality, and performance in entrepreneurship.

2.6. The Role of Platform Features in Trust Formation

Digital mentoring environments are characterized by interactions that happen through platform-based tools. Therefore, the platforms themselves play an active role in the formation and development of these interactions.

First, most digital mentoring platforms rely on specific architecture to enable their core operations. Typically, it involves a number of features that are focused on matching participants, establishing communication, and supporting the mentoring relationship through additional functionality. Matching systems may involve multiple criteria based on goals, interests, and professional backgrounds of participants (Ensher et al., 2003; Störmann et al., 2010). Such an approach increases

the possibility that participants will share similar values and backgrounds, which will facilitate trust building. Over time, technologies used in these processes will continue to become more complex and involve even more sophisticated matching mechanisms to improve interaction quality.

Another key component of any mentoring platform is communication features. Typically, they include multiple modalities ranging from text messages to video chat. These tools affect the frequency, level of engagement, and depth of interaction (Leck & Wood, 2013). All these factors are extremely important when building trust in digital environments because the lack of personal contact increases the need for interaction. However, while digital mentoring platforms can provide some benefits in comparison to traditional ones, developing deep relational ties is one of their biggest challenges.

Finally, some platforms employ mechanisms for gathering information about the mentors, such as ratings, feedback, and testimonials. By using such features, mentees can obtain signals of credibility and reliability and make a decision about the mentor's competence before forming a relationship (Leck & Orser, 2013).

Some other features of digital mentoring platforms may include onboarding procedures and progress tracking systems. Such tools provide participants with clearer expectations in terms of the relationship and reduce ambiguity at the beginning of the process (Evans, 2018). In general, all these characteristics create a predictable environment that can be conducive to developing trust.

Digital mentoring platforms represent another type of enabling environment in which trust can develop. While they effectively address issues associated with accessibility and scalability, they still cannot replace traditional mentoring in terms of the relational component. For this reason, the

design of digital mentoring platforms needs to take into account the need to promote trust and trust building in online settings.

2.7. Culture as a Moderator of Trust

These findings indicate that mechanisms related to relational elements like similarity perception, communication efficacy, and psychological safety serve as mediators whereby platform attributes affect trust formation. Meanwhile, cultural differences can be considered moderating variables that impact the way relationships are developed and the extent to which trust emerges in digital mentoring systems.

Previous studies have discussed the role of perceived similarity between mentor and protégé as an element for developing trust. It has also been mentioned that these similarities come from shared backgrounds such as values, interests, shared language, and jobs. (Evans, 2018; St-Jean, 2012)

This shared background, which can lead to trust, can also be culture. There have been definitions provided for culture, but it can be said that it's shared patterns that lead to behavior in different social groups.

Table 3- Definition of Culture (cited in Erez & Earley 1993, p. 41)

Authors	Key Defining Characteristic
Herskovits (1955)	Culture is the man-made part of the environment.
Parsons & Shils (1951)	On a cultural level we view the organized set of rules or standards as such, abstracted, so to speak, from the actor who is committed to them by his own value-orientations and in whom they exist as need-dispositions to observe these rules. Thus a culture includes a set of <i>standards</i> . An individual's value-orientation is his commitment to these standards.
C. Kluckhohn (1954)	Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values.
Hofstede (1980)	[Culture consists of] a set of mental programs that control an individual's responses in a given context.
Triandis (1972)	[Culture is] a subjective perception of the human-made part of the environment. The subjective aspects of culture include the categories of social stimuli, associations, beliefs, attitudes, norms and values, and roles that individuals share.
D'Andrade (1984) & Geertz (1973)	A culture is viewed as a pattern of symbolic discourse and shared meaning that needs interpreting and deciphering in order to be fully understood.

2.7.1 Hofstede model

Among many other attempts to define culture, Hofstede model stands out as a useful tool for analyzing its key aspects. The model started with four dimensions but was further expanded to six, representing the major tendencies observed in society: power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation and indulgence-restraint.

High power distance means that hierarchical structures are accepted in a particular society, and the power itself is never questioned by those who subordinate. On the contrary, societies with a low power distance are characterized by the emphasis on equality and informality. Thus, this dimension may be critical for online mentoring, especially in cases when mentees might feel uncomfortable asking critical questions.

The opposition between individualist and collectivist culture reveals whether individuals prioritize personal goals or community needs. The former emphasizes freedom and personal achievements, while the latter favors harmony and loyalty. This difference also impacts online interactions, particularly the level of openness in communication.

Masculinity and femininity in a particular society show what values dominate. While masculine societies are characterized by competitive spirit and the pursuit of success, in feminine societies, cooperation and harmony prevail. This distinction shapes the very essence of the mentoring relationship.

Uncertainty avoidance shows to what degree people tolerate ambiguity in a given culture. Those with a high level of uncertainty avoidance need clear structure and regulations, while societies with a low level are much more tolerant and ready to make decisions spontaneously. This

dimension may play an important role in digital mentoring due to the absence of physical cues in communication.

Long-term and short-term orientation represents people's attitude towards time. Individuals who belong to societies with long-term orientation strive for future goals and persistence, while short-term orientation is associated with a tendency to act now and preserve traditions. This aspect also influences digital mentoring because expectations in terms of the length and commitment to a mentoring relationship are formed accordingly.

Finally, indulgence and restraint are associated with the willingness of people to express emotions and enjoy life. In cultures with a higher degree of indulgence, openness is encouraged, while restraint is typical for cultures where control is prioritized. This feature can influence online interactions as well.

2.7.2 Culture and digital Behavior

In addition to shaping interpersonal interactions, cultural background impacts people's interaction with digital media. Jiao (2025) finds that all Hofstede's dimensions significantly correlate with national levels of digitalization. For example, individualistic cultures more rapidly adopt digital technologies; societies with lower uncertainty avoidance are characterized by higher levels of digitalization; long-term orientation promotes greater usage of information technologies.

Considering that the development of digitalization depends on cultural background, it is safe to assume that trust can be similarly affected by culture in digital environments. However, this aspect still needs to be explored in depth.

2.7.3 Culture and online trust

Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that culture has a significant impact on both interpersonal trust and digital communication. Previous findings in the area of cross-cultural psychology and organizational behavior showed that people from different cultures have distinct expectations in terms of communication style, relationships, authority and uncertainty (Hofstede, 2001). These distinctions affect trust-building processes in interpersonal interactions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

Nevertheless, the growing popularity of digital technologies has recently sparked interest in trust-formation processes in computer-mediated communication (CMC) as well. At present, despite numerous works devoted to the interconnection between culture and trust and culture and digitalization, the specific role of culture in the process of building trust online remains understudied (Leck & Wood, 2013).

2.8. Conceptual Framework and Research Direction

According to the literature examined in this chapter, trust is considered an essential mechanism for developing mentoring relationships. In other words, without the necessary degree of trust, knowledge sharing, learning, and positive mentoring interactions would be impossible (St-Jean, 2012; Leck & Wood, 2013). The traditional mentoring process involves building trust based on the face-to-face interaction between mentor and mentee. Digital mentoring environments bring certain challenges due to the lack of non-verbal elements and other factors associated with the use of communication technologies (Ensher et al., 2003; Evans, 2018).

The review also suggests that building trust requires a combination of relational mechanisms. Similarity of participants, effective and clear communication, psychological safety, and the characteristics of mentors and mentees are essential mechanisms through which trust forms in mentoring relations (St-Jean, 2012; Leck & Wood, 2013). The importance of those mechanisms becomes even more relevant to digital environments where interaction is regulated by specific features.

Moreover, digital mentoring usually occurs in digital mentoring platforms that provide specific conditions for interactions and build the basis for trust. Such platform elements as matching algorithms, communication methods, feedback procedures, and program structures are all critical for providing the necessary context for trust-building (Ensher et al., 2003; Evans, 2018). Those features do not ensure trust development but create the conditions that allow trust to emerge through the relationship.

Finally, culture is another element that impacts interaction and trust-building. The communication style of participants, their expectations and perceptions of each other may differ depending on the background of the person, affecting interaction and, thus, trust-building (Hofstede, 2001). In the context of the limited number of contextual clues in digital environments, culture might make the process even more difficult.

Despite the number of studies in the field of mentoring and digital interaction, little is known about trust formation processes in the mentioned context. There is only one study that combines mentoring with digital interaction and examines platform elements and relational mechanisms influencing trust development (Leck & Wood, 2013). However, the relationship of mentoring, trust, culture, and digital interaction remains unstudied.

Therefore, this study uses an integrative approach considering trust as a phenomenon emerging in a culturally diverse digital environment due to the interaction of relational mechanisms and features of mentoring platforms. The selected framework serves as a foundation for the conceptual model developed in the chapter five.

2.9 Development of Propositions

Since the focus of this paper lies in analyzing the way that e-mentoring platforms help build trust in entrepreneurial settings, this paper has examined relevant literature pertaining to mentoring, e-mentoring, trust, and culture, as well as the characteristics of the chosen digital mentoring platforms. On this basis, it should be noted that, as the goal of this research is not to test hypotheses quantitatively, but rather develop a theoretical foundation for qualitative analysis, no propositions will be tested in this study.

Instead, based on the research methodology outlined in Chapter 4, this study takes an exploratory and interpretive approach. Namely, this means that rather than examining the causality of phenomena, it attempts to identify ways in which specific platform characteristics may support the emergence or development of certain mechanisms of trust. As such, the following propositions are formulated as the bases for interpreting the data collected.

Proposition 1- Matching and Perceived Similarity

The review of the literature revealed that perceived similarity was identified as one of the most important antecedents of trust in entrepreneurial mentoring situations (St-Jean, 2012; Evans, 2018). Similarity in core values, shared goals, and past experiences allows for reducing uncertainty and increasing relational closeness. In digital spaces, this effect can be supported through the use of matching systems.

Therefore, it can be said that digital mentoring platforms which incorporate more personalized matching mechanisms are likely to facilitate perceived similarity, which consequently would enable the development of cognition-based trust, as well as encourage self-disclosure.

Proposition 2- Communication Modalities and Trust Development

Similar to the case of traditional mentoring, quality of communication has been found to have a great impact on the process of trust formation in computer-mediated virtual mentoring (Ensher et al., 2003; Leck & Wood, 2013). Since the absence of non-verbal cues makes it difficult for partners to form affect-based trust, it becomes important to choose appropriate modes of communication.

It can be assumed that the use of rich communication tools, such as video and voice communication, as well as text messaging, would contribute significantly to affect-based trust due to allowing for building an emotional connection and ensuring greater certainty regarding the intentions of the interlocutor. At the same time, however, asynchronous communication may increase ease of access, but decrease relational depth.

Proposition 3- Privacy, Anonymity, and Psychological Safety

Trust development in digital environments, including virtual mentoring, depends on an individual's sense of psychological safety, which allows for opening up to others. According to literature, the perception of increased privacy and/or anonymity decreases the risk of revealing sensitive information and can lead to greater self-disclosure (Knouse, 2001; Evans, 2018).

Therefore, it could be suggested that digital platforms that give users an opportunity to maintain their privacy and regulate the extent to which they disclose personal information would foster psychological safety and increase self-disclosure. At the same time, while providing anonymity may have this effect, it can also result in reduced accountability and lower perceived credibility.

Proposition 4- Structured Program Design and Uncertainty Reduction

In virtual mentoring relationships where there are unlikely to be any pre-existing relationships, structured program design can be instrumental in increasing relational trust since it helps reduce uncertainty. As such, mentoring platforms that are based on clear structures are likely to increase initial trust by helping create a sense of reliability (Evans, 2018; Lall et al., 2023).

At the same time, however, it should be recognized that over-structure may lead to a loss of flexibility and reduce users' autonomy. Therefore, the impact of various degrees of structure should be assessed and compared.

Proposition 5- Community and Feedback as Social Proof

On digital platforms, trust formation can depend not only on personal experience with a mentor but also on social proof in the form of user ratings or reviews, for instance. Such feedback allows users to assess a mentor's quality based on their previous experiences (Leck & Wood, 2013).

Digital mentoring platforms with strong community functions and the ability to leave feedback are expected to be helpful in reducing uncertainty and building cognition-based trust. Additionally, community engagement may foster relational mechanisms, including perceived similarity and belonging.

Chapter 3 – The Digital Mentoring Industry: Context, Trends, and Platforms

3.1 Entrepreneurship Ecosystem and the Need for Mentoring

Entrepreneurship is among the most important activities that lead to economic growth, social development, and innovation. Especially in recent years, due to challenges happening worldwide for economies, such as geopolitical and environmental challenges, the importance of entrepreneurship has become more significant than before, as it drives job creation, technological progress, and competitiveness (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2025).

Based on the World Bank report (2026), SMEs, small and medium enterprises, are the backbone of the economy. They create around 90% of all businesses worldwide, account for 50% of employment, and generate half of global GDP.

Entrepreneurship has never been easy. From the first step of recognizing an opportunity, to establishing a business and sustaining it, entrepreneurs face different challenges that can be wildly fatal for their business. This shows up in the high failure rate of new businesses within their first 5 years. While it varies between industries, the average failure rate for entrepreneurs and small businesses is around 50%. (Perry et al., 2020)

Despite these failure rates, there are even barriers that stop individuals from even starting entrepreneurship. Based on the report of GEM (2025) the most significant barrier belongs to psychological and cultural aspects. The fear of failure is the strongest barrier, it is responsible for 40% of adults who see a good opportunity but don't start a business because of the risks. The high cost of entrepreneurship which can be financially, socially or psychological and the environment which makes exist harder, make failure more bigger and increase the risk of start. These barriers are also

cultural; as in some cultures, failure seems more negative, while in others it is seen as an experience.

The other barriers that have been found are related to technology and the digital world. These can be divided into privacy and security concerns when using new technologies for entrepreneurs, and differences in AI adaptation and new technologies. Awareness about the importance of AI and digital tools is not equal across different countries, and people's skills in using these tools also differ. This creates a gap between entrepreneurs who want to start their business; someone more familiar with digital concepts can be more successful, as digital tools let them do tasks more efficiently and rapidly. The environment is also important for digital and AI adoption. In some countries, training courses and regulations are more supportive than others. To be more specific, within Europe, strict regulations increase uncertainty about digital tools and AI. Limited resources are also among the important barriers for entrepreneurs, making market entry hard.

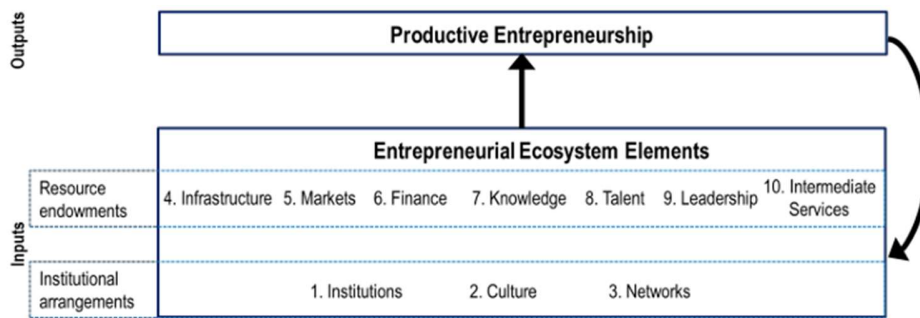
Besides the challenges mentioned, another barrier comes from structural and systemic ecosystems. Entrepreneurial ecosystems are mostly insufficient worldwide; it's not only limited to low- or middle-income countries, but countries such as the UK, Norway, Spain, the US, and Japan also don't have sufficient ones (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2025).

Entrepreneurial Barriers	1. Psychological and Cultural Barriers: Fear of Failure, Stigma of Failure
	2. Structural and Systemic Ecosystem Barriers: Weak Business Survival, Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, Poor Entrepreneurial Education, Inadequate Entrepreneurial Finance:
	3. Digital and Technological Barriers: AI Adoption and Awareness, Data Security and Privacy
	4. Policy and Regulatory Barriers: Burdensome Bureaucracy and Taxes, Complex Market Entry
	5. Demographic and Social Barriers: Age, Nationality and Gender Barriers
	6. Economic and Motivational Barriers: Necessity-Driven Entrepreneurship, Financial Vulnerability
	7. Sustainability and Impact Barriers: Resource Constraints on Sustainability Goals, Policy-Perception Misalignment
	8. Global and Market Access Barriers: Trade Barriers and Geopolitics, Weak International Reach

Figure 2- Entrepreneurial Barriers (cited in OECD, 2025)

Entrepreneurial ecosystems have different definitions, but the most accepted one is: *“The entrepreneurial ecosystem is a set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way as that they enable productive entrepreneurship.”* (Stam, 2015[17]cited in OECD, 2025)

The OECD categorized the elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem into 10 categories to increase accuracy and make it measurable. These elements are provided below:



Source: Adapted from (Stam and van de Ven, 2021^[19])

Figure 3- Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (cited in OECD, 2025)

Among the elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, there are networks and intermediate services. Networks include entrepreneurs' access to others, formally or informally, for sharing experience and information. Intermediate services consist of any services that can offer entrepreneurs information, advice, consultancy, and mentoring. Here, the importance of mentoring becomes clear as a game-changing element in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, which can be a solution for entrepreneurial challenges, increase the rate of entrepreneurship, and make entrepreneurship more sustainable.

3.2 Digitalization and the Growth of Online Mentoring

The digital and information revolution has impacted most aspects of life and changed many sectors that existed before. New information and communication technologies (ICT) provide opportunities that didn't exist before for progress and growth, such as entrepreneurship. With advances in ICT, new smartphones and tablets can now do functions that were previously only possible for computers. This increases individuals' access within each country in terms of using, quality, and affordability of ICT. (citation)

Based on the Data Hub report (2025), 98.1% of the population worldwide has connectivity in terms of mobile phone coverage to the internet—at least 2G. This percentage of connectivity faces a significant decrease when it reaches Africa, South America, and some countries in the Middle East.

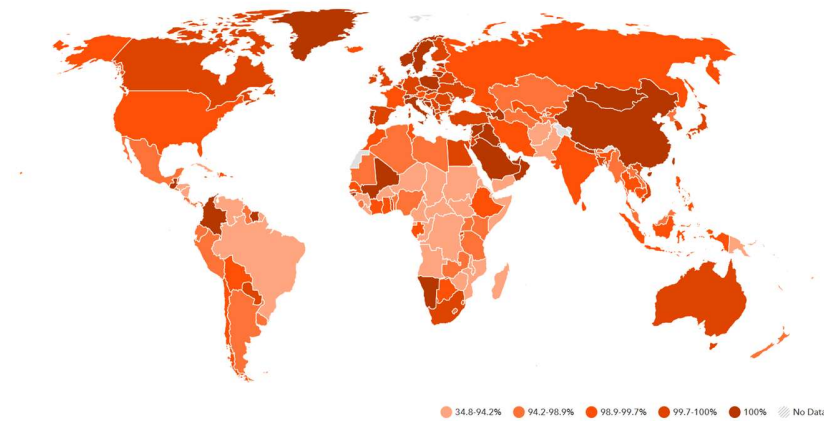


Figure 4- Level of Connectivity (Datahub, 2025)

In terms of the number of individuals using the internet, this rate has reached 73.6% worldwide. This rate refers to internet users, defined as individuals who have used the internet from any location during the last three months (International Telecommunication Union, 2025).

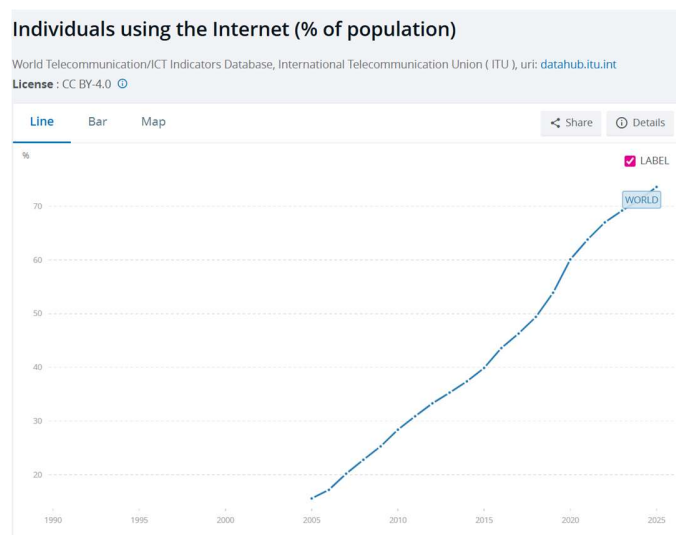


Figure 5- Individual usage of Internet (ITU, 2025)

The provided figures indicate the widespread adoption of the Internet worldwide and its integration into individuals' daily lives. As Internet usage continues to increase, every sector experiences significant changes, creating new opportunities. Similarly, the practice of mentorship has evolved alongside these transformations, giving rise to e-mentoring as a modern approach.

However, the earliest presence of e-mentoring goes back to the 90s, when the internet was expanding from military and academic uses into other areas. This provided the chance for mentoring to be implemented in virtual and electronic environments, overcoming barriers that once existed, like time, geography, and difficulties accessing mentors in some regions and countries.

3.3 The Digital Mentoring Platform Industry

Mentoring- from the traditional type to online mentoring- can be implemented in different sectors and industries, such as hospitality, IT/software, engineering, management and manufacturing, and business. It's not limited to one sector but provides professional growth across different ones. Due to the lack of acceptance of a definition of mentoring in industry, it has never been recognized as a separate industry itself; however, its impact is not negligible.

e-mentoring become a key solution in professional environments and corporates, and it use for the knowledge transfer, to learning and engagement and retention. New platforms for mentoring are more adoptable and flexible compare to traditional mentoring as AI integrations in these platforms allows each user to have different experience based on its own needs and journey for protégé become more close to personal career (Metastat, 2025).

As mentoring is not recognized as an industry sector, economic data are not reliably available, but there are data for the mentoring software market published by commercial reports. According to Market Reports World (2025), the mentoring software market size in 2025 was USD 432.6 million,

expected to reach USD 942.6 million by 2034. Metastat, another data-driven site working on industry data, published a 2025 report stating the current market size is USD 1,682 million, estimated to grow to USD 4,669 million by 2032. As is clear, there is significant difference among reports, likely due to their data collection methods. Despite differences in market size and future forecasts among reports for the mentoring software market, one thing remains constant: the prediction of growth over the next 10 years.

Different individuals and organizations get aware of the benefits of mentoring software and the attraction of it, forecasted to increase year by year. As mentoring can increase the productivity and it gives the sense of care to employees and individuals. It also can increase the motivation of individuals and increase their satisfaction. (Metastat, 2025)

98% of Fortune 500 companies have mentoring programs, and they use them for employee retention. Companies that offer mentoring have been more profitable than others and more resilient in terms of employee quits (Lopata et al., 2024, Cook, 2024).

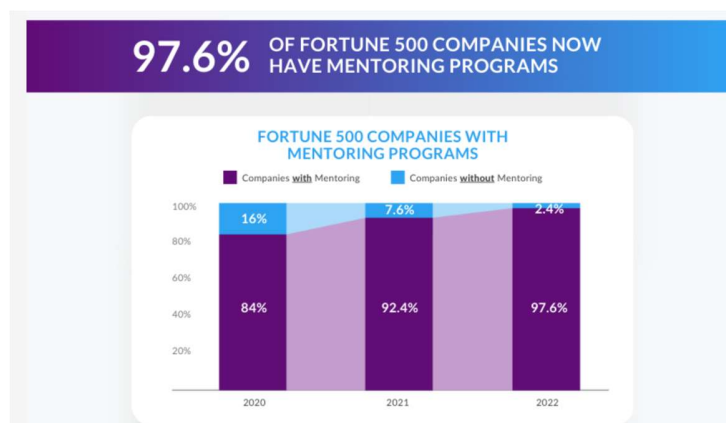


Figure 6- Percentage of Fortune 500 Companies with Mentoring Programs (Lopata et al., 2024, Cook, 2024)

Metastat Insight has published another report about this market by indicating the region. As it shows, North America has the highest rate of mentoring software market in 2025 by 44%, followed by Europe.

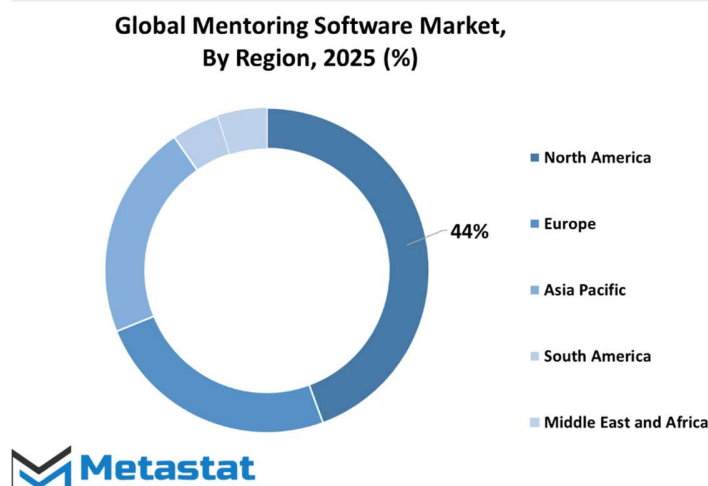


Figure 7- Mentoring Software Market, Metastat

AI integration in mentoring platforms, combined with data analysis, provides opportunities for mentoring that never existed before. By using it, the matching process can be implemented more accurately, as all data from both sides, mentor and protégé, can be considered to match them in the best way possible. Chatbots and virtual assistants also make the mentoring process easier for both sides by providing instant messaging, feedback, and answers to questions that might arise during platform use and the mentoring process itself. (Metastat, 2025)

3.4 Key Entrepreneurial E-Mentoring Platforms

Mentor Cruise

Mentor Cruise is a digital mentoring platform that operates as a marketplace connecting mentors with mentees across various domains, including entrepreneurship, technology, and career development. The platform is particularly relevant for entrepreneurs and startup founders, as it provides

access to experienced professionals who offer guidance on business development, product strategy, fundraising, and growth.

The platform is structured around a subscription-based model, where mentees select mentors based on publicly available profiles that include professional background, areas of expertise, experience, and user reviews. This approach emphasizes user autonomy in the matching process, allowing entrepreneurs to choose mentors that align with their specific needs and goals. In addition to one-to-one mentoring, Mentor Cruise provides continuous support through messaging, scheduled calls, and long-term mentoring relationships rather than one-off sessions.

One of the key characteristics of Mentor Cruise is its focus on ongoing interaction and accessibility. Unlike traditional mentoring programs that are time-bound or highly structured, Mentor Cruise enables flexible and continuous engagement between mentors and mentees. The platform also incorporates feedback mechanisms such as ratings and testimonials, which help signal mentor quality and credibility. Overall, Mentor Cruise represents a user-driven, flexible mentoring model that prioritizes accessibility and personalized support for entrepreneurs.

Micro Mentor

Micro Mentor is a global nonprofit online mentoring platform designed to support entrepreneurs, particularly those in early-stage ventures and underserved communities. Unlike commercial mentoring platforms, Micro Mentor operates with the objective of increasing access to business mentorship worldwide, with a strong emphasis on inclusivity and social impact.

The platform connects entrepreneurs with volunteer mentors through a profile-based system, where users can search for mentors based on industry, expertise, and business needs. Micro Mentor supports both formal and informal mentoring relationships, allowing participants to engage at

different levels depending on their goals and availability. Communication is primarily conducted through messaging, with the possibility of extending interactions to other channels outside the platform.

A distinctive feature of Micro Mentor is its focus on accessibility and scalability. By offering free access to mentoring services, the platform removes financial barriers that often limit entrepreneurs' access to professional guidance. It also promotes a global mentoring network, enabling cross-border connections between mentors and mentees. However, compared to more structured platforms, Micro Mentor provides a relatively low level of formal guidance and program design, relying instead on self-directed interactions between users. This positions the platform as an open and flexible mentoring environment that prioritizes reach and inclusivity.

Growth Mentor

Growth Mentor is a digital mentoring platform specifically designed for startup founders, marketers, and growth professionals. The platform focuses on providing practical, experience-based guidance to entrepreneurs through direct interaction with mentors who have hands-on experience in scaling businesses.

Growth Mentor operates as a curated marketplace, where mentors are carefully selected and vetted based on their expertise and track record. Mentees can browse mentor profiles, read reviews, and book one-on-one sessions according to their needs. The platform emphasizes real-time interaction through video calls, which distinguishes it from platforms that rely primarily on asynchronous communication.

In addition to one-on-one mentoring, Growth Mentor incorporates community-oriented features, such as group sessions, knowledge sharing, and peer interaction. These elements create an

environment where entrepreneurs can learn not only from mentors but also from other participants. The platform also encourages structured interactions by offering guidance on session topics and mentoring goals, while still maintaining flexibility for users.

Overall, Growth Mentor represents a hybrid model that combines elements of marketplace mentoring with curated quality control and community engagement. Its focus on practical advice, real-time communication, and user experience makes it particularly suitable for entrepreneurs seeking actionable insights and rapid feedback.

Mentorship Center

Mentorship Center refers to a structured mentoring environment typically associated with programs, incubators, or institutional initiatives aimed at supporting entrepreneurs and startups. Unlike marketplace-based platforms, Mentorship Center operates within a more formal framework, where mentoring relationships are often organized and guided by an overseeing organization.

The platform provides structured mentoring programs that include onboarding processes, predefined objectives, and ongoing monitoring of mentoring relationships. Matching between mentors and mentees is often facilitated by program administrators or based on specific criteria related to the goals of the program. This structured approach reduces uncertainty and ensures that participants follow a defined path throughout the mentoring process.

Mentorship Center typically integrates additional support services, such as training resources, workshops, and progress tracking, which contribute to the overall development of entrepreneurs. The platform may also foster community interaction by connecting participants within the same program or ecosystem, such as startup incubators or entrepreneurial networks.

Compared to more flexible platforms, Mentorship Center emphasizes consistency, guidance, and accountability. Its structured design is particularly beneficial for early-stage entrepreneurs who require clear direction and support. However, this level of structure may also limit flexibility and personalization compared to user-driven platforms.

4. Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Research Design

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how trust is established in online mentoring platforms for entrepreneurs from different cultures. To answer this question, this study adopts a qualitative research design, combining two different phases. The first phase is a scoping review of related literature to identify important factors that facilitate trust in e-mentoring from a theoretical perspective. Unlike systematic reviews, a scoping review allows identification of key concepts and theories about a topic to clarify its extent. The scoping review can be conducted when the aim is to identify key characteristics or factors related to a concept; for this reason, this methodology was adopted (Peters et al., 2020).

The framework for scoping review that had been followed consists of 5 stages:

Identify research question: in this steps, the related studies had been studies in mentoring and e-mentoring in order to find the related research question and find the gap. After reading the fundamental literatures in this subject, the research question had been formulated which was: *What factors are identified in the literature as facilitating or hindering trust in e-mentoring, particularly for entrepreneurs, and how do these factors relate to platform design?*

Identify relevant studies: for identifying relevant studies, Scopus was used as the database. Search strings combined terms like mentoring, mentorship, online, virtual, entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, trust, and effectiveness.

Study selection: Studies were limited to English-language publications in business, management, and accounting. After screening titles, abstracts, and content, 19 articles remained for in-depth review. After removing the not related articles from title, abstract and its contexts, 19 articles remain for deep review.

Charting the data: Papers were analyzed, and a chart was created summarizing methods, trust factors, mentor functions, platform features and services, and inclusion of cultural differences.

Summarizing and reporting: Relevant information was synthesized to inform the thesis's second phase.

Table 4- Comparison of Platform Features Across Trust Building Categories

Feature Category	Description	Key Supporting Studies
Matching and personalization	Algorithm-based or manual matching that considers skills, interests, and – ideally – cultural background or values.	Janasz, Ensher & Heun (2008); Ensher et al. (2003)
Communication modalities	Availability of text, voice, and video channels; richness of media affects trust.	Ensher et al. (2003); Leck & Wood (2013)
Anonymity and privacy	Options to conceal identity or control information sharing; can encourage honest disclosure.	Knouse (2001); Evans (2018); Ensher et al. (2003)
Structured program design	Onboarding, tutorials, guidelines, progress tracking; reduces uncertainty.	Evans (2018); Lall et al. (2023)

Community and feedback features	Ratings, reviews, testimonials, forums; provide social proof and signal trustworthiness.	Leck & Wood (2013); Heaton-Shrestha et al. (2009)
---------------------------------	--	---

Note: The factors in this table are drawn primarily from studies that explicitly examine e-mentoring. Foundational concepts such as perceived similarity (St-Jean, 2012; Bosma et al., 2012) and the impact of programme structure (Fagenson-Eland et al., 1997) are supported by traditional mentoring research but have been shown to transfer to virtual settings (e.g., de Janasz et al., 2008, for similarity; Evans, 2018, for structure).

The second phase of study had been conducted by qualitative comparative case analysis. This method allows for the comparison of different cases, which in this research are e-mentoring platforms that provide services for entrepreneurs, in order to identify similarities and differences across them. This methodology was selected because it makes it possible to systematically examine how these platforms are designed and how they differ from one another in terms of features related to trust. It is also a well-established method that has been used in previous studies. The choice of this approach is aligned with the purpose of this research, which is to analyze the platforms themselves rather than focusing only on users or outcomes.

Comparative case analysis (cross-case analysis) is a qualitative method that facilitates the comparison of similarities and differences across multiple cases by organizing evidence and identifying patterns through systematic analysis (Cruzes et al., 2014)

4.2 Case Selection

The platforms selected for this study were chosen from among the many platforms available for different uses. The main criteria considered for selecting these platforms is that they offer specific mentoring services for entrepreneurs, with a clear focus on entrepreneurs and startups. While there

are some platforms with a larger number of users, the platforms selected here are specifically designed, or have services designed, for entrepreneurs. In addition, the availability of information on their websites and other public sources was also taken into consideration. The global reach of the platform was another factor for consideration and selection.

Table 5- Mentoring Platforms

Platform	Description	Location	Year Established
Micro Mentor	A global, non-profit online mentoring platform that connects entrepreneurs and small business owners with volunteer mentors to support business development and learning.	US	2008
Mentor Cruise	A marketplace-based mentoring platform that connects users with industry professionals for paid, ongoing mentorship focused on career and skill development, especially in tech and business.	Switzerland	2017
Growth Mentor	A global mentoring platform designed for startup founders and marketers, offering on-demand mentoring sessions with experienced professionals through a subscription-based model.	US	2017
Mentorship Center	A mentoring software solution designed for organizations to create and manage structured mentoring programs, particularly for startups and entrepreneurial ecosystems.	US	2020

4.3. Data Collection

Data were collected from publicly available sources between February and April 2026. Because these sources are online and may be updated over time, the data could have changed at different points during this period. Sources included:

Official platform websites (features, testimonials, case studies).

Blog posts and press releases.

Industry reports and user reviews (e.g., G2).

For each platform, information was extracted on the five feature categories defined in the analytical framework (Table 4.1). All data were recorded in a structured matrix to facilitate comparison.

4.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The process was:

Familiarisation: Reading and re-reading the collected material for each platform.

Coding: Assigning codes to text segments that related to the five feature categories

Theme development: Grouping codes into the five pre-defined themes, while remaining open to emerging sub-themes

Cross-case comparison: Comparing how each platform implemented features within each theme, identifying commonalities and differences.

Interpretation: Linking the observed features back to the trust and culture theories, assessing which trust-building mechanisms (cognition-based, affect-based) each feature potentially supports, and considering how cultural dimensions might moderate their relationship.

Chapter 5- Findings

In this chapter, the results of the study are provided in response to the following research question: what are the factors that affect the formation of trust in digital entrepreneurship mentoring and how do they manifest in digital mentoring platforms?

The chapter consists of two major sections. In the first section, the findings of the scoping review are provided, highlighting the mechanisms of relationships that allow for establishing trust in digital mentoring. Following the inclusion criteria, 19 papers are included in the analysis, including literature on e-mentoring, entrepreneurial mentoring, and the mechanisms of trust formation in digital contexts.

Based on the above information, the second section provides an analysis of the mechanisms of building trust relations between participants in the e-mentoring process through platform design. As opposed to simply listing various characteristics of the platforms, the emphasis is placed on interpreting how certain elements of design influence trust relations.

5.1 Trust in E-Mentoring Platforms

Trust has long been identified as a cornerstone of mentoring relationships, as it enables openness, knowledge sharing, and meaningful interaction between mentor and mentee (Buche, 2008). However, building a relationship based on trust in e-mentoring contexts is complicated because of a number of reasons related to the lack of face-to-face interactions. Without the ability to use such

communication factors as tone of voice, body language, and timely response, people become unable to evaluate others' intention and reliability (Buche, 2008). Thus, in contrast to interpersonal communication, where trust naturally arises in the process of communication, in digital environments, it needs to be developed actively and consciously.

According to the literature on virtual teams, trust in digital environment at its first stages usually develops through the mechanism of "swift trust" that involves making decisions based on scarce data and initial impressions rather than after extensive interaction (Robert, Denis, & Hung, 2009). Thus, while swift trust helps people start interacting with one another and builds up the foundation for subsequent development of a positive relationship, it is quite weak and prone to fading away in case of unpredictable behaviors of other people involved. Over time, as communication is continued and parties get to know more about one another, they develop stronger trust based on reliable perceptions about one another's competence, consistency, and honesty (Robert, Denis, & Hung, 2009).

When talking about e-mentoring communities, it should be noted that most of the time, mentoring relationships are started among those who do not know one another. For this reason, their initial trust perceptions will be built primarily through such sources of information as profiles and communication (Walter, Ortbach, & Niehaves, n.d.). In this regard, the notion of social presence becomes important as it measures the degree to which one feels connected to others in digital spaces (Walter, Ortbach, & Niehaves, n.d.). Higher social presence, achieved through more rich channels of communication or access to more information about people's lives, may increase trust as well.

Furthermore, trust may be developed in digital interaction through normative actions. Such actions involve setting rules for interaction, communicating regularly and monitoring one another's

performance, thus helping to reduce uncertainty and create conditions for trust development (Jarvenpää & Leidner, 1999).

5.1.1 Mechanisms of trust formation in digital mentoring

Although trust is formed in a digital mentoring environment gradually during the process of interaction, it does not appear out of nowhere and is based on a number of relational mechanisms. Indeed, in the absence of face-to-face interaction in a computer-mediated environment, these mechanisms become especially relevant since they compensate for the lack of interpersonal communication and allow building trusting relationships. The following mechanisms play an important role in the development of trust in computer-mediated contexts.

Firstly, one of the major factors that affects trust in digital mentoring is perceived similarity between mentor and mentee. Individuals are more likely to form connections and mutual understanding when they notice similar values, goals, or work experience. Similarity leads to relational closeness and lowers uncertainties, thus promoting the development of trust (St-Jean, 2012; Evans, 2018). In particular, in digital contexts, where interaction between individuals usually starts from the point zero and they are still strangers to each other, perceived similarity can be seen as an important signal indicating that the participants can trust each other.

Secondly, quality of communication can affect the emergence of trust in a computer-mediated mentoring relationship. In fact, since there are no non-verbal communication cues in computer-mediated interaction, the importance of the clarity and frequency of communication increases significantly. High-quality communication enables reducing uncertainties in the perception of a partner's message and showing commitment to building the relationship and, therefore, developing

trust (Leck & Wood, 2013; Ensher et al., 2003). In contrast, low-frequency and ambiguous communication may have an opposite effect, hindering trust formation.

Thirdly, psychological safety becomes a vital condition for trust formation. Psychological safety can be described as the perception of safety in communication with another person. Namely, psychological safety implies feeling free in expressing one's opinions, experiences, and thoughts, which does not lead to judgment or negative consequences (Evans, 2018; Edmondson, 1999). In a digital mentoring relationship, psychological safety makes the mentees feel comfortable in interacting and participating in self-disclosure activities.

Speaking about self-disclosure, it should be mentioned that this mechanism can be viewed as one of the factors reinforcing trust and making it deeper. Indeed, when individuals reveal personal and professional information, trust and relational closeness are formed and developed (St-Jean, 2012). Thus, self-disclosure appears to be an effective tool in reinforcing and enhancing trust, provided there are certain psychological conditions (including trust) necessary for such actions.

Finally, a mentor's personal characteristics can contribute to the formation of trust as well. Namely, according to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), trust is built based on perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity. As to digital mentoring, these perceptions include views about mentor's expertise and his/her ability to provide useful recommendations and advices (i.e., mentor's ability), concern for the mentee (i.e., mentor's benevolence), and ethical behavior (i.e., integrity).

Thus, as has been noted above, there are multiple mechanisms that affect the development of trust in digital mentoring relationships. All the mechanisms are interconnected and interdependent and create the general picture of the process. Further analysis of trust in the given environment should start from examining these mechanisms.

5.1.2 Platform Features as Enablers of Trust

Although the relational mechanisms that lead to trust formation were outlined above, the operations of these mechanisms are not confined to their pure relational aspect but depend on the technological environment in which they are performed. Thus, as interactions on mentoring platforms take place through technology-mediated channels, the specificities of such interactions, including the design of digital platforms, are of vital importance to analyze the emergence and evolution of the abovementioned relational mechanisms. The design of mentoring platforms, however, does not contribute to the development of trust directly but merely creates necessary conditions for trust formation.

Matching and personalization are among the most important platform features that impact trust. Matching systems determine how mentors and mentees are matched and what criteria should be used. These criteria typically include the professional background, goals, skills, and interests of both participants. As discussed previously, perceived similarity plays an essential role in building trust. As a result, when participants are paired using the appropriate criteria and thus share many similarities, the process of developing a sense of connection and commonality becomes easier (Ensher et al., 2003; St-Jean, 2012). Consequently, the matching system itself serves as the main tool of achieving perceived similarity and initiating trust-building.

Moreover, various communication channels provided by mentoring platforms are important enablers of trust. Typically, digital mentoring involves several communication modalities, including messaging, video calls, and voice communication. These features have a direct effect on the quality of communication and influence trust formation by changing its frequency, clarity, and richness

(Leck & Wood, 2013). For instance, the introduction of richer forms of communication, such as video and voice, may make up for the lack of non-verbal communication elements. While these features improve social presence and help to build trust in the long run, synchronous communication provides more opportunities for immediacy.

Moreover, privacy and anonymity are among the crucial factors that facilitate trust formation. Specifically, digital platforms usually give users an opportunity to set privacy options, controlling the amount of information revealed about themselves during communication. The level of privacy helps users manage the risk of disclosure and increase their willingness to self-disclose. Higher levels of privacy contribute to psychological safety, which positively influences trust formation (Knouse, 2001; Evans, 2018). However, excessive anonymity may weaken credibility and accountability, resulting in a trade-off between openness and trustworthiness. Hence, the platform should find a middle ground between ensuring users' privacy and encouraging them to reveal relevant information.

Furthermore, a well-structured mentoring program can contribute to trust formation by eliminating initial uncertainty. Features like onboarding, goal setting, progress tracking, etc., can establish certain expectations for participants regarding their interaction, making it more predictable and structured (Evans, 2018; Lall et al., 2023). In turn, higher predictability allows for the creation of initial trust. Although such structural features are useful in facilitating trust at early stages of relationships, excessive rigidity may inhibit natural relationship growth and decrease flexibility.

Lastly, community features and feedback mechanisms are helpful in reducing uncertainty. Ratings, reviews, testimonials, and community interaction create social proof, which reduces uncertainty and facilitates trust formation by signaling participants' competence, credibility, and reliability (Leck & Wood, 2013). Nevertheless, although community and feedback mechanisms can be

effective in fostering initial cognitive trust, they cannot completely substitute direct interaction in the process of building affective trust.

The platform features help create the right conditions for implementing relational trust formation mechanisms. Mentoring platforms influence how users perceive each other, interact with one another, and manage uncertainty, which affects trust formation significantly.

5.1.3 Culture's Influence on Trust Building

Although features of the platform facilitate the use of relational processes that contribute to trust building, they are not equally applicable to everyone. Culture serves as an important moderating factor that impacts how trust is perceived, built, and maintained within digital-mentoring networks. In this regard, culture affects how interactions are interpreted, how communication is handled, and how mentoring relationships are pursued.

Firstly, culture impacts some of the main pillars of trust-building: communication style, relationship expectations, and self-disclosure. Straightforward and explicit communication can be considered effective and informative in low-context cultures, while the same communication style is viewed negatively and too aggressive in high-context cultures (Leck & Wood, 2013) 1. Furthermore, rules about politeness, timeliness, and emotionality vary by culture, which alters how the quality of communication is assessed and how trust is accumulated in digital-mentoring networks.

The importance of hierarchy in mentoring is another critical cultural issue that needs to be addressed. People from high-power-distance societies accept hierarchical relations and obey their mentor, which means that the former avoid questioning or challenging them (Hofstede, 1980) 2. In contrast, members of low-power-distance cultures believe that mentoring should involve equality and interaction (Hofstede, 1980) 2. However, due to the absence of many visual cues that can

clarify role expectations, there is a potential for misinterpretations or disagreements, which can impact trust building (Jarvenpää & Leidner, 1999) 3.

Finally, cultural orientations impact openness and self-disclosure. Individualistic cultures tend to encourage people to share their thoughts and experiences, which helps build trust between participants (Leck & Wood, 2013) 1. On the contrary, collectivist societies are less inclined to express themselves and share information, which impedes trust (Leck & Wood, 2013) 1. Since self-disclosure is vital to trust-building in mentoring (Leck & Wood, 2013) 1, the aforementioned cultural differences significantly impact relationship-building within digital-mentoring networks.

Furthermore, uncertainty avoidance also plays a moderating role in trust-building. People from cultures characterized by high uncertainty avoidance prefer predictable environments, established rules, and structured interactions, which implies that such platform features as tutorials, well-defined roles, and explicit communication practices are more effective at fostering trust (Jiao & Ayob, 2025) 4. However, people who belong to societies that tolerate uncertainty are more comfortable with flexible mentoring programs that lack rigid structure, which means that fewer formalities are needed to develop trust.

Cultural backgrounds affect the perceived usefulness of different features of the platform. For instance, anonymity is valuable in situations when privacy is valued highly but can reduce trust in cases when personal identity is associated with reliability (Jiao & Ayob, 2025) 4. Similarly, program structuring, enriched media, and social presence cues vary in effectiveness among diverse cultural groups because of different preferences for formalities, hierarchies, and self-disclosure.

In conclusion, culture does not foster trust directly but impacts the circumstances under which it arises. Specific norms of different cultures determine how people perceive communication, assess

similarities, and communicate using digital tools. To understand why some people are more likely to build trust within digital-mentoring networks than others, it is necessary to take into account cultural factors (Walter, Ortbach, & Niehaves, 2013).

5.1.4 Conceptual model

From the above discussion, it can be stated that trust in digital mentoring is a phenomenon resulting from the interaction of the mentioned relational mechanisms and platform features in a multicultural environment. Therefore, rather than occurring as the direct result of an interaction process, trust in digital mentoring is created via a dynamic process during which the combination of technology and relationships contributes to individual perception of other participants of the process.

Relational mechanisms through which trust is established include several aspects, such as perceived similarity, communication quality, psychological safety, self-disclosure, and mentor characteristics. These elements are broadly considered in existing research, both in the areas of trust and mentoring (St-Jean, 2012; Evans, 2018; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). However, in digital mentoring scenarios, these elements cannot be seen in isolation, as they are always shaped by specific technological features of the process.

In its turn, platform-related features are critical for enabling these processes. Matching systems enable creation of perceived similarities between individuals by establishing connections between people who have similar backgrounds or objectives (Ensher et al., 2003; St-Jean, 2012). Interaction quality and the presence of social cues created by communication tools play a crucial role in fostering digital mentoring relationships (Leck & Wood, 2013; Walter, Ortbach, & Niehaves, n.d.). Privacy and anonymity of the environment impact participants' psychological safety and self-disclosure level (Knouse, 2001; Evans, 2018). Structured program design allows reducing uncertainty

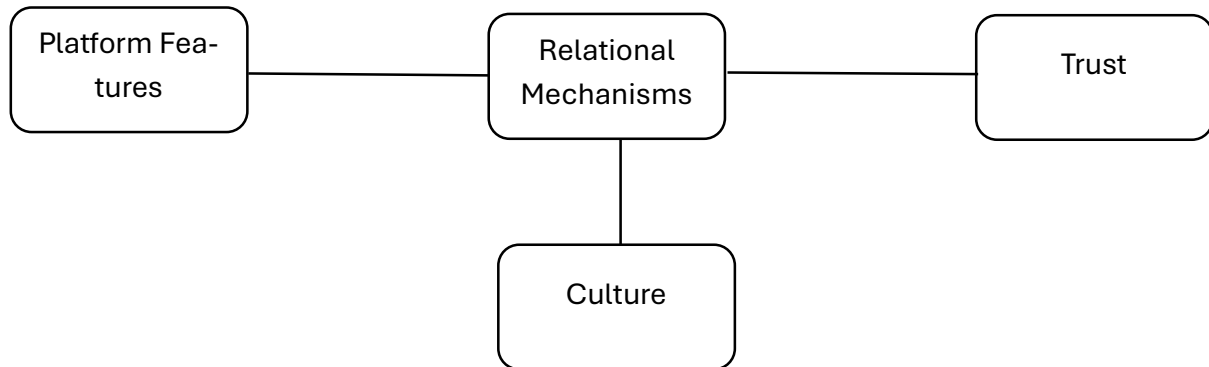
in digital mentoring, thereby helping establish initial levels of trust (Evans, 2018; Lall et al., 2023). Lastly, feedback and community features are responsible for providing implicit information about mentor's credibility and reliability (Leck & Wood, 2013).

As mentioned before, this interaction does not take place uniformly among different users and cultures. Cultural context plays the role of moderator of trust building process in digital mentoring by affecting such aspects as communicative preferences, hierarchy perception, self-disclosure level, and tolerance to uncertainty (Hofstede, 2001; Evans, 2018). Therefore, one and the same platform design may generate very different levels of trust due to cultural diversity.

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that the trust in digital mentoring is enabled and shaped neither exclusively by the process itself, nor by technology. Instead, it is the result of their interplay. On the one hand, platform features allow enabling and shaping relational processes, which result in trusting behavior. This behavior, in its turn, impacts mentoring outcomes in terms of learning process, relationship development, and performance of mentees (St-Jean, 2012; Kunaka & Moos, 2019).

This conclusion forms the basis of the following stage of work, when the level of reflection of these relations on existing digital mentoring platforms will be analyzed. This theoretical model of digital mentoring trust can be illustrated in Figure X.

Figure 8- Conceptual Model Based On Scoping Review



5.2 Platform Analysis

Having analyzed the theoretical model of trust formation in digital mentoring platforms above, the current paper will explore how this model is operationalized in real-world digital mentoring platforms in the following section. The conceptual model outlined above provides a thorough description of those relational and platform-related factors that contribute to the formation of trust. Yet, it should be noted that, as is always the case, the conceptual framework should be combined with the analysis of actual platforms' features to achieve a holistic understanding of the issue under discussion.

While the main purpose of the following analysis is to provide a description of the selected platforms' features, it also has to include the evaluation of the ways in which such platforms facilitate or prevent the formation of trust. From this perspective, the platform itself may be viewed as one of the factors influencing the process under consideration.

To this end, four mentoring platforms will be analyzed – namely, MentorCruise, MicroMentor, GrowthMentor, and Mentorship Center. Such an approach will enable evaluating different

approaches to the creation of mentoring platforms in terms of their impact on the development of trust within such communities.

In particular, such aspects as platform structurality, matching algorithms, communicative possibilities, and social dimensions will be evaluated. Furthermore, each of the platforms will be evaluated according to the conceptual model presented above, i.e., it will be explored what kinds of trust-building processes are facilitated and limited in the specific platforms.

In this context, special emphasis will be placed on such aspects as perception of similarity, high-quality communication, psychological safety, self-disclosure, and mentor credibility. Moreover, cultural issues related to building trust in online communities will be taken into account.

5.2.1 Matching and Personalization

Matching and personalization are considered the beginning of trust development in mentoring platforms since mentors and mentees do not interact with each other before the process begins, which means that they have no experience to evaluate the credibility of potential partners. For that reason, matching algorithms become the basis for establishing perceptions and developing certain expectations about the relationship.

All platforms under analysis make use of matching techniques, but the levels of complexity and the information used for matching can be quite different. Platforms like GrowthMentor and MentorCruise utilize more advanced methods to connect mentors and mentees. For instance, GrowthMentor offers its users to make use of AI-supported tools that provide recommendations concerning suitable mentors on the basis of user input. Moreover, GrowthMentor profiles are equipped with various information regarding mentors' languages, locations, and cultural

backgrounds. Similarly, users of MentorCruise can see mentors' locations and background information. Both options help establish some kind of similarity apart from skills, knowledge, or expertise.

However, some platforms, for example, MicroMentor, implement guided onboarding when users are expected to provide necessary information about themselves, namely, their languages, location, stage of entrepreneurship, and challenges. In doing so, it is possible to develop matching techniques based on user input, thus reducing the level of uncertainty to a minimum and increasing chances of creating valuable relationships. In case some users lack experience, it becomes vital to rely on guidance.

The Mentorship Centre appears to have a combination of matching techniques because it uses both automatic and manual methods. However, what distinguishes this platform from others is that it focuses more on user goals and benefits. Thus, the matching algorithm becomes much more structured due to user objectives and outcomes of mentorship.

From a theoretical standpoint, the process of matching corresponds to the concept of perceived similarity. According to research, the more similar people are, the higher the possibility of establishing closer relationships based on mutual understanding and trust (Ensher et al., 2003; St-Jean, 2012). It implies that modern matching algorithms should pay special attention to establishing more complex similarities to achieve more meaningful results. However, it can be argued that even though various platforms offer multiple criteria for matching, they still focus mostly on observable, quantifiable similarities. Although some platforms add more layers to the notion of similarity, deeper aspects are ignored completely.

It is worth mentioning that in the theoretical context, perceived similarity involves various aspects that are important for building deeper, relational trust. In this way, it can be said that contemporary platforms lack some key elements of similarity, which makes the process of trust formation incomplete and ineffective.

Overall, it becomes evident that the concept of matching is essential for the process of trust creation. Even though there are certain gaps between theoretical models and practices, these processes are crucial for establishing cognitive trust.

5.2.2 Communication Modalities

Communication is one of the main mechanisms enabling trust-building throughout the process of mentoring. Although matching algorithms influence initial expectations regarding compatibility, it is through communication and further interactions that trust evolves from initial perceptions into a more robust and relational state. In particular, in digital environments, the type and quality of available communication modalities become highly significant for this purpose.

Most of the platforms under study offer both synchronous (video calls, voice calls) and asynchronous (messaging) communication features. Platforms such as MentorCruise and GrowthMentor emphasize the importance of direct interaction through the encouragement of regular communication using video calls. Video-based interaction facilitates the exchange of information, including non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, intonation, facial expressions. Hence, in terms of the development of trust, video-based interaction increases social presence and enables the creation of affect-based trust.

On the other hand, asynchronous communication is widely used due to its flexibility and relative independence of location, time zone, and other limiting factors. Such a feature increases

accessibility and allows individuals to interact conveniently; however, it may have detrimental effects on the development of trust. Namely, asynchronous interaction leads to a slower pace of communication, which means reduced immediacy and emotional engagement. Consequently, delays in responses, the absence of verbal tones and nuances, and limited contextual cues contribute to misunderstanding and impede the evolution of relational trust.

In contrast to platforms that favor video-based interaction and prioritize direct contact between mentors and mentees, other platforms focus on the provision of textual information as a primary mode of interaction. For example, on the MicroMentor website, users communicate via messaging systems after being matched. On the one hand, such an approach increases access to mentoring services; on the other hand, it may result in a more superficial relationship with reduced social presence. Hence, the development of relational trust in such cases is likely to become challenging.

Another example is the Mentorship Center website. This platform operates in a more organized environment where structured mentoring is implemented according to specific goals. Structured mentoring allows users to establish clearer objectives, ensures increased accountability, and improves the completion rate of tasks. At the same time, this process limits the possibilities for spontaneous interactions, which are beneficial for building trust.

It can be stated that the effectiveness of available communication modalities does not depend on their mere existence; rather, their usefulness depends on whether these tools are applied correctly. Namely, frequent, consistent, and effective communication indicates commitment and reliability, thus becoming the foundation of trust-building process (Leck & Wood, 2013). Inconsistency in interaction undermines the development of a relational aspect of the trust.

A common trend among reviewed platforms is that although communication modalities are diverse, no suggestions are made regarding the use of the available communication features. Consequently, it is up to users to manage their communication and maintain trustful relationships. Hence, variability exists in users' experience, as the development of trust relies both on the features provided by the platforms and on users' communication capabilities.

It should be noted that communication is never culture-independent. Different communication styles, including direct vs. indirect communication, varying levels of formality, as well as different expectations of the communication process, are likely to affect trust-building. In digital contexts, the absence of contextual cues increases misinterpretations. It should be mentioned that despite this, there is no evidence of culturally adaptive communication features on the reviewed websites.

To conclude, it can be said that communication modalities are directly related to interaction and relational trust. Platforms provide tools for interaction, but the success of this process depends significantly on user skills. While richer communication channels increase social presence, effective interaction remains essential for fostering trustful relationships.

5.2.3 Anonymity and Privacy

For anonymity and privacy, these features play an especially important role in fostering trust among the users of mentoring platforms. Indeed, these aspects significantly impact trust perceptions in terms of risk, credibility and openness.

All platforms under consideration have one important feature: a strong emphasis on identity transparency and credibility signals. Thus, platforms like GrowthMentor and MentorCruise require detailed mentor profiles that include such information as professional background, verifiable work experience, and even reviews and ratings. In GrowthMentor, users can find, read about and arrange

their scheduled meetings directly through the site, thus reducing uncertainty and fostering cognition-based trust.

At the same time, in MentorCruise, users are offered continuous interaction through messengers and video sessions with possible review writing. In other words, this platform combines credibility signals and continuous interaction to provide users with maximum psychological security during communication and strengthen accountability. As a result, users can see whether or not mentors are credible enough before initiating the conversation. Anonymity here is low, with trust fostered by visible competence and credibility of participants.

MicroMentor offers a very different concept based on openness and accessibility. Here, anyone can sign up and create a profile, then participate in the program as a user who interacts with volunteer mentors via messengers. This way, entry barriers are lowered, making the platform more appealing to potential users, who, in turn, get more opportunities to communicate with mentors without any formal verification process or paid credibility signals.

Finally, the Mentorship Center stands out as an interesting option since it offers structured mentoring software solutions. Indeed, the environment in question requires participants to perform certain actions according to the established order. As a result, identity becomes rigid, since users interact within a controlled system.

Thus, anonymity plays a significant role in the trust formation processes since, as shown by the above discussion, it impacts both credibility and psychological safety of interactions. From the theoretical perspective, there seems to be a clear trade-off, with identity transparency positively affecting credibility (thus, cognition-based trust), while anonymity is crucial in establishing

psychological safety and encouraging self-disclosure. Thus, users need to be able to use privacy options flexibly to ensure effective trust formation.

All platforms under analysis seem to favor identity transparency over anonymity, providing users with extensive opportunities to learn about potential conversation partners. Although this approach fosters cognition-based trust to a great extent, it fails to promote affect-based trust, as it does not encourage open and deep interactions. Moreover, discussing one's uncertainties and failures with the mentor often occurs in entrepreneurial contexts, and the lack of psychological safety can be detrimental in this situation.

This tendency can be influenced by culture, with those environments with high uncertainty avoidance relying on visible identity to foster trust. At the same time, in communities with open culture and willingness to communicate informally, anonymity would facilitate more affect-based trust. Unfortunately, none of the above platforms offers any adaptive privacy options depending on the cultural settings.

Thus, anonymity and privacy play an important role in mentoring platforms, providing means to enhance credibility on one hand and foster psychological safety on the other. While current platforms emphasize the former aspect, they fail to offer flexible privacy control options necessary for deeper trust to develop.

5.2.4 Structured Program Design

The issue of structured program design is one of the most critical elements of trust formation in digital mentoring relations since users in this environment may not have any previous relationships with the persons they will interact with. Therefore, trust cannot develop organically as it usually

occurs in traditional face-to-face interaction. On the contrary, in such a mediated environment as digital mentoring, structure plays a major role in establishing interactions and fostering trust.

First, it should be noted that platforms used to develop digital mentoring relationships have differing degrees of structure based on particular design logics. Thus, some platforms such as GrowthMentor and MentorCruise offer a semi-structured design. Specifically, these platforms give users great freedom of choice but require adherence to certain interaction frameworks. For example, on GrowthMentor platform, users organize mentoring sessions, book the meetings, make appointments for video calls, etc. On the MentorCruise platform, the users interact with the mentors through emails, calls, or texts, but at the same time, there is also an option for users to purchase and establish continuous subscription-based mentoring relationships.

Such structure facilitates predictability and thus helps users understand interaction rules and patterns better and develop their trust as reliable and consistent actions signal trustworthiness (Evans, 2018). In turn, the freedom offered by these platforms ensures that users still choose their own mentors and decide on their preferred mode of communication.

However, there are also platforms like MicroMentor where interaction and engagement is much more flexible. In this case, during the process of onboarding, the system asks users about their goals, their current stage in the entrepreneurial journey, the issues they face, etc. But then users are free to contact mentors and develop relationships according to their own understanding of how and when to communicate. While such flexible interaction patterns may enhance participation and allow for building relationships naturally, they also create uncertainty as far as regularity and commitment are concerned.

On the opposite end of the structure continuum is the Mentorship Center platform. The use of this platform implies a rather complex organizational process where users go through onboarding, engage in goal setting, follow up regularly, and track their progress. It should be stated that this form of structure is appropriate for mentoring programs conducted under the management of particular organizations and aimed at solving their problems. In terms of trust formation, structured mentoring may be associated with the concept of institutional trust when users place trust not only in a person but in the institution as well.

While structure may be helpful for enhancing trust formation, excessive structuring may also become problematic. In this context, it is worth discussing the advantages and disadvantages of structured interaction. First, a highly structured environment may limit the ability of people to engage in spontaneous interaction, which can also be useful in terms of trust building. In addition, it may limit opportunities for informal conversations that are necessary for establishing affect-based trust relationships.

Thus, structure appears to be necessary and useful but to a certain extent. Another aspect of structured interaction design related to trust is cultural sensitivity. Specifically, culture-related variables, such as uncertainty avoidance, play an important role when it comes to designing such systems. While users in cultures with high levels of uncertainty avoidance appreciate structure and its ability to minimize uncertainty and unpredictability, in those cultures where people do not need rigid frameworks of communication, excessive structuring may negatively influence interaction and engagement.

5.2.5 Community and Feedback Features

The fifth category of elements that contribute to trust formation is comprised of community and feedback features. Whereas trust development via personal interaction is based on the use of individual experience as a criterion of performance and reliability, community and feedback features enable one to leverage the experiences of other people. As such, these elements work as signals of credibility and reliability allowing users to make decisions on the basis of social proof.

The importance of feedback and community features varies across all analyzed platforms. GrowthMentor and MentorCruise platforms incorporate feedback systems extensively. Mentors' profiles in both services have sections where the performance of mentors is evaluated by the community, including ratings and written reviews and testimonials provided by former mentees. Consequently, such feedback features allow users to assess the quality of service prior to the beginning of any kind of interaction.

Thus, the use of feedback as a reputation system is observed in both MentorCruise and GrowthMentor. In addition, MentorCruise integrates ongoing feedback from mentoring sessions within extended mentoring programs to build accountability and consistency in the service delivery process.

In turn, MicroMentor emphasizes the role of community and its accessibility to users. While providing the opportunity to engage with a large pool of mentors, MicroMentor does not feature elaborate feedback mechanisms. Thus, the absence of feedback features makes trust formation during interaction highly dependent on users' assessment of mentors' performance at the first stage of contact.

Finally, as far as the Mentorship Center is concerned, feedback features operate as integral parts of the mentorship process rather than reputation-building signals. That is why feedback plays an

important role in evaluating the effectiveness of mentoring programs and improving the quality of the offered service but lacks the function of increasing initial trust among participants.

Community and feedback features may be considered as social proof elements, allowing one to draw conclusions regarding the behavior of other people when making decisions. According to Leck and Wood (2013), social proof is critical in decision-making processes in digital environments, which is explained by the lack of personal interactions and direct information about other parties. Social proof allows one to estimate the competence and reliability of mentors and form the corresponding attitude.

However, despite the fact that community and feedback features facilitate trust formation, they still have several limitations. First of all, community and feedback features are useful mainly to generate cognition-based trust because of a narrow interpretation of reputation and performance factors. Positive testimonials and feedback may contribute to the establishment of a mentoring relationship. Still, the same features are unlikely to ensure relational compatibility between users.

Secondly, feedback features may create biases among participants. Positive feedback may result in high expectations. The lack of negative feedback reduces the validity of the evaluation. Finally, the absence of feedback from other participants may decrease the trust level associated with novice mentors. As a result, the latter is put at a disadvantage regardless of their actual capabilities and competence.

To summarize, it becomes clear that community and feedback features allow for the partial externalization of trust formation based on the experiences and judgment of the community members. Nevertheless, the feedback approach does not eliminate the necessity for personal interaction and trust establishment between mentors and mentees.

5.3 Discussion

As seen from the findings obtained above, trust is not an outcome of any technical element used in the creation of digital mentoring platforms but emerges as an emergent feature created through interactions between technology and relational dynamics. The existing studies have focused on the importance of trust in mentoring relationships (St-Jean, 2012; Leck & Wood, 2013), but have lacked the consideration of its operationalization within platform-based settings in general and in entrepreneurial mentoring specifically.

An important finding is related to the difference between cognition-based and affect-based trust. As shown from the findings, the majority of digital mentoring platforms are highly efficient at building up the former because of the use of the elements, such as profiles, matching systems, and feedback options, making the participants aware of their competence, credibility, and reliability. The use of such features is consistent with existing models, which suggest that the ability and integrity are essential for initiating trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). At the same time, affect-based trust can hardly develop in such settings because of the lack of communication mechanisms, which would contribute to the establishment of emotional connection and interpersonal closeness between the mentors and mentees.

A crucial finding is connected to the idea that platforms serve as an active medium, which shapes the relational mechanisms. For instance, matching systems facilitate perceiving similarities, communication features affect the interaction quality, and privacy controls create psychological safety, among others. Hence, the findings confirm the view that digital trust cannot be considered as a pure interpersonal construct but requires an investigation of the socio-technical interaction.

However, the results of the analysis reveal some gap between theory and practice since, despite the recognition of the importance of relational constructs, such as similar values, shared communication styles, cultural backgrounds, and common experiences, the platforms themselves focus primarily on more visible and tangible criteria, such as skills and experiences. Therefore, the platforms are efficient in helping users to connect but fail to support relational mechanisms further, contributing to trust formation.

Another interesting finding is related to the moderating effect of culture on trust formation, which was revealed in the study. Specifically, the differences between cultures were demonstrated in relation to communication styles, perceptions of authority, and willingness to self-disclose personal information. Such variables play an important role in the process of trust formation as they determine not only relational mechanisms but also the functioning of particular platform elements, which should be considered during platform development. However, the examined platforms did not seem to include such features in their designs.

Finally, the analysis revealed a number of tensions, which characterize the environment of digital mentoring. For example, it is a matter of choosing between transparency and psychological safety when using detailed profiles and visible identities can help build up trust but discourage people from sharing sensitive information. Another tension concerns the choice between structuring and freedom, meaning that one has to either sacrifice uncertainty to achieve trust or encourage autonomy, which may result in inconsistent participation.

Thus, the findings obtained during this work make an important contribution to the literature in the sphere of digital mentoring platforms. First, the study provides an integrative perspective on trust formation, considering socio-technical factors affecting the process. Second, the identified

aspects of culture should be considered in the future research for developing more efficient tools to support trust.

Practically, the obtained results imply that designers should shift their attention from the mere functionality of platforms to relational dynamics supported through particular design choices. For example, platforms might incorporate communication features that facilitate both cognition-based and affect-based trust. Also, guided and structured interaction processes may be helpful in building trust.

5.4 Limitations

There are some potential weaknesses of the study that cannot be overlooked.

The first one consists of the lack of empirical validation of the proposed relationships due to the qualitative nature of the study, which is built on scoping review and platform analysis. The study provides rich insights into trust formation and the mechanisms underpinning this process but does not have any empirical support for the relationships described by the researcher.

Secondly, the platform analysis included only several selected platforms designed for mentoring purposes. Although these platforms represented several models of digital mentoring available today, they did not include all types of mentoring platforms regarding their design, users, and industry. Thus, the results of the platform analysis can be regarded as indicative rather than comprehensive.

Third, the study used publicly available information for platform analysis, which may not be sufficient enough for assessing all of the characteristics required by the model. For example, the

evaluation of platform features based on the information presented in website content does not allow for determining the quality of interaction, user satisfaction, and trust formation process itself.

Moreover, the influence of culture on mentoring relationships is analyzed theoretically, not empirically. In particular, although it was found out that cultural differences affect trust formation significantly, their impact was not tested with regard to the particular platforms and users belonging to various cultures. As a consequence, the significance of culture should not be overestimated.

Finally, the study focused on entrepreneurial mentoring only, which differs considerably from other mentoring types both in goals and context. Consequently, the obtained results may be applicable to the domain considered in the study only, and cannot be generalized to others.

5.5 Implications and Future Research

From a practical point of view, the findings of this paper have implications for designing digital mentoring platforms. The developers of platforms should shift their attention away from functionality and start considering the effect of specific platform characteristics on relationship building and dynamics. Namely, they should strike a balance between cognition-based trust facilitators, such as profiles and feedback systems, and affect-based trust facilitators, including more efficient communication channels and informal contacts.

Additionally, the findings indicate that platform designers might pay more attention to sophisticated matching algorithms taking into account both professional criteria and relational and cultural factors. Moreover, incorporating flexible privacy control and cultural adaptability measures in the platform might positively affect users' experience and enhance trust development.

In addition, the implications of this paper go far beyond platform development because, according to recent studies, mentoring is considered a crucial element of an entrepreneur-friendly environment. Therefore, the results of this study might have significant value for policy makers because they will help create effective mentoring programs contributing to innovation, entrepreneurship, and business development. Thus, the paper encourages the implementation of digital mentoring programs that will promote trust among participants in order to increase the rate of new businesses opening.

Future research could expand this work by testing the proposed conceptual model empirically. More specifically, quantitative studies could analyze the relationships between platform characteristics and relational mechanisms leading to trust formation, whereas qualitative studies could focus on the analysis of participants' experience. It should be noted that comparative studies carried out in various cultural contexts might provide additional useful information concerning trust development in global digital mentoring environments.

In addition, future research should explore trust formation in hybrid mentoring models, including both online and offline contact. In addition, its long-term impact on entrepreneurial performance should be investigated.

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to explore the process of trust building in digital mentoring platforms designed specifically for entrepreneurs. The shift towards digitalization in mentoring requires a better understanding of the dynamics of trust in the online environment.

One of the key conclusions from the findings is that trust building in digital mentoring is neither guaranteed nor driven mainly by technological design. In fact, trust-building is described here as a socio-technical process resulting from the interplay between relational mechanisms and technological features of platforms. Such relational mechanisms as the feeling of perceived similarity, quality of communication, safety, self-disclosure, and characteristics of mentors prove especially important to trust development. Nevertheless, each of those mechanisms is facilitated by platform features, which include matching systems, communication tools, privacy features, program structuring, and feedback.

Another important point raised in this research is a need to distinguish between cognition-based and affect-based trust. While digital mentoring seems to facilitate cognition-based trust because of signaling its users' competence and credibility, it appears incapable of fostering affective trust due to a lack of personal emotional connection and close relationship building. It thus means that platforms can successfully promote trust to the level of engagement but cannot support trust building at a deeper level.

Finally, the influence of cultural differences in the interpretation of communication quality, feelings of respect for authority, self-disclosure, and other important mechanisms is recognized in this study. At the same time, digital mentoring platforms currently used tend to ignore culturally sensitive aspects of design, thus leaving significant room for improvement.

Overall, the contribution of this paper to the research on digital mentoring and its specific challenges lies in presenting a new conceptual framework that treats trust in digital mentoring as an interactive process between technology and users' behavior within a culturally defined context.

From a practical perspective, one could suggest that platform developers pay more attention to relational mechanisms, enhancing their potential through richer communication features, more complex matching algorithms, and other means. Besides, such insights are especially valuable because of digital mentoring's relevance to entrepreneurial development, allowing for new policy considerations and institutional interventions aimed at improving the availability and inclusiveness of mentoring platforms.

To summarize, the importance of digital mentoring cannot be overestimated since it allows people around the globe to receive help in their entrepreneurial ventures without unnecessary costs or restrictions. Further research should focus on finding ways to develop human-centric rather than efficiency-centric platforms, which are likely to promote more sustainable trust relations.

References

- Bosma, N., Hessels, J., Schutjens, V., Praag, M. V., & Verheul, I. (2012). Entrepreneurship and role models. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 33(2), 410–424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2011.03.004>
- Buche, M. W. (2008). Development of trust in electronic mentoring relationships. *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations*, 5(1), 35–50. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJNVO.2008.016001>
- Crisp, C. B., & Jarvenpaa, S. L. (n.d.). *SWIFT TRUST IN GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS: TRUSTING BELIEFS AND NORMATIVE ACTIONS*.
- D. Leck, J., & M. Wood, P. (2013). Forming Trust in E-Mentoring: A Research Agenda. *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management*, 03(01), 101–109. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajibm.2013.31013>
- Dumitraşcu-Băldău, I., & Dumitraşcu, D. D. (2019). Intercultural Communication and its Challenges Within the International Virtual Project Team. *MATEC Web of Conferences*, 290, 07005. <https://doi.org/10.1051/mateconf/201929007005>
- Dutton, H., Deane, K. L., & Bullen, P. (2022). Exploring the benefits and risks of mentor self-disclosure: Relationship quality and ethics in youth mentoring. *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 17(1), 116–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2021.1951308>
- Eby, L. T., Allen, T. D., Evans, S. C., Ng, T., & DuBois, D. L. (2008). Does mentoring matter? A multidisciplinary meta-analysis comparing mentored and non-mentored individuals. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 72(2), 254–267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2007.04.005>

- Ensher, E. A., Heun, C., & Blanchard, A. (2003). Online mentoring and computer-mediated communication: New directions in research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 63(2), 264–288. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0001-8791\(03\)00044-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0001-8791(03)00044-7)
- Evans, C. (2018). *Trust and connection in formal, virtual mentoring*. <https://doi.org/10.24384/000544>
- Headlam-Wells, J. (2004). E-mentoring for aspiring women managers. *Women in Management Review*, 19(4), 212–218. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420410541281>
- heaton-shrestha, C., May, S., Edirisingha, P., Linsey, T., & Burke, L. (2009). From face-to-face to e-mentoring: Does the “e” add any value for mentors? *Journal of Education*, 20.
- Higgins, M. C., & Kram, K. E. (2001). Reconceptualizing Mentoring at Work: A Developmental Network Perspective. *The Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 264. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259122>
- Jarvenpaa, S. L., & work(s):, D. E. L. R. (1999). Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams. *Organization Science*, 10(6), 791–815.
- Knouse, S. B. (2001). Virtual mentors: Mentoring on the internet. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 38(4), 162–169. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1920.2001.tb00498.x>
- Kram, K. E., & Isabella, L. A. (1985). MENTORING ALTERNATIVES: THE ROLE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT. *Academy of Management Journal*, 28(1), 110–132. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256064>

- Kunaka, C., & Moos, M. N. (2019). Evaluating mentoring outcomes from the perspective of entrepreneurs and small business owners. *The Southern African Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajesbm.v11i1.214>
- Kwong, C. C. Y., Thompson, P., Cheung, C. W. M., & Manzoor, H. (2012). The role of environment in fostering conducive entrepreneurial learning: Teaching the “art” of entrepreneurship in boot camps. *Journal of General Management*, 38(1), 45–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030630701203800103>
- Kyrgidou, L. P., & Petridou, E. (2013). Developing women entrepreneurs’ knowledge, skills and attitudes through e-mentoring support. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 20(3), 548–566. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-04-2013-0061>
- Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258792>
- McAllister, D. J. (1995). AFFECT- AND COGNITION-BASED TRUST AS FOUNDATIONS FOR INTERPERSONAL COOPERATION IN ORGANIZATIONS. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(1), 24–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256727>
- Moore, J. H., & Wang, Z. (2017). Mentoring Top Leadership Promotes Organizational Innovativeness through Psychological Safety and Is Moderated by Cognitive Adaptability. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00318>
- Mullen, C. A., & Klimaitis, C. C. (2021). Defining mentoring: A literature review of issues, types, and applications. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1483(1), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14176>

- Oosthuizen, N., & Perks, S. (2019). The Enabling Conditions Necessary for Effective Online Mentoring: A Proposed Model. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(6), Pages 600-612. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v9-i6/5975>
- Orser, B., Riding, A., & Stanley, J. (2012). Perceived career challenges and response strategies of women in the advanced technology sector. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 24(1–2), 73–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2012.637355>
- Perry, A., Rahim, E., & Davis, B. (2020). Startup Success Trends in Small Business Beyond Five-Years: A Qualitative Research Study. In I. R. Management Association (Ed.), *Start-Ups and SMEs* (pp. 1533–1546). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-1760-4.ch079>
- Peters, M. D. J., Marnie, C., Tricco, A. C., Pollock, D., Munn, Z., Alexander, L., McInerney, P., Godfrey, C. M., & Khalil, H. (2020). Updated methodological guidance for the conduct of scoping reviews. *JBIE Evidence Synthesis*, 18(10), 2119–2126. <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-20-00167>
- Peters, T. T., & Dew, T. R. (2010). *Virtual mentoring: A response to the challenge of change* (pp. 173–185). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-60520-861-6.ch010>
- Ragins, B. R. (1989). Barriers to Mentoring: The Female Manager's Dilemma. *Human Relations*, 42(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872678904200101>
- Ragins, B. R., & Scandura, T. A. (1997). The way we were: Gender and the termination of mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(6), 945–953. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.82.6.945>
- St-Jean, É. (2011). Mentor functions for novice entrepreneurs. *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 17(1), 65–84.

St-Jean, E. (2011). Mentor functions for novice entrepreneurs. *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 17, 65–84.

St-Jean, É. (2012). Mentoring as professional development for novice entrepreneurs: Maximizing the learning. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 16(3), 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2419.2012.00404.x>

St-Jean, É., & Tremblay, M. (2020). Mentoring for entrepreneurs: A boost or a crutch? Long-term effect of mentoring on self-efficacy. *International Small Business Journal*, 38(5), 424–448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242619901058>

Sullivan, R. (2000). Entrepreneurial learning and mentoring. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 6(3), 160–175. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13552550010346587>

Teubner, T., & Dann, D. (2018). How Platforms Build Trust. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3266472>

Walter, N., & Ortbach, K. (n.d.). *Trust Needs Touch: Understanding the Building of Trust through Social Presence*.

Josty, P. (2024, April 19). *Rethinking fear of failure*. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.

International Telecommunication Union. (2024). *Internet use continues to grow, but universality remains elusive, especially in low-income regions* (Facts and Figures 2024).

HTF Market Insights (2026) reports that the global online business mentorship market is expected to grow significantly.

R. Mayer, J. Davis and F. Schoorman, “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1995, pp. 709-734.

International Telecommunication Union. (2025). *ITU DataHub – ICT indicators database*. ITU.

World Bank. (2026). *SME Finance | World Bank Group*. World Bank. Retrieved March 17, 2026

Crotti, R. et al. (2025), “Data and methods for entrepreneurial ecosystem diagnostics”, *OECD SME and Entrepreneurship Papers*, No. 69, OECD Publishing, Paris,

Cook, S. (2024, March 11). *2024 mentoring impact report: 98% of Fortune 500 companies have mentoring*.

Lopata, A., Afia, B., & Gotian, R. (2024, December 17). *Why mentoring programs fail—and how to make them worthwhile*. Harvard Business Review.

Rarick, C.A., & Han, T. (2015). The Role of Culture in Shaping an Entrepreneurial Mindset. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 19, 119.

Scandura, T.A., & Mezas, J.M. (2010). Assessing the State of Cross Cultural Mentoring Research.

Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. (2026). *GEM 2025/2026 global report: From uncertainty to opportunity*.

Appendix

Appendix A- Summary of Articles Included in the Scoping Review

Number	Authors and Year	Study Context	Methodology	Key Focus	Key Findings		Mentoring Type
1	St-Jean (2012)	Entrepreneurial Mentoring	Quantitative	Trust & similarity	Perceived similarity strongly influences trust and mentoring outcomes		Traditional
2	Evans (2018)	Virtual mentoring	Qualitative	Trust Development	Trust develops in layers (organization, similarity, behavior, structure)		Digital
3	Leck & Wood (2013)	E-mentoring	Conceptual	Online Trust	Communication and perceived similarity affect relationship quality		Digital
4	Ensher et al. (2003)	E-mentoring	Empirical	CMC	Communication and perceived		Digital

					similarity affect relationship quality	
5	Knouse (2001)	E-mentoring	Conceptual	Digital Interaction	Lack of non-verbal cues affects trust; anonymity may help openness	Digital
6	Lall et al. (2023)	Entrepreneurial Mentoring	Empirical	Platform Engagement	Structured interventions increase interaction and trust initiation	Digital
7	Bosma et al. (2012)	Entrepreneurship	Quantitative	Role Models	Similarity (gender, sector) influences mentoring effectiveness	Traditional
8	Heaton Shrestha et al. (2009)	Mentoring relationships	Qualitative	Mentor Behavior	Trust depends on empathy, honesty, and communication	Both
9	Mayer et al. (1995)	Organizational Trust	Conceptual	Trust Model	Trust based on ability, benevolence, integrity	-

10	McAllister (1995)	Trust	Quantitative	Trust types	Distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust	-
11	Dutton et al. (2021)	Relationships	Empirical	Self-disclosure	Self-disclosure strengthens relational closeness and trust	-
12	Jarvenpää & Leidner (1999)	Virtual team	Empirical	Online Trust	Social presence enhances trust in online environments	-
13	Walter et al. (2013)	Digital Interaction	Empirical	Social Presence	Social presence enhances trust in online environments	-
14	Kunaka & Moos (2019)	Entrepreneurial mentoring	Empirical	Outcomes	Mentoring improves business performance and skills	Both
15	St-Jean & Audet (2012)	Entrepreneurial Mentoring	Empirical	Mentoring support	Emotional and informational	Traditional

					support are key for entrepreneurs	
16	St-Jean & Tremblay (2020)	Mentoring	Empirical	Learning process	Trust enables openness and learning in mentoring	Both
17	Ozgen & Baron (2007)	Entrepreneurship	Empirical	Opportunity recognition	Mentors contribute to entrepreneurial decision-making	Traditional
18	Ragins (1997)	Diverse Mentoring	Conceptual	Diversity and Trust	Trust linked to respect, inclusion, and shared understanding	Both
19	Mullen & Klimaitis (2021)	Mentoring	Conceptual	Belonging and Trust	Trust linked to respect, inclusion, and shared understanding	Both