Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences
Department of Sociology and Political Science

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How communication practices have changed in Business-to-Business during COVID-19

A case study of Eltorque AS

Master's thesis in Media, Communication and Information Technology
Supervisor: Michael Grothe-Hammer
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Abstract

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has caused significant challenges to business-to-business (B2B) firms. This is particularly relevant for marketing and sales operations, enabling communication between agents, customers, and business partners. This paper examines how communication practices have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic in B2B settings. Therefore, the research question is: *How did B2B communication practices change during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what types of challenges do the new communication practices give?*

The study uses Eltorque AS as a case study, using in-depth interviewing with sales managers, which can help to answer the research question. Practice theory and social exchange theory (SET) is used to explore the research question. Eight sales managers were interviewed, which through transcription and coding, revealed two main categories. The categories announced several practices and strategic changes that might be beneficial for small-to-medium B2B. These two categories were practices that remain but are substantially changed, and new practice emerged.

I claim that some of the issues appearing in communication practice-based approaches and by applying social exchange theory, connected to investigations of communication and interaction in B2B settings, could better understand the dynamics of how communication has changed and how sales managers are communicating with customers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. SET concentrates on the relationship among exchange parties as to the governance mechanism of exchange. Therefore it is beneficial for explaining B2B relational exchange.

The findings in this study show that it is more challenging to create trust and analyse the interviewees' body language when having a virtual meeting. Nevertheless, virtual selling has become a large part of the sales managers everyday operations. It has shown to be both time- and cost-effective in gaining new customers, but the lack of interpersonal communication and interaction might harm the negotiation results. An interesting finding in this study is how the sales managers use their mobile phones to contact customers or business partners. The conclusions of this study might be helpful for other sales managers, which are struggling with communications in this crisis. It can also be beneficial for a future situation, such as a financial crisis.

Sammendrag

Den raske spredningen av COVID-19 har forårsaket betydelige utfordringer for business-to-business (B2B). Dette er spesielt relevant for markedsføring og salg, noe som muliggjør kommunikasjon mellom agenter. For å utforske forskningsspørsmålet har jeg brukt praksissteori og sosial utvekslingsteori (SET). Denne artikkelen undersøker hvordan kommunikasjonspraksiser har endret seg under COVID-19-pandemien i B2B. Forskningspørsmålet blir dermed: *Hvordan har B2B kommunikasjonspraksiser blitt endret under COVID-19 pandemien, og hvilke type utfordringer gir de nye kommunikasjonspraksisene?*

Studien bruker Eltorque AS som casestudie som ved hjelp av dybdeintervju med salgssjefer og salgspersoner, kan bidra til å svare på forskningsspørsmålet. Åtte salgssjefer og salgspersoner ble intervjuet, som gjennom transkripsjon og koding avdekket to hovedkategorier. Kategoriene avdekket flere fremgangsmåter og strategiske endringer som kan være gunstige for små og mellomstore B2B. Disse to kategoriene var praksiser som gjenstår, men som er vesentlig endret, og ny praksis som dukket opp.

Jeg hevder at noen av problemene som vises i kommunikasjonspraksisbaserte tilnærminger og ved å anvende sosial utvekslingsteori, knyttet til undersøkelser av kommunikasjon og interaksjon i B2B-innstillinger, kan være med på å bedre forstå dynamikken i hvordan salgsledere og salgspersoner kommuniserer med kunder gjennom COVID-19 pandemien. SET konsentrerer seg om forholdet mellom utvekslingspartnere for utveksling. Derfor er det gunstig å forklare B2B relasjonsutveksling.

Funnene i denne studien viser at det er mer utfordrende å skape tillit og analysere intervjuobjektenes kroppsspråk når man har et virtuelt møte. Likevel har virtuelle salg blitt en stor del av salgssjefens daglige drift. Det har vist seg å være både tids- og kostnadseffektivt for å skaffe nye kunder, men mangelen på mellommenneskelig kommunikasjon og samhandling kan skade forhandlingsresultatene. Et interessant funn i denne studien er hvordan salgssjefene bruker mobiltelefonene sine til å kontakte kunder eller forretningspartnere. Resultatene i denne studien kan være nyttige for andre salgssjefer og salgspersoner som sliter med kommunikasjon i denne krisen. Det kan også være gunstig for en fremtidig krise, for eksempel en finanskrise.

Preface

With this master thesis, I am entering my final chapter of academic education. The education has offered challenges and experiences which I will bring into the future. My two years at NTNU studying the program Media, Communication and Information Technology results in this master's thesis.

The starting point for this master's thesis was my interest in communication in organisations. When the opportunity to write my master's thesis in collaboration with Eltorque AS, I just had to do it. Communication with customers is an essential aspect of a business operation, and how COVID-19 affected this hooked my interest.

I want to thank Eltorque AS and the informants for making themselves available for this master's thesis. From NTNU, I would like to thank my supervisor Michael Grothe-Hammer. Finally, I would like to thank Heidi Amundsen and Jeanett Haugstulen Grinden for taking the time to read through my master's thesis.

Synne Ekren

Trondheim, June 2021

Table of content

List of figures

List of tables

List of Abbreviations (or Symbols)

ANT	Actor-network theory
B2B	Business-to-business
B2C	Business-to-consumer
COVID-19	Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)
NTNU	Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet
NSD	Norsk senter for forskningsdata
PCI	Problem-centred interview
PR	Public relations
RoI	Return of investment
SET	Social exchange theory

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had destructive effects for most business-to-business (B2B) companies worldwide. An essential aspect of a business's operation is the increase in sales. The year 2020 has shown a significant challenge in developing new communication strategies which enable selling (Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020, Hartmann and Lussier, 2020). How the sales managers are communicating with the customer is a crucial part of settling an agreement. From a B2B perspective, large-scale events such as fairs and conferences have been canceled. All cancellations of fairs and conferences make it challenging for human interaction, a crucial part of B2B marketing, and contracting with new buyers. The pandemic has forced sales managers to work from home, making it more challenging to meet new customers, enabling selling. Sales managers in the maritime industry are used to travel worldwide to gain new customers.

Using social exchange theory (SET) in explaining communication practices in B2B has shown to be a helpful paradigm. It has become a growing research interest among different researchers (Lambe et al., 2001, Chang et al., 2012, Yang et al., 2012, Cowan et al., 2015, Lussier and Hall, 2018, Woisetschläger et al., 2016, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). Implementing social exchange theory (SET) and practice theory in how sales managers communicate with customers might shed new light on the topic, which might be helpful for other small-to-medium-sized businesses.

1.1 The study topicality

The new everyday life has changed social practices, especially in the form of social distancing. Social distancing or physical distance is a type of non-medical control that aims to stop or slow the spread of infection (FHI, 2021). Due to restrictions globally and locally, the physical appearance disappeared, which led to dependence on online rather than physical communication. The COVID-19 pandemic is believed to have more damaging economic consequences than the global financial crisis in 2008 (Ratten, 2020). Besides the adverse effects, the crisis enables more accessible communication due to geographical reasons.

How will the post-pandemic future be? We are experiencing home office, less travelling, and more pressure on digitalisation. The pandemic might reshape our world, potentially forever. Because of these enormous changes, it puts pressure on international businesses where travelling is a big part of gaining new customers. This has forced a new overlook for businesses in order to survive in the current market environment. This study investigates how communications practices have changed in sales and marketing during the pandemic. To examine the research question, I use SET and practice theory which several other researchers have used in examining business relations and communication (Lambe et al., 2001, Chang et al., 2012, Yang et al., 2012, Cowan et al., 2015, Lussier and Hall, 2018, Woisetschläger et al., 2016, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020).

1.2 Research question

This study aims to discuss the implications for B2B produced of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question for this study is:

How did B2B communication practices change during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what types of challenges do the new communication practices give?

The following chapters will further discuss the role of human agents internal and external to the firm in dealing with this situation. The thesis uses the company Eltorque AS as a case study when examining how communication practices have changed during the COVID-19 crisis. When discussing this, the study explore the research question with a practical lens (practice theory) and social exchange theory (SET), which provides a more comprehensive understanding than economic theory. This is particularly important when examining human practices and emotions throughout the stages of a crisis, as stated by Mora Cortez and Johnston (2020). The findings in this study might be helpful for other business and organisations, which is experiencing the changes in communication practices as challenging for maintaining daily operations and sales. Therefore, at the end of the conclusion, I will highlight some key findings that might benefit other small-to-medium-sized businesses.

1.3 Eltorque AS

Eltorque AS is an international business with offices worldwide, including China, Netherlands, Turkey, and Singapore, to mention some. The business develops, manufactures, and markets electric actuators and control systems for the international shipbuilding and onshore industries. Their headquarter is located in Trondheim, Norway, and they have been operating since the start in 1996. Today, they have a firm footing in the maritime industry, with more than 105.000 Eltorque AS actuators installed onboard over 1000 vessels. An essential part of Eltorque AS operations is travelling worldwide to different conferences, exhibitions, and fairs to meet customers physically. The restrictions with COVID-19 make it harder to maintain these daily operations for the sales managers, and gaining new customers is more challenging, as stated by the sales managers in the interviews. These challenges are seen by several B2B around the world. By investigating a business like Eltorque AS, I could provide helpful findings for other B2B or researchers looking into this issue.

The collaboration with Eltorque AS has challenged eight sales managers to answers questions about their communications practices with customers and how they gain new customers throughout this crisis. Everyone who has participated in this research has done this voluntarily and has signed a consent form. I am employed by the company being investigated, which will be discussed further in the methodology section. I have not been paid by Eltorque AS when conducting this examination.

1.4 Structure of the study

The study contains five parts: a literary review in the beginning, theory and previous research, methodology, analysis and discussion, and conclusion. Firstly, the literature review explains the relevance of PR, communication, and social media in B2B. Secondly, the theory is explained and conducted. Thirdly, the study's methodology will be explained and discussed. Then comes the discussion and analysis of the findings from the interviews with the informants. Finally, the conclusion rounds off the research. Here the thesis's strengths and weaknesses will be discussed, and a suggestion for further research will be explained.

2 B2B communication practices

In order to gain a complete understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects communication in B2B, it is desirable to implement some literature in PR and communication. By doing this, one can see how communication has been before the COVID-19 crisis, compared to how it is during the pandemic. Firstly, I will explain why this is relevant to the thesis; then, I will describe PR and marketing communication in B2B. Finally, I will look at B2B relational exchange.

Research on B2B practices is increasing. It has evolved toward a key concept in management research, including B2B marketing and purchasing studies. In addition, Pedersen et al. (2020) claim that research on communication practice to B2B might be beneficial in creating an understanding of the interaction between managers and consumers or business partners. The practice viewpoint is located in the communicative part of the interaction. This implies reading the message sent and how it is being sent. Finally, Pedersen et al. (2020) suggest increased future research on what B2B sales, marketers, and purchasers do when they engage with customers and suppliers.

B2B is businesses that sell their products to other businesses (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). B2B distinguishes from B2C (business-to-consumer) because of the nature and complexity of industrial products and services, significantly fewer customers, nature and diversity and industrial demand, closer and longer-lasting supplier-customer-relationships and larger volumes per customer. Therefore, branding is essential to B2B as to B2C (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). Because communication is a part of branding, it is crucial to investigate what this means for B2B to answer the research question fully.

2.1 PR and market communication in B2B

An organisation depends on several stakeholders, groups, or individuals who rely on the organisation to meet its own goals (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). This includes clients, the local community, politicians, employees, suppliers, and so on. It is important for building a reputation. Because of this, there is a probability that literature on this might help answer the research question. It will be interesting to look at how Eltorque AS uses PR and marketing communication as a tool for communicating with customers. Communication and long-lasting relationship are closely related to each other. According to Flynn (2006), relationships are the result of communication.

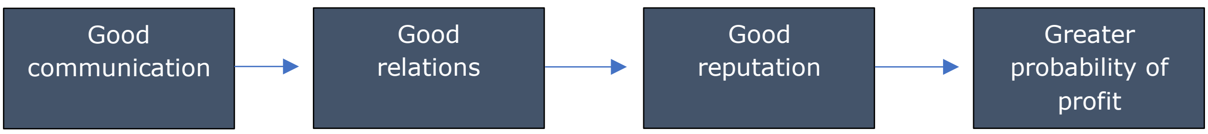

Figure 1: The tie between communication, relationships, reputation and visibility (Flynn, 2006).

As described by Brønn and Arnulf (2019), reputation is the most important intangible asset an organisation has, giving it a competitive edge. These properties are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and cannot be replaced (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). Communication consists of several things in an organisational context, including business communication, PR (public relations), market communication, business communication, and organisational communication (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019).

Marketing is the organisational function that handles sales and distribution. Marketing communication is about multiple activities that support sales, usually communication aimed toward customers (B2B or B2C). Examples of this can be advertisements, sponsorship, packaging or personal sales. PR means public relations and has several organisational stakeholders in focus, such as investors, local communities, legislators, employees, to mention some. PR is external and internal, while market communication is mainly externally directed.

Marketing PR includes tactics that are specifically designed to support sales activities. The goal of marketing communication and PR is the same, and it is about informing, changing, or reinforcing a behaviour or changing or reinforcing attitudes. The marketing department and marketing communication raise awareness about products and ultimately influence attitudes that result in sales. Although marketing communication and PR are differentiated according to their goals, target groups, and channels used, they must work together to succeed (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019).

Communication is interconnected, and it is, therefore, important to coordinate. Formal or informal, internal or external, it is a significant challenge for an organisation (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). Who is talking to whom, through what channels, and with what message? It is essential to clarify who has what responsibility so that the dangers of fragmented communication are reduced. According to Brønn and Arnulf (2019), you should ask several important questions. These could be who is responsible, what place is this responsibility gathered, the company's overall message, the content of each communication plan, to name a few. Finally, what function is responsible for how people communicate, i.e., to ensure that leaders, in particular, are effective communicators? Brønn and Arnulf (2019) also believes that common sense dictates that organisations should overview who says what to whom.

Hartman and Lenk (2001) claim that organisations with effective strategic communication can gain a competitive advantage due to their intangible value. Several companies use this by proactively integrating communication with strategic planning that recognises the cause and effect relationship between communication and its success (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). However, leaders tend to look at communication as a means to an end, such as cost-benefit analysis (Smeltzer et al., 1986). Walker (2014) states that such an approach is typical of organisations that recognise the benefit of marketing and PR but forget the value and power of the employees' and managers' communication skills. Both employees and managers must communicate well, both verbally and written, to achieve success (Walker, 2014).

2.2 B2B relational exchange

B2B relations exchange has been a central research drive (Lambe et al., 2001, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). In relational exchange, the governance mechanism is a critical point and is a determinant of how the relationship will succeed (Lambe et al., 2001). Relationships in B2B needs a governance mechanism built on a foundation of commitment, trust, and exchange norm, which supply mechanics such as agreements. Previous research has tried to explain the development of a relationship between exchange partners, facilitating relational exchange (Lambe et al., 2001).

Relationships between buyers and sellers have existed since humans began trading goods and services. These relationships developed in a natural way over time as buyers and sellers developed trust and friendships supported by quality products and services. Today these relationships have become strategic and the process of relationship development is accelerated as firms strive to create relationships to achieve their goals (Wilson, 1995, p.336)

Lambe et al. (2001) claims that B2B relational exchange is motivated by the mutual recognition of the individuals that engage in the exchange. Variables that are seen as essential to keep in mind when an exchange occurs are trust and commitment. Researchers have identified the variables as being critical factors of relational exchange (Wilson, 1995). These variables are essential for how the sales managers communicate with the customers and other business partners.

2.3 Digital transformation

Communication has changed from an obligation a few had from time to time to become a fundamental organisational life feature. Effective communication is not just something that happens but has grown into a field of different professions (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). More and faster communication methods have emerged in recent years, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, to mention some. These channels are often used to communicate effectively to the target group. On the other hand, effective communication is about knowing who to reach, getting their attention, creating the right kind of mutual exchange, and achieving the wanting consequences without misunderstandings, conflicts, or honest mistakes (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019).

Social communication and social behaviour have been changed because of the Internet. This has led to the development of new communication platforms and channels (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Moreover, digital transformation applies to the globally accelerated process of technical adaption by companies and communities due to digitalisation (Sivarajah et al., 2020). Research from Dwivedi et al. (2021) shows that companies' use of social media positively affects sustainability. Pandey et al. (2020) have researched digital marketing in organisations. Digital marketing gives definite targeting of prospective customers. The findings of Pandey et al. (2020) declares that organisations could archive greater sales productivity through digital marketing by building the buyer-seller relationship, higher RoI and branding. I should also mention that academic research in B2B digital marketing is still in its early state. When the outbreak and rapid spread of COVID-19 happened, it had an immediate and severe impact on B2B sales forces. Challenges such as remote working, cancellations and postponing actual events and meetings, and travel restrictions put pressure on the sales departments (Hartmann and Lussier, 2020).

Social technology is primarily about people. Brønn and Arnulf (2019) state that no technology will ever replace the face-to-face communication that captures facial expressions, body language, codes, and physical meetings between people. A replacement is not necessarily an objective with these technologies but more to simplify work and become known in new ways (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). How will the COVID-19 pandemic affect B2B in their sales and marketing functions? Cortez and Johnston (2020) offer new actionable knowledge in handling the current COVID-19 crisis. The findings from their research can be divided into four areas: digital transformation, decision-making processes, leadership and emotions, and stress. Digital transformation is about *embracing agile principles and proactive strategic flexibility, decentralising power,* *embracing proactive strategic flexibility, protecting long-term strategic goals, and reinforcing relationship orientation (*Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020)*.* There is a lack of research on how communication practices have changed in B2B due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings in this study might be helpful for further research or to help salespeople or sales managers to manage their job. It also illuminates the challenges the sales managers face in meeting the new practice that has emerged due to the pandemic.

3 Previous research and theory

3.1 Practice theory

There has been a growing interest in adopting practice theory in studies such as consumption, institutions, innovation, strategy, marketing, to mention some (Nicolini, 2012). Practice theory offers a structure to analyse all actors' deeds and words, including recipients, providers, and other participants. The practice perspective highlights both the social nature of practices and the individual, emphasising the economic agents' micro-level practices. The theories of practices and social practices build on sociological literature (Nicolini, 2012). Daily experiences, social boundaries, power relations, and constraints are understood as effects of the structures and relations among practices.

3.1.1 Definition of practice

I can review the origins of practice-based approaches in diverse ways, and the concept itself has a different accent for different researchers. I want to summarise based on various researchers who have identified three central traditions (Nicolini, 2012, Reckwitz, 2002). Firstly, the Marxist tradition eschews focusing primarily on cognitive aspects and creating knowledge an assertive entity. Hence, knowing is said to doing. The second tradition is phenomenology. Phenomenology refers to symbolic interactionists, which attaches a tremendous interactional and social dimension. Every variety of knowledge serves and typifies work and can be entered only through interaction. The third tradition is described by Garfinkel, Giddens, and Bourdieu (Schatzki, 2002). Bourdieu's habitus reflects the question of how human activity is regulated. On the other hand, Giddens places practices among actors and social structures and recommends that individuals play a fundamental function in reproducing structures and action outcomes because they appropriate and interpret structures according to their agendas (Håkansson, 1982). Nicolini et al. (2003, p.7) define practices «...as what persons say, imagine, conceive, and produce, and think while attempting to carry out these activities». Schatzki (2012, p.2) defines the practice as «...an open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings». He refers to social reality to be interpreted as a bundle of materials and practice arrangements. Reckwitz (2002), on the other hand, differentiating between *Praxis* and *Praktik*.

> *Practice(Praxis) in the singular represents merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to 'theory' and mere thinking). 'Practices' in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A 'practice' (Praktik) is a routinised type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice … necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements (2002, p. 249–250).*

We want to understand some phenomenon as it happens in practice. Reckwitz (2002) argues that individuals are carriers or hosts of practices. What this indicates, meaning, purpose, understanding, and know-how are not personal qualities. They are, as Reckwitz (2002, p.250) describes, «...elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individuals participate».

3.1.2 Practices contribute social phenomena

Practices are common phenomena, and they deliver participants who co-exist and come together within particular plans and limits of clarity. Practices are also primarily responsible for establishing social orders, the organisation of artifacts, organisms, characters, and everything in which we conduct our lives (Nicolini, 2012). Shatzki (2002) argues that humans co-exist, and their actions are organised through three central social mechanisms. Chains of actions that refer to one action serve the other. Commonalities in and orchestration of the ends, projects, and emotions indicate that personages react commonly to the same thing without agreeing. Prefiguration actions refer to discovering how everyday things are directed in terms of limitations and opportunities. Conferences, fairs, and offices result from the coming together of practices and material arrangement. Because our lives are largely conducted by sites such as mentioned above, we can state that practice and systems build up the site of human co-existence (Nicolini, 2012). «Human lives hang together through a mesh of interlocked practices and orders, as a constitutive part of which this hanging together occurs» (Schatzki, 2002, p.70). Nicolini (2012) argues that social orders are at the same time also the site of practices because human practices are carried out amid. If there is a need to create a sense of social order, such as organisation or society, the point to start is the continuing practices and the tangible arrangements that compose them.

There are various practice-based theories, cultural and aesthetic, activity theory, situated learning theory, and actor-network theory (ANT), to mention some. Some qualities are familiar to those studies; all of them take a process-oriented stance from *a sociology of nouns* to *sociology of verbs*. Research that focuses on practices reviews how practices are social accomplishments and highlights that practices are culturally, socially, and historically settled. Practice-based studies highlight the value of concepts like tensions, inconsistencies, incoherencies, and paradoxes. Related to this, research from 2009 shows that salespeople are market shapers who:

> *... develop and act on and within a complex pattern of relationships with other companies as well as with their colleagues in their own organisation, making exchanges and forming identities within and across these companies as well as within and across markets (Geiger and Finch, 2009, p.616).*

3.1.3 Summary

Using practice theory on B2B might help understand and examine salespeople's interaction and communication with customers. Practice theory is what a person says, imagines, conceives, produces, and thinks while conveying these activities. What this implies is daily experiences, social boundaries, power relations, and constraints. These are understood as effects of the structures and relations among practices. Collaboration is a fundamental part of social practice because of the emerging «practice turn» in marketing, organisations, and strategy. Thereby, collaboration is a vital part of business operations. This thesis aims for definite descriptions and revealing social practice and wants to understand some phenomenon as it happens in practice. Implementing practice theory and SET in the research of sales manager's communication with customers could enlighten specific strategic changes that can be beneficial for small-to-medium sized businesses.

3.2 Social exchange theory

Homans (1958) and Blau (1964) refer to social exchange theory as something based on psychology, which attempts to link behavior to reward and punishments social exchange enables partners to get to know each other better and understand each other's objectives, assisting problem-solving behavior. Standards of exchange influence communication between associates supported by getting and taking relational benefits and are seen as the crucial SET point. The sales managers and buyers need to create mechanisms that facilitate exchanging information and establishing a personal relationship. Social exchange theory (SET) has shown to be a useful paradigm in explaining socially appropriate behavior in many disciplines, including B2B relationships and marketing. When entertaining activities occur between the customer and the sales manager, SET is therefore particularly relevant to the selling environment in which customer entertainment is a standard. Blau (1964) and Homans (1958) explain that the core idea of SET is that exchange creates economic and social outcomes for the partners that can be either favorable or unfavorable. SET has been applied to understand interaction and discussion in small businesses (Liu et al., 2020). A lot of other researchers have also investigated SET in the fields of marketing and B2B (Chang et al., 2012, Cowan et al., 2015, Lussier and Hall, 2018, Woisetschläger et al., 2016, Yang et al., 2012).

3.2.1 Economic and social exchange

SET refers to «the interpersonal relationship which exists between members of the buying and selling centers» (Metcalf et al., 1992, p.29). The exchange outcomes are critical for a broad understanding of SET. We distinguish between economic and social rewards. Economic rewards such as money are relevant, but social rewards are at least as significant. Social rewards can be partners sharing ideals or emotional satisfaction (Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). SET postulates that exchange interactions between individuals involve economic and social outcomes (Lambe et al., 2001). Granovetter (1985) holds that economic relations are usually covered with social content that offers expectations of abstention of expediency and trust and so degrades transaction cost. Social bonds can extinguish effective financial communication if the social viewpoints of exchange exceed the economic purposes. The sensation of necessity to reciprocate and friendship may generate an unproductive allocation of means to weaker business allies (Uzzi, 1997). In step with SET, allies can modify their behavior and actions to boost economic incentives and relational interests. Exchanges don't seem to be restricted to tangible assets and intangible value (Blau, 1964).

Blau (1964) distinguished between social and economic relationships and social exchange relationships. Social and economic relationships can translate into business relationships. Social exchange relationships are long-term and are more open to ended and associated with stronger interpersonal attachment, while monetary exchange relationships are short-term and involve weaker interpersonal attachments.

> *Compared with those in economic exchange relationships, individuals engaged in quality social exchanges demand less immediate payback and are more generous (Mitchell et al., 2012a, p.101).*

People that generate beneficial and mutual exchanges over a period usually go from economic exchange to social exchange, as exchangeable, general patterns cause loyalty, trust, and commitment (Mitchell et al., 2012b). Different researchers have reviewed how business relationship profiles and propose different things (Bishop and Scott, 2000, Organ, 1990, Porter et al., 1974). Operators could exchange through work performance and engage in advantageous actions exceeding their regular job functions once they formed social exchange relationships (Masterson et al., 2000, Settoon et al., 1996, Sluss et al., 2008).

There are three circumstances that SET relies on. The actors are passionate about each other for treasured resources. Secondly, actors perform in ways to extend positively appreciated resources and reduce negatively appreciated resources. Finally, actors engage in recurring exchanges with particular companions over a period (Mitchell et al., 2012a). When the exchange is happening, the participants are driven to maximise private earnings at the tiniest price. Consequently, they create specific estimates concerning which objects are received and which are provided. Gergen explains the exchange reasoning:

> *To say that people behave in such a way as to archive maximum rewards at a minimum cost indeed has the ring of universal truth about it... People are bent on achieving what to them is valuable and desirable (Gergen et al., 1980, p.266).*

Traditionally, the view of social exchange is embedded in economic rationality and considers resources that are exchanging as objects to maximise self-interest. On the other side, Homans (1958) explains that economic calculations of exchange can explain social behaviour. Thibault and Kelly (1959) asserted that social exchange relations are based on interdependent interactions.

3.2.2 Negotiated versus reciprocal relations

Negotiated and reciprocal relations are the two sets of exchange relationships, according to Blau (1964). Negotiated exchange connections are supported by binding treaties and haggled. Both parties have to accept a mutual trade and discrete. In distinction, reciprocal exchanges are non-negotiated and are joined voluntarily without distinct detailed arrangements in terms of what's traded or the circumstances by which the companies should negotiate the settlement (Mitchell et al., 2012a). This sort of attachment favors the resulting of a successful set of interactions among two parties. The study reveals that reciprocal exchanges offer lower vigor bias levels and use affective commitment between the companies involved, more powerful understandings of fairness, and more vital engendered trust. The investigations expose that reciprocal exchanges suggest compliance to another for later commitments, like trust (Molm et al., 2000, Molm et al., 2003).

On the opposite hand, mediated exchanges highlight pledges - or expectations of grounds supported established agreements. Accordingly, an estimation of risk is not sensible. Blau's theory, hence, insinuates propitious negotiated exchanges may grow into reciprocal exchanges if associates display trustworthiness (Lawler et al., 1995). Lawler and Yoon (1995) gave more solid attention to the exchange method and claimed that arranged agreements supported integrated cooperativeness could develop affective involvement between the parties included. Their study noticed that successful and reciprocated exchanges had a positive effect after a range of negotiated agreements. This effect had intensified relational attachment between the parties, which grew trusting and committed relationships (Lawler and Yoon, 1993). Two components are indispensable for negotiated exchanges to emerge into reciprocal relations; individuals must be mutually liable for the task's outcomes. Individuals need to share a way of liability for the outcomes of the exchange agreements. This implies that negotiated exchanges modify when each party's consequences rely upon the opposite outcomes via cooperation and gratefulness for the exchange's consequences. The study highlights the greatness of the evaluations executed within businesses that unfold collaboration and trust (Mitchell et al., 2012a).

3.2.3 Interpersonal and inter-organisational interaction

Interpersonal and social interactions between boundary spanners have a vital role in how inter-organisational businesses grow (Pulles and Hartman, 2017). Relational exchanges are crucial to building inter-organisational bonds linking buyers and service providers due to the shortage of product/brand awareness (Bolton et al., 2003, Claycomb and Martin, 2001, Sheth, 1996). In step with SET, selves are debated to enroll into new relationships and keep old ones supported by the expectations and understandings that these relationships are rewarding (Blau, 1964, Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). How the connection will form depends on whereby the fundamental interactions will occur. This is often an important part of the meeting. When the exchange occurs, the partners appraise both the economic and social consequences of their transactions and match them to their expectations. They'll also weigh them to their value provider by different potential partners (Pulles and Hartman, 2017). Creating joint trust is necessary when striving to cut back risk perception, facilitate problem-solving, and overcome communication barriers (Ford, 1980, Håkansson, 1982, Hallen et al., 1991, Metcalf et al., 1992).

3.2.4 Likeability, trust, and reciprocity

Studies have shown that interpersonal interaction between boundary-spanning individuals has a fundamental role in how inter-organisational interaction develops (Pulles and Hartman, 2017). How partners perceive each other in the interactions has been argued to be a great predictor for both performance benefits (McCarter and Northcraft, 2007). Characters can suspect personal liking to possess a vital influence on how individuals communicate with one another. In business relationships, likeability is commonly cultivated as an important factor. However, interpersonal interaction is commonly ignored in business relationships because they are inclined to be imagined on an organisation-to-organisation level (Ellegaard, 2012, Mandják et al., 2016).

A study from Pulles and Hartman (2017) reveals that likeability significantly influences a business partner's willingness to engage in collaboration. Attractiveness, power, satisfaction, and trust are often mentioned as concepts that play a crucial role in how organisations interact (Cox, 2001, Pulles et al., 2016). Likeability forms positive expectations of future interactions. It further incentivise the partner to cooperate in closer collaboration. However, interpersonal interaction is often neglected in business relationships because they tend to be conceptualised on an organisation-to-organisation level (Pulles and Hartman, 2017).

Economic exchanges are rooted in social systems, as mentioned earlier (Granovetter, 1985). This involves social ties and the way they'll influence economic consequences both negatively and positively. Using the term ties implies a connection between social nodes to develop, control, and transfer resources for mutual benefits. When exchanges are happening, it is through social ties that interdependence and reciprocity are cultivated. Because negotiation is happening when representatives from separate organisations solicit agreement on delivery and pricing, it enhances our perception of inter-organisational relationships (Bendoly et al., 2006).

Interpersonal relationships represent an important function in how inter-organisational relationships occur (Hohenschwert and Geiger, 2015). Many alliance breaks when little awareness is given to cultivating personal relationships linking boundary spanners that form and transform the evolving partnership (Hutt et al., 2000). Hutt et.al (2000); discusses how interpersonal ties unites managers in partnering organisations. Boundary-spanning activities at multiple managerial levels will therefore help the relationship develop. Switching intentions can also be affected by interpersonal factors. The switching plans are often reduced when a partner makes a considerable advance in developing interpersonal relationships (Pulles and Hartman, 2017). This is often also noticed within the advertising industry. One of the greatest reasons clients change agencies is that the personnel turnover (Haytko, 2004). Granovetter (1985) contends that economic connections usually are covered with social content that leads to expectations of abstention of exploitation and trust. These expectations will diminish the transaction price and, at the same time, social ties stifle productive economic interaction if the social looks of exchange exceed the economic purposes. As I reviewed earlier, the emotions of commitment to reciprocate may generate an ineffective allocation of sources to weaker business allies (Uzzi, 1997). Similarly, social exchange theory indicates that exchanges don't seem to be restrained to tangible goods and join intangible value (Blau, 1964). Accordingly, business partners modify their actions towards one another not simply upon economic preferences but also on relational benefits. Thus, boundary spanners' interpersonal and social interactions hold a vital function in how inter-organisational interactions emerge (Pulles and Hartman, 2017).

On the other hand, the interaction between boundary spanners is especially relevant in a meeting. A partner's benefits from the engagement are as important as the exchange conditions negotiated (Herbst et al., 2011). The boundary spanners involved in these negotiations have a vital role because they need to negotiate a good deal for their organisations. Because negotiation is deep-rooted in interpersonal interaction, personal attributes can therefore have a powerful influence on the negotiation results (Maddux et al., 2008). Physical appearance and gender are shown to influence proposals and requests (Solnick and Schweitzer, 1999). We should also examine the importance of likeability because likable people are generally more appealing to be nearby (Pulles and Hartman, 2017). Likeability points to an oneself that we may see because of the extent to which this character is acknowledged as polite, pleasant to be around, nice, and polite (Doney and Cannon, 1997, Ellegaard, 2012, Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005). In a buyer-supplier interaction, the concept of likeability can be argued as a person's confidence in predicting their partner's future behavior (Doney and Cannon, 1997).

In psychology studies, the connections among persuasiveness and likeability are noticed as people commonly trust persons they like (Chaiken and Eagly, 1983). Pulles and Hartman (2017) discuss in their study that likeability is a vital factor that positively affects expectations of future interactions and is hence worth examining when analysing business interaction. Researches, such as Tellefsen and Thomas (2005), and Urda and Loch (2013), explain that likeability is firmly associated with personal engagement and also the notion of social transactions. For building a relationship with a new customer, likeability is an important factor. This opens for managerial operations. Practice on individual skills such as likeability might establish effectiveness in producing organisation-level relational capabilities (Pulles and Hartman, 2017).

A fundamental exchange rule in SET is reciprocity. What lies in this is about someone exchanging a resource with another someone. This usually occurs in close relationships when one party provides more resources than the other, and therefore an unevenness arises. Consequently, this produces guilt or distress that partners often try to balance. In a B2B setting, this can be seen as forming an egocentric bias in that they expect more from the salespeople they patronise regularly. «Reciprocal relationships entail interdependence» (Garner, 2017, p.423). Sales managers who maintain a relationship exchange can thus have a competitive advantage.

3.2.5 Summary

As we have seen, SET is a valuable paradigm in explaining socially appropriate behavior in B2B relationships. The strategies used in SET to form a long-term relationship can be transferred to business relations. Sales managers need to create mechanisms that facilitate exchanging information and establishing a personal relationship (Pulles and Hartman, 2017). In steps of generating trust, likeability, and reciprocity, the interaction is essential to examine (Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005, Urda and Loch, 2013). If sales managers use these strategies, it could positively benefit the businesses. Interpersonal interaction is a crucial part of SET, enabling partners in a B2B to get more in-depth about soliciting agreement on delivery and pricing, to mention an example. Negotiation is deep-rooted in interpersonal interaction (Maddux et al., 2008). Personal attributes can therefore have a powerful influence on the negotiation result (Ford, 1980, Håkansson, 1982, Hallen et al., 1991, Metcalf et al., 1992). Interpersonal interaction has been ignored in business relationships because they are inclined to be imagined on an organisation-to-organisation level, not B2B. Based on research linking SET to B2B, I will try to investigate how the sales managers possibly use this when interacting with clients and customers.

4 Methodology

By interviewing sales managers working directly with customers to Eltoruqe AS, I will use the statements to answer the research question in this master thesis. Eltorque AS is used as a case study in the thesis. If the goal is to research some people's attitudes, opinions, or experiences on a particular topic, an interview is a good fit (Johannessen et al., 2010). By conducting interviews, valuable means of understanding how the interviewee experiences and reflects on a topic will appear. When using a semi-structured interview, the interviewees have the opportunity to go in-depth on the subject and thus get into aspects that the interviewer did not think out in advance (Tjora, 2018). The semi-structured interview became a natural choice, considering the qualitative research emphasizes understanding and insight more than explanation and overview. Attitudes are necessary for answering the problem in this master thesis, and a semi-structured interview will enlighten this.

4.1 Case-study

In this thesis, a case study has been used to answer the research question. Case studies are used in many situations, contributing to our knowledge of the individual, organisational, group, political, social, and related phenomena (Yin, 2017). Because this study investigates a social phenomenon, it is desirable to use a case study. The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2017). The events examined in this study are communication practices between businesses and customers and how these have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strength of a case study is the ability to deal with a whole variety of evidence, such as in-depth interviews (Yin, 2017).

As mentioned in the introduction, the case that is being investigated is the company Eltorque AS. Eight informants have been interviewed, and they were chosen because they have some form of communication with customers. I chose the case with Eltorque AS because I wanted to write about communication practices in a business and because it was available. Since I already work in Eltorque AS, it was evident that the choice fell on this. The study focuses on B2B communication. Therefore, the study takes a closer look at a company and uses a case study as a method. Choosing a case based on convenience is not necessarily optimal for the greatest possible general visibility (Tjora, 2018). This will be further explained and discussed in *4.8 Quality of the study.*

4.2 Problem-centered interview

The concept of a Problem-centered interview (PCI) borrows mainly from the theory-generating procedure of grounded theory (Glaser & Struss, 1998). Data can only be confirmed and handled through steps determined ex-ante in the operationalisation. To examine the research question, PCI is used in interviewing situation. Using a short questionnaire, I will collect data on social characteristics, such as age, position, and work experience. The procedure must ensure that the interviewer's view of the problem does not only overlap the respondents. Through data gathering and evaluation, insight is achieved (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). Socially relevant problems are a fundamental principle of PCI, which is being investigated in this thesis. By using PCI, I will portray the organisations of perception and knowledge processes. The goal is to develop a communications situation focused on the individual respondent, depending on the respondent's reflection and eloquence. If the interviewer making the communication process focused reasonably and acceptably on the reconstruction of the action and orientations, you would get the interviewee to respond as described above (Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

The respondent's ability to remember and motivate self-reflection depends on the interviewer and respondent's trust relationship. It is essential to know that the interview may be less solemn because I know those I interview. I work at Eltorque AS myself, and I thus have a relation to those who are interviewed. It is, therefore, important that I adhere to the communication strategies mentioned. When several people speak about the same topic, this may lead to alternative aspects and different perspectives, corrections of earlier statements, and redundancies and contradictions. Redundancies may contain new formulations that facilitate interpretation, contradiction, express individual ambivalence, and indecision. Repeated questioning can clarify the result of a misunderstanding on the interviewer's part or lack of memory to the interviewees. When conducting the interviews, some of the informants used different concepts to explain how face-to-face communication had changed. I, therefore, rapidly asked follow-up questions, so I understood what they meant by the term they used. This applies in particular to the informants from countries other than Norway. Different cultures may have other ways to communicate, and use the term differently, which I also tried to clarify during the interview. To not make the respondent feel forced to give isolated answers to isolated questions, story-telling might work as a reflection method because it cuts down the artificialness of a study situation (Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

4.3 Communication strategies during the interview

It is vital to establish contact whit the interviewees (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). When using communication strategies, your goal is to generate storytelling. Ad-hoc questions and general explorations might get the interviewee to enter into a dialogue. Some methods develop understanding, such as confrontation, problems directed forward experience, and specific investigations with references to previous answers. During the interview with the informants, I tried to use storytelling to make them remember a specific episode with a customer. This can make it easier for the informant to explain what practices they use when communicating with customers. As Witzel and Reiter (2012) stated, the respondents are considered experts on their orientation and actions. During the interview, I tried to make the informants feel confident and the liberty to correct their statements if they felt the need.

During the interview, I broadly formulated the questions to function like an empty page structured and filled out by the interviewee in his or her own words. The general exploration serves to disclose the subject's view of the problem successively. To get more details from the respondents, I asked questions that allowed the story's thread to be further spun and detailed. Simultaneously, I repeatedly asked questions to sort of «luring» out concrete examples of experiences or episodes that stimulate the respondent's memory, lacking or unclear terms, or clarifies abstractions.

4.4 Selection and data collection

The people who were preferred to be interviewed were those who have direct communication with customers. This can be anything from old to new customers, as long as they have some communication. Since Eltorque AS is a small company, the number of respondents will thereby only be a few. The unit consists of people who primarily live in

Norway, but three respondents live in China, Singapore, and the USA. All respondents have had their rights reviewed during the interview, and all have signed consent to participate. The respondents may withdraw from the study at any time. In consultation with NSD, all personal information is taken care of to ensure the respondents' privacy. I started the process by talking to the business manager to get the relevant sales managers' contact information. After getting this, I asked the sales managers if they were willing to participate in the study, which they were enthusiastic about doing. The informants were asked which day suited them best, and a day was then chosen for the interview. Some of the interviews were done physically, as this was attainable and permissible, while others were conducted digitally because the informants live in other parts of Norway and the world. All of the interviews were conducted during February 2021. The table below provides an overview of the interviewees taking part in this study.

Table 1: Overview of informants

Sales manager	***Experience***	***Worked at Eltorque AS***
1	25 yrs.	10 yrs.
2	9 yrs.	3 months
3	6 yrs.	3 yrs.
4	6 yrs.	6 yrs.
5	15 yrs.	7 yrs.
6	14 yrs.	1 yrs.
7	24 yrs.	11 yrs.
8	1 yrs.	1 yrs.

4.5 Instruments and anonymisation

If a topic includes sensitive or personal aspects of life, anonymisation is preferred (Tjora, 2017). The folder and documents have been encrypted to ensure that others do not have access to these documents. What this means is that you would not be able to open the folder without the code. Encryption is a mathematical method that ensures confidentiality for the information cannot be read by unauthorised persons (Datatilsynet, 2017). The only person that has access to the folder is me. The document will use access restrictions; these are blocks or restrict access to the data material for unauthorised persons. These measures will ensure that information about the informants does not go astray.

The information that emerges in the interview situation will be processed in the best possible way to safeguard personal information. I useed an audio recorder owned by the institution responsible for the processing. Besides, the transcription will take place on hardware belonging to the company, Eltorque AS. Those who have access to this information are me.

The respondents have only been asked for their first name and not their last name. The first names have been obtained to find the respondent if the person wishes to withdraw. In the master thesis, the respondents are referred to as sales managers one, two, and three. Gender will be included if it is stated or if it is relevant to the topic that is being discussed. In cases like this study, where the researcher focuses on a small business, it is not easy to guarantee complete anonymity (Tjora, 2017). Since the thesis does not address sensitive topics, it is not critical to provide total anonymity to the respondents, even though I have tried in the best possible way to make it hard to trace who said what. The project focuses on the international company Eltorque AS, as mentioned earlier.

4.6 Interview guide

The questions that are being asked must be well-formulated so that the interviewees understand what you are requesting. What words you use and what kind of approach to use is crucial here (Johannessen et al., 2010). When you are using a semi-structured interview, there should only be a few questions, and the interviewer should have thought about follow-up questions beforehand. This study uses the PCI approach as described above when interviewing the participants. The questions are broadly formulated to generate storytelling (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). In the interview guide, there are three main questions. It is important that I know where and when to ask follow-up questions. It is essential to get into the depths of the problem itself, and by having prepared different kinds of follow-up questions, this will be covered. The interview started with a warm-up, which covered the name, age, work experience, and position. Afterwards, the interviewer will ask the three main questions. The questions focus mainly on how they communicate with new or old customers due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The questions in the interview guide are broadly formulated to generate storytelling (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). The interview guide is to be found in appendices (see Appendices 1). The first column in the interview guide consists of the three main questions. I try to «lure» out the details about the phenomenon being studied with these three questions. The questions try to disclose the subject's view of the problem. Making the questions broad formulated will make it easier for them to answer in their own words (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). Column two contains of questions that are clarifying questions for understanding the phenomenon. These are questions I asked as follow-ups and for getting more details. The third column is for the interviewer only. It would work as a general reminder that I should keep my main themes in mind during the interview. During the interviews, I found this very helpful because some interviewees tended to talk about other things than the topic. The third column, therefore, helped me to point the interviewees in the right direction.

Further on, the researcher wants to understand how the recipients feel the COVID-19 pandemic has changed their working practices and relationships with the customers. These questions will answer the master thesis problem if they are asked in the right way. If the researcher asks good follow-up questions, the interview will display more details about how the interviewees communicate with customers. Based on these assumptions, it is generated well-formulated follow-up questions document beforehand. This was because the researcher lacked experience with interview situations in general and wanted to be as prepared as possible. The researcher knows the interviewees beforehand, and this gives an advantage in the actual interview setting. Thus, one can assume that the interviewees feel safe from the start, and because of this, they could have an easier time opening up and answering the questions. Either way, the interviewer must facilitate this in any case.

4.7 Data analysis

The basis of analysing procedures is complete transcriptions of the interviews. The next step is to mark the text with keywords derived from the interview concepts and guidelines suited to the topic (Witzel and Reiter). For developing a coding grid, the markings can serve as a basis. By coding the transcription, the researcher can build a concept-driven data bank for the documentation. The coding makes it easy to search keywords, and they can be found, or the coding can create cross-links between different places in the text and individual cases. Further, the development of case-specific main topics is the first step of theory development (Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

In this paper, I have been using inductive coding with a variant of Grounded Theory. The method comes from Goia, and it is a way of structuring empirical data. The first thing I did was code small parts of the data in Nvivo. These are encoded in labels or phrasal descriptors. From here on, the codes that I created were organised into first-order concepts or themes. Thereby, I turned the first-order codes into second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013).

> *In this 2nd-order analysis, I are now firmly in the theoretical realm, asking whether the emerging themes suggest concepts that might help us describe and explain the phenomena we are observing (Gioia, 2010, p.20).*

I found Nvivo a little challenging to use, so I used both the Nvivo and pen and paper because I felt this made it easier to get a good overview. I had never used coding software before, which made it more challenging. I scheduled a meeting with my supervisor to help me start coding and structure the coding. After the meeting, I felt more confident in making the codes. I started to read the transcriptions one time without writing the codes, and afterwards, I noticed some repeated concepts in all the transcriptions. Thereby I started coding the transcriptions, and I ended up with 16 codes. Some of them I threw away, which was not relevant to answering the research questions. One of the codes I did not use was «small VS big company». The codes are described in the table below. The codes were based on what was most noticeable in the interview with the sales managers.

Table 2: Coding structure

<table>
<tr><th>Context for practices</th><th>Practices</th><th>Aggregate Dimensions</th></tr>
<tr><td>Positive for the company</td><td rowspan="6">Interpersonal communication
Networking
Establishing trust and likeability</td><td rowspan="6">Old practices that are changed</td></tr>
<tr><td>Physical vs. non-physical meeting</td></tr>
<tr><td>Interpersonal interaction</td></tr>
<tr><td>website</td></tr>
<tr><td>How to meet customers</td></tr>
<tr><td>Trust and likeability</td></tr>
<tr><td>Networking</td><td rowspan="6">Virtual selling</td><td rowspan="6">New practice that has emerged</td></tr>
<tr><td>Internal communication</td></tr>
<tr><td>Virtual selling</td></tr>
<tr><td>Challenge: technologies</td></tr>
<tr><td>Communication software/tools</td></tr>
<tr><td>Challenge: meeting customers online</td></tr>
</table>

As seen in Table 2 above, the practice context is in the left column. The codes made were *positive for the company, physical vs non-physical meeting, interpersonal communication, website, how to meet customers, trust and likeability, networking, internal communication, virtual selling, challenges: technologies, communication software, and tools and challenges: meeting customers online.* In retrospect, I know that

I could recode the code website to marketing, or social media, as this was a part of the website code. When we have a set of concepts and themes, we examine if it is likely to extract the rising second-order themes into further second-order total dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). In the middle column of Table 2, we can see the practices found by analysing the codes even further. These practices were *interpersonal communication, networking, establishing trust and likeability, and virtual selling*. I analysed the four practices, and thereby it was noticeable that two groups stood out. In the right column of table two, we see the second-order dimensions. These two groups were linked to how the practices of the sales managers have changed during the pandemic. These groups were *practices that have been substantially changed* and *new practice that has emerged*.

The citations used in this study are selected based on which categories were found in the coding. Some of the quotes have been directly translated from Norwegian to English, which can influence them. I have tried to make them as similar as possible to prevent any loss of essential data. After this, a decision was made to illuminate best the different categories found in the coding. However, it is difficult to say that some quotes work better than others. I decided which ones would shed light on the problem and the topic in the best possible way throughout the study. These are citations representing a tendency among the informants, pointing precisely to solve the research question. It is essential to have a balanced selection of quotes, where all the informants are repeated equally. This was a bit difficult as some gave more in-depth answers to the phenomenon than others. It was thus decided to use the quotations that best described the phenomenon.

4.8 The quality of the study

The thesis generalisation is relevant in the grounded theory, which aims to develop concepts, typologies, or theories. Previous research and theories are used to ensure relevance beyond the data analysed in the project for greater validity and generalisability (Tjora, 2017). The purpose of the study is not to generalise the findings but rather to provide an understanding of and insight into the phenomenon of how different communication traditions, with the help of SET and practice theory, can help navigate the COVID-19 crisis. Despite a limited selection, it is still assumed that the study may be valid and transferable for similar cases.

In order to achieve greater validity, it is recommended to be transparent in research. To meet the criteria with validity, I have been trying to write an explanatory method- and theory chapter, which enlightens the different choices made along the way. Based on this, the reader can take a critical stance on the relevance and precision of the study. After the transcription and processing of the data material, it was apparent that I could have asked even more follow-up questions. I could have done this differently to strengthen the connection between findings and design (Tjora, 2017). This is especially actual for the part with communication with customers. I could have asked several more critical questions about the phenomenon, generating the sales managers to think more critically. However, by securing the study in related research on the phenomenon and its critical aspects, the study's validity is strengthened. Another point worth mentioning is how the communication with the informants who did not have Norwegian or English as their mother tongue. It was sometimes difficult for both parties to understand each other due to the poor English of the informants. This created problems with communication, which may lead to misunderstanding and not getting my questions correct. This applies to interviewees from other parts of the world, which can be harmful because it could have lifted the study.

It is difficult to say anything about the study's pragmatic validity because the number of interviewees is eight. Based on the experiences the sales managers in Eltorque AS have and what they did to make their business survive the pandemic, they might have some strategies that can be helpful to other small-to-medium companies. The thesis reliability can be affected by my commitment and knowledge of the topic being examined. As Tjora (2017) states, the researcher must explain how one's position may affect the research work. I am employed in the business being investigated, which can be both favourable and unfavourable. This can benefit the thesis positively by asking precise questions to the interviewees and knowing the business beforehand. The downside of this is that it might cause much bias in the interview setting. During all of the interviews, I tried to be aware of this and ask open questions. My understanding of the company might benefit the thesis because of the business and industry knowledge. In the interviewing setting, the inside of the people being interviewed might affect the thesis negatively. When you know those you are interviewing, it is easy for the interview to become less severe. I have tried to be aware of this when interviewing the ones I knew the best. The knowledge of the people that are being interviewed might also be beneficial because they might feel calmer in the interview setting. Because of this, they might be having an easier time opening up and therefore giving in-depth answers.

Implementing quotes from the transcripts helps to include the informants' voice in the thesis, strengthening the reliability (Tjora, 2017). The quotes included in the discussion and analysis have been selected because they illustrate common denominators in the case that are being examined. This will be discussed in the following sub-chapter.

Other methods I addressed that would have been beneficial in investigating the communication and interaction between sales managers and customers or business partners are observational methods or electronic communication. Observational methods enable researchers to analyse managers' actual sayings and doings (Pedersen et al., 2020). For example, the observations could have been negotiations sessions or sales meetings. By studying electronic communication, I would have gotten greater insight and would have allowed precise understanding. For example, it could have been beneficial to analyse e-mails and chat logs to allow detailed insights into sayings.

5 Analysis and discussion

This study looks at how communication practices have changed in the case of Eltorque AS. First, I have been looking at how traditional communication practices have changed based on interviews with sales managers in Eltorque AS and how these produce new challenges. Then, by using practice theory and SET, I am going to examine the research question.

> ***How did B2B communication practices change during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what types of challenges do the new communication practices give?***

As mentioned in the introduction, the current COVID-19 has disastrous consequences for most B2B worldwide. Because of this, it is required a new approach for surviving a firm's business operations. This study will investigate traditional communication techniques, and practices sales managers can adopt to navigate the crisis from a social exchange theory view. The study has interviewed eight sales managers who work in the same field, organisation, and company. Interviews have then been transcribed and then analysed for further findings. The findings were coded and divided into categories that formulate some suggestions, which may be applicable for other firms worldwide. As described in the introduction and theory chapter, SET and practice theory is used as a practical lens to navigate the subject. This chapter starts with reviewing, analysing, and discussing the two findings: old practices that remain but are substantially changed and new practice have emerged.

5.1 Old practices that remain but are substantially changed

The day-to-day experience has changed radically since the COVID-19 outbreak. Most of the employees have been working at a home office since March 2020. All personal contact is happening via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Skype, to mention some. Basic tasks at work are restricted due to this pandemic, and this can harm social life, and at the same time, it increases psychological tension. Therefore, the sales operations are taking place digitally, changing the sales manager's daily practices drastically. In this part, we will look at how the managers have approached this difficultness:

1. First, I have been looking at traditional communication practices. I will look at how interpersonal interaction and communication have been affected by the situation with COVID-19.
2. I will discuss networking and how the actors managed this before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. I will discuss the practice of establishing trust and likeability, which are great points from SET.

5.1.1 The practice of interpersonal interaction and communication

All eight sales managers point out that the most significant difference before and during COVID-19 is not meeting the customer physically. In a B2B setting, it is vital to meet the customers physically, as explained in the theory chapter (Lambe et al., 2001, Pulles and Hartman, 2017, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). The physical meeting and interaction is also a crucial part of SET and how the relationship will develop (Hutt et al., 2000, Herbst et al., 2011, Hohenschwert and Geiger, 2015, Pulles and Hartman, 2017, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). The practice of interpersonal interaction and communication is something that was abandoned because of the COVID-19. How the communication with the customers arises is relevant to look at, as this often determines a possible trade.

All meeting places, such as conferences, fairs, or physical meetings, have been absent for over a year. Before the pandemic, the sales managers had up to ten small-to-big conferences and fairs yearly. It was their most important resource for creating an outer face and making Eltorque AS an attraction. It was in these places that new potential customers appeared. As described earlier, networking is an integral part of B2B, which happens at fairs and conferences (Pulles and Hartman, 2017, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). These meeting places have been gone for over a year now, which challenges the sales managers to find new ways of reaching customers and keeping them warm. Sales manager six points out that he has tried to network virtually, but this is more challenging and awkward.

> *I invited someone for digital coffee then, but it is difficult, those you know well you can talk to on the phone, while those you do not know well, may not answer the phone (Sales manager six).*

5.1.1.1 Description of the practice and what the actors do

Before COVID-19, the sales managers were travelling worldwide to meet the customers in a face-to-face setting. Because of the restrictions and lockdowns, they have not had the opportunity to do what they usually do. Challenging times have put enormous pressure on the sales managers to find new and better solutions to gain new customers. The problem is not communication-related, as the sales manager seven describe it. Not being able to see the customers face-to-face and to get the interpersonal touch is the biggest problem.

> *I can see in the market is not the lack of communication; it lacks physical contact. The COVID-19 is not causing any communications problems. The problem is the lack of interpersonal contact and communication (Sales manager seven).*

The COVID-19 situation made it easier to make strategic changes for the company, as stated by sales managers one, two, and six. When employees work from home, it reduces non-essential operations, making the sales managers have more time to do things they usually do not have time to do. Sales managers and the management made changes in several fields such as internal work and further development. The internal work and development will strengthen the company when the market returns are stated by sales manager one.

> *It was probably a situation like the COVID-19, which was going to happen before we got to some internal changes that one never sets out to make. It is straightforward to set aside some important tasks internally when you have a lot to do (Sales manager one).*

Communication has been lacking across the department, but this has been improved during the pandemic. The company has been allowed to sharpen the various functions to work more efficiently and increase quality. When all the processes are improved, in turn, this will lead to increased service. A fundamental principle of SET is to combine the resources of buyers and sellers who are currently in a relationship. Improving internal communication can also increase the connection between boundary spanners, which is essential in B2B. Making changes to the internal communication will improve the sales manager's conversation with customers and potential customers. The theory on internal communication in branding and market communication is a crucial point. As stated in the theory chapter, internal communication must be suitable for external communication to be successful. Internal communication must be well-functioning between managers and employees if the organisation is to succeed and survive (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). By conducting these strategic changes in the business, they might experience better communication flow and improved customer service.

> *It is very easy to set aside some important tasks internally to build the organisation further. As it has been now, we have been able to sit down and take a little more grip of what has been set aside. We have made some strategic changes in several fields, strengthening us when the market comes back again (Sales manager three).*

As Giddens claims, stated by Håkansson (1982) in the theory chapter, there are three main characteristics when it comes to practices. This example of changed practices shows that the sales managers try to find new possible solutions. The sales managers have several different tasks to complete, and how they do this should be according to a template. It is, of course, possible to change this. Practices are formed within the constraints and possibilities conducted to bear by the combination of social action. The pandemic has made sales managers think differently when it comes to reaching new customers. Since practices are always inherently situated and unique, they are connected to social life globally and locally. Knowing whom you will reach and how you will approach the concerned is essential to have in mind.

This study's participants were primarily from Norway, but three were from China, United States, and Singapore. Other cultures and countries could have different views when it comes to how to approach someone. Although several sales managers agree that the pandemic has streamlined work, they still claim that it is still vital to show up. «Sometimes it is important to show up to the customer, show that we are here! Other cultures may have a different view of showing up as well» (Sales manager two). Behaviour, signs, ideas, norms, and rituals are learned and shared in a social group of the same nationality. As sales manager two describes, showing up at the customer's office may be the only solution to settle a deal within a specific culture. Someone's culture is based on the way of seeing the world and interpreting life. For instance, when sales managers meet customers, they are used to doing practices such as the symbolic action of shaking hands when reaching for an agreement. This symbolic act is gone, and it is hard to replace over a digital screen. The COVID-19 crisis increases the perception of lack of choice, which I presume can foster negative attitudes toward work, based on the interviews. Not knowing the person you are talking to makes it more complicated to analyse what the customer is looking for.

An essential part of working with people in a selling situation is that it is important to read people as sales manager two states. Furthermore, sales manager two addresses the importance of video during a virtual meeting is essential. When using video during the meeting, you will get a more personal touch. Several of the sales managers interviewed mentioned that they used video during virtual meetings very differently. Sales manager three, four, and five did not use the web camera when having a virtual meeting. While sales manager one, two, six, seven and eight preferred to use the camera when having a virtual meeting. Difficulties like making people turn the video on were repetitive. Sales manager three states that he does not like to use the web camera during a virtual meeting;

> *I do not have on my webcam. I think it works well, but everyone handles it differently of course, some may get a little stressed by video conferencing. I think it works best with video conferencing if you sit alone in your own office. If you sit several people in a meeting room and are going to have a video conference with someone sitting in more than one meeting room, it will easily be chaos (Sales manager three).*

It quickly becomes chaotic when several people sit in the same room and everyone trying to speak their mind. I asked the sales managers why he is not using his camera while talking to customers or partners. The interviewee seemed to be a bit awkward about it. The answered question seemed to me as the interviewee did not like to use the web camera.

> *No, it is simply because the camera is on the machine. It is standing on the side of the screens that I use. I can, therefore, not look at the camera because then I do not see the screens. I have not bought an external webcam. But I see that many do not have a web camera, so I am not alone in that then. It varies greatly (Sales manager three).*

Other states that several customers do not use the camera might make the situation more awkward if only one has turned on the camera. If the customer does not use the camera, it is harder for the sales managers to analyse its presence. Sales manager two states that when entering a meeting, he always tries to get the customers or potential customers to turn their camera on. This thus becomes a problem in the practice of communicating with the customer. Regular communication practices disappear when you do not have the opportunity to see the person and analyse their body language.

> *What is extremely challenging is those who refuse to use video because you lose all the mimicry. It is a good idea to use some tips and tricks on how to get people to turn on the video, and one thing is to be out early in meetings and to have the video on so that you set the standard. Or that you knot a little with the camera when you come in and - «yyyyyes there was the video in place yes, hey» (Sales manager two).*

By doing this, sales manager two practically forces the customer to turn on the camera because they are dependent on taking advantage of the minor advantages they have in a virtual meeting. The personal touch would have a better impact, and it is easier to get what the customer wants when seeing their facial expression. Various sales managers mentioned that it is easier to talk to customers you already have established a connection and a relationship with than customers you do not know. Regarding SET, creating a long-term relationship is more challenging when interpersonal interaction is missing. As sales manager two said, it is crucial that the virtual meeting is being exploited to the fullest.

5.1.1.2 Implications for the lack of interpersonal interaction and communication

When using a virtual meeting platform, traditional communication practices are more challenging for individuals to seize meaning from facial expressions, nonverbal communications hints, and vocal tones. When this is left outside, based on the interviews, we can assume that it can create cognitive tiredness and make it more complicated to analyse the behaviour to whom you are talking. This can cause adverse reactions moving the current situation. The sales managers are used to being physically present, and when making important decisions over a screen, it often makes the situation more challenging, as the sales managers say. All these symbolic practices vanish when having a virtual meeting. The lack of traditional communication practices, such as the interpersonal touch to a meeting, can be managed with rewards. In SET, rewards are used to manage issues like the one described above. Sales manager five mentioned that it is crucial to have a positive attitude when interacting with customers and smile and use positive words because this can be rewarding. When interacting with customers, this is particularly relevant because rewards are social and economical, which are an incentive to strengthen ties.

> *The biggest challenge is difficult questions where we want to present a good solution, and the customer must trust that this is a good solution. It is not just that, or that we are pushing for something that you do not need. It's easier to have a relationship when you sit together around the table and discuss these things... It is better to look someone in the eye and explain to take the questions there and then. Feel free to draw or write on a piece of paper lying on the table and wave your hands a little and so on (Sales manager five).*

As sales manager 5 describes, it is more accessible to see what the customer wants when you are in a physical meeting. In a physical meeting, the sales managers can adjust the presentation to the needs of the customer. Changing the sales presentation is not necessarily so easy in a video conference, as several limitations presented earlier. When it comes to old customers, several sales managers say that those are much easier to maintain a good relationship. They describe it as talking to an old friend, and that never gets awkward. The challenge is the potential and new customers. As Granovetter (1985) pointed in the theory section, social bonds can extinguish effective financial communications if the exchange's social viewpoint exceeds the economic purpose. It is easier for sales managers to modify their behaviour and actions to boost relational interest and economic incentives in a physical meeting. The lack of physical appearance may, therefore, harm the business in the long run.

Sales manager two explains the same issue. When you give a presentation physically, you can change along the way and take it a little ad hoc. Sales manager two describes this as: «A character to people who are good at selling, they read their people well». In other words, one generalises the sales work, and it becomes difficult in a virtual meeting. As Thibault and Kelly (1959) argued, social exchange relationships are based on interdependent interaction. It is not easy to establish interdependent interaction in a virtual meeting when you do not have the same preferences as in a physical encounter. Lawler and Yoon (1995) point out that individuals must be mutually liable for the theory section's tasks' outcome. They need to share a way of liability for the exchange agreements' result to succeeding a negotiation. According to the sales managers, it is harder to develop trust and collaboration in a virtual meeting, as described earlier. A solid interpersonal attachment is vital in building a long-term relationship in a B2B setting. As described in the theory chapter, there are three circumstances that SET relies on. These circumstances can be challenging to maintain during a virtual meeting. It can be challenging to estimate which objects are received and which are provided. Sales manager two describe this as a problem when talking to new or potential customers;

> *The good conversation disappears. «I see you, and I hear what you say, and I can give you good feedback on this». This is not easy to achieve under the current situation with COVID-19. Especially with people, you do not know, new relationships. It is as if you are talking to friends or family with old relationships, so when you call these, you know if they are smiling or angry, you can hear it. But you do not hear this with people you do not know and getting to know someone well over a digital platform is more challenging than it is with a regular relationship (Sales manager two).*

Not knowing the person you are talking to makes it more complicated to analyse what the customer is looking for. An essential part of working with people in a selling situation is that it is important to read people as sales manager two states. Sales manager six points out that an essential part of their job is to adapt to different people.

> *When we talk about people and sales, it is not something that is written in stone. People are people. It may be important to mention that people are different, and thus a different approach to different people is needed (Sales manager six).*

What makes a virtual meeting difficult might be that cultural diversity makes communication troublesome. For some cultures, eye contact is an integral part of a meeting and may be seen as rude if not maintained. The way we communicate is mainly dependent on the culture we grew up in. When people from different cultures meet, they use their implemented practices which reflects their social order. Another issue is when it is not clear what they expect from each other. Sales managers in this study seem to prefer personal contact before using a phone call or a virtual meeting, mainly because it is easier to read body language and other signs that are important to look after.

5.1.2 The practice of networking

Something that is frequently being mentioned during the interviews is networking. The corporate network is an important point to mention. During the interviews, the sales managers mentioned the importance of establishing and maintaining their networks to build mutual dependence. The impression that the sales managers gave was that businesses are encouraged to groom their relationship with the partners regularly and, by doing this, choose to cooperate with the most appropriate partners. This means meeting the customers face-to-face and hearing what they have to say and showing them that the business cares about them. The lack of interpersonal communication makes it harder to implement this in the new everyday life to the sales managers.

5.1.2.1 Description of the practice and what the actors do

The impression of networking based on the interviewees indicates going to fairs and conferences to meet new potential customers or suppliers. Alternatively, the sales managers can book a meeting through their existing or shared network, which is often preferred. People tend to trust the ones they know, which is also an essential point in SET. Therefore, building mutual trust and likeability is crucial in developing a long-term relationship. This part has been challenging to maintain with the COVID-19 circumstances. The sales managers say that the best customers you will get are using a shared network, especially abroad. As sales managers gain new customers and create a good customer relationship, they can start sharing networks based on this mutual relationship. By sharing the shared network, they increase their chances of making a deal with the new customer. It is, therefore, crucial to know someone that the new customer is familiar with.

Regarding shared networks, all of the interviewees mentioned the importance of shared networks and the practice of networking. Networking and gaining trust are essential parts of SET, and how they can develop a good business relationship (Cox, 2001, Pulles et al., 2016). This also applies to marketing (Wilson, 1995, Lambe et al., 2001). This became more complicated during the COVID-19 crisis because the arenas for meeting the potential customer were cancelled. Sales manager one describes this as:

> *The largest trade fair events, they are the largest meeting place for, among other things, the oil industry. Then you get to talk to all the key players and competitors and get to check out what is happening in the market, and that is the big fairs (Sales manager one).*

As reviewed before, when a social exchange occurs, it enables partners to get to know each other better and understand each other's objectives. We can discuss the term relationship when we talk about B2B because they create social and economic outcomes that can either be favourable or unfavourable for those involved. As described in the theory chapter, how the connection between the boundary spanners occurs is fundamental for forming (Hutt et al., 2000, Pulles and Hartman, 2017). This is, as described, an essential part of the meeting. The sales manager's social network is a crucial part of staying connected and strong. Managing ties with customers and suppliers is a part of the sales manager's daily work routine.

5.1.2.2 Implications of networking

All the sales managers mentioned that not meeting new potential customers at fairs and conferences is a significant disadvantage. Grooming and maintaining a relationship with customers you already have is even more challenging when the only communication tool they can use is calling them on the phone or through software like Teams, Skype, or WeChat. During the interviews, the sales managers said that reaching potential customers is more complex through platforms like those mentioned above.

> *You have gained a distance to your customers, and you cannot follow the market as closely as when you are traveling. This is impossible to achieve. One tries to a certain extent to maintain this contact, and one cannot carry weekly calls to a hundred pieces. That is not how it works. I do not think it is possible to maintain the «famous meeting place» digitally. It is challenging to maintain when the situation is as it is (Sales manager one).*

Sales manager one refer to conferences and fairs when saying famous meeting place. This implies that physical contact is an essential part of networking for the sales managers in the business being investigated. One of the sales managers mentioned that the ones you are trying to reach might not be in the position you are trying to reach. The impression from the sales managers refers to the challenge with downsizing, making it more complicated and stressful for both parties when trying to reach the ones you aim for. As the sales manager states, much time goes to searching for the person you will reach. Beforehand, at fairs and conferences, it was easier to get in touch with the ones you aimed for because everyone that attended was searching for «your product». The interviewees state that when you do not have a face on the person you are trying to network with, it is even harder to get the personal touch. Sales manager two states that relationship building is about meeting people face-to-face: «Relationship building is very often based on physically meeting people, and it is challenging now» (Sales manager two).

5.1.3 The practice of establishing trust and likeability

The interviews with the sales managers claim it is more challenging to establish social ties and trust when conducting a non-physical meeting. SET argues that trust is an essential medium for gaining improved supplier financial performance and customer gratification (Hutt et al., 2000, McCarter and Northcraft, 2007, Herbst et al., 2011). Some sales managers confirmed that management involvement in deliberations is a starting point for buyer-seller compatibility, facilitating dyadic dependency with a long-term relationship. Likeability induces partners willing to collaborate because it can create positive expectations of future interactions, as discussed in the theory chapter. Because of this, likeability is worth examining when analysing business interactions because it is an essential factor. Likeability can affect a partner's willingness to collaborate, but it does not significantly influence negotiation profits. A relationship, as Blau (1964) explains, needs time to develop, and the interactions must be repeated.

The social and interpersonal interactions between boundary spanners play a vital role in how businesses grow, both stated by the sales managers and in the theory chapter. When the boundary spanners meet physically, they have the opportunity to match both the economic and social consequences of their transactions on a different level compared with a virtual meeting. Creating joint trust in a virtual meeting can be challenging because of the communication barriers and limitations of a video meeting. A virtual meeting makes it more challenging to create trust, likeability, and reciprocity, as mentioned earlier, which is crucial in SET (Cox, 2001, Pulles et al., 2016, Doney and Cannon, 1997, Ellegaard, 2012, Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005).

As mentioned in the introduction and theory chapter, B2B relationships can be transferred into SET relationships because they both need grooming to be kept and maintained. To build a long-term relationship, the sales managers must know the importance of quality information exchange, as mentioned in the theory chapter. Information exchange is based on the development of benevolent trust and credibility, which in other terms is based on reciprocity (Tellefsen and Thomas, 2005, Urda and Loch, 2013, Garner, 2017). These are vital points in SET in how a relationship is taking form. The partners who have a greater frequency of interactions have the best prerequisite for building a long-term relationship. Trust takes a long to grow and is usually solid over time. However, as declared by the sales managers, it could instantly shift throughout a pandemic, such as COVID-19. The pandemic may make some suppliers renege on their earlier agreements or drop their ability to meet their volume commitments given in a much calmer time. The sales managers ascertained that setting a deal during difficult times takes more time considering the situation. Because of the fast-evolving times with COVID-19, we may presume that some businesses may no longer collaborate in bargaining with challenging issues quickly appearing in a business relationship. The stability of interdependency could immediately change, and this may also affect multiple companies in how they interact with each other, as stated by the sales managers.

As described in the theory section, personal attributes can have a powerful influence on the negotiation results (Ford, 1980, Håkansson, 1982, Hallen et al., 1991, Metcalf et al., 1992). All the sales managers that got interviewed in this study were male, except one female. Physical appearance and gender are shown to influence proposals and requests.

In this study, we have not looked further at how gender could provoke a deal but focused on physical appearance and how likeability can create an advantage.

5.1.3.1 Description of the practice and what the actors do

Likeability in a B2B setting influences a person's confidence in predicting their partner's future behaviour (Pullers and Hartman, 2017). Likeability and attractiveness are often associated with each other. In SET, likeability is a critical point in how the interaction between individuals involves both economic and social outcomes. The exchange partners will evaluate the economic and social outcomes based on the interaction taking place (Blau, 1964, Lambe et al., 2001, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). When describing the practice of trust and likeability, we build on SET. The sales managers play a vital role because they need to negotiate a good deal for their company. How sales managers do, this is essential in understanding how trust and likeability are created in a B2B setting. The sales managers used to have face-to-face communication with potential customers and customers before the pandemic. With the COVID-19 situation, the usual interaction got replaced with video and phone meetings.

> *Communication is mainly to understand each other; you want to understand each other. Communication is mainly about understanding each other; you want to understand each other. By meeting the customer physically, you can sit down together and use body language, which affects how the customer sees you... So, in my opinion, communication is not affected. Information flow is not a significant issue but is the left of personal aspect left outside, which you cannot do now (Sales manager seven).*

Sales manager seven claims that communication is not affected; it is how the interpersonal aspect is affected. Sales managers seven refer to the lack of body language and physical contact, making it easier to create trust and likeability. During the pandemic, the sales managers have used the phone and software such as Microsoft Teams and Skype Business to get in touch with customers and potential customers. As described by sales manager six, the critical role in choosing a socialisation strategy can help increase the chances of a deal. What sales manager six refers to when saying socialisation strategy is how you choose to approach customers. If you are having a meeting, you could prepare different options if the customer wants something different from your main suggestion.

The ability to see what the customer wants is crucial when meeting the potential customer, as stated by several interviewees. Sales manager two specified that being creative when presenting to a potential customer is essential. By using animations, good-looking PowerPoint, videos, and interactive content will engage the customer better. The way the sales managers choose to approach the customers, as described above, can potentially help create beneficial mutual based on the buyer's behaviour, which requires higher profits, higher sales, and possibly isolation from competitive threats.

As described in the theory section, personal attributes can have a powerful influence on the negotiation results. All the sales managers that got interviewed in this study were male, except one female. The sales managers in this study seem like people who know how to adjust and talk to people. After the interviews with the sales managers, the primary impression is that they are positive, genuine, and not insecure. Negotiation is deep-rooted, and therefore personal attributes like this can have a powerful influence on the results (Maddux et al., 2008). Most of them chattered and had no problems answering the interviewer's questions themselves. The problem was getting them to keep it short and concise. Thus, it was easy to distinguish between those who worked more towards service than those who worked directly with customers. Some of the sales managers travel the world more than others, and during the interviews, it was easy to see who has been talking the most with customers. Some sales managers have a more vital role in gaining new customers, and those who have were undoubtedly more willing to talk in the interviews. They described everything in detail, and they often ended up talking about things that were not part of the question. The interview time was also somewhat longer for these sales managers. Therefore, likeability is a crucial point for the sales managers, and this is a challenge to create during a video meeting because of the lack of physical interaction. As sales manager, six points out;

> *Someone once said, in sales, sales are about «chippers friendship» and when you are going to open a new door, it is important to meet each other and, in a way, get some chemistry and remember a face. It is much harder now. It is the worst part, considering this COVID-19 situation (Sales manager six).*

When the sales managers are trying to build trust and likeability in a video meeting with a customer, they need to work harder to process nonverbal cues because of the distance the video creates. As mentioned in the theory chapter, practices can provide comfort. Several sales managers specified that a handshake and see a person in the eyes is something they miss doing in a meeting with a new customer. This is something that the sales managers are referring to as vital in building trust and likeability. Simultaneously, as sales managers one, two, and four explain, everyone is affected by COVID-19. Therefore, people may be more willing to answer that phone call or that email. As described in the theory section, many alliances break when little awareness is given to cultivating personal linking boundary spanners that form and transform the evolving partnership. When these activities get cancelled, it challenges the relationship from developing further.

5.1.3.2 Implications for establishing trust and likeability

Studies have shown that relational behaviour resembles a more decisive influence on the satisfaction of exchange relationships (Mitchell et al., 2012a, Mitchell et al., 2012b). Some critical SET point is about building trust, likeability, and reciprocity. Social bonds and longevity are vital in improving customer relationship satisfaction. Simultaneously, as sales managers one, two, and four explain, everyone is affected by COVID-19. The lack of interpersonal contact makes it harder to analyse the appearance of the customers. The sales managers state that it is harder to get the personal touch in a video meeting than meeting the customer face-to-face. When it comes to generating mutual trust between boundary spanners, it is more challenging when using a video meeting. Personal engagement is an important part, which can be hard to implement in a video meeting or phone call. Social transactions are hard to conduct online, concludes the sales managers. People tend to trust people they like, and therefore the sales managers must be good at communicating through a video meeting or phone call. Individual skills such as likeability might establish effectiveness in producing relational capabilities.

> *The physical meeting is important, being close to people. Take sports as an example. It is not so much fun to run around in a park with an iPad to play football with people who are not there physically. So, I have no belief that digital meeting platforms and digital tools replace physical*

attendance. I have a threat that it can be an important substitute and an important efficiency methodology if people use this correctly (Sales manager two).

The sales managers claim that the supplier's criticality varies, and the level of involvement depends on this. A proactive phone call can be a sufficient trigger closer to buyer-seller communication. How the interaction is taking place is crucial in creating a mutual trust. Personal liking is a critical point of SET and has a vital influence on how individuals communicate. Sales manager three explains;

You do not get the same communication as with someone you have met face-to-face. There is something about it. It gets a little weird at a video conference or on the phone; you do not get to know each other in the same way. Simultaneously, this makes it easier to take that phone because it is just what we must use. You get a little more used to it too (Sales manager three).

A central theory of SET is the mixture of resources of customers and sales managers currently in a relationship. High disturbance events can facilitate interaction and communication. Shared understanding and prior adaptions favour the shared implementation of new modifications to diminish or prevent harmful consequences due to the COVID-19. Sales managers insisted it was easier to understand a proposed offer or action if boundary spanners grew to trust and engagement beforehand. When the supplier or ship designer cannot acknowledge client requests, suppliers are a trusted origin of information to find viable business options. Being honest and transparent might save an enormous time and money in a crisis such as COVID-19. The potential for value creation in a B2B during a situation could be noted by linking multiple connections at many levels and many functions.

5.2 New practice that emerges

Daily routines and practices have changed drastically over the last year. Their traditional meeting-places have vanished, and thereby, their most crucial resource for creating an outer face. Networking has become harder to achieve than before. The participants in this study stated that conversation online was less efficient than face-to-face. The situation has forced them to meet all the customers, clients, and suppliers online, making them rethink their approach strategy.

Making the employees working from home reduces non-essential operations. Sales managers have more time to do things they usually do not have time to do, such as internal work and further development. Regarding SET, this implies increasing the likelihood to gain exchange rewards because sales managers are using more time to explore statistical software such as SuperOffice, Google Analytics, and Hotjar. Thus, they can analyse data before the crisis and during the crisis, making comparisons possible. As stated by the sales managers, internal data processing fosters more accurate information and makes customer service more efficient, both in terms of cost and results.

5.2.1 The practice of virtual selling

The new situation with COVID-19 contributes to new sales transformations, meaning how the sales managers facing potential customers have changed meaning, and they must adapt to this situation. Virtual selling has a compulsory part of every business during the pandemic. This requires the sales managers to get more creative and find other ways of gaining and maintaining the customer's attention. What lies in this is that they must use Microsoft Teams, Skype, WeChat, and other communication software types more frequently than before to contact customers and potential customers. While the sales managers typically work in separate functions, the pandemic has forced them to welcome virtual selling together. Before the pandemic, the sales managers had different functions. Some of them were travelling worldwide to attend different fairs and conferences to attract potential customers. These places are where several sales managers are stating is the best way of getting new customers. The sales managers in Eltorque AS use Microsoft Teams and sometimes Skype or WeChat; this depends on whom they will contact and where they are located in the world. Because Eltorque AS has offices worldwide, such as in China, Singapore, the USA, and the Netherlands, they already have experience communicating software to use when contacting different people from different countries. Virtual selling means all types of communication between the sales managers and the potential customer. The first meeting, negotiations, showing them a presentation of the products, a phone call, and other communication methods are part of virtual selling. The sales managers stated different implications of the virtual selling environment, which will be discussed later.

5.2.1.1 The practice of virtually selling and what the actors do

The majority of the sales managers state that virtual selling is more challenging than meeting the customers face-to-face. Eltorque AS has done well through this crisis, indicating that the sales managers have been creative in meeting potential customers. The sales managers highlight the importance of treating it as a physical meeting. Meaning showing up in the virtual meeting well dressed, with enough lighting, and with the web camera on. During the pandemic, Eltorque AS bought posters that could work as a background when the sales managers have meetings, which will present the company in a good way. The background should not be messy or distracting; therefore, it is essential to find a balance. Another requirement that the sales managers state is good sound. All the sales managers in Eltorque AS have their headsets with a mic, which makes the audio better.

Most sales managers point out that using a telephone is a helpful tool in catching customer attention. It is easier to reach the ones you want to attain, and the possibility you will get an answer right away is more prominent than sending an email. Everyone is trying to make their business survive the pandemic, and therefore the sales departments try to find other ways of getting their attention. It is conceivable that the customer receives dozens of emails daily, and the email your company sends is therefore only one in the number of different emails. The previous research and theory used in this thesis say nothing about mobile phone use, which can be an exciting point to go into more detail. The sales managers have different communication software to use, but they still choose to use mobile phones. By using the mobile phone, they feel more satisfied with the outcome. «The tools I use in my job are telephone, which is both necessary and very important because this is where I get the best customer contact» (Sales manager two). Sales manager two enlights how the mobile phone helps to reach the customer more effectively. The way the sales managers communicate using the mobile phone might create mechanisms that facilitate and establish a personal relationship, as mentioned in the theory chapter. By using the mobile phone, the sales managers can generate a stronger interpersonal attachment. Suppose a part is passionate about the other. In that case, this might be beneficial in creating positive outcomes as social and economic rewards, such as setting an agreement or contract with a customer or business partner (Blau, 1964, Lambe et al., 2001).

> *Mobile phones are a great tool. It is simpler than sending an email, which suddenly becomes another email. So if you are going to sit writing emails all the time, you can suddenly get a grumpy feeling. Sometimes you think, now I let this lie for a while because you do not answer the email (Sales manager six).*

Sales manager six refers to the practice of communication through mail as something that can give you a grumpy feeling. When communicating through the mobile phone, you must surely get the answers right away. Sales manager six also points out that he sees the advantage of using virtual meetings.

> *Suppose you compare a virtual meeting with a meeting that takes place in Copenhagen. First, you have to fly down. Also, you have to fly home, and you have to «this and that». Thus a virtual meeting will be much more efficient. You also save much money on it (Sales manager six).*

Virtual meetings help to streamline the work process, in addition to being very cost-effective. People can be restrictive in receiving calls from salespeople, and it becomes more critical to have sharpened their message to suit the customer's wishes. A suggested tactic from sales manager six is scheduling a meeting for 10-15 min to establish a framework for the conversation, which is a norm in the sense of SET.

> *Both customers and salespeople have learned Teams and Zoom, Google meeting and all these available platforms... You can say to a customer that «yes we only need 10-15 minutes, we can share the screen, I will show you something»... Then 10-15 minutes may be enough to start a discussion, find cases, and maybe come to an agreement (Sales manager six).*

The challenge for companies such as Eltorque AS requires more intercommunication with value chain actors. The sales managers noted the importance of constantly liaising with suppliers and investing time to review product specifications meticulously. It also takes more effort to coordinate with potential customers as miscommunication is greater via virtual meetings, as stated by the sales managers. All of this can make the process very slow because of limitations and constraints. Therefore, the importance of being honest and precise is an integral part of virtual selling and an essential point in SET.

> *You do not get the same discussion virtually. If you write an email, then you have everything written formally. However, at the same time, it is easy to misunderstand each other. Especially if you speak different languages, not everyone is equally good at writing in English, but they can be good at speaking (Sales manager two).*

Sales manager seven believes that there is no problem with communications regarding virtual selling towards new customers. He asserts that using the external and internal network will help reach the new potential customers, and they will be more willing to agree to a virtual meeting. The same person also claims that he did not get much business out of going to fairs and conferences. This may indicate that the sales managers work differently and thus have different practices of reaching new customers. The personal aspect is the recurring theme, and sales manager seven points out the lack of this.

> *I still get product reviews from my customers. I can contact my customers through different platforms such as Microsoft Teams. So, in*

my opinion, communication is not affected, information flow is not a significant issue, but the personal aspect that is left outside is something that may have an affection! (Sales manager seven).

My assumption of this movement with virtual selling is that it could lead to more integrated and functional sales in the future. Based on the interviews with sales managers, some measures that may be relevant for minor to medium-sized international companies are listed in the following subchapter. Several sales managers point out that they have tried to follow up with customers and potential customers in the best possible way. Mobile phones and video conferencing have become a big part of their daily routines at work. Some claim that it is difficult to reach customers, and others claim the opposite. Several of the sales managers mentioned the use of SuperOffice, which had helped them track and compare sale statistics. Internal processing of data supports the desire for precise information, which ends with more efficient customer service. Doing this will increase the likelihood of gaining exchange rewards, which is crucial in SET, as mentioned in the theory chapter (Homans, 1958, Blau, 1964, Mitchell et al., 2012a) . Using social media might be helpful as well, as stated by sales manager one.

Now that we are closed and shut out of the market due to the COVID-19, it is clear that marketing is a significant contributor today because I see that people and companies have become much more aware of what is happening on social media. On LinkedIn, for example, I think that it is essential to refer to the website (Sales manager one).

Using social media as a communication tool might work well in times like the COVID-19 crisis. The use of social media can advertise extensive information or events, as described in the theory chapter (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). Time constraints and the need for knowledge have led to a distinct classification of communication methods. Most of the sales managers noted that applying social media during the pandemic can be powerful. This is particularly when the company wants to communicate general information about its operations, such as suggested contacts or working hours. They also point out other news or events that can be of public interest. According to the theory, social media can lead to bidirectional communication and exchanging emotions and positive messages during the current difficult situation (Lambe et al., 2001, Brønn and Arnulf, 2019, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020).

When the situation occurred, Eltorque AS started to change some of their old habits on social media. As mentioned in the theory chapter, businesses can build and maintain good relations with external groups such as their clients and customers by using social media (Brønn and Arnulf, 2019). Eltorque AS started to publish more content on LinkedIn and Facebook, making them increase the number of followers. On LinkedIn, the number went from 245 in 2020 to 645 followers in 2021. Eltorque AS posted a supportive post on LinkedIn before Christmas, which engaged many of their customers and clients. In the post, they wanted to thank every customer for their support throughout the challenging year. Sales manager one suggest that directing the customers to their webpage helps gain more customers. By doing this, they will increase attraction towards Eltorque AS, which might be beneficial in making more settlements and sales.

If you manage to get an increased amount of visitors to your websites, it is very, very positive. I think the focus is more now than it has been before. It is essential to promote yourself and what you sell (Sales manager one).

They changed their webpage, which got great feedback afterwards. Because consumers have more options today, it is essential to stand out. With a more intuitive and cleaner look on their webpage, it is easier for them to go through it. The sales managers registered that web traffic increased about 5-10% during the pandemic.

> *After we got a new website, we see that the traffic has increased 5-10%. Not only does this have to be due to the new look, but it helps to make the page easier to navigate (Sales manager three).*

Suppliers and customers are using websites more frequently than before the crisis because of their demand for information. To make the website easy to use, sales manager one states that any relevant information should be at least one or two clicks away.

> *Marketing is a very important contributor today. An example is our website. It is important to play on everything that online solutions can play on. The information should be easily accessible, preferably no more than two or three clicks away. I think that is very, very important (Sales manager one).*

Their presence on social media such as LinkedIn and Facebook has increased because of risen activity levels. They have adapted to the new situations, making them practice virtually selling through platforms in new ways. They have also seen increased user activity and increased traffic to their social channels and their website. As described in the theory chapter, strategic communication using social media can help build its reputation from the inside and out and strengthen internal communication.

5.2.1.2 Implications of virtual selling in B2B

Working from home during the COVID-19 can be challenging. Some people already worked from home before the pandemic, and they have some experience of it even though they may burst into new challenges. The home may be teeming with activity, a toddler that requires attention, a dog that needs a walk, a teenager who needs help with their homework or sharing the office with your spouse. All these responsibilities and challenges appear when you are trying to balance home and office. Some of the sales managers point out the difficulties during times in the home office. Having enough bandwidth is crucial when having a virtual meeting. If you have a ten-year-old kid playing an online game, the bandwidth may be too insufficient for having a virtual meeting. Businesses rely on a constant Internet connection when working from home. Even though most people have a solid network at home, they put more pressure on it than ever before using applications and professional-grade services. Besides the bandwidth, the human technique is also to be considered. During the interview with two of the sales managers, the bandwidth was too insufficient. Some sales managers lost the internet connection several times during the interview, which interrupts the conversation. During the discussion with sales manager one, I had to use a mobile phone, as the bandwidth was insufficient.

> *What we are experiencing now is a challenge related to our ongoing discussion. When we are trying to get a video conference or video meeting, it is important to have a good internet connection and bandwidth, which is not always the case (Sales manager one).*

If the network or bandwidth is not working, sales managers' work is challenging to execute. The ongoing viral outbreak has brought new attention to otherwise mundane aspects of daily life. As the focus turns more and more to the Internet, the things that enable online functions are being brought to the fore more than ever. Bandwidth is an increasingly important aspect of modernised life, but many selves may not understand it. Once a term is kept for technical considerations, it is now finding wider use to transform more practical concerns. Given COVID-19, knowledge of bandwidth may be something of a new requirement. Besides the bandwidth, the challenge of people who find it troubling using software such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, or WeChat is repetitive. Several sales managers address this issue and refer to it as the most «exciting part» of the meeting.

> *The biggest challenge is whether the technique works. You have the technical, and you have the human; you also have the bandwidth. Several people work under one roof, and it can simply be too much for your company's bandwidth (Sales manager two).*

Some sales managers mentioned that the pandemic is making companies evolve faster than before, meaning implementing more digital solutions. Some may have been very unwilling to use a virtual meeting before but must use it because they cannot meet physically. In turn, this can lead to the technique failing and one spending a lot of time and energy on starting a meeting, such as getting the camera on, making the microphone work, or sharing a PowerPoint presentation. Sales manager six also highlights the challenges of people not using the camera when having a virtual meeting. I have mentioned this before, but it is essential to mention it in this part because it makes it more challenging to see how interested the customer is.

> *Let us say you meet six people. Three of them are just listening to you, while the rest are on camera. You cannot make a scathing sermon on the use of the screen. That bit is outrageous. Because of this, you have less control over how interested the customer is (Sales manager six).*

The sales managers also mentioned that people who have been «afraid» of digital meeting platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, now enjoy using it in their daily routine. This is forcing them to use tools they have been resisting to put their hands on. Having a digital meeting before the crisis would probably be impossible if the ones you would communicate with do not feel comfortable using Microsoft teams. Therefore, the COVID-19 has made the sales managers more comfortable with using different communications tools.

6 Conclusion

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has caused significant challenges to B2B firms. This is particularly relevant for marketing and sales operations, which enables the communication between agents. This research paper examines how B2B communications practices have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the new challenges these new communication practices produce by using Eltorque AS a case.

To examine the research question, I have been using practice theory and SET to reveal how the sales managers communicate with customers and business partners. SET has been used by multiple researchers regarding B2B relations and has shown to be a helpful paradigm (Lambe et al., 2001, Chang et al., 2012, Yang et al., 2012, Cowan et al., 2015, Lussier and Hall, 2018, Woisetschläger et al., 2016, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). SET concentrates on the relationship among exchange parties as to the governance mechanism of exchange. Therefore it is beneficial for explaining B2B relational exchange (Pulles and Hartman, 2017, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020).

By interviewing eight sales managers in Eltorque AS, I have revealed two main changes in communication practices. I have separated them into two categories that reveal the new communication practices and cast light on these new challenges. These categories reveal several tactics or strategic changes that might benefit small-to-medium B2B, which can impact society. I categorised the essential practices that emerged during data analysis into an implemented model that identified two interrelated categories: old practices that remain but are substantially changed, and new practice emerged. The findings in this study might be helpful for other sales managers, which are struggling with communications towards customers or business partners in this crisis. Based on the interviews, I will advise sales managers and salespeople, which will be presented in the following subchapter. It can also be beneficial for a future crisis, such as a financial crisis. This chapter will record these findings and be further specific to present actionable guidance to navigate the pandemic.

6.1 Summary of the change and the new practice

The participants in this study stated that conversation online was less efficient than face-to-face. The situation has forced them to meet all the customers, clients, and suppliers online, making them rethink their approach strategy.

As mentioned earlier, daily routines and practices have changed drastically over the last year. Their traditional meeting-places have vanished, and thereby, their most crucial resource for creating an outer face. Networking has become harder to achieve than before. Practices are always situated in history, context and inherently situated and unique. Therefore, sales managers and salespeople should investigate how to best approach whom they are going to meet. Especially if they are from another culture, different cultures use different communication practices, making it harder to understand each other. The new situation produces new challenges as the difficulty of building trust over a screen. As the interviewees stated in the analysis and discussion, having a positive attitude might be rewarding. In light of SET, rewards are social and economical; therefore, people must interact with each other, smile, and have a general positive radiance. Likeability and physical appearance seem to have an influence when talking to customers. By constantly improving communication skills, the sales managers and salespeople are more likely to have a good conversation with a potential customer. Suppose sales managers and salespeople use more time exploring statistical software. In that case, this action of practice might increase their knowledge and benefit the company.

Old practices that remain but are substantially changed are interpersonal interaction and communication, networking, and trust and likeability. The practice of meeting people face-to-face makes interpersonal interaction challenging. At the same time, a virtual meeting has several limitations as creating trust, the practice of handshake, and body language. By not meeting the customers physically at the standard meeting places as fairs, conferences or exhibitions, networking is more troublesome to sustain. As stated by the sales managers in the discussion and analysis, the best networking is done by talking to people face-to-face. Trust and likeability are critical SET point. They are an essential aspect when building a long-time relationship. This challenges the sales managers in finding new ways to engage with potential customers by using social media more frequently.

Communication practices that have emerged due to these new changes are the practice of virtual selling. Virtual selling means all types of communication trying to reach an agreement over communication software such as Microsoft Teams. Virtual selling has shown to be time- and cost-effective in gaining new customers. However, it has some limitations which are challenging. Some of these are mentioned before, such as not communicating with the customer or business partner physically, lacking interpersonal communication. Body language, practice as shaking hands, and looking someone in the eye, is something that the interviewees have frequently mentioned.

As we have seen, communication practices have changed because of the pandemic. As the sales managers stated in the interviews, social distancing puts pressure on the business's operations and sales. The dependence on virtual meetings has become a big part of the sales manager's daily routines. An interesting finding in this study is the way the sales managers is using their mobile phones. In a world with many different solutions in communication software, they choose a traditional method such as the mobile phone. This might be something that future research could investigate. There are not just negative consequences of COVID-19. The pandemic has intensified society's digitalisation and made people who have not felt comfortable using software enjoy using it. The increased use of virtual meetings makes it easier to communicate due to geographical reasons. Based on this assumption, perhaps these changes will reshape our world, potentially forever? Fewer business trips, home office, and more digitalisation?

6.2 Key points to sales managers and salespeople

Based on what was discovered in the discussion and analysis, some bullet points came to the surface. The specific measures are measures that the sales managers have mentioned during the interview, which they claim is working. The specific measures are:

- Use the phone. Participants in this study argued that using the phone will be an excellent trigger to closer buyer-seller communication. This will make them differ from other companies.
- Schedule a short meeting. Some sales managers suggest a tactic to schedule an appointment for 10-15 min to establish a framework for the conversation. In the framework, you should prepare different options for the customer. In this way, you will probably gain their interest.

- Use social media to exchange emotions and positive messages. Participants noted that applying social media during the pandemic can be powerful.
- Try something new on social media or the company's webpage. The participant's company completely renovated its homepage when the COVID-19 crisis started. It is essential to stand out, and by changing their homepage, they increased their traffic by 5-10%. If this increased traffic is only because of the new look, it is not easy to say. It might be a combination of people seeking more information than before and finding the webpage easier to use.
- Check bandwidth. When working from home, it is crucial to have a stable and good internet connection; if not, virtual meetings might be difficult.

6.3 Contributions to previous research

As described earlier, there has been a lack of research on how communication practices have changed in B2B due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, how the pandemic will affect B2B sales and marketing is still unknown. Previous research, such as Mora Cortez and Johnston (2020), shows that the situation can have disastrous effects on the market. For some time, B2B relation exchange has been a central research drive (Lambe et al., 2001, Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2020). Previous research has tried to explain the development of a relationship between exchange partners, facilitating relational exchange (Lambe et al., 2001). Pedersen et al. (2020) suggest increased future research on B2B sales, marketers, and purchasers when they engage with customers and suppliers. The findings in this study might enlighten mobile phone usage, which is not mentioned in the previous research or literature. The lack of interpersonal interaction is mentioned in every research paper concerning communication practices in B2B. This thesis enlightens the challenges with virtual selling, as when individuals have different usage of the web camera. As mentioned in the theory chapter and literature, relationships in B2B needs a governance mechanism built on a foundation of commitment, trust, and exchange norm, which supply mechanics such as agreements (Lambe et al., 2001). Using the microphone and not the web camera affects sales managers' usual communication practices. Therefore it is more challenging to establish trust and likeability towards customers or business partners. Future research might dive into more in-depth research regarding this challenge. This will be discussed further in the next sub-chapter.

6.4 Strengths, limitations, and future research

With the help of SET and practice theory, the research aims to understand how communication practices have changed concerning the sales managers working in Eltorque AS during the COVID-19 crisis and which challenges it produced. It is not considered suitable to generalise in this thesis, as it investigates a social phenomenon. We want to provide an understanding of and insight into the examined phenomena. As mentioned earlier, the study contains eight informants, which makes it hard to develop concepts. Thus, future research can try to obtain informants from across industries and companies to create greater depth. This will lead to more views and perspectives emerging, which can strengthen generalisability. Despite a limited selection of informants, it is still assumed that the study may be valid for similar cases, such as small-to-medium-sized businesses. The thesis can be compared with results from comparable studies done by other researchers. Thus, we can argue that the findings may be valid outside the case study, based on previous research used in this thesis. Some strategies were identified through the interviews, which might be beneficial for other similar cases.

This study did not use quantitative data, such as sales, profitability, or market shares. Using indicators like this can help measure the true impact of the strategies mentioned by the informants in this research. Therefore, future research could study the connection between sales, profitability, or market shares and conduct in-depth interviews with sales managers or salespeople to determine a possible correlation.

The study uses SET and practice theory as a tool to look at how salespeople communicate with customers. Among other things, likeability and how relationships are built in a B2B have been examined. Future studies may therefore take a closer look at how business relationships develop over time. This can provide further details in the explaining of the relationship between relational outcomes and personal characteristics such as likeability, as mentioned in this thesis. Within SET, likeability is an essential point in relationship building. In-depth case studies or experiments with several episodes will allow investigating these conditions in more detail. It could also be interesting to look at how corporate culture is affected by this pandemic. The new everyday life has led to home offices and minimal social contact, which might affect the company negatively. We know little about how the corporate culture will be affected by increased flexibility in the workplace and how this may affect well-being, innovation power, and productivity. Research questions like these might be relevant for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Appendix 2: Consent form

Appendix 2: NSD approval

Appendix 1: Interview guide

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>Topics to be touched on / suggestions for potential inquiries</td><td>Permanent theme to be touched on in each category</td></tr>
<tr><td>Introduction:
• Data protection, recording; Anonymization
• Transcription. Recordings are deleted afterwards.
• Letter of approval
• Objective: Find out how to communicate with customers / acquire new customers? What tools are used, how this has been before and during covid.</td><td>Say things that you think I know.
Dig for answers!</td><td rowspan="2">Notice how they approach / communicate with new customers, and what tools they use. How do they gain new customers during the COVID-19 pandemic?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Warm-up:
• Who are you (first name / code only)?
• Age?
• Title, position?
• How long did you work at Eltorque?
• Work experience (number of years)?</td><td>Don’t forget you code!</td></tr>
</table>

Topic block and main questions	Topics to be touched on / suggestions for potential inquiries	Permanent theme to be touched on in each category
		Notice how they approach / communicate with new customers, and what tools they use. How do they gain new customers during the COVID-19 pandemic?
How do you usually approach/get new customers?	• How does your typical day start? Step by step. What is the first thing that you do before approaching/communicate a customer? • What tools do you use? • Do you work in teams or alone? • How was that, in details? What did you do when this happened? • How has the communication practices changed? • Can you describe the process in details with an example? What did you do from the beginning to the end? • How did this work before covid-19? Use an example to describe in details? • How does this affect your daily work? • How do you differ from other vendors in these difficult times?	
What are the main changes for your team being produced by the current Coronavirus situation? What is working well and what is not?	• How does your typical day start? Step by step. What is the first thing that you do before approaching a customer? • What tools do you use? • Do you work in teams or alone? • How was that, in details? What did you do when this happened? • Can you describe the process in details with an example? What did you do from the beginning to the end? • How did this work before covid-19? Use an example to describe in details?	

	• How does this affect your daily work? • How do you differ from other vendors in these difficult times? .	
How has the current Coronavirus pandemic changed relationships within your business network? With customers?	• Can you describe in details with using an example? • How do you feel this affecting you work? • How you made any changes that have worked? Or not worked? • Have you started using new tools? • Can you describe this in details? With an example?	
Final part:		
• Aspects that the interviewer found interesting, formulate tips and ask questions. • Take hold of any moods. • Possibly express your own impressions or feelings in words.		

Appendix 2: Consent form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project communication practices?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged many companies in how they communicate with their customers. The research assignment is thus to map sales personnel's communication practices before and during the covid-19 pandemic. Eltorque can use the knowledge produced through this project to gain better insight into how to communicate effectively with their customers. The research project is carried out by a master's student at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, collaborating with Eltorque AS.

Who is responsible for the research project?

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology is responsible for the project.

Researcher: Synne Ekren

Supervisor NTNU: Michael Grothe-Hammer

Contact person Eltorque: Arild Bø

Why are you being asked to participate?

The study wants to map how sales personnel communicated with customers before and during the covid-19 pandemic.

In this survey, we want the people who have direct communication with customers and whose function is to generate sales.

In total, there will be seven respondents in the research project.

What does participation involve for you?

If you choose to participate in the project, you will be interviewed, in the form of a semi-structured interview. The interview will take approx. 30 minutes. We will not ask personal questions other than name, position, and work experience. The other questions will primarily be about how you communicated with customers before and during the covid-19 pandemic.

The information collected is the practices the respondents use before and during the covid-19 pandemic. The data will be registered through audio recordings from equipment borrowed from NTNU and notes during interviews. After the report is completed, we will delete the audio recordings.

Participation is voluntary
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be

made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- Those who want access to your information are the researcher (Ekren).
- No personal equipment from the researchers is used, but equipment borrowed from NTNU that has a higher security clearance.

A report will present a selection of answers, and they are anonymized. The researcher will submit the report to the participating company, Eltorque AS and NTNU.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end on June 7, 2021*.* At the end of the project, we will delete audio recordings and other anonymized information about you.

Your rights
So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?
We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with *[insert name of institution responsible for the project]*, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- Norwegian University of Science and Technology by Synne Ekren (synneek@stud.ntnu.no)
- Our Data Protection Officer: Synne Ekren
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Grothe-Hammer
Supervisor

Synne Ekren
(Student)

Project Leader

Student (if applicable)

(Researcher/supervisor)

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project *[insert project title]* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- ☐ to participate in interview.
- ☐ my data can be presented in a report

I agree that my information will be processed until the project is completed, approx. June 7, 2021

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix 2: NSD approval

Melding

04.02.2021 09:30

Tilbakemelding på meldeskjema med referansekode 299841:

NSD har vurdert at personvernulempen i denne studien er lav. Du har derfor fått en forenklet vurdering med vilkår.

HVA MÅ DU GJØRE VIDERE?

Du har et selvstendig ansvar for å følge vilkårene under og sette deg inn i veiledningen i denne vurderingen. Når du har gjort dette kan du gå i gang med datainnsamlingen din.

HVORFOR LAV PERSONVERNULEMPE?

NSD vurderer at studien har lav personvernulempe fordi det ikke behandles særlige (sensitive) kategorier eller personopplysninger om straffedommer og lovovertredelser, eller inkluderer sårbare grupper. Prosjektet har rimelig varighet og er basert på samtykke. Dette har vi vurdert basert på de opplysningene du har gitt i meldeskjemaet og i dokumentene vedlagt meldeskjemaet.

VILKÅR

Vår vurdering forutsetter:

1. At du gjennomfører datainnsamlingen i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet
2. At du følger kravene til informert samtykke (se mer om dette under)
3. At du laster opp oppdatert(e) informasjonsskriv i meldeskjemaet og sender inn meldeskjemaet på nytt.
4. At du ikke innhenter særlige kategorier eller personopplysninger om straffedommer og lovovertredelser
5. At du følger retningslinjene for informasjonssikkerhet ved den institusjonen du studerer/forsker ved (behandlingsansvarlig institusjon)

KRAV TIL INFORMERT SAMTYKKE

De registrerte (utvalget ditt) skal få informasjon om behandlingen og samtykke til deltakelse. Informasjonen du gir må minst inneholde:

- Studiens formål (din problemstilling) og hva opplysningene skal brukes til
- Hvilken institusjon som er behandlingsansvarlig
- Hvilke opplysninger som innhentes og hvordan opplysningene innhentes
- At det er frivillig å delta og at man kan trekke seg så lenge studien pågår uten at man må oppgi grunn
- Når behandlingen av personopplysninger skal avsluttes og hva som skal skje med personopplysningene da: sletting, anonymisering eller videre lagring
- At utvalget ditt har rett til innsyn, retting, sletting, begrensning og dataportabilitet (kopi)
- At utvalget ditt har rett til å klage til Datatilsynet
- Kontaktopplysninger til prosjektleder (evt. student og veileder)
- Kontaktopplysninger til institusjonens personvernombud

Ta gjerne en titt på våre nettsider og vår mal for informasjonsskriv for hjelp til formuleringer:
nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/sjekkliste-for-informasjon-til-deltakerne

Når du har oppdatert informasjonsskrivet med alle punktene over laster du det opp i meldeskjemaet og trykker på «Bekreft innsending» på siden «Send inn» i meldeskjemaet.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 07.07.2021.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

Dersom du benytter en databehandler i prosjektet, må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

NSD SIN VURDERING
NSDs vurdering av lovlig grunnlag, personvernprinsipper og de registrertes rettigheter følger under, men forutsetter at vilkårene nevnt over følges.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG
Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Forutsatt at vilkårene følges, er det NSD sin vurdering at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER
Forutsatt at vilkårene følges, vurderer NSD at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:
- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER
NSD vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18) og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER
Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:
nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema
Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

ELTORQUE